

Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
China's Expanding Global Influence: Foreign Policy Goals, Practices and Tools

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Cynthia A. Watson, PhD

Professor of Strategy, The National War College

Good afternoon. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the results of my on-going research on Chinese involvement in Latin America. I have been studying this topic for the past five and a half years, which has been a period of expansion in such involvement. These are my personal, not Department of Defense, National Defense University or National War College, views based on interviews, readings, and watching the trends.

Chinese involvement today in Latin America is greater by any tool of measurement than it has been historically. The geographic distance between China and Latin American states was a prohibitive factor in the development of strong ties before the age of mass transit and the globalized world. China's ties with the region between the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and 1970 was limited to Castro's Cuba, but the Latin American states begin shifting their diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in the early 1970s, coinciding with China assuming the permanent seat on the United Nations' Security Council in 1971. Since the late 1990s, China has had both the economic reserves and requirements to find resources to pursue a broader agenda around the world along with a greater confidence to reach out to regions largely ignored in the past. These efforts have been multi-faceted.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) involvement in Latin America is a subset of broader Chinese interest in the region. China's leadership has clearly decided to expand its presence in the region commensurate with Chinese national interests. I believe that this decision relates directly and firmly to Beijing's mission of reclaiming a "great power" status in the international community with the strategic vision that great powers have roles in all parts of the world. China's engagement with the region is not the highest priority for Beijing and should not be misunderstood: the PRC's growing ties with Latin America are measured, and are intended to create a more sustained relationship, but not at the costs of creating panic in the United States.

The specific concern you are addressing in these hearing includes using the PLA as an instrument of statecraft. In Latin America, I believe the PLA is a tool the Chinese are using somewhat successfully. PLA officers make periodic visits to the region, usually with reciprocal trips to China by Latin American military officials, but these are significantly less than Beijing's investments in military ties with the United States. China invites Latin American military officers to the PLA National Defense University "foreign officers' course", but the Latin American militaries would almost invariably prefer to attend professional military education (PME) in the United States.

Furthermore, the PLA segregates foreign students from the Chinese officers, thus degrading the value of the PME opportunity. Latin American officers would strongly prefer engaging directly with officers from a major world military, which the PLA option does not allow. In fact, those states sending officers to the PLA foreign course almost invariably are those which have been banned from attending U.S. PME because of Congressional concerns about human rights or some other specific concern. There is only one regime, that in Caracas, that appears to prefer sending its officers to China for PME, but I will address this peculiar case below. PME through the PLA is, however, a form of expanding China's role in the world because it broadens the ties that China has with others, in direct contrast to much of the first fifty years of the PRC's existence when its outlook was internally-focused.

Of particular interest in the PLA relationship with the military under Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías. Chávez Frías has made several trips to Beijing and the impetus for the relationship appears to come strongly from his initiative rather than Beijing's, as illustrated by Hu Jintao's decision not to stop in Caracas in November 2004 when on an extended tour of the region. The Venezuelan president avidly seeks better ties with the PRC, including more substantial arms sales and coordination between the PLA and Venezuelan forces. But the reasons for these policies are anti-U.S. rather than because of any natural affinities with China. No historical ties exist between Venezuela's military and the PLA. While China certainly seeks to enhance its petroleum and energy options with providers globally, the highly volatile government in Caracas is precisely the type of regime that Beijing interacts with cautiously, calling to mind the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe where Beijing certainly has ties but arguably relatively cautious ones. It appears perfectly plausible that Beijing has actually been notifying Washington of its interactions with Caracas.

The PLA involvement in Latin America is only one of the tools the PRC is using to forward its desire to broaden ties around the world. Trade between Latin America and China is growing significantly because both states find the trade beneficial. The intention of the World Trade Organization, however, is to enhance precisely this type of trade as does the United States with its avowedly free trade posture. In the era of lowering tariffs and expanding opportunities resulting from increased options due to technology and political intentions, the expanding Latin America-Chinese connections are the type of outcome the United States ought to expect. They are not currently threatening to U.S. interests unless we see the hemisphere in exclusively zero-sum terms.

Those who most fear Chinese incursions into Latin America imply that the regional governments will not realize that China is a threatening presence. I would note that, to the contrary, Latin America is exceptionally sensitive to the idea of any violations of its sovereignty by any major power. Latin American countries will not simply allow Beijing to expand into the region because they naïve. For instance, the Latin American nations are keenly aware of the PRC's failure to follow through on its promises for investment; the regional states are determined to receive treatment as a respected, sovereign portion of the world. If anything, Latin America is acutely critical of outsiders for fear of being on the receiving end of massive "disrespect".

My current appraisal does not mean that Chinese involvement might not increase in the future. China's obvious desire to return to its self-proclaimed role as a global power will require a future presence, diplomatic and otherwise, in Latin America as well as other regions of the world. The key factor for U.S. strategists is whether that role has achieved a markedly increased, and possibly threatening, position in the western hemisphere based on military linkages. With greater U.S. attention diverted elsewhere, Latin America will continue looking for other partners. Military leadership within the region will desire expanded opportunities for military education, interaction, and weapons modernization. If Washington is not interested in having a sustained, deep and satisfying, mutually respectful relationship with Latin America, the latter will turn elsewhere.

Latin America may ultimately choose to interact with the PLA more fully than is currently the case but this choice would depend upon decreasing linkages with and interest on the part of the United States rather than because of Chinese intervention in the region. I do not believe that China would be the driving factor in this relationship. Instead, U.S. lack of interest in a region where armed forces see a natural tie within the hemisphere among regional militaries would allow greater PLA involvement.

Another possible entry for PLA engagement with Latin American armed forces would result from increased restrictions on U.S. military ties to the region, such as those limitations imposed during the military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. This is not an argument for ending political sanctions on Latin American militaries where the U.S. Congress and/or Executive see them as necessary. Rather, it is a reminder that strategy always results from decision to prioritize goals in national security at the same time as running the risk of unintended consequences.

For China, the important relationship remains and is likely to remain for the foreseeable future, that with the United States. And in Latin America the U.S. connection is still important. China will continue to employ its military as a vehicle for carrying out foreign policy plans. But that military is and will almost certainly remain under the close reins of the Chinese Communist Party and civilian leadership.