

Trends in PRC Security Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Introduction

Activities by the People's Republic of China (PRC) [in the security and defense sector](#) in Latin America and the Caribbean are a small, but [strategically significant](#) portion of its engagement with the region. The PRC has openly acknowledged its interest in engaging with the region on security matters in the [2008](#) and [2016](#) China-Latin America Policy White Papers, as well as in the [2022-2024 China-CELAC plan](#). That interest is also reflected in the PRC [Ministry of Foreign Affairs white paper](#) elaborating China's [Global Security initiative](#).

The security dimension of PRC engagement in the region has been highlighted by the head [of U.S. Southern Command](#) and other senior U.S. [defense officials](#), as well as occasional coverage in the [media](#) and academic works, generally with a focus [on the threat](#). The present work compliments those writings by providing a brief overview for a general audience, of the characteristics and trends in PRC security engagement in the region, and how it is evolving, focusing on seven major trends:

- Focus of Arms Purchases on Anti-U.S. Populist States
- Chinese Use of Gifts to Develop Security Relationships
- Procurement and Quality Difficulties
- Setbacks in PRC Arms Sales to Democratic States
- Increasingly Persistent PRC military presence in Latin America
- Expanding Activities by PRC-Based Private Security Companies in Latin America
- Increasing Training of Latin American Security Personnel in the PRC

Focus of Arms Purchases on Anti-U.S. Populist States. To date, the principal purchasers of PRC military equipment in Latin America have been anti-U.S. populist regimes, including Venezuela (under Hugo Chavez and Nicholas Maduro), Bolivia (under Evo Morales), and Ecuador (under Raffael Correa).

Venezuela's purchases from the PRC during those periods include 25 Hongdu K-8W fighter aircraft ([18 in 2008 and 7 more in 2010](#)), as well as [military radars](#). They also include Chinese [armored vehicles](#) such as the [VN-4 purchased for the Venezuelan Naval Infantry beginning in 2012](#), and the [ZBL-09 Armored Personnel Carriers](#), as well as Chinese riot control vehicles, purchased for the Bolivarian National Guard [beginning in 2013](#). The PRC has also sold Venezuela [C-802 anti-ship missiles](#) (beginning in 2020), [DJI Mavic Air UAVs](#) (since 2014), and at least 215 SAIC/IVECO military ambulances, among other items.

With respect to Bolivia, the PRC sold the Morales regime [6 K-8W fighters](#), [6 H-425 military helicopters](#), and [31 armored vehicles](#), as well as [donating](#) a number of dual use vehicles and equipment over the years.

The PRC sold the anti-US populist regime of Rafael Correa in Ecuador [709 military trucks](#), a [CETC radar system](#), and [10,000 assault rifles](#), albeit with substantial problems, as discussed later.

China has had some success in military sales to less anti-US regimes, including providing four [WMZ551 Armored Personnel Carriers](#) to Argentina, at least [27 Type 90B multiple-launch rocket system](#) vehicles to Peru, and an Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) [to Trinidad and Tobago](#) in 2014.

PRC military-affiliated industries have also had some success selling non-military goods to governments in the region. In 2012, for example, the Brazilian Navy contracted China's [Guangzhou Hantong to build an oceanographic ship](#). It was delivered in 2015.

Chinese Use of Gifts to Develop Security Relationships. The PRC has regularly donated vehicles and equipment to Latin American military and police forces as part of its efforts to curry goodwill and build relationships. It has donated [5 8x8 armored vehicles](#) and a self-propelled bridge to Peru. In November 2022, it offered to provide an additional [3 ZBL-08E 8x8s](#), as well as [46 support vehicles](#), including 16 SUVs, 18 King Long busses; 12 ambulances, and 3 firefighting vehicles. The PRC has similarly donated equipment to [Bolivia](#), [Colombia](#) (including [self-propelled bridges](#)), and the [Jamaican](#), [Dominican Republic](#), and [Guyanese Defense Forces](#).

Such donations often concentrate on dual use vehicles and [engineering equipment](#), rather than weapon systems, per se. They have also included military transport aircraft,

such as the gifting of Harbin [Y-12 military transport aircraft to Guyana](#), [Colombia](#), and [Costa Rica](#).

PRC donations of security equipment to the region has focused on police forces, with whom Chinese engagement may appear less strategically challenging, yet where the sheer needs of the beneficiaries magnifies the good will purchased by the PRC investment. Major examples include the PRC donation of [140 motorcycles and eight ATVs](#) to the Dominican Republic police and military in December 2020, on top of [firetrucks](#) donated in 2018, and [30 ambulances](#) given in July 2022. In Costa Rica, the PRC donated a [\\$16.5 million police training facility](#), followed by [350 police vehicles](#), and at least \$10.5 million in equipment ([\\$5 million](#) in 2017 and [\\$5.5 million in 2018](#)). In 2021, the PRC further gave Costa Rica [100 motorcycles](#), as well as [2,000 helmets and Kevlar vests](#). In Panama, in 2023, the PRC donated [6,000](#) in Kevlar vests and protective helmets worth [\\$4 million](#) to the national police, air and naval service (SENAN) and border control service (SENAFRONT).

Procurement and Quality Difficulties. Latin American countries across the political spectrum have had significant difficulties with their arms purchases and gifts from the PRC. At least four of the K-8W fighters Venezuela purchased from the PRC had [crashed by 2022](#), with some problems attributed to errors arising from poorly translated Chinese technical manuals. In Bolivia, [two of the 6](#) Chinese K-8Ws have similarly crashed.

In Ecuador, problems with the performance of the radars led the PRC-sympathetic government of Rafael Correa to return them, ultimately devolving into a [protracted legal dispute](#).

Both [Argentina](#) and [Peru](#) have had difficulties with poor quality of Chinese munitions, leading to the jamming of guns and the endangering of personnel firing them, particularly in combat situations.

Military trucks [given to Peru](#) by the PRC had problems [violently shaking at road speeds](#). The effects were reportedly so severe that the Peruvian military wanted to return the donated vehicles. A Y-12 transport aircraft donated to Colombia had to be taken out of service after flying through [inclement weather rendered it unairworthy](#).

In the case of both Peru's purchase of the [Chinese Type-90B MLRS](#), and Bolivia's purchase of the [H-425 helicopters](#), suspicion of corruption in the acquisition contract, including inflation of the purchase price, led to investigations by the governments buying the equipment.

Setbacks in PRC Arms Sales to Democratic States. Although the PRC continues to pursue arms sales in the region, including regular engagement with Latin American defense organizations, participation in [military trade shows](#), and the previously noted use of gifts, among other techniques, it has experienced an increasing number of setbacks in those efforts, particularly among democratic states.

In Argentina, in 2023, the outgoing PRC-sympathetic Peronist government of Alberto Fernandez decided to purchase U.S.-made Danish F-16 fighter aircraft, [instead of Chinese JF-17s](#). The latter would have been the most sophisticated Chinese aircraft sold to the region to date. The rejection of the PRC offer came on top of an Argentine decision not to pursue a [Chinese armored vehicle](#) to [replace problematic WMC-551](#) Chinese armored vehicles, and the prior government's purchase of a [French patrol boat](#) instead of a [Chinese one being considered](#).

Also in June 2023, the center-right Uruguayan government of Luis Lacalle Pou decided [to withdraw from](#) the purchase of Chinese offshore patrol vessels for “[geopolitical](#)” [reasons](#),” although the PRC had [twice lowered the price](#) in an effort to save the deal. A supporting 2017 PRC-Uruguay defense agreement was [blocked in June 2022](#) by the Uruguayan parliament.

In Brazil, participation by PRC-based vendors in a bid for Brazil's future frigate program and [its surveillance architecture Sisgaaz](#) have not advanced.

Increasingly Persistent PRC Military Presence in Latin America. [Since at least 2019](#), the PRC has had personnel at the electronic intelligence-gathering facility in Lourdes, Cuba. It has reportedly also been [negotiating an agreement](#) to train Cuban military personnel on the island on an ongoing basis. Such activities suggest increased Chinese willingness to risk provoking the United States by establishing a low-level ongoing presence close to the US mainland.

Growing US presence in the region also includes periodic deployments by its hospital ship “Peace Arc” to the region (in 2011, 2015 and [2018-2019](#)), the visit of two Chinese missile frigates to Chile, Argentina and Brazil [in 2013](#), and a port call by a PRC military ship to [Havana Cuba in 2016](#). 100-200 PRC military police were present in the Brazil-led MINUSTAH Peacekeeping mission in Haiti [from 2004-2012](#).

PRC delegations periodically come to the region. In June 2023, the Political Comisar of the Chinese Navy [Fleet Admiral Yuan Huazhi](#) visited the leadership of the Brazilian Navy.. In August 2022, a delegation from the PRC [participated in a military sharpshooting exercise](#) hosted by Venezuela. In 2023, as well as in prior years, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) sent uniformed members to participate in [Mexico's Independence Day Parade](#).

The PLA, in principle, has a position as [observer at the Interamerican Defense Board](#) and Interamerican Defense College in Washington DC, although it has not regularly sent persons there in recent years.

The PLA has also regularly sent military delegations to visit Latin American military institutions. In recent years, they have visited, and even attended key Latin American training schools, including Colombia's [Lancers special forces school](#) in Tolomaida, Brazil's [Jungle Warfare School](#) in Manaus, and the latter's well respected peacekeeping school, [CCOPAB](#).

PLA representatives are further beginning to be included at forums in the region in which the US is present. In November 2023, for example, the head of the PLA Naval Infantry Zhu Chuansheng [attended the 4th Naval Infantry symposium in Rio de Janeiro](#), also attended by his US counterpart, Marine Corps General David Bellom, as well as senior military leaders from Portugal, Argentina, Colombia, South Korea and France.

Expanding Activities by PRC-Based Private Security Companies in Latin America.

As PRC-based firms expand their operations in dangerous parts of the region, Chinese private security companies (PSCs) are [increasingly following them there](#) (albeit not yet to the same degree as in Asia or Africa). In Peru, China Security Technology Group [provides security services](#) in the mining sector. In Argentina, Beijing Dujie Security Technology Company [has an office](#) in Buenos Aires. In Panama, China's [Tie Shen Bao Biao](#) advertises Personnel protection services. The PRC-based security company [Zhong Bao Hua](#) An represents itself as having business in Panama, El Salvador and Costa Rica. In Mexico, the "Mexico-Chinese Security Council," created in 2012 by former PRC government official Feng Chengkang, represents itself as [protecting Chinese business personnel from gang violence](#).

Increasing Training of Latin American Security Personnel in the PRC. Latin American military personnel have long traveled to the PRC to participate in [courses in China's National Defense University](#) in Changping, as well as other professional military education programs. They have also served in the PRC as defense attaches, and in other capacities. Such activities are gradually broadening. In July 2023, for example, Dominican Republic Defense Minister Carlos Diaz Morfa authorized Dominican personnel to participate in a military [sniper competition in Xinjiang](#).

Beyond traditional military engagement, the Chinese government is expanding opportunities for Latin American law enforcement personnel to visit the PRC. In September 2023, for example, the PRC hosted the "[Global Public Security Cooperation Forum](#)" in Lianyungang, attended by senior police leaders of [Suriname](#) and Nicaragua. There, Nicaraguan Police Chief Francisco Diaz reportedly discussed [training of Nicaraguan police personnel in China](#). In a similar fashion, in July 2023, Dominican leaders reportedly negotiated [training for Dominican police officials in the PRC](#).

Implications and Conclusions

Two decades of PRC security engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean has already borne fruit in the knowledge of the region, and in the relationships the PLA has built with its security sector counterparts. Peru's recent Interior Minister Vicente Romero Fernandez, for example, had attended a [professional military education school in China](#), while its former Minister of Defense [George Chavez Cresta](#) served there as military attaché. Similarly, the [Commander of Uruguay's Army](#) General Mario Stefenazzi was that country's [military attaché in the](#) PRC.

Expanding PRC security engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean supports its relationships with, and influence over, partners there, including improved ability to protect PRC-based companies operating in the region. Even more importantly, in the [event of a war](#) between the PRC and the US, PLA relationships with Latin American defense personnel and familiarity with its strategic geography from operating there improves the speed and effectiveness with which the PLA can launch military operations in the region, from small scale intelligence and special forces operations, to the projection of military force against the US and its allies from facilities in the region.

While security engagement is the right of sovereign countries, the equally sovereign United States has the right to consider how expanding PRC security engagement could affect its strategic equities in the region, and conduct a respectful, if frank dialogue with our neighbors on the subject.

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