

# [***China's Coming for the Western Hemisphere and We're Not Ready | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK8-X261-DY68-100N-00000-00&context=1516831)

Newsweek.com

March 18, 2024 Monday 11:17 AM EST

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**Length:** 1396 words

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**Highlight:** In the first two decades of the 21st century, China's trade with the region jumped 26-fold to $315 billion while it simultaneously enhanced influence in the technology and security domains.

**Body**

Bipartisan action is increasingly hard to come by, especially in a presidential election year. But one issue still manages to get attention on both sides of the aisle: China's growing influence right here in the Americas.

That is for good reason. In the first two decades of the 21st century, China's trade with the region jumped 26-fold to $315 billion while it simultaneously enhanced influence in the technology and security domains. China has used its economic engagement to cement access to vital natural resources, such as lithium, or to push countries in the region to loosen ties with Taiwan.

Why is this possible? For one thing, outside the dedicated public sector officials who have Latin America and the Caribbean as part of their portfolios, the United States has historically paid a problematic lack of attention to the region. That didn't bear the level of direct implications 20 years ago – when China's economic and political presence in the Americas was minimal – as it does today.

Presidential visits and action are a thermometer of U.S. prioritization. President [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has traveled to the region once since taking office in 2021, and from 2017 to 2020, then-President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/donald-trump?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) made only one visit to the region, to Argentina for the Group of 20 (G20). Biden held the inaugural Leaders' Summit of the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity in November to enhance regional competitiveness and leverage vital sectors like clean energy and semiconductors; while Trump launched América Crece (Growth in the Americas initiative) to boost sustainable economic growth by catalyzing private-sector investment. Presidential action is important but policies that can span administrations come from the power of [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

Thus, it's welcome news that senators [*Bill Cassidy*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/bill-cassidy?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) (R-LA) and [*Michael Bennet*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/michael-bennet?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) (D-CO), alongside House co-sponsors representatives Maria Salazar (R-FL) and Adriano Espaillat (D-NY) introduced the Americas Act on March 5. The bill seeks to marshal the collective resources, institutions, and international agreements of the U.S. government to incentivize investment in the hemisphere and to show our regional partners that strong ties with the United States can bring concrete support in addition to words of encouragement.

The bill proposes a much-anticipated, welcome set of policy tools—from e-governance to commerce—to advance prosperity in the hemisphere while simultaneously beginning to check China's economic ambitions. Notably, it's endorsed by House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mike Gallagher (R-WI). Among the bill's many provisions, it puts forward concrete steps to advance U.S. trade and investment in the hemisphere, including through the harmonization and cumulation of existing commercial agreements, provides for greater financing through the Development Finance Corporation, and importantly, is framed around how to nearshore industries from China.

The introduction of the Americas Act is also a welcome reminder that the situation demands not just a response, but a long-term strategy. If the United States fails to actively compete with its primary authoritarian revivals, nations in the region may continue to be persuaded to prioritize engagement with China in sectors detrimental to U.S. interests.

In a recently published [*Atlantic Council Strategy Paper*](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/how-the-united-states-can-counter-malign-chinese-and-russian-influence-in-the-western-hemisphere/), we propose what a U.S. and allied strategy for the region should look like to effectively counter malign Chinese (and Russian) influence. Latin America and the Caribbean present extensive opportunities for the United States to cultivate fruitful partnerships predicated on shared values. After Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest proportion of democratically elected governments over the past few decades. The region boats major multinational firms that play an increasingly important role in the global economy. Geostrategically, the Panama Canal continues to function as a critical transit point for U.S. and global trade.

A good strategy starts with clear goals. First, the United States and regional partners should advance security in Latin America and the Caribbean. It's the number one concern in the region. Doing so will require a multi-country approach to eliminating security threats, including reducing Chinese and [*Russian military*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/russian-military?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and intelligence activities in the region, as well as preventing their investment in sensitive national security areas. U.S. Southern Command, underfunded relative to other commands despite its focus on areas in proximity to the United States, should receive increased funding to advance its mission.

Second, the United States should work with global and regional partners to enhance prosperity across the western hemisphere. This prosperity should be built on a clear foundation: free and fair trade, anti-corruption, rule of law, and high labor and environmental standards. Both the United States and regional governments will need to be persistent in systematically de-risking economic relationships with China and Russia. In sectors that are critical to national security, there should be complete decoupling; in other areas, lesser countervailing measures or generally free trade can continue. To account for reduced Chinese and Russian commerce, and to ensure diversified, nearshored economic portfolios, the United States and its free-world allies should offer attractive and affordable alternatives for regional economic development. Here, the Americas Act is a good start.

Finally, the United States, alongside global and regional partners, should promote freedom, democracy, and human rights in the region. Advancing security and prosperity will be critical toward this end, but it will also require countering Chinese and Russian disinformation, while pressuring and containing the influence of autocratic governments in the region.

To achieve these ends, our strategy rests on several pillars. To begin, the United States needs to correct its longstanding error of laxity or inattentiveness to the region and *prioritize*. In particular, the United States must organize its national security bureaucracy and concentrate resources on competing with its authoritarian rivals in the region in terms that ultimately benefit the people of the Americas.

The United States should also *invest* in domestic and regional innovation, private enterprise, and economic competitiveness. While China is an economic power, the United States also has substantial economic might, and it should provide attractive investment alternatives to companies and projects backed by Beijing.

The United States must also compete more effectively in the information space, and it should *message* positive U.S. engagement in the region, while highlighting malign forms of Chinese and Russian influence. This will require a reinvigorated and robust public diplomacy apparatus.

Finally, the United States needs to *align* regional and global partners, building multilateral frameworks of likeminded nations that advance prosperity and common democratic values. From organizing minilateral groupings to secure supply chains to cultivating people-to-people connections via cultural exchange, there are a multitude of steps the United States can take to align partners as it competes with China and Russia in the region.

While much of the focus on strategic competition is on the geographic frontline regions of the Indo-Pacific and Europe, the reality is that it extends to the hemisphere in which America resides. Absent a strategic course correction, the United States will find itself more vulnerable close to home. That would be an unfortunate new reality with grave consequences for U.S. power projection globally.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2363735/growing-influence.jpg)

**Graphic**

Growing Influence

LUIS ACOSTA/AFP via Getty Images

Members of China's security service run next to the car of China's President Xi Jinping, as he leaves from Cocoli docks in the expanded Panama Canal, in Panama City, Panama on Dec 3, 2018.

**Load-Date:** March 18, 2024

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