



BEYOND RENEWABLES: HOW CHINA PROJECTS INFLUENCE IN COLOMBIA THROUGH WHOLE-SYSTEMS EXPORTS

BY HANNAH ZHANG

Hannah Zhang (hezhang@taftschoool.org) is a student at The Taft School in Connecticut. Her fieldwork in Colombia was conducted as part of The Taft School's Global Studies and Service Diploma program. The views expressed are solely those of the author.

Colombia has emerged as one of the most revealing cases for understanding contemporary US-China competition in Latin America. For more than two decades, it has been the United States' [closest security partner](#) in South America, with the bilateral relationship anchored in [Plan Colombia](#), extensive military and intelligence cooperation, counter-narcotics operations, and close diplomatic ties. Also, unlike many of its regional neighbors—such as Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Ecuador, which have attracted substantial Chinese investment in mining, energy, and infrastructure—Colombia received comparatively limited [Chinese](#) investment and remained outside the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) until 2025.

But China has steadily expanded its commercial presence in Colombia through growing trade, renewable-energy supply chains, engineering services, and infrastructure projects while the United States remains Colombia's principal security partner. Consequently, Colombia now increasingly reflects a broader shift in Latin America, where [strategic competition](#) is shaped [not only by](#) diplomacy and military cooperation but economic integration, industrial capacity, and technological influence.

Much has been written about China's role in Latin America, focusing on the Belt and Road, debt diplomacy, and infrastructure finance. Recent scholarship, however, argues that China's competitive advantage extends well beyond financing infrastructure projects, [increasingly resting](#) on [manufacturing capacity](#), engineering expertise, integrated supply chains, logistics networks, and capacity to deliver complete industrial ecosystems supporting [modern infrastructure development](#).

I carried out field research in Colombia in 2025 and 2026, including site visits in La Guajira and Bogotá, and conducted interviews with government officials, academics, representatives of international organizations, industry leaders, indigenous community representatives, and students of the indigenous Wayuu community in Loma Fresca—one of the communities directly affected by [renewable-energy development](#) in La Guajira. Based on my findings, I would argue that China's most consequential advantage lies not only in financing infrastructure, but in shaping the manufacturing, engineering, and logistics systems upon which future infrastructure depends.

From resources to systems

For much of the 20th century, geopolitical competition centered on securing access to natural resources. Today, resources remain strategically important, but an equally critical question is who controls the industrial capabilities to transform those resources into technologies underpinning modern energy systems. Solar modules, batteries, transformers, and advanced power electronics depend on capabilities built over decades. [International Energy Agency](#) data shows that China has become the leading manufacturer of many clean-energy technologies, including solar modules and battery components. Strategic advantage increasingly depends not only on access to critical resources, but also the industrial capabilities required to process them and manufacture finished technologies.

China's influence increasingly flows through its manufacturing base and engineering networks. This reflects China's [broader strategy](#) of integrating manufacturing, engineering, financing, and logistics into complete infrastructure systems, enabling Chinese firms to compete not simply as equipment suppliers but providers of integrated infrastructure solutions. This translates into Chinese firms playing an increasingly important role throughout Latin America's energy value chain. They [supply](#) renewable-energy equipment, participate in the construction and operation of electricity transmission infrastructure, and develop or invest in large-scale energy and transport projects across the region.

China's overseas engagement reflects decades of state-led investment in manufacturing, export capacity, engineering

capabilities, and technological upgrading. As these [capabilities matured](#), overseas infrastructure projects became a natural extension of China's state-led [industrial development model](#) rather than isolated commercial ventures. Similar dynamics can be observed [across the Indo-Pacific](#), where Chinese firms play increasingly important roles in supplying solar modules, battery systems, transmission equipment, and engineering services, even as many governments simultaneously deepen their security cooperation with the United States.

These broader patterns emerged consistently in my interviews in Colombia. In one interview with a representative of a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE), the conversation repeatedly returned to factories, engineers, logistics networks, and long-term technical cooperation rather than to discussions about individual wind farms or solar parks. The SOE representative framed overseas investment as an industrial ecosystem linking manufacturing, engineering, procurement, logistics, financing, and technical expertise.

Taken together, these interviews suggested that countries do not simply purchase Chinese equipment. They become integrated into Chinese-centered production, engineering, and supply-chain ecosystems. In fact, whether speaking with investors, academics, engineers, or indigenous leaders, conversations almost always returned to implementation. Who could build the project? Who could finance it? How many jobs are generated? How does the region benefit?

As Washington seeks to strengthen resilient supply chains with partners across the Indo-Pacific, understanding how Chinese production networks expand into third regions such as Latin America becomes increasingly relevant.

La Guajira: Where competing models meet

La Guajira is where Colombia's domestic energy ambitions collide most visibly with competing external models. The peninsula possesses some of the strongest onshore [wind resources](#) in the Western Hemisphere, high solar irradiation, and access to Caribbean shipping routes. On paper, it should anchor Colombia's long-term energy strategy. In practice, it has become a test of whether international partners can operate within Colombia's institutional realities.

Over the past two years, several flagship [renewable energy projects](#) have stalled. Italy's Enel [withdrew](#) from the Windpeshi project after prolonged delays. Portugal's EDP Renewables [stepped back](#) from planned investments. The Colectora transmission line—owned by Grupo Energía Bogotá, which is itself majority-owned by the City of Bogotá—has faced [repeated setbacks](#) despite being essential for connecting La Guajira's wind resources to the national grid.

These developments are [often attributed](#) to regulatory complexity. However, my fieldwork suggests that La Guajira exposes the limits of external engagement models that treat infrastructure as a purely technical exercise. Indeed, Chinese firms' success in expanding their role in Colombia comes despite these constraints, although that success is uneven. [Bogotá's first metro line](#), one of Colombia's largest infrastructure projects, provides perhaps the clearest example. In 2019, a Chinese consortium led by China Harbour Engineering Company won the concession to deliver the project, while financing has come from the [World Bank, Inter-American](#)

[Development Bank, and European Investment Bank](#). The arrangement illustrates that China's competitive advantage does not necessarily depend on Chinese capital. It can instead lie in the engineering, manufacturing, and integrated delivery capabilities through which infrastructure is built.

In the energy sector, PowerChina, a major EPC contractor, reported [10 photovoltaic projects](#) totaling 567 MW under construction in the country in 2024. Windpeshi and other stalled projects in La Guajira demonstrate that community consultation and regulatory uncertainty can delay or derail renewable-energy development regardless of the developer's nationality.

[Community acceptance](#) depends less on nationality than on the quality of participation, trust, and long-term relationships with indigenous communities. Across interviews with Wayuu leaders, local officials, and development practitioners, the theme of institutional trust repeatedly emerged as a decisive factor. Communities do not oppose renewable energy. They oppose development models that replicate the extractive dynamics of the coal era, where national benefits flowed outward while local conditions remained unchanged. Energy law experts, tribal leaders, and Inter-American Development Bank representatives stressed the need for consultation, social and agency coordination, as well as accrued benefits to local communities such as education, water access, and employment.

These constraints therefore pose real challenges for individual projects, but they have not prevented Chinese firms from expanding their broader role in Colombia.

Industrial statecraft as geopolitical influence

China's integrated supply-chain model helps explain why its influence is unlikely to diminish even as Colombia's political leadership and energy priorities evolve. The country's newly inaugurated [president](#), Abelardo de la Espriella, has signaled greater support for expanding oil and gas production, [marking a shift](#) from the previous administration's emphasis on accelerating the renewable-energy transition. Yet this change in policy is unlikely to alter the structural foundations of China's influence. Whether Colombia expands hydrocarbons, develops green hydrogen, or continues investing in renewable energy, it will still depend on the enabling capabilities in which China has established a significant competitive advantage. These include transmission infrastructure, engineering services, manufacturing capacity, logistics networks, and digital systems.

Ahmed Afifi of Qatar Investment Authority highlighted to me La Guajira's geographic significance. Situated between the Caribbean and northern South America, with strong renewable resources and access to maritime routes, the region is well-positioned for green hydrogen, energy-intensive industries, and potentially future data infrastructure. Geography may determine potential, but institutions determine whether that potential is realized.

Professor Marlon Córdoba of the University of La Guajira emphasized that the energy transition will succeed only if local universities, businesses, and communities acquire skills needed to participate in emerging industries. Otherwise, La Guajira risks

repeating the experience of the coal era, where national wealth failed to generate lasting prosperity for local communities.

None of those I interviewed argued that Colombia should choose between Washington and Beijing. The more common view was that Colombia's long-term success depends on strengthening its own institutions while engaging constructively with both. Colombia's greatest strategic asset will not be any single foreign partner, but its ability to leverage external investment to build domestic industrial and institutional capacity.

Implications for Washington and Bogotá

The United States continues to provide critical support through security cooperation, governance initiatives, development finance, and institutional partnerships. The challenge is that strategic competition increasingly requires complementary capabilities. Maintaining long-term influence will require deeper engagement in infrastructure finance, technology partnerships, supply chain resilience, and workforce development.

For policymakers in Washington, Bogotá, and across the Indo-Pacific, the message from Colombia is clear. Strategic influence in the coming decades will not be determined by security pacts alone, but through manufacturing capacity, engineering expertise, and the resilience of supply chains. The United States remains an indispensable security partner, but security without industrial depth is a hollow foundation.

Colombia's experience is not an anomaly but a preview of how economic and strategic power increasingly converge. Understanding that convergence is no longer an academic exercise, but a national security imperative.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.