

Not an Away Game

US Strategic Competition in America's Own Neighborhood*

WALTER H. WARD, JR.

Since the Civil War, US security challenges have traditionally been expressed in terms of North and South, but from World War II onward, the prevailing focus has shifted to the East and West. Eastern Europe and the Middle East were defined as the “East,” while today, US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) challenges are framed as the Far East. For nearly a century, an ocean, both literal and figurative, has separated the homeland from strategic competitors in this East-West orientation. However, the landscape has undergone a significant transformation.

Strategic competition is now much closer to home and no longer lurking beneath the surface. Chinese and Russian influence in Central and South America has become highly visible, as they strive to create political, economic, and social divisions between the US and its regional partners. Their motives are neither altruistic nor mutually beneficial, but rather part of a deliberate strategy to enhance their own power while undermining US influence and diverting attention away from distant shores.

Fortunately, the United States possesses asymmetric means to effectively secure victories in strategic competition within Central and South America, enabling success in the long run. The key lies in people—the fundamental building blocks of the endeavor. The United States Air Force, leading the way in force development within the Department of Defense, is equipping its personnel with language and cultural skills suited for the present mission. This article delves into the ways China influences military and economic affairs in Central and South America. More importantly, it provides recommendations where the United States holds a distinct asymmetric competitive advantage and emphasizes the need for swift action to ensure strategic competition returns to its status as an away game.

By exploring these dynamics, this article aims to rebalance the playing field and provide strategic recommendations that enable the United States to secure a mutually beneficial outcome while safeguarding its interests in Central and South America.

*Co-published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese in collaboration with USAF Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs.

China's Stealthy Military Influence in Central and South America

China has silently pursued a long-term strategy of exerting influence over the militaries of Central and South America. In a thought-provoking piece for the Center for International Maritime Security, Capt Steven Arango, USMC, highlights China's growing influence achieved through investments in officer professional military education. Drawing upon a RAND report, Arango reveals that China provides a staggering five times more opportunities for professional military education than the United States, and this disparity continues to widen each year.¹

The concerns raised by Arango are echoed by John S. Van Oudenaren and Benjamin E. Fisher, who emphasize China's investment in professional military education across Central and South America. Referring to a 2010 news article from Xinhua News Agency, Van Oudenaren and Fisher disclose that China had already educated over 4,000 officers from more than 150 countries by that time.² However, they caution that the mere provision of seats in courses does not guarantee sustainable integration or operational capability. Their research uncovers a striking disparity—while international students are exposed to Chinese history and culture, including a shared narrative of European colonial exploitation, they are segregated into separate international cohorts rather than being fully integrated with their People's Liberation Army counterparts. This stands in stark contrast to the experience at institutions such as Air University and other service professional military education establishments, where international officers are fully integrated alongside their US colleagues.³

In US professional military education institutions, the United States actively facilitates the unrestricted integration of international students by providing a baseline of English language skills. This invaluable gift opens doors for these students to fully participate in classes alongside American and other international students—a gift that keeps on giving in many ways. However, a stark contrast emerges when examining the experience of international officers attending Chinese Defense Studies campuses.⁴

No similar effort is made to support the integration of international officers within the Chinese system. Instead, they are segregated into classes conducted in their native language, limiting direct engagement with their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, the instruction and materials largely reflect official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) positions, rarely allowing for diverse perspectives.⁵ The disparity could not be more pronounced when compared to the experience of attending professional military education at a US institution. As both a student and instructor, I have witnessed and participated in numerous spirited discussions

between US and international officers, fostering a deeper understanding of challenges and strengthening relationships.

Despite the disparity in educational quality, China is undeniably providing greater quantity in terms of educational opportunities. However, upon returning to their home countries, these officers bring with them connections and ideologies that tangibly extend the reach of Chinese influence, reaching right to our own doorstep. By widening the gap between our relationships with our closest neighbors, China gains a strategic competition advantage as the visiting team, while our ability to deter their malign influence in INDOPACOM is compromised.

This stark juxtaposition highlights the importance of addressing the approach to international military education. It is imperative that the United States not only maintains its commitment to unrestricted integration but also expands its efforts to counter the widening influence of China. By strengthening relationships, deepening understanding, and offering a competitive educational experience, the US can effectively navigate the evolving landscape of strategic competition in our own backyard.

China's Economic Infiltration

China is also actively pursuing a similar path economically, making significant strides in Central and South America. Data from the House Foreign Affairs Committee reveals that while Mexico and Canada remain the US' top trading partners, China has successfully penetrated these regions, with trade increasing by a staggering 26-fold between 2000 and 2020. Moreover, projections indicate that this growth will double by 2035.⁶ These gains are not surprising when considering the substantial political investment made by President Xi Jinping. Since assuming office in 2013, President Xi has visited Latin America on 11 occasions, in stark contrast to the mere five US Presidential visits to the region documented in Department of State historical records up until 25 October 2022.⁷

Beyond the numerical figures lies a more concerning trend of vertical integration, wherein China strategically acquires key industries rather than solely purchasing their products. The House Foreign Affairs Committee highlights that China has invested a staggering USD 16 billion in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia's lithium production industry.⁸ Furthermore, China stands as the largest investor in seven of Peru's major mines, controlling 100 percent of their iron ore production and 25 percent of their copper output, including two of the largest mines. This economic investment has facilitated the transfer of USD 634-million worth of military equipment between 2009 and 2019, paving the way for the adoption of PRC-style "digital authoritarianism" and surveillance tactics through Huawei networks.⁹ These developments are taking place within our contiguous land mass

and steadily encroaching closer to our borders, raising significant economic and security concerns.

China's economic ambitions have encountered significant challenges alongside their military exchanges. In a recent article published in the *Wall Street Journal*, Ryan Dube and Gabriele Steinhauser shed light on the crumbling state of many of China's infrastructure investments in Latin America. Host countries in the region have not received the expected benefits, mirroring patterns observed in Africa and Asia.¹⁰ For instance, Ecuador's largest hydroelectric plant, constructed with an investment of USD 2.7 billion and financed at a 6.9-percent interest rate, stands perilously close to sliding down a mountainside due to erosion, despite being built by hundreds of Chinese workers flown into Ecuador between 2010 and 2016.¹¹

China's growing military and economic influence in our hemisphere is forcing us to confront strategic competition on our own turf. This shift has the potential to diminish our capacity to effectively compete in INDOPACOM, an arena where we hold significant interests and treaty alliances. However, there is still an opportunity to change the tide by strengthening our relationships both to the North and South. Coalescing our alliances and partnerships can serve as a vital enabler in countering malign Chinese influence and effectively securing our own interests, as well as those of our alliance partners, in the INDOPACOM region.

To achieve this goal, the United States must recognize that the Chinese way of war has evolved. It must make comprehensive investments in the region across all domains, recognizing the need to compete on multiple fronts. Moreover, the US should capitalize on its asymmetric cultural advantage by fostering and leveraging cultural connections. By investing strategically, bolstering relationships, and embracing cultural ties, the US can navigate the challenges posed by China's economic influence, seize opportunities for mutual benefit, and successfully safeguard our interests and those of our alliance partners in the INDOPACOM theater.

Pitching a Winning Strategy: Countering China's Malign Influence in Our Backyard

To effectively counter China in the SOUTHCOM AOR, the United States must confront the stark reality that the Chinese way of war differs significantly from what we have encountered in the past. China has adopted a comprehensive whole-of-government approach, actively waging this war and extending its reach through Central and South America. A decade ago, Professor Stefan Halper at Cambridge University prepared an unclassified report for Mr. Andy Marshall at the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, providing an extensive analysis

spanning 559 pages. This report detailed China's not only whole-of-government but also whole-of-society approach to advancing CCP objectives.

One such strategy, known as "The Three Warfares," was sanctioned by the CCP in 2003. It encompasses psychological warfare, media warfare, and legal warfare, also referred to as *lawfare*. According to Halper, these three warfares are actively employed against the United States, aiming to diminish our capacity for power projection. One key assumption underlying the analysis is that China utilizes the three warfares to "diminish or rupture regional alliances," further jeopardizing our interests¹²

A single story on the 2022 Summit of the Americas, featured in the English language version of chinamil.com, explicitly reveals how the three warfares are being employed in Latin America to disrupt partnerships and enhance China's strategic competition as a home game for the United States.¹³ When even prominent figures like actor and World Wrestling Entertainment superstar John Cena are compelled to issue video apologies in both English and Mandarin for referring to Taiwan as a country, fearing repercussions from Chinese-controlled media sources, it becomes evident that the three warfares have entrenched themselves.¹⁴

In the face of these challenges, the United States must adopt a robust defensive strategy to counter China's whole-of-government warfare. This strategy necessitates a comprehensive approach, bolstering partnerships, enhancing information warfare capabilities, and safeguarding regional alliances. By fortifying our defenses and exposing the tactics employed by China, the United States can effectively resist and neutralize the impact of the three warfares. Through resilience and proactive measures, we can protect our interests and maintain stability in the SOUTHCOM AOR.

A recent article in *The Economist* highlights a significant shift in China's approach to Latin America. China's policy banks have ceased making new loans in the region since 2020, with even Venezuela receiving credit solely for maintaining oil shipments to China. Furthermore, a study conducted by the College of William and Mary reveals that the region experienced a higher number of cancelled or suspended Belt and Road transactions compared to any other area, reaching its investment peak in 2014.¹⁵ However, amid these developments, mineral extraction remains a constant, with Latin American exports to China, primarily consisting of minerals and other natural resources, surging 28 times higher between 2017 and 2021 than in previous years.¹⁶

Against this backdrop, a remarkable opportunity arises for the United States to adopt a comprehensive whole-of-government approach, fostering a brighter future with our closest neighbors while strengthening our position in strategic competition. Data indicate that China's efforts in the region do not effectively benefit the

overall nation, as they fail to generate local jobs and often result in crumbling infrastructure. This counternarrative, reminiscent of colonialism, presents a stark reality that can easily resonate. By coupling it with incentives for US businesses to make capital investments that benefit all parties involved, we can finally unleash the full potential of our own region in a sustainable and mutually beneficial manner.

Through strategic partnerships, shared prosperity, and long-term investments, the United States can cultivate a thriving regional ecosystem. By harnessing the power of collaboration and aligning our interests, we can build a foundation for sustainable growth and development, leaving behind the pitfalls of China's diminishing influence. This approach not only strengthens our hand in strategic competition but also establishes a win-win scenario, fostering a resilient and prosperous future for ourselves and our neighbors.

Conclusion

The US military possesses a commendable model for cultivating relationships with international partners through professional military education, but it is evident that maintaining quality has become a challenge in keeping up with quantity. The US model, encompassing English language instruction, full integration, and academic freedom to explore diverse topics, has proven to be an effective system for building enduring, values-based relationships. Complementing this, the Air Force's Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP) develops Airmen equipped with language proficiency, cultural understanding, and regional expertise, enabling them to directly collaborate with their Latin American counterparts on shared security interests. The result is an increased operational capability and a perception of equality, as Latin Americans witness their own sons and daughters working as capable partners alongside the world's leading military—an invaluable achievement that cannot be easily replicated.

However, China holds an advantage purely in terms of the sheer number of opportunities, even if the quality does not match the US experience. To address this imbalance, the United States must seek avenues to fund additional opportunities for international officers to attend professional military education alongside their American counterparts. As previously cited articles have highlighted, the tactics and values Latin American officers bring back from their educational experiences in China have a profound impact. The same applies to their experiences in the United States. Increasing capacity at service schools presents a relatively low-cost proposition that sends a powerful message about our commitment to the region—one that revolves around our most valuable resource of all: people.¹⁷

By investing in expanding opportunities and fostering deeper engagement, the United States can reaffirm its dedication to the region and bolster its partnership-

building efforts. Strengthening the human dimension of our relationships demonstrates a genuine commitment to mutual growth and collaboration. Through these actions, the United States can reinforce its role as a trusted and capable partner, contributing to the sustained security and prosperity of the region.

The final recommendation to prevent strategic competition from becoming a home game is to leverage the significant asymmetric advantage the United States possesses in terms of culture. Numerous cultural domains provide opportunities to foster closer connections and shared identity with our Latin American partners. From the presence of large Latin American and Caribbean diasporas in the United States to the influence of pop culture and the shared commitment to democratic principles among most countries in the region, avenues abound for bridging the gap through cultural and linguistic exchanges. A foundational step involves increasing investment in educational exchanges at universities and high school levels, utilizing culture and language as tools to diminish the distance between us. Additionally, bolstering the tourist economy, both inbound and outbound, between Latin America and the United States represents another vital stride toward fostering mutually beneficial interactions. With the majority of the COVID pandemic in the rearview mirror and a strong desire for experiential travel among consumers, culturally and economically advantageous opportunities await. It is important to recognize that approaches such as these represent the long game, requiring time to witness tangible benefits. Nevertheless, enduring impact and lasting outcomes often demand significant investments over time.

China's endeavors in Latin America compel us to prioritize something that we should have been doing all along—taking our own region seriously. This year marks the bicentennial of the Monroe Doctrine, which effectively declared a “no trespassing” sign on the region. However, history is unlikely to attest that the United States dedicated the level of effort required for the shared security and prosperity of our neighbors. While China has capitalized on an opportunity, the game is far from over, and data indicate that the timing is perfect for a comeback—if we are willing to commit for the long haul instead of merely stepping back once Chinese influence recedes. Through military and economic cooperation, while leveraging common cultural elements, we can forge a stronger and more prosperous region for ourselves and our neighbors—without compromise. Settling for anything less weakens us at home and hampers our aspirations for security and prosperity both East and West.

The key to winning the away game in strategic competition lies in ensuring it never becomes a home game. By proactively embracing our role and strengthening relationships within the region, we can fortify ourselves against external influences and create a resilient environment conducive to shared security and prosperity. This

requires an unwavering commitment to nurturing strategic partnerships and working collaboratively toward a brighter future for all. □

Notes

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Walter H. Ward, Jr.

Mr. Ward is a distinguished leader in the field of military education and cultural understanding. Currently serving as the director of the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) at Air University, located at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, Mr. Ward spearheads a dedicated team of 65 military personnel and Air Force civilians. Together, they are committed to the deliberate development of Airmen and Guardians, fostering partner interoperability, and promoting a deep understanding of adversaries through language proficiency, regional expertise, and cultural education. Mr. Ward retired as a colonel, after serving as the Commander of the 317th Airlift Group, stationed at Dyess Air Force Base in Texas. He commanded six squadrons, overseeing the efforts of 1,200 aviators, maintenance professionals, and support personnel. Under his guidance, the group effectively operated 28 C-130J aircraft, engaging in combat aerial delivery operations across the globe.