

Commentary & Reply

On "Expanding the Rebalance: Confronting China in Latin America"

Jonathan Bissell

This commentary is in response to Daniel Morgan's article "Expanding the Rebalance: Confronting China in Latin America" published in the Autumn 2015 issue of Parameters (vol. 45, no. 3).

Colonel Daniel Morgan sheds much-needed light on the Western hemisphere and the challenges posed by deep Chinese engagement throughout it in his recent "Expanding the Rebalance: Confronting China in Latin America" article. He lays out strong evidence demonstrating China's massive expansion of engagement in the hemisphere over the last 15 years using the four traditional pillars of national power: diplomatic, information, military, and economic. His proposal for the Pacific Command and the Southern Command to work together to mitigate and confront contemporary issues, be more transparent, and work multi-laterally with diverse partners offers innovative solutions that should be seriously considered by senior leaders and United States policy-makers.

His call for the inclusion of China in the annual PANAMAX exercise goes too far, however. China's interests in the Western hemisphere appear to be economically driven, predominantly by its demand for extractable resources. As China's growth wanes, the demand for these commodities shrinks, adversely affecting the economic growth of several Latin American countries whose populist leaders depend heavily upon Chinese mineral consumption to satisfy their domestic social spending promises. With the source of this revenue drying up, Latin American leaders who exploited this commodity boom (while failing to diversify their economies) are feeling political adversity during national elections. The recent change in the mood of the electorates in Argentina, Guatemala, and Venezuela reflect voter frustrations with corruption and poor economic choices. The complex, multi-lateral engagements of many governments in the global south anchored around unsustainable Chinese investments seem to be imploding.

The so-called South-South institutions (i.e. Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, MERCOSUR, and Union of South American Nations) have proven to be far less effective than the framework of intergovernmental institutions (IGOs) the United States set up following World War II, such as the United Nations (UN) and the other regimes from the Bretton Woods Accords. As China increases its power on the world stage, it relies on these US-formed IGOs to build its global credibility. It does so by selectively participating in various regimes, such as UN peacekeeping missions. China's recent deployment of the Chinese hospital ship, the *Peace Ark*, is reminiscent of the US's effective use of

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its own *USS Comfort* and *USS Mercy* hospital ships as instruments of smart-power. However, its use of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea Treaty to validate the expansion of its maritime boundaries in the South China Sea, via an existing UN-sponsored, multi-lateral treaty is legally questionable at best. China struggles to adhere to other international laws; its human rights and property rights enforcements remain dubious. By permitting the Chinese to participate in PANAMAX, the United States would be lending this autocratic regime tacit credence to our hemispheric neighbors, clearly not part of the strategic vision Washington endorses under its liberal world-order goals. China seems to play by international rules and norms merely when it profits itself. The ways and means to achieve China's strategic ends primarily benefit China, at varying costs to everyone else in the international system

The recent elections of the political opposition in Argentina, Guatemala, and Venezuela demonstrate voter displeasure with endemic corruption. Latin American leaders under increasing levels of public scrutiny may be less prone to accept the "kick-backs" that go along with large defense acquisitions, unscrupulous economic agreements, and additional quid pro quo activities from other less-than-transparent states such as China. This could potentially open these markets to the United States once again, improving both hemispheric economic collaboration and security cooperation efforts. Additionally, the transparency provided by the adaptation of the Trans Pacific Partnership, the continued US engagement through forums such as the Financial Action Task Force, and the cross-COCOM cooperation as suggested by Colonel Morgan should be considered as key tools to addressing Chinese influence in Latin America.

Author declined to reply.