

# Americas QUARTERLY

## CHINA'S NEW PLAYBOOK FOR LATIN AMERICA

A SPECIAL REPORT



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Claudia Opimi Vaca, *Bajo el toborochi* (Under the toborochi) (detail), 2025. Cotton fabric embroidered using an appliqué technique from the Tajibo community of the Bolivian Amazon, 27 7/8 × 82 3/4 inches (70 × 210 cm). Courtesy of the artist





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# Americas

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# China's Evolving Strategy

**Beijing is now more focused on technology and military engagement in Latin America.**




SINCE DONALD TRUMP RETURNED to the White House, the same lament has circulated throughout Washington and beyond: that the president's actions might be pushing Latin America closer to China. Indeed, Trump's stated desire to "take back" the Panama Canal, his high tariffs on Brazil and other countries, and the recent decertification of Colombia's drug-fighting efforts have strained relationships with several longtime allies.

Yet concerns about a loss of U.S. influence should fully account for the other side of the equation: China's approach to Latin America also seems to be evolving. After 20 years of offering loans, new ports and other infrastructure projects, Beijing is pursuing a more selective approach — focused on high-end technologies and other strategic sectors.

Trade continues to boom. Last year, China-Latin America trade rose 6% to \$518 billion, with soybeans, lithium and copper flowing east and smartphones, electric vehicles and more flooding back. Yet Latin America's relative share of infrastructure investments under China's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is now falling for the third consecutive year. That reflects a broader shift toward a more "targeted, strategic approach" to the region, as well as changing economic priorities within China itself, writes Margaret Myers in this issue's cover story.

Meanwhile, another front is evolving: military diplomacy. A group of analysts from the Center for Strategic & International Studies Americas Program highlight China's significant rise in engagement with most armed forces in the region. This military diplomacy aligns with Beijing's Global Security Initiative, which offers countries a mix of defense cooperation, technology and non-traditional security support — from climate change to health.

Most Latin American countries are trying to find a balance. The two largest economies in the region are moving in opposite directions, with Mexico edging closer to the U.S. orbit while Brazil takes ever greater distance from it, writes Brenda Estefan, a professor at IPADE Business School in Mexico City.

With China's influence growing in Latin America, the U.S. still holds advantages. But unless Washington renews both its economic and security efforts, the hemisphere could find itself more firmly in Beijing's orbit through trade ties and military partnerships. 





# China's Changing Playbook

Beijing has entered a new phase in its engagement with Latin America, focusing less on big infrastructure projects and more on technology. *AQ* takes stock of what's ahead.

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Beijing is redefining its relationship with Latin America as it adopts new priorities and objectives.

*By Margaret Myers*

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## CONTRIBUTORS IN THIS ISSUE



### **Margaret Myers**

Myers is a senior advisor to the Inter-American Dialogue, a lecturer at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and an adjunct researcher at the Núcleo Milenio sobre los Impactos de China en América Latina (ICLAC) in Chile.



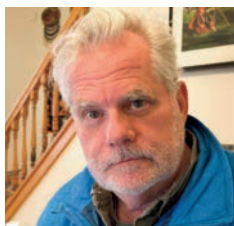
### **Cyntia Barrera Díaz**

Barrera Díaz is a bilingual editor and journalist. She covered corporate and financial news across the U.S. and Latin America for Reuters and was later a Spanish-language team leader and breaking news editor at Bloomberg.



### **Mie Hoejris Dahl**

Dahl is an independent journalist who covers politics, economics, environment, crime and social issues across Latin America. She writes for international outlets including *The Economist*, *Foreign Policy*, *Mongabay* and others, and holds a master's degree in public administration from Harvard Kennedy School of Government.



### **Scott Wallace**

Wallace is an award-winning journalist and author of *The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes* (Crown, 2011) and *Central America in the Crosshairs of War* (George F. Thompson, 2024). He is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Connecticut.



### **Graciela Ibáñez**

Ibáñez is a journalist based in Chile, where she covers politics, culture, finance and economics. She teaches business journalism at Universidad Gabriela Mistral and Universidad Viña del Mar, and hosts a podcast about Valparaíso called “La patria de los soñadores.”





## OUR READERS

Tell us what you think. Please send letters to managing editor José Enrique Arrioja at [jarrioja@as-coa.org](mailto:jarrioja@as-coa.org)



AQ contributing editor Brian Winter welcomed Ana Toni, executive director of COP30, in June for a virtual discussion on the upcoming climate summit in Belém, Brazil. Toni explained how Brazil is preparing for the landmark event, and answered questions about cooperation between the public and private sectors in the planning process.


## COP30 COVERAGE

Content from AQ's last special report, on the COP30 climate summit, earned reprints and coverage around the region:





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 Los mercados reaccionan con alzas a un nuevo nombramiento a la junta de la Fed; pláticas comerciales en Canadá y México; y a propósito de la COP30 en Brasil, [@ArriojaJoseE](#) de [@AmerQuarterly](#) nos explica una propuesta “realista” para la lucha contra el cambio climático.

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**Brookings Global**   
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Actionable insights and tools to address shared challenges and achieve a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world.

“Migration is not a threat but a lever for growth.” In [@AmerQuarterly](#), [@dany\\_bahar](#) and [@MarcelaEscobari](#) explain how, with the right policies, Ecuador's population of Venezuelan migrants could help the country tackle crime and improve the economy.



**Andrea Margit**  · 3rd  
Vice President at Ashoka Latin America  
Ashoka · Harvard University  
Graduate School of Design

As we look toward COP30 in Belém, the Amazon can be more than a backdrop — it must become a turning point in global climate negotiations.

In a powerful, open-access article, [Beto Verissimo](#) and [Juliano Assunção](#), leading the [Amazônia 2030](#) initiative, present a crystal-clear roadmap to reframe tropical forests — not as passive victims of deforestation and exploitation, but as vital assets in the climate solution.

The Amazon, which holds half of the world's tropical rainforests, plays a planetary role in absorbing carbon, regulating rainfall, and preserving cultural and ecological diversity. But to unlock its full potential, we need a shift in global policies and mindsets — one that links protection and restoration.

As the authors put it: “We need a new approach—one that recognizes the two-way relationship between forests and the climate.”

How can the Global North and South work together to create complementary financial systems that both reward standing forests and pay for the restoration of degraded lands? Read the article at [Americas Quarterly](#): <https://lnkd.in/dzCcN3GP>

Para os leitores em Português: <https://lnkd.in/dyXQwacH>







A power-generation vessel owned by Turkish corporation Karadeniz Powership leaves Havana Harbor in August, despite Cuba's deepening electricity crisis. The island nation's power shortages have led to at least three nationwide blackouts over the past year, in addition to frequent partial outages.

PHOTO BY YAMIL LAGE/AFP/GETTY

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Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum and Guatemala's President Bernardo Arévalo embrace during a meeting in Guatemala in August. They discussed railway and electricity integration, border security and other bilateral issues before signing an agreement with Belize's Prime Minister Johnny Briceño to protect 5.7 million hectares of Yucatán Peninsula jungles.

PHOTO BY AYSHA CHUMACERO/AFP/GETTY










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2022

  
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**FOLCLORISMO EN LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE MACHALÍ, VENEZUELA**  
**Y SU RELACIÓN CON LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE LAS ZONAS DE ORIGEN DE LOS**  
**INDIÓGENAS DE LA ZONA DE MACHALÍ EN LOS ESTADOS DE TRINIDAD Y**  
**TOBAGO Y GUYANA**

Yo, **ANGEL RODRIGUEZ**, por el presente certifico que el autor del trabajo de grado titulado **"FOLCLORISMO EN LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE MACHALÍ, VENEZUELA Y SU RELACIÓN CON LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE LAS ZONAS DE ORIGEN DE LOS INDIÓGENAS DE LA ZONA DE MACHALÍ EN LOS ESTADOS DE TRINIDAD Y TOBAGO Y GUYANA"**, es el estudiante de grado de la carrera de **LETRAS EN LENGUA CASTELLANA**, al momento de inscribirse en el curso de **Investigación Científica**, en la **Escuela Nacional de la República**, en la ciudad de **Machalí**, Estado de **Trinidad y Tobago**, en el año **2016**.

**Walter José Rodríguez**  
Máster en Lengua Castellana y Literatura

Yo, **Yolanda**, la Jefe de la Sección de Asesoría Técnica del **CEBACHOCAR** de la **Escuela Nacional de la República**, en la ciudad de **Machalí**, Estado de **Trinidad y Tobago**, certifico que el autor del trabajo de grado titulado **"FOLCLORISMO EN LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE MACHALÍ, VENEZUELA Y SU RELACIÓN CON LA IDENTIDAD CULTURAL DE LAS ZONAS DE ORIGEN DE LOS INDIÓGENAS DE LA ZONA DE MACHALÍ EN LOS ESTADOS DE TRINIDAD Y TOBAGO Y GUYANA"**, es el estudiante de grado de la carrera de **LETRAS EN LENGUA CASTELLANA**, al momento de inscribirse en el curso de **Investigación Científica**, en la **Escuela Nacional de la República**, en la ciudad de **Machalí**, Estado de **Trinidad y Tobago**, en el año **2016**.

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17. **Principio del simbolismo:** **elemento** es **relación** **entre** **la** **forma** **de** **la** **palabra** **y** **el** **significado** **que** **representa** **en** **la** **mente** **del** **hablante** **y** **del** **oyente**.  
 18. **Principio del arbitrariedad:** **no** **existe** **ninguna** **relación** **lógica** **entre** **el** **significado** **de** **una** **palabra** **y** **el** **objeto** **que** **representa** **en** **la** **mente** **del** **hablante** **y** **del** **oyente**.  
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 20. **Principio del carácter de signo:** **una** **palabra** **es** **un** **signo** **porque** **representa** **un** **significado** **en** **la** **mente** **del** **hablante** **y** **del** **oyente**.  
 21. **Principio del carácter de símbolo:** **una** **palabra** **es** **un** **símbolo** **porque** **representa** **un** **significado** **en** **la** **mente** **del** **hablante** **y** **del** **oyente**.  
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 36. **Principio del carácter de signo:** **una** **palabra** **es** **un** **signo** **porque** **representa** **un** **significado** **en** **la** **mente** **del** **hablante** **y** **del** **oyente**.  
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 44. **Principio del carácter de signo:** **una** **palabra**

[illegible]



Ana Mercedes García, 63, holds a picture of her son Ricardo Ernesto Martínez, 31, a construction worker imprisoned in 2022 under President Nayib Bukele's anti-gang state of exception in El Salvador. Prosecutors had up to two years to present evidence against alleged gang members, but in August, the National Assembly, controlled by Bukele's party, reformed the Law Against Organized Crime to extend the deadline to August 2027.

PHOTO BY STRINGER/AFP/GETTY



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A woman raises a flare during a September march in Santiago, Chile, on the anniversary of the country's 1973 military coup. The event commemorated the thousands of victims of Augusto Pinochet's 17-year dictatorship.

PHOTO BY CRISTOBAL BASAURE ARAYA/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY









## AS HEARD ON THE AMERICAS QUARTERLY PODCAST

Experts and policymakers join AQ's contributing editor Brian Winter to discuss the issues currently shaping Latin American politics, economics and culture.



*"Many in the U.S. private sector see Mexico as key in decoupling from China. Despite some production shifting to the U.S., Mexico remains vital and often more cost-effective, even with tariffs."*

—Ernesto Revilla, managing director and head of Latin American economics at Citigroup



*"Officials in the Brazilian presidential palace and at the Foreign Affairs Ministry see Trump's actions as a push for regime change. They believe this won't stop with Bolsonaro's trial and will continue into next year's election. The government is already preparing, expecting U.S. retaliation once the verdict of the trial is out, and further interference to support Bolsonaro's political heir."*

—Patricia Campos Mello, reporter for Folha de S. Paulo



*"Whoever wins the Bolivian elections, be it Rodrigo Paz Pereira or Tuto Quiroga, will shift Bolivia's international stance, distancing it from 21st-century socialism. Both strongly oppose the governments of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba."*

—Raúl Peñaranda, journalist, editor of the news portal Brújula Digital and former president of the La Paz Association of Journalists

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# Anna Stewart Ibarra

The executive director of the Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI) discusses emerging environmental threats.



*Interviewed by Rich Brown*

**AQ: Can you describe the IAI's work?**

**ASI:** The IAI was created in 1992 by countries of the Americas as a mechanism to generate and share critical scientific information on environmental challenges like biodiversity loss and climate change that require cooperation and have cross-border causes and implications. We train and fund multinational research teams and then work to make sure that governments have this information to inform policies.

**AQ: What are some recent concrete successes?**

**ASI:** We've helped develop dengue early warning systems in the Caribbean, for example. During the Cricket World Cup in Barbados last year, we partnered with the Caribbean Public Health Agency, the Barcelona Supercomputing Center and the Health Ministry to implement an early warning tool that's now being replicated regionally. It uses climate information to predict dengue outbreaks months ahead of time. We're also funding research on climate and health across the region on questions like how to protect the elderly during heat waves and predict water-borne infectious diseases.

**AQ: What issues do you wish got more coverage?**

**ASI:** Climate change is affecting water availability and therefore energy security — just look at Ecuador. I'm Ecuadorian-American and worked there for many years. Last year they suffered extended blackouts as drought reduced hydropower. And then sargassum! Massive blooms of this seaweed are washing up on Caribbean beaches, hurting local fisheries and tourism. The science and policy on this are still way behind, but there's so much potential for nature-based solutions that support local communities, like using sargassum as a biobased construction material.

**AQ: Which environmental threats most concern you?**

**ASI:** First, as extreme climate events like floods, droughts, and heat waves become more frequent, poor communities are hardest hit, creating a spiral of poverty and deepening inequalities. I'm also very concerned about microplastics and the plastic pollution crisis. This is an example of where research, innovation and cross-border policymaking can provide urgently needed solutions. **AQ**

**Stewart Ibarra** is executive director of IAI and an expert on climate and public health in Latin America and the Caribbean.

THIS INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED FOR CLARITY AND LENGTH

# CHINA'S NEW PLAYBOOK IN LATIN AMERICA

Beijing's regional strategy is shifting from an era of large loans and infrastructure initiatives to more targeted, strategic engagement.

*by Margaret Myers*





China's President Xi Jinping and Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva met in Beijing for a China-CELAC summit in May.





**C**HINA HAS ENTERED a new phase in its engagement with Latin America. It is one still characterized by extensive resource-seeking and market-seeking activity, features of the relationship for more than three decades now. As China invests and trades in Latin American raw materials, and builds markets across the region for everything from its toys and textiles to ultra-high-voltage transmission lines and cloud services, overall trade continues to rise.

At the same time, the relationship is rapidly evolving toward a more targeted, strategic approach. For all the recent attention given to China's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects, Latin America's relative share of investments under the plan is falling for the third consecutive year. The region received a little more than 1% of Beijing's global BRI construction spending and 0.4% of outbound investment in the first half of 2025. Growth in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region is also slowing.

Whether those trends hold remains to be seen. But the days of Beijing showering the region with loans and large-scale infrastructure projects may be over, or at least diminished, replaced by more deliberate engagement and a focus on specific sectors of Chinese interest, especially at the higher end of the value chain.

The shift in focus among Chinese companies is being driven by a variety of factors and is evident across multiple continents. China's economic policies are changing amid Beijing's efforts to achieve moderate rates of economic growth, and so are perceptions of China in Latin America and other parts of the world. Meanwhile, sweeping shifts in U.S. economic and foreign policy under President Donald Trump are actively recalibrating relations between Washington and Beijing — with consequences for inter-Ameri-

can and China-Latin America ties.

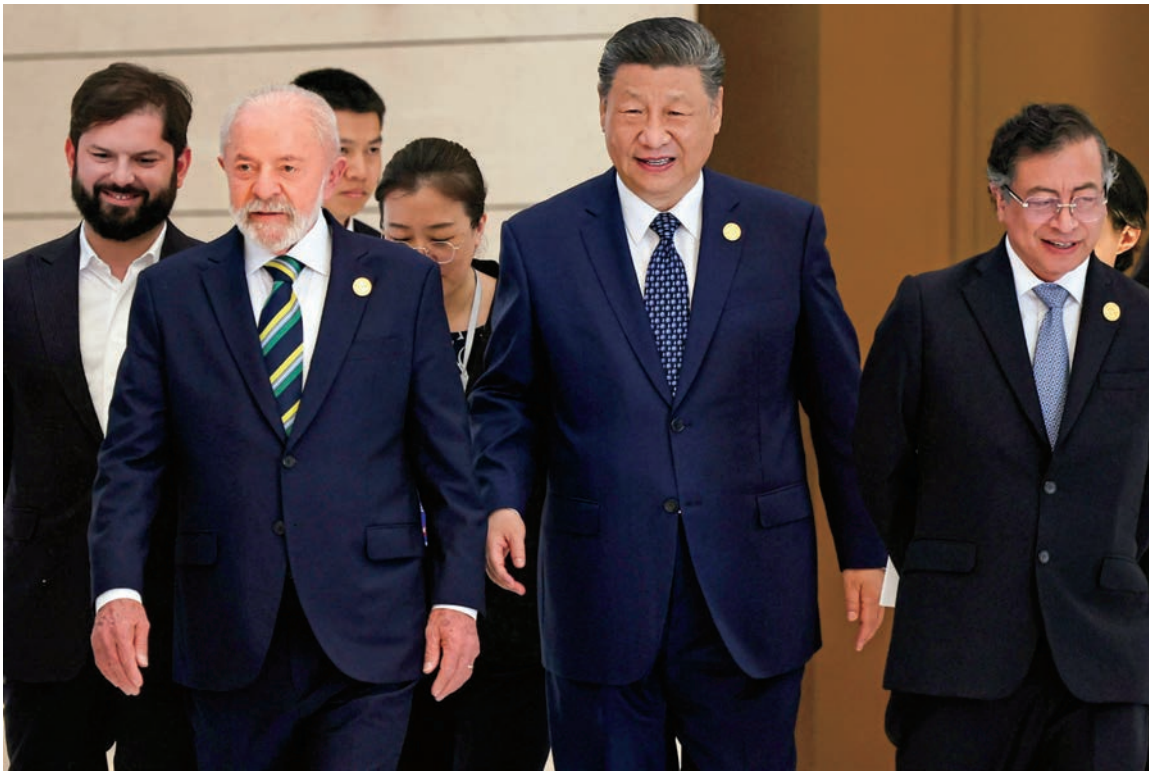
Against this backdrop, this would seem a pivotal moment to reassess the evolving China-Latin America relationship, one that calls on Latin American governments to craft forward-looking policies attuned to new trends. It may also lead Washington, which has sought to counter Beijing's influence in the region, to think critically about the effectiveness of its own strategies and the extent to which they align with current realities.

### A new phase

**T**HE CHINA-LATIN AMERICA relationship is defined as much by continuity as by change. China's demand for the region's natural resources, ranging from extractives to agricultural goods, continues to fuel China-Latin America trade, which reached \$518.47 billion in 2024, up 6% year-on-year. China was the destination for about a third of the region's mineral exports in 2023. The region supplied approximately 75% of China's total soybean imports and nearly all (98%) of China's imports of lithium carbonate in 2024.

Latin America has also long been a vital market for Chinese goods. Even as China's exports to the region declined 2.4% in 2023, Chinese electric vehicle exports to Latin America grew 55%, according to China Customs data, totaling \$4.2 billion. Exports from China to Latin America climbed again — by 13% — between 2023 and 2024, including sizeable sales of high- and low-tech goods. Mexico, Colombia and other countries have also continued to import substantial quantities of industrial machinery, telecommunications equipment and consumer electronics from China, contributing to steady export growth in those sectors. Moreover, if U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods persist, Chinese exports could increasingly be diverted to Latin American markets.





Presidents Gabriel Boric of Chile, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Xi Jinping of China, and Gustavo Petro of Colombia attend the China-CELAC summit in May.

Additionally, China's outreach to Latin America and other regions has for years been closely linked to its domestic economic agenda. The BRI, launched in its earliest form in 2013 and extended to Latin America in 2018, was as much a tool to address China's structural economic challenges, such as excess construction capacity and steel production, as it was a diplomatic or foreign policy initiative. Around 2013, as the BRI began to take shape, and as global commodity prices fell, China's engagement with the region concentrated on large-scale infrastructure projects — frequently financed by Chinese banks and executed by Chinese construction companies.

China's food and energy security priorities, along with its broader growth agenda, remain central to its engagement with Latin America. But numerous factors, including lessons learned by both Chinese and regional actors, are redefining the contours of the relationship. These shifts are particularly evident in

Chinese capital flows to the region, as Chinese companies zero in on sectors of strategic importance to Beijing while increasingly pursuing new, localized avenues for deal-making across the region.

### The mitigating effects of Chinese domestic economic policy

**C**HINA'S RECENT PUSH TO sustain moderate economic growth — despite headwinds such as weak domestic demand, demographic pressures, and high debt — has reshaped its overseas engagement and, by extension, the priorities of the BRI. Alongside domestic stimulus measures, Beijing is seeking greater market share in high-end technologies in both developed and developing markets, including Latin America. At the same time, Chinese banks and companies are in many cases adopting a more cautious, risk-sensitive approach to engagement with the region, while



seeking new avenues for deal-making.

This shift is evident in a recent decline in China's overseas lending to the region and the slowing of its FDI. Once a defining feature of the China–Latin America relationship, sovereign lending, often in support of major infrastructure projects, by China's two main development finance institutions (DFIs) — the China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of China (Ex-Im Bank) — has slowed dramatically. Between 2019 and 2023, the region received an average of just over \$1.3 billion annually from these banks, down sharply from the 2010 peak, when CDB alone extended nearly \$25 billion to regional governments. In 2023, according to the Chinese Loans to Latin America and the Caribbean Database (Inter-American Dialogue/Boston University), lending was limited to just two loans to Brazil, totaling \$1.3 billion.

Multiple factors help explain the decline in Chinese DFI lending to Latin America and the Caribbean. A key driver has been China's reluctance to extend

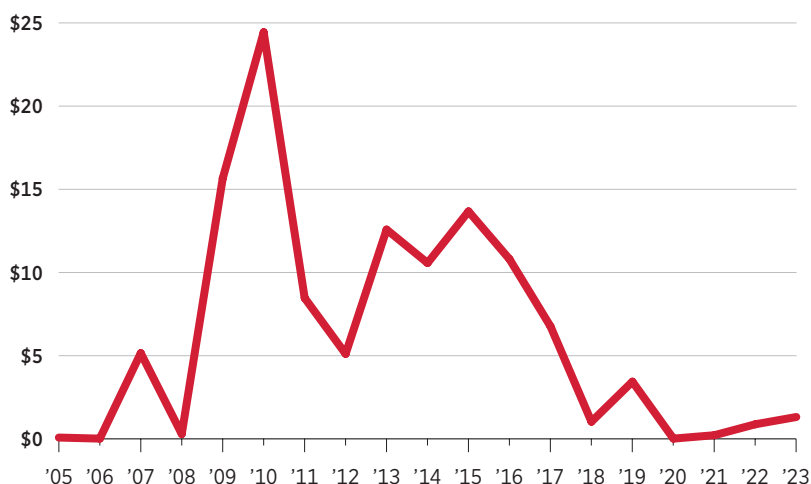
new credit to Venezuela, which has accounted for nearly half (49%) of all Chinese DFI finance to the region since 2005. Beijing's patience with Caracas has eroded amid sustained security and economic risks in the country, and neither CDB nor Ex-Im Bank has issued loans to Venezuela for the past nine years. Lending has also slowed to other major recipients, such as Brazil and Ecuador.

At the same time, demand for Chinese finance has diminished in parts of the region. Jamaica, for instance, has received 10 Chinese loans since 2005, but its successful effort to reduce debt-to-GDP ratios by 40 percentage points in just five years has lessened the government's appetite for new borrowing. Jamaica's last DFI loan from China was in 2017.

China's own domestic priorities further constrain overseas lending. Beijing has directed state banks to concentrate more on supporting growth at home, while companies abroad rely on other sources of finance for priority smaller-scale projects. New rules

## China Development Bank and Ex-Im Bank finance to Latin America and the Caribbean, 2005–2023

TOTAL VALUE (BILLIONS)



SOURCE: CHINESE LOANS TO LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN DATABASE, INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE AND BOSTON UNIVERSITY GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY CENTER, 2024.



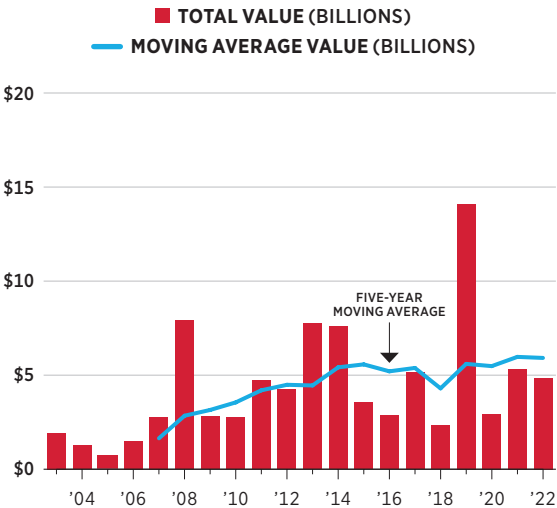
introduced in 2023 by the National Financial Regulatory Administration (NFRA) — a State Council body overseeing banking and insurance — impose stricter risk management standards that are likely to continue to mitigate China’s external financial activity. In 2025, the NFRA also introduced new market risk management guidelines for China’s commercial banks, including Bank of China and ICBC, both of which remain active in Latin America. While not aimed specifically at overseas lending, the rules, and the signal they send, are reinforcing a more cautious, risk-averse approach to cross-border finance.

Alongside declining sovereign loans, China’s FDI in Latin America has also slowed. Data from the Inter-American Dialogue indicate a downward trend in Chinese project announcements in recent years, reflected in tapering greenfield FDI and a sharper decline in mergers and acquisitions (M&A). Growth in Chinese M&A first slowed in 2014 and has steadily fallen since 2020, based on a five-year moving average.

### New areas of focus

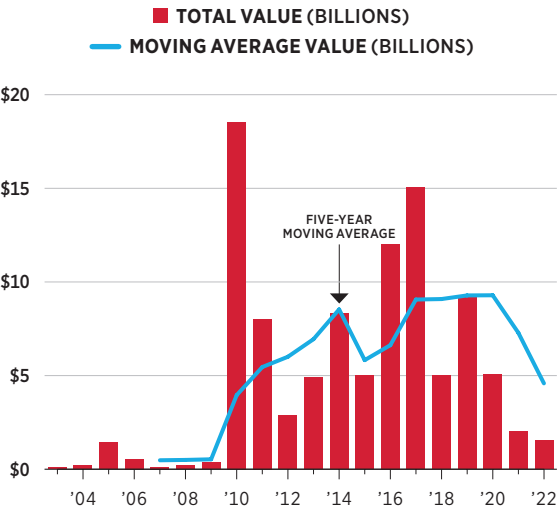
**D**ESPITE A SLOWDOWN IN finance and investment, Chinese companies remain active in Latin America, focusing on smaller, targeted investments in strategic sectors such as lithium, high-tech goods, and information and communication technology (ICT). China is seeking to manufacture in the region in some cases, including electric vehicle factories in Brazil and auto parts companies across Mexico, all of which rely on imports of components from China. In other instances, Chinese companies are aiming to be primary suppliers of wide-ranging technological equipment and services. Investments in safe cities projects, solar parks, and transmission projects incorporate Chinese technologies and standards and facilitate the exportation of China’s high-tech goods. These and other deals align closely with Beijing’s priorities for high-quality, innovation-driven growth, driving a shift toward selective engagement both regionally and globally.

### China greenfield FDI in LAC by year, 2003–2022



SOURCE: MARGARET MYERS, ÁNGEL MELGUIZO, AND YIFANG WANG, “NEW INFRASTRUCTURE”: EMERGING TRENDS IN CHINESE FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE, JANUARY 2024.

### China mergers and acquisitions in LAC by year, 2003–2022

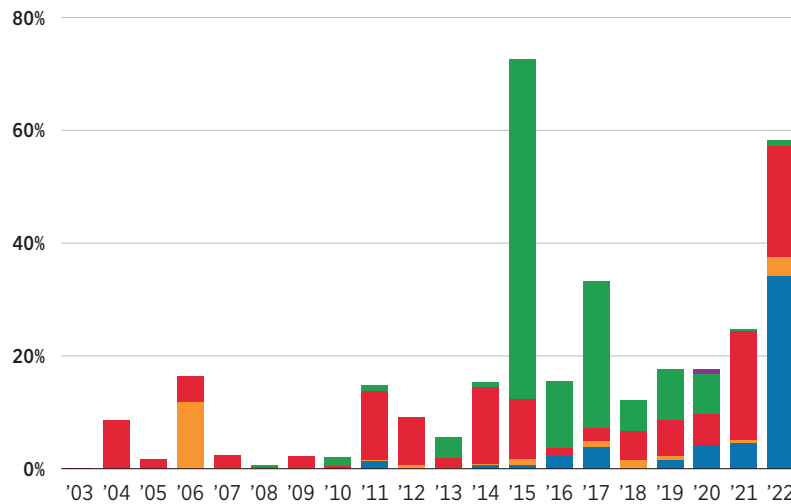


SOURCE: MARGARET MYERS, ÁNGEL MELGUIZO, AND YIFANG WANG, “NEW INFRASTRUCTURE”: EMERGING TRENDS IN CHINESE FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE, JANUARY 2024.

## China FDI in “new infrastructure” industries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2003-2022

VALUE OF “NEW INFRASTRUCTURE” DEALS (AS % OF TOTAL ANNUAL CHINA FDI IN LAC)

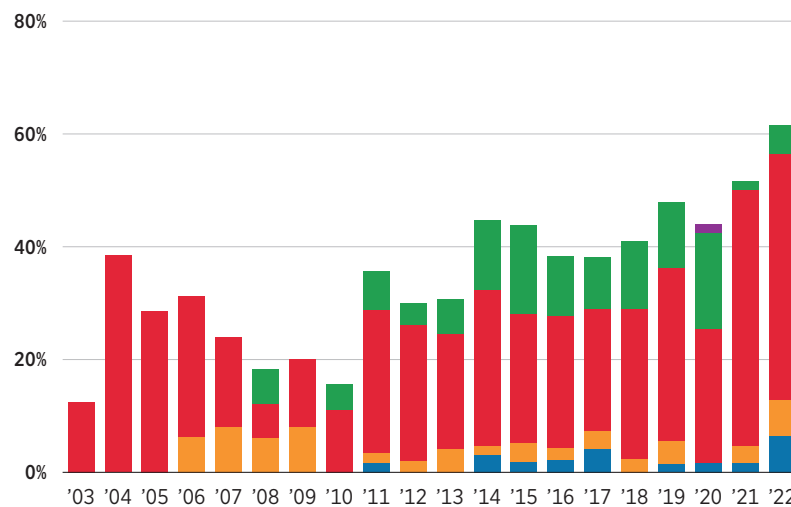
■ ELECTRIC VEHICLES ■ HIGH-END MANUFACTURING ■ ICT ■ RENEWABLE ENERGY ■ URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE



## Number of “new infrastructure” deals

(AS % OF TOTAL ANNUAL CHINA FDI IN LAC)

■ ELECTRIC VEHICLES ■ HIGH-END MANUFACTURING ■ ICT ■ RENEWABLE ENERGY ■ URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE



SOURCE: MARGARET MYERS, ÁNGEL MELGUIZO, AND YIFANG WANG, “NEW INFRASTRUCTURE”: EMERGING TRENDS IN CHINESE FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, INTER-AMERICAN DIALOGUE, JANUARY 2024.





Recent analysis by the Inter-American Dialogue demonstrates the extent to which China's investment in Latin America is focused on so-called "new infrastructure" (新基建), a term evoked most recently by Premier Li Qiang during the 2025 "two sessions" as a key component of China's economic strategy. The term generally encompasses those industries — telecommunications, fintech, and energy transition, for instance — that Beijing considers to be broadly in innovation-related.

### "New infrastructure"

**I**N LATIN AMERICA AND the Caribbean, investment in "new infrastructure" industries has grown over time, with ICT (including Huawei offerings across the tech stack), renewable energy technology, and, increasingly, electric vehicles accounting for the bulk of this activity. "New infrastructure" industries, including electric vehicles manufacturing, such as the battery, car, and bus manufacturing taking place in Mexico and Brazil; other high-end manufacturing, including medical and machinery manufacturing; ICT; renewable energy investments, such as solar parks in Argentina and Chile and dams across much of the region; and urban infrastructure, including the still slow-to-develop Bogotá metro project, accounted for 58% (around \$5.7 billion) of total annual Chinese FDI in the region in 2022 and over 60% of the total number of FDI deals announced by Chinese companies that year.

To be sure, talk of large, China-backed infrastructure projects persists in Latin America. Chinese, Peruvian, and Brazilian officials are said to be discussing the Twin Ocean Railway with renewed interest. Brazil and China signed an agreement to launch a technical, environmental and economic feasibility study for the project in 2025. Initially promoted by Chinese officials in 2014, this project would traverse Peru and Brazil, navigating complex terrain and likely extensive public opposition. Even the long-defunct Nicaragua Canal continues to feature in China-Latin America discourse. In November 2024, at the XVII China-LAC

Business Summit, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega sought support from China for a new proposed canal route. Other big-ticket projects — most prominently the massive Chancay Port in Peru — are considered notable examples of China's enduring interest in large infrastructure development, but they arguably reflect earlier phases of China's engagement in the region. Study of Chancay began well ahead of cosco's 2019 purchase of 60% of the shares from Volcan. New Chancay Port-adjacent projects are likely to materialize, however, capitalizing on port-driven growth.

In general, though, China's focus, whether overseas or at home, is still on bolstering growth and market presence in often high-tech industries. This focus is apparent even in Chinese high-level talks with Latin America leaders. During Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's visit to China in May 2025, China announced plans for a new wind, solar, and energy storage hub from CGN Power and a commitment from Great Wall Motor to invest approximately \$1 billion into Brazilian car manufacturing plants, among other deals. Tsingshan Holding Group's plans to invest \$233 million in a lithium iron phosphate plant in Chile were announced during Chilean President Gabriel Boric's recent visit to China. And President Xi Jinping's November 2023 talks with Peruvian President Dina Boluarte, Uruguay's Luis Lacalle Pou, and Colombia's Gustavo Petro, as well as his April 2023 meeting with Lula, focused on expanding already extensive trade relations, while also encouraging cooperation in mostly innovation-related sectors, including urban mobility systems in Colombia, pharmaceuticals in Uruguay, digital economy, energy, and mining in Peru, and 5G in Brazil, among other areas.

At home, China would appear to be doubling down on this course of action, advancing supply-side policies for high-tech and high-end manufacturing to boost China's economic prospects. These policies persist despite the drawbacks of "involution," or Chinese company price competition that compels businesses to continuously cut prices, which are the subject of much deliberation in Chinese policy circles. Still cen-



Workers prepare a sedan at an MG Motor Co. dealership in Mexico City. The company, part of the Chinese state-owned SAIC Motor, would be affected by the planned import tariffs that Mexico announced in September.

tral to China's approach is what Xi has called "new quality productive forces," or the pursuit of high-tech, high-efficiency, and high-quality to bolster economic growth. Just this year, China's Government Work Report reiterated the importance of developing "new quality productive forces," focusing on high-tech, high-efficiency, and high-quality growth models, in pursuit of a "modernized industrial system."

### Local engagement

**A**MID THIS SHIFTING landscape, people-to-people connectivity — one of the Belt and Road Initiative's stated objectives — is another growing focus for China's planners, whether in support of diplomatic goals or commercial ventures. In pursuit of local government buy-in for municipal (e.g., smart cities) or other projects, to bypass national-level complications, or as part of China's often-decentralized approach to aid distribution, much of China's engagement is being carried out locally, through a tangled web of overlapping interactions and a kaleidoscopic cast of characters, with government, Party, quasi-governmental,

and commercial actors all playing prominent roles.

Local level engagement also features in China's efforts to promote "new infrastructure" across Latin America, and to acquire the lithium and other tech-related minerals and metals. China's provincial level investments in Argentine lithium are now well-established, but in the case of Jujuy, efforts to access those resources date back to a 2010 MOU between Argentina's Geological Mining Service (Sege-mar) and China Geological Service (CGS), promoting scientific exchange and capacity-building workshops. In 2015, then-President Cristina Kirchner and Chinese President Xi extended this partnership, formalizing joint research and training initiatives. And, beginning as far back as September 2017, CGS, Sege-mar, and the National University of Jujuy conducted geological studies to assess the industrial potential of Jujuy's salt flats.

Long-standing local initiatives are underway elsewhere, too, to establish markets, facilitate strategic deal-making, and advance policy coordination, in addition to other objectives.





## "Uncharted waters"

**T**HE EFFECTS OF THE many trends underway in the China-Latin America dynamic — on the region, on China's economic interests, and on the standing of other regional partners — are still unfolding, and will continue to be shaped by a range of factors, including ongoing shifts in Chinese economic and foreign policy, regional responses, and U.S. efforts to counter Beijing's engagement.

China's "new infrastructure" initiatives have been embraced in many parts of the region, given their alignment with regional development priorities, particularly in energy transition, climate adaptation and digitalization. But whether and to what extent the region benefits from China's increasingly targeted engagement will largely depend on regional approaches to resource governance, technology transfer, and the development of robust legal and regulatory frameworks for emerging technologies.

At the same time, China's policy measures may take a toll on its relations with parts of the region. Already, China's industrial strategy — including efforts to offload excess capacity in Latin America and other markets — has encountered some resistance in the region. Steel tariffs by Mexico, Chile and Brazil reflect this dynamic, while Brazil's January 2024 electric vehicle tariffs signaled concern over surging imports from China. Pressure on Latin American manufacturers may very well increase as China seeks to boost competitiveness in sectors such as medical equipment and machine tools, where some regional firms remain active.

Chinese assessments of Latin America's viability as a market and partner will also continue to shape future decision-making. The overseas activities of Chinese companies are being monitored more closely as Beijing "braves uncharted economic waters" and "ventures into dangerous shoals," as the 2024 3rd Plenum "decisions" document puts it. While China re-

mains committed to engagement across the region and to cultivating new markets and partnerships, firms are likely to follow paths of least resistance — either by focusing on receptive localities in Latin America or by shifting attention to other regions. As it stands, Latin America is capturing a decreasing share of China's BRI investments, accounting for just 1.14% of construction projects and 0.4% of overall investment in the first half of 2025.

For all stakeholders — including the U.S., which remains committed, in theory, to limiting China's influence in the region — it will be critical to grasp both the trajectory of the China-Latin America relationship and the pace of its evolution. At present, the U.S. risks missing the forest for the trees, so to speak, by focusing too narrowly on a subset of mostly national security-related Chinese projects or an outdated vision of the BRI. China's engagement is dynamic — aligned with evolving industrial policy and economic security objectives — and, if successful, intended to establish a dominant market position for China across strategic industries, while nurturing the sorts of bilateral trade relations that ensure some degree of political alignment with Beijing. The U.S. game of whack-a-mole in Latin America — or a piecemeal, reactive approach to derailing select projects of concern — is unlikely to meaningfully alter this trajectory, and is straining U.S.-Latin America relations. There is a pressing need for a comprehensive, clear-eyed assessment of China's progress and priorities — one that resists a static view of China's global interests, interrogates the scope and limits of U.S. competitiveness across domains, and upholds the centrality of inter-hemispheric partnerships in advancing shared objectives. 

**Myers** is a senior advisor for the Inter-American Dialogue and an adjunct researcher at Impactos de China en América Latina y el Caribe (ICLAC) in Chile

# BEIJING'S STEADY MARCH INTO LATIN AMERICA'S ARMIES

To counter China's increasing military diplomacy in the region,  
the U.S. needs to deepen its engagement and reaffirm  
its position as the partner of choice.

*By Ryan Berg, Christopher Hernandez-Roy, Henry Ziemer and Jessie Hu*







**F**OR YEARS, U.S. OFFICIALS have warned about China's growing influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. But since 2010, that reference has been elevated to a new category, as leaders from the Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) have consistently identified the competition from Beijing as a "key challenge" in every annual report presented to the Armed Services Committees of the U.S. Congress.

Amid those concerns, the U.S. typically comforted itself by reflecting on its lead in one key area: being the "preferred partner" in defense and security cooperation in the Americas. While in general terms, this remains the case today, that confidence is starting to look shaky as China is beginning to surpass the U.S. in one related field: military diplomacy.

Encompassing international military education and training (IMET), military diplomacy pivots on visits by high-level military leaders to the region, exchanges and dialogues between military colleges and defense universities, and joint war games, exercises and exhibitions. A new dataset compiled by the Center for Strategic & International Studies Americas Program shows China's substantial ascent in the area of diplomacy with most armed forces in the Western Hemisphere. One case illustrates the trend: In 2020, China had five times as many students from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) enrolled in its military colleges as the U.S.

Military diplomacy can accrue significant soft and hard power advantages. In peacetime, it helps build goodwill, capacity and influence networks within foreign militaries. During conflict, it can enhance familiarity with preparedness levels, doctrine and command, or even underpin interoperability between forces. A cadet who trains abroad often carries that experience into senior leadership, shaping how a country thinks about security, alliances and even arms purchases.

China has always regarded the importance of military di-

**Brazilian navy ships patrol Guanabara Bay ahead of the BRICS summit in Rio de Janeiro this July.**





plomacy as a critical element in how it engages with other countries. In LAC, however, these considerations often took a back seat to economic ties. Yet, China's ambition to extend military cooperation with the region emerged in the Foreign Ministry's 2008 Policy Paper, and was later reinforced in the country's 2016 Policy Paper, which stated: "China will actively carry out military exchanges and cooperation with Latin American and Caribbean countries ... in such fields as military training, personnel training and UN peacekeeping, [and] expand pragmatic cooperation in humanitarian relief, counter-terrorism and other non-traditional security fields."

The policy papers explain why, a decade ago, China began a concerted effort to draw closer to LAC in the defense and security domain. It did so by launching the China-LAC High-Level Defense Forum, under the umbrella of the China-CELAC Forum, which deliberately excludes the U.S. and Canada. Over the past 10 years, this initiative has produced white papers and road maps for the region's defense and security cooperation, while the ties have also thrived under non-traditional paths, such as the start of the China-LAC Military Medicine Forum.

### **A non-aligned region**

**I**N PAST ERAS, SOUTHCOM was at the leading edge of military-to-military engagements in the Americas. The institution also advanced partnerships through flagship initiatives such as the National Guard State Partnership Program, the Theater Maintenance Partnership Initiative, and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative Technical Assistance

Program. SOUTHCOM has also developed extensive international military education and training programs in the Americas.

Thanks to U.S. assistance, the region boasts a wealth of multilateral fora and bodies for defense engagement, such as the Conference of the Defense Ministers of the Americas, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of the Americas) and the Inter-American Defense College (IADC). The IADC claims it has trained 3,169 students from 29 different countries since its inception — over 27% of whom have reached general officer or flag ranks.

While SOUTHCOM maintains a steady presence and the Trump administration has signaled a strong interest in the region, U.S. military diplomacy appears to have declined in recent years. Some of the reasons are familiar — bureaucratic red tape, extensive reporting requirements, and restrictions on the use of U.S. government funds to support education and training programs. Flatlining defense budgets that barely manage to keep up with inflation have also had an impact.

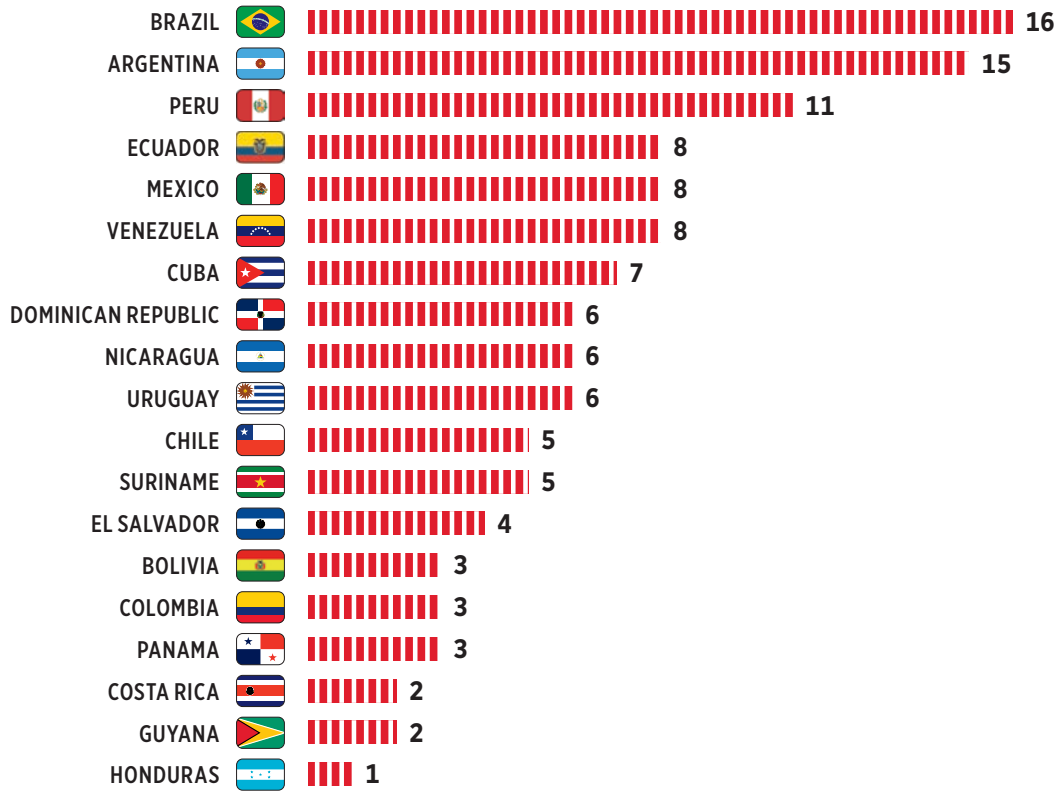
Starting in 2014, SOUTHCOM has seen a noticeable decrease in the resources needed to support its mission. In fiscal year 2025, the institution reported over \$322 million in unfunded "wish list" items. From this list, roughly one-third is typically allocated to support military training and exercises with LAC partners — exactly the type of military diplomacy at which China has become adept. The unfunded "wish list" is a proxy for missed strategic opportunities to strengthen defense ties with the region and build partner networks.

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**A decade ago, China began a concerted effort to draw closer to LAC in the defense and security domain.**



## CHINA'S MILITARY EXCHANGES WITH LAC (2022-2025)



SOURCE: CSIS AMERICAS PROGRAM

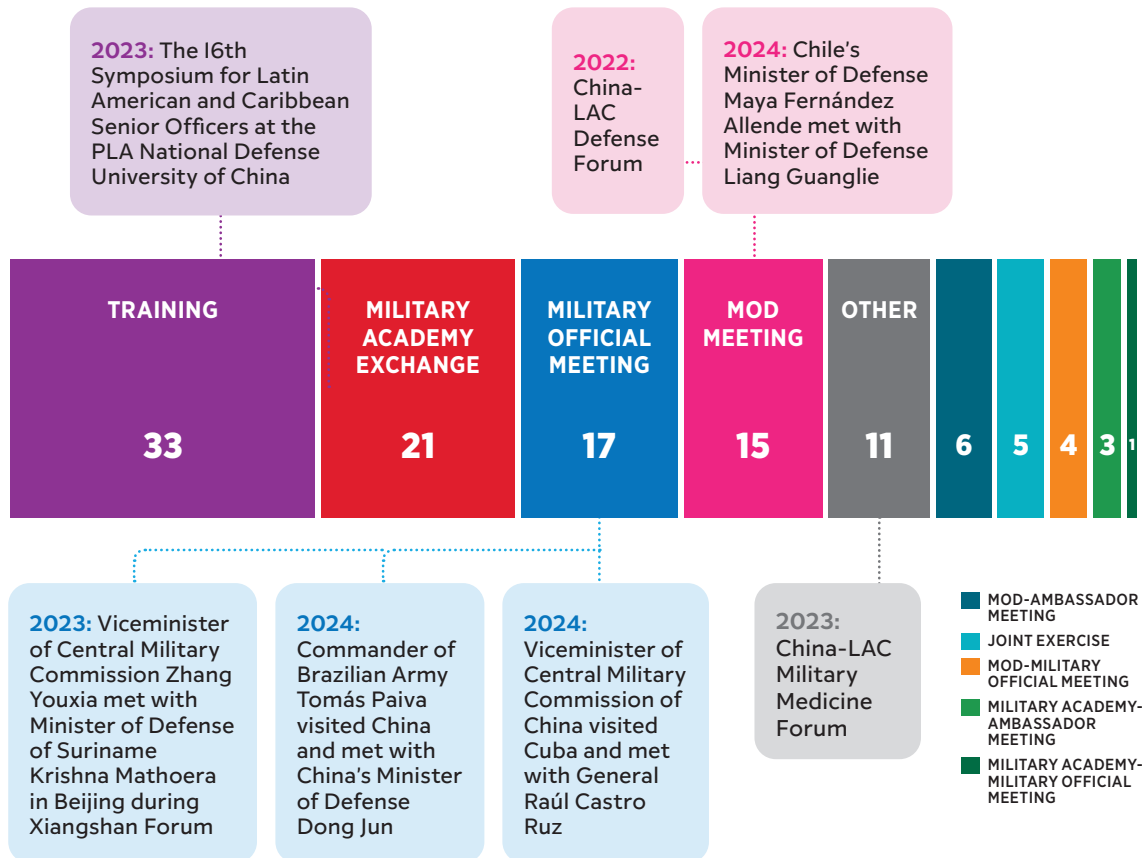
Research by the Center for International Policy, which publishes the Security Assistance Monitor, demonstrates how traditional recipient countries in LAC have seen a decline in IMET billets. Peru shrank almost four times from approximately 1,000 trainees in the mid-2010s to fewer than 200 in 2019; Argentina fell from over 500 trainees in the late 2000s to just over 100 in 2019.

Beijing has adroitly filled these gaps with IMET opportunities in China. Typically, Chinese IMET offers greater perks to LAC students, including business-class travel, luxury hotels, large allowances and trips for the entire family. In a differentiation from U.S. strategy, which tends to invest in senior officers

and those identified as future senior officers, Beijing has offered more opportunities for officers at lower ranks. According to CSIS's dataset, between 2022 and 2025, military officers from 19 LAC countries attended short-term exchange programs, such as the Senior Commander Course and Latin American Military Officer Seminar for senior officers hosted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) National Defense University.

Taking advantage of LAC's desire to remain non-aligned, China has initiated high-level defense dialogues attended by many in the region. Meetings of the China-LAC Defense Forum, for instance, bring high-level leaders from Beijing into contact with their equivalents in 24 LAC countries. In total, be-

## TYPES OF MILITARY EXCHANGES (2022-2025)



SOURCE: CSIS AMERICAS PROGRAM

tween 2022 and 2025, the period of CSIS's dataset, China has conducted 119 military exchanges with 19 different countries.

### Heavyweights

**H**OWEVER, CHINA'S MOST FREQUENT defense cooperation in LAC has been with South American heavyweights Brazil and Argentina. In Brazil's case, exchanges span all three mil-

itary branches — army, air force and navy, and are likely the result of the Joint Commission for Exchange and Cooperation, established in 2004 to enable regular ministerial dialogue and training programs. Bilateral dialogues have also included top-level officials such as the Commander of the Brazilian Army, Tomás Paiva, and the Chinese Minister of Defense, Dong Jun.

In June, before tensions arose with the Trump administration, Brazil went further, assigning both an





army general and a navy admiral to serve as defense attachés in Beijing. That level of senior representation is rare outside the country's ties with the U.S. Brazil's efforts to position itself in a multipolar world have also created rare opportunities for China-U.S. interaction in the military arena, such as when both countries participated in Operation Formosa, hosted by Brazil in 2024.

The military exchanges with Argentina also encompass all three branches and are heavily concentrated on educational exchanges. The bulk of the exchanges took place in 2023, a timeframe that coincided with the strengthening of ties between then-President Alberto Fernández and China. Fernández also flirted with purchasing Chinese JF-17 fighter jets for the Argentine Air Force. However, the election of President Javier Milei may be restraining China's influence, and so far this year, no military exchanges between the two have taken place. Still, institutional defense ties between the two countries remain, and Argentina is also in the process of signing cooperation frameworks on academic exchanges between the National Defense University of Argentina and the PLA National Defense University.

## Back to basics

**C**HINA SEES CONSIDERABLE ADVANTAGES in continuing its inroads in military diplomacy, and its efforts are set to deepen in the coming years with its Global Security Initiative (GSI), which considerably broadens areas of cooperation and fuses security, defense and military cooperation through emerging technologies and climate change and health initiatives.

Given this reality, the U.S. should not underestimate the long-term consequences. Reversing Washington's declining influence in military diplomacy will require concerted effort. Fully funding IMET

and expanding billets for LAC officers at U.S. defense colleges will ensure the U.S. continues to educate and shape the next generation of military leaders in the region. At the same time, the U.S. should pay particular attention to China's efforts to leverage its military diplomacy into advantages in arms sales, status of forces agreements, greater rotations and even basing agreements.

Three of the region's largest countries — Argentina, Brazil and Colombia — are Major Non-NATO Allies, providing the U.S. opportunities to deepen cooperation on arms procurement and encourage greater interoperability. In the non-traditional areas of security and defense encompassed by China's GSI, the U.S. could double down on its historic advantages in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts, where proximity and familiarity are natural advantages.

The U.S.'s more muscular approach to combating organized crime and violence in the hemisphere may also create opportunities for engagement. Countries like Ecuador have been eager to receive greater support in their fight against criminal organizations, while longstanding allies like Colombia face new threats heralded by the proliferation of cheap commercial drones. The U.S. should leverage tools like multinational exercises and joint patrolling missions to empower its allies, weaken the influence of organized crime, and reaffirm its position as the security cooperation partner of choice.

The question is no longer whether China is competing for the hearts of Latin America's militaries. It's whether the U.S. is prepared to compete back. **AQ**

**Berg** is head of the Future of Venezuela Initiative at CSIS and director of its Americas Program, where **Hernandez-Roy** is deputy director and senior fellow, **Ziemer** is associate fellow, and **Hu** is research intern.



# A CAREFUL REALIGNMENT

**In the battle for influence between Washington and Beijing, Latin American countries are often making subtle shifts.**

*by Brenda Estefan*

**M**EXICO CITY — While most Latin American countries are still trying to strike some kind of balance between China or the United States, the return of Donald Trump has already led to important, if sometimes subtle, shifts in the biggest geopolitical question facing the region.

Indeed, governments are taking different paths depending on their geography, domestic priorities and interactions so far with the U.S. president. The two largest economies in Latin America are moving in opposite directions, with Mexico edging closer to Washington's orbit while Brazil takes ever greater distance from it.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum's government recently sent to Congress a proposal to impose tariffs of up to 50% on Chinese cars and auto parts, as well as on steel, textiles and even pharmaceuticals. If approved, the measure would also affect other Asian exporters such as South Korea and India. Officials argue the plan is designed to shield domestic industry, but its timing — coming as Sheinbaum prepares for the

review of North America's USMCA free-trade pact — suggests a broader intent. Sheinbaum's administration has decided to side with its northern neighbor, knowing that, given the high level of economic integration, it is its safest bet. Beijing, Mexico's second-largest supplier of goods and raw materials, has accused the country of yielding to U.S. pressure.

Brazil, by contrast, has become a case study in how to defy Trump's demands. The White House had thrown its weight behind Jair Bolsonaro, urging that coup-related charges be dropped. Tariffs and sanctions followed when Brazilian authorities refused, including 50% levies on Brazilian exports — among the steepest Washington has imposed on any country. Yet far from folding, Brazil's judiciary pressed ahead, convicting Bolsonaro and handing him a 27-year sentence.

For Washington, it was a diplomatic defeat: The U.S. had deployed some of its sharpest tools, only to watch Brazil celebrate its Independence Day under the banner "Brazil for Brazilians" — a slogan that resonated domestically as a rebuke of foreign meddling — soon followed by a letter from President Luiz Inácio Lula





The Chinese-built Chancay mega-port in Peru was inaugurated last November and has become a major hub for commerce between South America and Asia.

da Silva in *The New York Times* declaring: “President Trump, we remain open to negotiating anything that can bring mutual benefits. But Brazil’s democracy and sovereignty are not on the table.”

The costs of Washington’s campaign are already visible. Brazil’s exports to the U.S. have slumped, while sales to China are surging. Since Trump’s tariffs took effect, Brazil’s shipments to Beijing have risen 31%, helping to offset losses elsewhere. Public perceptions are shifting, too. A recent survey found that the share of Brazilians with a favorable image of the U.S. fell to 44% in August, from 58% in February of last year, while positive views of China rose over the same period. What was once America’s largest ally in the hemisphere is drifting further into Beijing’s embrace. Trump, however, might be ready to shift his tone. He and Lula shared a positive interaction at the UN General Assembly that the two leaders could build upon.

## The steps of others

**T**AKE COLOMBIA, a long-time close U.S. ally. In mid-September, I gave a lecture at Universidad de los Andes on “the new global disorder and business.” After the event, a participant confided that he’s worried foreign policy is being treated as a political football — whether to align more with Washington or Beijing — rather than as a state decision. The recent tilt toward China reflects more a reactive stance than a deliberate strategy in foreign policy. Earlier this year, the country joined China’s Belt and Road Initiative — a move the foreign ministry hailed as “historic” — and the BRICS New Development Bank.

Although the U.S. has been Colombia’s leading importing partner for decades, bilateral trade with Beijing has reached record levels, with China now close to overtaking Washington as the top source of imports. These moves should not be read as a definitive shift toward Beijing, but in the current geopolitical landscape, they clearly nudge the Andean nation one step away from Washington. This might explain why, for the first time in three decades, Washington has “decertified” Colombia’s anti-drug efforts, with Trump pointing to record coca cultivation and unmet eradication goals under President Gustavo Petro. Though the move places Bogotá alongside Venezuela and Myan-

mar, a waiver keeps U.S. aid flowing — leaving Petro facing both international censure and mounting political pressure at home.

Yet Colombia is divided. Next year’s presidential election will determine which vision prevails. For now, a May LATAM Pulse poll found that 34.5% of Colombians believe their country should tilt toward China, barely 2.5 percentage points behind those favoring alignment with the U.S. — an important shift that has been fueled by episodes such as the angry exchange of tweets between Petro and Trump in the early days of the second Trump administration.

In Argentina, President Javier Milei has sought to court Washington rhetorically, echoing Trump’s disdain for multilateralism, but economic realities are pulling in the opposite direction. China remains Argentina’s largest buyer of soy, beef and other agricultural goods, and Beijing’s currency swaps provide crucial relief to Buenos Aires’ battered reserves. In a significant boost to Argentina-China ties, China Eastern Airlines has started ticket sales for a new Buenos Aires-Shanghai flight via Auckland, set to begin in December, marking the return of a Chinese carrier to Argentina after a decade. This route, poised to be the world’s longest regular commercial flight, underscores deepening economic links.

Complementing this, the Milei administration loosened visa requirements for Chinese citizens holding U.S. visas, reciprocating China’s visa-free policy for Argentines, enhancing mobility and signaling pragmatic cooperation amid geopolitical tensions. Milei’s balancing act illustrates the limits of ideology when survival depends on trade flows.













## A port and its repercussions

**P**ERU OFFERS another revealing case. The \$3.5 billion Chancay mega-port — located 46 miles north of Lima and inaugurated last November when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the country for the APEC summit — started formal operations shortly after Trump returned to the White House. The facility, operated by China’s cosco Shipping, has accelerated its emergence as a direct hub between South America and Asia. In April, the Port of Guangzhou initiated a direct service to Chancay, cutting transit times to roughly 30



# Many Latin American countries rely heavily on trade with China

VALUE OF EXPORTS AND IMPORTS (2024)

	SHARE OF EXPORTS TO CHINA (%)	CHINA'S RANKING AS EXPORT DESTINATION	SHARE OF IMPORTS FROM CHINA (%)	CHINA'S RANKING AS IMPORT SOURCE
CHILE 	36.1	1	24.3	1
PERU 	33.8	1	28.6	1
BRAZIL 	28	1	24.2	1
BOLIVIA 	14.9	2	22.3	1
ECUADOR 	14.8	3	22.4	2
URUGUAY 	13.6	3	22.1	1
ARGENTINA 	7.5	4	19.2	2
COLOMBIA 	4.8	4	24.9	2
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC 	2.8	6	18.3	2
PANAMA 	2	15	25.3	1
COSTA RICA 	1.9	9	17	2
MEXICO 	1.5	3	20.7	2

NOTE: CHART INCLUDES TOP 12 LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES BY CHINA'S VALUE IN EXPORTS IN 2024. PER THE ITC, IN URUGUAY, THE TOP EXPORT DESTINATIONS IN 2024 WERE 1. BRAZIL, 2. FREE ZONES, AND 3. CHINA. SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTRE (ITC)


days and logistics costs by about 20%. Although a Trump ally hinted at the possibility of tariffs on goods transshipped through the port, such threats have not deterred Lima from deepening ties with Beijing. For Peru, the calculus is simple: Chinese capital and infrastructure arrive faster and with fewer conditions than their Western counterparts.

Central America shows a mixed picture: While Nicaragua unsurprisingly pushes forward with Chinese-backed projects, countries like Guatemala and El Salvador tilt closer to Washington.

During the years when Washington's attention was consumed elsewhere, Latin America slipped down its list of priorities. Now that the region has moved back up the agenda, it is under a framework of threats and tariff blackmail that has eroded goodwill. And Xi is not wasting the opportunity: He now presents himself as Trump's opposite — predictable, pragmatic, respectful of sovereignty. In a region highly resistant to outside tutelage, this posture is well received. This has strengthened Latin America's inclination to

hedge its geopolitical bets through ambiguity rather than explicit alignment.

Many in the region understand that an effective foreign policy requires a delicate balance: safeguarding national interests while navigating great-power rivalry with strategic subtlety. Where room for maneuver is narrow and the stakes with the U.S. are vast, governments will tend to align with Washington. Yet the more Washington relies on coercion, the quicker public opinion drifts away. On the other hand, among countries with more options or looser ties to the U.S., threats are without doubt a singularly poor strategy.

All things considered, Latin America's ties with China won't be easily broken, and they can be more resilient than many have expected. 

Estefan is a professor at IPADE Business School in Mexico City and a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington. She is also a columnist at *Reforma*, Mexico's leading newspaper.



# China's Inroads Are Encouraging Stronger U.S. Ties

**With Beijing relevant as ever in Latin America,  
Washington is developing a renewed  
commitment to the region.**

*by Susan Segal*



**Susan Segal** is the CEO  
of Americas Society/  
Council of the Americas

**C**HINA'S THRIVING TIES WITH Latin America and the Caribbean still lack the depth and breadth of the U.S. relationship with the region. Beijing clearly has a long-term strategic vision, but it is hard to imagine that it will develop the kind of cultural and social bonds that are essential for long-term, deep relationships. Moreover, much of China's progress has stemmed from the United States' relative disengagement from the region — a vacuum that is now beginning to close.

China has become South America's largest and most significant trading partner, mainly due to its hunger for raw materials like copper, iron ore and lithium. These resources are exported to China and then resold to Western markets. However, many of the large infrastructure projects China has planned have not yet come to fruition. Considering that Beijing is now more focused on tech, telecoms, critical minerals, vehicles and green energy, these projects may never fully materialize after all.

In contrast, the U.S. continues to be Latin America's biggest foreign investor. I would also say that U.S. and other Western companies remain the preferred economic partners in the region. Washington is also recognizing an obvious truth: Countering China's growing influence in the region requires resources and commitment. Most investment will come from the private sector, but the government must play a catalytic role with some resources if the U.S. wants to compete.

Recent encouraging signs suggest that U.S. economic engagement has increased, and that policymakers better understand the importance of building public-private partnerships to support regional investment. This is happening especially quickly when it comes to critical minerals. The U.S. has finally understood that, for our long-term security, we need to mine and refine these minerals at home and within our hemisphere.

Imagine the strength of a renewed U.S. commitment to the region — one that combines economic investment with genuine cultural ties across the Americas. It's a winning formula for a hemisphere that is united, prosperous and secure. **AQ**



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THE AQ PROFILE

# The Politician Redefining Climate Finance

**Barbados' Prime Minister Mia Mottley**  
has emerged as the leading voice  
of small island states in the global  
fight against climate change.

*by Mie Hoejris Dahl*





Mia Mottley speaks at the COP28 UN climate conference in Dubai in December 2023.

**B**OGOTÁ—Four years ago, Mia Mottley, prime minister of Barbados, walked onto the stage at the opening of the World Leaders' Summit at COP26 in Glasgow and delivered the speech that would consolidate her as a global leader in climate justice and the voice of small island developing states.

Global warming of two degrees Celsius would be “a death sentence” for the people of Antigua and Barbuda, the Maldives, Samoa, Barbados, and other states on the front lines of climate change, she said in her speech on November 1, 2021. “When will leaders lead?” she asked in her contralto voice. “Try harder,” she demanded.

Since then, she has made a name not only by spearheading plans to reform global climate adaptation finance, but also by overseeing Barbados' transition from a constitutional monarchy under the British crown to a republic.

In the lead-up to the 30th Conference of the Parties, or COP30, in Brazil in November, much of the world is looking to her leadership to accelerate the global fight against climate change. The Trump administration seems likely to boycott COP30, and with climate becoming a back-burner issue in the U.S. and elsewhere, Mottley is a prominent voice pushing in the other direction.

Her goal is to rewire global finance so vulnerable states can withstand climate change without drowning in debt. She has proposed reforms to international finance institutions that would enable cheaper lending, rapid liquidity after climate shocks,

and debt-for-climate swaps to fund resilience. While she has delivered progress for Barbados, scaling her ideas into systemic global reforms faces resistance from powerful lenders and donor fatigue.

### Entering the political stage

**B**ORN INTO A POLITICAL family in the capital city Bridgetown, Mia Amor Mottley is the daughter of a former Barbados consul general in New York and granddaughter of a former mayor of Bridgetown. Her early life was international and cosmopolitan: She attended the United Nations International School in New York and earned her law degree from the London School of Economics in 1986.

Mottley entered Barbadian politics quickly. Elected to parliament in 1994 for St. Michael North East, an electoral district that includes Bridgetown, she immediately became minister of education, youth affairs and culture at age 29. Over the years, she held other senior roles: attorney general, minister of home affairs and minister of economic affairs, before becoming deputy prime minister from 2003 to 2008.

Mottley, 60, is a woman of firsts. In 2001, she became Barbados' first female attorney general, handling cases involving criminal justice, anti-corruption frameworks, and maritime boundary arbitration. In 2008, she became the first female leader of the Barbados Labour Party (BLP), a party that internationally might be read as a social democratic labor-rooted political party, but in the Barbados

**Mottley's goal is to rewire global finance so vulnerable states can withstand climate change without drowning in debt.**





Mottley delivers a speech at a CARICOM conference in February in Bridgetown, Barbados.

context, is considered center-right. In 2018, she became the country's first female prime minister after her party won 73% of the popular vote in a historic landslide, sweeping all 30 seats in parliament. She repeated the feat in 2022 with another 30-0 victory. She now leads the world's newest republic.

"She took over leadership at a time where we had experienced probably the worst governance for a decade under former Prime Minister [Freundel Jerome] Stuart," said Peter Wickham, principal director of Caribbean Development Research Services, which conducts political polls and research throughout the Caribbean.

National debt was at a record high, and social services were crumbling as the government struggled to repay its debt. Just before the elections, raw sewage bubbled up through manholes on the South Coast, leaving foul odors and brown wastewater. Nationally, "a lot of her success has been related to the fact that she inherited a very bad situation and turned it around fairly quickly," Wickham explained.

During her first term, Mottley restructured national debt in 2018-2019 and improved the country's credit rating by Standard & Poor's from selective default when she took office to B- by the end of 2018. This allowed Barbados to borrow on international markets again, like in July 2025, when Barbados issued a \$500 million bond, and invest in social services. "It [the crisis] gave her the opportunity to shine," Wickham told *AQ*.

"She lives on crisis, frankly," Wickham added. He argued she has even created her own at times, noting she was not heavily associated with climate issues in the past but saw an opportunity to latch onto the debate to secure resources for Barbados.

### A small nation facing big climate risks

**B**ARBADOS IS A PEAR-SHAPED island, located in the North Atlantic Ocean along with 12 other independent Caribbean island states. Roughly the size of Rhode Island, it is home to almost 300,000 people who see saltwater slowly eroding

their land. Without action, the island's beaches could lose 20%-50% of their sand volume by the year 2100, according to Barbados' Coastal Zone Management Unit. Barbadians have only 285 cubic meters of fresh water per person annually — roughly four times less than the global average — with water scarcity worsened by climate change.

With low-lying geography in the hurricane belt, Barbados is particularly vulnerable to storms. "When a hurricane passes, it can wipe out the entire island because it is so small," said Colin Murdoch, ambassador and permanent observer of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva. Evacuation is nearly impossible. "There is nowhere to move to," Murdoch said.

Hurricanes tear apart infrastructure, and Murdoch noted that damages can reach 200%-300% of a small island state's GDP, which in the case of Barbados was around just \$7 billion in 2024. "You're not just starting from zero. You're starting from less than zero," he said. "And this can happen over and over again. ... It's probably the biggest issue that Caribbean countries face."

### A strong voice

**T**O TACKLE BARBADOS' MOST pressing issues, Mottley began looking outward. In her COP26 speech, she declared, "National solutions to global problems do not work." Since then, she has raised the voice of Barbados and other climate-vulnerable states at major global forums like the UN General Assembly, World Bank meetings, and at the World Economic Forum in Davos. She charms audiences with her gap-toothed smile and weaves in phrases from Caribbean icons like Rihanna and Bob Marley, asking world leaders, "Who will get up and stand up for the rights of our people?"

"She has outstanding leadership in putting Barbados and other small island states on the global agenda," said Ayesha Nicholls, a Barbadian communications expert. In a region where outsiders often con-





Mottley speaks at a climate finance event at the World Bank's headquarters in Washington, D.C. in April 2024.

fuse Barbados with other countries, Nicholls said the island is now recognized for having a strong leader. Barbadians are proud of Mottley, and “her speeches are replayed at home,” she said.

“The first and hardest thing for small states, which are often not known, is to get on the radar,” Murdoch said. He credits Mottley’s forceful personality and gift for public speaking with forging diplomatic alliances and elevating small island states in global debates. “She has a strong reputation in the region, a strong following — and she’s very down to earth and close to the people,” Murdoch told *AQ*. Mottley, who declined to be interviewed for this story, plays a prominent role in the Caribbean community. From January to June in 2020 and in 2025, she chaired CARICOM, the 15-member regional trade bloc headquartered in Georgetown, Guyana. During

her first tenure leading CARICOM, she played a central role in coordinating the regional COVID-19 crisis response. During her second stint, she used the platform to position the Caribbean as a unified bloc on climate finance ahead of COP30 in Brazil.

Since 2022, she has spearheaded the Bridgetown Initiative, which calls for a reset of the global financial system to unlock trillions for climate adaptation without saddling fragile economies with new debt. She presents the world’s climate calculus not as an abstract moral question but as a balance-sheet problem.

Last year, Barbados became a testing ground as Mottley pioneered the world’s first debt-for-climate-resilience swap. The deal restructured part of Barbados’ external debt in exchange for commitments to invest in climate adaptation. By work-

ing with the Inter-American Development Bank and The Nature Conservancy, Barbados refinanced high-interest bonds at better terms, freeing up \$165 million in fiscal savings — money earmarked for investments in water infrastructure, food security and environmental protection.

### Cutting colonial ties

**B**ARBADOS GAINED INDEPENDENCE IN 1966, but had been a constitutional monarchy under the British crown until Mottley oversaw the country's transition to a republic on November 30, 2021. By making Barbados a republic, Mottley “has written her name in history books,” Wickham said.

Mottley links the climate crisis to colonialism and global inequality. She notes that today's international loan system was designed when some vulnerable nations were still colonies and fails to address their needs.

She has called on leaders in advanced economies to act. “If you in the northern worlds don't want additional migrants, and if you want global stability, and you don't want the risk of more pandemics, and you don't want the risk of more coups, and you don't want the risk of more violence and war, well, then the important thing to do is act proactively,” she said last year, speaking at an event at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York.

### Looking ahead

**“W**HEN SHE TAKES THE stage at COP30, people will listen,” said Nicholls. Wickham agreed the summit will be “a big deal” for the prime minister and said she will use it to “continue lobbying, raising money and interest” in climate adaptation for small island states.

But some are skeptical about the upcoming summit. “I detect fatigue and disappointment with these international conferences,” Murdoch said. He noted that climate pledges often go unfulfilled, leading small states to increasingly turn to bilateral agree-

ments or international courts for enforceable rights.


Mottley's current term as prime minister runs until January 2027 at the latest. With just over a year left before Barbados is set to hold general elections, Mottley faces pressing domestic challenges. Homicides, though still few in number, reached a record in 2024, and the cost of living is among the highest in the Caribbean, while citizens watch as the sea rises over their island. On the other hand, Mottley has taken important steps to steer Barbados out of a debt crisis and press for reforms to the international climate finance system.

While Mottley has been applauded for her international climate leadership and her bold moves to turn Barbados into a republic, critics say the prime minister is less popular at home, where daily struggles with crime and the cost of living are a bigger concern than climate adaptation. Concerns also linger over her concentration of power, since she holds the powerful finance portfolio in addition to serving as prime minister.

But the fact is that currently, Barbados has no elected opposition in parliament. A May 2021 national poll found that 79% of Barbadians preferred Mottley as their leader — the highest approval rating for any sitting prime minister.

While observers have speculated she could be considered for a major international role — even UN Secretary-General — Wickham said that seems less likely after Trump's return to the U.S. presidency. Mottley once promised to step down after her current term, but has since reversed that stance and now appears likely to run again.

“The problem in the Caribbean is that as a prime minister, there is not much else you can do afterwards,” Wickham said.

For now, eyes will be on her performance at COP30 in Brazil to see how she continues shaping global climate justice leadership. 

**Dahl** is an independent journalist covering politics, economics, environment, crime and social issues across Latin America



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PHOTO ESSAY

# MEXICO'S HISTORIC INTEROCEANIC CORRIDOR

*A new project is transforming communities,  
livelihoods and landscapes across southern Mexico.*

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAURICIO PALOS**

*Reporting by Andrzej Ryback*







Passengers alight in Matías Romero, Oaxaca, from the new Tehuantepec Interoceanic Train. All photos taken in January 2025.



**COATZACOALCOS, MEXICO** — For over a century, Mexican planners have strived to connect the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea via railways crossing the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the country's south. The idea, first undertaken by President Porfirio Díaz in 1907, is finally coming together with renewed proportions and reach.

Today's Tehuantepec Interoceanic Corridor aims to compete with the Panama Canal, industrialize towns and cities along its path, and turn southern Mexico into a world-class logistics and manufacturing hub. It centers around three new rail lines; involves two major port upgrades, industrial initiatives, new gas lines, and highways; and offers sweeping incentives to attract private companies to four states: Veracruz, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Tabasco.

Since its start in 2019, the project, known by its Spanish acronym CIIT, has received massive public investment — around \$4 billion — from the administrations of President Claudia Sheinbaum and her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. It has also attracted \$1 billion in projected private funding. Alongside the railways, the government plans to create “development poles,” industrial parks designed to attract private investment in specific sectors including semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, automobiles and clean energy, among others. Companies including Mota-Engil México, Grupo Carso and ProIstmo have already been granted licenses to develop them.

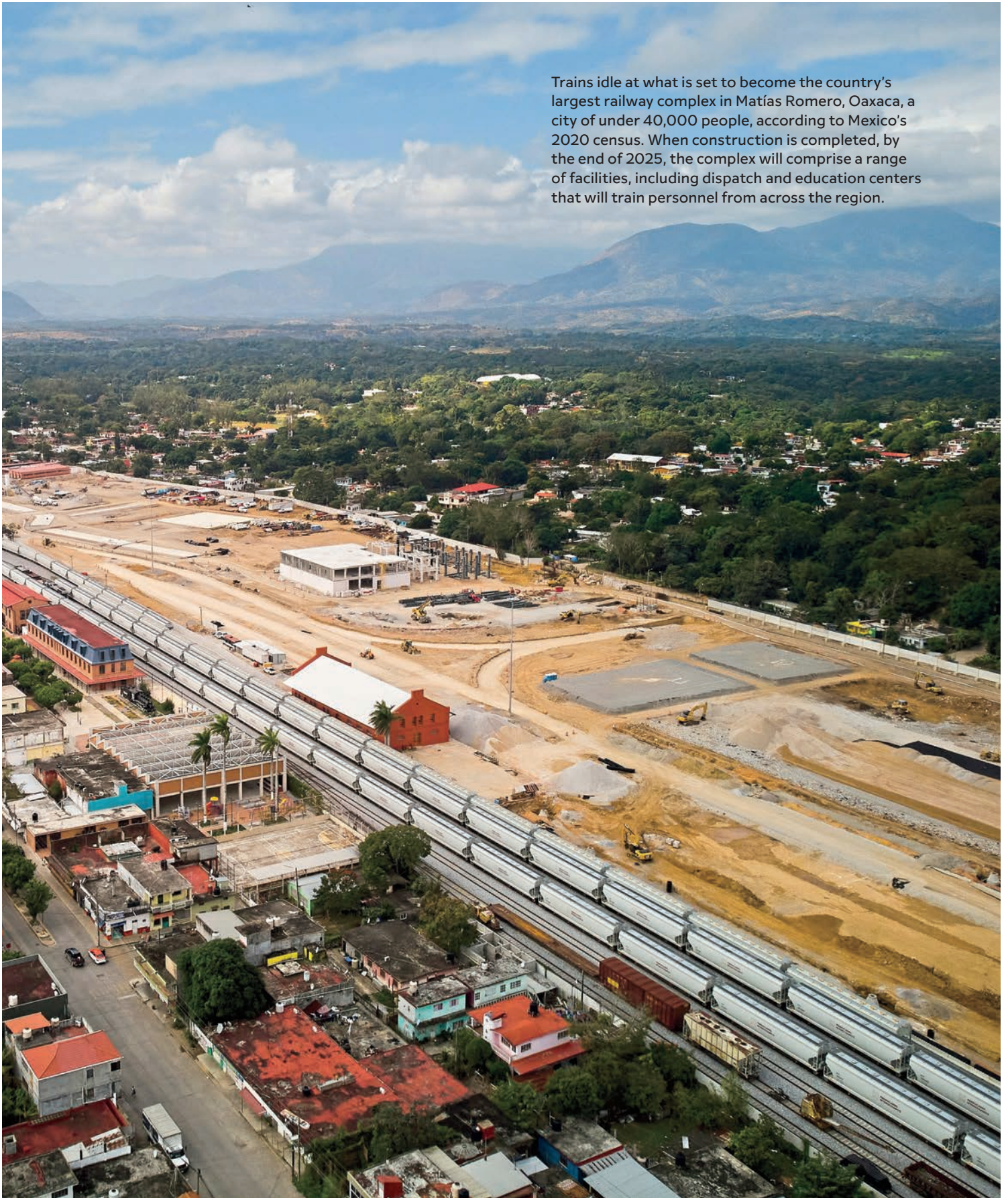
Because the CIIT connects two major ports and its backbone, Line Z, will move maritime cargo between them, the project is administered by the Mexican navy, which provides security for railway operations and industrial park construction. Policymakers have promised abundant energy and water resources for investors, but Indigenous communities and environmental advocates are concerned over displacement and water use.

In April, the corridor made its first major delivery. Its 308-kilometer Line Z transported 900 U.S.-bound Hyundai vehicles from Salina Cruz in Oaxaca to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. The operation took about a week and bested the Panama Canal on time and cost.





Trains idle at what is set to become the country's largest railway complex in Matías Romero, Oaxaca, a city of under 40,000 people, according to Mexico's 2020 census. When construction is completed, by the end of 2025, the complex will comprise a range of facilities, including dispatch and education centers that will train personnel from across the region.







**“The new Interoceanic Railway follows the old line built under President Porfirio Díaz in 1907. We had to rebuild the track, replace the rails and sleepers, and replace the old bridges to meet the speed and weight requirements of the new trains.”**

— Vice Admiral Juan Carlos Vera Minjares



Vice Admiral Juan Carlos Vera Minjares, the former director of the CIIT, speaks in his Mexico City office.







Lisa Hernández Jiménez, a Prolstmo engineer, walks a job site where the company aims to attract private investment.



**“The Interoceanic Corridor is a great opportunity for the region. Thousands of jobs will be created in the industrial parks along the route, so people won’t have to emigrate to the U.S. anymore. Until now, young engineers from the Isthmus had to go to Mexico City or Puebla because there were never enough jobs for them here. This project could change that.”**

—Lisa Hernández Jiménez, an engineer at Prolstmo



Above: Employees of Prolstmo examine one of the company's models in Texistepec, Veracruz. Prolstmo is a private company tasked with advancing five of the 12 “development poles” that aim to attract manufacturing and other investment along the CIIT.



Trains are loaded onto a ship in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. The 180-meter ferry is operated by CG Railway (CGR) and was built to transport entire railway cars across the Gulf of Mexico and toward Mobile, Alabama.







PHOTO ESSAY

Residents of the small town of José María Morelos, Oaxaca, stand on a new bridge built as part of the CIIT. The town is not along any rail route, but the bridge is part of the broader effort to improve infrastructure in the region that the CIIT traverses.





**“Before the construction of the Interoceanic Corridor, we were isolated during the rainy season. Our suspension bridge was swept away by floods last year. The CIIT funded a new concrete bridge, and thanks to that, our village is accessible by car even during the rainy season.”**

— Fernando Ponce Torres, town council member, José María Morelos

A ship is loaded with raw sugar in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. The CIIT's main rail line, Line Z, will cross the Isthmus and connect Coatzacoalcos with Salina Cruz, in Oaxaca.







**“Our house is about 15 meters from the tracks, and so far, we’ve been allowed to stay there. The trains don’t run often, maybe once or twice a day, so we can’t complain about the noise. People who were relocated often got better houses than the wooden sheds they lived in. Even then, it’s hard when your home is demolished.”**

— Javier Chávez and Elsa Matus



The government is building developments of new housing like this one in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, to relocate people displaced by rail construction. Although the government has built over 4,000 of these houses, some residents allege irregularities in the process, including 600 families in Tabasco who were relocated to houses without access to basic services.





Javier Chávez and  
Elsa Matus live  
beside the tracks  
of Line Z in  
Mojoñé, Oaxaca.




María del Carmen González Villanueva rides Line Z from Salina Cruz to Coatzacoalcos. The other two lines of the CIIT—Line FA and Line K—will connect Coatzacoalcos with Palenque and Oaxaca with Guatemala, respectively.

*Palos is a photographer and farmer based in Northeast Mexico and the author of My Perro Rano: Chronicles of Central America*

*Ryback is a journalist focused on Latin America and Africa who was previously a correspondent in Russia and Poland for Der Spiegel*





**“I live in Tijuana and want to visit my family in Ixtepec. I haven’t traveled in a train since I was a kid, so I was a little nervous. But this is amazing, a real luxury! There are always traffic jams and accidents on the roads—you never know when you’ll get there.”**

— Passenger María del Carmen González Villanueva



ONE YEAR LATE



# A Persistent Paradox

**Hunger remains a critical challenge for Latin America, but the region has seen signs of improvement.**

*by Luiza Franco*

**A** YEAR AGO AQ PUBLISHED a special report exploring a paradox in Latin America: Although the region produces and exports more agricultural products than ever before, it struggles to feed its own people.

A year later, the news remains worrisome, tied as it is to structural, long-term causes. The food paradox persists, with food insecurity currently affecting 25.2% of the population, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). That is higher than a decade ago (in 2015 it was 23.7%), part of a global rise.

However, the situation is getting a little bit better. Food insecurity levels have been declining gradually since hitting a peak during the pandemic, and they maintained that downward trend in 2024 (25.2%) compared to 2023 (26.7%).

Experts say the recent drop is thanks to the economic recovery in several South American countries, fueled by social safety nets, post-pandemic recovery moves, and policies aimed at improving access to food. Brazil is a good example. Since 2023, Brazil has reactivated its food security policies, expanding school meals and a food acquisition program, and strengthening family farming. Cash transfers still matter, but the poorest also saw their earnings increase in 2024. And after finding itself on the UN's world hunger map in 2021, following shifts in public policy priorities and the impacts of the pandemic, Brazil is now off that map again.



## Food insecurity affects over 25% of the region's population even amid record agricultural production.

Overall, experts say, the reduction is not that impressive. “It’s very strongly linked to challenges that got resolved after the pandemic was over. So, I think it’s almost like going back to business as usual,” said Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, a professor of public health at Yale.

“Hunger and lack of food are not the same thing. The problem lies in access, distribution, and the resources needed to produce or buy food, as well as the distribution of the food itself,” said José Graziano, a former director general of the FAO who helped design Brazil’s “Zero Hunger” program in the early 2000s. The “food paradox” can also be understood as a logical outcome of the system itself. Global commodity markets and export-oriented agriculture affect local food availability and affordability, as the push to export can drive up prices for those same staples at home.

In the meantime, difficulties in accessing food, especially healthy food, remain — and people and organizations across the region are seeking to address them. In last year’s special report *AQ* profiled some of these groups.

In Argentina, where the prevalence of moderate to severe food insecurity went from 19.2% in 2014 to 33.8% in 2024, Banco de Alimentos de Argentina continues to deliver on its target. In 2024 they delivered 21,000 kilos of food to 4,000 organizations that reached 882,000 people.

In Mexico, The Hunger Project’s program led by Indigenous and rural women has grown in Chiapas and Oaxaca, now reaching 469 participants who are strengthening family gardens, forming savings groups, and launching small businesses. Women have begun earning modest but rising incomes while gaining more control over household spending and

savings. Challenges remain, from climate change to reliance on cash transfers, but leadership and autonomy are clearly emerging, exemplified by 19-year-old Luisa Fernanda Ruiz Pérez, who has turned her textile business into a training platform for others and was recently invited to showcase her work at a national crafts fair.

In Oaxaca, local NGO Mbis Bin, which means “seeds for sowing” in Zapotec, continues to provide training to promote sustainable agriculture in a state where one in four are affected by food insecurity. They’ve organized training on chick incubation; vanilla cultivation; bio-inputs; and planting organic vegetable gardens following the milpa method, a Mesoamerican planting technique in which a variety of fruits and vegetables are interspersed in the same plot. All of this can provide both nutrition and income to rural households.

“I think of the matter of dealing with hunger as a film: You have the main characters, which are jobs and income, and the supporting characters, which are these smaller programs. You can’t make the film without the first, but all are important to the script,” Graziano told *AQ*.

As the region slowly makes its way out of the depth of food insecurity, another concern has arisen: obesity rates. The prevalence of adult obesity increased from 12.1% in 2012 to 15.8% in 2022. “We have learned a lot about how to address hunger, but we still don’t know how to fix the problem of obesity,” Graziano said. **AQ**

**Franco** is an editor and podcast producer at *Americas Quarterly*

*With reporting by Mark Viales, in Chiapas, Mexico*



The Ituí and Itaquai Rivers  
flow through the Vale do  
Javari Indigenous Territory  
in Brazil.





An aerial photograph of a wide, winding river with muddy brown water flowing through a vast, dense green rainforest. The river meanders through the landscape, creating several large loops and bends. The forest is thick and covers the entire visible land area. The sky is a clear, pale blue with some light clouds.

THE LONG VIEW

# The Uphill Battle to Protect Brazil's Isolated Indigenous Peoples

The history of the Amazon's Javari Valley shows the importance, and the perils, of preserving Indigenous rainforest reserves.

*by Scott Wallace*

RAFAEL VILELA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY

ISSUE 4, 2025 • Americas Quarterly 71



**V**ALE DO JAVARI INDIGENOUS TERRITORY, BRAZIL — The next round of the UN Climate negotiations will be held in November in the Amazon, where scientists have accumulated indisputable evidence that the rainforest is a critical stabilizer for the global climate. It stores carbon, produces rainfall, and its unparalleled biodiversity is still yielding new discoveries. All the while, climatologists warn that deforestation and planetary warming are pushing the Amazon toward a tipping point of irreversible collapse.

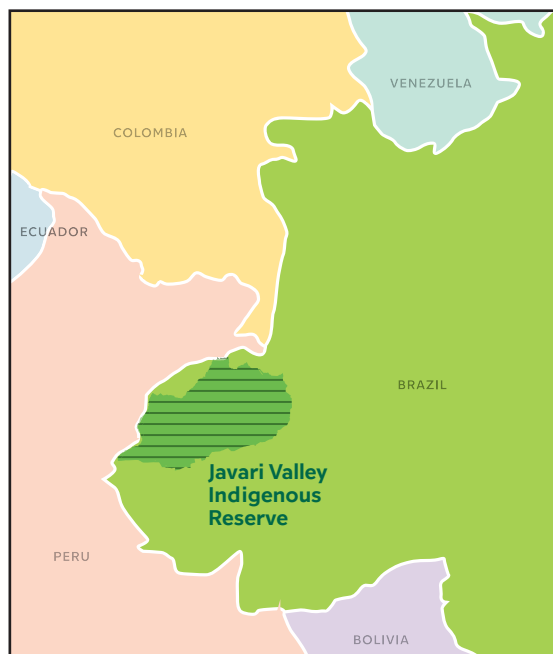
As satellite imagery and geospatial data have become more sophisticated, they have made clear that Indigenous territories, which make up nearly a quarter of the Brazilian Amazon, play an outsized role in holding back the advance of deforestation.

The wealth of resources in these territories has placed them squarely in the crosshairs of ranchers, land speculators, timber thieves, powerful politicians aligned with agribusiness and the mining industry, and even missionaries in search of souls to evangelize. Even so, viewed from space, Indigenous lands remain islands of deep green abutted by denuded scrub, pastureland and monoculture plantations.

All this shows that the decades-long campaign to protect Indigenous territories in the Amazon has been critical for both preserving its forests and mitigating global climate change.

## The Javari Valley

**T**HE VALE DO JAVARI Indigenous Territory in far western Brazil plays a unique and pivotal role in this equation. Covering 33,000 square miles (85,444 square kilometers) and roughly the size of Portugal, the Javari Valley reserve has retained a remarkable 99% of its original forest cover, sheltering a dazzling abundance of fish and wildlife. Its stream-laced forests and rugged interior harbor around 6,300 people, including at least 11 and possibly as many as 16 isolated Indigenous communities,



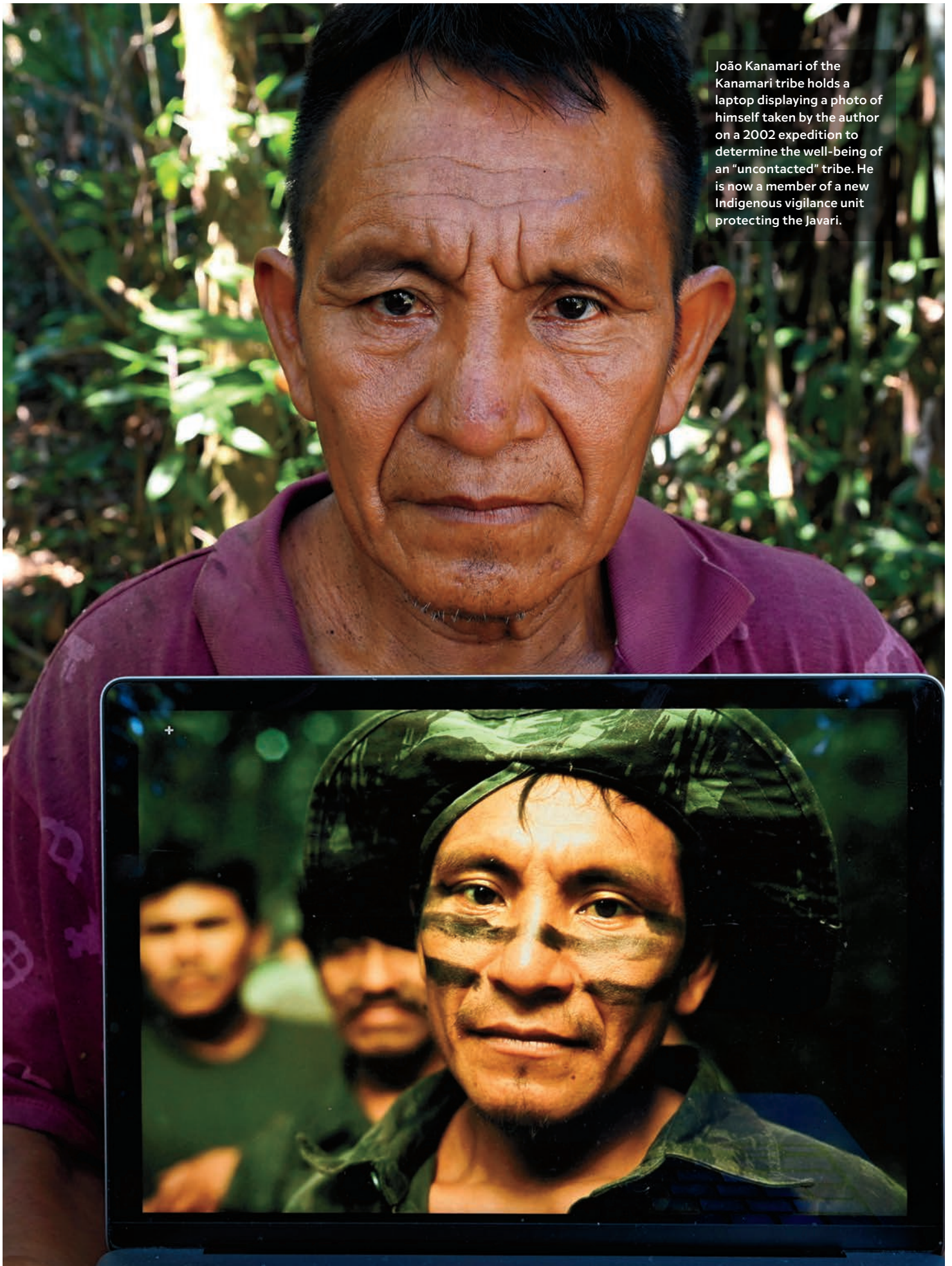
The Javari Valley Indigenous Territory in far western Brazil preserves land near borders with Peru and Colombia.

making the Javari home to the largest concentration of so-called “uncontacted tribes” in the world.

But “uncontacted” is something of a misnomer. All such communities have had at least glancing contact with the outside world, and it’s often been deadly. Like elsewhere in the Amazon, the groups in the Javari are believed to be the descendants of survivors of violent clashes with European intruders, including slaving raids that convulsed the western Amazon during the rubber boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The survivors fled into the jungle’s deepest, most inaccessible redoubts and continue to shun contact with the outside world. The isolated groups seem to possess an awareness of the mortal dangers posed by strangers, either from their firearms or from communicable diseases to which they have little to no immunological resistance.

In the 1980s, after more than a century of cataclysmic encounters for isolated tribes across the Amazon, field agents within FUNAI, Brazil’s Indigenous affairs





João Kanamari of the Kanamari tribe holds a laptop displaying a photo of himself taken by the author on a 2002 expedition to determine the well-being of an "uncontacted" tribe. He is now a member of a new Indigenous vigilance unit protecting the Javari.





Sydney Possuelo and members of the Matis tribe orient a 2002 Brazilian government expedition into the Javari.

agency, pushed for a groundbreaking new policy that bans outsiders from making contact with such communities. That policy aligns with Brazil's 1988 Constitution, which recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to practice their traditional ways of life in their homelands free from persecution.

In 1996, officials drew up the boundaries of the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory to protect this right for the area's isolated communities. All its major waterways originate in a latticework of gulleys and creeks deep inside the reserve. FUNAI was thus able to secure the territory from large-scale intrusions with the placement of strategically positioned checkpoints along those rivers.

"When the Javari reserve was demarcated, it was done [partially] to protect all these waterways," said Sydney Possuelo in 2002, when I trekked with him for nearly three months through the far reaches of the Javari on a Brazilian government expedition to check the well-being — but not make contact with — one such tribe, the seldom-glimpsed *fleicheros*.

Possuelo, a legendary explorer and former FUNAI president, had pushed hard for the agency's no-contact policy and founded an elite unit within FUNAI to protect isolated Indigenous groups. He is intimately familiar with the Javari Valley, having led expeditions into its depths while helping direct the uphill fight to enforce its boundaries alongside "contacted" Javari communities.

## Transformation

SINCE THE EXPEDITION IN 2002, I have seen the Javari undergo a profound transformation, particularly in the past 15 years. Located in the tri-border region that Brazil shares with Peru and Colombia, its strategic but remote location caught the eye of drug traffickers looking for unpoliced routes to move product east toward Manaus and Belém and on to markets in Europe and North America. Meanwhile, non-Indigenous populations living along the Javari's frontiers, including



## **The campaign to protect Indigenous territories in the Amazon has been critical for both preserving its forests and mitigating global climate change.**

settlers who had been expelled from the territory in 1996, have slipped deeper into destitution after losing access to the fish, game and timber that supported their livelihoods.

This state of affairs has given rise to seething resentment among frontier communities near the Javari and other Indigenous reserves. Their anger has been stoked by populist politicians like former President Jair Bolsonaro, who has often repeated the mantra that “there is too much land for too few Indians.”

During his tenure, Bolsonaro severely crippled FUNAI and the environmental protection agency, IBAMA. He emboldened supporters to take the law into their own hands, slashed budgets and career staff, and installed like-minded loyalists in key posts. Deforestation rates skyrocketed. Invasions of Indigenous lands surged. Environmental crime — and organized crime — flourished across the Amazon, including inside the Javari.

Bolsonaro lost his bid for reelection to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2022, and robust policing of Indigenous lands and protected areas has since resumed to some degree. But the effects of Bolsonaro’s policies continue to reverberate.

### **A new Indigenous initiative**

**T**HE REPERCUSSIONS CAME INTO sharp focus for me when I returned in July. Amid concerns over security, I was the only journalist invited by the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley, Unijava, to attend the first-ever general meeting of a 112-strong Indigenous vigilance force (Equipe de Vigilância da Unijava, EVU). In six separate teams, the force will monitor the major rivers that serve as the principal infiltration points for a panoply of intruders: drug traffickers, gold miners, poachers, even guides from Peru sneaking in Euro-

pean tourists to view exotic “natives” and wildlife.

The meeting was a historic moment. It was the largest gathering ever held inside the territory of a multiethnic Indigenous force drawn from “contacted” communities throughout its far-flung reaches. The participants came to share experiences and receive training in everything from satellite communications, geospatial mapping and drone surveillance to boat maintenance and first aid.

Not long ago, such work would have been the exclusive domain of federal agents, with limited participation from local communities. But the power vacuum produced by the retreat of FUNAI, IBAMA, and other enforcement agencies from the field spurred Indigenous leaders to find a new way forward.

“We had no choice,” said Beto Marubo, director of the Union’s international relations, recalling early discussions that led to creating the homegrown force to counter a growing influx of outsiders seeking to involve Indigenous communities in their illicit trades. “If we didn’t act, we’d have lost our resources. There wouldn’t have been anything left even to feed our families.”

The two-week meeting took place at a newly built training center on a bluff overlooking the Quixito River on the northern flank of the territory. The setting called to mind a kind of rough-hewn logging camp, with several airy, screened-in buildings set on five-foot stilts connected by a grid of plank catwalks. Amid exuberant shouts and pounding hammers, the teams added flourishes to the training center between sessions: dining tables and benches for the refectory, racks for hanging hammocks in the dormitories, ramps down the embankment to the boats. The mood was industrious and optimistic, but also subdued.

The 2022 murders of Indigenous rights activist



Members of the Equipe de Vigilância da Unijava (EVU) train in first aid at the organization's first-ever general meeting in July. The EVU is a new multiethnic Indigenous vigilance force that monitors intrusions into the Javari Valley reserve.

Bruno Pereira, one of EVU's founders, and British journalist Dom Phillips at the hands of poachers with suspected links to the drug trade were frequently invoked in sessions and private conversations. Participants were urged to avoid confronting trespassers, and instead to gather evidence and report it up the chain of command for authorities to act. "Remember, we are not a militia," Indigenous attorney Eliesio Marubo, Beto's brother, told the assembly. The volunteers were also warned to refrain from posting images from the event on social media that could expose them or their companions to reprisals.

Just about everyone at the meeting owned a smartphone, and they frequently communicated with friends and family back in their villages via Starlink. The availability of instant communication in the depths of the jungle was remarkable; Starlink is also present aboard all six of the organiza-

tion's patrol boats.

The paradox of using cutting-edge technology to help preserve ancient, traditional cultures and the forests that harbor them is not lost on Orlando Possuelo, one of EVU's founders and the movement's chief field advisor. But there's no turning back the clock on the changes sweeping the Javari, he told me.

That includes a growing sense of agency among the Indigenous people themselves. Orlando, Sydney Possuelo's son, worked for years as a FUNAI contractor and said the era of paternalism from FUNAI and other agencies is now a thing of the past. "In a word, it's about autonomy ... the decisions will now be theirs to make." **AQ**

**Wallace** is an award-winning journalist and author and an associate professor of journalism at the University of Connecticut





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# The Entertainment Juggernaut Made in Mexico

**Corporación Interamericana de  
Entretenimiento (CIE) continues to capitalize  
on the rising demand for live events.**

*by Cyntia Barrera Díaz*

**M**EXICO CITY—Few companies in Latin America embody the glamour and volatility of the entertainment business as vividly as Corporación Interamericana de Entretenimiento (CIE).

Founded in 1990 as Operadora de Centro de Espectáculos S.A. (OCESA), the Mexican company has evolved from a bold bet on concerts and live events into one of the top four entertainment powerhouses in the world by number of ticket sales, controlling arenas, convention centers, racetracks, food sales, advertising, ticketing platforms, and major cultural festivals.

Today, the company has made Mexico a key stop on the touring circuit for Latin American superstars like Bad Bunny, and since 2015, has positioned the Formula 1 Mexico City Grand Prix as a top destination for racing enthusiasts. The British band Coldplay performed eight shows in 2022 across three Mexican cities,



Carlos Sainz celebrates after winning the Formula 1 Mexico City Grand Prix last year. CIE plans to host the event through 2028.



prompting a running joke that they could be moving in permanently. Taylor Swift brought her Eras Tour to a sold-out Foro Sol in 2023, later writing on Instagram: “After years of wanting to play in Mexico City, just got to play 4 of the most unforgettable shows for the most beautiful and generous fans.”

Reaching this level of success took CIE years of experimentation and learning curves with various entertainment formats in a country where both the government and society were long wary of large-scale live events.

Today, the company mainly focuses on Mexico, whose entertainment and media sectors were labeled as “fast-growing” by global consultancy firm PwC in July. Operating 14 venues in Mexico City, one in Monterrey, and two in Guadalajara, with a total capacity exceeding 312,000 visitors, CIE is currently one of the most prominent players in a competitive field, with several companies vying to be at the forefront to profit from improving conditions. PwC forecasts that Mexico’s total entertainment and media revenue in the advertising and consumer sectors may reach a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.26% over the next five years, totaling \$33.5 billion by 2029. Despite the enticing perspective and increasing appetite for live events and concerts, CIE’s revenue was around \$226 million last year, a 3.9% decline from 2023.

## Where it all began

**I**N THE 1970S AND 1980S, Mexico faced significant challenges in hosting live concerts and other events. When legendary rock band Queen performed in Monterrey and Puebla, it was marked by chaos, as unruly crowds hurled shoes on stage. In 1989, unable to secure a venue in Mexico City, Rod Stewart sang in Querétaro, a two-hour drive from the capital, drawing more than 50,000 fans eager to pay for international acts. The massive crowd overwhelmed security, breaking through barriers in a frenzy to get closer to the stage, forcing police to deploy tear gas to restore order.

By then, it was clear that Mexico was ready

to open its stages to larger and more ambitious live performances. Alejandro Soberón Kuri, CIE’s founder, recognized the moment and moved to professionalize the country’s live entertainment industry. The company’s first two concerts, held in 1991, featured Australian rock band INXS at the Palacio de los Deportes, a venue originally built for the 1968 Olympics with a capacity of over 15,000. CIE secured permits from a cautious local government, proving that large-scale, well-managed events could be successfully staged in Mexico City.

The following year, U2 performed at the same location, although under a different promoter. But CIE soon notched a major milestone: In 1993, the company booked Paul McCartney, a global superstar with an enduring cross-generational appeal.

There was just one problem: There was no suitable venue for the former Beatle to perform. The only location capable of accommodating the expected throngs was Estadio Azteca, the iconic facility that had hosted two FIFA World Cups. But its owner, Televisa, then the dominant force in Spanish-language broadcasting, refused to lease it.

Taking advice from McCartney’s legendary tour promoter Barrie Marshall, Soberón and his team made a bold decision: to build a stadium themselves. They raced against the clock to prepare a section of an auto racing track with metal structures to install seating. It wasn’t ideal, but it was good enough, and around 120,000 tickets were sold for McCartney’s first two shows in Mexico.

Just weeks later, Madonna brought her Girlie Show tour to the same venue, despite attempts by conservative groups to censor the performance due to its sexual and religious content. She had decided to play in Mexico after hearing from McCartney himself about his first gig in Mexico City.

CIE’s rapid rise faced a serious challenge in December 1994, when the Tequila Crisis triggered a financial collapse and the peso lost over half its value almost overnight. The funds earmarked to pay the Rolling Stones and dozens of other acts evaporated in days, throwing the company into an instant crisis.





A performance during the Vive Latino Festival this March at Mexico City's Estadio GNP Seguros, organized by CIE.

## The IPO lifesaver

**I**N NEED OF CAPITAL to honor existing commitments and fuel further growth, CIE turned to the stock market. In December 1995, the company launched its initial public offering in the local market, breaking through a listing drought in the wake of one of Mexico's worst economic crises.

The following 13 years were a period of aggressive expansion across Mexico and parts of South America. CIE partnered with Disney to bring Broadway productions such as *The Lion King* to local audiences, acquired a stake in Mexico City's horse racing track from a Carlos Slim investment vehicle, and bought amusement parks in both Mexico and the U.S. The company also managed radio stations in Argentina, hosted major trade fairs, and operated one of the region's largest convention centers, Centro Banamex.

Later on, CIE further diversified into gaming, securing licenses to operate sportsbooks and bingo halls. In a notable move, it even struck a deal with

rival Televisa, which in 2002 invested \$107 million for a 40% stake in OCESA Entretenimiento, CIE's live entertainment unit.

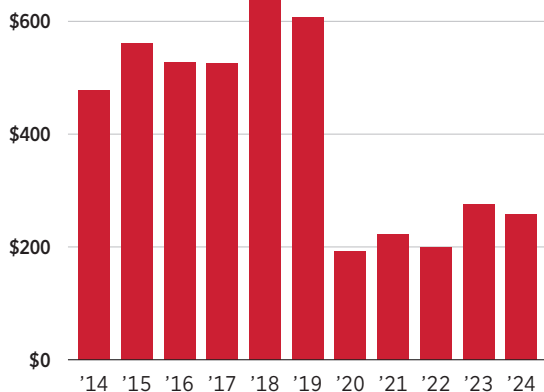
But CIE's rapid expansion came at a cost. By December 2009, the company was burdened with debt and announced a \$400 million restructuring plan. To stabilize its finances, it began divesting non-core assets and refocused on its primary strength: concerts, theater plays and festivals. The streamlined operation allowed CIE to access new loans in local currency and repay debt, moves that were well received by the market.

## The poisoned golden ticket

**I**N 2019, CIE CAUGHT the attention of global entertainment giant Live Nation, which offered to acquire a 51% stake in OCESA Entretenimiento, including the 40% previously held by Televisa. The proposed \$400 million deal promised to reshape the

## CIE's revenues, 2014-2024

\$800 REVENUES (MILLIONS USD)

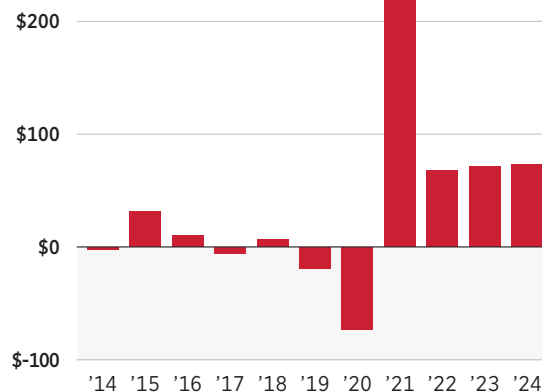


NOTES: LIVE NATION ACQUIRED A MAJORITY STAKE IN OCESA IN 2021. CALCULATIONS BASED ON THE WORLD BANK'S ANNUAL MXN TO USD EXCHANGE RATE.

SOURCE: CIE

## CIE's net profits, 2014-2024

\$300 NET PROFITS (MILLIONS USD)



NOTES: NET PROFITS REFER TO THE COMPREHENSIVE INCOME ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE CONTROLLING INTEREST. LIVE NATION ACQUIRED A MAJORITY STAKE IN OCESA IN 2021. CALCULATIONS BASED ON THE WORLD BANK'S ANNUAL MXN TO USD EXCHANGE RATE.

SOURCE: CIE

landscape of live events in Latin America.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the concert industry to a standstill and put that transaction on hold. CIE even resorted to building a temporary hospital inside its convention center in the capital, bringing partial relief to a collapsed national health care system in a country that recorded over 600,000 COVID-19 deaths, one of the highest tolls during the pandemic.

Live Nation sought to renegotiate key terms and delay the cash payment portion of the deal. When no agreement was reached, the U.S.-based company terminated the purchase, leading to arbitration proceedings. The dispute lingered until late 2021, when all three parties reached a new agreement and Live Nation ultimately completed the acquisition.

As restrictions were lifted and audiences returned, OCESA hit the ground running. Major festivals like Vive Latino and Corona Capital resumed much stronger as global superstars once again filled stadiums across the region.

And Live Nation came back for more. Earlier this year, the company bought from CIE an additional

stake in OCESA, boosting its ownership to 75% and cementing its grip in the region. CIE declined an interview request with CEO Soberón, citing a tight schedule. In a report to investors published in June, analysts Elizabeth Martinez, Pablo Franco and Heinz Cederborg, of Mexico City-based credit company HR Ratings, see a stabilization and annual growth in CIE's revenues of 2% between 2025 and 2028, supported by a "normalization of the special events and the constant expansion of the Formula 1 Mexico City Grand Prix related sales."

In the future, CIE is expected to emphasize car races, aligning the Mexico City Grand Prix with week-end-long Day of the Dead celebrations throughout the country's capital. The event will continue to be part of the international calendar through 2028. The company has not publicly shared any other expansion projects with investors. **AQ**

**Barrera Díaz** is a bilingual editor and journalist who has covered corporate and financial news across the U.S. and Latin America for Reuters and Bloomberg





The Argentine band Tanghetto mixes traditional tango instruments like the bandoneón with surprising new additions.

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# Books

## Nonfiction

**A new book recovers the often overlooked but fascinating history of the British presence in South America.**

**Reviewed by Andrew Downie**



**Small Earthquakes:  
A Journey Through  
Lost British History  
in South America**

By Shafik Meghji

Hurst Publishers

304 pages

ONE OF THE FIRST things Shafik Meghji did before setting out to write *Small Earthquakes* was to consult with Andrew Graham-Yooll, an esteemed former editor of the English-language newspaper *Buenos Aires Herald* and the author of several superb books on South America.

In one of his works, the minor classic *A State of Fear*, Graham-Yooll writes that the region is “a continent which European writers have failed to explain and few Latin Americans have succeeded in interpreting.”

Meghji gives it a good shot in this breezy mix of history, travelogue and nature writing. The book’s subtitle is *A Journey Through Lost British History in South America*, and Meghji starts in Buenos Aires before branching out into Uruguay, Patagonia, the Falklands/Malvinas, Chile and the Easter Islands, before finishing up in the Atacama Desert.

The histories of those areas have been told many times before, and the tales of Spanish conquests, plus, more recently, American meddling, are well known. But the British influence has long been overlooked, in part because they bowed out in numbers at the start of the 20th century, but also because the British attitude to South America has long veered between patronizing and uninterested.

For a nation still more curious about its old colonies in North America, Australasia and the Indian subcontinent, South America is today, in Meghji’s words, “a distant place of little relevance.”

Meghji tries to explain the largely forgotten British influence in two ways. He delves into the history books and the stuffy old memoirs to remind readers how the British saw the continent during their time there, mostly in the 19th century.

More interestingly, he hits the road to see what remains, taking buses to skirt urban sand dunes, riding jeeps across barren moonscapes, and braving icy seas in boats and small craft. Along the way, he meets with anthropologists, linguists and historians, as well as the relatives of Victorian explorers, Welsh colonizers and Scottish engineers. There are evoc-





Buenos Aires' former pumping station, the Palace of the Running Waters, was designed by a British engineering firm.

ative trips to slaughterhouses that employed whole towns, well-kept cemeteries and not-so-well-kept museums, and quaint tea rooms with Welsh names and exceedingly good cakes.

Every page has a juicy detail or anecdote, and Meghji strikes a nice balance between the crucial and the trivial. We learn how the import of guano fertilizer to the UK inadvertently led to the creation of London's sewage system; that the first overseas branch of the Harrods department store was opened in Buenos Aires in 1914; and that Oxo stock cubes have their origins in Uruguay.

But there are also long sections on how the Brits terrorized Indigenous peoples and aided nations fighting for their own destiny. After a UK recruitment

drive by Simón Bolívar, more than 6,000 crossed the Atlantic to join South American armies and navies and help them win independence wars. Thomas Cochrane, the Scottish politician who founded and commanded Chile's first navy, is so revered there that Pablo Neruda wrote a collection of poetry about him.

At the time, British banks and insurers managed much of Latin America's money, and it was the pound that helped finance railways, ports and sanitation infrastructure, some of which still exists today. One of Meghji's first visits is to Buenos Aires' "Palace of Running Waters," a French Renaissance-style former pumping station he rates alongside the Casa Rosada, the home of Boca Juniors, and the famous Recoleta Cemetery in terms of memorable landmarks.

## Cultura

If there's one drawback, it comes with the subtitle and the scope. Meghji's journey is not through South America but the Southern Cone, so the northern half of the continent is missing. That's a shame, because there is much worth writing about elsewhere, especially in Brazil.

British money was central to Brazil's growth in the second half of the 19th century. Manaus's glorious old opera house was built with iron from Glasgow foundries, and the Paranapiacaba railway junction on the edge of a cliff between São Paulo and Santos

is an open-air museum to how British engineering changed the country. Arguably most important of all, Charles Miller arrived in Santos with a soccer ball in 1894, giving the world the beautiful game.

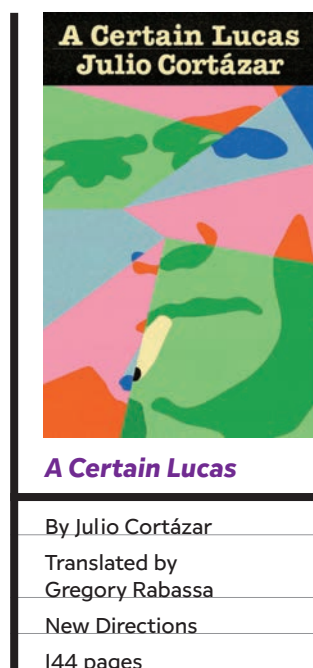
With the once bold British stories fading, and South America looking more and more to the Global South, it would make another great travel book. Volume 2, anyone? **AQ**

**Downie** is a Scottish foreign correspondent currently writing a biography of Pelé

## Fiction

**A Cortázar classic is back at an opportune time**

**Reviewed by Miranda Mazariegos**



**“W**HAT GOOD IS A WRITER if he can't destroy literature?” wrote Julio Cortázar in his seminal work, *Hopscotch*, in 1963. Sixteen years later, he came out with a new novel that showed, above anything else, that very desire to do away with the rules of literature.

Fragmented, absurd, with troves of playful language, and following an eccentric character's ramblings, *A Certain Lucas* is everything one expects of Cortázar and, therefore, nothing one expects of a novel. His whimsical work, translated by Gregory Rabassa and long out of print, has been resurfaced by New Directions Publishing in an edition released in October.

Loosely connected to the main character, Lucas, the series of interlocking fragments covers a constellation of playful writing characteristic of Cortázar. Lucas, then, is just an excuse for his creator to delve into his own obsessions: questions about identity; musings on why “we” write; criticisms of the incessant need for hyperproduction — the seemingly natural instinct to make of everything something “useful”; what he calls “amateur” citizens whose privilege clouds their understanding of lives beyond their



own; inequality; government inefficiency; authoritarianism; and lack of autonomy. All of this is told through inventive, absurd stories: little fish being injected into our bloodstreams, driving beside a dead copilot, spelling errors turned into lively rats, and swimming in pools of grits.

It's perhaps this mix of playfulness with depth that makes the new edition so necessary. Cortázar's text is inherently political, yet not obviously so. It comes as a welcome reminder — a warning, even — that what burdens us today also did decades ago.

Take the story "It Could Happen to Us, Believe Me." In it, Cortázar makes a taunting critique of the blurred lines between literature, media, propaganda, and an audience's vulnerability to censorship. A "big shot" buys an invention that flattens out printed letters: The device pulls on each letter and leaves it smooth on the page, a horizontal string of ink. Intended to censor his opponents by flattening out their words, he ironically ends up eliminating all the texts in the world, including his own propaganda. But how could the words of the story be written, then? Because they were written by the creator of the invention and "there's no rule that doesn't have its exception." All systems have their contradictions, and manipulating them can create a double-edged sword: agency that leads to freedom or a way in for those looking to exercise even further control.

The absurd and fantastical work that Cortázar cre-

ates serves to subvert the flatness we've grown accustomed to. For modern readers, Cortázar is an act of resistance against simplified narratives and attention spans taken over by tech addictions. Cortázar requires patient, attentive readers, ready to be challenged by this so-called "destruction of literature." New Directions, an independent publishing house focused on literature in translation, discovered and republished a book that is better enjoyed through a second (even third) read, reminding us of the necessity of patience in reading.

All of that said, that this book was originally published a decade into Cortázar's career says a lot about its form and function. It's arguably his most self-indulgent work. Although most of the fragments were amusing, sometimes it felt like Cortázar was playing with the reader to show off, rather than to engage. This made the novel often hard to get through and, whereas *Bestiary* is imaginative and *Hopscotch* genuinely reflective, *A Certain Lucas* often just felt absurd for the sake of being so.

In all, readers will find in this book Cortázar in all his splendor: absurdity, magical realism, playfulness, an eccentric character, and mazes that turn you around and surprise even the most attentive of readers. It's up to each one of you to decide whether you have the palate for so much destruction. **AQ**

**Mazariegos** is an editor at *Americas Quarterly*

# Upcoming Books

The latest in economics, history, policy and fiction from across the hemisphere

## FICTION

**Coração sem medo**  
Itamar Vieira Junior  
Todavia  
336 pages

**Me gusta así**  
Erika Paula Curbelo  
Sigilo  
160 pages

## NONFICTION

**Violín: Mediating Musical Style and Devotional Practice in 21st-Century Cuba**  
Robin D. Moore  
Cambridge University Press  
246 pages

**Extracting the Future: Lithium in an Era of Energy Transition**  
Mark Goodale  
University of California Press  
304 pages

# Film

## Drama

**An ambitious film misses the mark in depicting a temperamental teenager at the turn of the millennium in Argentina.**

**Reviewed by Ena Alvarado**

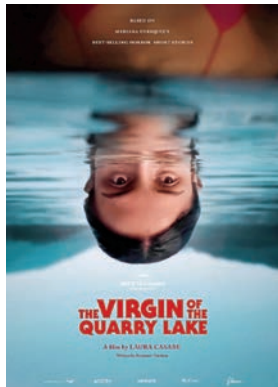
**I**N THE WEST, depictions of female rage have captivated readers and moviegoers alike for a very long time — from Euripides' *Medea* all the way to Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*. Argentine director Laura Casabé's recent debut feature, *The Virgin of the Quarry Lake*, presumably belongs to this age-old tradition, only to deleterious effect. The film, adapted from two short stories by literary powerhouse Mariana Enríquez, offers a culturally uninspired and politically disappointing perspective on women's bottled-up anger.

Natalia, a moody teenager, lives on the outskirts of Buenos Aires with her grandmother, Rita, though she spends most of her time outdoors with her two best friends, Josefina and Mariela. All three girls are infatuated with their childhood buddy, Diego, with whom they often go swimming.

When Diego starts hanging out with 30-something-year-old Silvia, Natalia's entire life begins to crumble. Her hatred of this unexpected rival runs so deep that she asks Rita to get rid of her through a spell. After that tactic doesn't work, Natalia proceeds to waste the rest of her vacation sulking and full of bitterness. Not only does she despise Diego's new girlfriend, but she also debases her grandmother — and on occasion, her two friends — every chance she gets.

Casabé seems to imply that Natalia's volatile emotions are justified because of her budding (and thereby uncontrollable) desire. Yet the emergence of a sexual appetite does not give anyone the right to bend another person's will or, worse, resort to violence, which she later does. The film portrays Natalia as a victim: She is often gasping for breath or crying. But why should viewers sympathize with such a character?

As a backdrop to Natalia's story, *The Virgin of the Quarry Lake* is set during the summer of 2001, a notoriously nightmarish year for Argentines. Facing the prospect of a nationwide bank run, the government imposed restrictions on deposits and withdrawals (the so-called *corralito*), which ultimately led to millions of people losing their savings. Argentina's peso lost two-thirds of its value, unemployment skyrocketed, busi-



***The Virgin of the Quarry Lake* (La virgen de la tosquera)**

Directed by Laura Casabé

Screenplay by  
Benjamín Naishtat

Distributed by Filmax

Argentina, Mexico  
and Spain





# Music

## AQ's Fall Playlist

A trip through contemporary tango's many facets

by Sebastián Zubieta



**Tango 7 (Argentinxs)**  
by Tanghetto

**Orillas del universo**  
by Sexteto Fantasma

**El choclo**  
by Carolina Winograd

**Tango**  
by Nahuel Santos

**Los libros de la buena memoria**  
by Luis Alberto Spinetta

**B**Y NOW, EVERYONE IS FAMILIAR with the story of how tango originated in Buenos Aires' brothels during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, gaining increasing international popularity. Since then, generations of artists have continued to leave their mark on the genre, and in this issue of *AQ*, we explore the current tango scene through music by artists working in Argentina and beyond. Our playlist has everything: unusual instruments, jazzy tango? Got it. Tango-bachata? Yes! Tango closer to chamber music? Yes, we have that, and whimsical singers, too.

The Latin Grammy-nominated electrotango band Tanghetto was founded by Max Masri and recently released a live album celebrating the 20th anniversary of a career that has taken them to stages worldwide. Their music incorporates instruments beyond the original tango sounds, including percussion and electronics, creating a distinctive style that is evident in "Tango 7 (Argentinxs)." The piece weaves the phrasing of tango melodies and the traditional sounds of the bandoneon and violins in an unusual time signature. Tango, like much of Western popular music, typically proceeds in a recurring binary pattern, meaning that noticeable musical events occur periodically every two, four, or eight beats. An odd-numbered time signature of seven beats (as the title of this piece implies) is far less common, giving the composition a slightly unsettled feel. Our tango ear is so accustomed to binary time that our offset expectations make the piece propulsive and evocative.

Speaking of unusual instruments in tango, the trumpet in Sexteto Fantasma creates a jazzy sound reminiscent of European cabaret music of the interwar period. I searched for previous instances of the instrument being used and found that, despite the coexistence of jazz and tango musicians in the lively mid-century Buenos Aires nightclub scene, crossover was very limited. That is a shame, because the trumpet blends really well with the bandoneon.

The Sexteto's "Orillas del universo" features a flexible vocal duet be-





Dancers spin at a performance by the porteño band Tanghetto.

tween the group's own Rodrigo Perelsztein and guest singer Cucuza Castiello over an intricate and detailed instrumental accompaniment as they joyfully sing existential and contemporary lyrics.


Revisiting a very famous standard, in any style, is always a gamble, which pays off for Carolina Winoograd in her passionate version of one of the most famous tangos of all time, "El choclo." The band is expertly varied and responsive to her singing, which is then free to ebb and flow around their base.

Nahuel Santos ventures tango into unexpected territory with his latest release, *Tango*. The album features traditional orchestral sounds, otherworldly vocal arrangements, and bachata, as in "Boquitas pintadas." This song transitions into a tango-bachata fusion after a deceptively traditional start, with bongos, guiros, and guitar arpeggios blending surprisingly well with the sound of bandoneon and piano in a relentless song of heartbreak (in that sense, the two styles are not that far apart).

The playlist continues with Adam Tully, a New Yorker who has lived in Buenos Aires for over a de-

cade, dedicating himself to tango; a socially engaged milonga by trans singer Susy Shock; a decidedly pop track by Polish tango ensemble Bandonegro; and more.

Tango continues to be a multifaceted genre, and there are as many ways of doing it as there are artists: Some will reimagine the classics, some will focus on characteristic instruments, with a special place for the bandoneon, some will emphasize the evanescent nature of the music, while others will highlight its origins as dance. Naturally, all the approaches will be right and speak of its continued relevance.

The bonus track is Luis Alberto Spinetta's 1976 "Los libros de la buena memoria," which features Juan Carlos Mosalini in a bandoneon solo that brings tango into the world of the most radical rock songwriter of the time. The song was a very welcome fusion at a time when successive authoritarian governments strove to officialize tango and demonize rock. 

**Zubieta** is music director at Americas Society

**LISTEN TO OUR PLAYLIST NOW!  
OPEN SPOTIFY & SCAN THIS CODE:**



# Visual Arts

## Museum Review

**A new museum celebrates Chile's 19th-century immigrants.**

**by Graciela Ibáñez**

**I**N THE 19TH CENTURY Valparaíso went through a remarkable transformation. With the beginning of Chile's independence movement and the declaration of free trade for the port of Valparaíso in 1811, thousands of immigrants — mainly British, German, Italian, Spanish, French and Arab — began arriving. This influx fueled growth, and with it, Chile's first bank, public library, private school, observatory, stock exchange, and a hub of technological progress.

In celebration of the city's rich immigrant history, a new museum brings to life the journey that Europeans and Arabs made across the ocean and toward Valparaíso. The opening coincides with a period when the arrival of thousands of immigrants in Chile over the past decade has generated internal tensions, changing the course of the nation's politics and once more the social fabric. Between 2018 and 2023, the foreign-born population increased by 47% to 1.9 million.

The Destino Valparaíso — Museo del Inmigrante opened in August in a building that dates back to 1869 and sits atop one of the city's many hills. The Dib family, of Lebanese and Syrian descent, purchased the building in 2016 and undertook a renovation.

"This museum is a tribute to the people who crossed the world and arrived in precarious conditions in Valparaíso," Eduardo Dib, leader and founder of the project, told *AQ*. The 1865 census shows that the port city had about 70,000 inhabitants, of whom about 5,000 were foreigners.

Through an audio guide and first-person storytelling, the 1,800-square-meter museum recreates the lives of those who traveled by sea and over the Andes Mountains to arrive at Valparaíso.







A reproduction of a  
late 19th century Italian  
home in Valparaíso





## Cultura



Left: Eduardo Dib, the founder of the museum. Dib's family is of Lebanese and Syrian descent.  
Right: The building where the museum is housed dates back to 1869 and used to be a German school.

Each migrant community has its own room. There are antique tennis rackets and golf clubs from the British, who introduced sports like tennis, football and golf to Chile. The exhibit also explores the founding of British schools and the city's only Anglican church — built before religious freedom was granted in Chile, when Catholicism was the only legal faith. By 1931, Valparaíso was known as the most British city in South America, earning it the nickname “Liverpool of the Pacific.”

The Germans became the second most powerful community after the British. We learn about their history in banking, the introduction of classical music in Chile, and their work establishing pharmacies.

Sewing machines and shoe trees reveal the influence the French had on fashion and culture. In 1830, France established Valparaíso as its main supply port on the Pacific coast, favoring the settlement of French citizens. French priests of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts introduced private education to Chile with the school they founded in Valparaíso in 1837.

By the end of the 19th century, Italians had become the largest immigrant community, and the museum highlights their significant influence on food. Pesto, Pasqualina pie, and focaccia, popular dishes then and now, are the heritage of the immigrants from Liguria.

Arab colonies, we learn, made their journey escaping the Ottoman Empire, and they worked mostly in the textile industry. Today Chile is home to the largest Palestinian community outside the Middle East. The Spanish room describes how Asturians founded hardware stores and Basques and Galicians established bakeries.

Immigrants helped turn Valparaíso into a cosmopolitan city where English was widely spoken. “Coming here is like seeing all the stories of Valparaíso you heard as a kid,” said Juan Yuz, dean at Federico Santa María Technical University. Visitors from the Greater Valparaíso area can reconnect with their past through photos, food and objects. “Some even leave in tears after finding ancestors in the photographs,” said Dib.

Now, however, Valparaíso is far from its glorious past. Chile's centralization in Santiago, the capital city, wiped out the innovation, commerce, fashion, business and finance that once made the port such a vibrant hub. Remembering and cherishing that past is the museum's goal. “We want it to become a place where the past connects with the present,” said Dib. **AQ**

**Ibáñez** is a Chilean journalist covering the politics, economics and cultures of Latin America





Top: An emporio, the type of business Italians founded in Valparaíso.

Bottom left: The French room, which is focused on fashion.

Bottom right: The museum also has information on smaller immigrant communities, such as the Greeks.



## LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

INCLUDES DATA PROVIDED BY

**Bloomberg**

In 2024, LAC's informal employment rate was 47.6%, below the global average of 57.8%. According to the International Labor Organization, informal employment accounted for 48%-70% of the net increase in employment last year in most of the region outside of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.



ARGENTINA



BRAZIL



CHILE



COLOMBIA



DOMINICAN  
REPUBLIC



ECUADOR



GUATEMALA



MEXICO



PERU



VENEZUELA

### INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT

Informal employment rate	51.6%	36.5%	27.5%	56.1%	54.7%	68.6%	83.2%	55.5%	72.1%	N/A
Percentage point difference from LAC average	+4.0	-11.1	-20.1	+8.5	+7.1	+21.0	+35.6	+7.9	+24.5	N/A
Percentage point difference from global average	-6.2	-21.3	-30.3	-1.7	-3.1	+10.8	+25.4	-2.3	+14.3	N/A

DATA FROM 2024 EXCEPT FOR GUATEMALA (2023) AND MEXICO (2025). VALUES ROUNDED TO NEAREST DECIMAL POINT..

### GDP GROWTH (PROJECTED)

2025	4.5%	2.2%	2.4%	2.5%	3.2%	3.0%	3.6%	0.5%	3.1%	-4.0%
2026	3.0%	1.6%	2.2%	2.8%	4.0%	2.1%	3.5%	1.3%	2.9%	-5.5%
2027	2.9%	2.0%	2.3%	2.9%	4.5%	2.4%	3.5%	2.0%	2.9%	N/A

PROJECTIONS CURRENT AS OF SEPTEMBER 2025

### ECONOMIC INDICATORS (PROJECTED)

2025 Inflation	41.5%	5.1%	4.3%	5.0%	3.8%	1.3%	2.9%	3.9%	1.8%	180.0%
2025 Unemployment rate	7.2%	6.1%	8.4%	9.1%	5.3%	4.0%	N/A	2.8%	6.0%	N/A
2025 Govt. deficit as % of GDP	0.2%	-8.3%	-2.0%	-7.3%	-3.0%	-3.0%	-2.7%	-4.2%	-2.8%	N/A

PROJECTIONS CURRENT AS OF SEPTEMBER 2025

### PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATINGS

President										
	Javier Milei	Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva	Gabriel Boric	Gustavo Petro	Luis Abinader	Daniel Noboa	Bernardo Arévalo	Claudia Sheinbaum	Dina Boluarte	Nicolás Maduro
Approval	42%	46%	31%	37%	57%	41%	31%	74%	3%	N/A

SOURCES: GDP growth forecasts, inflation rate, unemployment rate, government deficit as percentage of GDP: Bloomberg (September); Dominican Republic unemployment, Ecuador unemployment, Venezuela GDP growth and inflation: IMF (April). Informal employment rate: International Labor Organization NOTE: Figures rounded to nearest decimal point.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL: Argentina: Encuesta de Satisfacción Política y Opinión - Universidad de San Andrés (July); Brazil: Genial/Quaest (September); Chile: Plaza Pública Cadem (September); Colombia, Invamer (August); Dominican Republic: TResearch International (August); Ecuador: Cedatos (August); Guatemala: CID Gallup (September); Mexico: El Financiero (August); Peru, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (July). NOTE: Figures rounded to nearest percentage.

PHOTOS: CANCELLEÍA AYENTINA VIA COMMONSWIKIMEDIA; CASA YOSADA VIA COMMONSWIKIMEDIA; GETTY; SEBASTIAN BAYYOS/NUYPHOTO/GETTY; FLICKY; ASAMBLEA NACIONAL DEL ECUADOR YFOM QUITO, ECUADOR VIA COMMONSWIKIMEDIA; GOBIENO DE GUATEMALA VIA COMMONSWIKIMEDIA; YODYIGO JAYDON VIA COMMONSWIKIMEDIA; WOYLD INTELLECTUAL PYOPEYTY OYGANIZATION VIA COMMONSWIKIMEDIA; GABY OYAA/BLOOMBEY/GETTY



# AQ

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