Linking Latin America and the Pacific: A Strategy for the Long Term

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Introduction

The Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) strategic guidance—“Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense”—is intended as a guide for the joint force of 2020 and the nation’s defense community as a whole. A key pillar of this guidance is a new emphasis on the Asia–Pacific region, with special attention paid to China’s role as a rising global power. This “rebalance” of priorities toward Asia and—to a certain extent—away from the Middle East is an understandable strategic response toward a nation that has the potential to eventually rival and challenge U.S. global presence. However, the United States could be better served in this regard by expanding its scope and considering the Pacific as defined by the ocean rather than just Asia, even at the risk of further complicating an already complicated strategic picture. An Asia–Pacific focus ignores the North, Central and South American nations that are also part of the Pacific and will be (or already are) theaters for U.S.–China competition. By connecting Western Hemisphere nations, especially in Latin America, with the Asia–Pacific region, the United States can form a broader, globally relevant, long-term strategic plan that better addresses the diverse security picture vis-à-vis the United States, China and the world.

The New Strategic Guidance

DoD’s strategic guidance is chiefly a military document that outlines roles and missions for the joint force. However, it specifically mentions the connection between security and economy. This “securitization of economy” is only briefly highlighted but provides a hint of the complex global modeling required for true strategic development. One recurring issue for the United States is that its defense apparatus has divided the world primarily into self-contained geographic combatant commands. The combatant command model has served the United States fairly well in its recent conflicts, which have been regionally contained. Developing a strategy that addresses another world power must cut across the organizational inertia and stovepiping that define DoD. In that context, a rebalance toward the Asia–Pacific region can be accomplished through increasing the resources of the appropriate command—in this case U.S. Pacific Command. Unfortunately, doing so takes resources from other commands and makes it difficult for the United States to address cross-regional and cross-command issues that accompany the pairing of global economics and security.

The strategic guidance mentions Latin America only once, in a shared sentence with Africa. The guidance references the United States becoming the security partner of choice for Latin American nations and using low-cost, rotational forces with small footprints to do so. On one hand, that Latin America gets such little focus is a good thing; the region is not beset by the costly and recurring issues of the Middle East or by the latent tensions in Asia. On the other hand, it signals a lack of interest in a region that is increasingly influencing American domestic
and international security. Further, the strategic guidance misses an opportunity to disaggregate Latin America and focus more on the specific needs and opportunities within specific countries than on the few nations with the largest problems. The concepts of America’s backyard and benign neglect are outdated; now is the time to use the new Pacific focus to craft relevant security strategy for both China and Latin America—the latter is already a proving ground for Chinese power expansion and experimentation.

**Latin America as Part of the Pacific**

The first positive for expanding the Pacific focus to include Latin America is that it will highlight the difference between the efficacy of state power of arms and state power of money. The United States is the best in the world at projecting military power. That capability has the potential to reassure its allies in the Asia–Pacific region that their physical security is assured and to counter any military power China may project into the region. But how is the United States countering the financial power being projected around the globe? Chinese economic presence in Latin America has surged significantly over the past decade while U.S. stakes have declined—and although the United States remains the top trading partner, that may not be the case for much longer. Moreover, China employs financial tools that the United States cannot or will not duplicate, such as large subsidized-interest loans to semi-government corporations. An example is the meteoric rise of Chinese telecom Huawei in Latin America; not only does Huawei have access to favorable loans via the China Development Bank that dwarf those available by their largest competitor, Ericsson, but Huawei itself has an opaque organization that has been linked to government/military espionage activities. Such government-linked financial incentives and cash availability make China an attractive business partner for cash-strapped developing nations. China’s negative reaction to assertive military power in its regional waters is well known and objectively understandable; the United States must adopt a similar attitude toward Chinese advancements in Latin America and prevent economic wedges from joining the existing political wedges between the United States and Latin America.

Related to the power of money is the United States’ express intent to be the security partner of choice for Latin America. The defense guidance links security partnerships to freedom, stability and prosperity. The underlying assumption is that being a close security partner will result in close economic partnerships; there is long-term risk involved in such an assumption. The United States may very well end up with close security and economic ties such as it enjoys with Japan. Alternatively, U.S. security subsidization might result in exploitation by China; the United States may underwrite the security costs while the host nations and China enhance their fiscal partnerships—as Saudi Arabia is doing. However, one mechanism for security partnerships that the strategic guidance gets right is the small-footprint, rotational-force model. Latin American militaries are, for the most part, comparatively small in the global scheme. The historical lack of interstate conflict and a firm anti-interventionist streak mean Latin America will most likely resist larger military integration efforts such as the U.S. relationships with Europe and South Korea. Accordingly, small force rotations are a good fit; the United States just needs to ensure that such rotations are treated as priority missions and not relegated to block-checking status.

Including Latin America in the broader concept of the Pacific will also highlight the vulnerabilities of another traditional mechanism of security cooperation—foreign military sales. An expanded view of the Pacific should show the United States that the purchasing power of most of the Asia–Pacific partners is similar to that of Latin America; although there are some big spenders in each region, most potential partners have more modest budgets. As U.S. weapons and equipment take longer to develop and become significantly more expensive, U.S. allies simply will not be able to afford them. Even past-generation equipment is not without expense and difficulty—a potential U.S. F-18 fighter jet purchase agreement by Brazil has been held up for years in part by a combination of cost and proprietary technical transfer issues. The United States should view this lengthy and difficult process as the norm for emerging allies and develop a sales scheme that plays more to the fiscal realities and abilities of the majority of partner nations.

Ultimately, by contextualizing Asia–Pacific allies with Latin American ones, the United States can build a China security strategy that can survive in the long term and that is granular enough to address Latin America’s requirements and goals. To the first point, China has an advantage over the United States in that its authoritarian government has a remarkable ability to “muddle through” crisis and sustain a consistent message and vision across political cycles. The United States needs its own long-term strategy to manage China’s rise. An inclusive model
of the Pacific can prevent strategic tunnel vision that aligns only with the physical country and nearby regions of China—in other words, only with the geographic combatant command. The goal is for the United States to stop thinking about China in a regional context and start thinking about it in a global one. A trans- or bi-regional strategy could be more suitable for the long term because it would bring more players (both international and bureaucratic) to the table and decrease the appearance of favoring one region at the expense of all others. Plus, a strategy that sufficiently connects Latin America and the Asia–Pacific region could better resist the volatile political climate within the United States that calls for the reduction or expansion of presence in any given region at varying times since China will be important for decades to come.13

The U.S. strategy toward the Pacific must be nuanced and specific enough to include all nations and be relevant to their individual situations. The United States has a fairly fine-tuned strategy with some Pacific nations already—chiefly Japan and South Korea. However, the United States is expanding its specific connections to other nations, such as Australia, the Philippines and Singapore. Including Pacific-side Latin American nations can capitalize on this specificity and will benefit both the United States and Latin America in several ways. First, it will force a discussion about what China’s presence in Latin America looks like now, what it will look like in the future and what the reciprocal relationship will be—in terms of both economics and security. The United States has an opportunity to show how what is good for China may not always be good for Latin American nations. For instance, Mexico is undercut by cheap Chinese production and Brazil is caught in a raw commodities export model that jeopardizes long-term growth.14 The United States must partner closely with Pacific nations such as Peru and Chile to ensure that they do not become raw-material breadbaskets for China’s expansion.15 The United States must be able to provide the developmental resources for these nations and help build the state-level mechanisms to protect them. China is also quietly increasing its military presence in the region as part of its strategy to increase influence in Latin America with the goal of securing natural resources.16 The United States must counter this expansion with its own tailored military relationships and by continually highlighting how China’s self-centered activities have negatively impacted other regions, such as Africa.17 The United States needs to conduct and paint itself as the responsible, long-term partner of choice.

The second benefit is a subset of the United States countering Chinese military presence in Latin America. By taking a nation-by-nation approach, the United States can properly contextualize and tailor its military efforts with Latin America. This is an opportunity for the United States to focus on the non-kinetic aspects of its new defense guidance. Mexico and Colombia may very well need continued hard-power-related resourcing and support from the United States; however, not every nation is consumed by a counternarcotics campaign. The humanitarian relief/rescue, disaster response, capacity building and even cybersecurity requirements are just as valid for South and Central American nations.18 A tailored approach will let the United States leverage its military as an institution rather than just as a force. The United States military has levels of expertise, experience and professionalism in many functional areas—such as logistics or personnel—that China cannot match. More joint training exercises, more officer embedding and exchanges, more professional education and more noncombat operations focus (both in equipping/sales and training) will show U.S. allies that the United States takes seriously the nuances of each nation and will force the United States to pay more than lip service to the non-counterterror aspects of its strategic guidance. By being an attentive and responsive security partner that demonstrates a valuation of relationships over material, the United States can contrast itself to China in terms of reliability, longevity and long-term aims for each nation.

Conclusion

The United States’ strategic focus on the Asia–Pacific region in general and on China in particular is appropriate and understandable in the current security environment. However, a broader and more comprehensive strategy that considers the Pacific Latin American nations along with those of Asia is more suited to managing a rising global power such as China. An inclusive Pacific vision will force the United States and its Latin American partners to address long-term issues about Chinese presence and influence in the region. The United States has an opportunity to adopt a relevant, granular strategy that fits the individual needs of its southern partners while countering advancements that would benefit only China. The Pacific is more than just a single region or even an ocean; it is a network of interactions and relationships full of potential value and risk. If the United States can avoid strategic tunnel vision, it can ensure that it and its Asia–Pacific and Latin American partners build lasting, effective relationships that can benefit all.

2 There are three so-called functional combatant commands—Strategic Command, Transportation Command and Special Operations Command—that conduct worldwide operations; however, these commands are enablers for the geographic combatant commands that control the employment of forces in a given region.

3 Ibid., p. 3.


7 For elaboration, see: David Lai, The United States and China in a Power Transition (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), pp. 97–152.


12 Remarks of Dr. David Lai in his presentation “Potential Future U.S.–China Relations,” part of The Johns Hopkins University/Applied Physics Laboratory Rethinking Series, 28 March 2012, Crystal City, VA.

13 For example, two years ago both the Sustainable Defense Task Force and the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility called for the reduction of force structure in Europe and Asia as part of deficit reduction plan; currently the United States is expanding its force structure in Asia. To note, the final report of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility stayed away from specific reductions for the Department of Defense; however, the idea of reduction of force structure in Asia can be found in the “$200 Billion in Illustrative Savings” proposal released in November 2010, http://www.fiscalcommission.gov/sites/fiscalcommission.gov/files/documents/Illustrative_List_11.10.2010.pdf; Sustainable Defense Task Force final report is available at http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/1006SDTFReport.pdf.


15 Both Chile and Peru have extensive natural resources, such as copper and lithium, which are already the target of substantial Chinese investment. See Barbara Kotschwar, Theodore H. Moran and Julia Muir, “Chinese Investment in Latin American Resources: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” Peterson Institute for International Economics, February 2012, p. 6, http://www.piie.com/publications/wp/wp12-3.pdf.


18 In fact, China recognizes this and has conducted humanitarian exercises with Peru, which could put the United States in a difficult position in the event of a disaster while also setting a precedent for Chinese intervention and expanded military presence. See Ellis, China–Latin America Military Engagement, p. 20.