



**Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime,
Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global
Women's Issues**

***“China's Role in Latin America and the
Caribbean.”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Rubio, distinguished members of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues, good morning. I am honored to share my views with you and the committee on the increased presence in Latin America and the Caribbean of the People's Republic of China (PRC), PRC-based companies and entities, and the impact on U.S. national security interests and those of our partners in the region.

I appear before the committee in my personal capacity. My views do not necessarily represent those of my employer or the US government.

Overview of PRC Engagement in Latin America

PRC economic, political, institutional, and security engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean has increased substantially in the past two decades. PRC-based companies have invested more than \$160 billion in the region.¹ The PRC's two major policy banks (China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank) have lent \$136 billion for projects there.² PRC trade with the region in 2020 was \$314 billion, more than 17 times the level when the PRC was accepted into the World Trade Organization in 2001.³ In terms of such commerce alone, the PRC is now the number one partner with every country south of Costa Rica, or number two behind Brazil.

Reflecting the lure of the PRC for our neighbors in Latin America and the Caribbean, since 2017, 21 states in the region have pledged themselves to the PRC "Belt-and-road Initiative. The most recent was Argentina, which formalized its membership in February 2022 during a state visit to the PRC by its President Alberto Fernandez.⁴

In the almost twenty years I have followed the evolution of Chinese engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean, I have become increasingly concerned by its complex effects on the region, with which we are bound by ties of geography, commerce, and family.

To avoid misstating the serious challenge before us, I do not believe the Chinese Communist Party is pursuing a malevolent plot to impose its system of governance on the Western world. Rather, through the agency of its companies, and the support and coordination of its Communist regime, the PRC is attempting to "rewire" the region and the world to its own economic benefit.⁵ As part of that process, the PRC uses economic and other levers to intimidate and silence its critics, and to coopt political and economic institutions in the region to serve its ends own ends.

In support of those efforts, the PRC is employing a range of political, institutional and other engagement efforts. One element of particular importance for this committee, is that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is working in Latin America and the Caribbean, engaging with our partners, in order to give its military increasingly global reach, building capabilities, relations and options to operate in the Western Hemisphere, in the event that reactions by the US and other Western nations to its economic and other ambitions leads to military conflict.

PRC Interest in Latin American Resources

With respect to economic engagement in Latin America, PRC-based companies are pursuing sources of supply for commodities in the region, from petroleum, iron and copper to strategic materials such as lithium and niobium.

As in other parts of the world, PRC-based companies are expanding their physical presence in Latin American supply chains, from extractive operations, to processing, storage, to logistics, to increase their security of supply, and maximize the degree to which Chinese companies, secure the value added from those operations.

In the lithium sector, strategically important for batteries for electric vehicles and other green technologies, PRC-based companies are active in each of the four Latin American states with significant current or potential lithium reserves:

In Argentina, currently the most productive country for lithium extraction in the region,⁶ the Chinese firm Ganfeng has majority ownership of the Cauchari-Olaroz lithium project.⁷ In addition, PRC-based Zijin mining spent \$960 million to acquire Neo lithium, with its Tres Quebradas project in Cajamarca province.⁸ Just this month, Zijin broke ground on an important new operation there to include a \$380 million lithium carbonate plant.⁹

In Chile, the Chinese firm Tianqi owns a \$4.1 billion, 25% share of the SQM lithium project in the Atacama Desert.¹⁰ In January 2022, the Chinese company BYD won a concession from the Chilean government for a new lithium project.¹¹

In Bolivia, Chinese firms TBEA and Ganfeng are positioned to play a role in the exploitation of in major deposits¹² such as Coipasa and Pastos Grandes, if the Bolivian government of Luis Arce makes participation sufficiently lucrative to take viable proposals with viable technologies forward.

In Mexico, the same Chinese company Ganfeng has acquired complete control of the Bacanora lithium project in the Sonora desert,¹³ which could become Latin America's biggest lithium operation. Ganfeng's newly acquired position sets up a conflict with the populist government of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who has threatened to nationalize the sector.¹⁴

The tendency of PRC-based companies to cut corners with respect to local labor, environmental and other regulations, and to display a lack of sensitivity in their engagement with local communities, governments, and vulnerable peoples has made them the focus of protests by a range of local groups. Examples include the pushback against Chinese operations in the \$6 billion Las Bambas mine, forcing the temporary shutdown of the facility in December 2021.¹⁵ Such cases also include Rio Blanco, in Piura, where protests against the Chinese-operated mine led to killings, and ultimately, the closure of the mine.¹⁶ They also include the Mirador project in Ecuador, where resistance by the local community, and national protests forced a similar shutdown.¹⁷

PRC Focus on Latin American Strategic Markets

Beyond resources, Chinese firms are also pursuing access to Latin American markets, particularly in lucrative strategic sectors, including digital technologies, manufacturing, construction services, "green energy" technologies and biotechnology among others. Recent examples include a commitment by Great Wall Motors to invest \$1.8 billion in Brazil in that country's electric car market.¹⁸ Similarly, PRC-based companies have sold over 410 busses to the Chilean transportation system, which now has more such vehicles than any country outside of China.¹⁹

PRC objectives in both resource and market-oriented pursuits are understandable to any Latin American who has read Raúl Prebisch,²⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein,²¹ or Fernando Henrique Cardoso:²² the PRC desire to ensure that its companies realize, to the extent possible, the value

added of acquiring and transforming those resources, producing those products, and providing those services, for itself. The risk for our Latin American and Caribbean neighbors, as often predatory Chinese companies, backed by the PRC government, pursue those objectives in a Latin America with great needs, weak institutions, and corruptible individuals, is that PRC success leaves the Chinese on top, the West out, and Latin Americans serving as mid-level managers, technicians, workers, or customer service personnel in Chinese-owned operations.

Domination of Connectivity as a PRC Strategic Concept

At the core of the PRC pursuit of its economic objectives in Latin America and elsewhere is “multidimensional connectivity,” as reflected in China’s use, since 2013 of the “Belt and Road initiative” to both shape and explain the nature of its economic engagement with the world in terms of mutually beneficial flows of goods, money and ideas, and the Chinese construction of infrastructure to enable them.²³

In Latin America, as elsewhere, the PRC focus on connectivity includes the construction and operation of transportation infrastructure such as roads, train and metro lines,²⁴ ports and engineered river connections.²⁵

In the port sector, PRC-based companies are involved in at least 40 major projects in the region,²⁶ including seven operations by Hutchinson Port Holdings in Mexico, three in the Bahamas, three in Panama, and one in Buenos Aires.²⁷ In addition to Hutchison’s projects, PRC-based firms are involved in four ports in Brazil,²⁸ including China Merchants Port 2017 acquisition of TCP Participações,²⁹ as well as a project to expand São Luis into a megaport.³⁰ Other significant PRC port initiatives in the region include the new \$3 billion Chancay mineral port in Peru,³¹ Posorja in Ecuador (where China Harbour is contracted to DP World for the \$1.2 billion port expansion),³² China Merchant Port Holdings’ April 2020 acquisition of full ownership of the Port of Kingston, Jamaica,³³ and the role of PRC-based investors in the expansion of the port of Berbice, Guyana.³⁴ Chinese investors have also expressed interest in a multi-billion port, free trade zone and tourism project built around La Union, with El Salvador’s populist government.³⁵

Beyond transportation infrastructure, PRC projects also include a range of other types of connectivity, such as the generation and transmission of electricity. The PRC’s increasingly dominant role in the Latin American electricity sector,³⁶ especially in renewable energy, is particularly relevant for the US and this committee, insofar as such position sets up the PRC and its companies to disproportionately benefit from US funding of green energy development in the region, if proper care is not taken in how such deals are structured.

China’s significant and growing role in the region’s electricity sector includes construction of six hydroelectric facilities in Ecuador,³⁷ three in Bolivia,³⁸ two in Honduras³⁹ and ownership of the Chaglla hydroelectric facility in Peru.⁴⁰

Even while the PRC has played an increasingly significant role in hydroelectric projects in the region, the record of its companies on project quality, performance, community relations and the environment has been problematic at best. The \$2.2 billion Coca Coda Sinclair dam in Ecuador, built by the PRC-based firm Sinohydro in troublesome proximity to an active volcano, had hundreds of identified engineering defects,⁴¹ including over 7,600 cracks.⁴² Its construction had an impact so severe on the region’s hydrology that it caused the re-routing of the Coca river,⁴³ leading to the rupture of one of Ecuador’s major oil export pipelines, spilling 15,000 gallons of petroleum,

affecting 150,000 people.⁴⁴ Nor was this the first such problem for Chinese hydroelectric facility builders, even in Ecuador.⁴⁵ China Water and Electric was fined and removed from the Toachi-Pilaton project for poor performance,⁴⁶ while China National Electric Engineering Company was similarly fired from the Mazar Dudas and Quijos projects.⁴⁷

In solar and wind energy, PRC-based companies are involved with the two largest photovoltaic projects in the region: the Cauchari photovoltaic complex in Jujuy Argentina,⁴⁸ with a new phase agreed to during Argentine President Alberto Fernandez' visit to China in January 2022,⁴⁹ as well as a \$1 billion, 1.1 Gigawatt solar project being expanded by Chinese firms near Açu, Brazil.⁵⁰ Other examples of new Chinese wind and solar projects include the Potrero del Clavillo-El Naranjal solar and wind farm, and the Cerro Arauco wind/solar park in La Rioja, Argentina,⁵¹ both advanced by Argentine President Fernandez January 2022 state visit to China.

In nuclear energy, Argentina's government has contracted China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) for an \$8 billion project to build a new design Hualong-1 nuclear reactor in the Atucha nuclear complex.⁵² Given repeated PRC problems with quality, safety and performance on its projects in the hydroelectric and other sectors, it is chilling that CNNC's Argentine venture will be the first time it has attempted to build this relatively new reactor design outside of the PRC.⁵³ In addition, PRC-based companies have previously expressed interest in building a nuclear reactor in the Angra complex in Brazil,⁵⁴ something that could become more realistic if, as expected, the Workers Party and its candidate Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva return to power there in this October's national elections.

With respect to electricity transmission, beginning in 2010,⁵⁵ Chinese companies State Grid, China Three Gorges, and State Power Industrial Corporation (SPIC) have invested tens of billions of dollars in electrical transmission infrastructure in Brazil.⁵⁶ In Peru, Chinese companies hold approximately half of power distribution capabilities in the greater Lima area, following the \$3.6 billion, 2020 acquisition of Luz del Sur by Yangtze Power.⁵⁷ In Chile, five major Chinese acquisitions in recent years, including the purchases of Compañía General de Electricidad (CGE), Transelec, Atiaia, Pacific Hydro, and Chilquinta,⁵⁸ together give PRC-based companies control of an unprecedented 57% of the country's electricity distribution capacity.⁵⁹ Chinese companies are now moving forward with important electricity transmission and distribution projects, including a \$191 million high voltage connection from Tacuarembó to Salta, Uruguay,⁶⁰ plus \$1.1 billion in work for State Grid on the power grid of Buenos Aires.⁶¹

Beyond electricity, the PRC's increasing and multidimensional role in the connectivity of the region further includes telecommunications. That advance includes the much-discussed role of Chinese components and solutions in 5G architectures currently being rolled out across the region,⁶² such as Huawei's pilot "5G city" project in Curitiba, Brazil.⁶³ It also includes more than twenty years of growth and learning in the region by Huawei, ZTE, and other PRC-based companies in supplying a range of components to the region's telecommunications architectures, from phones to servers and routers to fiber optic connectivity.⁶⁴

Beyond telecommunications as a form of digital connectivity, PRC-based companies also play a significant and growing role in the region in a broad range of eCommerce activities. These include Jack Ma's Alibaba, Fintech companies with partial Chinese ownership such as NuBank,⁶⁵ as well as China-based non-traditional banking firms such as Fosun.⁶⁶

The PRC further has a significant and expanding role in Latin America-based space architectures and space cooperation. The PRC has built and launched a communication relay satellite and two earth observation satellites for Venezuela,⁶⁷ as well as a communications relay satellite for Bolivia,⁶⁸ and a microsatellite, Pegasus, for Ecuador's prior populist government. PRC-based companies have also played a key role in the outfitting ground control facilities for those satellites and the training of their space-oriented personnel.

In Brazil, the PRC has collaborated in building, and has launched, 5 satellites under the China-Brazil Earth Research Satellite program.⁶⁹ Indeed, the latest such launch occurred in December 2019 during the administration of China-skeptic Jair Bolsonaro.⁷⁰

The PRC has further built a deep-space radar facility in Neuquén, operated by personnel of the People's Liberation Army (relatively standard for Chinese space operations),⁷¹ but with only sporadic access by Argentine government personnel.⁷² While the facility appears consistent with the needs of PRC lunar and other deep space missions to maintain communication with objects under a rotating earth, it has the potential to capture communications from other satellites in orbits that pass over it.⁷³

Chinese space-sector activities in Latin America also include Argentina's participation via ground communication facilities, in its Beidou satellite-based global navigation system,⁷⁴ as well as a PRC launch of remote sensing satellites, made by the firm Satellogic for Argentina.⁷⁵

In short, PRC-based companies play an increasing role in the connectivity that underlies the very fabric of almost every dimension of Latin American economies.

China's expanding presence in such connectivity is a concern for two reasons: First, PRC-based companies have consistently shown a disposition to leverage participation in one area, to advance the interest of Chinese companies in others, often with the facilitation of the PRC government. As a consequence, the strategic dominance of Latin America's connectivity by PRC-based companies positions them to advance their position across a range of other parts of the region, capturing the associated value added for their benefit.

Second, the increasing presence of PRC-based companies in the region's digital infrastructure significantly expands risks of intelligence exploitation by the Chinese against both government and commercial targets. While PRC-based companies such as Huawei may claim that they would never turn over their user's data to the Chinese government,⁷⁶ such claims are contradicted by the PRC laws to which they are subject. Specifically, the PRC's 2017 National Security Law obligates its companies to hand over information deemed relevant to PRC security.⁷⁷ Moreover, the PRC has a long history of intellectual property theft against Western companies, and the government has been publicly called out by the US Justice Department for turning a blind eye to cyberespionage against commercial targets outside the PRC.⁷⁸ As an example, in December 2021, Microsoft froze the accounts of the Chinese cyber-hacking group Nickel, whose targets included companies in 16 Latin American countries.⁷⁹

The opportunity for the PRC to access sensitive government, commercial and personal data from Latin American and Caribbean digital networks is only increasing. In addition to the previously noted ubiquitous Chinese presence in telecommunications and space, other vulnerabilities include the expanding footprint in the region of the Chinese rideshare company DiDi Chuxing, which currently has approximately half of the ride-share market in Latin America, operating in Mexico,⁸⁰

Brazil,⁸¹ Colombia,⁸² Chile,⁸³ and the Dominican Republic.⁸⁴ The potential risks posed by Didi was publicly expressed in a letter by six members of this Congress to senior members of the Biden administration,⁸⁵ as well as reflected in an investigation into DiDi, publicly acknowledged by the Defense Department.⁸⁶

Vulnerabilities to potential Chinese government and commercial espionage further include the increasing presence of Chinese surveillance and control systems across the region. At the national level, these include ECU-911 in Ecuador and BOL-110 in Bolivia, among others. In Mexico, in January 2022, the PRC-based Hikvision took over Syscom, Mexico's largest telecommunications and security systems company.⁸⁷

Other risks include the increasingly ubiquitous role of Chinese scanner technology in airports and other sensitive sites across the region, such as that owned by the Chinese firm Nutech. Such technology, if accessible to the PRC through backdoors and digital connectivity, potentially provides those with access to the objects scanned, including computers, smartphones and other electronic devices, the potential ability to compromise them.⁸⁸

In yet another dimension of the challenge, smart cities offerings from PRC-based companies are proliferating in the region.⁸⁹ As with other digital technologies, if there is the possibility of remote access to this data through backdoors, or even processing of the data on remote PRC-based servers, such systems potentially provide the PRC-affiliated operators access to sensitive financial, location, movement and other personal data of millions of the region's residents, including its government officials and corporate executives. PRC-based companies currently have smart cities initiatives in at least seven Latin American countries: Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.

Vulnerabilities from the expanding PRC digital footprint in the region also include the proliferation of Chinese-run data centers across the region. These manage sensitive personal, corporate and even government data. Huawei, for example operates data centers in at least three Latin American countries: Mexico, Chile and Brazil,⁹⁰ where the Chinese firm Tencent also operates a data center since November 2021.⁹¹ Indeed, in Chile, the PRC-based company *Aisino* almost won the right to manage the country's entire Civil Registry.⁹²

PRC Use of Institutions in its Strategy

PRC engagement with Latin American and Caribbean institutions is a key supporting element of its strategy there. As seen in other parts of the world as well, the PRC works with institutions in the region to neutralize opposition to its advance, and where possible, coopt those institutions to facilitate the advance of PRC interests. This pattern can be seen in China's leveraging of the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB), since it joined the institution in January 2009. Beyond a notable decrease in the critical tone of the IADB's analytical products since the PRC became part of the IADB Board, the institution's increasingly cozy relationship with the PRC included an attempt by the PRC to host a 2019 executive meeting of the bank's directors in Chengdu, China. The initiative ultimately fell through when the PRC refused to respect the wishes of its Latin American board members, by not giving an official visa to attend the meeting to Ricardo Hausmann, the representative of the de jure Venezuelan government of Juan Guaido, ultimately leading to board to cancel the meeting in Chengdu.⁹³

The PRC has also worked with the IADB to set up a “co-financing fund” in parallel with Chinese banks, for projects of interest to Chinese companies.⁹⁴ In May 2021, the bank’s current President Mauricio Claver-Carone spoke out against the PRC’s use of its role in the IADB to win a disproportionate share of contracts for PRC-based firms.⁹⁵

The PRC’s key multilateral tool for engagement with the region has been the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). Although the PRC has been an active observer member at the Organization of American States (OAS) since 2004,⁹⁶ it has arguably chosen CELAC to advance its agenda because the body brings together the entirety of the region while excluding the United States and Canada. The PRC also arguably favors CELAC due to the organization’s lack of a permanent secretariat or other standing bureaucracy, the absence of which facilitates the PRC’s ability to advance its own agenda through the institution, while minimizing the risk that its Latin American partners in the organization will be able to effectively coordinate a collective bargaining position toward China to advance their own interests.

The PRC has used its interactions with CELAC to create a broad range of vehicles for interacting with the region, including 22 official “China-CELAC forums.”⁹⁷ Such venues allow the PRC to engage with the region on a range of issues from telecommunications to biotechnology, to agriculture to infrastructure to space to local government, among other areas.

In December 2022, at the 3rd triannual China-CELAC summit, the PRC published the 2022-2024 China-CELAC plan for its engagement in the coming years.⁹⁸ Although the intentions behind PRC proclamations in such documents are not always clear, and while not all of its commitments may produce tangible results, the 2022-2024 China-CELAC plan, like the 2015-2019 plan⁹⁹ and 2019-2021 plan¹⁰⁰ which preceded it, provide some indication of PRC priorities for engaging with the region. In the most recent plan, for example, the PRC expression of interest in working with Latin America in digital technologies, space, and renewable energy should be of interest to this Committee.

PRC Security Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean

PRC security engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean is openly acknowledged in its 2008¹⁰¹ and 2016¹⁰² policy white papers toward the region, and more indirectly in its 2015¹⁰³ and 2019 Defense Strategy White Papers.

The PRC is a significant, if not the largest, provider of military goods to the region, with authoritarian populist governments such as Venezuela, Ecuador under Rafael Correa, Bolivia under Evo Morales, and Peronist governments in Argentina being the region’s most important purchasers of Chinese arms.¹⁰⁴ Major deals have included the sale of K-8 fighter aircraft,¹⁰⁵ Y-8 and Y-12 military transports,¹⁰⁶ and JYL-1¹⁰⁷ and JY-27A radars to Venezuela;¹⁰⁸ the sale of six H-425/Z-9 helicopters¹⁰⁹ and 31 armored vehicles¹¹⁰ to the populist regime of Evo Morales in Bolivia, and the sale of radars, plus some 709 military trucks¹¹¹ and 10,000 rifles to the populist regime of Rafael Correa in Ecuador.¹¹²

The current Peronist government in Argentina has budgeted to acquire the Chinese FC-1/JF-17 fighter which, if the transaction occurs, would be the most advanced PRC-built aircraft sold to the region to date.¹¹³

Beyond populist states, PRC-based military goods companies have also sold 27 Type-90B truck-based multiple launch rocket system to Peru,¹¹⁴ as well as an offshore patrol vessel (OPV) to Trinidad and Tobago.¹¹⁵

The PRC also regularly sells or gifts less sophisticated equipment to militaries and police in the region.¹¹⁶ Examples include trucks, military construction equipment donated to the Guyana Defense Force in 2017,¹¹⁷ police cars donated to the Guyana Police Service that same year,¹¹⁸ 200 motorcycles donated to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in 2019,¹¹⁹ and 140 motorcycles and 8 ATVs donated to the Dominican Republic military and police that year,¹²⁰ among others.

Beyond arms sales, the People's Liberation Army has maintained a regular, if not continuous, presence in Latin America that is more significant than commonly recognized. It includes at least three separate multi-port visits by the PLA hospital ship Peace Arc in 2011, 2015, and 2018-2019,¹²¹ participation of PLA military police for eight years in the MINISTUH peacekeeping operation in Haiti,¹²² PLA attendance at elite Latin American military schools such as the Lancers course in Colombia,¹²³ the Jungle Warfare Course¹²⁴ and the renowned military peacekeeping institute CCOPAB¹²⁵ in Brazil. It also includes regular institutional visits by PLA personnel to virtually every country in the region that the PRC recognizes.

In the military portion of the PRC's "people-to-people" diplomacy, PLA leaders have visited the region at least 200 times in the past two decades.¹²⁶ Reciprocally, the PRC also regularly brings Latin American defense and police officials to China for training and military education activities, not unlike what it does with other Latin American government, business, and academic figures, as noted earlier. Prominent military examples include bringing Latin American and Caribbean armed forces personnel to the three to five-week training courses that the PLA conducts in its National Defense University in Changping, inviting students to its select year-long Army and Navy Command and General Staff programs in the greater Nanjing area,¹²⁷ and bringing Latin American cadets into its regular military academy, among other activities.

I do not expect the PRC in the near term to seek a formal military alliance agreement or military base, as it did in Djibouti, in Africa.¹²⁸ This is not because of PRC benevolence or peaceful intent, but rather, because, given the cost and provocative effect of bases and military alliances, it has only made such commitment when its growing capabilities and global military reach were adequate to defend them. The PRC is not yet in such a position to do so in the Western Hemisphere.

Despite likely PRC restraint in pursuing military bases in the Western Hemisphere, as in other areas, it is adept in advancing incrementally by cautiously "testing the waters." To this end, it was significant that the PRC expressed interest in participating in a \$300 million polar logistics base being constructed by the Argentine military in the extreme south of that country, in Ushuaia.¹²⁹ The Argentine government currently indicates that the PRC will not be involved in its construction or operation of such a base, but it is important to keep attention on the matter.

Whether or not the PRC overtly seeks a military base in the Western Hemisphere, it is logical that officials within the PLA plan for how they would fight a global conflict with the United States or other Western powers if called upon to do so. It is thus not unthinkable that the PLA analyzes how they could leverage their commercial and military presence and relationships in the Western Hemisphere in such time of conflict, and what they could do now, to do so more effectively in the future.

Options for the PLA in operating in the Western Hemisphere in the context of a future conflict with the US could include deploying intelligence assets or special forces into the region to create diversionary crises, or to put US deployment and sustainment flows and the US homeland itself at risk.

If, in the context of a war with the PRC, the United States suffered grave losses in the opening phase, such as the sinking of multiple aircraft carriers and other capital ships, it is not inconceivable that some regimes hostile to the US in the Western Hemisphere could conclude that the US might not be willing to incur the high costs and nuclear escalation risks to pursue a protracted conflict with the PRC to complete victory. From such a conclusion, those anti-US regimes might decide that now was the time to set themselves up for a future payoff by “betting on the PRC.” If, in that context, one or more such regime decided (or were obliged to) grant the PRC access to their ports, airfields, and other facilities, the knowledge of those militaries and relationships with them that the PRC has today would play a major role in how rapidly and effectively the PLA could make use of those facilities to threaten the US homeland.

The Role of PRC Soft Power in Advancing its Strategic Objectives

PRC influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is significant. A February American University survey of Latin American opinion leaders, for example, found that 78% of those surveyed believed China’s influence in Latin America to be high, and 86% saw its influence on the Latin American economies as high.¹³⁰

Despite such indicators, the nature of PRC influence, is arguably often misleadingly compared with the very different bases of US soft power in the region. The latter, as discussed by authors such as Joseph Nye,¹³¹ is primarily built on consensus and affinity, the identification of our Latin American neighbors with the US or principles such as democracy, human rights and free markets. In a similar fashion, a non-trivial number of Latin Americans find elements of Chinese culture and work ethic worth emulating. Perhaps more concerning, some in the region draw lessons from the PRC’s authoritarianism and state led predatory economic approach in confronting challenges of development, insecurity, or disorder in their own societies.¹³²

The PRC’s greatest “soft power” influence comes from the expectation of gain, on the state, company and sometimes personal level, from potential access to the PRC market, or being a partner or beneficiary in a Chinese project locally.¹³³ As an illustration, Peru’s Attorney General’s office is currently investigating irregularities in the granting of 15 contracts to Chinese firms under the current government of Pedro Castillo.¹³⁴

Importantly, such benefits-based PRC influence coexists with distrust by Latin American elites who understand that the Chinese can be predatory partners, yet downplay US warnings, believing that they can manage the risk in order to reap the associated rewards. More dangerously, some find it convenient to dismiss US concerns as mere “great power competition,” so that they can take the Chinese money,¹³⁵ to their gain, although often to the detriment of their countries.

People-to-people diplomacy is an area in which the Chinese arguably secure important objectives. The PRC currently has 44 Confucius Institutes in the region, including eight in the sparsely populated Caribbean.¹³⁶ These Confucius Institutes principally act as gatekeepers, for attracting youth of the region oriented toward China, identifying those with the talent and perseverance in learning the mandarin language and Chinese script. The PRC government offers the most

promising of these students full scholarships, through the PRC cultural promotion organization Hanban, to study in the PRC. Because of the paucity of youth in the region with deep language of the Chinese language and country, those who graduate these programs often go on to become key technocrats and leaders in the China-facing portions of their Foreign Affairs and Commerce ministries, or in the PRC-oriented portion of the country's leading companies. As a result, a not insignificant portion of PRC-facing technocrats in Latin American governments come to owe their prestigious economic and bureaucratic positions to the PRC.

In the most recent 2022-2024 China-CELAC plan, the PRC committed some 5,000 scholarships for Latin American students, plus 3,000 "work opportunities,"¹³⁷ This commitment was the continuation of the 6,000 scholarships for Latin Americans that the PRC committed to in the 2015-2019 plan,¹³⁸ and the 6,000 it offered in the 2019-2021 plan.¹³⁹

However concerning, such scholarships only touch the surface of the insidious challenge of PRC "people-to-people diplomacy. Beyond Confucius Institutes and associated Hanban scholarships, PRC outreach includes a significant, if unknown number of engagements in which agents of the PRC government and/or Chinese Communist party bring the region's leading China-facing academics, think-tank professionals, businesspersons, journalists and even politicians to the country for luxurious trips built around the façade of academic exchanges. These include both individual events and collective gatherings such as the China-Latin America Think Tank Forum. The International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party plays a key role in such outreach, both in bringing senior Latin American Congresspersons and political leaders over to the PRC and working with key Latin American elites in their own country as de facto lobbyists, whether trying to persuade their governments to flip recognition from Taiwan to the PRC or coordinating on other political or economic matters of interest to the PRC.¹⁴⁰

China as an Incubator of Authoritarian Populism

With respect to the strategic political effects of PRC engagement with the region, the dynamic that most concerns me is the inadvertent, sometimes deliberate role of the PRC as an *"incubator of authoritarian populism" as the Chinese government, Communist Party and PRC-based companies pursue their interest in the region.*

To be clear, the populist authoritarian governments that have come to power in Latin America to date, including Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, have done so by exploiting discontent with the inability of their predecessors to effectively address endemic corruption, inequality, insecurity, and disappointing economic performance in their societies. Once in power, however, as those populist governments followed an often Cuban and Chavista-inspired path to hijack democratic institutions, consolidate power, and move against the private sector and free press, they have been aided in that effort by the ability to leverage PRC resources in the form of purchases of their commodities, associated loans, and occasional investments, to keep them afloat. In borrowing alone, as Chavez in Venezuela, Correa in Ecuador and Morales in Bolivia consolidated their power, PRC-based policy banks provided those governments \$62.2 billion, \$18.4 billion, and \$3.4 billion respectively.¹⁴¹

Skeptics who see populist regimes as naive business ventures for PRC-based companies miss the point; in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, and as documented by an excellent Vanderbilt University study on 100 Chinese debt contracts with foreign governments, PRC-based companies have proven adept at structuring deals in ways that ensure that they get paid¹⁴² even while imposing

questionable constraints on the sovereign decisions of their partners,¹⁴³ and even as the populists have defaulted on everyone else. In the end, dealing with such regimes has arguably been difficult for the PRC-based companies involved, including problems on a range of issues from contract completion to personal security. Nonetheless, such engagements have also been beneficial for those companies. They have arguably secured favorable deals negotiating terms with politically receptive, isolated regimes, in often non-transparent government-to-government interactions in which their populist counterparts have brought political loyalists rather than knowledgeable technocrats to the table.

In the ongoing relationship, the Chinese, for their part, have reciprocally provided benefits to their populist authoritarian friends that help them maintain themselves in power. This includes selling Venezuela the armored vehicles used to repress democratic protesters, based on the industry using such vehicles to help the PRC repress its own population. Examples include the VN-4s and “Rhino” armored vehicles used in May 2019 to crush democratic protesters,¹⁴⁴ as well as those with unfolding barricade doors, used in January 2020 to wall off access to the Venezuelan Congress and shut out Juan Guaido and other democratically elected members of Venezuela’s Congress.

PRC-based companies have also provided technologies to help authoritarian partners in the region monitor and control their populations, just as the PRC controls its own.¹⁴⁵ Recent examples include support to the de facto Maduro regime in Venezuela from the Chinese electronics company CEIEC to spy on de jure President Guaido and his political supporters,¹⁴⁶ implementation by Chinese telecommunication firm ZTE of the Fatherland Identity Card system,¹⁴⁷ which the government made obligatory not only to vote, but also to obtain rations of scarce foodstuffs and other basic goods (the famous “CLAP”) boxes,¹⁴⁸ and to receive scarce Chinese and Russian vaccines against Covid-19.¹⁴⁹

In Cuba, Chinese telephones and data management systems supplied by Huawei to the state telecommunications firm ETECSA, based on the same technologies the PRC uses to control its own population,¹⁵⁰ proved instrumental in the Cuban government’s response to unprecedented nationwide protests in July 2021,¹⁵¹ by digitally isolating the protesters from each other, and from the outside world.¹⁵²

The collective result of such economic, military and technical support to the PRC’s populist authoritarian friends has arguably been the extended survival of their regimes. In the process the PRC has contributed to a hemisphere with fewer democratic governments, ever less disposed to cooperate with the United States on issues important to our security from transnational organized crime to migration, to corruption and human rights.

The PRC Diplomatic Struggle with Taiwan

Since the election of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government in Taiwan in January 2016, the PRC has resumed efforts to actively persuade governments in the region to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. It has done so by offering a range of financial and other incentives, often working through its Chinese Communist Party-sponsored “United Front” organizations in the targeted countries.¹⁵³

The abandonment of Taiwan by the Panamanian government of Juan Carlos Varela in June 2017, by the Dominican Republic government of Daniel Medina in May 2018, and by the Salvadoran

FMLN government of Salvador Sanchez Ceren in August 2018, was consistent with the pattern observed in the prior the flip by the Costa Rican government of Oscar Arias in May 2007. In each case, the change was not only diplomatic, but facilitated the significant expansion of PRC activities in the country through the signing of (often non-transparent) Memorandums of Understanding opening the recognizing country to activities by PRC-based countries in key sectors such as electricity, telecommunications and construction, even by buying-off politically well-connected elites by facilitating PRC purchases of limited quantities of the traditional exports of that country, such as fruit or coffee, often connected to those well-connected elites.

In the cases of Panama, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, the firm response to the changes by then-US ambassador to El Salvador Jean Manes, including the recall of US senior diplomats from the three for consultations, arguably led to both the PRC and its partners in the region to proceed with greater caution. That caution was reinforced by the election of more US-oriented governments in both Panama (Nito Cortizo, elected in May 2019) and in the Dominican Republic (Luis Abinader, elected in July 2020). In each case, the incoming governments, more attentive to US concerns, facilitated reviews of some of the more questionable deals with the PRC signed by their predecessors. Nonetheless, each ultimately continued to engage economically with the PRC and its companies in the areas where it made sense. Further delaying the PRC advance in these cases, the Covid-19 pandemic also impeded the ability of the PRC to proceed with some of its promised investments. As the region pushes beyond Covid-19, China is positioned to make important economic advances in each. In Panama, for example, China Harbour is set to continue previously suspended work on the fourth bridge over the Panama Canal this year.¹⁵⁴

In the case of Nicaragua's December 2021 recognition of the PRC, the PRC has moved with unusual caution in announcing major new projects and agreements. Nonetheless, the reappearance of Chinese Nicaragua Canal promoter Wang Jing in November 2021, shortly before the change,¹⁵⁵ coupled with Wang's close relationship with the Ortegas' son Laureano, who led the delegation to Tianjin China to negotiate Nicaragua's flip to the PRC,¹⁵⁶ makes it likely that Wang Jing's reappearance means that some Nicaragua Canal-related Chinese investments could be part of the path forward for that country.

In Paraguay, President Mario Abdo-Benitez helped to publicly expose the PRC's unsuccessful attempt to change the country's diplomatic recognition to the PRC in exchange for expedited access to China's Covid-19 vaccines.¹⁵⁷

In Honduras, the campaign commitment of incoming President Xiomara Castro to recognize the PRC¹⁵⁸ makes it likely that its government could eventually flip as well, even though the President has committed not to do so for now.¹⁵⁹

The change in Honduras and/or Guatemala's diplomatic posture would then shift the strategic focus of PRC attention to the Caribbean Basin, where all remaining states recognizing the PRC with the exception of Paraguay would then be located.

In the Caribbean, Haiti is particularly vulnerable to flip, with the mentioned Presidential replacements to the current interim government of Ariel Henry expressing interest in relations with the PRC. The government of St. Lucia, whose present Labor Party government previously recognized the PRC, is also arguably vulnerable to change if it sees a plurality of its neighbors are doing so as well.¹⁶⁰

PRC diplomatic advance is important not only because it opens the door for an associated expansion of economic and other influence, but also because it is destabilizing to the status quo in Asia. As the number of states in the world that recognize Taiwan decrease toward zero, amidst ever increasing PRC military superiority over its island neighbor, the temptation for the PRC to forcibly incorporate Taiwan into its territory, and the prospect of an associated conflict that could involve the United States, and possibly nuclear weapons, grows.¹⁶¹

The PRC's Special and Increasing Attention to the Caribbean

The ongoing PRC efforts to reorient the global economy and institutions to its benefit, as well as China's struggle to diplomatically isolate Taiwan, and PLA preparations for the possibility of an eventual conflict with the United States all lead to a particular PRC interest in the Caribbean.

For the PRC, the Caribbean has particular importance, as the southeastern maritime approach to the United States which is at the same time, a key logistics hub for the US economy, and the location of the vast majority of the countries in the hemisphere that continue to diplomatically recognize Taiwan.

The PRC wishes to have a strong economic and political presence in the subregion without provoking the United States, for the same reason that it wishes to exclude rival powers such as the United States from the strikingly similar strategic geography that its own southeastern maritime approach, including the straits of Malacca. It is thus not surprising that in its 2022-2024 plan for engagement with the region, the PRC gave particular, if largely unrecognized, attention to the "small island states" of the region.¹⁶²

The fact that the PRC has located eight of its 44 Confucius Institutes in the Caribbean is out of proportion to the relative population of the region and the size of its economies, as is the number of ports, highway projects and tourism investments that it maintains there. Operations of note include the previously mentioned three PRC port operations in the Bahamas, the China Merchant Port operation in Kingston,¹⁶³ port work in Berbice, Guyana,¹⁶⁴ the \$4.2 billion Baha Mar tourist resort,¹⁶⁵ over \$1 billion of highway projects in tiny Jamaica alone,¹⁶⁶ the Amaila Falls hydroelectric facility and multiple infrastructure projects in Guyana, interest in the Atlantic LNG refinery in Trinidad and Tobago,¹⁶⁷ and plans by China Harbour to construct a drydock there,¹⁶⁸ just to name a few.

It is also arguably not by coincidence that a significant portion of the PLA military engagement detailed previously has occurred in the Caribbean, including the PRC's 8-year deployment of military police to Haiti under MINUSTAH, its frequent gifts of vehicles and equipment to Caribbean defense and police forces, its sponsorship of training and institutional visits by their leaders to the PRC, and its inclusion of multiple Caribbean port calls in each of the three deployments of its military hospital ship to the region.

PRC Coordination with US Adversaries

Due to the PRC's strategic economic interests in access to sources of supply, markets, and technologies, it has generally attempted to disassociate itself from provocative statements and actions by anti-US regimes in the region such as those by the Hugo Chavez and Nicholas Maduro regimes in Venezuela. Nonetheless, the PRC strategically benefits from the survival of such regimes, which both distract its rival the US,¹⁶⁹ and undermines the prevalence of region-wide consensus on a Western-style democratic rules-based order that would benefit the US. Thus,

insofar as authoritarian populist governments take reasonable steps to protect the interests of PRC-based companies and pay off past debts, the PRC has not been in a hurry to help the US to bring about more responsible, less criminal forms of government in these countries,¹⁷⁰ even as the PRC simultaneously works to maintain the impression that it is cooperating with the US.

With respect to Russia and Iran, there are few overt indications that the PRC cooperates overtly with those governments in Latin America in the ways that it sometimes does in other parts of the world.¹⁷¹ Nonetheless, as with in-region US adversaries such as Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, the PRC strategically benefits from Russia's provocative actions in the region, such as its periodic deployment of nuclear-capable Tu-160 backfire bombers and other military assets,¹⁷² and most recently, the threat by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov that the deployment of Russian forces to Venezuela or Cuba could not be ruled out,¹⁷³ followed by the March 2022 military cooperation agreement signed between Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov and his Venezuelan counterpart.¹⁷⁴

In the current Ukraine conflict, Russia's actions strategically benefit the PRC, insofar as they distract the West and force it to consume time and resources on matters other than responding to the PRC advance in the region (and globally), even while Russia's actions also weaken itself, making it more dependent on the PRC, including as a purchaser of Russian oil and foodstuffs, even while forcing it to work through the PRC for financial transactions as Russian banks lose access to the SWIFT system.¹⁷⁵ Russia's military campaign in the Ukraine, as well as western sanctions and other actions against Russia further allow the PRC to observe Russian vulnerabilities, in order to minimize its own vulnerabilities to a likely similar Western response if, as is possible in the coming years, the PRC attempts to incorporate Taiwan into its territory.

Such benefits to the PRC notwithstanding, it is nonetheless hurt to some degree by the effects of the international crisis in the prices of petroleum and food, both of which the PRC must import in significant quantities, as well as the fragility of the global economy and financial system in general, upon which demand for Chinese products, and other aspects of the PRC economy depends.

Finally, in Latin America, as elsewhere, the war in the Ukraine arguably forces the PRC to proceed more cautiously, due to its desire not to be associated with Russian aggression, particularly after having made uncharacteristically strong statement with Vladimir Putin in Beijing during the Olympics, before the degree of Putin's mismanagement of the Ukraine invasion, and the associated brutality of Russian actions against civilian populations and associated war crimes,¹⁷⁶ was exposed.

The US Response and Areas for Improvement

In my research and writings since the early 2000s on Chinese engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean, I have observed the US response evolve from concerned observation to stronger actions and messaging to our partners. I have seen good and creative initiatives under both Republican and Democratic administrations, but believe that we have consistently been lacking in four areas:

- (1) An adequate and sustained level of resources for both strategic thinking, and economic, security and other engagement in the Western hemisphere, given its enormous importance to US prosperity and security.

- (2) Adequate data for our leaders in Congress, the President and his or her senior representatives, the State Department, the Defense Department, and other federal agencies to support their engagements with Latin American and Caribbean publics about the relative performance of and behaviors of concern by PRC-based companies, as well as the PRC state and its intelligence services in the region.
- (3) An appropriate combination of flexibility and resources, within specific US government organizations, such as the Development Finance Corporation, USAID, Commerce, and the Defense Department, to better empower them to provide timely, attractive alternatives to often predatory or risky partner engagements with the PRC; and
- (4) Effective coordination at the Federal agency level, beyond policy documents, in formulating integrated whole-of-government initiatives to respond to the PRC challenge.

Recommendations for US Strategy and Policy

Pursuant to my observations in this hearing thus far, in my personal capacity as an analyst, I respectfully offer my recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of the US response to PRC activities in Latin America and the Caribbean:

1. Do not seek to block our Latin American and Caribbean partners from routine commercial and political engagement with the PRC so long as they are transparent, conducted in accordance with the rule-of-law and a level playing field, even if the results occasionally make us uncomfortable. Attempting to do so is both not realistic and would likely generate resentment and a counterproductive response from our partners.
2. Do more to ensure that the interactions between our partners and the PRC that do occur are indeed conducted with transparency, in a rule-of-law framework on a level playing field, and through strong partner government and regional institutions. Doing so has both a component of *persuading* our partners, and one of *enabling* them.
 - a. On the persuasion side, the US should do more with interagency efforts to discourage partners from engaging in the types of back-room, government-to-government deals with the PRC and its companies that may benefit the PRC and partner representatives signing the deal, but not their countries. Tools that the US can use more aggressively to discourage bad partner behavior in this area include State Department public diplomacy and visa policy (and associated sanctions), Treasury OFAC sanctions, and US Justice Department Investigations targeted at individuals engaged in illegal behavior, where merited.
 - b. On the enabling side, the US should expand and resource State Department-led programs to strengthen our partners institutions and processes, including anti-corruption initiatives, project planning support to partner nations, contract evaluation, and enforcement of environmental, labor and other partner laws on the back end. Such initiatives will not “keep the Chinese out of Latin America,” but

rather, will help channel that engagement in ways that is most healthy for our partners and the region, while better positioning the US as helping our partners succeed, as a reflection of the joint stake that we have in the prosperity of our common neighborhood, the Western Hemisphere.

3. In areas of digital technologies, where the presence of untrusted PRC-based vendors could compromise government and leader personal information undermining the ability of our partners to make sovereign decisions, the US should make explicit efforts to keep PRC-based entities out, leveraging whole-of-government tools. Such efforts could include making clear our need to stop sharing certain types of intelligence information if our partners' incorporation of PRC-based vendors such as Huawei cause their networks to become untrustworthy. Similarly, we can explain our inability to promote certain investment programs where such partner incorporation of Chinese vendors into their networks would make the intellectual property of the investing entity vulnerable. In applying such pressures, however, we must both be more effective in communicating to our partner and the broader community "why" we are doing such things. Moreover, where possible, the US should also work to ensure the viability of alternative solutions from US-based companies. Where there are not such viable solutions, it should work with like-minded democratic partners to identify alternatives from trusted companies in democratic partner nations, respectful of privacy and intellectual property rights, such as Ericsson or Nokia.
4. With respect to information, the US should do more to ensure the creation of both government and other databases on the performance of PRC-based companies relative to their competitors. Such efforts could collect data on associated issues of contract disputes involving PRC-based companies, conflicts with affected communities and workers, and non-compliance with labor, environmental and other commitments. The collection of data should also include evidence of dissatisfaction with the managerial practices of PRC-based companies operating in the region, and cases of intellectual property theft by those companies from their competitors. It could also usefully include information about Latin American and Caribbean politicians and other government officials from the region who go to the PRC on trips sponsored by its government. Data collection efforts should also include the identification of senior leaders in the China-facing portions Latin American Foreign and Commerce ministries and PRC-relevant regulatory organizations who have received their education in the PRC, or other significant benefits from the country. Data collection should similarly include PRC military and other security sector activities in countries the region, including specific military and police leaders receiving PRC-funded trips, abusive activities by PRC diplomats in the region, and cyberespionage and cyber-hacking tied to the PRC government and its companies. Such information should be available to support both interactions by US senior leaders with our partners, as well as US public diplomacy and engagement with our neighboring nations more broadly, so that the US can talk more credibly and empirically with them about the risks of engagement with the PRC.

5. With respect to resources, laws and regulations, I respectfully submit that not only does the US need to significantly expand resources dedicated to this hemisphere to effectively compete, but we also must re-think some of the rules which constrain our agility to do so. I applaud the Development Finance Corporation as a powerful potential tool in competing with the PRC yet perceive that it has become excessively constrained by limits regarding the income level of the countries that it can engage with and the types of projects that it can support, at the cost of paralyzing the DFC role as an effective tool for channeling private sector resources to provide healthy, transparent alternatives to PRC funds. In a similar fashion, US military education and training programs (IMET) and other DoD security assistance engagement build invaluable relationships and offer powerful incentives for our partners to not engage with the PRC in ways that undercut their ability to work with us in the security realm. Such programs also help us to help our partners succeed in controlling the corrupting influences of narco-trafficking and other criminal organizations, which is good not only for the US, but helps our neighbors show their people that democratic governance works. In the process, their success helps to keep at bay authoritarian populist alternatives to democracy that also serve to open the door to problematic types of engagement with the PRC, among other difficulties. Yet as with DFC, Title X DoD security assistance funding, and in particular, Section 333 activities, are arguably hampered with an excess of requirements that limit DoD agility in adapting our engagements to the needs of our partners.
6. With respect to the broad messaging themes of US public diplomacy involving the PRC in Latin America, I believe that Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, including its indefensible tactics and war crimes,¹⁷⁷ in conjunction with the PRC statement of solidarity with Russia in on the eve of its invasion (a friendship that "knows no limits")¹⁷⁸ creates an opportunity for the United States to remind the world that democracy, human rights, and legal commitments must mean something, if the global institutional order that has brought today's security and prosperity is to remain viable. The war unleashed by Vladimir Putin's ambitions in the Ukraine lays bare the implications of the PRC attempt to assert moral neutrality "types of democracy," and reminds us a world in which nothing can be declared bad, ultimately leads to a violent, insecure, Hobbesian chaos of "might makes right." In the same vein the PRC avoidance of condemning Russian aggression,¹⁷⁹ including Russia's killing of more than a thousand Ukrainian civilians¹⁸⁰ (and probably far more), deliberately destroying their cities, and brutally displacing more than ten million Ukrainians from their homes,¹⁸¹ even as the PRC profits commercially from Russia's international isolation, should lead us to remind our Latin American neighbors of past PRC statements of fraternity with the Ukrainian people, which sound remarkably similar to PRC rhetoric in Latin America, and ask, "Where is the PRC in Ukraine's hour of need today? Where will it be for you, when you are no longer useful to it?"
7. Finally, I believe that the upcoming June 2022 Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles is an important opportunity for the US government to leverage the lessons of Russia's Ukraine invasion, Covid-19, and other aspects of the shifting strategic environment in

Latin America to reach out to the region, whose conditions affect all of us, with a renewed spirit of partnership.

Distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your time and attention, and the opportunity to share my analysis with you today.

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