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Co-Chair Joshua Hodges
Co-Chair Reva Price
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Dear Co-Chairs Hodges and Price and distinguished members of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission:

Thank you for holding this hearing entitled “China’s Expanding Interests in Latin America: Development, Leverage, Coercion, and Crime.” This is a crucial issue that deserves the attention of the Commission and of the U.S. government. I am honored to have this opportunity to submit this testimony as a statement for the record.

I am a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution where I direct the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and the Brookings series, the Fentanyl Epidemic in North America and the Global Reach of Synthetic Opioids, and codirect the Africa Security Initiative. Illicit economies, such as the drug trade and wildlife trafficking, organized crime, corruption, and their impacts on U.S. and local security issues around the world are the domain of my work and the subject of several of the books I have written. I have conducted fieldwork on these issues across Latin America as well as in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. I have been studying Chinese criminal networks operating in drugs, wildlife trafficking, logging, and mining and money laundering since 2008 and extensively written about those issues in books, such as *The Extinction Market: Wildlife Trafficking and How to Counter It*, and reports such as “China and Synthetic Drugs Control: Fentanyl, Methamphetamines, and Precursors” and “China’s Role in Poaching and Wildlife Trafficking in Mexico.”ⁱ

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This testimony draws extensively on my December 2025 testimony before U.S. Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control for a hearing entitled “Dirty Money: Chinese Organized

Crime in Latin America.”ⁱⁱⁱ In that testimony, I review in detail the variety of illicit economies in which Chinese actors engage in Latin America and the Caribbean and the steps the government of China has taken to counter or facilitate them. I also detail Chinese law enforcement assistance to Latin American and Caribbean countries. In this testimony, I review Chinese illicit and law enforcement activities in the region and focus on the broader strategic implications and impacts.

Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, Chinese criminal networks have expanded in Latin America and the Caribbean, just like in other regions of the world, alongside China’s legal trade and investment expansion in the region.

Their activities span the trafficking of drugs and their precursors, money laundering, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, wildlife trafficking, illegal logging and mining, and human smuggling. All of these illicit economies as well as highly violent criminality long predate the arrival of Chinese criminal groups. But the presence of Chinese criminal groups often leads to a dramatic increase and diversification in illicit extraction and smuggling, such as in natural resources contraband, because the demand for such products in China is very large. By connecting local illicit economies to global markets and increasing the value of commodities, Chinese criminal groups also motivate local criminal actors expand and diversify their illicit activities.

Unlike Latin American criminal groups, they engage in little violence. Chinese criminal groups and legal businesses that engage in illicit activities rely primarily on corruption and patronage, developing networks of influence with local and national political and business elites and law enforcement actors. They also systematically exploit weak institutions, inadequate regulatory systems, and enforcement gaps.

Chinese networks remain the principal suppliers for precursor chemicals for the production of fentanyl and methamphetamine for Mexican cartels. They also supply chemicals for the processing of coca into cocaine across Latin America. With every new wave of scheduling of chemicals by China, they rapidly pivot to non-scheduled precursors and develop new recipes for the production of illicit drugs. They rely on the lack of conspiracy, racketeering, and material support clauses in China’s laws to escape law enforcement action by China.

Chinese underground banking networks have become the top money launders for Mexican cartels, displacing other long-established money laundering systems in the region and elsewhere in the world. Since they are able to pass most of the costs on Chinese citizens seeking to avoid China’s capital control systems, they are able to provide much lower rates to cartels than other money laundering networks. They utilize a wide range of methods, including mirror transactions that avoid international bank wires, trade-based money laundering, and cryptocurrency.

In extractive industries and fisheries, Chinese companies and intermediaries often exploit flawed licensing systems, weak inspections, fraudulent permits and falsified documentation, and poor supply-chain monitoring to move illegal ore, timber, and seafood under the cover of nominally legal operations. Other times in fishing, large Chinese flotillas engage in blatant illegality in

exclusive economic zones of Latin American countries, devastating biodiversity and economic resources. In wildlife trafficking, Chinese networks organize local hunting and export a wide variety of species to China and East Asia for high profits, as under-resourced environmental agencies and limited border inspections struggle to detect and prosecute the illegal trade. In economies in natural resources, Chinese investors, traders, and logistical operators frequently pre-finance extraction, supply heavy equipment and chemical inputs, and guarantee purchase of commodities such as gold, timber, and wildlife products.

Chinese actors' portfolios of legal and illegal activities allow them to obscure their nefarious behaviors beyond money laundering. It also equips them with significant political capital with local authorities and businesses and protects them from local law enforcement.

The highly diversified and sophisticated operations of Chinese actors across a wide range of illicit economies and extensive presence in and exploitation of legal trade and regulatory loopholes have become business exemplars for Latin American criminal groups. They too have now learned to diversify their activities, such as into natural resource exploitation, beyond narcotics. By reducing money laundering costs through Chinese underground banking and expanding revenue streams, the Latin American criminal groups too become more resilient to law enforcement actions.

Chinese criminal and gray-zone networks in Latin America and the Caribbean should be understood as part of a broader ecosystem that erodes governance, regulatory authority, and elements of sovereignty that has existed for decades before the arrival of Chinese criminal groups. But by interacting with local criminal and corruption networks in Latin America as well as acting on their own, Chinese illicit networks amplify countries' governance deficiencies and further weaken the already inadequate rule of law, policy autonomy, and fiscal stability. Cumulatively, illicit activities of all actors in Latin America contribute to the erosion of what can be described as functional sovereignty. The intermeshing of legal and illegal business, the entrenchment of corruption, and the weakening of regulatory and judicial institutions make it far harder for governments to transition toward transparent, rules-based governance, attract responsible investment, and achieve inclusive and equitable long-term development.

Latin American law enforcement agencies often struggle to act against Chinese criminal networks and because these networks are not violent, and effective in developing high-level political protection systems in Latin America, often consider it a low priority.

Moreover, some Chinese criminal networks, such as those that provide services to the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party in the form of developing broad networks of influence and acting as eyes, ears, and enforcers on Chinese diaspora communities, also benefit from China's reluctance to mount law enforcement efforts against them. Only when they attract extensive negative publicity abroad that makes it too diplomatically costly for China to continue extending protection might Chinese authorities become motivated to act against them.

In the past few years, China has been increasing its law enforcement engagement and cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean through technological transfers, such as Safe Cities, and more systematic and structured law enforcement frameworks, such as the Global

Security Initiative (GSI). Exporting an image of China of very low violence and predatory crime levels, China now provides some form of bilateral or multilateral law enforcement training to the vast majority of countries in the region. At least 35 cities in Latin America and the Caribbean have bought the Safe System surveillance system and other Chinese law enforcement technologies, despite concerns about human rights, privacy and other civil liberties and the risks of Chinese espionage. Yet China's law enforcement engagement with Latin America, like with the rest of the world, remains limited, selective, and self-serving. Its law enforcement assistance is instrumentalized and subordinated to its geostrategic objectives: China extends law enforcement cooperation to countries with which it enjoys positive relations and with those it seeks bring into its orbit and denies it to countries with which relations deteriorate.

In conclusion, I detail the following recommendations for U.S. policy:

- helping state authorities in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop law enforcement tools against Chinese criminal networks;
- encouraging the adoption of U.S. anti-crime and port monitoring and operations technology as alternatives to Chinese systems such as Safe Cities;
- dismantling Chinese money laundering networks;
- countering Chinese criminal groups' operations beyond drugs;
- building clean, transparent, and traceable supply chains;
- reducing corruption and patronage systems and establishing apolitical, independent legal systems;
- scrupulously adhering to human rights and civil liberties protections, avoiding any kind of vilification of Chinese communities, and holding law enforcement accountable;
- adopting comprehensive, sustainable socioeconomic anti-crime policies;
- strengthening U.S. domestic resources, institutions, and laws for such support systems in Latin America and the Caribbean; and
- helping Latin American and Caribbean governments and investigative systems, such as investigative journalists, to encourage China to take enforcement actions against criminal behavior by Chinese entities in the region.

In the subsequent parts of the testimony, I provide a very quick overview of the panoply of criminal groups in Latin America and the Caribbean and discuss their role in:

- the trafficking of illicit drugs and chemical precursors;
- money laundering;
- illegal mining;
- illegal logging and timber trafficking;
- wildlife trafficking;
- IUU fishing; and
- human smuggling.

In discussing these illicit economies, I lay the threats and harms they pose. I further discuss U.S. efforts to engage China in advancing fentanyl and synthetic drug controls and anti-money laundering cooperation. Next, I lay out the cumulative impact of Chinese criminal networks in

Latin America. I also explore their patterns of exploitation of weak institutions and regulatory gaps. I further discuss the circumstances of illicit activities lead to the erosion of government sovereignty. In the last two sections, I analyze the complex connections between some Chinese criminal groups and Chinese authorities, Chinese government responses to Chinese criminal groups and illicit activities, and China's growing law enforcement cooperation with Latin America and its strategic implications. I conclude with detailed policy recommendations.

An Overview of Chinese criminal networks and activities in Latin America

Chinese transnational criminal networks are expanding in Latin America, as they are in other parts of the world. They are now present in most, if not all, Latin American and Caribbean countries. They are engaged in a broad and highly diversified set of activities in both legal and illegal domains, including the trafficking of illicit drugs and their precursors, money laundering, IUU fishing, wildlife trafficking, illegal logging and mining, and human smuggling. Over the past two decades, these networks have expanded alongside China's legal trade and investment, embedding themselves in local economies, political systems, and diaspora communities through corruption, collusion with local elites, exploitation of regulatory and enforcement gaps, and sometimes the use of coercion. Crucially, however, Chinese legal businesses, such as some of those involved in ports, infrastructure, fisheries, and extractive industries, also sometimes violate regulatory measures and engage in corruption and nefarious and illicit practices. Such Chinese networks exploit and often overwhelm weak systems for customs control, financial supervision, environmental regulation, and maritime monitoring.ⁱⁱⁱ

The exact panoply of Chinese criminal groups in Latin America is hardly known, including because local law enforcement agencies often lack the specialized capacities needed to study Chinese criminal groups. Overwhelmed by highly violent and long-established Latin American criminal groups, law enforcement agencies in Latin America also lack focus on Chinese illicit networks.

Some of the Chinese criminal groups whose presence has been documented in Latin America are large and notorious, such as the 14K Triad, Sun Yee On Triad, and the Fujian Mafia. Others are medium-sized operations, such as Guangzhou Enterprise, operating in Colombia. Others yet are small family-based networks that, despite sometimes grandiose names such as the Zhang Cartel—which has smuggled fentanyl precursors to Mexican drug trafficking organizations—may consist of only a handful of individuals. Other groups include Flying Dragons, Tai Chen, and Fuk Ching groups.^{iv}

Latin America and the Caribbean's many illicit economies, in which Chinese criminal groups are now involved, long predate the arrival of Chinese criminal groups there. But the presence of Chinese criminal groups often leads to a dramatic increase and diversification in illicit extraction and smuggling, such as in natural resources contraband, because the demand for such products in China is very large. By connecting local or regional illicit economies, such as in wildlife trafficking, to voracious global markets, Chinese criminal groups also inflate the value of such illicit economies and products. That, in turn, stimulates local criminal actors to enter these illicit economies and increases illicit extraction and its detrimental effects.

Unlike Latin American criminal groups, Chinese criminal networks rarely use violence, and if they do, the violence tends to be highly limited. In fact, while many Latin American criminal groups kill hundreds or thousands of people yearly, amounting to homicides rates of tens of thousands in Latin American countries, Chinese criminal groups are responsible for a tiny proportion of these murders. Most of their coercive activity is directed at Chinese diaspora communities, whom they extort under the threat of violence.^v

Instead, Chinese criminal networks operate through corruption and collusion and the cultivation of influence networks. By cultivating protection from government officials and politicians, regulatory and enforcement agencies, port authorities, and political brokers, they further weaken oversight and enforcement and entrench patterns of clientelism and poor regulatory systems. Regulatory agencies and justice systems become further eviscerated and increasingly unable or unwilling to act against well-connected actors in strategic sectors such as ports, extractive industries, and high-value trade corridors.^{vi}

Some Chinese criminal networks, such as those that provide services to the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party, also benefit from China's reluctance to mount law enforcement efforts against them.

Example I – Drug trafficking and chemical precursors

Chinese precursor suppliers and money laundering networks are now critical nodes in the illegal drug economy in Latin America and around the world, supplying vital chemicals for the production of fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine. Indian supply networks are the second most frequent suppliers of these chemicals for illegal drug production.

After China scheduled the entire class of fentanyl-type substances in 2019 as a result of U.S. diplomacy, Chinese supply networks shifted from exporting finished fentanyl directly to the United States to supplying an expanding range of precursors and pre-precursor chemicals to Mexican criminal groups.^{vii} Since then, Mexican cartels, such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, have been synthesizing in Mexico the vast majority of fentanyl and methamphetamine that enters the United States.

Many Chinese precursor and money laundering networks take advantage of legal trade and investment. Chinese precursor networks, often small and midsized pharmaceutical and chemical companies, brokers, and trading platforms, frequently sell nonscheduled precursors for the production of illegal drugs, advertising them online, along with recipes for such illicit conversion. When more precursors are scheduled, they quickly develop new methods of synthesizing illicit drugs from nonscheduled precursors.

Example II - Chinese money laundering networks

Chinese actors now provide not only the crucial chemical inputs necessary for illicit drug production, but also the financial architecture that enables Mexican and other Latin American criminal organizations to hide and launder their drug proceeds.

Chinese underground banking systems have proliferated in the Americas. They have displaced long-established systems such as the Black Peso Exchange as the preferred channel for laundering the proceeds of Mexican cartels.^{viii} Imposing the majority of costs on Chinese customers who seek to avoid Chinese capital control regulations, Chinese money laundering networks offer cheaper services capable of rapidly moving vast sums of money.

Chinese money launderers use a wide set of tools, including cryptocurrencies and trade-based money laundering, which hides criminal proceeds in hard-to-detect under-invoicing and over-invoicing.

Many Chinese money laundering systems use methods that bypass international wire transfers through formal banks and thus escape law enforcement scrutiny. Instead, they use, for example, they use “mirror” transactions over encrypted platforms in several countries: Mexican cartel operatives in the United States hand bulk cash to Chinese money launderers, where it is deposited into U.S. accounts. Then, corresponding credit transfers in yuan in China and in pesos in Mexico occur, without any international wire exchange taking place.^{ix} U.S. investigations and court cases revealed that the Bank of China was among the Chinese financial firms utilized by Chinese operators for laundering Mexican cartels’ money.^x Alternatively, Chinese brokers purchase high-value consumer goods and ship them to China, where they resell them for profits.

Moreover, since Chinese criminal networks also traffic in wildlife, seafood, and timber, often through overlapping logistical routes, front companies, and financial circuits, they can also utilize these commodities for laundering money and transferring value across illicit economies.^{xi} Thus, wildlife products and timber no longer function merely as direct illicit revenue sources, but also as commodities for value transfer and barter to pay for drug precursors.^{xii}

Moreover, the expansion of Chinese underground banking in Latin America and around the world can encourage not just criminal groups, but also legal businesses and political actors to move funds outside regulated banks with tighter law enforcement oversight. Such a development would reduce the reach of anti-money-laundering frameworks, limit central banks’ visibility over capital movements, and diminish the role of formal financial institutions and regulations.^{xiii} As businesses and wealthy individuals would become accustomed to using such channels to evade taxes or capital controls, a parallel financial system could undermine domestic policies.

Prevalence of under-invoicing and over-invoicing in trade practices could give the impression of artificial and false trade patterns, disadvantage law-abiding firms, and erode a country’s tax base. When inspectors, regulators, and customs and tax authorities face large volumes of mispriced business transactions, their capacity to detect anomalies declines, and a culture of dual accounting and selective compliance can take hold.^{xiv} When only small numbers of violations are punished, more actors become willing to violate regulations.^{xv}

Overwhelmed agencies that repeatedly confront complex, transnational cases—especially those involving politically or diplomatically sensitive partners—may find that only a small fraction of investigations lead to meaningful prosecution and sanctions. They may even face punishment for their investigative efforts. Regulators and law-enforcement officials may lower their ambitions, start self-censoring, and focus only on lower-risk domestic actors.

Enforcement thus becomes selective and politically negotiated, with high-value international trade sectors, for example, functioning as de facto zones of partial exemption because they are perceived as too sensitive to aggressively regulate.^{xvi}

U.S. efforts to engage China in advancing fentanyl and synthetic drug controls and anti-money laundering cooperation

Since the Obama administration, the United States has demanded that Beijing schedule fentanyl, analogues, and fentanyl precursors. China has repeatedly complied, including by scheduling the entire class of fentanyl type drugs in 2019.^{xvii} After a period of minimal and ultimately suspended cooperation between 2021 and 2023, during which the Biden administration issued novel-indictments against Chinese precursor sellers,^{xviii} the Biden administration succeeded in reactivating U.S.-China counternarcotics cooperation in 2024. The cooperation featured a joint counternarcotics working group that exchanged intelligence, and China agreed to schedule additional fentanyl precursors and nitazines, another type of synthetic drug. Beijing also took law enforcement actions against online sellers and warned China’s chemical industry about the need to comply with Chinese regulations.^{xix}

For the first time in 2024, China also extensively engaged with the United States about the expansion of bilateral anti-money-laundering cooperation efforts. As I describe in “The fentanyl crisis: From naloxone to tariffs,” Chinese banks, including the People’s Bank of China, joined various U.S.-China fentanyl dialogues, with the exchanges becoming anchored in a formal exchange and cooperation platform between the U.S. Department of Treasury and the People’s Bank of China.^{xx} China also cooperated in U.S. law enforcement efforts to target money launderers working for the Mexican cartels, including by arresting Chinese money launderers.^{xxi}

However, U.S.-China counternarcotics cooperation, like all China’s international law enforcement cooperation, remains contingent on broader strategic relations. Thus, the U.S.-China anti-money-laundering cooperation was disrupted when the Trump administration imposed fentanyl-linked tariffs on China in January 2025. In its subsequent diplomacy with the United States in 2025, China effectively created its own counter-leverage to the fentanyl-linked tariffs by imposing its own counter-tariffs, boycotting U.S. exports to China with special political salience in the United States, such as soybeans, and restricting exports of sensitive commodities to the United States and the West, such as rare earths. By October 2025, China negotiated more or less the same deliverables to the Trump administration that it already had on the books with the Biden administration—i.e., the full scheduling of nitazines and the scheduling of additional fentanyl precursors. It was essentially able to double-count the same deliverables to two different U.S. administrations.

It is not clear that the restart of some China-U.S. counternarcotics cooperation following the October 2025 summit between President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping will resurrect anti-money-laundering cooperation to its 2024 levels, let alone deepen it. However, the 2025 arrest in Mexico of Zhi Dong Zhang, known as Brother Wang, and his extradition to the United States provide important intelligence and prosecution opportunities regarding Chinese money laundering networks. Zhang is indicted for trafficking fentanyl and cocaine to the United States via Mexico and laundering money for the Sinaloa Cartel and Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación.^{xxii} With more than 170 bank accounts and 150 companies already identified as linked to him, Zhang is believed to have an extensive knowledge of Chinese money laundering systems as well as Chinese precursor smuggling networks.^{xxiii} He can thus provide crucial intelligence.

In the Americas, the United States has long worked with Mexico and other regional partners in counternarcotics efforts through joint investigations, intelligence sharing, and capacity building in the law enforcement, security, and criminal justice sectors. For decades, U.S. agencies also provided training and technical assistance to financial intelligence units and customs services. During the Biden administration, the counternarcotics cooperation began extensively focusing on detecting and seizing synthetic drugs and their precursors and investigating and dismantling the networks behind them, as well as Chinese criminal networks, specifically.

The Biden administration also invested in developing multilateral structures to counter synthetic drugs and engage China. The most important among them was the 2023 launch of the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats. The coalition was an important platform for engaging Latin America and the Caribbean in efforts to mitigate and prevent the growth of Chinese criminality in the region as well as the devastation that synthetic drugs inflict on public safety and health.

Turning away from multilateral institutions,^{xxiv} the Trump administration has let the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats die on the vine.^{xxv} Instead, it has recently launched a new coalition consisting of a small set of Latin America countries—the Shield of the Americas—to counter drugs, migration, and China’s role in Latin America.^{xxvi} The Trump administration has emphasized a highly militarized approach to counternarcotics efforts. It has encouraged members of the Shield of the Americas to step away from criminal justice approaches and counternarcotics efforts vis-a-vis criminal groups and instead adopt military measures.^{xxvii} In dismantling the U.S. Agency for International Development and reducing the budget and priorities of the State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the Trump administration has further strongly deemphasized capacity building and institutional support for criminal justice systems and anti-corruption efforts as core tools against organized crime.

Illicit economies in natural resources

Chinese intermediaries play important roles in a wide variety of illicit economies in natural resources, including the illegal mining of metals like gold, timber extraction and trafficking, wildlife trafficking, and IUU fishing. They link local extractive industries in Latin America, which frequently and extensively violate regulations with impunity, with Chinese demand, capital, logistics, and markets.^{xxviii} These intermediaries range from criminal groups to legal

Chinese companies and Chinese joint ventures with Latin American businesses.^{xxxix} They finance production, provide equipment and inputs, secure fake or laundered licenses, arrange transport and export, and serve as the important buyers for high-value commodities, such as gold, hardwoods, shark fins, sea cucumbers, and jaguar parts. Because China is the world's largest importer of many of these commodities, even a relatively small number of Chinese intermediaries can profoundly shape local markets and distort governance incentives and systems.^{xxx}

Example III – Illegal mining

Chinese actors play a wide variety of roles in illegal mining as investors, traders, and logistical operators. For example, Chinese companies and brokers in Peru, Bolivia, Guyana, Venezuela, and Ecuador provide capital, heavy machinery, fuel, and inputs such as mercury or cyanide for illegal gold mining. Often, they do so through “partnerships” with local cooperatives or influential political patrons.^{xxxi} Rarely do Chinese actors appear as illegal miners, even though they occasionally participate in the recruitment of such frontline workers.^{xxxii} Mostly, miners are either self-organized or recruited and supported by local criminal groups or even large local legal businesses.

Chinese traders then purchase the illegally extracted ore or semi-processed gold before laundering it through ostensibly legal traders and refineries. Using falsified origin documents, they then export it onward, such to Chinese controlled trading houses or smelters.^{xxxiii} These capital-intensive operations are heavily dependent on Chinese and other foreign buyers and financiers.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and investigative reporting from Latin America have revealed that Chinese networks' participation has at times transformed small-scale artisanal mining into far more extensive and environmentally detrimental operations.^{xxxiv} By guaranteeing purchases and prefinancing operations, Chinese investors and traders encourage a rapid and highly environmentally destructive expansion into remote, biodiverse areas.^{xxxv} The result is extensive deforestation, river pollution with mercury and cyanide, soil degradation, habitat destruction, species collapse, and the displacement of indigenous and rural communities. Even local communities who become seduced by the short-term profits often rapidly find that the medium-term and long-term costs far exceed any -short-term fiscal gains.^{xxxvi}

Moreover, because much of the illegally extracted ores and minerals are exported informally or laundered through misdeclared shipments, government lose royalties, taxes, and foreign exchange earnings. Yet the countries also bear the long-term expenses of environmental remediation or the consequences of environmental destruction and public health threats.^{xxxvii} Local economies become locked into high-risk, low-governance extraction, with few incentives for diversification or investment in sustainable livelihoods. Miners and communities are often subject to control by criminal or militant actors and transfer their allegiance to them, further weakening state authority.^{xxxviii}

Example IV – Illegal Logging and Timber Trafficking

Like in illegal mining, Chinese entities, often legal businesses, are frequently central to demand for illicitly harvested timber. But China is not alone. Substantial amounts of illegally and unsustainably harvested wood also heads to India, Europe, and the United States, despite nominally strong regulations and laws in the United States and Europe. Illicit actors in source countries—including Brazilian or Peruvian logging companies, sawmills, and other processing plants; corrupt environmental engineers and other officials; and traders—find it relatively easy to circumvent regulations and launder timber. Chinese actors also facilitate the laundering of illegally harvested wood.^{xxxix} Critically, they arrange for the shipment of large volumes of wood to ensure a steady flow of timber to Chinese markets, irrespective of the timber’s actual provenance or whether its extraction was sustainable or environmentally destructive.^{xl}

In Peru, for example, more than 70% of timber shipped to China from the Port of Callao in 2021 came from companies that were on the Peruvian government’s “red list” for suspected illegality or ongoing legal proceedings, indicating how systemic illicit sourcing has become in exports bound for China.^{xli}

Example V - Poaching and Wildlife Trafficking

In the wildlife trafficking networks, Chinese brokers often organize the poaching of new species and even new biological taxa and dramatically scale up the preexisting poaching of species. Among the species now trafficked from Latin America to China are jaguars, songbirds, parrots, reptiles, and marine products including totoaba, shark fins, sea cucumbers, and seahorses.^{xlii} Chinese wildlife traffickers often take advantage of legal Chinese trade and infrastructure, leveraging Chinese diaspora networks as well as relationships with Mexican and other Latin American criminal groups to source new contraband.^{xliii} They recruit local hunters and fishers to poach specified species and prospect for new ones for Traditional Chinese Medicine or luxury consumption, and provide advance payments for their poaching. These networks sometimes use the same logistical and financial channels for exporting poached wildlife to China that they use for the trafficking of timber, minerals, drugs, or legal consumer goods.^{xliv}

Example VI – IUU Fishing

Large Chinese fishing fleets targeting high-value species such as squid, tuna, and sharks along Latin America’s Pacific and Atlantic coasts, large Chinese fishing fleets often engage in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, with devastating environmental and economic impacts. Chinese flotillas of 300-500 vessels at a time have been documented operating off of Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina and in their exclusive economic zones, while the overall size of China’s distant water fleet has been estimated to number at least 17,000 vessels.^{xlv} Some of the fishing vessels can also double as China’s maritime militias or carry spy equipment.

Individual countries in Latin America and the Caribbean may face annual losses in the hundreds of millions of dollars, as a result of Chinese fishing fleets’ problematic practices.^{xlvi} These losses and harms compound the losses and destruction that Latin American fishing fleets themselves inflict through illegal, unreported, and unregulated practices. In some countries in the region,

IUU fishing is estimated to strip as much as 15% of annual seafood catch.^{xlvi} Cumulatively, the annual losses can reach \$2.3 billion, with some \$500 million in lost tax revenues.^{xlviii}

Not all of the vessels engaged in IUU fishing for Chinese markets are flagged as Chinese. Some use flags of convenience, even as Chinese motherships provide fuel, supplies, and at-sea processing of the seafood catch. Chinese companies and brokers also blend illegally caught fish with legally harvested seafood products, sometimes exploiting weak port controls.^{xliv} Chinese trafficking networks also buy illegally harvested marine products from Latin American artisanal fishers and organized crime groups, reinforcing local incentives to violate regulations.¹

Turning off their automatic identification systems (AIS), Chinese fishing fleets often engage in highly destructive practices, such as bottom trawling, that devastate ecologies and the sustainability of fisheries. High-capacity fleets concentrated in relatively small areas can devastate marine ecosystems within short periods, particularly by targeting top predators such as sharks and engaging in widespread bycatch and fishing in or near protected marine areas. Such practices impair ecosystem resilience and regeneration capacity.

Given seafood's centrality as a global source of protein, such practices also threaten long-term food security.^{li} Illegal operations in Latin American countries' exclusive economic zones undermine the countries' economic resources, the survivability of their own fishing fleets, and the livelihoods of local fishing communities. The arrival of large Chinese fleets often results in dramatic reductions in catch. It also depresses prices and increases their volatility.^{liii} For example, Peruvian artisanal fishers' associations estimate that IUU fishing by Chinese vessels has harmed tens of thousands of fishers and their families, with cascading effects on coastal employment and social stability.^{liii}

Sometimes, local fishers or criminal groups that have monopolized local fisheries, such as in Mexico, resort to selling illegally caught seafood to Chinese intermediaries. They may also supply the fishing fleets with contraband fuel.^{liv} As communities observe that foreign vessels operate with impunity—sometimes blatantly offshore and with their AIS systems turned off—they lose confidence in the state's capacity and willingness to enforce laws and regulations and defend their interests and national resources.^{lv} This erosion of civic trust is compounded when local elites or security forces are perceived to benefit from corrupt arrangements with Chinese companies. With the sense of frustration and impunity, the willingness of local Latin America actors to engage in IUU fishing grows.

Despite these problematic practices, Chinese fishing fleets have long received substantial state subsidies from the Chinese government. Facing international diplomatic pressure, China has begun cracking down on IUU fishing linked to Chinese vessels. Its 2019 revisions to its Fisheries Law finally included provisions against IUU fishing, though enforcement remains limited.^{lvi} In June 2023, China signed onto the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, a crucial framework that seeks to limit national subsidies to fishing fleets.^{lvii} Around the world, the artificial inflation of fishing fleets due to state subsidies drives much IUU fishing—by Chinese actors and others. China's 2022 Five-Year Plan for fisheries also set the goal of reducing the size of China's fishing fleet as well as to enhancing aquaculture and limiting wild catch.^{lviii} In 2025, China also ratified the Port State Measures Agreement, a framework that seeks to limit the transportation, processing, and laundering of illegally-caught seafood.^{lix}

Example VII – Human smuggling

Chinese criminal groups also facilitate the smuggling of Chinese nationals through Latin America and into the United States. They also exploit migrant labor in extractive industries, the service sectors, and illicit cannabis cultivation in the United States.^{lx} Such Chinese smuggling networks combine Chinese facilitators, local intermediaries, and corrupt officials and utilize fraudulent documents, sham employment, and debt bondage to move people along contraband routes and exploit them after.^{lxi} However, unlike in the case of wildlife trafficking or illegal logging, the scale of Chinese migrant smuggling pales in comparison to the scale of undocumented migration into the United States from within Latin America.

The cumulative impact of Chinese criminal networks in Latin America

Chinese criminal networks and legal businesses that violate laws and policies in Latin America are participants in a broader ecosystem that is characterized by poor rule of law, inadequate law enforcement, extensive corruption, and intensive criminal activity. This ecosystem also features many other criminal and militant groups, some of which originate in Latin America, and some that more recently arrived in Latin America from Europe, for example. This ecosystem has existed for decades and long precedes the presence of Chinese illicit networks. It warps and hallows out official governance, regulatory authority, and elements of sovereignty across the region.

Indeed, by interacting with other criminal and corruption networks in Latin America as well as acting on their own, Chinese illicit networks amplify countries' governance deficiencies and further weaken the already inadequate rule of law, policy autonomy, and fiscal stability.^{lxii}

Furthermore, by providing sophisticated and relatively cheap money laundering services to criminal groups in Latin America, such as Mexican cartels, Chinese criminal networks enhance the financial resources of the local criminal networks.

Chinese actors engage in sophisticated operations across a wide range of illicit economies. In fact, their diversified polycrime portfolios and extensive exploitation of legal trade and regulatory loopholes have become business exemplars for Latin American criminal groups. Latin American groups have now also learned to diversify their activities into natural resource exploitation—such wildlife, timber, and seafood trafficking—and outright taking over licit extractives industries. Latin American criminal organizations' portfolio diversification and interactions with Chinese criminal networks strengthen their resilience against law enforcement actions in particular issue areas, such as narcotics. By reducing money laundering costs and expanding revenue streams, it also increases their profits.

Environmental and resource crimes linked to Chinese demand—including overfishing, illegal logging, unsustainable mining, and wildlife trafficking—and perpetrated both by Chinese and non-Chinese entities threaten biodiversity and environmental and economic sustainability while undermining tax collection, income flows, and long-term development. Cumulatively, they harm fiscal stability and reduce the state's capacity to provide public services, often already lacking across Latin America, and investments in legal economic opportunities.^{lxiii}

Like legal commodity-based extraction, illicit resource extraction deleteriously reinforces commodity dependence and undermines long-term development.^{lxiv} By privileging the rapid exploitation of natural resources for export to China, Chinese traders and their partners skew economies toward primary commodities with high environmental externalities and volatile prices, rather than toward higher value, more diversified sectors.^{lxv} Because so much activity occurs illegally or in gray zones, value is captured by criminal and corrupt networks rather than reinvested in infrastructure, education, or productive diversification, deepening the infamous “resource curse.”^{lxvi}

The cumulative environmental damage through deforestation and other habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, soil and water contamination, depleted resources, and the emergence of zoonotic diseases shrink future economic options, whether in sustainable forestry, tourism, agriculture, or fisheries. They lock regions into cycles of extraction, abandonment, and high environmental and public health costs.^{lxvii}

The intermeshing of legal and illegal business, the entrenchment of corruption, and the weakening of regulatory and judicial institutions make it far harder for governments to transition toward transparent, rules-based resource governance, attract responsible investment, and achieve inclusive and equitable long-term development.^{lxviii}

Patterns of Exploitation of Weak Institutions and Regulatory Gaps

There are consistent patterns of nefarious activities linked to Chinese networks across illegal mining, logging, IUU fishing, poaching, and wildlife trafficking.

First, Chinese networks, whether they are criminal groups or legal companies violating regulations, exploit institutional weakness to embed illicit activity in legal trade. Diversified portfolios and preexisting gaps in local regulatory capacity, oversight, and technical expertise facilitate such gray zone activities. In sectors such as mining, logging, and fisheries, Chinese companies and intermediaries often take advantage of flawed licensing systems, weak inspections, and poor supply-chain monitoring to move illegal timber, ore, and seafood under the cover of nominally legal operations.

In wildlife trafficking, Chinese networks leverage limited enforcement, under-resourced environmental agencies, and minimal border inspections to organize poaching, consolidate products, and export high-value species to China with little risk of detection.

Second, corruption, collusion, and patronage are the main tools Chinese networks use to subvert regulations. Chinese criminal actors and complicit legal businesses cultivate relationships of influence with officials, politicians, police commanders, regulators, and port or customs authorities through gifts, campaign contributions, business partnerships, and outright corruption.

Logging provides an example of such patterns of nefarious behavior. In countries such as Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia, China-oriented supply chains have relied on fabricated permits, timber laundering through sawmills, and the acceptance of clearly irregular documentation.^{lxix} Like in mining and gold laundering, local authorities often profit from the illegal operations they are meant to prevent through bribery, kickbacks, and undisclosed revenue collection. Such poor and

outright illegal practices critically compound deforestation, habitat destruction, climate change, biodiversity loss, and zoonotic disease emergence and spread.

Kickbacks from highly profitable Chinese markets—including in rare timber species or wildlife products such as jaguar teeth, bones, and skins and totoaba bladders—encourage local officials and political brokers to tolerate illegal extraction and trafficking. Enforcement remains sporadic.

Similarly, in fisheries, Chinese distant-water fishing fleets often concentrate in jurisdictions with weak monitoring, enforcement capacities, and port controls. Authorities there may struggle to detect or act against Chinese fishing fleets' intrusions into their exclusive economic zones or ignore destructive practices such as shark finning and bottom trawling.

Third, Chinese criminal networks, like all illicit networks, exploit legal gaps and institutional fragmentation across jurisdictions. For example, in smuggling precursor chemicals for illicit drugs, Chinese suppliers take advantage of differences between Chinese and other legal frameworks. For example, they exploit the lack of conspiracy, material-support, and racketeering statutes in China's legal system. Since many precursors for dangerous drugs, such as methamphetamine and fentanyl, are not scheduled (i.e., their production, sales, and exports are not controlled), Chinese networks sell them to criminal buyers in Latin America, often knowing fully well that they are selling to cartels.^{lxx} Yet the absence of these statutes in China's legal system means Chinese authorities often feel unable to act against these networks. Moreover, since the production of illicit drugs is evolving toward utilizing ever more basic chemicals with widespread legal use, it's likely that the number of unscheduled precursors will grow with time.

Meanwhile, Latin American authorities frequently lack the capacity to detect these chemicals at ports and borders, allowing shipments to move as legitimate industrial trade.

Similar jurisdictional seams exist in money laundering: Chinese underground banking and trade-based schemes bypass international wire transactions where most extensive controls have been established. Instead, Chinese money laundering networks move money through mirror transactions only within a country, not across countries.^{lxxi} Although China took important steps to improve anti-money-laundering cooperation with the United States in 2024, Beijing's anti-money-laundering cooperation with Latin American countries remains limited.^{lxxii}

Trade-based money laundering is a particular potent form of financial conspiracy, since many customs and tax agencies struggle to detect under- or over-invoicing in high-volume consumer-goods trade. Moreover, since Chinese companies do high-volume legal trade around the globe, Chinese money laundering networks have a great advantage over other money laundering networks in being able to hide large illicit transactions worldwide.

Fourth, many Chinese criminal enterprises operate simultaneously in legal and illegal spheres.

For example, Chinese companies involved in logging, mining, or fishing often hold legitimate concessions or operate through registered local partners while they systematically violate environmental, labor, or quota regulations.

In financial crimes, Chinese criminal networks exploit Chinese businesses, students abroad, and diaspora commercial networks to function as witting or unwitting nodes in underground banking.

Chinese actors' portfolios of legal and illegal activities allow them to obscure their nefarious behaviors beyond money laundering. It also equips them with significant political capital with local authorities and businesses and protects them from local law enforcement. Operations that cross the boundaries of legality and illegality make it challenging for under-resourced regulators, inspectors, and prosecutors to distinguish legal commerce from criminal facilitation. Such operations also raise the political costs of enforcement, since investigations and prosecution can easily be framed as attacks on investment, jobs, or bilateral economic ties. Even top government officials and high-level institutions may hesitate to confront China-linked actors for diplomatic, economic, or personal self-interest reasons.

The result is a vicious feedback loop: weak institutions create opportunities that Chinese and other criminal networks exploit, while their use of corruption, legal ambiguity, and economic leverage further entrenches selective enforcement and impunity.

The erosion of government sovereignty

In the most severe cases, criminal networks and illicit economies can even threaten the functional sovereignty of state institutions and decision-making structures. Such functional sovereignty degrades when criminal networks systematically infiltrate government institutions and when vested interests, such as industrial or agricultural groups, capture institutions and distort policies over many years. Such actors can then prevent the adoption of effective regulation and subvert enforcement efforts. States may retain formal sovereignty, but their ability to enforce laws, protect natural resources, and regulate capital and trade in the public interest becomes severely constrained.

Chinese business networks and criminal networks are hardly the only actors in Latin America that may warp institutions and policies this way. Preexisting capture of institutions by powerful local vested interests predates the influence of Chinese actors by many decades. However, Chinese actors may sometimes strongly amplify such problematic practices.

Several dynamics signal that sovereignty erosion is underway. One indicator is a qualitative shift in corruption from isolated instances to systematic practice that involves many levels of government and law enforcement institutions as well as politicians and legal businesses. Systematic intimidation of journalists, whistleblowers, prosecutors, and honest officials becomes a frequent feature.

A second indicator is the politicization and weakening of the resources and independence of regulatory and oversight bodies and enforcement institutions. When governments repeatedly decline to enforce laws against fishing fleets or mining or logging concession holders, they cede sovereignty over maritime and resource domains. When environmental and customs agencies lack the capacity or political backing to inspect high-risk cargo, the state's jurisdiction over its borders declines. Law-enforcement priorities shaped by political calculations—such as avoiding

friction with China or protecting domestic patronage networks—further degrade functional sovereignty.

A third warning sign is the erosion of fiscal capacity. Large-scale IUU fishing, illegal logging, and unregulated mining, such as that linked to demand in China, deplete natural resources while generating little tax or royalty revenue for public coffers and diverting rents to criminal and corruption networks. Over time, such practices weaken the tax base, reduce resources for public investment, and increase dependence on short-term rents or external financing, strengthening the leverage of domestic oligarchs and foreign state-linked investors.^{lxxiii} Meanwhile, Chinese underground banking and trade-based laundering used to move cartel profits or elite capital abroad further bypass tax authorities and weaken revenue collection.

Finally, parallel economic and governance systems, sometimes outright criminal ones, may also emerge and consolidate. In some localities affected by illegal mining, logging, or wildlife trafficking, local and Chinese criminal actors organize entire supply chains—from extraction and processing to export and financial settlement—largely outside formal regulatory and banking channels. They can also provide extensive employment for local communities, thus obtaining substantial political capital.^{lxxiv} Communities and even entire local governments may become dependent on such criminal systems for employment, access to micro-credit, and even semi-public services. Their bonds with formal state decline dramatically.^{lxxv}

In such cases, (re)generating authority for the state and rule of law requires not only law enforcement efforts, but also deep institutional reforms, and the development of legal economic opportunities, effective anti-crime socio-economic programs, and robust social services.^{lxxvi}

Chinese government responses to Chinese criminal groups and illicit activities

The Chinese government has a complex management attitude toward foreign Chinese criminal groups that centers on selective enforcement. That selective law enforcement is further subordinated to China's geostrategic interests.^{lxxvii}

China's law enforcement selectiveness partially stems from the fact that Chinese criminal networks operating in Latin America and the Caribbean sometimes shape Latin American governments and actors to be more susceptible to Chinese government influence. As I explain in "China and synthetic drugs control" and in "Chinese crime and geopolitics in 2024," Chinese criminal groups cultivate political capital with Chinese authorities and foreign government officials by promoting China's political, strategic, and economic interests.^{lxxviii} Large criminal networks that also operate in legal economies, such as the 14K Triad, particularly provide a variety of services to the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Chinese legal enterprises. Such services include establishing networks of corruption and influence among foreign politicians and businesses that can be parlayed into securing favorable business deals for Chinese companies or extending China's diplomatic and political influence in specific countries.

Despite high-profile anti-corruption campaigns launched by President Xi Jinping, rent-seeking and the protection of politically-connected business interests remain widespread in China. Career advancement for many Chinese officials is still closely tied to delivering economic growth, employment, and investment. This system incentivizes official tolerance of Chinese firms and brokers that generate trade and revenues—even when they engage in problematic or illegal activities such as illegal logging or fishing.

Moreover, just like Chinese overseas police stations, some Chinese criminal groups have also become components of China's so-called United Front concept and system that sees all kinds of Chinese state agencies, nonstate entities, and citizens as a joint, if disparate, front to promote the CCP's influence and definition of China's interests.^{lxxix} These criminal groups gather informal intelligence for the Chinese government and monitor and pressure Chinese diaspora communities or political dissidents.

At the same time, China's legal framework contains important gaps, including the absence of robust conspiracy, racketeering, and "material support" statutes. Thus, many Chinese actors operating in the gray zone of economies can escape China's law enforcement. For example, Chinese traders who sell nonscheduled precursor chemicals to Mexican cartels rely on the legality of the chemicals to evade Chinese prosecution, even when they knowingly sell to criminal actors with illicit intent. Beijing has demonstrated that it can tighten controls and crack down on specific actors when it chooses to do so, but enforcement against politically-connected enterprises and the upper tiers of criminal networks remains uneven.

China tends to act against Chinese criminal groups when they cross its redlines. These include:

1. Engaging in violence in China or perpetrating highly visible violence against Chinese citizens, such as in scam centers.
2. Facilitating extensive capital flight from China.
3. Promoting political or business opposition to the Chinese Communist Party or the Chinese government.

Chinese criminal groups that service the Chinese government's may also eventually be subject to China's prosecution, such as when they attract extensive negative publicity abroad that makes it too diplomatically costly for China to continue extending protection.

Internationally, China's approach to crime and counternarcotics cooperation is often instrumental. Law-enforcement collaboration with other countries tends to be subordinated to broader geopolitical considerations.^{lxxx} The Chinese government expands or withholds law enforcement cooperation with other countries depending on its relations with the country at any particular time. China extends law enforcement cooperation to countries with which it enjoys positive relations and with those it seeks bring into its orbit and denies it to countries with which relations deteriorate.

Cumulatively, China's managed approach to criminal groups should not be interpreted as the Chinese government systematically directing all Chinese criminal networks. Rather, Beijing has

at times benefitted from selectively shielding actors that operate at the intersection of crime, business, and state interests.

China's growing law enforcement cooperation with Latin America

In the past few years, China has been increasing its law enforcement engagement and cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean through technological transfers and more systematic and structured law enforcement frameworks, such as the GSI. Priding itself on being the world's toughest cop, China actively advertises itself to foreign audiences as a place of high public safety and highly effective law enforcement. In Latin America and the Caribbean, it increasingly markets its domestic model of pervasive surveillance and technology-driven policing as a solution to Latin American governments' struggle with violent crime and insecurity.

The signature law enforcement technology that China promotes in Latin America and the Caribbean is Huawei's high-tech surveillance system known as Safe City, which features CCTV cameras, facial recognition, license-plate readers, and big data analytics and feeds them into centralized command centers.^{lxxxix} As of now, at least 35 major cities across Latin America have purchased it. Other Chinese technologies, including for command-and-control centers, are being rapidly adopted in a variety of law enforcement functions and by a variety of law enforcement actors abroad. Examples include Ecuador's ECU 911 system, financed by Chinese loans and built primarily by Huawei and the state-owned China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation,^{lxxxix} and law enforcement technology exports to Argentina^{lxxxiii} and Bolivia.^{lxxxiv} As in the case of Ecuador, such law enforcement technological platforms are often financed by Chinese loans.^{lxxxv} They also lock governments into long-term relationships with Chinese firms for maintenance, software updates, and data management.^{lxxxvi}

While these systems can strengthen law enforcement operational capacities in recipient countries, they also create asymmetrical dependencies: Chinese firms gain privileged access to sensitive data, communications infrastructure, and decision-makers in security institutions, often under opaque contractual terms and with limited democratic oversight.^{lxxxvii}

As I explained in my December 2025 testimony to the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, these technologies raise concerns about whether data privacy, human rights, and civil liberties will be violated and whether the technologies will enable^{lxxxviii} Equally concerning is that these technologies could serve as backdoor for Chinese espionage.

China's GSI has become an umbrella framework for the provision of Chinese law enforcement trainings, engagements, and capacity-building efforts in Latin America. China now provides some form of bilateral or multilateral law enforcement training to the vast majority of countries in the region. Its law enforcement training features courses on cybercrime, financial investigations, riot control, and "stability maintenance," as well as others tailored to the needs of Latin American and Caribbean countries.^{lxxxix}

As with Chinese law enforcement technologies, such assistance is unconstrained by human rights and civil liberties considerations and safeguards. Beijing uses such exchanges and assistance to build influence with security elites in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Weakly governed and highly violent environments where governments urgently seek visible security gains are particularly susceptible to Chinese offers of turnkey surveillance and policing systems. Such assistance may enhance Beijing's diplomatic leverage rather than systematically strengthen rule of law.

Moreover, Chinese law enforcement cooperation is hardly a fully equitable two-way street. In its law enforcement cooperation abroad, including in Latin America, Beijing pursues its own priorities, such as monitoring Chinese expatriates, pressuring dissidents, and pursuing fugitives through campaigns such as Operation Fox Hunt and Operation Sky Net.^{xc}Such activities are sometimes conducted with limited transparency or judicial oversight of host countries.

In some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as in Cambodia and the Solomon Islands, concerns have arisen that China's presence in law enforcement systems amounts to colonialization and dramatically skews law enforcement toward Chinese interests at the expense of locals. China's presence in law enforcement systems in Latin America is not as extensive currently.

But Washington should be concerned that reliance on Chinese surveillance systems and training could complicate U.S. counternarcotics and anti-crime partnerships and security interests. One risk is that Chinese technological platforms could create opportunities for espionage or data exfiltration, potentially giving state-linked firms access to sensitive video feeds, communications, and law-enforcement databases. These risks in turn make U.S. law enforcement agencies further constrained in sharing operational intelligence, investigative leads, and U.S. technical tools.

A second concern is that the design and use of these systems can shift policing priorities toward regime and elite protection, including local actors deeply implicated in corruption networks tied to China, rather than independent justice enforcement and rule of law. When both China and the United States underemphasize building a broader ecosystem of institutional impartiality, independent law enforcement and justice institutions, and independent accountability and oversight, the quality of anti-crime efforts dramatically declines. Anti-crime and anti-corruption efforts become a narrow tool of political and geopolitical competition, where advantage can easily swing toward U.S. adversaries.

Policy recommendations

Countering Chinese criminal networks and activities in the Western Hemisphere requires a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy that emphasizes the rule of law and clean supply chains. This strategy's core elements, which I also lay out in my December 2025 testimony to the U.S. Senate, include:

1. Helping state authorities in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop law enforcement tools against Chinese criminal networks.

Latin American law enforcement agencies often lack the linguistic skills and operational focus on Chinese criminal networks, as they grapple with a range of highly violent Latin American groups. Countering the role of Chinese networks may be low on their priority list. While suppressing the most violent criminal groups must remain Latin America's top law enforcement priority, U.S. law enforcement agencies can support partners in Latin America and the Caribbean by strengthening awareness of the risks posed by Chinese criminal groups and by building investigative capacity—including linguistic training—to counter them.

In addition to growing specialized capacities within agencies, such support could also encourage the development of joint task forces that pull in experts on Chinese criminal networks from across a wide set of local agencies.

The United States can also help its partners in Latin America and the Caribbean develop positive relations with Chinese diaspora communities, so that those communities feel empowered to report crimes and repression that target them. Such positive relations with Chinese local communities can become valuable springboards into broader investigations.

2. Encouraging the adoption of U.S. anti-crime and port monitoring and operations technology alternatives to Chinese systems, such as Safe Cities.

To be effective in persuading Latin American and Caribbean countries to eschew Chinese technologies, with their associated espionage and repression risks, the United States will need to provide them with technological alternatives for critical infrastructure and public safety systems. However, U.S. technologies must strictly adhere to human rights and civil liberties protections. The United States could expand funding for alternative U.S. security and technology partnerships to compete with Chinese surveillance systems. Congress could authorize dedicated financing—such as a regional security and governance facility—to help Latin American partners acquire and maintain technologies from the United States or U.S. allies for anti-crime operations, port monitoring, and customs enforcement. Any such programs should include strong safeguards on data protection, procurement transparency, and human-rights compliance. Oversight requirements could ensure that surveillance technologies are subject to independent review and that systems remain interoperable with U.S. partners, reducing dependence on opaque Chinese platforms.

3. Dismantling Chinese money laundering networks.

With Chinese money laundering networks rapidly eclipsing the Black Peso Exchange Market, financial intelligence units and law enforcement agencies in Latin America and the Caribbean must expand their purview, with the United States helping them build up-to-date systems.

That includes building strong anti-money-laundering measures and anti-illicit activities systems into cryptocurrencies, which are widely utilized by Chinese and other criminal networks.

The United States could also expand training programs similar to International Military Education and Training and civilian security-sector assistance focused on financial investigations and port and customs integrity.

4. Countering Chinese criminal groups' operations beyond drugs.

Since Chinese criminal groups operate in many domains other than drugs, countering their money laundering schemes and illicit activities in logging, mining, IUU fishing, and wildlife trafficking is essential. More focus on all of these activities will help Latin American and Caribbean countries develop a multifaceted picture of the Chinese criminal networks and their local and international networks of influence, including political and government sponsors in China.

Since Latin American criminal groups have diversified their activities into a variety of illicit and licit economies, strengthening law enforcement efforts against crimes against nature and business corruption helps counter both Chinese and local criminal networks.

Law enforcement investigations into illicit economies in natural resources often provide unique venues for infiltrating criminal groups, generating intelligence, and uncovering their political and government-linked networks. Thus, fostering competent and well-resourced law enforcement forces specializing in efforts against poaching, wildlife trafficking, IUU fishing, and illicit logging, deforestation, and mining provides varied benefits to dismantling organized crime.

Such non-drug economies also need to feature prominently in intelligence gathering and efforts to gather financial intelligence and counter money laundering.

In the case of IUU fishing specifically, it would be particularly advantageous for the United States to expand and strengthen its cooperative agreements with Latin American and Caribbean countries to utilize the U.S. Coast Guard as a partner rapid-response capacity. In addition to protecting economic sustainability and biodiversity, tasking the Coast Guard with this role would help develop intelligence on these crimes' convergence with drug trafficking and espionage.

5. Building clean, transparent, and traceable supply chains.

The IUU fishing domain, however, is a prime example of how local and foreign criminal networks intersect. The United States should use its collaboration with Latin American and Caribbean countries to encourage the needed strengthening of regulations, monitoring, and enforcement against domestic fishing fleets' and port authorities' irregular and illegal practices. The persistence of bad local practices will continue to attract and enable criminality from the outside.

Overall, countering Chinese criminality and corruption in natural resources requires countering all criminality in such supply chains. In seafood, timber, ores and minerals, legal wildlife commodities, and agricultural products, the United States should be diligent and steadfast in encouraging countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to develop transparent, traceable, and clean supply chains and strengthen their monitoring and punishment of violations.

The United States itself and U.S. companies should lead by example in adopting high legality and sustainability standards and strictly enforcing them.

6. Reducing corruption and patronage systems and establishing apolitical, independent legal systems.

Systematically prosecuting criminal groups' political and business sponsors, Chinese or local, and their political patrons at all levels of government, is fundamental to success. That in turn requires building up effective, apolitical prosecutorial and legal systems shielded from political interference as well as infiltration by criminal groups.

Countering generalized corruption and patronage systems that provide exceptions to the rule of law for one's clique fosters both objectives. Criminality thrives amidst corruption.

Countering corruption is significantly enhanced by strong independent oversight bodies, such as offices of inspectors general and other systems of transparency and accountability, including thriving investigative journalism and civil society organizations that expose the malfeasance of politicians, police, and security forces and hold them to account.

7. Scrupulously adhering to human rights and civil liberties protections, avoiding any kind of vilification of Chinese communities, and holding law enforcement accountable.

Strongman law enforcement tactics ultimately backfire and, over time, cause profound damage to all aspects of the rule of law. They may be popular for a while, but they destroy the essential trust of populations in police forces and the law.

Vilifying minorities, such as Chinese diaspora groups, both undermines justice and deprives law enforcement agencies of valuable, accurate intelligence.

All law enforcement activities need to take place amidst scrupulous adherence to the rule of law, due process, and civil liberties and human rights. All too often, wars on crime have become a mechanism for broad political repression and for overthrowing democracy. Unaccountable law enforcement forces, incentivized to suspend the rule of law against alleged criminals—on the basis of often flimsy allegations—readily become tools of authoritarianism and turn on all citizens without restraint.

Brutal and unaccountable law enforcement forces also lose their anti-crime effectiveness. In many countries, such police forces have become the top criminals themselves, redistributing drug markets and other crime turfs to their own benefit.

In contrast, reducing impunity for all, including law enforcement forces, and strengthening the rule of law improve anti-crime efforts.

8. Adopting comprehensive, sustainable socioeconomic anti-crime policies.

Chinese networks tap into preexisting systems of corruption and patronage among Latin American and Caribbean elites and institutions, but they also exploit marginalized local populations dependent on illicit economies or readily lured to them, such as in illegal mining, logging, and poaching.

Well-designed socioeconomic measures to counter illicit economies in Latin America and the Caribbean will help reduce the pool of regional persons willing to participate in illicit economies. They can help address the root causes of crime and strengthen bonds between local marginalized populations and the state. They can also help weaken the bonds between local populations and criminal groups and increase both state capacity and legitimacy.

Yet all too often, such programs are not designed as a comprehensive, sustainable strategy that focuses on legal job creation, but rather limited short-term, discrete handouts and buy-offs. Such socioeconomic programs easily become mechanisms of political patronage with a limited impact on reducing crime. They also end up outright co-opted by organized crime.

9. Strengthening U.S. domestic resources, institutions, and laws for such support systems in Latin America and the Caribbean.

To be effective in countering Chinese criminality and fostering Latin American capacities to do so, the United States must strengthen its own resources for the task. They include developing adequate resources and maintaining strong laws.

If the majority of U.S. Coast Guard platforms, such as cutters and other vessels, are tied up in counternarcotics efforts, few will be available to partner with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to counter Chinese and other IUU fishing, for example.

The number of U.S. Fish and Wildlife inspectors and special agents has been generally flat since the 1970s, even though crimes in natural resources have ballooned. Their presence in Latin America is thin. Investigative capacities and personnel in other agencies, such as Homeland Security Investigations, have been reoriented to other U.S. domestic priorities, such as undocumented migrants.

Resurrecting and expanding Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Forces dedicated to countering Chinese criminality is also essential. These task forces effectively bring together agents and experts from across many U.S. law enforcement agencies and across all domestic layers of the U.S. government, and have been part of the U.S. Justice Department's toolbox since 1982. Before they were dismantled by the Trump administration, they were some of the world's most effective law enforcement bodies. Their undoing leaves the United States vulnerable to organized crime efforts, including those by Chinese actors.

To effectively uncover Chinese criminal networks, the United States must lead by example and sustain its legislation and enforcement mechanisms, such as the Forest Act and the Lacey Act. The Lacey Act has been the basis for prosecuting all kinds of organized crime activities in natural resources around the world, and it remains a cornerstone law enforcement tool against Chinese criminal networks. It is essential, however, that the tool is not weakened by narrowly

diluting the interpretation of harm to include only direct interference with the endangered species itself while the destruction of the ecosystem on which it depends is excluded from the concept of harm.

The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) has similarly been a cornerstone U.S. legislation to combat political sponsors of organized crime around the world. The Trump administration's efforts to minimize prosecutions under the FCPA and weaken other anti-corruption tools counterproductively foster the conditions under which all organized crime, including Chinese networks specifically, thrive.

10. Helping Latin American and Caribbean governments and investigative systems, such as investigative journalists, to encourage China to take enforcement actions against Chinese entities' criminal behavior in the region.

Latin American and Caribbean countries can leverage China's increasing interest in expanding law enforcement assistance in the region to demand that Beijing take diligent and robust efforts to counter corrupt and criminal Chinese networks. They should take advantage of Chinese bilateral commitments and various pieces of domestic Chinese legislation that promise to strengthen accountability in fishing and logging and expand them into other domains, such as mining. Latin American and Caribbean countries should demand that law enforcement assistance with China is fully a two-way street and not one narrowly focused on limited Chinese interests.

China often starts taking law enforcement actions when nefarious behavior by its businesses and citizens faces widespread public exposure. Therefore, the United States should support civil society nongovernmental organizations and investigative journalists in Latin America that specialize in public interest protection and fearlessly expose local and external corruption and illegality.

Overall, the United States should treat China-linked criminal activity in Latin America as a governance challenge, not merely a drug-control problem. Addressing it thus requires building strong, independent rule-of-law institutions that target illegality in a broad spectrum of economies, including in natural resources and in financial and institutional infrastructure and systems. Rather than being narrowly militaristic, an effective approach will be multi-sectoral and encompass building strong mechanisms of accountability, including a strong civil society and robust investigative media in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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