

A Dragon in the Backyard

The People's Republic of China's Posture Plans Threaten Atlantic Security

DR. JOHN RINGQUIST

Abstract

China's expanding presence in the Atlantic—through the Belt and Road Initiative, port development, and military diplomacy—threatens US security and regional influence. By leveraging commercial projects, debt financing, and dual-use infrastructure, the People's Republic of China (PRC) gains strategic access to ports in Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. These ports, built to People's Liberation Army Navy specifications, could support naval operations, threatening US sea lines of communication and regional dominance. This paper analyzes PRC's strategic objectives, key port projects, and their implications for US security, recommending countermeasures to limit China's influence.

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) push into the Atlantic Ocean marks a deliberate challenge to the Monroe Doctrine and threatens longstanding US dominance in the region. In an era defined by strategic competition for resources and influence, Beijing has found willing partners across the Caribbean, South America, and Atlantic Africa. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the PRC funds and builds ports, airports, and infrastructure that promise prosperity but carry steep costs—economic, political, and ultimately strategic. Many of these projects serve dual purposes, offering the appearance of commercial development while enabling the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its naval arm, the PLA Navy (PLAN), to gain logistical footholds under the guise of civilian operations.

The debt burden often follows. Nations lured by Chinese capital discover too late that their multi-billion-dollar obligations come with strings attached. In some cases, what begins as scientific cooperation or bilateral exchange morphs into privileged access for Chinese state actors—economic leverage converting swiftly into security access. Across the Atlantic basin, Beijing's strategy is clear: establish infrastructure nodes, exert influence, and—where conditions permit—convert ports into platforms for military presence.

The prospect of PLAN basing in Africa, the Caribbean, or South America opens a new front in strategic competition, placing US sea lines of communication (SLOC) and hemispheric security at risk. China's approach is not limited to a

single corridor or continent. From Tierra del Fuego to Mauritania, nations seek Chinese investment, and the PRC delivers—with construction projects, defense materiel, and access to its vast internal market. Beijing blends military diplomacy, development assistance, political pressure, and technological promise into a tailored mix of inducements that steadily expand its Atlantic presence—across the areas of responsibility of multiple US combatant commands.

This article examines PRC activities across Atlantic Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, assessing whether China stands on the threshold of establishing military bases—or has already laid the groundwork through the quiet transformation of ostensibly commercial facilities.

For clarity, this article defines a *base* as a port under Chinese operational control—where the PLA or PLAN may maintain a sustained presence, supported by sovereign-like authority and enabling military functions. A *dual-use* port, by contrast, refers to a civilian installation capable of supporting military operations, typically based on infrastructure characteristics such as quay depth, pier length, cargo-handling capacity, warehousing, and intermodal access.

In practice, the distinction blurs. Under the PRC's civil-military fusion laws, commercial vessels—including state-owned shipping lines and civilian maritime militia—can fall under military command in wartime or crisis. Scientific facilities, such as satellite tracking stations or oceanographic centers, may function as proto-bases when host-nation oversight is weak or absent.

The advent of containerized weapon systems further lowers the threshold for military utility. Any port with CONEX handling capability becomes a potential logistics hub. A forward-deployed force package, delivered in containers and staged discreetly, could enable antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) operations without warning. Should the PRC hold operational control over such a facility—via a port concession, long-term lease, or *de facto* authority—conversion to a logistics node or forward-operating site becomes a matter of political will, not physical infrastructure.¹

The transformation from dual-use to full-fledged base occurs when the PLA or PLAN maintains a permanent presence with the tacit or formal approval of the host state. In this scenario, infrastructure is merely the enabler. Strategy—and sovereignty—is the deciding factor.

Chinese port control and overseas basing are not abstract concerns—they represent tangible threats to Atlantic security. While strategic forecasting is never an

¹ All these ports, facilities, and tactics will be discussed in greater detail within this article. The difference between a base and a dual-use facility is the time required to prepare the site for military operations. The former is assumed if PLA and PLAN forces are physically present; the latter is time-dependent but can be prepared years ahead of use.

exact science, the potential roles that Atlantic ports could serve in PRC doctrine are increasingly clear. These facilities are more than logistical nodes for commercial support or naval resupply; they form the backbone of China's gray-zone strategy—incremental, deniable, and designed to constrain US freedom of action without triggering overt conflict.

Through commercial concessions, operational control, and long-term leases, Beijing quietly builds the scaffolding for future military use. Dual-use ports—especially those where Chinese firms have exclusive management rights—enable the pre-positioning of weapons, personnel, and critical materiel. In a crisis, these facilities could serve as forward-operating logistics hubs or staging grounds for asymmetric attacks.

This is not speculation. The PRC already controls operations at key ports in Peru, Panama, and Barbados—each situated along vital SLOCs. These sites represent security blind spots where the PLA could establish logistics nodes, stockpile military hardware, and embed force packages inside innocuous containerized cargo. Panamax vessels can deliver these loads using Chinese-supplied cranes operating under PLA directives masked as commercial logistics.²

The threat extends beyond the visible. The same hydrographic surveys used to chart shipping routes can support mine-laying by PRC naval militia or reserve forces. Disassembled unmanned aerial vehicles or unmanned underwater autonomous vehicles can arrive in containers, ready for rapid assembly and deployment. In locations where China controls airfields or holds privileged access to runways, the deployment of reconnaissance or armed drones becomes a question not of capability, but of timing and political calculation.³

Atlantic port access is not incidental to Beijing's maritime ambitions—it is a strategic objective. How China gains and maintains that access will determine whether its plans for a global logistics network remain aspirational or evolve into operational reality.

PRC policy documents leave little doubt about intent. Official Chinese doctrine advocates a forward-oriented posture designed to preempt threats to its economic lifelines and overseas interests. The 2025 white paper, *PRC's National Security in the New Era*, calls for “a strategic proactive battle to turn danger into safety and crisis into opportunity,” as well as “daring to fight [while] seeking cooperation and

² Thomas X. Hammes, “PRC's Exploitation of Overseas Ports and Bases,” *Atlantic Council*, 21 March 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

³ Hammes, “PRC's Exploitation of Overseas Ports.”

promoting win-win results.”⁴ Under the banner of assisting the Global South—Africa, South America, and the Caribbean—China claims to support independent peace maintenance and global security governance free from Western interference.⁵

Meanwhile, military guidance echoes these ambitions. The 2020 white paper *Science of Military Strategy* urges the PLA to “vigorously strengthen the construction of comprehensive long-sea support capabilities” and “improve the construction of naval bases” to safeguard its maritime trade.⁶ In short, the PLA does not simply seek access; it seeks infrastructure to project power globally.

This posture finds expression in China’s simultaneous efforts to build influence, harden assets, and normalize its presence across multiple domains—from counterpiracy and maritime security cooperation to scientific research and disaster relief.

Chinese strategists understand that Western governments remain skeptical of PRC motives. They dismiss concerns as exaggerated. A commentary from the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, a government-affiliated think tank, accuses the West of “exaggerating the perceived security threat from the PRC’s investments in ports, communications infrastructure, strategic mineral deals, military exercises and diplomacy, and possible logistics bases in Africa.”⁷

But skepticism toward China’s intentions is not only justified—it is overdue. Leaked intelligence, particularly the revelations surrounding “Project 141,” exposes a deliberate Chinese strategy to establish a global network of overseas bases and logistical support sites. These disclosures contradict Beijing’s public reassurances and affirm what China’s operational behavior already indicates: the PRC is laying the foundation for sustained expeditionary military operations far beyond its traditional sphere of influence.

According to classified documents obtained and reported by *The Washington Post* in 2023, Project 141 outlines China’s intent to build at least five permanent overseas bases and ten additional logistics support sites by 2030. Equatorial Guinea appeared prominently in these plans, but the criteria for selection—political alignment, economic dependency, and the availability of suitable port infrastructure—

⁴ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Security in the New Era* (white paper), 12 May 2025, 10, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/>.

⁵ State Council Information Office, *China’s National Security in the New Era*, 16.

⁶ *Zhanlüe xue (The Science of Military Strategy, 2020 Revision)* (National Defense University Press, 2020, Beijing, PRC), as translated: *In Their Own Words: The Science of Military Strategy* (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 2022), 325, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>. This doctrinal document is a product of the Academy of Military Science, which reports directly to the Central Military Commission, chaired by President Xi Jinping.

⁷ Zhou Yuyuan, “The New Journey and New Thinking of China-Africa Cooperation in the Era of Great Changes,” *Interpret: Translations of Foreign Military Thought*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 May 2023, <https://interpret.csis.org/>.

cast a much wider net. Virtually any nation with a viable port and close ties to Beijing could become part of this expanding military architecture.

The BRI serves as the gateway. While marketed as a global development initiative, BRI infrastructure projects create the permissive conditions for basing and port control. One stark example is Khalifa Port near Abu Dhabi, where commercial construction under a BRI umbrella reportedly masked the development of a covert military facility.⁸

China's ambition to project force globally is not new. As early as 2013, the state-run *International Herald Leader* called for a global chain of "strategic support bases" to enable maintenance, resupply, and force rotations in friendly nations.⁹ This vision has since matured into the doctrine underpinning Project 141—anchored in ports built to PLAN specifications, secured through commercial deals, and managed under Chinese control.

From Santiago in Cuba to Luanda in Angola, Beijing advances its interests through port development deals that often appear benign—until the infrastructure, management, and political relationships shift to favor PLA access. The strategy is consistent: capitalize on the development aspirations of smaller nations and the geopolitical ambitions of larger ones. In both cases, China leverages economic opportunity to secure military access.

Assessing the threat potential of individual ports requires more than tracking cranes and quay lengths. A serious evaluation must consider multiple variables: proximity to US territory and strategic chokepoints, port infrastructure and modernization levels, national debt exposure to China, diplomatic frequency of engagement, and the permissiveness of host-nation oversight.

When a port lies close to the US homeland, operates with minimal local oversight, and belongs to a nation heavily indebted to China, the likelihood of covert or rapid military use rises dramatically. Add dual-use capability, geostrategic location, and strong PLA diplomatic engagement, and the threat potential becomes acute.

Some regions already exhibit these warning signs. Equatorial Guinea's port facilities possess nearly all markers of high-threat potential in the Gulf of Guinea. Chancay Port in Peru—located near critical Pacific shipping lanes and within reach of the Panama Canal—presents similar concerns. Small Caribbean states, despite their size, sit along vital sea lines and often lack the capacity to monitor or resist

⁸ Devvrat Pandey, "Leaked Pentagon Documents Give Insight into PRC's Secret 'Project 141,'" *India Today*, 28 April 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

⁹ "Chinese Paper Urges PLA Navy to Build Overseas Military Bases," *NATOSource* (blog), 19 January 2013, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

strategic encroachment. Their threat potential stems not from traditional military capacity, but from the vulnerability that Chinese access exploits.

To mitigate these risks, US planners must deepen their understanding of BRI projects, assess the operational implications of PLAN-compatible infrastructure, and anticipate the transformation of dual-use facilities into permanent basing nodes. Project 141 is no longer a theoretical blueprint—it is a live strategy, already underway.



Figure 1. Estimated Chinese naval overseas bases and ports in the next 10 years. (Source: China Defense Mashup, “Chinese paper urges PLA Navy to build overseas military bases,” NATOSource [blog], 19 January 2013, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>. By 2025 Sihanoukville, Hambantota, and Djibouti were regularly receiving PLA and PLAN visits.)

China’s BRI is more than an infrastructure program—it is a blueprint for global integration under Chinese leadership. Through a vast web of maritime, rail, and road networks, the PRC links inland resource hubs to coastal ports and international markets. These corridors are not merely commercial—they are strategic arteries that serve China’s broader geopolitical objectives.

The maritime dimension of BRI, often described as the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” now encompasses hundreds of shipping companies, port operators, logistics consortia, and policy think tanks. Together, they form a unified architecture of influence. Beneath the surface of this expansive network lies a

critical constant: the companies spearheading these efforts operate under the control—or firm influence—of the Chinese state.¹⁰ Whether state-owned or privately structured, these entities align with Beijing’s political priorities and serve its strategic aims abroad.

Two major state-owned enterprises anchor the PRC’s global maritime posture: the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and China Merchants Group. These firms maintain a growing footprint across the Southern Hemisphere, gaining operational control over terminals and ports once regarded as politically neutral. Even ostensibly private firms like CK Hutchison Holdings operate under the shadow of state influence, with Beijing exercising significant leverage over their commercial decisions.

Providing the policy scaffolding for this expansion are a trio of ideological instruments: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched in 2021; the Global Security Initiative (GSI), in 2022; and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), unveiled in 2023.¹¹ These initiatives function as political justifications for strategic activity, framing China’s global presence as a benign alternative to Western hegemony—while enabling Beijing to consolidate influence in unstable or contested regions.

For China, commerce and security are inseparable. The BRI’s success depends on political stability and reliable access. That imperative has reshaped China’s defense posture. A decade ago, the PRC’s *Military Strategy* document warned that its overseas interests were “vulnerable to international turmoil, terrorism, piracy . . . the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, sea lines of communication, as well as institutions, personnel, and assets abroad.”¹² The threat matrix identified by Chinese strategists continues to drive military modernization and expeditionary readiness.

The China Institute of International Studies—a Ministry of Foreign Affairs–affiliated think tank—has acknowledged the particular vulnerability of BRI projects to coup d’états, sanctions, and market disruptions. These events threaten to erase Beijing’s financial gains and political capital.¹³ As a result, Chinese investments in ports, railways, and logistics hubs are designed not only to extract resources

¹⁰ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future* (white paper), October 2023, <http://english.scio.gov.cn/>.

¹¹ Alexander Wooley et al., *Harboring Global Ambitions: PRC’s Ports Footprint and Implications for Future Overseas Naval Bases* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, July 2023), <https://docs.aiddata.org/>.

¹² State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy* (white paper), May 2015, 4–5, <http://www.PRC.org.cn/>.

¹³ Jake R. Rinaldi, “PRC Strategic Adaptation in Africa,” US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 9 October 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>.

and streamline trade, but also to establish control over chokepoints critical to long-term dominance.¹⁴

To hedge against these threats, China blends trade relations with coercive leverage. Contract cancellations, payment defaults, expropriations, or nationalizations are not just economic setbacks—they are triggers for diplomatic or security responses. Through deep commercial integration, China creates dependencies; through military cooperation, it protects those dependencies.¹⁵

The PLA identifies the protection of overseas interests as a strategic mission. To that end, Beijing has prioritized “open seas protection, protection of its maritime rights and interests, and military operations other than war.”¹⁶ These tasks are not abstract—they support the concrete goal of sustaining Chinese influence over distant assets acquired through development, enforced through diplomacy, and defended by force if necessary.

In this context, every rail line, runway, and shipping lane under Chinese influence becomes part of a larger architecture of strategic presence. The BRI may advertise “win-win” development—but the strategic reality is zero-sum.

Embedded within China’s BRI are security clauses that quietly enable the forward deployment of Chinese paramilitary capabilities. Under the guise of private military contractors (PMC), the PRC inserts trained personnel into foreign nations—ostensibly to protect Chinese infrastructure and nationals but, in reality, to advance broader strategic objectives.

These PMCs operate alongside construction projects, often in high-risk environments where Beijing claims it must safeguard its citizens. In Africa alone, nearly 20 percent of the estimated 2,000 Chinese firms rely on such security support. Legally, all Chinese PMCs must be majority state-owned—either fully controlled or with the PRC holding at least 51-percent ownership.¹⁷ Moreover, the personnel manning these firms are not neutral actors; most are former members of the PLA or Chinese National Police, trained and readily convertible to uniformed service.

Despite their civilian appearance, these contractors function as the vanguard of China’s global military posture.¹⁸ They represent a key instrument of Beijing’s gray-zone strategy—operating without insignia, cloaked in legality, and deployed

¹⁴ Zhang Mengying, “[African Security and the Joint and High-Quality Development of the ‘One Belt and One Road’ Initiative between China and Africa],” *Journal of Shaanxi Normal University* 52, no. 2 (2023), 154.

¹⁵ Wang Hong, “New Security Challenges in Africa and Their Impact on China-Africa Cooperation,” *China International Studies*, no. 72 (September/October 2018), 41.

¹⁶ State Council Information Office, *China’s Military Strategy*, 7, 12, 21.

¹⁷ Task & Purpose, “China’s Secret Mercenary Army Exposed,” *YouTUBE*, 1 May 2024, 3:10–3:15, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

¹⁸ Task & Purpose, “China’s Secret Mercenary Army Exposed,” 7:09–7:40.

in plain sight. Their missions go well beyond static security. They collect intelligence, stabilize regimes favorable to Beijing, and create the conditions for a future overt military presence.

This forward deployment model aligns with China's broader strategic imperative: to reduce reliance on distant resupply and secure support nodes for global operations. The PLA Navy (PLAN) remains constrained by limited replenishment capability—operating just nine Type 903/903A oiler vessels. To overcome this weakness, Beijing seeks a constellation of strategic strong points—commercial ports, dual-use facilities, and friendly host nations—capable of sustaining deployments without direct replenishment from the mainland.¹⁹

Strategic strong points need not host full military bases. Their value lies in logistics, access, and continuity of operations. These facilities allow the PLAN to maintain a limited but persistent presence abroad, protect SLOCs, and extend the operational reach of Chinese forces. They also serve diplomatic purposes: by contributing to public security, participating in multilateral operations, or intervening to maintain order in trade-partner nations, China builds legitimacy for its presence while reinforcing its influence.

Strong points also serve intelligence functions. They offer real-time awareness of local political and military developments and generate actionable information in support of PLA planning and broader PRC foreign policy.²⁰ They are not staging grounds for invasion—but platforms for enduring presence, tailored influence, and situational dominance.

Nowhere are these dynamics more fluid—and more exploitable—than in the South Atlantic. The region presents Beijing with the freedom to choose when and where to embed a military presence, often under the cover of regional security cooperation and multilateral peacekeeping operations. China's membership in such architectures is never neutral; it is purposeful, pragmatic, and strategic.

Ports, then, are not the end state of Chinese expansionism—they are the means. The ultimate objective is a global resource and logistics network that can sustain China's twenty-first-century economy while insulating it from US-led disruptions. As Washington considers sanctions, export controls, or economic denial strategies, Beijing works to neutralize those tools before they are used.

Africa remains central to that strategy. Between 2000 and 2019, PRC-Africa trade surged by 1,900 percent—driven largely by China's appetite for raw materials. Sixty

¹⁹ Ryan Chan, "Map Shows Chinese Navy Fleet's 300-Day Mission to Three Continents," *Newsweek*, 27 January 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/>.

²⁰ Conor Kennedy, "Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy," *China Brief* 19, no. 6 (2019), <https://jamestown.org/>.

percent of this trade stems from three nations: Angola, supplying oil; the Democratic Republic of the Congo, exporting rare earths and strategic minerals; and Zambia, rich in copper. In return for resource access, China provides development loans—and builds the infrastructure to move materials to port and ship them home.

The scale and redundancy of China's logistics networks across Africa are no accident. Where Beijing trades, infrastructure follows. Where infrastructure appears, port access and management often ensue—almost always on terms favorable to the PRC. In many cases, China builds to PLAN specifications. Piers, deepwater quays, and port cranes capable of servicing naval vessels are included in commercial plans—providing latent military utility without the need for overt militarization.²¹

These ports do not need to become bases overnight. But when the strategic moment arrives, their transformation will require little more than a diplomatic green light.

Diplomacy, Policy, and Strategy in Africa

China's strategic posture in Africa now rests on a foundation of integrated diplomacy, security engagement, and economic leverage—anchored by the BRI and framed by a rising security architecture. In 2022, Beijing unveiled the GSI, a doctrine that formalizes China's ambition to assume a greater role in international security—particularly in Africa. By 2024, the GSI envisions Chinese entities providing direct security for infrastructure, projects, and personnel across the continent. In parallel, GSI articulates a clear goal: to supplant the United States as Africa's preferred security partner in areas ranging from joint exercises to arms transfers and military training.²²

China does not pursue this objective haphazardly. It advances through sustained diplomatic engagement and high-profile initiatives designed to offer African partners an alternative to Western models of governance, development, and security cooperation. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), especially the Beijing Action Plan for 2025–2027, serves as a flagship platform. Within it, the PRC promotes the GSI alongside the GDI and the GCI—a trio of policies aimed at entwining economic growth, political alignment, and social governance under Chinese leadership.

The Chinese navy has joined this effort. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) regularly convenes West African defense chiefs to discuss Gulf of Guinea

²¹ Benedict Hamlyn, "China in Sub-Saharan Africa: Sanction-Proof Supply Lines and Dual-Use Ports," *RUSI*, 14 March 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/>.

²² Carla Freeman and Bates Gill, "PRC's Bid for a Bigger Security Role in Africa," *United States Institute of Peace*, 12 September 2024, <https://www.usip.org/>.

security—underscoring China’s deepening maritime interests in the region.²³ These interests are not abstract. West Africa offers abundant mineral resources, valuable fisheries, and shipping lanes critical to global trade. As Chinese firms continue to develop and manage port infrastructure along the coast, securing those investments becomes an imperative. Though piracy in the Gulf of Guinea differs in scale and scope from Somali waters, it remains a persistent threat—and a convenient justification for expanded PLAN involvement.

Beijing’s approach is deliberate. In West Africa, the PRC weaves together commercial access, diplomatic ties, and military cooperation. Nigeria, Cameroon, and Senegal—all signatories to the BRI—have become focal points for this integrated strategy. Since 2008, PLAN vessels have visited African ports, but Chinese military training and advisory activity in the region has surged in recent years. The trend is unmistakable: Beijing uses economic ties and soft power to open the door, then follows with memoranda of understanding and security agreements to introduce military advisors, equipment, and deeper institutional ties.²⁴

PLAN port calls in the Gulf of Guinea began in earnest in 2014. Between 2014 and 2019, the PRC conducted 39 military exchanges with littoral states—most centered on antipiracy cooperation. These exchanges, while nominally cooperative, serve dual purposes: they enhance the operational readiness of African militaries and normalize the PLA’s presence in sensitive coastal areas.²⁵

China’s influence in Africa is no longer emerging—it is entrenched. Commercially and diplomatically, the PRC maintains a near-omnipresent footprint across the continent. That presence provides leverage across multiple sectors: infrastructure, politics, logistics, and now defense. Nowhere is this more evident than in Djibouti. Since 2016, the PLA has maintained a permanent base adjacent to the Doraleh multipurpose port—ostensibly to resupply ships, counter piracy, and support humanitarian operations. Yet even this veneer of benevolence masks deeper control. China’s state-owned Merchants Port Holdings owns a 23.5-percent stake in Doraleh, solidifying Beijing’s commercial and military stake in one of the most strategic maritime nodes in the world.²⁶

²³ Paul Nantulya, “What to Expect from Africa-PRC Relations in 2025,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 7 January 2025, <https://africacenter.org/>.

²⁴ Abdul-Gafar Oshodi, “Power Vacuum in West Africa’s Sahel: 3 Ways PRC Could Fill the Gap as West Exits,” *The Conversation*, 10 February 2025, <https://theconversation.com/>.

²⁵ Bonny Lin et al., “Is PRC Building a New String of Pearls in the Atlantic Ocean?,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

²⁶ “5 Key Chinese ‘Belt and Road’ Projects Underway in Africa,” *Agence France-Presse*, 1 September 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

China's port management and maritime development programs across Africa give Beijing a unique platform for future military posture and logistical dominance. The PLA base in Djibouti exemplifies the strategy: positioned near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and within striking distance of the Suez Canal, it anchors China's access to global trade routes while safeguarding the imported energy on which its economy depends.

Beijing's presence in Africa is not a temporary foray. With over 10,000 Chinese firms, more than 250,000 workers, and roughly one million Chinese immigrants on the continent, China has both the rationale and the imperative to expand its security footprint. The BRI's economic momentum reinforces the case for deeper military engagement with African partners.²⁷

Fragile states with high-risk profiles provide Beijing with a dual justification—humanitarian protection and economic security—for augmenting its presence. Political violence, terrorism, and instability threaten Chinese personnel, infrastructure, and investments. Not coincidentally, the states most integral to the BRI—those rich in energy and minerals and tied to Chinese arms or infrastructure programs—also figure prominently in discussions of potential PLA bases or logistical hubs. Angola, South Africa, Nigeria, Guinea, and Cameroon all present themselves as candidates for dual-use facilities or outright military cooperation agreements.²⁸ For Beijing, rapid response capability—whether for natural disaster, humanitarian crisis, or political unrest—requires either a permanent presence or the ability to deploy forces quickly into these regions.

Overseas logistics hubs and potential ports are not isolated ambitions. They form part of a larger politico-military strategy designed to impose strategic costs on the United States and its allies while positioning the PRC as a credible global security partner in counterpiracy, peacekeeping, and humanitarian operations. Chinese foreign policy blends Confucian rhetoric with the cold calculus of realpolitik. Beijing proclaims respect for sovereignty and harmony, yet employs coercive instruments—financial inducements, binding security agreements, and selective economic pressure—to secure concessions.²⁹

This hybrid approach—call it *Confucian Realpolitik*—integrates all elements of national power. Diplomacy opens markets; trade fosters dependence; information

²⁷ Paul Nantulya, "Considerations for a Prospective New Chinese Naval Base in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 12 May 2022, <https://africacenter.org/>.

²⁸ onas Parello-Plesner, "PRC's Risk Map in the South Atlantic," in *Transatlantic Security and the Future of Seapower*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton (Washington: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2016), 49–54, <http://www.jstor.com/>.

²⁹ "Security Nexus Webinar, Episode 23: China's Strategic Culture: Confucianism or Realpolitik?," Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 12 July 2024, <https://dkiapcss.edu/>.

control and lawfare obscure strategic intentions; and military engagement cements relationships with key actors in regional economic and security organizations. The BRI is not merely an economic program—it is a geopolitical wedge, driven deep into the security architecture of the Southern Hemisphere at a moment when US influence is receding.

China has adopted a distinctly realpolitik strategy in the areas of responsibility of US Southern Command and US Africa Command—regions where American military and diplomatic resources are limited and where US instruments of national power are routinely outspent by Beijing and its state-owned enterprises. This disparity in presence and investment provides China with maneuver space to expand its influence with relatively little resistance.

The 2020 Chinese military treatise *Science of Military Strategy* outlines many of the activities now visible across the South Atlantic. It cites Beijing's 2011 civilian evacuation from Libya as proof of strategic agility and uses that example to justify a standing requirement to construct "maritime support points . . . augment military maritime capabilities, and enhance the ability to perform special overseas tasks."³⁰ Protecting BRI investments, the document implies, is not merely economic policy but a driver of military development, operational experience, and greater visibility for the PLA and PLAN in the South Atlantic.³¹

For Chinese forces to operate effectively in this theater, however, they require more than abstract doctrine—they need practical familiarity with its waters, ports, and maritime conditions. This knowledge can only be gained through sustained operations. Participation in international missions—whether counterpiracy efforts or United Nations–sponsored peacekeeping—offers a convenient pretext for an enduring presence.³² Absent such multilateral cover, Beijing turns to bilateral relationships and joint naval exercises to normalize its activities, ease local skepticism, and make its deployments appear less threatening.

Should commercial interests expand into seabed mining or other resource extraction, China could invoke new justifications for deploying the PLAN into West African waters. Its record in East Africa offers a blueprint. Since 2009, Beijing's antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden have operated largely outside multinational frameworks, preferring bilateral agreements with coastal states. These patrols have pointedly avoided confronting Houthi attacks on shipping, underscoring that their

³⁰ Zhanlüe xue, trans., *In Their Own Words*, 312, 325–26.

³¹ Zhanlüe xue, trans., *In Their Own Words*, 312–16.

³² Ryan D. Martinson, "PRC as an Atlantic Naval Power," *RUSI Journal* 164, no. 7 (2019): 24, <https://doi.org/>.

purpose is not collective security but the protection of Chinese interests under a thin veneer of international legitimacy.³³

Once initial cooperation is established, Beijing can expand its footprint by moving PLAN vessels from port to port across the region, maximizing visibility while minimizing opportunities for organized opposition. In time, such a routine presence erodes any distinction between temporary deployments and a de facto regional base network.

Seabed mining provides Beijing with a strategic rationale for deploying PLAN assets deep into the Atlantic. Vessels such as the oceanographic ship *Zhu Kezhen* can perform a wide range of dual-use tasks—weather forecasting, current and wave analysis, ocean depth mapping, and collection of critical undersea warfare data on salinity, temperature, speed, and subsurface currents. While most seafloor survey ships fly the flag of commercial PRC companies, their data flows seamlessly to the military. Beijing facilitates such access by proposing “joint” surveys with foreign governments and signing memoranda of understanding that guarantee access to partner data.³⁴

If Chinese firms secure International Seabed Authority contracts for mining on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the case for a sustained PLAN presence becomes ironclad. China’s 2015 amendment to its national security law explicitly extends protection to seabed mining operations.³⁵ This legal framework gives the PLAN license to position vessels in the region under the guise of protecting commercial ventures, while also enabling rapid military response to events in Africa or South America.

For the PLAN’s crews and strategists, Atlantic deployments are more than missions—they are laboratories for learning. What began as brief forays into the South Atlantic has evolved into long-duration deployments involving multiple port calls, joint exercises with regional navies, and independent training operations, from gunnery drills to missile exercises.³⁶ Operations in the Gulf of Guinea regularly pair Chinese Type 054 frigates with partner-state vessels in blue-water scenarios. These engagements serve a dual purpose: they cultivate interoperability with local forces and hone the PLAN’s ability to sustain far-flung operations.³⁷

Ship visits, a staple of Chinese military diplomacy, carry both symbolic and operational weight. They signal Chinese reach to regional audiences while provid-

³³ n Marchant, “PRC’s Global Maritime Ambitions 10,000 Miles Beyond Taiwan,” *Proceedings* 150, no. 12 (December 2024), <https://www.usni.org/>.

³⁴ Martinson, “PRC as an Atlantic Naval Power,” 24–25.

³⁵ Martinson, “PRC as an Atlantic Naval Power,” 27.

³⁶ Martinson, “PRC as an Atlantic Naval Power,” 21.

³⁷ Paul Nantulya, “The Growing Militarization of China’s Africa Policy,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2 December 2024, 4–5, <https://africacenter.org/>.

ing practical opportunities to assess the capacity of host-nation ports to support PLAN missions. Since 2000, the PLAN has conducted 55 port calls and 19 bilateral exercises or events in Africa.³⁸ In 2023 alone, PLAN warships—including the guided-missile destroyer *Nanning*, the frigate *Sanya*, and the supply ship *Weishan Hu*—visited ports in South Africa, Gabon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast.³⁹

The scale of potential support infrastructure is vast. At least 78 African ports constructed or upgraded with Chinese involvement are capable of berthing PLAN warships.⁴⁰ Many have already been used for exercises, logistics stops, or extended port calls. Each visit deepens Chinese familiarity with port facilities, expands operational options, and normalizes PLAN presence in the eyes of host governments.

The PLAN's port engagement strategy extends beyond fully capable naval facilities to include West African ports that cannot berth warships but can still host visits. The baseline requirements for accommodating PLAN vessels are depth (draft) and pier space. Vessel class dictates minimum draft: frigates, 6 meters; cruisers, 6 meters; destroyers, 6.5 meters; aircraft carriers, 11 meters; and oil tankers, 16 meters. In practice, any port that can host large oil tankers or cruise ships can also berth most PLAN surface combatants.

However, long-duration naval presence demands more than water depth. The decisive factors are cargo-handling capacity, bunkering facilities, warehouse storage, port security, and tolerance for tidal surges.⁴¹ Many modern African ports—such as Mindelo in Cabo Verde—feature cruise ship terminals that meet these criteria, providing the berthing space, port-handling equipment, and logistical infrastructure necessary to support military vessels.

³⁸ Paul Nantulya, "Mapping PRC's Strategic Port Development in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 10 March 2025, <https://africacenter.org/>.

³⁹ Vaishali Basu Shama, "PRC's Military Intervention in Africa," *Modern Diplomacy*, 16 December 2024, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/>.

⁴⁰ Shama, "PRC's Military Intervention in Africa."

⁴¹ Zongyuan Liu, "Tracking PRC's Control of Overseas Ports," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 August 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

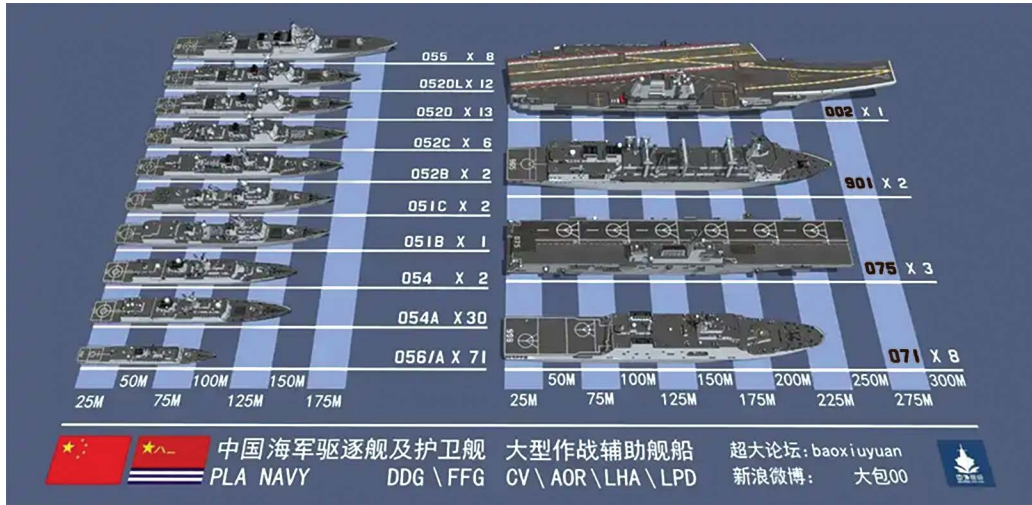


Figure 2: PLA Navy ship lengths and types. (Source: Baoxiuyuan [Chao Da Lun Tan] and Sina Weibo, 2020.)⁴²

In Africa, three Atlantic ports stand out for their ability to sustain PLAN operations: Luanda in Angola, Lekki in Nigeria, and Walvis Bay in Namibia.⁴³ Each offers a different tier of capability. Luanda can berth any Chinese surface combatant. Walvis Bay can host up to eight Type 052D guided-missile destroyers simultaneously. Lekki can accommodate smaller combatants, such as Type 056 corvettes and Type 054 frigates, while still providing the logistical footprint necessary for extended visits.⁴⁴

The steady rise in PLAN port calls, joint drills, and interoperability exercises with regional security partners signals a deliberate expansion of Chinese naval engagement in the African Atlantic. Each visit builds local familiarity, strengthens operational access, and advances the PRC’s broader strategy of normalizing PLAN presence along critical maritime corridors.

Potential African Base and Dual-Use Ports

The scale of Chinese port construction in West Africa is unprecedented, granting the PRC a network of strategic footholds and a growing ability to shape the region’s maritime future. Case studies of the most consequential projects reveal a clear linkage between infrastructure expansion and Beijing’s capacity to convert these facili-

⁴² John Pike, “Warship Modernization,” GlobalSecurity.org, n.d., <http://globalsecurity.org/>.

⁴³ Nantulya, “Mapping PRC’s Strategic Port Development.”

⁴⁴ Nantulya, “Considerations for a Prospective New Base.”

ties into logistics “strong points” for the PLA Navy. Each port offers more than berthing space. They provide operational control, warehouse storage, and integrated infrastructure capable of sustaining supply depots for long-range deployments.

Nigeria, Namibia, Angola, and Gabon supply the PRC with oil, minerals, and other resources critical to sustaining its economy. Yet each also maintains defense ties with the United States—ties Washington is now scrambling to revitalize as a counterweight to Beijing’s advances. Three ports in particular—Lekki in Nigeria, Bata in Equatorial Guinea, and Walvis Bay in Namibia—illustrate the Chinese model for port development and its potential for dual-use conversion or outright military basing. Angola, with its deepwater facilities, also presents the prospect of an air base to complement maritime access. Gabon’s river ports, though less developed, could be upgraded to serve strategic functions.

Of these five, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon have drawn repeated scrutiny from Western intelligence agencies seeking to determine whether Beijing will commit to a permanent base. The truth is that all five possess the requisite characteristics for dual-use transformation. In the end, the decisive factor will be political—whether host governments judge that granting the PRC a sustained military presence serves their own strategic interests more than the alternatives.

Table 1. Port Threat Potential, African Atlantic Ports

Port	Port Control	Debt Leverage	Dual Use	Base	Strategic Utility	Ship Type
Lekki, Nigeria	Yes—75% stake in port management	USD 5.4B debt	Yes	No	Cargo and shipping, Gulf of Guinea security	Corvette/ frigate
Walvis Bay, Namibia	Yes—multiple companies and construction	66% GDP; high level of debt	Yes	Yes	Energy Exports; Cape of Good Hope; Project 141	All PLAN vessels
Luanda /Caio/ Lobito, Angola	No-Luanda Yes- Lobito	21% national debt	Yes	Yes	Energy exports; Project 141	All PLAN vessels
Bata, Equatorial Guinea	No—significant influence	49.7% GDP	Yes	Yes	Energy exports; Project 141	Corvette/ frigate

Port control: Is the port operated by PRC companies? If so what percentage?

Debt leverage: How much of the nations’ GDP is tied to debt to China?

Dual Use: Does the port have dual-use capability?

Base: Identified or offered by host nation?

Strategic Utility: Named project, plan, or strategic location

**Capable of supporting PLAN frigates **Capable of supporting all PLAN vessels*

The threat potential of African Atlantic ports is significant, but one facility stands above the rest: Lobito, Angola. While Walvis Bay possesses all the prerequisites for a naval base, so does Lobito—augmented by its access to the Lobito Corridor railway, which spans the continent to Dar es Salaam. There, the PRC is building a USD 10 billion port at Bagamoyo on the Indian Ocean, effectively linking China’s Atlantic and Indian Ocean logistics nodes.⁴⁵ Angola’s high debt to Beijing, coupled with its reliance on exports to service that debt, creates conditions ripe for coercion should the PRC press for a permanent Atlantic naval foothold—despite Luanda’s recent overtures to the West.

Walvis Bay ranks as the next-highest threat, with modern facilities and proximity to newly discovered oil and gas reserves. The PRC could pursue a split strategy: developing dual-use facilities at Walvis Bay under the guise of counterpiracy while simultaneously operating from Angola. Control of both ports would give Beijing near-immediate access to the Cape of Good Hope and South Atlantic SLOCs.

Although Gabon and Equatorial Guinea are often cited as likely basing sites, neither offers the political stability the PRC prefers for long-term investment. Nigeria, by contrast, is politically secure and maintains the largest navy in West Africa. However, its deep military and diplomatic ties to the United States complicate Beijing’s calculus. Lekki Port may emerge as a dual-use option, likely tied to a temporary regional security mission..

Nigeria remains one of Beijing’s most important African partners—and the largest naval power in West Africa. Yet the country faces persistent maritime security challenges, including illegal and unregulated fishing, piracy, maritime theft, human trafficking, and terrorism. Its ports are functionally divided between oil export terminals, commercial fishing hubs, and cargo facilities—the latter in urgent need of modernization due to the silted channels of Lagos and other older harbors.

Lekki Port illustrates the PRC’s strategic playbook: build modern, high-capacity infrastructure under Chinese management, ensuring both economic influence and latent military utility. Designed to handle containers, liquid bulk, and dry bulk cargoes.⁴⁶ Lekki features a 16.5-meter draft channel, five Super Post-Panamax ship-to-shore cranes, and 15 rubber-tire-gantry cranes serving a 300-meter berth.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ “Port of Bagamoyo: China’s Challenge to Create Africa’s Largest Maritime Hub,” *AEDIC*, 12 February 2025, <https://aedic.eu/>.

⁴⁶ “Lekki Deep Water Port,” Infrastructure Concession Regulatory Commission, 3 April 2018, <https://ppp.icrc.gov.ng/>.

⁴⁷ Tola Adenubi, “First Ship Berths at \$1.5bn Lekki Deep Seaport, Discharges 13 Cranes,” *Tribune Online*, 1 July 2022, <https://tribuneonline.ng/>.

⁴⁸ Plans are underway to deepen the channel to 19 meters, allowing access for larger commercial and naval vessels.⁴⁹

These capabilities—combined with expansive cargo-handling and storage facilities—make Lekki an ideal candidate for a logistics hub that could support PLA Navy operations if required. The PRC’s stake is decisive: Chinese investors own 75 percent of the facility, and the port’s managing director and CEO is a senior executive from the state-controlled China Harbour Engineering Company.⁵⁰

Lekki is not an outlier; it is emblematic of Beijing’s broader footprint. In 2022, Chinese Ambassador to Nigeria Cui Jianchun revealed that since 2000, Chinese firms have built 100 African ports, with the China Harbour Engineering Company responsible for roughly 70 percent. By 2025, Beijing expects to hold ownership stakes in 35 West African ports—transforming economic projects into a network of potential dual-use logistics nodes across the region.⁵¹

Equatorial Guinea has emerged as one of the most likely candidates for a Chinese naval foothold in the Atlantic. The deepwater port of Bata, situated in the Gulf of Guinea, combines strategic geography with modern infrastructure and a substantial Chinese commercial presence.⁵² Constructed by the PRC’s First Harbor Engineering Company and later upgraded by the China Road and Bridge Corporation, Bata also hosts a Chinese-built undersea cable linking it to Malabo. As a landing point for the Africa Coast to Europe system, the port doubles as a node for critical communications infrastructure—a factor that would further benefit Chinese military planners.

Although Beijing does not formally operate Bata Port, the adjacent Equatorial Guinea Navy base and nearby international airport provide dual-use synergies that could be quickly leveraged.⁵³ Bata Port’s connections to mainland Equatorial Guinea and Gabon would meet the need for port support infrastructure when combined with the port’s existing oil facility, intermodal yard, and warehouses.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Joshua, “Lekki Deep Sea Port Hosts Second Vessel Ahead Of September Take-Off,” *Shipping Position Online*, 8 August 2022, <https://shippingposition.com.ng/>.

⁴⁹ Godwin Oritse, “FG Moves to Deepen Lekki Channel Beyond 16.5m, Targets 19m,” *Vanguard*, 25 May 2025, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/>.

⁵⁰ “African Infrastructure: Nigeria’s Lekki Deep Water Port,” *The Business Year*, 25 March 2025, <https://thebusinessyear.com/>.

⁵¹ “PRC in 78 Ports in 32 Countries in Africa,” *Ports Europe*, 15 March 2025, <https://www.portseurope.com/>.

⁵² Shama, “PRC’s Military Intervention in Africa.”

⁵³ Tycho de Feijter, “Chinese Ports and Terminals on the Gulf of Guinea,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 46, no. 5 (2022): 20–25, <https://atlantische-commissie-s3-bucket.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/>.

⁵⁴ Thomas Mantelet, “The Road to Atlantic: PRC’s Naval Projection,” *Finabel*, 27 September 2022, <https://finabel.org/>.

With two piers measuring 531 and 550 meters, Bata can berth any vessel in the PLA Navy fleet, from destroyers to aircraft carriers.⁵⁵

Debt dynamics make Equatorial Guinea particularly susceptible to Chinese pressure. By 2021, its obligations to Beijing represented nearly half of its GDP, giving the PRC ample leverage in future negotiations. Leaked Project 141 documents list Equatorial Guinea as a prospective site for a Chinese base—confirmation that Beijing views Bata not merely as a commercial hub, but as a strategic anchor for sustained naval presence in the Atlantic.

South of Equatorial Guinea, Gabon has become another focal point of Chinese engagement in the Gulf of Guinea. Resource-rich—especially in oil—and strategically positioned, Gabon has long figured in Beijing’s maritime calculus. Under former president Ali Bongo, Libreville appeared receptive to discussions of a Chinese base. His successor, President Brice Nguema, has publicly dismissed the idea but continues to advance PRC-backed port development, reflecting a pragmatic willingness to leverage Chinese financing while denying formal military alignment.⁵⁶

At the Twenty-Second FOCAC in September 2024, Nguema signed agreements for a series of infrastructure projects: river ports at Ndjole and Lambaréné, improvements to navigation along the Ogooué River, and construction of a deepwater port at Port-Gentil. Together, these projects will accelerate Gabon’s mineral and petroleum exports while embedding Chinese companies deeper into Gabon’s logistics chain. Though presented as purely commercial, such infrastructure carries inherent dual-use potential—an option Beijing could activate if political conditions shift.⁵⁷

Washington views Gabon as a frontline state in the contest over Atlantic access. US responses have included expanding special-operations training, installing maritime-domain awareness radars to counter illegal fishing, and revitalizing cooperation through the State Partnership Program—all framed as support for Gabon’s political transition.⁵⁸ The implicit objective is to preempt a PRC foothold that could evolve into a permanent PLA Navy presence.

Gabon’s southern neighbor, Angola, mirrors this dynamic. Highly indebted to Beijing and economically dependent on exports to China, Angola remains a candidate for future PLA basing. Yet, like Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, it is also firmly within US Africa Command’s purview. The competition for influence is

⁵⁵ Lin et al., “Is PRC Building a New String of Pearls?”

⁵⁶ Jacob Zenn, “PRC’s Initiates Push to Establish a Military Base in Gabon,” *OE Watch*, 20 June 2024, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/>.

⁵⁷ “Gabon-PRC Strategic Agreement for the Development of River Ports,” *Maritimafrica*, 6 September 2024, <https://maritimafrica.com/>.

⁵⁸ Adekunle Agbetiloye, “US Proposes Strategic Deal to Block Chinese Military Expansion in Africa,” *Business Insider Africa*, 7 September 2024, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/>.

intensifying: Beijing offers infrastructure and financing, while Washington leverages security cooperation and defense partnerships. Which path these states ultimately choose will determine whether the central Gulf of Guinea becomes a PRC logistics hub—or a bulwark against it.

Angola illustrates how Beijing leverages postwar recovery needs into long-term strategic access. Emerging from decades of civil war with depleted capital and urgent infrastructure requirements, Luanda turned to China, which exchanged aid and investment for oil-backed guarantees. Today, Angola owes Beijing more than USD 21 billion, yet Chinese projects continue to expand and modernize its economy. The price of that aid may extend beyond debt service: growing Chinese influence over Angola's ports creates pathways for dual-use and, potentially, permanent PLA access.

The scope of Angola's maritime infrastructure makes it uniquely attractive to Beijing. Along its 1,600-kilometer coastline, Angola maintains five operational seaports capable of hosting large PLAN surface combatants, including Type 052D and 055 destroyers, as well as replenishment vessels. Luanda Port, with a 650-meter quay and 12.5-meter draft, can berth two destroyers simultaneously while offering Panamax handling, heavy cranes, and full cargo throughput.⁵⁹ Lobito Port is the anchor of the Lobito Corridor, the transcontinental rail line linking Angola to Tanzania via Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its facilities already reflect the scale of Chinese-backed modernization. The bulk terminal has been dredged to 10.3 meters, while the tanker terminal reaches depths of 17 meters—sufficient for virtually all PLAN surface combatants and replenishment ships. Heavy-lift capacity includes cranes rated to 100 tons, supplemented by floating cranes for oversized cargo.

The port's infrastructure is equally diverse. Lobito operates terminals for cruise ships, bulk cargo, petroleum, containerized goods, and fishing vessels. Its quays extend 1,230 meters for bulk cargo operations, with two container terminals measuring 570 meters and 552 meters, respectively. Together, these berths can host PLAN vessels across multiple classes, from frigates to destroyers.⁶⁰

Just as important, Lobito's extensive cargo-handling and warehousing capacity is dual-use by design. Facilities optimized for mineral and petroleum exports could, with minimal adaptation, accommodate military materiel. Containerized cargo systems, already established for commercial throughput, would provide the logistical

⁵⁹ "Luanda Multipurpose Port and Terminal," DP World, <https://www.dpworld.com/angola/port-services/port-particulars>

⁶⁰ "Luanda Multipurpose Port and Terminal," *DP World*, n.d., <https://www.dpworld.com/>.

backbone for PLA and PLAN operations should Beijing decide to shift from economic penetration to forward basing.

The deepwater Caio Port in Cabinda anchors Angola's oil industry, providing services tailored to tankers and offshore production requirements. Further south, the deepwater port under construction at Barra do Dande near Luanda represents a major expansion of Angola's maritime capacity. Planned facilities include 29 oil storage tanks, a dedicated support zone, a container terminal, and a multi-use terminal—making it one of the most capable petroleum and cargo hubs on Africa's Atlantic seaboard.

China's stake in Angola's maritime network extends beyond construction. Beijing holds a 30-percent share in Luanda's port management and a 20-year concession to operate the multipurpose container and general cargo terminal at Lobito.⁶¹ This integration of investment, ownership, and management advances the objectives outlined in Project 141: commercial penetration and economic dominance as the pathway to forward logistics and military access.

Angola's military infrastructure adds another dimension. The newly completed naval port at Soyo provides five berths suitable for advanced combatants. Its 330-meter military pier, alongside an adjacent 900-meter cargo pier, both dredged to 10 meters, can host Type 052D and Type 055 destroyers.⁶² President João Lourenço has gone further, requesting Chinese assistance in building a new air base—an initiative that, if realized, would give the PLA Air Force a forward-operating “lily pad” on the Atlantic coast.⁶³

Taken together, Angola's civilian ports, naval facilities, and prospective air base present Beijing with an array of options for sustaining overseas deployments. For the PLA and PLAN, the implication is clear: Angola could evolve from a commercial partner into a logistical hub, giving China durable Atlantic-facing reach.

Continuing south along the West African coast, Namibia's Walvis Bay emerges as one of the most credible candidates for a future Chinese logistics base. Identified in 2014 Chinese military planning documents, the port has since become a proven site, regularly hosting PLAN ship visits and exercises. Walvis Bay already functions as a Maritime Silk Road partner facility—a deepwater port that has benefited from extensive Chinese construction aid.

The most recent Walvis Bay Expansion Project situates the port within a wider PRC-built cluster that spans São Tomé and Príncipe, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana,

⁶¹ Hamlyn, “China in Sub-Saharan Africa.”

⁶² “PR reopens Soyo Naval Base,” Embassy of the Republic of Angola, 10 July 2023, <https://angola.org/>.

⁶³ Lukas Fiala, “Sky High Ambitions? Military Aviation and Africa-PRC Relations,” *PRC GGS & the GSI Project* (blog), 5 April 2024, <https://PRCglobalsouth.com/>.

Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, The Gambia, and Senegal. As part of the BRI's maritime security clauses, Walvis Bay could serve as a launch point for Chinese antipiracy patrols, maritime law enforcement training, and BeiDou-enabled domain awareness programs.⁶⁴ Beijing's 2017 *Vision for Maritime Cooperation* explicitly commits the PRC to such activities, giving China both legal and commercial justification for sustaining a naval presence in the South Atlantic.

Walvis Bay's facilities make it uniquely suited to support PLAN operations. The port offers three anchorage positions ranging from nine to 12 meters in depth; eight berths, including three at 12.8 meters deep and 503 meters long and five at 10.6 meters deep and 899 meters long; a cruise ship berth at 11 meters deep and 300 meters long; a dedicated tanker berth; and three container berths. Its maximum depth of 14 meters provides access for all classes of PLAN vessels, from corvettes to carriers. Complementary infrastructure—including oil bunkering, modern warehouses, upgraded roads, and advanced computer systems—further enhances its strategic utility.⁶⁵

China's interest in Namibia extends beyond maritime infrastructure; it is driven by the country's emerging oil boom. Offshore discoveries have the potential to yield one million barrels per day, with reserves estimated at no less than 3.5 billion barrels.⁶⁶ For Beijing, such a find represents not just an economic windfall but a strategic opportunity. By securing Namibian oil, China could offset vulnerabilities tied to Middle Eastern supply routes and develop sanction-resilient alternatives in the event of conflict. Namibia's debt obligations to Beijing can be collateralized against these resources, mirroring China's energy-for-loans arrangements elsewhere in Africa.

The expansion of Walvis Bay is directly tied to this energy development. Planned upgrades include new quays and berths designed to service oil platform vessels, enhancing the port's role as both a commercial and potential dual-use logistics hub.⁶⁷ Chinese firms are well positioned to lock in these opportunities, embedding long-term control over critical infrastructure. In parallel, the PLA Navy could leverage Namibia's growing offshore energy industry to justify a security presence, much as it has done in the Gulf of Guinea under the guise of antipiracy patrols and energy protection partnerships.

⁶⁴ Paul Nantulya, "Chinese Hard Power Supports Its Growing Strategic Interests in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 17 January 2019, <https://africacenter.org/>.

⁶⁵ "Port of Walvis Bay, Namibia," *LBH Group*, n.d., www.lbhwalvisbay.com.

⁶⁶ Makungu Coco, "Namibia's Oil and Gas Boom: Major Discoveries Propel Nation to Exploration Hotspot," *Angola Oil & Gas*, 23 September 2024, <https://angolanminingoilandgas.com/>.

⁶⁷ Kaula Nhongo, "Namibia Plans \$2.1 Billion Port Expansion for Offshore Oil Developments," *World Oil*, 18 August 2023, <https://www.worldoil.com/>.

Walvis Bay's geography amplifies its strategic utility. Within days of sailing to major South African and Angolan ports, the harbor offers an ideal launch point for PLAN patrols to secure SLOCs around the Cape of Good Hope and, further afield, into the South Atlantic toward South America's Cape Horn and the Straits of Magellan. Such positioning would give China the capacity to monitor—and, in time, threaten—some of the world's most vital maritime chokepoints.

Beyond Africa, Beijing's posture in Namibia connects to its broader ambition of creating parallel SLOCs that bypass traditional Western-controlled routes such as the Panama and Suez Canals.⁶⁸ The PRC's pursuit of port access in the Caribbean and South America reflects a unified strategy: linking African, Latin American, and even Antarctic engagements into a Southern Hemisphere network of logistical and energy strong points. Namibia's oil wealth and Walvis Bay's expansion thus represent not only a local development but a critical node in China's global maritime architecture.

The SLOCs emerging from Africa and South America are lifelines of global commerce, carrying trade indispensable to the United States and its allies—and equally vital to China. A forward position astride these routes would give Beijing more than commercial leverage. It would allow the PLAN not only to disrupt trade but also to monitor and potentially constrain US and allied naval movements. Such positioning offers China an early-warning capability against the redeployment of Western forces from the Atlantic into the Pacific or Indian Oceans.

Beijing's strategy is not confined to Africa. Across the Atlantic, South American nations from Brazil to Argentina are welcoming Chinese port construction and infrastructure projects. The objectives mirror those in Africa: economic footholds that evolve into political leverage and, ultimately, military access. But in the Western Hemisphere, these projects carry an added edge. They create opportunities for Beijing to establish exclusive economic zones and discreet enclaves from which intelligence collection or military activity can be conducted just beyond the US strategic perimeter.

China's port projects in South America and the Caribbean are a blend of upgraded facilities and new construction, integrated with parallel rail and road initiatives that anchor Beijing's economic presence. The BRI has proven effective as a Trojan horse for industrial penetration that increasingly shades into military cooperation. The result is the gradual encirclement of the US and its allies, a strategic challenge that is emerging not on distant shores but in the very waters of the Western Hemisphere.

⁶⁸ Robert C. O'Brien, "PRC's Next Move: A Naval Base in The South Atlantic?," *Pacific Council on International Policy*, 31 March 2015, <https://www.pacificcouncil.org/>.

PRC's South American and Caribbean Port Plays

China's South American and Caribbean port strategy is more than commerce—it is statecraft executed through infrastructure. By embedding its companies across the hemisphere, Beijing is securing geostrategic footholds, eroding US dominance, and reshaping regional norms in its favor. The goals are consistent: cement advantageous positions along critical maritime routes, isolate Taiwan diplomatically, and secure resources vital to China's internal stability.

The tools are financial and deliberate. Since 2005, Beijing's state-owned China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank have poured roughly USD 120 billion into the region, complementing USD 8.5 billion in outward foreign direct investment. These loans are seldom collateralized by cash. Instead, they are secured with oil, minerals, or agricultural commodities, binding regional economies to Beijing's demands.⁶⁹ In return, China extends development incentives to states that toe its line in international forums, exchanging infrastructure for votes at the United Nations and policy concessions at home.

Each port China builds or manages is more than a gateway for trade—it is an access point for influence, a lever to shift the political balance of the hemisphere. Beijing's objectives remain unchanged since its 2016 *Policy Paper on South America and the Caribbean*: consolidate the “One China” principle, drive a multipolar order, institutionalize and strengthen the FOCAC and the Community of South American and Caribbean States (PRC-CELAC Forum), and expand cooperation in energy, infrastructure, and defense.⁷⁰ Maritime access underwrites every part of this agenda. Where local partners lack capacity, Beijing supplies it—funding, building, and managing ports that become dual-use assets for commerce today and potential platforms for power projection tomorrow.

China's port footprint in South America and the Caribbean has expanded dramatically—growing to 40 facilities over the past two decades. While Pacific-facing ports offer Beijing the most direct commercial routes back to China, Atlantic facilities are just as significant. They create a logistical channel that can be used not only for trade but also for future naval deployments. Infrastructure, in Beijing's hands, is never neutral. Each project is designed to establish a durable physical presence in the hemisphere and to use commercial leverage to secure intelligence and military access.

⁶⁹ Diana Roy, “PRC's Growing Influence in Latin America,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 June 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

⁷⁰ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean*, 24 November 2016, <http://english.www.gov.cn/>.

Although the PLA Navy has not yet permanently based vessels in South America or the Caribbean, Chinese-built and Chinese-managed ports are already capable of sustaining its operations. In at least three cases, Beijing has secured exclusive access arrangements that place these facilities effectively beyond outside scrutiny. Chancay Port in Peru and Antigua both grant the PRC private-use rights that block competitor visibility, while Balboa Port in Panama operates under long-duration security clauses that allow Chinese concessionaires to dictate use. These “black box” ports, by design, obscure Beijing’s activities and provide latent military utility.

At the center of this strategy is COSCO Shipping. Too often portrayed as a purely commercial actor, COSCO is in fact a state-owned enterprise whose global posture aligns with Beijing’s strategic aims. In practice, this means that port management decisions serve not only Chinese trade but also China’s long-term security and intelligence requirements.⁷¹

Beijing’s port choices across the hemisphere are deliberate moves to penetrate the security envelope of the Americas. The result is an evolving network that positions China to exploit economic dependence, harvest intelligence, and—if needed—project military power from inside what has traditionally been Washington’s uncontested sphere.

China’s port strategy in South America and the Caribbean extends beyond commerce into the security and intelligence realm. The case of CK Hutchison is emblematic. While the firm is nominally independent, Beijing’s national security law ensures that any Chinese-linked enterprise can be compelled to act as an extension of the state. In practice, this means that ports under CK Hutchison’s management—and others like it—become latent instruments of Chinese power projection. Even if not overtly open to the PLAN, their proximity to host-nation naval bases transforms them into convenient adjuncts for surveillance, logistics, and intelligence-gathering. This model mirrors Africa, where Chinese vessels berth near local partner navies. In the Americas, Chinese companies now control ports adjacent to naval bases in Mexico, Panama, Brazil, and Peru, eroding operational security in environments long assumed to be US-dominated.⁷²

Beijing’s port placement also reflects strategic foresight in less obvious theaters. Some facilities are positioned to provide access to the Antarctic, a central vantage point from which China can extend influence into both the Atlantic and Pacific.

⁷¹ Sabina Nicholls, “PRC’s Rapacious Port Expansion in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Diálogo Américas*, 7 September 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/>.

⁷² Nicholls, “PRC’s Rapacious Port Expansion.”

Ports here are not just logistical hubs—they are geopolitical footholds, offering Beijing leverage in regions critical to sea-lane security and resource competition.

The economic dimension is equally consequential. Chinese development projects across South America mirror Beijing’s African playbook: infrastructure for access, access for influence. By 2025, despite tariff wars and US counter-efforts, Beijing has deepened inroads into alternative sources of food, minerals, and energy. The Chancay Port agreement is the clearest example—granting the PRC a 60-year exclusive lease and a 60-percent ownership stake. From this position, China secures reliable flows of iron, copper, and lithium for its industries, alongside corn, beef, and soybeans for its domestic market. In Brazil, Chinese initiatives extend to Portos do Paraná, where expansion plans envision as many as 22 new terminals. By positioning itself at the heart of South America’s two largest ports, China is not just facilitating trade—it is embedding itself into the critical infrastructure that sustains regional economies.

The security implications are clear. Control over key ports translates directly into influence over supply chains, trade routes, and partner governments. Chinese doctrine openly expects the PLA and PLAN to defend overseas holdings and Chinese nationals. Beijing’s expanding portfolio of cooperative exercises and training programs with regional militaries provides the perfect cover to acclimate its forces, assess partner capabilities, and normalize a PLA presence in the hemisphere.⁷³ In effect, each commercial investment doubles as a strategic wedge—granting Beijing both a rationale for intervention and the infrastructure to make it operationally feasible.

Beijing’s port strategy is not simply about access—it is about risk management and control. The official communique *PRC’s National Security in the New Era* makes this explicit: China reserves the right to defend its “core interests” and sustain economic development through global security arrangements. Crucially, the doctrine highlights the need to prepare for both “black swan” events—improbable but catastrophic shocks—and “gray rhinoceros” events—highly probable but neglected threats. This framing underscores Beijing’s recognition that global volatility can jeopardize its overseas holdings, and it justifies a proactive security posture abroad.⁷⁴

To mitigate these risks, the PRC fuses development with security. Infrastructure projects are rarely stand-alone investments. Construction is followed by port management agreements, “security assistance,” and advisory programs, ensuring that commercial enclaves double as strategic outposts. The model mirrors Africa, where

⁷³ Claudio Bozzi, “Why PRC’s Port Play Has Trump So Up in Arms,” *Asia Times*, 24 January 2025, <https://asiatimes.com/>.

⁷⁴ State Council Information Office, *China’s National Security in the New Era*.

Chinese-built ports have gradually evolved into dual-use facilities. In South America and the Caribbean, the same trajectory is visible. Large-scale projects such as Nigeria's Lekki Port and Peru's Chancay Port are not merely economic ventures. They have the potential to redirect trade, alter supply-chain dependencies, and weaken US and allied dominance in critical regions.

Chinese leverage in the hemisphere extends far beyond PLAN deployments. Diaspora networks, state-owned enterprises, and Chinese construction firms all function as enablers, granting Beijing visibility into regional commerce and facilitating preferential access to infrastructure. Ports in particular are multipurpose tools. They allow China to: (1) collect intelligence on shipping and cargoes; (2) secure logistics routes favorable to Chinese trade; (3) identify staging points for sabotage or covert PLAN operations; and (4) wield port visits and development as symbols of friendship—or instruments of pressure—depending on a partner state's alignment.⁷⁵

Beijing's South American and Caribbean port ventures are not scattershot investments. They form the backbone of a deliberate campaign that fuses commerce, diplomacy, and military positioning into a single framework of risk mitigation and power projection. For Washington, the implications are direct: these ports erode US freedom of maneuver in its own hemisphere.

In China's security calculus, ports are far more than commercial outposts. Once Beijing secures control—through exclusive trade agreements, long-term leases, or management concessions—they become strategic enablers in crisis or conflict. Control of a berth with the proper depth and length, paired with tugs, cranes, and cargo-handling equipment, gives the PLA Navy and civilian auxiliaries immediate access to the best facilities for as long as necessary. Warehouses, inland transport links, and integrated logistics infrastructure ensure that goods—whether military materiel or critical resources—move seamlessly from ship to shore.

The leverage extends beyond logistics. Financial arrangements, often opaque, can erode host-nation sovereignty over customs and port security. Collusion between Chinese operators and local authorities enables Beijing to manipulate access to surveillance systems, cargo data, and security networks. Conversely, where China lacks outright control, it can impose friction: delaying adversary cargoes, denying husbanding services, or restricting access to raw materials and victualing. In extreme

⁷⁵ Henry Ziemer, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Jennifer Jun, "The Geopolitics of Port Security in the Americas," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 23 September 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

cases, Beijing has abandoned port projects midstream, weaponizing development assistance itself as a compliance tool to bend host states toward its policy objectives.⁷⁶

This influence is reinforced by the security dimension of port construction. Equipment transfers, training programs, and “technical assistance” blur the line between commercial management and military preparation. Every crane, tug, and surveillance system installed under Chinese contracts carries dual-use potential—tools of commerce in peacetime, force multipliers in wartime.

Globally, Western security firms and intelligence observers suspect that Chinese-installed port scanners and “smart” cranes are not simply commercial tools but covert collection systems, harvesting sensitive cargo data and traffic patterns. The deeper risk lies in Beijing’s policy of civil-military fusion, codified in the PRC’s 2017 National Security Law, which compels all Chinese firms to support national security objectives. In practice, this extends to port management and shipping operations, transforming ostensibly commercial ventures into latent instruments of state power.⁷⁷

Chinese-controlled ports and facilities already sit astride global chokepoints critical for commerce and military operations: the Caribbean Sea, the Panama Canal, and the Cape of Good Hope. In a crisis, Beijing could exploit these footholds to delay or disrupt US and allied deployments. Some efforts are designed with multiple objectives in mind. A failed attempt to establish a joint PRC-Argentina naval base, for example, would have given China not only an Antarctic gateway but also access to the Strait of Magellan—an alternative to the Panama Canal—where it could track and report any Western attempts to bypass a blocked canal. Every Chinese-operated port worldwide should therefore be viewed as a logical future destination for PLAN deployments.

US adversaries such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua already facilitate Beijing’s projection of influence into the Caribbean and South America. Yet the broader risk is embedded in the dual-use design of most ports: facilities built for commerce today can easily be repurposed to reposition Chinese military vessels tomorrow. The Panama Canal remains the prime target. In the event of conflict, Beijing’s ability to interfere with, delay, or surveil the canal would directly hinder the rapid repositioning of US and allied forces from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Even smaller Caribbean nations pose outsize risks. Beyond Cuba, Beijing has identified Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, and Jamaica as high-value nodes for Belt and Road access. These states, with limited oversight capacity, offer China

⁷⁶ Zeimer, et al, “The Geopolitics of Port Security”; and Leland Lazarus, “A PRC-Funded Port in South America Could Threaten U.S. National Security,” *China-US Focus*, 17 July 2024, <https://www.PRCusfocus.com/>.

⁷⁷ Zeimer, et al, “The Geopolitics of Port Security.”

fertile ground to combine commercial investment with intelligence collection and influence operations. Their proximity to US shores magnifies the risk. Among them, the Bahamas is arguably the most dangerous. Situated close to US testing ranges and major military facilities, it provides Beijing with a sensitive vantage point. Even after ownership of its ports transitions to BlackRock under a Panama Canal-linked deal, COSCO—China’s state-owned shipping giant—will retain an operational role, ensuring Beijing’s hand remains in play.

Beijing has weaponized commerce in the Caribbean, using development projects to secure UN votes, isolate Taiwan diplomatically, and establish footholds in ports and facilities that double as logistics strongpoints. Trade and infrastructure deals provide the cover story; the real game is access and influence. China’s expanding presence in the Caribbean is as much about intelligence collection and surveillance as it is about commerce.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Cuba. Chinese intelligence sites there target US assets directly, from intercepting SpaceX launch data and conducting broad signals intelligence to monitoring US military exercises. These facilities also provide command-and-control support for other intelligence operations across the region, embedding Beijing’s eyes and ears just off the US coastline.⁷⁸ Commercial projects act as the enabling layer. Chinese companies secure leases and contracts that furnish Beijing with a legal pretext for maintaining personnel and equipment in proximity to sensitive US facilities.

The model mirrors Chinese behavior in the Pacific. In Palau, Chinese firms have repeatedly appeared where and when the United States announced plans for radars, airfields, or port improvements.⁷⁹ Land leases and commercial fronts gave Beijing a presence in areas vital to US basing and surveillance architecture. The same gray-zone tactics—using commerce to mask intent and prepare the ground—are being deployed in the Caribbean. By shaping the operational environment through port control and commercial enclaves, China positions itself to delay, degrade, or impose costs on US forces in the Western Hemisphere, just as it seeks to do in the Indo-Pacific.

⁷⁸ Matthew Funaiolo et al., “China’s Intelligence Footprint in Cuba: New Evidence and Implications for U.S. Security,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁷⁹ Michael E. Miller, Lyric Li, and An Rong Xu, “The U.S. Military Is Investing in This Pacific Island. So Is China,” *Washington Post*, 29 July 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

Table 2. Port Threat Potential, Caribbean Ports

Port	Port Control	Debt Leverage	Dual Use	Base	Strategic Utility	Ship Type
Freeport, Bahamas	Yes—100% CK Hutchinson owns; ongoing construction	Over USD 3.0B	Yes	Yes	SLOC; near US and allied naval bases***	All PLAN vessels including RO-RO
Antigua and Barbuda Multiple ports	Yes—100% Special Economic Zone (SEZH) granted	Over USD 200M; high level of debt	Yes	Yes	SLOC; SEZH; airport	All PLAN vessels
Kingston, Jamaica	Yes—100% control	~USD 900M	Yes	Yes	SLOC; Near Guantanamo Bay; 2 x days from Miami or Panama Canal	All PLAN vessels
Panama Canal: Fuerte Amador cruise terminal and Colón container port	Yes—100% CK Hutchinson manages 2 of 5 Caribbean ports/terminals		Yes	Yes	Energy exports; Project 141	All PLAN vessels including RO-RO

Port control: Is the port operated by PRC companies? If so what percentage?

Debt leverage: How much of the nations' GDP is tied to debt to China/What is the estimated debt?

Dual Use: Does the port have dual-use capability?

Base: Identified or offered by host nation?

Strategic Utility: Named project, plan, or strategic location

*Capable of supporting PLAN frigates **Capable of supporting all PLAN vessels

***US Navy Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center is located on Andros Island in the Bahamas⁸⁰

Even as Beijing advances its commercial footprint, it collects intelligence on the United States and shapes conditions to control—or outright deny—ports to US military and commercial use. Civil-military fusion, a cornerstone of Chinese national security doctrine, is woven directly into BRI projects. Where China builds ports and secures management contracts, strategic leverage follows.

The Bahamas illustrates this point starkly. The island nation has few natural resources, but it sits in a position of enormous geostrategic value—just 67 miles off the US coast and astride sea lanes carrying traffic from the Eastern Seaboard into the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. It is no accident that China maintains its largest embassy in the world in Nassau, where Chinese diplomats have direct line-of-sight on US Navy testing and training ranges.⁸¹

⁸⁰ "AUTECH Complex Navy Base in West Palm Beach, FL," MilitaryBases.com, n.d., <https://militarybases.com/>. (The US Navy performs a variety of naval testing, submarine crew validation, and undersea simulated warfare at this site.)

⁸¹ "Chinese Investment and Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean," *RMC Global*, 3 January 2025, <https://rmcglobal.com/>.

Chinese capital has reshaped Bahamian port infrastructure, most notably through the USD 3 billion Freeport mega port, developed under Hong Kong–based CK Hutchinson. Freeport’s container terminal is a major hub, boasting a 16.1-meter draught and more than 1,000 meters of dock frontage. Its three berths average 15 meters in depth, supported by six mobile cranes, four floating cranes, and heavy-lift capacity ranging from 50 to 100 tons. The port accommodates container ships, roll on/roll off vessels, and cruise liners with ease, and its infrastructure includes container yards, bulk storage, cargo warehouses, bunkering facilities, and ship repair shops.⁸² These features make Freeport not merely a commercial hub but a ready-made logistics node that could be leveraged by the PLAN in the event of crisis or conflict.

The Bahamas holds another asset with clear utility for Beijing’s long-term designs. At the Grand Bahama Shipyard in Freeport, two massive floating docks—constructed by China’s Beihai Shipbuilding Company, a subsidiary of the state-owned PRC State Shipbuilding Corporation—now anchor one of the most capable repair facilities in the Western Hemisphere. Carnival Corporation financed nearly half of the USD 600 million project, but the industrial logic serves Chinese interests as much as commercial clients. The larger of the two docks, rated at 125,000 tons, is the biggest in the region, while its 93,500-ton counterpart ranks among the largest as well. Both are capable of servicing the entire spectrum of cruise ships currently operating or under construction, as well as commercial vessels of comparable size.⁸³

The strategic dual-use implications are obvious. A facility capable of accommodating the world’s largest cruise liners is equally capable of servicing PLAN combatants, auxiliaries, or logistics platforms. Access to repair and refit capacity of this scale—so close to US shores—would provide Beijing with a force-multiplying asset in any contingency.

Nor is the Bahamas an isolated case. Beijing has successfully extended BRI development financing to five additional Caribbean states: Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, and the Dominican Republic.⁸⁴ Each represents another step in a widening arc of influence. The Freeport model demonstrates how Beijing uses infrastructure projects to secure access in states eager for development but neglected by US investment. In effect, these deals lay down

⁸² “Freeport,” *World Ports Directory*, n.d., <https://ports.marinelink.com/>.

⁸³ Oswald Brown, “Groundbreaking Held for Grand Bahama Shipyard’s \$600 Million Expansion,” *Bahamas Chronicle*, 27 October 2023, <https://bahamaschronicle.com/>; and “PRC to Build Large Drydocks to Expand Grand Bahama Shipyard,” *Maritime Executive*, 24 May 2022, <https://maritime-executive.com/>.

⁸⁴ Rachel Oswald, “Caribbean Islands Becoming Hot Spots for Chinese Investment,” *Roll Call*, 25 March 2019, <https://rollcall.com/>.

the skeleton of a logistics network that could, in crisis, host PLAN vessels, provide maintenance, and support Chinese power projection in the Western Hemisphere.

Antigua and Barbuda stands out as a case where Beijing has secured a level of autonomy and sovereign privilege rarely granted elsewhere. More than USD 200 million in aid has translated into a client state willing not only to support Beijing's policies but also to advocate for them across the region. The centerpiece of this arrangement is Antigua's decision to grant China a Special Economic Zone (SEZH), effectively ceding control over customs, immigration, shipping, and airline operations. Within this zone, Chinese entities operate free of Antiguan oversight, adjacent to the country's most significant military installation. The scope is sweeping: airlines, port operations, construction, passenger services, and commercial cargo can all be undertaken without host-nation interference.

The Chinese SEZH links directly to St. John's, where the state-owned China Civil Engineering and Construction Company (CCECC) has built a port.⁸⁵ This means Beijing effectively controls multiple port facilities in a small Caribbean state with little restriction. The reach extends further: PRC entities have constructed Antigua's national stadium and international airport, embedding China across the island's infrastructure. In 2020, CCECC—through its parent company, the state-owned China Railway Construction Corporation—chose Antigua as the site of its regional headquarters, positioning itself to expand rail links that connect Chinese-built ports across BRI partner nations.

Such activity has raised alarms among diplomats and regional security observers. Antigua hosts one of Beijing's largest embassies in the Caribbean, disproportionate to its size and influence. The concern is clear: China's civil-military fusion strategy compels Chinese companies and diaspora communities to support intelligence collection. What appears to be commercial expansion is also laying the groundwork for espionage, surveillance, and a potential forward presence.⁸⁶ The Antigua model is already being replicated elsewhere as historically reliable US partners across the Caribbean welcome Chinese development aid, gradually transforming into outposts for Chinese influence and intelligence collection.

The Port of Kingston, Jamaica, is among the most at-risk ports in the Caribbean. Ranked in the top ten Latin American ports by cargo throughput, Kingston sits astride vital maritime routes. Commercial traffic from the Panama Canal and vessels transiting the Mona Passage between Puerto Rico and Hispaniola funnel through the Caribbean toward US East Coast ports, making Kingston a natural

⁸⁵ Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "PRC Building New Outpost on U.S. Doorstep, Leaked Documents Reveal," *Newsweek*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/>.

⁸⁶ Tatlow, "PRC Building New Outpost."

chokepoint. Historically, Jamaica has been a US security partner, but geography gives it added weight: the port lies near US Naval Station Guantanamo Bay and other regional US military activity. PRC control of Kingston provides a vantage point from which ship movements can be tracked, signals intelligence collected, and Guantanamo effectively bracketed from both Santiago, Cuba, and Kingston.⁸⁷ A vessel exiting the Panama Canal can reach Kingston in two days; from Kingston, another two days brings it to Miami.⁸⁸ That proximity—combined with Chinese port management and Jamaica’s debt exposure—makes the island vulnerable to Beijing’s coercive leverage.

Beijing’s role in Kingston dates to 2015, when Chinese consortia began financing, expanding, and operating the port. Initial minority stakes grew into dominant control: after investing USD 250 million in dredging and upgrades, China Merchants Port Holdings, a state-owned enterprise, secured a 100-percent, 30-year concession in 2020.⁸⁹ By 2025, Kingston Freeport Terminal Limited added another USD 50 million in upgrades, including geo-positioning systems, cranes, and new facilities, pushing total PRC investment beyond USD 400 million. The result was a 50-percent increase in cargo capacity.⁹⁰

The port itself is formidable. Kingston is accessed through a 15-meter-deep channel and boasts more than 2,400 meters of continuous quay with nine deep-water berths capable of handling roll on/roll off, lift-on/lift-off, container, and bulk cargo vessels. Drafts range from nine to 15 meters. Supporting infrastructure includes 250,000 square meters of open dock space, 16,680 meters of warehouse space, six mobile cranes, and CONEX stackers.⁹¹

Chinese involvement extends far beyond the port. In 2017, the China Development Bank awarded the state-owned China Harbour Engineering Company a USD 458 million contract to construct Jamaica’s new highway system, in exchange for exclusive rights to collect toll revenue for 50 years. Such projects, layered atop port investments, deepen Beijing’s economic entrenchment in Jamaica.⁹²

⁸⁷ Henry Ziemer, Jaehyun Han, and Aidan Powers-Riggs, “No Safe Harbor: Evaluating the Risk of PRC’s Port Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 26 June 2025, <https://features.csis.org/>.

⁸⁸ “Port Development,” *Kingston Freeport Terminal, Ltd.*, 2021, <https://kingstonfreeport.com/>.

⁸⁹ “Regional: Chinese Firm Now Majority Owners of Kingston Freeport Management Company,” *Antigua Observer*, 24 April 2020, <https://antiguaobserver.com/>.

⁹⁰ Judana Murphy, “US \$50 Million to Further Upgrade Port of Kingston This Year,” *Jamaica Information Service*, 11 April 2025, <https://jis.gov.jm/>.

⁹¹ “Port Development,” *Kingston Freeport Terminal, Ltd.*, 2021, <https://kingstonfreeport.com/>; and *Kingston Wharves Limited*, <https://kingstonwharves.com/>.

⁹² Ziemer, Han, and Powers-Riggs, “No Safe Harbor.”

While it is unlikely Beijing would risk establishing an overt military base at Kingston, the port is now well positioned to support PLAN ship visits under the guise of commercial exchange. A naval presence could flow naturally from the existing business relationship, with Jamaica serving as a convenient destination for PLAN vessels transiting the Panama Canal or sailing from Africa. Given Beijing's control of Kingston and its strong commercial position in Panama through CK Hutchison, Jamaica represents another step in the PRC's quiet conversion of commercial ventures into dual-use platforms that could one day constrain US maneuverability in its own hemisphere.

The PRC is completing several major port projects in Panama, including more than USD 1 billion in investments at the Fuerte Amador cruise terminal and the Colón container port. The Fuerte Amador terminal is designed to accommodate five mega-cruise ships simultaneously, while upgrades at Colón allow the port to manage post-Panamax vessels.⁹³ With approximately 14,000 ships transiting the Panama Canal annually, the stakes are high: although the United States remains the largest user, the PRC is the second-largest, accounting for 21.4 percent of total cargo volume between 2023 and 2024. Control over supporting port facilities—rather than the canal itself—gives Beijing leverage.

The Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings operates Balboa and Cristóbal, two of the five ports directly adjacent to the canal, and Chinese companies have also invested in a cruise terminal tied to canal operations.⁹⁴ This presence highlights Beijing's recognition of the canal's strategic value. While Washington remains wary, particularly following President Donald Trump's threats to annex the canal and eject Chinese firms from its operations, Beijing has maintained influence not through direct control of the canal but via commercial entities positioned around it.

The extent of PRC leverage became clear in early 2025 when CK Hutchison attempted to sell its global port holdings to US investment giant BlackRock. Beijing intervened, blocking the sale outright—including the disposal of interests in 41 other ports worldwide—and later imposed a mechanism ensuring its continued control. The eventual deal required the mandatory inclusion of China's COSCO Shipping in the BlackRock consortium. This arrangement guaranteed Beijing's hold on CK Hutchison's string of ports, particularly those in Panama and the

⁹³ Matthew Crittenden et al., "PRC's BRI in Latin America: Case Study – Ports," *GeoLab*, 14 August 2020, <https://doi.org/>.

⁹⁴ Shawn Yuan, "Does PRC 'Operate' Panama Canal, as Trump Says?," *BBC News*, 22 January 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

Caribbean.⁹⁵ Even where Beijing ceded rights outside Panama, COSCO retained veto authority in Panama Canal–related decisions, ensuring China a decisive voice in one of the world’s most critical maritime chokepoints.

The Balboa and Cristóbal ports are more than commercial nodes—they are prime locations for shipping surveillance and signals intelligence collection. In a crisis, Chinese access to these ports could delay or disrupt US or allied force movements between oceans. While Beijing avoids overt claims of military intent in the Americas, its strategic control of ports adjacent to the canal provides continuous avenues to influence Panamanian politics, propose BRI projects, and justify its role as a “development partner.” Meanwhile, PRC superport projects across the hemisphere threaten to reroute trade flows directly to China through secure and unrestricted sea lines of communication (SLOC), designed to undercut the vulnerabilities of the “Malacca dilemma.”

Among South American ports, three sites stand out for their threat potential: Chancay in Peru, Ushuaia in Argentina, and Punta Arenas in Chile. Of these, Chancay Port ranks highest. Its significance lies in its minimal Peruvian oversight, strategic proximity to both the Panama Canal and the Pacific shipping lanes, and direct rail connections that extend trade access toward the Atlantic. Peru’s heavy indebtedness to the PRC, coupled with the construction of a massive modern harbor under Chinese management, heightens the port’s vulnerability to coercion. At the political level, Chinese influence extends to direct ties between Lima and Beijing, including recognition by President Xi Jinping. Chancay’s technical specifications—deepwater capacity, large-scale container facilities, and the ability to berth post-Panamax vessels—render it ideal for potential PLAN basing should Beijing and Lima decide to advance in that direction.

Argentina’s Ushuaia Port ranks second in threat potential. Its location at the southern tip of the continent places it adjacent to the Strait of Magellan, the Southern Ocean, and the approaches to Antarctica—making it a gateway for monitoring or controlling SLOCs that bypass the Panama Canal. Argentina’s high sovereign debt increases susceptibility to external pressure, providing Beijing leverage. However, political developments in Buenos Aires have thus far delayed or limited PRC ambitions at Ushuaia.

Chile’s Punta Arenas, by contrast, represents the lowest threat among the three. Still, as an alternative to Ushuaia, its strategic value is notable. Positioned near the Strait of Magellan and with access to the Southern Ocean, Punta Arenas could in the future provide support for PLAN vessels. While currently less vulnerable to

⁹⁵ “CK Hutchinson’s Panama Canal Port Sale and Strategic China Partnership: Geopolitical and Economic Implications for Global Trade Infrastructure Investment,” *Market Pulse*, 27 July 2025, <https://www.ainvest.com/>.

Chinese influence than Peru or Argentina, the port’s location ensures it remains a potential node in Beijing’s long-term maritime calculus.

Table 3. Port Threat Potential, South American Ports

Port	Port Control	Debt Leverage	Dual Use	Base	Strategic Utility	Ship Type
Chancay, Peru China claims Chancay is COSCO’s private port	Yes—60% operations stake	Over USD 16.9B	Yes	Yes	SLOC; near Panama Canal	All PLAN vessels including RO-RO; up to 15 ships
Argentina* Ushuaia Port Other ports available but Ushuaia is closest to Strait of Magellan and Antarctica	No— BUT has PLA personnel at Argentina Deep Space Radar at Neuquén and the radio telescope at the Félix Aguilar Observatory	Over USD 43B very high level of debt Repeated defaults and Chinese bailouts	Yes	Yes	SLOC; Antarctica access; Strait of Magellan; base access could serve as basis for expanded Chinese Antarctic presence	Corvettes, frigates, destroyers, icebreakers, resupply vessels
Chile Punto Arenas	No—but Chile has a defense agreement with China	Total debt unknown but port development would be very expensive	Yes	Yes	SLOC; Near Strait of Magellan and near Antarctica	Corvettes, frigates, destroyers, icebreakers, resupply vessels

Port control: Is the port operated by PRC companies? If so what percentage?

Debt leverage: How much of the nations’ GDP is tied to debt to China/What is the estimated debt?

Dual Use: Does the port have dual-use capability?

Base: Identified or offered by host nation?

Strategic Utility: Named project, plan, or strategic location

*PLA has a 50 year lease at Neuquén with little oversight

**Chile is actively working to increase its ability to defend its Antarctic territory through new piers and icebreakers; China could benefit from use of both

Peru’s Chancay Port offers the PRC a Pacific foothold capable of pulling trade and raw materials from the Atlantic, insulating Beijing from sanctions or embargo efforts during a crisis. With immense cargo capacity and multiple deepwater berths, Chancay enables rerouting of commodities from across South America to a port under Chinese control. Vessels departing from Chancay reach Shanghai in roughly 23 days, bypassing both Mexican and US ports along the way.⁹⁶ The supply-chain implications are significant. When combined with the Chinese-financed trans-continental railway project linking Peru to Brazil, Chancay has the potential to

⁹⁶ Zeimer, et al, “The Geopolitics of Port Security”; and Micah McCartney, “PRC’s Xi Unveils Megaport in America’s Backyard Amid US Concerns,” *Newsweek*, 15 November 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/>.

redirect regional trade flows from the Atlantic toward Pacific seaways, undercutting established shipping patterns and US maritime dominance.

Although billed as a private commercial venture, COSCO—China’s state-owned shipping giant—owns a 60-percent stake in Chancay and controls facilities that include 15 deepwater berths, large enough to berth an aircraft carrier. The port’s capacity to host up to 15 vessels simultaneously raises strategic concerns.⁹⁷ COSCO’s infrastructure could serve not only as a hub for commercial shipping but also as a staging ground for PLAN operations, regional security engagements, or humanitarian responses. Beijing could easily justify deploying PLAN assets under the pretext of disaster relief, citing the region’s active tectonics and earthquake vulnerability, while gaining operational familiarity with the port.

Further south, Beijing has turned to Argentina as a gateway to the South Atlantic and Antarctica. The waters off Argentina offer rich fisheries, strategic access to the Southern Ocean, and proximity to one of the world’s critical maritime chokepoints—the passage around the southern tip of South America. Argentina’s vulnerability to Chinese leverage is rooted in its participation in the BRI and its recurring sovereign debt crises. With USD 43 billion in debt and a history of defaults, Buenos Aires has repeatedly turned to Beijing as a lender of last resort. In 2023, China extended a USD5 billion accord that required repayment in yuan.⁹⁸ A follow-on debt relief package in 2025 raised further concern, both for its timing—occurring during concurrent International Monetary Fund negotiations over a USD 20 billion bailout—and for the terms, which risk placing Argentina more firmly under Beijing’s sway.⁹⁹

China’s willingness to prop up Argentina during its repeated fiscal crises gives it both opportunity and leverage. Past projects have already created conditions for PLA personnel to linger in-country under the guise of development assistance. In the future, Beijing could press for port concessions or preferential access in exchange for continued debt relief. Alternatively, China could demand security guarantees on its loans, imposing caretaker arrangements that tie debt repayment to direct resource extraction. For now, Beijing appears to be holding these options in reserve, pursuing a strategy of patient entrenchment similar to its approach with heavily indebted African states.

⁹⁷ McCartney, “PRC’s Xi Unveils Megaport.”

⁹⁸ Bert Hoover, “Argentina: Why Did PRC Suspend \$6.5 Billion Currency Swap Deal?,” *Latin Post*, 21 December 2023, <https://www.latinpost.com/>.

⁹⁹ “Argentina Extends PRC Debt Deal Despite U.S. Pressure,” *Agence France-Presse*, 11 April 2025, <https://PRCglobalsouth.com/>.

The PRC has refined a tactic of securing unfettered access and operations by cloaking its activities in the guise of providing essential services or cooperative ventures. Two high-profile projects in Argentina illustrate this method: the PRC-Argentina Deep Space Radar facility in Neuquén and the radio telescope at the Félix Aguilar Observatory in San Juan. While not port infrastructure, both cases establish a precedent that Beijing can leverage scientific or commercial agreements for dual-use activities.

At Neuquén, the 50-year lease agreement cedes effective operational control of the site to Beijing. PLA personnel manage the radar facility, while Chinese scientists, bound by the PRC's civil-military fusion laws, are compelled to report all findings to the central government. The Félix Aguilar Observatory arrangement follows a similar pattern. Although nominally scientific projects, these facilities provide capabilities with clear military utility: satellite signal interception, telemetry guidance, and surveillance of orbiting spacecraft. Weak Argentine oversight and the cession of site authority have allowed Beijing to repurpose operations with minimal pushback, creating a de facto PLA-controlled enclave within Argentine territory.¹⁰⁰

The implications are stark. Facilities ostensibly dedicated to astronomy and telecommunications can serve as nodes in China's global intelligence architecture, providing data that could, in a time of conflict, directly aid PLA targeting against US and allied space and terrestrial assets. Beijing's willingness to insert PLA personnel into Argentina under the cover of cooperative agreements signals a broader strategy. This strategy extends beyond Argentina's borders, positioning China to exploit weak governance structures in the Antarctic and to use scientific or commercial projects as steppingstones toward eventual military openings in the South Atlantic.

The PRC seeks a permanent presence on the southern tip of the Americas, where access to the Pacific, Atlantic, and Antarctica converge. Argentina represents Beijing's preferred partner for such ambitions. Despite Argentina's existing naval facilities at Port Belgrano and Mar del Plata further north, the PRC has focused its efforts on Ushuaia Port, pursuing a construction project to expand both Argentine Navy and commercial facilities.

The PRC is actively pursuing a construction project in Ushuaia Port to expand existing Argentine Navy and commercial facilities. Yet its ambitions have encountered a temporary obstacle. The United States capitalized on Argentina's change of administration to counter not only Beijing's port initiative but also its efforts to

¹⁰⁰ R. Evan Ellis, "PRC – Argentina Space Engagement: Reconciling Science, Sovereignty, and Strategic Risk," *Diálogo Américas*, May 2024, <https://dialogo-americas.com/>.

sell advanced fighter jets to Buenos Aires.¹⁰¹ This political rapprochement between Argentina and Washington has, for now, slowed the PRC's advances in Argentina.

In 2024, Argentine President Javier Milei announced that the United States would build an integrated naval base at Ushuaia. Designed as a major logistics hub for Antarctic operations, the base will also possess facilities for the repair and re-supply of cruise ships and commercial vessels operating in Antarctic waters.¹⁰² Ushuaia's cruise ship terminal and commercial berths can already accommodate most PLAN surface combatants, whether at civilian facilities or the adjacent naval port. The commercial harbor offers a draft of 7 to 11 meters depending on the berth, with a 650-meter pier capable of handling both cargo and passenger traffic, supported by warehousing, maintenance, and bunkering services.¹⁰³ Strategically located in Tierra del Fuego, Ushuaia provides direct access to the South Atlantic and the Southern Ocean.

While a US-constructed base does not categorically deny future PRC access, it makes it unlikely that Washington would permit Beijing to pressure Buenos Aires into granting concessions at such a strategically sensitive location. Nonetheless, the PRC could still find opportunities. PLAN ships could readily use Ushuaia's warehouses to store containerized cargoes or winter over, while Chinese icebreakers support operations in Antarctic waters. A permanent PLAN or Coast Guard presence at Ushuaia would provide a decisive logistics boost to PRC's expanding Antarctic scientific and intelligence activities.

If Beijing's advances in Argentina remain stymied, China may turn to neighboring Chile. A PLAN presence near the Strait of Magellan would still ensure access between the Atlantic and Pacific, reinforcing China's long-term strategy to establish itself at one of the world's most critical maritime crossroads.

Although most of Chile does not face the Atlantic, the Strait of Magellan provides a vital connection between the two oceans. In the Southern Cone, the PRC confronts a different set of opportunities and constraints. Beijing seeks access to Chile's rich fishing grounds as well as a foothold in the emerging "green hydrogen" sector, which Chile hopes will transform its economy. Green hydrogen has the potential to rival oil as a global energy source, and when combined with newly discovered Antarctic oil deposits, it represents a vast reservoir of energy that the PRC would eagerly exploit if it could secure access.

¹⁰¹ Guillermo Saavedra, "PRC Pressures Argentina to Build Naval Base," *Diálogo Américas*, 3 January 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/>.

¹⁰² "Milei Allows US to Construct Naval Base in Strategic Southernmost City of Argentina," *Orinoco Tribune*, 6 April 2024, <https://orinocotribune.com/>.

¹⁰³ "Ushuaia," *World Port Directory*, n.d., <https://ports.marinelink.com/>.

Chile, however, lacks the port infrastructure to support either the growing number of vessels transiting the Strait of Magellan or its nascent green hydrogen program. The International Energy Agency estimates the global green hydrogen market could exceed USD 100 billion by 2030, placing further strain on Chile's already stretched naval capacity to monitor shipping diversions from the Red Sea or the congested Panama Canal.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Chinese fishing fleets are entering Antarctic waters in increasing numbers. Their presence could provide Beijing with a pretext to deploy coast guard or PLAN vessels as “escorts,” consistent with China's declared policy of defending its fishing fleets and commercial interests.

Punta Arenas, Chile's southernmost major port, offers only limited service to the Chinese navy. Its facilities include bulk cargo cranes, warehouses, docks, and terminals, supplemented by smaller subsidiary ports—Puerto Percy, Lenadura, Bahía Gregoria, Caleta Cutter, and Laredo—that primarily support oil and natural gas vessels. These subsidiary ports can accommodate ships up to 240 meters in length with drafts of 12 meters, making them sufficient for a range of commercial and military platforms.¹⁰⁵

Despite its ambitions in the Southern Cone, the PRC has not yet attempted to build a port in Chile, even though it proposed a USD 1.25 billion port project at Río Grande in Argentina. Chile is a BRI partner and possesses ample natural resources to justify such an investment, but its Atlantic-facing waters present formidable challenges. At the Atlantic mouth of the Strait of Magellan, the tidal range reaches 12 meters—six times the global average—and currents can run at eight knots, complicating port construction and operations.¹⁰⁶

Nonetheless, Beijing recognizes the region's strategic and commercial value. Should no competitor emerge, the PRC could seek to capitalize by offering Chile a port project that Argentina has already denied. Chile's overstretched naval resources further open the door for Beijing to propose “joint patrols” ostensibly aimed at securing the Strait and protecting Chinese fishing fleets. Whether these patrols were conducted by the PRC Coast Guard or PLAN vessels would matter little; the 2011 Chile–China defense cooperation agreement provides legal cover for such a deployment. The real trade would be straightforward: Belt and Road development in exchange for the operational space required to sustain Chinese naval assets far from home waters.

¹⁰⁴ Patricia Garip, “Why the U.S. and PRC Suddenly Care About a Port in Southern Chile,” *Americas Quarterly*, 23 April 2024, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/>.

¹⁰⁵ “8 Major Ports In Chile,” *Marine-Salvage.com*, 23 September 2022, <https://marine-salvage.net/>.

¹⁰⁶ Garip, “Why the U.S. and PRC Suddenly Care.”

A Chinese-controlled port at Punta Arenas or Puerto Sara in Tierra del Fuego would hold enormous geostrategic consequences. In wartime, it could allow Beijing to delay or even close Strait of Magellan traffic, constraining US and allied movements between the Atlantic and Pacific. Moreover, any PRC-managed port would almost certainly employ LOGINK, China's global logistics data platform. Through LOGINK, Beijing would gain privileged access to shipping manifests, cargo movements, and commercial intelligence—information that could be weaponized in both peacetime competition and conflict.

The Chile–PRC defense cooperation agreement of 2011 has yielded little tangible presence thus far, limited to a single PLAN ship visit. That absence, however, may not endure. As Beijing expands its global port holdings and matures the logistics network needed to sustain its growing fleet, Chile could become a future node in China's broader maritime strategy. Access to ports is not merely a matter of convenience—it grants the PRC the means to blunt sanctions, evade attempts to curtail its strategic mobility, and threaten US regional dominance through the possibility of PLAN deployments in the Atlantic.

Future conflict will not be defined solely by kinetic engagements but also by the economic domain. Control over ports and SLOCs could enable Beijing to cut commercial arteries vital to the United States and its allies.¹⁰⁷ Today, China's diplomatic, economic, and military partnerships in the Atlantic already surpass what it possessed a decade ago. With every BRI project that displaces US or allied investment, Beijing secures more resources, more political influence, and more logistical footholds to sustain its long-term strategic aims.

Contesting China: The Bigger Picture

Economic warfare may be war by other means, but it presents challenges that cannot be resolved through kinetic action without incurring global backlash. Beijing's BRI agreements are building a network of logistics nodes and dual-use ports across the Western Hemisphere—assets that Chinese commercial entities can gradually expand over time with little resistance. This long-term approach aligns with PRC strategy, which explicitly advises leaders to exploit black-swan shocks and gray-rhino threats by using diplomatic, economic, and informational tools to capitalize on the vulnerabilities of nations facing natural disasters or political instability.

China has little tolerance for instability or political risk, yet it leverages its financial strength to lock vulnerable states into high levels of debt. While sovereign

¹⁰⁷ Pieter Balcaen, "Beyond Sanctions: Economic Warfare and Modern Military Conflict," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 20 December 2024, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>.

nations retain the right to choose their own development paths, BRI loans often carry obligations that create dependency and provide Beijing with coercive leverage. For this reason, the United States and its combatant commands must closely monitor debt exposure under BRI frameworks and be prepared to offer alternative financing mechanisms. Failing to do so risks ceding economic and strategic ground to Beijing, whose debt diplomacy is designed to translate economic reliance into political compliance.

The PRC's dominance over African, South American, and Caribbean ports carries the potential to become weaponized, a prospect that many security observers already warn against. The growing chain of Chinese-controlled ports represents a direct threat to US supply chains. As demonstrated throughout this analysis, Beijing—or partner nations aligned with its interests—could exploit port control to deny the United States access to raw materials, logistics hubs, or markets for exports. The danger lies not only in overt denial but also in the gradual conversion of commercial facilities into military assets, particularly in locations where China maintains exclusive rights, opaque agreements, or direct management of port infrastructure.

China's global logistics tracking system, LOGINK, exemplifies this risk. While ostensibly a commercial tool, it could facilitate intelligence collection on ship movements worldwide. Likewise, ports run by Chinese firms provide platforms from which PLA personnel—masked as civilian employees—could conduct cyber or electronic warfare against US or allied installations, target subsea cables, or compromise communications landing sites. Such facilities also offer opportunities to preposition containerized weapons, ammunition, and military equipment under the cover of commercial shipments, easing the PLAN's logistics burdens while ensuring access to forward-deployed caches during crises.

In ports where China serves as operator and manager, its security forces already provide site access and control. In practice, this could allow the PLA to act as the true guarantor of port security under the cover of commercial management. Beyond the ports themselves, Beijing's expanding presence at strategic chokepoints—the Panama Canal, Caribbean sea lanes, and the SLOCs off Africa's coast—creates opportunities to fuse scientific research missions with intelligence collection. Such dual-use efforts could directly inform Chinese strategies designed to delay, degrade, or deny US and allied naval deployments to the Pacific in the event of conflict.

Although a Chinese first strike against US targets in the Atlantic is unlikely, the risk of a PRC campaign designed to delay or impair US and allied responses to crises elsewhere—particularly in regions closer to Beijing's core interests—is very real. Port access and management provide China with the ability to preposition weapons and materiel under commercial cover, setting the conditions for escalation. Should global politics turn against Chinese interests, Beijing could employ economic

warfare as a precursor to kinetic conflict, leveraging its port network to impose costs on US freedom of maneuver.

The critical question, therefore, is what the United States and its allies can do to counter China's growing port footprint and its potential for an enduring Atlantic presence astride vital SLOCs and near sensitive military facilities. The answer lies in employing the full spectrum of national power to contest Beijing's BRI influence. Diplomatically, the Department of State and the Department of War (DOW) must coordinate across bureaucratic seams to ensure Chinese port projects are met with credible alternatives—whether in the form of development aid, financing packages, or cooperative infrastructure projects.

Financially, BRI's high-debt model presents an opening. Many recipient states will struggle to service their obligations to Beijing. US efforts to help countries refinance debt could alleviate that burden and reduce their vulnerability to Chinese coercion. Port management contracts must also be held to transparent, competitive standards, modeled on Western contracting practices and resistant to corruption.

Washington must recognize that it cannot, and should not, attempt to shoulder this burden alone. Partnerships with international stakeholders—including the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, both active port investors, as well as European Union (EU) shipping companies and private maritime security firms—can provide additional ballast to counterbalance Chinese influence. A coalition approach offers the best chance of preventing Beijing from translating commercial access into strategic dominance.

The DOW can dilute Chinese influence by disrupting the BRI infrastructure–materiel–training continuum that enables Beijing to establish and sustain a military presence alongside paramilitary PMC personnel. To contest this influence, the DOW must be prepared to modernize security cooperation and foreign military sales processes. Prioritizing inland nations over littoral states—where China could secure an Atlantic base—should be abandoned. The existential threat posed by terrorism can be load-shared with the African Union (AU), NATO, and the EU, freeing the United States, NATO, and key non-NATO partners to focus resources on countering Chinese inroads near critical bases and facilities.

Combatant commanders already face competing priorities, but if contesting Chinese influence in the Atlantic is to be elevated, new diplomatic associations must be forged—or old ones reinvigorated. Where PRC firms compete for ports and influence, combatant commands should demonstrate commitment to existing defense agreements through increased personnel deployments and, whenever possible, enhanced naval presence. At the same time, commands should accelerate the deployment of information warfare capabilities in contested regions.

China has seized much of the information space across its BRI partners. The United States and its allies must push back with targeted campaigns that expose Beijing's coercive practices, highlight when Chinese firms renege on development promises, and underscore the security risks inherent in opaque debt agreements. When PRC firms bid on port projects, their direct ties to the Chinese state should be made transparent, and the dangers of their dual-use designs should be emphasized through coordinated media and strategic messaging efforts.

The intelligence and surveillance risks posed by AI-enabled, internet-linked Chinese port equipment, construction firms, and management consortia threaten both current and future US and allied operations. PRC telecommunications giants such as Huawei are now ubiquitous across Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. These communications networks provide Beijing's decision makers with access to sensitive data streams. Artificial intelligence tools can mine such data to identify operational patterns, track the movements of ships, personnel, and aircraft, and even analyze the performance of US military exercises to inform countermeasure development.

The commercial ventures seeded by the PRC across the Atlantic provide ample cover for intelligence collection and personnel placement. These footholds allow Beijing to exploit data from passing US satellites, monitor Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders from US naval vessels, and gain a situational awareness advantage across the hemisphere. Countering these advantages will require vigilance. Washington must consistently remind partners who adopt both US and Chinese technologies that Beijing conducts systematic industrial espionage and willingly circumvents financial and legal norms for strategic gain.

Practical countermeasures include exposing and publicizing PRC intelligence-gathering efforts, deploying systems to jam or degrade Chinese surveillance tools, and expanding human intelligence networks to safeguard US forces while reinforcing liaison operations with host-nation militaries. In countries where China enjoys autonomy or outright control of ports, US and allied naval forces can employ freedom of navigation port calls to probe Chinese reactions and test the operational environment. But these measures cannot remain unilateral; they demand coalition action.

As Washington concentrates on competing with Beijing in the Pacific, the PRC has methodically moved its pieces into the Atlantic. What today appears commercial could quickly become military. Once that transition occurs, China will have not only new entrepôts but also voting blocs in the United Nations aligned with its policies and resistant to US presence. Sovereignty offers small states the justification to grant China military access, particularly if Washington is perceived as disinterested or disengaged. Countering Beijing's port capture and development strategy is therefore not simply an economic contest—it is a core requirement of

regional defense. The Monroe Doctrine itself faces a twenty-first-century test, as China pursues not only area-denial strategies in Asia but also area-opening strategies in the Atlantic. 🇺🇸

Dr. John Ringquist

Dr. Ringquist is a retired US Army lieutenant colonel, an Army Engineer and Africa Foreign Area Officer, who now serves as an instructor at the US Army's Command and General Staff School (CGSS) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His extensive military career included numerous diplomatic and strategic roles across Africa, serving as a defense attaché and the Chief of the Office of Security Cooperation in various embassies. A highly educated academic, he holds a PhD in History from the University of Kansas and a Masters of Public Policy and Administration from the University of Missouri. Before joining CGSS, he taught history at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Ringquist is a widely published expert on contemporary military affairs, African security issues, climate change, and the 79th United States Colored Infantry Regiment during the Civil War, known for his work on the nexus of environmental history, technology, and global security challenges.

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