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Latin America in a changing geopolitical climate: relations with Russia and China



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Executive summary

Despite being geographically remote from Latin America, both China and Russia continue to play important roles in the region, in Russia's case by focusing diplomatic attention on several countries that have difficult relations with the United States, and in China's case through deep economic engagement.

- Although Russia is no longer trying to export an alternative system of government to Western liberalism, it does still present itself as a counter to automatic American hegemony in Latin America. In terms of diplomacy, Russia's main focus has been on relations with Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, the three Latin American countries most at odds with the US.
- However, the appeal of Russia as a balance to US hegemony is not confined to those three countries alone. In February, Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez declared that his country should end its "dependence" on the US and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while offering itself to Russia as a "gateway" to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).
- Russian remains an important supplier of arms to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela although it now faces increasing competition from China.
- China's burgeoning relationship with LAC is based on rapidly expanding economic interaction, underpinned by China's appetite for LAC commodities. In 2000, LAC trade with China accounted for less than 2% of the regional total, but by 2035 it could reach 25%, or over US\$700bn, more than double the total in 2020. China is now the top trading partner for Brazil, Chile, Peru, Argentina, and Uruguay, and the second-largest for a raft of other nations.
- In addition to trade, Chinese companies have invested more than \$160bn in LAC, and China's two policy banks, China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of China (ExImBank), have lent US\$136bn.
- China has worked with LAC governments from across the political spectrum, but Beijing's policy of non-intervention in domestic politics makes it an easier partner for LAC leaders who come in for criticism from the US on topics such as human rights and corruption. Cultural exchanges are also helping to boost China's standing among a new generation of opinion leaders in LAC, increasing receptiveness to Beijing's model of global governance.
- China does not have the same historic security ties to LAC as Russia, but China is a significant supplier of military goods to certain countries, with Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina its most important clients in recent years.
- For the US, in its desire to stem China's growing regional influence, it will be important to realise that investment, not ideological commitments to democracy or human rights, is the most important factor for LAC leaders.



Despite their distance, Russia and China have long played a role in LAC's geopolitical sphere

1. Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)'s international affairs have historically been dominated by its close neighbour, the United States. The region is geographically remote from both Russia and China, and yet both nations have played, and continue to play, an interesting role in its geopolitical sphere.

After the end of WWII, Washington went to great lengths to exert control over the region in the face of competition from the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the US worked hard to bring LAC countries into the interdependent 'liberal world order', girded by institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.

For its part the Soviet Union supported leftist and anti-US movements throughout the region. It provided huge economic support for Cuba, which was also at the centre of arguably the most dangerous moment in the 20th century: the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. However, the decline and then collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 saw Moscow's activities in the region drastically reduced.

Shortly after came the first signs of growing Chinese activity in the region, with trade starting to increase. This process accelerated following China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, which [allowed](#) it to form new trade relationships and give it a say in a rapidly globalising world. Its accession kickstarted the remarkable growth that has seen China develop into a serious geopolitical rival to the US, and the date provides a good jumping off point for the following assessment of its activities in LAC.

The turn of the century is also a key period for Russia. Vladimir Putin was elected as president for the first time in 2000, and a global commodities boom allowed the Russian state to strengthen itself using oil revenues, and to start to look outwards once more after almost a decade of post-Soviet turmoil.

Here we examine how the changing geopolitical climate since the start of the 21st century has altered LAC relations with both Russia and China, and what might come next.

2. Russia: a spoiler, rather than a rival

Russian involvement in LAC may be less significant than it was during the days of the Soviet Union, but by focusing on several key areas Moscow has managed to maintain an [influence](#) which outweighs the relatively few [resources](#) it dedicates to the region.

Russia's commercial activity in the region is marginal and is concentrated in a handful of sectors. Trade with the region may have [grown](#) 44% from 2006–2016, but it reached a total of just US\$44bn at the end of that period. As Figure 1 shows, this pales into insignificance compared to both US and China trade with LAC. In addition, around 50% of trade went to Brazil and Mexico, with [Argentina](#) also an important partner. Russia is a major [purchaser](#) of agricultural goods, including meat from Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Going the other way, many Latin American nations are reliant on Russian [agricultural](#) fertilisers. In March, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay pushed for fertilisers to be [excluded](#) from Western sanctions on Russia due to the invasion of Ukraine, underlining the benefits of heavy involvement in crucial economic sectors for Moscow.

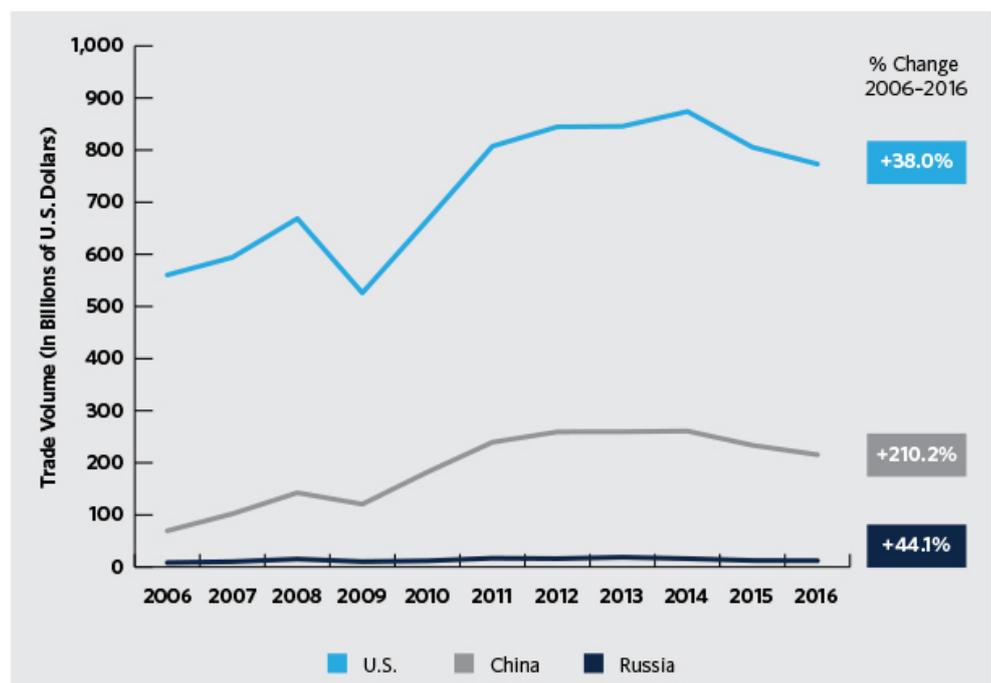
The oil and gas sector has also been an [important](#) avenue for investment, as Russian firms can use the expertise developed in their domestic industry. Rosneft has [played](#) a key role in Venezuela, while other Russian firms such as Gazprom, Lukoil, and

TNK have also invested in Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia. [Russian](#) mining firms have also been involved in Venezuela's gold industry, nickel mining in [Guatemala](#), and bauxite mining in Guyana and Jamaica.

Interestingly, Russian nuclear [energy](#) firm Rosatom has been active in the region, signing agreements with Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and [Nicaragua](#) in recent years. However only one project of note has come to fruition to date: the building of a research [reactor](#) in El Alto, Bolivia. Other interests include the GLONASS satellite system, which has a number of users in LAC as well as ground stations in Brazil and Nicaragua.

Russia's involvement in the region has been limited by its own economic difficulties during the 2010s, as the country was hit hard by the 2008 financial crash, and its continued economic activity in LAC will be affected by sanctions due to the invasion of Ukraine. LAC countries have been reluctant to take sides over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, [perhaps](#) given a history of non-alignment and the experience of sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela. But even if regional governments decide to continue trading with Moscow, sanctions make it difficult to do so. Damage to the Russian economy caused by sanctions will also constrain Moscow's ability to devote already limited [resources](#) to LAC countries.

Figure 1:
Russia, US and China
total trade with LAC
(2006–2016)





3. Russian diplomacy

In terms of diplomacy, Russia's main focus in LAC is relations with [Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela](#), anti-US regimes which look to Moscow to counterbalance hostile [relations](#) with the US. The Kremlin has offered debt relief and diplomatic support as these countries become increasingly isolated on the world stage. Deputy Prime Minister [Yuri Borisov's](#) tour of the three nations in mid-February, in the run up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, showed the continued strength of these relations.

Russia is no longer trying to export an alternative system of governance to Latin America, but it is keen to present itself as an ally to those who want to develop an alternative to US hegemony throughout the region. In February, Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez declared that his country should end its "[dependence](#)" on the US and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while offering itself to Russia as a "[gateway](#)" to LAC, demonstrating the potential for such an approach. This is made easier due to historical relationships built during the Cold War, which has left some nostalgic views of Moscow among older officials and politicians, particularly those who benefited from scholarships or training programmes in the Soviet Union.

"Russia, across the region, has been quite successful in ensuring that the Western attempts to isolate Russia diplomatically and economically have not been successful on a global scale," Oliver Stuenkel, an associate professor at the School of International Relations, Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV), told

a Canning Conversations event at the beginning of May. "In a way I think Russia has quite an easy task at hand in Latin America because basically all it wants is to make sure that these countries continue to utilise and preserve ties to Moscow to better manage their highly asymmetric ties to Washington," he added.

Receptiveness to the Russian view of the world has been boosted by the steady expansion of Kremlin-[controlled](#) media outlets in LAC. Across the region, [audiences](#) can access state broadcaster RT, and RT Spanish has built a following of millions since launching in 2009. "They have really a very professional presence on the internet," said Sandra Weiss of the International Politics and Society Journal during the Canning Conversations event, adding that RT is considered a serious news agency in the region, rather than a propaganda platform. In addition, the Sputnik news agency launched its own Spanish-language output in 2014.

Russia also worked hard to project soft power in the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, making commitments to send its Sputnik vaccines to LAC. While they were the first [vaccines](#) to arrive in Argentina, Paraguay, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador, Russia has struggled to deliver on its promises and has faced some doubts over the [quality](#) of the vaccines. For example, [Guatemala](#) cancelled Sputnik imports in July 2021 after receiving just 550,000 doses of 8m ordered.

4. Russian security engagement

In terms of security engagement, Russia continues to [leverage](#) ties built during the Cold War. Many countries in the region bought Soviet-era weapons systems, which makes it easier to sell upgrades, and prices tend to be lower than the US-made equivalent. Arms sales and servicing provide opportunities to develop security relationships, with Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela the main buyers. Peru has also been an important client due to arms [purchases](#) made in the wake of the 1968 leftist military coup.

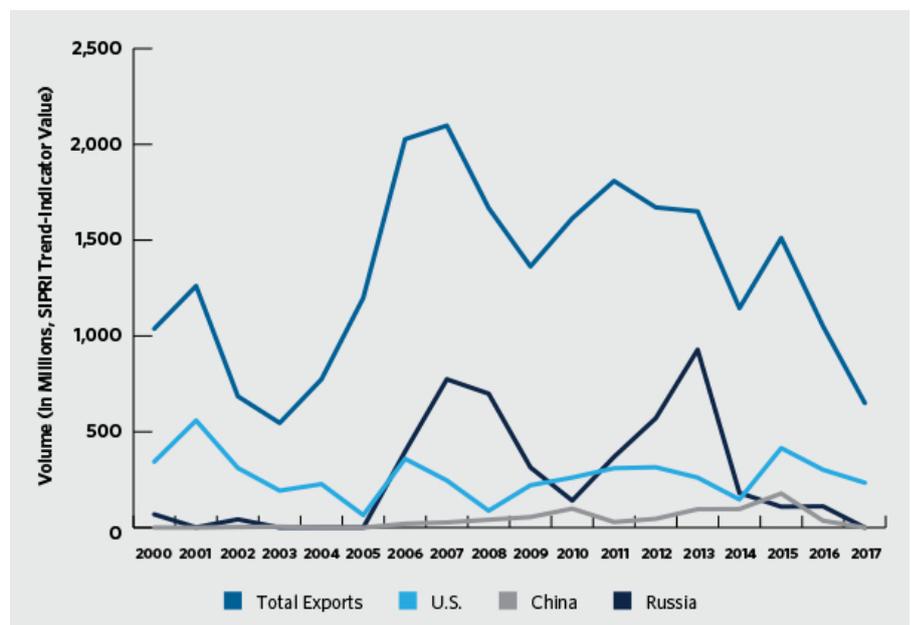
Venezuela bought more than US\$11bn of [Russian](#) military hardware in the last [20 years](#), starting under the leadership of former President Hugo Chavez, including advanced S-300 surface-to-air missiles and Su-30 fighter jets. Russia has also sold or donated T-72 tanks, TIGR armoured vehicles and other equipment to Nicaragua, and it has helped modernise Cuba's military by writing off US\$30bn in debt and providing credit for new equipment. It also signed a 2016–2020 defence modernisation programme with Havana. In the region more widely military helicopters are an area of particular [success](#) for Russia, with more than 400 legacy aircraft in use in the region and Russian manufacturers garnering 42% of new sales.

However, as Figure 2 shows, in recent years Russian arms sales to the region have [dropped](#), and from 2015–2019 just [0.8%](#) of Russia's total sales went to LAC countries. This is due in part to an economic

crisis in Venezuela, constrained military spending in LAC after the end of the commodities boom, and the [growth](#) of alternative suppliers such as China, who can offer cheaper equipment. For example, Chinese companies have had increasing success selling to Venezuela, a key Russian market, and recently won a bid to replace Russian truck-mounted rocket launchers used by the [Peruvian](#) military. Another factor is a change in LAC governments, with Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro ending the country's previously [expressed](#) interest in the Pantsir S-1 missile system following his election in 2018.

Beyond arms sales and servicing, Russia has provided military and intelligence [support](#) including opening a police counter-narcotics [training](#) centre in Nicaragua in 2017 and [training](#) Nicaraguan troops. Its forces have [carried](#) out joint military exercises with Venezuelan counterparts, who also regularly [attend](#) the annual International Army Games military exercise organised by Russia's Ministry of Defence. In mid-January, as Moscow prepared to invade Ukraine, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov hinted at the [possibility](#) of deploying Russian troops to Venezuela and Cuba, following on from the deployment of nuclear-capable bombers in 2008, 2013, and 2018. And, in February, Moscow signed an [agreement](#) to strengthen military cooperation with Caracas. While the Kremlin has denied any links to their activities, Russian [mercenaries](#) from the Wagner Group have also been deployed to Venezuela.

Figure 2:
Arms exports to LAC countries 2000–2017



5. China: a rapid rise

At the turn of the century China had only a [marginal](#) involvement in LAC, but the situation has evolved rapidly since China's rapid economic growth fuelled a commodities boom which majorly benefited LAC exports, and helped to [reduce](#) the impacts of the 2008 financial crisis in the region.

Economic [interests](#) were the first stage of Beijing's strategy, as reflected in China's first policy paper on LAC in 2008, with Beijing looking to secure access to raw materials and agricultural goods; establish new markets for exports; and seek investment opportunities. This stems in part from a lack of environmental regulations which led to air, water, and soil pollution during China's period of industrialisation, limiting the use of arable land and Beijing's ability to feed its population. More recently, a booming middle class in China has increased demand for certain agricultural products. Trade remained resilient [during](#) the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing China's importance to the regional economy.

In 2000, trade with China [accounted](#) for less than 2% of the regional total, but by 2035 it could reach 25%. This means the value of trade is expected to reach more than US\$700bn in 2035, or more than double the total in 2020. China is now the top trading partner for Brazil, Chile, Peru, Argentina, and Uruguay, and the second-largest for a raft of other nations. However LAC-China exports continue to be [dominated](#) by a handful of goods, with soybeans and other oilseeds; crude petroleum oil; copper ores and concentrates; iron ores and concentrates; and



In 2000, trade with China accounted for less than 2% of the regional total, but by 2035 it could reach 25%.

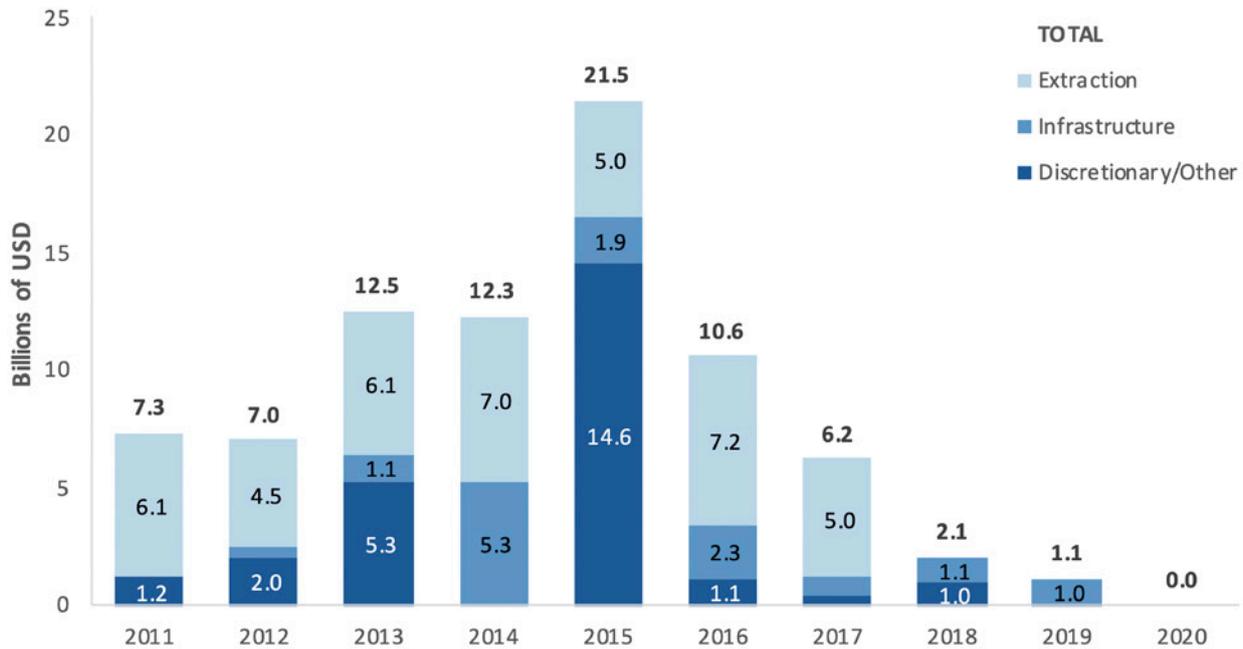
refined copper making up almost 70% of the total from 2015–2019. In addition, as Figure 3 shows, just a few countries provide most of the exports.

China's increasing economic might meant that Beijing started to make loans and investments in LAC. China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have also made significant investments, particularly in critical infrastructure such as electricity generation and transmission. For example in 2020, [Chinese](#) firms China Three Gorges and State Grid Corporation bought US\$6.5bn in assets from Sempra Energy in Chile and Peru, out of a total US\$7bn in mergers and acquisitions that year. Overall, Chinese companies have invested more than [\\$160bn](#) in LAC, and China's two policy banks, China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of China (ExImBank), have lent [US\\$136bn](#). As Figure 4 shows (on the following page), lending for extractive and infrastructure projects dominates, but overall lending has steadily declined from a peak of US\$21.5bn in 2015.

Figure 3: Top LAC-China exports, 2015–2019

Commodity	Share of LAC-China Exports	Top source countries
Soybeans, other oilseeds	20.6%	87% Brazil, 12% Argentina
Crude petroleum oil	16.2%	51% Brazil, 31% Venezuela, 13% Colombia
Copper ores, concentrates	14.6%	47% Chile, 41% Peru
Iron ores, concentrates	10.1%	88% Brazil
Copper	8.5%	82% Chile, 10% Peru
Total, top 5	69.9%	51% Brazil, 20% Chile, 11% Peru, 8% Venezuela

Figure 4: CDB and ExImBabk lending to LAC governments, 2011-2020



Chinese President Xi Jinping’s flagship foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has also become increasingly important in recent years after a slow start to life in the region. In 2018 [Panama](#) became the first LAC nation to sign onto the BRI, which aims to improve infrastructure connectivity, and since then the involvement of Chinese companies in logistics, electricity, and construction centres around the strategically important Panama Canal has raised concerns in the US. However the attraction of the BRI is obvious in a region in which a serious [infrastructure](#) gap is seen as a major drag on economic performance.

A similar situation has arisen in the telecoms sector, where US officials have tried to highlight the risks of allowing Chinese firm [Huawei](#) to be involved in developing 5G connectivity due to security concerns. However Huawei has been involved in the region for [around](#) 20 years, and in 2014 the image of the US was severely [damaged](#) by revelations that its security agencies ran a surveillance programme throughout LAC.

In general, there has so far been less resistance to Chinese investment than in some other parts of the world, as LAC governments know they need to seek foreign cash to carry out significant projects.



There has been less resistance to Chinese investment in LAC than in some other parts of the world.



Beijing's policy of non-intervention in domestic politics makes it an easier partner for some.

6. Chinese diplomacy

China has worked with LAC governments from across the political spectrum, reflecting the primacy of its commercial activities. In addition, Beijing maintains a policy of non-intervention in domestic politics, which makes it an easier partner for LAC leaders who come in for criticism from the US on topics such as human rights and corruption.

However, as economic ties became stronger, China began to focus on its [discourse](#) power strategy. In 2014 it established the China-CELAC forum, which aims to deepen economic, security, political, and diplomatic cooperation, and it upgraded agreements with a number of LAC nations. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) has also been part of China's efforts to convince LAC nations to end diplomatic ties with Taiwan and support China's claim to the island, which have been increasingly successful as Beijing has been able to offer significant sweeteners. Costa Rica switched in 2007, Panama did so in 2017, and [El Salvador](#) and the Dominican Republic in 2018, followed by Nicaragua in December 2021. After switching allegiances each country has received promises of [funding](#) for development projects, such as sports stadiums, as well as scholarships, student trips to China, and memorandums of understanding which boost business with Beijing.

Cultural exchanges are also helping to boost China's standing among a new generation of opinion leaders in LAC, increasing receptiveness to Beijing's models of global governance and internet governance. China has also made increasing efforts to engage

local, state, and federal officials in LAC, using its developing network of local ties to spread [positive messages](#) about China. One recent example of the effectiveness of this approach is the establishment of a Sinovac Covid-19 vaccine production facility in the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo, which was achieved through negotiations with state authorities despite Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's pledge not to buy Chinese vaccines.

Vaccines allowed China to [strengthen](#) ties with a number of LAC countries during the pandemic, delivering Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines to the region [before](#) Western vaccines arrived. The speed of response and competitive prices helped boost Beijing's image initially, but Western vaccines have since [gained](#) ground thanks to a greater number of donations and accusations that Chinese sales came with pressure to cut ties with Taiwan or other conditions.

In addition to diplomatic outreach, China has been investing in Spanish- and Portuguese-language arms of its state media [corporations](#). Xinhua Español is the main Spanish-language state media outlet, while People's Daily and CGTN also produce content in local languages. These outlets supply content to regional media companies such as Agência Brasil, Granma (Cuba), La Tercera (Chile), and teleSUR (Venezuela). A December 2021 agreement between CGTN and 30 LAC organisations is designed to deepen cooperation, allowing Beijing greater scope to push positive messages about China.

7. Chinese security engagement

China does not have the same historic security ties to LAC as Russia, but its defence engagement in the region has been enabled by its booming economic engagement. Its growing importance is highlighted by Beijing's 2008 and 2016 policy whitepapers which [state](#) that China wants to promote military cooperation with the region.

China is a significant supplier of [military](#) goods to certain countries, with Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina its most important clients in recent years, but it has also sold weapons systems to Peru and a patrol vessel to Trinidad and Tobago. As mentioned previously, Chinese companies have made some inroads into Russia's market share of the arms trade in the region. Important deals

include [K-8 fighter](#) jets sold to Venezuela, which has bought more than [US\\$615m](#) in weapons in the last 10 years, and H-425/2-9 helicopters to [Bolivia](#), while [Argentina](#) has allocated funding to acquire the FC-1/JF-17 fighter jet, which would be the most advanced aircraft China has sold to the region if the deal goes through. In addition, China has [gifted](#) less high-tech equipment such as trucks to militaries and police forces in a number of countries, helping to build and maintain relationships. These interactions all help China to improve the quality and [functionality](#) of its military equipment in different environments.

Chinese forces have made regular trips to the [region](#), including three visits by the hospital ship Peace Arc in 2011, 2015, and 2018-19. Chinese military police were also part of the MINISTUH peacekeeping operation in Haiti for eight years, and a small number of troops have taken part in training courses at elite institutions such as the Lanceros special forces course in Colombia and the jungle [warfare](#) course in Brazil. Military officials regularly visit countries with which China has diplomatic relations, and officials from those countries also travel to China for training and education. There is also a high-level [defence](#) forum within CELAC, and China participates in the International Army Games alongside Russia and Venezuela.

China's increasingly extensive engagement with Latin American militaries should be understood within the context of a much larger and even more expansive public diplomacy initiative, involving a tangled web of overlapping interactions and a kaleidoscopic cast of characters. It is also a critical feature of the Belt and Road Initiative, which though often considered to be an infrastructure platform, is, in actuality, dedicated to building connectivity in many forms, including through people-to-people ties.

Interestingly, Chinese law enforcement has carried out [joint](#) operations with regional allies against Chinese criminal groups operating in LAC, such as the Pi Xiu [triad](#) in Argentina. However China has avoided formal military [alliances](#), and even avoided speaking out in support of anti-US regimes such as Venezuela, preferring to quietly support them financially. As such there is no prescribed division between LAC countries that engage with the US and those that engage with China, perhaps reflecting once again the primacy of commercial concerns.



Chinese engagement with LAC militaries is a critical feature of the BRI.



Russia and China have so far managed not to step on each other's toes in LAC.

8. Conclusion

As detailed above, Russia and China have very different relations with LAC countries. While Russia is limited commercially, it uses its small footprint in the region to support a handful of anti-US regimes and provide a diplomatic counterweight in international forums. On the other hand, China prioritises its vast and growing commercial interests, working with governments of all stripes and offering only quiet backing for anti-US forces such as Venezuela. However, these differing approaches can be complementary for the two nations, as Chinese [money](#) provides breathing space for these regimes to engage in more provocative activities alongside Russia. While it may appear that Russian and Chinese companies are competing for oil and gas contracts or arms sales, so far the two allies have managed not to step on each other's toes in the region.

Moving forward the approach of both nations looks set to continue along the same lines, although Russia's economic activities may be further constrained by Western sanctions due to the invasion of Ukraine. Diplomatically, Russia may target Bolivia's President Luis Arce, whose predecessor Evo Morales, of the MAS political party, had strong relations with Moscow, according to Maximilian Hess, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He told the Canning Conversations event: "Russia will continue to try to look for political ground where it can gain it". However, he added, in terms of security engagement, Russia's plans will remain fairly limited. "I don't see any major potential expansion," he said.

China will continue to prioritise economic activities, but these will evolve to take in new sectors, argued Margaret Myers, Director, Asia & Latin America Program, Inter-American Dialogue, during a Canning Insights session on China and Latin America in April. "All in all China would seem exceedingly well positioned to continue competing in sectors of critical interest to Latin America and the Caribbean in the coming years, including in those sectors – digital economy, green economy, energy transition– that are seen by Latin American governments and constituents as critical to the region's economic growth," said Myers.

For Robert Soutar, managing editor of *Diálogo Chino*, an independent journalism platform that focuses on sustainable development and the China-Latin America relationship, Beijing will want to secure a new set of raw materials, such as lithium and cobalt, for the green energy transition. "Climate will increasingly determine, I would argue, the economic and political engagement with the region," he said.



Economic ripples of Russia's invasion of Ukraine are now spreading to LAC.

Peter Lu, a partner at law firm Baker McKenzie, believes that the focus on infrastructure investment will continue, and there will also be greater interest in working in warehousing and logistics for the agriculture sector. Lu also predicts that Chinese fintech companies will move into LAC, and there will be more investment in utilities and renewable energies.

With the economic ripples of Russia's invasion of Ukraine now spreading to LAC so soon after the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic, regional governments are even keener than before to secure investment and trade deals. This means that US warnings about the risks of Chinese involvement in LAC do not resonate as much as policymakers in Washington might expect, said Tatiana Prazeres, a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for China and Globalisation in Beijing. "The region tends to be very pragmatic, very aware of its economic needs and the opportunities that China is offering," said Prazeres, which means that the US and its allies need to offer appealing alternatives if they want to slow China's advance.

As things stand the prospects are dim, given US disengagement from LAC under former President Donald Trump (2017-2021). The Summit of the Americas (6-10 June) has provided an opportunity for President Joe Biden to set out a new vision for US engagement with the region, with an official White House statement promising to "push back against the threats to our democracies by fortifying democratic institutions, investing in civil society, strengthening independent media, and following through on a regional digital transformation that is transparent and equitable." But US policymakers need to realise that investment, not ideological commitments to democracy or human rights, is the most important factor for LAC leaders.

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