The Dragon, the Jaguar, and the Eagle

The Rise of China in Mexico and Brazil, a Historical-Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This article offers a historical-comparative analysis of the People's Republic of China's engagement with Mexico and Brazil, tracing early migration, trade, and diplomatic ties to modern strategic partnerships. It argues that China's expanding influence in Latin America—particularly in military, technological, and economic domains—poses a growing threat to US national security. From a military-historical perspective, the study examines the evolution of Chinese security cooperation and its implications for US interests in the Western Hemisphere. Drawing on primary sources and case studies, it identifies historiographic gaps in Sino–Latin American relations and proposes US policy responses. These include strengthening security cooperation, countering Chinese narratives through information operations, and promoting equitable trade. The analysis underscores the urgency of recalibrating US strategy in the region to confront the China's encroachment. Mexico and Brazil, due to their proximity and strategic weight, are pivotal in shaping the future balance of power in the Americas.

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In 1949, Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), successfully implemented his theory of protracted warfare and a strategic "hearts and minds" campaign to consolidate popular support and defeat the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), led by Chiang Kai-shek.[1] Following the Communist victory, Chiang retreated to Formosa—modern-day Taiwan—bringing an end to a civil war that had raged since 1927 and claimed an estimated six million lives.[2] The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) marked the beginning of a new political era—one that emerged from devastation into authoritarian consolidation. In its earliest years, the PRC experienced catastrophic famine, internal purges, and violent political reordering, resulting in more than 30 million deaths, including countless political opponents of the CCP.[3]

[1] Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "The Chinese Revolution of 1949." *Milestones: 1945–1952*, https://history.state.gov/.

[2] Michael Lynch, *The Chinese Civil War 1945–49* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 91.

[3] Asian Studies Association, "China's Great Leap Forward," *Education About Asia* 17, no. 3 (Winter 2012): https://www.asianstudies.org/.

While the PRC's emergence in 1949 immediately altered the strategic calculus of the Cold War, its influence on US foreign policy, defense planning, trade relations, and diplomatic posture has steadily intensified across decades. Yet it was not until the period between 2008 and 2014 that China began to systematically expand its military and security ties with Latin American partners—most notably Mexico and Brazil. A series of white papers released by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2008 and 2016 outlined Beijing's intent to pursue multidimensional engagement with the Latin America and Caribbean region. These documents established the doctrinal and diplomatic foundations for what has since become a broader strategic alignment—one that may forge lasting Dragon–Jaguar ties and reconfigure hemispheric power dynamics.[4]

Given Mexico's and Brazil's geographic and economic proximity to the United States, China's deepening influence in these two nations represents a tangible challenge to US interests. In the event of a major-power conflict with China, preexisting security and political partnerships in the Western Hemisphere could be exploited by Beijing to disrupt US logistical networks, sow political division, or constrain US freedom of maneuver. However, the United States retains credible options to mitigate these risks. Washington can counter Beijing's advances by investing in long-term security cooperation, expanding partner capacity-building programs, executing tailored information operations to challenge Chinese narratives, promoting sustained diplomatic engagement, and pursuing fair and mutually beneficial trade agreements with both Mexico and Brazil.

This historical and geopolitical analysis of the PRC's engagement with Mexico and Brazil contributes to the evolving academic discourse on Sino–Latin American relations. It traces the arc of bilateral ties by examining early Chinese immigration, trade networks, diplomatic recognition, and key inflection points. From a military history perspective, the study also investigates the evolution of Chinese security activity in both nations and assesses the strategic risks this poses to the United States. As China deepens its defense ties and information presence across the Western Hemisphere, particularly with states proximate to the US homeland, it becomes imperative to scrutinize how these relationships could erode American influence and compromise national security.

This project adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. It draws on official documents from the governments of China, Mexico, and Brazil; bilateral treaties; transcripts of senior-level interviews; and archival materials. The research also leverages the author's foreign

[4] State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, November 2016), https://english.www.gov.cn/.

language proficiency in Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese to access and analyze materials not readily available in English. Supplementary sources include academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant commercial publications. The study applies a comparative lens to examine war and society, diplomatic history, and public policy across four principal actors: the PRC, Mexico, Brazil, and the United States.

From a historiographic standpoint, this work stands on the foundation laid by eminent scholars of the Chinese diaspora in the Americas. Historians such as Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Madelyn Hsu, Robert Chao Romero, Laurence J. C. Ma, Carolyn Cartier, and Tatiana Seijas have illuminated the dynamics of Chinese migration, labor exploitation, and the formation of racialized identities in Latin America. Their scholarship contextualizes the sociohistorical origins of China's longstanding ties to the region.

Equally vital are the contributions of scholars examining Chinese diplomacy, foreign economic policy, and global strategy in Latin America. Notable among them are Flora Botton Beja, Enrique Dussel Peters, Harold Trinkunas, and Robert G. Sutter, whose works have shaped contemporary understanding of Beijing's regional intentions and tactics. Their insights underscore the significance of China's growing influence in Latin America not merely as economic outreach, but as part of a deliberate strategic encroachment into what was once considered an uncontested American sphere of influence.

A pivotal development occurred in 2018 when the US *National Defense Strategy* (*NDS*) formally designated the PRC as a strategic competitor. This marked a doctrinal turning point in American defense planning and triggered renewed interest among policymakers and scholars. In its wake, leading institutions—including the Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies—have devoted substantial resources to studying China's hemispheric ambitions. The PRC continues to rank as the top national security concern in successive *NDS* iterations.[5]

Despite this growing body of research, critical gaps remain—particularly concerning the sensitive and underexplored domain of China's security cooperation with Mexico and Brazil. The classified or opaque nature of these relationships, coupled with a scarcity of primary sources detailing military engagements, has limited scholarly inquiry. This study seeks to bridge those gaps by synthesizing available evidence and advancing a nuanced understanding of Chinese military and diplomatic inroads into Latin America.

[5] US Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review, and Missile Defense Review* (Washington: Department of Defense, 27 October 2022), 1, https://media.defense.gov/.

In doing so, this project provides a foundation for future academic inquiry and offers timely insights for US policy makers. As China's presence in the Western Hemisphere grows, especially in close strategic proximity to the United States, the need for rigorous analysis becomes ever more urgent. This work contributes to that imperative by mapping China's evolving role in Latin America and identifying its implications for US strategic posture in the twenty-first century.

Sino-Mexican Relations History

The relationship between China and Mexico is neither recent nor incidental. It is a centuries-old entanglement shaped by imperial trade, migration, and shifting geopolitical tides. From the Manila galleons of the Spanish Empire to the strategic dialogues of the twenty-first century, Sino-Mexican ties have evolved from commercial curiosity to calculated diplomacy. This section traces the arc of that relationship, revealing how historical patterns of migration, labor, and diplomacy laid the groundwork for today's strategic entanglements. Understanding this trajectory is essential to grasp how the PRC has positioned itself as a formidable actor in Mexico—one whose influence now extends beyond trade into the realms of security, infrastructure, and digital domains.

The Colonial Period: Chinese Migrations and Interactions in Mexico

Sino-Mexican interaction predates the modern nation-state and reaches as far back as the early seventeenth century, when Mexico—then New Spain—played a central role in the Spanish Empire's transpacific trade.[6] The *Nao de China*, or Manila galleon, served as the principal conduit for goods flowing between Asia and the Americas. Silk, spices, porcelain, and other luxury items from China were transported across the Pacific, exchanged in Manila, and delivered to Acapulco before making their way to Mexico City and beyond.[7]

More than material goods crossed the ocean. By the 1630s, records indicate that Chinese laborers and slaves—brought via the transpacific slave trade—had established a presence in at least 15 Mexican cities.[8] These early migrants contributed to colonial society as artisans, entertainers, craftsmen, merchants, and administrators. Their ar-

[6] Peter Gordon and Juan Jose Morales, "Long View: The 16th-Century Trade Route That Brought China to Mexico," *Americas Quarterly*, 2019, https://www.americasquarterly.org/.

[7] Gordon and Morales, "Long View."

[8] Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95–96.

rival marked the beginning of a small but resilient Chinese community in Mexico, one whose legacy would evolve alongside the nation's shifting identity.[9]

Figure 1. Trade route from Manila to New Spain, 1600s. (By author.)

The Porfiriato and the Movimiento Anti-Chino

By the late nineteenth century, under President Porfirio Díaz's regime—commonly referred to as the *Porfiriato*—Mexico sought to modernize its economy by expanding industry and infrastructure, particularly the railroad system. Mexican policymakers initially aimed to attract European immigrants to meet labor demands. However, this effort faltered. European settlers often refused to relocate to rural or tropical regions and rejected the working conditions common to Mexican laborers.[10]

In response, Mexican officials turned to non-European sources of labor. Chinese migrants, already familiar with strenuous industrial work and willing to accept

[9] Gordon and Morales, "Long View."

[10] Abelardo de la Cruz Mateos, "Mexican Diplomacy and the Chinese Issue, 1876–1910," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 67, no. 1 (1987), 64, https://read.dukeupress.edu/.

lower wages, presented a pragmatic solution.[11] Their adaptability to Mexico's climate and working conditions made them ideal for labor-intensive sectors, especially rail construction and agriculture.[12]

Simultaneously, a wave of global Chinese migration surged during the late 1800s, driven by political instability, poverty, and violence within China.[13] In the United States, this influx triggered domestic backlash against the immigrants, who were perceived as job stealers despite their strong work ethic and good conduct, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—the first major federal law to restrict immigration based explicitly on ethnicity.[14] The legislation imposed a ten-year ban on Chinese laborers entering the US and barred them from obtaining citizenship.[15] Though later repealed in 1943, under wartime exigencies and diplomatic necessity, the act institutionalized anti-Chinese sentiment for generations.[16]

These restrictions redirected many Chinese migrants southward, with Mexico emerging as a key alternative destination. Mexican officials capitalized on this shift, encouraging Chinese immigration to meet the nation's growing labor demands. The formalization of bilateral ties followed with the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation in 1899, which laid the groundwork for regularized diplomacy, trade, and travel.[17] The establishment of Mexico's first legation in Beijing in 1904 marked a turning point, signaling mutual recognition and state-level cooperation.[18]

While the *Porfiriato*[19] (1876–1911) officially rejected xenophobia toward Chinese immigrants,[20] anti-Chinese sentiment nonetheless persisted across Mexican society for decades.[21] Much of this hostility stemmed from labor competition, as

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[11] Robert H. Duncan, "The Chinese and the Economic Development of Northern Baja California, 1889–1929," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 74, no. 4 (1994), 617, https://doi.org/.

[12] Duncan, "The Chinese and the Economic Development," 617.

[13] Yareli Castro Sevilla, "Reflections on Chinese Mexican Living Archives: Genealogies of Resistance," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, 20 April 2023, https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/.

[14] David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 12th ed., vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 674, 692.

[15] "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)," National Archives, 17 January 2023, https://www.archives.gov/.

[16] Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "Chinese Exclusion Act Repeal, 1943," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, https://history.state.gov/.

[17] Duncan, "The Chinese and the Economic Development," 617.

[18] Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), *Manual de Organización Específico de la Embajada de México en la República Popular China* [Specific Organization Manual of the Embassy of Mexico in the People's Republic of China] (Mexico City: SRE, n.d.), 5, https://sre.gob.mx/.

[19] The *Porfiriato* was the name used to label the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz.

[20] "Mexico During the Porfiriato," The Mexican Revolution and the United States Exhibition, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/.

[21] Joshua Charles Walker, "Immigrants at Home: Revolution, Nationalism, and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Mexico, 1910–1935" (senior honors thesis, The Ohio State University, 2008), 5.

American- and British-owned railroad companies operating in Mexico routinely recruited Chinese workers and paid them significantly less than their Mexican counterparts.[22] This wage disparity fueled resentment among native laborers and provided fertile ground for nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. The portrayal of Chinese migrants as "job stealers" became a recurring theme in both political discourse and popular sentiment.[23]

This prejudice coalesced into a broader ideological campaign known as *El Movimiento Antichino* (1871–1934), which framed anti-Chinese attitudes within a nationalist context. Mexican elites often exploited this movement to forge unity among disparate factions by casting Chinese migrants as a common threat to national identity, labor rights, and economic stability.[24] During the revolutionary period, these sentiments escalated into acts of mass violence.

One of the most egregious examples occurred during the presidency of Francisco I. Madero. In May 1911, Maderista forces[25] conducted the Torreón Massacre, in which 303 Chinese residents were murdered and their properties looted and destroyed.[26] The violence was not random—it reflected a deliberate expression of ethnic scapegoating amid revolutionary upheaval. Contemporary press reports captured the brutality of the event. One account noted that "17 Chinese were murdered after firing on revolutionaries who approached their work area."[27] Another described how a Chinese-owned hotel, a railroad station, and several other buildings were burned to the ground.[28]

Historian Daniel R. Jennings has documented the massacre in a digital repository that catalogs more than 17 primary sources, offering critical insight into the scale, nature, and historical documentation of this atrocity. His work underscores

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[22] José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, *El movimiento antichino en México (1871-1934): problemas del racismo y del nacionalismo durante la Revolución Mexicana* (Tesis de Licenciatura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988), 76, https://ru.dgb.unam.mx/jspui/bitstream/20.500.14330/TES01000079575/3/0079575.pdf.

[23] Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), "Un análisis de la migración china a México a través de documentos que el AGN resguarda," *Gobierno de México*, accessed March 6, 2025, https://www.gob.mx/agn/articulos/un-analisis-de-la-migracion-china-a-mexico-a-traves-de-documentos-que-el-agnresguarda.

[24] José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, *El movimiento antichino en México (1871-1934): problemas del racismo y del nacionalismo durante la Revolución Mexicana* [The Anti-Chinese Movement in Mexico (1871-1934): Problems of Racism and Nationalism during the Mexican Revolution] (licenciatura thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988), 75–76, https://ru.dgb.unam.mx/.

[25] The term *maderistas* refers to Francisco I. Madero's supporters.

[26] "El Museo Arocena abre la exposición Memorial. La matanza de chinos en Torreón (1911)" [The Arocena Museum Opens the Exhibition Memorial: The Massacre of Chinese in Torreón (1911)], Secretaría de Cultura, Gobierno de México, 17 May 2021, https://www.gob.mx/.

[27] Raul A. Reyes, "Mexican Chinese Superhero Brings Forgotten Part of History Alive," *NBC News*, 27 September 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/.

[28] Reyes, "Mexican Chinese Superhero."

the importance of integrating archival material into the broader analysis of Sino-Mexican relations and the systemic nature of anti-Chinese violence in early twentieth-century Mexico.[29]

The Twentieth Century and the Emergence of the PRC

The early twentieth century marked a period of profound instability for both China and Mexico, with diplomatic relationships shaped by revolution, migration, and shifting global alliances. In October 1911, Chinese nationalists overthrew the Qing Dynasty, ending centuries of imperial rule and establishing the Republic of China.[30] This upheaval reverberated globally—not only as a pivotal political transition but as a catalyst for migration and economic realignment.

Mexican–Chinese trade relations already had deep historical roots by this time. The Mexican silver dollar, long a staple of Chinese commerce, served as a de facto global currency and symbolized the interconnectedness of the two nations within the broader framework of global trade.[31] As political uncertainty deepened in China, economic ties and existing migration channels fueled continued Chinese diaspora movement to Mexico—particularly from Guangdong Province and the Pearl River Delta region.[32] This migration was largely Cantonese in origin and would shape the cultural and demographic composition of Chinese communities in Mexico well into the modern era.[33]

Despite this economic and migratory connection, anti-Chinese sentiment persisted in Mexico through the mid-1930s, as *El Movimiento Antichino* continued to frame Chinese communities as economic and cultural outsiders. In the 1940s, as China's civil war intensified and the global order reconfigured during and after World War II, Mexico aligned itself with the Chinese Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek and maintained a resolute anticommunist stance. Diplomatic recognition of the CCP's claims over China remained off the table, as Mexico prioritized alignment with the United States during the early Cold War. Bilateral cooperation between

[29] Daniel R. Jennings, "La Matanza: The 1911 Massacre of Chinese in Torreón, Mexico," n.d., https://danielrjennings.org/.

[30] Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "The Chinese Revolution of 1911," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*,, https://history.state.gov/.

[31] Peter Gordon, "*The Silver Way Explains How the Old Mexican Dollar Changed the World*," *National Interest*, 23 May 2017, https://nationalinterest.org/.

[32] Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 1–11, http://www.jstor.org/.

[33] Fredy González, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 17–18.

Mexico and the United States expanded significantly during this period, bolstered by wartime solidarity and a shared opposition to communist expansion.

Following Cuba's lead in 1960, Mexico became the second Latin American nation to recognize PRC.[34] Yet, until 1971, Mexico maintained a dual-track diplomatic posture—officially recognizing the PRC while tacitly supporting the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and Taiwan.[35] During this period, the Mexican government even prosecuted local sympathizers of the communist regime, viewing them as potential security threats.[36] Over time, however, the rise of leftist currents within Mexican politics catalyzed a diplomatic realignment. This ideological shift culminated in a pivotal moment: Mexico's formal recognition of the PRC, marking a decisive turn in bilateral relations and signaling Mexico's intent to assert greater autonomy in its foreign policy.

On 14 February 1972, Mexico formally established diplomatic relations with the PRC, marking a critical inflection point in Sino-Mexican relations. President Luis Echeverría, a left-leaning nationalist, soon followed with an official visit to Beijing—setting a precedent that future Mexican presidents would emulate.[37] Echeverría's outreach to the PRC and Cuba was part of a broader strategy to assert Mexico's leadership within the Non-Aligned Movement and the Global South. His foreign policy sought to balance cordial ties with the United States while resisting what many in the region perceived as US economic imperialism. A contemporary newspaper captured the moment: "Fidel Castro and over half a million Cubans gave President Luis Echeverría Álvarez of Mexico a tumultuous welcome in the streets of Havana today. It was the first meeting between the two men."[38] The visit symbolized Mexico's pivot toward a more independent foreign policy, one that embraced ideological plurality and strategic diversification.[39]

The normalization of ties with Beijing set in motion a broader regional trend. Mexico's recognition of the PRC catalyzed a diplomatic domino effect, encouraging

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[34] Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba, *Declaración Conjunta entre la República Popular China y la República de Cuba sobre la Profundización de las Relaciones Binacionales en la Nueva Era* [Joint Declaration... on the Deepening of Binational Relations in the New Era], 25 November 2022, https://cubaminrex.cu/.

[35] Eugenio Anguiano, "Las vinculaciones de México con China y Estados Unidos" [Mexico's Links with China and the United States], *Economía UNAM* 16, no. 46 (January–April 2019), https://doi.org/.

[36] Anguiano, "Las vinculaciones de México."

[37] "Relación Política" [Political Relationship], Embajada de México en China, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 29 September 2021, https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/.

[38] James Reston, "Cubans Acclaim Mexican Leader: 500,000 Greet Echeverría at Start of Visit," *New York Times*, 18 August 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/.

[39] Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 10, 1974," Document 48, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–11, Part 1, Documents on Mexico; Central America; and the Caribbean, 1973–1976*, https://history.state.gov/.

other Latin American nations to reevaluate their China policies. Over the next three decades, Sino-Mexican relations deepened significantly. From the 1970s through the early 2000s, bilateral ties were marked by high-level exchanges, trade expansion, and sectoral cooperation. Notably, in 1990, Chinese President Yang Shangkun made the first official visit by a Chinese head of state to Mexico—underscoring Beijing's growing interest in Latin America as a strategic partner.

By the turn of the century, bilateral trade had reached USD 1.8236 billion, accompanied by cooperative agreements in science, technology, and culture.[40] This period of steady engagement laid the groundwork for the next phase in Sino-Mexican relations—one increasingly defined not only by economic partnership but also by strategic competition within the broader context of US–China rivalry in the Western Hemisphere.

Sino-Mexican Trade in the Digital Age

The early 2000s were marked by growing Mexican frustration over a deepening trade imbalance with the PRC. To contextualize this economic dynamic, it is important to consider the 1994 ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NAFTA aimed to eliminate tariff and nontariff barriers to trade and investment among the three countries, positioning Mexico as a competitive exporter within the Western Hemisphere.[41] However, the PRC's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 accelerated its global trade competitiveness, largely through low-cost manufacturing, which in turn displaced Mexico's market share and undercut its trade efforts.[42]

In 2005, a Mexican congressional report criticized the growing asymmetry in bilateral trade. The report detailed how China employed protectionist measures—such as tariffs and nontransparent trade barriers—to its advantage, resulting in a staggering USD 14 billion trade deficit for Mexico.[43] While Mexico viewed the imbalance as exploitative, the PRC remained focused on its long-term strategic objectives, including diplomatic expansion, economic development, and global influence.

Chinese diplomatic documents, including transcripts from President Hu Jintao's state visit to Mexico on 11 September 2005, reinforced Beijing's commitment to

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[40] *Declaración Conjunta entre la República Popular China y la República de Cuba sobre la Profundización de las Relaciones Binacionales en la Nueva Era*, 25 November 2022, https://cubaminrex.cu/.

[41] "North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)," *Federal Register*, https://www.federalregister.gov/.

[42] Kevin P. Gallagher, "NAFTA's Uninvited Guest: China and the Disintegration of North American Trade," Global Development Policy Center, Boston University, 27 June 2014, https://www.bu.edu/.

[43] Centro de Estudios de las Finanzas Públicas, *México-China: Relaciones desiguales, retos y oportunidades para México* [Mexico-China: Unequal Relations, Challenges and Opportunities for Mexico] (Mexico City: H. Cámara de Diputados, 2005), 12, https://www.cefp.gob.mx/.

deepening bilateral ties. During his address to the Mexican Congress, President Hu emphasized the importance of mutual benefit, shared development, and expanded cooperation.[44]

This evolving relationship—encompassing migration, labor, diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange—sets the stage for further analysis of Sino-Mexican military engagement and security cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. Understanding this progression is essential for grasping the broader implications of PRC influence in Mexico and could inform US policy makers as they formulate strategies to address potential future conflicts with China.

Sino-Mexican Security Cooperation

Although trade and diplomacy have long shaped the public narrative of Sino-Mexican relations, a more consequential development has unfolded behind the scenes: the gradual deepening of security cooperation. What began as symbolic commitments to nonproliferation has evolved into a layered partnership involving military education exchanges, cyber cooperation, and infrastructure investments with dual-use capabilities. This section traces the trajectory of that evolution, illustrating how the PRC has used economic leverage and diplomatic goodwill to insert itself into Mexico's security architecture—raising urgent questions about sovereignty, regional alignment, and the erosion of US strategic primacy in the Western Hemisphere.

Strategic Agreements

Sino-Mexican security cooperation can be traced to 1973, rooted in the shared objective of nuclear nonproliferation. Mexico had long championed such efforts, emerging as a regional leader in the 1960s. In 1967, Mexico joined 32 other Latin American and Caribbean nations in signing the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which established the world's first Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ).[45] The PRC, along with the United States, France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, later signed and ratified Protocol II of the treaty, committing not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the signatories of the NWFZ.[46]

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[44] "Relaciones entre China y México" [Relations between China and Mexico], Embajada de la República Popular China en México, 15 September 2005, http://mx.china-embassy.gov.cn/.

[45] "14 de febrero de 1967: Firma del Tratado de Tlatelolco" [February 14, 1967: Signing of the Treaty of Tlatelolco], Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Nucleares (ININ), Gobierno de México, 14 February 1967, https://www.gob.mx/.

[46] "Protocols to Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaties," United Nations, https://www.un.org/.

While largely symbolic in its early stages, this cooperation laid the groundwork for future security engagement. In the context of rising Sino–American competition, the prospect of PRC–Mexico security collaboration has taken on far greater strategic significance. Should tensions escalate into open conflict, Mexico's proximity to the US homeland would render any security alignment with the PRC a matter of grave concern in Washington.

A survey of the official archives of both countries—the foreign ministries of the PRC and Mexico, the PRC's Ministry of National Defense (MND), and Mexico's Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA)—reveals a notable absence of formal bilateral security or military agreements between 1990 and 2005. Nor do these sources indicate frequent military-to-military engagement during that period. Rather, the relationship during those years appeared publicly centered on diplomatic formalities and the expansion of ties in trade, education, scientific research, and cultural exchange.

This posture began to shift after 2005, as the PRC embraced a more assertive approach to defense policy and global power projection. Two key documents now undergird the modern Sino-Mexican relationship: the 2008 Bilateral Investment Treaty and the 2013 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). While neither agreement explicitly addresses military or security cooperation, both provide structural frameworks that facilitate strategic convergence.

The 2008 Bilateral Investment Treaty established the legal scaffolding for deepened economic engagement. In practical terms, it signaled to Beijing and Mexico City that mutual investment was not only desirable but protected under international legal norms. That foundation proved fertile ground for the CSP five years later. A transcript of high-level talks between Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto and PRC president Xi Jinping reveals the ideological tone of the partnership. Xi expressed "the Chinese and Mexican peoples share a natural feeling of closeness for both the countries are with ancient civilizations and a glorious history of fighting bravely for national independence and liberation."[47] Beneath the language of cultural kinship lies a calculated strategy to align with Mexico through shared narratives of post-colonial sovereignty and historical resilience.

The CSP itself encompasses four principal objectives: (1) strengthening strategic bilateral relations; (2) enhancing practical cooperation; (3) expanding socio-cultural exchanges; and (4) coordinating multilateral affairs.[48] Each of these categories serves

[47] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto: Two Heads of State Announce Upgrading China-Mexico Relationship to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," 5 June 2013. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/.

[48] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, "President Xi Jinping Holds Talks."

as a potential conduit for expanding the agreement into the defense and security domain. These categories provide ample aperture for expanding the CSP into the security and military realms. The framework is sufficiently broad to permit future developments in joint training, intelligence sharing, and even defense technology collaboration under the guise of civilian infrastructure or capacity-building programs.

The PRC launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, extending a formal invitation to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018. Although Mexico has declined to join the BRI formally, it has nonetheless cultivated a growing security relationship with China. This includes collaboration in areas such as education, scholarship programs, information technology, and communications—sectors with inherent dual-use potential. These activities are not isolated to diplomatic corridors; they have been operationalized in major urban centers, including Mexico City, Monterrey, and Chihuahua.

China's strategic ambition became increasingly apparent in a 2025 briefing to the European Parliament, which outlined Beijing's intent to expand its military ties across Latin America through professional military education (PME).[49] This diplomatic campaign reflects a broader People's Liberation Army (PLA) strategy: to internationalize its military influence by cultivating elites in foreign defense establishments.

Chinese military diplomacy underscores the PRC's strategic emphasis on professionalizing its armed forces through international partnerships, including with Mexico. In 2013, the PLA initiated a service academy exchange program involving 20 officers from various countries, Mexico among them. This initiative was anchored in two premier institutions—the PLA National Defense University and the College of Defense Studies in Beijing—both known for cultivating foreign military elites in subjects ranging from international security and diplomacy to political-military affairs. While the PRC's MND archives highlight joint exercises and peacekeeping operations in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, they remain conspicuously silent on comparable activities in Latin America.[50] This absence, however, should not be mistaken for disinterest; rather, it reflects a deliberate, phased approach to expanding influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Exploring New Frontiers

Since 2015, Mexico has cooperated with the PRC-led Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), a multilateral entity that includes ten member

[49] *China's Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America: Opportunities and Challenges*, EPRS/BRIE(2025)769504 (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2025), 4, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/.

[50] "Overseas Operations," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/.

states and rotates its leadership. APSCO operates under the veneer of peaceful space collaboration, but its activities carry broader strategic implications. The US Department of Defense's *2024 Annual Report to Congress* identifies APSCO as a vehicle through which the PRC leverages space surveillance infrastructure and strengthens data-sharing networks—both critical components of modern space architecture resilience.[51] In this domain, space becomes not only a scientific frontier but also a contested theater of strategic competition.

China's outreach to Mexico has also included soft-power initiatives in the military medical sphere. The deployment of the *Peace Ark* hospital ship, a high-profile example of military medicine diplomacy, included port calls in Mexico. While framed as humanitarian goodwill, such visits offer China a low-risk means of expanding its defense diplomacy footprint in the Western Hemisphere.

Additional indicators of deepening Sino-Mexican defense ties emerged in 2016, when Mexico's SEDENA and the Navy (SEMAR) traveled to Beijing to promote bilateral cooperation in cybersecurity and defense policy.[52] According to public records, China engaged Mexico in at least 18 documented military-diplomatic interactions between 2003 and 2016—a modest but noteworthy figure, signaling deliberate, long-term cultivation of security relations.[53]

China's interest in Mexico is not confined to defense diplomacy. It has also made strategic investments in the energy and infrastructure sectors—especially near maritime chokepoints critical to US and global supply chains. A case in point is the Trans-Isthmus Railroad project, an ambitious Mexican initiative designed to serve as an overland alternative to the Panama Canal. With access points on both the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Coast, the project could eventually redirect shipping routes and challenge traditional logistical hubs. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Bank of China have committed approximately USD 600 million to this endeavor, while Chinese state-owned enterprises—including the China Railway Construction Corporation and the China Communications Construction Company—have played direct roles in its development.[54]

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[51] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 18 December 2024), https://media.defense.gov/.

[52] "Los Secretarios de la Defensa Nacional y de Marina Realizan una Gira de Trabajo por la República Popular de China" [The Secretaries of National Defense and of the Navy Conduct a Working Tour of the People's Republic of China], Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), Gobierno de México, 21 June 2019, https://www.gob.mx/.

[53] John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, China Strategic Perspectives 13 (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2018), https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/.

[54] R. Evan Ellis, "Mexico Targeted: CCP Economic Influence in Mexico," *The Watch*, 7 May 2025, https://thewatch-journal.com/.

Parallel to these infrastructure efforts, Beijing employs a layered strategy to transfer technology to Mexico. Although there is no publicly available evidence of direct military technology transfers between the PLA and Mexican armed forces, the PRC relies on indirect pathways—such as corporate investment and talent recruitment programs—to seed dual-use capabilities abroad. These efforts align closely with the CCP's Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which aims to fully modernize the PLA by 2049. According to official Chinese policy statements, the MCF strategy entails systematically reorganizing the national science and technology enterprise to ensure all civilian innovation contributes to both economic and military objectives. As one PRC white paper bluntly states, the CCP is acquiring "the intellectual property, key research, and technological advances of the world's citizens, researchers, scholars, and private industry in order to advance the CCP's military aims."[55]

In this context, the PRC's commercial expansion into Mexico—particularly through firms such as Huawei and China United Network Communications Group (Unicom)—takes on greater strategic significance.[56] These companies, which maintain operations in cities such as Mexico City and Querétaro, serve not only as telecommunications providers but also as potential enablers of surveillance and cyber dominance aligned with CCP objectives.[57]

Strategic Competition

Viewed through the lens of logistics and supply chain security, Sino-Mexican cooperation reveals a deliberate Chinese effort to counterbalance US regional influence. The PRC's strategy includes investments in critical sectors such as lithium extraction in Sonora, port management in Veracruz, Ensenada, Manzanillo, and Michoacán, and expansion into digital infrastructure, telecommunications, and security technologies.[58] These initiatives are not scattershot; they represent a calculated approach to embed Chinese influence within nodes vital to North American trade and connectivity.

Beyond formal investments, the PRC has also engaged with Mexican law enforcement agencies under the banner of combating transnational crime. According

[55] "Military-Civil Fusion and the People's Republic of China," US Department of State, 2017-2021 Archive, https://2017-2021.state.gov/.

[56] Unicom recently obtained a 30-year permit to operate in Mexico.

[57] "One Chinese Company Permitted to Operate in Mexico," *1Route* (blog), June 2023, https://www.1routegroup.com/.

[58] R. Evan Ellis, *Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee: China's Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., 31 March 2022, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/.

to documents from the US Department of Justice, Chinese and Mexican officials have cooperated—at least nominally—to target Chinese underground banking networks and curtail the financial operations of the Sinaloa Cartel. These criminal syndicates have facilitated the laundering of millions of dollars and trafficked fentanyl, ecstasy, cocaine, and methamphetamines into the United States.[59] Whether these joint efforts reflect genuine partnership or tactical obfuscation remains subject to scrutiny.

These security engagements dovetail with Beijing's broader foreign policy goals. The PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) explicitly prioritizes safeguarding "national sovereignty, security and interests on behalf of the state" as the core mission of its diplomatic apparatus.[60] China's defense white papers echo the same theme: development and security are two sides of the same coin.

The PRC's Defense Attaché Office in Mexico provides a formal mechanism for advancing these interests. According to official Chinese sources, the office executes five primary functions: maintaining diplomatic contact with the Mexican armed forces; coordinating bilateral defense engagements; participating in multilateral defense diplomacy; promoting China's defense modernization achievements; and fostering military-to-military rapport with its Mexican counterparts.[61] Taken together, these functions constitute a persistent institutional presence within Mexico's defense ecosystem—quiet but significant.

This sustained military-diplomatic engagement, undergirded by a latticework of bilateral agreements, suggests that the PRC's presence in Mexico is not a transient phenomenon. Barring a dramatic shift in geopolitical alignments or foreign policy posture, the Sino-Mexican security partnership is likely to persist—and deepen—as China continues to challenge the US-led order in the Western Hemisphere.

xMore substantively, the PRC cultivates long-term defense partnerships through recurring exchanges between senior military officials. It also opens access to its premier defense education institutions—including the China Defense Institute, Army Command College, Navy Command School, and Naval Research Institute—to officers from Mexico and other Latin American nations. These training oppor-

[59] "Federal Indictment Alleges Alliance Between Sinaloa Cartel and Money Launderers Linked to Chinese Underground Banking" (press release, US Department of Justice, 28 March 2024), https://www.justice.gov/.

[60] "Organization and Responsibilities," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/.

[61] "Agregaduría de Defensa" [Defense Attaché], Embajada de la República Popular China en los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 8 March 2022, http://mx.china-embassy.gov.cn/.

tunities serve not only to build goodwill but also to shape a new generation of regional military elites with exposure to Chinese doctrine, systems, and strategic worldview.[62]

Simultaneously, the PRC has constructed a layered information operations presence in Mexico. It promotes CCP narratives through multiple vectors: controlling key elements of communications infrastructure, amplifying state-sponsored propaganda, engaging in cyber operations, and advancing censorship. By endorsing favorable views of the PRC while suppressing dissenting perspectives, Beijing seeks to dominate the narrative space.

Freedom House, a bipartisan American organization founded in 1941 to defend democratic values and combat authoritarianism, has highlighted Beijing's influence efforts in Latin America. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC exploited US delays in vaccine development and personal protective equipment (PPE) distribution to project itself as a more reliable partner. It exported over one million doses of Sinovac vaccine to Mexico and delivered significant quantities of PPE—framing this aid as evidence of Chinese solidarity.[63] In contrast, the United States appeared reactive and internally focused, ceding ground in the realm of soft power.

Chinese state-owned and affiliated entities have cemented their presence in Mexico's digital ecosystem. Technology firms such as Huawei—a global leader in 5G infrastructure[64]—alongside TikTok,[65] Xinhua News Agency, and China Global Television Network, have created conduits for PRC influence. Through these platforms, Beijing not only amplifies CCP-friendly messaging but also exerts control over the content environment, removing material deemed harmful to its image or interests.[66]

Cyber espionage forms another critical facet of Beijing's influence architecture. According to Google's threat intelligence team, from 2020 through the second quarter of 2024, Chinese cyber actors conducted sustained espionage operations targeting Mexican government officials and digital infrastructure. The PRC accounted for roughly one-third of all state-backed phishing[67] campaigns in Mexico

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[62] Gabriel Marcella, "China's Military Activity in Latin America," *Americas Quarterly*, 20 January 2012, https://www.americasquarterly.org/.

[63] "The Government of Mexico Receives 800,000 Doses of the Sinovac COVID19 Vaccine," Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 27 February 2021, https://www.gob.mx/; and Ellie Young and Jessica Ludwig, "Beijing's Global Media Influence Efforts in Mexico," *Freedom House*, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/.

[64] Matthew Bey, "Huawei's Success Puts It in Washington's Sights," *Stratfor Worldview*, 28 June 2018, https://worldview.stratfor.com/.

[65] TikTok is one of the most popular apps downloaded in Mexico.

[66] Young and Ludwig, "Beijing's Global Media Influence: Mexico."

[67] The *Oxford Dictionary* defines *phishing* as "the fraudulent practice of sending emails or other messages purporting to be from reputable companies in order to induce individuals to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers."

during that period—making it the leading foreign actor in this domain.[68] In one telling episode, the Chinese embassy reportedly pressured Mexican institutions to cancel events critical of CCP policies, further underscoring the PRC's willingness to leverage diplomatic weight to suppress unfavorable discourse.[69]

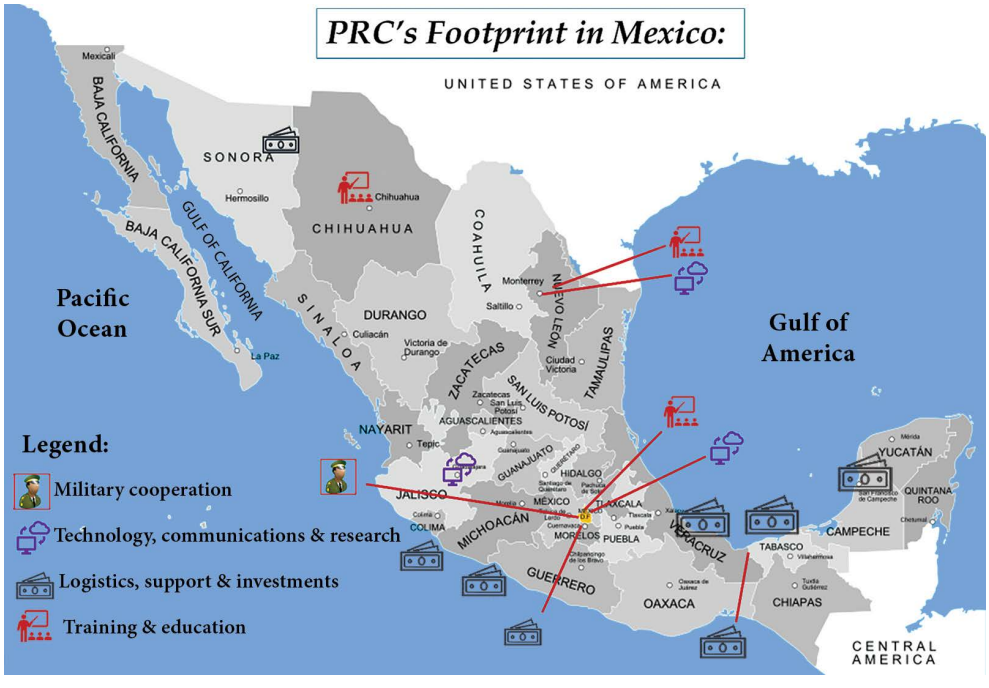

Figure 2. PRC's footprint in Mexico. This image illustrates the PRC's engagements, including military cooperation, technology, space, communications, logistics, infrastructure, and training collaboration. This map is not all-inclusive. (Adapted from a template on Wikimedia Commons. Title, legend, and icons added by the author.)[70]

The PRC's activities in Mexico provide a revealing case study in strategic competition within the Western Hemisphere. This bilateral relationship offers a window into China's broader security, intelligence, and influence strategies—many of which could be employed in a future confrontation with the United States. Given that Mexico is the US's most significant trading partner in the hemisphere, the strategic implications are profound.

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[68] Aurora Blum and Kelli Vanderlee, "Insights on Cyber Threats Targeting Users and Enterprises in Mexico," *Google Cloud Blog*, 10 September 2024, https://cloud.google.com/.

[69] Young and Ludwig, "Beijing's Global Media Influence: Mexico."

[70] "Political Divisions of Mexico," Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by Giggette, last modified 17 July 2024, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and GNU Free Documentation License 1.2 or later, https://commons.wikimedia.org/.

The next section shifts focus to Brazil—South America's largest country and another cornerstone of US regional strategy.

Sino-Brazilian Relations History

The trajectory of Sino-Brazilian relations stretches across centuries, shaped by imperial commerce, colonial legacies, and shifting global power dynamics. From Portuguese expansion in East Asia to the migration of Chinese laborers to Brazil's plantations, the two nations have long been connected—if indirectly—by the geopolitical currents of empire. Yet it is in the post–Cold War period that their bilateral relationship has matured into a strategic partnership with global ramifications. As South America's largest economy and a key geopolitical actor, Brazil offers the PRC a vital entry point into the Western Hemisphere. Understanding this relationship requires a look at its historical foundations, which continue to inform Beijing's ambitions in Latin America and Brazil's evolving role on the global stage.

Imperial Crosscurrents: Portugal, Macau, and the Brazilian Connection

Sino-Brazilian ties are rooted not in direct imperial conquest but in the ripple effects of European colonialism. In 1535, Portuguese navigators established a presence in Macau—an outpost that would later serve as a bridge between China and Lusophone nations.[71] Over the next several centuries, the Portuguese solidified their control, culminating in de facto colonial rule after China's defeat in the First Opium War in the 1840s. The resulting power vacuum and internal chaos in China allowed Lisbon to entrench itself further in the region.[72]

[71] "Resumption by China of the Exercise of Sovereignty over Macao," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 31 May 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/.

[72] "Resumption by China... over Macao," Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

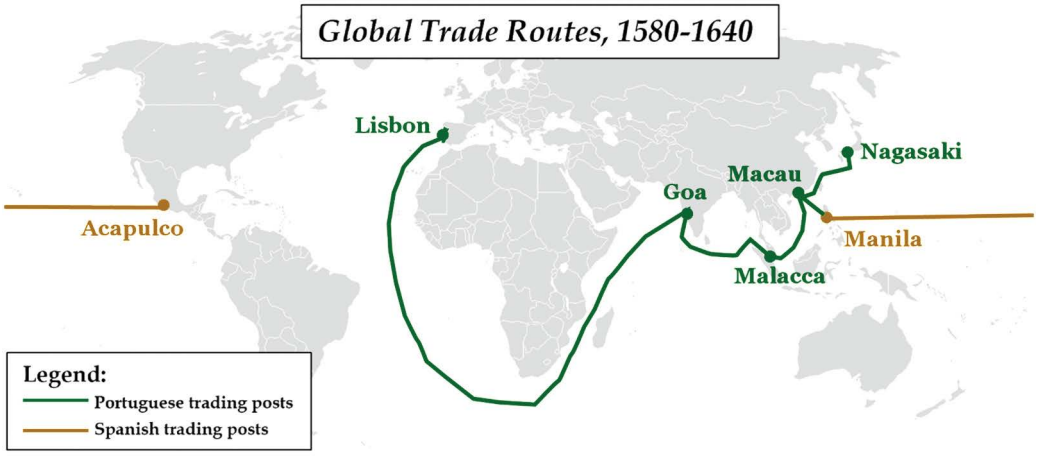

Figure 3. Global Trade Routes, 1580–1640. This image illustrates the connection between the Portuguese and the Chinese (via Macau), which eventually permeated into Brazil. (Adapted from a template on Wikimedia Commons. Title, legend, and icons added by the author.)[73]

Brazil entered this equation through the dynamics of trade and migration. In the mid-nineteenth century, a wave of Chinese migrants—originating from Macau and Hong Kong—began arriving in Brazil, drawn by economic opportunities and facilitated by a shared Portuguese linguistic and administrative framework.[74] The migration accelerated following the 1887 Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Portugal and China, which formalized Portugal's "perpetual occupation" of Macau.[75] This arrangement enabled relatively seamless movement of labor from East Asia to Brazil's agricultural frontier.[76]

For more than a century, Macau served as the connective tissue linking China and Brazil through commerce, language, and shared imperial legacy. That chapter formally closed in 1999, when Portugal returned Macau to Chinese sovereignty under a joint declaration with the PRC. Yet the legacy of Portuguese imperialism,

[73] "Map of Macau Trade Routes," Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by Dr. Covert, last modified 25 May 2018, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and GNU Free Documentation License 1.2 or later, https://commons.wikimedia.org/.

[74] Jerry Feng, "Chinese Brazilians: A Story of Exploitation but Successful Opposition," *China Hands Magazine*, 10 March 2025, https://chinahandsmagazine.org/.

[75] "Mr. Denby to Mr. Bayard, Peking, June 21, 1888," Document 216, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With the Annual Message of the President, December 3, 1888, Part I* (Washington: GPO, 1889), https://history.state.gov/.

[76] Ana Paulina Lee, *Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation, and Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), https://www.sup.org/.

and its unintended facilitation of Sino-Brazilian connectivity, remains a critical backdrop to the current strategic alignment.[77]

Strangers in a Strange Land: The Chinese Diaspora and the Politics of Indentured Labor

The arrival of Chinese migrants in Brazil coincided with a tumultuous period of economic restructuring and racial anxiety in Latin America. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, countries such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil abolished slavery—Brazil doing so in 1888, making it the last nation in the Western Hemisphere to do so. The end of slavery created a profound labor vacuum, especially in Brazil's lucrative agricultural sectors, prompting the nation's Portuguese elite to seek alternative forms of exploitable labor.

In response, the Brazilian government turned to Chinese laborers, recruiting them under the guise of indentured servitude to work primarily in tea and coffee cultivation. These migrants, however, entered a society still gripped by the racial hierarchies of the slaveholding era. Deep-seated prejudice shaped the policies and public discourse of the time. Much as fears of racial mixing had animated elite anxieties during the peak of the African slave trade, Chinese immigrants now became targets of similar suspicion.[78] Brazilian social scientists and political elites voiced alarmist theories about the so-called "Mongolization" of Brazilian society—a reflection of the era's pseudoscientific racism.[79]

Official policy mirrored these sentiments. An 1870 imperial decree—Decree No. 4547—established the conditions for importing Chinese laborers, including ten-year contracts designed to bind them to plantation work.[80] Yet opposition quickly mounted. Many Brazilians, particularly from the dominant white elite, feared that Chinese migrants would integrate racially with the existing population. Debates within the *Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil* (Chamber of Deputies) revealed the extent to which racial ideology, not just economic calculus, governed immigration policy.

In 1890, just two years after abolition, Brazil codified its racial preferences in Decree No. 528, Article 1, which effectively barred immigration from Africa and Asia unless explicitly authorized by the *Congresso Nacional do Brasil* (National

[77] "Resumption by China... over Macao," Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

[78] Feng, "Chinese Brazilians."

[79] Sales Augusto dos Santos and Laurence Hallewell, "Historical Roots of the 'Whitening' of Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 29, no. 1 (January 2002), 67, https://www.jstor.org/.

[80] Decreto No. 4.547, de 9 de Julho de 1870 [Decree No. 4,547 of July 9, 1870], Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil, https://www2.camara.leg.br/.

Congress).[81] Although Chinese laborers were initially seen as a solution to post-emancipation labor shortages, they were ultimately deemed racially undesirable.

Instead, Brazil began to court Japanese migrants in the early twentieth century, rationalizing the shift with racial logic. Japanese were perceived as more "white-adjacent" than their Chinese counterparts—"white" versus "yellow" in the vernacular of the period. This marked the institutionalization of Brazil's *branqueamento* (whitening) policy, a eugenics-adjacent campaign designed to engineer a whiter Brazilian populace through selective immigration and assimilation.[82] The Chinese, thus, were caught in a complex web of racialized exclusion, economic utility, and geopolitical marginalization.

Figure 4. Chinese migration route to Brazil, 1800s. (By author.)

Diplomatic Growth and Strategic Realignment

Brazil and the PRC formally established diplomatic relations in 1974, marking a pivotal shift in Latin America's foreign policy orientation amid the Cold War.

[81] Decreto No. 528, de 28 de Junho de 1890 [Decree No. 528 of June 28, 1890], Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil, https://www2.camara.leg.br/.

[82] Feng, "Chinese Brazilians."

On August 15 of that year, both nations signed the *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil*. The United States Central Intelligence Agency, which monitored the development closely, archived the agreement—now declassified—as part of its broader surveillance of Chinese global outreach.[83]

According to the *Ministério das Relações Exteriores* (Ministry of Foreign Relations) archives, Brazil opened its embassy in Beijing shortly thereafter, with the PRC reciprocating by establishing an embassy in Brasília.[84] These foundational steps laid the groundwork for what would become one of the most consequential Sino–Latin American partnerships.

Between 1990 and 2005, Sino-Brazilian ties deepened markedly. In 1993, the two nations elevated their bilateral engagement by signing a strategic partnership agreement, a milestone recorded in the PRC MFA's official documentation.[85] This period witnessed a dramatic expansion in trade volumes, technological collaboration, and political coordination—reflecting not merely economic alignment but a shared interest in multipolar global governance.

For Beijing, Brazil holds strategic value not only as South America's largest country but also as a gateway to Atlantic maritime routes. The Port of Paranaguá, Brazil's second-largest by volume, offers the PRC a critical logistical node for its global supply chains.[86] This maritime connectivity, coupled with Brazil's agricultural and resource wealth, aligns squarely with China's ambitions to diversify partnerships, expand influence in the Western Hemisphere, and accelerate the emergence of what Chinese officials term a "just and equitable new international political and economic order"—a direct counterpoint to US-led global primacy.[87]

Sino-Brazilian Security Cooperation

As the PRC expands its global strategic footprint, Brazil has emerged as a key security partner in the Western Hemisphere. What began as symbolic diplomatic overtures has matured into a consequential defense relationship encompassing joint

[83] *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil*, 15 August 1974, https://www.cia.gov/.

[84] "People's Republic of China," Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 7 February 2025, https://www.gov.br/.

[85] "Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu Meets with Brazilian Under Secretary for Asia and Pacific of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Eduardo Paes Saboia," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 31 May 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/.

[86] R. Evan Ellis, "Are Chinese Ports in Latin America Preferred by Organized Crime?," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 10 October 2023, https://www.csis.org/.

[87] "China Maintains with Brazil Long-Term and Stable Strategic Partnership Based on Mutual Benefit," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 31 May 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/.

military training, technology transfer, and space collaboration. Brazil's geopolitical stature—combined with its tradition of strategic autonomy—makes it an ideal interlocutor for Beijing's broader effort to dilute US influence in Latin America. This section outlines the architecture of Sino-Brazilian security cooperation, charting its evolution from foundational agreements to substantive military integration shaping the region's security dynamics.

Strategic Agreements and Institutional Foundations

Sino-Brazilian defense cooperation formally dates back to 1988 with the mutual establishment of Defense Attaché Offices in Beijing and Brasília.[88] While the 1990–2005 period lacks clear evidence of binding bilateral defense agreements, the two countries intensified military ties in 2004 through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by their respective Ministries of National Defense. This MOU broadened the scope of military collaboration, promoting personnel exchanges and institutional cooperation in key defense areas.[89]

Similarly to the Sino-Mexican security cooperation relations, after 2005, consistent with the PRC's global pivot beyond Asia, China pursued deeper security relationships across Latin America. Two landmark agreements—the 2011 *Defense Cooperation Agreement* and its 2014 *Complementary Protocol*—serve as the bedrock of contemporary Sino-Brazilian military engagement.

According to the *Ministério das Relações Exteriores* (Ministry of Foreign Relations) archives, the 2011 agreement institutionalized a framework for bilateral military cooperation across a broad spectrum of areas. It emphasized the following domains:

1. Exchange of experience and cooperation in defence products and services and related management, research, procurement, usage and maintenance;
2. Exchange of experience in military operations including UN peacekeeping operations;
3. Exchange of expertise and experience in defence technological areas;
4. Military education and training, joint military exercises, as well as exchange of information related to those issues;
5. Military medicine;

[88] Danilo Marcondes and Pedro Henrique Batista Barbosa, "Brazil-China Defense Cooperation: A Strategic Partnership in the Making?," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 17, no. 2 (July 2018), 147, https://www.jstor.org/.

[89] Alexandro de Araujo Baptista, "The Influence of China in Brazil: How It Can Change Military Cooperation Between Brazil and the United States" (master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2021), 18.

6. Humanitarian assistance;
7. Security in important events as well as exchange of information related to this issue;
8. Other fields of defence that may be of mutual interest.[90]

The 2014 *Complementary Protocol* extended these commitments by addressing capability gaps in cybersecurity, telecommunications, and satellite technology. It marked a strategic deepening of cooperation in sensitive, dual-use technologies—areas with both civilian and military implications.[91]

Together, these agreements reveal a methodical Chinese approach to building long-term defense ties with Brazil, centered on interoperability, information exchange, and co-development. For Beijing, this partnership is not merely about regional engagement—it is a deliberate step toward cultivating hemispheric alliances that dilute Washington's traditional sphere of influence.

Professionalization of the Joint Forces

Over the past quarter century, the Sino-Brazilian defense partnership has evolved from symbolic overtures into substantive military collaboration. A critical dimension of this maturation is the professionalization of joint forces through sustained training, language exchanges, and increasingly complex exercises. Since 2000, the PRC has prioritized bilateral military education with Brazil, laying the foundation for deeper interoperability.

A defining moment occurred in the summer of 2024, when Brazil hosted Operation Formosa, led by the Brazilian Navy.[92] For the first time in history, the PRC deployed a detachment of marines to South America to participate in a joint military exercise with Brazil.[93] This unprecedented move marked a significant expansion of China's expeditionary reach in the Western Hemisphere.

Operation Formosa included military forces from at least 11 countries across five continents, drawing multinational participation and several observer states. Approximately 3,000 Brazilian troops took part, alongside forces from both the PRC and the United States—though notably, US and Chinese units did not engage

[90] "Signature of Treaties on the Occasion of the President Dilma Rousseff to the Popular Republic of China – Beijing, April 12, 2011" (press release, Government of Brazil, 12 April 2011), https://www.gov.br/.

[91] Ana Soliz de Stange, "China and Brazil's Cooperation in the Satellite Sector: Implications for the United States," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 4 (May–June 2023): 121, https://media.defense.gov/.

[92] This is not related to Taiwan. Formosa is a city located northeast of Brasilia in the state of Goiás.

[93] Lan Xinzhen, "Military Exercises for Peace," *Beijing Review*, 23 September 2024, https://www.bjreview.com/.

in joint training.[94] The exercise focused on regional security cooperation, emphasizing joint landing and anti-landing operations. These drills enhanced multinational capabilities in interoperability, partner capacity-building, expeditionary logistics, and fire-support coordination.

For Beijing, Operation Formosa likely served a dual purpose. In addition to public diplomacy and defense signaling, it likely provided an opportunity for intelligence collection—specifically on Brazilian–US interactions, tactical training methodologies, communications protocols, and after-action assessments. The presence of Chinese forces on Brazilian soil offered the PRC a rare vantage point into Western Hemisphere military coordination.

Sino-Brazilian naval ties further reflect a pattern of pragmatic, long-term cooperation. The two navies have conducted high-level exchanges and equipment transfers. A notable example is the *Vital de Oliveira*—the first Brazilian naval vessel built in China, underscoring growing defense-industrial collaboration. In 2012, following a catastrophic fire that destroyed all electronic systems at Brazil's Antarctic Navy Base, the China Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) stepped in to supply replacement systems—further solidifying China's role as a dependable defense technology partner.[95]

Together, these developments point to a deliberate and systematic Chinese effort to build military trust with Brazil, not only as a regional partner but as a potential pillar of Beijing's broader effort to erode US primacy in Latin America.

Space and Information Domains

An increasingly critical dimension of the Sino-Brazilian partnership lies in their collaboration across the space and information domains. Although space cooperation between the two nations dates back to the 1980s, it was formally institutionalized in 2004 through the *Complementary Protocol to the Framework Agreement* on the peaceful uses of outer space. This agreement launched the China–Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CBERS) program, a joint initiative to develop and operate remote-sensing satellites.[96]

Now progressing toward the launch of their seventh satellite, scheduled for 2028, the CBERS program underscores a durable and expanding partnership in space

[94] Dodge Billingsley, "Chinese Marines Participate in Brazil's Military Exercise for the First Time," *OE Watch* (TRADOC G2 Foreign Military Studies Office) 14, no. 12 (December 2024), https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/.

[95] Baptista, "The Influence of China in Brazil," 18–19.

[96] *Framework Agreement Between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the Peaceful Applications of Outer Space Science and Technology*, United Nations Treaty Collection, No. 26362, registered 17 October 1988, https://treaties.un.org/.

technology. Framed publicly as a tool for "public services and economic development," CBERS enables shared access to satellite imagery and environmental data.[97] However, the dual-use nature of space assets raises significant concerns about the intelligence benefits accrued to the PRC. As Dr. Ana Soliz de Stange notes, the CBERS partnership facilitates not only the co-development of satellite platforms but also the strategic sharing of imagery—effectively extending the PRC's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) reach into the Western Hemisphere.[98]

Beyond space, the PRC has invested heavily in shaping the information environment in Brazil. Echoing its strategy in Mexico and elsewhere, Beijing has cultivated media partnerships to propagate CCP narratives. According to Freedom House, "Beijing's media influence in Brazil is significant and growing."[99] The China Media Group (CMG), the CCP's main state-run broadcaster, has established formal cooperation agreements with major Brazilian outlets, including *Globo*, one of the country's largest media conglomerates.[100]

Programming such as *Mundo China* ("China World") disseminates state-curated content in Brazilian Portuguese across widely accessible platforms—including YouTube, Facebook, X, and Instagram—presenting what the CCP describes as "a new vision of China for everyone."[101] These efforts serve as force multipliers for Beijing's public diplomacy while obscuring the regime's authoritarian underpinnings. Freedom House reports that China's influence operations in Brazil include the dissemination of state media propaganda, amplification of embassy communications, subsidization of journalism, and targeted outreach to the Chinese diaspora.[102]

Taken together, the space and information lines of effort reflect a coordinated Chinese strategy: to deepen technological entanglement with Brazil while shaping the regional narrative to align with Beijing's geopolitical interests. This dual-front campaign—rooted in access, influence, and long-term positioning—positions the PRC as a rising power in South America's strategic ecosystem.

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[97] Zhao Lei, "China, Brazil Make Progress on 7th Satellite: Long-Term Collaboration Offers Benefits of Space Technology to Developing World," *China Daily*, 19 November 2024, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/.

[98] Soliz de Stange, "China and Brazil's Cooperation in the Satellite Sector."

[99] Ellie Young, Sarah Cook, and anonymous, "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022: Brazil," Freedom House, 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/.

[100] Pablo Sebastián Morales and Paulo Menechelli, "Mundo China: The Media Partnership Reframing China's Image in Brazil," *International Communication Gazette* 85, no. 1 (2023): 63–79, https://doi.org/.

[101] Mundo China (@mundo_china), X (formerly Twitter), https://x.com/.

[102] Young, Cook, and anonymous, "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022: Brazil."

Recent Developments

In May 2025, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva traveled to Beijing to meet with President Xi—a visit that marks a consequential deepening of Sino-Brazilian ties with long-term strategic implications for the Western Hemisphere. During the visit, the two nations signed more than 20 bilateral agreements spanning technology, space, artificial intelligence (AI), and port infrastructure.[103] These agreements are not mere symbols of goodwill; they establish a durable framework for security-relevant cooperation with provisions intended to last for half a century.

Among the most consequential developments is the joint commitment to establish a Technology Transfer Center between Brazil's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (*Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Inovação*, or MCTI) and China's Ministry of Science and Technology. In parallel, the MCTI signed a joint declaration of intent with the China National Space Administration to share satellite data with Latin American and Caribbean nations.[104] These moves, framed as scientific cooperation, expand Beijing's technical footprint in the region while offering the PRC an asymmetric edge in regional intelligence gathering and influence projection.

The PRC's strategy is deliberate and multifaceted. In addition to formal technology-sharing frameworks, China continues to leverage joint research and development ventures—including the China–Brazil Joint Laboratory and the CBERS satellite program—as vectors for technology acquisition and influence. Chinese state-backed firms have also poured capital into renewable energy initiatives across the Amazon and Brazil's northeast, sectors that offer both environmental cover and strategic access.

President Lula has actively championed deeper collaboration in AI, explicitly calling for increased data sharing with China. This posture risks opening channels for technological entanglement that could bleed into sensitive domains such as cyber defense, surveillance infrastructure, and intelligence cooperation. China's well-documented use of dual-use technologies, often embedded in commercial partnerships, underscores the national security concerns such integration could invite.

Port infrastructure development is another critical vector of Chinese engagement. Chinese companies have announced major investments in Brazil's port sector and expressed interest in bidding for the Santos–Guarujá Tunnel project—Latin America's first underwater tunnel. Launched by President Lula in February 2025, the project involves more than BRL 6 billion in estimated investments. While

[103] "Lula Celebrates Results of His Visit to China: 'Our Relationship Is Very Strategic'," Government of Brazil, May 2025, https://www.gov.br/.

[104] "Lula Celebrates Results of His Visit to China."

the initiative is positioned as a hallmark of economic modernization, Chinese participation would give the PRC a physical stake in Brazil's maritime logistics—a development with clear strategic overtones.[105]

Although Brazil has not formally joined the PRC's BRI, it remains a founding member of the BRICS bloc—established in 2009 with the aim of rebalancing the global economic order. A key BRICS objective is to reduce dependency on the US dollar, a goal that aligns with Beijing's ambition to reshape global financial norms.[106] Since 2010, Chinese investments in Brazil have exceeded USD 72.2 billion.[107] Such capital inflows are not disinterested. Rather, they signal Beijing's intent to secure long-term influence in Latin America—an objective that could become operational in the event of a geopolitical rupture between the PRC and the United States.

[105] "Lula Celebrates Results of His Visit to China."

[106] Stewart Patrick, "What Is the BRICS Group and Why Is It Expanding?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 December 2023. https://www.cfr.org/.

[107] Ana García et al., *Chinese Investments in Brazil: Investment Data, Public Policies for Investment Facilitation and the Case of the Manaus Industrial Pole* (Rio de Janeiro: BRICS Policy Center, 2023), 6.

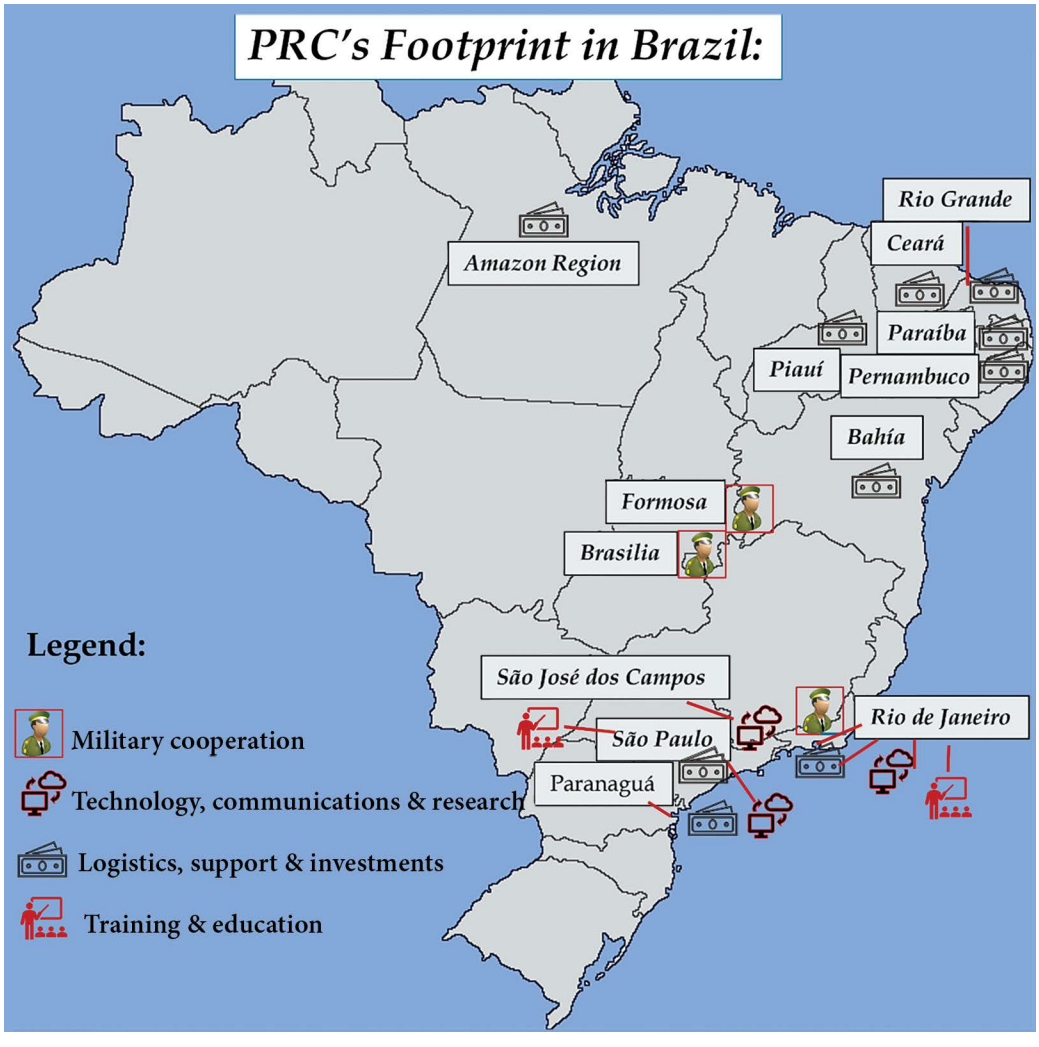

Figure 5. The PRC's footprint in Brazil. This image illustrates the PRC's engagements, including military cooperation, technology, space, communications, logistics, infrastructure, and training collaboration. This image is not all-inclusive. (Adapted from a template on Wikimedia Commons. Title, legend, and icons added by the author.)[108]

[108] "Blank Map of Brazil with Borders of States (2024)," Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by Vardion, last modified 11 April 2024, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and GNU Free Documentation License 1.2 or later, https://commons.wikimedia.org/.

Conclusion

Since 2008, the PRC has expanded its political, diplomatic, economic, and military influence across Latin America—particularly in Mexico and Brazil—posing escalating risks to US national security. Through BRI enticements, massive investment, and targeted bilateral agreements, Beijing advances its trade and strategic objectives while cultivating long-term dependencies. These relationships improve Chinese maritime domain awareness and establish forward logistics nodes that could support deployments in a future US–PRC conflict. China exploits commercial protections to maximize trade advantages while disadvantaging its partners, all under the guise of cooperation. These partnerships show no signs of faltering and will likely deepen over time.

The PRC is also capitalizing on recent US foreign policy shifts emphasizing unilateralism and strategic retrenchment. As Washington pivots inward, China steps forward—positioning itself as a viable, stable partner for Latin America. Its expanding military exchanges, professional development programs, and cultural engagements with Mexico and Brazil not only bolster China's joint force capabilities but also familiarize it with NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM theaters. The PRC will likely focus its military collaboration on amphibious operations and intelligence collection—doctrines directly applicable to a Taiwan contingency.

The maritime domain will face mounting challenges as the PRC deepens its footprint in Mexican and Brazilian ports. Brazil's growing collaboration with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will likely accelerate over the next five to ten years, enhancing the PLAN's operational proficiency in naval missions relevant to Indo-Pacific theaters, particularly the East and South China Seas.

Despite these developments, longstanding US partnerships with Mexico and Brazil offer strategic advantages. Deep cultural ties and shared democratic values throughout the Western Hemisphere will likely steer Mexico and Brazil toward alignment with the United States—or, at minimum, neutrality—in the event of conflict. However, the PRC will persist in asserting influence through the BRI, strategic bilateral agreements, military diplomacy, and aggressive economic expansion. To counter this, Mexico and Brazil must remain central pillars of US strategy in Latin America.

Even amid recent shifts in US foreign policy, military strategy and diplomatic scholarship affirm the importance of sustaining balanced and proactive engagement with key Latin American partners. Building partner capacity and countering PRC narratives are viable, cost-effective strategies. Targeted investments in PME, security cooperation, and exchange programs—such as those conducted by Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (Fort Benning, Georgia), the

Inter-American Air Forces Academy (Joint Base San Antonio–Lackland), Surface Warfare Officers School (Newport, Rhode Island), the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School (Stennis Space Center, Mississippi), and International Maritime Officer School (Yorktown, Virginia)—provide essential platforms for strengthening interoperability and trust. These institutions, staffed by culturally adept and multilingual personnel, are well positioned to train and influence foreign military counterparts.

Information operations and public diplomacy will also be decisive. By expanding collaboration agreements and leveraging social media and other communications platforms, the United States can amplify its soft power and strengthen regional partnerships. Notably, in June 2025, General Gregory M. Guillot, Commander of USNORTHCOM and NORAD, hosted senior Mexican defense officials to reinforce bilateral security cooperation. "This visit reflects the enduring trust and open communication between our nations' militaries," Guillot said. "Mexico is an essential partner in the defense of North America, and engagements like this ensure our efforts are aligned and effective."[109]

Efforts like these are critical to pushing back against PRC propaganda that seeks to delegitimize US-led humanitarian, security, and capacity-building missions. Diplomacy and trade will also remain foundational to US engagement with Mexico and Brazil. Positive diplomatic and commercial ties will incentivize alignment with the United States. Conversely, protectionist trade policies—such as unilateral tariffs—could drive these partners toward Beijing, which is eager to offer more favorable terms.

This article contributes to the strategic literature by providing a historical-comparative and geopolitical assessment of the PRC's growing presence in Latin America. Although scholars have examined China's diplomatic and economic engagement in the region, few have explored in depth the PLA, PLAN, and PLA Air Force's military diplomacy with Mexico and Brazil. Nor has a comprehensive study of China's evolving military presence in the region emerged. Future research should incorporate the lived experiences of military personnel engaged in this complex environment, as human factors—such as religion, gender, race, socio-economic background, and political ideology—undeniably shape strategic outcomes. In sum, the PRC will continue to shape the trajectory of US foreign and domestic policy for decades to come. Scholars and strategists alike must remain vigilant.

[109] Mayrem Morales, "Mexican Defense Leaders Visit NORAD and USNORTHCOM Headquarters to Strengthen Bilateral Security Cooperation," *U.S. Northern Command News*, 26 June 2025, https://www.northcom.mil/.

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