

REMARKS BEFORE U.S-CHINA ECONOMIC AND SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION

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'CHINA'S MILITARY POWER PROJECTION AND U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS'

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss China's military interests in Latin America as part of this day long hearing on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) expanded activity globally. Please let me begin by reminding you these are my personal assessments and should not be interpreted as the official policy of the Department of Defense, National Defense University, National War College, or any agency of the U.S. Government.

As I noted in my contribution to the *Chinese Strategic Intentions: A Deep Dive into China's Worldwide Activities* (December 2019), I attribute China's interests in the Latin American region as 1. "guaranteeing long-term access to energy, natural resources, and food; 2. Increasing diplomatic links to support China's emergent role as a global leader; 3. Eradicating the remaining diplomatic recognition of Taiwan; and 4. Furthering China's ambition to replace the United States as the dominant external country for long-term relations".¹

The goals of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fall under these overarching goals for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) because the PLA is an organ of the CCP rather than an instrument of

¹ SMA Chinese Strategic Intentions White Paper FINAL 01 Nov.pdf see "Chapter 20. China's Creeping Interests in Latin America: Challenging the Monroe Doctrine", p. 146.

overall Chinese foreign policy. The focus of this discussion is PLA influence overseas but I would stress that evidence for China using a much wider array of instruments than some countries is compelling.

China's focus is on expanding its long term relations with the states of the region under the auspices of four objectives noted above. As such, the PLA strives to strengthen China's role across the board in this region rather than creating simply a dominant PLA role in Latin America. This is an important point because the PLA represents power projection but is being used by Beijing not for that power projection but as part of a broader attempt to build long-term relationships.

Uses of military-military ties with Latin America

The PLA uses all of the instruments at its disposal to expand its role across Latin America. One of the most important things for Latin America is China's welcome of officers to professional military education (P.M.E.) programs. Long important for militaries not welcomed to U.S. P.M.E. programs, the PLA offers its "international course" for militaries to hear about China's military role around the world. Located across town from the main PLA National Defense University northeast of central Beijing, this program allows especially Venezuelan, Ecuadoran, and Bolivian officers to learn from their Chinese counterparts in an environment with other foreign officers. They are not, however, fully integrated into courses with Chinese counterparts. These foreign militaries instead study about China's interests, hear Beijing's perspective on the international system, and overall reinforce what is currently a predisposition against the United States in these militaries which have now been excluded from the U.S. P.M.E. system for at least two decades.

The Chinese and Latin American armed forces have exchanged visits to provide evidence of their interest in stronger ties. These meetings occur alternatively in Beijing as well as the capitals of Latin America. Relatively light in substance, the meetings generally provide photographic evidence for each side of the meeting occurring rather than allowing substantial outcomes because the PLA is not a locus

for negotiating within the Chinese system. Discussions appear to focus on basic accords to facilitate better cooperation, donation of equipment, or the low level of arms sales Beijing offers.

Bases in Latin America: not so much

Latin American states value protecting their sovereignty as highly as does China. It is highly unlikely that this region would welcome PLA establishment of bases to mirror the one built in Djibouti. Remarks by PLA Lieutenant General He Lei a year ago indicated that *China* desired two different conditions to allow it to develop comparable bases to Djibouti: a welcome from a host nation and an opportunity to improve a peace-keeping mission in this relevant country.² Latin American states do not generally welcome foreign military basing because of the centrality of protecting sovereignty in the region's culture. This sensitivity to sovereignty resulted from decades of foreign intervention in their history. Interestingly, Latin American states historically had considerable engagement in blue helmet operations, seen by some as violating sovereignty, but Latin American armed forces appear less involved in those efforts today. China is not offering peace keepers in the Latin American region at present.

Concern about Hutchinson Whampoa operation of the Panama Canal Zone spans to the 1990s. China did not, however, immediately establish a PLA presence in the Central American isthmus with a curious reality that Panama did not shift diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the mainland until 2017. Other commercial port ties exist in El Salvador, for example, but there does not appear a dramatic increase in PLA operations there.

The 2011 visit by the PLA hospital ship, *Peace Ark*, represented an attempt to replicate the "soft power" of medical medicine that the Chinese have learned from decades of similar U.S. visits around the globe. The PLAN does not currently circumnavigate the globe nearly as often as does the U.S. Navy with

² Alidad Vassigh, "Gauging China's Military Intervention in Latin America", *worldcrunch.com*, 2019.

Peace Ark's visits to Latin American ports similarly far less frequent than *U.S.N.S. Comfort* or *U.S.N.S. Mercy*.

At present, while U.S. Southern Command does offer the opportunity for military-to-military exercises between U.S. and Latin militaries, this is not yet a frequent behavior between PLA and Latin American militaries. The deepening of ties between China and any of the Latin American nations could lead to this type of interaction but at present the focus of PLA activities remain largely domestic. China remains far from this form of coordination for the foreseeable future.

Arms Sales, 'ALBA', and Argen

China uses arms a manner of enhancing longer-term ties with the region rather than to create conditions for inter-operability as the United States often does. Chinese arms are far less expensive than U.S. sales, an important issue for most Latin American states which cannot come anywhere near the level of defense spending of NATO partners or Japan. These are less sophisticated arms but also require smaller maintenance packages which again benefit the states' defense budgets in the region.

Foci of PLA arms expanding penetration include Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia (often called ALBA states by the late Venezuelan Hugo Chávez Frías) and Argentina, all states where China's overall relationship is deeper because of strong anti-U.S. sentiments. Coincidentally, these are states where U.S. military (and political) ties are weakest in the region. These are also the countries where the PLA is able to offer arms that are the less sophisticated and cheaper than those offered by the United States or Europe. These arms sales are most often linked to needs of the police and internal security since there are few international points of friction in Latin America. These are not arms that substantially increase China's prowess in Latin America but provide bonds of military-to-military respect from the PLA towards the underfunded armed forces of these states.

China's overall military engagement in this region is deeper than it has ever been but is still relatively weak compared with U.S. ties. As regimes exit or enter power, China poses a potential interlocutor but generally not a highly desired long-term link because the PLA does not offer the same approach of cooperation and coordination as does U.S. Southern Command and the individual services in longer-term links to the militaries in this region.

Conclusions

China's overall presence in Latin America is significantly greater than it was when Hu Jintao visited several South American countries in November 2004 after an APEC meeting. The bulk of the engagement, however, remains financial, trade, and diplomatic rather than military. Latin America is a region where the armed forces' role in societies decreased in the post-Cold War world. At least one analyst argued in February 2020 that the stressed democracies of this region may be reconsidering the role of the military which could open the door to better access for Beijing but we are a long way from that point at present.³ PLA officers currently have weak ties with Latin American peers, though a greater role by Latin Americans in protecting the *patria* could stimulate Beijing's interest but this does not appear true right now.

U.S. engagement with Latin America is the key to not only Washington's role in the region but also Beijing's. The primary instrument of U.S. policy for decades has been U.S. Southern Command with the combatant commander arguably the single best known U.S. figure in the region.⁴ Latin American militaries historically (1982 in Argentina, 1980s in Nicaragua, post 1999 in Venezuela as notable exceptions) welcomed strong ties with the U.S. armed forces, often ties much deeper than any other type of relations between our two regions.

³*Washington Post*, 12 February 2020.

⁴ Part of the reason for this is the repeated history of U.S. administrations not operating with ambassadors in place, a phenomenon irritating Latin American counterpart regimes.

Recent U.S. domestic rhetoric excoriating Mexican and Central American immigration seriously undermine this state of affairs. Latin Americans from Argentina and Chile north to the Mexico-U.S. border increasingly fear that the United States no longer cares seeks positive, sustained relations with this part of the world. The hostility developing along this path reinforces those inflammatory, nationalist anti-U.S. sentiments advocated by the late Hugo Chávez Frías and Nicolás Maduro Moros in Caracas or Bolivian Evo Morales.

By extension, this may open the door to Latin American regimes reconsidering the benefits of stronger involvement by PLA in these countries across the region if they believe China offers a better partner for the future than does the United States. This is not an inconsequential possibility. China remains cautious about its military engagement in this region because of a two hundred year history of the Monroe Doctrine (1823). The shifting international perspectives do NOT guarantee that this region, long determined to chart a course best for its future, will reject Beijing's overtures, including PLA-Latin American military ties. The power for this decision lays with the United States far more than it does with China or the PLA.