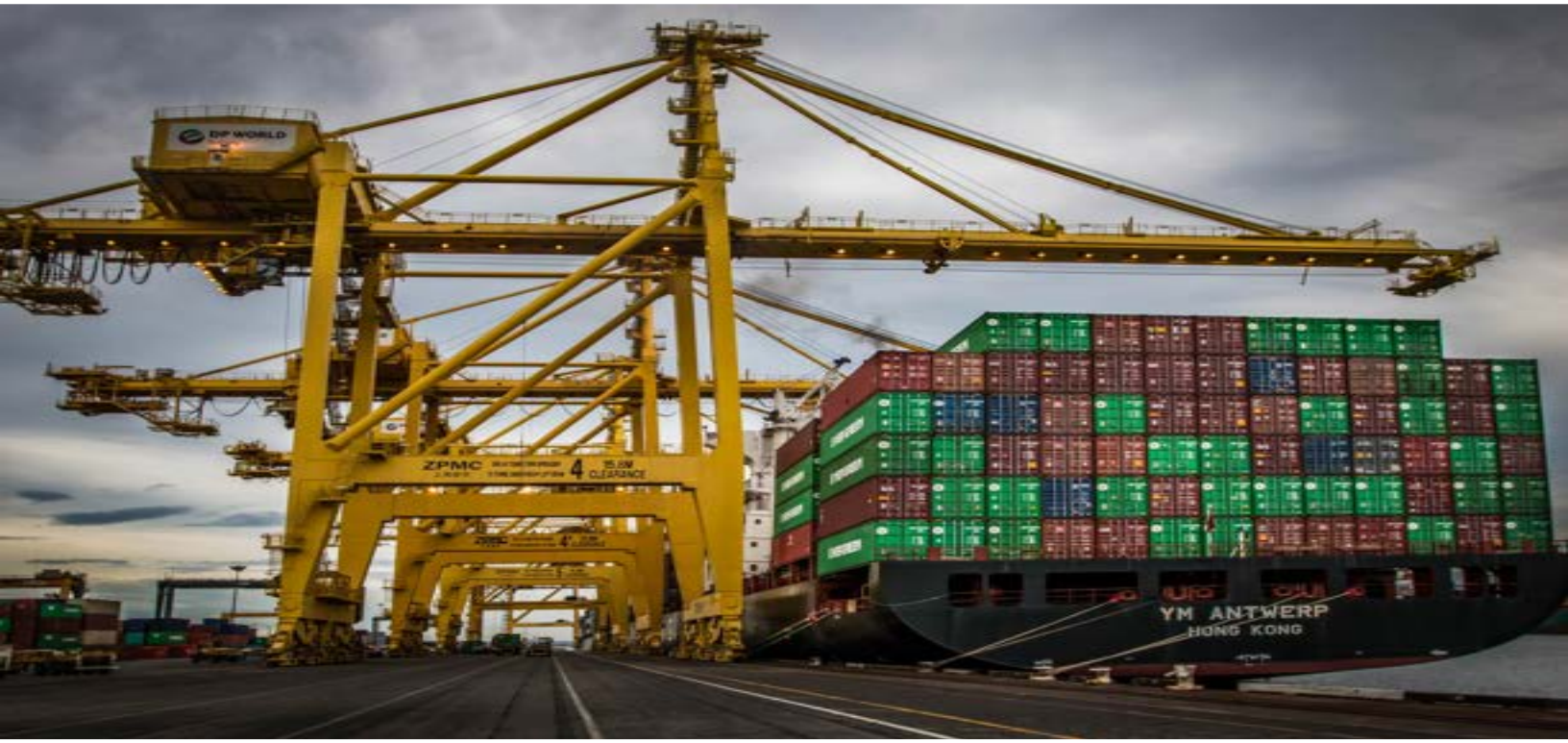
Ports of Power

China's Growing Maritime Network of Ports, Bases, and Dual-Use Facilities

by Lea Thome and Hon. Mark Kennedy
Foreword by ADM James G, Foggo, USN (ret.), Dean of the Center for Maritime Strategy

February 2026



Center for Maritime Strategy
NYU Development Research Institute
Wahba Initiative for STRATEGIC COMPETITION

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About the Wahba Initiative for Strategic Competition

The Development Research Institute (DRI) at NYU advances rigorous, policy-relevant research on global development challenges, supporting faculty and student scholarship while translating research into real-world impact.

The Wahba Initiative for Strategic Competition (WISC), housed within NYU DRI, focuses on the intersection of strategic competition and development outcomes. It examines how capital, technology, infrastructure, and alliances shape development trajectories—in areas such as AI diffusion, digital and physical infrastructure, secure supply chains, and energy systems. WISC's work addresses execution-focused questions: why major projects stall, how policy and capital can better align, and how trusted technology ecosystems and institutional coordination can support inclusive growth.

Through applied analysis and high-level convenings, WISC integrates empirical scholarship with policy engagement to advance solutions that strengthen economic resilience and long-term global stability.

About the Center for Maritime Strategy

The Center for Maritime Strategy (CMS) is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank and research institution dedicated to studying maritime issues and their context within wider American national security policy. Through its research and analysis, external outreach, publications, and high-level events, CMS engages key stakeholders across government, academia, and industry.

Our mission is to strengthen American national security through its sea services, conducting policy-driven research, advocacy, and education on the relationship between maritime power and national security policy.

Founded in January 2022, the Center supports all of the Nation's sea services, including the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine, through conducting scholarly research and analysis to drive prudent national security policies. Its inception came in response to several key national security challenges that demand revitalized maritime power:

1. The re-emergence of strategic competition with China and Russia.
2. The decline of the American maritime industrial base.
3. The expense and complexity of maritime platforms and systems which necessitates judicious foresight and long-term force planning.
4. Ever-increasing globalization driven by maritime highways and expanding sea-based infrastructure.
5. The difficulty of achieving political consensus on Capitol Hill in an era of heightened partisan polarization.

The Navy League of the United States sponsors the Center for Maritime Strategy, furnishing operational support and leveraging its 120-year history of supporting the American sea services with nearly 200 local chapters throughout the globe.

About the Authors

Lea Thome is a China specialist and international security scholar, focusing on civil-military fusion and new technologies threatening national security. She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Rochester and her master's degree in Global Affairs as a Schwarzman Scholar from Tsinghua University. Previously, she served as the Schwarzman Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Kissinger Institute on the United States and China, a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research, and a program manager at AidData.

She has written extensively on China's military and maritime strategy, Chinese state-directed financing in critical sectors, and emerging technologies for various media outlets and platforms. Thome originally hails from Duisburg, Germany, but has spent significant time between Europe, Asia, and America. This report is a product of her research on ports for the Wilson Center.

Mark Kennedy (U.S. Congress, 2001-07 MN) is a Senior Fellow at NYU's Development Research Institute and Founding Director of the Wahba Initiative for Strategic Competition. Kennedy defines paths to strengthening the alliances, technology, and economic foundations of America's global leadership. As President Emeritus of the University of Colorado and past President of the University of North Dakota, Kennedy highlights the central role of talent and technology in economic development and geopolitical competition. As an appointed Civic Leader supporting the Secretary of the Air Force and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), Kennedy champions the grand strategy and military needed to deter aggression.

Mark applies experiences as a first-generation college graduate, presidentially appointed member of the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations, author of Shapeholders, Business Success in the Age of Activism (Columbia University Press), member of the Council on Foreign Relations, member of the Boston Global Forum's Board of Thinkers, Chairman Emeritus of the Economic Club of Minnesota, corporate executive, University of Michigan MBA (with distinction) and St. John's University (MN) graduate.

About ADM James G. Foggo, USN (ret.)

Admiral James G. Foggo, USN (ret.), is the Dean of the Center for Maritime Strategy. He is a 1981 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. ADM Foggo is also an Olmsted Scholar and Moreau Scholar, earning a Master of Public Administration at Harvard University and a Diplome d'Etudes Approfondies in Defense and Strategic Studies from the University of Strasbourg, France.

He commanded the attack submarine USS Oklahoma City (SSN 723) in 1998, which was awarded the Submarine Squadron 8 Battle Efficiency "E" award and the Admiral Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy, for being the most improved ship in the Atlantic Fleet.

Following command of USS Oklahoma City, he would go on to command eight more times to include: Submarine Squadron 6 in Norfolk, Virginia; Submarine Group 8; Allied Submarines South; the U.S. 6th Fleet; Allied Striking and Support Forces NATO; Naval Forces Europe; Naval Forces Africa; and Allied Joint Forces Command (NATO), all headquartered in Naples, Italy.

During these command tours, he participated in combat operations as the Operations Officer for Joint Task Force Odyssey Dawn (Libya) in 2011 and Commander Naval Forces Europe for strike operations against Syrian chemical weapons sites in April 2018.

Throughout his career, Foggo has been a champion of the Navy as an extended arm of diplomacy. He maintained close relationships with the U.S. ambassadors in his area of responsibility from Europe to Africa and into the Middle East. He sponsored numerous regional ambassadors conferences at his headquarters in Naples to address security challenges in the Balkans, Mediterranean and the Black Sea regions. Throughout 2021, he taught a seminar at the Foreign Service Institute on civil-military relations for rising foreign service officers. In November 2021, Foggo was named to the American Academy of Diplomacy as one of a handful of retired flag officers who serve alongside more than 200 retired ambassadors with the common goal of enhancing American diplomacy around the globe.

Foggo is a Distinguished Fellow of the Center for European Policy Analysis and a Distinguished Fellow of the Council on Competitiveness. He is a member of the board of directors of the Olmsted Foundation and the Naval Historical Foundation. He occupies a seat on the editorial board of the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Explorer's Club of New York.

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Foreword

By Admiral James G. Foggo, USN (ret.)
Dean of the Center for Maritime Strategy

The Center for Maritime Strategy is delighted to partner with the Wahba Initiative for Strategic Competition to bring you this insightful monograph. "Ports of Power" chronicles China's meteoric rise in the maritime domain over the last two decades. The study presents a cautionary tale of how a rising power that once yielded to American sea power is now able to flex its muscles outside the first and second island chains while simultaneously expanding its global reach. Unlike many other studies written on this topic, "Ports of Power" is not content to simply identify and admire the problem. Rather, this study offers solutions to mitigate the risk of a Chinese monopoly in maritime infrastructure around the world and a strategy to compete with Beijing in this domain.

China's rise can be attributed to a variety of factors. While the United States was distracted by the Global War on Terror, China incrementally expanded its global reach with President Xi's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI).[1] China now dominates the commercial shipbuilding industry, with over 50 percent of the world's commercial traffic sailing under a Chinese flag.[2] China has leveraged its investments and loans to debtor nations in a strategic and calculated way, giving China control of more than 60 percent of the world's port facilities. According to container shipping expert John McCown, "China now builds 50 percent of the world's container ships, 97 percent of container equipment, 70 percent of container cranes, controls 14 percent of container ships by flag, represents 40 percent of worldwide volume, and controls or has investments in 357 international container terminals in 63 different countries."[3] China has maximized its industrial capacity, particularly in the maritime domain where it can now outproduce any other western nation in terms of simultaneous commercial or warship production.[4]

China accomplished all of this under the radar while Western powers, in particular the United States of America, became complacent and distracted. Complacency set in after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the period during which well-known scholar Francis Fukuyama famously referred to as "The End of History." Western powers divested from a Cold War defensive posture and instead relied on crisis response. The United States downsized its presence in Europe, shuttering or departing from strategically important bases like Keflavik, Iceland while reducing American troop strength on the continent.

Furthermore, Al Qaeda's attack on the homeland on 9/11 was a "Pearl Harbor" moment for the United States. America demanded retribution, and Congress and the Bush Administration mobilized to respond. This resulted in two "forever wars" that led the U. S. military to Iraq under the pretense of destroying Saddam Husein's "clandestine" nuclear program and to Afghanistan to not only eliminate Al Qaeda, but to build a nation that would preclude terrorist networks from ever using Afghanistan as a base of operations in the future.

Accordingly, America's strategy and defense budget became increasingly focused on counterinsurgency operations and littoral warfare in support of forces ashore. In fact, Marines debarked from their traditional habitat aboard afloat platforms and moved ashore, becoming a heavy, self-sustained force relaying on its own air cover and fires (tanks and artillery). Baseline defense budgets were inadequate to cover battlefield requirements in support of the Global War on Terror, so supplemental authorizations became the norm, contributing to an increase in the national debt. In fact, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen cautioned during and after his service that the greatest threat to our national security is its national debt.[5] Twenty years after 9/11, the

United States effectively withdrew from both war zones, with Iraq more or less able to function as an independent state and Afghanistan collapsing into a complete failure.

In the interim, China took advantage of America's distraction and deployed all the tools of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power to establish relationships with strategic partners around the globe. As needed, China frequently employed lawfare and economic warfare to coerce weaker nations within its sphere of influence to cooperate. In his first term, President Barack Obama extended America's engagement in the "forever wars," but dedicated his second term to reducing America's footprint in Europe and the Middle East and instead articulating a pivot to the Pacific. President Obama rebalanced the fleet with 60 percent of battle force ships moved to the Pacific theater of operations while at the same time engaging the Chinese in targeted diplomacy.

The first meeting between President Obama and President Xi took place in Sunnyland, California in June 2013 and became known as the Sunnyland Summit.[6] During this summit, both sides agreed to explore options to discuss regional security issues including North Korea and non-proliferation, cyber security and the protection of intellectual property, climate change, and a "new model of major country relations" to include risk mitigation measures applied to both of our naval forces operating in close proximity to one another. Chief of Naval Operations Jonathan Greenert was delegated the latter task by National Security Advisor Susan Rice upon conclusion of the Sunnyland Summit. Admiral Greenert subsequently directed that I take the lead as his representative in negotiations with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy concerning "Rules of Behavior in the Maritime Domain." This was a tall task and there was no pre-existing framework for conducting such a negotiation with the PLA Navy.

Coincident with the Sunnyland maritime discussion, China enthusiastically agreed to host the 14th Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao, China whereby China took the lead in advocating the "Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea" (CUES), a series of measures that can be taken to alleviate uncertainty and mitigate risk when any warship experiences a chance encounter with another warship on the high seas during peacetime.[7] CUES is patterned after the INCSEA Agreement between the United States and Russia that has prevented countless untoward incidents between the two countries' warships since its inception in 1972. By taking the lead on CUES, China appeared to be serious about risk mitigation during encounters on the high seas—a positive sign for potential cooperation between the two nations as I embarked on my first trip to Beijing. My Chinese counterpart was fluent in English and known to his staff only somewhat jokingly as the "Chief Barbarian Handler." We Americans were the barbarians.

The negotiations were painstakingly slow, as both sides distrusted the other and were initially unable to even agree on the title of the agreement. While the Chinese favored an agreement centered around "rules" of behavior in the maritime domain, the American side preferred a title emphasizing "standards" of behavior in order to give commanding officers some latitude. In hopes of breaking the logjam, I met one-on-one with the Chief Barbarian Handler, who asked me a simple question: "Admiral Foggo, do you know why we are here?" My answer was equally as simple: "To determine the standards of behavior in the maritime domain between our two navies." He disagreed, and he opined that we were there to ensure that, if our two nations ever went to war, it would be based on a decision made by President Xi or President Obama, not the men in the cockpit of an airplane or on the bridge of a ship![8] The implication of his statement was that these diplomatic efforts should be focused on preventing accidental war resulting from miscalculation or escalation emanating from disputes in the maritime domain—an assessment which underscored the potential for naval conflicts between China and the United States to potentially balloon into something far bigger and more dangerous.

I agreed wholeheartedly with his assessment, and we agreed to settle on the title of "Rules of Behavior in the Maritime Domain" in order to get on with the real crux of the discussions, i.e., how to avoid an escalation between our respective navies in stressful situations on the high seas. In fact, we did just that. The agreement was signed by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and his Chinese counterpart in November 2014. In the final analysis, the Memorandum of Understanding Between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters remains one of the only concrete accomplishments in the Sino-American relationship in the aftermath of the Obama-Xi Sunnyland Summit.[9]

Photo from the author's collection taken during the talks at PRC Naval Headquarters in Beijing, China (2013) with Chinese counterparts.

As I departed the Pentagon in December 2014 for my next assignment as Commander, U.S. Sixth Fleet in Naples, Italy, I believed America's diplomatic engagement with China had actually accomplished something worthwhile that would contribute to peaceful coexistence between the PLA Navy and U.S. Navy in the South China Sea. It soon became apparent that the Chinese had other goals in mind. What may have started as an erstwhile effort to mitigate risk was soon discarded as the Chinese built up their BRI infrastructure around the world to support both commercial and military operations. While China stayed true to its promise to avoid the type of risky encounters this agreement envisioned, it simultaneously sought to gain an edge over the United States through more covert means, extending its influence across the globe through a series of infrastructure projects and bilateral engagements centered around increasing Chinese commercial and military presence in key geostrategic locations.

"Ports of Power" explains the pathway and the methodology China employed to establish its current foothold in global ports around the world. This study is more than just a list of Chinese port facilities and capabilities that have popped up around the globe in the last twenty years. Rather, "Ports of Power" articulates the People's Republic of China's (PRC) strategy to attain maritime dominance. The authors meticulously articulate a classic "ends, ways and means" strategy by revealing the PRC's maritime "tool kit" for ports, bases, and dual-use facilities. The tool kit contains the eight ways in which China will achieve its goals, which include (1) port investments, (2) port calls, (3) research vessels and blue exploration missions, (4) medical diplomacy at sea, (5) gifting and loaning of equipment, (6) joint maritime exercises, (7) overseas bases and facilities, and (8) shipbuilding and shipping. All of these tools are discussed in more detail in the report to include individual case studies that illustrate the manner in which the PRC is employing these tools.

China's primary mechanisms for deploying these tools are its three major shipping companies (COSCO, China Merchants Ports, and Hong Kong-based Hutchinson Port Holdings) which represent a whopping 80 percent of China's port projects abroad. These companies and their extensive economic ties across the globe enable the PRC to project power without overtly deploying it. China's advantage is in its ability to develop and sustain a long-term strategy that mirrors President Xi's concept of the "China Dream." China does not waffle in execution of strategy, nor does it change every four or eight years commensurate with a change in administration. When the Chinese Communist Party decides on a course of action, it sticks to it. The United States would be wise to adopt similar practices.

Furthermore, China has proven itself to be good at taking risks and capitalizing on its failures. Take the case of Sri Lanka for example. China invested heavily in Sri Lanka because of its strategic location and the fact that it contains the deep-water port in Hambantota. I'm certain that China's investors were not happy when Sri Lanka defaulted on its loans, but China turned this around to its advantage by securing a 99-year lease of the port of Hambantota.[10]
China is also good at experimentation and adaptation. China watched the U.S. Navy operate from Camp Lemmonier, Djibouti in the Horn of Africa for a decade before negotiating a deal with the government of Djibouti to establish what America has traditionally referred to as a "cooperative security location" down the road from the American base. China's selection of real estate was optimized by having access to water. What started as a small footprint grew into a much larger footprint, and today the PRC base in Doraleh, Djibouti represents China's first overseas naval base.[11] With a modern extended pier, Doraleh can host a Chinese aircraft carrier, and likely will in the near future. As the study explains, the PRC has been incredibly strategic in choosing where to invest in establishing a maritime presence. As China probes locations around the globe and eventually plants its flag, it takes a deliberate approach in determining if there is utility in expanding a commercial facility to a dual-use facility. China's forethought, combined with its strategic and tactical patience, generally pays off, particularly in the case of its base at Doraleh. All of this has contributed to China's new ability to project power by means of its modern blue water navy.

In fact, China has surpassed the U.S. Navy in terms of total battle force ships, now exceeding 370 warships as compared to America's 297 ships (soon to be 290 ships by 2030). While many argue that the quality and capability of U.S. warships exceed that of the PLA Navy, particularly when it comes to the comparison of the *Ford*-class aircraft carrier to its Chinese counterpart Fujian, China is advancing quickly and claims to have incorporated electromagnetic assisted launch on the flight deck. Chinese Luyang III destroyers are similar to the *Arleigh Burke*-class Flight III DDGs and, while the United States sundowns its *Ticonderoga*-class cruisers, China has fielded the *Renhai*-class cruiser—an impressive warship by all accounts. In the undersea domain, the United States is still the world's dominant force, but both China and Russia are investing in both manned and unmanned undersea platforms. I remain concerned that the "No-Limits" partnership that President Xi has brokered with President Putin could lead to a technology transfer in which China could leap forward one or two generations in submarine stealth and technology.[12] As China's navy continues to ascend in strength, its web of maritime power described in this report will allow Beijing to deploy its navy in ways which can increasingly challenge American seapower and threaten to disrupt the global order.

Fortunately, "Ports of Power" does not leave readers with a sense of hopelessness in the face of a rising China. On the contrary, it presents us with a clarion call to action by outlining a series of steps the United States and other Western powers can take to compete with China and mitigate the risk of PRC dominance in the maritime domain.

First, America needs a comprehensive National Maritime Strategy that supports both national and economic security. Second, the establishment of a "Harbor Accord" is essential to ensure transparency and collective security against a variety of threats. Third, the United States should take the lead in international port infrastructure by expanding the mandate and footprint of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to counter the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. For example, the United States is backing the transformation of the Elefsina (Eleusis) shipyard and port near Athens into a major commercial and logistics hub, using it as a strategic, Western-aligned alternative to the Chinese-controlled Piraeus port. The U.S. Development Finance Corporation provided a $125 million loan to facilitate the port's rehabilitation. Fourth, to complement port development, the United States should

take the lead on a Blue Ports Alliance of like-minded nations that wish to ensure safe and unimpeded access for goods and services. Fifth, it is essential that the United States and its allies establish a more robust network of regional hubs for fuel and consumable distribution. While the United States does have a modest plan to increase the Tanker Security Program with the addition of "console" tankers, it is insufficient to meet the needs of a fleet on a wartime posture. Sixth, in conjunction with the Blue Port Alliance, it is essential that America make its network of overseas infrastructure more resilient against cyberattacks and reduce the dependency on Chinese crane services. Seventh, while instituting a comprehensive maritime strategy is a good start, America must ensure that this is a whole of government effort that includes the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Commerce, Justice, and Transportation. With 90 percent of its commerce traveling by sea, America's economic security depends on the robustness of its maritime security. Eighth, it will be important to establish public-private partnerships to accomplish America's goals in the maritime domain, and the United States must leverage the power of both public and private academic institutions like the Merchant Marine Academy or other service academies, California Maritime, MIT Woods Hole, and the Webb Institute. Ninth and finally, America must ensure a robust strategic communications plan that links sea lines of communications to worldwide port infrastructure.

"Ports of Power" explains how we got here and provides solutions to counterbalance the threat of a Chinese monopoly on the system of global maritime infrastructure. It is a well-crafted study and should be required reading at America's war colleges, service academies, and industry or institutions working in the field of maritime commerce. It is only by heeding the lessons of this report that the United States and its allies will be able to counter Chinese influence before it is too late.

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Executive Summary

China's Maritime Toolkit for Ports, Bases, and Dual-Use Facilities

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is transforming commercial maritime infrastructure into a strategic architecture of influence, fusing logistics, diplomacy, and defense in ways that blur the lines between commercial ports and military power projection. Through its expanding network of port investments, dual-use facilities, and naval access agreements, China is reshaping the world's maritime landscape—and with it, the global balance of power.

Over the past two decades, Chinese state-owned enterprises have gained control or operating stakes in more than 100 overseas ports and terminals, from Peru's Chancay megaport to Greece's Piraeus and Djibouti's naval base. Chinese companies operate at more than 100 ports and terminals across the globe, and China officially operates one overseas naval base in Djibouti. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is reportedly developing and retaining a presence at the newly reopened Ream Naval Base in Cambodia through a joint training and logistics center. Government and expert analysis have identified at least 20 more overseas locations which could become potential host sites to PLAN and People's Liberation Army (PLA) facilities. Over the past six years, the PLAN has made dozens of port calls around the globe—leaving almost no region untouched.

This global footprint allows Beijing to combine economic influence, military access, and logistical reach creating an ecosystem of ports, bases, and digital platforms supporting its military and commercial objectives. These actions include (1) port investments; (2) port calls; (3) research vessels and blue ocean missions; (4) diplomacy at sea; (5) gifting, loaning, and sales of equipment; (6) joint maritime exercises and anti-piracy missions; (7) construction of naval bases and military installations; and (8) shipping and shipbuilding.

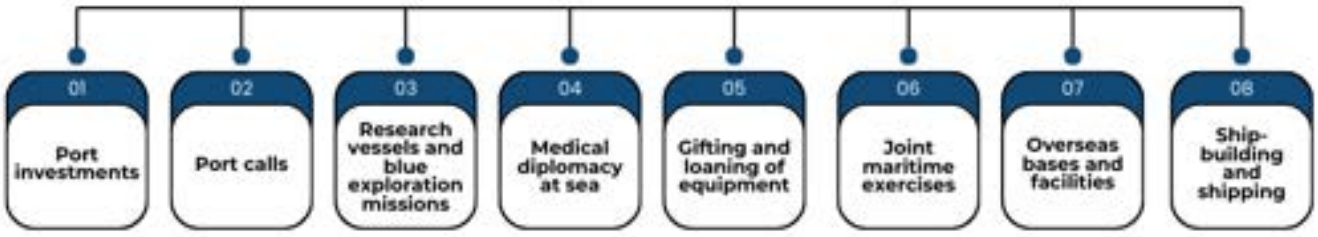

Figure 1: China's Toolkit for Maritime Statecraft. Figure by the authors.

Each tool is mutually reinforcing, enabling the PRC to project power without overtly deploying it. The cumulative effect is a world where global shipping lanes and logistics networks increasingly depend on Chinese infrastructure, equipment, and data.

Two events highlight the continuing emphasis Chinese stakeholders place on ports as a means of power over the past 12 months: the recent acquisition deal of Hutchison's Panama Canal and its global ports by a BlackRock-led consortium, which was interrupted by China, and the opening of a new megaport in Peru.

Implications for the United States and Its Allies

While the United States retains unmatched naval capability, it has a limited domestic commercial shipping industry, minimal overseas port holdings, and fragmented maritime governance compared to China's rapid naval modernization. To sustain deterrence, secure sea lanes, and maintain access to global trade, Washington and its allies must build an architecture of trust—a coordinated maritime strategy that integrates defense, commerce, and development. An explicit strategy is imperative given China's multifaceted approach around the world.

Since China already cemented a maritime foothold in all regions of the world, there are pressing policy steps the U.S. government can take in addition to adopting a broader international ports strategy:

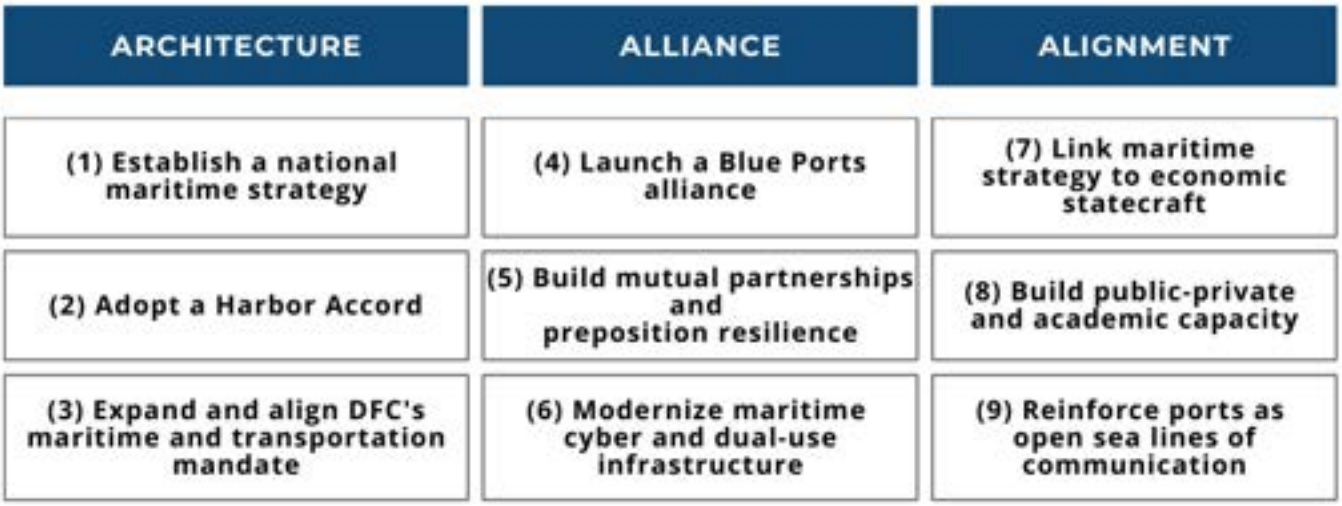

Figure 2: The Architecture-Alliance-Alignment Framework. Figure by the authors.

1. **Establish a National Maritime Strategy.**
   Create a whole-of-government framework to integrate defense, commerce, and development priorities, led by a new National Security Counsel Senior Director for Maritime Infrastructure.

2. **Adopt a Harbor Accord.**
   Unite allies under common principles for transparency, cyber integrity, and pre-negotiated surge access at critical ports, modeled after the Artemis Accords for space.

3. **Expand and Align the Development Finance Corporation (DFC)'s Maritime and Transportation Mandate.**
   Reauthorize the DFC with a dedicated *Maritime Infrastructure Window* to finance trusted ports and logistics corridors in partnership with allied operators.

4. **Launch a Blue Ports Alliance.**
   Within the G7, Quad, or Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, coordinate financing and certification of secure transparent ports akin to the Blue Dot Network.

5. **Secure Access and Preposition Resilience.**
   Negotiate port-access agreements with key Indo-Pacific and Atlantic allies and expand the Maritime and Tanker Security Programs to guarantee surge capacity.

6. **Modernize Maritime Cyber and Dual-Use Infrastructure.**
   Establish cybersecurity certification for cranes, sensors, and logistics platforms; counter LOGINK proliferation; and promote automation and AI-based resilience.

7. **Link Maritime Strategy to Economic Statecraft.**
   Incorporate port and shipping access into trade, investment, and supply-chain frameworks; align DFC, Department of State, and Department of Defense tools under a Maritime Resilience Task Force.

8. **Build Public–Private and Academic Capacity.**
   Expand maritime workforce development and shipbuilding innovation through a joint Maritime Innovation Lab linking government, industry, and universities.

9. **Reinforce the Narrative: Ports as Open Sea Lines of Communication.**
   Communicate that America's objective is *connection*—keeping global ports open, transparent, and governed by mutually-agreed norms.

China's maritime expansion is redefining the geography of global influence. The United States and its allies must construct a maritime architecture of trust that proactively and directly addresses China's bid for global maritime statecraft through ports, bases, and dual-use facilities and tools.

Chapter 1

Contextualizing China's Growing Military and Maritime Ambitions Abroad

Ports are a larger part of a new maritime statecraft the PRC has been harnessing over the past several years. In 2020, the PLAN surpassed the U.S. Navy's fleet size. Every few weeks, media reports about Chinese military ambitions abroad, such as China now "operating in America's backyard" through its exclusive operations at the newly constructed Chancay port in Peru.[1] These headlines highlight growing concerns that China is not only seeking to rival the United States in economic power, but also in military and, particularly, naval power. The PLA and PLAN were largely considered as domestic and regional forces until Chairman Xi Jinping came to power, but now clearly harbor broader global ambitions.

Introduction

After the disappearance and then removal of former Minister of Defense Li Shangfu from the ranks of power, the appointment of the new Minister of Defense and former Navy chief Dong Jun in 2023 highlights the relevance of China's interest in the near and far seas, already documented in the 2010s and 2020s.[2]

China's interest in naval power initially was born out of two key interests: safeguarding its maritime territory against disputes with other countries and securing maritime trade routes that support its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its larger export and manufacturing power. According to one database, the BRI has provided the avenue for the Chinese government to invest in at least 129 active port projects abroad through ownership stakes in either ports or their terminals. Of these, 17 of these are now under majority Chinese ownership and, thus, operational control.[3] Chinese shipping companies COSCO Merchants and China Merchants Ports, as well as the Hong Kong–based company Hutchison, are among the top 10 port operators in the world. These three companies are now responsible for more than 80 percent of China's port projects abroad.[4]

Maritime security and maritime trade are closely intertwined. About 80 percent of all trade is sea-borne, and about 90 percent of Chinese trade is delivered via maritime shipping lanes.[5] Recent events have revealed how vulnerable maritime shipping lanes and maritime choke points can be. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted supply chain vulnerabilities. The pandemic not only affected the domestic production of goods in China, but also caused major delays in maritime shipping. Another example has been the attacks of the Houthis in the Red Sea up to and following the October 7, 2023 Israel-Hamas war. With the Houthi rebels launching attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea heading for Israel, many shipping companies have chosen to suspend shipping in the area and to instead travel around the Horn of Africa.[6] It was only in early 2026 that commerce began flowing through the Red Sea again.[7] Beyond these examples, piracy has remained a challenge to maritime security and trade.

The Chinese government has been working on rapidly modernizing its military in multiple ways. In speeches since 2020, Xi has discussed and declared a full military modernization and military readiness to perform a large-scale invasion of Taiwan by 2027.[8] This modernization is not limited to the PLA. The PLAN has also undergone rapid changes in recent years. The Congressional Research Service found that China's naval modernization efforts include "a wide array of platform and weapon acquisition

programs, including anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), submarines, surface ships, aircraft, unmanned vehicles (UVs), and supporting C4ISR (command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) systems."[9]

At home, the PLAN has been working on new ships at its key shipyards, such as Jiangnan Shipyard and Hudong-Zhonghua Shipyard in Shanghai. Satellite imagery has revealed the construction of assault ships, tracking vessels, and a third aircraft carrier (launched in November 2025) which will equip the PLAN with even greater maritime capabilities.[10] The PLAN fleet is now larger than the U.S. Navy with more than 370 vessels and is forecasted to grow to some 495 vessels by 2035, while the U.S. Navy is projected to have only 290 vessels by the end of 2030.[11] Fleet size may not reflect actual power at sea, but the PLAN's rapid increase means it will continue to grow and modernize.

Ports allow countries to exert economic influence over maritime shipping and its processes; naval bases allow countries to do so militarily. But recently, a new phenomenon has emerged: the construction and emergence of dual-use naval facilities and assets. China has aggressively invested in building a toolkit that employs its previous and new ports investments, naval assets, and facilities around the globe. The result has China increasing its global economic and military footprint as well as its maritime statecraft.

Understanding China's Push for Maritime Statecraft

In July 2019, the State Council Information Office of the PRC released the white paper titled "China's National Defense in the New Era." Although the white paper states that "never Seeking Hegemony, Expansion or Spheres of Influence" is the distinctive feature of its national defense strategy, in the same document, the State Council Information Office also describes its increasing overseas activities.[12]

Writing of the PLAN and its mission, the white paper states that "in line with the strategic requirements of near seas defense and far seas protection, the PLAN is speeding up the transition of its tasks from defense on the near seas to protection missions on the far seas, and improving its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuver operations, maritime joint operations, comprehensive defense, and integrated support, so as to build a strong and modernized naval force."[13] Particularly striking, the State Council Information Office coins a "new-model security partnership featuring equality, mutual trust, and win-win cooperation." This new model features the active development of "constructive relationships with foreign militaries" and "a new configuration of foreign military relations which is all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-tiered."[14] These new-model security partnerships are especially vital to understanding China's global maritime strategy, which not only addresses the military dimension, but also comprises political and economic dimensions in an 'all-dimensional' and 'multi-tiered' approach.

Finally, the release of China's latest white paper on national security in May 2025 offers a window into how China understands security, changing its terminology from overt 'defense' to 'national security.' Previously releasing a national white paper on defense almost every five years, the government shifted its tone when instead of a defense white paper, it released a national security paper in 2025. This not only breaks in timeline and tradition, but also offers a semantic shift in language, albeit implicit, where defense is often referred to overseas deterrence—and in some cases, aggression—while national security prioritizes domestic stability.

While the document addresses maritime interests and rights, it does so in the context of China's near seas. Outlining "safeguarding national territorial integrity and maritime rights and interests" as a supporting factor for "the steady and enduring progress of Chinese-style modernization," the white

paper states that "China insists on coordinating land and sea development and upholding the unity of national sovereignty, security, and development interests."[15]

While there are multiple additional governmental documents and press releases from Chinese government actors and agencies, these military and defense strategies reveal China's intentions to become a maritime power. Its 2019 white paper also reveals that it was implementing this vision by expanding its far seas capabilities by "build[ing] far seas forces, develop[ing] overseas logistical facilities, and enhanc[ing] capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks."[16]

Although its 2025 national security white paper makes no explicit mention of far seas capabilities, maritime power, and sea lines of communication, this shift may be due to the changed theme of the white paper, moving from overt defense to more implicit national security, as well as increasing scrutiny in its maritime actions in 2025.

Meanwhile, American perceptions of Chinese maritime expansion overseas have fluctuated over the past two decades. In 2004, the 'String of Pearls' theory was first posed by American researchers trying to understand China's future role in its direct waters and beyond. A non-publicly available report prepared by the defense company Booz Allen Hamilton theorized that "China's investments in seaports across the littoral areas of the Indian Ocean could be used to create a network of naval bases stretching from southern China to Pakistan."[17] Consequently, "pearls" was used to refer to potential Chinese overseas bases and military facilities, which China would try to construct in a string alongside important trade routes up to the Horn of Africa.

As previously mentioned, Chinese scholars and policymakers have primarily referred not to bases, but to strategic strong points. Peter A. Dutton, Isaac Kardon, and Conor M. Kennedy—scholars who have extensively written about China's global maritime influence and affiliated with the China Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College at the time of their report—describe strategic strongpoint as the following:

> The strategic strongpoint concept has no formal definition, but is used by People's Republic of China (PRC) officials and analysts to describe foreign ports with special strategic and economic value that host terminals and commercial zones operated by Chinese firms. Each case study examines the characteristics and functions of port projects developed and operated by Chinese companies across the Indian Ocean region. The distinctive features of these projects are: (1) their strategic locations, positioned astride major sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and clustered near vital maritime chokepoints; (2) the comprehensive nature of Chinese investments and operations, involving coordination among state-owned enterprises and private firms to construct not only the port, but rail, road, and pipeline infrastructure, and further, to promote finance, trade, industry, and resource extraction in inland markets; and (3) their fused civilian and military functions, serving as platforms for economic, military, and diplomatic interactions.[18]

But China's strategy has become more globalized than initially envisioned by American analysts, scientists, and policymakers. Isaac Kardon, Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Wendy Leutert, Associate Professor at Indiana University, revealed that "Chinese firms own or operate terminal assets in ninety-six ports in fifty-three countries" in their article, *Pier Competitor.* Although "international port terminals that Chinese firms own and operate already provide dual-use capabilities to the People's Liberation Army during peacetime," Kardon and Leutert argue that this "form

of networked state power is limited in wartime because it depends on commercial facilities in non-allied states."[19]

In addition to academic and policy research on this topic, U.S. government agencies have also extensively studied China's rising maritime statecraft, as well as its access to global ports and potential bases. The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) of the Office of the Director for National Intelligence (ODNI), offers some insight into where these at-threat locations may be: "Burma, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Pakistan. Seychelles. Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, and the UAE."[20]

By comparison, the following section was included in the 2023 ATA about China's growing military capabilities abroad: "In addition to continuing to develop its existing military base in Djibouti, Beijing reportedly is pursuing potential bases in Cambodia, Equatorial Guinea, and the UAE." Furthermore, ODNI also noted China's military progress and strategy in 2023: "While the PLA is making uneven progress toward establishing overseas military facilities, the PLA probably will continue to use tailored approaches to address local concerns as it seeks to improve relations with amenable countries and advance its overseas basing goals."[21]

In 2025, ODNI's ATA did not note any specific locations for China to potentially expand its maritime and military presence, but ascertained that "Beijing may also pursue a mixture of military logistics models."[22] Rather, the assessment focused on exploring other maritime challenges, including maritime shipping routes across the Arctic.

Between 2023 and 2024, the United States assesses that Beijing's overtures have rapidly increased from three potential "overseas military installations and access agreements" to nine.[23] ODNI also identifies Ream as a 'military facility' instead of a potential base. ODNI's list, in combination with the list of potential locations identified in the March 2025 'China Military Power Report' released by the Department of Defense, gives policymakers and analysts a roadmap on where to look for the construction of potential military installations and facilities, as well as a framework of understanding how the PRC may be able to secure potential basing and dual-use locations.

A Toolkit of Ports, Bases, and Dual-Use Facilities

The PRC has heavily invested in building a toolkit comprising commercial ports, dual-use facilities and assets, military bases, and evolving infrastructure that may serve a variety of purposes. While the PRC has heavily emphasized its military presence in the Asia-Pacific, its actions suggest its ambition for maritime power is not solely limited to its neighborhood. Rather, the PRC appears to be seeking to enhance its maritime statecraft around the world along strategically important chokeholds and locations that will allow it to realize its interests commercially and militarily.

China's interest in ports predates the leadership of Xi, with Chinese and Hong Kong companies investing in European ports beginning as early as the 1980s. Under Xi, maritime expansion has blended commercial interests with military strategy. In 2016, after months of speculation surrounding China's construction near the Djibouti port, China announced that its first international base was opened as a PLA supply facility.[24] With resurgent piracy in the region and China's interest in maritime shipping lanes, the base was preceded by an anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden as early as 2008 to counter maritime insurgency.[25] From 2008 to 2017, the PLAN "conducted 26 escort missions for Chinese and foreign commercial ships in the Gulf of Aden and the waters off the Somalian coast," officially opening the PLA's first overseas base in 2017 amid Chinese construction and extension of Djibouti's port.[26] Since 2015, China has reportedly requested military access at multiple sites across the world, from

Gabon and Equatorial Guinea to Oman and the UAE. According to U.S. government assessments, nearly 20 potential locations have emerged that may already offer China basing access or may do so in the future: Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, Mozambique, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Tajikistan. Additionally, China has already made overtures in "Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Namibia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands."[27]

Figure 3: Selected primary maritime chokepoints across the world. Figure by the authors.

Almost all of these potential basing locations are at or near vital maritime chokepoints that dictate the maritime flow of commercial and non-commercial goods. The PRC has also invested in ports and terminals near these locations. In the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, China already has its only overseas base: the Djibouti PLAN support facility. Not far away, the Suez Canal has faced a series of challenges to maritime trade and security, including the ongoing Houthi attacks on ships. The Strait of Hormuz is bordered by Qatar, the UAE, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, among other countries. It is also the foremost oil corridor in the world, which China heavily relies on as the largest oil importer in the world.[28] The Strait of Malacca, which passes between Malaysia and Indonesia, is the closest maritime chokepoint geographically to China's territory. While China has no direct overseas base that connects it to the South China Seas and the Andaman Sea, it upgraded the Ream naval base in Cambodia in the early 2020s and has eyed access locations in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

These cases highlight the evolving nature of China's quest for a global military and naval statecraft. It is seeking rapid global maritime expansion through commercial, dual-use, and military means, and is doing so by turning commercial maritime infrastructure at and near ports into dual-use facilities. This toolkit falls in line with the Chinese government's strategy of pursuing civil-military fusion, defined as "a strategy that strives to reinforce the PRC's ability to build the country into an economic, technological, and military superpower by fusing the country's military and civilian industrial and S&T [science and technology] resources."[29] Such civil-military fusion projects may include telecommunications, 5G, biotechnology, and—particularly relevant—dual-use naval facilities at ports and other facilities.

However, one cannot view ports and bases in a vacuum, but must also consider a range of other dual-use activities such as "friendly" port calls, hospital ship visits, shipping and shipbuilding, or the gifting and loaning of equipment.

Consequently, this network of maritime commercial, dual-use, and military infrastructure overseas ensures extensive maritime power for the PRC. Maritime statecraft is strategically important to China for its national security and sovereignty, but the Chinese government has become increasingly interested in expanding its maritime power to secure its commercial supply chains and respond to the United States and other perceived challenges—and to possibly be able to deter these challenges in the future. Beijing's aggressive investments into ports, along with increasingly belligerent maritime actions, now pose significant challenges to American defense and security. Beijing's success in global port and base expansion will determine how far-reaching China's global reach will be. The United States and its allies must be aware of China's strategy and respond accordingly.

Chapter 2

The PRC's Toolkit: Gaining a Foothold at Ports and Bases

While it has become clearer as to *why* the PRC has attempted to create a maritime and military global presence through expansion at ports and bases and *which* locations it has chosen to prioritize in its quest for maritime statecraft, it is necessary to understand *how* China may approach host states for ports, dual-use infrastructure, and military installations in order to prepare a fitting policy response. Policy choices can only be pinpointed to actively address this challenge through understanding Beijing's efforts, from early stages of approaching a host nation to the late stages of finalization of construction or utilization.

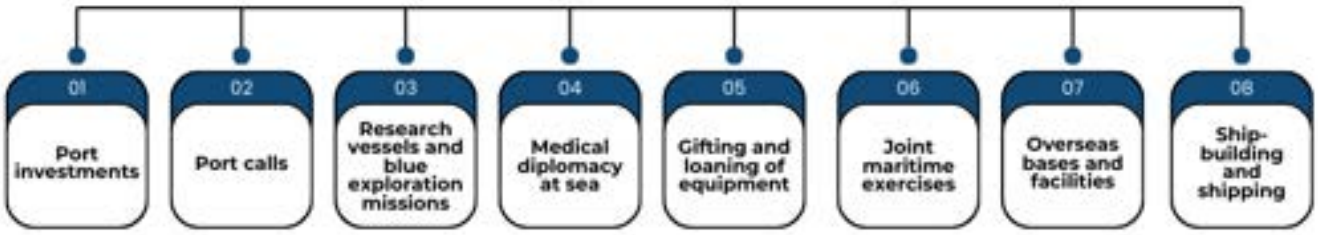

Figure 4: China's Toolkit for Maritime Statecraft. Figure by the author.

Studying Beijing's successful cases of Djibouti, its recent military construction and presence at the Cambodian Ream Naval base and examining Beijing's investments into ports and terminals across the world show the PRC has pursued a multi-dimensional toolkit that spans commercial, dual-use, and military approaches to enhance its global military statecraft. On this scale, eight major categories of actions in the PRC toolkit have emerged across military, economic, and political dimensions: (1) port investments, (2) port calls, (3) research vessels and blue exploration missions, (4) medical diplomacy at sea, (5) the gifting and loaning of equipment, (6) joint maritime exercises, (7) the establishment of military facilities and installation overseas, and (8) shipping and shipbuilding.

Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt, USN (Ret.), in his 2020 book *China as a 21st Century Naval Power*, summarized the PRC's approach as an expansion of its overseas presence not merely to become a naval power, but instead a maritime power, encompassing maritime elements that may not be solely military in nature. McDevitt's analysis goes hand in hand with the PRC's multi-dimensional maritime approach—the PRC may pursue commercial interests solely for their economic benefit, such as at ports, but it may also do so to strategically posture and exert influence abroad and make use of port calls when necessary for the PLAN to resupply.[30]

Commercially, the PRC may choose to assert its position as a maritime power through investments, grants, and loans for maritime infrastructure, including ports. Going beyond investments that finance the construction, dredging, or design of maritime infrastructure, the PRC may also choose to directly invest into port or terminal stakes, allowing it to directly control port operations in a commercial realm. These economic and commercial investments bring along important implications for PRC-associated companies. Economic investment and management of maritime infrastructure allow these companies to gain insight into the commercial flow of goods as well as to potentially control this flow in the future. Militarily, the PLAN can make use of China's overseas port investments by making port calls for replenishment, resupply, and refuel at ports where host governments allow for it. However, in war

time and contingency scenarios, the utility of PRC overseas ports beyond economic management is uncertain. As outlined by Kardon and Leutert in their article *Pier Competitor*, global ports "[enable] the PLA to operate with growing scope and scale in peacetime, but [provide] only limited combat support in wartime."[31] In such a scenario, overseas naval and military bases will prove most helpful for PRC maritime expansion. Thus, maritime expansion priorities for the PRC may be at locations that would allow the PLAN a more global and strategic reach beyond its only official international base in Djibouti.

But some PRC activities, dubbed dual-utilization of maritime infrastructure, fall in between commercial and pure military activities. Such activities may include port calls at commercial ports for resupply and refuel, the gifting and loaning of military equipment and training, escort missions and anti-piracy task forces, medical support, addition and construction of new maritime infrastructure such as new berths and piers, and research vessel visits. This list is neither definitive nor exhaustive, as future technologies and infrastructure may alter what constitutes dual-use assets and actions. These activities typically do not reward the PRC with a direct military facility, but they strengthen military cooperation between the PRC and the host government and increase the likelihood of further cooperation in the future. They may serve as indicators for PRC advances for officially recognized dual-use infrastructure and military bases in the future.

This horizontal strategy is recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense's China Military Power report released in December 2024 which assesses that "a mixture of military logistics models, including preferred access to commercial infrastructure abroad, exclusive PLA logistics facilities with prepositioned supplies co-located with commercial infrastructure, and bases with stationed forces, most closely aligns with the PRC's overseas military logistics needs."[32] In particular, the Department of Defense contends that "the PLA's approach likely includes consideration of many sites and outreach to many countries but only some will advance to negotiations for an [...] agreement." To support such an advancement, the PLA often utilizes these additional measures such as port investments, port calls, and the gifting of equipment.

The PRC's toolkit to enhance its maritime statecraft follows eight distinct actions, detailed below.

Port Investments

PRC and Hong Kong-based companies now hold investments in around 100 ports worldwide. Reports by the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and AidData assess the number of global port projects and investments by China to hover between 78 (AidData) and 129 ports (CFR). In addition to this number of terminal and port projects where PRC-related companies are directly invested or involved in the management, more projects have emerged around the world that focus on construction and modernization of port infrastructure. Most of these port investments and operations are centralized in Europe, followed by the Indo-Pacific, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa.

These numbers offer some surprising insights: port investments by PRC and PRC-related companies are highest in Europe, where they are typically non-consequential for military purposes, followed by other strategic regions. This high number is likely due to early investments made by the PRC in the 1990s and 2000s into European ports (much earlier than the PRC began investing in the ports of some other regions), as well as the PRC's efforts to secure economic access to these ports, owing to Europe's importance as a strategic trading partner of China.[33]

Two cases have recently highlighted the security risk of foreign investments into European ports: COSCO's investment into the Container Terminal Tollerort in Hamburg, Germany and the docking of an American military ship in Gdynia, Poland. Under former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's leadership, COSCO was supposed to buy a large (but still minority) stake in the Port of Hamburg's Container Terminal Tollerort, with the Hamburg port seeing more than a third of its products either imported or exported from China. Under heavy pressure from both domestic and foreign leaders, as well as a classification of the port as critical infrastructure under the German Federal Office for Information Security, Scholz's administration finally settled on a 24.99 percent stake. The deal was completed in June 2023, despite continued concerns about Chinese investments in the German economy.[34]

While the deal highlighted Europe's concern over economic dependencies and overreliance on China, the docking of an American military ship at the Polish port of Gdynia underlined the security implications of Chinese terminal management. At Gdynia, Hutchison manages the Gdynia Container Terminal (GCT), but the wider port has also been utilized for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) purposes and finds itself right next to a Polish base and shipyard.

Gdynia Port Incident
as reported by Politico Europe

"In August, equipment for the American army was to be unloaded on a dock near GCT. However the ship's bow protruded about 50 meters into Hutchison's zone, and the company refused to consent to the unloading. The Gdynia port authorities tried to intervene to find a solution, but ultimately the transshipment of the military equipment was unsuccessful."[35]

Although Chinese investments in European maritime infrastructure will remain largely commercial in the future under increasing scrutiny, security concerns remain. Civil and military infrastructure often overlap at European ports and the PLAN limitedly uses European ports for technical stops. This is not only consequential for European countries, but also for the United States and other NATO members that typically utilize these ports and locations.

American policymakers have highlighted the Port of Chancay, Peru's soon-to-be largest port (just north of the capital, Lima), as cause of concern. While the Port of Chancay on the southern coast of Peru will be featured later as a case study, it has mostly gone unmentioned that a new port project was awarded, shortly after Chancay, to a subsidiary of the Chinese company Jinzhao.[36] This would mark China's second port in Peru in just a few years, as well as Jinzhao's first port construction and concession overseas. Since Peru is one of the biggest copper-producing countries in the world, this new port focused on minerals will have important implications for critical mineral supply chains.

While the United States has been concerned by expansion of ports closer to coastal North America, reporting has also emerged of Chinese efforts to expand its port stakes further south. In the Argentinian province of Tierra del Fuego in the southernmost part of South America, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in August 2022 between the governor and Chinese company Shaanxi Chemical Industry Group to build a multipurpose port in Rio Grande. While there is no formal agreement beyond the MoU and no construction has taken place, this memorandum also reveals interest by Chinese companies (and by extension, the Chinese government) in enhancing its proximity to Antarctica. This is especially noteworthy as China has been accelerating the construction and opening of new Antarctic stations, most recently opening *Qinling* in early 2024. Militarization of the Arctic and Antarctic have been forbidden by the 1961 Antarctic Treaty, but these stations permit China access to critical underwater infrastructure, as well as potential future communications by other Antarctic states.

China has active port and terminal management stakes in sub-Saharan Africa and has contributed toward the construction and modernization of maritime infrastructure in the region. According to a report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Chinese state-owned firms are active stakeholders in an estimated 78 ports across 32 African countries as builders, financiers, or operators" and "Chinese firms are present in over a third of Africa's maritime trade hubs," with most of these activities concentrated in West Africa.[37]

In Tanzania, the Dar es Salaam Port had its berths and port facilities updated by China Harbor and Engineering Company.[38] Previously, a project for the Bagamoyo port in Tanzania was halted after the signing of a 2013 agreement which would have seen China Merchant Holdings receive a lease of 99 years.[39] Although more than 10 years have passed since this agreement was signed, the Tanzanian government has reportedly been working with China to renegotiate its terms and start construction. According to U.S. government reports and assessments, China has likely considered Tanzania as a location for basing access.[40]

In West Africa, China has made multiple port investments. China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) constructed the new port of Lekki in Nigeria, with CHEC reported to hold a stake as high as 75 percent ownership in the port.[41] In the Middle East and North Africa, Chinese companies have only invested in port projects in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Oman. However, China and Kuwait have recently revived their cooperation on the construction of the port in Mubarak al-Kabeer after a 10-year pause.[42]

In Central Asia and the Caucasus, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) won a tender to develop the port of Analia located alongside the Black Sea in Georgia, a strategic maritime location for Russia, Ukraine, and NATO.[43] Closer to home, China has made port investments all over the Indo-Pacific region. In Pakistan, China has invested in the port of Gwadar in Balochistan.[44] In Sri Lanka, CHEC first built the Hambantota port in 2011 and, when the Sri Lankan government had to default on its debt in 2018, China Merchant Ports was issued a 99-year lease of the port.[45]

However, the number of ports operated or owned by Hong Kong or Chinese firms may soon be in flux: CK Hutchison announced in March 2025 that its stake at the Panama Ports Company, as well as its global ports stakes, would be sold to a BlackRock-led consortium following increasing scrutiny by U.S. government officials in early 2025. As of February 2026, CK Hutchison's operation of the two ports at the Panama Canal had ended without such a deal moving ahead, following a ruling by the Panamanian Supreme Court that CK Hutchison's concession over the ports was unconstitutional after a prolonged back-and-forth.[46]

According to its website, the Panama Ports Company was launched in 1997 to operate two ports at the Panama Canal: Balboa and Cristobal (having allowed the Hong Kong company Hutchison access to both sides of the canal).[47] Balboa is at the southern end of the Panama Canal, while Cristobal is on the northern side at Colon. Since the start of operations, both ports have undergone significant construction, development, and extension in the 1990s and 2000s.

While Panama may have seized operations and control of these ports, Chinese influence will continue beyond the ports of Balboa and Cristobal. CCCC and CHEC were awarded "a $1.42 billion contract [to] build the fourth bridge over the Panama Canal" in 2018.[48] While construction stalled, development of the bridge was scheduled to resume in 2023.[49] In April 2024, the Amador Cruise Terminal—built by CHEC—was opened near the port of Balboa.[50]

Besides infrastructure constructed and developed by Chinese stakeholders, Chinese and Hong Kong shipping lines will continue to use the Panama Canal. When the newly expanded Panama Canal reopened in 2017, Cosco Shipping Panama "completed [...] the first official voyage through the newly expanded Panama Canal" after winning the privilege of doing so in a drawing.[51] COSCO Shipping's Asia-USEC & Golf services, as well as some of its Far-East-WCSA and Far East-Caribbean ones, will continue passing by and through the Panama Canal.[52]

This geographic breakdown of port stakes and investments reveals how far-reaching China's commercial port network has become over the past decade, growing increasingly through China's flagship BRI infrastructure initiative. While investments into port construction and operations decreased temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic and after, the examples of ports like Chancay and Lekki show that Chinese firms and operators have not yet abandoned large-scale maritime infrastructure projects such as ports. However, these port investments are only part of a wider maritime toolkit.

Port Calls

Port calls play an essential role of naval exchange between a visiting navy and a host country or port, allowing foreign naval vessels to dock at a local port to resupply, refuel, and replenish, in addition to other activities and exchanges.

Between January 2018 and July 2025, the Chinese Ministry of Defense officially reported at least 46 port calls conducted by the PLAN, typically reported as "Going Out" activities, excluding visits by the Chinese hospital ship *Peace Ark*.[53] The Ministry of Defense did not report these port calls and PLAN visits on its website from 2020 to 2022, possibly due to the limited international outreach resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the National Defense University, "the total number of PLA senior-level visits, exercises, and port calls grew significantly from 2002–08, stayed relatively constant from 2009–19, and dropped dramatically in the COVID-19 years of 2020–22 before gradually beginning to rise again starting in 2023," highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic was just a temporary disruption.[54]

In addition to other kinds of military and naval diplomacy, the PLAN routinely conducts port calls coined as 'friendly visits.' They are often shorter in nature, lasting only three to five days compared to the typical week-long medical service provision. 35 of these 46 port calls between 2018 and 2024 were labeled as such friendly visits, although at least 11 of them also included joint maritime exercises by the PLAN and its host government's navy. Only three of them have officially been labeled as technical stops which would entail repair, resupply, and refueling.[55]

Examples of these port calls conducted by the PLAN included a visit by Chinese warships *Qi Jiguang* and *Jinggangshan* at the Malaysian port of Penang in May 2024. This visit lasted three days and included multiple bilateral exchanges, including training and an on-deck reception.[56] In October 2024, the same two warships conducted a friendly visit for three days at the port of Chittagong in Bangladesh.[57] Similarly to the visit at Penang, this port call in Bangladesh featured multiple exchanges and activities aimed at engaging the host country and its public. China's navy has also made visits to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, with no visits—other than hospital ship visits—yet reported for 2026.[58]

The PLAN's extensive history and growing prevalence of calls at commercial ports point toward the Chinese government incorporating naval presence in foreign ports into its power projection toolkit. These port calls aid in normalizing visits by China's navy and may serve as a stepping stone to a broader military presence or access in a host country, showcasing the willingness of a host country to entertain

the PLAN at one of its ports for a few days. Such visits also highlight ports and countries where China is seeking to grow stronger military and bilateral partnerships.

Research Vessels and Blue Exploration Mission

With Chinese military strategy naming blue-sea exploration as one of the tools for maintaining its power abroad as a "non-war military mission," the docking and exploring activities of research and survey vessels—such as the *Yuan Wang 5* tracking vessel used to monitor launch activities—should be understood as a tool for China's PLAN to expand its power at sea.[59] In recent years, these activities have grown increasingly frequent. These research and survey vessels have mostly navigated in the Indo-Pacific region, although China's survey and research activities have increased in the Arctic region as well. More recently, Sri Lanka has become one of locations at the center of debate for Chinese research vessels, such as at the CMP-leased and -operated Port of Hambantota on the southernmost tip of the island nation and the Port of Colombo.[60]

In August 2022, *Yuan Wang 5* first docked at Hambantota for a refuel and resupply port call. The PRC Embassy in Colombo made the official request for the replenishment call of *Yuan Wang 5* with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the end of June 2022, almost two months ahead of time.[61] Despite complaints by international observers and neighboring country India, a second visit occurred in October 2023 when scientific research vessel *Shi Yan 6* docked in Colombo. In January 2024, *Xiang Yang Hong 3* was turned down for a port call, which, if approved, would have marked the third visit of a Chinese research vessel in Sri Lanka within 17 months. Instead, the Sri Lankan government issued a one-year moratorium on foreign research vessels docking and operating within Sri Lanka's exclusive economic zone. Despite the moratorium, Sri Lanka's Ministry of Foreign Affairs allowed the Chinese naval ship *Po Lang* to dock in Colombo in October 2024 for four days due to the training nature of the port call.[62]

While Sri Lanka has attempted to minimize hosting Chinese research vessels, the Maldives appear to have welcomed these ships in recent months. Following the failed docking attempt in Sri Lanka, *Xiang Yang Hong 3* made its first port call in the Maldives in January 2024 followed by a second in February 2024. Just a few months later, the same vessel returned to the Maldives in late April 2024 as it concluded its three-month mission, before visiting for a fourth time in July 2024. Officially, the vessel operated outside of the Maldives' territory beyond the port calls it made across the island. These activities occurred alongside the signing of a military pact for free assistance signed between the Maldives and China in March 2024.[63]

Maritime research activities conducted by China overseas continued into 2025. In May 2025, the Japanese government reported that a Chinese research vessel was found to be conducting research activities in Japan's exclusive economic zone without prior notification by the Japanese Coast Guard.[64] Just a few weeks earlier, another Chinese research vessel operated south of Australia, raising concerns that were ultimately denied by China's embassy in the country.[65]

These blue-exploration missions paint a broader picture of China's maritime strategy and strategic interests, especially as they have been occurring much more rapidly. A January 2024 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report unveiled that China has "64 active research and survey vessels, over 80 percent [of which] demonstrated suspect behavior or possess organizational links suggesting their involvement in advancing Beijing's geopolitical agenda."[66] This finding highlights that, beyond the handful of reported port calls and survey missions in the Indian Ocean region, Chinese research vessels operate at a much larger scale.

Medical Diplomacy at Sea

The Chinese Navy has increased its use of medical diplomacy at sea in the number of countries visited, the frequency of visits, and the active number of Chinese hospital ships. Most of its medical visits, which involve docking at ports for days-long stays to provide medical services to local populations, have been conducted by the *Peace Ark*. However, for the first time in 2025, China's newest hospital ship, the *Silk Road Ark,* embarked on China's annual flagship mission, the *Harmonious Mission 2025*. The *Silk Road Ark* was first commissioned in late 2024.[67]

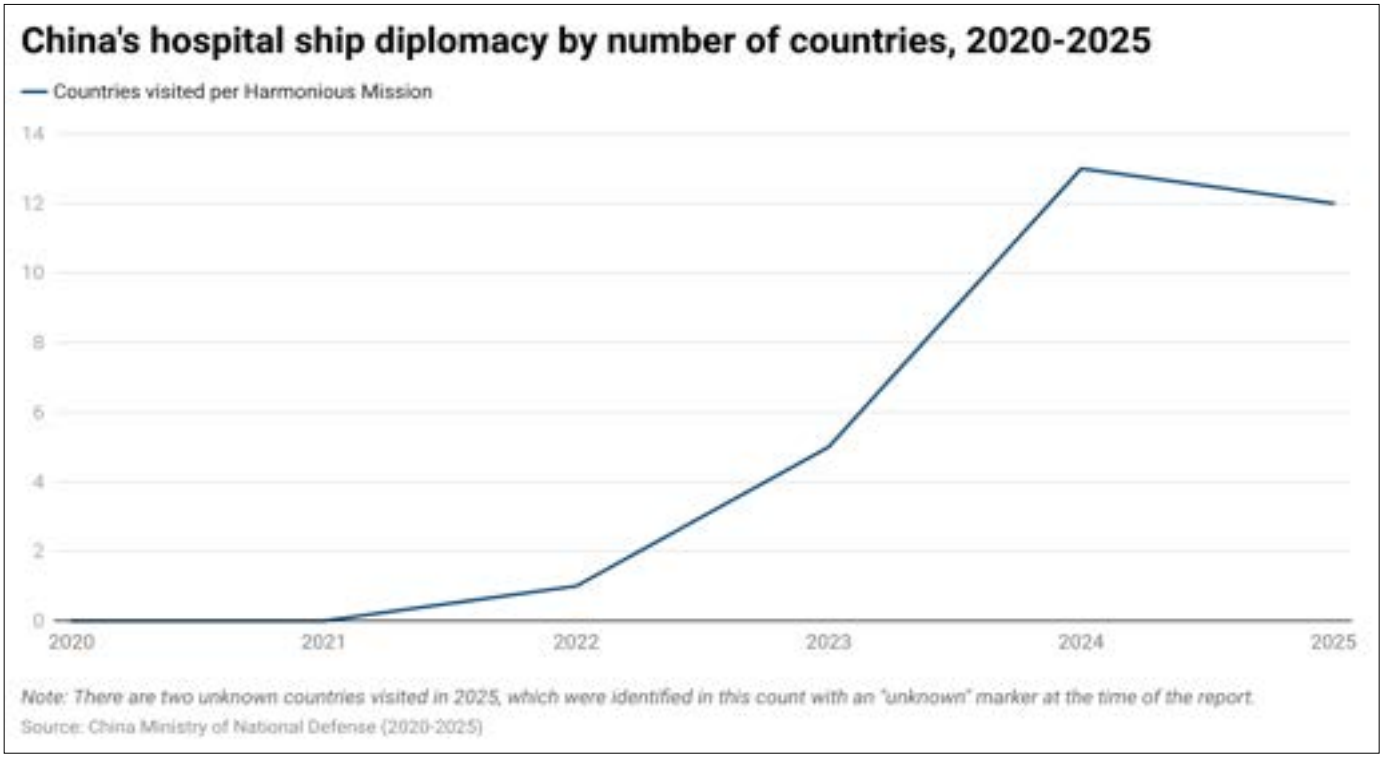

Figure 5: Number of Countries Visited on Each Harmonious Mission by China's PLAN, 2020-2025[68]

While some years had no hospital ship services overseas—notably, the years of the COVID-19 pandemic—China's hospital ship diplomacy has increased over the past decade and has picked up post-pandemic. This denotes an increasing importance of these medical missions, especially as China commissions new hospital ships, such as the *Silk Road Ark*.

In June 2024 the *Peace Ark* embarked on *Harmonious Mission 2024* where it was to "visit 13 countries, namely, Seychelles, Tanzania, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa, Angola, the Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, Benin, Mauritania, Djibouti and Sri Lanka, and provide medical service to local people" while "also [making] port calls to France and Greece."[69] The *Peace Ark* serves as China's primary hospital ship commissioned in 2008 with the *Auspicious Ark* commissioned in 2025, shortly after the *Silk Road Ark* entered into service.[70]

Comparably, on its *Harmonious Mission 2023*, the *Peace Ark* only docked in five countries: Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Timor Leste.[71] *Harmonious Mission 2022* only included a week-long visit to Indonesia to perform medical services.[72] The Ministry of Defense described the *Peace Ark*'s success by stating that, "since its commission in 2008, the ship has taken the *Harmonious Mission* as its major mission and traveled overseas several times to carry out humanitarian medical services, visiting 43 countries and regions, serving more than 250,000 people and performing more than 1,500 surgeries, with a total voyage of over 260,000 nautical miles" by 2023.[73]

For *Harmonious Mission 2025*, the *Silk Road Ark* embarked from China in September 2025 and was scheduled to visit 12 countries in the Pacific and South America. The medical stops included "Nauru, Fiji, Tonga, Mexico, Jamaica, Barbados, Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Papua New Guinea." According to China's Ministry of Defense, the 2025 mission was scheduled for 220 days and is the longest hospital ship mission to date by China's defense forces.[74]

At least two of the announced stops are where Chinese firms and banks have financed or invested in local ports: the port of Chancay in Peru and Kingston in Jamaica, with the ship also docking in Brazil where Chinese enterprises have invested in a VLCC terminal and ports. In addition to these countries, the *Silk Road Ark* extended its mission to also conduct a four-day technical stop in Uruguay at the port of Montevideo for its first naval visit in January 2026.[75] Following its ongoing mission, one noteworthy event to watch is whether the *Silk Road Ark* will dock at Chancay port in Peru where U.S. military officials have warned of potential militarization of the port in close proximity to the United States. This extended mission comes at a time of worsening regional tensions, especially with the United States capturing Venezuela's illegitimate president, Nicolas Maduro, in January 2026.

While European ports offer little military utility, they have been used in the past for port calls by the *Peace Ark*. As part of its 2024 visit, the *Peace Ark* announced plans to make port calls in France and Greece during its *Mission Harmony 2024*. This emphasizes that Europe is not as gravely concerned with its security at ports compared to, for example, the United States, despite the European Parliament's recent efforts to devise a European port strategy, although it remains unclear whether these port calls ultimately took place in Europe.

However, this increasing number of medical visits from 2022 through 2024 shows the PRC's and PLAN's heeding closer attention to the strategic importance of medical diplomacy. The use of medical diplomacy at sea as an effort to seek closer military ties was further illustrated when the *Peace Ark* docked in Libreville, Gabon for the second time in its mission history on September 26, 2024.[76] This medical service visit also included a first for the China-Gabon partnership: on October 3, following the conclusion of the seven-day visit, the *Peace Ark* "held a joint exercise on maritime rescue and evacuation with the Gabonese Navy."[77] While the joint exercise appeared humanitarian in intent with rescue and evacuation practiced, this exercise also marked the first joint exercise held between Chinese and Gabonese militaries, intertwined with China's hospital ship diplomacy.

Of the 13 countries that the *Peace Ark* visited on *Harmonious Mission 2024*, Djibouti is already home to a PRC base and five further countries have been listed by the ODNI or DOD as potential basing sites.[78] The selection of these countries to be served by China's hospital ship implies that this may have been a strategic choice undertaken by China's Ministry of Defense. Medical diplomacy, especially conducted by a country's navy, can be seen as a tool to grow military partnership and cooperation, and is also one undertaken by other countries, such as the United States through ships like the USNS *Mercy* and USNS *Comfort*.

Gifting, Loaning, and Sales at Sea

As the PRC has turned toward modernizing its PLAN domestically, it has also sought to strengthen the navies of its partners in an attempt to bolster maritime cooperation. Specifically, the Chinese government has chosen to gift or loan military equipment with maritime utility to its closest partners, two particularly striking examples being Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

With China's construction of the Ream Naval Base still ongoing, the Cambodian government announced in September 2024 that China had donated two 56C-type Corvettes to Cambodia.[79] It is unclear on what terms China did so and whether the PLAN may also provide technical training or on-site support. However, it does not mark the first time that Cambodia has been the recipient of Chinese military equipment and arms. Starting in 1965, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) Arms Transfer database has noted 27 instances of Beijing's transfer of arms to Cambodia. Seven of these transfers have occurred since 2018 and have included missiles, air defense systems, artillery, and armed vehicles.[80] The donation of the two corvettes at Ream fit into the broader pattern of the China-Cambodia security partnership, but the occurrence of this donation at the same time as the expansion of the Cambodian naval base at Ream highlights the significance of Ream to Beijing.

While Sri Lanka has partnered economically with Beijing in the past through China's BRI, there has been no official military partnership between the countries, and Sri Lanka routinely conducts joint military exercises with neighboring India—one of China's geopolitical competitors in the region. Nevertheless, in addition to port investments in Hambantota and Colombo, China has also routinely transferred arms to Sri Lanka, doing so on 16 separate occasions since 2000, according to SIPRI. Arms transfers to Sri Lanka took a pause after 2009, but three transfers have taken place since 2016, most recently in 2023. In 2019, China gifted the frigate class advanced offshore patrol vessel *SLNS Parakramabahu (P-625)* to Sri Lanka in an official handover ceremony for search and rescue and maritime patrol.[81] Not only was this vessel gifted to Sri Lanka, but, "in order for the Sri Lankan crew to get used to operating this frigate they travelled to China two months in advance. The officers and sailors were given extensive training onboard."[82] The gift followed two years after the Sri Lanka port was leased on a 99-year term to China Merchant Ports.[83]

The Chinese government also donated four patrol boats to the Philippines in 2018.[84] While the gift did not have any direct implications for China's military presence abroad, it occurred in the context of worsening diplomatic ties between China and the Philippines over contested territory in the South China Seas, either highlighting that such in-kind donations can be treated separately from maritime tensions or, potentially, in an effort to cool these tensions.

While gifting of equipment typically does not directly lead to an overseas military installation, new equipment bolsters the recipient country's military and China's military power abroad. Often, the gifting of equipment also includes technical training either in China or the recipient country. Sometimes, it includes on-site support by Chinese military personnel knowledgeable in servicing the equipment. Thus, a gift does not only stop at the handover ceremony but carries intelligence implications beyond.

Beyond gifts and sales of military arms and equipment, PRC companies have also invested in the equipment essential to port operations. Specifically, cargo lifting equipment such as ship-to-shore (STS) cranes, as well as cargo scanning equipment produced in China, have been disseminated around the world.[85] These sales and occasional donations open another door of dual-use misuse: access to critical digital information and data related to cargo and operations at the shipyards where these tools are being used. A recent study conducted by the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) found communication devices on such cranes produced by Chinese crane producer Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries (ZPMC) present at U.S. ports.[86]

Furthermore, customs scanners (provided by enterprises such as Nuctech) employed at ports are often gifted as well, with "donations and zero-interest loans [appearing] to be a deliberate business strategy

of Chinese government entities to facilitate the acquisition, installation, and use of customs inspection equipment produced by Chinese companies."[87]

Gifting, loaning, and selling port and naval equipment presents not only an opportunity to win goodwill from partners and other countries, but also access to information. U.S. government agencies like the U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD) have already warned about companies like Nuctech, a China state-controlled company. The U.S. Maritime Advisory states that access may include "biometric information, personally identifiable information (PII), patterns of life and/or behavioral migrant patterns, cargo information, proprietary data, and geo-locational metadata."[88] However, given that private companies and state-owned enterprises like ZPMC or Nuctech sell or provide this equipment, the extent to which the Chinese government has been able to access and use this data is unclear.

Joint Naval Exercises

Joint naval exercises, although sometimes intended to practice patrol and humanitarian rescue, are inherently military in nature. Despite China's relatively small circle of strong military partnerships, it has expanded its efforts to host maritime exercises with many countries in its direct neighborhood and beyond.

A report issued by the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) in June 2024 found that China engaged in 137 joint exercises between 2018 and 2023, with exercises coming to a low in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic but recovering again by 2023.[89] Out of these 137 joint exercises, only 46 included the PLAN, according to CMSI. The Chinese Coast Guard participated in joint exercises in 2020 and 2023.

While the CMSI report identified Southeast Asia as a center of focus for Beijing's joint exercises, the PLAN has also sought new countries to train with beyond its traditional partners. In September 2024, China and Singapore conducted the third iteration of the "China-Singapore Exercise Cooperation 2024" at a military port in Zhanjiang in China's Guangdong province.[90] In an announcement by China's Ministry of Defense, the Chinese government highlighted that "the navies of the two countries have arranged mutual ship visits and joint exercises and training many times" beyond the conduct of this exercise.[91]

A month prior in early August 2024, the joint China-Tanzania "Peace Unity-2024" exercise was held in the waters by Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. This maritime drill focused specifically on the "scenario of maintaining the security of maritime transport in the waters east of Tanzania," even though Chinese companies do not directly have a stake in Tanzania's port that could be affected by maritime security challenges to transportation. However, merchant shipping has been susceptible to piracy off of Tanzania's coastline alongside the Indian Ocean, especially in the waters near Somalia and the Red Sea—highlighting a larger-scale challenge to overall maritime security rather than individual port investments. In May 2024, the Chinese "guided-missile frigate Xuchang (Hull 536) attached to the 46th Chinese naval escort taskforce" participated in joint maritime drills in Nigeria's waters alongside other navies to celebrate the 68th anniversary of the Nigerian navy.[92]

Meanwhile, in March 2024, Cambodia and China hosted their annual "Golden Dragon" exercise, which for the first time featured "live-fire drill jointly organized by the Chinese naval ship formation and the Royal Cambodian Navy."[93] This exercise was held in the waters near Sihanoukville Autonomous Port, which also happens to be in close proximity (approximately 15 miles) to the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia. Additional recent exercises have involved countries including Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.[94]

Beyond maritime exercises, China has also hosted joint exercises with other countries involving its other service branches. While these maritime exercises often focus on anti-piracy, counterterrorism, and humanitarian rescue, Beijing may also use them as part of its toolkit to further strengthen its military partnerships, gain access to overseas ports, and expand its maritime power.[95]

Naval Bases and Military Installations

Djibouti remains the only country with an official Chinese base. However, in every region in the world (except for Europe and North America), China has made efforts to establish a base or military presence. Within its own region of the Indo-Pacific, China has been most assertive in maritime expansion. In 2019, it was first reported that China was trying to establish a permanent military presence in Cambodia, although the reopened base now allows port calls by multiple foreign navies other than the PLAN.[96]

Outside of maritime expansion, the United States has also expressed concerns about the PRC's military activities in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially in Cuba. According to an anonymous Biden administration official, "China has been operating a spy base in Cuba since at least 2019, part of a global effort by Beijing to upgrade its intelligence-gathering capabilities."[97] In June 2023, *The Wall Street Journal* first broke the news that "China and Cuba have reached a secret agreement for China to establish an electronic eavesdropping facility on the island," focusing on intercepting communications to and from the United States.[98] A 2024 report by CSIS again highlighted these developments, as satellite imagery examined by CSIS offers insights into "four active sites in Cuba capable of conducting electronic surveillance operations."[99]

Both the UAE and Oman have encountered reporting of a potential basing access for the Chinese military in the past years. In November 2023, reports emerged that President Joe Biden was briefed on Chinese plans to construct a base in Oman in addition to its logistics support facility in Djibouti.[100] While these rumors have not been substantiated through construction or acknowledgement, these developments highlight China's growing security interest in MENA and the Gulf States. By comparison, news reports of a potential security installation at the Khalifa Port near Abu Dhabi first emerged in 2021, as COSCO owns a terminal at the port. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the buildup was halted in the UAE due to U.S. concerns. Only two years later, in April 2023, *The Washington Post* reported that the buildup of a security installation had resumed in the UAE.[101] The case of Khalifa Port and Chinese interest in both commercial and military infrastructure expansion will also be featured as a later case study in this report.

While Chinese investments in Central Asia and the Caucasus are largely intended to make the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) a viable alternative to its maritime trade routes and SLOCs, some military activities are reported to have already taken place in the region. Although Tajikistan is a land-locked country and thus is not privy to maritime investments, China is believed to operate two military facilities there—one at the border with Afghanistan since approximately 2016 and a new facility funded and constructed by China in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region first reported in 2021.[102] While neither the Tajik or Chinese governments have officially announced the existence of the facilities, these facilities would allow China to extend its military influence into Central Asia and its own border region. Such military outposts of the PLA matter significantly in China's widening military influence, even though they are most likely aimed at maintaining domestic and regional stability. These two outposts also highlight China's interest in seeking a military presence in regions like Central Asia and beyond.

Equatorial Guinea and Gabon were reportedly approached by China to host a military base alongside their coasts. In Gabon, reports were that such an agreement was already concluded under former President Ali Bongo. However, since Bongo was ousted through a coup in 2023, the United States has been lobbying for Gabon to walk back any agreement.[103] *The Wall Street Journal* first reported Chinese plans to build a base in Equatorial Guinea in 2021. U.S. officials raised "the prospect that Chinese warships would be able to rearm and refit opposite the East Coast of the U.S."[104] Such plans have especially worried the United States and its allies. A base off the Gulf of Guinea and West Africa would allow the Chinese navy, now the largest fleet in the world, unprecedented access to the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. Such a base, or even the ability for Chinese vessels to resupply and refuel off the Gulf of Guinea, would allow the PLAN far-reaching access to the rest of the world. While no claims have been substantiated either through actual construction or acknowledgement, a Chinese base or support facility for the PLAN may have some of the widest-reaching implications for China's maritime expansion overseas, making the PLAN a truly global force.

The Pacific Islands have become a specific region of attention over China's maritime expansion. In 2022, it was reported that a secret agreement was signed between China and the Solomon Islands which would have allowed Chinese military forces to enter the island nation, which the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has denied.[105] In Kiribati, China was reported to be developing a former American air strip.[106] Chinese naval vessels and hospital ships make port calls in Pacific Island ports almost every year. These developments indicate that Chinese maritime interests have extended beyond the first island chain and its direct neighborhood.[107]

Multiple government and expert analyses have attempted to identify future overseas naval bases that China is attempting to secure and build. Comparing the potential locations for PRC basing overseas suggested by the Department of Defense (2023), Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2024), AidData (2023), and Singleton (2023), all four sources agreed that Sri Lanka, Equatorial Guinea, Pakistan, and Cambodia could emerge as future basing locations.[108] Notably, Cambodia already underwent construction by Chinese contractors at its naval base in Ream and, based on geospatial imagery, had seen the docking of Chinese naval vessels at the newly updated base. Sri Lanka and Pakistan are also home to Chinese port projects in Hambantota, Colombo, and Gwadar (with Hambantota and Gwadar having been utilized militarily and for dual-use purposes before). While the deep-sea port of Bata is not Chinese managed or operated, it was built by CCCC and modernized by China Road and Bridge Corporation.[109] This analysis highlights that military buildup is believed to most likely occur at maritime sites where Chinese companies are already commercially invested, with the exception of Equatorial Guinea. Additionally, three of these four U.S. government sources say they believed that Burma, UAE, Seychelles, Tanzania, and Tajikistan may also potentially house a future PRC base. Two of these four sources also listed Solomon Islands, Cuba, Namibia, Angola, Thailand, Kenya, Mozambique, Vanuatu and Indonesia. Only one source each suggested Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh, Mauritania, Argentina, Nigeria, and Cameroon.

While this expert and government analysis may offer some insights into how to rank the most likely emerging Chinese basing locations and respond to them, it is also important to consider locations that may appear unlikely as these basing agreements may be made non-official, as was initially the case with the Solomon Islands agreement or as the PRC considers alternative locations.

Shipping and Shipbuilding

Chinese operators, owners, and enterprises have not only invested in port architecture across the globe, but also in shipbuilding as a means to ensure a robust supply of the vessels needed to transport goods from port to port.

The scale and reach of China's shipbuilding industry and its shipping companies have only just started to be addressed by domestic legislation in the United States. In 2025, the United States instituted port fees on Chinese-flagged and operated vessels following an investigation by the U.S. Trade Representative's office. This investigation found that Chinese shipbuilders and Chinese-flagged ships have a competitive advantage overseas due to the large-scale subsidies and investments received domestically within China.[110]

However, this shipbuilding and shipping challenge is not limited to the United States. China directs massive amounts of financing both domestically and overseas to support this vessel construction. A recent study by AidData found that "China has committed at least $10.25 billion (in constant 2022 USD) in loans and grants to finance ships in 71 instances to 16 low- and middle-income countries from 2000 to 2022."[111] Such ships are often built in China's own shipyards, including Hudong-Zhonghua or Shanghai Jiangnan-Changxing, which also construct naval vessels for the PLAN. By providing money to countries overseas (like Russia) or companies registered in the Marshall Islands to purchase Chinese-constructed vessels, China is only widening its advantage in shipbuilding.

Furthermore, beyond building and launching the vessels that transport goods, Chinese companies are also at the forefront of transporting the cargo. Statistics show COSCO Shipping ranked among the top 10 global shipping operators in recent years. While other European and Asian companies such as Maersk and Evergreen are often ranked alongside COSCO, American shipping operators and lines are notably absent.[112]

While the United States has already started to address this issue through its Section 301 investigation, which allows the Office of the United States Trade Representative to scrutinize unfair trade practices and propose action, shipping remains of concern as U.S. shipbuilders are unable to compete not only militarily, but also for commercial U.S.-flagged and U.S.-operated vessels.

A large part of global goods flow through the U.S. marine transportation system rather than being produced domestically or transported by other means such as air and rail. Thus, critical goods ranging from toys and household goods to imported food or advanced technologies are being transported through global ports and chokepoints. Servicing schedules and stops are determined by shipping operators such as Maersk, Evergreen, or COSCO. The world witnessed challenges of global shipping first during the COVID-19 pandemic when global supply chains collapsed, and again during the Houthis' bombardment of ships in the Red Sea, forcing ships to take detours and be delayed—if not attacked. The United States and its allies need to make global shipping a priority to secure supply chains, avoid domestic shortages, and to safeguard against increasing geopolitical tensions.

Shipbuilding and shipping are at the forefront of the flow of global goods. Their connection to ports and maritime statecraft must be carefully examined to identify systematic risks in the maritime transport and infrastructure system, such as securing robust global supply chains as well as screening and regulating cargo.

Chapter 3

Where is China Flexing its Maritime Toolkit?

While China is establishing itself as a global naval and maritime power, certain case studies demonstrate precisely how the Chinese government approaches the expansion of its maritime power, either directly through its Ministry of Defense and the PLAN or indirectly through the extension of its companies. These case studies fall into two different categories: power through commercial investments in strategically important locations and dual-use and military infrastructure building alongside its ports.

Construction and Operation at Chancay Port, Peru

The case of Chancay, Peru highlights China's assertion of maritime power through port construction and management through a Chinese company overseas, amassing geopolitical and geoeconomic influence over the continent. Two other examples, the Khalifa Port in the UAE and Ream in Cambodia, typify the PRC's dual and military use of maritime infrastructure.

Figure 6: Satellite image of Chancay Mega seaport under construction in Peru in 2023. Image: Planet Labs (2025), accessed January 2026.

In November 2024, the Peruvian megaport of Chancay was officially opened by President Xi, who traveled to Peru for the opening ceremony and to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) annual summit. Chancay is a small coastal city less than 100 kilometers from the capital of Lima. The

Chancay port was championed to be South America's gateway to the rest of the world and to global trade. As such, it is now the largest port in Peru after the first phase of construction was completed in November 2024.[113]

Official announcement of COSCO deal on Chancay Port on May 13, 2019

"The President of the Republic, Martín Vizcarra, led the signing of the closing of agreements between the Chinese state-owned company Cosco Shipping Ports Limited (CSPL) and the Volcan Mining Company, held on May 13, through which the Chancay Multipurpose Port Terminal will be built, in the Lima region, a project promoted by the Ministry of Transport and Communications (MTC) through the National Port Authority (APN).

"This important work has an estimated term of 28 months and a total investment of US$ 3 billion, including the design, financing, construction, maintenance and operation of the new port mega-complex.

"In its initial stage, an investment of US$ 1.3 billion is expected for the construction of four moorings, the execution of the port entrance complex, located east of the Panamericana Norte, and a 1.8 km tunnel that will connect the operational area and the access point without affecting the city. In its final stage, the operational area will have two terminals and 15 docks where agro-industrial products, rolling cargo, and solid and liquid bulk cargo will be transported. An annual throughput of 1 million [twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU)] for container cargo and 6 million tons of general and bulk cargo is expected.

"The Chancay port terminal will be the hub for concentrating and distributing transshipment cargo from Asia to the countries on the west coast of South America and the main commercial connection point between the countries of Asia Pacific, China and Peru. Its operation will relieve truck traffic in the capital and complement the handling of export and import cargo at the Callao Port Terminal, tripling the capacity of the first port.

"This important project estimates the creation of 9 thousand direct and indirect jobs, which will generate new business opportunities and employment associated with logistics and port operations."[114]

The idea to build a port in Chancay emerged as early as 2008. By 2010, a feasibility study was completed that would help make the port project a reality. The study envisioned the port to be a multipurpose project that would "handle containerized cargo, general cargo, non-mineral bulk cargo, liquid cargo and rolling cargo."[115] In its entirety, the Chancay port project is expected to cost $3.5 billion dollars upon the conclusion of its construction with the first phase of the port now in operation.[116]

However, it took until 2019 for the Peruvian government to move forward in building the port. In January 2019, COSCO announced that "the Company will establish its first greenfield subsidiary in South America by acquiring [a] 60% stake in Terminales Portuarios Chancay S.A. (Chancay Terminal) from Volcan Compañía Minera S.A.A., ("Volcan") for a total consideration of US$225million, with an initial payment of US$56million."[117]

Such investment and acquisition made Chancay "the first terminal project controlled by China COSCO Shipping Corporation, the parent company of Hong Kong-headquartered COSCO Shipping Ports, in South America, as well as the group's second greenfield port project invested overseas."[118] Steady development of the port took place following the acquisition. In 2021, COSCO contracted CCCC and its subsidiary CHEC to aid in construction.[119]

However, as the port project neared completion, the tide turned both domestically and internationally. In 2021, the National Port Authority (APN) of Peru signed the *Resolución de Acuerdo de Directorio N° 008-2021-APN-DIR* with COSCO that would "[grant] the company COSCO SHIPPING Ports Chancay PERU

S.A. the exclusivity of the exploitation of essential services in the port infrastructure" and prevent other port and terminal operators from stepping in.[120] Almost three years later, APN sought to clarify reports that it did not have the authority to grant such exclusivity and was seeking legal annulment of this article. However, despite concerns over exclusivity, APN reported that it would not seek to annul its partnership with COSCO and that construction would continue as planned.[121]

Similarly, the United States also started expressing its concerns as the construction of the port neared completion, more than four years after the first announcement that COSCO would be involved in the project. In October 2023, *AP News* cited an unnamed senior U.S. official who assessed that "Chinese companies have been buying power, mining and port assets across Latin America in recent years but the scale of Beijing's investments in Peru, along with their strategic position, has caused particular concern," leading the U.S. government to raise these concerns with the Peruvian government.[122] In August 2023, General Laura Richardson, then-Commander of U.S. Southern Command, voiced the deep concerns shared by the U.S. government about the developments at Chancay: "They're on the 20-yard line to our homeland. Or, we could say that they're on the first and second island chain to our homeland. And the proximity in terms of this region and the importance of the region, I think that we have to truly appreciate what this region brings, and the security challenges that these countries face."[123]

Despite pressure by the U.S. government, the Peruvian government retracted the legal case against COSCO shortly before its President Dina Boluarte traveled to China at the end of June to meet President Xi. Prior to this trip, a new amendment was ratified on June 8 that would alter Peru's National Port System Law to grant COSCO the right to exclusively operate the Chancay port.[124] With no more obvious roadblocks, the COSCO-built and operated port of Chancay officially opened in November 2024, with President Xi traveling to Peru for the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference and to inaugurate the port.[125]

While legal troubles may have been resolved at Chancay, concerns raised by domestic and international stakeholders and policymakers remain. With the port now officially open, Chinese presence has transitioned from construction to actual operation and docking. Upon the inauguration of the port, which saw the attendance of Xi in Lima, General Richardson warned again that Chancay port "could be used as a dual-use facility," falling in line with Beijing's playbook on ports.[126]

Thus far, operations at the port have focused on forming new trade and inland routes in Latin America, connecting Chancay further with neighboring countries. In March 2025, news reports noted that China Merchant Ports bought Brazil's only private Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) terminal by "[acquiring] 70 percent of Vast Infraestrutura, operator of the onshore crude oil transshipment terminal in the Port of Açu."[127] Furthermore, in May 2025, China and Brazil were reported to be in talks to construct a 3,000-kilometer railway linking Brazil with Chancay.[128] China's relationship with Brazil has become increasingly important due to Brazil's large exports of soybeans to China, making the partnership critical to China's food security. In July 2025, Brazil and China signed an MoU to conduct a feasibility study for the ambitious rail project. Such a rail-to-seaport corridor would allow China to streamline its soybean imports from Brazil with greater quantities and speed. As Chancay port is further developed and extended, additional partnerships among China and other South American countries and regions may still be on the horizon.

While Chancay is still a significant distance away from the United States (with 4,500 miles between Chancay and San Francisco), COSCO's exclusive operation will allow a large-scale Chinese commercial

presence in Latin America, allowing for broader operations of shipping lines and Chinese vessels in the region.

Extension at Ream Naval Base, Cambodia

In 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* first reported that China was trying to establish a permanent military presence in Cambodia which included a secret agreement between the countries.[129] These reports centered around the Ream Naval Base in the southern tip of Cambodia alongside the Gulf of Thailand. While the Cambodian government denied the veracity of this report, a subsidiary of Chinese state-owned company China Metallurgic Group Corporation began extension works at the Cambodian naval facility between 2020 and 2022, first agreed upon in 2016.[130]

Figure 7: Geospatial image of Ream, Cambodia, where Chinese contractors upgraded the Cambodian Navy's base. Image: Planet Labs (2025), accessed January 2026.

The extension resulted not only in dredging work, but also construction of a pier at the Cambodian naval base. In December 2023, Chinese warships were the first foreign ships to be docked there.[131] By 2024, two Chinese military ships were docked for more than six months at the newly expanded and modernized base near Sihanoukville in a rotational and semi-permanent presence.[132] In January 2024, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet again denied a permanent Chinese presence at the base.[133]

Construction was completed at the Ream Naval Base in 2025 and was officially handed over to the Royal Cambodian Navy in April 2025. Hun Manet, Cambodia's prime minister, attended the ceremony commemorating the opening of the base, highlighting its strategic importance. Just days after the inauguration, Japanese warships were the first foreign naval ships to dock at Ream. Following U.S.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's meeting with South Asian defense leaders, the Department of Defense shared that the U.S. Navy was also planning to make a port call at Ream later in 2025, with Secretary Hegseth set to visit the ship at port.[134] Ultimately, this port call took place in January 2026, though Secretary Hegseth did not pay the ship a visit while in port.[135]

While Cambodia has denied multiple reports of a Chinese permanent presence at Ream Naval Base, cooperation between China and Cambodia has not stopped. Shortly after the base handover, the two countries opened the China-Cambodia Ream Port Joint Support and Training Center in April 2025, which "will support joint operations between the two militaries in areas such as counterterrorism, disaster prevention and relief, humanitarian assistance, and training."[136] According to Chinese media outlet *Global Times*, the joint center will include the "necessary personnel from both countries [...] stationed at the site to ensure smooth operations."[137] Such a joint cooperation center and a rotation of Chinese warships may present a formal permanent Chinese military presence at the base in all but name.

With a growing Chinese presence at Ream, China's Jiangsu province and Cambodia's Preah Sihanouk province signed an agreement in June 2025 to form cooperation between Jiangsu's Jiangyin port and the Preah Sihanouk Autonomous Port.[138] This cooperation will also include establishing a special economic zone at Sihanouk located in close proximity to the Ream Naval Base, further incentivizing Chinese investment in the port and region. The U.S. Navy made its first port call in eight years at the Sihanouk port in December 2024 as an apparent response to China's increasing presence in the area.[139]

Cambodia and China have enjoyed a security cooperation with joint maritime drills, but China's construction and access to Ream was an unprecedented advance in this bilateral relationship. Ream does not have a commercial port and thus does not seem to follow the pattern of development at China's first overseas base in Djibouti. Cambodia and China's "ironclad friendship" has only strengthened since then, with Cambodia soon to break ground on the Funan Techo canal project (linking the Mekong River with the Gulf of Thailand) which will be partially funded by China.[140]

Security Infrastructure Construction at the Khalifa Port, United Arab Emirates

As many of Beijing's overseas ports have seen use for port calls, few have seen actual military infrastructure construction at or near its ports with the exception of the Dolareh extension of the Djibouti Port and the Ream Naval Base near the Sihanoukville Port in Cambodia. But the case of the Khalifa Port in the UAE highlights that the two previous cases were not exceptions in China's commercial port strategy, but rather that military construction alongside ports has become a part of Beijing's toolkit.

The Zayed Port has served the UAE and Abu Dhabi since the 1970s. But by 2012, the new Khalifa Port was opened and most container traffic was transferred from Zayed to Khalifa. This megaport developed by Abu Dhabi Ports now has a 7.8 million TEU container capacity and is home to 36 berths and 33 STS cranes.[141]

In a press release by Abu Dhabi Ports, the company stated that "Khalifa Port's second container Terminal – CSP Abu Dhabi Terminal – is a concession agreement between Abu Dhabi Ports Group and COSCO SHIPPING Ports" and that "COSCO's first international greenfield subsidiary represents a strategic hub along China's Belt and Road initiative with the largest Container Freight Station (CFS) in the region."[142]

Figure 8: Geospatial image of Khalifa Port, United Arab Emirates, where COSCO Shipping Ports operates the CSP Abu Dhabi Terminal alongside AD Ports. Image credit to Planet Labs (2025), accessed January 2026.

Six years after the Khalifa Port's inauguration, COSCO Shipping Ports and Abu Dhabi Ports opened the CSP Abu Dhabi Terminal at the port.[143] In 2016, the two companies signed an agreement that would see a joint venture operate a new container terminal. Through a 35-year concession agreement, CSP invested more than $430 million total dollars into the port and its terminal.[144] Operations officially commenced in April 2019. In another press release on AD Ports' partnership with COSCO, Chairman of the UAE Department of Transport Sheikh Theyab bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan stated that "the decision by COSCO SHIPPING Ports to invest in Abu Dhabi is a testament to our strategic location, attractive business environment and supportive regulation," and that this decision "will open the door to more foreign direct investment in the Emirate."[145]

Cooperation between the UAE and China on maritime commerce and transportation has only increased since the opening of COSCO's terminal at Khalifa Port. In 2024, CSP partnered with Etihad Railways to further integrate transportation services between the port and Abu Dhabi.[146] However, cooperation between the UAE and COSCO seems to have reached new heights in recent years.

In the spring of 2021, U.S. government officials reportedly warned that "China was secretly building what they suspected was a military facility at a port in the United Arab Emirates, one of the U.S.'s closest Mideast allies, according to people familiar with the matter."[147] At the time, a spokesperson of the UAE Embassy in Washington, D.C. told *The Wall Street Journal* that "the UAE has never had an agreement plan, talks or intention to host a Chinese military base or outpost of any kind." By December 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* again reported that construction at Khalifa Port had been halted following the trip

of U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to the UAE in September 2021.[148] However, U.S. efforts to stop construction did not appear to be effective initially, according to media sources; by April 2023, it was reported that Chinese construction had resumed at Khalifa Port for military infrastructure.[149]

While no further military construction has been reported since 2023, the Khalifa Port highlights that U.S. actions against Chinese security access often are reported only after an agreement or construction has started. It also highlights that this sort of response may not immediately prove to be effective Khalifa Port also highlights one potential facet of Beijing's playbook: to advance military partnerships and installations alongside port construction being conducted by PRC companies. As the Port of Khalifa continues to modernize and evolve, it is a case to be studied further.

Chapter 4

Implications of Chinese Overseas Ambitions

The strategic importance of ports is highlighted through recent developments at the Panama Canal. Hutchison Ports holds concessions at two ports at either side of the canal and has attempted to sell its overseas stakes to an American-European consortium. However, the sale was previously paused under Chinese government intervention, and put on hold indefinitely when Panamanian authorities stepped in to regain control of the ports. This moment warrants attention for further action. China has built an impressive toolkit that it employs in seeking to gain a maritime and military foothold overseas through the gradual militarization of critical maritime infrastructure, specifically at ports and naval bases.

As part of this toolkit, seven different approaches have emerged in which Beijing seeks to advance its military partnerships: (1) port investments; (2) port calls; (3) medical diplomacy at sea; (4) research vessels and blue ocean missions; (5) gifting, loaning, and sales of equipment; (6) joint maritime exercises and anti-piracy missions; and (7) construction of naval bases and military installations.

Consequences of China's Maritime Toolkit and Statecraft

The PRC employs its toolkit for maritime assets selectively and horizontally. Sometimes, the PRC acts indirectly through self-initiative from private and state-owned companies seeking to invest in ports and port equipment abroad. Not every overseas port where a Chinese company owns management stakes will lead to a naval base or military installation. Rather, it is the result of a carefully designed risk assessment framework.

The PRC carefully discerns which goals it pursues at particular ports based on a variety of factors. The Chinese government differentiates between military, political, and economic influence or power in its maritime expansion efforts. But beyond this multi-dimensional approach, it also considers three additional factors: its domestic needs, host government needs, and situational and geopolitical context.

Depending on the situation, the PRC may choose to expand its maritime influence via ports and bases. While its first—and so far officially—only acknowledged base in Djibouti has achieved greater basing access for the PRC, China's construction at Ream in Cambodia could be at least partly attributed to its need to establish a naval stronghold in the Indo-Pacific amidst geopolitical tensions in the South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait. Other PRC government needs may include ports and bases along vital maritime chokepoints and SLOCs or ports and terminal ownership in countries that supply China with critical food and energy sources.

The PRC has been highly responsive to host government needs in its maritime expansion, stepping in to assist economically, politically, and military while being allowed to construct, manage, or invest in maritime critical infrastructure. In the case of Sri Lanka, China Merchant Ports was able to step in when debt repayments at Hambantota Port became unsustainable. The Chinese government has often offered military equipment as loans or gifts and has provided police support. This was also the case in Pakistan, where China gifted the Pakistani military with warships while building the port of Gwadar. Often, Beijing has profited from providing internal security assistance in response to a host government's internal domestic instability.[150]

Beijing's approach depends on the needs and willingness of the host government, its own needs at that time, and the current geopolitical context. Owning multiple naval bases overseas may be attractive in the PRC's global maritime and military power posture, yet it is costly in a geopolitical context where host countries have grown wary of Beijing's approaches and where they seek to carefully balance engagement with Beijing against their partnerships with other allies. The PRC thus may aim to take what it can get at various locations across the globe, based on this situational context.

As Beijing has gained access to ports around the globe, the question arises as to when China may achieve a sufficient port network and how it may use it. It remains unclear what may constitute a sufficient port network, both in terms of number of ports but also level of engagement and ownership to achieve greater maritime statecraft. China's recent protest over the Hutchison Ports deals reveals that it recognizes the strategic importance of these port investments and that it does not seek to minimize them, as it was rallying up alternative Chinese and Hong Kong-based investors to acquire Hutchison's network in response to BlackRock's acquisition efforts.

With Chinese companies now invested in more than 100 ports around the globe, the PRC already exhibits an extensive commercial reach and may soon choose to focus on developing its military foothold at selected locations of interest and building a network to maintain access to strategically important goods and locations.

Potential Areas for Future Study and Limitations of Research

In addition to the tools outlined in this report, potential areas of further research into China's maritime toolkit include examining the role of China's shipbuilding industry in expanding Beijing's global influence as well as helping to bolster Chinese presence in shipping corridors and SLOCs. Not only does China invest and interact with maritime infrastructure overseas, but it has become one of the leading providers of the vessels that carry global goods. Furthermore, China's role in providing increasing internal and regional security through police training, United Nations peacekeeping, and anti-piracy missions plays an important but understudied role in China's maritime statecraft.

This study primarily examines the military dimension of Chinese port investments globally. While in certain cases this military dimension intersects with economic and political activities, not all port investments are made with military intentions. However, this does not preclude China from using these ports for military purposes in the future.

As the world is undergoing tectonic shifts in geopolitics and geoeconomics, it is becoming increasingly difficult to stay abreast of all of China's maritime activities. In particular, while militaries often report on their official visits, exchanges, and activities, this report often relied on media reporting and other sources for these informal activities.

This study does not encompass all activities, data, and strategies fully; rather, it aims to give a glimpse into how China is building its maritime statecraft—through a horizontal toolkit, sometimes selectively and unselectively, used and piecing together elements often not studied in relation with each other.

Policy Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The U.S. government and other regional actors affected by China's widening maritime reach and power must act swiftly and proactively to address PRC overtures and activities at potential basing sites. It is

important that policy actions in response to China's maritime expansion address both the economic implications of China's port investments and the security improvements that PLAN basing may provide. In addition to developing a broader international ports strategy, there are multiple policy actions stakeholders across the U.S. government can take.

ARCHITECTURE	ALLIANCE	ALIGNMENT
(1) Establish a national maritime strategy	(4) Launch a Blue Ports alliance	(7) Link maritime strategy to economic statecraft
(2) Adopt a Harbor Accord	(5) Build mutual partnerships and preposition resilience	(8) Build public-private and academic capacity
(3) Expand and align DFC's maritime and transportation mandate	(6) Modernize maritime cyber and dual-use infrastructure	(9) Reinforce ports as open sea lines of communication

Figure 9: The Architecture-Alliance-Alignment Framework. Figure by the authors.

Architecture: Building the Foundations of Maritime Power

1. Establish a National Maritime Strategy

The United States should lead the creation of a comprehensive National Maritime Strategy that unites defense readiness, commercial competitiveness, and development finance.[151] Coordination should be anchored in a Senior Director for Maritime Infrastructure and Logistics under the auspices of the National Security Council, ensuring synchronization across departments responsible for ports, shipping, cyber systems, and undersea networks. A unified framework would define priority ports for assured access, strengthen domestic port resilience, and integrate U.S. maritime policy with Indo-Pacific and National Freight strategies.

2. Adopt a Harbor Accord Among Allies

Modeled after the Artemis Accords in the space domain, a Harbor Accord would unite trusted partners around principles for secure, transparent, and open maritime infrastructure. Members would commit to full transparency of ownership and operating rights, common safeguards against cyber intrusions and authoritarian logistics systems such as LOGINK, and pre-negotiated surge access for humanitarian and security contingencies. Such an accord would enshrine the norms needed to keep global ports open to commerce and closed to coercion.

3. Expand and Align DFC's Maritime and Transportation Mandate

Congress should reauthorize and expand the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) with a dedicated *Maritime Infrastructure Window*. This would allow the DFC to finance strategic ports and shipping corridors—such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor—in collaboration with allied operators such as APM Terminals, Hapag-Lloyd Terminals, or ICTSI. The DFC already took a first step towards realizing this expanded mandate when it signed a loan agreement for the Lobito Atlantic Railway in December 2025, dedicating funding to the Lobito seaport and railway in Angola for strengthened U.S. cooperation.[152] Future coordination with the Export–Import Bank and Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) would attract private capital while ensuring that critical infrastructure remains in trusted hands.

The U.S. Congress in 2018 passed the BUILD Act (Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act) which established the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC). Since its official inception in 2019, the DFC has invested billions of dollars in development projects around the world. However, in the active DFC commitment database last updated at the end of March 2024, only 21 out of its 1,322 active commitments are labeled as transportation and warehousing projects.[153] One of these recent commitments was DFC's November 2023 commitment of a $553 million investment into establishing the new West Container Terminal at the Port of Colombo, where China Merchant Port also runs a terminal in addition to its lease of the Hambantota Port.[154] The construction of this new deep-sea container terminal at Sri Lanka's largest port is spearheaded by the Indian-led Adani Group, showcasing that partnership in infrastructure investment can be vital when countering Chinese influence at ports. Ultimately, this joint investment into the Colombo terminal was discontinued, as the DFC's partner, the Adani Group, forged ahead its own path and opened the terminal in April 2025.[155] Since then, the DFC and other U.S. agencies have not followed up with similar dedicated action at other ports and maritime projects.

DFC Announcement of $553 Million Investment into West Container Terminal in Colombo

"DFC works to drive private-sector investments that advance development and economic growth while strengthening the strategic positions of our partners. That's what we're delivering with this infrastructure investment in the Port of Colombo," said DFC CEO Scott Nathan. "Sri Lanka is one of the world's key transit hubs, with half of all container ships transiting through its waters. DFC's commitment of $553 million in private-sector loans for the West Container Terminal will expand its shipping capacity, creating greater prosperity for Sri Lanka – without adding to sovereign debt – while at the same time strengthening the position of our allies across the region."[156]

Alliances: Extending Reach Through Trusted Partnerships

4. Launch a Blue Ports Alliance

Within the frameworks of the G7, Quad, or PGII, the United States should spearhead a Blue Ports Alliance—a multilateral mechanism for evaluating, financing, and modernizing trusted ports. This alliance would certify and co-finance projects that meet high standards for transparency, sustainability, and cybersecurity, providing a democratic alternative to China's Maritime Silk Road. Its network of interoperable, dual-use ports would reinforce resilience and freedom of navigation at key global chokepoints.

While the U.S. government has been working to address domestic national security concerns that affect its maritime domain, it must also look beyond its borders to support these efforts. The White House in February 2024 announced a new Executive Order aimed at strengthening cybersecurity at ports.[157] One of the biggest changes announced in the Executive Order was the $20 billion investment by the United States allowing "PACECO Corp. (a U.S.-based subsidiary of Mitsui E&S Co., Ltd of Japan) to onshore U.S. manufacturing capacity for its crane production." This new investment into domestic crane manufacturing coincided with a congressional investigation by the House Committee on Homeland Security and the House Select Committee on the CCP on the communication devices discovered on STS cranes manufactured by Chinese state-owned enterprise ZPMC, the global market leader of cranes.[158] Similarly, the White House under the Biden administration also announced the imposition of tariffs and an investigation on Chinese steel and shipbuilding in April 2024.[159] However, such domestic measures only offer limited support of American maritime commerce, as American goods and ships still pass through ports all over the world.

Other countries and partners have become acutely aware of the risks posed by Chinese investments

and oversights at overseas ports. In January 2024, the European Parliament passed a resolution to adopt a comprehensive European ports strategy by the end of 2024.[160] As of January 2026, no such strategy has been made public. Similarly, U.S. partners in the Indo-Pacific have become increasingly concerned with China's growing maritime and military capabilities in its direct neighborhood. India, for example, has increasingly stepped up as a port investor, engaging in the Iranian port of Chabahar and Sittwe port in Myanmar.[161]

The U.S. government must act internationally alongside partners and allies to strengthen its maritime commerce and security at home. It must step up to lead an international alliance on secure critical maritime infrastructure that enables member states to share information and risks cross-border, work on diversifying supply chains together, and partner together to provide financial and logistical support for overseas port investments. Such an initiative can mirror the Blue Dot Network but, instead of focusing on private companies and soliciting these companies to bid for projects, the initiative would take place at the government level and address the security and political risks at global ports.

5. Build Mutual Partnerships and Preposition Resilience

America must not depend on goodwill during a crisis. It should negotiate binding port access agreements and long-term logistics arrangements with key allies—including Japan, the Philippines, India, and Australia—while modernizing the Maritime Security Program and Tanker Security Program. Pre-positioning repair capacity, fuel stocks, and humanitarian supplies across allied ports would minimize single-point vulnerabilities and ensure rapid response capability in conflict or disaster. Notably, many host governments have been balancing Chinese investments and concerns raised by the United States and its allies rather than siding exclusively with China. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan government imposed a one-year moratorium on the docking of foreign research vessels following the docking of multiple Chinese research vessels and the concerns raised by the Indian government. Similarly, while the Maldives partnered closely with China through a new military pact signing and removing Indian military personnel from its territory, Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu recently called India its "closest ally."[162] These events and activities reaffirm that host governments tend to engage with all sides.

Sometimes, host governments may even initiate balancing acts: officials in Pakistan reportedly approached the United States to construct a port in Pasni in October 2025.[163] Such a port would not only allow the United States access to Pakistan's critical minerals, but it would also be in close proximity to Chinese interests and presence in Gwadar. At the time of writing this report, it is uncertain how U.S. officials will engage with this proposal.

Nations attempting to execute such balancing acts often try to extract benefits from both sides rather than completely aligning with one country or the other. The United States should note these cases and work on building partnerships and trust rather than alienating countries that have closely worked with China in the past.

6. Modernize Maritime Cyber and Dual-Use Infrastructure

Maritime strength today depends as much on data integrity as on dock capacity. The United States should lead the creation of cybersecurity certification standards for cranes, sensors, and logistics software, excluding untrusted equipment and code. Working with allies, the United States should promote digital interoperability and ensure that allied ports can securely share operational data. Investing in automation, predictive maintenance, and AI-enabled logistics will make ports not only more efficient, but also more resilient to coercion or sabotage.

Alignment: Integrating Maritime Power into Broader Strategy

7. Link Maritime Strategy to Economic Statecraft

Port policy must become a pillar of U.S. geoeconomic statecraft. The United States should embed maritime access and security considerations into trade negotiations, investment screening, and export-control frameworks. A new Maritime Resilience Task Force, bringing together DFC and the Departments of State, Commerce, Treasury, and Defense would align financing, sanctions, and industrial policy to ensure that economic tools reinforce strategic objectives rather than operate in isolation.

In addition to countering China's commercial investments swiftly and sustainably, the U.S. government must also take action to address the dual and military nature of these investments and proactively act against Chinese basing ambitions for overseas military access. As Djibouti has become home to the PRC's first overseas base and as reports have emerged of construction in the UAE, the United States must also be aware that even governments that already host U.S. military sites may still choose to respond to China's requests for establishing bases. China expert Craig Singleton categorizes potential locations in four different categories: (1) existing military facilities, (2) suspected military facilities under construction, (3) high-risk locations for potential military access, and (4) reportedly evaluated for potential military access.[164]

The U.S. government must move toward adopting similar classifications of potential basing sites and ring the alarm bell when sites are reportedly being evaluated, not when they are already suspected to be under construction. Not only must individual agencies adopt such classifications as part of a broader risk assessment, but they should streamline and coordinate their assessments when possible. While agencies such as the Department of Defense and ODNI produce annual reports that identify Beijing's military overtures, both agencies often come to different conclusions, creating ambiguity about the nature of the threat and how best to proceed.

Furthermore, to preserve national security, the U.S. government must also determine which global ports and U.S. military sites abroad must remain secure and separate from other foreign military influence stationed nearby. In doing so, the U.S. government can prioritize which sites to continually work with and invest in. The Strategic Ports Reporting Act, which passed in the House of Representatives in May 2025, would require such constant monitoring and reporting, including necessary actions to protect strategic ports against China gaining operational control.[165] A maritime resilience taskforce is the ideal coordinating body for such a monitoring and risk assessment framework.

8. Build Public–Private and Academic Capacity

Sustaining maritime leadership requires talent and innovation. Washington should expand maritime workforce programs through the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and allied universities; incentivize private investment in port modernization and shipbuilding; and launch a Maritime Innovation Lab linking the Navy, Department of Transportation, and leading research institutions. Such a lab would advance dual-use technologies from autonomous shipping and green fuels to cyber-resilient logistics platforms, marrying competitiveness and security.

The case of the Anaklia Port project in the country of Georgia has showcased that, even when U.S. companies are interested in investing in infrastructure projects abroad, they may encounter difficulties in executing these projects. In the case of DFC's historic investment into a new container terminal at Colombo port to counter China's investments there and at Hambantota, funding has been withheld

due to ongoing U.S. investigations into the founder of Adani Group, which led the development of the new terminal and is part of the consortium now operating it. Additional difficulties may include overall interest and the lucrativeness of investing abroad, operational and workforce constraints, reputational and corruption risks, and environmental sustainability. The Blue Dot Network—founded by the United States, Japan, and Australia—may help in eliminating or lowering some of these barriers to entry for infrastructure investment abroad for private companies. Similar initiatives include the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative by G7 and the Global Gateway Initiative by the European Union Commission. While these initiatives may not be able to counter Chinese infrastructure investment dollar-for-dollar, they must instead focus on offering both swift and sustainable alternatives for infrastructure investments.

9. Reinforce the Narrative: Ports as Open Sea Lines of Communication

The final task is to win the narrative battle over the world's sea lanes. The United States and its allies must clearly articulate that their goal is connection, not containment—keeping ports open, transparent, and governed by mutually accepted norms. By emphasizing cooperation in humanitarian response, sustainable development, and digital security, Washington can ensure its maritime engagement is seen as enabling prosperity.[166]

4.4 Looking Ahead: China as a Maritime Power

Maritime power has long defined the rise and reach of nations. Today, the contest for the seas is not measured only in ships or missiles, but in who builds and governs the infrastructure that connects the world. China's strategy of embedding state-directed enterprises in ports and logistics networks has blurred the lines between commercial access and strategic control. Harbors once viewed purely as engines of trade are increasingly becoming nodes of influence—capable of shaping the choices of host nations and the freedom of others to navigate.

China's maritime power, both through its economic and military efforts abroad, will continue to grow over the next few years, especially as contention has continued around maritime issues such as in the Taiwan Strait, South China Seas, and the Red Sea. Currently, the PLAN finds itself at a turning point in its maritime power expansion. It is advancing from near-seas deterrence to a navy that is capable of far-seas operations beyond the Indo-Pacific and Djibouti.

This report has shown how China's maritime toolkit integrates commercial investments, diplomatic outreach, and military presence into a coherent system of leverage for greater maritime artifacts. It also demonstrates that the challenge is not simply China's expansion, but the absence of a comparably coordinated strategy among partners and allies. Assessments by the U.S. government, media, and experts show China's rapid increase in approaching potential host governments for basing access and continual investments in new commercial port projects. While China's overseas commercial and military projects currently offer little utility in war-time scenarios, this may soon change if China proves to be successful in negotiating basing and military agreements with other countries.

The United States and its allies have the means to ensure a different outcome. Through the Architecture–Alliances–Alignment framework advanced in this study, they can build a maritime architecture of trust that sustains freedom of navigation, transparency of ownership, and resilience of supply. That architecture begins with national coherence, extends through trusted partnerships, and aligns economic statecraft with security strategy. It draws on the same principles that made maritime trade the foundation of prosperity: openness, predictability, and shared benefit.

Consequently, as it may take the PRC years to still develop pre-emptive and war-time capability, strategic foresight and long-term strategy in response to China's maritime expansion can aid in preventing Chinese maritime aggression that inches closer to U.S. territory. Understanding Beijing's toolkit for maritime statecraft now can help in preventing contentious scenarios in the future.

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