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Strategic Insights: The Dragon in the Tropics: China's Military Expansion into the Western Hemisphere

September 30, 2014 | Dr. Jose de Arimateia da Cruz

A prosperous and stable China will not be a threat to any country. It will only be a positive force for world peace.

Vice President Xi Jinping, 2012

Despite the fact that Latin America has been an area of U.S. influence since 1823 with the establishment of the Monroe Doctrine, the region has been always relegated to an afterthought by U.S. foreign policymakers. Latin America, as J. D. Gordon stated, “has largely remained a policy backwater for the United States, with America manifesting little by way of strategy toward the region, when it in fact noticed it at all.”¹ This benign neglect posture by U.S. foreign policymakers has tremendous geopolitical and national security implications for the homeland in the 21st century.

By neglecting Latin America, the United States has opened a door for external powers to fill the political vacuum left by the U.S., particularly antagonistic nations to U.S. hegemony in the region, such as Iran, Russia, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These countries have quickly positioned themselves as an alternative to the lack of political interest on the part of the United States. Within the context of Latin American politics, the Chinese presence in the Western Hemisphere presents a new alignment of governments that have nurtured an anti-American foreign policy sentiment such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Brazil. In fact, China has entered into bilateral agreements with each of these Latin American countries. Those nations, while economically tied to the U.S. market, have recently taken a more confrontational

position vis-à-vis the United States, thanks to their new foreign policy alignment with the PRC. While the U.S. presence in the region is either declining or nonexistent, China's involvement is on the rise. Even former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that China is making "disturbing" gains in the region.²

China's "Ya-Fei-La" or "Asia-Africa-Latin America" plan was conceived during the Mao-era "in a movement to promote developing country solidarity."³ However, China's first official policy paper on Latin America was not issued until November 2008. In this policy paper entitled "China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean," the Chinese Government officially stated that its objectives toward Latin America and the Caribbean was to boost "mutual visits by defense and military officials of the two sides as well as personnel exchanges." Additionally, the Chinese government wants to expand "professional exchanges in military training, personnel training, and peacekeeping."⁴ According to David Shambaugh, contributing to peacekeeping operations is part of China's global security. In fact, China now ranks as the 16th largest national contributor of personnel to peacekeeping operations, and it is the first among permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council.⁵ In addition to providing UN Peacekeeping Operations, China is also actively engaged in what they called "bilateral military-to-military or military diplomacy."⁶ As part of its military diplomacy, China also maintains defense dialogues or strategic dialogues with 26 countries worldwide.⁷ Some of those countries are key players and strategic partners in Latin America including Brazil and Mexico.

Another important aspect of China's "going out" strategy, "a strategy designed to systematically promote exports, gain access to needed resources, and accelerate the development of its multilateral enterprises,"⁸ is to train foreign officers at its military academies and institutions.⁹ For example, both the Chilean and Uruguayan armies have been sending their officers to study at the Defense Studies Institute in Changping since 1999 and 2009, respectively.¹⁰ Also, as part of its military diplomacy, China has conducted military exercises with several Latin American countries. In November 2010, Chinese military personnel "participate[d] with 50 Peruvians in the humanitarian exercise *Angel de la Paz* (Angel of Peace), including deployment to the village of Villa Maria del Trunfo to perform medical services for the local population."¹¹

David Shambaugh reports that, as part of China's going out strategy, China is "becoming a major seller of weapons abroad, ranking fourth internationally in 2010, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute."¹² There are two reasons China has created a niche for its weapons in Latin America. First, is the rise of the pink tide in Latin America between 1998 and 2009 when leftist leaders, many hostile to the United States, won elections in Venezuela (1998), Chile (2000), Brazil (2002), Argentina (2003), Uruguay (2004), Bolivia (2005), Nicaragua (2006), Peru (2006), Ecuador (2007), Honduras (2007), Paraguay (2008), and El Salvador (2009). Coming to

power in the aftermath of the implementation of structural adjustment programs in Latin America by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, leaders of the pink tide revolution formed an ideological block critical of the U.S. Washington Consensus. This ideological bloc led by Venezuela is known as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). As J. D. Gordon argues:

Through its auspices, authoritarians bent on expansion and collectivism has carried out a massive propaganda campaign against the U.S. and its regional allies in order to undermine their legitimacy, while promoting socialism and systematic economic redistribution at home.¹³

Those regimes' antagonistic political posture toward the United States and their inability to acquire Western military technology have led them to look to Chinese equipment.¹⁴ According to R. Evan Ellis, "the first major breakthrough for the PRC in making military sales to Latin America was arguably Venezuela's 2008 announcement that it would purchase K-8 (Karakorum) aircraft, co-developed with Pakistan."¹⁵ Not only Venezuela, but also Bolivia, purchased Chinese K-8s "after the United States blocked it from acquiring a comparable aircraft from the Czech Republic."¹⁶

The second reason for Latin American nations to purchase Chinese military equipment is the price. Chinese military equipment—compared to its competitors, the United States, Russia, England, and France—is relatively cheap, therefore providing an alternative venue to Latin American nations to acquire needed military hardware. Between 2006 and 2009, China exported conventional military weapons to several countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.¹⁷

Since Deng Xiaoping and the pragmatic moderators came to power in China in 1979, thereby joining communism and capitalism—otherwise known as the Beijing Model¹⁸—China has been striving to achieve its rightful place among great powers in the international system. Whether the United States likes it or not, China will be a great power to reckon with in the future. While China's rise to power is inevitable, it is still not a high priority for Washington. Yet, China's rise and expansion in the Western Hemisphere presents a series of critical national security concerns that cannot be ignored by the United States and the U.S. Army. In fact, in the *U.S. War College Key Strategic Issue List 2014-15*, the Western Hemisphere concerns specifically identify Chinese soft power and its political-economic-security-informational engagement as a priority.¹⁹

One national security issue for the United States and the Army is the footprint expansion of the Chinese military in Latin America. China's military partnership with members of the ALBA coalition raises a number of concerns. First, China does not

differentiate among its customers. China's primary goal is to establish a commercial footprint within the region. Therefore, military weapons sold to some countries in Latin America could end up in the wrong hands. Venezuela is a good example. Previously under Hugo Chavez and now under Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has been building its military capability. Since Venezuela has had some border scimmages with some of its neighbors, an argument could be made that it is in Venezuela's interests to arm itself. The concern is that Venezuela has had a cozy relationship with Colombia's *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP or FARC) narco-terrorists as well as a strategic partnership with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Also, as pointed out by Ellis in his article, "The United States, Latin America, and China: A Triangular Relationship," China's willingness to sell low-cost arms to countries such as Venezuela has undermined the U.S. ability to work with its allies to impose arms-purchase controls on certain regimes.²⁰

Another major concern regarding China's expansion in Latin America is its support for authoritarian regimes. For much of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Latin American nations were under the stronghold of bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes. Democracy returned to Latin America with the "third wave" of democratization in the late-1980s when the militaries returned to their barracks. China's expansionist strategic policy in Latin America could reverse the accomplishments of almost 3 decades of fragile yet democratic values.

As part of its "going out" strategic policy. China today is more interconnected with the world than ever. While these increased human connections are valued in the globalized world of the 21st century, it also represents a national security concern. Ellis argued that with these increased human contacts, "Chinese and Latin American criminal and terrorist organizations will interact in ways difficult to anticipate, and often outside the knowledge or control of the Chinese state."²¹ As crime becomes more sophisticated and international, drug traffic organizations (DTOs) become the "black swans" of the globalized world. They are hard to find, but they do exist, and, once discovered, it is too late to assess their damage to society.

While Chinese President Xi Jinping sees a prosperous and stable China not as a threat to any country, but rather as a positive force for world peace, others see China's peaceful rise as a matter of concern and a danger to the international system. China will not dominate the world. However, it will be a rising superpower that may not always play by the rules of the game, especially if it sees those rules as a creation of the Western world and an attempt to keep China in its place.

The U.S. Government and the Army can do much to make sure that as China rises within the international system it respects international norms, values, and institutions and does not represent a threat to the Western Hemisphere. The United States should

show the region that it is concerned about China's influence and it cares about the direction and future of the Western Hemisphere. But, actions speak louder than words or pseudo speeches. Recently, President Barack Obama met with 50 African heads of state in Washington, DC, and announced that the United States would provide \$33 billion in investments and vowed to increase electricity to 60 million African households.²² While such action is commendable toward a continent that has suffered much too long, no such plan of action exist for Latin America. The United States could show good will and confidence-building toward Latin America by pursuing the same economic strategy to win the "hearts and minds" of some leftist regimes turned China's allies. In fact, some observers believe that the Obama administration organized the U.S.-African Leaders Summit in a "desperate effort to catch up with China" who has become Africa's top business partner."²³ The U.S. Government and the Army could also expand the Colombia Plan, a counternarcotic offensive, to include other nations that are also impacted by the cancer of drug trafficking in the region. In fact, it would be wise on the part of the U.S. Government and the Army to create a Latin American Plan, similar to the Marshall Plan created in the aftermath of World War II to rebuild Europe, with a military focus to the region: surveillance, joint military exercises, weapons transfer, counternarcotics, police training, etc.

China's expansion in the Western Hemisphere has focused on commodities trade and natural resources needed for its industrial expansion. The U.S. Government could propose a new plan to increase loans and investments in the region. As it has been pointed out, "without the more than \$40 billion from China Development Bank, for example, it is doubtful whether Venezuela's socialist regime could have survived the 2012 national elections and thus continued to partner with Iran, buy Russian arms, and export revolution to its neighbors."²⁴

Much like a Greek tragedy, China's rise will be one of the greatest dramas of the 21st century. Whether China will play by the rules of the international system remains an open-ended question for Sino futurologists to answer. However, it is worth remembering the wisdom and foresight of Franklin Roosevelt in his attempt to create "a one-world system managed by cooperative great powers that would rebuild war-ravaged Europe, integrate the defeated states, and establish mechanisms for a security cooperation and expansive economic growth."²⁵ Roosevelt pleaded with Winston Churchill, who was adamantly opposed, that China be included as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Roosevelt's strategic thinking was simple. He wanted China as a friend because "in 40 or 50 years' time, China might easily become a very powerful military nation."²⁶ Forty to 50 years' time is upon us. China is changing the world, and the world is changing China. China will continue its peaceful rise. How China fits in with the international system depends how China is treated.

ENDNOTES

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13. Gordon.
14. Ellis, "China-Latin America Military Engagement," p. 22.
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16. R. Evan Ellis, "The United States, Latin America and China: A Triangular Relationship?" *Inter-American Dialogue*, May 2012, p. 9.

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18. For an excellent discussion on how the Beijing Consensus or Model may legitimize authoritarian regimes, see Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: Legitimizing Authoritarianism in our Time*, New York: Basic Books, 2010.

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20. Ellis, "The United States, Latin America and China," p. 7.

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23. *Ibid.*

24. R. Evan Ellis, "Russia, Iran, and China in Latin America," p. 10.

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26. *Ibid.*

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