

STRATEGIC HORIZONS

Volume 2 Number 1 2026

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New Great-Power Contest

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a Fragmented State

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A Vacuum of Strategy

America's African Retreat and the New Great-Power Contest

DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL

Abstract

This article argues that the United States is committing a strategic blunder of the first order by downgrading its diplomatic, informational, and military presence in Africa at the precise moment the continent has become a central arena for great-power competition. While America retreats, its primary adversaries—the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation—are executing a coordinated envelopment strategy. China employs patient economic and financial statecraft to create dependency, while Russia uses military and informational tools to foster instability and sever Africa's ties to the West. This analysis, framed by the DIMEFIL construct, posits that this dangerous strategic vacuum can and must be countered. A reversal does not require massive terrestrial deployments but a smarter application of power leveraging America's asymmetric advantage in space. The US Space Force offers the critical capabilities in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; secure communications; and informational warfare required to reassert American influence, expose adversary actions, and offer African nations a superior partnership.

It is one of the more exquisite ironies of our age that just as Africa ascends to the forefront of global strategic relevance, the United States—custodian of the liberal order and self-appointed steward of global stability—chooses this moment to avert its gaze. This is not mere oversight; it is a studied, almost philosophical, disengagement. A retreat not born of necessity, but of a peculiar blend of strategic torpor and moral fatigue.

Africa, once the cartographic afterthought of American foreign policy, now stands as the fulcrum upon which the balance of twenty-first-century geopolitics may well pivot. Its mineral wealth is not merely vast—it is indispensable. Its population is not merely growing—it is surging toward a demographic explosion that will define labor markets, consumer bases, and migratory flows for generations. And its 54 sovereign votes in the United Nations are not symbolic—they are decisive.

As Senior Enlisted Advisor John Raines of the National Guard Bureau aptly observed, “Africa is a continent of immense strategic significance. With its vast natural resources, growing populations, and critical geographic position, it is a focal point for both opportunity and challenge.”¹

¹ John Raines, keynote speech, African Senior Enlisted Leader Conference, Rabat, Morocco, 12 June 2025.

And yet, Washington slumbers.

This is not the benign neglect of yesteryear. It is a dereliction of duty in the face of manifest opportunity and patent threat. For while we retreat into the comforting abstractions of “strategic patience” and “resource prioritization,” our adversaries—unencumbered by democratic scruples or bureaucratic inertia—advance with the cold precision of states that understand power and intend to wield it.

Beijing, with its Belt and Road Initiative, does not merely construct roads and ports—it builds dependencies. Moscow, with its Wagnerian proxies and arms-for-access diplomacy, does not merely pursue influence—it seeks leverage. Both understand what we, in our strategic somnolence, appear to have unlearned: that the international order does not tolerate absence. Where American presence recedes, it does not leave behind emptiness—it leaves behind opportunity, swiftly seized by those less encumbered by deliberation. Influence, after all, is not static. It migrates—toward will, toward ambition, toward power willing to act.

To grasp the magnitude of this failure, one must turn to the diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL) framework—a taxonomy of statecraft that, in its comprehensiveness, exposes the full spectrum of our abdication.² Diplomatically, we are absent. Informationally, we are incoherent. Militarily, we are sporadic. Economically and financially, we are parsimonious. In intelligence and law enforcement, we are reactive rather than proactive. It is a symphony of strategic underperformance.

And yet, all is not lost. America retains asymmetric advantages that no rival can match—chief among them, our dominance in the space domain, our unmatched innovation ecosystem, and the enduring appeal of our values when we choose to live by them. But these advantages are not self-executing. They require will. They necessitate vision. They need, dare one say, leadership.

The hour is late, but not terminal. What is needed is not a new doctrine, but a return to first principles: that power unused is power lost, that influence unguided is influence squandered, and that the defense of a liberal world order begins not in abstraction, but in the dusty corridors of African capitals where the future is being negotiated—often without us.

² Cesar Augusto Rodriguez, Timothy Charles Walton, and Hyong Chu, “Putting the ‘FIL’ into ‘DIME’”: Growing Joint Understanding of the Instruments of Power,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 97, no. 2 (2020): 121–28, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/>.

The Dragon's Embrace: Economic Statecraft as Strategic Envelopment

Power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. But unlike nature, power does not merely fill—it reshapes. And in Africa, the void left by American strategic indifference is not being filled by benign actors or neutral forces. It is being occupied—methodically, deliberately, and with chilling sophistication—by a regime that understands the art of influence not as a blunt instrument, but as a scalpel.

To mistake China's African strategy for opportunism is to misread the moment entirely. This is not improvisation; it is orchestration. Beijing's approach is a masterclass in economic statecraft—an elegant, almost balletic, envelopment of an entire continent. Under the capacious and deliberately amorphous banner of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has not merely entered Africa; it has embedded itself.³

It does not arrive with the moralizing baggage of Western diplomacy—no lectures on transparency, no sermons on civil liberties. It arrives with cranes, concrete, and capital. It offers the seduction of infrastructure without the inconvenience of reform. And in so doing, it ensnares.

The loans are not aid; they are instruments of leverage. Their terms are not generous; they are predatory. The collateral is not abstract; it is sovereign. The case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port—ceded to China for 99 years after a debt default—is not an anomaly.⁴ It is a warning. In Africa, the same model is being replicated with unnerving precision. From Nairobi to Kampala, strategic assets—airports, railways, ports—are being quietly mortgaged to Beijing under terms that would make a Renaissance usurer blush.

But the ingenuity of China's strategy lies not merely in its physical footprint. It lies in its digital one. The telecommunications infrastructure built by Huawei and ZTE—often financed by Chinese state banks—constitutes the nervous system of Africa's emerging digital economies. These are not neutral platforms. They are, from Beijing's perspective, dual-use assets: commercial on the surface, intelligence-gathering beneath. The continent's data—its communications, its

³ Paul Nantulya, "China's United Front Strategy in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 5 September 2023, <https://africacenter.org/>.

⁴ Brahma Chellaney, "China's DebtTrap Diplomacy," *Project Syndicate*, 23 January 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>; and Brahma Chellaney, "Kenya revelations shine a light on China's predatory lending practices," *The Strategist*, 24 November 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>.

transactions, its metadata—flows through Chinese-built networks, stored on Chinese servers, governed by Chinese protocols.⁵

This is not just economic power. It is financial, technological, and covertly, intelligence power, applied with the precision of a surgeon and the patience of a strategist. It is a web of dependency that stretches from presidential palaces to the smartphones of ordinary citizens. And once woven, it is not easily undone.

What we are witnessing is not merely the rise of China in Africa. It is the quiet construction of a new geopolitical architecture—one in which sovereignty is conditional, transparency is optional, and allegiance is transactional. It is a world not of rules, but of arrangements. Not of alliances, but of entanglements.

And the West, in its languor, watches.

The Bear's Claw: Predation in the Guise of Partnership

If China is the architect of Africa's gilded dependency, Russia is its demolition crew. Where Beijing builds, Moscow burns. Where China seduces with infrastructure, Russia coerces with instability. It is a strategy not of construction, but of corrosion—a feral, improvisational campaign that trades in chaos and profits from collapse.

Russia's approach is not subtle, but it is effective. It does not pretend to offer development. It offers dominion. Through the thinly veiled fiction of "private military contractors"—most infamously the Wagner Group, now rebranded with the antiseptic sobriquet "Africa Corps"—Moscow has inserted itself into the very sinews of African sovereignty. The deal is brutally transactional: regime survival in exchange for resource extraction. Palace guards for gold mines. Shock troops for diamond fields. Political assassins for access to a nation's subterranean wealth.⁶

This is not diplomacy. It is plunder masquerading as partnership. It is neocolonialism stripped of even the pretense of a civilizing mission. The czarist impulse lives on, now clad in camouflage and armed with Kalashnikovs.

But Russia's genius—if one may use the term in its most cynical sense—lies in its mastery of the modern coup. It has refined the art of regime change into a repeatable algorithm. First, the informational barrage: a deluge of disinformation,

⁵ US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. *The New Big Brother: China and Digital Authoritarianism*, A Democratic Staff Report prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 21 July, 2020, 5, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/>.

⁶ John A. Lechner and Sergey Eledinov, "Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?," *Foreign Policy*, 7 February 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Julia Stanyard, *Mercenaries and Illicit Markets: Russia's Africa Corps and the Business of Conflict* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2025), <https://globalinitiative.net/>.

tailored with surgical precision to exploit colonial grievances, ethnic tensions, and economic despair. France is blamed. The United States is blamed. The United Nations is blamed. The truth is irrelevant; the narrative is everything.⁷

Once the informational battlefield is saturated, the political center collapses. A military faction, emboldened and embittered, seizes power. And then, like clockwork, Moscow appears—not as an invader, but as a savior. It offers recognition, weapons, and mercenaries. It provides legitimacy to the illegitimate. And in return, it receives *carte blanche* access to the nation's mineral lifeblood.⁸

For example, one observes in the Central African Republic not a mere foreign policy engagement, but a meticulously orchestrated theatrical performance of what might charitably be termed “postmodern colonialism,” devoid of even the Victorian era's fig leaf of a civilizing mission. The *modus operandi* is grimly precise: first, the informational artillery barrage. As detailed by Monika Pronczuk, the Kremlin's operatives, through figures such as Ephrem Yalike-Ngonzo, seeded the national consciousness with a calculated cacophony of calumny, painting France, the United States, and the United Nations as the malevolent architects of the CAR's persistent woes.⁹ This deluge of disinformation, disseminated through local media and online conduits, artfully inflamed pre-existing anticolonial sentiments and tribal resentments, meticulously preparing the ground for the subsequent political necrosis and the convenient emergence of a malleable, militaristic faction.

Having thus weakened the body politic to the point of collapse, Moscow then stepped onto the stage, not as an invader, for that would be too uncouth, but as a latter-day *deus ex machina*. The 2018 agreement for military assistance quickly transmogrified into a pervasive presence of Wagner Group mercenaries and “advisors”—a term that, in this context, strains credulity beyond its breaking point. These forces, often numbering in the hundreds, provided the Faustin-Archange Touadéra regime with the muscle to consolidate its precarious hold on power, a grotesque *quid pro quo* for unencumbered access to the nation's geological patrimony. The AP's reporting on Russia circumventing sanctions to funnel weaponry into the region lays bare the transactional core: in exchange for arms and the brutal services of these modern praetorians, Russia secures *carte blanche* over the

⁷ Monika Pronczuk, “A former staffer exposes how Russia's disinformation machine worked in Central African Republic,” *AP News*, 21 November 2024, <https://apnews.com/>.

⁸ Monika Pronczuk, John Leicester and Michael Biesecker, “Russia skirts Western sanctions to ramp up its military footprint in Africa,” *AP News*, 10 June 2025, <https://apnews.com/>; and Ryan Bauer et al., *Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa: Examining Changes and Impacts Since the Wagner Rebellion* (Santa Monica: RAND, May 2025), <https://www.rand.org/>.

⁹ Pronczuk, “A former staffer exposes how Russia's disinformation machine worked.”

CAR's diamond and gold mines, and indeed, timber concessions, a rapacious extraction that strips the nation of its future for immediate, nefarious gain.¹⁰

This is the raw application of military and informational power—deployed with ruthless efficiency and minimal cost. It is a strategy of maximum disruption for minimum investment. And it is working.

The West, meanwhile, dithers. It issues statements. It convenes summits. It wrings its hands. But it does not act. And in the vacuum of action, Russia thrives.

What we are witnessing is not merely the erosion of Western influence. It is the deliberate dismantling of the rules-based international order, one coup at a time. Russia is not building an empire. It is building a network of client states—fragile, dependent, and hostile to the West. It is not exporting ideology. It is spreading instability.

And unless we awaken to this reality, we may soon find that the map of Africa has been redrawn—not in borders, but in allegiances. Not in ink, but in blood.

The Pincer and the Cage: A Geopolitical Convergence

In the grand theater of geopolitics, there are moments when disparate actors, driven by divergent motives, nonetheless converge upon a shared objective. Such is the case in Africa today, where the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation—two authoritarian powers with distinct historical legacies and strategic temperaments—have found common cause in the quiet dismantling of the postwar liberal order. Their methods differ in texture, but their choreography is unmistakably coordinated. Together, they form a strategic pincer movement, a geopolitical vise that is slowly, inexorably, closing around the African continent.

This is not the stuff of Cold War nostalgia, nor is it a crude revival of nineteenth-century imperialism. It is something more insidious: a new form of great-power competition that cloaks itself in the language of partnership while practicing the politics of domination. It is a “good cop, bad cop” routine on a continental scale, with African nations cast not as partners, but as subjects—interrogated, manipulated, and ultimately subdued.

China plays the role of the benevolent builder. It arrives with the trappings of modernity: gleaming infrastructure projects, digital connectivity, and the promise of economic uplift. But beneath the surface lies a more calculating design. The ports, railways, and telecommunications networks are not gifts; they are instruments of leverage. The loans that finance them are not investments; they are shackles.

¹⁰ Sam Mednick, “The US-Russia battle for influence in Africa plays out in Central African Republic,” *AP News*, 11 September 2024, <https://www.ap.org/>.

And the digital infrastructure—ubiquitous, opaque, and state-controlled—serves not only to connect but to surveil. Beijing's strategy is not conquest by force, but by fiber-optic cable. It is the construction of a gilded cage, one whose bars are made of debt, data, and dependency.¹¹

Russia, by contrast, dispenses with subtlety. It is the feral disruptor, the geopolitical arsonist. Where China builds, Russia breaks. It inserts itself into fragile states through the backdoor of instability—arming militias, propping up juntas, and trading security for sovereignty. Its currency is not capital, but coercion. Its diplomacy is conducted not in embassies, but in barracks. And its objective is not development, but disruption. It severs the ties that bind African nations to the West—military, political, and ideological—and replaces them with a crude bargain: loyalty in exchange for survival.¹²

Together, these strategies are not merely parallel—they are symbiotic. China creates the dependencies; Russia ensures there is no alternative. The Chinese build the cage; the Russians herd the unsuspecting into it. One offers the illusion of progress, the other the reality of fear. And both, in their own way, work to peel the continent away from the democratic, rules-based order and integrate it into a new sphere of influence—one defined not by law, but by power; not by norms, but by necessity.

This emerging order is not merely illiberal—it is post-sovereign. In it, the independence of nations is conditional, their autonomy negotiable, their futures mortgaged to foreign capitals. It is a world in which might makes right, and where the West, through its own strategic lassitude, has ceded the initiative.

The implications are profound. Africa is not a peripheral theater. It is the demographic and resource frontier of the twenty-first century. To lose it to authoritarian influence is not merely to forfeit markets or minerals—it is to surrender the ideological high ground in the defining contest of our time. It is to allow the rules-based order to be hollowed out from its periphery, until it collapses at its core.

The moment is critical, but the outcome is not yet foregone. What is required is not nostalgia for a bygone era of unchallenged primacy, but a sober recognition that the contest is underway—and that it must be met with resolve, resources, and a renewed sense of purpose. For if we do not engage, others will. And they already are.

¹¹ Suneel Kumar, "China's Digital Expansionism in Africa and the US Counter-Strategies," *Insight on Africa* 16, no. 2 (July 2024): 146–65, <https://doi.org/>; and Bulelani Jili, "The Spread of Chinese Surveillance Tools in Africa: A Focus on Ethiopia and Kenya," in *Africa-Europe Cooperation and Digital Transformation*, ed. Chux Daniels, Benedikt Erforth, and Chloe Teevan (London: Routledge, 2022).

¹² Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, commercial concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure," *Brookings Institute*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/>; and Samuel Ramani, "Russia's New Hybrid Warfare in Africa," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

America's Abdication: A DIMEFIL Autopsy

In the annals of strategic misjudgment, few errors are as damning—or as baffling—as voluntary withdrawal from a theater of active competition. It is not merely a lapse in judgment; it is a conscious abdication of responsibility, a retreat not from war but from relevance. And in Africa, the United States has chosen, with astonishing consistency, to vacate the field.¹³

This is not a tactical repositioning. It is not a recalibration of priorities. It is a systemic failure—a collapse across the full spectrum of national power, as defined by the DIMEFIL construct. Each pillar, once a source of American strength, now stands diminished, neglected, or altogether abandoned.

Let us begin with diplomacy—the first and most visible currency of power. Presence, in international affairs, is not symbolic; it is substantive. The act of showing up, of maintaining embassies, consulates, and high-level engagement, is not mere protocol—it is projection. It signals seriousness. It affirms commitment. And it is precisely this presence that the United States has allowed to atrophy.

The closure of consulates, the reduction of diplomatic staff, the absence of sustained engagement—these are not administrative decisions. They are strategic signals.¹⁴ And African leaders, attuned to the nuances of global courtship, have read them with perfect clarity. A shuttered embassy is not a neutral act; it is a declaration of disinterest. A vacant ambassadorial post is not a bureaucratic oversight; it is a message of marginalization.

Contrast this with our adversaries. China has institutionalized its diplomatic offensive through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)—a sprawling, meticulously choreographed summit that convenes dozens of African heads of state, not as supplicants, but as honored guests.¹⁵ Russia, too, has followed suit, hosting its own high-profile Africa summits, complete with military parades, economic pledges, and the unmistakable theater of geopolitical courtship.¹⁶

¹³ Andrew Milburn, “Out of Africa: The Strategic Mistake of US Disengagement from Somalia,” *Modern War Institute*, 16 September 2021, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>; Ishaan Tharoor, “The U.S. Is in Retreat in West Africa’s Sahel,” *Washington Post*, 24 April 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>; and John J. Chin and Haleigh Bartos, “Rethinking U.S. Africa Policy amid Changing Geopolitical Realities,” *Texas National Security Review* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 114–33, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁴ Jessica Donati, “Trump Inherits US Embassies in Africa Lacking Staff, Resources,”

¹⁵ Liam Karr, “Africa File, September 12, 2024: China-Africa Forum (FOCAC) Takeaways; Mali and Russia Prepare to Avenge Defeat in Northern Mali,” *Critical Threats*, 12 September 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/>.

¹⁶ Paul Frimpong, “Relevance of FOCAC in the Context of ‘Africa+1’ Summitry,” *Africa-China Centre for Policy & Advisory*, June 2024, <https://africachinacentre.org/>.

These are not mere photo opportunities. They are rituals of influence. They are the architecture of alignment. And while Beijing and Moscow build permanent diplomatic infrastructure, Washington offers little more than episodic visits and reactive statements. We have not merely lost the narrative—we have forfeited the stage.

This is not a failure of resources. It is a failure of imagination. A failure to grasp that diplomacy is not a luxury to be indulged in times of peace, but a weapon to be wielded in times of competition. And in Africa, the competition is not looming—it is underway.

If diplomacy is the visible architecture of influence, then information is its animating spirit. And here, too, the United States has chosen retreat over engagement, silence over assertion. In the informational domain, our insouciance is not merely negligent—it is breathtaking.

While Russian troll farms churn out disinformation with industrial efficiency, and Chinese state media saturates the airwaves with slickly produced paeans to authoritarian “stability,” America’s voice has grown faint, even apologetic. Institutions once forged in the crucible of ideological contest—Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—now languish, underfunded and underutilized, their reach diminished, their mission diluted.

This erosion did not happen overnight. It was institutionalized in 1999, when the once-formidable US Information Agency (USIA)—an instrument forged in the ideological furnace of the Cold War—was quietly folded into the Department of State. What followed was not integration but dilution. Bereft of its independence, stripped of its strategic clarity, and buried under layers of bureaucratic inertia, the USIA’s mission was reduced to a shadow of its former self. As Nicholas J. Cull and Juliana Geran Pilon document, the agency’s demise was less a policy decision than a political afterthought—an act of bureaucratic euthanasia carried out in an era that mistakenly believed the war of ideas had been won.¹⁷

Thus, the deeper failure is not merely institutional—it is philosophical. We have ceased to wage the battle of ideas. We have not articulated, with clarity or conviction, why a partnership with the United States and the West offers a better future than the authoritarian alternative. We have allowed the narrative terrain to be defined by our adversaries, reacting to their lies rather than asserting our truths. In doing so, we have ceded the most vital ground of all: the imagination of the next generation.

Africa’s population is the youngest in the world—a generation rising. With a median age under 20, it is a continent of students, of digital natives, of citizens

¹⁷ Nicholas J. Cull and Juliana Geran Pilon, “The Crisis In U.S. Public Diplomacy: The Demise of the U.S. Information Agency,” in *Case Studies Working Group Report*, ed. Richard Weitz (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012): 543–642, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

whose political and cultural identities are still in formation.¹⁸ And into this crucible of emerging consciousness, our adversaries have poured a torrent of anti-American invective—tailored, targeted, and relentless. We, by contrast, have unilaterally disarmed. In the contest for hearts and minds, we have chosen neither.

And then there is the military domain—perhaps the most visible, and certainly the most calamitous, of our retreats.

The recent expulsion of American forces from Niger, and with it the forfeiture of Air Base 201, is not a mere logistical inconvenience. It is a self-inflicted wound of staggering proportions. This was not an outpost in the wilderness. It was the billion-dollar linchpin of our intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) architecture across North and West Africa. It was our eye in the sky, our ear to the ground, our forward presence in a region teetering on the edge of jihadist resurgence.¹⁹

To abandon it is not a tactical repositioning—it is a strategic capitulation. It is the deliberate blinding of our intelligence apparatus. It is the surrender of terrain not to a superior force, but to inertia and indecision. And the consequences are immediate and dire.

Even before our final departure, Russian Africa Corps personnel were reportedly cohabiting Air Base 101 with American forces—a surreal and humiliating tableau that perfectly encapsulates the new geopolitical reality.²⁰ We are not being outgunned; we are being outmaneuvered. We are not being expelled by force; we are being displaced by will.

In this context, the role of space-based tools like the Tactical Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Tracking (TacSRT) becomes even more critical. Brig Gen Jacob Middleton, commander of US Space Forces Europe–Africa, noted that the TacSRT program’s ability to deliver intelligence “at scale and at the speed of relevance is significant.” During the withdrawal from Air Base 201, the TacSRT was employed to help security forces monitor for potential threats—one of the few operational examples publicly cited. “Anything where you need information at speed and relevance about what’s going on around you is what I’m being asked to provide,”

¹⁸ Tariq Khokhar, “Chart: The World’s Youngest Populations Are in Africa,” *Data Blog*, 11 July 2016, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/>; and Nicolas Reuge et al., *Transforming Education in Africa: An Evidence-based Overview and Recommendations for Long-term Improvements* (New York: UNICEF, 2021), <https://www.unicef.org/>.

¹⁹ Charles Welty, “US Completes Withdrawal from AB 201,” *Air Force News*, 6 August 2024, <https://www.af.mil/>; Christopher Korkor, “The Impact of US Withdrawal from the Sahel on Counterterrorism Operational Effectiveness,” *APSA Preprints*, 27 March 2025, <https://doi.org/>; and Philip Reynolds, “Security Conditionality: Evidence and Effectiveness,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 18, no. 1 (2025): 89–116, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁰ Reuters, “Russian troops enter base housing US military in Niger, US official says,” *Voice of America*, 3 May 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/>.

Middleton said.²¹ This capability, while not a substitute for physical presence, demonstrates the growing importance of space-enabled situational awareness in contested environments.

In forfeiting Air Base 201, we have traded a forward position for a distant perch. We have exchanged proximity for abstraction. And in doing so, we have crippled our ability to understand, anticipate, and act. We are now spectators in a theater where we once held the stage.

This is not the natural ebb and flow of empire. It is the conscious dismantling of presence, the abdication of responsibility, the retreat of a superpower not from overextension, but from conviction.

In the economic and financial domains, the United States offers a model that is, in theory, unimpeachable—market-driven, transparent, and rooted in the rule of law. But in practice, it is often ponderous, fragmented, and ill-suited to the exigencies of geopolitical competition. We champion private-sector investment, and rightly so. Initiatives like the first Trump administration's Prosper Africa are designed to catalyze commercial engagement, to unlock the dynamism of American enterprise.²² But the American private sector is not a geopolitical instrument—it is a fiduciary entity. It demands stability, legal clarity, and predictable returns. These are virtues in a mature market; they are liabilities in a volatile one.²³

China, by contrast, is unburdened by such constraints. It does not wait for market signals or conduct due diligence. It dispatches capital with the speed of command. A single directive from Beijing can green-light a multibillion-dollar infrastructure project—no shareholder meetings, no environmental reviews, no congressional oversight. To an African leader facing restive populations, crumbling infrastructure, and the ever-present specter of political instability, the choice is not ideological—it is temporal. The American offer is principled but slow. The Chinese offer is expedient and unconditional.²⁴

The US Development Finance Corporation, though well-intentioned, is shackled by congressional mandates, risk ceilings, and bureaucratic inertia. US aid programs, while noble in aspiration, are often diffuse, encumbered by layers of compliance, and devoid of the visceral impact that a new highway, a gleaming dam, or a functioning

²¹ Quoted in Greg Hedley, "From Europe to Pacific, Space Commanders Want More Commercial Data," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 12 December 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

²² Aubrey Hruby, *Making the Most of Prosper Africa: Leveraging US Competitiveness in African Markets* (Washington: Atlantic Council, March 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

²³ Ellen J. Odoner et al., *Fiduciary Duties of Corporate Directors in Uncertain Times*, Millstein Center Director Papers (New York: Columbia Law School, August 2017), <https://millstein.law.columbia.edu/>.

²⁴ Tim Zajontz, *The Political Economy of China's Infrastructure Development in Africa: Capital, State Agency, Debt* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

power grid can deliver. The United States offers process; China offers product. And in the theater of perception, product wins.²⁵

But perhaps the most quietly devastating consequence of our retreat is the degradation of our intelligence and law enforcement capabilities—the final, indispensable levers of national power.

Intelligence is not conjured from satellites alone. It is cultivated in whispers, in relationships, in trust painstakingly built over years. It is the CIA officer embedded in a local service, the DEA agent nursing a source in a roadside café, the liaison officer who knows which colonel can be believed and which cannot. These networks are not scalable; they are perishable. And when embassies are downsized, when military bases are shuttered, when presence is replaced by posture, these networks wither.

The result is a blindness that is both operational and strategic. Our ability to track the illicit flows of arms, gold, and narcotics—the lifeblood of both jihadist insurgencies and Russian mercenary operations—is severely compromised. The architecture of transnational crime, once mapped and monitored, now operates in the shadows we have chosen to vacate.

We speak often of combating terrorism and organized crime. We issue statements, publish strategies, and convene task forces. But these are declarations without deployment. The field has been abandoned. And in our absence, malign actors flourish.

This is not merely a lapse in execution. It is a failure of will. A superpower does not lose influence because it is outmatched. It loses influence because it ceases to compete. And in Africa, we have ceased to compete.

The High Ground: Reengagement Through the US Space Force

The path to renewed American engagement in Africa does not lie through the dust-choked corridors of expeditionary warfare, nor through the weary repetition of nation-building experiments that have too often collapsed under their own contradictions. It lies, rather, in the intelligent application of power—precise, persistent, and unencumbered by the liabilities of physical presence. It lies in space.

²⁵ James Roberts and Brett Schaefer, *The U.S. Development Finance Corporation Is Failing to Counter China* (Washington: Heritage Foundation, 17 September 2021), <https://www.heritage.org/>; Shayerah I. Akhtar and Nick M. Brown, *U.S. International Development Finance: Corporation: Overview and Issues*, R47006 (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 10 January 2022), <https://www.congress.gov/>; and A.V. Boreyko, A.A. Vernigora, and S.V. Kislitsyn, “The Infrastructure Competition between the United States and China in Developing Countries,” *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92 (2022): S627–35, <https://doi.org/>.

In this domain, America remains unchallenged. And yet, paradoxically, it is the newest and least understood branch of our armed services—the US Space Force—that holds the key to a sustainable and strategically coherent reengagement with the African continent. Its role is not ancillary. It is foundational.

A recent example of this foundational role occurred on 27 May 2025, when Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTTF–HOA) service members participated in the first-ever US Space Force training held at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti. Hosted by the National Security Space Institute, the course introduced joint warfighters to the fundamentals of space operations—including space domain awareness, space law, and both offensive and defensive space capabilities. “It is critically important that joint warfighters understand space capabilities and are able to integrate them into their everyday joint plans and operations,” noted Joseph Spegele, an instructor with the institute. This training not only enhanced the operational readiness of CJTTF–HOA personnel but also underscored the Space Force’s growing role in supporting Africa Command’s mission to promote regional stability and protect US and partner interests.²⁶

The first and most immediate contribution is in the realm of space-based ISR. As our terrestrial footprint contracts, our need for persistent situational awareness expands. Satellites, unlike embassies or forward operating bases, do not require host nation approval. They do not negotiate status-of-forces agreements. They do not get expelled. They orbit.

And from that orbit, they see everything.

This is not a poor substitute for boots on the ground. It is, in many respects, a superior capability. National technical means can be focused on high-value targets, while the explosion in commercial satellite imagery—driven by private-sector innovation—has democratized access to near-real-time intelligence. The result is a level of transparency that would have been inconceivable a decade ago.

We can now monitor, with forensic precision, the dredging of a Chinese-built port in East Africa and determine whether it is being deepened to accommodate People’s Liberation Army Navy warships. We can track the convoys of the Russian Africa Corps as they shuttle looted gold from the Central African Republic to

²⁶ Micheala Maldonado, “Expanding horizons in East Africa: CJTTF–HOA members train with US Space Force” (press release, Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa, 27 May 2025), <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

airstrips in Libya. We can map the logistical arteries of predation and influence, and we can do so without ever setting foot on contested soil.²⁷

This is not merely intelligence—it is ground truth. And it must inform every dimension of American statecraft: every diplomatic démarche, every economic sanction, every military contingency. It is the connective tissue that binds our instruments of power into a coherent strategy.

In an era where presence is perilous and access is denied, space is the high ground. And it is from this vantage that America must begin its return.

If space-based intelligence is the eye of American power, then secure communications and position, navigation, and timing (PNT) are its nervous system—silent, invisible, and indispensable. And it is here, in the realm of orbital infrastructure, that the United States possesses not only a technological edge, but a diplomatic instrument of rare potency.²⁸

The US Space Force, often caricatured as a futuristic abstraction, is in fact the guarantor of the most fundamental enablers of modern statecraft. Without secure communications, there is no command and control. Without reliable PNT, there is no modern economy, no precision agriculture, no synchronized logistics, no coordinated security operations.²⁹ These are not luxuries; they are the sinews of sovereignty.

The establishment of US Space Forces in Europe—Space Forces Africa (SPACEFOREUR–AF) further underscores this strategic shift. Activated at Ramstein Air Base on 8 December 2023, SPACEFOREUR–AF is the US Space Force component field command supporting both US European Command and US Africa Command. With a mission scope spanning 51 countries in Europe and 53 in Africa, it is singularly responsible for integrating space forces across two continents. Its operations include space situational awareness and security cooperation, all aimed at enhancing interoperability, resilience, and the long-term sustainability of

²⁷ John R. Hoehn, *Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Design for Great Power Competition*, R46389 (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 4 June 2020), <https://www.congress.gov/>; John Vandiver, “US should be wary of potential for greater Chinese military use of Africa ports, report argues,” *Stars and Stripes*, 13 March 2025, <https://www.stripes.com/>; and US Space Force, “Space Delta 7 - Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance,” April 2024, <https://www.spaceforce.mil/>.

²⁸ Peter L. Hays and James J. Wirtz, “Enabling National Security through Space: Intelligence and Communications,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Space Security*, ed. Saadia M. Pekkanen and P.J. Blount (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024): 704–25, <https://doi.org/>.

²⁹ Cordell DeLaPena, Jr., “Space Industry Days MilComm & PNT (MCPNT)” (presentation, AFCEA Space Industry Days Briefing, 19 October 2023), <https://afcea-la.org/>; and *Challenges to Security in Space: Space Reliance in an Era of Competition and Expansion, 2022* (Washington: Defense Intelligence Agency, March 2022), <https://www.dia.mil/>.

space. In doing so, SPACEFOREUR–AF plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the international order and safeguarding allied interests from Iceland to South Africa.³⁰

By offering African partners access to resilient, jam-resistant satellite communications and GPS-based PNT, the United States provides more than a service—it offers a strategic choice. It empowers African militaries to coordinate counterterrorism operations without fear of interception. It enables governments to build digital economies on a foundation that is open, interoperable, and governed by the rule of law.

If the United States seeks to lead in Africa through orbital means, it must go beyond observation and invest in cooperative space partnerships with African nations. While ISR and SDA provide American policy makers with critical strategic awareness, building trust with regional partners demands shared capability and access. Nigeria's National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) and South Africa's South African National Space Agency (SANSA) already operate dual-use satellite programs and collaborate with international partners.³¹ These institutions represent valuable nodes for capacity building, data-sharing protocols, and technical cooperation. Engaging them in joint initiatives—not just as recipients of intelligence, but as partners in space-enabled development—offers both strategic and diplomatic dividends. Through programs such as the GPS modernization, satellite-based environmental monitoring, and co-development of earth observation platforms, the United States can empower African states while reinforcing a rule-of-law-based space architecture.

As emphasized by US Space Forces Europe and Africa leadership, “space is a team sport.” The success of space-based strategy in Africa will depend not only on American capabilities but also on the strength of partnerships—with allies, commercial entities, and regional actors. This collaborative approach is not optional; it is foundational to resilience, interoperability, and long-term strategic advantage.³²

³⁰ Chris Gordon, “Presence Matters’: Space Force Activates New Component for Europe and Africa,” *Air & Space Force Magazine*, 8 December 2023, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

³¹ Rose Croshier, “Recommendations for US–Africa Space Cooperation and Development,” *Center for Global Development Brief*, March 2022, <https://www.cgdev.org/>; Temidayo Oniosun, “Why the United States needs a robust strategy for space cooperation with Africa,” *AfricaSource* (blog), 22 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>; Chigomezyo M. Ngwira et al., “Enhancing Scientific Capacity in Africa – A Report on the 2023 International Space Weather Initiative School and the African Geophysical Society Annual Conference,” *JGR Space Physics* 130, no. 2 (February 2025): e2024JA033447, <https://doi.org/>; and Innocent E. Bello, “Space Technology and Geospatial Intelligence for National Security, Good Governance and Development in Africa: A Paradigm Shift,” *World Journal of Innovation and Modern Technology* 9, no. 4 (2025): 36–48, <https://www.researchgate.net/>.

³² Jacob Middleton, “The U.S. Space Force: Partnering to Win” (keynote speech, GOVSATCOM Conference, Luxembourg, 13 March 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/>.

And herein lies the crux: this is not merely a technical decision. It is a declaration of alignment.

The alternative is China's BeiDou system—a closed, opaque, and politically contingent architecture. To build one's national infrastructure atop BeiDou is to tether one's sovereignty to the whims of Beijing. It is to accept that one's communications, navigation, and timing—indeed, one's very ability to function in the modern world—are subject to the strategic calculus of a foreign power.³³

The American GPS constellation, by contrast, operates under a transparent legal framework, with public documentation, civilian access, and a track record of reliability unmarred by coercion. It is not a tool of domination; it is a platform of partnership.

The US Space Force's emphasis on commercial partnerships mirrors the broader evolution of the space domain. As Brigadier General Middleton noted, "If we had left the internet solely to the military, it would not meet today's requirements."³⁴ The same logic applies to space: commercial innovation drives down launch costs, accelerates development, and enhances resilience.

In this sense, the provision of secure space-based services is not a peripheral gesture—it is a central pillar of alliance-building. It is a nonkinetic, nonintrusive, and profoundly consequential way to bind nations together in a shared architecture of trust. It is diplomacy by orbital infrastructure.

And in a world where influence is increasingly measured not by the number of boots on the ground but by the number of satellites overhead, this is the kind of power that endures.

If space-based ISR is the eye, and secure communications the nervous system, then space domain awareness (SDA) is the conscience of American space power—the capacity not merely to see, but to understand, to anticipate, and, if necessary, to deter.³⁵ It is the quintessential great-power mission, and nowhere is its relevance more acute than in the skies above Africa.

For too long, we have treated orbital space as a neutral backdrop to terrestrial affairs. That illusion is no longer tenable. The orbits above Africa are now contested

³³ Rumi Aoyama, "China's dichotomous BeiDou strategy: led by the party for national deployment, driven by the market for global reach," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 11, no. 2 (2022): 282–99, <https://doi.org/>; and Shannon Vaughn, "LEO Wars: China's Orbital Challenge to the US-led Digital Order," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 29 April 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/>.

³⁴ Middleton, "The U.S. Space Force."

³⁵ Kevin Pollpeter, *Space Domain Awareness as a Strategic Counterweight* (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 2021), <https://www.cna.org/>; and Dennis M. Rice, *Deterrence and Space Strategy: A Framework from the Study of History and Theory*, Schriever Paper 2 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, December 2023), 46, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

terrain—crowded, surveilled, and increasingly militarized. To cede this domain is not merely to forfeit visibility; it is to surrender initiative. And in a theater where our terrestrial access is constrained, orbital superiority becomes not a luxury, but a necessity.

We must deny our adversaries sanctuary in space. That begins with the most fundamental act of sovereignty in the space domain: knowing what is up there. Every Chinese and Russian satellite that traverses the skies above the continent must be tracked, cataloged, and characterized. This is not paranoia; it is prudence.

Is that new Chinese satellite a benign meteorological platform—or is it conducting multispectral reconnaissance of Congolese rare-earth deposits, mapping the mineral arteries of tomorrow's supply chains? Is that Russian satellite relaying targeting data to Wagner Group artillery units in the Sahel, transforming orbital telemetry into terrestrial lethality? These are not academic questions. They are the operational queries of a new era of conflict, where the boundary between space and Earth is not a barrier, but a conduit.

To ignore these questions is to allow our adversaries to operate with impunity. To answer them is to impose friction, to reintroduce cost into their calculus. A robust SDA capability allows us to map their orbital order of battle, to detect patterns, to infer intent. And should deterrence fail, it allows us to hold those assets at risk—not recklessly, but deliberately, as part of a calibrated strategy of escalation control.

In this sense, SDA is not merely a technical function. It is a strategic imperative. It is the orbital equivalent of maritime domain awareness in the Cold War: the quiet, constant vigilance that underwrites deterrence and enables diplomacy. It is the difference between being a spectator and being a sovereign actor in the most consequential domain of the twenty-first century.

To lose the ground war is grave. To lose the high ground is fatal.

In the modern contest of nations, the battlefield is not only physical—it is perceptual. The struggle is not merely for territory, but for truth. And in this war of narratives, space is not a passive backdrop; it is a decisive front. The United States must recognize that its space assets are not only instruments of surveillance or deterrence—they are weapons in the informational war, and they must be wielded as such.

The Russian “firehose of falsehood”—a relentless torrent of disinformation, half-truths, and manufactured grievances—cannot be countered with silence or bureaucratic delay. It must be met with a flood of unassailable truth. And that truth, increasingly, comes from above.

When a Russian-backed warlord commits an atrocity in the Central African Republic, and Moscow's propaganda machine blames it on French peacekeepers or local forces, it is not a press release that will win the argument. It is commercial

satellite imagery, timestamped and geolocated, showing the movement of vehicles, the burn patterns of villages, the presence of uniformed personnel. It is visual evidence, rapidly analyzed and declassified, that can expose the lie to the world within hours.

This is not science fiction. It is a capability we already possess. What we lack is the doctrine—the institutional will to use it proactively, not reactively. We must move beyond the defensive crouch of rebuttal and embrace the offensive posture of strategic truth.

To that end, the US government—through the Space Force and the Intelligence Community—should establish a Strategic Truth Cell: a dedicated unit tasked with the rapid exploitation of overhead imagery to expose malign activity. Its mission would be simple but profound: to make the invisible visible, to make the deniable undeniable.

To move from concept to capability, the Strategic Truth Cell must be situated at the intersection of technical collection and public diplomacy. A joint construct bridging US Space Force, US Space Command, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency would ensure it has access to the full spectrum of national technical means. The Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Open Source, in coordination with the National Declassification Center, could provide the requisite authorities for rapid imagery declassification. Modeled in part on the Global Engagement Center's coordination function for counter-disinformation, the Strategic Truth Cell would fuse classified and commercial satellite imagery, generate geospatial narratives, and push products to Department of State posts, partner governments, and African media. Its mission would be clear: to visually document and expose malign activity in near-real time—making deniability impossible and truth strategically consequential.

Imagine a regularly published report, disseminated across African capitals and global media, replete with time-lapse satellite photos showing the environmental devastation wrought by an unregulated Chinese cobalt mine. Imagine tracking the flight path of an illicit Iranian arms shipment as it snakes its way through Sudan into the Sahel. Imagine exposing the construction of a covert military facility masquerading as a civilian port.

This is not propaganda. It is truth as strategy—truth as deterrent, truth as alliance-builder, truth as the antidote to authoritarian narrative warfare. In a world awash in lies, the ability to show what is actually happening—objectively, visually, incontrovertibly—is a form of power more potent than any press conference or diplomatic communique.

And space is the ultimate arbiter of that truth. It sees what others hide. It remembers what others deny. It is the final high ground—not just of military advantage, but of moral clarity.

Conclusion: A Choice Between Strategy and Decline

What currently passes for American policy toward Africa is not a strategy—it is a symptom. A symptom of geopolitical fatigue, of a superpower grown weary of its own responsibilities, and of a political class increasingly seduced by the illusion that we can choose the theaters in which history will unfold. But history, like our adversaries, is not so obliging.

While we debate, they act. While we deliberate, they deploy. The Chinese Communist Party and the Kremlin have already made their choice. They have designated Africa—not as a humanitarian project, not as a peripheral concern, but as a central front in their long-term campaign to dismantle the American-led international order. They see what we refuse to acknowledge: that Africa, with its vast reserves of critical minerals, its youthful population, and its strategic geography, is not a continent to be pitied or patronized—it is a prize to be won.

To pretend otherwise is not merely naïve—it is delusional. It is to substitute wishful thinking for policy, and inertia for strategy. And the cost of that delusion will not be measured in abstract metrics. It will be measured in the realignment of global power.

We now face a stark and consequential choice.

We can continue our feckless retreat, content to issue moralistic pronouncements from the sidelines while a continent of 1.4 billion people is methodically absorbed into an authoritarian, extractive orbit. This is the path of least resistance. It is also the path to strategic irrelevance.

Follow it, and we will awaken to a world where the global supply chains for cobalt, lithium, and rare earths run through Beijing; where the maritime chokepoints of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Guinea are patrolled by the People's Liberation Army Navy; where the United Nations General Assembly becomes a reliable echo chamber for anti-Western resolutions, its voting bloc shaped not by shared values but by transactional allegiance.

Or, we can choose to compete.

A renewed American engagement in Africa—anchored not in nostalgia, nor in the burdens of past misadventures, but in the technological supremacy of the US Space Force—is not a call for empire. It is a call for clarity. For realism. For the sober recognition that in the twenty-first century, influence is not sustained by sentiment, nor by the inertia of past prestige. It is sustained by presence. By capability. By the ability to see farther, to act faster, and to offer more than our adversaries can promise.

Power today is not merely projected by boots on the ground. It is projected by satellites in orbit—by the quiet, persistent hum of a constellation that sees what others cannot, that connects what others cannot reach, and that enables action where others are paralyzed by distance or denial. The high ground of space is not metaphorical. It is literal. And it is from this vantage that the United States can reassert its leadership—not through coercion, but through competence.

By leveraging our dominance in this domain, we can offer African nations something neither China nor Russia can: a partnership that enhances sovereignty rather than erodes it. We can provide secure communications that protect national command authority. We can deliver actionable intelligence that helps African forces defeat the very insurgencies our adversaries quietly fund. We can expose the truth—visually, incontrovertibly—when propaganda seeks to enslave minds and rewrite reality.

This is not charity. It is strategy. It is the foundation of a new compact—one built not on dependency, but on mutual interest. Not on paternalism, but on partnership.

And let us be clear: history will not judge kindly an abdication born not of necessity, but of a catastrophic failure of imagination and will. The tools are in our hands. The advantage is ours to lose. The only question is whether we will summon the resolve to use it.

The time for strategic awakening is not tomorrow. It is now.

To revitalize American engagement in Africa and assert leadership in the new great-power competition, the following actions are recommended:

- Institutionalize orbital cooperation with African space agencies (NASRDA, SANSa, etc.) through bilateral memoranda of understanding, capacity-building grants, and joint space missions.
- Stand up a Strategic Truth Cell as a joint unit, empowered to declassify and disseminate satellite imagery that exposes malign state behavior.
- Expand SPACEFOREUR–AF initiatives to include regional liaison officers embedded with African Union space and defense coordination bodies.
- Leverage commercial satellite constellations and cloud-based geospatial analytics platforms to support counterterrorism, anti-trafficking, and anti-exploitation efforts in real time.

This path does not require occupation or coercion. It demands presence, persistence, and the strategic application of truth—delivered at the speed of relevance from the high ground of space. 🦅

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Will Libya Ever Be Whole Again?

Prospects for Unity and Stability in a Fragmented State

DR. ACHALA GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL

Abstract

Libya's post-Gaddafi fracture into rival eastern and western power centers presents a critical test case for American statecraft in managing regional instability. This article examines whether Libya's reunification remains achievable amid entrenched political divisions, competing foreign interventions, and militia fragmentation. Analysis reveals that external actors—Russia, Turkey, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates—have sustained Libya's partition through proxy support, transforming the conflict into a broader great-power contest with implications for Mediterranean security and energy markets. Despite failed UN mediation efforts and the expiration of interim governing arrangements, pathways to unity exist through grassroots pressure, shifting regional alignments, and institutional bridging mechanisms. The article advocates a comprehensive US strategy employing diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments to forge a power-sharing arrangement and credible electoral process. Without assertive US leadership coordinating international efforts and pressuring spoilers, Libya risks permanent partition or renewed civil war—outcomes that threaten counterterrorism gains, enable Russian entrenchment, and destabilize North Africa.

Nearly 15 years after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya remains less a nation than a negotiated truce among rival power centers. What began in 2011 as an Arab Spring revolt against dictatorship metastasized into a prolonged civil conflict that shattered central authority and fractured the state into competing political and military enclaves. The collapse of the regime removed a tyrant, but it also removed the only structure capable of holding Libya together.

Today, Libya exists in a condition of suspended disintegration. An internationally recognized government governs in the west from Tripoli, while a parallel authority backed by the Libyan National Army dominates the east. Neither camp possesses the legitimacy, cohesion, or coercive power required to reunify the country. Yet each retains sufficient military and financial leverage to veto any political settlement that threatens its position. The result is a durable stalemate—too weak for unity, too strong for peace.

For Libyans, this limbo has meant endemic insecurity, predatory governance, and the steady erosion of public trust in national institutions. For foreign policymakers, Libya presents a more consequential dilemma: whether a strategically located, resource-rich state on NATO's southern flank can still be reconstructed

as a sovereign whole—or whether fragmentation has hardened into permanence. At stake is not only Libya’s future, but the stability of the central Mediterranean, North Africa, and the broader competition for influence in the Middle East and Africa. The question is no longer how Libya fell apart. It is whether the forces pulling it together can ever outweigh those keeping it divided.

A Decade of Fragmentation in Post-Revolution Libya

Libya’s post-revolutionary order is defined by two men who embody its paralysis. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, ensconced in Tripoli, and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, dominant in the east, stand atop rival systems of power that mirror the country’s geographic and political divide. Neither commands the authority to reunify Libya. Both, however, possess sufficient military force and financial leverage to block any settlement that threatens their position. Libya is thus trapped in a condition of mutual obstruction rather than national governance.¹

The roots of this fragmentation lie in the disorder that followed Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow. The collapse of the regime in 2011 created a vacuum that no successor authority was prepared to fill.² Transitional institutions proved incapable of disarming or subordinating the revolutionary militias that proliferated across the country. By 2014, contested elections produced two rival legislatures—one in Tripoli, the other in Tobruk—triggering Libya’s first post-revolution civil war and formalizing an east–west split along ideological, tribal, and geographic lines.³

International efforts to paper over this divide produced only partial fixes. The 2015 UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement created a Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, but it never extended effective authority beyond western Libya.⁴ In the east, Haftar and the House of Representatives rejected subordination to Tripoli and instead constructed a parallel order centered on the Libyan National Army and a rival administrative apparatus in Cyrenaica.⁵ Libya thus acquired not one weak state, but two competing ones.

¹ Karim Mezran, “The end of Libya’s false stability period,” *MENASource* (blog), 20 September 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>; and Jamal Jawhar, “From Haftar to Dbeibah: The Map of Control and Influence in Libya,” *Asharg Al-Awsat*, 5 June 2025, <https://english.aawsat.com/>.

² Walid Ali, “How security shaped Libya’s transition,” *Democratization* 32, no. 4 (2025): 993–1015, <https://doi.org/>; and Hafeed Al-Ghwell, “Libya: How to govern around fragmentation,” *Arab News*, 9 August 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/>.

³ Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Libya is caught in an ever-deepening vicious circle,” Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 24 March 2025, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/>.

⁴ Imad K. Harb, “The Still Elusive Libyan Peace,” *Arab Center*, 17 August 2017, <https://arabcenterdc.org/>.

⁵ Luis Aleman and Karim Mezran, “Libya’s stalled transition: When domestic spoilers meet foreign interests,” *MENASource*, 18 September 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

This fragile equilibrium collapsed in 2019 when Haftar launched a military campaign to seize Tripoli. Backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russian mercenaries, his forces swept across southern Libya and advanced to the capital's outskirts. The offensive failed not because of internal reconciliation, but because of foreign counter-intervention.⁶ Turkey entered the conflict decisively on behalf of the Tripoli authorities, deploying drones, advisors, and Syrian auxiliaries that reversed Haftar's gains. By mid-2020, the war settled into a stalemate, with front lines hardening around Sirte.⁷ A ceasefire halted open warfare and froze Libya into zones of control—but it resolved none of the underlying disputes over legitimacy or sovereignty.

Since then, Libya has existed under the rule of two tenuous coalitions. In the west, Dbeibeh's Government of National Unity—installed through a UN-led process in early 2021—governs Tripoli and its environs. In the east, Haftar dominates Cyrenaica through military force buttressed by the political cover of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. Neither side recognizes the authority of the other. Dbeibeh's mandate was intended to expire after national elections in December 2021; those elections never occurred. Instead, Libya's interim arrangements calcified into permanence. Dbeibeh remains in office despite eroding legitimacy, while Haftar's allies have periodically attempted to install rival prime ministers to challenge Tripoli's claim to national authority.⁸ As the UN's Special Representative observed in 2025, *all* of Libya's governing institutions have now outlived their mandates—an indictment not only of Libyan elites, but of a peace process that rewards obstruction.⁹

Beneath these rival governments lies an even more fragmented reality. Power on the ground is exercised by militias and local strongmen whose loyalties are transactional and contingent. In Tripoli, the GNU governs through accommodation with armed groups that function as both security providers and political kingmakers.¹⁰ In the east, Haftar's LNA is itself a coalition—part regular force,

⁶ Unit for Political Studies, "Will the Defeat of Haftar in the West of Libya Lead to Reviving the Political Process?," *Situation Assessment* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 21 April 2020), <https://www.dohainstitute.org/>.

⁷ Jason Pack and Wolfgang Puszai, "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli," Policy Paper (Washington: Middle East Institute, November 2020): <https://www.mei.edu/>.

⁸ Driss Rejichi, "Libya: Tripoli in dangerous standoff as PM set on reining in last opponents in the west," *Middle East Eye*, 17 October 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/>.

⁹ "Briefing Security Council, Special Representative Highlights Libya's Fragile Security, Economic Progress, Urges Renewed Commitment to Elections," Press Release SC/16192 (press release, United Nations Security Council, 14 October 2025), <https://press.un.org/>.

¹⁰ "Libyan armed groups agree with authorities on security in Tripoli and borders," *Arab Weekly*, 24 August 2024, <https://the arabweekly.com/>.

part tribal militia, part Salafist formation—held together by patronage and external backing.¹¹ This produces a volatile equilibrium in which alliances are temporary and violence is never far from the surface.

Recent events underscore the fragility of this order. The assassination of prominent Tripoli militia leader Mahmoud “Ghnewa” al-Kikli in May 2025 triggered the capital’s worst fighting in years, as erstwhile allies turned on one another in a scramble for territory and influence.¹² In September 2025, clashes erupted again when Dbeibeh attempted to curb the power of a nominally loyal militia, the Special Deterrence Force, sparking battles over control of Tripoli’s airport and key security nodes.¹³ These episodes reveal the core pathology of Libya’s post-2011 system: any effort to impose authority—whether by reforming security institutions or rebalancing power—risks detonating the very coalitions that sustain a fragile peace.

Libya today is not governed so much as *managed*—by armed actors who profit from disorder and by political elites who fear the consequences of genuine unification. It is a state suspended between collapse and consolidation, where stability is episodic, legitimacy is absent, and violence remains the ultimate arbiter of political disputes.

The fragmentation is not merely political; it is military, institutional, and systemic. Libya is ruled, in the loosest sense, by overlapping authorities rather than by a sovereign state. Governance suffers accordingly. Basic services remain unreliable or nonexistent in many regions. Corruption flourishes as militias, political patrons, and their entourages siphon oil revenues and foreign assistance. For ordinary Libyans, daily life is shaped by insecurity—militia checkpoints, rolling power outages, and the ever-present risk that a localized dispute will erupt into armed conflict.

Even Libya’s most critical national institutions have been reduced to bargaining chips. The National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank—once pillars of state continuity—have been repeatedly hijacked in the struggle between east and west. In 2024, disputes over Central Bank leadership prompted Haftar’s camp to impose an oil blockade, slashing production to a fraction of capacity and rattling global energy markets until a political deal restored exports.¹⁴ Libya possesses Africa’s largest proven oil reserves, and its roughly one million barrels per day of production

¹¹ Matteo Capasso et al., *Libya: Country Report* (Brussels: EU-LISTCO, April 2025), <https://www.cidob.org/>.

¹² “Explainer: What’s happening in Tripoli, Libya’s contested capital?” *BBC Monitoring*, 21 May 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/>.

¹³ “Libya Stands at the Brink of More Fighting,” *Soufan Group*, 8 September 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/>.

¹⁴ Agence France-Presse, “Libya east administration says closes oil fields over Central Bank rift,” *Al-Monitor*, 26 August 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

accounts for nearly all state revenue.¹⁵ When conflict disrupts that flow—as it did repeatedly between 2022 and 2024—the consequences are immediate: state coffers are drained, patronage networks tighten their grip, and international oil prices briefly spike. Few cases illustrate more clearly how natural wealth becomes a curse when national institutions lack resilience and legitimacy.

Libya's post-2011 experience is therefore less a failed transition than a cautionary tale of how revolutionary optimism can decay into chronic state weakness. The question—*Will Libya ever be whole again?*—hangs over this trajectory. For now, a frozen stalemate prevails. No faction possesses the coercive power or political legitimacy to reunify the country, yet each retains the capacity to veto any arrangement that threatens its core interests. International ceasefires and roadmaps have succeeded in stopping the shooting, but not in resolving the underlying struggle for authority.

This stalemate should not be mistaken for stability. Libya's political equilibrium is brittle and reversible. As long as rival leaders continue to treat politics as a zero-sum contest, national reconciliation will remain elusive. Indeed, in late 2023, the then-UN envoy for Libya, Abdoulaye Bathily, warned that conditions were rapidly deteriorating and ordinary Libyans were increasingly fearful that prolonged political paralysis could trigger a return to full-scale war.¹⁶ The status quo is unsustainable. Without progress toward unity, Libya risks sliding either into de facto permanent partition or another descent into open conflict.

Whether Libya can ever be made whole again depends on understanding the forces that keep it divided—and identifying what combination of internal pressure and external leverage might finally break the impasse.

Regional Power Plays: Neighbors, Mercenaries, and Proxy Battles

Libya's internal fractures have been widened—and in many cases sustained—by the deliberate intervention of regional and global powers. What began as a domestic uprising metastasized into a proxy contest, turning Libya into a North African analogue of Syria: a weak state hollowed out by foreign patrons arming local clients to advance external agendas. This internationalization of Libya's conflict did not merely complicate peacemaking; it reshaped the battlefield, hardened divisions, and rewarded intransigence.

The decisive phase of this proxy war unfolded during Khalifa Haftar's 2019–2020 offensive against Tripoli. Haftar's Libyan National Army advanced not on Libyan

¹⁵ *Country Analysis Brief: Libya* (Washington: US Energy Information Administration, 3 December 2024), <https://www.eia.gov/>.

¹⁶ “UN Envoy to Libyan Leaders: Resolve Impasse, Do Not Fail the People,” *UN News*, 18 December 2023, <https://news.un.org/>.

strength alone, but on foreign backing. Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia each saw in Haftar a vehicle for their own interests. For Cairo, he was a bulwark against Islamist forces and a means of securing Egypt's western desert frontier.¹⁷ For Abu Dhabi, Libya represented another front in a regional campaign against political Islam and Turkish influence, justifying extensive arms transfers, air support, and drone operations.¹⁸ For Moscow, Haftar offered something more strategic: a foothold on NATO's southern flank.¹⁹

Russia's deployment of Wagner Group mercenaries to eastern Libya transformed the conflict. Wagner provided experienced fighters, artillery, and air-defense systems, enabling Haftar's advance and entrenching Russian influence in Cyrenaica. Moscow's objectives were clear: expand its Mediterranean presence, secure leverage over European energy flows, and establish military access points that could threaten NATO's southern perimeter.²⁰ Western governments have since warned that Russia's entrenchment in Libya extends its strategic reach deep into North Africa and Europe's near abroad, turning Libya into a pressure node rather than a peripheral conflict.

Haftar's campaign ultimately failed—not because of diplomacy, but because of countervailing foreign force. Turkey intervened decisively on behalf of the Tripoli-based government, deploying military advisors, Bayraktar TB2 drones, and Syrian auxiliary fighters. Ankara's intervention halted Haftar's advance and reversed his gains, producing the mid-2020 stalemate that persists today. In doing so, Turkey established itself as the dominant external power in western Libya.²¹

Turkey's motivations blended ideology and cold calculation. Supporting the UN-recognized government aligned with Ankara's backing of post-Arab Spring political movements and countered the influence of its regional rivals. More importantly, Turkey extracted tangible strategic returns. In late 2019, it concluded a controversial maritime delimitation agreement with Tripoli, advancing its "Blue Homeland" doctrine by asserting expansive claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.²² That deal gave Turkey a direct stake in Libya's political future: any hostile successor

¹⁷ "Haftar Leverages Egypt and Russia's Support While Pursuing Dynastic Rule in Libya," *Al-Estiklal*, December 2024, <https://www.alestiklal.net/>.

¹⁸ "UAE Plans New Offensive in Libya to Expand Influence and Control Key Resources," *Watan*, 27 April 2025, <https://www.watanserb.com/>.

¹⁹ Emadeddin Badi, "Russia is making a fragile pivot from Syria to Libya. The West should beware falling into a new trap," *MENASource*, 2 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

²⁰ Victoria Maldonado, "Strategic Ambitions: Russia's Deepening Military and Geopolitical Footprint in Libya," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 24 June 2024, <https://gssr.georgetown.edu/>.

²¹ "Libya's Haftar deepens rapprochement with Turkey," African Press Agency, 28 August 2025, <https://apanews.net/>.

²² Michaël Tanchum, ed., *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities* (Ankara: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021), <https://www.kas.de/>.

regime could invalidate it. Ensuring friendly authorities in Tripoli thus became a strategic imperative. In the aftermath of the ceasefire, Ankara consolidated its position through construction contracts, energy deals, and sustained military presence—embedding itself deeply in western Libya’s political economy.

Yet Turkey has not remained doctrinaire. As the conflict froze, Ankara recalibrated. Recognizing that permanent division would limit its leverage, Turkish officials began engaging Haftar and the eastern authorities as well.²³ High-level visits to Benghazi and outreach to Cyrenaican elites reflected a deliberate hedging strategy: maintain Tripoli ties while cultivating influence in the east. By positioning itself as the one actor capable of speaking to all sides, Turkey seeks to become Libya’s indispensable power broker. It also hopes, over time, to broaden acceptance of its maritime agreement by securing eastern acquiescence—potentially easing Greek and Cypriot objections if a future unified Libyan state ratifies the deal. Turkey’s outreach further dovetails with its rapprochement with Egypt, using Libya as a venue for repairing a once-hostile bilateral relationship. This diplomacy is opportunistic, risky, and effective—often more agile than Western efforts constrained by consensus politics.

Beyond Turkey and Russia, a constellation of other actors has shaped Libya’s trajectory. The United Nations, through UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and successive envoys, has remained the primary diplomatic framework, brokering the 2020 ceasefire and the interim unity government in 2021. Yet UN influence is limited by the absence of enforcement power and by the disunity of its member states. The European Union officially backs UN mediation and launched Operation Irini to enforce the arms embargo, but internal divisions have blunted its effectiveness.²⁴ Italy and Malta prioritize migration control and energy security, cooperating pragmatically with western Libyan authorities and militias.²⁵ France, driven by counterterrorism concerns in the Sahel and commercial interests in eastern Libya, has periodically courted Haftar.²⁶ Europe thus speaks with multiple voices—undermining the very unity it urges upon Libya.

African actors have fared no better. The African Union and Libya’s neighbors, particularly Algeria and Tunisia, have attempted mediation under the banner of “African solutions,” but their initiatives have been overshadowed by heavier

²³ “Libya’s Haftar deepens rapprochement with Turkey,” *African Press Agency*.

²⁴ Maurizio Geri, “Mediterranean Security: Operations Irini, Sea Guardian and Mediterraneo Sicuro,” *Trends Research & Advisory*, 10 May 2023, <https://trendsresearch.org/>.

²⁵ “Malta and Italy Strengthen Collaboration on Migration and Security,” *Malta Daily*, 5 December 2024, <https://maltadaily.mt/>.

²⁶ “Haftar Praises France’s Role in Resolving Libyan Crisis,” *Libya Review*, 24 December 2024, <https://libyareview.com/>.

non-African involvement.²⁷ Still, these states remain deeply exposed to Libya's instability. Algeria fears jihadist spillover and arms trafficking across its southern frontier. Tunisia, hosting hundreds of thousands of Libyan refugees and serving as the base for the US Embassy to Libya since 2014, is acutely vulnerable to renewed conflict.

The cumulative effect of this multi-sided interference has been to prolong Libya's fragmentation. External patrons have encouraged Libyan factions to hold out rather than compromise, fostering the belief that time and foreign backing might yet deliver victory. Instead of a single international strategy, Libya has endured overlapping and often contradictory ones: a UN process here, a Turkish patronage network there, an Egyptian–Russian axis elsewhere. Peace has been managed, not enforced.

For Libya to become whole again, this external tug-of-war must give way to a coordinated international push for settlement. Regional rivals need not become friends—but they must accept that a unified Libya is preferable to an endless proxy contest. There are faint signs of alignment: the Turkey–Egypt rapprochement, quieter Gulf de-escalation, and US efforts to reduce zero-sum competition. Yet suspicion remains endemic. Every external actor wants assurance that reunification will not advantage its adversaries.

Until that assurance exists, Libya's division will persist. Libyans may fight on the ground, but the balance of power is shaped elsewhere—by whose drones dominate the skies, whose mercenaries man the front lines, and whose money sustains the war economy. Breaking this pattern will require an outside-in settlement as much as an inside-out one: a grand bargain among external stakeholders that constrains proxy warfare and creates space for Libyan political compromise. Without it, unity will remain aspirational—and Libya will remain a battlefield for other nations' ambitions.

International Mediation: Peace Efforts and Persistent Deadlock

Libya's collapse has not gone unnoticed by the international community. What it has lacked is not attention, but effectiveness. For more than a decade, the United Nations has led an unbroken chain of mediation efforts, cycling through special envoys charged with reconciling Libya's rival factions and restoring national governance. From the mid-2010s through the present, successive envoys have negotiated

²⁷ "Will the African Union's Mediation Efforts Unite Libya?," *Libya Review*, 12 October 2024, <https://libyareview.com/>.

ceasefires, power-sharing formulas, and election roadmaps. The results have been mixed at best.

UN mediation has produced important but limited achievements. The October 2020 nationwide ceasefire halted large-scale fighting, and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum that followed produced the interim Government of National Unity in early 2021.²⁸ These were real accomplishments. But they addressed symptoms rather than causes. Implementation of subsequent steps—national elections, unification of institutions, consolidation of civilian authority—has repeatedly stalled. Each approach to the finish line has triggered familiar forms of sabotage: disputes over constitutional frameworks, battles over candidate eligibility, and mutual fears that elections would simply enable the other side to seize power permanently.

By late 2023, UN Special Representative Abdoulaye Bathily abandoned diplomatic euphemism. Addressing the Security Council, he warned that Libya's "protracted institutional and political divisions," compounded by unilateral actions and elite competition over resources, were holding the aspirations of ordinary Libyans hostage.²⁹ In the absence of a unified government and legal framework, he cautioned, Libya's oil revenues were being consumed by patronage rather than invested in stability—raising the risk of economic collapse even as political paralysis persisted. Bathily attempted to break the deadlock by proposing mechanisms to bypass Libya's feuding institutions, including a joint committee to draft election laws. The effort failed. By mid-2024, he stepped aside, another envoy exhausted by the system he was sent to fix.

His successor, Hanna Tetteh of Ghana, inherited the same impasse in early 2025. She continued to press Libya's leaders toward compromise, stressing that endlessly recycled interim arrangements are no substitute for legitimate, unified governance. Under her leadership, UNSMIL convened an advisory committee of Libyan figures, which issued recommendations in mid-2025 calling for a technocratic unity government and a defined electoral timeline.³⁰ The recommendations were sound. The response from Libya's power centers was predictable. The Government of National Unity, the House of Representatives, and Haftar's camp all professed support in principle—while maneuvering to strip the proposals of any provisions that threatened their entrenched interests. Consensus remained performative; obstruction, operational.

²⁸ "Joint Statement Welcoming the Agreement Reached by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum" (press release, US Department of State, 5 February 2021), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>.

²⁹ "UN Envoy to Libyan Leaders: Resolve Impasse," *UN News*.

³⁰ "Libya: UNSMIL Presents AC's Report to GNU, PC," *Tripoli Post*, 12 May 2025, <https://www.thetripolipost.org/>.

Other international initiatives have fared no better. The Berlin Process sought to corral external actors into respecting Libya's sovereignty by enforcing the arms embargo and withdrawing foreign fighters. Commitments were made, then quietly ignored. The European Union has publicly supported UN mediation and imposed sanctions on designated spoilers, while launching Operation Irini to interdict weapons shipments. Yet internal EU divisions—particularly between states prioritizing migration control and those focused on counterterrorism or commercial interests—have blunted Europe's influence. Africa-led mediation efforts, championed by the African Union and Libya's neighbors, were marginalized once major powers escalated their involvement. The AU remains a potential contributor to post-conflict monitoring or peacekeeping, but it lacks leverage over the conflict's primary drivers.

Hovering above all these efforts is the United States—the actor with the greatest potential influence, and for much of the past decade, the least visible presence. After the 2012 Benghazi attack, Washington sharply reduced its footprint. The 2011 NATO intervention that toppled Gaddafi was conducted under the banner of “leading from behind,” and what followed was something closer to disengagement. That absence mattered. It created space for regional powers and Russia to become decisive actors in Libya's internal balance of power.³¹

That posture has begun to shift. Russia's growing military presence in Libya, combined with the country's strategic location astride the Mediterranean and its role in energy markets and counterterrorism, has forced Libya back onto Washington's strategic map. In recent years, the United States has more actively supported the UN process and worked to align international partners—while carefully navigating relationships with key regional actors whose interests diverge sharply. Still, US engagement remains reactive rather than decisive.

The cumulative result is a mediation architecture that has succeeded in preventing renewed nationwide war, but failed to produce a unified state. The process has become ritualized: dialogue rounds, technical committees, and expiring roadmaps that generate just enough progress to delay collapse, but not enough to resolve the underlying struggle for power. The UN can convene and cajole, but it lacks the leverage to compel compliance. Without enforcement, mediation becomes theater.

Breaking this deadlock will require more than procedural ingenuity. It will demand stronger alignment among external powers and sustained pressure on Libya's elites to prioritize national survival over factional advantage. That pressure can only come from states with real influence—above all, the United States, working in

³¹ Ari Heistein, *US-Russia Relations Following the 2011 NATO Intervention in Libya* (Istanbul: Global Relations Forum, June 2020), <https://www.gif.org.tr/>.

concert with allies and regional partners. A coordinated diplomatic campaign, backed by credible incentives and penalties, offers the only plausible path out of paralysis. The next section examines what such a US-led strategy would require, and how Washington might finally convert managed stalemate into durable stability.

US Policy and the DIME Framework: A Strategy to Forge Stability

The United States has clear and enduring interests in Libya's future: counterterrorism, regional stability, energy security, and limiting the strategic penetration of rival powers into the central Mediterranean and North Africa. Yet American policy has too often oscillated between overreach and disengagement. What Libya requires instead is a strategy grounded in realism but animated by purpose—one that rejects both the illusion of rapid democratization and the complacency of managed decay. A viable US approach must be assertive without being doctrinaire, engaged without being imperial, and pragmatic without surrendering leadership.

AFRICOM's posture captures this balance. Rather than grandiose nation-building, it emphasizes incremental but consequential steps to create conditions under which Libyans themselves can pursue reunification. As AFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley, USMC, testified to Congress in 2025, national unity cannot be imposed from outside—but it can be enabled. He warned that Libya's fragmented security landscape constitutes a fundamental obstacle to stability, noting that militias operating beyond any unified command structure not only perpetuate violence but periodically disrupt global energy markets when their clashes interrupt oil production.³² His assessment underscores a central truth: Libya's instability is no longer a local tragedy; it is a strategic liability.

Diplomatically, the United States must move from supporting mediation to shaping it. Reestablishing a permanent US diplomatic presence in Libya—conditions permitting—would be a decisive signal of renewed seriousness. Congress has already appropriated funds to reopen the US Embassy in Tripoli, which has operated from Tunis since 2014.³³ A resident ambassador would allow sustained engagement with Libya's political, military, and economic actors, rather than episodic diplomacy conducted at arm's length. Washington should continue engaging all sides of the Libyan divide, making unmistakably clear that US policy favors a unified Libya governed by consent, not force. Unlike regional actors, the United

³² *Statement of General Michael E. Langley, Commander, United States Africa Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 119th Cong., 1st sess. (3 April 2025), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

³³ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Libya and U.S. Policy," *In Focus*, 22 May 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

States seeks neither oil concessions nor military basing rights, a neutrality that—properly leveraged—confers real diplomatic credibility.

That credibility should be used to impose coherence on an otherwise fractured international approach. The United States is uniquely positioned to convene and align Egypt, Turkey, European partners, and Gulf states around a single political roadmap. Doing so will require uncomfortable conversations—pressing partners to curtail arms transfers, discouraging unilateral maneuvers, and insisting that no faction be indulged as a spoiler. Just as important, Washington must reinforce the authority of the UN process by backing consequences for obstruction. Sanctions against political and militia leaders who deliberately sabotage unity or elections should be applied consistently, and extended when necessary to foreign enablers. Diplomacy without enforcement merely incentivizes delay.

The informational domain is no less consequential. Libya's contest for legitimacy is as much narrative as material. The United States should expand strategic communications that elevate national identity over factionalism and amplify Libyan voices calling for accountable governance. Supporting independent media and civil society initiatives can help erode the militia-driven information ecosystem that thrives on fear and disinformation. At the same time, Washington must counter malign influence. Russian propaganda and Wagner-linked narratives have sought to normalize foreign mercenaries and recast Moscow as a stabilizing force.³⁴ Quiet assistance to Libyan partners in exposing disinformation—whether extremist, criminal, or state-sponsored—can blunt these efforts. Just as importantly, US officials must consistently signal that partition, warlord rule, or military dictatorship will never confer international legitimacy. Repetition matters. In fractured societies, clarity shapes expectations.

Militarily, restraint does not mean absence. While no serious policy contemplates another large-scale intervention, US military influence remains substantial. Counterterrorism operations continue to be essential; Libya's ungoverned spaces have previously allowed ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates to regroup, as evidenced by ISIS's seizure of Sirte in 2015.³⁵ Precision strikes, intelligence sharing, and selective training support remain necessary to prevent a resurgence. Beyond counterterrorism, the US military can play a constructive role if political conditions permit. AFRICOM has repeatedly emphasized that unifying Libya's armed forces under civilian authority is indispensable to sovereignty and stability. If a unity government emerges, US

³⁴ Global Engagement Center, "The Wagner Group's Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth" (Washington: US Department of State, 8 February 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>.

³⁵ "We Feel We Are Cursed': Life under ISIS in Sirte, Libya," *Human Rights Watch*, 18 May 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

and allied forces could support defense institution-building efforts that integrate rival units, professionalize command structures, and reduce militia autonomy.

Symbolic actions already matter. The USS *Mount Whitney*'s 2025 port calls in both Tripoli and Benghazi signaled US engagement with all Libyan constituencies. Going forward, a regular US naval presence in the central Mediterranean would reinforce deterrence and signal commitment—not only to Libyans, but to Moscow.³⁶ The United States should also remain open to supporting an international stabilization or peacekeeping mission if requested by a legitimate Libyan authority. Short of that, enhanced monitoring of arms flows and pressure on partner states to honor the embargo can constrain the military balance. Engagement with Libyan security leaders on all sides should reinforce one message above all others: the era of deciding Libya's future by force is over, and renewed large-scale violence will carry costs.

Economically, leverage is both substantial and underused. Libya's oil sector remains the country's only truly national asset—and its most frequent hostage. Preserving the neutrality of the National Oil Corporation and the integrity of the Central Bank is essential. The 2024 agreement to reunify Central Bank leadership and resume exports was a necessary step; it must be followed by a formal, transparent revenue-sharing mechanism that reduces incentives for blockades and resource coercion.³⁷ The United States can facilitate this by convening Libyan financial officials under international auspices and tying revenue distribution to verifiable governance benchmarks.

Anti-corruption measures are equally critical. Technical assistance to Libya's audit and oversight institutions, combined with targeted sanctions against individuals and networks that loot public funds, can begin to alter elite incentives. Development assistance should be selective and stabilizing, not expansive. Libya does not need massive humanitarian aid; it needs institutional repair. Programs that reintegrate militia-affiliated youth into civilian employment, strengthen municipal governance, and rebuild basic infrastructure address the grievances that sustain conflict. Sanctions remain a powerful deterrent—not only against Libyan spoilers but against foreign firms and traffickers profiting from Libya's war economy. The threat of US financial sanctions alone is often sufficient to close channels of illicit trade.

Finally, incentives must be real. A credible path toward unity should unlock tangible rewards: access to frozen sovereign assets, reconstruction assistance, and renewed investment. Persistent obstruction should carry escalating costs. Aligning

³⁶ Alison Bath, "Navy port calls in Libya end half-century lull as US seeks to fortify North Africa presence," *Stars and Stripes*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

³⁷ Charlie Mitchell and Kelly Norways, "Libya's oil output, exports to resume after deal on central bank head," *S&P Global*, 26 September 2024, <https://www.spglobal.com/>.

carrots and sticks is the only way to force a recalculation among Libya's entrenched elites.

Taken together, a DIME-informed strategy demands integration, not sequencing. Diplomacy without pressure invites delay; military engagement without political direction risks entrenchment; economic tools without enforcement become abstractions. This approach avoids the failures of the past. It is neither sentimental nor imperial. It recognizes that power must be balanced, interests aligned, and consequences enforced. Above all, it acknowledges that US strategic interests—countering terrorism, limiting Russian expansion, stabilizing energy markets, and preventing state collapse—converge with Libyans' own interest in sovereignty and peace.

AFRICOM's assessment reinforces the urgency. Libya's location and resources make it a strategic fulcrum between the Mediterranean and the Sahel. Continued instability provides fertile ground for terrorist networks, arms trafficking, and human smuggling—threats that radiate outward to Europe and beyond. Addressing these dangers later will be costlier than confronting them now. Preventing Libya from becoming a permanent vacuum—or a Russian forward operating base—is not an act of charity. It is an act of strategic prudence.

Prospects for Unity: Pathways and Pitfalls

Is there a plausible path for Libya to move from chronic fragmentation toward genuine unity and stability? In the near term, the answer is sobering. The prospects for political reunification—whether through national elections or a sweeping elite bargain—remain poor. Years of accumulated distrust, zero-sum politics, and externally reinforced veto power have hardened Libya's divisions. As of late 2025, Libya's rival leaders continue to prize the preservation of their own authority over the compromises required for national recovery.³⁸

Absent sustained external pressure, the most likely trajectory is continued stagnation: rival governments entrenched in Tripoli and Cyrenaica, periodic militia clashes punctuating an uneasy calm, and foreign patrons maintaining Libyan factions as strategic assets. This “no war, no peace” equilibrium steadily corrodes public confidence and institutional relevance. Libya risks drifting into *de facto* partition—not through formal declaration, but through the quiet normalization of separation and dysfunction.

³⁸ “Briefing Security Council, Special Representative Highlights Libya's Fragile Security, Economic Progress, Urges Renewed Commitment to Elections,” Press Release SC/16192 (press release, United Nations Security Council, 14 October 2025), <https://press.un.org/>.

Yet improbability is not impossibility. Libya's unity remains difficult, but not foreclosed. Several forces—if carefully aligned—could still open a narrow window for progress.

Grassroots Pressure and War-weariness

Across Libya, public patience with the country's entrenched political class is eroding. Recurrent protests in Tripoli, Benghazi, and other urban centers have reflected a rare convergence of grievances: anger at corruption, militia predation, and the chronic failure of the state to deliver basic services. In the summer of 2022 and again in mid-2023, spontaneous demonstrations escalated beyond symbolic dissent, culminating in the storming of the Tobruk parliament building—an unmistakable repudiation of political elites across the east-west divide.

This exhaustion with the status quo constitutes one of the few forces capable of exerting pressure on Libya's insulated power structures. When popular anger is directed simultaneously at rival camps, it undercuts the narrative that Libya's crisis is merely a regional or ideological contest. A cross-regional rejection of the existing elite order—effectively a vote of no confidence in all factions—has the potential to alter elite calculations, particularly if leaders come to fear not just foreign pressure, but domestic backlash.

That potential, however, remains constrained. Libya's protest movements have been episodic, leaderless, and vulnerable to repression or co-optation.³⁹ Street anger alone does not translate into political leverage unless it is channeled through durable organizations capable of sustaining pressure over time. Civil society remains weak, fragmented, and often exposed to militia intimidation. External actors cannot manufacture grassroots legitimacy, but they can reinforce it at the margins. The United States and the United Nations can do so by insisting that civil society representatives, municipal leaders, and professional associations are included in political dialogues—broadening the process beyond the familiar circle of armed elites.

War-weariness reinforces this dynamic. The relative reduction in large-scale violence since 2020 has not produced peace, but it has produced fatigue. Many Libyans—fighters included—have little appetite for a return to full-scale war. For militia members, constant mobilization has yielded diminishing returns, particularly as economic conditions worsen and foreign patronage becomes less reliable. Under the right conditions, segments of these groups may accept demobilization or in-

³⁹ Jennifer Holleis and Mohamed Farhan, "Between chaos and democracy: Libya at crossroads again," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 May 2025, <https://www.dw.com/>.

tegration into state structures, provided credible security guarantees and alternative livelihoods are available.

The current lull in violence therefore represents a narrow but consequential opening. It is easier to consolidate peace when the guns are largely silent than when they are firing. Whether Libya can exploit this window depends on whether public frustration can be transformed from episodic protest into sustained political pressure—and whether external actors are prepared to protect and amplify those nonviolent pathways before renewed conflict forecloses them.

Changes in the Regional Environment

Shifts in the broader Middle East and North Africa have begun to modestly improve the external conditions surrounding Libya's conflict. Chief among these is the thaw in relations between Turkey and Egypt, once the principal regional antagonists backing opposing sides in Libya's civil war.⁴⁰ Both capitals now have reasons to favor de-escalation. Ankara seeks to consolidate its gains in western Libya without becoming indefinitely entangled in an open-ended commitment. Cairo, for its part, wants a stable western frontier and has little appetite for sustaining a permanent proxy conflict on its doorstep.

If Turkey and Egypt can converge on a shared approach—supporting a transitional Libyan leadership acceptable to both—the stalemate could be loosened. Such an arrangement would likely be pragmatic rather than ideal: a civilian figure at the political helm to reassure western constituencies, paired with a defense structure that preserves eastern security interests. This would not resolve Libya's deeper institutional weaknesses, but it could reduce the external vetoes that have repeatedly derailed political progress.

Elsewhere in the region, the momentum for proxy warfare has slowed. Gulf states that once viewed Libya as a key battleground in broader ideological struggles have recalibrated their priorities. The aftereffects of the Yemen war and a renewed focus on economic diversification have dampened enthusiasm for sustained military patronage abroad.⁴¹ Reduced financial and logistical backing from these actors would not end Libya's conflict, but it would lower the ceiling of escalation and narrow the options available to spoilers.

Russia remains the most consequential wildcard. Moscow's deployment of Wagner mercenaries into eastern Libya provided Haftar with critical capabilities and

⁴⁰ Alia Brahimi, "Turkey and Egypt want better relations. But will Libya doom the rapprochement?," *Atlantic Council*, 23 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

⁴¹ Maddalena Procopio and Corrado Cok, "Diversification nations: The Gulf way to engage with Africa," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 March 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/>.

granted Russia a strategic foothold in the central Mediterranean. Yet Russia's position is no longer as assured as it once was. The decapitation of Wagner's leadership in 2023 and the sustained demands of the war in Ukraine have strained Moscow's expeditionary posture.⁴² Should Russia's influence in Libya weaken—or should the Kremlin calculate that a negotiated settlement better serves its interests—one of the most formidable external obstacles to Libyan unity would recede.

That outcome, however, would require firmness from the West. Any move by a future Libyan government to expel foreign mercenaries would need clear international backing. This opens the possibility, however limited, of a transactional understanding with Moscow: withdrawal of mercenary forces in exchange for constrained economic participation in post-conflict reconstruction. Such an arrangement would be unsatisfying and fraught with risk, but diplomacy in fractured states often advances through imperfect bargains rather than moral clarity.

Collectively, these regional shifts do not guarantee progress in Libya. They merely reduce some of the external pressures that have sustained division. Whether this opening is exploited will depend on sustained diplomatic engagement—particularly by the United States—to translate reduced rivalry into coordinated restraint. Without that effort, regional détente may prove temporary, and Libya will remain hostage to the next turn in great-power competition.

Institutional Bridging Efforts

Despite Libya's entrenched political split, limited efforts to preserve national institutions have persisted beneath the surface. These initiatives are not acts of reconciliation so much as exercises in mutual self-preservation—but they matter nonetheless. The recent reunification of the Central Bank's leadership, which allowed oil production to resume after prolonged eastern blockades, stands as a notable example. Similarly, the National Oil Corporation, though frequently contested, has largely retained its status as a national entity, with revenues continuing to flow through a single account prior to distribution. These arrangements endure for a simple reason: no faction ultimately benefits from turning off the country's only reliable source of income.

Such technocratic compromises demonstrate that Libya's rival camps are capable of cooperation when incentives align. They do not resolve the legitimacy crisis, but they prevent economic collapse and create functional linkages that can later support political progress. Expanding these institutional bridges—particularly in

⁴² "Russia's Africa Corps: Wagner's Successor in Africa (2022–2025)," Robert Lansing Institute, 30 September 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/>.

finance, energy, and security—offers one of the few credible pathways toward gradual reintegration.

The 5+5 Joint Military Commission illustrates this dynamic. Composed of senior officers from both eastern and western forces, the commission has met regularly since 2020 to monitor the ceasefire and explore avenues for security coordination. Its existence reflects a shared recognition that uncontrolled escalation would be disastrous for all sides.⁴³ In November 2024, Turkey's hosting of eastern and western military representatives marked a further step in confidence-building—remarkable given Ankara's earlier role as a partisan actor.⁴⁴ While expectations should remain modest, even incremental agreements—such as joint protection of oil facilities or limited coordination between units—could generate momentum toward broader security unification.

Recent developments suggest that even limited security-sector integration is no longer merely aspirational. In late 2025, General Dagvin Anderson, newly appointed Commander of US Africa Command, made a landmark visit to both Tripoli and Benghazi—one of the few senior international figures to do so in close succession. During that visit, Anderson announced that Libya would, for the first time, host elements of AFRICOM's flagship Flintlock exercise in 2026.⁴⁵

The significance of this decision lies not in symbolism, but in structure. Flintlock is not a ceremonial engagement; it is a demanding multinational exercise focused on interoperability, command-and-control coordination, and professional military standards. By involving Libyan personnel from both eastern and western forces in joint preparation and execution, the exercise creates a rare, practical venue for cooperation outside the zero-sum logic of national politics. As Anderson noted, Libyans “from the east and west will work together” in preparation for the exercise—an incremental but meaningful step toward integrating military institutions long divided by parallel chains of command.⁴⁶

Just as important was Anderson's emphasis on dialogue rather than diktat. By meeting leaders on both sides and framing US involvement as capacity-building rather than arbitration, AFRICOM reinforced a central principle of its Libya engagement: stability cannot be imposed, but it can be enabled. Flintlock 2026 does not resolve Libya's legitimacy crisis, nor does it guarantee durable security

⁴³ Agenzia Nova, “Libya: the joint military commission reassures on the stability of the ceasefire,” Nova News, 26 August 2024, <https://www.agenzianova.com/>.

⁴⁴ “Turkiye National Defence Ministry hosts Libya military joint commission delegation,” Middle East Monitor, 28 November 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/>.

⁴⁵ Patrick M Foughty, “Gen. Dagvin Anderson Marks First Visit to Libya; Stresses Unity and Peace Among Leaders,” US Africa Command, 2 December 2025, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

⁴⁶ Foughty, “Gen. Dagvin Anderson Marks First Visit to Libya.”

unification. But it does demonstrate that under the right conditions—external restraint, mutual incentives, and professional frameworks—cooperation between Libya's rival military establishments is possible.

This development should be viewed soberly. Exercises do not erase political fragmentation, and military confidence-building can collapse if political conditions deteriorate. Still, Flintlock's partial relocation to Libya marks a qualitative shift: from managing separation to cautiously testing integration. In a conflict defined by frozen lines and hardened distrust, even provisional cooperation of this kind represents progress worth consolidating.

Local governance offers a parallel avenue for institutional repair. Municipal authorities and tribal leaders frequently cooperate across front lines on pragmatic issues such as electricity distribution, trade, and public services. These interactions are driven less by ideology than by necessity, yet they have known a degree of success absent at the national level. Expanding local elections or structured municipal dialogues that include all regions could reinforce this bottom-up cooperation and create pressure for national political progress. Libya's mayors and local councils, accustomed to problem-solving rather than grandstanding, may prove more capable of forging a functional social compact than the country's entrenched political elites.

None of these efforts should be overstated. Technocratic coordination is not political reconciliation, and institutional bridges can collapse if elites again choose confrontation over compromise. Still, in a fragmented state where sweeping solutions remain elusive, these modest linkages matter. They preserve the skeletal framework of a national system—one that, under more favorable conditions, could be rebuilt into something resembling a unified state.

A Phased Power-Sharing Deal

If Libya is to escape permanent fragmentation, the most realistic path forward may lie not in an immediate leap to elections, but in a carefully constructed interim power-sharing arrangement. Past efforts failed largely because they triggered winner-take-all anxieties: each faction feared that compromise would become a prelude to its own marginalization. A transitional framework that gives all major players a stake—however unpalatable—may be the only way to break this cycle.

Such an arrangement would necessarily be limited in scope and duration. A small presidential council or unity cabinet, balanced across Libya's western, eastern, and southern regions, could provide a temporary center of authority without allowing any single faction to dominate. The mandate would be narrow but consequential: unify core economic and security institutions, stabilize governance, and prepare the ground for national elections. To reduce polarization, it would be essential that Libya's most divisive figures not occupy the top executive roles. Neither Abdul

Hamid Dbeibeh nor Khalifa Haftar could credibly preside over a unifying transition. Their participation, if any, would need to be indirect—through guarantees of security or political inclusion rather than executive control. A neutral technocrat or broadly respected elder figure would be better positioned to manage the interim phase.

The incentives for such a deal are substantial. Participation in a unity framework would confer international recognition, unlock reconstruction assistance, and potentially release Libya's frozen sovereign assets abroad. These are powerful inducements for elites who depend on patronage networks and external legitimacy. The disincentives must be equally clear. Continued obstruction should trigger escalating sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and pressure from domestic constituencies whose living conditions will only deteriorate further under stalemate.

History offers no illusion that such elite bargains are just or elegant. Lebanon's Taif Agreement and Bosnia's Dayton Accords were deeply flawed, rewarding armed actors with political relevance and deferring questions of accountability. Yet both succeeded in halting wars that had become unsustainable. Libya's circumstances are different, but the logic is similar. An imperfect peace that freezes conflict and restores basic state functions may be preferable to a principled paralysis that guarantees continued decay.

The United States would need to play a decisive role in brokering and enforcing such a deal. American leverage with regional actors is critical to neutralizing external spoilers, while US diplomatic weight can help ensure that Libyan signatories adhere to their commitments. Without sustained external enforcement, any power-sharing arrangement would quickly unravel.

Even then, risks abound. Libya's 2021 unity experiment collapsed once elections were delayed, reminding observers that interim arrangements can harden into permanent dysfunction. Elections remain essential to restoring legitimacy—Libyans have not voted since 2014—but they also represent the most dangerous phase of any transition. Rushed or poorly designed elections could reignite conflict, particularly if the rules of the game are contested or the results rejected.

For elections to succeed, preconditions must be established. Security guarantees, clear acceptance mechanisms, and an agreed constitutional framework are non-negotiable. Defining executive authority—especially constraining a winner-take-all presidency—will be essential to reducing elite fear of electoral defeat. International monitoring, and potentially a limited peacekeeping presence, may be required to deter violence and reassure losing parties. The lesson of the aborted 2021 election attempt is unambiguous: sequencing matters. Stability must precede ballots.

Ultimately, Libya's future hinges on whether its leaders and citizens can reconstruct a shared sense of nationhood after years of division. Trust will not be restored through declarations or conferences, but through incremental, verifiable steps that

demonstrate restraint, inclusion, and competence. The international community can provide security guarantees and economic support, but unity cannot be imposed from outside.

Libya's divisions are not rooted in immutable ethnic or sectarian fault lines. They are products of power struggles, geography, and institutional collapse. Beneath the fragmentation remains a shared national identity and a collective exhaustion with disorder. If those sentiments are harnessed—carefully and pragmatically—they may yet provide the foundation for a unified Libyan state.

Conclusion: A Strategy for Wholeness

Will Libya ever be whole again? No serious analyst can answer that question with certainty. The pessimistic case is strong. Libya's fractures have endured long enough to risk hardening into permanence, with rival authorities in Tripoli and Cyrenaica governing through militia bargains and foreign patronage while the population adjusts, grimly, to dysfunction. The prevailing trajectory points toward a prolonged frozen conflict—neither war nor peace, neither unity nor collapse.

Yet this outcome is not foreordained. Libya's current condition is not the product of immutable social divisions or civilizational fault lines, but of political predation, institutional collapse, and sustained external interference. Those forces can be countered. With disciplined engagement by Libyans themselves, reinforced by coordinated international pressure—above all from the United States—there remains a plausible path toward gradual reintegration. It will not be swift, and it will not be elegant. States broken by upheaval rarely repair themselves spontaneously. They are rebuilt, piece by piece, through persistence, leverage, and the refusal to accept disorder as a permanent condition.

For the United States, the case for engagement is not sentimental; it is strategic. A unified and stable Libya would anchor security in North Africa, contribute to energy market stability, constrain terrorist networks, and deny rival powers a forward operating base on NATO's southern flank. A perpetually fractured Libya, by contrast, exports instability—through terrorism, arms trafficking, irregular migration, and geopolitical leverage for Moscow and others. The costs of neglect were made plain after 2011, when Libya became a breeding ground for ISIS and a conduit for weapons flooding the Sahel. Those lessons should not be relearned.

The path forward is incremental, not transformative. It begins with preserving and expanding ceasefire arrangements, reinforcing technocratic institutions that still function, and preventing renewed militia escalation. It requires unifying economic governance, particularly oil revenue management, to remove incentives for coercion and blockade. It depends on constructing an interim political framework that diffuses winner-take-all fears while preparing the ground for legitimate elections. And it

demands careful sequencing: stability before ballots, rules before contests, enforcement before promises. Each step will be fragile. Setbacks are inevitable. That is precisely why sustained international engagement—rather than episodic diplomacy—is indispensable.

A credible US strategy must also reject half-measures. Diplomatic ambiguity and indulgence of spoilers have prolonged Libya's paralysis. Washington should state plainly that partition, renewed civil war, and mercenary-dominated governance are unacceptable outcomes—and be prepared to back that position with consequences. This does not imply reckless intervention, but it does require resolve: coordinated sanctions, pressure on external enablers, support for enforcement mechanisms, and readiness to deter large-scale violence if red lines are crossed. Peace processes survive not on good intentions, but on credible enforcement.

Skeptics will argue that Libya's elites will never compromise, that foreign interference will never recede, or that US attention is better spent elsewhere. Such fatalism is tempting—and dangerous. Libya's modern history is punctuated by abrupt inflection points after long stagnation. Few anticipated the regime's collapse in 2011. Fewer still predicted the decisive Turkish intervention in 2020. Change in Libya rarely announces itself in advance. When opportunity emerges, the decisive variable will be whether the United States and its partners are positioned to shape it—or merely observe it.

American leadership remains the essential variable. If the United States leads—patiently, strategically, and with clear-eyed realism—Libya has a fighting chance to move beyond managed fragmentation toward a functional, sovereign state. If Washington abdicates that role, Libya will remain a chessboard for others, its divisions calcifying into permanence. The stakes are high, but so is the opportunity: to prevent another failed state and to demonstrate that sustained engagement, properly applied, can still bend fragile states toward stability.

Libya can be whole again. But it will require discipline over drift, leverage over hope, and engagement over resignation. The window is narrow, and it will not remain open indefinitely. The time to act is now—before fragmentation becomes destiny. 🦅

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Suppression of Enemy Air Defense

SEAD in Iran's Defense Doctrine

MEHRAN ATASHJAMEH

Abstract

Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran was a cornerstone ally of the West, with the United States as its chief arms supplier. The revolution, the ensuing arms embargoes, and eight years of war with Iraq left Tehran's air force hollowed and incapable of sustaining suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) missions. This study examines how Iran sought to offset those losses by shifting to kinetic alternatives. Excluding nonkinetic methods such as electronic warfare, the analysis focuses on Iran's pursuit of antiradiation ballistic missiles and an expanding fleet of drones as asymmetric substitutes for manned airpower. Yet the June 2025 conflict—marked by Israel's Operation Rising Lion and the US-led Operation Midnight Hammer—tested these capabilities in combat. The results were sobering: while Iran could mass fire and impose costs, its missile- and drone-centric SEAD strategy failed to achieve durable suppression against a modern, layered defense.

Iran's defense strategy has undergone profound changes since the 1979 revolution. Before that rupture, Iran was a pillar of Western security in the Persian Gulf, armed and sustained by the United States. The revolution, the ensuing sanctions, and eight years of war with Iraq stripped Tehran of modern aircraft, precision weapons, and the ability to execute suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) missions once central to its doctrine. SEAD—neutralizing or disrupting hostile air defenses to secure freedom of action—is indispensable to modern airpower. For Iran, however, the collapse of its air force meant a crippling loss of that capability.

This article asks: How did Iran attempt to sustain SEAD without modern fighters and advanced munitions? The answer lies in asymmetric innovation. Unable to field a new generation of strike aircraft, Tehran turned to standoff alternatives: antiradiation ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and an expanding family of drones designed to saturate, overwhelm, and suppress enemy defenses. In doing so, Iran sought to substitute volume and ingenuity for the precision and reach it could no longer buy.

Yet this adaptation met its first real-world test in June 2025. Israel's Operation Rising Lion and the US-led Operation Midnight Hammer exposed both the potential and the limits of Iran's missile- and drone-centric SEAD strategy. Iran demonstrated it could mass fire and impose costs, but it failed to achieve lasting

suppression against a coordinated, multi-domain campaign. The implication is clear: Iran has developed tools that complicate adversary operations, but they remain an incomplete substitute for conventional airpower against a modern, layered defense.

This study addresses a gap in the literature by tracing Iran's shift from aircraft-based to missile- and drone-based SEAD, then weighing those doctrinal ambitions against battlefield performance. The first section introduces SEAD as a concept and its role in modern warfare. The study then reviews Iran's air force and SEAD capabilities before, during, and after the revolution and war with Iraq. Next, it examines the impact of sanctions and the aging fleet. Thereafter, the article analyzes Iran's reliance on ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones as substitutes for manned SEAD. Finally, it assesses the June 2025 conflict, drawing lessons for Iran's evolving defense posture and for regional security.

Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses Concept

The US Department of War defines SEAD as the effort to “neutralize, destroy, or temporarily degrade surface-based enemy air defenses by destructive and/or disruptive means.”¹ These operations combine kinetic strikes—such as missiles targeting radars and launchers—with nonkinetic measures, including electronic warfare to blind sensors and disrupt command networks. SEAD is not a luxury; it is the prerequisite for air superiority and the survival of friendly aircraft in contested airspace.

In its earliest form, SEAD fell to fighter pilots armed with unguided bombs. Pilots flew low and fast, releasing “dumb” munitions against radar and missile sites.² The tactics were crude, the risks immense, and the losses often severe. The Russian Air Force's experience in Ukraine underscored the folly of such methods in the modern era: forced to rely on unguided munitions and low-altitude tactics, Russian pilots absorbed heavy losses to Ukrainian air defenses. The lesson is clear—without precision and standoff reach, SEAD becomes a bloodletting.³

As air defenses grew more sophisticated—with integrated radar networks, long-range surface-to-air missiles, and mobile batteries—old methods collapsed under the weight of modern precision. The response was the development of guided

¹ Christopher Bolkcom, *Military Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD): Assessing Future Needs*, CRS Report RL30639 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 23 February 2005), 1, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

² Michael Paul, “Location, Suppression, and Destruction of Enemy Air Defenses: Linking Missions to Realize Advanced Capabilities” (Master's thesis, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2008), 1–3, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

³ Rafael Ichaso, “Russian Air Force's Performance in Ukraine Air Operations: The Fall of a Myth,” *Joint Air Power Competence Centre Journal*, no. 35 (2023), <https://www.japcc.org/>.

munitions, especially antiradiation missiles, which allowed aircrews to suppress or destroy air defenses from beyond their lethal envelopes.⁴ These innovations transformed SEAD into a mission where accuracy and distance replaced risk and attrition.

For states denied access to modern strike aircraft and advanced munitions, the challenge is stark. Iran embodies this dilemma. Sanctions and an aging fleet have left Tehran with few conventional options. Maintaining a credible SEAD capability has forced it into asymmetric innovation—investing in ballistic missiles and drones as substitutes for manned strike aircraft. But as the June 2025 war revealed, these substitutes can harass and impose costs, yet they fall short of delivering the sustained suppression needed against a modern, layered defense.

Doctrinal and Strategic Role of SEAD in Iran's Military Planning

Iran's SEAD development cannot be reduced to technology alone; it must be understood within the logic of Tehran's broader military doctrine. That doctrine, forged in the crucible of the Iran–Iraq War, reflects a hard lesson: Iran cannot match the conventional superiority of the United States or its regional allies. Instead, it relies on asymmetry, layered defense, and denial strategies designed to impose costs, buy time, and erode an adversary's freedom of action.

Rather than seeking total air superiority, Iran's doctrine focuses on degrading an opponent's ability to operate unhindered. Over time, Tehran's posture has shifted from reactive defense to the "Forward Defense" model—a strategy of shaping threats beyond its borders through proxies, cyber operations, and standoff strikes.⁵ Within this framework, SEAD plays a defined role. Unlike Western doctrines, where SEAD clears the skies for manned strike packages, Iran uses SEAD to blind enemy sensors, crack open defensive networks, and prepare the battlespace for missile salvos and drone swarms. The 2019 strikes on Saudi oil facilities,⁶ and more recently Iran's massed drone and missile attacks on Israel, reflect this logic of disabling defenses to create windows of vulnerability.⁷

Central to that posture is the deliberate use of proxy forces as an extension of Iranian power. Tehran deploys and sustains a network of partners—most prominently

⁴ Stanisław Czeszejko, "Anti-Radiation Missiles vs. Radars," *Journal of Telecommunications and Information Technology* 59, no. 3 (2013): 285–88, <https://www.journals.pan.pl/>.

⁵ Matthew McInnis, "The Strategic Foundations of Iran's Military Doctrine," in "Iran's Military Doctrine, Capabilities, and Strategy," *IJSS*, 3, <https://www.ijss.org/>.

⁶ Omar Ahmed, "Was Iran Really Behind the Attack on Saudi Aramco Facilities?," *Middle East Monitor*, 20 September 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/>.

⁷ "Iran Launches Salvo of Ballistic Missiles at Israel," *Arab News*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/>; Paul Millar, "How Israel Could Respond to Iran's Drone and Missile Assault," *France 24*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.france24.com/>.

Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthi forces in Yemen, and organic Shia militia elements in Iraq and Syria—to shape the battlespace beyond Iran’s borders.⁸ These proxies perform multiple roles relevant to SEAD: they provide forward staging and sanctuary for weapons and logistics; they generate additional axes of attack that force dispersion of enemy sensors and shooters; they conduct deniable strikes against rear-area infrastructure, airfields, and lines of communication; and they create political and operational ambiguity that complicates adversary targeting and escalation calculus.

Proxy arsenals are not identical to Iran’s own missile and unmanned aerial systems inventories, but they are consequential. Hezbollah’s rocket and missile stocks can threaten rear-area infrastructure and complicate Israeli air operations; the Houthis have demonstrated the ability to strike shipping and critical energy nodes in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf approaches; militia groups in Iraq and Syria provide launch sites, permissive territory, and local intelligence. Employed together with Tehran’s ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones, these forces multiply problems for an opponent’s integrated air- and missile-defense architecture.⁹

Doctrinally, then, SEAD for Iran is a combined, multi-actor construct. Rather than clearing the skies solely for manned strike packages, Iran uses suppression to open windows for missile salvos, swarm attacks, and proxy strikes; it seeks to impose a mosaic of threats that complicates an adversary’s sensor picture and command decisions. Exercises such as the Fadaian-e Harim-e Velayat series, and repeated combined training with proxy elements, demonstrate that Iranian planners have institutionalized the integration of antiradar drones and missile strikes with proxy operations in their war gaming and targeting concepts.¹⁰

The June 2025 conflict tested this model under fire. Proxies added depth to Iran’s approach and multiplied threat axes, but they did not convert Tehran’s asymmetric package into a full substitute for conventional airpower. In practice, proxies acted as force multipliers and political tools—useful for shaping and attrition—but they proved unable to deliver sustained suppression of a modern, layered integrated air

⁸ Seth G. Jones et al., *The Iranian and Houthi War Against Saudi Arabia* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 21 July 2021), <https://www.csis.org/>; and Shaan Shaikh and Ian Williams, *Hezbollah’s Missiles and Rockets* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26 June 2018), <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁹ McInnis, “The Strategic Foundations of Iran’s Military Doctrine,” 2–5.

¹⁰ “۴۰۰۰ تن تشاد روضح تالیو میروح نای یادف شیامزر رد اداپ پ م ادک / شیترای م اظن رترب داپ پ ۵ ی فرخ” [Introducing the Top 5 Military Drones of the Army / Which Drones Were Present in the Fedayeen Harim Velayat Exercise?], *Khabarfoori*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.khabarfoori.com/>.

and missile defense when employed against a coordinated Israeli–US campaign.¹¹ The result reinforces a key analytic point: proxies extend range and create dilemmas for adversaries, but they are a force multiplier within an asymmetric strategy, not a stand-in for the capabilities lost with an aging air force.

Iran's Air Force and SEAD Capability Before and During the Iran–Iraq War

Scholarship on Iran's air force before the 1979 revolution and its subsequent performance in the Iran–Iraq War is extensive, drawing on interviews, memoirs, and declassified files. Yet one critical dimension remains underexplored: Iran's ability—or inability—to conduct SEAD.

Evidence suggests that, unlike Western air forces, Iran entered the 1980s without dedicated antiradiation missiles. Instead, its pilots relied on substitutes such as AGM-65 Maverick air-to-ground missiles and unguided munitions. These were not designed to home on radar emissions, forcing Iranian crews to improvise tactics against Iraqi surface-to-air missile sites and radar networks.¹² The result was an ad hoc approach: courageous pilots flying at low altitude, attacking with weapons ill-suited for SEAD, and absorbing high risk in an unforgiving environment.

This improvisation illuminates the structural limits of Iran's air force after the revolution. Sanctions cut off the supply of modern precision weapons, while the war's attrition hollowed out the pilot corps and maintenance base. In this context, SEAD missions were less a doctrinal specialty than an act of necessity—pilots cobbling together solutions to keep air operations viable. The gap left by the absence of true antiradiation capabilities foreshadowed the trajectory of Iran's doctrine after the war: unable to sustain conventional SEAD through manned aircraft, Tehran would eventually look to missiles and drones as substitutes.

The lesson is clear. Iran's experience in the 1980–1988 war was not only a crucible for asymmetric doctrine but also the proving ground for a mindset: if conventional tools were denied, Tehran would find or build alternatives, however unorthodox, to keep contesting the skies.

¹¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Challenge of Missile Defense: Net Assessment Indicators* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 April 2019), 2–25, <https://www.csis.org/>.

¹² Ronald E. Bergquist, *The Role of Airpower in the Iran–Iraq War* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1988), 26, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

Iran's SEAD Capability from the Postwar Period to the Present

The 1979 Islamic Revolution severed Iran's access to Western arms, cutting off the flow of aircraft, munitions, and spare parts that had sustained its air force. Once equipped with advanced US-made F-14 Tomcats and F-4 Phantoms, Tehran soon found itself scrambling to keep aging platforms airborne. The Iran–Iraq War only deepened the attrition, leaving Iran with a gutted fleet and few prospects for modernization.

To compensate, Tehran turned to Eastern Bloc and Chinese suppliers. Aircraft such as the Chengdu F-7, a derivative of the 1950s MiG-21, entered service, but they underscored Iran's technological regression. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 1991 gave Tehran an unexpected windfall when Iraqi aircraft—including MiG-29s, Su-24MKs, and Su-22s—fled into Iranian airspace. Later, Iran acquired small numbers of Russian fighters, but these additions did little to alter the fundamental imbalance with US and allied airpower.¹³

Denied reliable access to modern strike aircraft and precision-guided weapons, Iran doubled down on asymmetric alternatives. Some efforts were clandestine. In the 1990s, Ukrainian security services exposed Iranian operatives attempting to smuggle technical manuals and components for the Kh-31 antiradiation missile—evidence of Tehran's determination to secure standoff SEAD capability despite sanctions.¹⁴ Earlier, the illicit transfer of Kh-55 cruise missiles had demonstrated the same intent.¹⁵ Reports also point to limited acquisitions of Kh-58 antiradiation missiles for Iran's Su-24s, Su-22s, and MiG-29s, though their numbers and readiness remain uncertain.

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran was a pillar of Western strategy in the Cold War. Its value rested on vast energy reserves, control of the Persian Gulf chokepoint, and proximity to the Soviet Union. Tehran's alignment with Washington made it one of America's closest regional allies.

The revolution shattered that partnership. The new Islamic Republic reoriented foreign policy toward exporting revolutionary ideology, confronting Western-aligned states, and supporting anti-US movements across the region. The 1980 US embassy hostage crisis triggered the first in a long line of sanctions, cutting Iran off from the arms trade that had once underpinned its military strength.

¹³ Douglas Barrie, "Iran and the Challenge of Combat-Aircraft Recapitalization", The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2017, 2–5, <https://www.iiss.org/>.

¹⁴ Dario Leone, "Busted: Ukraine Catches Iranian Military Attaché Trying to Smuggle KH-31 Parts out of Kiev," *National Interest* (blog), 20 June 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

¹⁵ John Pike, "X-55 Long-Range Cruise Missile," GlobalSecurity.org, 2 April 2019, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/iran/x-55.htm>.

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) marked a turning point. The “War of the Cities,” defined by missile strikes on urban centers, forced Tehran to improvise. To retaliate against Baghdad, Iran imported Scud-B missiles from Libya and North Korea. Those early purchases laid the foundation of a program that steadily advanced in range, accuracy, and survivability despite sanctions.

Four decades later, the missile force has become the centerpiece of Iran’s defense strategy. With the largest arsenal of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in the Middle East, Tehran treats missiles not as an auxiliary tool but as the core of its deterrence doctrine—an asymmetric substitute for the modern air force it cannot acquire.¹⁶

Hormoz-1

In May 2014, Iran unveiled the Hormoz-1, a short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) billed as the world’s first antiradiation ballistic missile (ARBM). Unlike conventional ballistic systems, the Hormoz-1 employs terminal guidance to home in on radar emissions during its final flight phase. With a 300-kilometer range, it gives Iran a standoff tool to strike enemy radar sites across much of the Persian Gulf—whether land-based installations or naval sensors operating within US Central Command’s area of responsibility.¹⁷

The missile’s design reflects Iran’s core problem: an aging fleet of strike fighters that cannot safely approach modern integrated air defenses. By substituting a ballistic missile for a manned SEAD package, Tehran sought to neutralize radars without exposing pilots to lethal envelopes of surface-to-air fire. Solid-fueled and road-mobile, the Hormoz-1 offers rapid launch capability, compressing the response window for US and allied radar crews in a region where geography places many sites within range.¹⁸

On paper, the Hormoz-1 signaled a leap in Iran’s asymmetric doctrine. By shifting SEAD from cockpit to launcher, Tehran appeared to create a credible threat to US and allied detection networks. Yet the June 2025 conflict revealed the limits

¹⁶ Mehran Atashjameh, “Passive Defense Measures in Saving Iran’s Ballistic Missile Arsenal,” *MES Insights* 15, no. 4 (2024), 2, <https://www.usmcu.edu/>.

¹⁷ Mariel Ferragamo et al., “U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/>; “Hormuz Ballistic Missiles, Another Advance in Iran’s Naval Capability,” *Iran Press*, 22 September 2022, <https://iranpress.com/>; and Sebastien Roblin, “How Iran’s Massive Missile Force Could Overwhelm Any Target,” *National Interest* (blog), 22 March 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

¹⁸ “US Central Command Priorities,” U.S. Central Command website, 2022, <https://www.centcom.mil/>; and Sahar Mokhtari et al., “Inferring Spatial Distribution of Oil Spill Risks from Proxies: Case Study in the North of the Persian Gulf,” *Ocean & Coastal Management* 121 (January 2016): 48–60, <https://doi.org/>.

of this innovation. Israeli and US forces, supported by mobile radars, emission-control practices, and layered missile defenses, absorbed and deflected Iranian salvos. The Hormoz-1 and similar systems demonstrated Iran's ingenuity under constraint, but they failed to deliver sustained suppression or blind adversary networks for meaningful periods of time.

The lesson is stark. The Hormoz-1 highlights Tehran's determination to maintain SEAD capacity in the absence of modern aircraft, but its performance under combat conditions underscores the gap between doctrinal ambition and battlefield effect. As with much of Iran's missile program, the Hormoz-1 imposes friction and costs—yet it cannot substitute for the freedom of action that true air superiority provides.

Drone-Based SEAD Method

The rise of drones has transformed the conduct of SEAD. By assuming high-risk missions—reconnaissance, electronic warfare, decoy, and strike—unmanned systems reduce the need to expose pilots to lethal environments. Israel demonstrated the concept during the War of Attrition, when drones were used to bait and blind Arab air defenses, rewriting the logic of SEAD for modern warfare.¹⁹

Iran recognized the value of drones early. During the Iran–Iraq War, Tehran fielded the first-generation Mohajer, a rudimentary platform that served more as a low-cost strike munition than an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) asset.²⁰ High pilot attrition and sanctions on advanced aircraft drove Iran to seek unmanned alternatives. Drones could fly closer to defended zones, gather intelligence, or strike targets at a fraction of the cost of a manned sortie. If lost, they carried no political risk of captured pilots and little strategic cost.

From these beginnings, Iran developed a diverse fleet: ISR drones for surveillance, loitering munitions for strike, electronic-warfare unmanned aerial vehicles for jamming and deception, and expendable decoys designed to saturate radars and missile batteries. Tehran has even experimented with combat drones capable of carrying air-to-air missiles—an ambitious, if limited, attempt to extend unmanned systems into traditional fighter roles. Most significant, however, has been the steady refinement of loitering munitions designed for SEAD. These drones can linger near defended zones, detect emissions, and dive on radars or launchers once they expose themselves.

¹⁹ Grant T. Willis, "Israel's Firebees: UAVs & the Future of the Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses," *Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers*, 2022, 1–10, <https://indopacificresearchers.org/>.

²⁰ *The Iranian Drone Threat* (New York: United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023), 5, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/>.

The appeal of such systems is obvious: they give Iran a cheap, expendable way to probe, harass, and degrade an adversary's defenses. Yet their limits were made plain in June 2025. During Operation Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer, Iranian drone swarms were met by Israeli and US layered defenses—interceptors, electronic warfare, and deception. While some drones penetrated and forced defenders to expend interceptors, the swarms failed to blind radar networks or suppress defenses long enough to alter the campaign's outcome.

The record is mixed but instructive. Drones allow Iran to impose costs, saturate defenses, and complicate enemy planning. They are emblematic of Tehran's asymmetric adaptation under constraint. But they do not substitute for the sustained suppression achieved by modern strike aircraft with advanced antiradiation weapons. In SEAD, as the June 2025 war proved, drones are a tool of harassment, not of decision.

Kian Drone Family

In recent years, Tehran unveiled the Kian series of suicide drones—Kian-1 and Kian-2—claiming they could be fitted with radar-wave receivers, effectively turning them into loitering munitions with antiradiation capability.²¹ With a declared range of 1,000 kilometers, the Kian family promised a low-cost, long-range option for striking enemy radar and early warning systems deep in the battlespace. For Iran, denied access to advanced strike aircraft, the Kian represented an attractive substitute: expendable, affordable, and versatile.

The Kian drones were designed to give Tehran flexibility in deployment. They could be launched from forward positions against nearby radar sites or from deep within Iranian territory against US and allied sensors along the Persian Gulf.²² In theory, this capacity allowed Iran to threaten radars without risking manned aircraft or exposing launch crews to immediate retaliation. By degrading or blinding early warning networks, the Kian family fit neatly into Iran's asymmetric doctrine: create temporary windows of vulnerability, then follow with missile salvos or larger drone swarms.

In practice, the record is more sobering. During the June 2025 conflict, Kian drones were employed as part of Iran's massed SEAD effort. Israeli and US defenses, however, proved adept at countering them. Mobile radars, decoys, and electronic-warfare measures diluted seeker effectiveness; layered interceptors

²¹ "Kian Combat and Defense Drone," *Iran Press News Agency*, 30 April 2022, <https://iranpress.com/>.

²² Stanisław Koziej, "Israel's Air Defense System Should Be a Model for Poland," *Eastern Frontier Initiative*, 16 April 2024, <https://easternfrontier.eu/>.

eliminated many before impact. While the Kians forced defenders to expend interceptors and attention, they did not deliver the sustained radar suppression Iran had hoped for.

The Kian family illustrates both the ingenuity and the limits of Tehran's approach. They provide a cheap, standoff harassment tool and complicate adversary planning, but they fall short of the decisive suppression required to alter the outcome of a modern, multi-domain campaign. As June 2025 made clear, the Kians are more a weapon of nuisance and saturation than a true substitute for conventional SEAD platforms.

Arash Drone Family

The Arash series represents a derivative of the Kian line, but with notable improvements. With a reported range of 2,000 kilometers—double that of the Kian—the Arash extends Iran's ability to strike radar and air defense sites far beyond its borders. Powered by a propeller rather than a jet engine, the system trades speed for endurance, offering greater flexibility in mission profiles. One of its defining features is containerization: the Arash can be carried in civilian-style launch boxes mounted on trucks, allowing camouflage as commercial traffic and complicating adversary ISR efforts.²³ This design gives Tehran a survivable, deceptive deployment option suited for surprise salvos.

The drone's doctrinal purpose is clear: provide Iran with a long-range, low-cost means of threatening adversary radar networks, particularly those in Israel. Reports indicate that Arash drones were employed during the June 2025 conflict. At least some were intercepted en route, underscoring both their operational intent and their vulnerability. The geography alone tells the story—the Arash's 2,000-kilometer range aligns almost precisely with the distance from Iranian launch sites to Israeli radar fields.²⁴

Combat, however, revealed the same asymmetry seen with other Iranian systems. While the Arash expanded Iran's theoretical strike reach, layered Israeli defenses—supported by US assets—detected and neutralized them before they could achieve meaningful suppression. The system demonstrated Tehran's ingenuity in extending drone-based SEAD capability, but it failed to blind Israeli radars or create sustained openings for follow-on strikes.

²³ "Iran's Arash; World's Longest-Range Suicide Drone with High Precision," *Iran Press News Agency*, 12 October 2022, <https://iranpress.com/>.

²⁴ "Distance From Israel to Iran," *DistanceFromTo.net*, n.d., <https://www.distancefromto.net/>.

The lesson is consistent. The Arash, like the Kian, reflects Iran's determination to build substitutes for manned SEAD platforms. Containerization and extended range add survivability and reach, but they do not overcome the technological edge of a modern integrated air and missile defense. In practice, the Arash proved a weapon of harassment and deterrence—not decision.

Shahed Drone Family

The Shahed-136, exported to Russia and rebranded as the Geran-2, has become one of the most visible Iranian drones on today's battlefields. In Ukraine, Russian forces have used it in large numbers to target high-value assets, saturate air defenses, and exhaust interceptor stocks.²⁵ The logic is straightforward: launch swarms of low-cost, expendable drones to overload defensive networks, expose radar positions, and set the conditions for follow-on precision strikes.²⁶

Iran has refined the Shahed family with this role in mind. Although not a dedicated antiradiation weapon, the Shahed-136 functions as a loitering munition optimized for saturation attacks. Its value lies less in its accuracy than in its numbers. At scale, Shaheds can distract and soften defenses, turning the weight of production into an operational effect.

Recent conflicts confirmed both the strengths and the limits of this approach. During Operation True Promise 1 and the June 2025 war, Iran launched mass salvos of Shahed drones against Israeli targets.²⁷ Most were intercepted by layered defenses, but the volume forced Israel and the United States to expend interceptors and revealed the potential of saturation to impose costs. Geography, however, mattered: the distance between Iranian launch sites and Israeli targets gave defenders time to detect, track, and engage incoming drones.²⁸ By contrast, US and allied radar sites in the Persian Gulf lie within far shorter flight times. In that theater, Shahed swarms—especially when paired with antiradar munitions—could compress warning windows and increase the risk of successful strikes.

The Shahed family thus illustrates Iran's asymmetric logic in its purest form: trade quality for quantity, and turn mass production into a weapon. In June 2025,

²⁵ Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Iran's Missile And Drone Program: Disrupting U.S. Aerial Hegemony*, Issue Brief (Doha, Qatar: Middle East Council on Global Affairs, July 2024), 4, <https://mecouncil.org/>.

²⁶ Matthew Luxmoore, "Russia Defies Trump With Largest-Ever Drone-and-Missile Attack on Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

²⁷ David Daoud and Ahmad Sharawi, "Iranian Drone and Missile Attacks Against Israel: June 24, 2025," *Long War Journal*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/>; and Shaan Shaikh, "The Iran-Israel Air Conflict, One Week In," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 19 April 2024, <https://www.csis.org/e>.

²⁸ Mehran Atashjameh, "Iran-Israel Conflict: Long-Distance Rivalry, Strategies, Toolkits, and Struggle for Penetrating Rival's Strategic Depth," *Institute of New Europe*, 22 April 2025, <https://ine.org.pl/>.

the concept strained against the reality of modern air and missile defense. Shaheds imposed costs but did not achieve decisive suppression. They remain a tool of harassment and attrition—dangerous in the Persian Gulf, survivable in local conflicts, but ultimately limited against a coordinated, technologically superior adversary.

Iran's Cruise Missile Arsenal

Cruise missiles are long-range, precision-guided weapons designed to fly low and hug terrain, exploiting radar gaps to slip past defenses. They can be launched from air, land, or sea platforms, strike fixed or mobile targets with accuracy, and deliver varied payloads. Their advantages—stealthy profiles, flexible basing, and precision—make them a cornerstone of modern SEAD campaigns.²⁹ The 2011 Libya intervention highlighted their value: US and allied Tomahawks systematically dismantled Libyan radar sites, missile batteries, and command centers, clearing the way for air operations.³⁰

Iran turned to cruise missiles in the 1990s as sanctions hollowed out its strike fleet. A watershed came when Tehran reportedly acquired Kh-55 cruise missiles from Ukraine, giving it a template for indigenous designs. From that foundation, Iran has produced the Soumar, Hoveyzeh, and Ya-Ali land-attack cruise missiles, along with adapted antiship variants such as the Noor and Qader. These weapons, launched from mobile ground launchers or aircraft, offer Tehran the ability to bypass traditional airpower, deliver precision at range, and hold adversary radars and bases at risk.

Cruise missiles now form a core pillar of Iran's deterrence and SEAD toolkit. By threatening high-value radars, air bases, and command nodes, they allow Tehran to impose costs without risking pilots.³¹ Yet their performance in June 2025 underscored their limits. Israel and the United States intercepted most inbound cruise missiles, using layered defenses and rapid reconstitution of radar coverage to blunt Iran's salvos. While a handful penetrated, the strikes failed to suppress defenses long enough to open sustained corridors for follow-on attacks.

²⁹ "Cruise Missile Basics," *Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance*, 2025, <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/>.

³⁰ Carlo Copp, "Operation Odyssey Dawn: The Collapse of Libya's Relic Air Defence System," *Defence Today*, June 2011, <https://www.ausairpower.net/>; and Joseph Speed and Panagiotis Stathopoulos, "SEAD Operations of the Future," *Joint Air Power Competence Centre Journal*, no. 26 (2018), <https://www.japcc.org/>.

³¹ Shahryar Pasandideh, "Under the Radar, Iran's Cruise Missile Capabilities Advance," *War on the Rocks*, 20 September 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/>.

Regional Security Implications

Iran's investment in missile- and drone-based SEAD carries consequences beyond the purely technical realm. These capabilities shape the strategic environment across the Persian Gulf and Levant, complicating US and allied force posture. Even if Iranian systems cannot decisively suppress a modern integrated air defense, they impose planning costs, shorten warning times, and increase the burden on defensive interceptors. A salvo of Hormoz missiles or Shahed drones may fail to blind a radar permanently, but it can still force US naval assets or forward-deployed air bases to expend scarce interceptors and reposition defenses.

For regional actors, the message is twofold. First, US and allied airpower is no longer uncontested; it must operate in an environment where even an incomplete Iranian SEAD threat can disrupt tempo and impose attrition. Second, partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are compelled to invest in ever-denser air and missile defenses, diverting resources toward protection rather than power projection. This dynamic strengthens Iran's deterrence by denial: Tehran does not need to win a battle in the air to achieve strategic effect—it need only raise the costs of entry.

At the same time, the June 2025 conflict underscored the fragility of Iran's approach. Against coordinated, multi-domain adversaries, its systems proved unable to achieve lasting suppression. For Washington and its allies, the lesson is to maintain integration across air, missile defense, cyber, and electronic warfare—ensuring Iranian salvos remain costly but strategically ineffective. For Tehran, the challenge remains sustaining mass production of drones and missiles under sanctions, while facing adversaries whose defenses grow stronger after each test.

Conclusion

Iran's pursuit of SEAD over the past four decades reflects adaptation under constraint. Denied access to modern fighter aircraft and advanced munitions, Tehran built an arsenal of substitutes: ARBMs like the Hormoz-1; loitering munitions such as the Kian and Arash; and dual-use platforms like the Shahed-136, optimized for saturation and attrition. Alongside these came a growing cruise missile portfolio—Soumar, Hoveyzeh, Ya-Ali, and others—that offered long-range precision from mobile, survivable launchers. These systems represent a deliberate, systematic effort to replace conventional strike packages with standoff, unmanned, and expendable alternatives.

This approach has strategic and economic logic. Drones and missiles are cheaper to produce than modern combat aircraft, expendable in combat, and politically low-risk. They complicate adversary defenses, impose costs, and allow Tehran to

project power despite sanctions and technological isolation. In this sense, Iran has demonstrated ingenuity: it created the world's first claimed antiradiation ballistic missile and fielded large families of loitering drones, positioning itself as a pioneer in asymmetric SEAD.

Yet the June 2025 conflict put these innovations to the test—and exposed their limits. Israeli and US forces, employing mobile radars, layered defenses, electronic warfare, and deception, absorbed and deflected Iranian salvos. While Tehran demonstrated the ability to mass fire and force adversaries to expend interceptors, its drones and missiles failed to deliver sustained suppression of air defenses. They imposed friction but did not achieve the decisive openings needed to alter the course of the campaign.

The lesson is clear. Iran's SEAD strategy has evolved into a coherent doctrine built on missiles and drones, but its tools remain a substitute—not a replacement—for modern airpower. They serve to contest the battlespace, not to dominate it. Iran can harass, saturate, and impose costs, but against technologically superior, multi-domain opponents, it cannot secure lasting air superiority. That gap—between ambition and effect—defines both the ingenuity and the fragility of Iran's SEAD doctrine in the twenty-first century. 🦅

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Reforging the Arsenal of Democracy

The Ukraine Wake-Up Call

DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL

Abstract

Three decades of post–Cold War complacency left NATO’s and Europe’s defense-industrial base optimized for peacetime efficiency at the expense of wartime endurance. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine exposed these vulnerabilities, and the shock of the Trump administration’s 2025 “Hague Commitment”—requiring Allies to spend 5 percent of GDP on defense—turned belated ambition into an urgent mandate, forcing a pivot from just-in-time logistics to a just-in-case posture. This analysis details how NATO and EU nations are rebuilding strategic stockpiles of munitions, expanding industrial surge capacity, and integrating fragmented arms industries into a cohesive, interoperable transatlantic arsenal. It argues that Washington’s now-conditional security guarantees have compelled unprecedented NATO–EU defense-industrial integration and reinforced the strategic necessity of industrial depth. Industrial strength, once an afterthought, has reemerged as the core of deterrence—the decisive factor in dissuading aggression, maintaining the balance of power, and preserving peace through strength.

Europe spent a generation in strategic slumber, convinced that industrial warfare was a relic and that peace had rendered our arsenals secondary. Post–Cold War governments gutted stockpiles and streamlined defense industries for peacetime efficiency, banking on American might to handle any conflict at the fringes of NATO. That illusion shattered when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Within weeks, Western armories began draining at Cold War rates. Artillery shells and air-defense missiles evaporated faster than factories could replace them, exposing the soft underbelly of NATO’s readiness. One British study found Russia expended more shells in 48 hours than Britain had in its entire arsenal—a damning indictment of the West’s complacency. “Interoperability,” long a NATO buzzword, collapsed in the mud of Donbas as incompatible ammunition and spare parts hamstrung Ukraine’s efforts. The message was unmistakable: without robust industrial muscle, even the best armies risk running out of ammo before the battle is won.

Ukraine’s agony was a bracing tutorial. European nations scrambling to arm Kyiv discovered their “just-in-time” logistics philosophy was a fatal peacetime indulgence. Governments scoured global markets for artillery shells and Soviet-caliber ammunition, paid premium prices for scarce missiles, and set up emergency repair

hubs in Poland and Germany to keep Ukraine's motley mix of Western weapons firing. Each improvised fix highlighted a core truth: industrial capacity is not a backend issue—it is the linchpin of modern warfighting. In a grinding war of attrition, stockpiles and surge production can matter as much as battalions and brigades.

America First and the Five-Percent Ultimatum

The full reckoning, however, did not arrive until 2025 with a new US administration willing to play hardball. President Donald Trump's return to the White House brought a sharp edge to American policy: "The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over. We count among our many allies and partners dozens of wealthy, sophisticated nations that must assume primary responsibility for their regions and contribute far more to our collective defense."¹ Trump's "America First" doctrine translated into an ultimatum at NATO's June 2025 summit in The Hague. There, under intense US pressure, all allies (save Spain) agreed to a new five-percent of GDP defense spending floor by 2035. This *Hague Commitment*—more than doubling the old two-percent guideline—is nothing short of revolutionary. "This is a quantum leap that is ambitious, historic and fundamental to securing our future," declared NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte.² The pledge earmarks 3.5 percent of GDP for core military needs and another 1.5 percent for related security investments, recognizing that resilience at home (from industrial base upgrades to cyber defenses) underpins frontline strength.

America's message was blunt: *If you want US protection, prove it by rebuilding your arsenal.* Trump openly suggested that while Europe must hit five percent, the United States "shouldn't have to" reach the same level. In other words, Washington expects its allies to catch up and will no longer foot the bill for European under-preparedness. This conditional US posture has been a shock to the system, but a productive one. Europe's leaders have finally been jolted out of complacency. They now face a mandate, not a request, to rearm and restructure. NATO's longstanding problem of free-riders and fragmented defenses is being met with an unprecedented mix of American stick and carrot: meet your commitments (the stick is implicit), and the United States will continue to extend its security umbrella—but under far more *reciprocal* terms.

Crucially, the five-percent pledge is forcing a transformation beyond budgets. It demands European governments actually absorb those funds effectively—which

¹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: White House, November 2025), 12, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

² Quoted in: Tim Martin and Michael Marrow, "NATO allies, besides Spain, set to make 5 percent GDP spending pledge," *Breaking Defense*, 23 June 2025, <https://www.breakingdefense.com/>.

in turn requires consolidating a fragmented defense industry.³ Simply put, no nation can efficiently spend five percent of GDP on defense in isolation; the sums are too vast and the efficiency losses too high if every country goes its own way. Trump's ultimatum has thus become the *de facto* catalyst for structural reform: Europe must integrate its defense-industrial base or waste a historic windfall.

From Just-in-Time to Just-in-Case

The new spending paradigm has raised expectations across the alliance, but as Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen Alexus G. Grynkewich, USAF, underscores, "The challenge now isn't that commitment. The challenge is taking that commitment and turning it into real capability and capacity on the battlefield."⁴ That observation captures the core strategic problem: money is no substitute for production lines, surge capacity, and integrated logistics. Restructuring Europe's military-industrial ecosystem is now a matter of urgency and strategy, not just economy. The old peacetime paradigm of lean inventories and single-source suppliers has given way to a wartime mindset of redundancy and resilience. NATO and EU initiatives in 2025 reflect this shift. The Alliance approved a new Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge to coordinate transatlantic arms production, while the EU launched the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP)—a funding vehicle specifically aimed at breaking bottlenecks in arms manufacturing. Under EDIP, Brussels is pouring €1.5 billion in grants to expand factories for ammunition and critical components.⁵ One outcome: Europe's annual output of 155mm artillery shells is on track to reach two million rounds in the next year, a sixfold jump spurred by the EU's Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and urgent national investments.⁶ Dormant production lines for gunpowder and explosives are being revived with EU subsidies. What was once derided as excess capacity is now seen as vital insurance—a "just-in-case" stockpile for the next rainy day of history.

The NATO alliance is likewise enforcing hard lessons on standardization and supply security. Allies have agreed that stockpiles must increase dramatically across all major munition types. Gone are the days when a country held only a few weeks' worth of shells or missiles. NATO's new goal is to ensure months (if not years) of

³ Nan Tian, Lorenzo Scarazzato, and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, "NATO's new spending target: challenges and risks associated with a political signal," SIPRI, 27 June 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/>.

⁴ Quoted in: Stew Magnuson, "JUST IN: U.S., European Defense Firms Should Come Together, New NATO Commander Says," *National Defense*, 17 July 2025, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/>.

⁵ "EDIP | A Dedicated Programme for Defence" (fact sheet, European Commission, n.d.), <https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/>.

⁶ "ASAP: EU strengthens ammunition production capacity in Norway," Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, 10 November 2025, <https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/>.

sustainment in high-intensity war, which means large war reserves and *warm* production lines that can surge output at a moment's notice.⁷ What seems like "excess" in peacetime—ammunition factories running below peak capacity, depots filled with missiles that might never be used—is in fact the price of readiness. As one senior NATO commander put it, a half-full munitions plant in peacetime is as prudent as a half-empty fire station in a city that hasn't yet burned. This is deterrence through depth: aggressors must know that the West can fight not just today's battle, but tomorrow's and next year's as well.

Ending the Fragmentation

Europe's greatest handicap has long been the duplication and fragmentation of its defense industries. Dozens of national variants of tanks, aircraft, and ships meant short production runs and incompatible parts—a luxury that a five-percent spending surge can no longer tolerate. In 2025, that reality is finally being confronted head-on. The Hague Commitment's massive funding boost has made Europe's patchwork arsenal fiscally untenable: nations can't efficiently absorb their new budgets by each reinventing the wheel. Thus, the EU and NATO are using financial muscle to force integration. EDIP incentives explicitly reward joint procurement—countries pooling orders for one standard system—and penalize go-it-alone projects. Similarly, NATO is turning long-neglected standardization agreements into binding requirements: for example, any new artillery system *must* fire the common 155mm round and use interoperable software, or it will not get Alliance funding or political support.⁸ The watchword is *interchangeability*, a step beyond interoperability. It is not enough that allied weapons can talk to each other; we need them to swap and share munitions, parts, and maintenance seamlessly. In practical terms, this could mean a US F-35 fighter refuels and rearms at a Polish airbase using European-made missiles, or a German tank gets repaired in a Czech workshop with French spare parts. Such scenarios must become routine if NATO is to present a united front in war. Every procurement decision is now being weighed against a stark question: Does this choice strengthen the alliance's common arsenal or splinter it further?

Interchangeability is not a technocratic tweak; it is a strategic imperative born of Ukraine's harsh lessons. When Ukrainian gunners found that technically

⁷ "NATO releases Updated Defence Production Action Plan, Commercial Space Strategy and Rapid Adoption Action Plan," NATO, 24 June 2025, <https://www.nato.int/>; and "Summary of NATO's Rapid Adoption Action Plan," NATO, 25 June 2025, <https://www.nato.int/>.

⁸ Eric Johnson, "Guns and Ammo: The Ukraine War and NATO's Ammunition Interoperability Problem," Modern War Institute, 7 November 2025, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/>.

“NATO-standard” shells from different nations did not shoot to the same accuracy, or that an American fuse setter did not recognize a European artillery fuse, it became clear that mere common standards on paper were insufficient. NATO is responding by tightening the enforcement of standards and updating them to account for software and safety nuances.⁹ The era of *national exceptions*—each country tweaking a design to suit parochial preferences—must give way to a culture of *coherence*. That means Europeans jointly develop major systems wherever possible, and even integrate US and European production for key capabilities. The logic is simple: 27 separate supply chains cannot win a sustained war with a peer adversary. A single, integrated supply chain with 27 nodes can.¹⁰

An Alliance Arsenal in the Making

Signs of a *transatlantic defense-industrial renaissance* are already evident. Major European defense firms like Germany’s Rheinmetall are expanding at a pace unseen in decades—acquiring smaller companies, opening new ammunition plants, and churning out armored vehicles. In November 2025, Rheinmetall broke ground in Baisogala, Lithuania, on a 155mm artillery ammunition plant. This is not merely an industrial expansion; it is a geopolitical statement. On NATO’s eastern flank—where the alliance’s promises are tested against geography and history—the plant embodies Europe’s determination to anchor its security in steel and powder, not just in words.¹¹ The war in Ukraine has elevated defense production from a sleepy sector to a strategic national priority across Europe. Defense spending in Europe has transformed defense production from a sleepy sector into a strategic national priority across the continent. Spending for the EU-27 jumped 10 percent in 2023 to reach a then-record of approximately €288 billion. This surge accelerated dramatically, with 2024 expenditure hitting €343 billion, a 19-percent increase over the previous year. This unprecedented growth is expected to continue through 2025, reaching nearly €392 billion as countries rush to meet interim targets on the way to the new long-term NATO commitment.¹² More importantly, those billions are being steered into cooperative projects. Joint acquisitions—once rare—are becoming the norm. Two dozen European nations banded together in

⁹ Johnson, “Guns and Ammo.”

¹⁰ Leighann Martin, “Modernizing Defense Logistics: Converging Kill Chains and Supply Chains” (white paper, Defense Logistics Agency, 1 April 2025), <https://www.dla.mil/>.

¹¹ Laura Alviz and Oliver Crook, “Rheinmetall Sees Extended Boom Regardless of Ukraine Peace,” *Bloomberg*, 5 December 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

¹² “EU defence spending hits 343 billion in 2024, targets 381 in 2025,” European Defence Agency, 2 September 2025, <https://www.eunews.it/>; and Sebastian Clapp, “EU defence funding,” European Parliament, 8 October 2025, <https://epthinktank.eu/>.

2023 to order ammunition in bulk, a move that cut unit costs and signaled industry to scale up production long-term. NATO's Support and Procurement Agency is coordinating multinational buys of everything from air defenses to fuel supplies, leveraging the alliance's collective clout to bolster inventory.¹³

On NATO's front lines, a new reality is taking shape: the Eastern allies are no longer junior partners living under Western Europe's security blanket—they are emerging as arsenals in their own right. Poland, in particular, has surged to more than four percent of GDP on defense, the highest in NATO, and is aiming for 4.7 percent by next year, essentially meeting the five-percent goal a decade early.¹⁴ Warsaw has undertaken a colossal rearmament program, ordering American F-35 fighters and M1 tanks *alongside* South Korean K2 tanks and K9 howitzers.¹⁵ The choice of Korean weapons raised eyebrows in Brussels, but Poland's logic was unassailable: the Korean kit was available immediately and in quantity, while European programs were tied up in endless development. Within months of signing deals, Korean tanks and howitzers began arriving in Poland—a speed that put many Western procurement efforts to shame. Crucially, these deals include technology transfer and local production, meaning Poland will soon be building advanced weaponry at home. In effect, Poland is becoming a regional manufacturing hub, expanding NATO's overall capacity. This eastern drive is a wake-up call to the rest of Europe: if the traditional arms suppliers do not step up, frontline states will find partners who will—and integrate them into NATO standards later. Fortunately, South Korea designed its systems with NATO calibers and communications in mind, minimizing interoperability issues. NATO is wisely moving to formalize this by certifying that new Korean-origin equipment in allied hands meets alliance requirements from the outset.¹⁶ In a broader sense, incorporating “arsenal partners” like South Korea—fellow democracies with robust industries—could become a strength, giving the West additional production lines *outside* the immediate theater. An alliance that can source high-end weapons from Detroit and Seoul and Warsaw is far more resilient than one dependent on a few defense contractors clustered in one country.

¹³ Federico Santopinto and Francesco Rosazza Boneitin, “The Increase in Defence Spending, the Role of the NSPA and the European Strategic Autonomy,” Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), November 2025, <https://www.iris-france.org/>.

¹⁴ Kateryna Kvasha, “Security, Europe!': Poland's Rise as NATO's Defense Spending Leader,” Wilson Center, 6 March 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

¹⁵ Peter Suci, “South Korea's K2 Black Panther Tanks to Be Built in Poland,” *The Buzz* (blog), 1 August 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

¹⁶ “Korea's Defence Ambitions and Cutting-Edge Tech Take Centre Stage in NATO Parliamentary Visit” (press release, NATO, 5 December 2025), <https://www.nato-pa.int/>; and Felix Kim, “South Korea emerging as strategic defense partner as NATO spending surges,” Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, 9 August 2025, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/>.

The United States, for its part, has recognized that a more self-sufficient Europe is in America's interest. US officials are now encouraging Europeans to buy from each other and even develop systems without American involvement when it makes sense. This is not altruism; it is strategic necessity. In a world where Washington faces simultaneous pressures in the Indo-Pacific, a stronger European pillar of NATO means the United States can concentrate on deterring China without fearing a collapse in Europe. That said, some tensions remain. New EU initiatives like the EDIP and a proposed €150 billion European "SAFE" defense loan program prioritize European suppliers.¹⁷ American officials grumble that this smacks of protectionism, aiming to edge US firms out of the European market.¹⁸ Such concerns are real, but manageable—past transatlantic spats over defense trade pale in comparison to the nightmare of a weak Europe in a world of renewed great-power threats. The bottom line is that a Europe capable of equipping itself is a far more credible ally. As long as interoperability is preserved, whether a drone or missile comes from a factory in Alabama or Bavaria is of secondary importance to NATO's strength. Washington has learned that insisting allies buy American at all costs can backfire. Sometimes, co-producing or buying European actually yields faster delivery, lower sustainment costs, and supply chains closer to the potential fight.¹⁹ The United States is thus reviving a Cold War practice: allowing and assisting allies to produce American-designed weapons under license (or vice versa). We see this with initiatives for joint 155mm shell production in Europe and discussions about European assembly lines for American missiles. Such co-production spreads capacity and insures NATO against any single point of failure—a transatlantic arsenal of democracy in the truest sense.

Industrial Strength as Deterrence

In an era of emboldened autocracies, Western leaders have rediscovered a timeless truth: economic and industrial power are the backbone of strategic power. It is no longer sufficient to have well-trained troops or advanced jets on paper; the question is whether you can keep them fighting next month, next year, for as long as it takes. Deterrence now hinges on visible, credible staying power. As US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth observed, the war in Ukraine laid bare a critical vulnerability: "the underinvestment that both the European continent and America has had,

¹⁷ "European defence readiness" (fact sheet, European Council, 2025), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/>.

¹⁸ Victor Jack, "Top US official berates Europe over cutting American industry out of defense buildup," *Politico*, 3 December 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/>.

¹⁹ "Strategic Co-Production as Europe's Response to Industrial Capacity Pressure," *Defence Finance Monitor*, 20 November 2025, <https://defencefinancemonitor.substack.com/>.

unfortunately, in the defense industrial base, the ability to produce munitions, emerging technologies rapidly and field them was a blind spot exposed through the aggression against Ukraine.”²⁰

That blind spot must now be erased. The challenge is nothing less than to achieve “Peace through Strength” by correcting a historical error of complacency. The principle cannot be parochial; it must extend across the Alliance. The hard power of the West must be undeniable, not theoretical.

For any adversary contemplating aggression, the calculus must be stark: NATO’s immediate forces on the frontier, backed by the revitalized, latent capacity of hundreds of transatlantic factories and the combined weight of Western GDP—an arsenal capable of grinding any aggressor into defeat.

The steps taken in 2025—the five-percent spending mandate, NATO–EU industrial cooperation, massive expansion of munitions output, and strict integration of standards—are all oriented toward one end: to make NATO an alliance that can fight a long war and thus deter any war from starting. We are, in effect, restoring the arsenal of democracy for a new age. Factories and shipyards may not be glamorous, but they are as critical to freedom’s defense as carriers and tanks. In the 1940s, American factories famously outproduced the Axis; today, Western unity of production can ensure no revisionist power ever miscalculates that it could outlast the free world in conflict. Morally, this endeavor carries no apologetic tone—nor should it. Building the capacity to defend our societies is not *militarism*, it is prudence. Stockpiling missiles or running assembly lines overtime in peacetime does not provoke war; it prevents war by raising the costs of aggression to prohibitive levels. *Peace through strength* is more than a slogan; it is a moral obligation to future generations. A secure Europe and America, free from coercion or conquest, requires investment in resilience, redundancy, and reach. Security purchased through resources expended today prevents payment in blood tomorrow.

The credibility of a security alliance rests on its worst-day scenario: whether guns, fuel, and unity endure if conflict grinds on. Following the awakening of 2022–2025, NATO increasingly answers in the affirmative. Factories across allied nations are once again producing with that knowledge in mind. The arsenal of democracy, once neglected, is being reforged—sharper, stronger, and shared. Any tyrant who tests it will encounter not a patchwork of weak links, but a steel chain of capacity and will.

Industrial power and alliance integration now stand as ultimate guarantors of Western deterrence—a silent but potent message that a war of exhaustion against

²⁰ “Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Press Conference Following NATO Ministers of Defense Meeting in Brussels, Belgium” (press conference, US Department of War, 13 February 2025), <https://www.war.gov/>.

the West cannot be won. The free world, having been caught unprepared once, will not be caught twice. The arsenal is being rebuilt not for its own sake, but to ensure that the lessons of Ukraine deter repetition before it occurs. Should deterrence fail, the means—moral and material—will exist to prevail.

Peace is secured not only by the courage of soldiers but by the foresight of nations to arm in time. That lesson, hard-earned, now drives policy in Washington, Brussels, and every NATO capital. Sustained effort will yield an Alliance capable of keeping the peace by preparing, collectively, for the worst.

Peace through strength, backed by unassailable industrial might and unity of purpose, is peace made real. As SACEUR Grynkeiwich reminds the alliance, “These are consequential times. The threats we face are only becoming more intertwined, but they are no match for the unity, the resolve and the shared purpose that I see gathered on this field today. We stand ready in defense of our nations, and we’re only going to get better.”²¹ This affirmation underscores the essential point: industrial rearmament is not merely a matter of capacity, but of collective will—the political and strategic cohesion that turns factories, budgets, and stockpiles into credible deterrence. The credibility of a security alliance rests on its worstday scenario: whether guns, fuel, and unity endure if conflict grinds on. 🦅

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²¹ Quoted in: Sabine Siebold and Andrew Gray, “New NATO commander stresses unity at handover ceremony,” *Reuters*, 4 July 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

China's Expanding Airpower in the Western Indian Ocean

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Abstract

This article analyzes China's evolving airpower posture across the Western Indian Ocean, highlighting how Beijing couples infrastructure investment and defense partnerships to expand its regional influence. While China's most substantial aviation ties center on proximate or well-resourced states—Pakistan, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—longstanding economic engagement often precedes military cooperation, including in aviation. Despite deep Gulf reliance on Western suppliers, China leverages unmanned aerial vehicle sales and training initiatives to penetrate these markets. Farther afield, Beijing employs heavy transports to support exercises, UN operations, and crisis evacuations, signaling growing expeditionary capabilities without yet requiring new dedicated air bases. The likely near-term deployment of a People's Liberation Army Navy carrier strike group into the region would underscore China's emergence as a global military actor and could precipitate additional basing arrangements. These developments continue to raise strategic concerns in Washington and New Delhi, underscoring the Western Indian Ocean's transformation into a more contested maritime-aviation theater.

China's influence in the Western Indian Ocean has expanded markedly since the start of this century, a development well documented across the diplomatic and academic literature. This engagement has centered chiefly on energy, trade, investment, and infrastructure—sectors that form the backbone of Beijing's economic strategy. Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative has accelerated these advances, targeting a region that includes several major suppliers of oil and natural gas. Although arms sales and contributions to UN peacekeeping missions have long been features of China's security posture, its military engagement in the Western Indian Ocean has largely been dominated by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Since 2008, when China began deploying naval task forces to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and later established a naval base in Djibouti, maritime operations have remained the centerpiece of its regional military presence.

By contrast, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) aviation footprint in the Western Indian Ocean remains limited and has received comparatively little analytical scrutiny. This article examines the emerging and potential roles of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), PLAN aviation units, the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC)

aviation brigade, and the PLA Army's air assault formations. Together, these forces represent a growing, though still modest, airpower capability that could reshape China's future posture in this critical theater. The analysis also explores how these engagements might evolve—whether through expanded arms transfers, more complex joint exercises, or stepped-up deployments that support PLAN operations or protect Chinese nationals and investments.

China's airpower initiatives in the region already encompass a wide spectrum: construction of military airfields and associated infrastructure, direct sales or donations of aircraft, joint aviation drills, pilot and technician training, and participation in regional air shows. These efforts involve not only traditional fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters but also an increasingly sophisticated portfolio of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Moreover, China's integration of space-based capabilities—such as satellite navigation and surveillance—has become an essential enabler of its airpower ambitions, underscoring a broader, multi-domain strategy.

For the purposes of this study, the Western Indian Ocean includes the west coast of India and Pakistan; the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman littoral states; the Gulf monarchies; the Red Sea and Indian Ocean littorals stretching from Egypt to South Africa; and the independent island nations of Maldives, Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, and Mauritius. Other major military stakeholders in this region include the United States, with its extensive network of air and naval bases, along with the United Kingdom and France, which maintain forward positions on Réunion and Mayotte. With the exception of these established Western powers and India—China's principal military competitor in the Indian Ocean—most countries in the region are potential security partners for Beijing.

Strategically, the Indian Ocean ranks below the Pacific in China's hierarchy of military priorities, and the Western Indian Ocean lies still further down that scale due to sheer distance. Nonetheless, Beijing views secure sea lanes for energy and trade, access to Africa's critical minerals, protection of Chinese citizens and assets, the expansion of political influence, and robust intelligence collection as vital interests that increasingly demand a military backstop. Without local bases, Chinese aircraft must either secure overflight rights paired with refueling stops or rely on aerial refueling to operate effectively in this space. Alternatively, the PLAN's carriers and large surface combatants offer a maritime-based airpower option. The vast distances of the Western Indian Ocean favor an integrated approach combining aerial refueling, dispersed land-based staging, and cooperative airfield access agreements. For now, however, the PLA's limited regional air capabilities place it

at a distinct tactical disadvantage, constraining Beijing's ability to project power or respond rapidly in a crisis.¹

China's Theoretical Ability to Project Airpower to the Far Seas

China's evolving ability to project airpower beyond its immediate periphery—and into far seas regions such as the Indian Ocean—stems directly from lessons it drew watching US operations in the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent campaigns in Iraq. Those conflicts demonstrated the decisive impact of integrated airpower on modern battlefields, prompting Beijing to overhaul the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). By the early 2000s, the PLAAF had transitioned from a force focused almost exclusively on homeland air defense to one guided by an independent doctrine emphasizing conventional deterrence and long-range offensive operations. This strategic shift aligned closely with the PLAN's expanding maritime requirements, pushing Chinese air strategy beyond East Asia to encompass distant theaters, including the Indian Ocean. Today, the PLAAF is expected to furnish air cover for any expeditionary activities undertaken by the PLAN, even if it has yet to conduct large-scale missions in the Western Indian Ocean. Notably, however, PLAAF activity in this broader region has increased in both frequency and complexity.²

As of early 2024, the combined fleets of the PLAAF and remaining PLAN aviation elements constituted the third-largest air force in the world, fielding over 3,150 aircraft—excluding trainers and unmanned systems. Of these, roughly 2,400 platforms were dedicated combat assets, spanning fighters, strategic and tactical bombers, multirole attack aircraft, and specialized strike variants. Critically, the PLAAF has developed limited but growing aerial refueling capabilities, employing a small number of IL-78 Midas tankers and newer Y-20U variants of its Y-20 heavy transport. These tankers significantly extend the reach of Chinese fighters and bombers equipped with refueling probes, potentially enabling sustained operations in the Western Indian Ocean without direct reliance on foreign airfields for fuel.

The Y-20 platform also underpins a suite of emerging capabilities, supporting airborne command and control, long-range logistics, paratroop insertion, strategic

¹ David Brewster, "Cold War Offers Clues about China's Plans for the Indian Ocean," *The Strategist*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>; and Diptendu Choudhury, "Convergence of the Indo-Pacific with the Indian Ocean—Is a Maritime-Centric Approach Enough?: An Indian Perspective," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 7, no. 3 (May/June 2024), 19–20, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

² Joshy M. Paul, *China's Air Power and Maritime Strategies Towards the Indian Ocean Region* (London: Routledge, 2025), 6–11.

reconnaissance, and humanitarian or disaster response missions. Parallel efforts to field advanced stealth bombers and fifth-generation fighters underscore China's determination to approach—and in selected domains match—US airpower standards.³ Taken together, these developments reflect a systematic effort to transform the PLAAF into a force capable not just of regional denial, but of global reach, tailored to support Beijing's interests in increasingly contested maritime spaces like the Indian Ocean.

By 2023, the PLA had completed the transfer of most PLAN aviation units to the PLAAF, consolidating China's fixed-wing combat airpower under a single service. However, the PLAN retained control over its helicopter forces, UAV units, and—critically—its carrier-based aviation.⁴ As a result, any Chinese effort to project sustained airpower into the Western Indian Ocean will rely heavily on the PLAN's evolving carrier capabilities, which have yet to operate in this region.

The PLAN's first carrier, the *Liaoning*, a refurbished Ukrainian hull with a ski-jump deck, carries an air wing of roughly 30 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. Its successor, the *Shandong*, built domestically, supports a slightly larger complement of 40 aircraft, including 36 J-15 fighters. Thus far, both carriers have operated exclusively with these fourth-generation multirole jets. The PLAN's most advanced carrier, the *Fujian*, began sea trials in 2024 and features three electromagnetic catapults—a significant departure from ski-ramp designs. This catapult system will enable launch operations for heavier platforms, such as the KJ-600 airborne early warning aircraft and the carrier-adapted FC-31 stealth fighter, greatly expanding the PLAN's at-sea airpower envelope.⁵ Meanwhile, a fourth carrier under construction at Dalian is expected to be nuclear-powered with four catapults, marking a

³ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 18 December 2024), 59–63, <https://media.defense.gov/>. For descriptions and pictures of aircraft in the PLAAF inventory, see *PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces*, 4th ed. (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, June 2024), 14–19, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Kris Osborn, “Chinese YU-20 Tanker Aircraft Refuel Carrier-launched J-15s,” *Warrior Maven*, 31 October 2024, <https://warriormaven.com/>.

⁴ Rod Lee, “PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, July 2023, 1–2, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

⁵ *PLA Aerospace Power*, 27–33; Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 16 August 2024), 28–36, <https://www.congress.gov/>; and Anil Chopra, “Six Aircraft Carriers by 2035—China's Ambitious Plan for PLA-N As It Looks to Counter U.S. & Cut Indian Influence,” *EurAsian Times*, 10 March 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

technological leap that should place PLAN carrier aviation on par with the US Navy's most capable supercarriers.⁶

While most fixed-wing combat assets now fall under PLAAF control, the PLAN retained its shore-based special mission aircraft—dedicated to maritime patrol, airborne early warning, surveillance, and antisubmarine warfare—as well as its UAV squadrons. Notably, at least one KJ-500 airborne early warning platform has been modified with an aerial refueling probe, signaling an intent to extend its operational reach. The PLAN has also experimented with small vertical take-off and landing aircraft from a variety of surface combatants, enhancing distributed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

Rotary-wing operations remain integral to the PLAN's concept of operations. Its fleet includes domestically produced Z-9 and Z-8/Z-18 helicopters and Russian-built Helix models, which serve aboard destroyers, frigates, and the PLAN's expanding class of Yushen landing helicopter assault ships. These amphibious vessels can carry up to 30 helicopters alongside 900 marines, providing a flexible platform for vertical envelopment and sea-based logistics. The PLAN continues to advance its UAV programs for maritime ISR, with multiple models deployed for persistent over-the-horizon targeting.⁷

In 2024, the PLAN commissioned the *Sichuan*, the first of its Type 076 amphibious assault ships, analogous in design to the US Navy's *America*-class. This vessel can operate fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and a full suite of amphibious systems and may evolve into China's first dedicated drone carrier—further broadening the range of maritime-based airpower options available to support operations deep into the Western Indian Ocean.⁸

The PLANMC maintains a modest but expanding aviation arm, equipped primarily with Z-8 and Z-9 helicopters tailored for vertical assault and amphibious landing operations. Established as an aviation brigade in 2017, this force comprises

⁶ Ritu Sharma, "China Developing 'World's Biggest' Aircraft Carrier That Could Compete with USS Gerald R. Ford, Satellite Shows," *EurAsian Times*, 3 March 2025, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>. The configuration of a PLAN carrier battle or strike group is still open to question. In an early test run, a Type 055 and a Type 052D destroyer, a Type 054A frigate, and a Type 901 supply ship accompanied the *Liaoning*. In 2024, an exercise in the South China Sea by the *Liaoning* and the *Shandong* included three Type 055 destroyers, five Type 052D destroyers, a Type 054A frigate, and two Type 901 supply ships. Cai Yi, a Taiwanese expert, believes the battle group for the PLAN's most recent carrier, the *Fujian*, will include two Type 055 destroyers, two Type 052D destroyers, two Type 054B frigates, and two Type 095 attack nuclear submarines. See "The Dream Combination of China's Aircraft Carrier Battle Group," *Chinese Arms*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.china-arms.com/>.

⁷ *PLA Aerospace Power*, 30–33.

⁸ Peter Suci, "China's Massive New Drone Carrier Is Almost Here," *National Interest*, 13 January 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

at least two flight squadrons and a dedicated aircraft maintenance group. As China accelerates the PLANMC's modernization, the brigade is expected to grow with additional helicopters and trained pilots, reinforcing its capacity to execute rapid ship-to-shore maneuvers. The PLAN's fleet of landing helicopter assault ships will likely serve as the principal platforms for PLANMC rotary-wing deployments, offering flexibility for amphibious insertions, casualty evacuation, and logistics. Although the PLANMC still lacks meaningful experience with large-scale expeditionary operations, Beijing clearly envisions it as a versatile tool for safeguarding China's overseas interests—whether through noncombatant evacuation operations, port security missions, or coercive shows of force.⁹

The PLA Army's (PLAA) aviation branch similarly anchors its capabilities in rotary-wing assets. Designed primarily to support ground operations within China and across the Taiwan Strait, the PLAA's aviation component provides close air support, reconnaissance, and airlift for air assault units and special operations forces. Today, the PLAA fields roughly 15 army aviation brigades, operating an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 helicopters, including as many as 400 medium-lift variants.¹⁰ While these formations are structured for regional contingencies, their scale and growing proficiency conceivably position them to undertake limited expeditionary missions as far afield as the Western Indian Ocean—particularly in scenarios requiring rapid insertion of light forces or evacuation of Chinese nationals.

China's burgeoning space partnerships further reinforce its ability to project airpower and exercise strategic influence in the Western Indian Ocean. The so-called Space Silk Road—a component of the broader Belt and Road Initiative—aims to establish a cutting-edge civil and commercial space infrastructure that also delivers latent military advantages. Under this framework, China has launched satellites for Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, cementing technological dependencies that extend well beyond terrestrial domains.¹¹ Of these partnerships, China's relationship with Egypt stands out as particularly deep, spanning multiple satellite launches and collaborative ground station operations.¹² Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

⁹ *PLA Aerospace Power*, 35; Jeff Schogol, "China Is Expanding Its Marine Corps, But How Capable Is It?," *Task & Purpose*, 25 January 2024, <https://taskandpurpose.com/>; P.R. Shankar, "China Has a Formidable Marine Corps but PLA's UN Peace-Keeping Fiasco Shows It's Not Battle-Hardened," *EurAsian Times*, 15 January 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

¹⁰ *PLA Aerospace Power*, 57–61; Asian News International, "China's PLA Enhances the Capability of Its Helicopter Fleet," *DTNEXT*, 8 April 2024, <https://www.dtnext.in/>.

¹¹ Zhang Ming, "The Space Silk Road and China-Arab States Space Cooperation: A Chinese Perspective," *MEI Insights*, no. 309, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 11 June 2024, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/>.

¹² Mustapha Iderawumi, "Egypt and China Strengthen Space Alliance with MisrSat-2 Protocol Signing," *Space in Africa*, 20 March 2024, <https://spaceinafrica.com/>.

has balanced its engagement, pursuing lunar research, education, and launch activities with both China and the United States. Notably, China's Long March 2C rocket carried the UAE's first observation satellite into orbit, signaling Beijing's growing role as an alternative launch provider.¹³

The strategic dimension of these partnerships becomes even clearer through initiatives like the International Lunar Research Station, a joint project involving China, Russia, Egypt, Pakistan, Djibouti, and South Africa. This endeavor positions itself as a potential counterweight to the NASA-led Artemis program, underscoring the geopolitical stakes embedded in space exploration and technology sharing.¹⁴

At the operational level, most Western Indian Ocean states have joined China's BeiDou global navigation network, reducing their reliance on the US Global Positioning System. This shift holds particular significance for a region where GPS coverage can be uneven and where Beijing seeks to insulate partner nations from American technological leverage. BeiDou underpins China's Digital Silk Road and serves critical military functions, supplying precision navigation and timing data to PLA aircraft, submarines, missiles, and space assets. In any future conflict, BeiDou would enhance China's ability to maintain command and control while potentially disrupting US or allied systems. More broadly, the spread of BeiDou infrastructure strengthens Beijing's capacity to coerce states within its spheres of influence and to complicate US contingency planning and counterintervention efforts in strategically vital corridors like the Indian Ocean.¹⁵

Despite its advances, the PLA still confronts formidable challenges in projecting airpower into the Western Indian Ocean. Chief among these is the absence of regional air bases. Any aircraft operating from mainland China must either secure multiple overflight and landing permissions for refueling or rely on aerial refueling over vast distances—both of which expose PLA movements to tracking, diplomatic leverage, and potential interdiction by rivals. While China's close military relationship with Pakistan offers a likely staging and refueling option, this corridor alone cannot compensate for the broader absence of forward-deployed infrastructure.

¹³ Naomi Kantor Itzhayek, Yoel Guzansky, and Galia Lavi, "China-UAE Space Cooperation: Risk or Opportunity for Israel?," *Strategic Assessment* 27, no. 1 (April 2024): 111–18, <https://www.inss.org.il/>.

¹⁴ "13 Countries Joined Russia, China in Lunar Station Project," *Sputnik News*, 29 April 2025, <https://sputnikglobe.com/>; and Andrew Jones, "South Africa Joins China's Moon Base Project," *SpaceNews*, 7 September 2023, <https://spacenews.com/>.

¹⁵ Sean Gorman, "America Is Losing Its GPS Dominance to China's BeiDou Satnav," *SpaceNews*, 8 April 2024, <https://spacenews.com/>; Namrata Goswami, "The Economic and Military Impact of China's BeiDou Navigation System," *The Diplomat*, 1 July 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>; Michael Listner, "China's Beidou Global Navigation System," *Defense Policy*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.defensepolicy.org/>; and Sarah Sewall, Tyler Vandenberg, and Kaj Malden, *China's BeiDou: New Dimensions of Great Power Competition* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, February 2023), <https://www.belfercenter.org/>.

Operational experience remains another critical limitation. The PLAAF has accumulated substantial peacetime hours but remains largely untested beyond East Asia. To date, Beijing's approach in the Indian Ocean has been cautious and defensive, with the far seas mission primarily carried out by the PLAN. Although China's aerial systems—from long-range bombers to stealth fighters and advanced tankers—now rival Western platforms in many technical respects, they have yet to prove their effectiveness under combat conditions. Moreover, persistent doubts surround the PLA's antisubmarine warfare capabilities and their capacity to protect PLAN surface groups in contested environments, a vulnerability that could directly undermine the utility of any air cover deployed to the region.¹⁶

The PLA fully recognizes the importance of joint operations and continues to overhaul its organizational structures to enhance cross-service integration. However, these reforms remain incomplete.¹⁷ In the aviation domain, joint training still centers primarily on integrated air defense within China's immediate periphery, with scant evidence that the PLA has developed robust protocols for coordinating potential far seas operations among the PLAAF, PLAN aviation, and PLANMC aviation units. This gap in joint expeditionary proficiency could prove a significant liability if China were ever required to mount a synchronized, multi-domain operation as distant as the Western Indian Ocean.¹⁸

Thus far, China has carefully avoided any kinetic military activity in the Western Indian Ocean, restricting the use of force largely to its immediate neighborhood, most notably along India's northern border. Beijing appears determined to continue avoiding direct military engagements in this maritime space for the foreseeable future. Instead, the more plausible scenarios involving Chinese airpower in the region include missions to protect or extract endangered Chinese personnel attached to UN peacekeeping operations, noncombatant evacuation operations, delivery of disaster relief, or long-range ISR sorties to bolster maritime domain awareness.

¹⁶ Joshy M. Paul, "China's Air Power Capabilities in the Indian Ocean: Challenges and Opportunities," *Air Power Journal* 18, no. 3 (July–September 2023), 40–44, <https://capsindia.org/>; Jonathan G. McPhilamy, "Air Supremacy: Are the Chinese Ready?," *Military Review* (January–February 2020): 56–61, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>; Chad Peltier, "China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations," *Jane's* (15 April 2020): 36–37; and S.P. Singh, "Indo-Pacific: Scramble for Dominance and Role of Air Power," *Chanakya Forum*, 3 May 2023, <https://web.archive.org/>.

¹⁷ Joel Wuthnow, "A New Step in China's Military Reform," *Joint Force Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2025): 4–13, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/>; and "Assessment of the PLA's Joint Operations Capabilities," *Indian Military Review*, 15 December 2022, <https://imrmedia.in/>.

¹⁸ Derek Solen, "PLA Army Air Defense Units Improve Effectiveness, Resiliency, and Jointness," *China Aerospace Studies Institute*, March 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Peter Wood, "Chinese Military Exercises Highlight Improvements in Joint Operations," *Foreign Military Studies Office*, 1 March 2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/>.

China has already demonstrated a nascent capacity to execute such missions beyond its home region. In 2011, the PLAAF dispatched four IL-76 transport aircraft from northwest China to east-central Libya to aid in the evacuation of nearly 36,000 Chinese nationals, staging through Khartoum for refueling and airlifting some 1,700 citizens out of Libya to Sudan.¹⁹ Today, similar missions would likely employ the newer Y-20 heavy transports, supported by Y-20U tankers to extend their operational reach. For ISR, China could integrate its expanding constellation of remote-sensing satellites with KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, again relying on aerial refueling to sustain coverage over such a vast theater. These capabilities reflect a measured but steadily advancing toolkit that allows Beijing to safeguard its overseas interests without committing to a permanent kinetic footprint in the Western Indian Ocean.²⁰

Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Sea

India views China as a principal security competitor, a perception shaped by repeated confrontations along their contested northern border and by intensifying naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean—a maritime domain New Delhi unequivocally regards as its strategic backyard. Unlike China's deep military supply relationships across much of Asia and Africa, Beijing plays no role in arming India. Instead, the bulk of India's roughly 2,000 military aircraft—across its air force, army aviation, navy, and coast guard—comes from suppliers such as Russia, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. China is not one of the suppliers.²¹ This inventory includes India's most advanced platforms, notably the 36 Rafale multirole fighters delivered by France between 2020 and 2022.²² India's pursuit of modern air and naval capabilities is driven in no small part by the imperative to deter Chinese advances in the Indian Ocean.²³

India currently operates two conventionally powered aircraft carriers, each equipped with ski-jump ramps and capable of embarking 25 to 30 fixed-wing aircraft. How-

¹⁹ Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, "Implications of China's Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya," *China Brief* 11, no. 4 (10 March 2011): 8–10, <https://jamestown.org/>.

²⁰ Thomas R. McCabe, "Chinese Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Systems," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

²¹ "List of Indian Military Aircraft: A Detailed Overview," *Warriors Defence Academy*, 13 March 2024, <https://warriorsdefenceacademy.com/>.

²² Rishi Iyengar, "A Tale of Four Fighter Jets," *Foreign Policy*, 8 May 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

²³ Tanuj Pandey and Swaim Prakash Singh, "Indian Military Air Base in Africa: A Futuristic Vision," *Air Power* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2023), 191–92, <https://capsindia.org/>.

ever, New Delhi has opted against acquiring a third carrier, instead channeling resources toward expanding its submarine fleet to bolster undersea deterrence.²⁴

To counter China's growing naval and prospective air footprint in the Western Indian Ocean, India has adopted a multifaceted strategy. It leads the 23-member Indian Ocean Rim Association, aiming to limit Chinese sway in regional political and economic affairs. Although India also participates in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Japan, and Australia—a grouping unified by shared concerns over China's assertiveness—the Quad's focus remains tilted toward the Pacific theater.

New Delhi has nevertheless deepened its operational engagement across the Indian Ocean. It has increased antipiracy patrols in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, emerged as a primary source of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief throughout the region, and is extending its naval reach to chokepoints such as the Mozambique Channel.²⁵ To secure greater access, India is actively negotiating expanded port rights. Meanwhile, the Indian Air Force conducts bilateral exercises with Egypt, the UAE, and Oman, complementing the Indian Army's and Navy's wide slate of drills with Western Indian Ocean partners.²⁶ Significantly, India is constructing new air and naval facilities on Agaléga, a pair of Mauritian islands northeast of Madagascar, to strengthen its forward presence and project power deeper into the southern Indian Ocean.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, China's most extensive airpower collaboration in the Western Indian Ocean centers on Pakistan, a neighbor with which Beijing shares both a border and a longstanding strategic partnership. Between 2020 and 2024, China accounted for an overwhelming 81 percent of Pakistan's arms imports, underscoring the depth of this defense relationship. Of all the states in the region, Pakistan stands out as China's closest military aviation partner.

This cooperation dates back to 1965, when China supplied the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) with 253 F-6 fighters—its variant of the Soviet MiG-19—marking

²⁴ Bhaswar Kumar, "India Decides It Will Not Operate a Third Aircraft Carrier. Here is Why," *Business Standard*, 4 February 2025, <https://www.business-standard.com/>.

²⁵ Harsh V. Pant and Sayantan Halder, "How Should India Tackle China's Expanding Reach in the Indian Ocean?," *Business Standard*, 25 June 2025, <https://www.business-standard.com/>; Sanchari Ghosh, "Why the Indian Ocean, Not the Indo-Pacific, Must Anchor India's Strategy," *The Diplomat*, 26 March 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/>; and Suyesha Dutta, "Explainer: What's Behind India's Shift from 'Non-Alignment' to 'Strategic Alignment' in the Indian Ocean?," *Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/>.

²⁶ "List of Military Exercises of India 2024-25, Participating Countries," *PWOnlyIAS* (blog), 2025, <https://pwnlyias.com/>.

²⁷ Samuel Bashfield, "Agalega: A glimpse of India's remote island military base," *The Interpreter*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

the start of a sustained flow of aircraft that would see China become the dominant source of Pakistan's combat aviation inventory by the early 1970s. By 1990, Chinese deliveries comprised more than half of Pakistan's fighter and support fleet. The partnership took a significant leap forward in 2007 when China and Pakistan jointly developed the fourth-generation JF-17 Thunder. Today, the PAF operates roughly 120 of these multirole fighters and has integrated China's Wing Loong II medium-altitude long-endurance UAVs into its inventory, enhancing both strike and ISR capabilities.²⁸

The depth of this collaboration was thrown into sharp relief during an aerial engagement over Kashmir in May 2025. Pakistan claimed that its Chinese-supplied J-10C fighters shot down five Indian aircraft—three French-made Rafales, a MiG-29, and a Sukhoi Su-30—though India contested these accounts on social media. Independent confirmation indicates that at least one Rafale and one MiG-29 were lost, lending credence to Pakistan's assertions. The engagement was notable not only for its immediate tactical stakes but also because the PAF became the first foreign operator of the J-10C. Pakistan initially ordered 36 of these advanced fighters and has inducted at least 20, with reports suggesting plans to expand the fleet to as many as 60. The apparent performance of the J-10Cs in this clash could accelerate Chinese fighter sales to other regional players, including Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, although the incomplete picture of the engagement tempers definitive conclusions about the aircraft's capabilities.

Looking ahead, the PAF has signaled interest in acquiring China's fifth-generation J-35 stealth fighter, derived from the FC-31 prototype. Pakistani media further report that PAF pilots are already undergoing training on the J-35 in China, suggesting Islamabad may seek to anchor its future airpower modernization around Chinese technology.²⁹ This evolving partnership underscores how Beijing leverages deep, longstanding defense ties with Pakistan to consolidate its strategic position in the Western Indian Ocean and to showcase its advanced platforms to prospective buyers across the broader Middle East and North Africa.

²⁸ Anil Chopra, "China-Pakistan Aerospace Nexus: Implications for India," *Indian Defence Review*, 1 January 2024, <https://indiandefencereview.com/>; Seong Hyeon Choi, "Kashmir Conflict: The Chinese Warplanes and Weapons Used by Pakistan," *South China Morning Post*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/>; and Sameer P. Lalwani, *A Threshold Alliance: The China-Pakistan Military Relationship*, Special Report no. 517 (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, March 2023), 7–10, <https://www.usip.org/>.

²⁹ Choi, "Kashmir Conflict"; Iyengar, "A Tale of Four Fighter Jets"; Gabriel Honrada, "China's Jets and Missiles Make Pakistan a Winner over India," *Asia Times*, 12 May 2025, <https://asiatimes.com/>; Leela Jacinto, "Chinese Weapons Pass Combat Test in India-Pakistan Clash – with Flying Colours," *France24*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.france24.com/>; and Justin Bronk, "Key Questions about the India-Pakistan Aerial Clashes," *RUSI*, 2 June 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/>.

A cornerstone of China–Pakistan air force collaboration has been the annual *Shaheen* (“Eagle”) exercise, which the two countries have conducted since 2011. Over the years, these drills have grown in scale and sophistication, incorporating larger opposing formations, combined-arms scenarios, unscripted elements, and operations across challenging terrain to approximate the complexities of modern combat. In 2024, this deepening partnership culminated in Exercise Indus Shield, designed explicitly to test and validate the interoperability of the PAF and PLAAF under realistic combat conditions. The exercise brought together PLAAF J-16 and J-10C fighters alongside Pakistan’s J-10Cs and JF-17s, underscoring how joint training has evolved beyond symbolic gestures into rigorous preparations for integrated air operations. These engagements are carefully structured to hone tactical proficiency, foster shared operational concepts, and reinforce the practical ties that underpin the China–Pakistan security axis.³⁰

China’s aviation cooperation with Pakistan also extends into the civilian sector, though with clear strategic undertones. A prime example is the new international airport at Gwadar—a USD 240-million project financed by China and built by a Chinese company—completed in October 2024. Despite its completion, the facility has yet to see passenger or commercial airline activity, fueling speculation that it serves Chinese strategic interests as much as, if not more than, Pakistan’s. Given Gwadar’s position near the mouth of the Persian Gulf and its integration into the Belt and Road Initiative, the airport could eventually support PLA air logistics or evacuation operations under the guise of civilian infrastructure.³¹

The depth of this partnership was further underscored during a 2025 visit to Beijing by Pakistan’s Air Force Chief of Air Staff, Zaheer Ahmad Babar. In discussions with Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun, Babar characterized the China–Pakistan relationship as “the cornerstone of Pakistan’s foreign policy,” emphasizing that Islamabad places exceptional value on its longstanding strategic friendship with Beijing.³² This convergence of military and political commitments ensures that Pakistan will remain China’s most reliable partner for projecting airpower—and by extension, influence—into the Western Indian Ocean.

Turning to Pakistan’s western neighbor, Iran relied heavily on Chinese arms after Iraq’s 1980 invasion triggered an eight-year war of attrition. During that

³⁰ Chopra, “China–Pakistan Aerospace Nexus”; Lalwani, *A Threshold Alliance*, 13–17; and TN Web Desk, “PAF Holds ‘Indus Shield–Chinese’ Exercise to Validate Interoperability with China,” *The News International* (Pakistan), 5 November 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/>.

³¹ Riazat Butt, “No passengers, no planes, no benefits. Pakistan’s newest airport is a bit of a mystery,” *Associated Press*, 23 February 2025, <https://apnews.com/>.

³² “Chinese Defense Minister Meets Chief of Air Staff of Pakistan Air Force in Beijing,” *Global Times*, 8 April 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

conflict, Tehran acquired roughly 100 Chinese J-6 fighters and an unknown number of F-7s, Beijing's variant of the MiG-21, to offset losses and sustain operational tempo. While Chinese arms sales to Iran tapered off in the late 1980s, they surged again in 1991 when Iran purchased 72 additional F-7s, seeking to rebuild its air force amid international isolation. However, subsequent aircraft deliveries from China dwindled and all but ceased after the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran in 2015.

The lifting of the UN arms embargo in 2021 briefly revived prospects for renewed cooperation. That year, China and Iran signed a sweeping 25-year strategic agreement that included provisions for joint production of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. Yet this framework has proven slow to materialize on the ground, hampered by financial constraints, sanctions overhang, and Iran's own evolving defense priorities.³³

In the unmanned sector, however, ties have been more pragmatic. China supplies components for Iran's robust indigenous UAV industry, though it stops short of delivering complete systems. In 2023, the United States sanctioned five Chinese firms for providing drone parts to Iran, underscoring how Beijing has skirted the margins of direct arms transfers while still enabling Tehran's drone capabilities.³⁴ On the manned combat aircraft front, Iran explored acquiring up to 36 J-10Cs, but negotiations faltered over financial terms. In 2024, seeking alternative options, the commander of Iran's air force traveled to Islamabad to discuss a potential purchase of the China-Pakistan-produced JF-17 Thunder. As of this writing, no formal agreement has emerged.³⁵

Taken together, Iran's interactions with China in the air domain reveal a partnership driven less by shared strategic vision and more by opportunistic procurement and hedging. While the two states have laid the groundwork for deeper cooperation, especially through the 25-year pact, actual integration of Chinese airpower platforms into Iran's order of battle remains tentative and constrained by economic realities and Tehran's preference for developing indigenous solutions wherever possible.

³³ John S. Park and Cameron Glenn, "Iran and China," *Iran Primer*, 11 October 2010, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/>; and Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating, *Cooperation between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and Potential Future Threats to America* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), <https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/>.

³⁴ Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Jemima Baar, "Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Iran," *Military DIME Research Project*, 13 December 2023, <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/>.

³⁵ Boyko Nikolov, "Iran's Air Force Chief in Pakistan: Talks Begin on JF-17 Jet Deal," *Bulgarian Military*, 28 October 2024, <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/>; and Przemysław Jurasek, "Iran eyes Chinese JF-17 jets to bolster aerial capabilities," *Daily Wrap*, 30 December 2024, <https://dailywrap.net/>.

Historically, the Iraqi Air Force (IAF) depended on the Soviet Union to supply its combat aircraft, a reliance that shifted to the United States following the ouster of Saddam Hussein. China never figured prominently in Iraq's airpower inventory. However, Beijing has steadily increased its footprint in Iraq's broader defense sector, providing significant quantities of tanks, artillery systems, and other ground combat platforms. More recently, Iraq has turned to China for unmanned capabilities, acquiring an undisclosed number of Cai Hong-4 and Cai Hong-5 UAVs. These purchases signal a growing Iraqi confidence in Chinese military technology and simultaneously bolster Beijing's reputation as a credible arms supplier across the Middle East.

Persistent reports indicate that Baghdad is now exploring deeper aviation ties with China and Pakistan through interest in the JF-17 Thunder—a fourth-generation multirole fighter jointly produced by Islamabad and Beijing. In 2024, senior IAF officials traveled to Pakistan for discussions that reportedly culminated in agreements to procure 12 MFI-17 Mushshak trainers and 12 JF-17s.³⁶ If finalized and executed, these deals would mark the first meaningful introduction of Chinese-linked manned combat aircraft into Iraq's inventory, potentially opening the door for broader aviation cooperation.

In contrast, the Kuwait Air Force continues to rely almost exclusively on aircraft sourced from the United States, Germany, and France. Chinese platforms are entirely absent from its order of battle.³⁷ Nevertheless, Kuwait does maintain modest defense ties with China, including collaboration on military education and training initiatives and a joint venture operating a weapons and ammunition manufacturing facility. To date, however, this cooperation has not extended into the realm of military aviation.³⁸

The Royal Saudi Air Force fields one of the most formidable air fleets in the Middle East, composed almost entirely of aircraft sourced from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. Chinese platforms are conspicuously absent from its inventory.³⁹ Riyadh remains deeply reliant on Western suppliers—especially

³⁶ "Iraqi Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; "Iraq Acquires Chinese CH-5 Killer Drones: Reports," *Defense Mirror.com*, 23 September 2023, <https://www.defensemirror.com/>; "Iraq Boosts Air Capabilities with Chinese CH-5 Medium-altitude Combat Drone," *Global Defense News*, 27 May 2024, <https://armyrecognition.com/>; and Ritu Sharma, "Pakistan's JF-17 Thunder Bags Another Fighter Deal, Media Says; India's LCA Tejas Banks on Massive IAF Contract," *EurAsian Times*, 12 May 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

³⁷ "Kuwait Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

³⁸ "Official Commends Kuwait and China Military Cooperation," *Kuwait Times*, 29 July 2024, <https://kuwaittimes.com/>.

³⁹ "Royal Saudi Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

Washington—not only for combat aircraft but also for sustainment, advanced munitions, and critical training pipelines. This dependency makes Saudi Arabia understandably cautious about jeopardizing its longstanding strategic relationships by turning to China for manned aviation systems.

However, unmanned platforms present a different calculus. Saudi Arabia has increasingly looked to China to diversify its UAV capabilities outside Western export control regimes. In 2014, Riyadh purchased CH-4 drones from China, later supplementing them with the more advanced and lethal Wing Loong II systems. To date, Saudi Arabia has imported approximately 70 combat UAVs from China and has signaled interest in acquiring as many as 285 more—a scale that underscores how Beijing has become a key partner in fulfilling Riyadh's growing appetite for armed drones. Further embedding this relationship, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation has established a drone manufacturing facility inside the Kingdom, deepening technological ties that could evolve into more autonomous local production over time.⁴⁰

China has also leveraged high-profile defense exhibitions to expand its footprint. In 2024, Saudi Arabia hosted the World Defense Show outside Riyadh, where 36 Chinese firms mounted an aggressive campaign to court buyers, many from Western Indian Ocean littoral states. Chinese exhibitors occupied more floor space than any other national contingent, with armed and unarmed UAVs dominating their displays. To punctuate this presence, China dispatched its Bayi Aerobatic Team, which performed precision routines using J-10 fighters refueled in flight by a PLAAF YU-20U tanker. This mission marked the first instance of China employing its aerial refueling capability to support a long-distance demonstration, signaling both growing technical confidence and an intent to showcase expeditionary competencies before a strategically consequential audience.⁴¹

The United States remains the principal supplier of aircraft to the Royal Bahraini Air Force, while France, the United States, and Italy collectively dominate the inventory of the Qatar Emiri Air Force. Chinese platforms are entirely absent from both fleets.⁴² In 2024, China and Bahrain announced a “comprehensive strategic

⁴⁰ Abhishek Kumar Darbey, “China's Increasing Global Drone Footprint – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review*, 24 November 2024, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/>.

⁴¹ Guo Yuandan and Leng Shumei, “PLA Bayi Aerobatic Team's J-10 Fighter Jets Depart for Saudi Arabia World Defense Show,” *Global Times*, 29 January 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>; and Tim Martin and Agnes Helou, “China Makes Presence Felt at Saudi Arabian Defense Show, Outpacing US, Russia,” *Breaking Defense*, 9 February 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

⁴² “Royal Bahraini Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; and “Qatar Emiri Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

partnership,” reflecting a steady, if modest, deepening of economic ties.⁴³ However, this relationship has yet to extend into the military aviation sphere. Similarly, Qatar has expanded its economic and trade engagement with China and issued joint pledges to promote military cooperation.⁴⁴ Thus far, these declarations have not translated into tangible collaboration between the Qatari and Chinese air forces.

Among the Gulf states, the United Arab Emirates stands out for developing the most substantial military aviation ties with China, even as the United States and France continue to supply the core of the UAE Air Force. In 2023, the UAE signed an agreement to purchase 12 Chinese L-15A advanced jet trainers, with an option for 36 more. By 2025, at least two were in active service, signaling the UAE’s willingness to diversify its procurement sources.⁴⁵ The UAV sector reveals an even deeper relationship. The UAE first acquired at least five Wing Loong I drones in 2011, then became China’s inaugural export customer for the more capable Wing Loong II in 2017. Between 2008 and 2018, China exported 181 combat drones and 163 strike-capable UAVs globally—22 percent of which went to the UAE.⁴⁶ To solidify these ties, the UAE’s International Golden Group partnered with China’s Norinco to establish the China-Emirates Science and Technology Innovation Laboratory, a joint venture focused on drone research and development.⁴⁷

Chinese strategic ambitions in the UAE have also drawn scrutiny from Washington. According to leaked American intelligence assessments, the United States suspected that the PLA was constructing a military facility—known to Beijing as “Project 141”—at Khalifa Port. Under heavy diplomatic pressure from Washington, Abu Dhabi reportedly suspended the project.⁴⁸ As of this writing, there is no evidence of a Chinese base on Emirati soil.

The UAE is also unique among Gulf Cooperation Council members in conducting bilateral air force exercises with China. The first Falcon Field exercise in 2023 and a follow-on in 2024 were both held in China’s Xinjiang province. The UAE

⁴³ Robert Mogielnicki, “A Flurry of Activity in Bahrain-China Relations,” *Arab Gulf States Institute*, 15 July 2024, <https://agsi.org/>.

⁴⁴ Ashraf Siddiqui, “Qatar: Chinese Envoy Highlights Strengthened China-Qatar Relations and Shared Global Commitments,” *Asian Telegraph*, 29 December 2024, <https://asiantelegraphqatar.com/>; and “China, Qatar Agree to Promote Military Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, 22 May 2024, <https://english.news.cn/>.

⁴⁵ “United Arab Emirates Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; and “UAE Receives First Batch of Chinese L-15 Falcons,” *The Aviationist*, 8 November 2023, <https://theaviationist.com/>.

⁴⁶ Darbey, “China’s Increasing Global Drone Footprint.”

⁴⁷ Eleonora Ardemagni, “In GCC-Asia Rising Ties, Defence Industry Is the Key,” *ISPI*, 18 June 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

⁴⁸ John Hudson, Ellen Nakashima, and Liz Sly, “Buildup Resumed at Suspected Chinese Military Site in UAE, Leak Says,” *Washington Post*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

deployed at least six Dassault Mirage 2000-0DAD/EAD ground attack aircraft alongside supporting transport assets, signaling a deliberate choice to expand defense ties with Beijing even under the watchful eye of Washington. These exercises demonstrated Abu Dhabi's independent strategic calculus and raised concerns within US defense circles about the UAE's long-term orientation.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Chinese defense firms have leveraged regional arms expos to further penetrate Gulf markets. At recent International Defense Exhibition and Conference events in Abu Dhabi, Chinese manufacturers prominently showcased systems ranging from the FC-31 stealth fighter to an array of armed drones, underscoring Beijing's ambitions to expand its aviation footprint across the Gulf.⁵⁰

Western suppliers continue to furnish virtually all aircraft operated by the Royal Air Force of Oman, leaving Chinese platforms entirely absent from its inventory.⁵¹ While Muscat has signaled interest in developing a "strategic partnership" with Beijing, this initiative appears primarily aimed at enhancing economic ties rather than forging a substantive security relationship.⁵² Reports have circulated that China explored establishing a military facility—likely naval—in Oman, but no such project has come to fruition.⁵³

Oman's recent defense diplomacy underscores its preference for balanced, non-aligned engagement. Illustrating this posture, Muscat has expressed interest in deepening cooperation with the PAF and exploring opportunities tied to Islamabad's defense production sector. At the same time, Oman conducted a joint air combat exercise with the Indian Air Force, reinforcing its commitment to maintaining broad, diversified security ties across competing regional actors.⁵⁴ his carefully managed neutrality allows Oman to engage a wide array of partners without becoming overly reliant on or aligned with any single power—China included.

⁴⁹ Albert Vidal Ribe and Joseph Dempsey, "More Than a Mirage: UAE Combat Aircraft in China," *Military Balance* (blog), 22 July 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/>.

⁵⁰ Liu Xuanzun and Ma Jun, "Chinese Defense Firms Exhibit Record-breaking Products at Industry Expo in UAE," *Global Times*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>; and Cui Haipei, "Chinese Tech Shines at UAE Defense Expo," *China Daily*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

⁵¹ "Royal Air Force of Oman," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁵² Yousuf bin Hamed al Balushi, "Opportunity Oman: Strategic Partnership with China," *Oman Observer*, 7 January 2024, <https://www.omanobserver.om/>.

⁵³ "China in Talks to Build Military Base in Oman: White House," *The Cradle*, 8 November 2023, <https://thecradle.co/>.

⁵⁴ "Oman Eyes Pakistan's Indigenous Defense Production, Deeper Air Force Ties," *Arab News*, 7 February 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/>; and "Oman, India Take Part in Joint Air Force Drills," *Middle East Monitor*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/>.

Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

Yemen remains mired in conflict—at war first with its neighbors and now largely with itself. The territory controlled by Houthi rebels in Sanaa experienced repeated Saudi and Emirati Wing Loong II drone and air strikes until 2022. In response, the Houthis launched their own drone and missile attacks, initially targeting Saudi Arabia and later striking international shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as an expression of support for Hamas operations in Gaza. These Houthi drones were either supplied directly by Iran or assembled locally using Iranian technology.⁵⁵ The Yemeni Air Force, for its part, consists mostly of aging Soviet-era aircraft but has cultivated a growing indigenous drone capability.⁵⁶

China has carefully balanced its relationships between the Houthi authorities in Sanaa and the internationally recognized government based in Aden. In a notable diplomatic maneuver, Beijing reportedly secured Houthi assurances to exempt Chinese-affiliated shipping from drone and missile attacks—a carve-out that may help explain the Houthis' selective targeting. Meanwhile, the United States sanctioned two Chinese firms for supplying “dual-use” components that bolstered the Houthis' capacity to produce more advanced missiles and UAVs, underscoring how Beijing's commercial or gray-market transfers can carry direct security implications in already volatile theaters.⁵⁷

Turning north, the Egyptian Air Force (EAF) stands as one of the most capable air forces in the Middle East, with a fleet predominantly composed of American, French, and Soviet/Russian platforms. However, Egypt has increasingly diversified its suppliers. The EAF operates 118 K-8 light attack and jet trainers jointly produced by China and Pakistan,⁵⁸ and in 2025, it received its first batch of J-10CE fighters from China. This procurement represents a significant strategic pivot, enabling Cairo to hedge against Western political conditions often tied to arms sales.⁵⁹ Additionally, Egypt employs Chinese-supplied Wing Loong II drones in

⁵⁵ “Six Houthi Drone Warfare Strategies: How Innovation Is Shifting the Regional Balance of Power,” *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, 6 August 2024, <https://acleddata.com/>; and Darbey, “China's Increasing Global Drone Footprint.”

⁵⁶ “Yemeni Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁵⁷ Tegaswini Deshmukh, “Red Sea Crisis: China's Secret Deal with Yemen's Houthi Rebels,” *Regtech Times*, 3 January 2025, <https://regtechtimes.com/>.

⁵⁸ “Egyptian Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁵⁹ Taha Sakr, “Chinese J-10CE Jets Arrive in Egypt, Marking Shift in Air Superiority Strategy,” *Daily News Egypt*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/>; and Ahmed Aboudouh, “Egypt's Purchase of a Chinese Fighter Jet Is a Reminder Cold War Tactics Are Back in the Middle East,” *Chatham House*, 12 October 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

counterinsurgency operations against militant networks in northern Sinai, integrating Beijing's systems into active combat roles.⁶⁰

In 2024, the PLA Air Force demonstrated its growing operational ambitions in North Africa when a Y-20 transport aircraft conducted flight maneuvers and several J-10 fighters from the Bayi Aerobatic Team were showcased on static display at the inaugural International Aviation and Space Exhibition in al Alamein, Egypt.⁶¹ This was followed by a far more substantive engagement in 2025, when six PLAAF Y-20 transports arrived at an Egyptian air base for the first bilateral exercise between the two air forces, designated *Eagles of Civilization 2025*. During the drills, Chinese and Egyptian units coordinated flights and executed joint tactical training. The PLAAF deployed J-10C/S fighters alongside a KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, marking the first occasion it fielded these assets in an international exercise. This evolving China–Egypt air force relationship highlights Beijing's intent to project airpower into the Middle East and raises broader questions about shifting alignments in a region traditionally dominated by US and European security partnerships.⁶²

Meanwhile, Sudan remains fractured by a civil war that erupted in 2023 and continues to splinter the country. The Sudanese Air Force still operates a fleet largely comprised of aging Soviet-era aircraft, much of it supplied by China over past decades. Unconfirmed reports suggest Khartoum is weighing a potential acquisition of J-10C fighters, particularly after Egypt's decision to integrate these platforms into its own force structure.⁶³

Unmanned systems have become an increasingly prominent feature of Sudan's conflict landscape. The Sudan Armed Forces employ Turkish and Iranian drones, while the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces relies on Wing Loong II and FH-95 UAVs procured via the UAE—highlighting how Chinese drone technology continues to diffuse through proxy channels even where Beijing is not directly involved.⁶⁴

China has also maintained a longstanding peacekeeping footprint in Sudan. It contributed two successive PLA Army helicopter detachments to the UN mission

⁶⁰ Darbey, "China's Increasing Global Drone Footprint."

⁶¹ Liu Jimei and Gao Sifeng, "Chinese Air Force Planes Participate in Air Show in Egypt," *China Military Online*, 5 September 2024, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

⁶² Darek Liam, "China, Egypt Begins Inaugural Joint Air Exercise 'Civilization Eagle 2025'," *Military Africa*, 20 April 2025, <https://www.military.africa/>; and Ying Yu Lin, "What a China-Egypt Military Training Reveals About the PLA's Combat Readiness," *The Diplomat*, 20 May 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁶³ "Sudan Plans to Purchase Chinese J-10C Fighter Jets," *Global Defense Corp*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/>.

⁶⁴ Kathryn Tyson, "Drones Over Sudan: Foreign Powers in Sudan's Civil War," AEI, January 2025, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/>.

in Darfur, which concluded in 2020, and has since deployed five successive helicopter units to support UN operations along the Sudan–South Sudan border. Each rotation involved four Mi-17 helicopters, reflecting Beijing’s steady commitment to showcasing its expeditionary logistics and rotary-wing capabilities under multilateral mandates.⁶⁵ At the onset of the current civil war, China evacuated approximately 1,300 nationals by land and sea but did not deploy PLAAF assets for the mission—underscoring both the limits of China’s willingness to employ its airpower in unstable environments and its continued preference for measured, risk-averse interventions.⁶⁶

The Eritrean Air Force remains exceedingly small, consisting mainly of a handful of Soviet-era aircraft originally provided by China, along with four Chinese-supplied Y-12 helicopters.⁶⁷ Although Asmara maintains cordial diplomatic ties with Beijing, there is no substantive cooperation in the military aviation sector.

Djibouti’s air force is even more modest, comprising just three Chinese helicopters and a few aging Soviet-era aircraft gifted by China decades ago.⁶⁸ In stark contrast, Beijing has made extensive strategic investments in Djibouti, highlighted by the establishment of a major PLA Navy base that became operational in 2017. This facility, guarded by PLANMC units, includes a helicopter pad and is capable of supporting Chinese aircraft carriers. However, Djibouti lacks the infrastructure to host meaningful fixed-wing operations: its commercial airport remains under Djiboutian control, the runway is too short for Y-20 heavy transports, and China cannot base fighter aircraft there. As a result, Djibouti’s practical utility as a platform for projecting Chinese airpower remains limited.⁶⁹

In 2023, Djibouti announced a USD 1-billion initiative to construct Africa’s first orbital spaceport in partnership with two Chinese-affiliated firms: the Hong Kong Aerospace Technology Group and Touchroad International Holdings Group. While this project carries potential military applications, it has become entangled in legal disputes, and its future is uncertain.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ “Chinese Peacekeeping Helicopter Unit to Sudan’s Darfur Awarded UN Peace Medals,” *Xinhua*, 18 July 2019, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>; and “China’s 4th Peacekeeping Helicopter Unit to Abeyi Completes One-year Mission,” *China Military Online*, 2 January 2025, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

⁶⁶ Ming-Shih Shen, “The Evacuation Operation in Sudan and PLA’s Capability of Long Distances Military Power Projection,” *INDSR Newsletter*, 28 August 2023, <https://indsr.org.tw/>.

⁶⁷ “Eritrean Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁶⁸ “Djibouti Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁶⁹ Mike Sweeney, “Challenges to Chinese Blue-Water Operations,” *Defense Priorities*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/>.

⁷⁰ Diksha Jain, “The Upcoming Djibouti Spaceport Project,” *CESCUBE*, 3 October 2023, <https://cescube.com/>; and Lauren Ploch Blanchard, “China’s Engagement in Djibouti,” Congressional Research Service, 6 June 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

Somalia once operated a fleet of 30 Chinese F-6C fighters, but decades of internal conflict following 1991 led to the collapse of its air force. Today, Somalia possesses neither operational aircraft nor trained pilots, and persistent security challenges preclude its consideration by Beijing as a venue for airpower collaboration.⁷¹ In 1991, the northern region of Somalia declared independence as Somaliland, maintaining its own government ever since. However, in 2020, Somaliland and Taiwan exchanged liaison offices, effectively severing Beijing's engagement with the breakaway territory and aligning Hargeisa more closely with Taipei in a manner directly at odds with China's strategic preferences.

Africa's East Coast and Western Indian Ocean Island Countries

With the notable exception of Tanzania, this region has attracted relatively limited attention from Chinese strategists focused on airpower projection. The Kenya Air Force (KAF) maintains a modest contingent of Chinese hardware, operating 10 Y-12 transport aircraft and approximately six Z-9WA armed helicopters.⁷² In 2024, the KAF commander attended the 8th International Military Flight Training Conference hosted by the PLAAF, as well as the 15th Zhuhai Air Show—engagements that reflect Nairobi's interest in maintaining cordial ties with Beijing.⁷³ Beyond these exchanges, Kenya and China have agreed to expand military collaboration through training programs, technology transfer, and prospective joint exercises, although concrete outcomes in the aviation domain remain limited.⁷⁴

By contrast, Tanzania stands out as a long-established partner in China's African security engagements. From its inception, the Tanzania Air Force Command (TAFC) has relied predominantly on Chinese aircraft. Today, its fleet includes 14 J-7Gs—an upgraded Chinese derivative of the MiG-21—six K-8 jet trainers, and two Y-12 transport planes. In 2011, Tanzania modernized its air force by replacing aging J-7s with new J-7G variants.⁷⁵ China's support extends beyond platforms:

⁷¹ Abraham Mahshie, "Somalia Hopes to Reconstitute Its Air Force with Renewed US Partnership," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

⁷² "Kenya Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁷³ "Commander KAF at the 15th China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition," *Ministry of Defense News*, 14 November 2024, <https://www.mod.go.ke/>.

⁷⁴ Eric Biegon, "Kenya and China Explore Enhanced Defence Cooperation," *KBC Digital*, 20 February 2025, <https://www.kbc.co.ke/>.

⁷⁵ "Tanzania Air Force Command," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; and Oscar Nkala, "Tanzanian Air Force Takes Delivery of 14 New J-7G Fighter Jets," *Defence Web*, 25 November 2013, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/>.

in the early 1970s, Beijing built and co-financed Tanzania's air force base at Ngerengere, later funding a USD 68-million reconstruction of the facility in 2017.⁷⁶

This enduring partnership is further underscored by operational cooperation. Since 2000, China and Tanzania have conducted 19 joint military exercises, culminating most recently in the Peace-Unity-2024 exercise. For this event, a PLA battalion deployed to Tanzania with its equipment transported aboard two PLAAF Y-20 heavy transports—marking the first known instance of the Y-20 being used to airlift forces for such a bilateral engagement. This operation highlights how Beijing leverages longstanding defense ties with Tanzania to incrementally expand its logistical and air mobility footprint along Africa's east coast.⁷⁷

Mozambique's air force remains small and shows no indication of any formal connection with the PLAAF or other Chinese aviation entities. By contrast, South Africa fields one of the continent's most capable air forces, with the majority of its aircraft procured from European suppliers.⁷⁸ In 2024, China sought to penetrate this market by prominently showcasing its Y-20A transport aircraft and newest helicopter models at the African Aerospace and Defence expo in South Africa, aiming to stimulate broader sales across the continent.⁷⁹ The following year, the chief of the South African National Defence Force visited Beijing for high-level discussions with China's defense minister, where both parties pledged to deepen military cooperation—though without specific references to air force collaboration.⁸⁰ This suggests that while Beijing is eager to expand ties, South Africa continues to guard its procurement autonomy, especially in the critical aviation sector.

Across the independent island nations of the Western Indian Ocean, air force capabilities remain minimal, though each possesses airports that could serve future military purposes. The Comoros maintains cordial relations with China, yet its air force lacks any combat-capable aircraft and has no history of engagement with Beijing in this domain.⁸¹ Madagascar's air force operates a modest fleet of transport aircraft, helicopters, and trainers, primarily tasked with reconnaissance, transport, and maritime patrol. To date, there has been no Chinese collaboration with the

⁷⁶ Alan Warnes, "The Rise and Rise of Tanzania's Air Force," *Times Aerospace*, 14 May 2018, <http://www.timesaerospace.aero/>.

⁷⁷ Jake Vartanian, "Peace and Unity: China's Growing Military Footprint in Tanzania," *China Landpower Studies Center*, 9 October 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>; and Paul Nantulya, "The Growing Militarization of China's Africa Policy," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2 December 2024, <https://africacenter.org/>.

⁷⁸ "South African Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁷⁹ "Y-20A at AAD 2024: China's Strategic Transport Aircraft Seeks to Conquer African Market," *Defense News Aerospace*, 19 September 2024, <https://armyrecognition.com/>.

⁸⁰ "China, South Africa Vow to Strengthen Military Cooperation," *China Military Online*, 10 June 2025, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

⁸¹ "Malagasy Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

Malagasy Air Force, though Madagascar's ports are occasionally cited as potential candidates for future visits by Chinese aircraft carriers.⁸²

The Mauritius Coast Guard Maritime Air Squadron fields several lightly armed patrol aircraft but does not operate combat platforms, while the Seychelles People's Defence Force Air Wing similarly conducts patrol missions across its vast maritime domain without combat aircraft.⁸³ Notably, both Mauritius and the Seychelles have developed more substantial defense aviation ties with India than with China, reinforcing New Delhi's longstanding role as a security partner in this segment of the Indian Ocean.

Among the island nations of the Western Indian Ocean, the Maldives has attracted the greatest Chinese attention in the security sector, emerging as a focal point for sharp China–India competition. The Maldives Coast Guard Aviation Squadron operates a handful of helicopters and surveillance aircraft supplied by India and Germany.⁸⁴ In 2024, the Maldives Defence Force took an additional step by establishing an Air Corps, which currently consists solely of Turkish-made drones.⁸⁵

That same year, newly elected President Mohamed Muizzu deepened the country's engagement with Beijing by signing a military agreement with China and ordering the departure of a small contingent of Indian troops stationed in the archipelago. However, Muizzu's overtures to China appear driven more by a strategy of balancing than outright replacement of the Maldives' traditional security ties with India.⁸⁶ This nuanced approach allows Male to extract benefits from both major partners while preserving strategic autonomy.

China's security interest in the Maldives has thus far focused more on maritime access than on aviation infrastructure. Nonetheless, Chinese companies have played a prominent role in shaping the country's air transport landscape, constructing and upgrading the Velana International Airport and, in 2024, securing a contract to expand the domestic airport at Kadhdhoo in the Laamu Atoll into an international facility.⁸⁷ These projects underscore how Beijing leverages economic initiatives that

⁸² Sarah Lesedi, "Mauritius Coast Guard Maritime Air Squadron (MAS) Arms Its HAL Do-228 MPA with Machine Gun Pods," *Military Africa*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.military.africa/>.

⁸³ "Seychelles People's Defence Force Air Wing," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁸⁴ "Coast Guard Aviation Squadron," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

⁸⁵ Athaulia A. Rasheed, "Is Maldives Ready for Its Tactical Drones?," *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁸⁶ Lea Thome, "China-Maldives Military Agreement: An Upgrade to the Bilateral Relationship," *9Dashline*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.9dashline.com/>; and Prateek Chakraborty, "Maldives Says India Has Withdrawn All Its Troops Ahead of May 10 Deadline," *India Today*, 10 May 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

⁸⁷ "Chagos Islands, Indian Ocean Power Play, China and India," *StratNews Global*, 20 October 2024, <https://stratnewsglobal.com/>.

could, over time, enable dual-use access—reinforcing China’s strategic foothold in a location critical to Indian Ocean sea lanes.

Conclusion

China’s approach to building airpower relationships in the Western Indian Ocean follows a clear pattern. Beijing has prioritized countries geographically proximate—such as Pakistan and Iran—or those with substantial air forces and the financial means to acquire advanced Chinese platforms, notably the UAE and Egypt. The farther a state lies from China and the smaller its indigenous air capabilities, the less Beijing has invested in direct airpower cooperation, with Tanzania standing out as a notable exception. Consistently, Chinese trade, investment, and infrastructure financing have paved the way for subsequent military-to-military engagements, including in the aviation sector.

For most Gulf states, deep-rooted airpower partnerships with the United States and Europe present formidable obstacles to Chinese ambitions. Yet Beijing is steadily advancing its position by marketing its latest generation of fighters and UAVs—systems that increasingly appear across the Western Indian Ocean. China’s willingness to sell armed drones without the political or human rights conditions often attached by Western suppliers gives it a distinct advantage. Outside of Turkey and Iran, China faces few serious competitors in this particular segment, positioning it to challenge Western primacy as the region’s preferred provider of military aircraft.

Looking ahead, Beijing will likely intensify efforts to secure airfield access agreements for the PLAAF, expand the participation of its aircraft in international air shows, and use heavy transports to deliver troops to exercises, support UN peace-keeping contingents, distribute humanitarian aid, or evacuate Chinese nationals in times of crisis. For now, there appears to be little strategic imperative to establish another dedicated PLA air base in the Western Indian Ocean; China can achieve its objectives through a combination of long-term arrangements and ad hoc access. Still, the establishment of the naval base at Djibouti—largely unexpected when announced—serves as a reminder that Beijing could again surprise analysts. While Gwadar in Pakistan remains the most frequently cited candidate for a future base, other plausible locations include the Maldives and Tanzania.

The most significant near-term development in China’s regional airpower posture will almost certainly be the first deployment of a PLAN aircraft carrier strike group—or potentially a large amphibious helicopter or drone carrier—into the Western Indian Ocean. This milestone, now likely within the immediate strategic horizon, would confirm Beijing’s determination to operate as a global military power and could sharpen the rationale for establishing additional naval facilities

beyond Djibouti. Regardless of the precise timeline, the steady growth of Chinese airpower activities across the Western Indian Ocean will continue to raise concerns in both Washington and New Delhi, underscoring the broader shift toward a more contested and multipolar maritime-aviation environment. 🦅

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His 37-year career as a Foreign Service Officer was marked by numerous challenging and significant assignments, primarily focused on Africa. His early posts included assignments in Lebanon, Kenya, and Tanzania. He later served as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Mauritania, Cameroon, and Sudan.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan appointed him US Ambassador to Burkina Faso, a role he held until 1990. Following this, he held several key positions in Washington, DC, including serving as the State Department's Coordinator for Somalia during the US intervention in 1992–93 and later as the Director of the Office of East and Horn of Africa Affairs. In 1996, President Bill Clinton named him US Ambassador to Ethiopia, where he served until 1999.

Since retiring from the Foreign Service in 2000, Ambassador Shinn has been teaching at The George Washington University. He is a prolific writer and a sought-after commentator on contemporary African issues, with a particular focus on the Horn of Africa and China's engagement with the continent. He is the co-author of several books, including *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2012), *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), and *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023). He also maintains an active blog where he shares his analysis on current events.

US–Mongolia Defense Relations

A Strategic Partnership in the Heart of Asia

DR. ACHALA GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL

Abstract

Mongolia occupies a singular position in contemporary geopolitics: a functioning democracy embedded between two authoritarian great powers. This article argues that the US–Mongolia defense partnership is not peripheral but strategically consequential for the United States’ Indo-Pacific and Eurasian posture. Anchored in Mongolia’s “Third Neighbor” policy, the relationship has evolved into a durable security partnership encompassing military cooperation, peacekeeping, critical minerals, and deep educational ties. Mongolia’s consistent contributions to international security and its democratic resilience challenge prevailing authoritarian narratives while offering the United States a non-provocative means of sustaining influence in the Eurasian heartland. The article contends that disciplined, calibrated US engagement—focused on institutionalized defense cooperation, economic sovereignty, and multilateral integration—can reinforce regional stability without triggering escalation. Mongolia’s experience demonstrates that geography need not dictate political destiny, and that small democratic states can play strategically outsized roles in an era of renewed great-power competition.

In an era defined by renewed great-power rivalry, the strategic choices of small states in contested regions carry consequences far beyond their borders. Nowhere is this truer than in Mongolia. Wedged between China and Russia, Mongolia is often dismissed as a geopolitical afterthought—a buffer state whose fate is presumed to be constrained by geography. That assumption is analytically lazy and strategically dangerous.

Mongolia is not a passive space between powers; it is an active democratic actor that has deliberately chosen alignment with a rules-based international order. For the United States, the relationship with Mongolia is therefore not an exercise in benevolence or symbolism. It is a calculated investment in regional stability, ideological competition, and strategic access in a part of Asia where American presence is otherwise limited.

This article argues that the US–Mongolia defense partnership constitutes a strategically valuable, low-escalation means of advancing American interests in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian heartland. Properly managed, it strengthens a democratic partner’s sovereignty, diversifies US security relationships, and complicates authoritarian influence—without provoking direct confrontation.

Strategic Context and the “Third Neighbor” Policy

To understand the strategic weight of Mongolia’s “Third Neighbor” policy, one must look beyond cartography and confront the deeper forces that shape state behavior: history, geography, power, and political identity. Foreign policy is not improvised; it is the outward expression of national memory. Mongolia’s contemporary strategic posture is inseparable from its past—an arc that runs from imperial dominance to prolonged subjugation, and finally to a hard-won democratic rebirth whose preservation remains an existential concern.

For much of the twentieth century, Mongolia existed as a Soviet satellite in all but name. Its defense posture, foreign relations, and economic orientation were dictated from Moscow, its sovereignty constrained by the imperatives of a collapsing communist system. Earlier still, it endured centuries of rule under the Qing dynasty. The Third Neighbor policy is thus not a diplomatic convenience but a deliberate rupture with a long inheritance of dependency. It reflects a conscious rejection of geographic fatalism—the assumption that Mongolia must inevitably subordinate itself to the preferences of its immediate neighbors.¹

Through this policy, Mongolia asserts a simple but consequential proposition: it will not consent to permanent vassalage. By cultivating deep political and security relationships beyond China and Russia, Mongolia seeks not confrontation, but strategic depth—room to maneuver, hedge, and preserve autonomy. Its choice of the United States as its principal “third neighbor” is therefore not a search for a new patron. It is a calculated alignment with a power whose strategic culture and political principles stand in opposition to imperial domination.² In effect, Mongolia extends an invitation to Washington to uphold the credibility of its professed commitment to sovereignty and self-determination, not in the abstract but in one of the world’s most unforgiving geopolitical environments.

For the United States, Mongolia’s posture carries both moral and strategic resonance. It offers an opportunity to reinforce a rules-based order while complicating the efforts of authoritarian powers to consolidate uncontested influence across the Eurasian heartland. This opportunity does not require sentimental

¹ Oyuntsetseg Densmaa et al., “Mongolia’s ‘Third Neighbor Policy’,” in *Proceedings of the XXV International Scientific and Practical Conference: Social and Economic Aspects of Education in Modern Society* (Warsaw: RS Global, 25 January 2021), <https://doi.org/>; and “Concept of Mongolia’s Foreign Policy” (press release, Institute for Strategic Studies, National Security Council of Mongolia, 2025), <https://en.iss.gov.mn/>.

² “Mongolia” (integrated country strategy, US Department of State, 18 March 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>; and “Joint Statement on the Strategic Third Neighbor Partnership between the United States of America and Mongolia” (press release, The White House, 2 August 2023), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

idealism or reckless ambition. It demands instead a clear-eyed recognition that, at certain junctures, principle and power can align to mutual advantage.

The strategic case for embracing Mongolia's overture rests on three interlocking pillars.

The Moral and Ideological Imperative: The Power of the Democratic Example

Mongolia's democratic endurance constitutes a direct challenge to the legitimizing narratives advanced by Beijing and Moscow.³ The Chinese Communist Party asserts that its model of technocratic authoritarianism is uniquely suited to Asia—more stable, more efficient, and culturally authentic than the disorder it ascribes to liberal democracy.⁴ Russia advances a parallel claim, framing “sovereign democracy” as a civilizational necessity and a bulwark against Western decay.⁵

Mongolia's very existence refutes these claims in practice. Emerging from the wreckage of Soviet communism, it surveyed its options and chose the unglamorous path of democratic governance. Its constitution enshrines fundamental rights; its elections are competitive; its civil society is active and often contentious. Each peaceful transfer of power in Ulaanbaatar, each critical editorial, each vigorous parliamentary debate projects a counternarrative into the authoritarian core lands to its north and south. It demonstrates that democracy is neither culturally alien nor strategically unviable in Asia—and that political liberty need not come at the expense of national identity.

For the United States, supporting Mongolia's democratic resilience is not an act of charity. It is an investment in the ideological dimension of great-power competition. This is soft power in its most effective form: the influence of example rather than coercion, projected without expeditionary forces or forward-deployed assets. In a contest increasingly defined by competing governance models, Mongolia's democratic success amplifies American credibility at minimal strategic cost.

Mongolia as a Strategic Platform for Influence and Observation

Geopolitics is ultimately about access—physical, political, and intellectual. From this perspective, Mongolia's geographic position is not a liability but a

³ МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ГАДААД БОДЛОГЫН ҮЗЭЛ БАРИМТЛАЛ (Foreign Policy Concept), Annex to Resolution No. 10 of the State Great Khural of Mongolia (2011), <https://legalinfo.mn/>.

⁴ “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” *Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies*, 13 July 2022, <http://english.scio.gov.cn/>.

⁵ “Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a news conference on the outcomes of Russian diplomacy in 2024” (press release, Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Malta, 14 January 2025), <https://malta.mid.ru/>; and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, “A War of Values with Russia,” *Project Syndicate*, 11 March 2025, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>.

strategic asset. Situated between two revisionist powers, it offers the United States a rare vantage point in a region otherwise resistant to sustained Western presence. This does not imply permanent basing or overt military deployment, which would be both impractical and destabilizing. The opportunity lies instead in subtler forms of engagement.

Mongolia provides a platform from which the United States can cultivate regional expertise, observe the dynamics of Sino-Russian interaction, and assess the flow of trade, energy, and influence across inner Asia. From Ulaanbaatar, American diplomats, analysts, and defense professionals gain proximate insight into the effects of Chinese economic coercion and Russian hybrid activity—insight grounded in lived regional experience rather than distant inference.⁶

Equally important, Mongolia offers a neutral diplomatic space for engagement with Central Asian states increasingly constrained by Chinese and Russian pressure. It functions as a conduit into a region where Western access has narrowed and where conversations can still occur on relatively equal footing. In this sense, Mongolia is not merely a platform, but a bridge—linking the United States to a strategically consequential but increasingly opaque part of the continent.

Securing such access through voluntary partnership, rather than force, yields a geopolitical dividend of exceptional value. In an era when access itself is a form of power, Mongolia stands as a listening post and testbed for American engagement in a region tilting toward authoritarian consolidation. Squandering that opportunity would reflect not restraint, but strategic myopia.

The Nature of the Partnership: An Ally of Principle in an Age of Expediency

In a period marked by transactional diplomacy and shifting alignments, partners who combine strategic position with principled commitment are rare. Mongolia is one such partner. Its adherence to international norms is not rhetorical; it is embedded in its national strategy. This is most evident in its disproportionate contributions to global peacekeeping. Mongolian forces have served alongside Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan and have deployed under United Nations mandates from South Sudan to the Western Sahara. These deployments are neither

⁶ Hunter Stoll, “A Case for Greater US Engagement in Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, 9 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

symbolic nor opportunistic. They reflect a consistent choice to contribute to the maintenance of international order.⁷

This record distinguishes Mongolia as a genuine security producer. Unlike states that benefit passively from stability underwritten by American power, Mongolia actively helps sustain that stability. Its engagement is structural, not situational. Mongolia's interests are best served in a system governed by rules rather than raw power—a logic that aligns its strategic objectives with those of the United States beyond immediate contingencies.

This alignment fosters a level of reliability uncommon in partnerships driven purely by expedience. In Mongolia, the United States finds not merely a state located at a strategic crossroads, but one whose conception of sovereignty, legality, and international conduct mirrors its own professed values. For a country of modest size, Mongolia offers exceptional strategic return. In an age often defined by moral equivocation and short-term calculation, it stands as a reminder that principled partnership—when grounded in shared interests and realistic expectations—remains both possible and strategically advantageous.

Evolution of the Strategic Partnership

Strategic relationships are not sustained by sentiment or symbolism. They endure only when translated into institutions, routines, and shared expectations that outlast political cycles. The evolution of the US–Mongolia relationship—from limited, episodic cooperation to an institutionalized strategic partnership—illustrates how deliberate statecraft can transform alignment into durability.

The decisive inflection point came in 2019, when Washington and Ulaanbaatar formally designated their relationship a “strategic partnership.”⁸ In diplomatic practice, such language is often applied casually. In this case, it was not. The designation reflected a mutual reassessment: Mongolia concluded that episodic engagement was insufficient to safeguard its autonomy, while the United States recognized that Mongolia's stability and democratic resilience carried strategic significance disproportionate to its size.

For Mongolia, the 2019 declaration anchored the Third Neighbor policy in a concrete security relationship. It signaled that engagement with the United States

⁷ “Uniformed Personnel Contributing Countries by Ranking,” United Nations, 31 March 2025, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/>; “Service and Sacrifice: Mongolia continues to strengthen its contribution to UN peacekeeping,” UN News, 9 March 2018, <https://news.un.org/>; and Bolor Lkhaajav, “The Mongolian Armed Force’s Contribution to Afghanistan,” *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁸ “Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between the United States of America and Mongolia” (joint statement, US Department of State, 31 July 2019), <https://mn.usembassy.gov/>.

was no longer peripheral or symbolic, but central to its long-term strategy for preserving sovereignty amid sustained pressure from its two neighbors. For the United States, the declaration amounted to a public acknowledgment that Mongolia's independence, political system, and security orientation were matters of enduring interest—not merely conveniences shaped by transient geopolitical conditions.

Crucially, the strategic partnership designation did more than clarify intent. It created a formal framework through which cooperation could be expanded predictably and incrementally. This structure was calibrated to Mongolia's constraints. It enabled deeper defense and security engagement without binding Ulaanbaatar to rigid alliance commitments or forcing it into overt alignment against China or Russia. In this sense, the partnership was engineered not for maximalism, but for sustainability.

That framework was substantially reinforced in July 2024 with the inaugural Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue in Washington.⁹ The significance of the dialogue lay not in its symbolism but in its scope. By explicitly broadening the relationship beyond military cooperation to include governance, economic resilience, and critical minerals, both governments acknowledged a core reality of contemporary competition: security is no longer divisible. Defense capacity, economic sovereignty, institutional integrity, and supply-chain resilience are interdependent elements of national power.¹⁰

The dialogue also marked a shift from coordination to integration. It formalized interagency engagement, created standing mechanisms for follow-through, and reduced reliance on ad hoc consultations driven by personalities rather than process. In doing so, it converted strategic intent into operational pathways—an essential step if the partnership is to endure beyond individual administrations.

Hence, the 2019 strategic partnership and the 2024 Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue represent a deliberate maturation of US–Mongolia relations. What began in the early post–Cold War period as cautious, limited engagement—focused primarily on training exchanges and peacekeeping—has evolved into a structured partnership supported by institutional mechanisms and shared expectations. This evolution matters because it reduces volatility. The relationship is no longer vulnerable to bureaucratic drift, leadership turnover, or short-term shifts in political attention.

Equally important, the partnership has been shaped to avoid the pitfalls that often accompany great-power engagement with small states. It provides a recog-

⁹ “Joint Statement on the United States–Mongolia Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue” (joint statement, US. Department of State, 26 July 2024), <https://mn.usembassy.gov/>.

¹⁰ Bolor Lkhaajav, “Mongolia, US Launch Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue,” *The Diplomat*, 3 August 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/> and Jargalsaikhan Enkhisaikhan, “The Mongolian Miracle,” in *Getting to Nuclear Zero in Northeast Asia*, ed. Gregory Kulacki et al. (London: Routledge, 2025), 83–102.

nized structure for expanding defense cooperation while preserving Mongolia's strategic autonomy and avoiding the optics of bloc politics. For the United States, this approach reflects a mature understanding of alliance management: strengthening a partner's sovereignty rather than subsuming it, and advancing shared interests without converting cooperation into dependency.

The distinction is fundamental. In Mongolia, Washington is not purchasing alignment or extracting loyalty. It is cultivating a sovereign partner whose security contributions, democratic institutions, and strategic positioning align naturally with American interests. The durability of the partnership rests precisely on that restraint. It is not a transient convergence born of momentary necessity, but a compact grounded in shared principles and a clear-eyed appraisal of what each side can—and cannot—reasonably expect from the other.

The Sinews of Cooperation: Military, Economic, and Educational Fronts

Strategic partnerships endure only when they are anchored in practice rather than proclamation. Diplomatic declarations may signal intent, but they do not confer capability. What ultimately sustains cooperation is measurable performance: forces that deploy, institutions that adapt, and networks that persist under pressure.

In the case of US–Mongolia relations, these foundations are no longer abstract. They have been constructed incrementally across three mutually reinforcing domains—military cooperation, economic engagement, and educational exchange. Together, they convert strategic alignment into operational reality and ensure that the partnership rests on durable interests rather than episodic convergence.

Peacekeeping Collaboration

Mongolia's role as a contributor to international peacekeeping is the most visible—and strategically consequential—expression of its defense partnership with the United States. This is not token participation designed to purchase goodwill. It is a deliberate national strategy that yields concrete military, diplomatic, and political returns.

Mongolian forces have deployed alongside US and coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they provided base security, logistical support, and training assistance under demanding conditions. In Afghanistan, Mongolian contingents served under both ISAF and the Resolute Support Mission, integrating effectively into NATO command structures and earning a reputation for discipline

and reliability.¹¹ These deployments demonstrated not only operational competence but an ability to function within complex multinational environments—an increasingly rare and valuable attribute.¹²

Beyond US-led missions, Mongolia has established itself as a credible contributor to United Nations peacekeeping, most notably in South Sudan. There, Mongolian units have protected civilians, secured humanitarian corridors, and operated in volatile conditions with professionalism that has drawn consistent international praise. Unlike some troop-contributing states that deploy underprepared forces, Mongolia has emphasized training, interoperability, and adherence to international norms—reinforcing its standing as a serious security actor.

From a strategic perspective, these contributions matter for three reasons.

First, they mark Mongolia as a security producer, not a passive beneficiary of stability underwritten by others. Its participation reflects a structural commitment to the maintenance of international order rather than a situational alignment driven by short-term incentives.

Second, peacekeeping deployments function as force multipliers for Mongolia's own military development. Exposure to coalition standards, logistics, and operational planning sharpens institutional competence, strengthens interoperability, and professionalizes the officer corps. These benefits translate directly into enhanced national defense capacity.

Third, for the United States, Mongolia's consistent performance provides reliable burden sharing. In an era when coalition cohesion often determines mission success, Mongolia's ability to integrate seamlessly into multinational operations adds value disproportionate to its size. It reinforces a broader truth frequently obscured in great-power discourse: that capable small states can meaningfully shape security outcomes when partnerships are grounded in competence and trust.

US support for Mongolia's military has been intentionally calibrated. Assistance has focused on mobility, force protection, training, and institutional development rather than offensive capability or permanent presence. This approach reflects both strategic restraint and geopolitical realism.

¹¹ Jim Garamone, "U.S., Mongolia Discuss Military-to-Military Relations During Pentagon Visit," *DOD News*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>; and David E. Sanger, "In Mongolia, Bush Grateful for Iraq Help," *New York Times*, 21 November 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/>. For a firsthand account of Mongolian forces serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, see Gonchigdorzhiin Nīāmdorzh, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Back to Baghdad* (Ulaanbaatar: Soyombo Printing Co., 2011).

¹² Grace Nechanicky, "18-year mission with Mongolian counterparts comes to an end," *Alaska National Guard Public Affairs*, 23 July 2021, <https://ak.ng.mil/>; and Bolor Lkhajav, "The Mongolian Armed Force's Contribution to Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

Joint training, professional military education, and targeted equipment transfers—such as tactical vehicles optimized for peacekeeping—have strengthened Mongolia's operational readiness without altering the regional balance of power.¹³ The objective is not to transform Mongolia into a frontline military actor, but to ensure it possesses a credible, professional force capable of defending sovereignty and contributing to international missions.

This restraint is not weakness; it is strategic discipline. By reinforcing Mongolia's capacity without forcing it into overt alignment against its neighbors, the United States strengthens a partner's autonomy while minimizing escalatory risk. The result is a form of security cooperation that stabilizes rather than provokes.

Military cooperation alone cannot sustain a strategic partnership. Economic resilience and human capital are equally decisive, particularly for a landlocked state navigating asymmetric relationships with far larger neighbors.

Mongolia's economic engagement with the United States—especially in areas such as infrastructure, governance reform, and critical minerals—directly supports its strategic autonomy. Diversifying economic ties reduces vulnerability to coercive leverage and reinforces the material foundations of sovereignty. For the United States, these investments also advance supply-chain resilience in sectors essential to both national security and technological competitiveness.

Educational exchange constitutes the partnership's most durable long-term asset. A significant share of Mongolia's political, military, and civil-society leadership has been educated in the United States.¹⁴ This has produced more than cultural familiarity. It has generated shared professional norms, institutional trust, and a common vocabulary of governance and security.

These ties lower transaction costs across the partnership. They facilitate cooperation during crises, smooth bureaucratic coordination, and ensure continuity across political transitions. In strategic terms, they anchor alignment at the level that matters most: elite formation and institutional culture.

Taken together, these military, economic, and educational ties form the connective tissue of the US–Mongolia partnership. They transform shared values into shared capabilities and ensure that cooperation is resilient rather than performative.

For Mongolia, peacekeeping and partnership are not gestures of prestige. They are instruments of statecraft—means of strengthening defense institutions, elevating international standing, and embedding sovereignty within a web of meaning-

¹³ William Leasure, "US Army Advisors Strengthen Partnership in Mongolia," U.S. Army Pacific, 10 April 2023, <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/>.

¹⁴ Ichinkhorloo Khosbayar, "What Mongolia Can Learn from U.S. Exchange Programs," *CPD Blog*, 19 September 2024, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/>.

ful relationships. For the United States, Mongolia represents a rare combination: a democratic partner in a difficult region that contributes to security rather than merely consuming it.

This is not alliance politics in the traditional sense. It is strategic cooperation shaped by realism and restraint—an example of how principled engagement, when matched to local constraints and mutual interest, can yield stability without confrontation.

Military Modernization Support

US support for Mongolia's military modernization reflects a pragmatic assessment of regional stability rather than a sentimental commitment to partnership. Mongolia's security posture matters because its vulnerability—or resilience—has implications that extend beyond its borders. In a Eurasian environment increasingly shaped by coercive diplomacy and power asymmetries, a capable Mongolian military contributes to stability precisely by reducing opportunities for pressure and miscalculation.¹⁵

American assistance has therefore been intentionally limited in scope and precise in purpose. The objective is not to alter the regional balance of power or to convert Mongolia into a forward military outpost. It is to ensure that Mongolia retains a credible capacity for self-defense, peacekeeping, and independent decision making.

The provision of Joint Light Tactical Vehicles illustrates this approach. These platforms are not prestige items; they are functional assets optimized for mobility, force protection, and sustainment in expeditionary and peacekeeping environments.¹⁶ Their value lies less in their numbers than in what they enable: safer deployments, greater operational endurance, and improved integration with coalition forces. In practical terms, such capabilities reinforce Mongolia's credibility as a security contributor and reduce perceptions of vulnerability that external actors might otherwise seek to exploit.

Hardware, however, is the least important component of modernization. Far more consequential is the sustained emphasis on training, professional military education,

¹⁵ “Department of War and Mongolian Ministry of Defense Conduct Bilateral Defense Framework” (press release, Department of War, 19 September 2025), <https://www.war.gov/>; and Larry A. Wyatt, Michele Devlin, and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, *Weaponizing Environmental Insecurity in Mongolia: A Strategic Framework for US Civil Affairs Engagements to Counterbalance China and Russia* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2025), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

¹⁶ “Joint Statement on the Strategic Third Neighbor Partnership between Mongolia and the United States Of America” (press release, Embassy of Mongolia to the United States, 2 August 2023), <https://mongolianembassy.us/>; and “Joint Statement on the United States–Mongolia Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue” (press release, US Department of State, 26 July 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>.

doctrine development, and institutional reform. US engagement has focused on strengthening command structures, logistics planning, and force management—areas that determine whether equipment translates into usable capability.¹⁷ This approach prioritizes resilience over expansion and competence over mass.

The logic underpinning this support is straightforward. A professional, institutionally sound Mongolian military is less susceptible to external coercion and internal erosion. It is better positioned to resist pressure that might compromise political independence or distort foreign policy choices. It is also more capable of contributing meaningfully to multinational operations, reinforcing Mongolia's role as a security producer rather than a dependent client.

Equally important is what US policy has deliberately avoided. Washington has not sought to bind Mongolia into formal alliance structures, encourage provocative deployments, or impose capabilities misaligned with Mongolia's strategic environment. This restraint reflects a mature understanding of partnership: strengthening autonomy rather than substituting for it. The goal is not to direct Mongolia's security choices, but to ensure that those choices are made from a position of competence and confidence.¹⁸

In this sense, military modernization support is less about augmenting force structure than about reinforcing sovereignty. By investing in institutions and operational proficiency, the United States reduces regional risk without escalating tensions. Mongolia's military becomes neither a proxy nor a pawn, but a stabilizing presence—capable enough to deter opportunistic pressure, yet restrained enough to avoid entanglement.

This approach exemplifies a form of security cooperation suited to contemporary competition: selective, disciplined, and aligned with local realities. It advances American interests not by projecting power through Mongolia, but by ensuring that Mongolia remains secure, autonomous, and capable of contributing to a stable regional order.

Khaan Quest Exercise

The annual Khaan Quest exercise represents the most visible institutional expression of the US–Mongolia defense partnership. Unlike Mongolia's overseas peacekeeping deployments, which test individual units in operational environments,

¹⁷ US Department of State, Integrated Country Strategy: Mongolia (Washington: US Department of State, 23 March 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

¹⁸ "U.S.-Mongolia Relations" (fact sheet, US Department of State, 1 August 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>; and Michael Klecheski, "US-Mongolia Relations: Standing Strong as Third Neighbors," *Asia Pacific Bulletin* 649 (14 June 2023): <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/>.

Khaan Quest functions as a standing mechanism for multinational integration and regional engagement. Its value lies not in scale, but in structure.

Conducted annually in Mongolia with sustained support from the US Department of War, Khaan Quest brings together military contingents from across the Indo-Pacific and select global partners. Its focus on peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response reflects deliberate design rather than constraint. These mission sets emphasize interoperability, command-and-control coordination, and procedural compatibility—the foundations of coalition effectiveness—without introducing escalatory dynamics associated with high-end warfighting scenarios.¹⁹

For Mongolia, Khaan Quest serves a dual purpose. Operationally, it reinforces professional standards, exposes Mongolian forces to diverse partners, and institutionalizes best practices in multinational coordination. Strategically, it establishes Ulaanbaatar as a credible convening state rather than a peripheral participant in regional security affairs. Hosting the exercise enhances Mongolia's diplomatic agency by positioning it as a platform through which cooperative security can be advanced on neutral ground.²⁰

For the United States, Khaan Quest offers a cost-effective means of sustaining presence and influence in the Eurasian interior without permanent basing or overt force posture adjustments. It provides a recurring venue for strengthening interoperability not only with Mongolian forces, but among a wider network of partners whose interactions might otherwise remain episodic.²¹ The trust and familiarity generated through repeated field-level engagement—shared planning, standardized procedures, and routine collaboration—constitute a form of strategic capital that cannot be replicated through episodic diplomatic contact.

As Lt Gen Joel B. Vowell, deputy commander, US Army Pacific, said, “Khaan Quest prepares us to meet these challenges, equipping us with the skills and trust needed to operate in volatile environments. This work is about upholding the values of freedom, justice and human dignity, protecting vulnerable populations and creating conditions for lasting peace.”²²

¹⁹ Tristan Moore, “Khaan Quest 2025 successfully ends with a closing ceremony,” 8th Theater Sustainment Command, 2 July 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/>; and “Mongolia: Promoting Humanitarian Principles at Khaan Quest 2025,” International Committee of the Red Cross, 1 July 2025, <https://www.icrc.org/>.

²⁰ Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren, “Mongolian Peacekeeping as a Foreign Policy Tool,” *Royal Society for Asian Affairs Blog*, 14 May 2024, <https://rsaa.org.uk/>.

²¹ “Khaan Quest demonstrates ‘strength and resolve’ of partners to seek peace,” *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 7 July 2025, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/>.

²² Quoted in: Tristan Moore, “Opening ceremony kicks off Khaan Quest 2025,” U.S. Army, 14 June 2025, <https://www.army.mil/>.

Beyond its immediate operational effects, Khaan Quest carries signaling value. It demonstrates that meaningful security cooperation need not be confined to formal alliances or driven exclusively by great-power rivalry. The exercise underscores the role of smaller and mid-sized states in sustaining regional stability through participation, professionalism, and institutional continuity. Mongolia's ability to host a multinational exercise while maintaining balanced relations with its neighbors illustrates how agency can be exercised even under significant geographic constraints.

At the same time, Khaan Quest avoids the pitfalls of overt militarization. Its focus on peacekeeping and humanitarian operations reinforces norms of collective security rather than confrontation. This restraint has been central to its durability. The exercise has persisted not because it dramatizes competition, but because it operationalizes cooperation in a manner compatible with regional sensitivities.

The sustained commitment of both Washington and Ulaanbaatar to Khaan Quest reflects a shared understanding that security partnerships are built through repetition and reliability rather than spectacle. As an institutionalized forum for cooperation, the exercise functions as both a practical tool and a strategic signal: practical in its contribution to interoperability and readiness, and strategic in its affirmation that the Indo-Pacific security environment is shaped not only by great-power maneuvering, but by the cumulative actions of capable, committed partners.

In this respect, Khaan Quest encapsulates the broader logic of the US–Mongolia defense relationship. It demonstrates how disciplined, non-provocative cooperation—grounded in capability and mutual respect—can strengthen regional stability without escalating competition.

High-Level Military Diplomacy

High-level military diplomacy has played a critical role in consolidating the US–Mongolia defense relationship, transforming sustained cooperation into recognized strategic commitment. The August 2023 visit by Mongolian Prime Minister Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene to the Pentagon—the first such visit by a Mongolian head of government—marked a significant milestone in this process.²³ The visit was not ceremonial. It reflected a deliberate decision by both governments to elevate defense engagement to the highest political level and to signal that the relationship had moved beyond routine military-to-military contact.

²³ Jim Garamone, "U.S., Mongolia Discuss Military-to-Military Relations During Pentagon Visit," *DOD News*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.war.gov/>.

During the visit, Michael S. Chase, deputy assistant secretary of defense for China, Taiwan and Mongolia, publicly acknowledged Mongolia’s “outsized impact” on international peace and security. While such language carries diplomatic weight, its importance lay less in rhetoric than in validation.²⁴ The statement reflected an established assessment within the US defense community: that Mongolia has consistently delivered reliable, professional contributions to demanding security missions and has earned credibility as a serious partner. Public recognition at this level reinforced Mongolia’s standing not only with Washington, but within the broader community of US partners.

This form of diplomacy serves multiple strategic functions. Externally, it signals to Beijing and Moscow that US engagement with Mongolia is intentional, sustained, and grounded in performance rather than opportunism. It raises the diplomatic cost of coercive pressure by underscoring that Mongolia’s security relationships are visible and supported at senior levels. Internally, it reassures Mongolian decision-makers that engagement with the United States rests on durable institutional commitment rather than transient political interest.

Equally important, senior-level engagement accelerates institutionalization. Direct interaction among political and defense leaders strengthens channels of communication, aligns strategic expectations, and reduces the risk of miscalculation. In practical terms, such engagement reinforces the bureaucratic frameworks that support defense cooperation—facilitating training initiatives, equipment transfers, and multinational participation in exercises such as Khaan Quest. These outcomes are cumulative rather than dramatic, but they are essential to sustaining partnership under stress.

The Pentagon visit also reflected a shared understanding of the partnership’s long-term horizon. For Mongolia, high-level defense diplomacy anchors the Third Neighbor policy in tangible commitments while preserving strategic balance with its neighbors. For the United States, it reinforces an Indo-Pacific and Eurasian approach that complements treaty alliances with partnerships based on capability, reliability, and voluntary alignment.

In this respect, the significance of the visit lay not in spectacle but in normalization. It demonstrated that Mongolia is no longer treated as an episodic partner, but as a standing participant in US security engagement. High-level military diplomacy thus functions as connective tissue—binding operational cooperation to political assurance and ensuring that the partnership remains resilient amid shifting regional dynamics.

²⁴ Quoted in: Garamone, “U.S., Mongolia Discuss Military-to-Military Relations.”

When executed with restraint and consistency, such diplomacy strengthens alliances without provoking escalation. In the US–Mongolia context, it has served precisely that function, reinforcing credibility, reducing uncertainty, and embedding cooperation within a stable strategic framework.

Economic Dimensions of Defense Cooperation

The US–Mongolia partnership cannot be understood solely through a military lens. Its durability increasingly rests on economic foundations that directly shape national resilience and strategic autonomy. In the contemporary security environment, economic capacity is not adjacent to defense; it is constitutive of it. Both Washington and Ulaanbaatar have come to recognize that supply chains, infrastructure, and connectivity are now integral components of security competition.

Mongolia's endowment of critical minerals—particularly copper and rare earth elements—illustrates this convergence of economic and strategic interests. These materials underpin modern defense systems, advanced manufacturing, and clean energy technologies. Global supply chains for rare earths remain heavily concentrated, with China exercising disproportionate influence over extraction, processing, and downstream production.²⁵ Mongolia's reserves therefore represent not an alternative panacea, but a meaningful opportunity for diversification.

For the United States, engagement with Mongolia's mining sector is best understood as risk mitigation rather than substitution. Transparent investment, governance reform, and responsible development offer a pathway to modestly reduce dependence on concentrated supply chains while strengthening a partner's economic sovereignty.²⁶ This is not an exercise in commercial opportunism; it is a strategic effort to reinforce the resilience of the defense industrial base and associated technologies over the long term.

Economic connectivity also has direct operational implications. Efforts to establish direct air links between the United States and Mongolia, while commercially modest, carry strategic significance. Improved aviation connectivity would facilitate the movement of personnel for training, exercises, and consultations, reducing friction in defense cooperation. It would also enhance responsiveness

²⁵ Solongo Li Yushin, "Mongolian 'Third Neighbor Policy' and Strategic Partnership with USA," *Mongolian Journal of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2025): <https://doi.org/>; and Bolor Lkhaajav, "Advancing the Mongolia–US strategic economic partnership," East Asia Forum, 4 October 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/>.

²⁶ "The United States and Mongolia Sign MOU to Collaborate on Critical Minerals" (press release, US Department of State, 26 June 2023), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>; and Erin L. Murphy, "Mongolia: A Case for Flexibility in U.S. Economic Engagement," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 15 March 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

for humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and contingency operations. In a land-locked country with limited logistical options, such flexibility constitutes a quiet but consequential advantage.²⁷

Collectively, these economic elements reinforce the partnership in ways that purely military arrangements cannot. Secure supply chains, infrastructure connectivity, and regulatory transparency reduce vulnerability to coercion and expand policy space for both governments. They also complicate efforts by external actors to exert leverage through economic pressure rather than overt force—a tactic increasingly favored in competitive environments.

For Mongolia, deeper economic engagement with the United States offers a practical means of diversification. China will remain Mongolia's dominant trading partner by geography alone, but diversification at the margins matters. Even incremental reductions in dependence can enhance bargaining power and reduce exposure to political or economic coercion. Participation in global supply chains for critical materials also elevates Mongolia's international standing as a reliable, rules-based economic actor.

For the United States, supporting Mongolia's economic resilience is neither altruistic nor speculative. It strengthens a partner's autonomy while advancing American interests in supply-chain security, technological competitiveness, and regional stability. The value of this engagement lies not in scale, but in alignment: economic cooperation that reinforces sovereignty rather than substituting for it.

In this respect, the economic dimension of US–Mongolia defense cooperation reflects a modern approach to partnership. It integrates military collaboration with the material conditions that sustain it, ensuring that security cooperation rests on foundations capable of withstanding political pressure, market shocks, and strategic competition alike.

Educational and Soft-Power Foundations

Beneath the visible structure of US–Mongolia defense cooperation lies a quieter but no less consequential foundation: sustained educational exchange, institutional engagement, and targeted development assistance. These instruments do not generate immediate operational effects, but they shape the human and institutional

²⁷ “United States, Mongolia Sign Open-Skies Agreement and Transportation Memorandum” (press release, US Department of Transportation, 4 August 2023), <https://www.transportation.gov/>; “Cabinet Approved Agreement to Start Direct Flight to the United States” (press release, National Security Council of Mongolia, 15 September 2023), <https://en.iss.gov.mn/>; and “United Airlines Launches Historic Flights Connecting Mongolia, Japan, and the United States,” *Jamogrand*, 22 September 2025, <https://www.jamogrand.com/>.

environment in which security cooperation either succeeds or fails. Over time, they reduce friction, align expectations, and reinforce continuity across political cycles.

Educational exchange has been particularly influential. More than 1,700 Mongolian citizens were pursuing higher education in the United States in 2024, a notable figure given Mongolia's population size.²⁸ The strategic relevance of this exchange lies not in the number alone, but in its concentration among Mongolia's political, military, and professional elite. A significant share of Mongolia's parliamentary leadership has studied in the United States, acquiring firsthand exposure to Western approaches to governance, civil-military relations, and institutional accountability. While education does not produce automatic policy alignment, it does cultivate shared reference points that facilitate cooperation under stress.

The effects extend beyond formal politics. US-educated Mongolians are disproportionately represented in business, civil society, and the defense establishment, contributing to a broader institutional culture that values transparency, rule-based decision-making, and professional norms. This background lowers transaction costs in bilateral engagement. Negotiations are more predictable, misunderstandings fewer, and coordination easier precisely because interlocutors share a common intellectual and professional vocabulary.

Equally important are the informal networks that emerge from these exchanges. Personal relationships forged in academic and professional settings often outlast official postings and provide trusted channels of communication. In security partnerships, such networks can prove decisive—enabling quiet clarification, early warning, or de-escalation when formal mechanisms are slow or politically constrained. Their value lies not in visibility, but in reliability.

These educational ties are reinforced by targeted US development assistance, most notably through the Millennium Challenge Corporation. MCC-funded infrastructure and water security projects address tangible challenges facing Mongolia, particularly in Ulaanbaatar. Their strategic relevance lies less in scale than in signal. By focusing on institutional reform and public goods rather than patronage, these investments strengthen governance capacity and public confidence while demonstrating long-term American commitment. This, in turn, reinforces trust in broader cooperation, including in sensitive defense domains.

Viewed in aggregate, educational exchange and development assistance anchor the partnership at the societal and institutional level. They ensure that defense cooperation is not isolated from the political and economic context in which it operates. In a region where external powers often leverage economic inducements

²⁸ "More Mongolians than ever studying in the U.S." (press release, US Embassy in Mongolia, 22 November 2024), <https://web.archive.org/>.

to extract political compliance, Mongolia's experience offers an alternative model: engagement that reinforces autonomy rather than dependency.

These soft-power foundations do not substitute for military capability, nor do they guarantee alignment in every circumstance. What they provide is resilience. They help ensure that the US–Mongolia partnership rests not solely on converging threat perceptions, but on a durable base of institutional familiarity, professional trust, and shared expectations. In strategic terms, that depth is often what determines whether partnerships endure once circumstances become less favorable.

Strategic Implications and Future Prospects

The US–Mongolia defense relationship carries implications that extend beyond bilateral cooperation. It illustrates how contemporary statecraft can operate effectively in a multipolar environment marked by asymmetry, ideological contestation, and geographic constraint. The partnership does not offer a universal template, but it does provide a credible example of how small democratic states can preserve autonomy—and how great powers can support that autonomy without destabilizing the surrounding region.

Mongolia's experience demonstrates that proximity to dominant neighbors does not preclude strategic choice. By engaging China and Russia where necessary while deepening ties with democratic partners beyond its immediate geography, Mongolia has expanded its strategic maneuver space rather than surrendered it. This approach challenges the assumption that geography alone determines alignment. It also offers a cautionary lesson: balance is not passive neutrality, but an active and continuous process requiring institutional capacity and external support.

For the United States, Mongolia offers practical advantages without the liabilities associated with formal alliance structures. Engagement with Mongolia provides access—diplomatic, military, and analytical—into a region where American presence is otherwise limited, while avoiding the escalatory dynamics that accompany forward basing or treaty commitments on China's periphery. This form of engagement reinforces US situational awareness and regional connectivity without compelling Mongolia to choose sides in a way that would invite retaliation.

The partnership also carries normative significance, though its effects should not be overstated. Mongolia's democratic system and consistent participation in international peacekeeping reinforce the credibility of a rules-based order by demonstrating that democratic governance and security contribution can coexist even in challenging environments. Mongolia's value lies less in symbolic alignment than in performance: its willingness to deploy forces, adhere to international norms, and sustain cooperation over time. These actions resonate more persuasively than declaratory statements.

At the same time, Mongolia's strategic position imposes unavoidable constraints. Its location between China and Russia confers leverage but also exposure. US policy must therefore remain calibrated. Cooperation that enhances Mongolia's resilience—professional military development, economic diversification, institutional capacity—strengthens regional stability. Measures that appear to instrumentalize Mongolia or draw it into overt confrontation would do the opposite. The effectiveness of the partnership to date has rested on this restraint.

This approach reflects a mature understanding of contemporary competition. Supporting Mongolia's autonomy reduces incentives for coercion and miscalculation, contributing indirectly to regional stability. A Mongolia that is secure, capable, and diplomatically balanced is less likely to become a flashpoint or a venue for proxy competition.²⁹ In this sense, the partnership serves not only bilateral interests but broader systemic ones.

Looking forward, sustaining these benefits will require consistency rather than expansion. The United States should prioritize continuity of engagement, focus on areas where cooperation delivers tangible resilience, and resist the temptation to overformalize the relationship. Strategic patience—not maximalist ambition—has been the partnership's defining strength.

Viewed in this light, the US–Mongolia defense relationship is neither symbolic nor exceptionalist. It is an example of how disciplined, principled engagement can preserve space for democratic autonomy in constrained environments. For American statecraft, the lesson is not that this model can be replicated wholesale, but that it can inform how power is applied—selectively, sustainably, and with an appreciation for local realities—in an increasingly contested international system.

Challenges and Limitations

The progress of US–Mongolia defense cooperation does not negate the structural constraints that define the partnership. A realistic assessment requires acknowledging the limits imposed by geography, logistics, and force capacity. These constraints do not undermine the relationship; they shape the conditions under which it can succeed.

Geography is the most consequential of these limits. Mongolia's position between Russia and China ensures that its foreign and security policy will remain an exercise in calibrated balance. Economic connectivity, energy supply, and basic transit routes bind Mongolia to its two neighbors in ways that no external partnership

²⁹ Batmunkh Gerelmaa, "Balancing Giants, Building Influence: Mongolia's Soft Power in Asia," *Journal of Politics and Law* 19, no. 1 (2026): 27–36, <https://doi.org/>.

can fully offset. Ulaanbaatar cannot afford overt alignment that would jeopardize stable relations with either Moscow or Beijing. As a result, there are natural ceilings on the pace and visibility of defense cooperation with the United States. Any approach that ignores this reality risks imposing costs on Mongolia that outweigh the benefits of engagement.

Logistical constraints reinforce these limits. Mongolia's landlocked status and underdeveloped transportation infrastructure complicate the movement of personnel and materiel. Defense cooperation must contend with restricted access routes, reliance on overflight and transit permissions, and high costs associated with airlift.³⁰ These factors constrain the scale and frequency of exercises, limit the feasibility of heavy equipment transfers, and reduce flexibility in crisis response. They demand advance planning and reinforce the value of modest, repeatable engagement over large, episodic initiatives.

Mongolia's military capacity also places clear boundaries on what the partnership can reasonably achieve. While Mongolian forces have demonstrated professionalism and reliability in peacekeeping and expeditionary roles, overall force size and support infrastructure remain limited. Mongolia is not positioned to serve as a regional military counterweight, nor should policy aim in that direction. The strategic value of the partnership lies in niche capabilities—interoperability, specialized training, institutional competence—not in mass or power projection.

These constraints point toward a clear policy logic. US engagement is most effective when it reinforces Mongolia's ability to make independent choices rather than attempting to expand its role beyond structural limits. Emphasizing professional military education, peacekeeping support, selective modernization, and economic resilience aligns with Mongolia's capabilities and strategic environment. Efforts that seek to accelerate cooperation beyond these parameters risk diminishing returns or unintended escalation.

Seen in this light, the limitations of the partnership are not liabilities to be managed away but conditions to be incorporated into strategy. They impose discipline on both sides and help ensure that cooperation remains sustainable. The US–Mongolia defense relationship succeeds precisely because it operates within these constraints, leveraging Mongolia's strengths while respecting the boundaries imposed by geography and scale.

This is the art of the possible in contemporary statecraft: advancing stability not by ignoring constraints, but by working within them with patience, precision, and restraint.

³⁰ David Brunnstrom and Simon Lewis, "US discussed 'creative ways' to help landlocked Mongolia export rare earths, officials say," *Reuters*, 4 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

Recommendations

A realistic appraisal of the strategic environment—tempered by recognition of Mongolia’s enduring constraints—calls not for grand gestures, but for disciplined, intentional policy. The objective of US strategy should not be to transform Mongolia into a formal ally or a regional counterweight, but to consolidate and selectively deepen a partnership that strengthens Mongolian sovereignty, contributes to regional stability, and advances American interests without provoking escalation.

The following recommendations prioritize feasibility, durability, and strategic restraint.

Consolidate the Bilateral Strategic Core

The United States and Mongolia should focus on strengthening existing mechanisms rather than proliferating new institutional structures. The Comprehensive Strategic Dialogue has proven its value as a coordinating framework and should remain the primary forum for setting priorities and ensuring follow-through. Its effectiveness would be enhanced by clearer tasking between annual meetings, designated lead agencies on both sides, and continuity in working-level engagement.

Rather than establishing multiple permanent task forces, cooperation in critical areas—such as minerals governance, cybersecurity resilience, and logistics—should be embedded within existing channels. Progress in these domains depends less on new bureaucratic entities than on sustained technical assistance, regulatory alignment, and targeted investment consistent with Mongolian capacity and political realities.

In the economic sphere, US engagement should emphasize diversification and transparency rather than displacement of existing trade relationships. Instruments already in use—the Development Finance Corporation, MCC compacts, and targeted commercial diplomacy—offer credible avenues to support infrastructure development, regulatory reform, and responsible resource extraction. These efforts should be framed as risk reduction rather than zero-sum competition with China, reinforcing Mongolia’s bargaining power without forcing binary choices.

Defense cooperation should continue along its current trajectory: focused on professionalism, peacekeeping readiness, and institutional development. Selective enhancement of domain awareness, planning support, and intelligence cooperation can proceed cautiously where mutually agreed, but without introducing capabilities or postures that would alter regional perceptions or impose new political costs on Ulaanbaatar. Expanded professional military education—particularly in strategy, logistics, and civil-military relations—offers long-term returns at modest cost and should remain a priority.

Integrate Mongolia Selectively into Multilateral Frameworks

Mongolia's strategic value increases when it is embedded—carefully and selectively—within broader regional networks. Full membership in treaty-bound alliances is neither appropriate nor necessary. Instead, the United States should support Mongolia's participation in flexible, issue-specific frameworks that enhance capacity without triggering bloc dynamics.

Mongolia's engagement in “Quad-Plus” dialogues should be encouraged where it adds substantive value, particularly in areas such as democratic resilience, supply-chain security, and governance standards. Such participation should remain functional rather than declaratory, reinforcing Mongolia's role as a contributor without implying alliance commitments.

Operational exposure is equally important. The United States should facilitate Mongolia's observer participation in select multinational exercises beyond Khaan Quest, focusing on those that emphasize interoperability, logistics, and coalition coordination rather than high-end warfighting. These opportunities would strengthen Mongolia's officer corps and deepen familiarity with coalition dynamics while remaining politically sustainable.

Washington should also support Mongolia's role as a convening state on governance and resilience issues, but with restraint. Existing forums in Ulaanbaatar already provide platforms for dialogue on democracy and rule of law; US support should reinforce these efforts rather than create new, highly branded initiatives that risk overpoliticization or regional backlash.

Measure Success by Continuity, Not Escalation

The success of US–Mongolia cooperation should be measured by endurance rather than visibility. A partnership that quietly strengthens Mongolia's autonomy, sustains its democratic institutions, and enables constructive regional engagement is more valuable than one defined by formal status or symbolic elevation.

US policy should therefore prioritize consistency over expansion, credibility over ambition, and restraint over theatrics. Mongolia's strategic importance lies precisely in its ability to operate without becoming a flashpoint. Preserving that balance is not a limitation—it is the partnership's defining strength.

Conclusion

The US–Mongolia defense relationship demonstrates how sustained, disciplined engagement can produce strategic value without escalation. It is not a relationship built on sentiment or symbolism, but on a shared assessment of interests, compatible political values, and a realistic understanding of regional constraints. Through incremen-

tal cooperation across military, economic, and educational domains, the two countries have developed a partnership that is durable precisely because it has avoided excess.

Mongolia's Third Neighbor policy has provided the essential framework for this engagement. It affirms Mongolia's agency while acknowledging the limits imposed by geography and dependence on neighboring powers. For the United States, working within this framework has required restraint as much as commitment—supporting Mongolia's sovereignty and defense capacity while avoiding actions that would force Ulaanbaatar into untenable choices or provoke unnecessary confrontation.

As the relationship has matured, cooperation has become increasingly institutionalized. Joint exercises such as Khaan Quest, senior-level defense engagement, targeted modernization support, and economic and educational ties have moved the partnership beyond episodic interaction. These efforts have yielded practical benefits: improved interoperability, enhanced professional capacity, and greater resilience against coercive pressure. They have also reinforced Mongolia's role as a contributor to international security rather than a passive beneficiary.

The partnership's future will depend less on expansion than on consistency. Its success hinges on maintaining calibrated support, respecting Mongolia's strategic environment, and continuing to prioritize capability over symbolism. Strategic patience—often undervalued in contemporary policy debates—has been the defining strength of this relationship and should remain so.

The broader lesson is not that Mongolia represents a model to be replicated wholesale, but that effective statecraft does not require maximalism. Even in regions shaped by great-power rivalry, carefully structured partnerships can preserve autonomy, reinforce stability, and advance shared interests. In this sense, the US–Mongolia defense relationship offers a quiet but instructive example of how power can be applied with precision, restraint, and enduring effect. 🦅

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Missile Defense Reimagined

A Theoretical Examination of the “Golden Dome” Proposal

DR. MELVIN DEAILLE

Abstract

This article reexamines the strategic rationale, feasibility, and risks of deploying a layered homeland missile defense architecture—termed “Golden Dome”—modeled after Israel’s Iron Dome but scaled for the continental United States. It explores the proposal through the foundational deterrence theories of Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling, and Herman Kahn, offering a comparative analysis of how each theorist might assess the impact of missile defense on strategic stability, crisis escalation, and allied assurance. Drawing on contemporary threat dynamics—including hypersonic weapons, drone swarms, and dual-capable missiles—the article evaluates the technical and strategic challenges of fielding space-based sensors and interceptors. It argues that while Golden Dome may offer limited protection against rogue-state threats and bolster extended deterrence, it risks undermining mutual vulnerability with peer competitors unless deployed with strategic restraint. The article concludes by recommending a measured, layered approach to missile defense—one that preserves stability, assures allies, and secures freedom of action in space.

President Trump’s second administration began with a flurry of executive orders, far outpacing his first term. Among the earliest, an order issued on 27 January 2025 directed the Secretary of War to develop options for a homeland missile defense system modeled after Israel’s “Iron Dome.”¹ Because “Iron Dome” is a trademarked term, the administration rebranded the initiative as “Golden Dome.”² Standing on the steps of the Pentagon shortly after his confirmation, Secretary Pete Hegseth underscored the President’s focus on defending the homeland, identifying Golden Dome as a top departmental priority.

Commanders-in-chief have long made defending the homeland a central mission. This initiative seeks to ensure that priority is met. At the same time, building a near-impenetrable missile shield raises questions that extend beyond technical feasibility. New threats to the homeland demand a defense upgrade, but Golden Dome brings political and strategic challenges the administration must navigate

¹ Donald J. Trump, “Executive Order 14186: The Iron Dome for America,” 27 January 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

² Jen Judson, “Iron Dome for America Gets a Golden Makeover,” *Defense News*, 25 February 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

carefully. The system must enhance protection without undermining strategic stability—and it must do so in a way that assures US allies while avoiding provocation of near-peer adversaries. A historical look at US missile defense efforts and deterrence theory helps illuminate how best to balance these competing objectives. After all, this is not the first time the United States has tried to build an all-encompassing shield against ballistic missile attacks.

Ronald Reagan and Star Wars

In his executive order, President Trump acknowledged the legacy of President Ronald Reagan's missile defense vision—best known by its informal moniker, “Star Wars.” The order noted: “President Ronald Reagan endeavored to build an effective defense against nuclear attacks, and while his program resulted in many technological advances, it was canceled before its goal could be realized.”³

Proposed in 1983 as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), Reagan's program aimed to develop a layered missile defense system—primarily space-based—that could intercept and destroy incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), particularly those armed with nuclear warheads. The central premise was bold and deeply strategic: shift US doctrine away from exclusive reliance on mutual assured destruction and toward a posture of active defense. As Reagan put it, the objective was to render nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete” and free the American people from living under the constant threat of annihilation.⁴

SDI never progressed to full deployment, and its more exotic elements—such as space-based lasers and kinetic energy weapons in orbit—remained largely conceptual. Several factors contributed to this outcome. First, the Soviet Union's collapse and the subsequent “peace dividend” reduced the urgency for such a system. Second, even with aggressive funding and high-level political support, the technological maturity necessary for space-based interceptors remained decades away. Finally, concerns about strategic stability, arms control treaty violations, and massive program cost dampened political enthusiasm by the early 1990s.⁵

Yet the program's impact should not be understated. Although SDI failed to achieve initial operational capability, it catalyzed significant progress in sensor technology, command-and-control architectures, and ground-based interceptor development. Many of the enabling technologies used today in missile defense—

³ “Executive Order 14186.”

⁴ Atomic Heritage Foundation, “Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI),” *Nuclear Museum*, 18 July 2018, <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/>.

⁵ Aaron Bateman, “The Enduring Impact of Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative,” *Arms Control Today*, September 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/>.

such as phased-array radar, satellite-based infrared surveillance, and midcourse intercept algorithms—can trace their lineage to early SDI research. Reagan’s vision also reframed the missile defense debate in US strategy circles, pushing it beyond the narrow confines of theater missile defense and into the broader conversation about homeland protection.

While Reagan’s Star Wars program fell short of its ultimate goal, it laid the conceptual and technological foundation for subsequent generations of missile defense efforts. Golden Dome, in many respects, inherits this legacy—and must now contend with the same core question Reagan faced: can missile defense provide meaningful security against strategic threats without undermining the very deterrence it seeks to enhance?

Current US Ballistic Missile Defense

The defense of the US homeland against ballistic missile attack begins with Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITW/AA), a system of systems designed to detect, assess, and enable response to missile threats. The backbone of initial missile launch detection resides in space-based sensors. Specifically, the Defense Support Program (DSP) and the Space-Based Infrared System (SBIRS) provide global coverage and early warning by detecting the heat signatures of missile launches anywhere on the globe. DSP satellites operate in geosynchronous orbit (GEO), while SBIRS enhances coverage by incorporating both GEO and highly elliptical orbits (HEO), increasing responsiveness to launches from multiple vectors.⁶

Once a missile launch is detected, the missile defense architecture shifts to tracking and discrimination. Ground-based radars provide vital confirmation, refine trajectory estimates, and contribute to fire-control solutions. Several key systems bolster US early warning capacity. Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) radars, positioned in Greenland and Alaska, monitor for launches over the polar region—historically the most likely flight path for an ICBM from Russia. PAVE PAWS, and its upgraded variant, the Solid State Phased Array Radar System (SSPARS), offer wide-area surveillance and the capacity to track multiple objects simultaneously. These phased-array systems are stationed along the US coasts to guard against submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), which remain a persistent threat due to their stealth and proximity.

⁶ Steve Lambakis, *Space Sensors and Missile Defense* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), 20–22, <https://nipp.org/>.

In addition to SSPARS, the Cobra Dane radar in Alaska plays a critical role in tracking ballistic missiles through both the exo-atmospheric and endo-atmospheric phases of flight. Sea-based assets further extend detection coverage and cue interceptors. The AN/TPY-2 radar and the Sea-Based X-Band Radar (SBX-1) contribute mobile, high-resolution tracking capabilities, particularly in support of regional and homeland defense missions. These systems support engagement decisions by queuing interceptors, whether fixed-site systems like Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) or mobile assets such as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).⁷

Satellite-based detection, coupled with ground- and sea-based radar tracking, creates a dual-phenomenology approach that enables decision-makers to assess the nature, trajectory, and potential target of an inbound missile. This layered detection enhances accuracy and contributes to informed decision-making under tight time constraints. At the center of this process is an integrated command-and-control structure that fuses intelligence, surveillance, and operational data. It enables military and civilian leaders to confer quickly, reach decisions with strategic implications, and direct engagement operations if necessary.

If national leadership authorizes an intercept, the United States can call upon several engagement options. The GMD system provides the primary homeland defense against long-range ballistic missiles. It employs ground-based interceptors (GBI) housed at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Space Force Base, California. These interceptors are designed to engage incoming warheads in the midcourse phase—outside Earth’s atmosphere—where discrimination and tracking are most complex.

In addition to GMD, the US Navy operates Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) on cruisers and destroyers equipped with Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors. These vessels provide flexible, forward-deployed missile defense and contribute to both regional and homeland defense missions. The Aegis Ashore configuration—stationed in Romania and Poland—extends this maritime capability to fixed land sites, enhancing NATO’s eastern flank.

For threats at shorter ranges or in theater contexts, the United States fields mobile systems such as the THAAD and Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3). These systems offer point defense against short- and medium-range ballistic missiles and can defend key assets, forward-deployed forces, or allied territory. They are also exportable and often deployed in support of allied missile defense requirements.

⁷ Lambakis, *Space Sensors and Missile Defense*, 22–25.

Notably, while the US missile warning architecture relies heavily on space-based sensors for global coverage, the United States has not deployed space-based interceptors. All current kinetic interceptors remain land- or sea-based—a deliberate policy choice shaped by technical, fiscal, and strategic considerations, particularly concerns about arms control and escalation dynamics in space.

Today's US missile defense system offers limited protection against ICBMs and more robust defenses against short- to intermediate-range threats. Most of the kinetic kill capability resides in a relatively small number of interceptors positioned on land or at sea. A comprehensive shield against a large-scale ICBM strike—such as one launched by Russia or China—remains beyond the reach of current systems. That reality reflects deliberate policy and strategic signaling: by maintaining a limited number of interceptors and making that limitation publicly known, the United States avoids threatening the assured retaliatory capabilities of peer nuclear adversaries. In doing so, it helps preserve strategic stability.

Although Reagan's original vision of a nationwide shield against enemy missile barrages never materialized, Israel has demonstrated that a near-impenetrable homeland missile defense—at least on a small scale—is feasible. Its success raises new questions about whether the United States can, or should, attempt to scale that concept to continental proportions.

Israel's "Iron Dome"

Israel's deployment of the Iron Dome system demonstrates that a layered missile defense architecture, designed to shield a national population from a range of aerial threats, is feasible—at least on a limited scale. Although public discourse often refers to Israel's entire missile defense apparatus as "Iron Dome," that term technically applies only to the lowest layer. The actual Iron Dome system defends against short-range threats such as unguided rockets, artillery shells, and mortars. It forms the base of a broader, integrated defense structure.

The second tier, David's Sling, provides coverage against medium- to long-range rockets, tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial systems. The top layer—composed of the Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 systems—targets long-range ballistic missiles, including nuclear-capable ICBMs.⁸ Together, these systems create a multilayered shield capable of intercepting a variety of aerial threats at different altitudes and phases of flight.

⁸ "What Are Israel's Iron Dome, David's Sling, Arrow and Thaad Missile Defences?," *BBC News*, 16 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

President Trump drew direct inspiration from this structure when he issued the executive order directing the development of “Golden Dome.” Israel’s missile defense performance during its 2024 conflict with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas had captured global attention and served as a compelling model. On 13 April 2024, Iran launched a massive, coordinated strike comprising roughly 170 drones, 120 ballistic missiles, and 30 cruise missiles—originating from launch sites across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In response, Israel’s missile defense network intercepted nearly 99 percent of incoming threats, an unprecedented success in modern warfare.⁹

Despite this performance, the system revealed limits. A ballistic missile launched by Houthi rebels in Yemen slipped through the defenses, highlighting the challenge of defending against long-range and maneuvering threats. As adversaries introduced more advanced systems—including cruise missiles with irregular trajectories and hypersonic glide vehicles—Israel’s interception rate declined. By June, another Iranian salvo featuring a hypersonic missile and multiple cruise missiles managed to penetrate Israeli airspace. The overall interception rate reportedly fell to 90 percent or lower.¹⁰ As threat complexity increases, interception probability inevitably decreases—a challenge that would confront any future US system as well.

While Israel’s defense architecture has proven remarkably effective, the scale at which it operates cannot be overlooked. The State of Israel occupies an area roughly equivalent to that of New Jersey—approximately 0.3 percent of the continental United States. Building a Golden Dome over a territory nearly 300 times larger poses logistical, operational, and financial challenges of an entirely different order. A system designed to shield New Jersey might be feasible; scaling that defense to encompass the remaining 99.7 percent of US territory demands not only massive investment, but also significant breakthroughs in sensor coverage, interceptor distribution, and command and control.

New System for New Threats

The threat landscape facing the United States has evolved dramatically since the Cold War, rendering legacy missile defense architectures increasingly insufficient. While early systems were designed to counter predictable, ballistic trajectories launched by a handful of state actors, today’s adversaries are developing a diverse array of capabilities—including hypersonic glide vehicles, maneuverable cruise missiles, and swarming drones—that challenge detection, tracking, and interception

⁹ Josef Federman and Jon Gambrell, “Israeli Military Says 99% of Drones and Missiles Launched by Iran Were Intercepted,” *AP News*, 14 April 2024, <https://apnews.com/>.

¹⁰ Sarah Shamim, “How Has Iran Managed to Pierce through Israel’s Air Defence Systems?,” *Al Jazeera*, 19 June 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

at every stage of flight. These emerging threats do not merely stretch existing defenses; they expose foundational vulnerabilities in sensor coverage, command and control, and kinetic response. As the Golden Dome initiative takes shape, it must confront this expanded threat environment head-on, designing a system not for yesterday's missile war but for tomorrow's multi-domain, multivector attack.

Legacy Threats

President Reagan's vision for missile defense centered on protecting the American people from the threat of nuclear-armed ICBMs, with the ultimate goal of rendering thermonuclear weapons obsolete. While his SDI fell short of that ambition, it helped lay the groundwork for today's missile defense architecture. The United States now fields a limited system designed to intercept a small number of ICBMs, primarily those launched by rogue states or accidental actors. Yet the current threat environment has grown far more complex than the Cold War-era scenarios Reagan envisioned.

As noted in President Trump's executive order, the Golden Dome system must address not only traditional ballistic missiles but also hypersonic glide vehicles, maneuverable cruise missiles, and an array of advanced aerial platforms—including unmanned systems and drone swarms.¹¹ Unlike ICBMs, which follow predictable, gravity-bound trajectories and lack midcourse maneuverability, these new threats exploit speed, agility, and stealth to evade existing detection and interception networks. They challenge the foundational assumptions on which legacy systems were built. Golden Dome, if it is to be credible, cannot merely update Cold War defenses—it must adapt to an era in which the lines between strategic, tactical, and asymmetric threats are increasingly blurred.

New Threats to the Homeland

Both China and Russia have demonstrated operational hypersonic capabilities, signaling a major evolution in strategic threat dynamics. Hypersonic weapons—defined by their ability to exceed Mach 5 (approximately 3,800 mph)—pose unique challenges to existing US detection and defense systems. These weapons fall into two primary categories: hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV) and hypersonic cruise missiles (HCM).¹² HGVs are typically launched atop ballistic missiles; after reaching the upper atmosphere, the glide vehicle separates and maneuvers at hypersonic

¹¹ "Executive Order 14186."

¹² Paul Bernstein and Dain Hancock, "China's Hypersonic Weapons," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 27 January 2021, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/>.

speeds through the atmosphere, exploiting both speed and agility to evade intercept. Space-based early warning systems, such as SBIRS, may detect the initial launch, but tracking the glider's unpredictable flight path strains current radar capabilities and undermines timely engagement.

HCMs, by contrast, use air-breathing engines—such as scramjets—for sustained flight at hypersonic speeds. These missiles can be deployed from aircraft, fly at lower altitudes, and maneuver aggressively, further complicating detection and tracking. Because their launch profiles do not resemble those of traditional ballistic missiles, space-based infrared sensors may fail to detect them in real time. Their low radar cross-section and rapid maneuverability mean that current US systems—designed primarily for ballistic threats—would struggle to generate effective fire-control data within the time needed for interception.

General Glen VanHerck, then-commander of US Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), highlighted these concerns in 2023 congressional testimony. He noted that while existing systems remain effective against traditional Russian strategic bombers, Russia has reconstituted a credible threat to North America using modernized bombers, advanced surface ships, and submarines armed with long-range, highly accurate nuclear and conventional cruise missiles. He further warned that the People's Republic of China is rapidly closing the gap, developing similar capabilities that could soon neutralize the warning-and-response margin upon which US homeland defense relies.¹³ As these systems mature, they risk overwhelming the existing architecture and shortening the decision window for national leaders—an operational and strategic problem that Golden Dome must be built to address.

Detecting New Threats

Hypersonic weapons, drones, and advanced cruise missiles present detection challenges that exceed the capabilities of the legacy DSP and SBIRS. These Cold War-era systems rely on satellites in geosynchronous and highly elliptical orbits, which are optimized for detecting the infrared signatures of traditional ballistic missile launches. However, the maneuverability, low flight profiles, and varied launch platforms of emerging threats demand a fundamentally different approach to space-based sensing.

To meet this challenge, the Department of War is developing the Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS) constellation. Unlike DSP and

¹³ Glen VanHerck, "Statement of USNORTHCOM and NORAD Commander to the HASC" (press release, USNORTHCOM, 8 March 2023), <https://www.northcom.mil/>.

SBIRS, which emphasize persistent coverage from high orbits, HBTSS will rely on a proliferated network of satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO), providing layered, trackable coverage across threat vectors. These sensors are designed to detect hypersonic launches during their boost phase and to maintain track through their unpredictable glide phase—something current systems cannot reliably do. Because of the limited dwell time associated with LEO satellites, achieving continuous coverage will require dozens—if not hundreds—of platforms operating in synchronized orbits. This shift represents a fundamental architectural transformation in space-based missile warning and tracking.

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, General Gregory Guillot, Commander of US Northern Command and NORAD, underscored that space-based infrared sensors alone will not be sufficient. He emphasized the need for a truly layered architecture that integrates multiple detection modalities. In addition to hypersonic detection, General Guillot advocated for incorporating space-based airborne moving target indication (AMTI) systems, which would allow for the detection and tracking of airborne threats, including low-flying cruise missiles and hostile aircraft. He also stressed the importance of terrestrial over-the-horizon radar, which would extend the nation's awareness beyond the curvature of the Earth—crucial for identifying threats that approach at low altitude and from nontraditional launch points.

Once detected, these threats could be engaged by a range of platforms, including fighter aircraft equipped with advanced interceptor missiles. As General Guillot noted, air-to-air missile engagement may represent one of the most viable options for cruise missile defense in the near term.¹⁴ These layered detection and response capabilities—spanning space, air, and ground—will form the backbone of any credible Golden Dome system. Without them, the United States risks relying on an outdated warning architecture ill-suited to counter next-generation threats.

Intercepting New Threats

The United States currently fields a variety of land-based and sea-based interceptors capable of defending against ballistic missile threats. However, countering the next generation of threats—hypersonics, low-flying cruise missiles, and unmanned systems—will require expanded capabilities across all domains. This includes an increase in homeland-based interceptor aircraft, enhanced forward-deployed assets, and potentially, the deployment of space-based interceptors.

¹⁴ Greg Hadley, "NORAD Boss: Fighters Will 'Certainly' Play Role in Golden Dome," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 30 April 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

Recent combat experience has underscored the effectiveness of airborne missile defense. During the April 2024 Iranian attack on Israel, American F-15s and F-16s operating in the region helped intercept incoming drones and missiles, contributing to an overall kill rate approaching 99 percent.¹⁵ This engagement highlighted the value of air-breathing platforms in high-volume, multivector threat environments. However, as previously noted, defending Israel—a country the size of New Jersey—is not analogous to defending the continental United States. Scaling such defense across vast American territory would require a sustained increase in alert aircraft, a concern voiced repeatedly by senior commanders. General VanHerck cautioned that the United States lacks sufficient aircraft on constant alert to handle a massed, time-sensitive threat. His successor, General Guillot, acknowledged the challenge, testifying that Northern Command is working to strike the right balance between “just-in-time” and “just-in-case” force postures.

Even with additional aircraft, land-based and air-breathing interceptors alone will likely fall short of the coverage and responsiveness needed to fulfill Golden Dome’s promise. General Stephen Whiting, Commander of US Space Command, has argued that the United States must develop “orbital interceptors” capable of projecting force in space and defending against threats that originate or transit through that domain.¹⁶ These interceptors could take a variety of forms—kinetic kill vehicles, nonkinetic effectors, or directed-energy weapons—but all would represent a dramatic leap beyond current missile defense paradigms.

Yet the technical challenges remain formidable. Boost-phase interception from space, while theoretically ideal, remains extraordinarily difficult. The physics of timing, target acquisition, and intercept geometry make such engagements a narrow-margin endeavor. Jeff Schrader, Vice President of Strategy and Business Development at Lockheed Martin’s space division, captured this complexity when he noted that hitting a missile in its boost phase from orbit is still “a pretty wicked hard problem, physics-wise.”¹⁷ While the technology has advanced significantly since Reagan’s Star Wars era, Golden Dome’s success will depend not just on innovation, but on operational integration, credible redundancy, and sustainable cost.

¹⁵ Hadley, “NORAD Boss.”

¹⁶ Brett Tingley, “US Needs ‘Orbital Interceptors’ to Win a War in Space, Space Command Chief Says,” *Space.com*, 8 April 2025, <https://www.space.com/>.

¹⁷ Audrey Decker, “Industry Eyes ‘Wicked Hard’ Golden Dome Space Interceptor Challenge,” *Defense One*, 18 April 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/>.

What If . . .

Whether Golden Dome can fulfill the technological and strategic promise once envisioned by the architects of Reagan's Star Wars remains an open question. But what if it can? Should the United States pursue it? Few would dispute that the US homeland now faces an expanding array of threats that extend well beyond traditional ballistic missiles—threats that legacy systems were never designed to counter. It is no longer a matter of *if* missile defense needs to evolve, but *how far* it should go, *how fast*, and *at what cost*.

At its core, the Golden Dome initiative forces policy makers to confront several foundational questions. Should the system be designed to handle only limited rogue-state attacks or scaled to defeat a full-spectrum barrage from a peer nuclear adversary? Can the United States enhance its defensive posture without undermining the strategic stability that nuclear deterrence has helped preserve since 1945? If Golden Dome succeeds too well—achieving even the perception of invulnerability—might it provoke an arms race or incentivize a first strike in a crisis?

These are not merely technical questions; they are strategic dilemmas grounded in the enduring logic of deterrence. Revisiting the insights of early Cold War theorists—figures like Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling, and Herman Kahn—offers a framework for assessing the risks, trade-offs, and potential consequences of an expansive missile defense architecture. Their arguments, still relevant in the age of hypersonics and space-based systems, provide a sobering lens through which to evaluate what Golden Dome must achieve—and what it must avoid.

Bernard Brodie: Deterrence, Economics, and Missile Defense

Bernard Brodie stands as one of the foundational figures in the theory of nuclear deterrence, shaping early American strategic thought in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Writing in an era when thermonuclear weapons redefined the nature of war, Brodie departed from traditional notions of victory and instead argued that the primary purpose of military power in the nuclear age was to prevent war altogether. His contributions remain critical to evaluating the strategic logic behind any missile defense initiative. As the United States considers building the Golden Dome system, Brodie's emphasis on economic efficiency, marginal deterrence, and the inherent limitations of active defenses offers a sobering—and still highly relevant—lens through which to assess its utility and potential consequences.

Brodie's Deterrence Theory

In *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Bernard Brodie advanced a theory of deterrence grounded in strategic restraint and economic rationality. He rejected the prevailing

“cult of the offensive”—the belief that security lay in striking first—and warned that such thinking, when applied to nuclear weapons, invited catastrophe. Instead, he championed a strategy of *marginal deterrence*: the idea that national security could best be preserved not through massive arsenals or preventive war, but through a carefully calibrated force structure designed to deter aggression by guaranteeing retaliatory capability.¹⁸

Brodie borrowed from the economic principle of diminishing marginal utility to frame his argument. Just as the value derived from each additional unit of a consumed good declines, so too does the strategic value of building additional nuclear weapons beyond what is necessary for credible deterrence. For Brodie, the utility of a second-strike force rested not in sheer numbers, but in survivability, credibility, and cost-effectiveness. He advocated for investing in hardened missile silos and dispersed bomber bases over more costly and uncertain “active measures” like missile defense. Missiles, once deployed in quantity, offered more reliable deterrence at lower marginal cost than manned bombers or complex defensive systems.

Brodie’s critique of excess remains relevant. At one point, the United States possessed nearly 32,000 nuclear weapons—a force size he would have deemed strategically redundant. His enduring insight was that stability does not require overwhelming superiority; it requires the minimum force necessary to impose unacceptable costs on an aggressor. In that framework, every dollar spent on missile defense must be weighed not only against its marginal effectiveness, but also against its potential to disrupt the very equilibrium deterrence seeks to maintain.

Brodie and Missile Defense

Brodie remained deeply skeptical of active missile defenses, particularly their strategic implications in a nuclear context. He argued that the pursuit of an impenetrable shield was not only technologically improbable but strategically destabilizing. From a technical standpoint, Brodie noted that no system could reliably intercept large numbers of fast, independently-targeted missiles, particularly in a saturation or spoofed attack. His skepticism stemmed not from cynicism, but from a sober assessment of physics, cost, and operational limitations—an assessment rooted in his analysis of German V-1 and V-2 rocket attacks during World War II, which formed the only empirical basis available to early missile defense theorists.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), chapters 8–10 outline Brodie’s argument that “strategy wears a dollar sign.”

¹⁹ Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, 185.

Brodie drew a sharp distinction between active and passive defense. Active measures—such as interceptor systems—seek to prevent or disrupt an incoming strike but come at significant financial and technical cost. Passive measures, by contrast, aim to absorb or mitigate damage (e.g., hardening silos, dispersing forces) and are generally more cost-effective. In his view, missile defense offered diminishing returns, particularly when adversaries could respond with relatively cheap countermeasures—more warheads, decoys, or penetration aids. Even with today's advanced systems, interception rates remain imperfect. Israel's Iron Dome, the most successful modern example, claims a 96 percent success rate—but as Brodie would argue, that four percent failure margin becomes unacceptable when dealing with nuclear weapons.

At the strategic level, Brodie feared that missile defense could incentivize arms racing and increase the likelihood of preemption. If one side believed it could neutralize the other's retaliatory capability—or appear poised to do so—it might be tempted to strike first.²⁰ Conversely, an adversary might conclude that a first strike is its only chance to overcome defenses before they fully mature. In either case, the result is heightened instability, not deterrence. For Brodie, strategic stability rested on mutual vulnerability: the assurance that any aggressor would face devastating retaliation. Missile defense—particularly if perceived as capable of negating that second strike—threatens to erode that equilibrium.

In the final analysis, Brodie did not reject missile defense out of technical conservatism or moral opposition. Rather, he saw it as strategically self-defeating—an expensive illusion that could destabilize deterrence, provoke escalation, and offer only the false promise of security. His insights remain as relevant today as when he first warned that in any arms race, “there is always a hole, an Achilles’ heel.”²¹

Implications for Golden Dome

In *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Brodie articulated a deterrence strategy rooted in cost-effectiveness, credibility, and restraint. His framework emphasized passive defense and second-strike survivability over expensive and technologically uncertain active defenses. Golden Dome, as currently envisioned, departs from that model. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated its price tag at more than USD 542 billion—a figure likely to rise. As the US Space Force Commander recently remarked, “I’ve never seen an early estimate that was too high.”²² Even if

²⁰ Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, 303.

²¹ Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, 202.

²² Chris Gordon, “Golden Dome’s Price Tag Will Likely Exceed Half a Trillion Dollars, Space Force Chief Says,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 16 May 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

such a system could be built, Brodie would argue that the payoff—an imperfect shield against potentially catastrophic threats—does not justify the enormous cost, especially when weighed against simpler adversary responses.

Unlike Israel, whose adversaries are numerous but generally lack the capacity to inflict existential damage, the United States must contend with two nuclear-armed peer competitors. China remains the pacing threat; Russia remains the existential one. In this context, failure carries far greater consequences. When a rocket slips through Israel's Iron Dome, the result may be tragic but localized. A single nuclear-armed missile penetrating Golden Dome, however, would be strategically devastating. Brodie's core concern—cost versus effectiveness—becomes amplified in this environment.

The economics are stark. Space-based interceptors, a likely component of any fully realized Golden Dome, remain prohibitively expensive. At a 2023 forum hosted by the American Enterprise Institute, defense analyst Todd Harrison estimated that approximately 950 space-based interceptors would be required to reliably target a single missile in boost phase. To counter a launch of just 10 missiles, the United States would need more than 10,000 orbital interceptors—a force dwarfed by the actual capabilities of Russia and China.²³ Meanwhile, adversaries could simply build more missiles or deploy penetration aids at a fraction of the cost, exploiting the law of diminishing returns that Brodie so frequently emphasized.

For Brodie, the central lesson was clear: a nation should not chase strategic invulnerability when it can achieve stability through credible, economical deterrence. By that standard, Golden Dome risks becoming a strategically seductive but fiscally unsustainable endeavor—one that might invite arms racing, strain alliances, and still fail in the moment it matters most.

Thomas Schelling: Deterrence and Strategic Stability

Thomas Schelling brought a fundamentally different lens to the theory of deterrence—one that emphasized psychology, perception, and strategic bargaining over sheer numerical force. A Nobel Prize-winning economist and Cold War strategist, Schelling explored how the threat of violence, rather than its actual use, could shape adversary behavior and preserve stability in a nuclear world. His concept of mutual vulnerability as the foundation for strategic stability challenged conventional thinking and remains central to modern deterrence theory. As the United States considers expanding missile defense through Golden Dome, Schelling's insights raise critical questions: Could such a system undermine the

²³ Decker, "Industry Eyes 'Wicked Hard' Golden Dome."

very stability it seeks to protect? Might it encourage risk-taking, misperception, or even preemption? To understand these dynamics, we must revisit the logic of deterrence as Schelling understood it—where credibility, uncertainty, and restraint are as vital as capability.

Schelling Deterrence Theory

Schelling argued that nuclear weapons transformed the logic of military power by decoupling warfighting from political coercion. In the pre-nuclear era, military force was primarily a tool for imposing one's will on the adversary through battle-field victory. Nuclear weapons, however, introduced a new dynamic: the ability to inflict catastrophic damage in a matter of minutes, making the threat of use more powerful than actual use. For Schelling, the essence of deterrence lay in the *threat* of violence—not in its execution. Deterrence worked when an adversary believed that crossing a certain line would trigger devastating retaliation, even if that retaliation remained uncertain or probabilistic.²⁴

Central to Schelling's framework was the concept of the secure second-strike capability—what he saw as the bedrock of strategic stability. If both sides possessed survivable forces capable of assured retaliation, neither would have an incentive to strike first. For the United States, this meant maintaining a credible triad: ICBMs, SLBMs, and nuclear-capable bombers. Stealthy submarines armed with SLBMs, in particular, provided a nearly invulnerable deterrent that ensured any nuclear attack on the homeland would be met with intolerable consequences.

This condition of mutual vulnerability—what Schelling termed the “balance of terror”—created a paradoxical form of stability.²⁵ As long as both sides remained exposed to unacceptable damage and believed the other's retaliation to be credible, the cost of aggression would outweigh any conceivable gain. In this framework, deterrence did not depend on perfect defense or total dominance but on the *perception* of inevitable, punishing retaliation. Strategic equilibrium was not achieved by denying an adversary's capabilities but by preserving the mutual certainty of destruction should deterrence fail.

In Schelling's framework, coercion became what he called the “diplomacy of violence.” Unlike classical warfare, where force was used to achieve victory through attrition or maneuver, nuclear deterrence relied on leveraging *the threat* of force to shape adversary behavior. This required manipulating the perceived risk of

²⁴ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), chapters 1 and 2 outline Schelling's view of how nuclear weapons have changed the strategic environment.

²⁵ This *balance of terror* is similar to the *stability* Brodie advocated, see footnote 20.

escalation—strategies that intentionally left outcomes uncertain. Brinkmanship, in Schelling’s view, was not irrational recklessness but a calculated gamble: by creating situations where neither side could fully control events, one might compel an adversary to back down for fear of mutual catastrophe.

Such tactics worked precisely because of the high cost of failure. In a world of shared vulnerability—where each side could inflict intolerable damage on the other—there was a powerful incentive to avoid crossing certain thresholds. But this condition also created an uneasy form of stability: it was stable *because* it was terrifying. For Schelling, mutual vulnerability was not just an unfortunate consequence of the nuclear age—it was the foundation of deterrence, the central fact that made coercion possible and war unthinkable.

Like Bernard Brodie, Schelling believed that the goal of military strategy had shifted from winning wars to preventing them. But Schelling took the logic a step further. He focused less on force size and more on the credibility of retaliation. Stability depended not on the number of warheads but on the survivability of second-strike forces. Hardened missile silos, dispersed submarine fleets, and survivable command-and-control systems became the cornerstones of deterrence—not population defense. In fact, Schelling viewed efforts to shield civilians, such as civil defense programs, with suspicion. A robust civil defense system, he argued, might tempt a nation to believe it could absorb a retaliatory strike—thus lowering the threshold for initiating conflict. This logic influenced policy: in the 1960s, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, reflecting Schelling’s influence, significantly cut civil defense funding—a posture that has endured to this day.²⁶

Missile defense, too, posed a threat to mutual vulnerability. By attempting to negate an adversary’s second-strike capability, missile defense systems risked undermining the very condition that underpinned strategic stability. For Schelling, anything that eroded mutual vulnerability—whether by shielding populations or neutralizing retaliatory forces—risked upsetting the delicate balance of deterrence. In that sense, Golden Dome raises the same dilemma Schelling grappled with decades ago: can security be enhanced through defense without provoking instability through fear of disarmament?

Schelling’s Theory and Missile Defense

Schelling viewed missile defense with deep ambivalence, recognizing its potential to erode the very foundation of strategic stability: mutual vulnerability. In his view,

²⁶ Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-first Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2008), 123.

any defense system capable of negating a retaliatory strike would undermine deterrence, not strengthen it. If one state could credibly defend against another's second-strike capability, the balance of terror that preserved peace would unravel. In such a scenario, an adversary—fearing disarmament or strategic impotence—might feel compelled to strike first, hoping to preempt the full deployment of the defensive system. Rather than reducing the risk of nuclear war, missile defense could paradoxically increase it.

Schelling also warned of the broader consequences that missile defense might unleash. A state perceived to be developing an effective shield might invite adversary countermeasures: more warheads, more launch platforms, more penetration aids. In his logic, defenses provoke responses, and the cycle of measure and countermeasure leads to an arms race—not stability.²⁷ From this perspective, missile defense becomes less about security and more about illusion, creating a false sense of invulnerability while driving adversaries to escalate their offensive capabilities.

To mitigate these risks, Schelling advocated for restraint in the development and deployment of missile defense. He did not oppose all defensive systems outright but insisted that they must be subordinate to—and never replace—credible retaliatory capabilities. Deterrence, for Schelling, rested not on denying an attack but on ensuring the promise of intolerable consequences in response. Missile defense might supplement deterrence in limited cases, particularly against rogue-state threats, but it could not serve as the foundation of strategic stability between nuclear peers.

This logic continues to shape US policy today. To avoid destabilizing perceptions, the United States has consistently signaled that its homeland missile defense systems are limited in scope and not intended to negate the retaliatory capabilities of Russia or China. The clearest evidence lies in the small number of GBIs currently deployed—too few to blunt a full-scale second strike by a peer adversary. In this way, the United States walks a narrow line: fielding defenses to manage regional threats while preserving the strategic logic of mutual vulnerability that Schelling believed was essential to nuclear peace.

Implications for Golden Dome

Schelling's deterrence model rested on two essential pillars: mutual vulnerability and the threat that “leaves something to chance.”²⁸ As long as both adversaries retained confidence that a retaliatory strike would penetrate, strategic stability—however uneasy—could be sustained. In this view, deterrence depends not on

²⁷ Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, 52–53.

²⁸ Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, 31–33.

eliminating risk, but on preserving it. Anything that undermines an adversary's belief in its own second-strike capability—such as a highly effective missile defense system—risks collapsing this balance and triggering destabilizing behavior.

Applied to Golden Dome, Schelling's logic issues a clear warning. If a missile defense architecture were perceived as capable of neutralizing a peer adversary's retaliatory forces, that adversary might feel pressure to act preemptively—especially if it believed the system was nearing operational readiness. This creates the very condition Schelling feared most: crisis instability fueled by mistrust and perceived closing windows of opportunity. Rather than deterring war, an overambitious missile defense posture could accelerate it.

If Schelling were advising policy makers today, he might counsel strategic ambiguity. Announcing capabilities, timelines, or deployment goals too early could invite the very arms race or first-strike fears that missile defense aims to avoid. A more prudent course—consistent with Schelling's thinking—would be to field elements of Golden Dome quietly, with minimal signaling, and only discuss capabilities publicly once they are irreversible and operational. In deterrence, perception is often more powerful than performance, and stability sometimes requires silence more than signaling.

Herman Kahn: Missile Defense, Prevailing, and Assuring Allies

Herman Kahn, often regarded as the most provocative of the early nuclear strategists, approached deterrence not as a fragile balance to be preserved but as a dynamic contest to be shaped—and, if necessary, survived. Where Brodie emphasized restraint and Schelling focused on stability through mutual vulnerability, Kahn argued that the United States should plan to *prevail* in a nuclear exchange and recover from one if deterrence failed. He championed civil defense, damage limitation, and active missile defenses not merely as supplements to deterrence but as tools to strengthen it by reducing US vulnerability and increasing adversary uncertainty. In contrast to Brodie's economic skepticism and Schelling's caution, Kahn saw missile defense as a means to reinforce credibility, reassure allies, and complicate enemy calculations. As Golden Dome emerges as a policy option, Kahn's unapologetically hawkish vision provides a sharply different lens through which to evaluate its strategic utility.

Kahn's Deterrence Theory

Kahn—a physicist, RAND analyst, and co-founder of the Hudson Institute—was one of the most controversial and influential nuclear strategists of the Cold War. His seminal work, *On Thermonuclear War* (1960), brought a Clausewitzian

rigor to the unthinkable, analyzing not only how to deter nuclear war but how to fight and survive one.²⁹ While other theorists like Schelling and Brodie emphasized the prevention of conflict through mutual vulnerability or strategic restraint, Kahn advanced a theory of *prevailing*—arguing that superiority in nuclear forces and national preparedness increased deterrent credibility and, if deterrence failed, would help a nation endure and ultimately prevail.

At the core of Kahn's thinking was the concept of *damage limitation*, patterned on Clausewitz's idea that victory amounts to compelling the enemy to do one's will while minimizing harm to oneself. For Kahn, deterrence was not simply about the threat of massive retaliation—it was about reducing the cost of escalation to the United States while increasing it for the adversary. That meant investing not only in offensive nuclear capabilities but also in civil defense and missile defense.³⁰ Unlike Schelling, who favored ambiguity and risk manipulation, Kahn believed deterrence should leave *nothing* to chance. A credible strategy, he argued, depended on the ability to absorb a nuclear strike and continue to fight, knowing that US forces—and the population—had some protection against retaliation.

In this framework, missile defense played an indispensable role. It was not merely a technological shield but a signal of resolve. A nation that built defenses for its people and its retaliatory forces demonstrated both the intent and the means to escalate deliberately. In Kahn's view, missile defense enhanced deterrence not by achieving invulnerability but by reinforcing the credibility of US willpower and survivability in a nuclear exchange.

Kahn's Thoughts on Missile Defense

Kahn viewed missile defense not as a panacea but as a critical component of a credible and layered deterrence posture. He believed a well-designed missile defense system—particularly one focused on point defense of strategic assets and population centers—could reduce the scale of catastrophe in the event deterrence failed. For Kahn, the goal was not to build an impenetrable shield, but to complicate an adversary's targeting calculus and limit the damage from an attack. This approach reflected his broader philosophy of damage limitation: reduce what can be destroyed, preserve what can survive, and retain the will to prevail.

While Kahn was optimistic about technological progress, he acknowledged the persistent limitations of missile defense. No system, he argued, would be perfect—deception, saturation attacks, and advanced offensive technologies such as multiple

²⁹ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

³⁰ Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, 37–38.

independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) would always pose challenges. Moreover, the deployment of effective defenses could provoke adversaries to build more sophisticated arsenals or adopt destabilizing countermeasures. These risks led Kahn to advocate for transparency, caution, and a balanced posture.³¹ Missile defense should reinforce deterrence—not replace it—and should be pursued in conjunction with resilient second-strike forces and civil defense infrastructure.

Kahn was particularly attuned to the high cost of missile defense and the difficulty of quantifying its strategic payoff. Nevertheless, he argued that its value extended beyond homeland protection. As a provider of extended deterrence, the United States needed to convince its allies not only of its will to defend them but of its ability to do so without suffering annihilation in return.³² Missile defense, in this context, served as a political and psychological tool. By demonstrating an ability to absorb a retaliatory strike, the United States could strengthen the credibility of its nuclear guarantees. If US leaders believed they could selectively shield the American population from retaliation, they would be more likely to respond decisively to aggression against an ally.

In this regard, Kahn's logic sharply diverged from Schelling's. Schelling believed credibility flowed from reputation, resolve, and the posture of retaliatory forces—not from the ability to defend one's own cities. In Schelling's view, the threat alone was sufficient; missile defense added risk. Kahn, by contrast, saw defense as a force multiplier for assurance. It gave weight to US commitments abroad by reinforcing the perception that America could—and would—act if deterrence failed.

Implications for Golden Dome

Kahn's theoretical framework would support the development of a robust missile defense architecture like Golden Dome. From his perspective, the system's most immediate benefit would be to reduce civilian casualties in the event deterrence fails—a core element of his damage limitation strategy. Missile defense, in this logic, enhances national resilience and provides leaders with options in the midst of crisis. It increases the probability that the United States could fight through a nuclear exchange, preserve national cohesion, and re-establish deterrence in the aftermath of an attack.

But for Kahn, the value of missile defense extended beyond the homeland. A functioning shield—especially one perceived as credible—would strengthen America's extended deterrence posture. By signaling that the United States can

³¹ Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, 51–53.

³² Payne, *The Great American Gamble*, 37–39.

defend itself while still honoring its commitments, missile defense becomes a strategic enabler of alliance cohesion. If Washington can selectively shield its population from retaliatory attack, it lowers the perceived cost of fulfilling nuclear guarantees to allies under threat. In short, Kahn viewed missile defense not as a risk to deterrence, but as a reinforcement of it—both by complicating adversary decision-making and by bolstering allied confidence in US resolve.

Golden Dome, viewed through this lens, offers more than defensive capability. It projects strategic will. For Kahn, that projection is essential: a nation that prepares to prevail—even in the worst-case scenario—deters more credibly and assures more effectively than one that relies solely on the threat of mutual annihilation.

Conclusion

Brodie, Schelling, and Kahn developed their theories of deterrence in a Cold War environment dominated by a single nuclear peer. That world no longer exists. Today, the United States faces a more complex threat landscape—marked not only by two nuclear-armed great-power competitors in Russia and China, but also by regional actors and a broader array of delivery systems capable of striking the homeland. Traditional BMD systems, anchored in the Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITWAA) architecture, were designed for a more linear threat. They now require urgent modernization. A new architecture—layered, multi-domain, and equipped with advanced sensors and interceptors—offers a potential pathway to defend against emerging threats, including hypersonics, cruise missiles, and drones. Yet protecting the homeland is no longer a stand-alone objective; it must be balanced with the need to reassure allies and preserve strategic stability with adversaries. Golden Dome, if it is to succeed, must navigate these competing imperatives with clarity, restraint, and purpose.

Interceptor Capability and Numbers

The current capabilities of US missile defense are well known. Both allies and adversaries are aware that the United States maintains 40 GBIs in Alaska and four at Vandenberg Space Force Base in California, supplemented by sea-based interceptors aboard Aegis-equipped cruisers and destroyers.³³ As Brodie and Schelling argued, this limited architecture plays a stabilizing role: it signals that US defenses are not designed to neutralize a peer adversary's second-strike capability, thereby preserving mutual vulnerability and contributing to strategic stability. While emerg-

³³ "Current U.S. Missile Defense Programs at a Glance" (fact sheet, Arms Control Association, January 2025), <https://www.armscontrol.org/>.

ing threats such as drones and hypersonics may demand new forms of interception, the most important variable for maintaining stability remains the number of interceptors capable of defeating ICBMs.

Here the arithmetic of deterrence becomes critical. China is estimated to possess roughly 400 ICBMs, with a potential launch capacity approaching 550.³⁴ Reports estimate that Russia has more than 500 ICBMs/SLBMs in total that could threaten America.³⁵ To field a homeland missile defense capable of reliably defeating either of these arsenals—let alone both—would require an interceptor inventory of enormous scale, whether deployed on land, at sea, or in orbit. Such an undertaking would be not only cost-prohibitive but strategically counterproductive. As Brodie warned, missile defense invites counteraction. For every US interceptor deployed, adversaries could respond by building additional offensive missiles at lower cost, rapidly restoring their numerical advantage and undermining the original investment.

There is also the problem of performance. No system, past or present, has demonstrated perfect reliability. Even Israel's Iron Dome—arguably the most effective operational missile defense system to date—has a 3–4 percent failure rate under optimal conditions, and considerably higher rates when facing maneuvering targets. For the United States, where adversaries possess thermonuclear warheads and global delivery systems, even a small margin of failure would carry existential risk. Brodie and Schelling both cautioned against seeking invulnerability through defense. The prudent course, consistent with their thinking, would be to deploy a limited number of interceptors sufficient to protect critical national infrastructure and defend against rogue-state attacks, while ensuring that China and Russia retain confidence in their second-strike capability.

Should future US strategy include the deployment of space-based interceptors capable of negating peer retaliation, that step must be taken with extreme discretion. If announced prematurely, such a system could destabilize deterrence and trigger an arms race before it is even operational. In line with Schelling's logic, any such capability should be treated as a strategic fait accompli—revealed only after it is deployed, functional, and irreversible. Moreover, as the United States moves to field new space-based sensors or interceptors, it must do so with a coherent strategy for securing freedom of action in space while avoiding actions that could provoke conflict in this increasingly contested domain.

³⁴ Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024 (Washington: Department of Defense, 18 December 2024), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

³⁵ Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2025," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 13 May 2025, <https://thebulletin.org/>.

Protecting Freedom of Action in Space

The success of Golden Dome will depend heavily on access to—and freedom of maneuver within—the space domain. Achieving the layered sensor coverage required to detect, track, and classify the full spectrum of modern threats will necessitate deploying additional satellites across multiple orbits, including LEO, MEO, and GEO. Space may also become the eventual home for future interceptors, should kinetic or directed-energy systems be stationed on orbit. Yet while space offers strategic vantage and global coverage, it is also an environment governed by physical and political constraints that make freedom of action uniquely difficult to preserve.

Unlike terrestrial battlefields, the laws of orbital mechanics—Kepler’s and Newton’s alike—render most space activity highly predictable. Satellites follow known trajectories, and maneuvering options are limited by fuel, physics, and position. In this domain, very little goes unnoticed. Any major deployment, repositioning, or unusual behavior by US assets would be immediately observable by adversaries. That level of transparency makes space both valuable and vulnerable, especially as Golden Dome becomes increasingly reliant on on-orbit infrastructure.

Preserving secure and assured access to space must therefore become a strategic imperative. This logic already found expression during the first Trump administration’s 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, which declared that nonnuclear strategic attacks—including those targeting US or allied nuclear forces, command and control, and missile warning systems—could constitute “extreme circumstances” warranting a nuclear response. Notably, this formulation included attacks on space-based early warning and attack assessment systems.³⁶ As Golden Dome advances from concept to capability, a similarly clear declaratory policy will be necessary—one that makes explicit that attacks on key space-based assets will be treated as strategic in nature.

If the second Trump administration intends to field Golden Dome, it must also make clear that US freedom of maneuver in space is nonnegotiable. This means not only building resilient space architectures and redundant systems but also establishing credible deterrence against hostile acts in space. As the line between terrestrial and orbital warfare continues to blur, the protection of space-based capabilities will be foundational to the success—and survivability—of any future missile defense strategy.

³⁶ *Nuclear Posture Review, 2018* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, February 2018), <https://defenseinnovationmarketplace.dtic.mil/>.

Assuring Allies . . . the Biggest Payoff

While Golden Dome is intended to enhance homeland defense, its most consequential strategic payoff may lie abroad—in the assurance it provides to US allies under the nuclear umbrella. As Herman Kahn argued, missile defense does more than protect populations; it signals to adversaries that the United States is prepared to escalate in a nuclear conflict while retaining the ability to shield its own citizens. This logic reflects Kahn’s core principle of “leaving nothing to chance”: when a nation builds defensive systems that reduce the cost of retaliation, it enhances the credibility of its deterrent posture. For allies facing nuclear coercion, that credibility is everything.

Although strategic stability between major powers has largely held since 1945, the United States’ extended deterrence commitments have come under growing strain. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, rising Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, and the rapid evolution of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal have tested allied confidence. In his book *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, former Obama administration nuclear strategist Brad Roberts warns that “hedging”—allied efforts to seek independent capabilities—often reflects declining faith in America’s extended deterrence.³⁷ The evidence is mounting. Polling in South Korea shows majority support for the return of US nuclear weapons to the peninsula, and even for domestic nuclear development.³⁸ In Europe, Poland has voiced interest in joining the NATO nuclear sharing arrangement, citing concerns over Russia’s aggression and the forward deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.³⁹

In this environment, missile defense offers a powerful signal of American resolve. By investing in the ability to defend its own population, the United States demonstrates to allies that it is willing and able to uphold its security guarantees—making it more likely that Washington would follow through on nuclear commitments in a crisis. Golden Dome, then, becomes not just a shield for the homeland but a strategic reassurance mechanism for allies who increasingly view their security through the lens of proximity to nuclear-armed adversaries.

³⁷ Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2015), chapters 7 and 8 are where Roberts outlines his measures of performance for evaluating US extended deterrence.

³⁸ Mark A. Green, “Seventy-One Percent of South Koreans Now Support the Return of Nuclear Weapons to Their Country—Even if It Means Developing Their Own,” *Stubborn Things* (blog), 31 January 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

³⁹ Marek Magierowski, “Why Poland’s President Wants US Nuclear Weapons - Atlantic Council,” *New Atlanticist* (blog), 17 March 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

That said, the technical challenges remain formidable. Physics is only half the battle. The strategic utility of Golden Dome will depend not just on its performance, but on how its development and deployment are communicated to allies and adversaries alike. US policy makers must weigh how much transparency to offer: enough to reassure allies and deter opportunistic aggression, but not so much as to provoke arms racing or preemptive fears from peer competitors. Striking that balance—between credibility, ambiguity, and restraint—will be one of the most consequential strategic challenges of the coming decade. 🦅

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Continental Defense at a Crossroads

US Strategic Contingency Planning for an Independent Alberta

DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL

Abstract

Alberta's hypothetical secession from Canada—unlikely but strategically explosive—would reshape the security architecture of North America. Its independence would touch every vital US interest: defense, energy, and the stability of the northern border. With Alberta anchoring key NORAD infrastructure and supplying a disproportionate share of continental oil, separation would raise immediate questions about basing rights, energy flow continuity, border management, and the opening for hostile foreign influence. The analysis argues for quiet, disciplined US contingency planning: ensuring uninterrupted NORAD operations at Cold Lake, protecting energy corridors, and blocking predatory state-backed investment in Alberta's critical infrastructure. The imperative is preparedness without interference—preserving continental defense and economic stability while respecting Canada's internal politics. For US planners, the task is clear: maintain an unbroken aerospace shield, secure supply chains, harden the border, and preempt adversarial leverage. Prudence demands planning now, before strategic surprise arrives on United States' northern frontier.

The disintegration of Canada is no longer an entirely academic proposition. What was once dismissed as implausible—Alberta's secession from the Canadian federation—now occupies the category that matters most to serious strategists: low probability, high consequence. Such scenarios do not demand alarmism. They demand preparation.

For the United States, Alberta's hypothetical independence would present an immediate strategic problem at the core of continental security. Canada is not merely a neighbor or ally; it is a structural pillar of North American defense, energy stability, and border integrity. Any rupture within the Canadian federation would therefore reverberate directly across US defense planning, particularly in areas where geography, infrastructure, and alliance commitments converge. Alberta sits precisely at that convergence.

Washington's longstanding posture toward Canadian unity has been one of principled restraint. Successive US administrations have affirmed support for a strong, united Canada while scrupulously avoiding involvement in Ottawa's internal constitutional debates. That posture should not change. But restraint in diplomacy does not excuse negligence in planning. From a national security perspective, the United States cannot assume that Canada's internal political configuration is

immutable. Prudence requires anticipating disruption—even among allies—and preparing quietly to manage its consequences.

Alberta's strategic salience to the United States is disproportionate to its population. The province anchors critical components of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) architecture, hosts key Royal Canadian Air Force basing essential to continental air defense, and constitutes the heart of North America's most important foreign energy supply. Alberta's oil and gas production underwrites US energy security at scale, feeding refineries across the Midwest and Gulf Coast through deeply integrated pipeline networks. At the same time, Alberta's long, lightly populated frontier with the United States would—if transformed overnight into a new international border—pose immediate challenges for customs enforcement, law enforcement cooperation, and infrastructure security.

These vulnerabilities would be magnified during any transitional period following secession. Political uncertainty, legal ambiguity, and institutional strain would create openings—openings that history suggests adversarial powers are quick to exploit. From hostile state-backed investment in critical energy infrastructure to disinformation campaigns aimed at fracturing allied cohesion, an emergent Alberta would present both temptation and opportunity to geopolitical competitors. For the United States, the risk would not be Alberta's independence per se, but the strategic vacuum that could accompany it.

This article examines Alberta's hypothetical secession strictly through a US national security lens. It does not assess the merits of separatism, nor does it speculate on its political likelihood beyond recognizing its strategic implications. Instead, it asks a narrower, more urgent question: What would the United States need to do—immediately and discreetly—to protect continental defense, energy stability, and border security if Alberta became an independent state?

The analysis proceeds in four parts. First, it situates Alberta's secessionist impulses within the broader strategic context relevant to US planners. Second, it assesses the implications for continental defense, with particular attention to NORAD continuity and aerospace control. Third, it examines risks to North American energy security and the stability of cross-border supply chains. Fourth, it addresses border security and the threat of hostile foreign influence during a period of political transition. The article concludes with policy-oriented recommendations designed to guide quiet US contingency planning—planning that preserves allied unity, avoids political interference, and ensures that North America's strategic defenses remain intact regardless of constitutional outcomes north of the border.

Strategic Context: Alberta Secession and US Interests

Any credible discussion of Alberta's possible independence must hold two truths simultaneously: its likelihood remains low, but its consequences would be profound. Alberta separatism is not a sudden aberration; it is a recurring feature of Canadian politics, flaring episodically in response to perceived structural inequities within the federation. At its core lies a durable belief that Alberta's political and economic interests diverge sharply from those of Ottawa.¹

These grievances are largely institutional rather than ideological. Alberta has long resented what it views as asymmetries in Canada's federal system—most notably the equalization framework that redistributes resource-derived revenues to other provinces, and federal environmental policies that constrain the development and export of Alberta's petroleum resources. Over time, these pressures have fostered a distinct political culture, more conservative and libertarian than that of central Canada, reinforcing a sense of regional alienation rather than a coherent separatist nationalism.

The result has been cyclical mobilization rather than sustained momentum. Alberta separatist movements have periodically coalesced into organized campaigns, but none has approached the threshold required for a successful independence referendum. Still, political marginality should not be mistaken for strategic irrelevance. Following the 2025 federal election—which again produced a Liberal government with minimal representation from Alberta—separatist rhetoric briefly resurfaced, accompanied by proposals for a provincial sovereignty act and speculation about a referendum question. These initiatives did not reflect a governing consensus, but they underscored the persistence of the underlying fault lines.²

Mainstream Alberta leadership has stopped well short of endorsing secession. Instead, it has employed the specter of sovereignty as a bargaining instrument. Premier Danielle Smith's invocation of an Alberta Sovereignty Act passage of Bill 14

¹ Carlos Freire-Gibb, "Alberta sovereignty push: Learning from the economic fallout of similar separatist movements," *The Conversation*, 3 January 2024, <https://theconversation.com/>.

² Darrell Bricker, "How to Fix Western Alienation," *Maclean's*, 18 November 2025, <https://macleans.ca/>; and Danielle Smith, "Alberta Next: Albertans to decide path forward for the province" (press release, Government of Alberta, 5 May 2025), <https://www.alberta.ca/>.

exemplify this approach:³ a lever designed to extract concessions from Ottawa rather than to precipitate rupture. Yet from a strategic standpoint, such rhetorical brinkmanship matters. It signals that constitutional strain can be weaponized domestically—and that under conditions of acute political crisis or prolonged institutional deadlock, previously unthinkable outcomes could move rapidly into play.⁴

For US planners, the implication is straightforward. Alberta's separation remains improbable. But improbability is not immunity. In moments of constitutional impasse or national crisis, political equilibria can shift abruptly. That alone is sufficient justification for contingency planning by the United States, whose security interests would be directly and immediately engaged by any such rupture within Canada.

From Washington's perspective, an independent Alberta would directly engage core US interests across multiple dimensions. First and foremost is continental defense. The binational NORAD alliance ties US and Canadian defense of North American airspace into an integrated command structure that relies on assets located in Alberta.⁵ For decades, Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Cold Lake in Alberta has hosted Royal Canadian Air Force fighter squadrons on 24/7 alert as part of NORAD's aerospace control mission. The CF-18 Hornet jets that serve as Canada's primary air defense fighters are based principally at Cold Lake (4 Wing) and at Bagotville, Quebec. This means Alberta's territory is not just a Canadian concern but a linchpin of North American air sovereignty. Any disruption to operations at Cold Lake—whether due to uncertainty over basing rights, personnel loyalty, or command-and-control—would risk a gap in the continent's radar coverage and intercept capabilities. Beyond NORAD, Alberta hosts other defense-relevant assets, including extensive training ranges and infrastructure used by allied forces. The US interest lies in uninterrupted aerospace warning and defense, regardless of Alberta's

³ Alberta's Justice Statutes Amendment Act, 2025 (Bill 14) significantly altered the province's democratic framework by removing constitutional and jurisdictional filters on citizen initiatives, stripping Elections Alberta of its authority to refer petitions for judicial review, and transferring gatekeeping power to the Justice Minister. These changes nullified prior court challenges and allowed stalled initiatives—including a sovereignty referendum petition—to restart immediately. While the Act affirms that referendum outcomes cannot override Canada's Constitution, its passage created a legal gray zone and centralized political control over contentious initiatives, marking a pivotal moment in Alberta's separatist movement and Canadian federal politics. For the official fact sheet associated with the Act, visit <https://www.alberta.ca/>.

⁴ Jason Markusoff, "How a UCP bill renewed Alberta separatist bid to force referendum, after court shot it down," *CBC*, 13 December 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/>; and Matthew Black, "Basically in campaign mode': Alberta separatists launch renewed referendum push after Bill 14 passes," *Edmonton Journal*, 14 December 2025, <https://edmontonjournal.com/>.

⁵ "Future Fighter Capability Project" (fact sheet, Government of Canada, 6 October 2025), <https://www.canada.ca/>; and "Alberta, Canada's New Arsenal?," *The News by Alberta Counsel*, 23 October 2025, <https://www.albertacounselnews.com/>.

internal status. The sudden relocation of what would become a new international boundary through the NORAD architecture raises questions about overflight rights, sensor data-sharing, and the legal status of US military support personnel or technology on Albertan soil. In short, Alberta's independence could inject friction into the most integrated defense partnership in the world.

A second US interest is energy security and economic stability. Alberta is often described as the engine of Canada's energy sector—a description hardly exaggerated given that Alberta contains the vast majority of Canada's oil and natural gas reserves. The province's oil sands constitute one of the largest petroleum reserves on the planet, holding an estimated 168 billion barrels of recoverable oil—the third-largest oil reserves in the world behind only Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.⁶ Alberta's production of crude oil, at roughly 4.3 million barrels per day in recent years, accounts for approximately 84 percent of Canada's total oil output.⁷ The United States is the primary market for this resource: more than 97 percent of Canada's crude oil exports go to the United States under current arrangements (Alberta contributed more than 87 percent of that),⁸ and as of 2024 Canada supplied approximately 62 percent of all foreign oil imports into the United States.⁹ Alberta alone was the source of roughly one-third of US imported crude oil by the mid-2010s, and that share has only grown as US refineries have become optimized for Alberta's heavy crude. Indeed, many American refineries are heavily dependent on Alberta's oil; for example, facilities in Illinois and Montana routinely run on more than 90-percent Alberta feedstock.¹⁰ This interdependence means that a political upheaval affecting Alberta's oil and gas industry could reverberate through North American energy markets. A disruption in Alberta's pipeline network or uncertainties over a new government's export policies might induce price volatility and supply shortfalls, absent swift mitigating actions. The US objective would be to assure stable energy supply chains and market confidence even in the face of Alberta's constitutional upheaval. That entails preventing any coercive leverage over

⁶ "Alberta's Oil Reserves Compared to Other Countries" (fact sheet, Government of Alberta, n.d.), <https://open.alberta.ca/>.

⁷ "Provincial and Territorial Energy Profiles – Alberta" (fact sheet, Government of Canada, 10 September 2024), <https://www.cer-rec.gc.ca/>.

⁸ "Market Snapshot: Almost all Canadian crude oil exports went to the United States in 2023" (press release, Canada Energy Regulator, 21 August 2024), <https://www.cer-rec.gc.ca/>.

⁹ US Energy Information Administration, "Petroleum & Other Liquids: Imports by Country of Origin," 2025, <https://www.eia.gov/>.

¹⁰ US Energy Information Administration, "Canada's crude oil has an increasingly significant role in U.S. refineries," *Today in Energy*, 1 August 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/>; and Mitch Anderson, "Tariffs Likely to Crater Canadian Crude Exports to U.S., Marathon Tells Investors," *Energy Mix*, 13 March 2025, <https://www.theenergymix.com/>.

energy transit (for instance, if a newly sovereign Alberta or a hostile third party tried to manipulate pipeline flows or tolls) and avoiding price shocks that could affect inflation and economic security.

Third, the creation of a new international frontier along the 49th parallel west of the Great Lakes would introduce border security and law enforcement challenges. The US–Canada border is the longest undefended land border in the world and has been managed through close cooperation and trusted institutions. However, if Alberta becomes a separate country, the portion of border between Montana (and a small section of northwest North Dakota) and Alberta would overnight become a new US–Alberta border distinct from the US–Canada border. Even if Alberta were to inherit the infrastructure and personnel from the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) in the short term, the legal basis for border operations, customs enforcement, and immigration control would need to be reconceived. Any enforcement gaps could be quickly exploited by transnational criminal networks. Experience shows that when new international boundaries emerge without robust controls, illicit flows of goods and people often surge until governance catches up.¹¹ In Alberta's case, one can envision risks such as smuggling of firearms, narcotics, or other contraband if organized crime groups sense that Alberta's fledgling border security agency is overwhelmed. Furthermore, divergent laws or regulations (for example, on firearm ownership or cannabis, where US and Canadian policies already differ) might create enforcement seams that criminals target. The United States has a vital interest in preventing the emergence of a porous border to its north, which could endanger American communities or become a conduit for terrorism and organized crime. This interest extends to cybersecurity as well: Alberta's energy infrastructure (pipelines, power grids) is deeply connected to the United States, and any cybersecurity lapses during a chaotic transition could have cross-border consequences.¹² Maintaining tight coordination on critical infrastructure protection and cyber threat intelligence sharing with any new Alberta authorities would be essential to prevent hostile actors from capitalizing on the moment of transition.

Finally, the United States has a strategic interest in mitigating hostile foreign influence in the event of Alberta's independence. A newly sovereign Alberta, particularly if it lacks full initial support from Ottawa or other traditional partners,

¹¹ David B. Carter, Bailee Donahue, and Rob Williams, "Border Barriers and Illicit Trade Flows Available for Purchase Get access Arrow," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (September 2024), sqae094, <https://doi.org/>; and Arie M. Kacowicz, Exequiel Lacovsky, and Daniel F. Wajner, "Peaceful Borders and Illicit Transnational Flows in the Americas," *Latin American Research Review* 55, no. 4 (2025): 727–41, <https://doi.org/>.

¹² "Pipelines" (fact sheet, Alberta Energy Regulator, June 2025), <https://www.aer.ca/>; and "Canada – US Electricity Transmission" (fact sheet, Waterpower Canada, 2025), <https://waterpowercanada.ca/>.

might become an attractive target for geopolitical competitors seeking to gain a foothold in North America. The most immediate concern would be hostile state-backed investment—for instance, efforts by Chinese state-owned enterprises or other adversarial actors to acquire stakes in Alberta’s critical oil and gas infrastructure. This is not a hypothetical worry; Canada has already grappled with the national security implications of foreign investment in Alberta’s oil patch. In 2012, the Chinese state oil company CNOOC moved to purchase Nexen Inc., a Calgary-based energy company, giving it control of billions of barrels in Alberta’s oil sands reserves. The deal prompted such misgivings in Ottawa that the Canadian government declared it would be the last approval of its kind, effectively “drawing a line in the sand” against further takeovers of Alberta’s strategic oil assets by state-owned firms. US regulators, too, scrutinized the CNOOC–Nexen transaction closely through the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), as Nexen owned assets in the Gulf of Mexico, reflecting lingering distrust of Chinese investment in sensitive sectors.¹³ If Alberta were on its own, desperate for capital and international recognition, it might be even more susceptible to investment overtures from countries like China or others looking to secure energy resources or influence. The risk is not only economic but also security-related: foreign control over energy infrastructure could translate into leverage over Alberta’s policies or even physical access for espionage or sabotage. Additionally, a new Alberta government might lack the sophisticated regulatory safeguards and intelligence apparatus to vet foreign deals or counter malign influence. Apart from investment, adversaries could use propaganda and disinformation to exacerbate the separation for their advantage—indeed, analysts have noted that Russian information operations have at times sought to amplify Western Canadian separatist narratives to undermine allied unity.¹⁴ Thus, the US interest is to deny any strategic “capture” of Alberta by hostile powers, whether through economic dependency or informational manipulation, and to ensure a friendly Alberta remains anchored in the Western alliance network.

In summary, Alberta’s hypothetical independence touches on an array of US strategic equities: the seamless functioning of NORAD and defense agreements, the stability of North American energy supplies, the integrity of a new stretch of international border, and the broader balance of influence in North America.

¹³ “Canada OK’s Foreign Energy Takeovers, Slams Door On More,” *CNBC*, 8 December 2012, <https://www.cnbc.com/>; and Geoffrey Hale, “CNOOC–Nexen, State-Controlled Enterprises and Canadian Foreign Investment Policies: Adapting to Divergent Modernization,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (2014): 349–73, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

¹⁴ Zach Laing, “Canada, Wexit, and the federal election targeted in Russian disinformation campaign, academics say,” *Calgary Herald*, 3 November 2019, <https://www.calgaryherald.com/>.

Having outlined the stakes, the next sections analyze each of these domains in detail, identifying specific risks on the horizon and potential mitigating strategies the United States should consider in its quiet contingency planning.

Continental Defense Implications: NORAD and Beyond

Continental defense is the arena in which Alberta's hypothetical independence would register first—and most dangerously—on US national security interests. Unlike trade, diplomacy, or even energy markets, aerospace warning and air defense tolerate no pause, no ambiguity, and no jurisdictional confusion. NORAD functions on the assumption of uninterrupted geographic access, integrated command authority, and seamless legal arrangements across the North American interior. Alberta's territory is embedded deeply within that system. Any political rupture that alters sovereignty over key basing, sensors, or airspace would therefore confront US defense planners with immediate operational questions, not abstract alliance concerns. This section examines how Alberta's independence could disrupt NORAD's architecture, identifies the specific vulnerabilities such a transition would expose, and outlines the imperatives for maintaining continuous aerospace defense regardless of political outcomes north of the border.

NORAD Basing and Aerospace Control

The most urgent operational concern posed by Alberta's independence would be preserving the integrity of North America's aerial defense shield. Under NORAD's binational structure, Canada's territory—including Alberta—is integral to early warning and fighter interception coverage against potential air threats. 4 Wing Cold Lake, Alberta, serves as one of the two primary Royal Canadian Air Force fighter bases (alongside Bagotville in Quebec) responsible for NORAD quick-reaction alert missions. From Cold Lake, Canadian CF-18 Hornets can rapidly deploy to intercept unknown aircraft approaching North American airspace from the northwest approaches or to patrol the high north.¹⁵ The personnel at Cold Lake have “stood guard to defend North America” continuously for decades, embodying the seamless cooperation of US and Canadian forces under NORAD. If Alberta were to become independent, this mission cannot simply pause while political negotiations unfold. Any hiatus in operations out of Cold Lake could create a dangerous gap in coverage, especially given the increasing activity of Russian long-range aviation that routinely probes North American air defenses.

¹⁵ “4 Wing Cold Lake” (fact sheet, Royal Canadian Air Force, 15 November 2024), <https://www.canada.ca/>.

Thus, the United States would need to ensure NORAD continuity from day one of Alberta's sovereignty. In practical terms, this may require quickly negotiating Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) or interim basing rights with Alberta's new authorities. One mitigation strategy is for US and Canadian defense officials, through US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and Canadian Joint Operations Command, to develop prenegotiated arrangements that could be activated in the event of independence. For example, Canada (or Alberta, post-independence) could agree in principle to host US liaison teams or even temporarily assign operational control of Alberta-based radar stations and airfields to NORAD's US commander until a permanent bilateral defense accord with Alberta is signed. Planning should also identify deployable communications and sensor packages that the United States could rapidly put in place to backstop any loss of data from Alberta-based installations. For instance, if command-and-control links between NORAD's headquarters and Alberta sites were disrupted by the political transition, the United States could deploy mobile radar systems or airborne early warning aircraft to cover blind spots. Similarly, surge basing options in adjacent areas (such as in Montana or other Canadian provinces) could be readied to host fighter assets if Cold Lake's status were uncertain. This might involve upgrading airfields in Montana or North Dakota to accommodate NORAD-alert fighters on short notice. The goal of these quiet preparations is to avoid any lapse in aerospace warning and control, thereby denying potential adversaries the temptation to test North American defenses during a moment of political distraction.

Command and Alliance Considerations

An independent Alberta would also raise longer-term questions about alliance relationships. Canada and the United States have enjoyed a uniquely intimate defense partnership—from NORAD to integrated plans under NATO—all predicated on Canada's integrity as a nation. If Alberta breaks away, both Ottawa and Edmonton (Alberta's capital) would have to decide how to structure their defense policies.¹⁶ The remainder of Canada would retain its NATO membership and NORAD commitments but might lose significant defense infrastructure and personnel located in Alberta. Alberta, for its part, would need to rapidly build the foundations of a national military or defense force. The United States has a strong interest in ensuring Alberta aligns with Western defense structures rather than becoming a weak link. Therefore, US strategists should consider options to embed

¹⁶ For the author's take on this matter, see: Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, "A Sovereign Alberta: The Prudent Path to a National Defense," *LinkedIn*, 31 October 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/>.

Alberta into existing defense frameworks as swiftly as politically feasible. One option could be inviting Alberta to become an adjunct partner in NORAD or a similar bilateral accord. Though NORAD has historically been a US–Canada-only treaty, creative diplomacy might allow Alberta to be associated in a temporary capacity (for example, Alberta could permit Canadian and US NORAD operations on its soil via a trilateral memorandum).¹⁷ In the longer run, Alberta could seek full NATO membership, which the United States might quietly encourage to cement the collective defense guarantee over North America’s entire geography. However, pursuing NATO membership would be politically delicate—it would require consensus of all NATO allies, including Canada. Ottawa’s acquiescence might depend on the amicability of the divorce. As an interim measure, the United States might pursue a bilateral security guarantee or defense cooperation agreement with Alberta, analogous to a mutual defense pact, to formalize commitments to its defense. This could be modeled on US alliances with other small nations, tailored to North American specifics.

Throughout this process, discretion is key. Publicly, US officials would likely reiterate support for Canada’s territorial integrity up until the point of an official secession. Privately, however, US defense planners should maintain open lines of communication with Canadian counterparts about how to handle NORAD assets in Alberta. Ideally, any transition of defense responsibilities would be coordinated trilaterally among Washington, Ottawa, and Edmonton to prevent misunderstandings. The worst outcome would be a three-way breakdown in which, for example, Canadian forces withdraw from Alberta and Alberta refuses outside help, leading to an undefended airspace sector. To preempt such a scenario, contingency authorities for joint operations on Alberta’s territory should be mapped out in advance. This might even include draft legal frameworks for temporarily integrating Alberta’s airspace into US homeland defense in an emergency (with Alberta’s consent), until Alberta establishes its own Air Force capabilities. While such measures would be extraordinary, they underline the imperative: North America’s defense cannot be put on hold. In summary, a combination of preplanned agreements, rapid-deployment options, and alliance diplomacy will be required to maintain the shield of North American defense seamlessly through Alberta’s potential transition.

¹⁷ Canada and United States, *Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America on the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD)*, signed April 28, 2006, in force May 12, 2006, <https://www.norad.mil/>.

Energy Security and Economic Implications

Energy security is where Alberta's independence would intersect most directly with US economic stability. The United States does not merely import energy from Canada; it is structurally intertwined with Alberta's oil and gas production through pipelines, refineries, and long-term commercial dependencies that cannot be rapidly reconfigured. Political disruption affecting Alberta's regulatory authority, transit guarantees, or investment environment would therefore transmit almost immediately into US energy markets, with implications for prices, industrial output, and strategic resilience. This section assesses how Alberta's secession could affect North American energy flows, identifies the points of greatest vulnerability in the integrated US–Canada energy system, and evaluates the policy options available to Washington to preserve supply continuity and market confidence during a period of constitutional upheaval.¹⁸

Oil and Gas Flows

Alberta's independence would send shockwaves through North American energy markets, but smart planning can blunt the impact. Alberta currently functions as the cornerstone of Canada–US energy trade. The integrated “vast handshake of pipelines and refineries” between Canada and the United States has only grown tighter in recent years. US refiners have grown more reliant than ever on Canadian heavy crude—by 2024 Canada supplied nearly two-thirds of US oil import volumes, a dramatic rise from just 16 percent in 2005. This heavy oil complements US domestic light oil, strengthening overall North American energy security. Much of that Canadian oil comes from Alberta's oil sands, and is delivered via major cross-border pipeline systems. The Keystone pipeline system, the Enbridge Mainline/Lakehead system, and other pipelines connect Alberta's fields to refineries in the US Midwest and Gulf Coast. In addition, Alberta exports natural gas to the Pacific Northwest and Midwest US through pipeline networks, and electricity trade exists at the provincial-state grid interties. These conduits represent lifelines of continental energy interdependence.¹⁹

A secession scenario raises critical questions: Will those pipelines and supply contracts continue uninterrupted? Who will control the taps—Alberta's new government, or some interim Canadian–Alberta authority? Could political disputes

¹⁸ Taylor MacPherson and Gabriel Giguère, “Canada's Energy Future Lies in Deeper North American Integration,” MEI, November 2025, <https://www.iedm.org/>.

¹⁹ Deborah Jaremko, “Explained: Why Canadian oil is so important to the United States,” Canadian Energy Centre, 30 January 2025, <https://www.canadianenergycentre.ca/>.

lead to a cutoff or rerouting of energy flows? The worst-case risk is that uncertainty or brinksmanship causes a transit or pricing disruption. For instance, imagine Alberta and Canada haggling over pipeline ownership or transit fees for pipelines that cross Canadian soil (such as Trans Mountain or the Enbridge lines that go east through Saskatchewan and Manitoba). If negotiations turned acrimonious, flows could be curtailed, causing a supply crunch at US refineries dependent on that oil. Even absent an intentional cutoff, market psychology might treat Alberta's independence as an unpredictable supply shock, bidding up oil prices. The impact of such volatility would be high: US consumers could see fuel price spikes, and industries reliant on steady petroleum and gas supplies might suffer. In the 1970s, oil shocks taught the United States the strategic costs of supply disruption, and while Alberta is a friendly source, political upheaval can induce similar effects if not managed.

To mitigate these risks, the US government should undertake rigorous contingency modeling. The Department of Energy (DOE) and Treasury ought to model market impacts under various disruption scenarios. These would include scenarios like a temporary halving of Alberta oil exports, a rerouting of exports solely through the United States, or a price renegotiation on pipeline tariffs. By understanding the potential price and supply ramifications, the United States can prepare countermeasures. One obvious step is to ensure the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve and strategic stockpiles are ready to buffer short-term supply interruptions.²⁰ Another is to explore long-term supply contracts with Alberta's producers or government that lock in certain export volumes to US buyers. Such contracts, possibly guaranteed or facilitated by the US government, could provide market confidence that even in a new sovereign context, Alberta's oil will keep flowing south. The United States might also encourage Alberta to continue honoring existing pipeline contracts and regulations to reassure investors.

A parallel strategy is to diversify energy transit routes that bypass potential chokepoints. In practice, Alberta sends the bulk of its US-bound crude exports by pipeline. Using Canada Energy Regulator (CER) 2024 data and scaling by Alberta's share of national export volumes, one can estimate that roughly 89 percent of Alberta's US-bound crude exports move by pipeline, with the remainder of approximately USD 9.8 billion moving by rail and marine. Truck ("road") movements

²⁰ "Strategic Petroleum Reserve" (fact sheet, US Department of Energy, 2025), <https://www.energy.gov/>. The SPR exists to buffer short-term supply disruptions, but its importance is magnified by recent policy decisions. In 2024, the Biden administration authorized historically large drawdowns—reducing the SPR to its lowest level since the early 1980s—in an effort to stabilize fuel prices ahead of the presidential election. This depletion leaves the United States with diminished capacity to absorb shocks from geopolitical or structural disruptions, such as those that could arise from Alberta's independence, making rapid replenishment and readiness a critical priority for energy security.

of crude are negligible and reported with pipeline in CER statistics.²¹ If post-independence disputes jeopardized pipelines that cross the remaining Canadian territory (for example, if Ottawa imposed conditions on pipelines crossing its land to reach US markets), one solution would be to expand direct US–Alberta corridors. The long-discussed Keystone XL pipeline, which would have provided an express route from Alberta to the US Gulf Coast, is a case in point. Its cancellation left Alberta seeking other outlets, including increasing crude-by-rail. In a scenario where Alberta is independent and perhaps at odds with Ottawa, the logic of reviving or enlarging pipeline connections entirely through US territory becomes stronger.²² The United States might find strategic value in supporting such projects (subject to environmental safeguards) to ensure it can import Alberta’s oil without third-party interference. As US Senator John Hoeven (R–ND) observed during the Nexen deal deliberations, “time doesn’t stand still”—if America delays pipelines, Canadian (or Albertan) oil will find other markets. In this case, “other markets” could even mean Asia via new pipelines to the Pacific, potentially financed by China.²³ It is in US interests to instead channel Alberta’s exports southward where they bolster North American energy independence. Therefore, a contingency plan could be to fast-track approvals for pipeline expansions from Alberta into the United States, if triggered by an independence situation.

Regulatory and Policy Continuity

Another aspect to consider is how Alberta’s energy regulatory framework would evolve post-secession. Currently, Alberta’s oil and gas operations are governed by Canadian federal export permits (for cross-border pipelines) in conjunction with provincial regulations. Upon independence, Alberta would assume full control of its export permitting and environmental oversight. The United States should be prepared to quickly engage Alberta’s new regulators to harmonize standards and ensure continuity of safety and environmental monitoring. Any lapses could risk accidents or outages (for instance, pipeline spills that halt operations). US agencies like the Department of Transportation (which oversees pipeline safety through the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration) and the Energy Depart-

²¹ Canada Energy Regulator, “Crude Oil Export Summary Figure Data (2024),” 15 December 2025, <https://www.cer-rec.gc.ca/>.

²² Kyle Bakx, “After losing billions of dollars on Keystone XL and tank cars, Alberta is pursuing another pipeline,” CBC, 2 October 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/>; and “Canadian Leader Ready To Work With Trump To Resurrect Keystone XL Pipeline,” *Teamsters National Pipeline*, 23 January 2025, <https://www.teamsterpipe.ome.com/>.

²³ “CNOOC–Nexen Deal Wins US Approval, Its Last Hurdle,” *CNBC*, 12 February 2013, <https://www.cnbc.com/>.

ment could offer technical assistance to an independent Alberta in standing up its regulatory bodies.²⁴ This serves a dual purpose: it protects against infrastructure mishaps and builds goodwill, anchoring Alberta's practices to North American norms rather than, say, cutting corners under pressure from less scrupulous investors.

Economically, Alberta's independence could also affect currency and trade. If Alberta launched its own currency or faced capital flight, its ability to fund oilfield operations might waver, indirectly threatening output. The Treasury Department might quietly analyze how to stabilize Alberta's economy (for example, via swap lines if they kept the Canadian dollar initially, or other measures) to prevent a financial crisis that would imperil energy production.²⁵ All these measures tie back to the core aim of energy stability: keeping oil, gas, and electricity flowing predictably to American consumers and industries.

In summary, the US energy strategy in an Alberta secession scenario would involve advanced planning and agile response. By modeling disruptions, securing alternative routes, locking in supply agreements, and assisting with regulatory continuity, Washington can substantially reduce the risk of an energy shock. The tone should be cooperative—Alberta would rely on oil revenues and has every incentive to maintain exports, so the US role is to facilitate that continuity. The worst-case fear of Alberta “turning off the taps” is unlikely unless provoked; more plausible is short-term turmoil or third-party meddling. With calm contingency planning, the United States can reassure markets that North American energy security will endure, political changes notwithstanding.

Border Security and Law Enforcement Challenges

The creation of a new international border is never a benign administrative act; it is a security event. An independent Alberta would transform a lightly governed segment of the US–Canada frontier into a distinct international boundary overnight, introducing legal, institutional, and operational uncertainties precisely where continuity has long been assumed. Border enforcement functions that currently operate on trust, shared databases, and integrated command relationships would have to be reconstituted under a new sovereign authority, with inevitable transitional gaps.²⁶ This section examines how Alberta's independence could stress US border security and law enforcement cooperation, identifies the risks such gaps

²⁴ US Department of Transportation “PHMSA's Mission,” 2025, <https://www.phmsa.dot.gov/>.

²⁵ Tristan Loa and David Wessel, “What are Federal Reserve swap lines?,” *Brookings*, 21 August 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

²⁶ “Canada–United States relations” (fact sheet, Government of Canada, 10 November 2025, <https://www.international.gc.ca/>).

would pose to homeland security, and outlines the measures necessary to prevent criminal exploitation, illicit flows, and enforcement degradation during a period of political transition.

New Border, New Risks

The birth of an international border between the United States and Alberta would be unprecedented in North America's modern history. Today, that line on the map is simply part of the long US–Canada frontier, guarded cooperatively by the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the CBSA, with routine policies under the umbrella of bilateral frameworks. Post-secession, however, the United States would suddenly face a direct border with a new state—one that initially might lack a fully-formed border security institution. The number of ports of entry on the Montana–Alberta boundary is relatively few (Montana and Alberta share six land crossings, only one of which—Coutts/Sweet Grass—is open 24 hours).²⁷ In normal times, trade and travel across this stretch, though significant for the region, is not as dense as the Ontario–Michigan crossings. Annual bilateral trade between Montana and Canada is about USD 6.9 billion, with Alberta accounting for roughly USD 2.2 billion of Montana's imports (primarily oil, gas, and related products).²⁸ Thousands of vehicles and travelers transit those border posts each day under established procedures. The immediate worry is that any administrative vacuum or confusion at the moment of Alberta's independence could disrupt this orderly flow and create openings for illicit activity.

One scenario to avoid is a lapse in coverage where, for example, CBSA officers withdraw because Alberta is no longer part of Canada, and Alberta has not yet deployed its own border agency. The United States cannot unilaterally police the Canadian side of the line; therefore, ensuring that Alberta can fulfill border control duties from day one is crucial. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should quietly engage with Canadian and Albertan counterparts on provisional border management arrangements. For instance, an agreement could be crafted whereby Alberta contracts with Canada or a private entity for border services in the transition period. Alternatively, Alberta could rapidly stand up a small border guard service with training and mentorship from the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) or even US CBP advisors. Predrafting a memorandum of under-

²⁷ "Ports of Entry between Alberta and Montana," *Waterton Park Tourism*, 2025, <https://www.watertonpark.com/>; and "Sweetgrass–Coutts Border Crossing," *ezbordercrossing.com*, 2025, <https://www.ezbordercrossing.com/>.

²⁸ Montana Department of Labor and Industry, "Montana Economy at a Glance: Canada Trade," 2025, <https://lmi.mt.gov/>; and Government of Alberta, "Montana and Alberta: Strong Partners, Trusted Neighbors," 2025, <https://www.alberta.ca/>.

standing (MOU) to this effect would save valuable time. The MOU might outline how to handle customs processes, information sharing on entrants of interest, and division of responsibilities at each port of entry during the handover.

Enforcement and Surveillance

Beyond the ports of entry, the bigger concern is the “between ports” border—the open areas of vast prairie, forest, and mountain where smuggling or illicit crossings could occur. Currently, US and Canadian law enforcement cooperate closely through Integrated Border Enforcement Teams (IBET) that patrol and monitor such areas, leveraging intelligence from both sides.²⁹ An independent Alberta would necessitate forging a new bilateral law enforcement partnership. The United States should aim to transpose existing cooperative models onto the US–Alberta context as seamlessly as possible. This could involve quickly negotiating cross-designation of officers or at least communication channels between US Border Patrol sectors and whatever law enforcement Alberta authorizes for border security (perhaps a branch of a new Alberta national police or a specialized border unit). Joint training exercises or tabletop simulations would greatly aid preparation. For example, DHS and the Alberta authorities could run a tabletop exercise on responding to a detected cross-border smuggling incident post-independence—this would identify gaps in pursuit authorities or communications that can be fixed ahead of time.

One known risk is that criminal organizations might test the new border for weaknesses. In recent history, law enforcement has noted an uptick in organized crime exploiting any lapse in cross-border vigilance. The 2022 truckers’ blockade at Coutts, Alberta—while a political protest—led to weapons seizures and exposed how a border disruption can attract violent elements.³⁰ It underscored the importance of intelligence sharing; in that case, the RCMP, with information from partners, intercepted a cache of firearms and arrested individuals allegedly plotting violence at the border. In a similar vein, the United States and Alberta will need to sustain real-time intelligence sharing about emerging threats. This could be facilitated by extending programs like the Shiprider joint maritime patrol (in Great Lakes) concept to land: mixed teams or at least co-located command centers that watch the border together. A near-real-time data-sharing system on border crossings and enforcement actions, possibly through an integrated database or network

²⁹ US Department of Homeland Security, “Beyond the Border Action Plan: Integrated Border Enforcement Teams,” 1 August 2024, <https://www.dhs.gov/>.

³⁰ Edward Alden, “Canada’s Trucker Protests: What to Know About the ‘Freedom Convoy,’” Council on Foreign Relations, 11 February 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/>; and Mack Lamoureux, “Police Make ‘Freedom Convoy’ Arrests, Find Guns, Body Armour, and Machete,” Vice, 14 February 2022, <https://www.vice.com/>.

accessible to both US and Alberta officials, would help ensure continuity of surveillance coverage. Practically, this means Alberta should be brought into existing information systems like lookout lists, smuggling trend analyses, and so forth, just as US and Canadian agencies currently exchange such data.

Immigration and Customs Controls

Another layer of complexity is immigration control. On Day 1 of independence, Alberta would presumably assume responsibility for immigration visas and refugee policy on its territory. The United States might face new questions: Will travelers from Alberta require distinct documentation? How to treat goods and trucks coming from Alberta vs. those from Canada? Initially, the simplest path might be treating Alberta as if it were Canada for customs purposes until told otherwise—for example, honoring existing country-of-origin provisions for Alberta goods under the US–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) unless and until Alberta negotiates new terms.³¹ Over time, separate trade agreements would be needed. US CBP would need guidance on tariff schedules and import rules for an independent Alberta. A proactive approach is for the Office of the US Trade Representative and DHS to quietly draft a contingent trade facilitation plan—essentially a template by which Alberta could be slotted into the current US–Canada trade framework with minimal disruption, perhaps as an associate member to USMCA in the short term. This would help avoid immediate tariffs or customs holdups that could slow commerce and divert law enforcement attention.

From a security standpoint, one worry is if Alberta's new immigration system is more lax or differently managed—could that become a backdoor for inadmissible persons to enter the United States? For instance, if Alberta were to offer visa-free travel to countries that the United States and Canada currently require visas from, there might be a pathway for bad actors to attempt entry via Alberta. To mitigate this, the Department of State and DHS should engage Alberta on aligning visa policies and perhaps establishing a preclearance or pre-inspection regime. The United States has preclearance arrangements in some Canadian airports, allowing US officers to screen travelers before they depart for the United States. A similar concept could be extended to an Alberta context: if Edmonton or Calgary remain major international air gateways, the United States could negotiate to station CBP preclearance teams there, ensuring travelers and goods are vetted under US standards before crossing. This is particularly important if Alberta's separation leads to divergent foreign relationships; for example, if Alberta were to open its doors to investment or

³¹ Office of the US Trade Representative, "United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement," 2020, <https://ustr.gov/>.

workers from a country under US sanctions or concern, US border controls must adapt accordingly.

In sum, the US approach to the new Alberta border should be one of rapid normalization—making the abnormal (a brand-new border authority) function as normally as possible through planning and cooperation. By drafting provisional agreements, conducting joint exercises, and maintaining intelligence sharing, the aim is to prevent any window of vulnerability where criminals sense an opening. The border must remain secure and efficient, reassuring both the local communities and the broader public that security will not be compromised. The contingency preparations by DHS/CBP within the first 90 days should include ready-to-implement frameworks for customs and immigration, and even public communication strategies to guide travelers and traders (without implying US endorsement of secession). With these measures, the United States can manage the transition such that, from a security standpoint, the 49th parallel west of Saskatchewan remains as controlled and cooperative as it has been for over a century.

Foreign Influence and Strategic Investment Threats

Periods of political transition create opportunity—not only for reform, but for exploitation. A newly sovereign Alberta would emerge into the international system with vast resource wealth, urgent capital requirements, and incomplete security institutions, a combination that historically attracts the attention of adversarial powers seeking leverage rather than partnership. For the United States, the principal concern would not be Alberta's independence itself, but the possibility that external actors could use investment, information operations, or covert influence to gain strategic footholds in the North American interior. This section analyzes the vulnerabilities an independent Alberta would face during its formative period, assesses the risks posed by hostile state-backed investment and influence campaigns, and considers how US policy can help prevent the emergence of a new vector of strategic penetration within the Western hemisphere.

Vulnerabilities of a New State

A newly independent Alberta, while rich in resources, would likely find itself in a moment of economic and strategic vulnerability. It would need international recognition, trading relationships, and investment to develop its infrastructure beyond what it inherited. During this formative period, adversarial state actors may see an opportunity to extend their influence. The two primary channels of concern are financial/economic leverage and political influence operations. Both China and Russia (among others) have histories of exploiting openings in allied

countries during times of transition or instability. The United States and Canada have been cautious about Chinese encroachment in critical sectors, as evidenced by strict investment screening and export controls. An independent Alberta might not immediately have such guardrails, making it a tempting target for well-resourced foreign entities.³²

Hostile Capital in Critical Sectors

The oil and gas sector is the crown jewel of Alberta's economy and thus the biggest prize for foreign investors. Even under Canadian sovereignty, Chinese state-linked companies made significant inroads by purchasing stakes in Alberta's energy companies through the 2000s. The 2013 CNOOC acquisition of Nexen was a watershed, provoking debates in both Ottawa and Washington about the national security implications. Ultimately that deal was approved, but Canada responded by tightening its Investment Canada Act guidelines to bar future takeovers of oil sands assets by foreign state-owned enterprises.³³ Alberta as an independent country might not inherit those stricter rules. If faced with large budget needs or lacking domestic capital, an Alberta government could even welcome foreign investment with fewer questions asked. This raises the scenario of *strategic capture*—where a hostile power gains controlling interests in critical infrastructure or resources, thereby acquiring political influence. For example, a Chinese conglomerate might offer to finance and build a new pipeline or refinery in Alberta when Western investors hesitate, in exchange for equity and favorable long-term supply contracts. Such dependence could constrain Alberta's foreign policy alignments or allow espionage under the cover of corporate presence.

To counter this, the United States should quietly encourage and assist Alberta in establishing robust investment screening mechanisms from the outset. A framework analogous to the US CFIUS or Canada's Investment Act review should be advocated. The US Treasury and State Department could share best practices and even intelligence on suspect investors. Ideally, Alberta would adopt legislation requiring national security review of any foreign investments in sectors like energy, telecommunications, or defense-related technology. This may be challenging for a

³² Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012); and Elliott Abrams, Ezra Hess, and Joshua Kurlantzick, "Protecting U.S. Allies and Partners from Chinese Economic Coercion," *Asia Unbound*, 2 December 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

³³ Roger W. Robinson, "Standing on Guard Post-Nexen: Chinese State-Owned Enterprise and Canadian National Security," *Macdonald-Laurier Institute Commentary*, June 2013, <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/>; and "Statement Regarding Investment by Foreign State-Owned Enterprises" (press release, Government of Canada, 7 December 2012), <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/>.

small new state under pressure to attract business, but the United States can buttress their resolve by rallying Western allies to provide alternative investment. For instance, encouraging US or allied firms to invest in Alberta's oil industry or infrastructure can provide the capital Alberta needs while keeping ownership in friendly hands. An "allied financing preference" approach could be pursued: perhaps a consortium of US–Canada investors (public or private) take stakes in key pipelines or facilities to crowd out untrusted bidders. Similarly, international financial institutions (where the United States has influence) could offer loans or guarantees for Alberta's infrastructure projects, reducing temptation to accept money from authoritarian states with strings attached.

Information and Political Influence

Beyond dollars, foreign adversaries might engage in subtler influence. Russia, for example, has a playbook of amplifying secessionist or divisive movements in Western countries as a form of political warfare. Reports from 2019 indicated that Russian-linked media highlighted the nascent "Wexit" movement in Alberta, potentially to stoke internal Canadian divisions.³⁴ While Alberta's independence would by then be a reality in this scenario, Russian or other propaganda could still seek to shape the new state's orientation—perhaps pushing anti-Ottawa sentiment to hinder any future Canada–Alberta reconciliation, or sowing distrust between Alberta and the United States. It is in the US interest that Alberta emerges as a stable, pro-Western democracy, not as a client state entangled with autocratic powers. Therefore, supporting Alberta's democratic institutions and resilience to disinformation is another facet of strategic planning. The United States could extend assistance in building Alberta's capacity for counterintelligence and cybersecurity (to prevent espionage or sabotage of critical systems by foreign agents). This might resemble the aid the United States gave to new Eastern European democracies in the 1990s to professionalize their security services and guard against Russian infiltration.

Intelligence cooperation is a particularly sensitive but important area. During the transition, traditional Canadian intelligence-sharing arrangements (e.g., within the Five Eyes alliance) would technically no longer cover Alberta's territory or any new Alberta intelligence agency.³⁵ To avoid leaving a blind spot, the US Intelligence Community should be prepared to rapidly establish channels with Alberta's security

³⁴ National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, *Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions** (revised pursuant to subsection 21(5) of the NSICOP Act (Ottawa: Government of Canada, June 2024), <https://nsicop-cpsnr.ca/>.

³⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council (FIORC)," National Counterintelligence and Security Center, n.d., <https://www.dni.gov/>.

services. This could range from stationing liaison officers to inviting Alberta's fledgling intel officials to participate in certain information exchanges by special agreement. The guiding principle is to not allow a blackout in which adversaries could operate. If, for instance, foreign spies attempt to recruit assets in Alberta's government or steal sensitive data about NORAD systems located in Alberta, both US and Canadian intelligence must detect and thwart this. An interim tripartite intelligence-sharing cell (US–Canada–Alberta) might be one solution until formal agreements can be signed with Alberta alone.

Protecting Critical Infrastructure

The risk of foreign influence also extends to critical infrastructure protection. Pipelines, power grids, and communication networks in Alberta could be targets for sabotage or cyber attack by adversaries looking to derail Alberta's transition or harm US interests. The United States already works closely with Canada on critical infrastructure security and cyber defense. Those cooperative mechanisms should be extended to Alberta. DHS's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the DOE could include Alberta's key infrastructure in their monitoring and threat-sharing programs.³⁶ For example, if a major pipeline in Alberta (feeding US markets) experiences a cyber intrusion attempt, Alberta's operators should have direct lines to US cyber defense teams for help—much as US pipeline companies do. Establishing joint cyber threat alerts and incident response protocols with Alberta's authorities will ensure that a hack on Alberta's grid or oil facilities can be swiftly contained before it cascades into the US energy supply.

In summary, defending against hostile foreign exploitation of an independent Alberta will require a mix of preventive economic policy and active security cooperation. The United States must act as a seasoned guardian, helping Alberta put up shields (legal, financial, cyber) that it may not yet fully possess. This is a delicate task: it must be done in a spirit of respect for Alberta's sovereignty, ideally through consensus in an alliance context, rather than heavy-handedly. By doing so, the United States not only protects its own flank but also helps ensure that Alberta's freedom does not inadvertently weaken North America's collective strength. In essence, Alberta should emerge as a sturdy new link in the Western chain, not a weak point that adversaries can target.

³⁶ US Department of Homeland Security and Public Safety Canada, *Canada–United States Action Plan for Critical Infrastructure* (Washington: DHS, updated 17 December 2020), <https://www.cisa.gov/>; Natural Resources Canada, *Canada–United States Joint Strategy for Electric Grid Security and Resilience* (Ottawa: NRCan, 2016), <https://natural-resources.canada.ca/>; and “CISA debuts 2025–2026 International Strategic Plan to boost global cybersecurity collaboration,” *Industrial Cyber*, 31 October 2024, <https://industrialcyber.co/>.

Policy Recommendations for US Contingency Planning

Given the multifaceted challenges outlined above, US policymakers should adopt a proactive yet quiet approach to contingency planning for Alberta's possible independence. The following recommendations summarize key steps for the inter-agency community, aligned by functional area:

- **Maintain Discreet Strategic Foresight:** The National Security Council (NSC) should establish a small interagency monitoring cell dedicated to the Alberta situation. This cell would track political developments in Alberta–Ottawa relations (e.g., any legislative moves toward sovereignty, referendum initiatives, or negotiations breakdowns) and monitor indicators of instability or foreign meddling. A consolidated dashboard of intelligence and open-source information would enable senior US leaders to make informed decisions quickly if the contingency accelerates. Crucially, this planning must remain strictly confidential. All agencies should heed communications guidance to avoid public signaling that could be misinterpreted as US meddling. US officials engaging Canadian counterparts should emphasize routine prudence—framing any low-level discussions as part of general continuity planning for continental defense and border security, not as expressions of support for separation.
- **Defense and NORAD Continuity Planning (DOW/USNORTHCOM):** The Department of War, through US Northern Command, should develop detailed basing and command continuity options for NORAD operations involving Alberta. This entails mapping out how to sustain the NORAD mission at CFB Cold Lake and other relevant sites. Concrete actions include predrafting SOFA terms for a US–Alberta defense cooperation (to be executed if independence occurs) and identifying rapid-deployment units to fill any gaps. US Air Force and RCAF planners might conduct joint evaluations of alternative airfields and the logistics of repositioning aircraft if needed. Additionally, USNORTHCOM in coordination with NORAD should run command post exercises simulating the scenario of Alberta's independence—testing communications redundancies, binational decision-making if one partner's territory is no longer officially in the alliance, and rules of engagement for interim situations. Parallel to this, DoD lawyers should review contingency authorities for operations on foreign soil that might apply (for instance, existing bilateral treaties or emergency deployment authorities) and identify if new legal authorizations would be needed for US forces or assets to operate in Alberta for NORAD purposes.

- **Homeland Security and Border Measures (DHS/CBP):** The DHS should spearhead provisional border security frameworks in collaboration with the Departments of State and Justice. This includes drafting MOUs for maintaining border services at Alberta crossings, as well as templates for customs agreements to keep trade flowing. US CBP should prepare to possibly expand personnel or technical support at key ports of entry if requested by Alberta. Joint tabletop exercises with Canadian and Albertan counterparts would be valuable—for example, simulating how a particular border incident (a migrant surge or smuggling attempt) would be handled the day before and after Alberta's independence. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) should likewise prepare to coordinate with a new Albertan law enforcement on organized crime matters that transcend the border. An emphasis should be placed on enhancing intelligence-sharing channels (potentially extending the IBET model) and ensuring interoperability of communication systems between US border agencies and Alberta's security forces. Cybersecurity units within DHS should integrate Alberta's critical infrastructure into information-sharing programs as discussed, focusing on threats to pipelines and public utilities.
- **Diplomacy and Alliance Management (Department of State):** The Department of State should quietly develop a diplomatic playbook for various Alberta secession scenarios. This includes crafting scripted messaging for use with the Canadian federal government (to reassure Ottawa of US respect for sovereignty and desire for a peaceful, lawful process) as well as with any emergent Alberta authorities (to convey US willingness to work together on mutual security and economic interests without prejudging political outcomes). Decision trees should be drawn for recognition policy: under what conditions and timing the United States would recognize an independent Alberta, coordinating ideally with allies to avoid unilateral surprises. State should also engage in contingency coordination with key allies such as the United Kingdom and NATO partners, since Alberta's situation could have alliance implications. Importantly, US diplomats in Ottawa should be prebriefed on messaging so that if the issue suddenly moves to the front burner, they can consult with Canadian officials in a manner that calms rather than inflames. The overall diplomatic stance must be one of studied neutrality—supporting a stable outcome and encouraging dialogue between Ottawa and Edmonton, without taking sides. This behind-the-scenes preparation will enable the United States to act as a stabilizing influence when the time comes, rather than appearing reactive or unprepared.

- **Energy and Economic Contingencies (Treasury/DOE):** The Treasury Department and Department of Energy should execute advanced economic impact analyses on Alberta's potential secession. This involves quantifying exposure: identifying which US states and industries are most reliant on Alberta's oil, gas, electricity, uranium (if any), or other exports. With that mapping, DOE can determine where strategic reserves or alternate suppliers should be bolstered. The agencies should also collaborate with industry to encourage contingency supply agreements, such as options to reroute crude delivery from other sources in an emergency. On the financial side, Treasury may quietly evaluate Alberta's fiscal health and banking sector—considering whether market turmoil in Alberta could have spillovers (for example, through Canadian banks heavily invested in Alberta). If risks are found, the United States might work with international financial institutions on backstop plans (though carefully, as direct US financial intervention in an independence scenario could be politically sensitive). Additionally, Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) could begin crafting sanctions-proofing guidelines—to ensure that any US sanctions regime (e.g., against Russia or Iran) continues to be enforceable if Alberta is no longer under Ottawa's sanctions enforcement. This might mean helping Alberta establish comparable sanctions policies immediately to avoid becoming a loophole in North America for banned entities.
- **Intelligence and Counterintelligence (Intelligence Community):** The Director of National Intelligence should ensure that the US Intelligence Community devotes attention to Alberta in its collection and analysis. In particular, intelligence should monitor foreign influence activities around the Alberta issue—for instance, any indications that Russian or Chinese operatives are attempting to funnel money or propaganda into Alberta separatist groups, or positioning themselves to take advantage of a transition. Counterintelligence units (FBI, CIA) should be alert to efforts by adversaries to penetrate Alberta's political circles or military assets (for example, attempts to recruit Canadian forces members in Alberta if they are uncertain about their future). The United States could consider seconding advisors to help Alberta set up counterintelligence practices, as noted, possibly through Five Eyes channels if Canada agrees. Finally, intelligence analysts should maintain an up-to-date risk matrix of the scenario, akin to the one in the NSC briefing, continually assessing likelihoods and impacts: e.g., the likelihood of NORAD disruption, energy shock, border crime spike, and so forth, updating mitigation progress for each.

Executing these recommendations requires high-level guidance but low-profile implementation. Timetables can be sketched in advance: for example, Weeks 1–2

after a decision to ramp up quiet planning could see tasking memos and points of contact established across agencies. Weeks 3–6 might produce the first drafts of MOUs, basing options, and impact models. By Weeks 7–12, agencies could conduct initial exercises and finalize refined contingency plans. Throughout, tight interagency coordination led by the NSC will ensure that all pieces—defense, diplomatic, economic, and law enforcement—move in concert.

Above all, the tone of US preparedness must remain one of contingency planning, not advocacy. Every public-facing official should be equipped with disciplined talking points: that the United States is confident in a united Canada, that all planning is routine prudence in line with longstanding continuity practices, and that the United States will neither interfere in nor speculate on Canada's internal matters. Privately, however, US leaders should be ready to act swiftly on the plans developed if Alberta's path to independence accelerates. The strategic logic is clear—it is far easier to preplan quietly than to improvise solutions in the heat of a crisis at the heart of our continent.

Conclusion

Alberta's hypothetical secession poses a rare and delicate challenge: preparing for a fundamental change in North America's geopolitical landscape without precipitating or encouraging it. For the United States, whose defense, energy, and economic ties with Canada run deep, the prospect demands a mindset of strategic prudence. This analysis has shown that while the breakup of Canada is not a scenario Washington desires, failing to prepare for it would be a grave mistake given the stakes for US national security. A sovereign Alberta would introduce discontinuities—in NORAD operations, in the flow of oil and gas, in the policing of the northern border, and in the alignment of a key piece of territory—that adversaries might seek to exploit if the United States and its allies were caught flat-footed.

To prevent that, the United States must engage in quiet, comprehensive contingency planning, leveraging its whole-of-government capabilities to mitigate risks. The recommendations provided here, from defense arrangements to diplomatic strategies, form a blueprint for such preparation. They reflect a hawkish appreciation that power vacuums and ambiguities invite challenges; therefore, US policy should aim to fill any voids preemptively—whether it be a gap in air defense coverage or an absence of investment safeguards—with American and allied solutions. At the same time, this must be balanced with diplomatic tact. Openly brandishing contingency plans could alarm Canadians and Albertans alike, or be misread as US endorsement of separatism. Thus, discretion and respect for Canadian sovereignty remain paramount in execution.

Geopolitically, a smoothly handled Alberta independence—should it come to pass—could reinforce North American security if managed well. One could envision a future where Canada and Alberta exist as friendly, democratic neighbors, both firmly in the NORAD and NATO family, jointly contributing to continental defense and North American energy independence. In that outcome, the United States would have successfully navigated the emergence of a new nation without any lapse in security or prosperity. Conversely, a poorly managed rupture could introduce enduring instability in the heart of North America—something no US policymaker or military commander would want on their watch.

In sum, the situation calls for what might be termed “forward defense” in policy planning: anticipating the next strategic horizon and quietly positioning US interests to weather it. Alberta’s secession remains a contingency, not an inevitability. But as this analysis underscores, the costs of being unprepared are simply too high. It is in exercises of foresight like this—war-gaming the what-ifs, strengthening the sinews of alliance, and hedging against strategic surprise—that the United States exemplifies prudent leadership. In the final calculation, whether or not Alberta ever raises its own flag, America’s security establishment will be judged by its readiness for any outcome. Preparing for an independent Alberta, while hoping never to see it, is the kind of sober, responsible step that keeps the peace and ensures that North America’s strategic horizons remain secure, whatever political transformations may come. 🦅

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The Dragon, the Jaguar, and the Eagle

The Rise of China in Mexico and Brazil, a Historical-Comparative Analysis

LT COL GILBERTO “GIL” SAMBOLIN PEREZ, USAF

Abstract

This article offers a historical-comparative analysis of the People’s Republic of China’s engagement with Mexico and Brazil, tracing early migration, trade, and diplomatic ties to modern strategic partnerships. It argues that China’s expanding influence in Latin America—particularly in military, technological, and economic domains—poses a growing threat to US national security. From a military-historical perspective, the study examines the evolution of Chinese security cooperation and its implications for US interests in the Western Hemisphere. Drawing on primary sources and case studies, it identifies historiographic gaps in Sino–Latin American relations and proposes US policy responses. These include strengthening security cooperation, countering Chinese narratives through information operations, and promoting equitable trade. The analysis underscores the urgency of recalibrating US strategy in the region to confront the China’s encroachment. Mexico and Brazil, due to their proximity and strategic weight, are pivotal in shaping the future balance of power in the Americas.

In 1949, Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), successfully implemented his theory of protracted warfare and a strategic “hearts and minds” campaign to consolidate popular support and defeat the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), led by Chiang Kai-shek.¹ Following the Communist victory, Chiang retreated to Formosa—modern-day Taiwan—bringing an end to a civil war that had raged since 1927 and claimed an estimated six million lives.² The founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) marked the beginning of a new political era—one that emerged from devastation into authoritarian consolidation. In its earliest years, the PRC experienced catastrophic famine, internal purges, and violent political reordering, resulting in more than 30 million deaths, including countless political opponents of the CCP.³

¹ Office of the Historian, US Department of State, “The Chinese Revolution of 1949.” *Milestones: 1945–1952*, <https://history.state.gov/>.

² Michael Lynch, *The Chinese Civil War 1945–49* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), 91.

³ Asian Studies Association, “China’s Great Leap Forward,” *Education About Asia* 17, no. 3 (Winter 2012): <https://www.asianstudies.org/>.

While the PRC's emergence in 1949 immediately altered the strategic calculus of the Cold War, its influence on US foreign policy, defense planning, trade relations, and diplomatic posture has steadily intensified across decades. Yet it was not until the period between 2008 and 2014 that China began to systematically expand its military and security ties with Latin American partners—most notably Mexico and Brazil. A series of white papers released by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2008 and 2016 outlined Beijing's intent to pursue multidimensional engagement with the Latin America and Caribbean region. These documents established the doctrinal and diplomatic foundations for what has since become a broader strategic alignment—one that may forge lasting Dragon–Jaguar ties and reconfigure hemispheric power dynamics.⁴

Given Mexico's and Brazil's geographic and economic proximity to the United States, China's deepening influence in these two nations represents a tangible challenge to US interests. In the event of a major-power conflict with China, pre-existing security and political partnerships in the Western Hemisphere could be exploited by Beijing to disrupt US logistical networks, sow political division, or constrain US freedom of maneuver. However, the United States retains credible options to mitigate these risks. Washington can counter Beijing's advances by investing in long-term security cooperation, expanding partner capacity-building programs, executing tailored information operations to challenge Chinese narratives, promoting sustained diplomatic engagement, and pursuing fair and mutually beneficial trade agreements with both Mexico and Brazil.

This historical and geopolitical analysis of the PRC's engagement with Mexico and Brazil contributes to the evolving academic discourse on Sino–Latin American relations. It traces the arc of bilateral ties by examining early Chinese immigration, trade networks, diplomatic recognition, and key inflection points. From a military history perspective, the study also investigates the evolution of Chinese security activity in both nations and assesses the strategic risks this poses to the United States. As China deepens its defense ties and information presence across the Western Hemisphere, particularly with states proximate to the US homeland, it becomes imperative to scrutinize how these relationships could erode American influence and compromise national security.

This project adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. It draws on official documents from the governments of China, Mexico, and Brazil; bilateral treaties; transcripts of senior-level interviews; and archival materials. The research also leverages the author's foreign

⁴ State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, November 2016), <https://english.www.gov.cn/>.

language proficiency in Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese to access and analyze materials not readily available in English. Supplementary sources include academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant commercial publications. The study applies a comparative lens to examine war and society, diplomatic history, and public policy across four principal actors: the PRC, Mexico, Brazil, and the United States.

From a historiographic standpoint, this work stands on the foundation laid by eminent scholars of the Chinese diaspora in the Americas. Historians such as Evelyn Hu-DeHart, Madelyn Hsu, Robert Chao Romero, Laurence J. C. Ma, Carolyn Cartier, and Tatiana Seijas have illuminated the dynamics of Chinese migration, labor exploitation, and the formation of racialized identities in Latin America. Their scholarship contextualizes the sociohistorical origins of China's longstanding ties to the region.

Equally vital are the contributions of scholars examining Chinese diplomacy, foreign economic policy, and global strategy in Latin America. Notable among them are Flora Botton Beja, Enrique Dussel Peters, Harold Trinkunas, and Robert G. Sutter, whose works have shaped contemporary understanding of Beijing's regional intentions and tactics. Their insights underscore the significance of China's growing influence in Latin America not merely as economic outreach, but as part of a deliberate strategic encroachment into what was once considered an uncontested American sphere of influence.

A pivotal development occurred in 2018 when the US *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) formally designated the PRC as a strategic competitor. This marked a doctrinal turning point in American defense planning and triggered renewed interest among policymakers and scholars. In its wake, leading institutions—including the Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies—have devoted substantial resources to studying China's hemispheric ambitions. The PRC continues to rank as the top national security concern in successive NDS iterations.⁵

Despite this growing body of research, critical gaps remain—particularly concerning the sensitive and underexplored domain of China's security cooperation with Mexico and Brazil. The classified or opaque nature of these relationships, coupled with a scarcity of primary sources detailing military engagements, has limited scholarly inquiry. This study seeks to bridge those gaps by synthesizing available evidence and advancing a nuanced understanding of Chinese military and diplomatic inroads into Latin America.

⁵ US Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review, and Missile Defense Review* (Washington: Department of Defense, 27 October 2022), 1, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

In doing so, this project provides a foundation for future academic inquiry and offers timely insights for US policy makers. As China's presence in the Western Hemisphere grows, especially in close strategic proximity to the United States, the need for rigorous analysis becomes ever more urgent. This work contributes to that imperative by mapping China's evolving role in Latin America and identifying its implications for US strategic posture in the twenty-first century.

Sino-Mexican Relations History

The relationship between China and Mexico is neither recent nor incidental. It is a centuries-old entanglement shaped by imperial trade, migration, and shifting geopolitical tides. From the Manila galleons of the Spanish Empire to the strategic dialogues of the twenty-first century, Sino-Mexican ties have evolved from commercial curiosity to calculated diplomacy. This section traces the arc of that relationship, revealing how historical patterns of migration, labor, and diplomacy laid the groundwork for today's strategic entanglements. Understanding this trajectory is essential to grasp how the PRC has positioned itself as a formidable actor in Mexico—one whose influence now extends beyond trade into the realms of security, infrastructure, and digital domains.

The Colonial Period: Chinese Migrations and Interactions in Mexico

Sino-Mexican interaction predates the modern nation-state and reaches as far back as the early seventeenth century, when Mexico—then New Spain—played a central role in the Spanish Empire's transpacific trade.⁶ The *Nao de China*, or Manila galleon, served as the principal conduit for goods flowing between Asia and the Americas. Silk, spices, porcelain, and other luxury items from China were transported across the Pacific, exchanged in Manila, and delivered to Acapulco before making their way to Mexico City and beyond.⁷

More than material goods crossed the ocean. By the 1630s, records indicate that Chinese laborers and slaves—brought via the transpacific slave trade—had established a presence in at least 15 Mexican cities.⁸ These early migrants contributed to colonial society as artisans, entertainers, craftsmen, merchants, and administrators. Their ar-

⁶ Peter Gordon and Juan Jose Morales, "Long View: The 16th-Century Trade Route That Brought China to Mexico," *Americas Quarterly*, 2019, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/>.

⁷ Gordon and Morales, "Long View."

⁸ Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95–96.

rival marked the beginning of a small but resilient Chinese community in Mexico, one whose legacy would evolve alongside the nation's shifting identity.⁹



Figure 1. Trade route from Manila to New Spain, 1600s. (By author.)

The Porfiriato and the Movimiento Anti-Chino

By the late nineteenth century, under President Porfirio Díaz's regime—commonly referred to as the *Porfiriato*—Mexico sought to modernize its economy by expanding industry and infrastructure, particularly the railroad system. Mexican policymakers initially aimed to attract European immigrants to meet labor demands. However, this effort faltered. European settlers often refused to relocate to rural or tropical regions and rejected the working conditions common to Mexican laborers.¹⁰

In response, Mexican officials turned to non-European sources of labor. Chinese migrants, already familiar with strenuous industrial work and willing to accept

⁹ Gordon and Morales, "Long View."

¹⁰ Abelardo de la Cruz Mateos, "Mexican Diplomacy and the Chinese Issue, 1876–1910," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 67, no. 1 (1987), 64, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/>.

lower wages, presented a pragmatic solution.¹¹ Their adaptability to Mexico's climate and working conditions made them ideal for labor-intensive sectors, especially rail construction and agriculture.¹²

Simultaneously, a wave of global Chinese migration surged during the late 1800s, driven by political instability, poverty, and violence within China.¹³ In the United States, this influx triggered domestic backlash against the immigrants, who were perceived as job stealers despite their strong work ethic and good conduct, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—the first major federal law to restrict immigration based explicitly on ethnicity.¹⁴ The legislation imposed a ten-year ban on Chinese laborers entering the US and barred them from obtaining citizenship.¹⁵ Though later repealed in 1943, under wartime exigencies and diplomatic necessity, the act institutionalized anti-Chinese sentiment for generations.¹⁶

These restrictions redirected many Chinese migrants southward, with Mexico emerging as a key alternative destination. Mexican officials capitalized on this shift, encouraging Chinese immigration to meet the nation's growing labor demands. The formalization of bilateral ties followed with the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation in 1899, which laid the groundwork for regularized diplomacy, trade, and travel.¹⁷ The establishment of Mexico's first legation in Beijing in 1904 marked a turning point, signaling mutual recognition and state-level cooperation.¹⁸

While the *Porfiriato*¹⁹ (1876–1911) officially rejected xenophobia toward Chinese immigrants,²⁰ anti-Chinese sentiment nonetheless persisted across Mexican society for decades.²¹ Much of this hostility stemmed from labor competition, as

¹¹ Robert H. Duncan, "The Chinese and the Economic Development of Northern Baja California, 1889–1929," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 74, no. 4 (1994), 617, <https://doi.org/>.

¹² Duncan, "The Chinese and the Economic Development," 617.

¹³ Yareli Castro Sevilla, "Reflections on Chinese Mexican Living Archives: Genealogies of Resistance," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, 20 April 2023, <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/>.

¹⁴ David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 12th ed., vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 674, 692.

¹⁵ "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)," National Archives, 17 January 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/>.

¹⁶ Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "Chinese Exclusion Act Repeal, 1943," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, <https://history.state.gov/>.

¹⁷ Duncan, "The Chinese and the Economic Development," 617.

¹⁸ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), *Manual de Organización Específico de la Embajada de México en la República Popular China* [Specific Organization Manual of the Embassy of Mexico in the People's Republic of China] (Mexico City: SRE, n.d.), 5, <https://sre.gob.mx/>.

¹⁹ The *Porfiriato* was the name used to label the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz.

²⁰ "Mexico During the Porfiriato," The Mexican Revolution and the United States Exhibition, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/>.

²¹ Joshua Charles Walker, "Immigrants at Home: Revolution, Nationalism, and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Mexico, 1910–1935" (senior honors thesis, The Ohio State University, 2008), 5.

American- and British-owned railroad companies operating in Mexico routinely recruited Chinese workers and paid them significantly less than their Mexican counterparts.²² This wage disparity fueled resentment among native laborers and provided fertile ground for nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric. The portrayal of Chinese migrants as “job stealers” became a recurring theme in both political discourse and popular sentiment.²³

This prejudice coalesced into a broader ideological campaign known as *El Movimiento Antichino* (1871–1934), which framed anti-Chinese attitudes within a nationalist context. Mexican elites often exploited this movement to forge unity among disparate factions by casting Chinese migrants as a common threat to national identity, labor rights, and economic stability.²⁴ During the revolutionary period, these sentiments escalated into acts of mass violence.

One of the most egregious examples occurred during the presidency of Francisco I. Madero. In May 1911, Maderista forces²⁵ conducted the Torreón Massacre, in which 303 Chinese residents were murdered and their properties looted and destroyed.²⁶ The violence was not random—it reflected a deliberate expression of ethnic scapegoating amid revolutionary upheaval. Contemporary press reports captured the brutality of the event. One account noted that “17 Chinese were murdered after firing on revolutionaries who approached their work area.”²⁷ Another described how a Chinese-owned hotel, a railroad station, and several other buildings were burned to the ground.²⁸

Historian Daniel R. Jennings has documented the massacre in a digital repository that catalogs more than 17 primary sources, offering critical insight into the scale, nature, and historical documentation of this atrocity. His work underscores

²² José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, *El movimiento antichino en México (1871–1934): problemas del racismo y del nacionalismo durante la Revolución Mexicana* (Tesis de Licenciatura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988), 76, <https://ru.dgb.unam.mx/jspui/bitstream/20.500.14330/TES01000079575/3/0079575.pdf>.

²³ Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), “Un análisis de la migración china a México a través de documentos que el AGN resguarda,” *Gobierno de México*, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://www.gob.mx/agn/articulos/un-analisis-de-la-migracion-china-a-mexico-a-traves-de-documentos-que-el-agnresguarda>.

²⁴ José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, *El movimiento antichino en México (1871–1934): problemas del racismo y del nacionalismo durante la Revolución Mexicana* [The Anti-Chinese Movement in Mexico (1871–1934): Problems of Racism and Nationalism during the Mexican Revolution] (licenciatura thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988), 75–76, <https://ru.dgb.unam.mx/>.

²⁵ The term *maderistas* refers to Francisco I. Madero’s supporters.

²⁶ “El Museo Arocena abre la exposición Memorial. La matanza de chinos en Torreón (1911)” [The Arocena Museum Opens the Exhibition Memorial: The Massacre of Chinese in Torreón (1911)], Secretaría de Cultura, Gobierno de México, 17 May 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/>.

²⁷ Raul A. Reyes, “Mexican Chinese Superhero Brings Forgotten Part of History Alive,” *NBC News*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.

²⁸ Reyes, “Mexican Chinese Superhero.”

the importance of integrating archival material into the broader analysis of Sino-Mexican relations and the systemic nature of anti-Chinese violence in early twentieth-century Mexico.²⁹

The Twentieth Century and the Emergence of the PRC

The early twentieth century marked a period of profound instability for both China and Mexico, with diplomatic relationships shaped by revolution, migration, and shifting global alliances. In October 1911, Chinese nationalists overthrew the Qing Dynasty, ending centuries of imperial rule and establishing the Republic of China.³⁰ This upheaval reverberated globally—not only as a pivotal political transition but as a catalyst for migration and economic realignment.

Mexican–Chinese trade relations already had deep historical roots by this time. The Mexican silver dollar, long a staple of Chinese commerce, served as a de facto global currency and symbolized the interconnectedness of the two nations within the broader framework of global trade.³¹ As political uncertainty deepened in China, economic ties and existing migration channels fueled continued Chinese diaspora movement to Mexico—particularly from Guangdong Province and the Pearl River Delta region.³² This migration was largely Cantonese in origin and would shape the cultural and demographic composition of Chinese communities in Mexico well into the modern era.³³

Despite this economic and migratory connection, anti-Chinese sentiment persisted in Mexico through the mid-1930s, as *El Movimiento Antichino* continued to frame Chinese communities as economic and cultural outsiders. In the 1940s, as China's civil war intensified and the global order reconfigured during and after World War II, Mexico aligned itself with the Chinese Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek and maintained a resolute anticommunist stance. Diplomatic recognition of the CCP's claims over China remained off the table, as Mexico prioritized alignment with the United States during the early Cold War. Bilateral cooperation between

²⁹ Daniel R. Jennings, “La Matanza: The 1911 Massacre of Chinese in Torreón, Mexico,” n.d., <https://danielrjennings.org/>.

³⁰ Office of the Historian, US Department of State, “The Chinese Revolution of 1911,” *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, <https://history.state.gov/>.

³¹ Peter Gordon, “The Silver Way Explains How the Old Mexican Dollar Changed the World,” *National Interest*, 23 May 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

³² Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 1–11, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

³³ Fredy González, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 17–18.

Mexico and the United States expanded significantly during this period, bolstered by wartime solidarity and a shared opposition to communist expansion.

Following Cuba's lead in 1960, Mexico became the second Latin American nation to recognize PRC.³⁴ Yet, until 1971, Mexico maintained a dual-track diplomatic posture—officially recognizing the PRC while tacitly supporting the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and Taiwan.³⁵ During this period, the Mexican government even prosecuted local sympathizers of the communist regime, viewing them as potential security threats.³⁶ Over time, however, the rise of leftist currents within Mexican politics catalyzed a diplomatic realignment. This ideological shift culminated in a pivotal moment: Mexico's formal recognition of the PRC, marking a decisive turn in bilateral relations and signaling Mexico's intent to assert greater autonomy in its foreign policy.

On 14 February 1972, Mexico formally established diplomatic relations with the PRC, marking a critical inflection point in Sino-Mexican relations. President Luis Echeverría, a left-leaning nationalist, soon followed with an official visit to Beijing—setting a precedent that future Mexican presidents would emulate.³⁷ Echeverría's outreach to the PRC and Cuba was part of a broader strategy to assert Mexico's leadership within the Non-Aligned Movement and the Global South. His foreign policy sought to balance cordial ties with the United States while resisting what many in the region perceived as US economic imperialism. A contemporary newspaper captured the moment: "Fidel Castro and over half a million Cubans gave President Luis Echeverría Álvarez of Mexico a tumultuous welcome in the streets of Havana today. It was the first meeting between the two men."³⁸ The visit symbolized Mexico's pivot toward a more independent foreign policy, one that embraced ideological plurality and strategic diversification.³⁹

The normalization of ties with Beijing set in motion a broader regional trend. Mexico's recognition of the PRC catalyzed a diplomatic domino effect, encouraging

³⁴ Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Cuba, *Declaración Conjunta entre la República Popular China y la República de Cuba sobre la Profundización de las Relaciones Binacionales en la Nueva Era* [Joint Declaration... on the Deepening of Binational Relations in the New Era], 25 November 2022, <https://cubaminrex.cu/>.

³⁵ Eugenio Anguiano, "Las vinculaciones de México con China y Estados Unidos" [Mexico's Links with China and the United States], *Economía UNAM* 16, no. 46 (January–April 2019), <https://doi.org/>.

³⁶ Anguiano, "Las vinculaciones de México."

³⁷ "Relación Política" [Political Relationship], Embajada de México en China, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 29 September 2021, <https://embamex.sre.gob.mx/>.

³⁸ James Reston, "Cubans Acclaim Mexican Leader: 500,000 Greet Echeverría at Start of Visit," *New York Times*, 18 August 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

³⁹ Office of the Historian, US Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, October 10, 1974," Document 48, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–11, Part 1, Documents on Mexico; Central America; and the Caribbean, 1973–1976*, <https://history.state.gov/>.

other Latin American nations to reevaluate their China policies. Over the next three decades, Sino-Mexican relations deepened significantly. From the 1970s through the early 2000s, bilateral ties were marked by high-level exchanges, trade expansion, and sectoral cooperation. Notably, in 1990, Chinese President Yang Shangkun made the first official visit by a Chinese head of state to Mexico—underscoring Beijing’s growing interest in Latin America as a strategic partner.

By the turn of the century, bilateral trade had reached USD 1.8236 billion, accompanied by cooperative agreements in science, technology, and culture.⁴⁰ This period of steady engagement laid the groundwork for the next phase in Sino-Mexican relations—one increasingly defined not only by economic partnership but also by strategic competition within the broader context of US–China rivalry in the Western Hemisphere.

Sino-Mexican Trade in the Digital Age

The early 2000s were marked by growing Mexican frustration over a deepening trade imbalance with the PRC. To contextualize this economic dynamic, it is important to consider the 1994 ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NAFTA aimed to eliminate tariff and nontariff barriers to trade and investment among the three countries, positioning Mexico as a competitive exporter within the Western Hemisphere.⁴¹ However, the PRC’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 accelerated its global trade competitiveness, largely through low-cost manufacturing, which in turn displaced Mexico’s market share and undercut its trade efforts.⁴²

In 2005, a Mexican congressional report criticized the growing asymmetry in bilateral trade. The report detailed how China employed protectionist measures—such as tariffs and nontransparent trade barriers—to its advantage, resulting in a staggering USD 14 billion trade deficit for Mexico.⁴³ While Mexico viewed the imbalance as exploitative, the PRC remained focused on its long-term strategic objectives, including diplomatic expansion, economic development, and global influence.

Chinese diplomatic documents, including transcripts from President Hu Jintao’s state visit to Mexico on 11 September 2005, reinforced Beijing’s commitment to

⁴⁰ *Declaración Conjunta entre la República Popular China y la República de Cuba sobre la Profundización de las Relaciones Binacionales en la Nueva Era*, 25 November 2022, <https://cubaminrex.cu/>.

⁴¹ “North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA),” *Federal Register*, <https://www.federalregister.gov/>.

⁴² Kevin P. Gallagher, “NAFTA’s Uninvited Guest: China and the Disintegration of North American Trade,” Global Development Policy Center, Boston University, 27 June 2014, <https://www.bu.edu/>.

⁴³ Centro de Estudios de las Finanzas Públicas, *México–China: Relaciones desiguales, retos y oportunidades para México* [Mexico–China: Unequal Relations, Challenges and Opportunities for Mexico] (Mexico City: H. Cámara de Diputados, 2005), 12, <https://www.cefp.gob.mx/>.

deepening bilateral ties. During his address to the Mexican Congress, President Hu emphasized the importance of mutual benefit, shared development, and expanded cooperation.⁴⁴

This evolving relationship—encompassing migration, labor, diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange—sets the stage for further analysis of Sino-Mexican military engagement and security cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. Understanding this progression is essential for grasping the broader implications of PRC influence in Mexico and could inform US policy makers as they formulate strategies to address potential future conflicts with China.

Sino-Mexican Security Cooperation

Although trade and diplomacy have long shaped the public narrative of Sino-Mexican relations, a more consequential development has unfolded behind the scenes: the gradual deepening of security cooperation. What began as symbolic commitments to nonproliferation has evolved into a layered partnership involving military education exchanges, cyber cooperation, and infrastructure investments with dual-use capabilities. This section traces the trajectory of that evolution, illustrating how the PRC has used economic leverage and diplomatic goodwill to insert itself into Mexico's security architecture—raising urgent questions about sovereignty, regional alignment, and the erosion of US strategic primacy in the Western Hemisphere.

Strategic Agreements

Sino-Mexican security cooperation can be traced to 1973, rooted in the shared objective of nuclear nonproliferation. Mexico had long championed such efforts, emerging as a regional leader in the 1960s. In 1967, Mexico joined 32 other Latin American and Caribbean nations in signing the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which established the world's first Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ).⁴⁵ The PRC, along with the United States, France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, later signed and ratified Protocol II of the treaty, committing not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the signatories of the NWFZ.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Relaciones entre China y México" [Relations between China and Mexico], Embajada de la República Popular China en México, 15 September 2005, <http://mx.china-embassy.gov.cn/>.

⁴⁵ "14 de febrero de 1967: Firma del Tratado de Tlatelolco" [February 14, 1967: Signing of the Treaty of Tlatelolco], Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Nucleares (ININ), Gobierno de México, 14 February 1967, <https://www.gob.mx/>.

⁴⁶ "Protocols to Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaties," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/>.

While largely symbolic in its early stages, this cooperation laid the groundwork for future security engagement. In the context of rising Sino–American competition, the prospect of PRC–Mexico security collaboration has taken on far greater strategic significance. Should tensions escalate into open conflict, Mexico’s proximity to the US homeland would render any security alignment with the PRC a matter of grave concern in Washington.

A survey of the official archives of both countries—the foreign ministries of the PRC and Mexico, the PRC’s Ministry of National Defense (MND), and Mexico’s Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA)—reveals a notable absence of formal bilateral security or military agreements between 1990 and 2005. Nor do these sources indicate frequent military-to-military engagement during that period. Rather, the relationship during those years appeared publicly centered on diplomatic formalities and the expansion of ties in trade, education, scientific research, and cultural exchange.

This posture began to shift after 2005, as the PRC embraced a more assertive approach to defense policy and global power projection. Two key documents now undergird the modern Sino–Mexican relationship: the 2008 Bilateral Investment Treaty and the 2013 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). While neither agreement explicitly addresses military or security cooperation, both provide structural frameworks that facilitate strategic convergence.

The 2008 Bilateral Investment Treaty established the legal scaffolding for deepened economic engagement. In practical terms, it signaled to Beijing and Mexico City that mutual investment was not only desirable but protected under international legal norms. That foundation proved fertile ground for the CSP five years later. A transcript of high-level talks between Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto and PRC president Xi Jinping reveals the ideological tone of the partnership. Xi expressed “the Chinese and Mexican peoples share a natural feeling of closeness for both the countries are with ancient civilizations and a glorious history of fighting bravely for national independence and liberation.”⁴⁷ Beneath the language of cultural kinship lies a calculated strategy to align with Mexico through shared narratives of post-colonial sovereignty and historical resilience.

The CSP itself encompasses four principal objectives: (1) strengthening strategic bilateral relations; (2) enhancing practical cooperation; (3) expanding socio-cultural exchanges; and (4) coordinating multilateral affairs.⁴⁸ Each of these categories serves

⁴⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto: Two Heads of State Announce Upgrading China–Mexico Relationship to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” 5 June 2013. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, “President Xi Jinping Holds Talks.”

as a potential conduit for expanding the agreement into the defense and security domain. These categories provide ample aperture for expanding the CSP into the security and military realms. The framework is sufficiently broad to permit future developments in joint training, intelligence sharing, and even defense technology collaboration under the guise of civilian infrastructure or capacity-building programs.

The PRC launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, extending a formal invitation to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018. Although Mexico has declined to join the BRI formally, it has nonetheless cultivated a growing security relationship with China. This includes collaboration in areas such as education, scholarship programs, information technology, and communications—sectors with inherent dual-use potential. These activities are not isolated to diplomatic corridors; they have been operationalized in major urban centers, including Mexico City, Monterrey, and Chihuahua.

China's strategic ambition became increasingly apparent in a 2025 briefing to the European Parliament, which outlined Beijing's intent to expand its military ties across Latin America through professional military education (PME).⁴⁹ This diplomatic campaign reflects a broader People's Liberation Army (PLA) strategy: to internationalize its military influence by cultivating elites in foreign defense establishments.

Chinese military diplomacy underscores the PRC's strategic emphasis on professionalizing its armed forces through international partnerships, including with Mexico. In 2013, the PLA initiated a service academy exchange program involving 20 officers from various countries, Mexico among them. This initiative was anchored in two premier institutions—the PLA National Defense University and the College of Defense Studies in Beijing—both known for cultivating foreign military elites in subjects ranging from international security and diplomacy to political-military affairs. While the PRC's MND archives highlight joint exercises and peacekeeping operations in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, they remain conspicuously silent on comparable activities in Latin America.⁵⁰ This absence, however, should not be mistaken for disinterest; rather, it reflects a deliberate, phased approach to expanding influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Exploring New Frontiers

Since 2015, Mexico has cooperated with the PRC-led Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), a multilateral entity that includes ten member

⁴⁹ *China's Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America: Opportunities and Challenges*, EPRS/BRIE(2025)769504 (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2025), 4, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/>.

⁵⁰ "Overseas Operations," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

states and rotates its leadership. APSCO operates under the veneer of peaceful space collaboration, but its activities carry broader strategic implications. The US Department of Defense's *2024 Annual Report to Congress* identifies APSCO as a vehicle through which the PRC leverages space surveillance infrastructure and strengthens data-sharing networks—both critical components of modern space architecture resilience.⁵¹ In this domain, space becomes not only a scientific frontier but also a contested theater of strategic competition.

China's outreach to Mexico has also included soft-power initiatives in the military medical sphere. The deployment of the *Peace Ark* hospital ship, a high-profile example of military medicine diplomacy, included port calls in Mexico. While framed as humanitarian goodwill, such visits offer China a low-risk means of expanding its defense diplomacy footprint in the Western Hemisphere.

Additional indicators of deepening Sino-Mexican defense ties emerged in 2016, when Mexico's SEDENA and the Navy (SEMAR) traveled to Beijing to promote bilateral cooperation in cybersecurity and defense policy.⁵² According to public records, China engaged Mexico in at least 18 documented military-diplomatic interactions between 2003 and 2016—a modest but noteworthy figure, signaling deliberate, long-term cultivation of security relations.⁵³

China's interest in Mexico is not confined to defense diplomacy. It has also made strategic investments in the energy and infrastructure sectors—especially near maritime chokepoints critical to US and global supply chains. A case in point is the Trans-Isthmus Railroad project, an ambitious Mexican initiative designed to serve as an overland alternative to the Panama Canal. With access points on both the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Coast, the project could eventually redirect shipping routes and challenge traditional logistical hubs. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and the Bank of China have committed approximately USD 600 million to this endeavor, while Chinese state-owned enterprises—including the China Railway Construction Corporation and the China Communications Construction Company—have played direct roles in its development.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 18 December 2024), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁵² “Los Secretarios de la Defensa Nacional y de Marina Realizan una Gira de Trabajo por la República Popular de China” [The Secretaries of National Defense and of the Navy Conduct a Working Tour of the People's Republic of China], Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA), Gobierno de México, 21 June 2019, <https://www.gob.mx/>.

⁵³ John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, China Strategic Perspectives 13 (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2018), <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/>.

⁵⁴ R. Evan Ellis, “Mexico Targeted: CCP Economic Influence in Mexico,” *The Watch*, 7 May 2025, <https://thewatch-journal.com/>.

Parallel to these infrastructure efforts, Beijing employs a layered strategy to transfer technology to Mexico. Although there is no publicly available evidence of direct military technology transfers between the PLA and Mexican armed forces, the PRC relies on indirect pathways—such as corporate investment and talent recruitment programs—to seed dual-use capabilities abroad. These efforts align closely with the CCP’s Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy, which aims to fully modernize the PLA by 2049. According to official Chinese policy statements, the MCF strategy entails systematically reorganizing the national science and technology enterprise to ensure all civilian innovation contributes to both economic and military objectives. As one PRC white paper bluntly states, the CCP is acquiring “the intellectual property, key research, and technological advances of the world’s citizens, researchers, scholars, and private industry in order to advance the CCP’s military aims.”⁵⁵

In this context, the PRC’s commercial expansion into Mexico—particularly through firms such as Huawei and China United Network Communications Group (Unicom)—takes on greater strategic significance.⁵⁶ These companies, which maintain operations in cities such as Mexico City and Querétaro, serve not only as telecommunications providers but also as potential enablers of surveillance and cyber dominance aligned with CCP objectives.⁵⁷

Strategic Competition

Viewed through the lens of logistics and supply chain security, Sino-Mexican cooperation reveals a deliberate Chinese effort to counterbalance US regional influence. The PRC’s strategy includes investments in critical sectors such as lithium extraction in Sonora, port management in Veracruz, Ensenada, Manzanillo, and Michoacán, and expansion into digital infrastructure, telecommunications, and security technologies.⁵⁸ These initiatives are not scattershot; they represent a calculated approach to embed Chinese influence within nodes vital to North American trade and connectivity.

Beyond formal investments, the PRC has also engaged with Mexican law enforcement agencies under the banner of combating transnational crime. According

⁵⁵ “Military-Civil Fusion and the People’s Republic of China,” US Department of State, 2017–2021 Archive, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/>.

⁵⁶ Unicom recently obtained a 30-year permit to operate in Mexico.

⁵⁷ “One Chinese Company Permitted to Operate in Mexico,” *1Route* (blog), June 2023, <https://www.1route.com/>.

⁵⁸ R. Evan Ellis, *Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee: China’s Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., 31 March 2022, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/>.

to documents from the US Department of Justice, Chinese and Mexican officials have cooperated—at least nominally—to target Chinese underground banking networks and curtail the financial operations of the Sinaloa Cartel. These criminal syndicates have facilitated the laundering of millions of dollars and trafficked fentanyl, ecstasy, cocaine, and methamphetamines into the United States.⁵⁹ Whether these joint efforts reflect genuine partnership or tactical obfuscation remains subject to scrutiny.

These security engagements dovetail with Beijing's broader foreign policy goals. The PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) explicitly prioritizes safeguarding "national sovereignty, security and interests on behalf of the state" as the core mission of its diplomatic apparatus.⁶⁰ China's defense white papers echo the same theme: development and security are two sides of the same coin.

The PRC's Defense Attaché Office in Mexico provides a formal mechanism for advancing these interests. According to official Chinese sources, the office executes five primary functions: maintaining diplomatic contact with the Mexican armed forces; coordinating bilateral defense engagements; participating in multilateral defense diplomacy; promoting China's defense modernization achievements; and fostering military-to-military rapport with its Mexican counterparts.⁶¹ Taken together, these functions constitute a persistent institutional presence within Mexico's defense ecosystem—quiet but significant.

This sustained military-diplomatic engagement, undergirded by a latticework of bilateral agreements, suggests that the PRC's presence in Mexico is not a transient phenomenon. Barring a dramatic shift in geopolitical alignments or foreign policy posture, the Sino-Mexican security partnership is likely to persist—and deepen—as China continues to challenge the US-led order in the Western Hemisphere.

More substantively, the PRC cultivates long-term defense partnerships through recurring exchanges between senior military officials. It also opens access to its premier defense education institutions—including the China Defense Institute, Army Command College, Navy Command School, and Naval Research Institute—to officers from Mexico and other Latin American nations. These training oppor-

⁵⁹ "Federal Indictment Alleges Alliance Between Sinaloa Cartel and Money Launderers Linked to Chinese Underground Banking" (press release, US Department of Justice, 28 March 2024), <https://www.justice.gov/>.

⁶⁰ "Organization and Responsibilities," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

⁶¹ "Agregaduría de Defensa" [Defense Attaché], Embajada de la República Popular China en los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 8 March 2022, <http://mx.china-embassy.gov.cn/>.

tunities serve not only to build goodwill but also to shape a new generation of regional military elites with exposure to Chinese doctrine, systems, and strategic worldview.⁶²

Simultaneously, the PRC has constructed a layered information operations presence in Mexico. It promotes CCP narratives through multiple vectors: controlling key elements of communications infrastructure, amplifying state-sponsored propaganda, engaging in cyber operations, and advancing censorship. By endorsing favorable views of the PRC while suppressing dissenting perspectives, Beijing seeks to dominate the narrative space.

Freedom House, a bipartisan American organization founded in 1941 to defend democratic values and combat authoritarianism, has highlighted Beijing's influence efforts in Latin America. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC exploited US delays in vaccine development and personal protective equipment (PPE) distribution to project itself as a more reliable partner. It exported over one million doses of Sinovac vaccine to Mexico and delivered significant quantities of PPE—framing this aid as evidence of Chinese solidarity.⁶³ In contrast, the United States appeared reactive and internally focused, ceding ground in the realm of soft power.

Chinese state-owned and affiliated entities have cemented their presence in Mexico's digital ecosystem. Technology firms such as Huawei—a global leader in 5G infrastructure⁶⁴—alongside TikTok,⁶⁵ Xinhua News Agency, and China Global Television Network, have created conduits for PRC influence. Through these platforms, Beijing not only amplifies CCP-friendly messaging but also exerts control over the content environment, removing material deemed harmful to its image or interests.⁶⁶

Cyber espionage forms another critical facet of Beijing's influence architecture. According to Google's threat intelligence team, from 2020 through the second quarter of 2024, Chinese cyber actors conducted sustained espionage operations targeting Mexican government officials and digital infrastructure. The PRC accounted for roughly one-third of all state-backed phishing⁶⁷ campaigns in Mexico

⁶² Gabriel Marcella, "China's Military Activity in Latin America," *Americas Quarterly*, 20 January 2012, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/>.

⁶³ "The Government of Mexico Receives 800,000 Doses of the Sinovac COVID19 Vaccine," Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 27 February 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/>; and Ellie Young and Jessica Ludwig, "Beijing's Global Media Influence Efforts in Mexico," *Freedom House*, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

⁶⁴ Matthew Bey, "Huawei's Success Puts It in Washington's Sights," *Stratfor Worldview*, 28 June 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/>.

⁶⁵ TikTok is one of the most popular apps downloaded in Mexico.

⁶⁶ Young and Ludwig, "Beijing's Global Media Influence: Mexico."

⁶⁷ The *Oxford Dictionary* defines *phishing* as "the fraudulent practice of sending emails or other messages purporting to be from reputable companies in order to induce individuals to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers."

during that period—making it the leading foreign actor in this domain.⁶⁸ In one telling episode, the Chinese embassy reportedly pressured Mexican institutions to cancel events critical of CCP policies, further underscoring the PRC's willingness to leverage diplomatic weight to suppress unfavorable discourse.⁶⁹



Figure 2. PRC's footprint in Mexico. This image illustrates the PRC's engagements, including military cooperation, technology, space, communications, logistics, infrastructure, and training collaboration. This map is not all-inclusive. (Adapted from a template on Wikimedia Commons. Title, legend, and icons added by the author.)⁷⁰

The PRC's activities in Mexico provide a revealing case study in strategic competition within the Western Hemisphere. This bilateral relationship offers a window into China's broader security, intelligence, and influence strategies—many of which could be employed in a future confrontation with the United States. Given that Mexico is the US's most significant trading partner in the hemisphere, the strategic implications are profound.

⁶⁸ Aurora Blum and Kelli Vanderlee, "Insights on Cyber Threats Targeting Users and Enterprises in Mexico," *Google Cloud Blog*, 10 September 2024, <https://cloud.google.com/>.

⁶⁹ Young and Ludwig, "Beijing's Global Media Influence: Mexico."

⁷⁰ "Political Divisions of Mexico," Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by Giggette, last modified 17 July 2024, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and GNU Free Documentation License 1.2 or later, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>.

The next section shifts focus to Brazil—South America’s largest country and another cornerstone of US regional strategy.

Sino-Brazilian Relations History

The trajectory of Sino-Brazilian relations stretches across centuries, shaped by imperial commerce, colonial legacies, and shifting global power dynamics. From Portuguese expansion in East Asia to the migration of Chinese laborers to Brazil’s plantations, the two nations have long been connected—if indirectly—by the geopolitical currents of empire. Yet it is in the post–Cold War period that their bilateral relationship has matured into a strategic partnership with global ramifications. As South America’s largest economy and a key geopolitical actor, Brazil offers the PRC a vital entry point into the Western Hemisphere. Understanding this relationship requires a look at its historical foundations, which continue to inform Beijing’s ambitions in Latin America and Brazil’s evolving role on the global stage.

Imperial Crosscurrents: Portugal, Macau, and the Brazilian Connection

Sino-Brazilian ties are rooted not in direct imperial conquest but in the ripple effects of European colonialism. In 1535, Portuguese navigators established a presence in Macau—an outpost that would later serve as a bridge between China and Lusophone nations.⁷¹ Over the next several centuries, the Portuguese solidified their control, culminating in de facto colonial rule after China’s defeat in the First Opium War in the 1840s. The resulting power vacuum and internal chaos in China allowed Lisbon to entrench itself further in the region.⁷²

⁷¹ “Resumption by China of the Exercise of Sovereignty over Macao,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 31 May 2024, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

⁷² “Resumption by China... over Macao,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

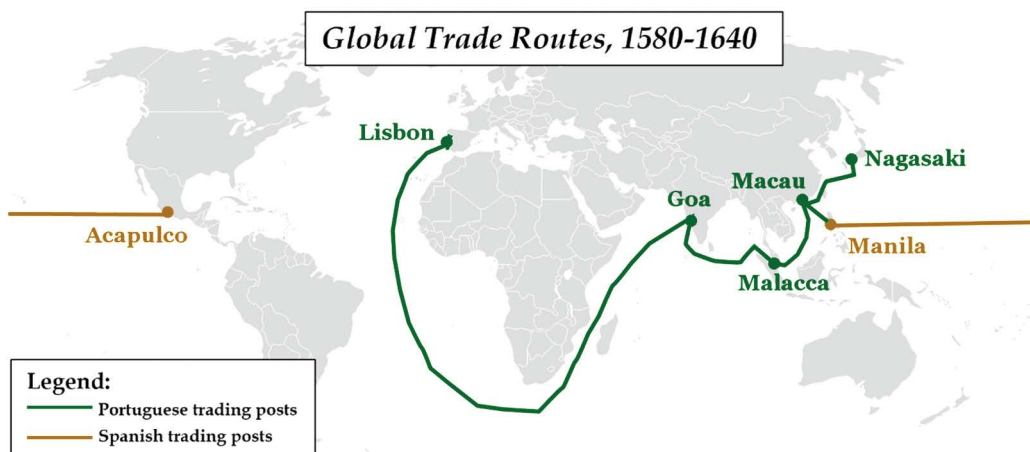


Figure 3. Global Trade Routes, 1580–1640. This image illustrates the connection between the Portuguese and the Chinese (via Macau), which eventually permeated into Brazil. (Adapted from a template on Wikimedia Commons. Title, legend, and icons added by the author.)⁷³

Brazil entered this equation through the dynamics of trade and migration. In the mid-nineteenth century, a wave of Chinese migrants—originating from Macau and Hong Kong—began arriving in Brazil, drawn by economic opportunities and facilitated by a shared Portuguese linguistic and administrative framework.⁷⁴ The migration accelerated following the 1887 Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Portugal and China, which formalized Portugal’s “perpetual occupation” of Macau.⁷⁵ This arrangement enabled relatively seamless movement of labor from East Asia to Brazil’s agricultural frontier.⁷⁶

For more than a century, Macau served as the connective tissue linking China and Brazil through commerce, language, and shared imperial legacy. That chapter formally closed in 1999, when Portugal returned Macau to Chinese sovereignty under a joint declaration with the PRC. Yet the legacy of Portuguese imperialism,

⁷³ “Map of Macau Trade Routes,” Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by Dr. Covert, last modified 25 May 2018, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and GNU Free Documentation License 1.2 or later, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>.

⁷⁴ Jerry Feng, “Chinese Brazilians: A Story of Exploitation but Successful Opposition,” *China Hands Magazine*, 10 March 2025, <https://chinahandsmagazine.org/>.

⁷⁵ “Mr. Denby to Mr. Bayard, Peking, June 21, 1888,” Document 216, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, With the Annual Message of the President, December 3, 1888, Part I* (Washington: GPO, 1889), <https://history.state.gov/>.

⁷⁶ Ana Paulina Lee, *Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation, and Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), <https://www.sup.org/>.

and its unintended facilitation of Sino-Brazilian connectivity, remains a critical backdrop to the current strategic alignment.⁷⁷

Strangers in a Strange Land: The Chinese Diaspora and the Politics of Indentured Labor

The arrival of Chinese migrants in Brazil coincided with a tumultuous period of economic restructuring and racial anxiety in Latin America. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, countries such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil abolished slavery—Brazil doing so in 1888, making it the last nation in the Western Hemisphere to do so. The end of slavery created a profound labor vacuum, especially in Brazil's lucrative agricultural sectors, prompting the nation's Portuguese elite to seek alternative forms of exploitable labor.

In response, the Brazilian government turned to Chinese laborers, recruiting them under the guise of indentured servitude to work primarily in tea and coffee cultivation. These migrants, however, entered a society still gripped by the racial hierarchies of the slaveholding era. Deep-seated prejudice shaped the policies and public discourse of the time. Much as fears of racial mixing had animated elite anxieties during the peak of the African slave trade, Chinese immigrants now became targets of similar suspicion.⁷⁸ Brazilian social scientists and political elites voiced alarmist theories about the so-called "Mongolization" of Brazilian society—a reflection of the era's pseudoscientific racism.⁷⁹

Official policy mirrored these sentiments. An 1870 imperial decree—Decree No. 4547—established the conditions for importing Chinese laborers, including ten-year contracts designed to bind them to plantation work.⁸⁰ Yet opposition quickly mounted. Many Brazilians, particularly from the dominant white elite, feared that Chinese migrants would integrate racially with the existing population. Debates within the *Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil* (Chamber of Deputies) revealed the extent to which racial ideology, not just economic calculus, governed immigration policy.

In 1890, just two years after abolition, Brazil codified its racial preferences in Decree No. 528, Article 1, which effectively barred immigration from Africa and Asia unless explicitly authorized by the *Congresso Nacional do Brasil* (National

⁷⁷ "Resumption by China... over Macao," Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁷⁸ Feng, "Chinese Brazilians."

⁷⁹ Sales Augusto dos Santos and Laurence Hallewell, "Historical Roots of the 'Whitening' of Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 29, no. 1 (January 2002), 67, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁸⁰ Decreto No. 4.547, de 9 de Julho de 1870 [Decree No. 4,547 of July 9, 1870], *Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil*, <https://www2.camara.leg.br/>.

Congress).⁸¹ Although Chinese laborers were initially seen as a solution to post-emancipation labor shortages, they were ultimately deemed racially undesirable.

Instead, Brazil began to court Japanese migrants in the early twentieth century, rationalizing the shift with racial logic. Japanese were perceived as more “white-adjacent” than their Chinese counterparts—“white” versus “yellow” in the vernacular of the period. This marked the institutionalization of Brazil’s *branqueamento* (whitening) policy, a eugenics-adjacent campaign designed to engineer a whiter Brazilian populace through selective immigration and assimilation.⁸² The Chinese, thus, were caught in a complex web of racialized exclusion, economic utility, and geopolitical marginalization.



Figure 4. Chinese migration route to Brazil, 1800s. (By author.)

Diplomatic Growth and Strategic Realignment

Brazil and the PRC formally established diplomatic relations in 1974, marking a pivotal shift in Latin America’s foreign policy orientation amid the Cold War.

⁸¹ Decreto No. 528, de 28 de Junho de 1890 [Decree No. 528 of June 28, 1890], Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil, <https://www2.camara.leg.br/>.

⁸² Feng, “Chinese Brazilians.”

On August 15 of that year, both nations signed the *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil*. The United States Central Intelligence Agency, which monitored the development closely, archived the agreement—now declassified—as part of its broader surveillance of Chinese global outreach.⁸³

According to the *Ministério das Relações Exteriores* (Ministry of Foreign Relations) archives, Brazil opened its embassy in Beijing shortly thereafter, with the PRC reciprocating by establishing an embassy in Brasília.⁸⁴ These foundational steps laid the groundwork for what would become one of the most consequential Sino–Latin American partnerships.

Between 1990 and 2005, Sino–Brazilian ties deepened markedly. In 1993, the two nations elevated their bilateral engagement by signing a strategic partnership agreement, a milestone recorded in the PRC MFA's official documentation.⁸⁵ This period witnessed a dramatic expansion in trade volumes, technological collaboration, and political coordination—reflecting not merely economic alignment but a shared interest in multipolar global governance.

For Beijing, Brazil holds strategic value not only as South America's largest country but also as a gateway to Atlantic maritime routes. The Port of Paranaguá, Brazil's second-largest by volume, offers the PRC a critical logistical node for its global supply chains.⁸⁶ This maritime connectivity, coupled with Brazil's agricultural and resource wealth, aligns squarely with China's ambitions to diversify partnerships, expand influence in the Western Hemisphere, and accelerate the emergence of what Chinese officials term a “just and equitable new international political and economic order”—a direct counterpoint to US-led global primacy.⁸⁷

Sino-Brazilian Security Cooperation

As the PRC expands its global strategic footprint, Brazil has emerged as a key security partner in the Western Hemisphere. What began as symbolic diplomatic overtures has matured into a consequential defense relationship encompassing joint

⁸³ *Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil*, 15 August 1974, <https://www.cia.gov/>.

⁸⁴ “People's Republic of China,” *Ministério das Relações Exteriores*, 7 February 2025, <https://www.gov.br/>.

⁸⁵ “Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu Meets with Brazilian Under Secretary for Asia and Pacific of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Eduardo Paes Saboia,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 31 May 2024, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.

⁸⁶ R. Evan Ellis, “Are Chinese Ports in Latin America Preferred by Organized Crime?,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 10 October 2023, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁸⁷ “China Maintains with Brazil Long-Term and Stable Strategic Partnership Based on Mutual Benefit,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 31 May 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/>.

military training, technology transfer, and space collaboration. Brazil's geopolitical stature—combined with its tradition of strategic autonomy—makes it an ideal interlocutor for Beijing's broader effort to dilute US influence in Latin America. This section outlines the architecture of Sino-Brazilian security cooperation, charting its evolution from foundational agreements to substantive military integration shaping the region's security dynamics.

Strategic Agreements and Institutional Foundations

Sino-Brazilian defense cooperation formally dates back to 1988 with the mutual establishment of Defense Attaché Offices in Beijing and Brasília.⁸⁸ While the 1990–2005 period lacks clear evidence of binding bilateral defense agreements, the two countries intensified military ties in 2004 through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by their respective Ministries of National Defense. This MOU broadened the scope of military collaboration, promoting personnel exchanges and institutional cooperation in key defense areas.⁸⁹

Similarly to the Sino-Mexican security cooperation relations, after 2005, consistent with the PRC's global pivot beyond Asia, China pursued deeper security relationships across Latin America. Two landmark agreements—the 2011 *Defense Cooperation Agreement* and its 2014 *Complementary Protocol*—serve as the bedrock of contemporary Sino-Brazilian military engagement.

According to the *Ministério das Relações Exteriores* (Ministry of Foreign Relations) archives, the 2011 agreement institutionalized a framework for bilateral military cooperation across a broad spectrum of areas. It emphasized the following domains:

1. Exchange of experience and cooperation in defence products and services and related management, research, procurement, usage and maintenance;
2. Exchange of experience in military operations including UN peacekeeping operations;
3. Exchange of expertise and experience in defence technological areas;
4. Military education and training, joint military exercises, as well as exchange of information related to those issues;
5. Military medicine;

⁸⁸ Danilo Marcondes and Pedro Henrique Batista Barbosa, "Brazil-China Defense Cooperation: A Strategic Partnership in the Making?," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 17, no. 2 (July 2018), 147, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

⁸⁹ Alexandro de Araujo Baptista, "The Influence of China in Brazil: How It Can Change Military Cooperation Between Brazil and the United States" (master's thesis, Marine Corps University, 2021), 18.

6. Humanitarian assistance;
7. Security in important events as well as exchange of information related to this issue;
8. Other fields of defence that may be of mutual interest.⁹⁰

The 2014 *Complementary Protocol* extended these commitments by addressing capability gaps in cybersecurity, telecommunications, and satellite technology. It marked a strategic deepening of cooperation in sensitive, dual-use technologies—areas with both civilian and military implications.⁹¹

Together, these agreements reveal a methodical Chinese approach to building long-term defense ties with Brazil, centered on interoperability, information exchange, and co-development. For Beijing, this partnership is not merely about regional engagement—it is a deliberate step toward cultivating hemispheric alliances that dilute Washington's traditional sphere of influence.

Professionalization of the Joint Forces

Over the past quarter century, the Sino-Brazilian defense partnership has evolved from symbolic overtures into substantive military collaboration. A critical dimension of this maturation is the professionalization of joint forces through sustained training, language exchanges, and increasingly complex exercises. Since 2000, the PRC has prioritized bilateral military education with Brazil, laying the foundation for deeper interoperability.

A defining moment occurred in the summer of 2024, when Brazil hosted Operation Formosa, led by the Brazilian Navy.⁹² For the first time in history, the PRC deployed a detachment of marines to South America to participate in a joint military exercise with Brazil.⁹³ This unprecedented move marked a significant expansion of China's expeditionary reach in the Western Hemisphere.

Operation Formosa included military forces from at least 11 countries across five continents, drawing multinational participation and several observer states. Approximately 3,000 Brazilian troops took part, alongside forces from both the PRC and the United States—though notably, US and Chinese units did not engage

⁹⁰ "Signature of Treaties on the Occasion of the President Dilma Rousseff to the Popular Republic of China – Beijing, April 12, 2011" (press release, Government of Brazil, 12 April 2011), <https://www.gov.br/>.

⁹¹ Ana Soliz de Stange, "China and Brazil's Cooperation in the Satellite Sector: Implications for the United States," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 4 (May–June 2023): 121, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁹² This is not related to Taiwan. Formosa is a city located northeast of Brasília in the state of Goiás.

⁹³ Lan Xinzheng, "Military Exercises for Peace," *Beijing Review*, 23 September 2024, <https://www.bjreview.com/>.

in joint training.⁹⁴ The exercise focused on regional security cooperation, emphasizing joint landing and anti-landing operations. These drills enhanced multinational capabilities in interoperability, partner capacity-building, expeditionary logistics, and fire-support coordination.

For Beijing, Operation Formosa likely served a dual purpose. In addition to public diplomacy and defense signaling, it likely provided an opportunity for intelligence collection—specifically on Brazilian–US interactions, tactical training methodologies, communications protocols, and after-action assessments. The presence of Chinese forces on Brazilian soil offered the PRC a rare vantage point into Western Hemisphere military coordination.

Sino-Brazilian naval ties further reflect a pattern of pragmatic, long-term cooperation. The two navies have conducted high-level exchanges and equipment transfers. A notable example is the *Vital de Oliveira*—the first Brazilian naval vessel built in China, underscoring growing defense-industrial collaboration. In 2012, following a catastrophic fire that destroyed all electronic systems at Brazil’s Antarctic Navy Base, the China Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) stepped in to supply replacement systems—further solidifying China’s role as a dependable defense technology partner.⁹⁵

Together, these developments point to a deliberate and systematic Chinese effort to build military trust with Brazil, not only as a regional partner but as a potential pillar of Beijing’s broader effort to erode US primacy in Latin America.

Space and Information Domains

An increasingly critical dimension of the Sino-Brazilian partnership lies in their collaboration across the space and information domains. Although space cooperation between the two nations dates back to the 1980s, it was formally institutionalized in 2004 through the *Complementary Protocol to the Framework Agreement* on the peaceful uses of outer space. This agreement launched the China–Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CBERS) program, a joint initiative to develop and operate remote-sensing satellites.⁹⁶

Now progressing toward the launch of their seventh satellite, scheduled for 2028, the CBERS program underscores a durable and expanding partnership in space

⁹⁴ Dodge Billingsley, “Chinese Marines Participate in Brazil’s Military Exercise for the First Time,” *OE Watch* (TRADOC G2 Foreign Military Studies Office) 14, no. 12 (December 2024), <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/>.

⁹⁵ Baptista, “The Influence of China in Brazil,” 18–19.

⁹⁶ *Framework Agreement Between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Cooperation in the Peaceful Applications of Outer Space Science and Technology*, United Nations Treaty Collection, No. 26362, registered 17 October 1988, <https://treaties.un.org/>.

technology. Framed publicly as a tool for “public services and economic development,” CBERS enables shared access to satellite imagery and environmental data.⁹⁷ However, the dual-use nature of space assets raises significant concerns about the intelligence benefits accrued to the PRC. As Dr. Ana Soliz de Stange notes, the CBERS partnership facilitates not only the co-development of satellite platforms but also the strategic sharing of imagery—effectively extending the PRC’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) reach into the Western Hemisphere.⁹⁸

Beyond space, the PRC has invested heavily in shaping the information environment in Brazil. Echoing its strategy in Mexico and elsewhere, Beijing has cultivated media partnerships to propagate CCP narratives. According to Freedom House, “Beijing’s media influence in Brazil is significant and growing.”⁹⁹ The China Media Group (CMG), the CCP’s main state-run broadcaster, has established formal cooperation agreements with major Brazilian outlets, including *Globo*, one of the country’s largest media conglomerates.¹⁰⁰

Programming such as *Mundo China* (“China World”) disseminates state-curated content in Brazilian Portuguese across widely accessible platforms—including YouTube, Facebook, X, and Instagram—presenting what the CCP describes as “a new vision of China for everyone.”¹⁰¹ These efforts serve as force multipliers for Beijing’s public diplomacy while obscuring the regime’s authoritarian underpinnings. Freedom House reports that China’s influence operations in Brazil include the dissemination of state media propaganda, amplification of embassy communications, subsidization of journalism, and targeted outreach to the Chinese diaspora.¹⁰²

Taken together, the space and information lines of effort reflect a coordinated Chinese strategy: to deepen technological entanglement with Brazil while shaping the regional narrative to align with Beijing’s geopolitical interests. This dual-front campaign—rooted in access, influence, and long-term positioning—positions the PRC as a rising power in South America’s strategic ecosystem.

⁹⁷ Zhao Lei, “China, Brazil Make Progress on 7th Satellite: Long-Term Collaboration Offers Benefits of Space Technology to Developing World,” *China Daily*, 19 November 2024, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

⁹⁸ Soliz de Stange, “China and Brazil’s Cooperation in the Satellite Sector.”

⁹⁹ Ellie Young, Sarah Cook, and anonymous, “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022: Brazil,” Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

¹⁰⁰ Pablo Sebastián Morales and Paulo Menechelli, “Mundo China: The Media Partnership Reframing China’s Image in Brazil,” *International Communication Gazette* 85, no. 1 (2023): 63–79, <https://doi.org/>.

¹⁰¹ Mundo China (@mundo_china), X (formerly Twitter), <https://x.com/>.

¹⁰² Young, Cook, and anonymous, “Beijing’s Global Media Influence 2022: Brazil.”

Recent Developments

In May 2025, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva traveled to Beijing to meet with President Xi—a visit that marks a consequential deepening of Sino-Brazilian ties with long-term strategic implications for the Western Hemisphere. During the visit, the two nations signed more than 20 bilateral agreements spanning technology, space, artificial intelligence (AI), and port infrastructure.¹⁰³ These agreements are not mere symbols of goodwill; they establish a durable framework for security-relevant cooperation with provisions intended to last for half a century.

Among the most consequential developments is the joint commitment to establish a Technology Transfer Center between Brazil's Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (*Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Inovação*, or MCTI) and China's Ministry of Science and Technology. In parallel, the MCTI signed a joint declaration of intent with the China National Space Administration to share satellite data with Latin American and Caribbean nations.¹⁰⁴ These moves, framed as scientific cooperation, expand Beijing's technical footprint in the region while offering the PRC an asymmetric edge in regional intelligence gathering and influence projection.

The PRC's strategy is deliberate and multifaceted. In addition to formal technology-sharing frameworks, China continues to leverage joint research and development ventures—including the China–Brazil Joint Laboratory and the CBERS satellite program—as vectors for technology acquisition and influence. Chinese state-backed firms have also poured capital into renewable energy initiatives across the Amazon and Brazil's northeast, sectors that offer both environmental cover and strategic access.

President Lula has actively championed deeper collaboration in AI, explicitly calling for increased data sharing with China. This posture risks opening channels for technological entanglement that could bleed into sensitive domains such as cyber defense, surveillance infrastructure, and intelligence cooperation. China's well-documented use of dual-use technologies, often embedded in commercial partnerships, underscores the national security concerns such integration could invite.

Port infrastructure development is another critical vector of Chinese engagement. Chinese companies have announced major investments in Brazil's port sector and expressed interest in bidding for the Santos–Guarujá Tunnel project—Latin America's first underwater tunnel. Launched by President Lula in February 2025, the project involves more than BRL 6 billion in estimated investments. While

¹⁰³ “Lula Celebrates Results of His Visit to China: ‘Our Relationship Is Very Strategic’,” Government of Brazil, May 2025, <https://www.gov.br/>.

¹⁰⁴ “Lula Celebrates Results of His Visit to China.”

the initiative is positioned as a hallmark of economic modernization, Chinese participation would give the PRC a physical stake in Brazil's maritime logistics—a development with clear strategic overtones.¹⁰⁵

Although Brazil has not formally joined the PRC's BRI, it remains a founding member of the BRICS bloc—established in 2009 with the aim of rebalancing the global economic order. A key BRICS objective is to reduce dependency on the US dollar, a goal that aligns with Beijing's ambition to reshape global financial norms.¹⁰⁶ Since 2010, Chinese investments in Brazil have exceeded USD 72.2 billion.¹⁰⁷ Such capital inflows are not disinterested. Rather, they signal Beijing's intent to secure long-term influence in Latin America—an objective that could become operational in the event of a geopolitical rupture between the PRC and the United States.

¹⁰⁵ “Lula Celebrates Results of His Visit to China.”

¹⁰⁶ Stewart Patrick, “What Is the BRICS Group and Why Is It Expanding?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 December 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ana García et al., *Chinese Investments in Brazil: Investment Data, Public Policies for Investment Facilitation and the Case of the Manaus Industrial Pole* (Rio de Janeiro: BRICS Policy Center, 2023), 6.



Figure 5. The PRC's footprint in Brazil. This image illustrates the PRC's engagements, including military cooperation, technology, space, communications, logistics, infrastructure, and training collaboration. This image is not all-inclusive. (Adapted from a template on Wikimedia Commons. Title, legend, and icons added by the author.)¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ "Blank Map of Brazil with Borders of States (2024)," Wikimedia Commons, uploaded by Vardion, last modified 11 April 2024, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 and GNU Free Documentation License 1.2 or later, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>.

Conclusion

Since 2008, the PRC has expanded its political, diplomatic, economic, and military influence across Latin America—particularly in Mexico and Brazil—posing escalating risks to US national security. Through BRI enticements, massive investment, and targeted bilateral agreements, Beijing advances its trade and strategic objectives while cultivating long-term dependencies. These relationships improve Chinese maritime domain awareness and establish forward logistics nodes that could support deployments in a future US–PRC conflict. China exploits commercial protections to maximize trade advantages while disadvantaging its partners, all under the guise of cooperation. These partnerships show no signs of faltering and will likely deepen over time.

The PRC is also capitalizing on recent US foreign policy shifts emphasizing unilateralism and strategic retrenchment. As Washington pivots inward, China steps forward—positioning itself as a viable, stable partner for Latin America. Its expanding military exchanges, professional development programs, and cultural engagements with Mexico and Brazil not only bolster China’s joint force capabilities but also familiarize it with NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM theaters. The PRC will likely focus its military collaboration on amphibious operations and intelligence collection—doctrines directly applicable to a Taiwan contingency.

The maritime domain will face mounting challenges as the PRC deepens its footprint in Mexican and Brazilian ports. Brazil’s growing collaboration with the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will likely accelerate over the next five to ten years, enhancing the PLAN’s operational proficiency in naval missions relevant to Indo-Pacific theaters, particularly the East and South China Seas.

Despite these developments, longstanding US partnerships with Mexico and Brazil offer strategic advantages. Deep cultural ties and shared democratic values throughout the Western Hemisphere will likely steer Mexico and Brazil toward alignment with the United States—or, at minimum, neutrality—in the event of conflict. However, the PRC will persist in asserting influence through the BRI, strategic bilateral agreements, military diplomacy, and aggressive economic expansion. To counter this, Mexico and Brazil must remain central pillars of US strategy in Latin America.

Even amid recent shifts in US foreign policy, military strategy and diplomatic scholarship affirm the importance of sustaining balanced and proactive engagement with key Latin American partners. Building partner capacity and countering PRC narratives are viable, cost-effective strategies. Targeted investments in PME, security cooperation, and exchange programs—such as those conducted by Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (Fort Benning, Georgia), the

Inter-American Air Forces Academy (Joint Base San Antonio–Lackland), Surface Warfare Officers School (Newport, Rhode Island), the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School (Stennis Space Center, Mississippi), and International Maritime Officer School (Yorktown, Virginia)—provide essential platforms for strengthening interoperability and trust. These institutions, staffed by culturally adept and multilingual personnel, are well positioned to train and influence foreign military counterparts.

Information operations and public diplomacy will also be decisive. By expanding collaboration agreements and leveraging social media and other communications platforms, the United States can amplify its soft power and strengthen regional partnerships. Notably, in June 2025, General Gregory M. Guillot, Commander of USNORTHCOM and NORAD, hosted senior Mexican defense officials to reinforce bilateral security cooperation. “This visit reflects the enduring trust and open communication between our nations’ militaries,” Guillot said. “Mexico is an essential partner in the defense of North America, and engagements like this ensure our efforts are aligned and effective.”¹⁰⁹

Efforts like these are critical to pushing back against PRC propaganda that seeks to delegitimize US-led humanitarian, security, and capacity-building missions. Diplomacy and trade will also remain foundational to US engagement with Mexico and Brazil. Positive diplomatic and commercial ties will incentivize alignment with the United States. Conversely, protectionist trade policies—such as unilateral tariffs—could drive these partners toward Beijing, which is eager to offer more favorable terms.

This article contributes to the strategic literature by providing a historical-comparative and geopolitical assessment of the PRC’s growing presence in Latin America. Although scholars have examined China’s diplomatic and economic engagement in the region, few have explored in depth the PLA, PLAN, and PLA Air Force’s military diplomacy with Mexico and Brazil. Nor has a comprehensive study of China’s evolving military presence in the region emerged. Future research should incorporate the lived experiences of military personnel engaged in this complex environment, as human factors—such as religion, gender, race, socio-economic background, and political ideology—undeniably shape strategic outcomes. In sum, the PRC will continue to shape the trajectory of US foreign and domestic policy for decades to come. Scholars and strategists alike must remain vigilant. 🦅

¹⁰⁹ Mayrem Morales, “Mexican Defense Leaders Visit NORAD and USNORTHCOM Headquarters to Strengthen Bilateral Security Cooperation,” *U.S. Northern Command News*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.northcom.mil/>.

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

³¹ Zhanlue 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/>.

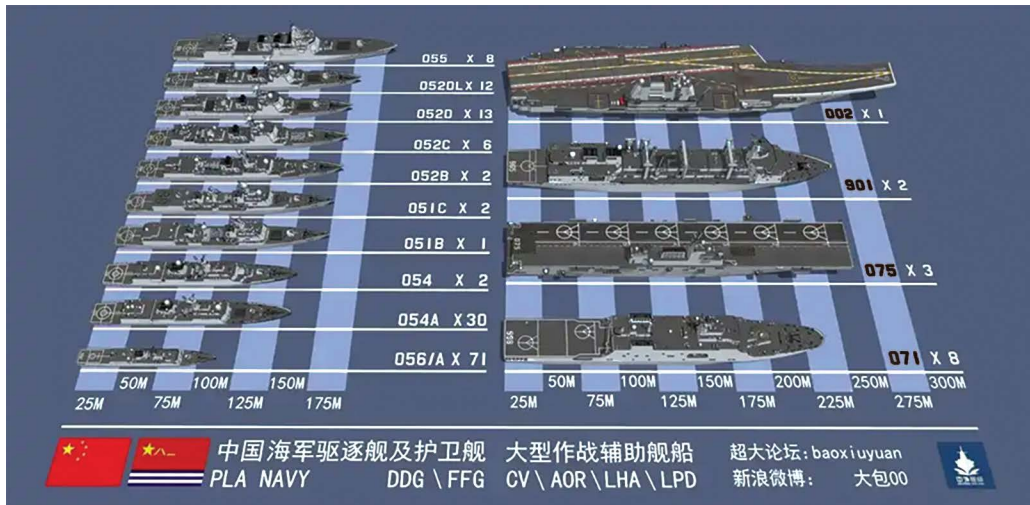


Figure 2: PLA Navy ship lengths and types. (Source: Baoxiuyuan [Chao Da Lun Tan] and Sina Weibo, 2020.)⁴²

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://tribuneonlineng.com/>.

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,” *Maritimafrika*, 6 September 2024, <https://maritimafrika.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 outsized 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 preposition 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 Funaiole 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 "AUTEC 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 ice-breakers; 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. 🦅

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An Officer of the Argentine Air Force in Vietnam

LUIS FERNANDO FURLAN

Abstract

This article examines the mission of Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear in South Vietnam during the mid-1960s, situating his observations within the broader context of the Cold War and Argentina's stance against global communism. Drawing on his direct experiences with counter-insurgency operations, psychological warfare, and civicmilitary action, the study highlights the strategic lessons he identified for Argentina's defense policy. De Alvear emphasized the importance of intelligence, education, and unified military structures, particularly air-ground units and helicopter deployment, in confronting guerrilla tactics. His insights connected Vietnam's revolutionary conflict to Argentina's own challenges with subversion, underscoring the need for preparation to prevent escalation into armed struggle. The article also explores Argentina's diplomatic alignment with the United States and its participation in training exchanges, framing Vietnam as both a laboratory of modern warfare and a source of doctrinal influence. Ultimately, de Alvear's mission provided Argentina with valuable perspectives on national security and defense modernization.

Between 3 October and 20 November 1964, Argentine Air Force Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear was in the Republic of Vietnam at the formal invitation of the South Vietnamese government. His mission was not ceremonial. It was observational and strategic: to study, firsthand, a pacification and reconstruction campaign unfolding within an active revolutionary war.

Foreign policy, in this context, functioned as more than diplomacy. It operated as a mechanism for the deliberate transfer of strategic knowledge—knowledge capable of shaping institutional modernization, military doctrine, and national preparedness. When organized and directed by the state, such transfers become policy instruments, designed to extract lessons from external conflicts and adapt them to domestic security requirements.¹

De Alvear's mission reflected precisely that logic. Coordinated by the Argentine government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with direct involvement from

¹ Comastri, H. "Científicos alemanes en la Argentina peronista. Límites y potencialidades de una política de transferencia científico-tecnológica". En: *Antíteses*, vol. 2, n.º 4, julio-diciembre de 2009, p. 695. Disponible en <http://www.uel.br/revistas/uel/index.php/antiteses/article/view/2739/3931> (consultado el 13/7/2016).

the Ministry of Defense, the deployment sought to harvest operational, doctrinal, and political insights from Vietnam's counterinsurgency experience. Those lessons were intended to strengthen Argentina's readiness—civilian and military alike—to confront the evolving demands of the Cold War, in which subversion and revolutionary warfare increasingly defined the battlefield.

The Argentine Republic in 1964

In 1964, Argentina was governed by President Arturo Illia, a leader of the Radical Civic Union of the People, an internal faction of the Radical Civic Union. His accession to power followed the elections of 7 July 1963—an outcome shaped as much by absence as by presence. Peronism remained proscribed, and Illia's victory rested on a narrow electoral base, conferring legal authority but limited political leverage.

Illia's foreign policy reflected a principled, almost doctrinal universalism. It emphasized Latin American solidarity, the defense of a peaceful international order, moral conduct in world affairs, national self-determination, non-intervention, and autonomy in decision-making. He promoted regional integration and invested political capital in multilateral frameworks, particularly the Organization of American States and the Alliance for Progress. Yet this moral universalism stopped short of neutrality. In the Cold War's binary contest, Argentina rejected equidistance and aligned itself with the United States in opposition to global communism.

Defense policy mirrored that alignment while expanding its conceptual reach. The Illia government formally incorporated the doctrine of national security, broadening national defense beyond conventional threats to include internal subversion and political warfare. Industrial development was treated as a strategic priority, inseparable from defense capacity. The government advanced a new National Defense Law and pressed forward with the re-equipment of the Armed Forces—most notably through military agreements with the United States—reflecting a growing recognition that modernization, deterrence, and internal stability were now interlinked imperatives.²

On 10 May 1964, Argentina concluded a Military Assistance Program (MAP) agreement with the United States to acquire military equipment, reinforcing a defense relationship already evident in operational cooperation. Argentine forces participated in US-designed hemispheric exercises such as Operation Unitas V in September 1964 and Operation Ayacucho later that year—visible markers of Argentina's integration into the Western security architecture.

² Fraga, R. *La Política de Defensa Argentina. A través de los Mensajes Presidenciales al Congreso. 1854-2001*. Buenos Aires: Instituto de Historia Militar Argentina, 2002, pp. 665 y 676.

Yet external alignment did not translate into internal stability. The Illia government faced sustained pressure on multiple fronts: the political influence exerted from exile by Lieutenant General Juan Domingo Perón in Spain; factional conflict within Peronism itself; mounting labor unrest; and the emergence of rural guerrilla activity. These pressures converged in mid-1964, when organized labor launched a sweeping *Plan de Lucha* against the government, occupying roughly 11,000 factories and workshops nationwide. What began as industrial protest increasingly assumed the character of political confrontation.

More ominously, internal order came under threat from armed subversion. These groups did not operate in isolation. They drew ideological sustenance from the broader currents of Cold War revolutionary warfare: national liberation movements in the Third World, the catalytic example of the Cuban Revolution, and the doctrines of Castroism and Guevarism. Revolutionary Peronism, articulated by figures such as John William Cooke, provided a domestic vehicle for these influences, fusing social grievance with insurgent ambition.

The danger was no longer theoretical. In February 1964, security forces uncovered the Camilo Cienfuegos guerrilla training camp in Icho Cruz–Talahuasi, in the province of Córdoba. Organized by the Communist Party and its youth federation, the camp was dedicated to preparing militants for sabotage and terrorist operations. It offered concrete evidence that revolutionary warfare had moved from rhetoric to preparation—and that Argentina was no longer merely observing the Cold War, but beginning to experience it at home.

In northwestern Argentina, the threat assumed a more explicit armed form. In the Orán region of Salta Province, the People's Guerrilla Army (EGP) operated as a Castroist–Guevarist organization with backing from Revolutionary Action Peronism. Its links were neither rhetorical nor merely aspirational. The EGP benefited from Cuban advisers, received material and financial assistance from Havana, and maintained contact with Cuban and Bolivian guerrilla elements operating in Bolivia under the inspiration of Ernesto “Che” Guevara. By March 1964, the group had been defeated through coordinated action by the National Gendarmerie and the Salta Provincial Police—but its brief existence was strategically instructive. It demonstrated both the feasibility of rural insurgency on Argentine soil and the external networks prepared to sustain it.

The political reverberations were immediate. In August 1964, the Chamber of Deputies convened a parliamentary interpellation of the ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense to address the EGP's activities in northwestern Argentina. At issue were two unresolved questions that cut to the heart of the state's authority: whether the Army should be formally employed in counter-subversive

operations, and whether Argentina required a new legal framework to confront internal revolutionary warfare.³

Events in the capital soon reinforced the urgency of those debates. On 21 July 1964, an accidental explosion in a Buenos Aires apartment exposed the existence of the Armed Forces of the National Revolution (FARN), a clandestine organization combining Trotskyist ideology with revolutionary Peronism. The blast, caused by improvised explosives, revealed plans to establish a rural guerrilla foco in the province of Tucumán. Once again, insurgency appeared not as abstraction but as preparation.

It was against this backdrop that General Juan Carlos Onganía, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, addressed the Fifth Conference of American Armies at West Point on 6 August 1964. His message was unambiguous: the struggle against communism and internal subversion constituted core missions of the Army. The timing was not accidental. The guerrilla movements of 1964 furnished precisely the empirical evidence that advocates of the national security doctrine required. For President Illia, they were an unwelcome complication. For the Armed Forces, they were confirmation.⁴

The military's contribution to national development was in line with the Civic Action of the Armed Forces, and General Onganía emphasized this point:

In Latin America there are vast regions whose pace of development has been slow; moreover, within each national territory coexist centers equipped with all the advances of modern life alongside deficient areas lacking roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, power plants, docks, drainage systems, and other works essential for social coexistence.

It is precisely in conducting these tasks that the Armed Forces play a predominant role, closing ranks with their people and collaborating silently where labor and capital are lacking.

Civic–military cooperation, by contributing decisively to the provision of a minimal regional infrastructure, becomes, moreover, an essential engine of national development. In this sense, the military organization, in its civic-action function, possesses a broad horizon, since its efforts are aimed

³ Díaz Bessone, R. G. *Guerra Revolucionaria en la Argentina (1959–1978)*. Buenos Aires: editorial Fraterna, 1986, pp. 88–101.

⁴ Novaro, M. *Historia de la Argentina 1955–2010*. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2010, p. 71.

at providing the community with some basic element for the satisfaction of its general needs.⁵

Rising concern over internal subversion compelled the Illia government to seek a formal recalibration of Argentina's defense framework. On 11 September 1964, the executive submitted a draft National Defense Law to the Chamber of Senators.⁶ The proposal advanced a broadened conception of national defense—one that fused security with development, treated internal subversion as a strategic threat rather than a policing problem, and defined coordinated roles for both the Armed Forces and civilian institutions in confronting revolutionary warfare.

Yet the initiative stalled. The draft never progressed beyond the Senate Defense Committee and was not brought before the full Congress. The paralysis was telling. While the nature of the threat was evolving, the political system proved incapable of adapting its legal and institutional architecture at the same pace.

The strategic environment, however, did not pause. The Cold War imposed simultaneous political, military, social, and economic pressures. Communist revolutionary warfare was no longer confined to distant theaters, and Argentina's own internal security situation was deteriorating. These conditions demanded comprehensive preparation—doctrinal, institutional, and operational—by both the state and its Armed Forces.

It was within this context that President Illia's foreign and defense policies converged. Lacking domestic consensus for sweeping legislative reform, the government turned outward, structuring an implicit policy of strategic knowledge

⁵ Ministerio de Defensa (República Argentina). *Antecedentes legales y parlamentarios 1944-1986*, versión en CD, ob. cit., p. 91. In the original Spanish:

Hay en América latina extensas regiones cuyo ritmo de desarrollo ha sido lento; además, coexisten en cada territorio nacional, centros provistos de todos los adelantos de la vida moderna, con zonas deficitarias donde faltan caminos, puentes, escuelas, hospitales, usinas eléctricas, embarcaderos, desagües y obras necesarias para la convivencia social.

Es, precisamente, en la ejecución de estos trabajos, donde las Fuerzas Armadas desempeñan preponderante papel, estrechando filas con su pueblo, colaborando silenciosamente allí donde faltan brazos y capitales...

La colaboración cívico-militar al contribuir decisivamente en la dotación de una infraestructura zonal mínima, se convierte, además, en motor esencial del desarrollo nacional. En tal sentido, el organismo militar, en función de acción cívica, posee un horizonte amplio, toda vez que su acción está orientada para dotar a la colectividad, de algún elemento básico para la satisfacción de sus necesidades generales.

⁶ Ministerio de Defensa (República Argentina). *Antecedentes legales y parlamentarios 1944-1986*, versión en CD, ob. cit., pp. 96-112.

transfer. By observing conflicts already in progress, Argentina could acquire lessons without first paying the full domestic cost of trial and error. The dispatch of Argentine Air Force Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear to the Republic of Vietnam in 1964 constituted a concrete expression of that logic: an effort to extract usable insights from a distant war that, in form if not geography, increasingly resembled Argentina's own emerging security dilemma.

The Republic of Vietnam in 1964

Since mid-1954, following the end of the Indochina War and the withdrawal of France, Vietnam had existed as a divided country, cleaved along the 17th Parallel. To the south stood the Republic of Vietnam, governed from Saigon and aligned with the Western, capitalist world. To the north stood the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, ruled from Hanoi and firmly embedded within the communist bloc. The division was geographic, ideological, and strategic—and it proved anything but stable.

South Vietnam entered 1964 politically fragile. The overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem on 1 November 1963 triggered a cycle of instability marked by short-lived governments and recurrent coups. On 30 January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh seized power, restoring a measure of order but not durability. Authority in Saigon remained contested, provisional, and vulnerable.

North Vietnam, by contrast, presented the image of cohesion and continuity. Ho Chi Minh had presided over the regime since 1945, supported by a disciplined revolutionary elite that included Pham Van Dong, Le Duc Tho, Le Duan, and General Vo Nguyen Giap—the architect of France's defeat in Indochina. Hanoi's leadership enjoyed ideological unity, institutional permanence, and a long-term strategic horizon.

The imbalance extended beyond politics to the battlefield. Since late 1960, South Vietnam had faced a sustained insurgency waged by the National Liberation Front—the Vietcong—directed, supplied, and reinforced by the communist regime in the north. The Vietcong operated across both rural and urban terrain, combining agitation, propaganda, and psychological intimidation with guerrilla warfare, terrorism, ambushes, and sabotage. It was a comprehensive campaign aimed less at military victory than at political erosion.

To counter this threat, the Armed Forces of South Vietnam were trained in counterinsurgency by US military advisers present since the final years of the Eisenhower administration, with assistance expanded under President John F. Kennedy. Even so, the Republic of Vietnam remained trapped in a multidimensional conflict—military, political, and psychological—fought simultaneously against an internal enemy and an external patron.

For the United States, the stakes were strategic. The survival of South Vietnam was central to the policy of containing communism in Southeast Asia, a cornerstone of the Domino Theory. Vietnam was not an isolated contest; it was a test case. Its outcome would signal whether revolutionary warfare could redraw the map of the Cold War—incrementally, asymmetrically, and without a formal declaration of war.

The pivotal moment came with the Gulf of Tonkin Incident on 4 August 1964. North Vietnamese torpedo boats were alleged to have attacked the US Navy destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* while they operated in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. Whatever the ambiguity surrounding the encounter, its political effect was unmistakable. The incident furnished President Lyndon B. Johnson with the necessary justification to authorize direct American intervention in Vietnam.

With that decision, the conflict crossed a threshold. What had been an advisory and proxy struggle became an overt war, culminating in the large-scale US military commitment that defined the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1975. Tonkin transformed Vietnam from a contested periphery of the Cold War into one of its central battlefields—an inflection point that framed the environment into which foreign observers, including Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear, would soon arrive).

Mission of Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear to the Republic of Vietnam (October 3–November 20, 1964)

By Decree No. 7014 of 8 September 1964, the Argentine government designated Air Force Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear and Embassy Counselor Francisco María Figueroa de la Vega as official observers to the Republic of Vietnam. Their task was to examine, on the ground, the pacification and reconstruction campaign underway in a country already deep in revolutionary war.

Argentina's acceptance of South Vietnam's formal invitation was neither incidental nor symbolic. The mission, planned to last approximately sixty days, was deliberately divided along functional lines. De Alvear was charged with analyzing military operations, doctrine, and organization, while Figueroa de la Vega focused on political, economic, and social conditions. Together, their reports were intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of a conflict whose structure, if not its geography, bore increasing relevance to Argentina's own security challenges.

The pacification and reconstruction effort in South Vietnam unfolded in the shadow of two wars: the recently concluded Indochina War against France (1946–1954) and an ongoing revolutionary insurgency supported from the north. For Argentine planners, Vietnam offered a living laboratory in which counterinsurgency, civic action, psychological warfare, and external intervention converged. The lessons drawn there promised practical value for Argentina's broader Cold War preparedness.

De Alvear was a particularly apt choice for such an assignment. Born in Buenos Aires on 9 January 1924, he entered the Military Aviation College in 1944 and graduated as an ensign the following year. A transport pilot by specialization, he brought with him recent international operational experience, having led an Argentine Air Force delegation to the United Nations Mission in the Congo between July 1962 and January 1963. At the time of his appointment to Vietnam, he served at the Command and Staff School as head of the Advanced Course and director of studies—positions that placed him at the nexus of doctrine, education, and institutional reform. He arrived in Vietnam not merely to observe, but to translate experience into instruction.

Comodore de Alvear departed for the Republic of Vietnam on 23 September 1964 and arrived ten days later at Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon.⁷ He remained in country until 20 November, observing a conflict already in motion and on the verge of escalation. His stay coincided with a critical interval—after the collapse of South Vietnam's political stability, yet before the full weight of American military intervention transformed the war.

During this period, de Alvear examined the conflict in its essential dimensions: strategic vision and political purpose; guerrilla warfare and counter guerrilla operations; psychological warfare; the training and education of military personnel; doctrinal and operational organization; and, crucially, the relevance of Vietnam's experience to Argentina's own security challenges. His observations were comprehensive by design, intended to capture not isolated tactics but the logic of a new kind of war.

For de Alvear, the struggle in South Vietnam could not be dismissed as a distant regional conflict. It was a battle fought squarely within the global framework of the Cold War. In that contest, neutrality was not a stable position but an illusion.⁸ The Cold War, he concluded, was not confined to defined theaters or declared fronts; its battles—Vietnam foremost among them—implicated every nation, whether directly engaged or not.

Southeast Asia represented one of the outermost lines of resistance in the broader effort to contain communism. The Vietnamese, by force of geography, stood on what de Alvear and his contemporaries regarded as the forward edge of the free world. This was the front line of an undeclared, global conflict—a “third world

⁷ Archivo General de la Fuerza Aérea Argentina. Legajo Personal del comodoro Carlos Torcuato de Alvear.

⁸ Mensaje del ministro de relaciones exteriores Zavala Ortiz ante el Congreso Nacional (1964): *Tal vez sea una de las circunstancias más imperiosas en la preocupación de los gobiernos, la internacionalización de los problemas nacionales. La soledad internacional ha dejado de existir.* En: Fraga, R. *La Política Exterior Argentina. A través de los Mensajes Presidenciales al Congreso. 1854-2001*. Buenos Aires: CARI-CEPE, 2003, pp. 516-517.

war” fought through insurgency, subversion, and proxy struggle rather than massed armies.⁹ A communist victory there would not merely redraw the map of Southeast Asia; it would shift the line of confrontation outward, toward new regions and new continents.

In 1964, South Vietnam embodied the defining characteristics of revolutionary war. Conventional military criteria proved inadequate. There were no fixed fronts, no clear rear areas, and no decisive battles in the classical sense.¹⁰ The conflict was fluid, ambiguous, and relentlessly adaptive, demanding flexibility, speed, and institutional learning. It was precisely this type of war—political as much as military—that de Alvear believed would shape future conflicts, including those Argentina might soon face at home.¹¹

In South Vietnam, security and development were not parallel endeavors; they were inseparable. Economic and social policy operated as instruments of security, and security operations, in turn, shaped the prospects for development. This logic placed the civic action of the Armed Forces at the center of the pacification and reconstruction effort. Fighting and building proceeded simultaneously. While Vietcong units were being hunted, factories, schools, roads, and bridges were being constructed. Hunger and illiteracy were treated not merely as social problems, but as vulnerabilities exploitable by insurgents. Civilian labor worked alongside military engineers, reinforcing the premise that counterinsurgency was waged as much through legitimacy as through force.¹²

According to Commodore de Alvear, guerrilla warfare was the most likely form of future conflict. The Vietcong exemplified its defining characteristics. Their attacks were rapid, brief, violent, and silent. They struck without warning and vanished just as quickly, restoring the appearance of normality almost immediately after the assault.

⁹ Alvear, C. T. de. “Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam”. En: *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, Nº 274, marzo de 1965, p. 17.

¹⁰ *La guerra en Viet-Nam se burla de todo lo convencionalmente establecido respecto de los conflictos bélicos. El enemigo no avanza según una línea más o menos definida, ni puede predecirse de dónde vendrá el próximo ataque. Estamos tan lejos de la campaña del Marne, de la línea Maginot y hasta de la “blitzkrieg” alemana, como de las adargas y rodela. O quizás no: es muy probable que en este momento y en esta guerra, andemos más cerca de la ballesta y de la macana que de la bomba nuclear.* Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965, p. 167.

¹¹ Un mayor de la Fuerza Aérea de Vietnam del Sur comentó que: *En esta clase de guerra nunca se puede decir en forma definitiva si este o aquel es el mejor armamento o el mejor material. Todo cambia velozmente: una táctica de combate que da buenos resultados hoy, puede ser un fracaso el año que viene, dentro de un mes, o de quince días.* Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ibídem, p. 182.

¹² En esa línea, un ministro de Vietnam del Sur describió el sistema de la “mancha de aceite”: *las fuerzas armadas llegan a un punto cualquiera y establecen una zona de seguridad. Inmediatamente detrás va nuestro personal para realizar su trabajo. Y la primitiva y pequeña zona de seguridad, como una gota de aceite sobre una hoja de papel, comienza a extenderse.* Alvear, C. T. de *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ibídem., p. 69.

This was not warfare aimed at decisive engagement, but attrition—designed to exhaust, unsettle, and delegitimize rather than to conquer territory through frontal battle.

Central to this method was the guerrillas' ability to dissolve into the population. They blended seamlessly into rural villages and urban neighborhoods alike, transforming civilians into camouflage. Operationally, they owned the night. By day they rested or resumed ordinary civilian routines; by night they attacked. The aphorism repeated throughout South Vietnam captured the asymmetry succinctly: "the day belongs to the Government, and the night belongs to the Vietcong." Sustaining this effort were two intangible but decisive assets—revolutionary faith and an unshakable belief in ultimate victory.¹³

Vietcong operations spanned a wide spectrum: ambushes, sabotage, terrorism, strikes, and public agitation.¹⁴ Kidnapping served multiple purposes—financing, intimidation, political revenge, propaganda, and psychological warfare. Each action was executed discreetly and reinforced by an extensive information and intelligence apparatus. Violence was never isolated; it was always communicative. Every act sought not only to damage physical targets but to shape perception, erode authority, and remind the population—constantly and invisibly—who could strike at will.

The attack on Bien Hoa Air Base on 1 November 1964 was emblematic of Vietcong operational doctrine. The choice of date—the anniversary of President Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow—lent the strike symbolic precision. The execution was equally deliberate: a nocturnal, surprise mortar attack; brief, concentrated violence; immediate dislocation of order; and rapid withdrawal without trace.

The effect was disproportionate to the means employed. Chaos and confusion followed the initial impact. The attackers vanished before any effective response could be mounted, leaving security forces unable to identify, pursue, or punish those responsible. Defensive measures proved inert, and the government's retaliatory capacity dissolved into impotence. Within hours, calm returned to the base—an eerie normalcy masking the depth of the breach.

For de Alvear, Bien Hoa illustrated the essence of modern insurgency. The operation achieved tactical success, psychological shock, and symbolic resonance simultaneously. It demonstrated how a disciplined guerrilla force could strike a hardened military target, impose strategic embarrassment, and escape untouched—

¹³ *El guerrillero comunista es por sobre todas las cosas, un fanático. Cree en el partido y en la sabiduría de sus líderes con verdadera fe religiosa. No se pregunta por qué. No se queja, no discute, no razona, no investiga, no analiza.* Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ibídem, p. 253.

¹⁴ Los sabotajes y las huelgas podían paralizar un país al afectar sus servicios de agua, luz, gas, teléfono, etc. A través de dichas actividades, el Vietcong podía lograr, con escasos recursos, iguales o mayores efectos que los provocados por un bombardeo aéreo en gran escala.

leaving behind not only physical damage, but a lingering sense of vulnerability that no immediate countermeasure could erase. According to Commodore de Alvear:

From a strictly military point of view, it was a work of art. Those who planned and executed it knew exactly what they were doing and demonstrated extraordinary professional efficiency. They had to secretly carry their mortars, disassembled piece by piece, to assemble them at the chosen site—perhaps inside a hut, to fire later through an opening in the roof; or in an underground shelter; or inside a hollow tree. They must have spent days and days aiming their weapons, adjusting and correcting until they achieved the perfection they sought. Without ranging shots, at night, with no possibility of correcting their aim after the first rounds, they hit the target with absolute precision . . . ¹⁵

Vietcong infiltration into South Vietnam operated across land, river, and sea, exploiting terrain and civilian traffic with calculated precision. Along rivers and coastal waters, guerrillas moved concealed among fishermen and commercial transport vessels, using sampans as both camouflage and conveyance. The Mekong Delta, with its swamps, dense tributaries, and countless small boats, became a natural sanctuary—a logistical hub in which insurgents blended seamlessly into the rhythms of daily life. Its geography rendered search and interdiction operations by South Vietnamese forces and police not only difficult, but relentlessly draining.

On the western frontier, the problem deepened. The long, porous borders with Laos and Cambodia, covered by jungle and rugged highlands, offered ideal corridors for infiltration. Terrain did the work of concealment, while the indifference—or complicity—of neighboring governments removed political obstacles. The result was strategic permeability: a war fought within South Vietnam but sustained well beyond its borders.

¹⁵ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 207-208. In the original Spanish:

Desde un punto de vista estrictamente militar, fue una obra de arte. Quienes lo planificaron y lo llevaron a la práctica sabían lo que hacían y demostraron una extraordinaria eficiencia profesional. Debieron llevar secretamente sus morteros desarmados, pieza por pieza, para montarlos en el emplazamiento elegido: quizá dentro de una choza, para disparar luego por una abertura en el techo; o en un abrigo subterráneo; o dentro de un árbol hueco. Habrán estado apuntando sus armas durante días y días, afinando y corrigiendo, hasta lograr la perfección que buscaban. Sin tiro de reglaje, de noche, sin posibilidad de corregir la puntería después de los primeros disparos, dieron en el blanco con absoluta precisión...

Supporting this mobility was a logistical and communications system of remarkable breadth and discipline. The Vietcong maintained an integrated network that spanned North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, threading through jungles and mountains with efficiency born of long preparation. At its core lay the Ho Chi Minh Trail—not a single route, but an evolving web of pathways whose branches fed men, weapons, and supplies into the southern battlefield.

Beneath the surface, the system continued. Extensive tunnel networks provided concealment, rest, command posts, and launch points for attacks. These subterranean structures expanded continuously and were meticulously interconnected, functioning as both sanctuary and maneuver space.¹⁶ Like the Ho Chi Minh Trail above ground, the tunnels formed a critical pillar of insurgent resilience.

The infrastructure was comprehensive. Support and transit bases facilitated movement and training; workshops produced weapons and ammunition; and a tightly coordinated information and intelligence apparatus bound the entire system together. This was not improvisation. It was an integrated, multinational insurgent architecture—complex, adaptive, and designed to sustain a protracted war of attrition against a conventionally superior opponent.

Among the principal instruments of counterinsurgency warfare was the strategy commonly described as “emptying the river.”¹⁷ Its premise was stark: guerrillas survive only so long as they remain embedded within the population. By separating insurgents from urban centers—and, above all, from rural villages—the state could sever access to food, intelligence, shelter, and recruits. Deprived of that environment, the guerrillas would be left exposed, like fish stranded when the tide recedes.¹⁸

This logic underpinned the “new life villages” program, a cornerstone of South Vietnam’s pacification and reconstruction effort. These settlements were not merely defensive enclaves designed to protect civilians. They were offensive instruments. Established precisely where insurgents had drawn strength, they aimed to dislocate the Vietcong from their primary sanctuary—the peasant population—by denying concealment, restricting mobility, and reasserting state presence at the village level.¹⁹ The concept was not novel. It echoed the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya (1948–1960), where population control and political legitimacy proved decisive against guerrilla forces.

Complementing population-focused measures were two indispensable capabilities: a robust information and intelligence apparatus, and the capacity to infiltrate opera-

¹⁶ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 219.

¹⁷ En respuesta a la metáfora de Mao Tsé Tung: “el guerrillero era el pez, y la población era el río”.

¹⁸ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 88.

¹⁹ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 95.

tives into insurgent ranks. The latter was particularly perilous, demanding highly trained personnel capable of surviving prolonged exposure within hostile networks. Yet without penetration of the enemy's internal structure, counterinsurgency remained reactive and incomplete.

De Alvear drew a sobering conclusion from these observations. Tactical success in South Vietnam would remain elusive so long as the Vietcong's true bases of support remained intact. Those bases lay beyond South Vietnam itself—in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. To strike them would require expanding the conflict geographically, transforming a contained insurgency into a broader regional war. Victory, in other words, carried the inherent risk of escalation. It was a strategic dilemma with no clean resolution—one that underscored the limits of counterinsurgency when political constraints forbid decisive action against external sanctuaries.²⁰

Psychological warfare stood at the center of the conflict in South Vietnam. It was directed primarily at the civilian population, and its objective was not territorial conquest but cognitive domination—the capture of minds rather than ground. In this arena, perception became the decisive battlefield.

Its methods were varied and insidious: propaganda, disinformation, slander, infiltration, disguise, and rumor. Unlike conventional combat, psychological warfare did not seek the physical destruction of the adversary. Its purpose was conversion. Individuals subjected to its pressure were not eliminated; they were absorbed. The aim was not to remove pieces from the board, but to make them change sides.

Such warfare demanded a distinct operational logic. It tolerated no rigidity and allowed no routine. Because it operated on belief, fear, and expectation, psychological warfare required constant adaptation to shifting attitudes and circumstances. Success depended less on firepower than on agility, credibility, and narrative control—attributes far more difficult to impose than to lose:

In psychological warfare there can be no routine procedures. When the struggle is for the conquest of human minds, one must always be ready to change course abruptly to adapt to the fluctuations of the thought one seeks to dominate. The true battlefield is the mind of the individual. More

²⁰ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 224–225. Señalaba que *quienes enfrentan un problema de guerrillas parecen condenados a mantenerse a la defensiva. Y la defensa, como actitud permanente, nunca dio buenos resultados en la guerra* (p. 224).

than for territories, the fight is for consciences. Once consciences are conquered, territories will follow as a matter of course.²¹

Preparation for psychological warfare was not optional; it was decisive. Without it, meaningful defense was nearly impossible. A society untrained in this domain risked defeat without a single bomb falling on its cities—conquered not by force of arms, but by the erosion of will, legitimacy, and cohesion.²²

What unfolded in Vietnam illustrated this reality with unsettling clarity. Psychological warfare there was not an auxiliary tactic but a central line of effort, fully integrated into the broader conflict. It fit seamlessly within the Cold War's comprehensive logic, where victory increasingly depended on shaping perceptions, exploiting social fractures, and neutralizing opponents without recourse to overt annihilation. In this form of struggle, collapse could precede combat—and surrender arrive without battle:

This Third World conflagration is of a very special character. It is much more political than military, and above all it concerns social and economic problems. War is no longer “the continuation of politics by other means,” but rather a complex conglomerate of economic, social, military, and political issues, whose management requires profound knowledge of psychology—because psychology has become the preeminent science of warfare.²³

Psychological warfare was among the Vietcong's most effective weapons. Its objective was not simply to harass the state, but to hollow it out from within. Vietcong operatives worked systematically to erode the foundations of the Republic of Vietnam by discrediting democracy as a form of governance, undermining the legitimacy and prestige of the administration, and exploiting nationalist sentiment to portray the

²¹ Alvear, C. T. de. “Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam”, ob. cit. En: *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 15. In the original Spanish:

En la guerra psicológica no puede haber procedimientos de rutina. Cuando se lucha por la conquista de mentes humanas, hay que estar siempre dispuesto a cambiar bruscamente de rumbo para amoldarse a las fluctuaciones del pensamiento que se desea dominar. El verdadero campo de batalla es la mente del individuo. Más que por territorios, se lucha por conciencias. Conquistadas las conciencias, los territorios vendrán por añadidura.

²² Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 30.

²³ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 258. In the original Spanish:

Esta tercera conflagración mundial es de carácter especialísimo. Es mucho más política que militar e interesan en ella, más que ninguna otra cosa, los problemas sociales y económicos. La guerra no es ya “la continuación de la política por otros medios”, sino un complejo conglomerado de asuntos económicos, sociales, militares y políticos, cuyo manejo requiere profundos conocimientos de psicología, porque la psicología ha pasado a ser la ciencia bélica por excelencia.

government as foreign, corrupt, or imposed. The target was confidence—once that collapsed, authority would follow.²⁴

De Alvear recognized that such methods were not unique to Vietnam. Psychological action succeeds by exploiting a society's internal fault lines. He had seen this firsthand in the Congo, where tribal divisions became instruments of political manipulation during his service with the United Nations mission between 1962 and 1963. Argentina, too, was not immune. The attempt by the Armed Forces of the National Revolution (FARN) to establish a rural guerrilla foco in Tucumán, drawing support from sugarcane workers organized under the FOTIA union, illustrated how labor structures could be mobilized for insurgent ends.

To counter the Vietcong's psychological offensive, South Vietnam created a dedicated institutional apparatus. The Joint Committee of the Central Directorate of Psychological Warfare, supported by the Armed Forces' own Directorate of Psychological Warfare, coordinated efforts to contest insurgent narratives and reassert state legitimacy.

The aim of this psychological action was explicit: to secure the support and goodwill of the civilian population and to rebuild confidence in the nation's military institutions. As one South Vietnamese general observed with disarming clarity, modern wars are no longer won by armies alone. They are won by nations—by societies willing to support their forces and to endure sacrifice. In Vietnam, as de Alvear understood, the battle for popular allegiance was not secondary to combat operations. It was the war's central contest.²⁵

Psychological warfare was directed not only at the civilian population, but also at the insurgents themselves. South Vietnamese forces sought to fracture Vietcong morale, disrupt internal cohesion, and induce defections. To that end, the Directorate of Psychological Warfare employed aircraft to overfly contested areas, dispersing leaflets designed to weaken guerrilla resolve, encourage desertion, and prompt local populations to withdraw cooperation from insurgent elements.

Education emerged as a parallel line of effort. De Alvear observed that psychological warfare could not be countered by an ill-prepared society, nor could a war of ideas be won by illiterate soldiers.²⁶ Strengthening national education therefore

²⁴ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 249. La acción psicológica se aplicaba sobre *todo aquello susceptible de un mínimo de razonamiento*; por otra parte, *los atacados casi nunca saben que lo son. Eso hace que no comprendan la necesidad de defenderse. Un disparo de fusil puede no dar en el blanco; pero las palabras siempre llegan al cerebro* (Alvear, C. T. de. "Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam", ob. cit., *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 16).

²⁵ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 83.

²⁶ Alvear, C. T. de. "Algo sobre nuestro frente en Viet Nam", ob. cit. En: *Revista Nacional Aeronáutica y Espacial*, año XXV, N° 274, marzo de 1965, p. 16.

became a strategic necessity rather than a social accessory. In this framework, the Ministry of Defense assumed a role that extended beyond force employment to institutional development, recognizing that human capital was itself a security asset.

These insights translated into concrete proposals. The possibility of exchanging personnel between Argentine and South Vietnamese military institutions was actively discussed. A South Vietnamese Army officer inquired whether Argentina offered scholarships to foreign students—an opening that de Alvear regarded as an opportunity rather than a courtesy. South Vietnam's hard-won experience in counterinsurgency warfare, he argued, constituted a body of practical knowledge from which Argentina could profit.²⁷

The exchange logic extended beyond conventional forces. Training for counterinsurgency naturally included Argentina's National Gendarmerie, whose operational profile closely resembled the requirements of such warfare. In conversation with a South Vietnamese Air Force major, de Alvear described the Gendarmerie's successful operations against the People's Guerrilla Army in northwestern Argentina and highlighted its experience in border security, anti-smuggling missions, and jungle terrain. The response was immediate and telling: "Wouldn't it be good if some of them came to work with us? They would give us a hand and expand their operational capability."²⁸

During his stay, Commodore de Alvear visited South Vietnam's principal military education institutions—the Military Academy, Naval School, Military Aviation School, and the Command and General Staff Academy. What struck him immediately was the depth of US influence on the training and professional formation of South Vietnamese officers. This influence was not abstract. Graduates of the Naval and Military Aviation Schools routinely completed advanced training with units of the US Seventh Fleet and at American military bases, embedding US operational concepts directly into South Vietnam's force structure.

Vietnam, in de Alvear's assessment, functioned as a living laboratory. Operational concepts, tactical techniques, and combat doctrines were not merely taught; they were tested, revised, and retested under combat conditions. One doctrinal conclusion stood out with particular clarity: counterinsurgency demanded the unification of military resources under a single command structure.²⁹ Fragmentation—whether institutional or operational—was fatal in a war defined by speed, ambiguity, and dispersion.

This requirement gave rise to the organization of small, integrated air-ground units. These were not conventional Army formations supplemented by air support.

²⁷ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 14.

²⁸ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 179.

²⁹ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 211.

They were composite units with a single commander, composed of air and ground elements fused into an indivisible whole. Aircraft, assault vehicles, paratroopers, infantry, engineers, helicopters, and supporting personnel operated as a unified system, capable of rapid deployment to any point in the theater. In guerrilla warfare, where the enemy appeared and vanished with equal speed, such integration was not a luxury—it was a necessity.

An American adviser underscored this lesson succinctly, noting that South Vietnamese forces had learned the decisive importance of *aerocooperation*: the fusion of air and ground components within a single operational entity rather than their coordination across institutional boundaries.³⁰

De Alvear carried this insight home. Drawing directly from the Vietnamese experience, he proposed that Argentina develop a comparable military construct—one in which all available means could operate *like the fingers of a hand*: coordinated, responsive to a single brain, and capable of forming a fist. Such a unit, he argued, would possess the ability to seize terrain securely, strike with precision, and respond with speed to emerging threats. The metaphor was deliberate. Modern warfare, he concluded, rewarded not mass alone, but integration, agility, and unity of command.³¹

Among the military instruments employed in South Vietnam, helicopters emerged as decisive. Their value lay not in a single function, but in their versatility. Rotary-wing aircraft performed troop transport, command movement, escort missions, search and rescue for downed aircrews, medical evacuation, reconnaissance, cargo delivery, airstrip preparation, recovery of damaged aircraft, and—when necessary—the destruction of materiel fallen into enemy hands. In counterinsurgency, this flexibility translated directly into operational relevance.

Guerrilla warfare imposed a tyranny of speed. Vietcong units appeared suddenly and vanished just as quickly, compressing the window for response to minutes rather than hours. Helicopters provided the only reliable means of deploying forces rapidly and precisely to the point of contact. They could fly at low altitude to evade detection, land in confined or unimproved areas, and operate under adverse weather conditions. In a war without fronts, vertical mobility replaced territorial depth.

Helicopters also enabled functions beyond combat. They conducted defoliation missions to deny concealment, evacuated wounded personnel with embedded medical teams capable of operating day or night, and lifted casualties directly from contested terrain using hoists and basket stretchers.³² Some aircraft were equipped

³⁰ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 181.

³¹ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 211-212.

³² Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 119.

with electric saws to clear landing zones on demand—an illustration of how terrain itself became a variable to be shaped rather than endured.

Heavy-lift capabilities further expanded operational reach. The US Air Force employed Sikorsky H-37 helicopters to transport oversized loads, including disabled rotary-wing aircraft, and to conduct recovery operations for helicopters shot down or forced to land in hostile territory. These assets sustained the air-ground system by preventing losses from becoming permanent.

At the tactical level, Sikorsky H-34 helicopters typically operated in pairs, with one aircraft escorting the other to provide immediate assistance in case of damage or emergency. Each carried a pilot, copilot, and observer—the latter maintaining continuous communication with ground forces and adjacent aircraft. The helicopter's machine gun, detachable and usable both in flight and on the ground, reflected the blurred boundary between air and surface combat in counterinsurgency operations.

De Alvear took a particular interest in the logistical and operational employment of these assets. To that end, he conducted a flight to the Tay Ninh area aboard a South Vietnamese Air Force H-34, observing firsthand how rotary-wing aviation functioned as the connective tissue of modern counterinsurgency warfare. The lesson was unmistakable: in this kind of war, control of the vertical dimension was not supplementary to ground operations—it was foundational.

The operational profile of the Vietcong, combined with Vietnam's unforgiving geography, rendered classical patrol and reconnaissance methods largely inadequate. The country's elongated terrain—dense jungles, mountainous regions, an intricate river system, and an extensive coastline—favored concealment, dispersion, and infiltration. Under such conditions, locating the enemy proved more difficult than engaging him. Even so, South Vietnamese and allied forces persisted through the triad of intelligence, patrolling, and reconnaissance, seeking to map infiltration routes, identify support bases, and interdict supply lines.

These realities transformed the conflict into a true intelligence war. Success depended less on firepower than on information—its accuracy, speed, and dissemination. The insurgents understood this well. The Vietcong maintained a disciplined and highly effective intelligence network that often rivaled, and at times surpassed, that of the state. As one South Vietnamese Air Force major emphasized to de Alvear, the decisive task was not striking the target, but finding it—and keeping it under observation. Without that, tactical superiority dissolved into irrelevance.³³

De Alvear's field observations reinforced this conclusion. He visited the major air bases at Da Nang and Bien Hoa, where he examined facilities used by US

³³ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 180.

Special Forces advising South Vietnamese units. At Bien Hoa, he conducted an observation flight with US personnel aboard a Bell helicopter over the Cam Ranh coastal region, noting its stability and smoothness—qualities that enhanced endurance and situational awareness during extended operations.³⁴ He also met with General Nguyen Cao Ky, commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force and a rising political figure, with whom he discussed professional matters ranging from flight equipment and personnel training to operational doctrine.

These engagements unfolded against a clear diplomatic backdrop. The Argentine government had rejected neutrality in the East–West conflict and adopted a policy of opposition to the global expansion of communism. Collaboration with the United States followed naturally from that stance. Argentina was accordingly counted among the free-world nations to which South Vietnam appealed for support in its struggle against insurgency and subversion. De Alvear’s mission thus reflected not only professional curiosity, but a broader strategic alignment—one that treated Vietnam’s war as relevant to Argentina’s own security future.

When asked by a South Vietnamese journalist what form of assistance Argentina might offer, Embassy Counselor Francisco María Figueroa de la Vega responded with deliberate clarity. Speaking personally, he stated that he was inclined to support any effort directed against communism.³⁵ The answer was neither evasive nor diplomatic. It reflected Argentina’s broader alignment in the Cold War and underscored that sympathy for South Vietnam was rooted in strategic conviction rather than opportunism.

De Alvear himself viewed the mission with equal realism. He acknowledged that Argentina’s presence in Vietnam was not politically neutral—and could not be. The arrival of the first South American observers carried symbolic weight, and with it, risk. As he noted pointedly, “It could not be denied that our presence in Vietnam had a certain political character, and it was not improbable that the communists might want to make an example of the two first South American observers to arrive in the country.”³⁶ The remark was more than anecdotal. It captured a central truth of Cold War conflict: even ostensibly technical or observational missions were inseparable from politics. To be present was already to have chosen a side.

³⁴ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 205.

³⁵ Con motivo del inicio del Operativo Ayacucho (diciembre de 1964), el presidente Illia expresó: *La participación argentina en el Operativo Ayacucho reafirmaba la solidaridad del país con las obligaciones interamericanas y representaba la determinación argentina de enfrentar, aquí y donde sea, la agresión marxista contra la dignidad, la libertad y la esperanza por una vida superior para nuestro pueblo*. Cisneros, A. y Escudé, C. *Historia General de las Relaciones Exteriores de la República Argentina*, parte III, tomo XIII. Buenos Aires: CARI-Nuevohacer (Grupo Editor Latinoamericano), 2000 (versión en CD).

³⁶ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., p. 75.

As for the positioning of the South Vietnamese conflict in relation to the Argentine Republic, the Commodore observed that:

Helping the Vietnamese in their struggle is helping ourselves. Today they stand on the most distant frontier of democracy, on the first line of battle. Behind that line are all the countries of the free world, Argentina included. The communists have now committed a large part of their resources to Southeast Asia. They are making extraordinary efforts to conquer it, and if they succeed, they will be in a position to concentrate on new objectives—one of which, and not the least important, is undoubtedly South America.

Do the Vietnamese deserve to be helped?

Personally, I believe so, but in reality it does not matter whether they deserve it or not. What matters is that we need them to triumph. And alone they will never achieve it. Should we remain with our arms crossed, indifferent to the problem, without collaborating even morally?

Are we interested in increasing the fighting capacity of that first line, behind which we now stand?

Or would it be preferable to wait passively until it is our turn to become the first line?³⁷

³⁷ Alvear, C. T. de. *Viet-Nam, ahora*, ob. cit., pp. 260-262. In the original Spanish:

Ayudar a los vietnamitas en su lucha es ayudarnos a nosotros mismos. Ellos están hoy en la más lejana frontera de la democracia, en una primera línea de batalla. Detrás de esa línea se encuentran todos los países del mundo libre, la Argentina inclusive. Los comunistas tienen hoy gran parte de sus medios empeñados en el sudeste asiático. Están realizando esfuerzos extraordinarios por conquistarlo y, si lo logran, estarían en condiciones de concentrarse en nuevos objetivos, uno de los cuales—y no de los menos importantes—es sin duda Sudamérica.

¿Merecen los vietnamitas que se los ayude?

Personalmente, creo que sí, pero en realidad no interesa saber si lo merecen o no. Lo positivo es que necesitamos que triunfen. Y solos jamás lo lograrían.

¿Debemos seguir de brazos cruzados, ajenos al problema, sin colaborar ni siquiera moralmente?

¿Nos interesa incrementar la capacidad de lucha de esa primera línea, en cuya retaguardia estamos por ahora?

¿O será preferible esperar pasivamente a que nos toque ser a nuestra vez primera línea?

Comodore de Alvear unequivocally supported Argentina's participation in the global strategy of containing communism. Yet his reading of the conflict in South Vietnam departed from purely military analysis. He regarded the armed struggle as secondary—a consequence rather than a cause. The decisive contest, in his view, lay in political legitimacy, social cohesion, and institutional preparedness.

From Vietnam, he drew a sobering inference: the most probable future war Argentina might face would resemble the one unfolding in Southeast Asia. It would not begin with conventional invasion or declared hostilities, but with subversion, infiltration, and psychological warfare. Crucially, de Alvear believed that Argentina still possessed a margin of time. If appropriate measures were adopted and preparation for this new form of conflict undertaken early, the country might prevent such a struggle from reaching its armed phase.

Recent events at home sharpened that conviction. The brief but revealing episode of the People's Guerrilla Army in Salta—its Cuban connections and rapid defeat—served as an early warning rather than a reassurance. For de Alvear, it underscored both the reality of the threat and the imperative of preemption: to confront revolutionary warfare before it matured into sustained insurgency.

His conclusions resonated within the broader climate of the Armed Forces. As historian Marcos Novaro observed, "Within the Armed Forces, a virulent anticommunism was gaining ground, convinced that the clash between the two world blocs would have countries like Argentina as its epicenter. The insurgent and repressive escalation in Indochina and North Africa from the mid-decade seemed to confirm this hypothesis."³⁸

Following de Alvear's return to Argentina on 20 November 1964, the national government did not alter its posture toward the conflict in South Vietnam. Alignment endured. In early 1966, Argentine Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Zavala Ortiz traveled to Saigon, a visit that functioned less as diplomacy than as signal—a deliberate affirmation of support for United States policy in Southeast Asia.³⁹

By that point, the conflict had crossed from proxy to open war. The United States had initiated direct military intervention on 8 March 1965, and the Vietnam War was fully underway. Argentina's continued engagement, modest in scale but clear in intent, reflected a strategic choice: to remain aligned with the Western coalition in what was increasingly understood as a decisive theater of the Cold War rather than to retreat into rhetorical neutrality.

³⁸ Novaro, M. *Historia de la Argentina 1955-2010*, ob. cit., p. 80.

³⁹ Sáenz Quesada, M. 1966. *De Illia a Onganía. El preludio de la Argentina violenta*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2023, pp. 56-57.

Conclusion

The mission to the Republic of Vietnam placed Commodore Carlos Torcuato de Alvear inside a live theater of communist revolutionary warfare and subversion. There, he observed not only the mechanics of insurgency, but the full spectrum of political, economic, social, and military responses marshaled to counter it and to sustain a fragile process of pacification and reconstruction. These observations unfolded within the unmistakable framework of the global East–West struggle.

From this vantage point, de Alvear articulated a strategic vision that extended beyond Vietnam itself. He consistently emphasized the conflict's relevance to Argentina's own security environment and warned against treating Southeast Asia as a distant or detached concern. His purpose was explicit: to anchor Argentina firmly within the Cold War's global geometry and to reinforce the country's commitment to collaboration in the broader effort to contain communism.

In the military domain, his analysis focused on performance under conditions of subversion and guerrilla warfare. He underscored the centrality of civic action by the Armed Forces, the operational logic of counterinsurgency struggle, the decisive role of psychological warfare, and the necessity of educating and preparing military personnel for conflicts in which legitimacy and perception mattered as much as firepower. These themes did not remain theoretical. Elements closely aligned with de Alvear's observations later found expression in National Defense Law No. 16,970, approved on 6 October 1966.⁴⁰

His contributions endured within Argentina's professional military education system. The lessons he drew from Vietnam—particularly regarding guerrilla warfare and psychological operations—were incorporated into curricula, debated in staff colleges, and subjected to sustained analysis. In this sense, de Alvear's mission functioned not merely as observation, but as transmission: translating a distant war into doctrinal insight with lasting influence on Argentine defense thought.

Doctrinally and operationally, de Alvear argued for the reorganization of military force around a unified, integrated structure, modeled on the air–ground units he had observed in Vietnam. Fragmentation, he concluded, was incompatible with counterinsurgency. Unity of command and rapid integration of capabilities were essential. In this context, he placed particular emphasis on helicopters as indispensable instruments of modern irregular warfare—a judgment that the Vietnam War would soon confirm beyond doubt.

⁴⁰ Ministerio de Defensa (República Argentina). *Antecedentes legales y parlamentarios 1944–1986*, versión en CD, ob. cit., pp. 113–121.

Argentina's subsequent procurement decisions reflected this lesson. Within a few years of de Alvear's mission, the Argentine Air Force incorporated rotary-wing platforms suited to counterinsurgency operations, including the Bell UH-1D and the improved UH-1H Iroquois in 1967, followed by the Hughes 369 HM in 1969. These acquisitions signaled not merely modernization, but adaptation to a new operational reality. De Alvear also underscored the central role of information and intelligence, recognizing that in insurgent warfare, awareness preceded action—and often determined its success.

The logic of knowledge transfer extended to personnel. Argentina expanded the exchange of officers and specialists for training in counter guerrilla warfare, sending military personnel to courses conducted by the Armed Forces of the United States. These efforts were reinforced by advisory missions from both the United States and France, embedding foreign operational experience into Argentina's evolving defense posture.

Taken together, these outcomes capture the significance of de Alvear's mission. He returned not with abstract impressions, but with a coherent body of lessons drawn from a conflict already reshaping the nature of war. Those lessons—organizational, technological, and doctrinal—offered Argentina tools to strengthen national security and to refine its development and defense policies within the volatile and uncertain landscape of the Cold War. 🦅

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