

Winning Hearts and Minds in Latin America

Assessing China's Influence on Latin Americans' Trust in the United States Military*

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has fundamentally reshaped both the nature of global conflict as well as American national security priorities. No longer preoccupied with a desire to contain communism, the United States has turned its attention to the Global War on Terrorism and to revisionist powers. According to the US 2018 National Defense Strategy, “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition. . . . It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”¹ The wide-ranging economic and political influence of today’s modern adversaries demands a multilateral solution, developed in partnership with our allies. Fortunately for America’s national security interests, untapped potential lies within our own backyard.

Historically discounted as natural partners in the pursuit of American foreign policy, Latin America’s armed forces are increasingly (and, perhaps, inadvertently) positioning themselves to serve as viable coalition partners in our efforts to combat terrorism and defend the rules-based international order. Recent increases in funding, force strength, and joint training have all served to deepen many Latin American armed forces’ abilities to collaborate with the United States toward common national security objectives. Put another way, as the size, professionalism, and capability of Latin American militaries increase, there is potentially much to gain by strengthening regional partnerships in pursuit of our National Security Strategy.²

It is important to note, however, that the potential strategic success of strengthening our regional military partnerships hinges not solely on the increasing capa-

*The views expressed in this paper are the authors’ alone and in no way represent the opinions, standards, or policy of the United States Air Force Academy or the United States government.

bilities of Latin American militaries themselves but also on public support for collaborative national defense efforts. Public support in this realm requires trust, and a tenuous and interventionist history between the United States and Latin America³ is widely understood to have fostered a “foreign policy legacy of resentment,” leaving Latin American trust in the United States in short supply.⁴ Recent research has determined that ongoing economic exchange with the United States can help to ameliorate long-standing negative perceptions of the United States among Latin Americans.⁵ It remains unclear, however, whether economic interconnectedness is powerful enough to generate positive perceptions of the United States military—the institution most logically associated with interventionist practices. In fact, though American scholars and policy makers have devoted attention to Latin American public perceptions of the United States writ large, less attention has been devoted to perceptions of the United States military itself. This article seeks to fill this void to and to evaluate Latin Americans’ collective expressions of trust in the United States military.

Moreover, this article also attempts to understand the potential offsetting influence of China’s rising soft power, or “ability to shape the preferences of others,” in Latin America on public perceptions of the United States military.⁶ While the US military has been strategically focused on the Middle East (and, increasingly, on the Asia Pacific region) in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, China has made notable inroads in Latin America in the realms of trade and financial investment. According to the Congressional Research Service (2020), “total China–Latin America trade increased from \$17 billion in 2002 to almost \$315 billion in 2019” and “Chinese banks (China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank) have become the largest lenders in Latin America.”⁷ Research suggests that Latin Americans’ image of China is improving as a result of China’s full spectrum “influence operations” and new economic role in the region.⁸ Does China’s increasing influence in the Latin American region adversely impact Latin American perceptions of the United States and its military? If so, collaborative inter-American military efforts in the Western Hemisphere may prove difficult. Beyond basic attitudinal assessments, this article seeks to understand whether, the extent to which, and for whom China’s economic influence and growing soft power in the region affects public trust evaluations of the United States military. Specifically, this paper addresses the following research questions: Do Latin Americans trust the United States military? Does China’s growing global outreach impact Latin American perceptions of the United States military? If so, where and for whom? To preview, our main finding is that high levels of trust in the Chinese government (in comparison to levels of trust in the United States government) will be negatively associated with support for the United

States military and these effects are more pronounced in higher capacity countries with left-leaning presidents.

Our article proceeds as follows: First, we document the rise of China's soft power influence in Latin America and introduce our hypotheses that these developments could serve to temper Latin Americans' collective expressions of trust in the United States military, thus reducing the potential for military collaboration. Next, we segue into an introduction of our primary data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)⁹ and multi-level regression model research design. We subsequently present our findings and discuss their potential implications for hemisphere collaboration in support of shared security goals, concluding with several related policy recommendations.

China's Increasing Influence in the Region

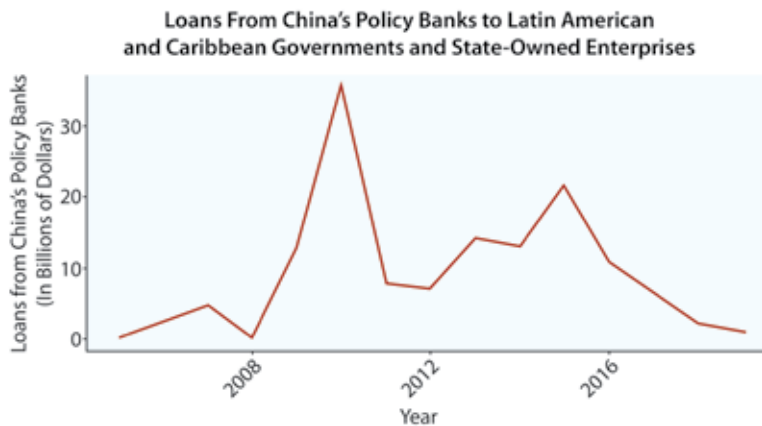


Figure 1. Loans from China's policy banks to Latin American and Caribbean governments and state-owned enterprises

Source: China-Latin America Finance Database¹⁰

America's current National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy (NSS) make it clear that China has emerged as a near-peer competitor to the United States. This newfound status follows in large part from China's ardent efforts to increase its financial reach, physical presence, and military capabilities around the world. Though the degree to which China has been successful in achieving these goals varies across countries, it is irrefutable that its global presence has grown substantially, especially in the financial realm. Focusing its efforts on the developing world, China has made deep inroads in Latin America. Figure 1 depicts the total annual amount (in billions) of loans from China's policy banks—

China Development Bank (CDB) and China Export-Import Bank (Ex-Im Bank)—to Latin American and Caribbean governments and state-owned enterprises.

China's financial entrenchment in the developing world is, in and of itself, of concern to US foreign policy interests. This development is especially vexing due to its potential implications for the growth in Chinese soft power. According to Moss, countries acquire soft power when they are liked, respected, trusted, or admired.¹¹ China appears to be endeavoring toward fostering these perceptions through its increased media presence, cultural exhibitions, and student exchanges around the world. Carreras provides some preliminary evidence that China's increased economic presence and targeted efforts to increase its soft power have proven effective in changing the hearts and minds of those in recipient countries.¹² If China's growing presence in the developing world has improved public perceptions of the country, as Carreras (2017) suggests, has it, in turn, contributed to worsening evaluations of US institutions? If so, under what conditions and for whom? The answers to these questions hold considerable implications for United States national security policy making with Latin American regional partners. In the next section, we introduce several hypotheses corresponding with the aforementioned questions. Then, we proceed to outline our approach to hypothesis testing.

Hypotheses, Data, and Research Methods

Broadly speaking, our research aims to understand whether China's growing soft power in the Latin American region influences Latin American trust evaluations of the US military and attitudes toward United States–Latin American military collaboration. Broadly speaking, we suspect that positive public perceptions of China will negatively impact trust evaluations of the US military and attitudes toward cross-national military collaboration. We posit that Latin Americans are cognizant of growing competition between the United States and China and, either consciously or subconsciously, use their perceptions of China to ground their evaluations of the United States military. Our specific hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Positive public perceptions of China's expanding economic influence will be negatively associated with support for the United States military.

Hypothesis 2: High levels of trust in the Chinese government (in comparison to levels of trust in the United States government) will be negatively associated with support for the United States military.

Hypothesis 3: These anticipated effects will be more pronounced in higher capacity countries with left-leaning presidents.

Hypothesis Testing

To test these hypotheses, we rely heavily on data from the 2012 wave of the Latin American Public Opinion.¹³ Among other items, this LAPOP wave assesses perceptions of Chinese influence and evaluations of trust in the US military among nationally representative samples of 14 Latin American countries.¹⁴ In total, 21,643 respondents were surveyed across these 14 countries. The LAPOP data is well suited to use for hypothesis testing not only because it includes questions pertinent to our hypotheses but also because of its extensive geographic coverage.

Trust in the United States Military

Included in this 2012 wave of the LAPOP survey is a question that asks respondents “How much do you trust the Armed Forces of the United States of America?” on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 7 (“A lot”). The average response to this question was 4.008. This suggests that Latin Americans, in general, exhibit moderate levels of trust in the US military. However, this average obscures notable intraregional diversity (depicted below in figure 2). Individual-level responses to this LAPOP question comprise our primary dependent variable.

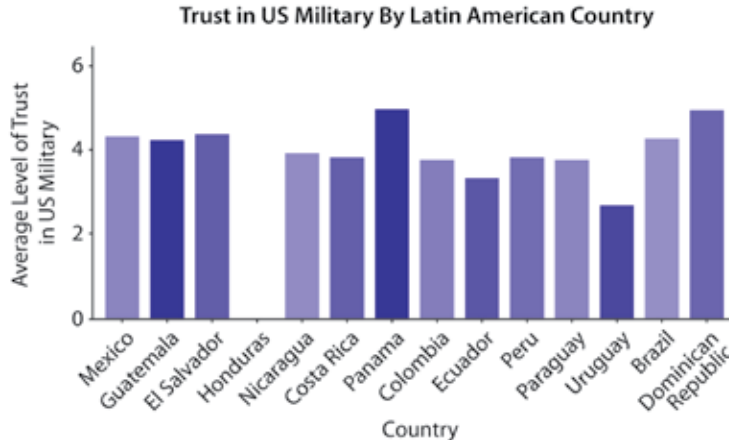


Figure 2. Trust in US military by Latin American country

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project

Perceptions of Chinese Involvement in the Region

Along with the question tapping trust in the US military, the LAPOP data asks survey respondents to rank the influence that China has on their country from 1 (“Very Positive”) to 5 (“Very Negative”). We use responses to this question to test

our first hypothesis and reverse the original scale—such that 1 corresponds with “Very Negative” and 5 corresponds with “Very Positive”—for the ease of interpretability. The average response to this question (3.56) signals that Latin Americans hold generally positive perceptions of China. This suggests that China is effectively extending its soft power reach in/to the Latin American region. As with trust evaluations, Latin Americans’ perceptions of Chinese influence varies across countries. Figure 3 captures and depicts this variation.

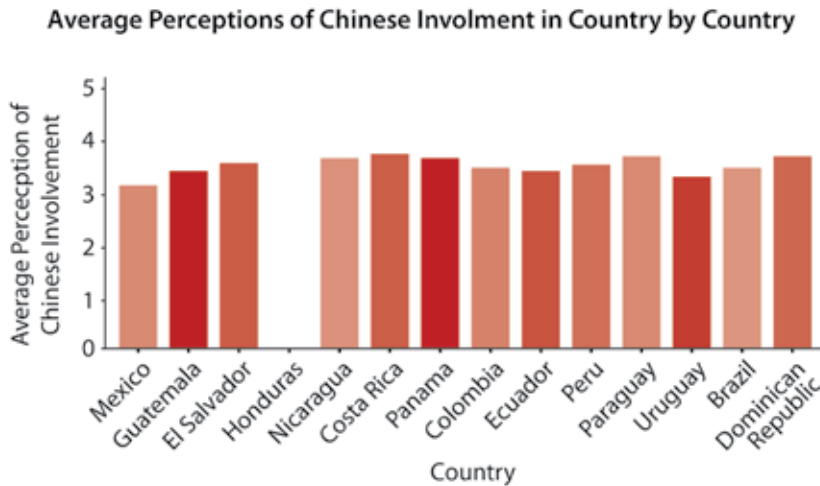


Figure 3. Average perceptions of Chinese involvement in country by country

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project

The LAPOP data also asks survey respondents to evaluate the extent to which they trust the Chinese government by asking “In your opinion is [the government of China] very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or not at all trustworthy, or do you not have an opinion?” Responses to this question allow us to test our second hypothesis and further assess the extent to which China’s increasing financial reach and physical presence in Latin America has augmented its soft power in the region. We recoded these responses to numerical values, where 4 corresponds with “Very trustworthy” and 1 corresponds with “Not at all trustworthy.” Perhaps more valuable than this question itself is the fact that the LAPOP wave under consideration asked Latin American respondents to make the same evaluations of the government of the United States. This provides us, as researchers, with a unique opportunity to assess the impact of the difference between numerically coded trust evaluations of the United States government and

the Chinese government on attitudes toward the US military. Figure 4 suggests that, on average, the level of soft power held by the United States supersedes that held by China (-0.19). Individual-level responses to these LAPOP questions comprise our primary independent variable.

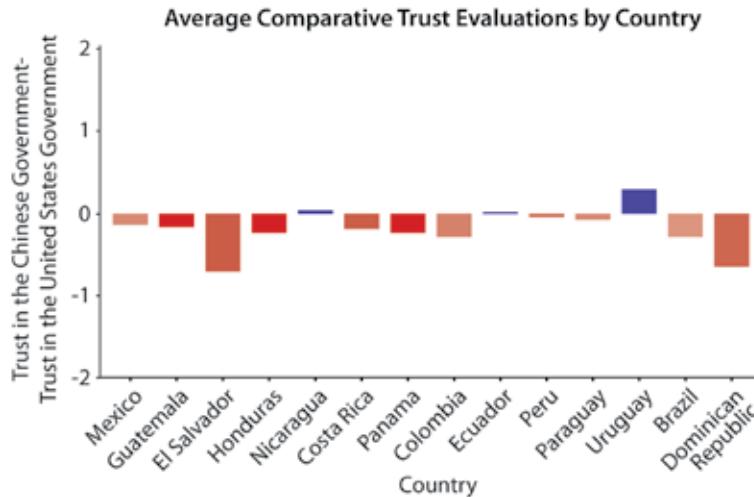


Figure 4. Average comparative trust evaluations by country

Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project

Interacting and Control Variables

In addition to our primary dependent and independent variables, we consider several interacting and control variables. Specifically, we consider multiple interaction effects that allow us to test our third hypothesis of heterogeneous effects. To capture these interaction effects, we pair several country level indicators with the individual-level LAPOP data. Specifically, we consider subregion (Central or South America), presidential ideology, and homicide rate. We argue that both subregion and homicide rate serve as proxies for state capacity (where countries in Central America and with higher homicide rates have lower capacity and where countries in South America and with lower homicide rates have higher capacity) and that presidential ideology speaks to the political ideological leanings of countries. We code each country's subregion on the basis of geographic location and compile data from Baker and Greene's (2019) "Latin American Election Results with Party Ideology Scores" dataset¹⁵ and the World Bank Development indicators to code presidential ideology and homicide rate, respectively.¹⁶ We merge these country-level indicators with our individual-level LAPOP data. This provides us with the opportunity to assess whether the impact of China's economic

and soft power influence on Latin American perceptions of the United States military differs on the basis of certain country-level characteristics.

Beyond primary country-level interactive variables, we control for several other factors at the country level, including logged development (using the World Bank's indicator of Gross Domestic Product¹⁷), democracy (using Polity IV's indicator of democracy¹⁸), the logged total United States direct investment over the prior five year period (using data from the US Bureau of Economic Analysis¹⁹), and subregion (when not included in the primary interaction term). At the individual level, we control for conventional gender, age, education, income, and ideology factors as well as for perceptions that China contributes to national economic development. The data for these control variables comes from LAPOP.

Modeling Specification

We model each of these variables with a multi-level specification. This type of specification is ideal for working with nested data structures (e.g., when individual survey respondents are clustered within countries). Multi-level models allow us to decompose the variance in individual trust evaluations of the US military between the two levels of the data (i.e., the individual-level and the country-level) by estimating a random intercept. This allows our models' intercepts to vary across countries. We can, then, explain the variance in the intercepts with country-level predictors. For our specific models, country-level predictors explain 23.4 percent of the variance in individual trust evaluations of the United States military. The specific modeling specification that we use for hypothesis testing is as follows:

where represents the trust evaluation of individual i in state j . Depending on the model, is either a perception of Chinese involvement in a country or a comparative trust evaluation of the United States and China of individual i in state j (described above). Depending on the model, is either subregion (Central or South America), presidential ideology, or homicide rate (described above). Vector includes individual-level control variables (gender, age, education, income, ideology, and perceptions that China contributes to national economic development), and vector includes country-level control variables (development and democracy). Finally, represents state-fixed effects, and is the error term.

Before presenting our results, it is worth commenting on possible endogeneity concerns associated with our modeling specification. As both our primary dependent and independent variables are at the individual level, we leave ourselves vulnerable to critiques that it is unclear whether perceptions of China influence trust evaluations of the US military, or vice versa. However, we argue that it is unlikely that Latin Americans use evaluations of the US military, specifically, to determine their postures towards China due to the dramatically different spheres in which

the US military and China operate. Whereas the US military's role in the Latin American region is overtly security driven, China's role in the region is primarily economic. In fact, Dominguez (2006) claims "Sino-Latin American military relations are and remain modest . . . The U.S. Department of Defense's annual reports to the Congress on the military power of the People's Republic of China in 2003, 2004, and 2005 do not express worries about China's imaginable military roles in Latin America."²⁰ The distinction between realms of operation helps to dispel concerns pertaining to endogeneity. We present the results of our analyses in the following section.

Results

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | |
|--|--|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Trust in the United States Military (1) | (2) | (3) |
| China Influence | 0.107 (0.082) | -0.035 (0.078) | 0.212** (0.055) |
| China Influence*Homicide Rate | 0.001 (0.004) | | |
| China Influence*Pres. Ideology | | 0.018** (0.007) | |
| China Influence*South America | | | -0.185** (0.075) |
| Observations | 3,418 | 3,418 | 3,418 |
| Log Likelihood | -7,161.668 | -7,157.304 | -7,151.309 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 14,355.340 | 14,346.610 | 14,330.620 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 14,453.460 | 14,444.730 | 14,416.480 |
| <i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 | | | |

Table 1. Explaining trust in the United States military

Source: Authors

Tables 1 and 2 contain the main results of the previously specified models.²¹ Table 1 assesses the relationship between trust in the US military and perceptions of China's influence (corresponding with Hypotheses 1 and 3), and table 2 examines the relationship between trust in the US military and comparative trust evaluations of the American and Chinese governments (corresponding with Hypotheses 2 and 3). The results provide mixed support for our hypotheses, with generally stronger confirmatory evidence for the second and third hypotheses.

The coefficients associated with "China Influence" disconfirm our expectations outlined in Hypothesis 1, that positive public perceptions of China's expanding

economic influence will be negatively associated with support for the US military. In fact, there is partial, though inconclusive, support of the reverse relationship. Specifically, the coefficient associated with “China Influence” in the third modeling specification is positive and statistically significant. This suggests that, at least according to this model, those with positive perceptions of China’s expanding economic influence are actually *more* likely to express trust in the US military. This completely rebuts our hypothesis and reveals an interesting relationship deserving of additional research.

Table 1 also serves to partially test the interactive effects outlined in Hypothesis 3. Here, the evidence is especially mixed. Specifically, there is no statistically significant relationship between trust in the US military and the interaction between perceptions of China’s influence and homicide rates. There is, however, confirmatory evidence of a positive and statistically significant relationship between trust in the US military and the interaction between perceptions of China’s influence and presidential ideology. There is also evidence of a negative and statistically significant relationship between trust in the US military and the interaction between perceptions of China’s influence and South America. In essence, these interactive effects suggest that positive perceptions of China’s influence have a larger effect on sentiments of trust in the US military in countries in South America and with left-leaning presidents than in countries in Central America and with right-leaning presidents.

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | |
|---------------------------------|--|----------------------|---------------------|
| | Trust in the United States Military (1) | (2) | (3) |
| Trust China > US | -0.459*** (0.063) | -0.441*** (0.062) | 0.141** (0.045) |
| Trust China > US*Homicide | 0.008*** (0.003) | | |
| Trust China > US*Pres. Ideology | | 0.016** (0.006) | |
| Trust China > US*South America | | | -0.323** (0.063) |
| Observations | 3,418 | 3,418 | 3,418 |
| Log Likelihood | -7,117.137 | -7,116.388 | -7,101.419 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 14,266.270 | 14,264.780 | 14,232.840 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 14,364.400 | 14,362.900 | 14,324.830 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2. Explaining trust in the United States military

Source: Authors

To preview, we find similar interactive effects when comparative trust evaluations serve as the primary independent variable under consideration (in table 2). We visually depict and briefly discuss these interactive effects with reference to results stemming from accompanying models. In sum, the models from table 1 disconfirm Hypothesis 1 but provide partial confirmatory evidence in support of Hypothesis 3. We further probe Hypothesis 3 and test Hypothesis 2 in table 2.

The coefficients associated with “Trust China > US” in Table 2 confirm our expectations outlined in Hypothesis 2, that high levels of trust in the Chinese government (in comparison to levels of trust in the US government) will be negatively associated with support for the US military. The persistent negative and statistically significant coefficients across modeling specifications provide satisfactory evidence in support of this hypothesis. Additionally, the results contained in table 2 allow us to assess the heterogeneous effects of our primary relationship outlined in Hypothesis 3. We find that, like the results from table 1, the primary interaction terms involving presidential ideology and subregion are statistically significant. Beyond this, the interaction term associated with homicide rate is also statistically significant. These provide confirmatory evidence in support of Hypothesis 3, that public perceptions of China and Chinese influence in Latin America have a more pronounced effect on the view of the US military in higher capacity countries with left-leaning presidents. We visibly investigate the nature of each of these statistically significant relationships in figure 5.

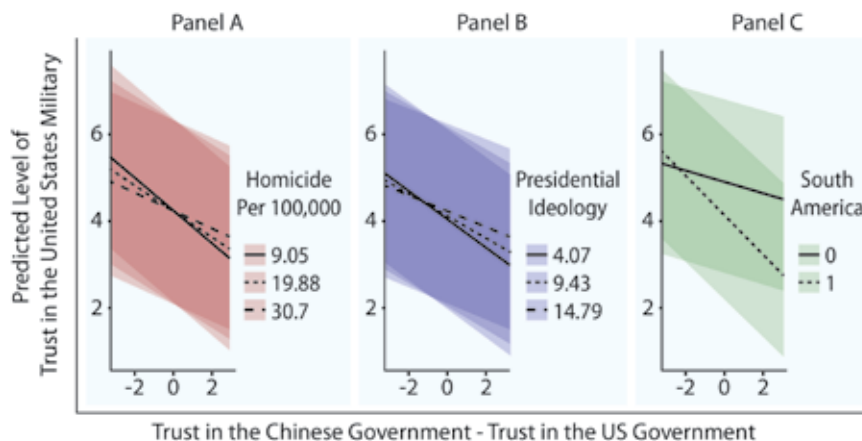


Figure 5. The effect of China–US Government trust evaluations on support for US military by homicide rate, presidential ideology, and subregion

Source: Authors

Figure 5 panel A indicates that greater trust in the Chinese government in comparison with the government of the United States has a larger effect on sentiments of trust in the US military in countries with lower homicide rates than in countries with higher homicide rates. To reiterate, we posit that homicide rates serve as an important signal of state capacity where countries with high homicide rates have low capacity and countries with low homicide rates have high capacity. Interpreted through this lens, our results indicate that individuals in low capacity countries (i.e., countries with high homicide rates) remain more steadfast in their trust evaluations of the US military, irrespective of their comparative government trust evaluations.

We suspect that this may arise from low capacity Latin American countries' continued reliance on the United States for security direction, training, and operational assistance (e.g., US Southern Command's Operation Martillo²²). We interpret our result to mean that security concerns overpower economic concerns in low capacity Latin American countries and that this prioritization informs and holds constant trust evaluations in the US military. As long as the United States remains preeminent (or maintains the perception of preeminence) in the security realm, our results suggest that trust evaluations of the US military, at least among lower capacity Latin American countries, are likely to remain stable.

Figure 5 panel B indicates that greater trust in the Chinese government in comparison with the government of the United States has a larger effect on sentiments of trust in the US military in countries with presidents associated with the political ideological left than in countries with presidents associated with the political ideological right. This result largely confirms the well-established association between political ideology/partisanship and support for military institutions in the United States and refines our understanding of support for the US military beyond national borders.²³ It affirms that trust evaluations in the US military prove unwavering among individuals in countries with presidents affiliated with conservative political ideologies. By contrast, trust evaluations in the US military fluctuate more notably with comparative government trust evaluations in counties with presidents affiliated with liberal political ideologies. These findings provide us with insight into the countries demanding additional attention and goodwill from the United States to offset the negative effects of trust in the Chinese government on evaluations of the United States and its subsidiary institutions.

Finally, Figure 5 panel C indicates that greater trust in the Chinese government in comparison with the government of the United States has a larger effect on sentiments of trust in the US military in South American countries than in Central American countries. In fact, trust in the US military remains unwavering in Central American countries across the spectrum of comparative trust evalua-

tions. The purported rationale for the interactive effect of comparative trust evaluations and homicide rates on trust in the US military likely holds and helps to explain the results in Figure 5 panel C. That said, there is also likely a geographic story at play. It is plausible to suspect that, despite China's efforts to increase its financial reach and soft power presence into the Central American region, the United States maintains the upper hand due to geopolitical advantages. Frequent physical contact and hemispheric interactions, shared cultural experiences and linguistic ties, and both long-standing and intimate security and economic relations have likely forged a bond undiminished by China's efforts to gain influence in the region. Unlikely to be tested on many of the aforementioned grounds, our results suggest that trust evaluations of the US military, at least among individuals in Central American countries, are likely to remain stable. Thus, we need to focus our efforts to "win hearts and minds" further south.

In sum, we find support for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 but not for Hypothesis 1. That is, we find that comparatively high levels of trust in the Chinese government will be negatively associated with trust in the US military and that positive evaluations of China, broadly speaking, influence trust in the US military more in high capacity South American countries and in countries with left-leaning presidents. Beyond testing our primary hypotheses, the results of our analyses provide additional evidence of both the individual and country-level factors that influence Latin Americans' trust evaluations of the US military. In what follows, we briefly detail these findings.

Irrespective of the conceptualization of China's soft power in the region (perceptions of China's influence or comparative government trust evaluations), our complete results suggest that age and education are negatively correlated with trust in the US military and that Latin Americans holding conservative political ideologies are more likely to trust in the US military than their counterparts holding liberal political ideologies. Neither gender or income (at the individual-level) nor sub-region, GDP, polity, or United States direct investments (at the country level) are statistically significant predictors of trust in the US military. Curiously, gender is not a strong predictor of trust in the US military, and sentiments that China contributes to economic development is, across four out of six modeling specifications, positively and significantly correlated with trust in the US military. These results, though not central to our primary analysis, deepen our understanding of who, among our Latin American neighbors, is likely to hold the US military establishment in high regard.

Discussion and Conclusion

The relationship between the United States and Latin America has long been a tenuous one, characterized by periods of both partnership and estrangement. Today, the US Southern Command's first stated line of effort is to "strengthen partnerships" in Central and South America.²⁴ At the same time, China seeks "to pull the region into its orbit through state-led investments and loans."²⁵ Our research raises serious concerns that China's efforts to increase soft power in the region are yielding comparative trust evaluation dividends harmful to the national security interests of the United States. Chiefly, we learn that high levels of trust in the Chinese government (in comparison to levels of trust in the United States government) are negatively associated with support for the US military. Though concerning, the outcomes of these great powers' countervailing efforts to win hearts and minds in Latin America need not be zero sum.

For one, if positive perceptions of China's contributions to economic development are positively correlated with trust in the US military (as some of our research findings imply), an implication is that both countries have the potential to concurrently grow goodwill in the region. Future inquiry should assess whether these attitudes are tied both to Latin Americans' views of external influence in their national affairs writ large and to Latin Americans' perceptions of and confidence in their own national political and military institutions. Another related illustration is our research finding that comparative trust evaluations that favor China are less impactful in shaping perceptions of the US military in some contexts than others. Chiefly, despite China's growing presence, public perceptions of the US military remain relatively inflexible in Central American countries as well as in countries with right-leaning presidents and low levels of state capacity. In countries exhibiting these characteristics, a zero-sum outcome is especially improbable. Scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike would be well-served to further probe the mechanism underlying these uncovered heterogeneous effects and, relatedly, to investigate the circumstances under which positive evaluations of the US military break down in countries that do not exhibit these characteristics.

Though outcomes of the United States's and China's countervailing efforts to win the hearts and minds in Latin America may not be zero sum, our research implies that China is at a distinct advantage when it comes to soft power in the region. Insofar as public attitudes and support prominently influence national security outcomes, China's advantage ought to prove worrisome to the United States. It follows that as the United States strives to deepen bonds with increasingly strengthened and professionalized Latin American militaries, it cannot neglect initiatives to garner public support for collaborative national defense efforts.

Future efforts to deepen inter-hemispheric military collaborations (while avoiding escalation of greater power antagonism in the region) ought to prominently feature initiatives to increase soft power influence and, more pointedly, public support for partner institutions. □

Notes

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21. Full modeling results are available upon request.
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