RESEARCH SUMMARY

Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Latin America

IRINA A. CHINDEA, ELINA TREYGER, RAPHAEL S. COHEN, CHRISTIAN CURRIDEN, KURT KLEIN, CARLOS SANCHEZ, HOLLY GRAMKOW, KHRYSTYNA HOLYNSKA

To access the full report, visit www.rand.org/t/RRA969-4

ISSUE

Over the past three presidential administrations, the United States has made countering the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific and, to a lesser extent, checking Russian revanchism in Europe core priorities of its national security strategy. Historically, however, great-power competition and conflict have also taken place outside the theaters of core concern to the great powers. This report—part of a four-volume series—explores where and how the United States, China, and Russia are competing for influence in Latin America; what kinds of interests they have in the region; where and why competition might turn into conflict; what form that conflict might take; and what implications the findings have for the U.S. government at large, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), and the Department of the Air Force in particular.

APPROACH

The project team employed a multi-method approach. First, it developed a unique data set of 16 variables to measure diplomatic, informational, military, and economic potential for great-power competition in secondary theaters. Second, it combined the assessment of competition potential with measures of conflict potential to identify cases with the greatest theoretical chances for future great-power involvement in conflicts in Latin America. Finally, it used qualitative methods—including interviews with subject-matter experts and analysis of primary and secondary source materials—to explore the main drivers and nature of conflict in Latin America and the possible implications for the U.S. government, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force. This research was completed in September 2021, before the November 2021 presidential elections in Nicaragua; Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine; and the October 2022 release of the unclassified versions of the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, the Nuclear Posture Review, and the Missile Defense Review. The report has not been subsequently revised.

KEY FINDINGS

The analysis yielded the following findings about potential for competition and conflict in Latin America:

- The potential for great-power competition in Latin America converges on the most populous and economically developed countries in the region.

continued

- Among the three competitors, the United States retains the lead in most domains of national power in the region, but China is making significant advances.
- Although China's influence-seeking is growing most significantly, the most-plausible conflict scenarios with great-power involvement that we examined involve Russia more than China, at least in the near term.
- The potential for the three competitors' involvement in Latin American conflicts is driven primarily by geopolitical concerns rather than economic and security-related ones.
- A reduction in the level of U.S. engagement in Latin America could create conditions that intensify strategic competition.
- The United States, China, and Russia have limited appetites for conventional military engagement in the region, but the United States is the most likely competitor to become engaged and sustain support for proxies because it has higher stakes in Latin America than its rivals do.
- In the conflict scenarios that we examined, the United States and its competitors could plausibly back opposing sides, in dynamics reminiscent of the Cold War.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis yields several recommendations for the U.S. government at large, DoD, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

- Acknowledge the strategic importance of Latin America and design a strategy for the region based on a long-term vision that promotes sustained engagement with local partners and allies.
- Better resource DoD and U.S. Department of State offices, as well as other U.S. government agencies that work in Latin America, to sustain competitive efforts across diplomatic, informational, military, and economic activities.
- Increase engagement with countries throughout the entire region while prioritizing those with the highest competition potential.
- Closely monitor the region to identify and prepare to respond to a variety of potentially emerging threats, especially in countries that are traditionally hostile to the United States, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Defense

- Maintain cooperation and capabilities related to counternarcotics and migration while developing capabilities and security relations to support success in great-power competition.
- Strengthen security cooperation with existing key partners and allies in Latin America and try to engage with less friendly governments where possible to maintain access in the region and limit competitors' influence.
- Prepare to identify Chinese dual-use assets in the region and be ready to deter or deny their use for military purposes.

Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

- Maintain and develop military access agreements and overflight rights with the countries in the region.
- Prepare for increased demand for U.S. Air Force assets in the theater and train and invest accordingly in developing the capabilities needed for victory.

continued



PROJECT AIR FORCE

RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF), a division of the RAND Corporation, is the Department of the Air Force's (DAF's) federally funded research and development center for studies and analyses, supporting both the United States Air Force and the United States Space Force. PAF provides DAF with independent analyses of policy alternatives affecting the development, employment, combat readiness, and support of current and future air, space, and cyber forces. For more information, visit PAF's website at www.rand.org/paf.