



**Statement before the Foreign Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime,
Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global
Women's Issues**

***“PRC Influence and the Status of Taiwan’s
Diplomatic Allies in the Western Hemisphere”***

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Chairman Curtis, Ranking Member Kaine, and distinguished Members of the Committee, I am honored to share my analysis with you today. The views I express here today are mine, and do not represent those of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the U.S. Army War College, or the U.S. Government.

I am testifying in my capacity as an academic who has followed and written on Chinese activities in Latin America and the eroding position of Taiwan there for over twenty years, both while in government and in the private sector. I believe both China's advance and Taiwan's eroding position profoundly impact U.S. strategic interests, the interests of the Western Hemisphere that we share and issues of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and the global strategic environment more broadly.

Per the title of the hearing, my remarks today focus on two interrelated topics: PRC influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Taiwan's eroding position there, including the implications of both.

The Influence of the PRC in the Western Hemisphere and its Strategic Importance

The influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and its impact on U.S. equities goes far beyond the approximately \$203.4 billion Chinese companies have invested in the region, recorded in at least 678 public transactions,^[1] and its \$499.6 billion of bilateral trade.^[2]

PRC physical presence as an employer, taxpayer, business partner, and purchaser of the region's goods, and the expectations of commercial and personal benefit that come with that commerce has tempered the willingness of elites to pursue their national interests in ways that resist the PRC advance, or to speak critically of PRC authoritarian behavior, whether in Hong Kong, the repression of Uighur Muslims and other elements of its own population, its aggression against Taiwan, or its construction and militarization of artificial "islands" in the South China seas and its maritime claims against its neighbors there.

The PRC has also used its commercial and other engagement to build significant "people-to-people" networks in the region. These include 44 Confucius Centers that serve as gateways for recruiting students to study in China on scholarships directly from the Chinese government,^[3] as well as numerous state-affiliated PRC-based universities, and private institutions like Huawei's "Seeds for the Future" program.^[4] It also includes luxurious paid trips to China for thousands of journalists, academics, political party elites,^[5] and even judges, military personnel and police officers.^[6] PRC outreach further includes providing free stories and images, and lucrative paid advertisements to Latin American media, from *La Jornada* in Mexico to *La Tercera* in Chile. It includes outreach to parties in the region with interests in China through the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party.^[7] These include Chambers of Commerce and "China friendship" caucuses, such as that headed by leftist Workers' Party (PT) member Yeidckol Polevnsky in Mexico,^[8] and that headed by radical Citizen Revolution party member Silvia Nunez Ramos in Ecuador.^[9]

In the digital domain, significant participation by PRC-based companies in the region's digital infrastructure and services puts at risk sovereign decision-making and the protection of intellectual property by both companies and political leaders. The 2017 PRC National Security Law and the

2019 Cybersecurity law, both oblige PRC-based companies to turn over data in their possession if the CCP government determines that it is of national security value for the Chinese government.^[10] In this context, it is of note that the PRC-based firm Huawei, among others, has supplied devices and components to the region's telecommunications architectures since the late 1990s. Today, such Chinese companies contribute up to 60% of the region's telecommunications infrastructure. Huawei's advantageous position in 5G, whose architectures are being rolled out now across much of the region, suggest that Chinese dominance in the sector will only grow larger. In Mexico, Huawei is a significant provider of cloud services to countless companies operating there, many of whom would never dream of locating their core intellectual property in the PRC. Through Telmex and its local partner the Carso Group, Huawei is also a leading provider of digital hardware and services to leading ministries of the Mexican government, including possibly the Office of the Presidency and the Communications and Transportation Secretariat (SCT).^[11]

In pursuing its economic and other interests, the PRC has also played a key role in propping up authoritarian regimes across the region. The PRC provided over \$60 billion in loans to the Maduro and Chavez regimes in Venezuela, and \$13 billion to the leftist Rafael Correa regime in Ecuador, repaid by the commodities of those nations, as authoritarian governments in each consolidated their power. Beyond Chinese extraction of the resources of such authoritarian regimes in exchange for products and work projects by PRC-based companies, the PRC has also provided a myriad of information technology and security equipment that has extended the life of these regimes and bolstered their ability to repress their own people. In Venezuela, for example, the PRC sold the "Fatherland Identity Card" system to that nation's authoritarian government to help it monitor and distribute scarce food and resources to pro-government groups. They also sold Venezuela the VN-1 and other armored vehicles used by the Chavista government to repress the populations,^[12] as well as the facial recognition cameras used to target protesters to later track them down in their homes. In Cuba, the Communist governments successful repression of protests in July 2021 was facilitated by it having contracted with PRC-based companies for its telecommunications technologies, allowing the Cuban Communist government to shut down protesters' ability to coordinate with each other, and with the outside world.^[13]

In security affairs, the growing PRC commercial presence and security relationships with nations in Latin America and the Caribbean create numerous options that China's Communist Party could exploit in the region, impacting U.S. forces and the defense of the U.S. homeland, if the PRC found itself in a war with the U.S. over its actions against Taiwan, or other issues in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, these are options the PRC could exploit without formal military alliances or basing agreements in this hemisphere. In Cuba, the PRC presence in at least one signals intelligence facility in Bejucal, Cuba, and possibly as many as four such facilities,^[14] could be used to collect electronic data on U.S. installations and force movements in the region. Numerous PRC commercial operations in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean create options for its intelligence and special forces to observe, and potentially disrupt U.S. deployment and sustainment flows, many of which would likely travel from U.S. installations through the Caribbean in proximity to those commercial facilities.^[15]

It is also likely that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has used undocumented immigration into the United States to position agents to conduct attacks against infrastructure and other targets during wartime. To be clear, Chinese youth unemployment is high, thanks in part to the lingering effect of the sustained "Covid lockdown" and other problems. Thus, the vast majority of the more

than 30,000 Chinese nationals that were estimated to have entered the United States without proper documentation in 2024 ^[16] are probably mostly economic migrants, yet it is difficult to imagine our capable, innovative adversaries in the PLA not taking advantage of such massive flows to inject at least a limited number of operatives who could be used to collect intelligence or act against certain U.S. targets during time of war.

With respect to Panama, both U.S. warships, and also U.S. logistics ships carrying supplies and heavy equipment through the Panama Canal to the Indo-Pacific, would be part of the “race” to reinforce Taiwan in any war, attempting to prevent an invading PLA from consolidating its victory. Thus, the closure of the Canal, even for days, could seriously impact the outcome of such a conflict. In wartime, the PLA thus has a strong, logical military imperative to shut down the canal, likely in superficially deniable ways, during such a conflict. Its ability to do this, particularly in a non-attributable way, is a function not only of Hong Kong-based Hutchison’s operation of two of the five Panama Canal Zone ports, but also from its combination of physical access, technical knowledge, and relationships the Chinese have through its myriad of other operations in Panama, including those of the Chinese logistics giant COSCO, one of the biggest users of the Canal, China Construction Communications Corporation (CCCC) and its subsidiary China Harbour, which is currently building a new bridge in the Canal Zone, ^[17] and countless smaller Chinese commercial entities that operate in the Colon and Panama Pacifico free trade zones, among others. ^[18]

In the domain of space, the PLA has access to Western Hemisphere skies through facilities they have built and personnel they have trained for politically sympathetic governments in Venezuela and Bolivia, as well as through multiple, PRC-operated space radar and telescope facilities in Argentina and Chile. In time of war, this access could help it to locate U.S. and allied satellites and other space assets to blind, jam, or destroy them, with potentially devastating impact on communications and operations of U.S. forces that depend on such assets. ^[19] In a similar manner, if the PRC were to employ an orbital weapon launching hypersonic missiles against strategic targets in the U.S., such as the vehicle it successfully tested in 2021, ^[20] facilities such as the PLA-operated deep space radar in Neuquen, Argentina, could be used to pass and receive data supporting such an attack. ^[21]

Finally, in the context of a war between the United States and the PRC, the exclusive operation of the Port of Chancay, granted by the Peruvian Port Authority (APN) to COSCO, raises concern because of the risk the Chinese could use control of the port, and a possible lack of adequate Peruvian government supervision regarding what is in ships and containers that come into and out of it, to resupply PLA forces operating against the U.S. in the Eastern Pacific, even if all parts of the Peruvian government did not knowingly approve of such support. ^[22] Yet the risk does not come from Chancay alone. PRC port and transportation infrastructure being built or contemplated in Nicaragua and Honduras, ^[23] with non-transparent, relatively anti-U.S. governments in each, could similarly be used to support the PLA in time of conflict, including the movement of war material between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts through rail and highway corridors, ^[24] particularly if the Honduran government of Xiomara Castro acts on its threat to expel the U.S. military from its forward operating location (FOL) for Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) in Soto Cano Air Base. ^[25]

In light of such possibilities, it is not surprising that the PRC has sought to stop the announced divestiture by Hutchison of port operations in its announced \$23 billion deal with Blackrock. The deal would cede to Blackrock not only Hutchison’s port operations in Panama, but also those in

the Bahamas, Mexico and 20 other countries.^[26] Yet even if the deal goes through, it would not fully address the risk, insofar as China has other port options throughout the region, including those of COSCO in Peru, China Merchants Port stake in the port of Kingston Jamaica, and its March 2025 agreement to acquire a deepwater port for Very Large Container Ships (VLCCs) in the port of Açú, Brazil,^[27] among others.

As I have noted, the PRC also has numerous non-port options for supporting military operations in time of conflict. Moreover, insofar as Blackrock itself has numerous holdings in the PRC,^[28] infrastructure operated by the company could still be subject to PRC leverage.

The Status and Strategic Importance of Taiwan's Continuing Autonomy

Turning to the matter of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and its future, in my professional opinion as a strategic and defense analyst, Taiwan's survival as an autonomous, democratic entity is critical to peace and stability in Asia, and for U.S. resistance to the strategic projection of the PRC both in the Indo-Pacific and in our own hemisphere.

Twelve nations continue to maintain formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, of which seven are in this hemisphere: Paraguay, Guatemala, Belize, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincents and the Grenadines. Seven years ago, the number was roughly twice that, with the government of Juan Carlos Varela in Panama abandoning Taiwan in 2017 due to PRC promises, lobbying and pressure; El Salvador and the Dominican Republic cutting relations in in 2018; Nicaragua doing so in December 2021; and Honduras in March 2023.

As the number of states recognizing Taiwan dwindles, the confidence of PRC ruler Xi Jinping that the PRC can successfully end Taiwanese autonomy at acceptable cost grow, just as it has ended democracy and autonomy in Hong Kong in violation of its own treaty commitments without an unacceptably costly international reaction.^[29] Such a move against Taiwan might involve a traditional invasion, but could also begin with a blockade or other form of coercion.^[30] Such a move would confront the U.S. and our allies with the imperative to militarily defend Taiwan at the risk of a catastrophic global war with the PLA, including risk of nuclear escalation. Not doing so, or failing in that effort, would remove the PRC's greatest geographic constraint to projecting its power across the Pacific, ultimately threatening Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States,^[31] and at the very least, risking the strategic reorientation and possible collapse of the democratic order in East Asia.^[32]

In Latin America and the Caribbean, diplomatic flips from Taiwan to the PRC have been the latter's fastest vehicle for expanding its presence and influence in individual countries.^[33] Such flips are almost invariably accompanied by the signing of numerous non-transparent MOUs that open up local markets to penetration by PRC-based telecommunications, electricity, construction, and other companies and products. These are often facilitated by the negotiation of free trade agreements by partners hoping to secure access to PRC markets, but who rarely succeed, due to PRC non-tariff barriers, limited export market size and experience of national trade promotion organizations, and the economic non-competitiveness of sending their traditional products such as shrimp, coffee, bananas, or fruit half-way around the world in refrigerated containers.

Providing empirical support to this logic, data from the respected *International Monetary Fund Direction of Trade Statistics* shows that, in every single case where partners have abandoned Taiwan for the PRC in Latin America since 2007, exports to Taiwan and the PRC two years after abandoning Taiwan fails to significantly rise, and often drops, while PRC penetration of the local market by Chinese producers, at the expense of local jobs, takes off.^[34] El Salvador's combined exports to Taiwan and the PRC fell from \$114.6 million in 2018, the year it abandoned Taiwan, to a mere \$74.9 million two years later. Costa Rica's combined exports fell from \$933.2 million in 2007, the year it abandoned Taiwan, to \$809.1 million two years later, and by 2023, was only \$457.6 million.^[35] Meanwhile Costa Rican imports of PRC goods exploded during the same period, prejudicing local producers, from \$763.3 million in 2007 to \$3.21 billion by 2023.^[36]

By February 2025, more than three years after Nicaragua's change from Taiwan to the PRC, despite, and in part because of its negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement with the PRC, the government of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo there had made little headway exporting to the PRC,^[37] while Chinese products had flooded the Nicaraguan market, facilitated by the spread of new Chinese retail establishments such as *Bazar Chino*, *China Mall*, *Supermercado Chino*, *La Estrella*, *Mundo Nica*, and *Nicaragua Electrónica*, displacing local merchants.^[38] By 2024, while Nicaragua still exported only \$51 million to the PRC it was importing \$1.02 billion in products and services from it.^[39]

In a similar fashion, after abandoning Taiwan for the PRC and initiating Free Trade Agreement negotiations, Hondurans discovered too late that the prices the PRC pays for its shrimp was far lower than the prices its Taiwanese partners paid, owing to the fact that the PRC can get the same shrimp much more easily from neighboring Vietnam, or from Ecuador.^[40] In the Dominican Republic, few of the PRC investments promised during the country's 2018 abandonment of Taiwan have been realized,^[41] yet the country is now plagued by Chinese shops accused of not paying taxes or respecting Dominican labor laws.^[42]

As a complement to such negative experiences, in the countries abandoning Taiwan for the PRC, the later's Communist government has set up training programs in the name of "teaching" their partners how to do business with China, but which really facilitate their ability to import more Chinese goods. The PRC has also set up Confucius Institutes, brought local journalists to the PRC on luxurious paid trips, including 30 from Honduras,^[43] and 25 from Nicaragua,^[44] and otherwise woven webs of influence capturing local elites and paralyzing their ability to pursue their national interests in resisting Chinese penetration.

Beyond the largely negative experiences of the countries which have "flipped" to China in recent years, each of the Taiwan-recognizing governments in Latin America is being tempted and pressured by the PRC in different ways to abandon its ally.

In Paraguay, Taiwan's geographically largest global partner, in my own interactions with the current President Santiago Peña and those close to him, I was convinced of the depth of his commitment to Taiwan as a matter of conviction.^[45] Unfortunately, PRC agents are constantly lobbying Paraguay's elites, from PRC agent Xu Wei meeting with Paraguayan Congress members on false diplomatic pretenses,^[46] to whispering in the ears of Paraguay's agricultural lobby about how more beef they could sell if only they switched recognition to the PRC.

In Guatemala, the left-oriented government of Bernardo Arevalo faces a profound political as well as economic crisis. While ideological conservatives in Guatemala are deeply fearful of the PRC, there are those who, for pragmatic and financial reasons, might abandon Taiwan and go with the PRC if the Arevalo government falls.^[47]

In the Caribbean, Belize, and the often overlooked “citizenship for investment” governments of Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Lucia, are tempted by the money of Chinese investors. While more Chinese investors in the Caribbean are trying to escape from the PRC with their money rather than support it, the leverage the PRC has over their businesses, families and other items of value in or reachable from Mainland China, subjects these Chinese to blackmail in support of the PRC agenda. Inclusion of St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Lucia on the Administration’s new travel ban “yellow list”^[48] could further add to pressures in those countries to recognize the PRC.

In Haiti, the escalation of violence with the collapse of the governing council, questions of future multinational funding, and the evaporating hope that the Kenya-led multinational coalition will maintain security^[49] increases the risk of a new criminal coalition that could impose authoritarian order, financed by the PRC in exchange for abandoning Taiwan.

Recommendations:

Responding effectively to the challenge of China’s advance and the associated defense of Taiwan’s autonomy is arguably the defining challenge for the U.S. strategic position globally, as well as its long-term national interest. That response is arguably an even greater challenge than prevailing against the former Soviet Union during the Cold War and will require fully leveraging all dimensions of U.S. national power. Naturally success will require U.S. military, technological and economic might. It will also require preserving and nurturing the “soft power” inherent in U.S. alliances and partnerships around the world. This soft power, that must be nurtured, also includes perceptions of the reliability of U.S. commitments and the shared principles that the United States represents. Among these are democracy, free markets, and the protection of the individual. Continued U.S. engagement in international institutions will also be important. Beyond preparing for war with the PRC, U.S. success in responding to the advance of the PRC and defending the autonomy of Taiwan requires “shaping the battlespace,” in order to limit and channel the PRC advance. Doing so is vital to ensure that the United States does not have to fight a war against the PRC, and if so, does not have to fight it alone in conditions of strategic disadvantage.

In pursuit of an effective national strategy necessarily and fully leveraging U.S. national power, I respectfully offer to the committee the following recommendations:

- **Continue to use leadership engagements, including those of Congress, the State Department, Defense Department and others, as well as the pressures, incentives, and other levers available through State Department programs, visa policy, and sanctions through the Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets and Control, to press partners to conduct their dealings with the PRC in a framework of transparency, and on a level-playing field.** Doing so will limit the ability of the PRC and its companies to engage in predatory deals that ultimately create webs of personal benefit and other leverage over Latin American and Caribbean elites. It will also limit the ability to secure deals

which disproportionately benefit the Chinese partner, creating economic damage, and ultimately resulting in flows of refugees and drugs to the United States, among other issues.

- **Work through State Department, Commerce, Defense, Justice Department, and other programs, including a possible restructuring or replacement of USAID, to build partner nation institutional capabilities.** These should focus on effective evaluation of contracts, acquisition decisions, other financial transactions, and the monitoring of the implementation of each of these. It should also focus on our partners' ability to fight corruption more broadly. Doing so will limit the most predatory aspect of China's advance, while avoiding damage to Latin American economies that impact the United States via migration and other harms, while also strengthening the perceived role of the United States in the region as a valued and trusted partner.
- **Better leverage the U.S. private sector as an alternative to predatory PRC investment.** The most promising, but not only candidate for doing so is a revitalized Development Finance Corporation or its equivalent, less restricted by imperatives regarding national income, or constraints involving the preferred beneficiaries of such investments.
- **Better leverage cooperation from democratic partners of the United States around the globe with their own interest in the region, its business opportunities, and conditions.** These include not only Taiwan, but also South Korea, Japan, Australia New Zealand, the European Union, and possibly India, to the degree that its strategic interests are not too closely tied to Russia. Leveraging such democratic partners recognizes that in the short term, funding from their banks and development agencies, or award of a contract to their companies, even if not going to a "U.S.-based company," may be preferable to a contract won by a PRC-based company and the webs of problematic economic leverage, dependency, harm, and the "people-to-people network" influences it may bring.
- **Fund the generation of better data about the relative performance of Chinese companies and the PRC government, vis-à-vis alternatives from democratic companies.** Doing so will help partners in the region make more informed, sovereign choices. This should include funding the generation of data and processes for accessing and delivering it, in order to support the talking points of U.S. senior leaders in their engagements with global partners about the PRC. It should also include funding of academic and other studies, previously done through the State Department and USAID, so that credible, trusted information on problematic Chinese practices and firm performance, can get into the public domain, complementing official U.S. messaging.
- **Better leverage U.S. advocacy for the value of democracy, protection of the individual, reliability, and anti-corruption practices, as factors which increase the attractiveness of the long-term value proposition persuading partners to give priority to the United States over the PRC as a partner.** The U.S. can better leverage the way in which such "brand appeal" complements its pursuit of deals and other goals through the use of pits markets, and threats.
- Within the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the intelligence community and other agencies, **give heightened attention to the risks associated with actions the PRC might take, in conjunction with partners such as Russia, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and others, in the Western Hemisphere in time of war.** The focus of such attention should include, but not be limited to:

- Anticipation, and preparations for response to PLA attempts to interrupt U.S. force deployment and sustainment flows from the Continental United States during such a conflict;
- Closure of the Panama Canal and denial of passage through alternatives such as the Straits of Magellan, the Drake Passage and the Arctic;
- Attacks on U.S. strategic infrastructure and other targets by PRC and other agents having previously, surreptitiously entered the United States;
- Exploitation of PRC space access in the Western Hemisphere, in order to locate and target U.S. space assets, and/or to exploit their own offensive space system for strategic attacks on the U.S., and;
- PRC use of ports and other facilities in the region under their control, to support forces conducting military operations against the United States.

U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) should expand their contingency planning for such possibilities, including conversations with U.S. partners as appropriate. Beyond NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) should prepare for the possibility for such PRC actions in the Western Hemisphere as it continues to refine its own campaign plan and contingencies, with partners, for a fight against the PRC in the Indo-Pacific.

- **Increase U.S. verbal, textual and symbolic messaging from all branches of government, including the United States Congress that it continues to fully support Taiwanese autonomy, and its defense if attacked by the PRC, including if such aggression is done in manners “short of major war” through the use of “strangulation” measures such as a full or partial blockade.** Such U.S. messaging and support should arguably include more regular Congressional Delegations (CODELs and STAFFDELS) to Taiwan, as well as expanded U.S. assistance and the authorization of defense sales and transfers for Taiwan’s own defense preparations. Such support, and future warfare planning, should be done, insofar as possible, in coordination with allies such as Japan with a shared strategic interest in Taiwan’s survival.
- **In Latin America, the U.S. government can and should also do more to support partners maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan.** The State Department should expand programs to promote and coordinate with Taiwan in embassies of countries in the region that recognize it, as well as coordinating with countries that recognize Taiwan in the U.S. American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) in Taipei. The U.S. government should further strengthen favorable economic and other support to Taiwan-recognizing partners, such as Paraguay, Guatemala, as well as others with economic incentives and support for leadership positions in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, over other partners who have abandoned Taiwan. In this regard, I recommend that the United States not include Taiwan-recognizing countries such as St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Lucia, among those it excludes from travel access to the United States.

In my judgment, the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019^[50] was an important statement and U.S. material commitment to Taiwan. As Taiwan’s international allies dwindle, as China’s President Xi approaches the end of his third term, demonstrations of US resolve and associated actions are critical for deterring PRC action that could ultimately lead to a catastrophic war, or the loss of Taiwan autonomy, are more important for U.S. interests than ever. The United States is at a tipping point moment in facing the challenge of China

and the U.S. reorientation of its approach toward the world. The choices that we make in this historical moment, or chose to ignore, regarding the China challenge and Taiwan as a bastion of democracy in Asia, will mark whether this moment marks an accelerated U.S. decent into dismantling its economic and institutional capabilities, alliances, and international reputation, or in contrast, marks the beginning our of a promising new era for the United States, Taiwan, and what both represent in the World.

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