

SOF Can Help Win the Competition for Influence in South America

Description

The United States faces growing challenges from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in South America, and US Special Operations Forces (SOF) are often at the center of this competition. The [National Security Strategy](#) states, "Recognizing the direct link between the region's prosperity and security and that of our own, it is vital for the United States to revitalize our partnerships to build and preserve economic resilience, democratic stability, and citizen security within the hemisphere, and no region impacts the United States more directly than the Western Hemisphere." SOF are uniquely suited to build partnerships towards these ends and as a counter to the malign influence of the PRC in America's backyard.

The countries of South America face an array of security, environmental, legal, and governmental challenges. These include countering [transnational criminal organizations](#) engaged in various malign activities and linked to violent extremist groups, which pose threats to both the region and the United States. [Humanitarian crises](#), meanwhile, necessitate assistance and relief efforts from the United States and its partners. Environmental degradation affects the region's natural resources, ecosystems, and, consequently, the wellbeing and security of its populations. [Land erosion](#), a direct consequence of deforestation, affects more than 60% of South America's soil and threatens the continent's food security. Finally, the [government-perpetuated human rights violations and other abuses](#) threaten the dignity and rights of the people in the region and can have far-reaching consequences to democracy and governance.

SOF must be aware of the complex and dynamic situation in South America, especially the threats and challenges facing the region, along with the PRC's aggressive campaign for influence and its reliance on the region for critical resources. This includes SOF working with South American partners to counter PRC malign activities that have the potential to erode US influence; challenge democratic values and norms; undermine human rights and the rule of law; exacerbate social and economic problems; fuel corruption and criminality; increase regional tensions and conflicts; and threaten U.S. allies and partners in the region—all which have implications for the security and stability of the region.

The United States has a long history of engagement in South America, grounded in shared interests, democracy, human rights, rule of law, security, prosperity, and social inclusion. This includes

cooperation on various regional and global issues, such as counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, climate change, health, migration, and humanitarian assistance. However, there is also a deep distrust in some areas towards the United States due to its [legacy of interventionist policies](#) and actions. Past interference in domestic affairs and perceived disregard for sovereignty have contributed to skepticism and caution regarding the United States. The PRC exploits these perceptions using the same method it uses in [Africa](#): amplifying propaganda beneath a veneer of grassroots legitimacy to create a narrative that highlights the ineffectiveness of democracy, criticizes the United States as hypocritical, and promotes the PRC.

Beyond proximity and shared history, South America is strategically important for the United States. The region accounts for [\\$740 billion in annual trade](#), more than double that of the United States's single largest trading partner, Canada; [contains 31% of the world's freshwater](#); [has the world's largest oil reserves](#); and is home to the [environmentally crucial Amazon rainforest](#). In 2022, [Colombia was the fifth-largest source of U.S. crude oil at 4%](#) of total imports, with Saudi Arabia being 7% for perspective. South America holds [66% of the world's lithium reserves](#), mostly in brine deposits in Chile and Argentina. From powering satellites to drones to electric vehicles, [the demand for lithium will increase](#) based on the trend of emerging technology and capabilities.

The PRC's dominance over [global critical mineral supply chains](#) presents one of the United States's largest strategic vulnerabilities. For example, two of the world's largest lithium miners, Ganfeng and Tianqi, are Chinese, and the PRC is the largest investor in [Peru's mining sector](#), controlling seven of Peru's largest mines, all of Peru's iron production, and 25% of its copper output. The PRC is also involved in energy development in South America; PowerChina has more than [50 ongoing projects](#) across Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. The accumulation of assets affords the PRC power to [affect local prices](#) in key sectors, and provides political leverage to strongarm elected officials to support PRC positions on issues such as recognition of the PRC's claims in the South China Sea or the implementation of "safe city" projects. [Safe city initiatives](#) provide governments with surveillance capacity to fight crime in urban areas, but the data infrastructures give the PRC real-time, unfiltered access to massive amounts of data and intelligence.

In addition to the demand for critical mineral resources, the PRC is facing a food security challenge due to its limited arable land, water scarcity, environmental degradation, and population growth. As a result, the PRC has become increasingly dependent on food imports to meet its domestic demand. According to the [World Bank](#), the PRC's food imports rose from \$14.1 billion in 2000 to \$133.1 billion in 2019, making it the world's largest food importer. One of the PRC's main sources of food is South America, which has abundant natural resources and agricultural production. In 2020, the [PRC imported](#) \$34.1 billion worth of food from South America, accounting for 25.6% of its total food

imports. [Brazil was the largest supplier](#), followed by Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay.

With the importance of South America for both countries in mind, the PRC competes with the United States for influence, which threatens US interests in the region. In March 2023, the commander of U.S. Southern Command, [General Laura Richardson, testified before Congress](#), stating, “What concerns me as a combatant commander is the myriad of ways in which the PRC is spreading its malign influence, wielding its economic might, and conducting gray zone activities to expand its military and political access and influence in [South America].” • [The PRC has increased its economic, military, and diplomatic ties](#) with South American countries, especially those hostile to the United States, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua. This includes increased military cooperation and arms sales, [providing these countries with weapons, equipment, training and intelligence](#). At the same time, the PRC exploits the vulnerabilities of South American countries by offering them enticing but predatory deals that erode sovereignty, democracy, and human rights. As the largest trading partner and creditor of many South American countries, the PRC has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure projects under its [Belt and Road Initiative](#), such as ports, railways, roads, dams, and power plants. The deep-water ports are dual use and could provide naval basing options for the PRC in the future.

The PRC also seeks to expand its [soft-power and cultural influence](#) through media, education, and cultural exchanges. [Richardson warned](#), “The PRC engages in an aggressive information operations campaign that attempts to depict the PRC as a more trustworthy partner than the US, and spreads disinformation about the US in the region.” • The PRC is also increasing its relationship with Russia, which likewise seeks to undermine US leadership and credibility [by supporting anti-American regimes and spreading disinformation](#), campaigns the [PRC is happy to amplify](#). As part of these efforts, the PRC has [launched diplomatic initiatives](#) such as the Forum on China-Latin America Cooperation, which aims to enhance cooperation and coordination on various issues such as trade, investment, health, education, and climate change. This includes efforts [to shape public opinion and perception on issues such as COVID-19 and Taiwan](#), using state-owned media outlets, social media platforms, and think-tanks while both harassing and recruiting local journalists. [The PRC also promotes cultural exchanges to spread their language and values](#), such as through its Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and tourism.

While [some view](#) the PRC’s growing presence and influence in South America as a threat, [others argue](#) that not all PRC activity is malign and that there are potential benefits for the region. For instance, PRC investment in South America has contributed to the improvement of infrastructure, energy, and connectivity, which are essential for the region’s economic and social development. [According to the International Monetary Fund](#), the PRC’s overseas investment has tilted toward

sectors where the PRC has a comparative advantage in the global markets, such as telecommunications, transportation, and renewable energy. Moreover, PRC trade with South America has provided the region with a stable source of income and market diversification, especially for its exports of commodities and agricultural products. While it is true that some PRC activity in the region has been beneficial to specific countries, which are essential for the region's economic and social development, there are concerns that the PRC is using these relationships to [pursue its geopolitical goals](#), including the further isolation of Taiwan, and to bolster authoritarian regimes such as those in Cuba and Venezuela.

As the PRC attempts to create a vision of South America in line with its interest, SOF are uniquely suited to push back against the PRC and engage partners on a continuous basis to be the region's preferred partner. The [Secretary of Defense said](#), "You can't surge trust; trust is something you have to work on every day." The best way to outcompete our adversaries is to help partners deliver at the speed of relevance by improving partner nation capability, capacity, and resilience through security cooperation, intelligence sharing, exercises, and training programs while upholding democratic values to ensure malign influence and autocratic alternatives do not further take root.

"Our Joint Exercise Program continues to provide an outsized return on investment not only in building readiness but also in strengthening partnerships that allow us to counter malign influence," Richardson said during her congressional [testimony](#). A notable illustration of this dynamic is the case of Paraguay, one of only 13 countries in the world, mostly in South America and Pacific Island Countries, that still recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country. In response, [the PRC limits trade and diplomacy with Paraguay](#), just as it does with any country that recognizes Taiwan. Over the past few years, and with the promise of enhanced trade, loans, and investment, the PRC has successfully persuaded several of these countries, such as the Solomon Islands, Panama, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, to [alter their affiliations](#). The United States has sought to reassure Paraguay in the face of this pressure through persistent SOF engagement. During a recent Joint Combined Exercise for Training (JCET), the president of Paraguay personally came to the closing ceremony to present certificates to the Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha. The JCET ultimately led to the [president of Paraguay visiting](#) 7th Special Forces Group and U.S. Special Operations Command in 2023. As of this publication, Paraguay continues to recognize Taiwan and its bilateral trade with the United States has [increased since 2021](#), following a period of steady decline.

Another critical aspect of SOF's value in the region is the information operations it conducts to expose the PRC's malign activities and intentions. This includes "naming and shaming" the PRC's predatory economic practices, human rights abuses, interference in domestic affairs, and attempts to undermine US leadership and alliances. As part of these operations, SOF support public

diplomacy initiatives that counter PRC disinformation campaigns on issues like COVID-19 and Taiwan, while emphasizing the contributions made by the United States to the region's health, security, and development.

Furthermore, SOF play a pivotal role in supporting other US government agencies' endeavors to impose costs on PRC actions that threaten regional security and sovereignty. This support involves collaborating on various measures, including sanctions, diplomatic pressure, legal actions, and cyber operations. [An example](#) of this support is assisting law enforcement agencies to disrupt the PRC's illicit activities, including money laundering, smuggling, and trafficking. By partnering with the interagency to counter these activities, SOF contribute to creating a bulwark against the PRC's influence in South America, aligning with broader U.S. strategic objectives.

The PRC's growing presence and influence in South America presents many challenges, including threats of eroding democratic values, undermining sovereignty, and advancing geopolitical goals against the interests of the United States. The PRC's economic engagements, coupled with its aggressive information campaigns and military cooperation, aim to reshape the regional landscape in its favor. With unique capabilities, competencies, and agility, SOF can foster trust, build generational partnerships, and bolster the capacity of regional partners towards achieving regional objectives in line with US national strategy, while countering the PRC's malign influence in South America.

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Main image: A member of the Special Operations Team from Colombia fires his weapon during a rifle marksmanship competition July 24 as part of Fuerzas Comando 2014 in Fort Tolemaida, Colombia. (U.S. Army)

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