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# Autechcracy in action:

China's Technology Behind  
Maduro Regime's Repression  
and Social Control



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# Executive Summary

**This analytical report reveals a profound paradox in the strategic relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Venezuelan regime:** Beijing's massive effort to export its economic development model failed spectacularly, yet this failure was overshadowed by a successful, calculated strategy to export its autocratic control model, which we call Autechcracy,<sup>1</sup> an autocracy enabled by technology.

Leveraged on Chavez's Anti-Western approach, Venezuela became China's "sandbox", the strategic testing ground for its technology and military companies, used in Venezuela for repression and elsewhere in Latin America for commercial purposes but also to strengthen autocracies- since the early 2000s and continues to do so even in 2025.

Initially, the foundation of China's presence was the "Fondo Chino" and oil-for-loan agreements the largest loan-for-development scheme in the region. Venezuela received more than **\$60 billion to \$68.7 billion** in financing between 2007 and 2017.<sup>234</sup>

**This funding represented over 40% of China's total lending to Latin America in that period.**

However, the regime's gross negligence and systemic corruption resulted in catastrophic project failures (e.g., the Tinaco-Anaco Railway) and a consistent failure to increase oil production. China's initial policy of "no conditionalities" became its greatest financial vulnerability. When the 2014 oil price collapse hit, Venezuela began to, de facto, default on payments intended to be covered by oil shipments. China was compelled to grant a two-year grace period in 2016 and has since been forced into accepting unconventional payment alternatives simply to recoup debt and secure the long-term presence of its state-owned companies.



Simultaneously, China pivoted to ensure the continuity of the regime necessary to eventually secure its repayment, successfully exporting its technology-enabled autocratic model.

**This system provides the regime with the capability to collect data, survey, analyze, and exert social control and repression that would have been impossible through conventional means.**

Similarly to a body, China provides Caracas' regime with the Brain (via e.g. ZTE and Huawei), Eyes (via e.g. CEIEC), and Muscle (via e.g. Norinco or Skyfend) through several state-owned and promoted companies.

In other words, China exported a proven, end-to-end **"Authoritarian Survival Kit"** that has sustained the Maduro regime despite internal collapse and external sanctions. This established model is now a template for technology-enabled autocratic governance across Latin America, posing an urgent, non-conventional security threat to regional democratic stability.

This report establishes the conceptual framework and serves as the fundamental starting point for exploring the strategic relationship between China and Venezuela, articulated under the conceptual understanding of **'Autechcracy'** (autocracy enabled by technology). Upcoming reports will detail specific case studies on how Chinese companies have supported the Venezuelan regime in its repression capabilities and enforcement.

This Survival Kit has been essential in enabling and facilitating this Autechcracy, which was conceived and designed by the Venezuelan regime, as it includes every technical, economic, and technological tool needed. Although China has played a significant role by providing financial resources, technical expertise, and advanced surveillance and control technologies, its involvement is primarily supportive. The driving force behind the consolidation of autocratic power is the Venezuelan regime itself, which intentionally uses these Chinese tools to reinforce its own political project. China, for its part, benefits from the arrangement, both by exporting elements of its own model and by using Venezuela as a testing environment for governance and monitoring systems but it is not the CCP directing or perpetuating the autocracy. Rather, it is the Venezuelan regime leveraging Chinese support to sustain and refine its own system.



## Diagnosis of Digital Sovereignty Risk: Mapping Foreign Infrastructure for State Control

Since Hugo Chávez rose to power in 1999, **Venezuela has served as a key entry point for China into Latin America**, consolidating its presence most notably through a series of contracts and alliances in sectors such as telecommunications, security, technology and later on, military and defense. This relationship has evolved beyond traditional finance for infrastructure and oil, focusing instead on building the digital backbone of the Venezuelan state and its capabilities to digitally monitor its citizens and economically, politically and physically repress them.

**12 Chinese** companies have established a presence in the country in strategic areas such as identity, technology, and the military. As examples, Huawei controls an estimated 60% of Venezuela's telecommunications infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> China also became Venezuela's most important supplier in the area of public order equipment for more than a decade (between 2014 and 2023), displacing Russia, per Control Ciudadano, an NGO.



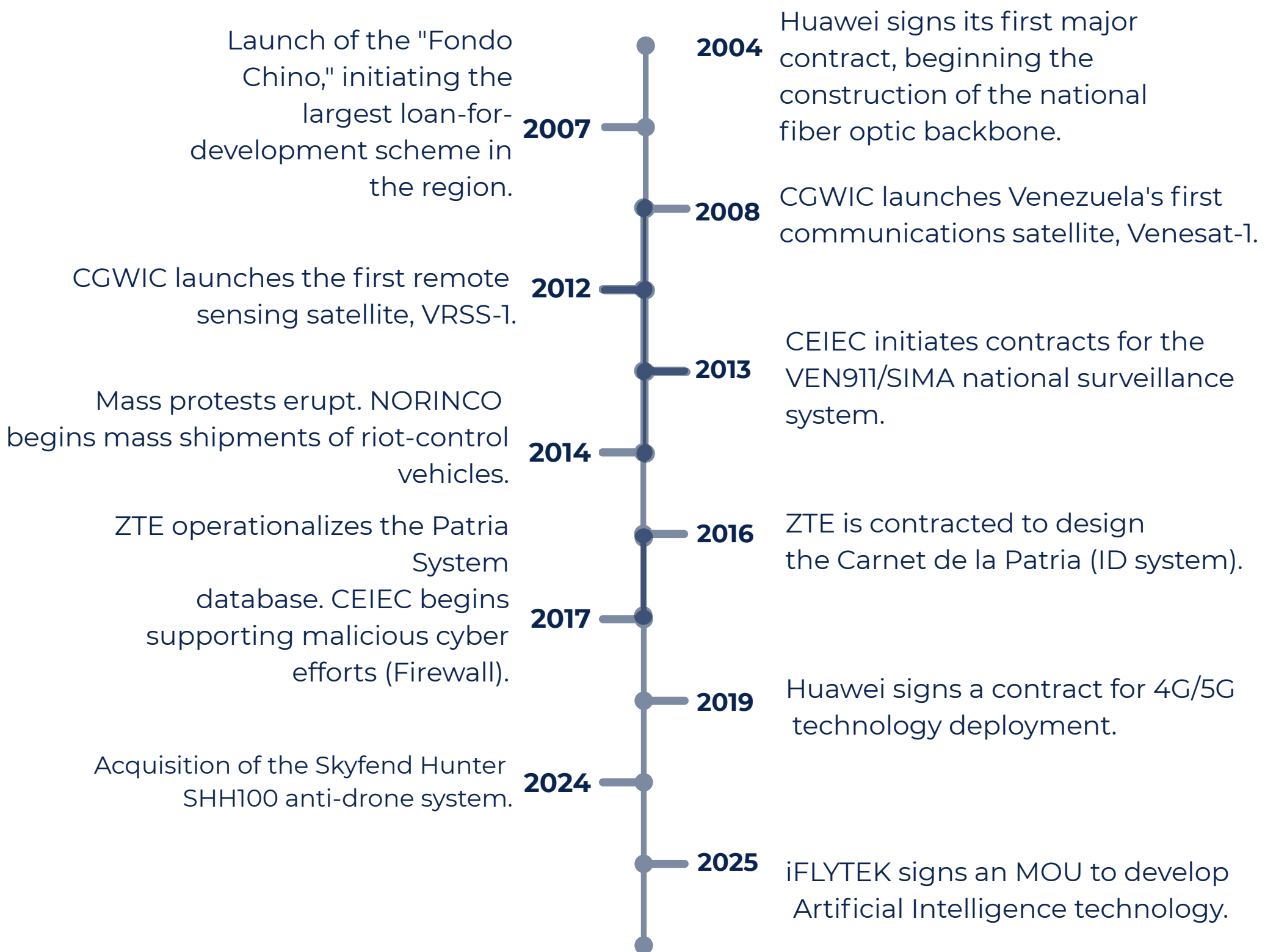


# TIMELINE



## Chinese companies involvement in Venezuela

### KEY EVENTS





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# The Infrastructure of Repression:

## Company by Company Mapping

The technological architecture of Autechcracy is built by at least 12 key Chinese state-linked entities, each playing a crucial role in enabling political control and military dominance:

**CGWIC**

**ZTE**



**inspur**



**CETC**

**CEIEC**

**SKYFEND**

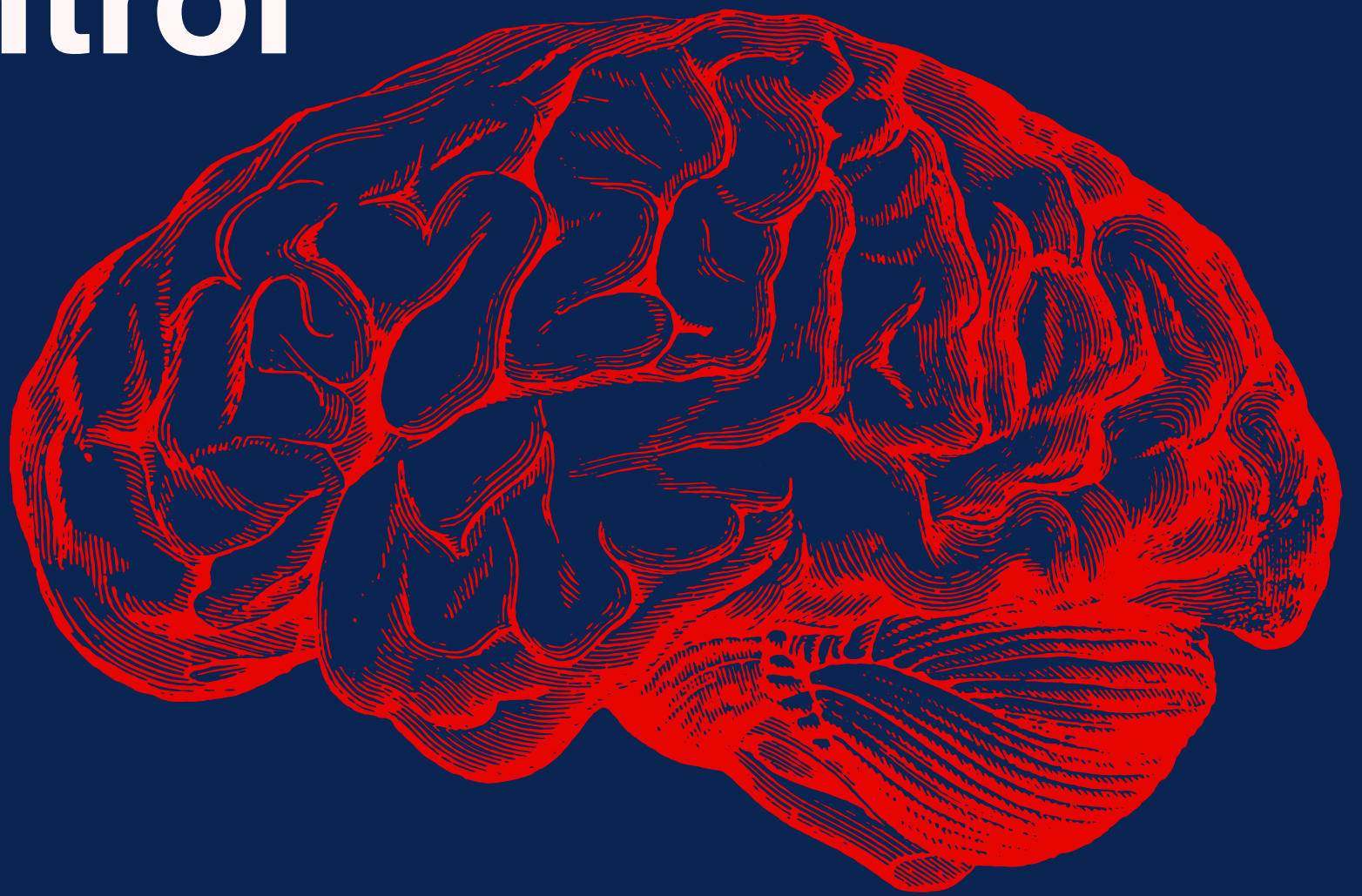


AVIATION INDUSTRY CORPORATION OF CHINA





# The Brain: Policy, Identity, and Foundational Control



The strategic core of China's penetration is the establishment of a state-controlled information architecture that grants the regime a comprehensive view and manipulation capability over its society and economy. The "Brain" of this system is two-fold: coercive citizen data management and control over the regulatory backbone.



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# Identity System re-wired for social control and coercion: The ZTE/Patria System<sup>9</sup>

The clearest instrument of tech-enabled data-driven political control is the Patria System, where the Chinese giant ZTE Corporation serves as the central architect. This system, anchored by the Carnet de la Patria (Fatherland Card), functions as the digital command center of repression.

In 2017, the regime hired ZTE through a \$70 million contract to build and manage this system, moving far beyond simple identification. The Carnet, modeled directly after surveillance and social control systems in China and rationing systems from Cuba, links a citizen's personal information with details like voting compliance, employment, and medical history to a centralized database.

This framework transforms essential welfare services into a tool for coercion, allowing the regime to reward loyalty and punish dissent through the conditional access of subsidized food, medicine, and pensions.



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# Policy Capture: Network, Infrastructure, and AI<sup>10 11 12</sup>

**Digital Infrastructure Control:** Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. established its dominance early, signing its first major contract—worth over \$250 million—with the state regulator CONATEL in 2004. This initial agreement was instrumental in building the national fiber optic backbone. Today, Huawei controls an estimated 60% of Venezuela's fiber optic and communications backbone. This command over all national data traffic grants the regime crucial capacity for mass data interception and real-time network management under surveillance protocols, something made evident in a 2024 report by Movistar Telefónica (a private telecommunications company) citing the intervention of 1.5 million users by the regime.




**The new barrier AI:** The threat continues to evolve. The regime signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chinese AI company iFLYTEK in 2024 to develop artificial intelligence technologies across key sectors. This partnership signals a definitive move toward weaponizing the vast data collected by the Patria and network systems with advanced AI analytics for predictive social control, posing a rapidly escalating threat to fundamental rights.





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# The Eyes: Surveillance, Censorship, and Intelligence



The second operational component of the architecture, the Eyes, is the physical and digital apparatus used to monitor dissent and repress opposition. This system is the regime's central nervous system for surveillance, built through reserved binational agreements and designed to shift the state toward predictive authoritarianism.



## CEIEC, ZTE and The Centralized Surveillance Architecture (VEN911/SIMA)



The core of the Eyes is the System for Integrated Monitoring and Assistance (SIMA), which became the national VEN911 emergency response network. Besides providing basic public safety, this \$1.3 billion project<sup>13</sup> became a centralized, data-mining operation also used for political control.

- **1. Scale and Replacement: China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC)** was the main provider, securing a contract initially valued at over USD 1.080 million in 2013 to install 30,000 security cameras and command architecture across the country. CEIEC completely replaced the videovigilance functions previously managed by the Venezuelan state company, CANTV, effectively handing the keys to the nation's emergency communications infrastructure to a foreign state-owned company.

**CEIEC**

- **Integrated Control:** The entire surveillance apparatus relies on Chinese companies: ZTE provided technological equipment for multiple VEN911 centers and was tasked with evaluating the broader system, while a U.S. Senate report confirmed Huawei's involvement in the SIMA-VEN911 framework.

**ZTE**



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- **2. Great Digital Firewall (CEIEC): Digital Blackout and Censorship**<sup>14</sup>

The physical surveillance network is complemented by direct digital control. CEIEC provided technical support and expertise to CANTV, utilizing a commercialized version of China's "Great Digital Firewall" to enforce censorship. U.S. sanctions documents confirm CEIEC has supported the regime's malicious cyber efforts since 2017, providing the capability for systematic, targeted blocking of independent media and democratic voices during periods of political tension.

- **3. Space-eyes: High-Level Reconnaissance by CGWIC**<sup>15 16</sup>

The surveillance capacity is completed by high-level reconnaissance systems. CGWIC (China Great Wall Industry Corporation) is responsible for the intelligence infrastructure and Earth-observing satellite systems (like the VRSS-2), which provide the regime with space-based reconnaissance and territorial oversight capability. This ensures the regime has a comprehensive view of the country, from street-level cameras to orbital intelligence.

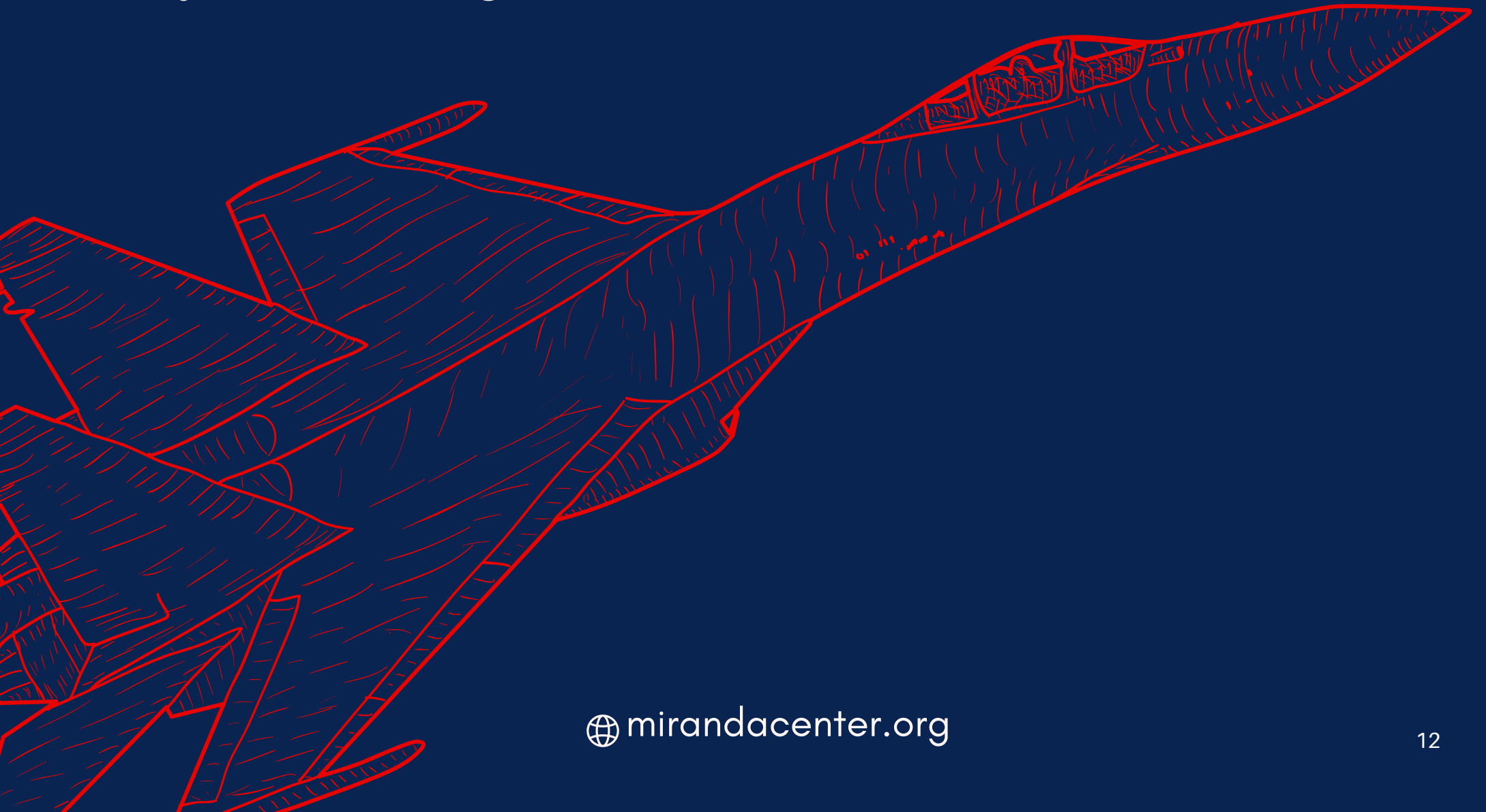
**CGWIC**



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# The Muscle: Infrastructure and Repressive Capacity

The final component of the architecture, the Muscle, provides the physical infrastructure and military hardware necessary for coercive enforcement, ensuring the state's digital control systems are backed by overwhelming force.





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# From Tiananmen to Caracas: Primary Supplier of Repression

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 28 29 30 31

China became Venezuela's primary public order equipment for over a decade (2014-2023) solidifying its role as the main enabler of physical repression. Only to Norinco, the Venezuelan regime paid \$500 million in military and repression equipment. Some of the companies involved are as following:

- **Targeted Riot Control (NORINCO):** The \$500 million agreement with NORINCO (China North Industries Group) provided the regime with the tools for suppression. In 2014 and 2015—coinciding with mass anti-government protests—the National Guard received shipments of armored vehicles, including VN-4 reconnaissance vehicles and WTC-1 water cannon riot-control vehicles used in repressions in 2014 and 2017.
- **Air Defense and Surveillance (CETC):** The China Electronic Technology Group Corporation (CETC) is the main provider of the strategic air defense network, including the acquisition of ten JYL-1 3D long-range radars in a deal amounting to \$150 million. CEIEC (also listed under The Eyes) contributed with a \$172.3 million contract for a military radio communications center.
- **Aerospace Suppliers:** The China Aviation Industry Corporation (AVIC) consortium, including manufacturers Hongdu Aviation Industry Group and the export arm China National Aero-Technology Import & Export (CATIC), supplied aircraft like the K-8 jet trainers and L-15 Falcons, ensuring dependence on the Chinese defense base.
- **Anti-Drone Systems (Skyfend):** The recent acquisition of the Skyfend Hunter SHH100 anti-drone system for the Aerospace Defense Command (CODAI) demonstrates the continued evolution of military-tech support.





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# OVERVIEW

THE BRAIN



THE EYES



THE MUSCLE





## Beyond equipment and tech: Strategic Infrastructure Control

Chinese companies also control key strategic infrastructure, linking commercial interests directly to military and logistical leverage.



- **Port Control (CHEC):** The China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) secured a \$600 million agreement to modernize the Port of Puerto Cabello, the country's largest terminal, providing strategic access and logistics control.

Other strategic sectors, including oil, gas, and—of particular geopolitical importance, mining, also rely heavily on Chinese companies as a financial lifeline for the regime. These areas are deliberately not addressed in this report.



# Autechcracy in action: How China has enabled Venezuela's regime capacity to repress

Chinese involvement in Venezuela has enabled the Venezuelan regime to control and repress its population through the use of Chinese technology and public order equipment. One clear example that has been working and being perfected since 2017 is explained below

## THE BRAIN: CARNET DE LA PATRIA<sup>32 33</sup>



The foundation of the system is the Carnet de la Patria, **an identity and payment system** which began its aggressive roll-out in January 2017. Venezuela hired ZTE Corporation as part of a \$70 million effort to build and fortify the fatherland database, including the development of QR codes used on the cards (at a cost of less than \$3 per account).

The database, managed by a team of ZTE employees embedded within the state telecommunications company Cantv, stores detailed personal information including medical history, employment, political party membership, and voting history.

This technical infrastructure enables the regime to compel citizens to adopt the card to receive essential public benefits, such as medicine, pensions, and subsidized food. As verified by United Nations<sup>34</sup>, the system is used to deny access to aid based on political affiliation—a practice critics deem "extortion" and "digital blackmail." By installing and managing this core database and payment system, ZTE provided the know-how, inspired by China's social credit systems, that provided the regime with the "Who" and "Why" (non-compliant citizens) to exclude citizens from government services or to label them as opposition, leading on many occasions to afterwards detentions.



# How China has used Venezuela as its sandbox and gateway into the America's

The close diplomatic relationship between Venezuela and China, based on ideological (anti-US) and commercial interests allowed the Chinese regime to use Venezuela as its gateway into the Americas for many of its technological and military endeavours, used by Venezuela and other regimes to tighten their grip on power leveraging on the new technological capabilities provided by Beijing. There are several examples of how this has unfolded since the early 2000's and continues to develop even today.

## **Example 1: Huawei's Strategic Sandbox in Venezuela<sup>35</sup>**

Huawei's presence in Venezuela, particularly between 2006 and 2019, was leveraged by the company to test and refine its long-term strategy, demonstrating that the country was not merely a market, but a crucial laboratory for its global operations:

### **De-Risking State-to-State Financial Models**

Venezuela allowed Huawei to pioneer a financial model that insulated it from conventional market risks and became foundational for its subsequent BRI activities. The deepening ties between Beijing and Caracas facilitated the use of the China-Venezuela Joint Fund (CVJF) and "oil for loans/goods" agreements. This mechanism secured funding for Huawei's large-scale infrastructure projects with nationalized entities like CANTV, effectively de-risking payment through sovereign collateral (Venezuela's oil). By successfully navigating this unconventional financing structure, Huawei validated a method for deploying massive infrastructure in politically volatile regions, bypassing conventional Western lending institutions and traditional risk assessments.

### **Sandbox for Deep Immersion and Long-Term Capability Building**

Venezuela provided a unique environment for Huawei to test and perfect a model of "deep immersion"—moving beyond a simple vendor relationship to becoming an essential, integrated partner in national capability development. This involved adopting a mixed entry strategy that included wholly owned subsidiaries, direct exports, and government joint ventures. The creation of the low-cost cell phone joint venture Orinoquia and the establishment of a training academy allowed Huawei to prove its capability for local manufacturing, R&D, and talent development (training local officials in ICTs).



## **Sandbox for Mastering Complex Deployment Logistics**

Venezuela's specific market conditions—characterized by political isolation and limited competition from major Western rivals like Cisco or Ericsson—provided a contained testing ground for mastering challenging deployment logistics. Huawei successfully implemented its strategy of moving from the "periphery to core" by conquering difficult, underserved markets, such as connecting rural areas. This complex task required adapting technology to local needs and deploying next-generation systems, thereby building a credible technical track record in large-scale infrastructure deployment that it could later leverage to compete in more lucrative and competitive global markets.

### **Example 2: The Military Sandbox: Breaking the US Preference**

The timeline for Chinese military hardware definitively proves Venezuela acts as the logistical "icebreaker" for the region. In 2008, the Venezuelan Air Force (FAV) signed the first major contract for 18 K-8 Karakorum jets from Hongdu Aviation (AVIC), a purchase explicitly made to replace U.S. F-5s after Washington blocked the sale of spare parts. This was the "proof of concept" that Chinese supply chains could sustain military operations in the Andes. Once Venezuela proved the logistics were viable, Bolivia immediately followed suit, signing a \$58M contract in January 2011 for six of the exact same K-8 jets. Industry analysis from Defense Update explicitly noted that Bolivia was "following the footsteps of Venezuela" in this acquisition, and the deal was financed through a Chinese loan structure identical to the one pioneered by Caracas.





### **Example 3: The Skyfend Anomaly: Legitimization and Market Creation**<sup>36 37 38 39</sup>

The case of Skyfend is the perfect illustration of how the Venezuelan "Sandbox" creates a market for sophisticated Chinese military technology in Latin America's grey zone. Venezuela's decision to integrate the Skyfend Hunter SHH100 anti-drone jammer created three essential conditions that enabled criminal acquisition: Legitimization, Visibility, and Commercial Access.

#### **Legitimization (Venezuela):**

On March 13, 2024, the Venezuelan Military (CODA) made a strategic decision to formally announce the integration of the Skyfend Hunter. This act legitimized the technology, establishing it as effective and battle-ready for the region's unique operating environment.

#### **Visibility and Market Creation (LAAD 2025)**

Following this state adoption, Skyfend immediately went into aggressive regional marketing. The company showcased the Skyfend Hunter at LAAD Defence & Security 2025 (April 1–4, 2025) in Rio de Janeiro, the region's largest defense expo. Skyfend's own event listings confirm their presence at Hall 3, Stand G71. By occupying this space, Skyfend signaled its intent to aggressively sell to regional governments, creating visibility and establishing a formal supply chain for the hardware. No other Latin American country officially promoted Skyfend at this event; Skyfend was promoting itself based on its own technological standing and recent sales successes (like Venezuela).

#### **Commercial Access & Leakage (Chile/Mexico)**

This visibility quickly created commercial channels. By mid-2025, commercial distributors such as Venta Dron Chile and Equipo Topográfico in Mexico—began listing the Skyfend Hunter. They rebranded the product under dual-use covers like "mining security" or "surveying equipment." This commercial availability created a legal loophole and an accessible market, which the Sinaloa Cartel (La Mayiza faction) exploited in May 2025. The cartel's use of the exact same system confirms the technology moved rapidly from a state-legitimized product to a readily available tool in the criminal marketplace.





## **Example 4: The Huawei-CONATEL Blueprint: Exporting Digital Authoritarianism to Nicaragua**

Venezuela provided the crucial proof of concept for deep integration of Chinese telecom technology and personnel, establishing a full-spectrum surveillance model that was then replicated in Nicaragua. Venezuela served as the indispensable testbed, enabling Chinese firms to establish both commercial prestige and deep state control before the model was replicated in Nicaragua.

### **THE VENEZUELAN SANDBOX: FULL-SPECTRUM CONTROL (CONATEL/CANTV)**

**Venezuela's sandbox model was built on the premise of embedded Chinese state presence within critical Venezuelan infrastructure to achieve comprehensive digital control:**

- **Commercial and Infrastructure Gateway (Huawei):** Huawei chose Caracas for its first dedicated retail store outside the People's Republic of China in June 2012. This landmark commercial expansion followed a massive \$250 million fiber optic contract with CONATEL. This relationship established Huawei as an embedded partner with state telecom operator CANTV and its subsidiary Movilnet, and included a scholarship program (Seeds for the Future, launched in 2015) that trained Venezuelan officials in China on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).
- **Surveillance and Censorship Hardware (ZTE & CEIEC):** This infrastructure was specifically deployed for political control. ZTE built the backbone for the Carnet de la Patria (Fatherland Card), which is a massive biometric database used to deny state benefits to political opponents. The China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC) was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2020 for providing software, training, and expertise to CANTV. The U.S. Treasury described the CEIEC suite as a "commercialized version" of China's "Great Firewall," which enables CONATEL to restrict internet service and block opposition media.

### **VISIBILITY AND MARKET CREATION (LAAD 2025)**

Nicaragua, a close ideological ally, adopted the lessons learned in Venezuela, replicating the regulatory structure that facilitates mass surveillance, with direct, ongoing Chinese collaboration through its regulator, TELCOR:

- **Replication of Regulatory Power: Nicaragua's "Gag Law" (specifically the Ley Especial de Ciberdelitos** [Law No. 1042] of October 2020 and subsequent reforms) and the newer Ley General de Telecomunicaciones Convergentes grant the regulator, TELCOR, powers mirroring those held by Venezuela's CONATEL. The law forces providers to supply "georeferenced and statistical information" on users and gives the state full authority to control online content. This is a functional copy of the Venezuelan regulatory blueprint.



## CONCLUSION

### **Venezuela has become China's most advanced testing ground for technology-enabled authoritarian governance in the Americas**

Venezuela has become one of China's most advanced sandboxes for technology-enabled authoritarian governance in the Americas. Through the integration of the Brain, Eyes, and Muscle of digital -and then physical- repression, the Venezuelan regime has built an Autechcracy that leverages Chinese tools to consolidate power, monitor society, and suppress dissent. Yet what emerges is not only a portrait of State capacity—it is a clear illustration of how this system reshapes the daily lives, freedoms, and safety of Venezuelans. Venezuela is no longer simply an authoritarian state—it is the hemisphere's first fully operational Autechcracy, where power is maintained not only through institutions or ideology, but through data extraction, surveillance, and technologically enforced coercion. The Brain that catalogs citizens, the Eyes that follow them, and the Muscle that represses them form a closed-loop system that leaves little space for dissent, privacy, or safety.

Civil society organizations and democratic groups operate under constant digital surveillance, facing targeted attacks, monitoring of communications, and real-time censorship that restricts their ability to mobilize, organize or even coordinate humanitarian support.

For ordinary Venezuelans, technology has become a gatekeeper to basic survival. Access to food, medicine, social programs, and identification is now mediated through systems designed for social control. This shifts power from institutions to a centralized digital platform that can penalize or reward citizens based on political loyalty. From 2014 to 2025, more than 320 people have been killed in the context of protests as a result of state repression, and over 18,000 individuals have been arbitrarily detained. These figures demonstrate that Autechcracy is not an abstract model—it produces concrete, lethal, and widespread consequences for Venezuelan society.

Moreover, China enabled the installation of technological and repressive capacities that the Venezuelan regime would not have been able to develop independently—capacities it could not have procured from democratic countries due to export controls and human-rights restrictions. Beijing effectively allowed the regime to bypass limitations on acquiring advanced surveillance, data-analytics, and public-order technologies, dramatically accelerating the state's ability to monitor, punish, and repress its population.



## GLOSSARY



- Aerospace Defense Command (CODAI)
- Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC)
- China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC)
- China Great Wall Industry Corporation (CGWIC)
- China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC)
- China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation (CATIC)
- China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC)
- China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO)
- China–Venezuela Joint Fund (CVJF)
- Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
- Compañía Anónima Nacional Teléfonos de Venezuela (CANTV)
- Commission for Telecommunications (CONATEL)
- Fondo de Desarrollo Nacional (FONDEN)
- National Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB)
- National Bolivarian Guard (GNB)
- Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)
- People’s Republic of China (PRC)
- System for Integrated Monitoring and Assistance (SIMA)
- Venezuelan Remote Sensing Satellite-1 (VRSS-1)
- Venezuelan Remote Sensing Satellite-2 (VRSS-2)
- Venezuelan National Emergency System 911 (VEN911)
- ZTE Corporation (ZTE)



## ENDNOTES



1. Autocracy is a technology-enabled authoritarian system in which digital infrastructure, data architectures, surveillance platforms, and coercive technologies are integrated into a unified apparatus for political control, social monitoring, and population management.
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**Contact us:**

[info@mirandacenter.org](mailto:info@mirandacenter.org)

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