

# China's Use of Soft Power in Support of its Strategic Engagement in Latin America

R. EVAN ELLIS, PHD

KELLY SENTERS PIAZZA, PHD, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

MAJ ADAM GREER, USAF

BRIG GEN (RET) DANIEL URIBE, PHD, USAF\*

## Introduction

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) expanding engagement and presence in Latin America and the Caribbean has captured the attention of political and business leaders and the people of the region, as well as the United States. Although the PRC's engagement and use of "soft power" has political, cultural, security and other dimensions, the attention that the PRC commands in the region is arguably driven primarily by the pace of China's rise, and the lure of benefiting from China through engagement and business. For Latin America and the Caribbean, the PRC's rise has been most directly felt through the PRC's increasing importance as a partner in trade, loans, and investment for the region over the past two decades. Since the acceptance of the PRC into the World Trade Organization in 2001, PRC-Latin America trade has expanded 17-fold, from \$18.5 billion in 2002, to \$312 billion in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

In political terms, in addition to regular regional bilateral interactions, the PRC has engaged Latin America principally through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and through virtually all the region's other multilateral institutions, including the Interamerican system, where it has had an active role as observer in the Organization of American States (OAS) since 2004. In the 2015, 2018 and 2021 China-CELAC ministerial-level summits, the PRC advanced multiyear "plans"<sup>2</sup> detailing how the PRC aspires to take its relationship with the region forward. PRC engagement also takes on cultural and informational dimensions, including targeted regional dissemination of PRC state-sponsored propaganda and news-media; the establishment of 44 regional Confucius Institutes for Chinese language and PRC culture education; various forms of "people-

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to-people” engagements including state-sponsored scholarships facilitating study in China and strategic “expert” exchanges; the promotion of trips by Latin American politicians, journalists, academics and others to visit China; and other forms of strategic engagement. In the security domain, although the PRC has proceeded cautiously, it has leveraged Latin American interest in engaging with China, arising from its growing power and economic activities with the region, as well as the growing capabilities and reach of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

In this paper, we explore how the PRC has used its version of soft power to further strategic goals in Latin America, the extent to which China’s efforts have proven effective, and the implications for the U.S. Military and its interactions with partner nations in the region.

### **PRC Objectives in Latin America**

PRC objectives in Latin America support the broader Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and PRC objectives to achieve national rejuvenation in pursuit of PRC Chairman Xi Jinping’s “China dream” speech,<sup>3</sup> of a state that is wealthy, powerful, and internally and externally secure. In Latin America, PRC objectives include securing access to commodities, products, and markets useful to China’s economy while leveraging PRC State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and firms to capture as much of the value added as possible. It has also included achieving PRC dominance in strategic technologies, and further isolating Taiwan to support the CCP’s aim to “reunify” Taiwan under the PRC in coming years.<sup>4</sup> The PRC has worked to ensure Latin American governments side with the PRC on “core” issues including Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, PRC South and East China Seas territorial claims and other matters. Within Latin America, the PRC seeks privileged access for its companies and personnel, as well as protection against expropriation and other legal actions.

### **Understanding China’s soft power and its evolution**

The CCP has increasingly looked to “soft power” to advance the PRC’s international political, economic, and security objectives. To some extent, soft power remains an ambiguous concept in the PRC, whose meaning, boundaries, and employment remain unclear – both for those PRC actors employing soft power, as well as those impacted by, and observing PRC soft power.

An early notion of “soft power,” although not explicitly using that term, has been at the heart of China’s self-identity and concept of international relations. From its early history, the grandeur of China’s civilization, culture and power were seen as important in motivating surrounding peoples and their leaders to cooper-

ate and trade with China, rather than organizing against China. The rituals of selectively receiving foreigners in the “forbidden city” were structured around the concept of imparting awe and reverence toward China’s power and majesty. In China’s concept of its history, even the conquest of China by the invading Mongols was an example of China’s soft power, insofar as the conquerors ultimately assimilated and were transformed by the culture they found in China. Modern organizations such as the PRC’s cultural promotion organization, Hanban, are shaped by this historically rooted self-concept that the power of China’s culture will have a favorable, transformative effect on those who become familiar with it.

Modern PRC formulations of soft power have evolved along similar cultural and historical lines. China’s dramatic economic rise has undeniably produced a form of soft power “attraction” within the international community, especially among those who wish to mimic China’s economic development or capitalize from its growth. Economic development aside, however, the PRC’s version (and normative *vision*) of “soft power” diverges sharply from the context from which the concept was originally derived, where soft power is a byproduct of liberal democratic values.

The modern concept of “soft power” first surfaced in PRC academic and foreign policy thinking shortly after Joseph Nye introduced the concept in 1990.<sup>5</sup> It took over fifteen years, however, for the concept to be canonized into official CCP discourse by PRC Chairman Hu Jintao, first in a January 2006 Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting where he linked international influence to soft power, then in a May 2006 address to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) where he ordered a thorough military study of the topic, and most importantly in the 2007 17th National Party Congress where Hu called for a Party-wide and nationwide effort to enhance China’s soft power.<sup>6</sup> The cumulative effects of these calls to action produced a frenzy of CCP, PRC, and PLA efforts to study, Sinicize, and ultimately deploy soft power in pursuit of CCP objectives, both domestically and abroad. To support overseas efforts, for example, the number of Confucius Institutes nearly quadrupled from just over 100 in 2006 to over 400 in 2012.<sup>7</sup>

However, lacking the soft power that naturally accompanies liberal governance systems, CCP leaders attempted to coopt the term and shape it into a more normative domestic and foreign policy tool. Under Hu, the official PRC concept of “soft power” fractured into multiple, sometimes disconnected concepts. Soft power was often not referred to as the theoretical opposite to hard power, but rather as descriptor for judging the otherwise intangible strength of PRC institutions. “Good discipline,” for example, was the “soft power” of PLA troops that would ensure their victory in battle,<sup>8</sup> and Chinese culture the “soft power” that would

provide “strong support” for effective governance and “deep motivation” to advance development.<sup>9</sup>

By the start of the 2012 18th Party Congress and PRC Chairman Xi Jinping’s first term, multiple Party and government arms were engaged in initiatives to advance PRC “soft power” at home and abroad. After assuming power, Xi doubled-down on Hu’s already determined approach to advance PRC soft power. In December 2013, Xi led an important CCP senior-leader study group meeting where he formally linked “improving the country’s soft power” to be crucial to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” – the overarching political objective of the PRC and CCP.<sup>10</sup> The distinction served to further formalize “soft power” as a prescriptive domestic and foreign policy tool – a form of CCP “political work” to be cultivated internally and deployed externally in support of CCP political objectives. In addition to “guiding the Chinese people to establish and adhere to the correct view of history,” Xi laid out political instructions to consolidate and deepen Chinese cultural soft power around Marxism and Socialism, repackage the CCP’s version of Chinese culture, and project China’s soft power to the outside world via a “foreign discourse system” and “positive propaganda efforts.”<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly given his 2013 guidance, as Xi’s tenure stretched on, it became apparent that the PRC’s manifestation of soft power under Xi diverged sharply from Nye’s original concept. To Nye, soft power was the natural byproduct of liberal values.<sup>12</sup> Persons exposed to aspects of the US system and its culture, such as its concept of democracy or free markets, through media, education, living in the United States, and/or studying in its institutions, internalize those values as desirable for their own countries, and thus act in ways that impact their own system in ways favorable to the United States.

In contrast, although the PRC’s massive economic development cultivated soft power among developing countries and Wall Street investors alike, Xi’s CCP embarked on deliberate campaigns to manufacture state-sponsored soft power to sway international perceptions of China, open new opportunities for the PRC and CCP, and prolong China’s “window of strategic opportunity” against push-back from the established international order. Outreach programs like the Confucius Institutes continued to multiply and the PRC advanced other efforts, including developing overseas news-media, engaging with ethnic Chinese diasporas, and advancing engagement programs aimed at influencing foreign leaders.

Although these sorts of PRC soft power initiatives were likely successful to some degree in facilitating greater political engagement, the PRC’s unique brand of authoritarianism, when projected abroad, created its own kind power byproduct. Rather than PRC culture persuading international political outcomes through “attraction,” PRC actors increasingly punished interlocutors for diverging from

CCP preferences, a phenomenon that has come to be known as “wolf warrior diplomacy” or “coercive diplomacy.” The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) tracked less than 20 such cases in 2016, but by 2019 instances ASPI labeled as “coercive” events more than tripled to 60 per year.<sup>13</sup> Cases ranged from state-issued threats, trade restrictions or business dealing cancellations, and sometimes even blackmailing events, arbitrary detentions, or exit bans from China.

Although Xi somewhat addressed China’s wolf warrior trend during a senior CCP meeting in May 2021 by calling for China to be more “lovable” to the rest of the world,<sup>14</sup> Xi’s main orders were for the CCP and PRC to double-down on efforts to comprehensively strengthen external propaganda systems, expand productive people-to-people exchanges, and master the science of foreign discourse and international communication to advance PRC interests. Furthermore, rather than addressing poor PRC behaviors, Xi boasted of having created a successful “internal and external propaganda system,” a “media cluster with international influence,” and successfully “guiding” international public opinion in China’s favor.<sup>15</sup> He pointed out that with the PRC’s new “multi-subject three-dimensional large-scale publicity pattern,” China’s “international discourse power and influence have been significantly improved.”

These sorts of CCP “soft power” initiatives – while arguably still in formative stages – are widely observable in Latin America where the PRC conceives that “soft power” is important to PRC objectives. China’s economic success in the past four decades, its ability to maintain social order, and more recently, its ability to weather the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, have shaped the thinking of Latin American peoples and policymakers.

For the PRC, the process of “shaping” foreign behaviors differs fundamentally than the liberal U.S. approach, which relies on affinity for U.S. values, culture, and institutions to facilitate conditions favorable to U.S. interests. In contrast, for the PRC, perhaps the most powerful “soft” mechanism is the expectation of benefit for nations, companies, and individuals engaging with the PRC. This transactional expectation is based on the lure of potential *access* – access to PRC markets, access to PRC products, and access to PRC companies, banks, and other sources of resources.<sup>16</sup>

The lure of access to PRC markets is substantial. China’s 1.4 billion people, with their increasing prosperity and entry into the middle class represent, if sometimes only in abstract, an attractive market for Latin American politicians, companies, and businesspersons. Ecuadoran banana magnate Segundo Wong was said to have quipped that if every person in China would eat one Ecuadoran banana once a week, Ecuador would become a fabulously wealthy country.

Beyond the lure of the market, the PRC, its companies, and its commercial institutions also represent an important source of loans and investments for Latin American governments. The PRC's reputation for not attaching conditions to a recipient's political and human rights practices, level of transparency, or other fiscal practices to PRC resources is often a particularly attractive for populist authoritarian governments seeking to diversify away from reliance on Western governments. In June 2021, for example, the government of Trinidad and Tobago announced that it would take a loan from a Chinese bank rather than from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) even though the Chinese interest rate was double that of the IMF, simply to avoid the policy conditionality of the IMF.<sup>17</sup>

For Latin American politicians, side benefits may also be a powerful motivator. PRC companies may generally be more willing to offer bribes or craft business contracts that personally benefit recipients. In Ecuador, for example, investigative journalist Fernando Villavicencio documented how PRC loans-for-oil contracts and other major projects benefitted close associates of leftist populist then-President Rafael Correa.<sup>18</sup>

The PRC's One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy<sup>19</sup> is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of how states and policy-makers come to expect benefits from cooperation with the PRC. Although both the obligations and benefits of participation remain ambiguous, OBOR membership seems to create some expectation that participating countries may attain greater participation in PRC-funded public infrastructure projects. Since the 2013 OBOR was extended to Latin America, 20 Latin American and Caribbean states have officially joined, with Argentina joining in 2022.

With all such hoped for benefits, both in China and local contexts, the reputation of the PRC and its companies of linking commercial cooperation to the partner's behavior in other areas adds to the "soft power" effect of the deal, real or imagined. The reputation for subtle but harsh "vindictiveness" by the Chinese government adds to this effect. Examples include the PRC cutting off purchases from Australia for its role in questioning the Chinese origins of Covid-19,<sup>20</sup> or its 2010 cutoff of purchases of Argentine soy oil to punish it for protectionist measures against Chinese products by the Argentine Congress.<sup>21</sup> These harsh behaviors, while seemingly counterproductive to PRC efforts to cultivate the attraction of "soft power," in reality powerfully serve PRC interests by conditioning targets to think about consequences for acting contrary to perceived PRC (or CCP) preferences.

As a result of this tactic, Latin American governments companies and businesspersons often perceive that speaking too critically regarding the human rights or other practices of the Chinese government, referring to Taiwan as an indepen-

dent country, or criticizing the poor environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices of PRC-based companies, could jeopardize an existing or future relationship from which they hope to benefit. In June 2021, for example, the government of Guyana abruptly reversed a public commitment to open a commercial trade office with Taiwan, presumably in response to strong PRC pressure in the context of the significant role of Chinese companies as an investor and economic actor in the country.<sup>22</sup>

An important aspect of “hope for benefits” as a vehicle of China’s soft power, is that parties coexist with mistrust of the PRC more easily than more affinity-oriented sources of such influence. Specifically, Latin American political leaders courting the PRC are usually aware of the reputation of the PRC and its companies as difficult, even predatory partners. Yet companies still elect to enter commercial interactions with PRC-based counterparts, even with the expectation that they will try to rob their intellectual property or otherwise take advantage of them. The expectation of benefit – legitimate or otherwise – and the belief that companies can sufficiently protect themselves, often overpowers concerns of dealing with malign PRC behaviors.

### **Instruments of PRC Soft Power**

Under Chairmen Hu Jintao and later Xi Jinping, the PRC’s fixation on soft power as an operational foreign policy tool flourished, and between 2006 and 2022, dozens of influential CCP, PRC, and PLA books and articles had been published on the topic. Policies clearly manifesting PRC soft power in Latin America, however, are likely still in relatively early stages, but generally include Confucius institutes, people-to-people engagements, media outreach, high-level public diplomacy, and activities by PRC firms – activities overall consistent with Xi Jinping’s 2022 orders for “strengthening and improving international communication work.”<sup>23</sup>

#### ***Confucius Institutes***

The PRC has established 44 Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as 18 affiliated Confucius Classrooms,<sup>24</sup> for the officially sanctioned study of Chinese language and culture (in June 2021 they were renamed “Centers for Language Education Cooperation”). Most are set up in major public universities in the region, although the examples of Jorge Tadeo Lozano University in Bogota, and the Technological Institute of Santo Domingo (INTEC), in the Dominican Republic, suggest that Confucius Institutes may also be estab-

lished in private institutions where the local politics of the university and other considerations make the option more appropriate.<sup>25</sup>

Although Confucius Institutes have been viewed in the United States as centers of government propaganda and espionage, in the Latin American context, with limited other opportunities for studying Chinese, the Institutes more importantly play a strategic role as a point of entry into the Chinese government system for students with the interest, aptitude and discipline for mastering the difficult Mandarin language and Chinese character set. Although controversy over Confucius Institutes has led to the restructuring of the relationship between the Institutes and the Cultural Promotion Organization Hanban,<sup>26</sup> the institutes orient students with the interest, aptitude and discipline toward the Hanban scholarships provided by the PRC government for university and graduate level studies and other academic opportunities in China, where they may not only be given a positive orientation toward the PRC, but potentially also assessed and compromised for later recruitment by PRC intelligence. In the 2019-2021 China-CELAC Plan, the PRC committed to 6,000 such scholarships for the region.<sup>27</sup> In the 2022-2024 plan, it committed to another 5,000 scholarships plus an additional 3,000 “training places.” As well as the “1,000 talents” program.<sup>28</sup> Through such scholarships for study in the PRC, thus, an important portion of the limited number of China-oriented diplomatic personnel and businesspersons in Latin America and the Caribbean who represent the interests of their countries and firms toward the PRC, enter that service owing their lucrative knowledge and qualifications to the Chinese government.

### *People-to-People Diplomacy*

People-to-people diplomacy is regularly mentioned in the Chinese media,<sup>29</sup> and was first emphasized as important by Xi Jinping in his “Thought on Diplomacy” at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in late 2012. Xi has subsequently issued high-level policy instructions advancing people-to-people exchange, most recently in May 2021 during a senior political study session.<sup>30</sup> These sorts of “people-to-people” exchanges often materialize contrary to liberal expectations, however, and are often confined to “high-level experts,” politicians, influential businessmen, or other conduits for PRC influence.

Beyond scholarships for Latin American and Caribbean students mentioned above, the PRC invests significantly in bringing a broad range of others from the region to court, influence, and potentially recruit partners. These include trips by political and party figures through the International Liaison Division (ILD) of the Chinese Communist Party. Between 2002 and 2017, the ILD held 300 meetings with representatives of 74 parties in 26 Latin American countries, including



many which were brought over to the PRC.<sup>31</sup> Within Latin America itself, the ILD also coordinates networks of “friends of China,” senior business and political personnel who may influence their governments on matters of interest to the PRC, while at the same time benefitting from the business opportunities that such special ties to the PRC afford.

### ***Media Outreach***

The PRC pursues its objectives in the traditional and social media space in a range of increasingly sophisticated forms. Most overtly, it produces its own material through formats such as the official media agency *Xinhua* and China Global Television Network (CGTN), as well as through the internationally distributed *China Daily*. It also buys lucrative advertising supplements in a range of periodicals in the region. These supplements have a high-quality, journalistic style appearance, allowing the promulgation of information serving the PRC government to be mistaken and less critically received as regular journalism by Latin American audiences. The payments for such supplements, including in prestigious periodicals like Chile's *La Tercera*, also create a powerful inducement for the benefitting news organizations not to take positions excessively critical to the PRC in other areas, lest they lose their Chinese patrons. Beyond these, PRC media such as CGTN provides often free images, video, and audio feeds to news outlets in the region. Due in part to the limited budgets of Latin American media outlets, and the difficulty of obtaining similar material on their own within the PRC, Latin American media often accept and use the media, without recognizing the choices made by the PRC government in producing the images themselves have propaganda effects. These include the depicting Chinese leaders and institutions in a consistently dignified fashion, and showing images of the PRC which are clean, orderly, and free of protests.

### ***High-level Public Diplomacy***

In recent years, the Chinese diplomatic corps in Latin America has become increasingly skillful in representing their country's position, operating in the local language, and speaking with confidence in defense of China's positions, by contrast to the more reserved posture of a prior generation of PRC diplomats. Since 2019, Chinese diplomats have notably become more outspoken, as well as sophisticated in their use of social media such as Twitter. A study by the Andres Bello foundation of the use of Twitter by Chinese diplomats in Latin America found that the total number of their tweets grew from 863 in December 2019 to 5,018 in May 2020, with 11 of 29 accounts examined created in 2020.<sup>32</sup> The study also

highlighted an uneven character to the Chinese social media. Of the tweets examined, the vast majority were generated by three Chinese diplomats: PRC ambassador to Venezuela, Lǐ Bǎoróng, PRC Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Zhāng Rùn, and PRC Ambassador to Panama Wèi Qiáng. Similarly, with respect to content, select Chinese “wolf warrior” diplomats such as Lǐ Bǎoróng in Venezuela, have been particularly outspoken in defense of PRC interests and the anti-US postures and activities of their hosts.

One area in which Chinese diplomacy has been particularly pronounced in 2021 is with respect to its pandemic-related medical diplomacy. Initially, Covid-19 related diplomacy was primarily defensive in character and oriented to perceptions regarding China’s role in the start of the pandemic in Wuhan. Over time, the PRC government, in conjunction with key Chinese companies doing business in Latin America such as Huawei and Alibaba, began to donate or sell medical goods, including masks and other personal protection gear, thermometers and thermal imaging cameras, test kits, and eventually vaccines.

The vaccines were particularly badly needed in the region in the early days of the pandemic, with an absence of significant quantities of Western vaccines such as those of Pfizer, Johnson and Johnson, and Moderna in the region. In a context in which badly needed Western alternatives were in short supply in Latin America, PRC diplomats often made delivery of the vaccines into high-profile media events; the Chinese ambassador and the President of the receiving country receiving the vaccines at the airport, with significant media coverage as boxes stamped with Chinese flags were rolled off the airplane.<sup>33</sup> The Chinese also sought to leverage the need for its vaccines to achieve other benefits, such as getting both Brazil and the Dominican Republic to reconsider prior decisions to exclude the PRC-based telecommunications company Huawei from 5G spectrum auctions in their respective countries.<sup>34</sup> China further also used the lure of expedited access to vaccines to attempt to convince Paraguay to change its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC.<sup>35</sup> With time, however, the soft power impact of the Chinese vaccines has waned, as more information has come out about their relatively low efficacy. Indeed, 46% of Latin Americans polled in late 2020 said that they would not take a Chinese vaccine.<sup>36</sup>

More broadly China’s engagement with the region connected to the pandemic, PRC diplomats, including members of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Chinese government organizations, have shifted their message to increasingly question rivals such as the US as advocates of democracy and exemplars of the democratic system, particularly in lieu of the January 6, 2020 overrunning of the US Capitol by protesters in Washington DC.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, they have begun to seriously contest a pillar of US soft power and influence back to the Cold War,

and even to World Wars I and II—the concept broadly, if informally understood in the United States and the international community that the US stood for “democracy,” by contrast to its rivals which represented “authoritarianism,” whether Communist, socialist, fascist or other.

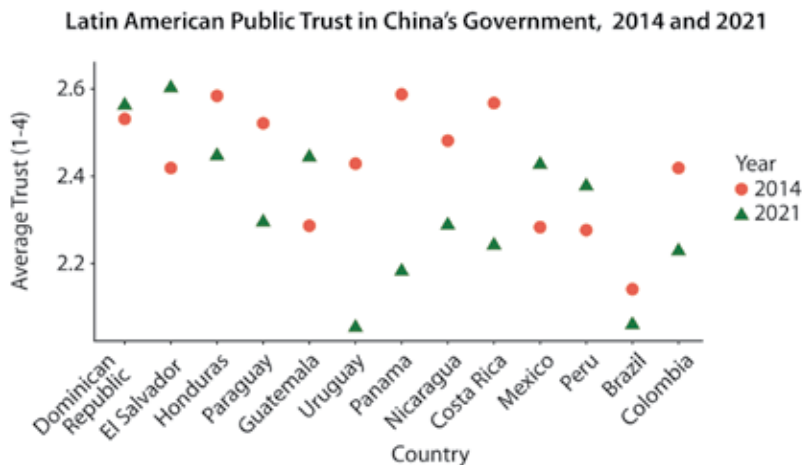
As the PRC has worked on one side to undermine the legitimacy of the US as a representative and advocate for “democracy” as a healthy system of governance, the PRC has simultaneously also become increasingly outspoken about the accomplishments of the Chinese system, including its cultural and economic achievements, its successes against Covid-19, and the 2021 Beijing Olympics.<sup>38</sup> PRC diplomats and other spokespersons have also been more aggressive in pushing back against the legitimacy of US advocacy for a particular type of democracy, suggesting that doing so is “divisive” and all types of “democracy” are legitimate. In the process, the Chinese message not only acts as a counter against those who would question PRC actions such as control over its population and cyberspace, and its repression in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and elsewhere. Indirectly, this appeal has multiple soft power benefits for the PRC. To the extent that the contradictions in the PRC discourse do not become items of focus, it increases the value of China and its message to allied authoritarian populist regimes superficially calling themselves “democracies,” including those of Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, while not overtly making the PRC an advocate of non-democratic governments. For the generation of Latin Americans who came of age after the ideological struggles of the Cold War, China is leading a dangerously attractive rebranding of democracy which facilitates Latin Americans frustrated with the performance of traditional democratic governments, to accept or even embrace actions by their leaders, which violate its core tenets in the name of hoped-for economic progress, security, and order.

Despite the appeal and danger of the PRC’s new diplomacy, it has also been accompanied by difficulties. It has created a backlash among those who find the arrogance implied by China’s new posture offensive. Indeed, the PRC’s relative lack of experience with an open media, and its growing self-confidence, arguably make it more vulnerable to inadvertently send messages which certain groups in the region find offensive.

### **Latin American Evaluations of China and Utility of Soft Power Instruments**

While China’s increasing inroads in the Latin American region are well-documented, the extent to which China’s efforts have proven effective in enhancing its soft power on public opinion are less understood. Data from the

2014 and 2021 waves of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) provide some preliminary insights on this topic. More specifically, these data shed light on Latin Americans' evaluations of China's government and Chinese political and economic influence in the Latin American region both in 2014 and 2021, independently, and across time. In what follows, we visually depict and describe some of the primary takeaways from these data on China's increasing soft power in Latin America.

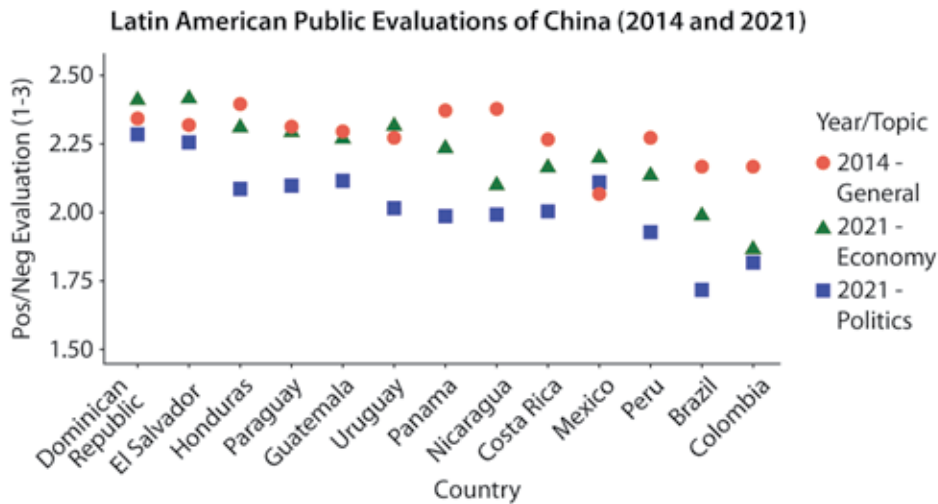


**Figure 1: Latin American Public Trust in China's Government 2014 and 2021**

Source: Authors

Figures 1 and 2 depict Latin American public trust in China's government and Latin American evaluations of China's political, economic, and overarching influence in the region, respectively. In line with Vanderbilt University's research described above, both convey a notable decline in Latin American attitudes on China over the course of the 2014-2021 period, with variation across countries. With respect to Latin American public trust in China's government,<sup>39</sup> Figure 1 conveys that trust is highest among respondents from the Dominican Republic (2.53 in 2014 and 2.56 in 2021 on a 1-4 scale) and lowest among respondents from Brazil (2.13 and 2.05 in 2021 on a 1-4 scale), with minimal attitudinal changes in these countries across the seven-year period. Of the other eleven countries in which this question was enumerated, seven (Honduras, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Columbia, Uruguay, and Brazil) experienced a decline in trust and four (El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru) experienced an increase in trust over the 2014-2021 period. On average, regional trust in China has decreased from 2.42 to 2.32 (a difference of 0.10) on a scale of 1-4 over the seven years. This means that, with the passage of time, regional trust in China's govern-

ment has marginally deteriorated. We interpret this to mean that Chinese initiatives to include engagement with the region's multilateral institutions and trips by political and party figures through the International Liaison Division of the Chinese Communist Party have fallen short in their soft power objectives, especially among the more developed countries ideologically proximate to the United States.



**Figure 2: Latin American Public Evaluations of China (2014 and 2021)**

Source: Authors

Figure 2 depicts a similar downward trajectory in Chinese soft power in the Latin American region. Specifically, Latin Americans' 2021 evaluations of China's economic and political influence in their home countries has declined nearly across the board in comparison with their 2014 general evaluations of China's influence.<sup>40</sup> The only country to have evaluated China more positively in terms of its economic and political influence in 2021 as compared to its general influence in 2014 was Mexico (where general influence in 2014 was 2.07 and political and economic influence in 2021 were 2.1 and 2.2, respectively, on a 1-4 scale). In every other country, evaluations of China's political influence in 2021 were noticeably poorer than evaluations of China's general influence in 2014. This observation is especially pronounced in the case of Brazil where evaluations of influence (general in 2014 and political in 2021) decreased by 0.45 on a scale of 1-4. In nine Latin American countries, evaluations of China's economic influence in 2021 was noticeably poorer than evaluations of China's general influence in 2014. However, in four countries (the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, and Uruguay), perceptions of China's economic influence were greater in 2021 as compared with

perceptions of China’s general influence in 2014. More positive evaluations of China over time tends to be the exception, though, not the norm. In general, across metrics available, Chinese soft power appears to have deteriorated, albeit marginally, over the seven-year period considered. We interpret this as preliminary evidence either that increasingly intimate economic relations between China and Latin American countries are not translating into proportionate increases in Chinese soft power and/or that the numerous soft power instruments that China has worked to develop in recent years have not yet generated desired outcomes.



**Figure 3: Less Involvement is Positive Involvement: Latin American Attitudes on China’s Political Influence**

Source: Authors

Figures 3 and 4 expand upon Figure 2, evaluating whether more perceived influence yields more positive perceptions of said influence in 2021 – the most recent and nuanced data on record. Figure 3 evaluates political influence,<sup>41</sup> and Figure 4 evaluates economic influence.<sup>42</sup> Figure 3 depicts Latin Americans’ per-

ceptions of Chinese influence on their home countries' politics and evaluations of whether this perceived influence is positive or negative – both on a scale from 1-4. In general, it suggests that countries with publics who perceive less Chinese political influence in their societies are more likely to perceive Chinese political influence to be positive than countries with publics who perceive more Chinese political influence in their societies. For illustration, the average positive/negative influence score (on a 1-4 scale) in eight Latin American countries with the highest perceptions of Chinese political influence is 1.98, and the average positive/negative influence score (on a 1-4 scale) in seven Latin American countries with the lowest perceptions of Chinese political influence is 2.89. We interpret this result as curious and as a signal that there may be a “sweet spot” of Chinese political influence that generates goodwill towards China but once surpassed, detracts from returns on investment.

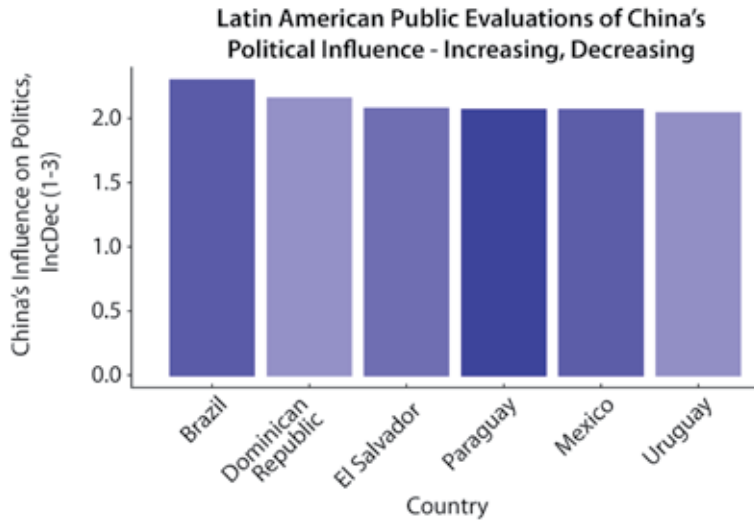


**Figure 4: Evaluations Across the Board: Latin American Attitudes on China's Economic Influence**

Source: Authors

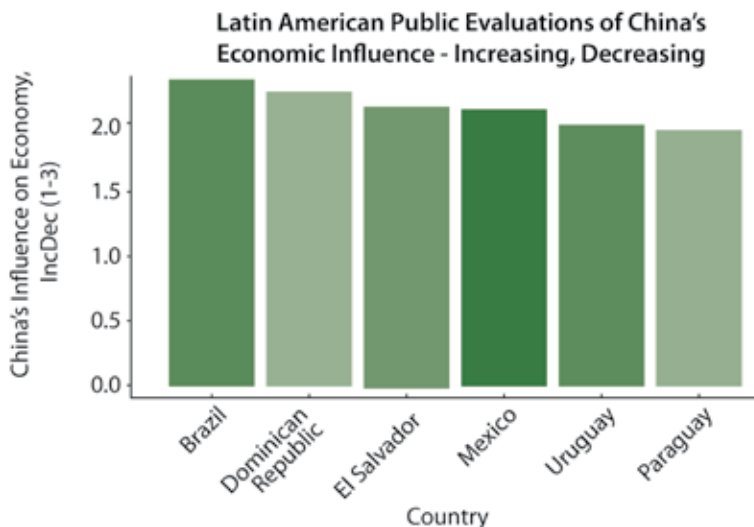
Figure 4 depicts Latin Americans' perceptions of Chinese influence on their home countries' economics and evaluations of whether this perceived influence is positive or negative – both on a scale from 1-4. The narrative emerging from Figure 4 is distinct from that from that associated with Figure 3. Specifically, dissimilar

from the realm of politics, there does not appear to be a strong clear pattern between perceived influence and the positive or negative nature of that influence.



**Figure 5: Latin American Public Evaluations of China's Political Influence—Increasing, Decreasing**

Source: Authors



**Figure 6: Latin American Public Evaluations of China's Economic Influence—Increasing, Decreasing**

Source: Authors

Finally, Figures 5 and 6 provide some insight, from select countries, into very recent trends surrounding Chinese political and economic influence. Specifically,



these figures report responses to questions asking about the extent to which Chinese influence has increased, decreased, or stayed the same in the prior 12 months.<sup>43</sup> Figure 5 reports that Latin Americans (in the six countries in which the survey was enumerated) perceive Chinese influence to have recently increased marginally. Brazilians report to have experienced the largest increase in Chinese political influence in their domestic politics in recent years (2.29 on a 1-3 scale), and Uruguayans report the smallest increase in Chinese political influence in their domestic politics in recent years (2.04 on a 1-3 scale).

Figure 6 reports that Latin Americans perceive Chinese economic influence to have recently increased in all countries except Paraguay. Brazilians report to have experienced the largest increase in Chinese economic influence in their domestic economy in recent years (2.37 on a 1-3 scale), and Uruguayans report the smallest increase in Chinese political influence in their domestic politics in recent years (2.02 on a 1-3 scale). Paraguayans are the only Latin Americans to report a decrease in Chinese economic influence in their domestic economy in recent years (1.98 on a 1-3 scale).

Similarly, polls show that many Latin Americans view Chinese companies and the PRC government with mistrust. A 2021 Vanderbilt University survey of 56,000 persons across Latin America found that 47% of respondents characterized the PRC government as untrustworthy or somewhat untrustworthy (by comparison, 45% of respondents viewed the US with such mistrust). Less than 12% characterized the PRC as “very trustworthy.”<sup>44</sup> however, as mentioned above, despite such mistrust, Latin Americans continue to see the PRC and its companies as a source of opportunity.

In sum, this exploration of public opinion data yields several insights: First, despite the numerous economic and soft power instruments of power that China has leveraged in the region in recent years, general public Latin American attitudes on China are becoming more negative, overall. At minimum, this suggests that these initiatives are not achieving Hu’s and, more recently, Xi’s public objective of improving China’s image abroad. Second, perceptions of more Chinese political and economic influence in the region does not appear to translate into more positive attitudes toward that influence. At best, more influence has little effect on positive/negative evaluations of that influence. At worst, more influence results in more negative attitudes toward China. Third, after years of increasing and strengthening its presence in the region, Latin Americans perceive China’s political and economic influence to be leveling off.

These general trends should not necessarily be mistaken as a faltering PRC approach, however. China’s quest for international influence is still in nascent stages and most recently reprioritized as recently as fall 2021.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore,

more research may be needed to validate if positive public opinion is necessary for the PRC to achieve strategic regional objectives – it is possible that the opinions of *elites* (policy makers, influential businesspeople, etc.) may be the key access point for the PRC to achieve its objectives. Lastly, future research can further refine correlation between positive public opinion and PRC influence. It is conceivable that the PRC prizes compliance over public opinion – an approach that would generally mirror the CCP's approach to domestic governance in China.

Still, it is useful to understand that PRC regional influence has not – as of yet, anyhow – seemed to result in a wave of pro-PRC public sentiment in Latin America. To the contrary, PRC regional engagement may actually turn public opinion against China. If this phenomenon translates into counterbalancing political action via normal democratic processes, then democracy may be able to sufficiently counter, shape, or limit PRC regional influence for the better.

### **Implications for U.S. Military and its Interactions with Partner Nations**

As suggested throughout this work, soft power is one key channel through which China's growing engagement with the region, although presently primarily economic in character, strategically impacts the United States. This includes implications for the U.S. military as it conducts operations and engages with partner nations in the Western Hemisphere.

At the political level, hopes for economic benefit and improved access to the PRC and PLA make partner nations more open to working with the PRC in the security domain, among other areas. This includes sending personnel to the PRC for professional military education (PME) and training activities, conducting institutional visits with People's Liberation Army (PLA) counterpart institutions, receiving Chinese military ships for port calls, purchasing or accepting donations of Chinese military hardware, and using Chinese surveillance and other information technology within Latin American security institutions, or in public areas that affect them.<sup>46</sup> In practice, authoritarian populist regimes in the region have been particularly disposed to work with the PLA in the security arena, including purchasing its military hardware and other security-relevant systems and training.

Such PME and training activities and institutional visits may create sensitivities where the personnel interacting with the Chinese have also engaged with US personnel, or have knowledge of US doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedure through interacting with US personnel and US institutions. Both such contacts, and the incorporation of Chinese telecommunications equipment into partner

nation architectures, may limit the types of information the United States can share with its partners, or the places or ways it can engage with them in country.

Beyond intelligence-related issues, PRC soft power may lead national-level leaders to limit cooperation with the United States out of desire to not offend PRC officials. Because the PRC is generally willing to punish interlocutors who fail to adhere to PRC preferences, U.S. partners may be under real pressure to conform to the PRC, especially as PRC preferences increasingly diverge from those of the United States.

In the short to medium term, such dynamics not only gradually undermine the ability of nations in the region to make the United States the “partner of choice,” but may impact U.S. ability to conduct security cooperation with nations on areas of direct relevance to U.S. national security, including the management of shared regional security challenges including narcotrafficking, money laundering and other U.S.-oriented illicit flows, as well as the activities of criminal and terrorist groups there, and refugees.

Additionally, PLA engagement with the region’s militaries may enhance the PLA’s ability to operate further outside of China’s borders, potentially in support of wartime contingency operations. In the long term, substantial PLA regional military integration could enhance China’s intelligence collection capabilities and/or give the PRC options to manufacture strategic dilemmas for the United States. In the context of a hypothetical protracted conflict, the PLA may seek to leverage existing engagements with Latin American security forces to obtain basing or logistical access and develop functional regional military capability. In any event, today’s competition for regional access could prove to be a strategic game – as the United States cedes ground as the “partner of choice” in Latin America, the PRC may gain future options to limit critical U.S. regional access in the future.

Finally, the US military has a role to play in the broader whole-of-government response to PRC engagement and soft power employment in the region, even though the Department of Defense should not be the lead agency in such a response. Still, as China’s approach – and its military’s approach – to soft power in the region continues to evolve, the U.S. approach must also evolve. It will not be enough for the U.S. military to simply double-down on existing approaches or attempt to tweak existing approaches to the China problem set.

Instead, U.S. strategists and policymakers need to continue to develop and adopt a strategic concept to counter CCP soft power initiatives and coercive behaviors in the region. At its core, a strategy must be whole-of-government in scope, recognizing, as shown in this work, that state-sponsored PRC soft power quickly spills from political and commercial arenas into affairs of security. United States military activities can be leveraged to produce effects on broader domains.

Successful U.S. security assistance, for example, can help partner nations control crime, insecurity, and corruption, which assists governments demonstrate that democracy, markets, and the rule of law can indeed address the challenges of their people, thus hardening states against problematic outside influence.

Effective U.S. engagement with partner militaries also makes partners an advocate for continuation of that relationship with the United States, a phenomenon particularly important when their political leaders are considering actions that would limit engagement or open the door for expanded PRC influence. The personal and institutional bonds that the U.S. military can build through effective partner nation engagement are unrivaled and those bonds facilitate information sharing and interoperability when facing challenges and threats from external actors. □

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40. The different metrics used to evaluate soft power in 2014 and 2021 stem from differences in questions enumerated across the two LAPOP survey waves. The 2014 wave asked survey respondents to evaluate whether Chinese influence was positive or negative. Specifically, this question asked: “In general, the influence that China has on our country is very positive, positive, negative, or very negative?” The 2021 wave asked survey respondents to evaluate whether Chinese political influence was positive or negative and whether Chinese economic influence was positive or negative. The English versions of these questions are: “And thinking about China and the influ-

ence that it has on the politics/economics of [insert country]. Do you believe that this influence is positive, neither positive nor negative, or negative.”

41. In addition to the politics question used to construct Figure 2, this figure also reports responses to the following question: “How much influence would you say that China has in the politics of [insert country]?”

42. In addition to the economics question used to construct Figure 2, this figure also reports responses to the following question: “How much influence would you say that China has in the economics of [insert country]?”

43. The English version of the specific question asked is: “Would you say that in the last 12 months the [political/economic] influence of China has increased, stayed the same, or decreased?” It is important to note that this particular question was only asked in a select six countries in the region, all of which are considered in the figures displayed.

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**R. Evan Ellis, PhD**

Serves as Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on China and other extra-hemispheric actors in the region, transnational organized crime, and populism. Dr. Ellis holds a PhD in Comparative Politics from Purdue University.



**Kelly Senters Piazza, PhD,  
United States Air Force Academy**

Dr. Kelly Piazza serves as an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the United States Air Force Academy. Dr. Piazza holds Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests include democracy, decentralization, gender, and strategic competition in Latin America.



**Maj Adam Greer, USAF**

Maj Adam Greer is Assistant Air Attaché to China. Maj Greer holds a Masters degree in Asian Studies from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. His research interests include Indo-Pacific Security Studies and PRC Domestic Politics.



**Brig Gen (Ret), Dr. Daniel Uribe, PhD, USAF**

Serves as consultant to the Air Force Culture and Language Center on issues related to US Southern Command. Dr. Uribe holds a PhD in Educational Technology from Arizona State University. His research interests include language and cross-cultural education and research within a Latin American context.