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CHINA'S

DEFENSE AND SECURITY APPROACHES
TO CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
DISPUTES, LIMITATIONS AND RISKS.

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CONTENT

Executive summary	05
Background and current scenario	07
The sale of defense material	08
Donation of defense material	09
Central America and the Caribbean, Beijing's new target?	10
Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua	14
Discussion of findings	18
What is China looking for?	19
China's economic weapon	21
Will Beijing be able to increase defense relations?	22
Concerns about a military base	24
Looking to the future	25
Conclusions	26
References	28

CHINA'S DEFENSE AND SECURITY APPROACHES TO CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: DISPUTES, LIMITATIONS AND RISKS.

Executive summary

Despite the efforts of the Chinese government to provide weapons and military equipment to Latin America and the Caribbean, its incidence on security and defense is limited. Through donations, China has transferred technology and equipment to the region's police and public security forces. Beijing has also successfully established defense cooperation agreements with the region, including training Latin American military personnel in Asia. However, Central American and Caribbean countries have not purchased military equipment, as is also the case in Latin America generally. These countries prefer acquiring their equipment from more traditional partners (except in the cases of Venezuela and Bolivia).

Through an extensive documentary review of press releases, newspaper articles, and the monitoring of Chinese diplomacy, this document pays special attention to the relationship of Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Cuba maintains good relations with that country in several areas. Although the transfer of military equipment is practically non-existent, Havana and Beijing hold official visits and million-dollar cooperation agreements. Nicaragua has established close and recent diplomatic relations with China, including high-level meetings. It also has the worrying history of a private Chinese initiative to build an interoceanic canal through its territory to compete with the Panama Canal. In El Salvador, China's unconditional cooperation encourages President Bukele, and there is speculation about constructing a Chinese commercial port in Salvadoran waters.

Although political leaders in the region view China's influence in Latin America and the Caribbean generally positively, experts share their concerns about its growing influence and its potential to challenge the existing order in the region. They also share evidence-based fears of the adverse socioeconomic effects of Chinese investment, like those seen in other economies worldwide.

While China has yet to be very successful in its defense and security approaches in Central America and the Caribbean, it has the potential to become more significant. Washington, for example, has concerns about the possibility of China establishing a military base in the region. In any case, China's security and defense policy concerning Central America and the Caribbean is not yet fully defined. Beijing's interest in the region could change depending on tensions with the United States.

CHINA'S DEFENSE AND SECURITY APPROACHES TO CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: DISPUTES, LIMITATIONS AND RISKS.

In the 21st century, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increased its global presence through diplomatic and cultural initiatives. It has done so mainly through trade and investment, such as through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Today, China has a strong presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, one area in which the Chinese government has not had much success so far is the defense and security sector, despite Beijing's attempts to provide armaments for the region's armed forces. China's limited influence in the sector does not mean the Chinese government will cease its attempts to exert influence. On the contrary, it can be affirmed that initiatives of this type will continue. The donation of

defense and security equipment, along with cooperation for humanitarian assistance, as well as in-person and virtual meetings and conferences, are helping to increase and cement relations between China's Armed Forces and their peers in the Western Hemisphere.

Central America and the Caribbean are two regions where defense and security-related activities with China are limited; however, given the current circumstances, they will potentially grow in the near future. This analysis will describe the different military and security projects, such as materiel donations and defense conferences, between the PRC and Central American and Caribbean countries.



**BACKGROUND
AND CURRENT SCENARIO**

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The sale of defense material

In recent years, Beijing has successfully transferred arms to very few Latin American and Caribbean countries. The first is **Venezuela**, under the government of Nicolás Maduro. Exactly how much weaponry has been transferred is challenging to identify due to the regime's well-known lack of transparency. Through publications, analysis, and official photos, it can be inferred that Caracas has obtained vehicles and aircraft of various models, including Shaanxi Y-8 medium aircraft, Norinco VN18 amphibious assault armored vehicles, among others (Infodefensa 2014; Infobae, 2021; Valverde, 2021). Another country is **Bolivia**, which purchased six Chinese Hongdu K-8 Karakorum (or Hongdu JL-8) fighter jets more than a decade ago to combat drug trafficking (Reuters Staff, 2011).

There have also been attempts to sell armaments to other countries. In 2009, China sent three Norinco MBT-2000 heavy tanks to **Peru** because the Peruvian Army had, and still has, the intention to replace its fleet of old Soviet T-55 tanks (Reuters Staff, 2009). Although the Chinese tanks were examined and tested, the Peruvian government did not decide to purchase them. Today, Beijing is trying to sell military weapons to two countries: Argentina and Uruguay. In **Argentina**, China aims to sell CAC/PAC JF-17 Thunder fighter jets (manufactured by China and Pakistan) to the Argentine Air Force (Ámbito, 2022). Meanwhile, there is speculation that Uruguay's Ministry of Defense is interested in buying two offshore patrol vessels to repower the Navy (Infobae, 2022). In 2019, Montevideo and Beijing signed a new military cooperation agreement (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional de **Uruguay**, 2019).

The US government cautiously monitors China's presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, a 2018 report by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission on China's role in those regions includes the defense sector (Koleski & Blivas, 2018). The report argued that "although China has significantly increased its military exports to LAC (Latin American and Caribbean) countries over the past decade, it remains a modest player concerning total arms market share in the region. Between 2013 and 2017, China ranked fifth in total arms exports to the region after the United States, Russia, France, and Germany" (p.21).

Donation of defense material

One tactic Beijing has used to improve its defense relations with Latin American and Caribbean countries is donating military equipment, primarily non-lethal. For example, in January 2019, China donated to **Peru**: 16 buses, 16 minivan vehicles, and ten ambulances for the Army; four patrol boats, one ambulance, and one minivan for the Navy; and a cooperative defense and location system (radar) for the Air Force; in addition to equipment for humanitarian demining and natural disasters: a bridge launcher vehicle system (composed of five vehicles), 15 sand bagging machines for flood control, and two all-terrain water tankers (Ministerio de Defensa de Perú, 2019). In November 2020, the Armed Forces of **Uruguay** received a donation of various Chinese military equipment: 700 infantry protection equipment, 30 night scopes for helmets, 100 night sights for rifles, 2,000 bulletproof vests, 3,000 ballistic helmets, 20 HF MR 9360 MANPAK tactical radios, and 10 HF MR 9360 FIX 125 tactical radios (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional de Uruguay, 2020).

It is important to emphasize that Beijing also donated military weapons to Ecuador in 2016 when it delivered 10,000 AK-47 rifles to the Ecuadorian Armed Forces. Curiously, instead of helping the forces' operations, the rifles were problematic since “there were problems with the rifle triggers, and it was also noted that most of them were meant for left-handed personnel.” In April 2021, then Minister of Defense Oswaldo Jarrín announced that the rifles would be melted down (Puente, 2021).



Central America and the Caribbean, Beijing's new target?

Central America and the Caribbean are two regions where Beijing has expanded its presence in recent years. A clear example is the diplomatic offensive, where several regional governments have severed relations with the Republic of China/Taiwan and recognized the People's Republic of China. Countries that have severed ties with Taiwan in recent years include Costa Rica in 2007 (EFE, 2007), Panama in 2017 (Vidal, 2017), El Salvador in 2018 (BBC News Mundo, 2018), Dominican Republic in 2018 (Fontdegloria, 2018), Nicaragua in 2021 (BBC News Mundo, 2021), Honduras in 2023 (Chang, 2023). In 2023, the Central American and Caribbean countries that still maintain relations with Taiwan are Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, República de China (Taiwán), 2023). The only South American country that still recognizes Taiwan is Paraguay.

The potential trade and investment benefits are well known, particularly as Central American and Caribbean governments are interested in accessing the Chinese market in exchange for recognition of the global power. Another interest is the promise that Chinese companies will undertake ambitious construction projects, hire local labor, and contribute to local job creation. For example in 2015, China inaugurated the Huaxing Library in Guyana (Embajada de China en Guyana, 2015). Similarly, in February 2022, construction began in El Salvador on “a modern library with non-reimbursable cooperation funds from China” (AFP, 2022). On the other hand, there have been construction projects that have not prospered and, instead, affected the local economy negatively. A clear example is the Bahamar Resort in the Bahamas (Cohen, 2016; Rucinski, 2017)¹. Caroline C. Cowen, an international strategic consultant, argues that “over the past two decades, China has played a larger role in the region by lending, making investments, and buying commodities” (Cowen, 2022). The role of the Chinese government and how it affects democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean has also been analyzed by organizations such as Expediente Abierto (Expediente Abierto, 2023).

¹ The \$3.5 billion Baha Mar resort project in the Bahamas, financed by a Chinese bank, has become one of the largest failed investments in the Caribbean. The project began when Bahamian resident Sarkis Izmirlian was asked by the Bahamian prime minister to develop the resort; however, when financing for the project dissolved amid the 2008 credit crunch, the Export-Import Bank of China provided a \$2.5 billion loan. Since then, the complex has faced a series of problems, including shoddy construction work, missed deadlines, and three scheduled openings of the complex that came and went between December 2014 and March 2015, with 2000 employees on a monthly payroll of \$4 million.

In defense and security cooperation, as in South America, Central American and Caribbean countries have not purchased military equipment. On the other hand, there are two areas in which Beijing has shown success:

- Several defense cooperation agreements have been signed, including training military personnel in China.

- China has transferred, via donations, technology for police and public security forces in the region. Expediente Abierto has compiled the following recent donations:

A. Bahamas: In 2017, China donated defense equipment valued at USD 1.2 million to the Bahamian government. “This latest gift of military equipment and supplies will help with military training, rescue operations in times of disaster, and the transportation and protection of Royal Bahamas Defense Force personnel in dangerous and high-risk situations,” explained a Bahamian news outlet (Bahamas, 2017).

B. Barbados: The Barbados Defence Force (BDF) received a donation of various equipment, including 4x4 vehicles, a mobile kitchen, a refrigeration truck, a tractor, and a small boat. The transfer ceremony occurred in February 2018 (Barbados Defence Force, 2018).

C. Costa Rica: In February 2021, the PRC government donated 100 motorcycles, ballistic helmets, bulletproof vests, shields, and body armor for law enforcement officers to the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Security. “Our security is certainly complicated, and we live in one of the most dangerous regions in the world,” explained Security Minister Michael Soto (Jimenez, 2021).

D. Guyana: In April 2017, the Guyana Defense Force (GDF) received a donation from China. That donation comprised 31 systems, including patrol boats, excavators, water tankers, fuel tankers, dump trucks, all-terrain ambulances, and several other vehicles. “We look forward to the continued support of the People’s Liberation Army and the People’s Republic of China, especially in strengthening the technical capacity of the Defense Force,” said Guyana’s then-President David Granger (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Guyana, 2017). Guyana has also sent military personnel to China for training.

In 2018, GDF Second Lieutenants Steffon Cameron and Teffurn James completed five years of training in China, including pilot (Chinese Air Force Basic Fighter Pilot) and officer development courses (Officer Development Course) (*Stabroek News*, 2018). The two officers studied at the Chinese Air Force University. In 2019, the Guyana government announced that 11 GDF second lieutenants received five-year scholarships to examine different areas, including naval architecture and ocean engineering, computer science and technology, industrial engineering, bioengineering, aeronautical engineering, and mechanical engineering (*Guyana Chronicle*, 2019). The GDF has not given any new news on how the studies of its staff in the Asian country are progressing.

E. Jamaica: In 2011, the PRC government donated US\$38 million to the Jamaica Defence Force (JDF). The donation included combat uniforms, helmets, boots, folding beds, and ballistic vests (*Radio Jamaica News*, 2011). China has also donated equipment for law enforcement. In 2018, Beijing donated a printer and a fan to the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF). During the transfer of the equipment, the Chinese Embassy in Jamaica mentioned a curious note: “The Chinese community, for its part, has contributed by co-sponsoring a QR code scanning system to improve police patrolling in commercial areas of downtown Kingston” (Embassy of the PRC in Jamaica, 2018). In other countries, there are concerns that surveillance technology, including that produced in China, may be used by autocratic governments.

F. Panama: The Chinese government has donated security equipment to Panama – a country that, it is worth mentioning, does not have armed forces, but security forces such as the National Air and Naval Service (SENAN, for its acronym in Spanish) or the National Border Service (SENAFRONT, for its acronym in Spanish). On December 16, 2022, “the mayor of the district of Panama, José Luis Fábrega, received from the ambassador of the People’s Republic of China in Panama, Wei Qiang, the donation of 10 motorized vehicles that will serve to reinforce the security of the capital municipality” (*El Capital Financiero*, 2022). On February 10, 2023, the Chinese government donated “a total of 6,000 bulletproof vests and 6,000 protective helmets,” valued at US\$4 million (Pinilla, 2023). According to the Minister of Public Security, Juan Pino, four thousand vests “will be distributed among members of the National Police, one thousand for the Naval Air Service and one thousand for the National Border Service. Helmets will be distributed in the same way.”

G. Dominican Republic: Like Panama, the Dominican Republic has also begun receiving security equipment after breaking relations with Taipei and recognizing Beijing. In December 2020, China donated eight off-road command vehicles for military use and 140 motorcycles, with about 15,000 spare parts and accessories for future maintenance. During the transfer ceremony, the Minister of the Presidency, Lisandro Macarrulla, stated that “the generosity of the Chinese Government has a direct impact on the strengthening of citizen security, an issue of great concern and utmost interest to the Dominican Government” (Ministerio de la Presidencia de República Dominicana, 2020). The vehicles were distributed among the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the National Police.

H. Trinidad and Tobago: In August 2019, China donated over 200 motorcycles to the Trinidad and Tobago police. In addition, “Fifteen police officers were trained in China in using the motorcycles, which have GPS and video recording technology,” explained a newspaper outlet in that country (*Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, 2019).

One topic that Washington, D.C. think tanks have repeatedly mentioned in their analyses is the travel of military personnel from Central America and the Caribbean to China to study and train at Chinese defense centers, including the National Defense University in Changping (Evan, 2019, 2020). However, other than official announcements from governments or regional media, it is unclear how many officers or non-commissioned officers from these regions have been trained in China in recent years.

In addition, meetings between Chinese diplomats and the heads of defense and security forces in Central America and the Caribbean occur regularly. For example, Ambassador Chen Daojiang, who presented his credentials in June 2022, met with Rear Admiral Antonette Wemyss Gorman, Chief of State May Defense of the Jamaican Defense Force on July 12, 2022 (*Our Today*, 2022). A month earlier, on June 23, Ambassador Dai Qingli to the Bahamas met with Commodore Raymond King, Commander of the Bahamas Defence Force (Royal Bahamas Defence Force, 2022).



Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua

Three Central American countries are particularly interesting for this analysis because of their location and foreign policy.

Cuba stands out for its historical relationship with the United States, the Soviet Union (now the Russian Federation), and China. Although Cuba's economic situation does not allow its government to acquire new military weapons, Havana and Beijing maintain good relations in several areas. For example, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez visited China between November 24 and 26, 2022, and met with President Xi Jinping (Martínez, 2022; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, República Popular de China, 2022). The rulers “agreed to continue to strengthen the political orientation for relations between the two Parties and Governments, promote the exchange of visits and high-level political dialogue, promote exchanges at all levels and cooperation in all spheres, bring into full play the various cooperation mechanisms” (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, República Popular de China, 2022). In past years, both governments have signed cooperation agreements on defense issues (*TeleSUR*, 2015). Havana has not explained what type of defense cooperation exists, but several news outlets report personnel training (Infodefensa, 2012). In a commentary for the Cuban state newspaper *Granma*, First Colonel Luo Tiefeng (Military, Naval and Air Attaché of the People's Republic of China in Cuba) explained that:

“ In recent years, under the watchful guidance of our top Party and state leaders, bilateral relations between the two armed forces have developed by leaps and bounds. Although the pandemic temporarily interrupted the exchanges of visits, the leaderships of the two armies, through various channels, maintained close communication throughout and continued to promote cooperation and exchange in all fields. (Tiefeng, 2022)

In an interview with the same newspaper in 2021, Colonel Tiefeng explained that “in recent years, thanks to the guidance and attention of the top leaders of both parties and countries, the rapid development of the bilateral military nexus characterized by the close exchange of all kinds between the high-level leaders of both armies and the continuous progress of cooperation in various areas has been achieved” (Embajada de la República Popular de China en la República de Cuba, 2021). During the 2003-2016 period, China conducted several exchanges of military personnel and military exercises with Latin American and Caribbean countries. Interestingly, Cuba is the third country on the list with the highest number of initiatives with China, only behind Chile and Brazil (Koleski & Blivas, 2018).

Although the transfer of military equipment is practically nonexistent, Beijing and Havana maintain strong diplomatic relations, evidenced by President Diaz-Canel Bermudez's visit to China in late 2022. In January 2023, the two governments signed a new agreement whereby Beijing will donate \$100 million "to execute projects of high social impact on the island," a deal made during the 2022 presidential visit (Sputnik Mundo, 2023).

The other two countries of particular interest for this analysis are **El Salvador and Nicaragua** since their respective governments broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan and established relations with the PRC in the last five years. In both cases, access to the Chinese market and promises of Chinese investment were determining factors.

In the case of **Nicaragua**, it is curious that this change did not occur earlier since a Chinese company had been trying for almost a decade to build a new inter-oceanic canal through Nicaraguan territory to compete with the Panama Canal (EFE, 2022a). In any case, the diplomatic decision to break off relations with Taiwan is not surprising since President Daniel Ortega, since returning to power in 2007, has maintained a foreign policy in which countries such as Cuba, Russia, and Venezuela are his main allies. Beijing and Managua have maintained close diplomatic relations; high-level meetings occur regularly. In November 2022, there was a virtual meeting between Gustavo Porras, president of the National Assembly of Nicaragua, and Li Zhanshu, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China (Flores, 2022).

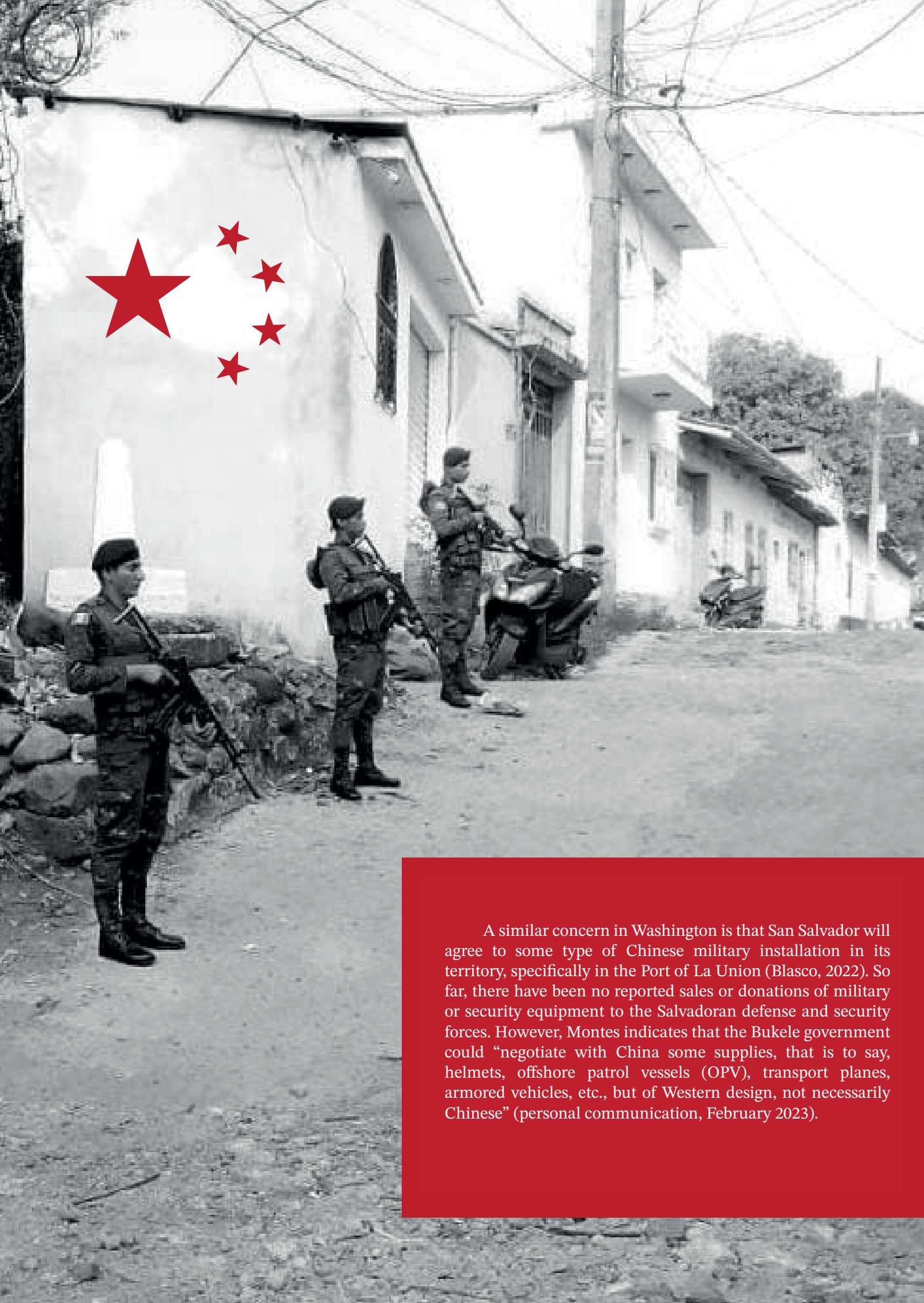
In addition, Nicaragua participated in the V China-Latin America Defense Forum, held virtually from December 12-13, 2022. In his address to the forum, the Commander of the Nicaraguan Army, General Julio César Avilés Castillo, explained that "we have the full right to maintain relations with friends such as the People's Republic of China" (Ejército de Nicaragua, 2022; EFE 2022b). General Avilés Castillo's speech has not been published in its entirety. Still, another excerpt made public by the Army of Nicaragua mentions how "impositions are unacceptable because we Nicaraguans are consistent with our principles of Independence, Sovereignty, Self-Determination, territorial integrity, and social justice." Although the General did not mention countries such as the United States (at least during the excerpt), it is understood that the above sentence is a criticism of Washington's sanctions on the government of President Daniel Ortega. In Nicaragua, security equipment has already been transferred. In November 2022, Beijing donated "helmets, bulletproof vests, shields, batons, knee pads, handcuffs, and gloves" (La Prensa, 2022).

It should be noted that every six months, the National Assembly of Nicaragua ratifies a resolution approving the entry and exit of military personnel. On November 11, 2022, that legislative body approved Presidential Decree No.20-2022 authorizing the entry of military personnel from said country. Article 17 of the decree authorized the entry of military personnel from crucial allies such as Cuba, Russia, and Venezuela, in addition to countries such as Mexico and (surprisingly) the United States, among others (Asamblea Nacional de Nicaragua, 2022). Curiously, the People's Republic of China was not mentioned. Still, it did authorize the "entry into the national territory of military personnel, ships, aircraft, and medical equipment from countries cooperating with Nicaragua, for humanitarian purposes and emergency health care, in support of the Government of the Republic of Nicaragua from January 1 to June 30, 2023" (La Gaceta, 2022). It is possible that this article could be used to approve the entry of Chinese military personnel in the first half of 2023 or the future.

In **El Salvador**, San Salvador and Beijing have strengthened relations since 2018. Two presidents made the Salvadoran government's decision to break ties with Taiwan. President Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014-2019) announced this decision in 2018 (López, 2018). President Nayib Bukele upheld his predecessor's decision instead of reversing it. The two governments are negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (CNN/Reuters, 2022).

In August 2022, President Bukele remarked that "Chinese cooperation comes with no strings attached, and I am not saying this to make propaganda for them because I am sure they do not need it, but it is the reality, at least in our case we have never been tied down...we have never been told that we would receive the pier, but only if we install one or another prosecutor. Or that we would receive a library, but only if we change the magistrates of the Court (of Justice)" (DW, 2022). The comment was a criticism of the United States government, because the previous year, "after the removal of some magistrates and the attorney general by the Congress controlled by the ruling party, Washington redirected part of the funding that it was to give the Bukele government, which, in turn, immediately received a \$500 million non-refundable cooperation fund from China" (DW, 2022).

According to Julio Montes, a Salvadoran specialist in security and defense matters, El Salvador could obtain from China the construction of its own military infrastructure, as there is a precedent in Central America with the case of its financing the facilities of the new Police Academy in Costa Rica (Montes, personal communication, May 2023).



A similar concern in Washington is that San Salvador will agree to some type of Chinese military installation in its territory, specifically in the Port of La Union (Blasco, 2022). So far, there have been no reported sales or donations of military or security equipment to the Salvadoran defense and security forces. However, Montes indicates that the Bukele government could “negotiate with China some supplies, that is to say, helmets, offshore patrol vessels (OPV), transport planes, armored vehicles, etc., but of Western design, not necessarily Chinese” (personal communication, February 2023).



**DISCUSSION OF
FINDINGS**

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

What is China looking for?

Several China and Russia analysts have praised China's relations with Latin America, and the implications of these relations for limiting the influence of the United States in the region. *Expediente Abierto* has carefully monitored the Chinese government's activities (including Chinese companies) in Latin America and the Caribbean. Apart from the geopolitical interest, there is also an apparent economic factor. In the *Expediente Abierto* report "Monitoring China's effect on democracy in Central America," Margaret Myers, Director of the Asia and Latin America program of the Inter-American Dialogue, explained that "China's economic strategy has to do with concerns about its food security (China is the world's most populous country with more than 1.4 billion people) and energy security" (Myers en Expediente Abierto, 2023, p.60). Myers argues that "at this point, what China is doing is extreme opportunism," explaining that "Chinese companies have learned to adapt to any circumstance" (p.61).

Dr. Ryan Berg, director of the Americas program for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a think tank in Washington, D.C., explained to *Expediente Abierto* that "there is a perception among many Latin American and Caribbean countries that China has helped their development while the United States has not." Moreover, "the world order is being contested, it is changing, the future is more uncertain, but we know that China will be a major player in the future." The Belt and Road Initiative, direct investment, and infrastructure projects help multiply China's presence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Expediente Abierto also spoke on this subject with Jorge Battaglino, an Argentine academic who teaches at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella and is a researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET, for its acronym in Spanish) and currently serves as director of the Universidad de la Defensa de la Argentina. The specialist explained that:

“ We are in a stage of full competition between two superpowers, which many authors define as a “transition of power” in which China is a “serious competitor” with the United States. Therefore, the government in Beijing wants, “as any power in the past, with aspirations of being a hegemon, to achieve the greatest amount of support-accessions-influence in South America, Central America, well, Latin America,” at the economic level, political level, cultural level “and of course at the level of defense policy.”

Other experts and publications regularly discuss Beijing’s strategy and objectives towards Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, in an interview for the Russian news agency *Sputnik Mundo*, editor-in-chief of *Latin America* magazine and professor at St. Petersburg State University, Victor Khéifetz, argued that “at a time when the United States is not stopping its trade and economic war with China, military and technical cooperation with Latin American countries is a demonstration of Chinese potential. The United States is squeezing China on one platform, and China could squeeze the United States in Latin America” (*Sputnik Mundo*, 2022).

The China Index 2022 report written by China in the World and the Doublethink Lab argues that Beijing’s goal for global influence is to create a new order that contrasts with the one created by Western cultures and powers. This strategy, called “the Chinese paradigm” or “Team China,” includes “forcing other countries to adopt the same foreign policy as China, conducting military exercises together, and even allowing Chinese law enforcement agencies to operate in certain countries” (Shen & Chang & Sando, 2022).

China's economic weapon

US Southern Command commander, US Army General Laura Richardson, at an event organized for the Atlantic Council – a Washington, D.C. think tank – on January 19, explained that “it is troubling to me to see [China’s] tentacles of in the Western Hemisphere.” Notably, the General focused on investment in Chinese technology and communications companies, such as Huawei, and port and maritime trade companies. That is, the General focused on Chinese capital and investment issues rather than military danger.

Dr. Berg gave a similar opinion to *Expediente Abierto*, as he explained that “China has turned economic dependence into a weapon.” If a Chinese company operates or buys a commercial port, it may be used for military purposes, as these are subordinate to Beijing’s guidance. There is a precedent to this assumption. In the United Arab Emirates, the U.S. government warned that the infrastructure of the Chinese company COSCO, which operates the Khalifa Port, could be used for military purposes. Abu Dhabi complained to Beijing about such construction, and it was canceled (Borger, Julian, 2021). For Dr. Berg, it is possible that, in the future, a Chinese company will carry out a similar construction in a Latin American or Caribbean port. Another example is the construction of a space station in Neuquén, Argentina. Although Argentine scientists may use the station, the Base is operated by Chinese personnel, and it is not known what operations are carried out at the facility. “The lack of transparency on the part of Chinese projects is a problem,” explains Dr. Berg of CSIS.²

However, as *Expediente Abierto* has explained, there are also several broken promises made by China to Latin America, specifically in infrastructure projects that were not carried out or were not completed. Although a Chinese company did build in Costa Rica “the National Stadium, named ‘La Joya de La Sabana,’ a modern building of 34,122 square meters of total construction area and 34,762 seats, which had a cost of \$111 million,” the rest of the Asian giant’s promises “are pending” (*Expediente Abierto*, 2023, p.73). Elsewhere, unfinished projects include the Puerto Limón highway, also known as Ruta 32, and the RECOPE Refinery. Similarly, the transoceanic canal in Nicaragua that was to be built by the Chinese consortium HKND has also not been built. In this context, Evan Ellis, research professor of Latin American studies at the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College and a specialist in Asian issues, argues that the Canal was not a government-to-government promise, “it is hard to say that it was a failed promise, in the same sense as the promises given for changing recognition to Taiwan.” However, the scholar calls the Nicaragua Canal “an illusion” but points out how close associates and family members of President Ortega sought to buy land in Brito, at the Canal exit, and participate as business partners in the massive Canal development activities (*Expediente Abierto*, 2023, p.73).

² The CSIS center has published a report on the Chinese space program in South America (Funaiole & Kim, & Hart, & Bermudez, 2022).

Will Beijing be able to increase defense relations?

Beijing is interested in increasing defense relations with its Caribbean and Central American peers. However, the PRC has not been successful in this area. For Ralph Espach of the Center for Naval Analyses in Arlington, Virginia, one of the primary explanations for this lack of Chinese success in this area is that “Latin American countries may avoid security commitments or activities that could be seen as affecting their sovereignty, or that damage or limit their long-standing security relationships with the United States” (Espach, personal communication, May 2023). A Latin American rapprochement toward China on this issue would present this risk. Similarly, Dr. Ryan Berg of CSIS explained to Expediente Abierto, “China has not been very active in defense, but it has the potential to become more active.” In an interview for *Expediente Abierto*, Colombian Army Colonel (r) Gersain Sánchez argued that today, Chinese defense relations with Central America and the Caribbean are limited. “There are no arms sales, there is no military force, but there is a solid economic development meant to block US economic interests in Latin America and the Caribbean.”

It is worth mentioning that China is competing with the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The Ministries of Defense of these countries also train with Latin American peers or invite military personnel from the Caribbean and Central America to study in defense centers in these countries. No survey, at least not a public one, asks Central American or Caribbean defense officers whether they prefer to study in China, the United States, or another country. However, the United States might be preferred because of the known cultural, economic, and political relations between that country and the region. On the issue of military or security equipment sales, China has so far focused on donating equipment to Caribbean and Central American forces. This is unsurprising since countries like El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica have limited defense budgets. Moreover, the armed forces of these countries are accustomed to using systems and platforms from other suppliers.

As an example of the limited Chinese success in the sale of armaments to the region, in Uruguay, the possibility of the Navy acquiring ocean patrol vessels from China seems to have cooled down since the country has shown interest in ships from Norway (Ámbito, 2023). Likewise, the government of Argentina approved the negotiation to purchase 156 Guarani armored transport vehicles produced by IVECO, which will increase defense relations between Argentina and Brazil (Higuera, 2023). It is doubtful that Argentina wants to acquire Chinese fighter planes, and, for the moment, no other country in Latin America or the Caribbean intends to buy Chinese armaments. Jorge Battaligno of Argentina’s National Council for Scientific and Technical Research explained to Expediente Abierto that countries use the geopolitical competition between China and the United States to look for alternatives to purchase defense and security material:

“ Argentina takes advantage of [the current geopolitical situation] because it says: our air force needs state-of-the-art aircrafts. If the United States makes a better offer, Argentina will opt for the US aircraft. There is no ideological preference for the Chinese; it is a product of the need that other Western countries did not sell to us (Battaligno in Expediente Abierto, 2023).

The fact that Argentina ultimately preferred Brazil’s proposal for armored vehicles over China’s proposal is a defeat for the intentions of Chinese defense companies such as NORINCO that want to have a presence in the Latin American market. However, there will undoubtedly be attempts to sell armaments to other countries in the region in the near future. Should political relations between the United States and an ally in Central America and the Caribbean deteriorate, these governments could look to China as a supplier of war material, as has already happened with Venezuela under former President Hugo Chávez.

Generally speaking, the trend is that very few countries in the region will want to trade a century of trying to curb US encroachment and US involvement and influence in their internal affairs, only to allow the Chinese Communist Party to exploit their resources and take advantage of their vulnerabilities. Countries in dire financial straits, or those regimes that care more about their own survival than the good of the nation, could undoubtedly succumb to Beijing’s incentives (Espach, personal communication, May 2023).

Experts agree that the United States’ power to undermine and isolate governments significantly closer to China in terms of security and defense would outweigh the Asian country’s ability to protect or support them (Espach, personal communication, May 2023).



Concerns about a military base

The possibility of China obtaining a military base in Latin America, particularly in Central America, causes consternation in Washington. Currently, Chinese military installations outside East Asia are very few, and the People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti, in North Africa in the Mediterranean Sea, and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka stand out. In the case of the port, it is being leased by China for 99 years; "China aims to give Hambantota Port a dual use, commercial and military. It is trying to build the capacity to move and maneuver ships in the port for military purposes," argued Dayan Jayatilaka, a former Sri Lankan diplomat (Tanchum, 2021; Van Staden, 2022). In both cases, it is essential to note that these facilities are ports, that is, places where Chinese Navy (People's Liberation Army Navy: PLAN) ships can dock. Therefore, it can be inferred that China may be interested in controlling the Port of La Union in El Salvador or building a transoceanic canal in Nicaragua. These projects could be particularly problematic for Washington, as they would mean that Chinese ships could sail and dock in the Western Hemisphere more frequently.

In reality, voyages by Chinese vessels in Western Hemisphere waters are rare. One of the few maritime expeditions is carried out by the Chinese hospital ship *Peace Ark* (or *Daishan Dao*). It has sailed in this hemisphere for humanitarian missions (*BBC Mundo*, 2018). On the other hand, it has been confirmed that there is a constant presence of Chinese-flagged vessels carrying out illegal and predatory fishing in Latin American waters, particularly in the Atlantic and South American Pacific.



Looking to the future

In extreme scenarios, a possible Chinese military presence in Central America would be focused on the naval area. Instead of thinking about military installations with tanks or anti-missile systems, it should be remembered that maritime control is of interest to Beijing, not only in the Western Hemisphere but also worldwide. “Due to the construction of large ports, which includes large investments, in the future, a naval force will be needed to protect them,” explained Colonel (r) Sanchez to *Expediente Abierto*. If Beijing, through its companies, manages to control regional ports, it is possible that in the future, we will see PLAN ships sailing through regional waters more frequently. “So far, China is not interested in sending military forces to Nicaragua... the time is not yet right,” said Colonel (r) Sanchez. The retired officer expressed that the Chinese government’s strategy is to “compromise corrupt governments and subsequently” gain greater control in the country. The governments of Maduro in Venezuela, Ortega in Nicaragua, and Bukele in El Salvador are examples of this effective economic strategy. Dr. Berg, likewise, thinks that in the future, some of China’s projects in the Western Hemisphere, as has happened in other regions of the world, may be dual-use, i.e., civilian and military. For the moment, Beijing does not appear to have an interest in a more active and explicit military presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. The record suggests that:

“ China has essentially no interest in the stability or security of Latin American countries, especially the smaller nations of Central America and the Caribbean. However, the stability and security of these countries are of critical importance to the United States for a wide range of reasons. Therefore, a move toward security cooperation with China (in any form), to the detriment of US interests, could invite a significant US response (Espach, personal communication, May 2023).



CONCLUSIONS

The People's Republic of China is viewed in the United States in several ways. On the one hand, Washington recognizes China's importance as an economic power producer and importer of products and resources, which makes the Asian country a vital partner for the US economy. China's position as a global power is undeniable. On the other hand, the US government, its top military leaders, and various think tanks constantly criticize Beijing and characterize it as a competitor and an economic and security threat. Many Washington think tanks regularly discuss the competition between Washington and Beijing in the Indo-Pacific area and whether a war between the two countries could occur in the near or distant future (Brookings Institution, 2023; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023; Ullman, 2023).

Latin America and the Caribbean view Beijing differently. China is the main trading partner of several countries and a significant investor. Access to the Chinese market is a goal for any country in these two regions. Although there are cases where infrastructure projects were unsuccessful, the overwhelming presence of Chinese products that destroy regional small and medium-sized enterprises and Chinese control of vital industries have provoked occasional protests and annoyance in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, the status quo remains.

In defense and security relations, Beijing has not been lucky. With the exception of Venezuela and other limited arms purchases, China has been unable to penetrate the Latin American defense market. Argentina's recent decision to purchase armored vehicles from Brazil and Uruguay's pause in purchasing ocean-going patrol vessels are Beijing's most recent setbacks in this area. On the other hand, Beijing continues to donate military and security equipment to the armed forces and police forces of Latin America and the Caribbean. There does not appear to be a preference for which type of government receives this equipment. Both Nicaragua, with the dictatorial government of Daniel Ortega, and governments with more transparency, such as Costa Rica, have received ballistic helmets, bulletproof vests, shields for their police forces, and other supplies in the last two years.

The governments of Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, the countries on which this analysis has focused, continue their friendly defense relations with China. This includes the occasional visit by Chinese military officers or participation in conferences. Currently, it does not appear that the Chinese government or its military force, the People's Liberation Army, has any short-term interest in attempting to increase its presence in Central America and the Caribbean. Moreover, these countries have not recently purchased Chinese military equipment. There is also no Chinese defense policy regarding Central America and the Caribbean. This could change, but much will depend on tensions between Washington and Beijing.



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