

It's Crunch Time for China's Central American Strategy

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Global Research, May 06, 2019

Region: [Asia](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

Two recent electoral regime changes in Central America pose serious challenges for China's regional strategy since the incoming leaders of El Salvador and Panama have pledged to take a tougher stance towards the People's Republic than their predecessors and thus appear poised to reach out to the US in an effort to play it off against China as they seek to maximize their countries' strategic positions in the New Cold War.

The "Reverse-South China Sea" Strategy

Central America has suddenly become an undeclared battleground in the [New Cold War](#) between the US and China after two recent electoral regime changes there seem set to have far-reaching strategic repercussions for the region. The president-elects of El Salvador and now Panama have pledged to take a tougher stance towards the People's Republic than their predecessors who surprisingly recognized Beijing over Taipei, with incoming Salvadoran leader [harshly criticizing](#) China during his trip to the US back in March while his Panamanian counterpart [just said](#) that the US must cultivate better relations with the region or risk losing out to its Asian rival. Both countries play important roles in [China's Central American grand strategy](#) to turn the region into a "reverse-South China Sea" for the US through the inroads that Beijing has been quietly making in Washington's soft underbelly after Panama and El Salvador decided to recognize the People's Republic.

Panama + El Salvador = Pro-Chinese Central America

The southern isthmus state irreplaceably facilitates Chinese exports to the US' East Coast, the [Caribbean region](#), and Brazil, though the planned [Trans-Oceanic Railroad](#) (TORR) will [revolutionize South American geopolitics](#) if it's ever constructed and render the latter purpose of the Panama Canal redundant for China. In addition, Panama joined China's [Belt & Road Initiative](#) (BRI) and is supposed to be host to a [high-speed railway](#) connecting the capital with the Costa Rican border, which could conceivably one day continue northward all the way to Mexico in becoming the "Central American Silk Road". As for El Salvador, its strategic position in the migrant-originating Northern Triangle imbues this tiny country with [outsized significance](#) because of the fears (whether founded or not) that the US has of China exploiting "[Weapons of Mass Migration](#)" there to undermine its national security. Together, both countries form indispensable components of China's regional strategy.

"Fortress America"

The US' rolling campaign of hegemonic domination in the hemisphere ("[Fortress America](#)") has seen the most success in resource-rich and more strategically important South America but is [finally beginning to expand](#) to Central America as Trump seeks to strengthen his

country's grip on this region. The so-called "[Troika of Tyranny](#)" that National Security Advisor Bolton declared late last year crucially includes the centrally positioned country of Nicaragua smack dab in the middle of the region, while the electoral regime changes that recently took place in El Salvador and Panama "bookend" the isthmus and complete the US' strategy of pressure in Central America that's intended to squeeze out Chinese influence. It's too early to say whether either of those two aforementioned states will reconsider their recognition of Beijing, but they're more than likely to try to play it off against Washington as they seek to maximize their strategic positions in the New Cold War.

"Balancing"

Neither the Salvadoran nor Panamanian president-elects seem content with being Old Cold War-like stooges of the US without at least receiving something tangible in return for their people since both were elected on promises of fighting corruption (which they implied was exacerbated in their countries since the commencement of their new partnerships with China) and bringing real dividends to their populations. As such, it's predictable that they'll likely scale back their Silk Road cooperation with China in exchange for more American aid or replacement projects by the US, though without cutting off ties with China in order to avoid becoming overly reliant on their "big brother". This might expectedly see some setbacks for China but importantly probably won't lead to the complete eradication of its influence by any means even though the US' will likely increase at its expense.

Winning Hearts And Minds

It's therefore not an exaggeration to say that it's crunch time for China in Central America and that it'll need to step up its strategy of engagement if it wants to compete with the US there under these much more difficult conditions. It would be advantageous to its interests if China proactively initiated the renegotiation of some of its Silk Road contracts as an "inaugural gift" to those countries' new leaders, which would improve its standing among the public who might have been influenced by those incoming presidents' unfriendly rhetoric towards Beijing. In addition, announcing socio-humanitarian projects such as scholarships and aid would show that partnering with the People's Republic involves many more benefits than just low-interest loans and large-scale infrastructure projects. If China is to retain its influence in Central America, then it must work on winning "hearts and minds" so that people end up voting for its implied candidate of choice during the next elections like they just did for the US' and consequently counteract some of the gains that America will likely make there during the next couple of years.

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This article was originally published on [Eurasia Future](#).

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