



**The Silk Road of Crime:
The Underworld of Chinese Criminal Networks in the Americas**

Written Testimony of Leland Lazarus
Founder and CEO– Lazarus Consulting, LLC
Term Member–Council on Foreign Relations
Member–National Committee on U.S.-China Relations

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Introduction

Chairman Cornyn, Co-Chair Whitehouse, and distinguished members of the Caucus, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Leland Lazarus, Founder and CEO of Lazarus Consulting, a geopolitical risk firm specializing in China's economic and national security influence in the Western Hemisphere. For over 13 years, I have had the privilege of serving my country as a Fulbright Scholar studying the Chinese diaspora in Latin America, a State Department Foreign Service Officer in China and the Caribbean, and the Special Assistant/Speechwriter to two Combatant Commanders of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). I still hold an active TS/SCI security clearance and work closely with the U.S. military, intelligence community, and law enforcement.

For years, SOUTHCOM treated China and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) as two separate, distinct threats. China was the long-term strategic threat, expanding its influence throughout the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), making loans for big-ticket infrastructure projects like ports and space research facilities that could have both civilian and military purposes. TCOs, on the other hand, were considered the more immediate threat facing partner nations, spreading violence and corruption throughout the region and often overwhelming local security forces.

But in recent years, we have seen growing evidence of the blending of these two threats. Chinese transnational criminal networks are spreading around the world, what I call the Silk Road of Crime, and it is now popping up right here in America and across the Western Hemisphere. These groups directly threaten the American people: some traffic fentanyl precursors, killing tens of thousands of Americans; others launder money for Mexican cartels and other TCOs in the region, providing the financial foundation for TCOs to facilitate illegal migration to the United States, amass wealth from various illicit activities, spread violence, worsen corruption, and destabilize democracies.

Still other groups based in Southeast Asia engage in digital scams, swindling innocent Americans out of billions of dollars. In October 2025, for instance, U.S. and UK authorities sanctioned digital scam organizations that have led to over \$16 billion in losses to U.S. citizens.¹ The U.S. Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network discovered that, from 2020 to 2024, Chinese Money Laundering Networks laundered \$312 billion in the U.S. financial system.² Their clients are often Mexican cartel members, and they frequently recruit Chinese students, “daigou” purchasing agents, and shell companies to launder the money.

Many of these criminals share four key features with Chinese organized crime elsewhere in the world:

- Crime convergence– These networks are involved in a whole host of crimes: they traffic fentanyl, launder billions of dollars, illegally mine gold and other minerals, facilitate wildlife and sex trafficking, and orchestrate digital “pig-butcher” scams. This is called “crime convergence,” popularized by NGOs like Earth League International.³
- Fujian Connection – Most hail from the Chinese coastal province of Fujian due to that region’s centuries-old migration patterns. This makes it particularly difficult for U.S. and regional law enforcement to penetrate these networks, given the dearth of Fujianese speakers in their ranks. Zhejiang and Guangdong provinces are also regions where criminals tend to originate.
- Local Business Associations – They tend to be prominent business leaders in their local diaspora communities, serving as presidents or vice presidents of local chambers of commerce or hometown associations. This allows them to intentionally create gray areas between their legitimate businesses and illicit activities, and they often use their prominent business ties to bribe local officials.
- Chinese Government Ties– They tend to have direct connections with local Chinese embassies, the United Front Work Department, or the Chinese Ministry of State Security. They also tend to use their influence or bribery to support Chinese BRI projects in the countries where they reside.

There is already a growing body of research and reports about Chinese transnational organized crime by Martin Thorley, Sebastian Rotella, Peng Wang, R. Evan Ellis, Andrea Crosta, Li Jiameng, and Vanda Felbab-Brown, as well as ProPublica, InSight Crime, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Earth League International, and the Brookings Institution. My research draws from the “geocriminality” concept developed by GI-TOC, determining the state-crime nexus between the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese

¹ “U.S. and U.K. Take Largest Action Ever Targeting Cybercriminal Networks in Southeast Asia,” last modified October 14, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0278#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20rapid%20rise%20of%20transnational,Group%20TCO%20being%20particularly%20significant.>

² U.S. Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, *Financial Trend Analysis: Chinese Money Laundering Networks: 2020-2024 Threat Pattern and Trend Information*, August 2025, <https://www.fincen.gov/system/files/2025-08/4000-10-INV-144549-S3F6L-FTA-CMLN-508.pdf>.

³ Andrea Crosta et al., *Environmental Crime Convergence Launching an Environmental Crime Convergence Paradigm Through Investigation of Transnational Organized Crime Operations* (Earth League International, June 2023).

global criminal networks.⁴ Chinese officials and state-owned enterprises often engage in opaque dealings and elite capture to advance China's larger economic and political objectives worldwide.⁵ The Wall Street Journal even described how China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran are increasingly leveraging criminal gangs to carry out cyberattacks, assassinations, and money laundering.⁶

Scholars have also documented the symbiotic relationship between Chinese local officials and the Chinese mafia. Peng Wang's 2017 book *The Chinese Mafia: Organized Crime, Corruption, and Extra-Legal Protection* details how the Chinese concept of *guanxi* (personal relationships) often erodes the effectiveness of a formal legal system in China, facilitating impunity of illicit activity.⁷ Corrupt public officials offer illegal services to the criminal underworld, including the safeguarding of organized crime groups and the protection of illegal entrepreneurs.

Similarly, in her 2022 book *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, Lynette Ong of the University of Toronto documents a pattern in which CCP or municipal governments consistently leverage nonstate actors like thugs for hire to suppress dissidents or evict people for rapid city redevelopment projects within their own borders.⁸ Using thugs for hire augments the state's coercive capacity to extend its arm of repression in a relatively cost-effective way, while at the same time giving plausible deniability and evasion of accountability for violent acts. Ong's work builds on Minxin Pei's *China's Trapped Transition*, which details the clientelist ties forged between local governments and mafias during the 1990s and 2000s.⁹ Some local governments even relied on mafias to carry out government services like tax collection and maintaining public order.¹⁰

Below, I share three examples of Chinese criminals operating in our Hemisphere:

⁴ Martin Thorley, *A Changing Landscape: China's New Model of Global Governance and Its Impact on Organized Crime*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, May 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Martin-Thorley-A-changinglandscape-Chinas-new-model-of-global-governance-and-its-impact-on-organized-crime-GITOC-May-2024.pdf>.

⁵ Peter Mattis, *Written Testimony of Peter Mattis: China's Global Influence and Interference Activities*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 23, 2023, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/>.

⁶ Sune Engel Rasmussen and Daniel Michaels, "America's Rivals Have a New Favorite Weapon: Criminal Gangs," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/americas-rivals-have-a-new-favorite-weapon-criminal-gangs-3c12a35f?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWetsqdSpTZCxpTccYIvUS3TVXZmlz6DMvmVFCw6I12y_3_AnSob-h9Reu2yNeRFA%3D&gaa_ts=69082177&gaa_sig=_BErMIARA-yEebL1Wlfa0JTuuLM9hogAV5s7GUxL2lvsGjh5wlaWNepUr4HNCgkJ4PIVESzHw2yICL3PgDoAPA%3D%3D.

⁷ Peng Wang, *The Chinese Mafia: Organized Crime, Corruption, and Extra-Legal Protection* (OUP Oxford, 2017).

⁸ Lynette Ong, *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, Oxford University Press, 2022, <https://www.amazon.com/Outsourcing-Repression-Everyday-State-Contemporary/dp/019762877X>.

⁹ Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Lynette Ong, *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, pg. 76

Zhidong Zhang

Also reported as “Brother Wang,” Zhang is a Chinese-born (Fujian), Mexico-based narcotics broker whose arrest in Cuba has become one of the most high-profile drug trafficking cases in the Western Hemisphere.¹¹ Fluent in Spanish and deeply embedded in Latin American networks, Zhang acted as a critical facilitator linking Chinese chemical suppliers with Mexican cartel fentanyl, methamphetamine, and cocaine production. U.S. and Mexican investigators say he coordinated precursor shipments, arranged logistics, and laundered tens of millions of dollars through a web of more than 100 shell companies and over 170 bank accounts in the U.S., Mexico, and China.



Source: Government of Mexico

First arrested in Mexico City in late 2024 at the request of U.S. authorities, he was inexplicably granted house arrest, from which he escaped in mid-2025 before fleeing to Cuba. After a failed attempt to enter Russia, he returned to Cuba, where he was captured on July 31, 2025. Havana handed him over to Mexico, which extradited him to the United States to face federal drug trafficking and money-laundering charges.

Zhang’s case highlights the increasingly globalized nature of synthetic drug production: Chinese precursor suppliers, Latin American cartels, and U.S. distribution networks operating as an integrated transnational ecosystem. His arrest raises uncomfortable questions about corruption and judicial failures in Mexico, the depth of Chinese criminal networks abroad, and the geopolitical implications for U.S.–Mexico–China cooperation on fentanyl, financial crimes, and illicit trans-Pacific supply chains.

Xizhi Li

¹¹ Will Grant, “Suspected Drug Kingpin Caught after Audacious Escape from House Arrest,” *BBC News*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz0xd4dvzlyo>.

Born in the countryside of Guangdong province, Li migrated to Mexicali, Mexico, when he was 10 years old.¹² A few years later, Li and his family moved to Southern California, where his prolific career in crime began. With the assistance of relatives, Li became affiliated with the 14K triads. By 2005, Li owned a restaurant that served as a base of operations for his illicit activities. Having a Mexican wife and living in Southern California, Li developed ties to Mexican criminal organizations and frequently traveled between the United States, Mexico, China, and Latin American and Caribbean countries. Within his network, Li maintained connections to China's wealthy elite and government officials within the CCP. Li's trafficking and smuggling operations raked in millions of dollars, but Li's impact on the criminal market was shaped by his and other criminals' innovative approach to money laundering. The method that Chinese launderers use is called "Flying Money."

First, a cartel operative gives US\$350,000 in cash to a courier who works for someone like Li in a U.S.-based city. Next, Li's organization in Mexico delivered the equivalent amount in pesos to the cartel within about a day, taking a two percent commission. After that, Li sold the US\$350,000 to wealthy Chinese nationals trying to circumvent the US\$50,000 capital outflow limit imposed by the Chinese government. Using another courier, the US\$350,000 was sent to a Chinese buyer who transferred the equivalent amount in Chinese currency to an account owned by the crime group, taking another commission of about 10 percent. Finally, Li sold US\$350,000 in Chinese currency to a foreign company; in Li's case, it was often a Mexican company that required Chinese currency to buy goods from China. The company then paid Li in U.S. dollars or pesos and a fee. This process often involves a network of Chinese-based banks facilitating transfers between each other. These banks are less than transparent regarding these issues, and tensions between the United States and China have prevented any kind of bilateral cooperation to stop it.

Dizi Shi

Shi is an alleged Chinese criminal featured in a recent Al Jazeera investigation detailing his role in a scheme to influence Paraguay to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Originally from Fujian province, Shi claimed to act as a proxy for Beijing, frequently traveling to Foz do Iguasu, Brazil, which borders Paraguay, to meet with Chinese diplomats from the São Paulo consulate and the embassy. During the pandemic, Shi allegedly sought to try to get Chinese vaccines to Paraguay in exchange for Paraguay ditching Taiwan. One of Shi's associates, Lin Fan, previously worked for the Chinese Ministry of State Security.

¹² Sebastian Rotella and Kirsten Berg, "How a Chinese American Gangster Transformed Money Laundering for Drug Cartels," *ProPublica*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/china-cartels-xizhi-li-money-laundering>.



Source: Al Jazeera and 101 East

Shi engaged in large-scale real estate and investment maneuvers, including the development of what is described as a digital scam compound near Paraguay's capital.¹³ He reportedly offered gifts and investment commitments to Paraguayan officials to facilitate corruption, weaken diplomatic ties with Taiwan, and bolster China's influence in the region. Shi is President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. He frequently writes reports back to the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, which is connected to China's United Front Work Department

Shi's case illustrates the shadowy overlap between organized crime, transnational investment vehicles, and geopolitical competition — particularly how Chinese-linked criminal actors may exploit weak governance environments in Latin America to pursue illicit agendas under the guise of economic development.

A Growing Global Pattern

I want to be very clear: I have not seen direct evidence that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is giving direct orders to these global criminal networks. Nor have I seen evidence that Xi Jinping directly communicates with TCOs to help carry out his foreign policy goals. Chinese Money Laundering Networks, for instance, are quite decentralized, and they are ostensibly actively working *against* the Chinese government, circumventing the government-imposed \$50,000 capital controls. But the CCP ostensibly has the surveillance capability and law enforcement networks to increase pressure on global criminal networks, yet it hasn't appreciably done so to date. We know the authoritarian, top-down nature of the CCP, and how it mobilizes various actors to achieve strategic goals. We've seen this in the strategic acquisition of rare earth and critical mineral mines, or the development of emerging technology like artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and quantum technology. Elements within the CCP may be leveraging criminals in a similar top-down manner.

We also know that corruption is rampant in China, and that there is a history of government officials colluding with thugs for hire to suppress dissidents domestically. As Xi Jinping's

¹³ Lynn Lee, James Leong, and Alex Lee, *China's Paraguay Connection*, Youtube, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QA78--LYmWA>.

domestic anti-corruption campaign continues, corrupt government officials may replicate this practice overseas. There are examples of Chinese criminals in Europe also supporting Chinese overseas police stations or seeking to repress overseas dissidents.¹⁴

Transnational criminals are being opportunistic and doing so in ways that benefit Chinese economic and political interests in countries around the world. In 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Wan Kuok Koi, alias “Broken Tooth,” who is a 14K triad leader.¹⁵ Wan is a member of the CCP People’s Political Consultative Conference, one of the country’s two main legislative bodies. Wan also heads the World Hongmen History and Culture Association, a seemingly innocuous organization that helped further China’s Belt and Road (BRI) initiatives in Southeast Asia. “This continues a pattern of overseas Chinese actors trying to paper over illegal criminal activities by framing their actions in terms of China’s BRI, the China Dream, or other major initiatives of the CCP,” a Treasury press release stated.

The report concluded: The Chinese enterprises behind the BRI projects have several things in common: their leadership has links to criminal networks or actors involved in illicit activities in other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as China; they have pre-existing organizations engaged in casinos and crypto currencies; they advertise themselves online to be associated with Beijing’s BRI and flaunt connections with key Chinese government agencies; and all of them have established associations that actively seek to assist Chinese nationals. A 2025 Reuters investigation found that Broken Tooth used his wealth and connections to try to corrupt officials in Palau to entice that country to break diplomatic recognition with Taiwan.¹⁶

Another example is in Taiwan itself. The China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP), a small pro-CCP political party in Taiwan with ties to the Bamboo Union gang and led by Chang An-Lo (who spent years behind bars in the United States for leading the Bamboo Union, and also spent decades in mainland China), engages in a host of influence campaigns, including receiving millions by the CCP to have a pro-unification radio station and social media page depicting Taiwan as a dangerous place; trying to recruit Taiwanese spies, especially those in the Taiwanese military; and intimidating or trying to shut down Tiananmen Square remembrance activities in Taiwan.¹⁷ There are also a host of other examples of Chinese criminals with CCP ties operating in Canada, the UK, Italy, Chile, Australia, Southeast Asia, and Africa.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sebastian Rotella, “Outlaw Alliance: How China and Chinese Mafias Overseas Protect Each Other’s Interests,” *ProPublica*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-beijing-chinese-mafia-europe-protect-interests>.

¹⁵ U.S. Treasury Department, “Treasury Sanctions Corrupt Actors in Africa and Asia,” last modified December 9, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1206>.

¹⁶ Peter McKenzie and Hollie Adams, “Inside the U.S. Battle with China over an Island Paradise Deep in the Pacific,” *Reuters*, April 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/inside-us-battle-with-china-over-an-island-paradise-deep-pacific-2025-04-30/>.

¹⁷ Katrina Northrop, “Behind Taiwan’s ‘unification’ Party, Chinese Espionage- and a Criminal Gang,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/09/29/china-influence-taiwan-gangsters/>

¹⁸ Leland Lazarus; Havertong, Myah; Alvarez Kuan, Javier; and Writt, Nicole, “From Fujian to Flushing: Chinese Criminal Networks in the Americas and Beyond” (2024). https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=jgi_research

Policy Recommendations

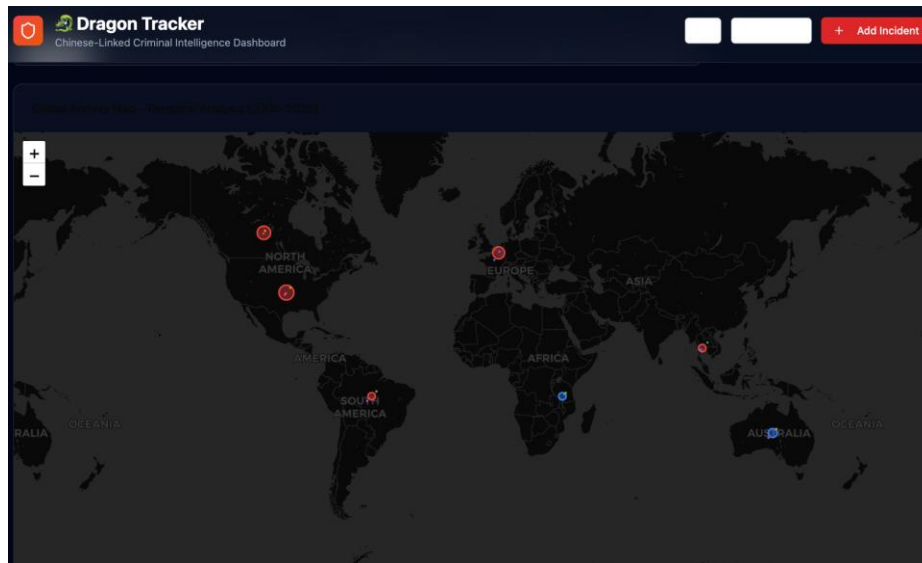
The rise of Chinese organized crime is a global challenge that requires a global solution. To address this emerging threat to our homeland, the U.S. government should take the following actions:

- **Press China to step up law enforcement actions against Chinese criminal networks. If the demand is not met, impose tariffs on China.** After the Trump-Xi meeting in South Korea in November 2025, China further tightened controls on fentanyl precursors to the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.¹⁹ However, the Trump administration should continue to press for China to crack down not just on fentanyl but also on money laundering, digital scams, and other Chinese criminal activities that threaten Americans. If it doesn't do so, the United States should raise additional tariffs or revoke Permanent Normal Trade Relations, as suggested by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.²⁰ President Trump should address Chinese criminality with Xi Jinping during his visit to China in April 2026.
- **Launch an interagency task force and leverage AI to stay ahead of the traffickers.** There is already precedent for this. In 2018, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration launched Project Sleeping Giant to track Chinese-related drug groups.²¹ But the grey-zone nature of the Chinese criminal-state nexus falls between the seams of U.S. law enforcement and counter-intelligence. Congress should create an interagency task force to map out potential links between Chinese criminals and CCP officials. The U.S. government could also use AI to ascertain routes and patterns of the fentanyl global supply chain, money laundering activities, illegal marijuana farms across the nation, wildlife and human trafficking, and ties to CCP officials. I have partnered with an AI Ph.D researcher to build an AI-powered dashboard called "Dragon Tracker" for this purpose. The United States could even work with private sector blockchain consultants to track cryptocurrency money laundering, which more illicit groups are doing.

¹⁹ Fan Chen, "China Tightens Controls on Fentanyl Precursors Bound for US, Canada and Mexico," *South China Morning Post*, November 10, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3332240/china-tightens-controls-fentanyl-precursors-bound-us-canada-and-mexico>.

²⁰ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF THE COMMISSION'S 2024 RECOMMENDATIONS*, November 2024, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/2024_Comprehensive_List_of_Recommendations.pdf.

²¹ Lisa Cavazuti, "Marijuana and Mexican Cartels: Inside the Stunning Rise of Chinese Money Launderers," *NBC News*, August 3, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/marijuana-mexican-cartels-stunning-rise-chinese-money-launderers-rcna158030>.



Screenshot of the AI-Powered “Dragon Tracker” Dashboard

- **Launch a Counter-Chinese Crime international task force.** The task force would share information and intelligence, Mandarin and Fujianese-language translators, and regional trends. What is happening in some countries today may turn up in other countries tomorrow. Currently, each country is dealing with this phenomenon on its own without identifying larger trends and best practices. This task force should also work with Indo-Pacific partners like Taiwan, Australia, and Singapore, who have dealt with Chinese gangs for much longer and can share valuable information about how these networks operate. The task force should also periodically bring together local police chiefs in some of the most affected cities and areas around the world to share their local experiences and identify global trends.
- **Increase scrutiny of travelers from Fujian province.** U.S. and partner consular officers must increase scrutiny of any visa applicants from Fujian province or Fuzhou city around the world, given the mounting evidence that the vast majority of Chinese transnational gangs hail from Fujian. Of course, there should be exceptions made on a case-by-case basis. The Department of State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs must share with other consulates around the world warnings about Fujian province as a potential Chinese criminal hotspot.
- **Beef up law enforcement resources in Flushing (NY), Sunset Park (NY), Los Angeles’ San Gabriel Valley (CA), and Sacramento (CA).** U.S. authorities should add more law enforcement and counter-intelligence resources and manpower in these four areas in New York and California, where Chinese crime thrives. The United States should also leverage NY Police Department and LA Police Department exchanges with LAC partner nations. Both cities have large Chinatowns, and their police have dealt with the Fujian mafia for years. Fujianese and Mandarin-speaking officers can share great lessons on infiltrating and disrupting these mafia groups.
- **Consider restricting WeChat in the United States, and work with Meta to monitor WhatsApp.** While tens of thousands of Chinese Americans and Chinese residents in the United States rely on WeChat to keep in touch with family back in China, Chinese criminals use the platform to communicate with each other and facilitate deals. Since

WeChat is a Chinese company, it has no legal obligation to cooperate with U.S. authorities. For this reason, the U.S. government should give WeChat parent company Tencent an ultimatum: work harder to shut down illicit activity on the app or risk being banned from the country. There is now a legal precedent for this with TikTok. The U.S. government should also increase its collaboration with Meta to crack down on Sinaloa and Jalisco gang members who use WhatsApp to communicate.

- **Launch a Community Outreach and Partnership Initiative with Chinese Business, Cultural, and Hometown Associations.** U.S. authorities should strengthen outreach to Chinese business, cultural, and hometown associations to ensure they have clear, accessible information about how Chinese transnational criminal networks and United Front actors may attempt to exploit their organizations—often without their knowledge or consent. Many of these associations are pillars of their local communities, providing economic opportunity, cultural preservation, and mutual support. By partnering directly with these organizations, the U.S. government can help them understand warning signs, safeguard their members, and report concerns without fear of retaliation. This effort must be framed as an affirmative measure to protect Chinese diaspora communities, who are frequently targeted by PRC-linked criminal groups and coercive state actors themselves. When clear evidence of illicit activity exists, U.S. authorities should take appropriate legal action—but such actions should be based on behavior, not identity, and accompanied by strategic messaging to emphasize that the goal is community safety and resilience, not broad suspicion of Chinese Americans or overseas Chinese communities.

Conclusion

Chinese criminal networks are no longer a distant problem unfolding in the shadows of Southeast Asia. The Silk Road of Crime is already running through our country and our hemisphere—exploiting our financial system, poisoning our citizens, corrupting partner nations, and advancing the interests of our strategic competitor, whether by design or by default. And unless we act now — with better intelligence, stronger partnerships, and smarter use of technology — it will continue to undercut our hemispheric security.

The good news is we have the tools and the talent to tackle this challenge. What we lack is integration and urgency. By standing up an interagency task force, empowering AI-enabled platforms like the Dragon Tracker Lazarus Consulting is developing, coordinating allied law enforcement efforts, and tightening the most vulnerable seams in migration, ports, finance, and communications, we can get ahead of these networks before they entrench themselves further.

For the Trump administration to truly destroy narco-terrorists, it must destroy the Chinese criminal networks providing them with financial lifelines. We cannot fight 21st-century criminal-state convergence with 20th-century stovepipes. If we take bold action now, we can sever the Silk Road of Crime and protect our citizens, our communities, and our Hemisphere.