Military and other security sector engagement by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is an important, and officially acknowledged (Xinhua 2016) part of its broader engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean (Ellis 2019a). It has nonetheless played a relatively minor role in that broader engagement, compared to Chinese trade, loans to, and investment in the region. Moreover, owing in part to the Chinese government’s desire to avoid alarming the United States, the PRC has sought to conduct its military and security engagement in the region in a relatively low-key fashion, and has generally avoided actions that would overtly provoke the United States, such as formal military alliances and base agreement, or the sustained deployment of Chinese combat forces to the region.

The nature of Chinese military and security engagement in Latin America has evolved with the growth of Chinese power and the increasing self-confidence of its leadership, as well as with the expanding needs of China’s global commercial presence, and the diplomatic, military and other capabilities that the PRC has available to support it. Chinese arms sales and donations to the region, the presence of Chinese military forces, and the number of Latin American military personnel attending Chinese schools and training facilities is modest compared to U.S. military engagement in the region, yet cold-war style “side-by-side” comparisons miss the point, regarding how such activi-
ties support the advance of China’s broader strategic position in the hemisphere, as well as its global military capabilities.

Chinese military engagement, what such activities say about the “threat” posed by the PRC, or the absence thereof, and the relationship of those activities to PRC strategic objectives more broadly is arguably one of the most misunderstood facets of PRC activities in Latin America and its broader global activities.

This chapter examines the nature of PRC military and security engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean and its evolution during the first two decades of the 21st Century. It begins with an examination of PRC objectives in engaging with Latin America and the world shaping that engagement, and the role that the Chinese leadership employs its military and security activities to support those objectives. It builds on that base by examining trends in the evolution of PRC security engagement in the areas of arms sales, institutional visits, training and professional military education engagements, the presence of Chinese military forces in the region, police and law enforcement activities. It ends by examining how current changes in the strategic landscape with Covid-19 and the deepening of US-China competition may impact the objectives, opportunities, demands and limits of Chinese security engagement.

The object of this chapter is not to pass judgement on whether such engagement is good or bad, or serves a legitimate public purpose, but to cast light on an important dynamic about which very little has been written.

**PRC Objectives and the Role of Security Engagement Therein**

A key objective of PRC global engagement in the current interdependent global order, according to China’s own leaders and policy statements, is the construction of a powerful modern socialist state by 2049 (NCUSCR 2020). China has done so, in part, through a state-led mercantilist policy trading with and investing in the rest of the world, focused on value chains in which it acquires commodities from the rest of the world, realizes the value added of transforming them, selling the world its high value added products and services, and benefitting from
the returns to capital. Inherent in this model is dependence on the global flow of factor inputs and finished goods between China and the rest of the world, as well as the global operation of its companies to extract needed resources and foodstuffs, access markets, and build and operate the transportation, electrical, communications and other infrastructure required to make that system function (Ellis 2019a).

While the PRC is not frontally challenging the liberal international order, it seeks to benefit from it, while only adhering to its rules when obliged to do so, and with China’s expanding power, seeks to bend that order, and global institutions, to better serve PRC interests, often to the detriment of other international actors.

In the context of China’s pursuit of its largely economic strategic objectives, the role of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and other Chinese security forces includes defense of the Chinese homeland from rivals, which many in Chinese leadership presume will not accept the rise of Chinese power and the re-orientation of the global economy and institutional order to China’s benefit. As PRC dependence on global trade and the operation of its companies and nationals throughout the world has grown, alongside expanding Chinese power, the PLA has increasingly focused on supporting that global engagement. The need to evacuate over 32,000 Chinese nationals from Libya following the collapse of that nation’s pro-China regime arguably highlighted the vulnerability stemming from the increasing number of Chinese operations and personnel overseas (Collins and Erickson 2011). Key milestones in the PLA advance along the routes important to its global commerce include the conduct of counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia (Panda 2017), and the establishment of a base in Djibouti to support its far seas operations (Headley 2018). In 2015, the PLA formally acknowledged the relationship between China’s growing global commercial footprint, dependence on global trade, and the need for PLA to operate globally and maintain relations with the Armed Forces throughout the world in its National Defense Strategy White Paper (State Council/PRC 2015).

China’s military engagement in Latin America and the rest of the world serves multiple, generally complimentary purposes. Arms sales by its companies help to support the growth of China’s defense and technical industrial base (Ellis 2011). This includes improving the
quality of its weapons through producing them and working with local partners to make improvements. Selling and supporting their goods in Latin America and other parts of the world also gives Chinese arms companies such as NORINCO and AVIC feedback on the performance of their systems in a variety of different missions and operating environments, and contributes to their ability to provide maintenance, logistics, and training support to their systems in this broad array of environments and missions, in multiple languages. It also helps these Chinese companies to increase in sophistication as international actors, participating in competitive public bidding processes, arms shows, and engagements with foreign militaries. All of these benefits contribute to the ability of China’s military technical and industrial base to cost-effectively provide more and better arms to defend the Chinese homeland and to support China’s increasingly global military engagements, with a variety of partners, in many places, and under a variety of circumstances.

Beyond contributing to China’s military and technical industrial base and ability to support its systems and operate globally, the sale and donation of military equipment is part of the PRC’s broader global engagement, in which China’s economic, political, and security engagement are mutually reinforcing elements of its relationship and corresponding influence with each partner. Paralleling military-to-military relationships that the U.S., Russia, and European nations pursue with their partners, China’s sales and donation of security goods facilitates its construction of enduring relationships with partner militaries, to include creating opportunities for ongoing interactions to provide training, maintenance and logistics support for the systems, giving the PRC leverage with partner nation military personnel for years beyond the initial sale, while helping China to understand better the partner militaries structure, doctrine, strengths, and weaknesses, if the circumstance for operating with them, or in their country, arises in the future (Ellis 2017).

As with sales and donations of security equipment, PRC institutional visits, training and professional military engagements (PME) are a vehicle for the Chinese government to build relationships and associated influence with Latin American and Caribbean military institutions and their personnel at all levels. The persons brought to the PRC
for training on the operation, maintenance, support and management of the Chinese equipment can be both courted, and evaluated by Chinese intelligence for orientations and vulnerabilities that open doors to influence or obtain information from them at a later period in time. Training and PME engagements, like interactions associated with equipment sales and donations, also help the PLA to better understand these militaries as institutions, facilitating operations with them, or in their countries in the future (Ellis 2017).

Of the different types of PRC security engagements, PLA deployments to the region are arguably the riskiest, but make strong, direct contributions to PRC strategic aims. Such deployments, including training exercises, port calls, and participation in peacekeeping missions, help the PLA to experience and better understand the operating environment, while engaging with their counterparts on a larger scale in support of operating with these partners or in their countries in the future. Among the broad range of types of engagement, Hospital ship visits, and other medical or humanitarian engagement, provide some added benefit of generating goodwill with Latin American populations.

Beyond arms sales, donations, military deployments and interactions between the PLA and partner nation Armed Forces, PRC security engagement in the region increasingly involves partner nation police and other law enforcement organizations. The PRC acknowledged its support for such law enforcement engagement, including fighting organized crime, corruption and related challenges in the China-CELAC 2019–2021 plan (see: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil 2018). Such engagement plays an important role in China’s construction of multidimensional relationships and influence, due to the important challenge of crime and corruption among most of China’s Latin American partners, a challenge that is only likely to grow as trans-Pacific commerce continues to expand (Ellis 2012), and due to the economic stresses on the region from the Covid-19 pandemic (Ellis 2020a).

Building ties with Latin American law enforcement also positions the Chinese government to better protect Chinese companies and nationals as they have an expanding presence in the region. In addition, the expansion of illicit ties between Latin America and the PRC to include human trafficking involving Chinese gangs and communities in
the region (Gagne 2014), drug trafficking and movement of precursor chemicals and synthetic drugs like fentanyl (Asman 2019), transpacific money laundering, illegal mining, and contraband goods, all creates needs within Latin American governments for coordination with the PRC when such activities involve Chinese persons, companies, or institutions.

In general, China’s military and security engagement with Latin America has reflected an evolving balance between contradictory imperatives. On one hand, as noted previously, in recognition of its commercial and financial interdependence with the United States, and seeking to avoid unifying U.S. political leaders against China as a threat, the PRC has avoided provocative military engagements in the region such as formal base access agreements and formal alliances with regimes hostile to the United States. In this sense, China’s military engagement in Latin America generally does not directly challenge U.S. interests in the region in the way that less powerful U.S. geopolitical rivals such as Russia and Iran do through their engagement in the region. On the other hand, China’s growing commercial presence in Latin America, and the importance of trade with it, have increased the imperative for the PRC to build relationships with Latin American and Caribbean militaries and security forces to protect those companies and trade routes.

That balance has also continued to evolve with growing Chinese power and confidence, and with different Chinese leaders. Xi Jinping, presiding over a PRC with a much larger economy, military, and technology base, has demonstrated greater willingness than his predecessors to engage boldly with Latin American counterparts in security affairs, among other areas.

Arms Sales

Particularly in the past decade, Chinese arms companies have increased the breadth and sophistication of their offering to Latin American and Caribbean countries, and have become more adept in operating in the international arms sales arena, to include their regular presence at Latin American military trade shows such as LAAD, SitDef,
and Chile’s Fidae and Exponaval (Ellis 2018). Chinese companies have also become more sophisticated as participants in competitive and other public procurements, while increasing the quality of their product offering. Such advances have been particularly notable with respect to mid-level equipment, where China’s greatest inroads in Latin American markets have been at the expense of competitors such as Russia’s Rosboronexport, rather than to U.S. or European suppliers. Although the head of U.S. Southern Command estimated Chinese arms sales to the region over the preceding 5 years totaled a modest $615 million, he noted that the challenge posed is significantly increased when additionally considering PRC equipment donations, not included in sales figures, helping the PRC to build relationships and open doors in the region (Woody 2019).

As with China’s advance in other sectors strategically valued by the government, Chinese arms suppliers have generally sought to enter the market on the basis of cost, subsequently working to improve the quality of their equipment, technology, and support (see, inter alia, Ellis 2011).

The Chinese government has continued to use the donation of dual-use equipment such as military trucks, busses (Hernández 2018) and construction equipment to strengthen relationships with partners in the region, including police forces as well as militaries (Woody 2019). On the other hand, Chinese weapon sales to the region have continued to be impeded by questions about the quality of Chinese products and support. Reluctance by partner nations to offend the U.S. by purchasing or accepting donations of Chinese goods has also continued to impede such sales (Ellis 2013), particularly as the U.S. increased attention to Chinese advances in the region under the Trump Administration.

From approximately 2015, political changes in the region shut important doors to expanding purchases of Chinese goods, particularly governments more friendly to the U.S. in Argentina, Ecuador, and Bolivia, as well as the deepening political and economic collapse of Venezuela, China’s most important arms purchaser in the region.

Although Chinese companies had long been providing donations and sales of military clothing and gear and other items such as small arms and man-portable air defense weapons, the Venezuelan regime of
Hugo Chavez provided China’s first major opportunity to sell large quantities of sophisticated end items to the region. Notable examples included aircraft, with the sale of K-8 light jets (Israel 2010), used primarily in a training role, and Y-12 and Y-8 military transports (El Universal 2012). The sale of more sophisticated L-15 fighters were discussed (Malyasov 2015), but never completed. The populist Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez was also the first in the region to acquire Chinese military radars, purchasing 10 JYL-1 air defense radars in 2005. Such sales continued, with the purchase of 26 radars in 2014 (Infodefensa 2014). As late as 2019, as the regime of Nicholas Maduro weathered economic and political collapse, the Venezuelan military took delivery on PRC long-range JY-27A air defense radars (Infodefensa 2019).

With respect to ground equipment, Venezuela purchased a range of armored vehicles initially for the Naval Infantry, but later for the Bolivarian National Guard, subsequently used for riot control purposes, including VN-4 wheeled armored vehicles (Hernandez 2015).

Bolivia had been an early purchaser of Chinese equipment at a time when their quality was marginal at best. Such purchases were highlighted in 2005 when the outgoing transitional government of Rodrigo Veltze transferred of aging and unreliable HN-5 man-portable air defense munitions, to the United States for destruction, shortly before the assumption of power by newly elected populist leader Evo Morales (Correo del Sur 2017). Under Morales, Bolivia continued to receive an array of non-lethal and dual-use gear, including 31 armored cars and other military vehicles donated in 2016 (La Prensa 2016), but also purchased some equipment from the Chinese, including six Harbin H-425 helicopters in 2011 for $108 million (El Deber 2018), leading to the arrest of the Bolivian general involved for corruption in the transaction (Infodefensa 2020), and a series of armored vehicles.

In Ecuador, under anti-US populist President Rafael Correa, the country followed Venezuela’s lead in contracting with the Chinese firm CETC for air defense radars in 2013, but subsequently cancelled the contract, ultimately leading to litigation (El Universal 2016). Despite the difficulties with the radars, the Correa government went on to contract for 10,000 AK-47 assault rifles (El Comercio 2016), as well an $81 million purchase of 709 Chinese military vehicles, including 4x4 and 6x6

Argentina, under leftist populist President Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, almost became a major purchaser of Chinese goods. It was evaluating the acquisition of 20 FC-1 fighters (Braslavsky 2015), which would have been the most advanced Chinese military aircraft sold to the region (Infobae 2015). It was also negotiating the purchase of five P-18 offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) (Mercopress 2015), representing a significant step forward in the region by Chinese shipyards, beyond the one OPV sold to Trinidad and Tobago in 2014 (Jamaica Observer 2014). Previously, in 2008, Argentina had purchased four WMZ-551 vehicles for $2.6 million, initially anticipated as part of a larger purchase to equip its battalion of its joint peacekeeping brigade with Chile, Cruz del Sur, although the Argentine Army had difficulty with the vehicles resulting in not pursuing further purchases, and limiting the use of those received due to defects (Infodefensa 2018).

In Peru, the PRC made headlines in 2009 when five of its MBT-2000 main battle tanks were displayed in a Peruvian military parade. Although the sale ultimately did not go forward, its armed forces subsequently bought Chinese military trucks, as well as a contract for 40 Type-90B Multiple Rocket Launch Vehicles (Maquina de Combate 2014), with 27 ultimately delivered. In 2017, as with Bolivia’s purchase of Chinese helicopters, the purchase was subject to investigation by Peruvian authorities for corruption (Infodefensa 2017a).

Colombia’s armed forces have been historically reluctant to purchase Chinese equipment, not only because of questions of quality and supportability, but also because of concern over the reaction of the United States (Ellis 2013). Nonetheless, its armed forces have received approximately $1-$7 million per year in donations, including $3 million in military bridging equipment in 2013 (El Espectador 2013). It has also received a donation of 2 Y-12 military transport aircraft in 2014, which the Colombian government put in the service of the Air Force operated airline Satena airline, but which were removed from service just five years later after an incident with air turbulence raised issues of the structural integrity of the aircraft (Cardenas 2019).

The relatively underfunded Uruguayan armed forces have similarly received donations of dual-use military equipment from the Chi-
nese over the years, including cars and busses for the Ministry of Defense. In February 2019, the left-of-center Uruguayan government was negotiating for the donation of a $4.2 million Chinese naval vessel (Presidency of Uruguay 2019), although the October 2019 victory of Daniel Lacalle Pou and his center-right National Party put the deal on hold.

The most significant Chinese military sale in the Caribbean was the previously noted 2014 purchase of a Chinese OPV by the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force (Jamaica Observer 2014). Other transactions of note include a 2017 PRC donation of vehicles and equipment to the Guyana Defense Force (Stabroek News 2017), as well as the donation of $1.1 million in non-lethal military equipment to the Jamaica Defense Force in 2011 (Caribbean Journal 2011).

Institutional Visits, Military Training and PME

Institutional visits and military personnel exchanges between China and Latin America have gradually expanded to include a broader range of military schools, organizations and programs, and some attendance in courses of longer duration. As with arms sales, political changes in the region and concerns over the reaction of the United States appear to have slowed, but not stopped the growth of such activities.

Many War Colleges and other institutions of higher military learning in Latin America, and senior staff organizations periodically receive delegations from the PRC, and reciprocally, send groups to visit their PRC counterparts, although the length and who funds such visits varies. On a number of occasions, PLA personnel have visited well-respected Latin American schools and military institutions with the objective of establishing similar institutions or capabilities in the PRC. Notable examples include PLA participation in the elite “Lanceros” special operations training course in Tolemaida, Colombia (Fuerzas Militares 2016) (where the US also has a significant presence), participation in the Brazilian jungle warfare course near Manaus (Blake 2015) (and subsequent work with the Brazilian Army to help China set up its own Jungle Warfare training capability in the south of China).
The Chinese have similarly conducted institutional visits between personnel of their institute for United Nations Peacekeeping, and Brazil's well-respected counterpart institution, CCECOPAB (Brazil Peace Operations Joint Training Center 2017). Such visits appear to be partly motivated by the strengthening of institutional ties between the PLA and its Latin American counterparts, and part, a desire to learn about the institution and their offerings in support of incorporating the best or most relevant elements of such institutions in the PLA's own program of instruction as it becomes an ever more internationally engaged and capable force.

With respect to professional military exchanges, Latin American and Caribbean militaries send their officers to a range of short courses in the National Defense University in Changping (outside Beijing), as well as to longer Command and General Staff school programs near Nanjing, among other schools (Ellis 2011). In recent years, a more limited number of Latin American militaries have sent cadets to the full 5-year program of the PLA Military Academy (Ellis 2017).

Participation of PLA personnel in professional military education programs in Latin America has been more limited than participation by their counterparts in programs in China. Notable cases, mentioned previously, include participation in the Lanceros course in Colombia, and the Brazilian Army Jungle Warfare training school.

**PLA Presence in the Region**

PLA forces have periodically deployed to the region, with a focus on port calls, and visits of increasing length and sophistication by their hospital ship “Peace Arc” (Ellis 2020c).

The longest, largest deployment by PLA forces was one of the earliest: the participation of 100–200 military police personnel in the United Nations peacekeeping force in Haiti, MINUSTAH from 2004 through 2012 (Ellis 2020c). During the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, PLA forces suffered their first officially recognized military casualties in the region in modern times (United Nations 2020).

The highest profile PLA deployments to the region beyond MINUSTAH have been the three visits to the region by the hospital ship.
“Peace Arc” in 2011, 2015, and 2018, with each one longer, and including more country stops than the prior. The amount of actual medical procedures conducted by the Peace Arc (versus checkups), by contrast to the U.S. hospital ship Comfort, however, is relatively small.

Other notable PLA deployments to the region included an exercise conducted with the Peruvian Army in 2010 in conjunction with the delivery of a mobile field hospital (Andina, 2010), and combat exercises conducted with Chilean (Ministry of Defense of the People’s Republic of China 2013a) and Brazilian Armed Forces (Ministry of Defense of the People’s Republic of China 2013b) in conjunction with the deployment of two Chinese missile frigates to the region in 2013. Chinese Naval vessels regularly make port calls in the region, with approximately 25 such visits in 10 years (Ellis 2020c).

Law Enforcement Engagement

In the past several years, the PRC has increasingly expanded its security engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean to include interactions with police and other law enforcement organizations, as well as Latin America militaries. In some cases, such as Costa Rica and Panama, Chinese interactions with Law Enforcement entities was inherently the focus of its security engagement, since those nations lack standing militaries. Official PRC blessing to work with Latin American law enforcement was highlighted in the China-CELAC 2019–2021 plan, including commitments between the PRC and CELAC to expand cooperation to combat corruption and organized crime (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil 2018).

The expansion of Chinese organized crime into the region, as a by-product of growing commercial and financial flows and associated human contact, highlighted the necessity on the Latin American side for such cooperation. Latin American police forces typically had few if any technical contacts with Chinese counterparts to coordinate on transpacific crime issues, let alone agents who could penetrate ethnically Chinese communities, speaking mandarin, Cantonese or Hakka (Ellis 2013). The agreement by the PRC to deploy national police to Argentina in 2015 to help the Argentine government take down the Pixue
gang operating in the greater Buenos Aires area reflected the logic of such needs and partnerships (Infobae 2016).

As with military cooperation, part of Chinese law enforcement engagement in the region has been donations of equipment for regional police forces, including police cruisers, motorcycles, computers and other equipment. Such donations have been particularly needed by typically underfunded police, although the donated equipment has not always been properly used, and has accordingly broken down or fallen into disuse.2

Some of the most notable Chinese equipment donations to Latin American police forces include a 2017 PRC donation of $2.6 million in vehicles to the Guyana Police Force (Stabroek News 2018), and a 2019, China donated 200 motorcycles to the Trinidad and Tobago police service (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian 2019). In 2018, Argentina imported Chinese armored vehicles to provide security for the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires (AutoBlog 2018).

While most donations have involved vehicles and equipment, the Chinese donated a $20.7 million building for the Costa Rica police academy, inaugurated in 2017 (Infodefensa 2017b), although the Costa Rican government had to turn elsewhere to equip it.

One of the most potentially impactful Chinese advances in the non-military side of the security relationship is the Chinese export of surveillance and control systems (Ellis 2019b). Such systems, frequently included in “smart cities” architectures, respond to real challenges of crime and insecurity in the region, and are offered at relatively competitive prices using technologies that Chinese companies such as Huawei and Hikivision have developed in supporting the PRC surveillance state (The New York Times 2019). Such systems include not only cameras for monitoring, but typically facial recognition or other identity-establishment capabilities, the ability to export data to other facilities for processing through artificial intelligence algorithms, including matching the identities of the individuals being captured against other information about them available through law enforcement and other databases.

While the capabilities vary, notable Chinese projects in this area include ECU-911 in Ecuador, which has expanded considerably since the contracting of the initial prototype in 2012, to currently include 4,300 cameras and 16 regional response centers (Rollett 2018). In Bolivia, a similar but smaller system, BOL-110, was even used in conjunction with tracking devices to monitor people infected with Covid-19 (La Razon 2020). Other China-provided systems include a security architecture installed in the Colon Free Trade zone in Panama (Ministry of Foreign Relations/Government of Panama 2018), a border monitoring system in Uruguay (Presidency of Uruguay 2018), one in the north of Argentina in Jujuy (DPL News 2019) where Chinese companies are major investors in the lithium sector, and systems in various cities in crime-ridden cities in the Northeast of Brazil, among others.

The risk of such systems is that the information obtained on the individuals monitored, including not only their images, but their movement and potentially other data accessed about them through government and commercial records made available to the system, is potentially accessible by Chinese companies such as Huawei who provide the solution. Critically, China’s 2017 National Security Law (National People’s Congress 2017) obliges its companies to turn over such data if the State demands it, thus giving Chinese intelligence potential access to sensitive information on Latin American business and government leaders, business deals and government activities, that could support the PRC in advancing its objectives in the country (Kharpal 2019).

A secondary risk is that, as in China, such systems can be used by authoritarian regimes to enhance government control over populations. In the name of addressing legitimate public purposes such as public safety and the fight against crime, Chinese surveillance technology undermines democracy in the hemisphere by helping populist authoritarian regimes identify and penalize protesters, or others engaged in anti-regime behavior.

A final important trend in non-military security engagement is the growing role of Chinese security firms, in support of the global engagement of Chinese companies. Currently, such firms are more active in support of Chinese operations in Asia and Africa, where they have more latitude from local governments to operate. Chinese security
firms are generally considered less sophisticated than their Western counterparts, including limitations on their local knowledge and the experience level of their personnel, as well as limitations in licensing by the host governments in their ability to carry arms or conduct operations in the national territory (Sukhankin 2020). Yet as with other Chinese firms, they are continuing to learn and evolve in their sophistication, and often enjoy the benefit of access to resources and favored treatment by their Chinese corporate partners.

**Impact of Current Trends – Coronavirus and Expanded Conflict with the United States**

Growing Chinese wealth and power, the change in the U.S. posture toward Latin America and the rest of the world represented by the “America First” policy of the Trump administration, the increasingly hostile U.S.-China relationship, and the transformation of the global landscape through the Covid-19 pandemic are each likely to expand the breadth and boldness of PRC security engagement with the region. That does not imply, however, that it will abandon its avoidance of military bases or alliances there, or will deploy combat forces there on a sustained basis in the near future.

Although the PRC was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020, registering a first quarter GDP decline of 5.8% (Reuters 2020), its ability to control its population through its authoritarian system allowed it to control the spread of the virus with strict lockdowns, including subsequent minor outbreaks in areas such as Jilin in the Northeast, then re-mobilize its production capabilities. Although the Chinese economy will continue to be weakened by depressed global demand for its products, it is forecast to be one of the few economies registering positive growth for 2020 (Bloomberg 2020). Moreover, the continuing viability of its economic and financial system, relative to much of the rest of the world, will position it to advance in global supply chains, replacing the role of weakened or bankrupted competitors, as well as acquiring assets in strategic sectors that Western companies are looking to sell off to shore up their own liquidity positions, and making deals to bail out developing countries.
in financial crisis, that will expand PRC influence and financial position there (Infobae 2020; Ellis 2020b). Collectively, such trends imply continuing growth in China’s resources and power, as well as its global corporate presence. This expansion, as the rest of the world remains mired in the Coronavirus crisis, will both create imperatives for the PRC to increase its military and other security cooperation to protect its companies and trade routes, while giving it both resources, and fueling the confidence of its leadership to do so.

China’s growing military capabilities themselves, and the associate evolution of doctrine may contribute to expanded activities in Latin America. This includes a growing fleet of naval ships, including aircraft carriers and support ships, growing experience in conducting “far seas” operations beyond the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean, and growing options for the logistics support to its forces, including its naval base in Djibouti, which gives the PRC expanding options to support the global reach of its forces.

As the PRC weighs the appropriate balance between caution and responding to opportunities and imperatives arising from its commercial engagement, multiple factors may converge to lead it to bolder action. The increasing hostility between the U.S. and China over trade, technology, and responsibility for Covid-19 bolster the case of hawks in China who see systemic conflict with the U.S. as inevitable, thus decreasing PRC incentives for avoiding provocative actions such as deployment of combat forces to the region, or basing and other formal military access agreements. Perceptions of decreased U.S. leverage, arising from its weakened economic position and the more confrontational posture it has adopted with some of its partners in the region on issues such as immigration could lead Chinese decisionmakers to further discount the risks of provocative action.

Events in Asia will also play a role in China’s military posture in the region. A war over Taiwan, or other significant military action in which the U.S. and other actors become involved could be a catalyst for China to activate plans for activities in the hemisphere to complicate the struggle for the U.S. by taking the “fight” to its own hemisphere, even if only through the use of Chinese commercial facilities for operations to create crisis to distract the U.S. or interfere with its ability to deploy to or sustain forces in the Pacific. In this context, sig-
significant U.S. losses in the early phase of a conflict in the Pacific, to include multiple carriers and other major surface ships, would prolong the conflict by handicapping U.S. power projection capabilities, and tempt some anti-U.S. states in the region to bet against the U.S. by agreeing to receive and resupply Chinese warships or other forces.

Although the evolution of Chinese power, the likely continued erosion of U.S. power in the region, and the growing confidence of Chinese leaders will likely lead to increasingly bold Chinese behavior in military engagement in Latin America, short of a war, it is not clear what particular opportunities or threats might trigger the PRC to adopt a more overtly aggressive military posture in the region. The question is fundamental for the U.S. and merits analysis by strategists and scholars alike.

China’s likely continued expansion of military and security engagement in Latin America will doubtlessly cause discomfort in Washington D.C., and a mixture of concern and welcome in the region. With China’s increased economic and political weight in the region, the U.S. will likely have reduced leverage with its neighbors to reject such engagement. Insofar as the United States has not, since the Cuban Missile Crisis, faced a strategic military threat in its own hemisphere, China risks underestimating its response. It will be crucial for both China and the United States to manage the evolving strategic balance in the region that is likely in process.

**Bibliography**


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The author recognizes Dr. Ana Soliz for posing this critically important question. Interactions per videoconference, June 26, 2020.


