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Severing the Silk Road: Building Strategic Advantage in Latin America and the Caribbean

The Chinese Strategic Advantage

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a “strategy initiated by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade, and stimulating economic growth.”¹ BRI was originally coined as a term by PRC President Xi Jinping in 2013. January 2018 saw Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) formally added to the BRI through the China Community of Latin America and the Caribbean States forum (China-CELAC). China places five significant priorities in the BRI²:

- Policy Coordination
- Infrastructure Connectivity
- Unimpeded Trade
- Financial Integration
- Connecting People

While on the surface, it seems like the PRC’s goals would benefit the United States and LAC, China’s policies disrupt global financial norms and create a significant threat in the western hemisphere. The advantage China is gaining in the western hemisphere is primarily in the disruption of economic norms. The Washington Consensus, a term coined by economist John

¹ “European Bank for Reconstruction and Development”, What We Do, accessed August 23, 2021. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

² Ibid.

Williamson in 1989, has set conditions for developing countries in the global south, including LAC, since the early 1980s. According to a May 2021 study from Georgetown Center for Security Studies, “Some Latin American countries have evinced a preference for Beijing’s investment style over that of the United States (U.S.), since environmental standards, working conditions, and transparency concerns are neither foremost in Chinese business contracts with the region nor all that likely to be enforced.”³ The United States has the opportunity in 2022 and beyond to counter China’s developing strategic advantage by renewing and refreshing U.S. foreign policy in LAC.

U.S. Foreign Policy Challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean

President Joe Biden inherited a foreign policy towards LAC from President Donald Trump that largely ignored root-cause issues. Then-President Trump, who had no foreign policy experience, appealed to populist ideas about illegal immigration stealing U.S. jobs and transportation of crime from LAC countries across the southern border. According to an October 2020 article from *The Atlantic*: “Latin American leaders have adapted their policies in recent years to account for this absence of U.S. Leadership, and Trump’s general unpredictability.”⁴ The same article states that LAC holds an “overwhelmingly negative perception of Washington.” Historically, the U.S. has acted as both protector and interventionist in LAC, which, when combined with U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration, has left LAC open to influence from the PRC and other anti-West strategic competitors. President Biden and Congress can counter China’s developing strategic advantage in LAC in three ways. First, the U.S. can focus on humanitarian aid to those LAC countries affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the U.S. can use its

³ Dr. Ryan Berg, “The Dragon Descends Southward: Chinese Foreign Policy in Latin America Warrants a U.S. Response,” *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, May 4, 2021.

⁴ Christian Paz, “The Biden Doctrine Begins with Latin America,” *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2020.

influence in the Washington Consensus to create economic policies favorable and acceptable to LAC nations. Third, United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), the geographic combatant commander responsible for military operations in LAC, can use its resources to address root-cause issues.

Addressing COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has ongoing significant impacts in LAC. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, even though LAC accounts for only 5% of the world's population, as of June 2021, nearly a quarter of the world's COVID-19 death toll was in Latin America.⁵ Additionally, according to the Pan-American Health Organization, only one in four people in LAC have received the COVID-19 vaccine.⁶ In nations already suffering from extreme poverty, combined with a gap between the low and upper class, many LAC nations will continue to suffer from the COVID-19 effects.

China is using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to build regional ties in LAC.

According to Leadership for the Americas – The Dialogue, a non-profit organization focused on issues within the Americas, China is making significant contributions to fighting COVID-19 in “nearly every country in Latin America and the Caribbean” as of March 2020.⁷ According to the article, the contributions are to nations that do not recognize an independent Taiwan and some

⁵ Samantha Pearson, Luciana Magalhaes, “South America is Now COVID-19 Hot Spot, With Eight Times the World's Death Rate,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-america-is-now-covid-19-hot-spot-witheighttimes-the-worlds-death-rate-11624299176>.

⁶ Dr. Carissa F. Etinne, “PAHO warns that only one in four people in Latin America and the Caribbean has been fully vaccinated against COVID-19,” Pan American Health Organization, World Health Organization Regional Office of the Americas, September 1, 2021, <https://www.paho.org/en/news/1-9-2021-paho-warns-only-one-four-people-latin-america-and-caribbean-has-been-fully-vaccinated>.

⁷ Margaret Myers, “China's Medical Outreach in LAC: Facts and Features,” Leadership for the Americas – The Dialogue, May 22, 2020. <https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2020/05/chinas-medical-outreach-in-lac-facts-and-features/>.

that do. In addition, China is using its technology broker, Huawei, to deliver items such as infrared cameras and “AI-enabled diagnostic services” to combat COVID-19.⁸ China is capitalizing on the COVID-19 pandemic to build favor for Chinese technology in LAC. This favor will result in stronger PRC-LAC partnerships, giving China a strategic advantage in the Americas by appealing to both government and everyday users of technology.

The United States’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic in LAC has not been enough. According to September 2021 data from the Wilson Center, a non-partisan congressionally mandated research center, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Haiti are the only countries that have not received COVID-19 aid from China.⁹ Every country in LAC except Cuba (and including Venezuela) is receiving COVID-19 relief from the U.S.¹⁰ However, according to the Wilson Center data, the U.S. aid is primarily in the form of monetary donations.¹¹ Additionally, the U.S. only provides vaccines to Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Argentina.¹² According to the Wilson Center data, China’s COVID-19 relief is in the form of tangibles, such as masks, ventilators, and vaccines. This imbalance between China and the U.S. can be corrected if the U.S. adjusts its COVID-19 relief approach in LAC to deliver tangibles instead of dollars. These tangibles directly aid in supporting people who need relief from COVID-19. In this way, the U.S. can demonstrate leadership in LAC and counter China’s influence in LAC populations.

⁸ Margaret Myers, “China’s Medical Outreach in LAC: Facts and Features,” *Leadership for the Americas – The Dialogue*

⁹ “Aid from China and the U.S. To Latin America Amid the COVID-19 Crisis,” *The Wilson Center*, Data as of September 13, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/aid-china-and-us-latin-america-amid-covid-19-crisis>. Author Note: The Wilson Center updates the tracker found at the referenced website as new data becomes available.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

Based on the early steps the Trump administration took, an argument can be made that the U.S. should focus on isolating itself to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. By doing this, the U.S. would have the resources to combat the pandemic nationally and not be responsible for global health. However, not acting to support COVID-19 relief and recovery in the Western Hemisphere opens the door for the PRC to assert influence and become a protector and favored partner in LAC. It is in the best interests of U.S. national security to be the leader in the COVID-19 response in the America's.

BRI and the Washington Consensus

Through the BRI, China provides significant economic investment in LAC nations. According to the Green Belt and Road Initiative, a research-based policy advisor under the Central University of Finance and Economics of Beijing, eighteen LAC nations are official BRI partners as of January 2021.¹³ According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean *Foreign Direct Investment in LAC, 2021*, China's direct investments in LAC have primarily been in the form of mergers and acquisitions, peaking at approximately US\$3Bn in 2011.¹⁴ The report also states that, due to COVID-19, foreign direct investment (FDI) in LAC from all sources (including the U.S.) took a significant downturn in 2020, resulting in an approximate 35% drop of total FDI.¹⁵ Additionally, according to Jose Ocampo, the Chair of the United Nations Committee for Development Policy, the economic crisis that exists in LAC

¹³ Christoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative"; Beijing, IIGF Green BRI Center, January 2021, <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

¹⁴ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021* (LC/PUB.2021/8-P), Santiago, 2021, 11-13, available at https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/47148.2/4/S2100318_en.pdf.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 11-13.

developed before the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁶ LAC growth from 2015-2020 reached only 0.2 annually, the lowest since WWII.¹⁷ The current economic investment landscape presents an opportunity for the U.S. to lead the Washington Consensus to change the investment narrative in LAC.

A U.S. focus of investment in technology and innovation in LAC will increase the potential to stimulate economic growth and promote a positive technology environment. The COVID-19 supply chain disruptions of Chinese-based technology highlighted the over-reliance of the U.S. on Chinese tech. As a hemispheric neighbor, LAC presents a specific opportunity for U.S. technology investment while breaking ties with Chinese manufacturing. Also, investing in technology research and design through partnerships in LAC offers a regionally based alternative to Chinese technology currently being installed in several LAC nations. A 2020 Special Edition of the “Global Competitiveness Report” from the World Economic Forum highlights the need to revive and transform the innovation ecosystem.¹⁸ Costa Rica and Panama are excellent examples of LAC nation’s technology investment that can be replicated across other LAC nations.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness report 2014-2015, Panama had the most “competitive market in Central America...thanks to its excellent technology and infrastructure”.¹⁹ This infrastructure is largely based on Chinese Huawei development. Similarly,

¹⁶ Jose Antonio Ocampo, “From the Washington to the Latin American Consensus”, *The Brookings Institute*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/10/06/from-the-washington-to-the-latin-american-consensus/>.

¹⁷ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021* (LC/PUB.2021/8-P), Santiago, 2021, 11-13

¹⁸ Klaus Schwab, Saadia Zahidi, “The Global Competitiveness Report Special Edition 2020: How Countries are Performing on the Road to Recovery,” *World Economic Forum, 2020*, 5-6, 8-9, 38-42, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2020.pdf.

¹⁹ Jessica Ramesch, “Panama Tops the Charts in Technology and Internet Coverage”, *International Living*, December 31, 2018, <https://internationalliving.com/panama-tops-the-charts-in-technology-and-internet-coverage/>.

Intel is investing approximately US\$350 million into Costa Rica to assemble and test computer chips, beginning in 2021.²⁰ This will result in an additional 200 jobs, bringing Intel’s total employment in Costa Rica to 2,600 people.²¹ The move by Intel represents the first move by a chip manufacturer to bring chipset technology innovation to LAC. President Biden has the opportunity to capitalize on Costa Rica and Panama’s successes by creating foreign trade policies that favor technology-based development and trade with LAC.

In the 2021 interim National Security Strategy (NSS), President Biden stated that “vital national interests of the United States are inextricably bound to the fortunes of our closest neighbors in the Americas.”²² According to the “United Nations Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean for 2021” report, FDI in LAC peaked around 2011 and is projected to continue to decline.²³ Additionally, the lack of FDI is compounded by COVID-19 and national investment policies that are already trending toward restriction and regulation and away from liberalization.²⁴ The 2021 NSS strategy goes on to assert that the U.S. will “work...to provide Central America with \$4 billion...over four years”.²⁵ It is yet unclear whether these funds will come as investment or aid dollars. The PRC, on the other hand, is steadily increasing FDI in LAC since 2002. Excepting a drastic reduction in 2019 due to COVID-19, it is expected that

²⁰ CINDE, “CINDE Announces: Intel Invests \$350 million in Latin America,” *Cision PR Newswire*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/cinde-announces-intel-invests-us350-million-in-latin-america-301190997.html> .

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Interim National Security Strategy Guidance”, Executive Office of the President, March 2021, 10, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

²³ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021* (LC/PUB.2021/8-P), Santiago, 2021, 25.

²⁴ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *World Investment Report 2021*, (UNCTAD/WIR/2021), Zhan, 2021, 16, available at https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/wir2021_overview_en.pdf.

²⁵ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Interim National Security Strategy Guidance”, 10.

PRC FDI in LAC will recover and continue to climb in the coming years.²⁶ Comparing the U.S. FDI and PRC FDI in LAC indicates that a U.S. return to a liberal internationalist approach in LAC has the potential to counter the steadily growing PRC influence in LAC.

A valid counter-argument is that China, Taiwan, South Korea, and India already meet the technology needs of the U.S. However, while partnerships for technology development in those countries are already well established, they also come with production chain risks. As a lead technology producer, China can install malicious code in technology and create a technology environment that threatens U.S. national security, as was the case in 2018, when China used the supply chain to attack thirty U.S. businesses.²⁷ Additionally, the extended supply chains across the Pacific create additional long-term costs for technology manufacturers. Investing in LAC will both shorten the supply chain and enable security of the technology supply chain. Additionally, doing so will break reliance on the PRC for essential technology production.

Leveraging USSOUTHCOM to Address “Root-Cause” Issues

U.S. military involvement in LAC is subject to historically negative judgment. Throughout post-colonial times and as recent as Operation Uphold Freedom in Haiti, in 1994, the U.S. military was used to intervene in national affairs in the western hemisphere. Operational end states ranged from counter-narcotics to regime change, resulting in an overwhelmingly negative view of the U.S. The “USA Today” went so far as to assert in a December 2018 headline that “U.S.

²⁶ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Foreign Direct Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021* (LC/PUB.2021/8-P), Santiago, 2021, 88.

²⁷ Jordan Robertson and Michael Riley, “The Big Hack: How China Used a Tiny Chip to Infiltrate U.S. Companies”, *Bloomberg*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-10-04/the-big-hack-how-china-used-a-tiny-chip-to-infiltrate-america-s-top-companies>.

Foreign Policy in Central America may have fueled the migrant crisis.”²⁸ However, USSOUTHCOM has at its disposal tools for addressing some of the LAC root-cause issues and, in turn, generating favorable judgment towards the U.S.

Root-cause is a term often used to address the causes of non-standard migration throughout LAC. While U.S. foreign policy addresses immigration at the U.S. southern border as a national security issue, it is the intranational issues in LAC states which result in the immigration crisis at the U.S. southern border. The Brookings Institute, in January 2021, itemizes “root causes” as “economic problems, ongoing violence, worsening corruption, and challenges to democracy.”²⁹ Similarly, the 2019 USSOUTHCOM strategy lists violence, corruption, and poverty as primary drivers in L.A.C.³⁰ Root-cause issues involve worsening conditions for people living in some LAC nations. As discussed previously, these root-cause issues have created a vacuum for PRC influence, which, if left unaddressed, will result in continued degradation of U.S. deference in the Western Hemisphere.

USSOUTHCOM’s response to Tropical Storm Grace in August 2021, followed immediately by a magnitude 7.2 earthquake, in Haiti displays the humanitarian relief capabilities USSOUTHCOM can leverage. Similarly, USSOUTHCOM is currently championing a “Band-aids, Not Bullets” campaign in Colombia.³¹ This effort seeks to provide humanitarian medical

²⁸ Dierdre Shergreen, “How US Foreign Policy in Central America may have fueled the migrant crisis,” *USA Today*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/12/21/has-united-states-foreign-policy-central-america-fueled-migrant-crisis-donald-trump/2338489002/>.

²⁹ Charles T. Call, “The imperative to address the root causes of migration from Central America”, *The Brookings Institute*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/29/the-imperative-to-address-the-root-causes-of-migration-from-central-america/>.

³⁰ Craig S. Faller, “SOUTHCOM Strategy 2019”, USSOUTHCOM, 2019, 3, available at https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM_Strategy_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353.

³¹ Jim St. Clair, “South Carolina National Guard Conducts “Band-Aids Not Bullets Diplomacy” in Colombia,” US Southern Command, September 8, 2021, <https://www.southcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/2773755/south-carolina-national-guard-conducts-band-aids-not-bullets-diplomacy-in-colom/>.

assistance in a remote Colombian village.³² In addition to medical aid, USSOUTHCOM is using military members to build relationships with Colombian people, as well as their Colombian military counterparts. In this way, military members are building diplomatic capital within the Colombian people to strengthen the U.S.-Colombian partnership while countering PRC influence in Colombia.

Humanitarian assistance is only one capability that USSOUTHCOM can provide to address root-cause issues. The narco-industry in Central America is a national security threat to the U.S.; however, it also provides income to Latin Americans involved with the industry.

USSOUTHCOM currently partners with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other western partners under Campaign Martillo (Hammer) to combat narco-trafficking in the coastal waters of Central America.³³ However, simply focusing on narco-trafficking destined for the U.S. and Europe does not address the problem. Multiple studies, as well as USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM testimony before congress, indicate that as much as 90% of trafficked narcotics make it to the U.S.³⁴ In the same 2019 testimony, USSOUTHCOM recommended to congress that, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan drawdown, additional Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets, should be allocated to USSOUTHCOM to further enhance counter-narco-trafficking.³⁵ However, few additional resources have been allocated. USSOUTHCOM

³² Ibid.

³³ "Campaign Martillo", USSOUTHCOM, accessed September 8, 2021, <https://www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/Operation-Martillo/>.

³⁴ Western Hemisphere Drug Interdiction Efforts: Why Maintaining Coast Guard Operations Matter: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, 116th Cong., June 4, 2019 (Prepared Statement of Vice Admiral Daniel B. Abel, Deputy Commandant for Operations, U.S. Coast Guard. Transcript available at <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109581/documents/CHRG-116hrg39475.pdf>

³⁵ Ibid.

can continue to advocate for more ISR resources to both counter-narco-trafficking and provide ISR against the growing PRC presence in Central America.

Lastly, USSOUTHCOM can address root-cause issues by enabling female leadership to represent USSOUTHCOM in LAC. According to the World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap" report for 2021, many LAC countries have made significant progress in closing gender gaps. LAC overall ranks third behind Western Europe and North America.³⁶ Additionally, USSOUTHCOM operates a "Women, Peace, and Security" (WPS) program as mandated by the DoD. According to USSOUTHCOM, the WPS program is "part of a national effort to promote the meaningful contributions of women in the defense and security sectors around the world."³⁷ However, the USSOUTHCOM principal staff leadership of twenty only has four women.³⁸ Of the four positions filled by women, three: the Chief of Staff, Command Surgeon, and Staff Judge Advocate (the fourth is the Congressional Affairs Chief), fill roles that potentially have significant engagement with their LAC equivalents. To promote WPS in LAC, USSOUTHCOM can proactively seek out U.S. military officers that are women to represent USSOUTHCOM efforts in LAC partnerships. In this way, LAC partners will see the benefits of enabling women as leaders in security and address gender inequality as a root-cause.

A realist might argue that the root-cause problems in LAC are not a U.S. problem. Instead, the U.S. should focus on securing its borders and interdicting narco-trafficking bound for the U.S.

While this may work short term, a reduction in non-standard migration and a reduction of narco-

³⁶ Robert Crotti, Kusum Kali Pal, Vesselina Ratcheva, and Saadia Zahidi, "Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Insight Report", *World Economic Forum*, March 2021, 20-23, Available at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

³⁷ "SOUTHCOM Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program", USSOUTHCOM, accessed Sept 15, 2021, <https://www.southcom.mil/WPS/>.

³⁸ "SOUTHCOM Leadership and Staff", USSOUTHCOM, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.southcom.mil/About/Leadership/>.

trafficking in the long term enables the U.S. to allocate resources to other national security projects, and not wage a “forever war” against the results of root-cause issues. Using USSOUTHCOM to address the root-causes will support long-term U.S. national security interests.

Conclusion

The PRC has made significant efforts to extend its influence across the globe, including in the Western Hemisphere. Through predatory loans, vaccine diplomacy, and disruption of global norms, the PRC is disrupting the liberal international world order and establishing itself to take place as the new standard. While the Washington Consensus hegemony seeks to regulate the global economy and support stable globalization, the PRC offers alternate economic support that only benefits the lender, not the borrower. The United States has the opportunity in 2021 to counter China’s growing strategic advantage by renewing and refreshing U.S. foreign policy in LAC. Policymakers should focus on free trade in the western hemisphere and create conditions favorable to technology development investment in LAC partner nations. Additionally, USSOUTHCOM should advocate for more resources to address root-cause issues and monitor PRC activities in LAC. With the end of the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. can proactively begin in 2021 to counter PRC influence in the western hemisphere and “Sever the Silk Road.”