

CHINA'S MILITARY PRESENCE IN SOUTH AMERICA

One of the defining features of the current geopolitical landscape is the growing political, commercial, and military influence of China in the American and African continents, alongside the shift in U.S. focus toward Asia. America, a continent historically under U.S. influence, has gradually opened—especially since 2000—to Chinese economic cooperation, which in certain cases has evolved into scientific and even military relationships. What does (and what could) this opening to the influence of the Asian giant mean geopolitically for Ibero-America?

The 1990s were the golden age for U.S. investment in Latin America. However, with the new millennium, North America shifted its focus to the Asian bloc, as Russia re-emerged and China began positioning itself as a potential competitor, though still far from reaching U.S. levels of production. This shift favored the rise of left-wing political parties in Latin America, grouped under what became known as 21st Century Socialism, with prominent figures such as Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Lula da Silva, and Néstor Kirchner. These governments, neglected by the U.S., turned to a resurgent China, which quickly came to the region's aid with loans, investments, and cooperation proposals. Starting in 2008, with Paraguay and later Argentina, the People's Republic of China exponentially increased its commercial cooperation with Ibero-America. The presence (at the time) of governments politically favorable to Chinese influence facilitated the arrival of investment, business proposals, and, as we'll see later, agreements for the construction of scientific bases on Argentine sovereign soil. Today, China purchases nearly 90% of Ecuador's oil and provides vital loans to Venezuela and Brazil—its main trading partner in the region and a member of the BRICS bloc. China's trade with the region increased thirty-fivefold between 2000 and 2022¹, and it is the top trading partner for countries such as Brazil (with \$125 billion in exports in 2022), Chile (\$43 billion), followed by Peru, Mexico, and

¹ Perspectives on International Trade. 2023 Report.

Ecuador².

The main export products are soybeans (due to the rising meat consumption in China, which requires feed) and fossil fuels (with an energy matrix composed of 31% oil and 22% gas)³. China also holds investments in strategic sectors across the region, such as port infrastructure and telecommunications.

Within the regional framework of Latin America, one of the most relevant multinational actors is Mercosur. This trade organization, established in 1991, was founded by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay with the goal of facilitating internal trade (by reducing tariffs and cutting bureaucracy). The 1990s were marked by a sense of national reconstruction (with U.S. loans) after years of military dictatorships, during which these countries had not only taken on large volumes of debt but also harbored resentments and war hypotheses—particularly between Brazil and Argentina, who had even developed nuclear weapons programs during the 1970s and '80s⁴. However, over the years, ideological differences among the member countries and undeniable economic disparities made it difficult to achieve truly free trade, even though Mercosur facilitated some migratory processes and benefited certain commercial sectors. The most serious disagreement emerged in September 2021, when Uruguay's Lacalle Pou administration signed a memorandum of understanding for a free trade agreement with China—violating the bloc's 2000 principle that international trade agreements must be negotiated collectively. This move strained Uruguay's relations with its two main regional partners, Argentina and Brazil, with Argentine officials even stating that if the agreement were finalized, Uruguay could be expelled from the bloc⁵.

Chinese Bases in the Americas

Currently, there are two countries in Latin America that host permanent Chinese installations: Argentina and allegedly, Cuba.

² Data from the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c72pn50j86jo>

³ 2021 Data. Available at: <https://energes.com.br/diferenca-entre-matriz-energetica-e-eletrica/>

⁴ Argentina's nuclear weapons project began in 1978 and was dismantled in 1983. However, the Cóndor and Cóndor II missile programs continued until 1991. Brazil, for its part, dismantled its nuclear weapons program in 1990. In 1991, both countries created the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC), aimed at mutual nuclear oversight.

⁵ Editorial Note (2021) – *Uruguay-China FTA causes "concern" within MERCOSUR*. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/tlc-entre-uruguay-y-china-causa-inquietud-en-mercosur/a-59139204>

In Argentina's case, in 2012 (under Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's administration), an agreement was signed between the Chinese and Argentine governments in which Argentina ceded sovereign territory in the province of Neuquén for a 50-year period, allowing the construction of a facility for scientific purposes. The agreement came during a time of severe economic recession in Argentina, with urgent financial needs due to debt deadlines and limited access to international credit. According to official information from Beijing, the so-called Deep Space Station was built to track Chinese astronomical satellites involved in the exploration of the Moon's far side. Criticism and concerns quickly arose over potential military uses of the base—such as missile tracking—which were officially quelled in 2019 (under Mauricio Macri's administration) when an agreement between Beijing and Buenos Aires limited the base's use strictly to peaceful purposes.

However, the opacity surrounding the base's activities (as it is protected under Chinese state information laws and thus inaccessible to Argentina without special authorization), the alleged existence of secret clauses in the original agreement, and most importantly, the fact that the Chinese space agency operating the base is subordinated to the People's Liberation Army, all contribute to doubts regarding what role the base might play in a potential wartime or military intelligence scenario⁶.

In the Caribbean, military cooperation between Cuba and China has been documented for about three years. These agreements include intelligence collaboration and joint training centers. According to publications from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)⁷, there are already several permanent Chinese-built Signals Intelligence (SIGINT)⁸ sites on the island. Cuba's strategic position offers two key advantages: its proximity to the United States and geopolitically sensitive points such as the Panama Canal and the U.S. base in Guantánamo; and its geography⁹, which reduces the

⁶ Cosgrove Moreno, N. (---) – *China's Controversial Space Station in Patagonia*. Global Affairs, University of Navarra. Available at: <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/la-controvertida-estacion-espacial-de-china-en-la-patagonia>

⁷ CSIS (2024) – *Secret Signals: Decoding China's Intelligence Activities in Cuba*. Available at: <https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-cuba-spy-sigint/>

⁸ SIGINT is an acronym referring to the identification, interception, interference, and monitoring of electromagnetic signals (radio, telephone, internet, etc.) as a source for generating intelligence.

⁹ Radio signal interception can be affected by distance, as it becomes difficult to isolate useful information from what is called "noise"—non-relevant information. To reduce this problem, it is necessary to have a "direct line of sight" with the signal source to obtain a cleaner signal.

limitations inherent in signal interception. These factors make the island a valuable ally for China—just as it once was for the Soviet Union.

Also noteworthy is that less than 1,000 kilometers from several of the identified SIGINT sites lie the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) bases, as well as several U.S. Navy and Air Force bases—including those used for nuclear ballistic missile launches. The SIGINT bases identified on the island¹⁰ are located in Havana (with three centers) and in Santiago de Cuba, in the south, near the U.S. base at Guantánamo.

Despite all available information, both the Chinese and Cuban governments deny that these facilities serve espionage purposes, claiming they are merely for scientific cooperation—or outright denying their existence^{11 and 12}.

Infrastructure Diplomacy and Debt

South America's geopolitical value rests on two main pillars: geography and data. The continent's geographic location not only places it near the U.S. but also makes it a crucial component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹³, launched in 2013. This initiative aims to develop infrastructure around the world (mainly maritime ports) to secure trade routes and communication lines.

The Pacific Ocean represents China's main commercial maritime route, given the long detour required via the Indian Ocean. Hence, many of the ports funded and managed by China in Latin America are located on the continent's eastern edge, particularly in Mexico and Peru¹⁴. Furthermore, China has proposed the construction of maritime ports in the Argentine cities of Rio Grande and Ushuaia (both in Tierra del Fuego Province), and in Punta Arenas, southern Chile¹⁵.

Controlling these ports would allow China to monitor the Strait of Magellan—a key

¹⁰ Specifically, the identified sites are located in Bejucal (March 16, 2024), El Salao (March 2, 2024), Wajay (March 11, 2024), and Calabazar (April 6, 2024).

¹¹ Belchi, A. (2023) – *A Chinese Spy Base in Cuba to Monitor the U.S.? What We Know*. Voice of America. Available at: <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/una-base-de-espionaje-china-en-cuba-para-vigilar-a-eeuu-lo-que-se-sabe/7146392.html>

¹² Editorial Note (2024) – *The Cuban Regime Denies Again the Presence of Chinese Espionage Bases in Cuba*. CiberCuba. Available at: <https://en.cibercuba.com/noticias/2024-07-02-u1-e199854-s27061-nid284498-regimen-cubano-vuelve-negar-presencia-bases>

¹³ In Latin America, countries participating in this initiative include Chile, Venezuela, the Guyanas, and Bolivia.

¹⁴ Ports include Ensenada, Manzanillo, Veracruz (among others), and Chancay (Peru), among many others.

¹⁵ Cárdenas, J. (2024) – *Why Are the U.S. and China Competing Over a Port in Southern Chile?* Americas Quarterly. Available at: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/por-que-estados-unidos-y-china-se-agolpan-sobre-un-puerto-en-el-sur-de-chile/>

maritime route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans that offers an alternative to the Panama Canal, which remains under U.S. influence.

The announcement of these plans during the administration of Alberto Fernández triggered alarm in the U.S. Southern Command. In April 2024, its commander, General Laura Richardson, expressed a willingness to cooperate with Argentina's new administration under Javier Milei¹⁶ to build a U.S. military base in Ushuaia—clearly intended to prevent Chinese settlement in the area.

This is not an isolated policy. For over a decade, China has been building the so-called “String of Pearls”—a network of Chinese-managed maritime ports across the Indian Ocean designed to secure trade routes and, if necessary, function as logistical bases for naval battle groups. Countries in this network include China, Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, Iraq, Kenya, and Northern Sudan¹⁷.

On the data front, as previously mentioned, a significant portion of China's investments in the region targets telecommunications infrastructure, especially for Internet and 5G networks. This grants China control over the digital economy, the Internet of Things, and Artificial Intelligence, in addition to communications themselves.

However, protocols for data circulation and storage have major strategic implications for the region, since both would be controlled and managed by a foreign power. According to Chinese legislation, state-owned 5G companies fall under the control of China's intelligence services¹⁸. In Latin America, Costa Rica was the first country to draft a legislative framework (file no. 23.292) to regulate 5G cybersecurity, prohibiting non-signatory countries of the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001) from being 5G technology providers—effectively excluding countries like Russia and China.

Is There a Danger?

Undoubtedly, China's control over port infrastructure, telecommunications, and debt

¹⁶ U.S. Embassy in Argentina (2024) – *U.S. Southern Command Chief, Gen. Laura Richardson, Visits Argentina to Strengthen Bilateral Ties*. U.S. Mission in Argentina. Available at: <https://ar.usembassy.gov/es/la-jefa-del-comando-sur-gen-laura-richardson-visita-argentina-para-fortalecer-lazos-bilaterales/>

¹⁷ Pesquera, D. (2024) – *What Is China's String of Pearls?* LISA Institute, Geopolitics section. Available at: <https://www.lisanews.org/internacional/que-es-el-collar-de-perlas-chino/>

¹⁸ National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China, Chapters 1 and 2, Articles 7, 10, and 18; and the Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China, Articles 28, 35, and 37.

carries geopolitical weight and suggests Latin America's direct involvement in a potential prolonged armed conflict between the U.S. and China.

We are talking about the control of maritime routes (which could serve as logistical bases for naval battle groups), telecommunications (with significant espionage potential), and a well-executed debt policy—commonly referred to as “debt-trap diplomacy”—implemented in the region.

From a purely military perspective, it can be said that nearly all Chinese investments in the region have useful military potential—especially in a region rich in natural resources critical for the semiconductor industry¹⁹, such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia. The control of strategic ports would provide China with a sufficient logistical network to project military power far from its homeland. Combined with an international intelligence network, this could lead to a prolonged “war of routes,” where, even without a declared conflict, a constant state of tension would persist—resembling a 3.0 Cold War.

Information and logistics are dominant strategic variables when discussing 21st-century conflicts, characterized by global scope and a covert pace.

¹⁹ These are essential for the manufacturing of various military products such as communication devices, missile guidance systems, etc.