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Policy Brief

China's Anxieties in Latin America

What Mobility and Knowledge Mean for US Strategy

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The capture of Nicolás Maduro by US forces in January 2026 returned Latin America to the center of US strategy and marked the sharpest expression yet of a revived Monroe Doctrine, now reframed through strategic competition with China. The instinct that followed was familiar: to identify the visible assets of Chinese influence, from ports and mines to loans and digital infrastructure, and contest them one by one. Those assets are real and they matter. China is now the principal trading partner of South America, but the more consequential shift is qualitative. Over the past decade, Chinese firms have moved from buying resources, selling goods, and lending money to owning and operating the systems Latin America runs on. The power sector shows how far this has gone. Nearly three-quarters of Chinese acquisitions in Latin America between 2017 and 2021 were in electricity, and nowhere is the result starker than in Lima, Peru, where two Chinese state-owned firms together distribute all of the capital's electricity to roughly ten million residents.[1] Infrastructure embedded this deeply cannot be dislodged on demand.

But an asset inventory shows where China is present, not who produces that presence or how much of it Beijing actually controls. Both questions start with a prior one: Who, exactly, is "China" in Latin America? The name covers the central party-state in Beijing and its diplomats, the policy banks and state enterprises, private firms, universities, and the migrants and merchants who carry the presence at street level. For all their different motives, these actors together produce what Washington experiences as Chinese influence in Latin America. Yet Beijing directs only a fraction of this activity, even as it profits from far more of it, converting commercial footholds into diplomatic leverage, diaspora networks into political access, and academic ties into influence over how China is understood.

The central party-state cannot discipline actors it does not direct, and the people who build its presence, on private ventures and state projects alike, often answer to motives of their own. The result is influence that outruns control, a shortfall that is China's most exposed flank in a hemisphere the United States still dominates. A more effective hemispheric strategy for the US should ask not only where China builds and invests, but also where China remains anxious. What does the Chinese government find hardest to manage in Latin America? China's economic ties with the region appear structurally resilient, rooted in commodity demand, export markets, and infrastructure needs. Competition among regional states and domestic elites seeking capital, technology, and political leverage gives Beijing multiple paths by which to recover from setbacks, including those driven by US pressure. The less predictable challenge lies in the people and knowledge behind the assets: the movement of Chinese nationals into and through the region, and the expertise China needs to navigate local politics, law, labor, communities, and elites. This human dimension makes physical assets defensible and durable. It is also the layer Washington has most neglected and the one where US advantages are real but perishable.

The first of China's anxieties is mobility. It concerns whether Chinese nationals can enter, work, invest, study, and build communities in a region that has long been harder for them to reach than many US analysts recognize. Until the mid-2010s, Latin America was among the most difficult developing regions for ordinary Chinese passport holders to access. The Xi Jinping era opened it up through visa facilitation, third-country visa substitution, and business expansion, but wider mobility has also generated risks that Beijing cannot fully control, including irregular migration, illicit networks, diaspora politics, and reputational damage. Inadequate knowledge is the second anxiety. Chinese officials, state-owned enterprises, and scholars have invested heavily in the region, yet they still frequently lack the local, linguistic, and political expertise needed to read its volatility. The January 2026 Maduro episode sharpened the concern. Xi Jinping's special representative for Latin American affairs, Qiu Xiaoqi, reportedly met Maduro in Caracas only hours before the capture, a sequence suggesting Beijing had been caught unawares. The shock was less economic than analytical: China's regional presence had outpaced the mobility channels and knowledge networks required to manage it.[2]

Beijing's goals in Latin America operate on two timelines. The first is structural: securing access to minerals, energy, and food supplies that China cannot reliably guarantee at home and does not want to obtain on terms set by others. The other is adaptive: finding new outlets for Chinese firms, capital, platforms, and people as China's economy slows, domestic competition intensifies, and familiar export markets become harder to penetrate. Latin America is among the most prominent Global South arenas for that outward push. Its major cities offer the kind of urban, mobile-first demand that Chinese e-commerce and fintech companies learned to serve in Southeast Asia's consumer markets, while its infrastructure gaps and resource endowments attract state-owned firms and policy capital. The same pressures that push firms outward also move people. For Chinese entrepreneurs, workers, students, and potential migrants facing narrower prospects at home, Latin America can look like a place to start again.

No single actor owns the push. The central party-state pursues strategic position and national prestige; the policy banks and state enterprises pursue returns and footholds; private firms pursue markets and ways around tariffs; migrants, students, and brokers pursue survival, status, and opportunity. These interests overlap, but they also collide. The Chinese government wants a presence that is profitable, disciplined, reputable, and strategically useful, and the collisions mean it seldom gets all four at once. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce's Venezuela guide in 2021 makes this anxiety unusually visible, warning Chinese firms about payment defaults, weak policy continuity, complex labor rules, work permit requirements, and the need for deeper research into local politics and business practices.[3] This does not mean China lacks influence. It means that Chinese influence is carried by actors whose incentives are local, commercial, and personal as much as strategic. That is why this brief begins with the politics of entry: who from China could enter Latin America, under what status, and through which networks.

MOBILITY: FROM CONTESTED ENTRY TO COMPLICATED OPENNESS

RECOGNITION, VISAS, AND THE POLITICS OF ENTRY

Entry into Latin America has been the first filter for Chinese engagement with the region. Apart from the indentured laborers of the nineteenth century, nearly every Chinese actor who hoped to invest, migrate, study, report, trade, or build political relationships in Latin America first had to get there once. That initial trip was where markets were inspected, partners met, risks assessed, and pathways into residence, work authorization, or settlement identified; once an actor was inside a country, options could widen through formal or illicit means. For the Chinese government, entry was therefore never a purely administrative matter; it set the earliest conditions under which influence, investment, knowledge, and community could be built.

The problem has deep historical roots. In the late nineteenth century, the Qing government established diplomatic and consular posts in Cuba, Mexico, and Peru to protect the more than 225,000 indentured laborers sent to Cuba and Peru and the wider overseas Chinese communities forming around them.[4] Merchants and workers continued to arrive, open businesses, and build local networks, but their visibility also bred anti-Chinese sentiment, exclusionary immigration laws, and discriminatory practice in several countries. The Republic of China inherited and expanded this consular mission: ROC diplomats acted not only as representatives of the Chinese state but as negotiators over migration, documentation, community protection, and the repeal of anti-Chinese measures. Many countries dropped explicit restrictions after the Second World War, but the ROC's accumulated expertise in migration management retained political value after 1949, when its posts continued to operate from Taiwan.

For the People's Republic of China (PRC), physical entry into Latin America was therefore contested from the start. Cuba became the first Latin American country to recognize Beijing in 1960, followed by Chile, Peru, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela in the 1970s, but many Latin American governments recognized Beijing much later, such as Costa Rica in 2007 and Panama in 2017. In countries that still recognized Taipei, PRC diplomats, journalists, and trade delegations often struggled to enter and cultivate relationships on the ground. Taiwanese diplomatic posts possessed local knowledge, consular experience, and long-standing relationships with host governments, and they could use that position to complicate PRC entry and regular presence. The "visa problem" was thus never merely about migration or tourism. It was built into the foundations of PRC–Latin America diplomacy:

Without physical entry, the PRC could not assemble the personal, political, and commercial networks that regional influence required.[5]

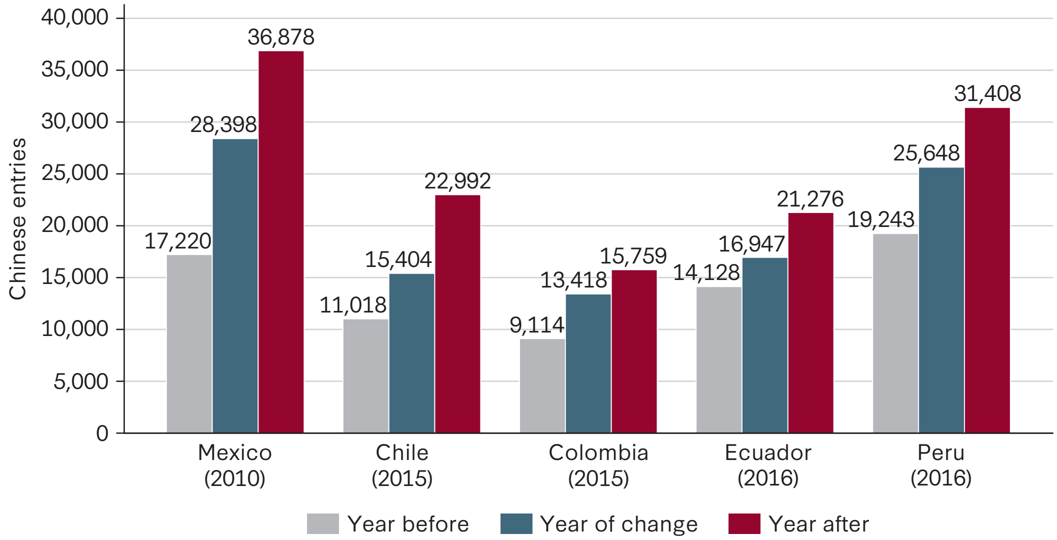
As diplomatic recognition expanded, the politics of entry did not disappear; it moved from recognition diplomacy to immigration control. From the 1980s through the 2000s, several South American countries received a rapidly growing inflow of family- and small-business migrants from China. In Venezuela, more than 120,000 Chinese migrants from Guangdong reportedly settled between 1979 and 2010, some through family networks and others through illicit channels such as forged birth certificates.[6] In Argentina, the Chinese population grew from around two thousand in 1980 to thirty thousand in 2000 and seventy thousand in 2009.[7] These communities built durable businesses and local networks, but their rapid growth also generated scrutiny over corruption, visa fraud, human trafficking, organized crime, money laundering, and extortion. Such problems never defined Chinese migration as a whole, but they shaped how Latin American officials came to view Chinese mobility.[8] So when China's economic rise produced a new generation of investors, managers, engineers, technicians, students, researchers, and private entrepreneurs trying to enter and operate in the region in the 2010s, they encountered visa systems already marked by suspicion, heavy paperwork, and reputational concerns.[9]

PRIVATE ENTERPRISE AND THE NEW DEMANDS OF MOBILITY

Latin America had rarely been a first-tier priority in Chinese foreign policy, yet the visa problem moved to the center of China's external agenda in the 2010s because mobility had become tied to the Communist Party's claims about its own governance. Officials treated the rising value of the Chinese passport as tangible proof that national rejuvenation delivered concrete benefits to ordinary citizens.[10] Latin America lent this agenda particular urgency. The region had long been unusually hard for ordinary passport holders to reach, but its governments were also more amenable to negotiation than the major developed economies were. Also, the commercial stakes were understood well before Xi and the Belt and Road Initiative: During President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's 2009 visit to China, Beijing reportedly pressed Brazil to streamline work visas for Chinese employees in order to improve the investment climate.[11]

The decisive breakthrough of the 2010s was not full visa-free entry but the rise of the US visa as a trusted intermediary credential. The mechanism was simple: A US visa gave a legitimate Chinese traveler a durable, recognized document, and it gave Latin American governments confidence that another state had already done serious screening. After the 2014 US-China arrangement extended tourist and business visas from one-year to ten-year validity, holding a US visa was often more practical than applying separately to Latin American consulates, with their notarization, authentication, fees, and paperwork. Mexico, Panama, and Colombia adopted nationality-neutral rules admitting visa-required foreigners who held a valid US or other designated visa; Chile (2015) and Peru (2016) went further with explicitly China-facing waivers for holders of US or Canadian visas; Ecuador granted ordinary-passport, visa-free entry in 2016; and Bolivia offered visa on arrival. The effects were visible. Chinese arrivals frequently spiked once a country eased its rules, and the easing itself proved contagious.

FIGURE 1. Chinese entries before and after visa relaxation. Selected Latin American countries, by year relative to each country's visa-policy change.



Sources: Chile, Subsecretaría de Turismo; Mexico, Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas de la SEGOB; Colombia, Datos Abiertos Colombia; Ecuador, Sistema Nacional de Información Turística; Peru, Sistema de Información Estadística de Turismo.

Note: The year beneath each country is the year it relaxed its visa rules. Figures use the best available public national series for each country; definitions vary by source and may include tourist arrivals, air-entry events, or foreign-entry events, and should be read as directional indicators of Chinese mobility rather than fully comparable migration totals.

Governments watched one another, and a single relaxation could prompt discussion, competition, and spillover across the region.[12] See figure 1.

This first-step opening mattered because China's regional presence was diversifying at the same time. In the early 2010s, China's footprint was dominated by state-owned enterprises in infrastructure, energy, mining, policy-bank finance, and commodity trade. Those sectors remain central, but as the US-China trade war and saturation in home and traditional export markets pushed firms outward, Latin America drew a wider range of private Chinese companies in electric vehicles, renewable energy, fintech, e-commerce, logistics, and digital services. These firms needed people on the ground to inspect sites, negotiate with partners, and transfer technology. The new wave did not displace the earlier migrant and corporate networks so much as absorb them: Former state-owned enterprise staff became the talent pool that private firms drew on, and many started businesses of their own, carrying the language, regulatory knowledge, and contacts that let a more diversified Chinese presence function.[13]

The combination of easier first contact, expanding corporate mobility needs, and inherited suspicions around Chinese migration produced complicated openness, not simple liberalization. Easier visitor access solved the first-step problem but settled none of what came after, including work authorization, labor law, irregular migration, and reputational risk. Some of these issues were genuinely new to the corporate era; others were older problems of Chinese migration recurring on a far larger scale. Three recent cases map the fault lines. The BYD controversy in Brazil captures the corporate-labor problem: Brazilian authorities found

163 Chinese workers in slavery-like conditions at the company's Bahia construction site, and Reuters later reported that hundreds had been brought in on irregular visas.[14] Ecuador further illustrates the irregular-migration problem: Having granted visa-free entry in 2016, Quito suspended the waiver in 2024, citing irregular migration and noting that roughly half of Chinese entrants had not departed through regular routes or within the permitted period.[15] The Zhang Zhidong case carries the reputational warning. US prosecutors allege that Zhang ran a Mexico- and US-based narcotics and money laundering network tied to cocaine, methamphetamine, fentanyl, shell companies, and cartels.[16] The story spread on Chinese social media not only for the charges but for the biography behind them. Zhang had reportedly studied Spanish at Peking University and reached Mexico through a state-supported study-work pathway before becoming embedded in its criminal economy, an itinerary that turned an individual prosecution into an embarrassment for the state that had enabled the journey.[17] These cases together show why the breakthrough remains so hard for Beijing to manage: The same movement of people that expansion requires also produces legal, political, and reputational liabilities that neither China nor its hosts can fully control.

KNOWLEDGE: FROM EMBEDDED BROKERAGE TO INSTITUTIONALIZED EXPERTISE

INFORMAL CHANNELS OF REGIONAL KNOWLEDGE

China's knowledge problem in Latin America grew out of the same problem of physical entry that shaped mobility. Beijing created its first major research institution in 1961, when the Institute of Latin American Studies was established under the CCP's International Liaison Department and later placed under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). But institutional creation did not produce deep expertise. Into the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese scholars, journalists, and trade representatives still had little ability to travel regularly or conduct sustained fieldwork. Knowledge depended less on a mature academic infrastructure than on people who could move, translate, introduce, and interpret.

That made informal brokers essential. The Chinese diaspora was neither the only source of knowledge nor politically uniform, but it was among the PRC's most valuable embedded assets. Where official PRC presence was limited, local Chinese merchants, community leaders, and sympathetic intermediaries supplied logistical support, political introductions, commercial contacts, and everyday interpretation of local society. In Chile, Peru, Venezuela, and elsewhere, these networks helped PRC-linked actors read local institutions and build relationships before China had a large diplomatic, corporate, or academic footprint.[18] Sometimes they served both sides at once: As Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez turned toward China for economic cooperation in the early 2000s, Chinese community actors supplied advice, contacts, and local knowledge to Beijing and Caracas alike.[19] China's early knowledge of the region, in other words, was embedded in mobility and everyday life long before it was formalized in universities or think tanks.

The thinness of that institutional base showed in language training and research funding. Before 2000, state support for Spanish instruction and Latin American studies was modest.

The Chinese Ministry of Education capped annual Spanish-language training at fewer than forty students until the late 1990s, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Latin American Studies, though the field's primary center, remained small relative to China's later ambitions.[20] An underappreciated irony is that US philanthropy helped build part of this infrastructure. The Ford Foundation supported international relations research, training, and materials, and between 1985 and 2010 funded conferences, projects, and Latin American research trips tied to the CASS institute.[21] Many beneficiaries became influential analysts and advisers. This complicates today's US-China–Latin America triangle. For a time, the US was not only a rival in Chinese views of the region but a funder and method provider that shaped Chinese area expertise.

The brokerage model carried a cost that grew with China's influence. The very embeddedness that made informal channels valuable turns them into liabilities once the stakes rise. Peru's "Chifagate" affair is the clearest recent case. Interim President José Jerí was filmed arriving, hooded, for undisclosed late-night meetings at a Lima *chifa* (Cantonese-Peruvian restaurant) and at the wholesale premises of businessman Yang Zhihua, who held a state energy concession, had supplied the Peruvian government, and had been a leader in PRC embassy–linked Chinese community networks.[22] None of the meetings appeared on the president's official agenda; the fallout was an influence-peddling investigation and, in February 2026, Jerí's removal by Congress after barely four months in office, amid intensifying US scrutiny of Peru's ties to Beijing. Networks that once quietly opened doors now operate in full view of opposition parties, investigative media, and a watchful Washington. A single unregistered dinner can turn an asset into an international embarrassment that the Chinese government neither arranged nor can control. It is partly to escape this dependence on improvised and increasingly exposed channels that the Chinese government has tried to build something more durable.

THE AREA STUDIES BOOM

As China's outward economic activity expanded after 2010, informal brokerage no longer sufficed. Firms, banks, diplomats, and migrants needed knowledge that was practical, specialized, and scalable, including in local law, labor regulation, environmental licensing, tax systems, community and indigenous politics, court procedures, and media environments. The Chinese government institutionalized area studies as a strategic knowledge project. The Ministry of Education created forty-two cultivation bases in 2012, and by 2024 there were 453 bases and centers across 186 universities.[23] Area and country studies became a first-level interdisciplinary field in the graduate discipline catalog in 2022 and entered the undergraduate major catalog in 2025, which in China's system means that high school graduates, whose majors are set at university entrance by their national exam results, can now choose area studies as their degree from the start. Both steps were explicitly framed as serving national strategy.[24] Funding tracked the push. Both the National Social Science Fund and the China Scholarship Council established dedicated categories for area studies applicants.

Latin American studies rode this wave, but its leading voices were not triumphalist. Guo Cunhai from the CASS Institute of Latin American Studies, surveying the field in 2025, observed that the number of researchers had grown from fewer than one hundred to more than a thousand, but the field required a shift from "scale expansion" to "quality improvement," with more fieldwork and deeper local knowledge.[25] That is precisely the risk of rapid institutionalization. Centers, conferences, and policy language can multiply faster than language depth, local networks, and practical experience. Chinese firms also feel the gap. A PricewaterhouseCoopers survey of forty-eight Chinese companies operating in Latin America found that their top three operational challenges were insufficient understanding of local laws and regulations, a shortage of internationalized talent, and limited international management experience.[26] Already in 2015, the China–Latin America Legal Research Center and China–Latin America Legal Training Base were established at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics to support Chinese firms "going out," address legal risks, train high-end legal talent familiar with Latin American legal systems, and convert legal research into practical training.[27]

A decade later, the Chancay port dispute showed why legal and regulatory expertise in Latin America had become strategic, not optional. Chancay is a Chinese-built deepwater megaport about fifty miles north of Lima, developed by COSCO at a reported cost of $1.3 billion and designed as a new Asia–Latin America logistics gateway.[28] In January 2026, a Lima court sided with COSCO Shipping Ports Chancay Perú and limited the regulator Ositrán's powers over the port. But that was only one round in a longer legal fight. On appeal, a Peruvian court reversed the decision in July 2026, holding that Chancay, though privately financed and operated, is a public-use port subject to Peruvian regulation, supervision, inspection, and sanctions.[29] The decision itself can still be appealed, and the case has unfolded under open US pressure, with US officials warning that Chancay could pose sovereignty and civil-military dual-use risks.[30] The lesson for Chinese firms is that infrastructure politics in Latin America does not end at inauguration. Courts, regulators, legislatures, media, and geopolitical pressure can reopen questions Chinese investors thought had been settled. For Beijing and Chinese companies, local legal and regulatory knowledge has become a permanent operating requirement.

The boom of area studies is not one-directional. Latin American universities are building their own China expertise. Mexico's Centro de Estudios China-México (CECHIMEX), founded in 2006 within the Faculty of Economics at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), is among the region's most important university-based China studies platforms; by 2026 UNAM described it as a national reference point after two decades of conferences, publications, and specialist training.[31] Chile's Millennium Nucleus on the Impacts of China in Latin America and the Caribbean, established in 2023, offers a different model: a publicly funded, interdisciplinary Millennium Nucleus studying the consequences of China's rise, with renewed funding for 2026–28.[32]

But the region's China-knowledge ecosystem is uneven, and that matters for US policy. Some institutions are public and relatively independent; others are built through local elite networks with direct stakes in the China relationship. In Chile, the Luksic business group, whose fortunes are tied to China trade, began funding Chile-China educational exchanges in 2000 and later financed Tsinghua University's Latin America Center in Santiago, opened in 2018 as the university's main regional hub.[33] This is not simply Beijing capturing institutions from above. It is also local elites building China-facing knowledge bridges for their own accumulation, status, and influence. The same channels that deepen mutual understanding can also entrench a China-oriented constituency, and it is difficult to tell where understanding ends and advocacy begins.

At the end of the spectrum most directly supported by the Chinese government sit the Confucius Institutes; Brazil alone hosts fourteen. They are often described in Washington as straightforward instruments of state soft power, but the flagship Brazilian case is more revealing. The Confucius Institute at São Paulo State University, founded in 2008 and run by Luís Antônio Paulino, a Brazilian academic and former finance ministry and presidential office official, is Chinese funded but locally built and locally sought. Its role has also shifted from language training toward talent supply. Its recurring job fairs channel Mandarin-capable graduates into Chinese firms in Brazil, including BYD.[34] The same company whose imported labor generated the Bahia controversy also recruits, through Confucius Institutes, the local workforce its expansion requires. Here the two strands of this brief converge: Knowledge infrastructure feeds the mobility wave, and even the most state-linked nodes of the ecosystem run through local elites and local demand.

This is why the independent pole of China studies in Latin America is worth defending. China's education ministries and funding agencies now treat knowledge of the outside world as a strategic capability and are pouring resources into building it, while Latin American universities, firms, and governments race to understand China in return. The United States should not assume that its advantages in regional knowledge, relationships, and institutional trust will sustain themselves. They will narrow unless Washington engages this emerging ecosystem on transparent, credible, and independent terms.

WHY THE UNITED STATES SHOULD ACT NOW

The case for acting now rests on timing, not novelty. The human dimension of China's presence in Latin America has been building for decades, but three clocks are now running at once, and all of them reward early movement.

The first is the visa trend, and it is accelerating in real time. In May 2026, Brazil, the region's anchor economy and its diplomatic bellwether, waived short-stay visas for ordinary Chinese passport holders, reciprocating Beijing's 2025 exemption for Brazilians. The measure is temporary until the end of 2026.[35] The spillover was almost immediate. On June 4, within weeks of the Brazilian waiver taking effect, Uruguay announced visa-free entry for Chinese nationals as well, with pressure mounting on other neighboring countries to match or cede Chinese visitor share.[36] What should concern the US is less any single waiver than the speed of contagion: a regional realignment unfolding in weeks, not years. And it has a particular shape. China granted these same South American states visa-free access in 2025; their reciprocal waivers now complete a bilateral China–Latin America visa architecture that is locking into place country by country, and in which the US has no role at all. In the same cycle, Brazil reinstated visa requirements on US, Canadian, and Australian citizens for lack of reciprocity.[37] The hemispheric drift is not simply toward openness; it is toward openness to China alongside friction with the US.

That points to the second reason to move: leverage the US already holds and is letting depreciate. As the mobility section showed, the regional opening of the 2010s ran not on visa-free entry but on the US visa as a trusted intermediary credential, an accident of history the US government has never deliberately used. Every new bilateral China–Latin America waiver erodes that credential's standing as the region's default trust proxy. The window to convert an informal byproduct into a deliberate instrument is open now, as most Latin American countries remain undecided on this matter.

The third clock is a temporary stabilization in US-China relations. President Trump's May 2026 state visit to Beijing produced what both governments framed as constructive strategic stability, with a reciprocal visit by Xi Jinping expected in the fall.[38] Such openings are narrow and seldom durable, and they are precisely the conditions under which structured, lower-temperature channels on third regions can be rebuilt. The US and Chinese governments held at least seven rounds of consultations on Latin American affairs before the dialogue went dormant after 2015; China, by contrast, has kept up the practice of communicating with Russia on one another's actions in the region.[39] The US blinded itself to Chinese decision-making in its own hemisphere while one of its principal rivals kept its eyes open. A time of temporary stabilization is the moment to reopen them.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The reflex in Washington is to treat Chinese presence in the hemisphere as a problem to be removed: Sanction the officials, seize the port, press the government to choose. That can win a discrete contest, but it does not win the region. Margaret Myers, a prominent China–Latin America relations expert, in testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, put it sharply: Coercive instruments can shift behavior at the margins but cannot substitute for a competitive presence, and pressing Latin American states to choose between Washington's demands and their own economic interests does not build durable partnerships.[40] The implication for policy is not retreat but its opposite: a more competitive United States, one that contests the region by being present and useful rather than by issuing ultimatums it cannot always enforce.

Rather than trying to deny China the mobility and knowledge it depends on, making the US indispensable to Beijing's management of mobility and knowledge turns the very channels China relies on into points of US insight, leverage, and partnership. It treats Latin American governments as partners and China as a competitor to be understood and outpaced, not an enemy to be expelled. The three recommendations below follow that logic.

1. ESTABLISH A US–LATIN AMERICA THIRD-COUNTRY VISA RELIANCE INITIATIVE

The intermediary credential already exists; the US has simply never formalized it. The US government should propose a framework under which participating Latin American states formally recognize a valid US visa as grounds for visa-free or expedited entry, in exchange for structured cooperation, including privacy-protected visa validation, aggregate mobility statistics, targeted fraud alerts, consular coordination, and capacity-building support for partner immigration agencies. For the region, this is a service, not a concession. It is precisely the visibility Ecuador lacked when it suspended its 2016 waiver over unaccounted-for Chinese entrants. For the United States, it converts a historical accident into a deliberate instrument, offering visibility into, and a screening role over, a large share of Chinese movement into the hemisphere, anchored in a credential the region already trusts and that no bilateral China–Latin America waiver can replicate.

The initiative must be openness with a trust layer, not a Chinese-exclusion scheme, which would fail on contact with regional sovereignty and would only speed the reciprocity track that cuts Washington out. Its aim is to keep the US inside the system, not to wall the system off. It is also crucial to note that the US visa is leverage only so long as it is issued. If Washington restricts the issuance of US visas to Chinese nationals until the credential becomes rare, it forfeits the very instrument this initiative depends on. Mobility policy and hemispheric strategy have to be aligned, not allowed to work against each other.

2. REVIVE US-CHINA–LATIN AMERICA CONSULTATIONS

The case for reopening the channel is not mainly about what the government learns. The pre-2015 rounds of talks already included American think tank and academic participants; the real beneficiary was the broader US knowledge ecosystem that competes with China on understanding, not just policy.

The deepest advantage for the US in the hemisphere is the maturity and independence of that ecosystem, including an intelligence community, a dense layer of think tanks, and universities with generations of Latin American expertise that China, for all its area studies spending, has not yet matched. Yet that advantage is perishable. Area knowledge goes stale without current information and live interlocutors, and a decade of dormancy has cut American analysts off from direct insight into how the Chinese government actually operates in the region. A standing consultation keeps the whole ecosystem supplied and engaged, which is what keeps it sharp. The format should remain transparent, with read-outs to regional partners that signal a window rather than a condominium, and it should center the files where the two powers' interests are not zero-sum, such as counternarcotics, debt sustainability, supply chain stability, and, over time, commercial cooperation. Dialogue here is not a concession to a competitor; it is how a knowledge superpower keeps its edge.

3. CREATE A WESTERN HEMISPHERE CHINA EXPERTISE INITIATIVE

China's education ministries and funding agencies are institutionalizing knowledge of the outside world as a strategic capability, and they are cultivating Latin America's China specialists alongside their own. As the section above on channels of regional knowledge showed, the region's own China expertise is uneven: Some is public and relatively independent, some is built through elite networks with a direct stake in the relationship, and some is funded by the Chinese state. Latin America's leading university programs now offer fellowships on

China-related research, and Chinese diplomatic missions have taken part in their events.[41] The US has no comparable hemispheric effort to connect Latin American China specialists, US area studies infrastructure, and policy-relevant research, and above all to strengthen the independent pole of that ecosystem.

The US should sponsor, without controlling, a Western Hemisphere China Expertise Initiative: a network linking US, Latin American, and Canadian universities and research centers to develop China–Latin America and broader China expertise through fellowships, Mandarin and area studies training, exchanges, and joint research on Chinese investment, labor, legal, and technology practices. The design principle is independence, precisely because the region's other China-knowledge channels, whether elite-funded centers or Chinese-state-funded institutes, come with interests attached. The goal is to give Latin American governments, firms, and civil society the analytical capacity to reach their own informed judgments about Chinese engagement. The US can play an essential role in helping the hemisphere learn to read China as deliberately as China is learning to read the hemisphere.

CONCLUSION

The Monroe Doctrine's revival has trained American attention on the hemisphere's visible prizes such as ports, mines, loans, and digital infrastructure, each to be contested in turn. Those holdings matter, but they are only part of the competition. The more durable contest is over the human dimension: the mobility that lets Chinese actors enter and operate in the region, and the knowledge that lets them understand where they are. These are the dimensions China itself finds hardest to control, as both the Maduro episode and the "Chifagate" affair revealed, and they are the dimensions in which the US still holds an advantage that is real, but underused and eroding.

That advantage cannot be preserved by seizing assets alone, or by demanding that Latin American governments choose sides. It is preserved by making the US indispensable to the flows and the understanding that neither China nor the region can fully manage alone, by formalizing the credential the region already trusts, by reopening the channel that lets Washington read China clearly, and by investing in the independent expertise that lets the hemisphere read China for itself. Each move rests on the same premise: The region's governments are partners whose interests must be engaged rather than overridden, and the US contest with Beijing is won by being more useful and better informed, not by trying to expel a presence the region itself has invited.

The case for moving is the calendar. Brazil's visa waiver is still a provisional pilot, Uruguay's is barely weeks old, and the regional realignment they signal is still taking shape; the stabilization in US-China relations has a season; and China's investment in knowing the hemisphere compounds with every year it goes unanswered. Windows like these do not stay open on Washington's schedule. The next time the hemisphere's human dimension shifts, it will be shaped by whoever took the trouble to understand it, not only by whoever seized the most visible pieces.

NOTES

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Preferred citation: Jian Ren, “China’s Anxieties in Latin America: What Mobility and Knowledge Mean for US Strategy,” Hoover History Lab Policy Brief no. 2603, Hoover Institution, September 2026.

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