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ARTICLE

The Strategic Role of Latin America in a Global Conflict Over Taiwan

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Robert Evan Ellis

Abstract

This work examines the role that Latin America might play as an object of Chinese military activities, in the context of a future struggle with the United States and allied Western powers over Taiwan. It argues that the orientation of People's Republic of China (PRC) leadership, its growing military power, diplomatic isolation of Taiwan and other factors are making such a conflict increasingly possible. It finds that Latin America and the Caribbean present strategic diplomatic, economic, and military objectives that the PRC will be tempted to exploit in the context of such a struggle, including digital architectures, the space domain, ports and airfields, and other strategic geography.

Keywords: PRC, Taiwan, Conflict, Digital, Space, Military, Strategic Infrastructure.

Introduction

In August 2022, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) space tracking ship Yuan Wang 5 made a port call in Hambantota, a facility operated by China Merchants Port Holdings (CM Port).¹ Control of the facility had been ceded to CM Port in December 2017,² in exchange for forgiveness of debt incurred to the People's Republic of China (PRC) by its predecessor government of the opposing party. The port call by the PLAN vessel Yuan Wang 5 illustrated that Chinese military use of strategic facilities around the globe does not require formal basing agreements or military alliances. Indeed, the Yuan Wang 5 episode highlights that combination of operation of a strategic facility by a PRC-based commercial entity, combined with significant economic leverage over, and friendly relations with the partner nation, may be enough.

1 News, "India miffed at Colombo for allowing PLA satellite tracker ship in Hambantota", *Hindustan Times* (August 5, 2022), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/india-miffed-at-colombo-for-allowing-pla-satellite-tracker-ship-in-hambantota-101650675082026.html>

2 News, "Sri Lanka formally hands over Hambantota port on 99-year lease to China", *The Hindu* (December 9, 2017), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-formally-hands-over-hambantota-port-on-99-year-lease-to-china/article61847422.ece>

The meeting between United States (U.S.) President Joe Biden, and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Bali, Indonesia,³ the follow-up meetings between Xi and Vice President Kamala Harris at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders summit,⁴ and those between U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe at an ASEAN military leaders summit in Cambodia⁵ are reminders that the U.S. and PRC are working to prevent the competition between the two nations from escalating into a military conflict. Nonetheless, President Xi's desire to cement his legacy through the incorporation of Taiwan into the PRC before the end of his third term in 2027,⁶ and his instruction to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to prepare for conflict over Taiwan,⁷ highlight that a war with the U.S. of global proportions, sparked by a PLA invasion of Taiwan or another matter, is no longer unthinkable. Indeed, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd anticipates that a war with China over Taiwan could reasonably occur within the next decade.⁸

In the context of a war with the PRC, China's operation and use of "dual use" infrastructure in Latin America, in combination with its regular military

3 John Feng, "Xi Dominates G20 Talks With Biden in Pages of China's Leading Newspaper", *Newsweek* (November 14, 2022), <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/xi-dominates-g20-talks-with-biden-in-pages-of-chinas-leading-newspaper/ar-AA14tdyU>

4 World, "U.S. VP Harris met briefly with China's Xi at APEC", *Reuters Breaking International News & Views* (November 18, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-vp-harris-met-briefly-with-chinas-xi-apec-2022-11-19/>

5 Jack Detsch, "U.S. Seeks to Allay Fears of Military Crisis With China", *Foreign Policy* (November 22, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/22/us-china-military-talks-asean-taiwan/>

6 Cindy Sui, "Will China Try to Take Taiwan in Xi's Third Term?", *Voice of America News* (October 22, 2022), <https://www.voanews.com/a/will-china-try-to-take-taiwan-in-xi-s-third-term-/6801580.html#:~:text=A%20U.S.%20Navy%20official%2C%20meanwhile%2C%20has%20warned%20that,terms%20for%20unification%20as%20early%20as%20next%20year>

7 Verna Yu, "Xi Jinping tells China's army to focus on preparation for war", *The Guardian* (November 9, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/09/xi-jinping-tells-chinas-army-to-focus-on-preparation-for-war>

8 James Giggacher, "War over Taiwan possible in next 10 years: Kevin Rudd", *Report Anu* (November 22, 2022), <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/all-stories/war-over-taiwan-possible-in-next-10-years-rudd>

interactions in the region,⁹ raise the possibility of the region becoming a battleground in such a conflict, even if it simply wishes to benefit from China's money¹⁰ without involving itself¹¹ in "Great Power Competition."¹² Much of the existing scholarship on Chinese engagement in Latin America and elsewhere examines its implications through the lens of the principally commercial character of that engagement¹³ and the lack of clear military ambitions toward the Western Hemisphere,¹⁴ without considering the strategic implications of the growing Chinese position in the context of a possible war of global scope.¹⁵ This work examines how PRC-based infrastructure, military and space engagement in Latin America could indirectly involve Latin America in a military conflict potentially brought about in the coming years by a possible PRC invasion of Taiwan or similar events.

Bases for the Likely Expansion of PRC Engagement in 2023

Chinese engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean, as with other parts of the world, have been slowed in recent years by a number of serious

9 Nightly News, "Exclusive: US Southern Command Gen. Laura Richardson on Russian and Chinese Activities in Latin America", *NBC News* (April 16, 2022), <https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/exclusive-us-southern-command-gen-laura-richardson-on-russian-and-chinese-activities-in-latin-america-137869381098>

10 Catherine Osborn, "Latin America Could Profit from U.S.-China Competition", *Foreign Policy* (December 10, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/10/latin-america-china-celac-democracy-summit-active-nonalignment/>

11 Shannon K. O'Neil, "Latin America Shouldn't Be a Pawn in U.S.-China Rivalry", *The Council on Foreign Relations* (September 24, 2021), <https://www.cfr.org/article/latin-america-shouldnt-be-pawn-us-china-rivalry>

12 Ryan C. Berg, "The Importance of Democracy Promotion to Great Power Competition in Latin America and the Caribbean", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies* (September 26, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/importance-democracy-promotion-great-power-competition-latin-america-and-caribbean>

13 Kevin P. Gallagher, *The China Triangle: Latin America's China Boom and the Fate of the Washington Consensus* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://www.amazon.com/China-Triangle-Americas-Washington-Consensus/dp/0190246731/>

14 Fabian Cambero y Dave Sherwood, "China invites Latin America to take part in One Belt, One Road", *Reuters Breaking International News & Views* (January 22, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chile-china-idUSKBN1FB2CN>

15 Evan Ellis, "China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies* (March 31, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-role-latin-america-and-caribbean>

but ephemeral dynamics whose effects are dissipating, positioning the PRC for a significant re-engagement with the region in 2023,¹⁶ as well as accelerated movement toward a crisis involving a PRC threat to end to Taiwan's existence as an independent political entity. Latin America is moving past the COVID - 19 crisis which postponed the realization of major public infrastructure works of interest to PRC-based entities. Populist authoritarian Venezuela is moving beyond the economic freefall¹⁷ and international isolation¹⁸ which obliged the PRC to restrict engagement as its biggest oil partner and funds provider. The rest of the continent, from Mexico to Chile, is now governed by leftist or other populist governments whose policies threaten to discourage traditional private Investment,¹⁹ and whose economic and fiscal difficulties and (sometimes) ideologies increase the attractiveness of China as an alternative source of loans, investments, and commodity purchases.²⁰

On the Chinese side, Xi's consolidation of power and transition to an unprecedented third term in office²¹ arguably provides the policy clarity that many PRC-based companies were waiting for, before moving forward with major investment commitments. In addition, although the PRC continues to suffer serious COVID - 19 outbreaks, the PRC zero covid policy which has impeded Chinese economic activity and the ability of its diplomats

16 Haibin Niu, "China's Economic Engagement with Latin America Beyond COVID-19", *Woodrow Wilson International Center* (2022), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/chinas-economic-engagement-latin-america-beyond-covid-19>

17 R. Viswanathan, "Venezuela's GDP will grow by an incredible 10 per cent in 2022", *The Week* (August 30, 2022), <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2022/08/30/venezuelas-gdp-will-grow-by-an-incredible-10-per-cent-in-2022.html>

18 Charles Kennedy, "Chevron Could Get Approval To Ramp Up Oil Production In Venezuela", *Oil Price News* (November 23, 2022), <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Chevron-Could-Get-Approval-To-Ramp-Up-Oil-Production-In-Venezuela.html>

19 Kate Linticum y Tracy Wilkinson, "The left now rules most of Latin America. Will it be able to live up to its promises?", *Los Angeles Times* (November 3, 2022), <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-11-03/the-left-has-swept-into-power-across-latin-america>

20 Evan Ellis, "Preparing for Deterioration of the Latin America and Caribbean Strategic Environment", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies* (January 14, 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/preparing-deterioration-latin-america-and-caribbean-strategic-environment>

21 Larry Wortzel, "Xi Jinping Consolidates Power in Beijing", *Newsweek* (January 11, 2022), <https://www.newsweek.com/xi-jinping-consolidates-power-beijing-opinion-1755807>

and businesspeople to engage abroad will likely ease in 2022. Similarly, absent a Chinese financial and economic meltdown, which continues to be a possibility, worst of the debt crisis highlighted by Chinese real-estate Company Evergrande will likely slowly resolve itself,²² freeing up still healthy institutions to proceed with loans and other projects.

On the diplomatic front, while the tone of U.S.–PRC interaction over Taiwan may continue to improve, helped by U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's expected trip to Beijing in early 2023,²³ President Xi's informal timetable for reincorporating Taiwan by the end of his third term in 2027 will likely accelerate PRC efforts to diplomatically "flip" Taiwan-recognizing states. Beijing would seek to do so in order to internationally isolate the later as much as possible before engaging in its endgame of escalation and threats moving toward military action against Taiwan.

Candidates in Latin America to abandon Taiwan in the coming years include Honduras, whose President Xiomara Castro, when candidate, proclaimed her intention to recognize the PRC,²⁴ Paraguay, whose strongly pro-Taiwan President Mario Abdo Benitez will be replaced as President in August 2023, and Haiti, which will eventually have elections in which the majority of actors interested in replacing Haiti's current unelected President Ariel Henry, all want to recognize the PRC.²⁵ Such changes, through non-transparent MOUs, and travel to the PRC by senior leaders and politically well-connected businesspeople, among other activities, will set the stage for dramatically expanding PRC influence in those states changing relations, in the process, decreasing the diplomatic restraints impeding a PRC move against the island.

22 Keith Bradsher, "China Is Finally Trying to Fix Its Housing Crisis", *The New York Times* (November 25, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/25/business/china-property-developers.html>

23 Edward Wong, "Blinken to Visit China Early 2023 After Biden an Xi's Meeting", *The New York Times* (November 14, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/14/us/politics/blinken-china-2023.html>

24 Jeff Ernst, "Honduras president-elect's China pledge puts Taiwan and US on edge", *The Guardian* (December 1, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/01/honduras-xiomara-castro-taiwan-china-diplomacy>

25 Author interview off-the-record with Haiti experts, October 2022.

In short, despite the attempt by the Biden administration to manage the U.S.-China competition with a more positive tone, the convergence of factors involving the posture and direction of the Xi administration suggests both a deepening of PRC engagement in Latin America, and an evolution for the worse of Taiwan's diplomatic and military situation in a way that could precipitate a crisis of global proportions in which PRC presence in Latin America, particularly in strategic infrastructure like the digital domain, ports, and space, becomes militarily relevant. The following section examines what that could mean.

PRC Strategic Imperatives Involving Latin America in a War Over Taiwan

If a war breaks out over Taiwan PRC imperatives regarding Latin America will involve the political and economic, as well as military domains.

Political and Diplomatic Preparations. In the political domain, the change in diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC by a state in Latin America or the Caribbean could be one of the precipitating events that triggers the unfolding of what will likely be a pre-planned campaign to intimidate, economically isolate, and militarily move against Taiwan. Currently, eight of the 14 states continuing to recognize Taiwan are located in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The PRC may not wait until all states have derecognized Taiwan before acting against the island, since waiting would probably be unnecessary and lend itself to a level of predictability that could undermine the PRC military campaign. Nonetheless, a flip to the PRC by one of the last politically and economically significant states in the region currently recognizing it, or a flip by multiple states in close succession, in combination with the prior meeting of other military and political conditions such as an event indicating a change in Taiwan's political or

military will to resist,²⁶ or an indication of U.S. hesitancy to fully defend Taiwan, could be sufficient to set the PRC campaign in motion.

Economic and Commercial Preparations. The run-up to a PLA operation against Taiwan will likely unfold over months, during which the PRC will conduct necessary positioning of forces, and insulate its supply chains, economic and financial system against the probable effects of the invasion and other activities. It would likely use the partial observability of these measures, in conjunction with directed messages to the Taiwanese and others, to convince the Taiwanese leadership and people that military action is coming, that resistance is futile, and thus try to intimidate the Taiwanese into capitulation without military action.

PRC actions will likely be accompanied by escalating tensions and events on the global stage with the U. S. and others seeking to dissuade the PRC from acting or negotiate a solution. During this period, the PRC will likely use its significant economic and associated diplomatic leverage in Latin America, as in other parts of the world, to convince partners there to remain neutral or supportive, including in its positions at the United Nations and other bilateral forums.

Even at this stage, the PRC might negotiate secretly with some Latin American governments, for permission to ports and other strategic facilities, if needed, in exchange for significant economic benefit. It might similarly promise significant future benefit for Latin American partners denying the U.S. and its allies use of such facilities, passage through its airspace and waters, or certain other forms of relevant cooperation “if needed, in the interest of neutrality,” if war were to break out.

In the economic realm, the PRC will likely work before the invasion with states in Latin America and elsewhere, to ensure the continued function of supply chains for items it needs, as well as the financial system, to mitigate

26 RFA Staff, “Kinmen locals shocked by claims army colonel swore to surrender to China”, *Radio Free Asia* (November 23, 2022), <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/kinmen-espionage-11232022011600.html>

disruptions impacting it, arising from the conflict itself, and from anticipated financial and other sanctions imposed on it by the U. S. and its like-minded democratic allies.

China's final moves to insulate its key supply chains, economic and financial system may include working with partners such as Argentina and Brazil to ensure continued Chinese food supplies, working with Brazil to ensure continued access to Niobium, working with Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Mexico to ensure continuing flows of lithium, and working with partners with which it has done bank currency swaps and non-U.S. dollar financial transactions to circumvent, as much as possible, anticipated loss of access to the U.S.-based SWIFT interbank clearing system.²⁷

Such PRC planning and associated negotiations with Latin American and other partners is likely to be shaped by the lessons learned from its study of the economic effects of Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, and the sanctions imposed on Russia for that invasion. Indeed, the initiation of the PRC plan may not occur until key vulnerabilities exposed by Russia's experience, are addressed within the PRC context.

PRC Intelligence and Military Preparations. Even prior to the initiation of hostilities, the PRC would likely deploy personnel into Latin America and other parts of the world to support the wartime collection of intelligence and conduct of special operations. PRC-based companies operating in the region could serve as one logical conduit for hosting and supporting these personnel, as well as any special equipment that they brought in. The Chinese personnel regularly assigned to such companies, in this context, would likely support the briefing of the incoming personnel regarding local conditions including relations with local political figures and the broader population, logistical and technical information, and other characteristics of the terrain.

²⁷ Mary Hui, "The world's money transfer system is China's Achilles heel in its sanctions battle against the US", *Quartz* (August 18, 2020), <https://qz.com/1893235/swift-transfer-system-leaves-china-vulnerable-to-us-sanctions>

The tasks of such incoming Chinese forces in wartime would be varied and depend on each country, its strategic attributes and relationship with China. They might include preparing for the disruption of key facilities or routes of interest to the U.S. such as the Panama Canal or U.S. forward operating locations such as in Aruba and Curacao,²⁸ Soto-Cano airbase in Honduras,²⁹ or Comalapa in El Salvador,³⁰ the observation of U.S. military operations and forces from near-U.S. locations such as facilities in the Caribbean, preparations to put U.S. deployment and sustainment flows proximate to areas such at risk, attacks against U.S. military and other personnel operating throughout the region, or planning attacks against the U.S. homeland from proximate locations such as Mexico and the Caribbean.

Other possible military operations that the PRC might plan involving Latin America could include using intelligence or special operations personnel inserted into the region to create diversionary crises within the region affecting the US. Such actions might include disrupting supply chains supporting key U.S. defense and other companies from Mexico and Central America, disrupting operations supplying critical minerals or other strategic items to the U.S. from the region, launching attacks against the logistics of key agricultural suppliers to create a food crisis in the U.S., or even creating such a food crisis for the US by conducting plausibly deniable biological attacks against the plant and animals in the region supplying the U.S.

PRC-based forces might further seek to create economic or political destabilization in U.S. partner countries, either diverting U.S. forces and

28 International Relations, “Curaçao / Aruba Forward Operating Location On The Front Line Of The Fight Against Narcotrafficking”, *Diálogo América* (November 4, 2019), <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/curacao-aruba-forward-operating-location-on-the-front-line-of-the-fight-against-narcotrafficking/#:~:text=Comalapa%20Air%20Base%20Location%20Soto%20Cano%20Air,the%20Honduras%20Air%20Force%20Academy%20in%20Toncontin%2C%20Tegucigalpa>

29 News, “Soto Cano Air Base”, *Military Bases US* (2022), <https://www.militarybases.us/air-force/soto-cano-air-base/#:~:text=Soto%20Cano%20Air%20Base%20Location%20Soto%20Cano%20Air,the%20Honduras%20Air%20Force%20Academy%20in%20Toncontin%2C%20Tegucigalpa>

30 Military News, “Comalapa Air Base, El Salvador”, *Global Security* (August 31, 2000), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/comalapa.htm#:~:text=Comalapa%20Air%20Base%2C%20El%20Salvador%20Comalapa%20is%20the,of%20alternatives%20to%20support%20multi-national%20counter%20drug%20omissions>

attention to help its partners manage such crises or exacerbating refugee flows to the U.S. In its wartime plans in Latin America and the Caribbean, as in other parts of the world, the PRC might seek to leverage economically dependent anti-U.S. partners to support its effort in both explicitly military and indirect or plausibly deniable ways, promising substantial economic benefit for doing so, or economically painful retribution for refusing. Doing so would leverage the Latin America-specific knowledge and capabilities of such partners in the region, while insulating the PRC and its companies in the region to some degree from direct blame. This would be particularly valuable in the early phases of the conflict, when any appearance of overt PRC violations of partner nation sovereignty could undermine its effort to secure their cooperation or neutrality.

With respect to specifics, solicited contributions from extra-hemispheric anti-U.S. partners might include help from Russia for information warfare and some direct military operations in Latin America and the Caribbean against U.S. forces and its allies, or contributions from Iran through terrorist activities against U.S. or its supporters in the region by its Qods forces and more loosely affiliated groups such as Hezbollah. The PRC might also logically solicit support from anti-U.S. partners in the region such as Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, including not only military actions, but also infiltrating social and political movements in the region to pressure or destabilize neighboring governments supporting or cooperating with the US.

Complimenting the actions of in-region and extra-regional PRC allies, the PRC itself could conceivably conduct certain types of economic or other sabotage to distract or indirectly impact the U.S., or to indirectly intimidate states in the region from supporting the international coalition in defense of Taiwan. The knowledge of critical Latin American infrastructure, and opportunities to impact it would be greatly facilitated by the already significant presence of PRC-based companies in the region including as operators of critical infrastructures in sectors such as telecommunications, electricity, finance, and ports, among others.

Using Access to the Digital and Space Domains in Latin America to Target the U.S. Prior to and during the opening phase of a conflict, Latin America would likely one focus of global PRC operations against the US in the digital and space domains. The Chinese government would almost certainly leverage authorities over PRC-based companies operating in Latin America, per its 2017 national security law,³¹ to oblige their sharing of digital intelligence from their extensive infrastructure and devices capturing information across Latin America. This would include information collected from the significant portion of Latin Americans using Chinese Huawei, ZTE, Xiaomi, Oppo and other smartphones, government, personal and commercial data traveling over Huawei and ZTE telecommunications architectures dominant in the region, data contained in Huawei and Alibaba cloud servers increasingly in use across the region, the extrapolation of information about the location and activities of key government and other personnel from Chinese ridesharing apps like Didi Chuxing, or from surveillance systems installed by companies such as Huawei, Hikvision, and Dahua.

On one hand, such Chinese digital access, complimented by the operation of Chinese security services (MSS) and networks of friendly local actors, such as the Chinese Communist Party “United Front” organization, would likely be used to obtain information regarding U.S. operations and personnel in the region, including partner nation organizations and key figures working with them, on matters specific to U.S. operations. As a compliment, such PRC capabilities would also likely be used to target political and security sector leaders in the region, and personnel with key technical knowledge and decision authority, possibly including blackmail leveraging PRC knowledge of their personal lives obtained through the previously mentioned digital access, in order to persuade them to cooperate with the PRC, or impede cooperation with the U.S.

Beyond its access to other digital domains in Latin America, PRC access to Latin American space architectures and personnel could give it

31 Jack Wagner, “China’s Cybersecurity Law: What You Need to Know”, *The Diplomat* (June 1, 2017), <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/chinas-cybersecurity-law-what-you-need-to-know/>

important wartime opportunities for capturing signals intelligence or other information on U.S. targets. Current sources of potential PRC access includes five satellites the PRC has co-developed and launched for Brazil under the China-Brazil Earth Research Satellite (CBERS) program.³² It also includes three satellites it has developed and launched for Venezuela,³³ one satellite it has developed and launched for Bolivia, the instrumentation of satellite tracking and control facilities in both Venezuela and Bolivia,³⁴ and its construction and operation of the deep space radar in Neuquén, Argentina, manned by PLA personnel with only periodic access for Argentine government personnel.³⁵ Chinese access to Peruvian satellite data through an information sharing agreement in the framework of the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO)³⁶ and its presence in observatories in the region such as the laser range-finding facility in Argentina's San Juan Observatory could also provide potentially useful information in time of war.³⁷ Access to such space facilities in the region could also provide data support to Chinese space-based attacks against the U.S. in wartime, such as the use of its new hypersonic glide vehicle to launch missile attacks against the U.S. from over the South Pole.³⁸

32 Xinhua, "New China-Brazil earth resource satellite sent into space", *The State Council of the People's Republic of China* (December 20, 2019), https://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/201912/20/content_WS5dfc6fac6d0bcf8c4c192a4.html

33 Deyana Goh, "China launches Venezuelan remote sensing satellite VRSS-2", *SpaceTéch Asia* (October 9, 2017), <https://www.spacetechnasia.com/china-launches-venezuelan-remote-sensing-satellite-vrсс-2/>

34 Shannon Tiezzi, "China's Space Diplomacy. The launch of a Bolivian satellite is the just the latest example of China's space diplomacy", *The Diplomat* (December 24, 2013), <https://thediplomat.com/2013/12/chinas-space-diplomacy/>

35 Victoria Vogrinic, "China's Heightened Space Presence in the Heart of Argentina's Patagonian Desert", *China Focus* (November 19, 2020), <https://chinafocus.ucsd.edu/2020/11/19/chinas-heightened-space-presence-in-the-heart-of-argentinass-patagonian-desert/>

36 China News, "China to offer APSCO states remote-sensing satellite data", *China Xinhua News* (July 5, 2013), http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2013-07/05/content_29337789.htm

37 Radio Astronomy, "The China Argentina Observational Station (NAOC)", *National Astronomical Observatories Chinese Academy of Sciences* (January 19, 2021), http://english.nao.cas.cn/research/researchdivisions/radioastronomy/202103/120210321_265672.html

38 Tyler Rogoway, "China Tested A Fractional Orbital Bombardment System That Uses A Hypersonic Glide Vehicle: Report", *The Drive* (October 18, 2021), <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/42772/china-tested-a-fractional-orbital-bombardment-system-that-uses-a-hypersonic-glide-vehicle-report>

In coming years, PRC strengthening of space cooperation with Latin America, as indicated in the 2022-2024 China-CELAC plan³⁹ and the associated establishment of a China-CELAC space working group, will only multiply PRC options for leveraging its access to Latin American space assets in wartime, whether with or without the full consent of partner governments.

PLA Access to Latin American Ports and Infrastructure. The question of overt Chinese military access to Latin American ports, airfields and other strategic terrain would likely occur in the second phase of a conflict featuring early PRC victories. Specifically, if, through its anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles and other “area denial” capabilities, the PRC were able to defeat or hold at bay U.S. power projection platforms such as aircraft carriers, amphibious and other major surface combatants, it would greatly reduce the probability that the U.S. and its allies could successfully repulse the initial invasion of Taiwan. Such U.S. chances would be particularly impaired if the PRC was able to compliment symbolic early successes against U.S. forces with the occupation of a substantial portion of Taiwan’s principal island of Formosa.

Such a combination of circumstances might persuade some governments in Latin America to calculate that the U.S., faced with a costly, protracted struggle in a distant theater against a foe that had proved itself, combined with the risk of nuclear escalation, might ultimately lead the U.S. a face-saving end to hostilities with the PRC, allowing the later to retain control of Taiwan, rather than continuing the fight for its liberation. Such calculations by Latin American and Caribbean governments might lead some, particularly some more anti-U.S. in orientation, to permit PLA military access to their port facilities, airports and other strategic infrastructure, with the expectation that the future commercial reward from the PRC accruing to them by taking such a risk could be substantial, while the negotiated end to the conflict would spare them substantial US retribution from doing so.

39 Embassy News, “China - Celac Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024)”, Embassy People’s Republic of China in the Cooperative of Guyana (December 13, 2021), http://gy.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/202112/t20211213_10469237.htm

As seen in the previously mentioned case of the PRC military use of the Port of Hanbantota, the PLA would be most easily and quickly able to use facilities that their companies already operated. Nonetheless, even without a PRC-based company in operational control of a Latin American port concession or other facility, it could still quickly make effective use of desired facilities in the region, with the voluntary or involuntary cooperation of the host government, if it had the operational familiarity with and data on the facility from having constructed it (as was the case with the port of Posorja in Ecuador),⁴⁰ or where its companies, such as China Shipping, had been a major use of the facility and could (or had) passed information about the facility to the PLA.

The ability to make effective military use of any such facility would be facilitated by their knowledge of and working relationships with their military counterparts in the country in question, built up over years of institutional visits, port calls by PLA Navy ships, and the hosting of Latin American defense officials in PLA military education and training institutions such as the short courses offered by the National Defense University in Changping, or the People's Liberation Army and Navy Command and General Staff College in and around Nanjing.⁴¹

The ability of the PRC to use ports and other facilities in the region in wartime for the resupply of forces, or even direct attacks against the U.S., would also be a function of both the political will of the partner nation, as well as the risk and opportunity implied by the geographic proximity of the facility to the U.S. A large deepwater Pacific port, owned and operated by PRC-based companies, and relatively distant from the U.S., such as the

40 ST, "Posorja Deepwater Port", *Ship Technology* (July 25, 2018), <https://www.ship-technology.com/projects/posorja-deepwater-port/>

41 For a detailed account of Chinese military engagement in the region, see: Evan Ellis, "Chinese Security Engagement in Latin America", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies* (November 19, 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-security-engagement-latin-america>

port currently being constructed in Chancay, Peru,⁴² for example, would be a logical candidate to serve as an intermediate PRC staging base in the Eastern Pacific portion of a PLA global campaign. At the same time, the fragility of the government at the moment of the conflict, or its economic dependence on the PRC would also condition its willingness to permit such PLA use of its facility.

Beyond Chancay, PRC use of the Argentine naval facility currently contemplated in Ushuaia⁴³ would be another logical possibility, given the strategic value of such a facility in controlling the Straits of Magellan. The incentives for the Chinese to use such a facility, and the Argentine government to allow it, would be arguably complimented by its relative distance from the U.S. and thus security from U.S. attack. Closer to the U.S., the tradeoff between distance, risk and host nation will would become more complex. PRC control of the Panama Canal, leveraging its existing port and other operations there⁴⁴ would be strategically invaluable in a conflict with the U.S., but would likely be highly contested, and would likely require a government much more hostile to U.S. interests than the present one, as well as one much less concerned about international perception of it as a neutral steward of the Canal and associated facilities.

To the north of Panama, the Gulf of Fonseca would be a tempting PRC site for wartime military use, although its proximity to the U. S. would make it vulnerable to U.S. forces. The possible PRC construction and operation of

42 FAB, "New port in Chancay Peru secures strategic point of trade with China", *Fundación Andrés Bello - Centro de Investigación Chino Latinoamericano* (October 3, 2022), <https://fundacionandresbello.org/en/news/peru-%f0%9f%87%b5%f0%9f%87%aa-news/new-port-in-chancay-peru-secures-strategic-point-of-trade-with-china/>

43 Infobae, "El régimen chino aumenta la presión para construir una base naval estratégica en Tierra del Fuego", *Infobae News* (November 3, 2022) <https://www.infobae.com/americas/america-latina/2022/11/03/el-regimen-chino-aumenta-la-presion-para-construir-una-base-naval-estrategica-en-tierra-del-fuego/>

44 Evan Ellis, "China's advance in Panama: An update", *The Global Americans* (April 14, 2021), <https://theglobalamericans.org/2021/04/chinas-advance-in-panama-an-update/>

a future commercial port facility at La Union,⁴⁵ the ability to project force affecting operations in the nearby Panama Canal, and the relatively easy access to the Atlantic in the dry corridor across Honduras⁴⁶ would all add to its strategic value, particularly if the left-oriented government of Honduras, like neighboring El Salvador and Nicaragua,⁴⁷ had switched relations to the PRC by the time of the conflict.⁴⁸

Deepened China dependence, possibly facilitated by the Bukele regime's increasing isolation from the U. S. and negotiations with the PRC to buy its debt and negotiate a free trade agreement further opening up Salvadoran markets to the PRC,⁴⁹ would increase the probability of a future Salvadoran government agreeing to such collaboration. Similarly, deepening influence by the far-left portion of the Libre party in Honduras,⁵⁰ coupled with its eventual recognition and deepening commercial relationship with the PRC, would contribute to the probability of that government's collaboration with the PRC in such a wartime project. Even in the absence of such conditions, the anti-U.S. Ortega government in Nicaragua would be a likely candidate for allowing the use of its ports, airfields and other facilities, including by the Russians and other PRC allies.

45 Kinling Lo, "China's new alliance stirs US worries over possible 'military base' in El Salvador", *South China Morning Post* (August 22, 2018), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2160731/chinas-new-alliance-stirs-us-worries-over-military-base>

46 EIU, "Honduran 'dry canal' nears completion", *Economist Intelligence Unit* (September 24, 2018), https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1607173544&subtopic_1.

47 Cgtn, "China and Nicaragua open a new chapter of diplomatic ties", *China Global Television Network* (December 10, 2021), <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-12-10/Chinese-Nicaraguan-officials-hold-talks-in-Tianjin--15S2K4lqqFG/index.html#:~:text=Nicaragua%20recognizes%20the%20one-China%20principle%20and%20that%20the.an%20inalienable%20part%20of%20China%27s%20territory%2C%20he%20said>

48 Jeff Ernst, "Honduras president-elect's China pledge puts Taiwan and US on edge", *The Guardian* (Tegucigalpa: December 1, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/01/honduras-xiomara-castro-taiwan-china-diplomacy>

49 Ralph Jennings, "China's free-trade talks with El Salvador reflect Beijing's inroads into US 'backyard'", *South China Morning Post* (November 10, 2022), <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3109152/chinas-free-trade-talks-el-salvador-reflect-beijings-inroads-us-backyard>

50 Afp, "Honduras political crisis deepens ahead of president-elect's swearing-in", *Radio France International* (Tegucigalpa: January 25, 2022) <https://www.rfi.fr/en/honduras-political-crisis-deepens-ahead-of-president-elect-s-swearing-in>

Closer to the U.S., as suggested previously, anti-U.S. governments such as Venezuela and Cuba would likely be more than willing to permit wartime use of its facilities by the PRC, Russia, Iran and other anti-US actors. The proximity to the U.S. and ability to put U.S. deployment and sustainment flows and the U.S. homeland itself at risk from Venezuela would make the value of such facilities high, although the vulnerability of such facilities to U.S. military response, owing to the same proximity, would complicate the ability of the PLA and other adversaries to effectively operate from there.

Finally, during wartime, current PRC commercial port operations in Mexico and the Caribbean could become relevant. These include Hutchison Port Holdings facilities in Freeport (Bahamas), Manzanillo, Tijuana, Lazaro Cardenas, and Veracruz (Mexico),⁵¹ and a 49 % stake in the port of Kingston,⁵² as well as a number of smaller cruise ship and other facilities in the region. As with Venezuela, however the proximity of the ports to the U.S. would make it complicated for the PRC to use them. Moreover, the leadership of the host countries, while not necessarily closely aligned with the U.S., would likely be reluctant to so overtly provoke their close northern neighbor with which they have significant and enduring family, trade and other ties.

Conclusions

In the context of an increasingly possible conflict with the PRC over Taiwan, it is important for U.S. and other defense planners to analyze in depth how the PLA could leverage and operate in Latin America and the Caribbean in time of war, as discussed by this article. It is similarly important for U.S. planners in the Pacific theater (U.S. Indo-Pacific Command)⁵³ to anticipate how PLA actions in other parts of the world including in the Western

51 Hutchisonports, "The World of Hutchisonports", *Hutchison Port Holdings Limited* (2022), https://hutchisonports.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Hutchison-Ports-Network-Map_102022.pdf

52 Jamaica Observer, "Regional: Chinese firm now majority owners of Kingston Freeport management company", *Antigua Observer by NewsCo Ltd* (April 24, 2020), <https://antiguaobserver.com/regional-chinese-firm-now-majority-owners-of-kingston-freeport-management-company/>

53 Uspacom, "Area of Responsibility", *United States Indo-Pacific Command* (2022), <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>

Hemisphere, could impact the ability of the U.S. to deploy and sustain forces in the Indo-Pacific in the context of such a conflict.

For Latin American leaders, military planners and analysts, it is imperative to anticipate how the region, long considered a zone of relative peace, could become the subject of struggle as the indirect result of PRC aggression against Taiwan, even if PRC claims that it does not have military designs on the hemisphere are true. In this context, it is in the interest of political leaders and others in the region to consider how military interactions with the PLA, as well as commercial projects with PRC-based companies by Latin American governments and partners, in strategic sectors such as ports, space and the digital domain, may indirectly contribute to the way in which the Chinese might look to exploit opportunities created by such projects in the undesirable event that the Xi administration's increasing focus on the forcible incorporation of Taiwan unleashes a conflict of global scope.

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