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“China's influence in Latin America rising”

By Jim Loney

MIAMI, March 10 (Reuters) - China is building up its military ties with Latin America, partly as a result of a U.S. policy that cuts military aid to some countries in the region, a U.S. military commander said on Thursday. Chinese military officials made 20 visits to the region last year and senior Latin American military officers who used to travel to the United States for training are going to China instead, said Gen. Bantz Craddock, commander of the U.S. military's Southern Command.

"It's a new dynamic, a new factor to be watched," Craddock, who is responsible for the U.S. military in Latin America and the Caribbean, told a group of military officials, security analysts and academics at a regional defense conference in Miami.

China was stepping into a void created in part by the U.S. policy to cut military aid to countries that refuse to exempt U.S. citizens from International Criminal Court jurisdiction, he said.

Fearing its soldiers could be vulnerable to politically motivated charges at the ICC, the United States asks ICC signatories to sign agreements not to transfer U.S. citizens to the court without U.S. consent.

Sanctions in the American Servicemembers Protection Act prevent some military training funds from going to countries that will not agree to the exemption.

Craddock said of the 22 nations affected by the sanctions, 11 are in Latin America and the Caribbean: Bolivia, Barbados, Peru, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Brazil, Trinidad, Venezuela, Ecuador, Paraguay and St. Vincent.

In recent years, Beijing has forged broad ties with Latin America, particularly Argentina and Brazil, to ensure access to steel and commodities needed for China's economic expansion.

In a presentation to the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee in Washington on Wednesday, Craddock said China's growing dependence on the global economy and its need to protect access to food, energy and raw materials had "forced a shift in their military strategy."

He said China's growing influence in Latin America was "not a threat" but should be taken into account as Washington considers its own policies in the region.

As a result of the military aid cuts, the United States faces the prospect of losing contact with a whole generation of Latin American military officers, Craddock said.

"We want to be, desire to be, the partner of choice," he said.

The United States has a long history of training Latin American military leaders -- much of it controversial because of human rights abuses by troops in a string of countries.