

CHINA'S MILITARY ACTIVITY IN LATIN AMERICA*

Arms sales, military exchanges, joint exercises—what exactly are the Chinese up to militarily in the hemisphere?

By Gabriel Marcella

*This article previously appeared in English in the Winter 2012 Americas Quarterly (www.americasquarterly.org)

One headline in the Asia Times Online pro-claimed: “China on the March in Latin America.”¹ Another, in Military Review, warned of China’s threat to the United States: “In Uncle Sam’s Backyard: China’s Military Influence in Latin America.”² Such language underlines fears about China becoming a military rival to the U.S. —or worse, undermining U.S. security in a region defined in the past by the Monroe Doctrine.

The truth, though, doesn’t look anything like the headlines. Although military diplomacy and arms sales and transfers to some countries of the region have increased in the past decade, the quantity and type of equipment involved hardly represents the strategic threat suggested by the headline writers. Moreover, much of the equipment is logistical in nature; little of it is for combat or power projection.

There is, to be sure, a heightened Chinese interest in building alliances and extending contacts with governments and institutional players (such as militaries) in the region—going beyond just trade and investment. But the notion that the Chinese are seeking to establish a strategic beachhead is far-fetched, irresponsible and counterproductive to establishing a useful relationship with China as its global influence rises. Contrary to the headlines, China does not want to challenge the U.S. in the hemisphere.

The alarmist reporting, much of it from U.S. sources, also ignores the Latin American perspective. Latin Americans are not simple bystanders. They seek to engage China in order to understand the nature and extent of China’s power and influence—and its effect on their national interests and foreign policies. They also want to keep their options open for acquiring military equipment at an affordable price and technology transfers for coproduction or independent production. They are also aware of the risks of acquiring a motley mix of

systems from various nations, a prospect that makes maintenance expensive and readiness problematic.

The Five Dimensions

Chinese military activities fall into five categories: humanitarian, peacekeeping, military exchanges, arms sales and donations, and technology transfers.

1. Humanitarian

Under the banner of “Harmonious Mission 2011,” the Chinese Navy’s hospital ship, the Peace Ark, entered the Caribbean in October 2011. The mission was to provide medical services to local people and military and administrative personnel of countries visited.

Stops included Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Costa Rica. The craft has 300 hospital beds and eight operating rooms—and carries 416 personnel, 107 of them medical workers. This was the second overseas voyage of the Peace Ark, following “Harmonious Mission 2010” in the Gulf of Aden and five countries in Asia and Africa, which treated 15,500 people.

The demonstration of soft power is similar to humanitarian missions conducted by the U.S. Navy’s hospital ship, the USNS Comfort, since 2007. Those trips have taken the USNS Comfort to ports of call in Central America, South America and the Caribbean to provide care to thousands. There is one important political distinction: unlike the Chinese program, the USNS Comfort does not attend to armed forces personnel and administrative personnel of the countries it visits.

2. Peacekeeping

Although it once opposed international peace-keeping, China is now the largest provider of peacekeepers of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, with over 3,100 in Africa and Lebanon.

In 2004, China sent 130 riot police to Haiti as part of the UN’s MINUSTAH peacekeeping forces, becoming the first Chinese uniformed formation to serve in the Western Hemisphere. Eight Chinese peacekeepers were killed during the devastating January 2010 earthquake. All but 16 of the 130 were withdrawn in 2010. Taiwan, which has ambassadorial level relations with Haiti, sent a rescue team of 23 people and two dogs.

3. Military Exchanges

Senior defense officials from Latin America visit China routinely and Chinese officials reciprocate with high-level visits to Latin America. Students from Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay have gone to China's Defense Studies Institute, the Army Com-mand College, the Navy Command School, and the Na-val Research Institute.

Though this might seem impressive, the numbers do not come close to the thousands of Latin American stu-dents, military and civilian, who go to the U.S., Europe and other countries for advanced studies. Moreover, most of the student programs are one-way: to China. It will be a measure of increased trust and confidence when Chinese officers are sent to study in Latin Ameri-can military schools. The U.S. has sent officers to study at various Latin American military schools for more than 50 years. Some of them have reached the highest ranks in the U.S. military.

ARMS SALES AND TRANSFERS: CHINA-LATIN AMERICA	
ARGENTINA	4 armored personnel carriers
BOLIVIA	6 light trainer/fighter jets (K-8 Karakorum) 6 multipurpose helicopters 2 patrol boats 2 medium transport aircraft (Antonov An-24) 500 Red Arrow-8 anti-tank missiles
ECUADOR	2 trainer aircraft 4 air search radar (2 to be delivered) 2 MA-60 transport aircraft (to be delivered)
VENEZUELA	10 air search radar (estimated) 25 K-8 Karakorum 100 short range anti-aircraft missiles 8 Antonov An-12 transport aircraft
PARAGUAY	11 jeeps
PERU	25 portable surface-to-air missiles 72 trucks 3,000 122-millimeter rockets
GUYANA	1 transport aircraft
MEXICO	13 105-millimeter towed guns

SOURCE: JANE'S DEFENSE WEEKLY REPORTS

4. Arms Sales

The truth is that Latin America is not a large market for arms sales. Its military establish-ments are small by world standards and their defense budgets austere. The defense problems that many coun-tries face are internal conflicts and public security, not conventional threats from over the horizon.

Latin American defense spending is forecast to grow from \$63 billion in 2011 to \$65 billion by 2014, with a mere 20 percent being available for procurement and the bulk going to personnel costs.³ While equipment modernization is

imperative, only a few countries (Chile, Brazil, Venezuela) can afford it. And those coun-tries have gone on the arms market to buy. According to Jane's

Defense Weekly Reports, the amount of arms recently sold or donated by China to Latin American countries is small [see table on p.69].

In the past decade, China sold \$58 million worth of Karakorum jets to Bolivia, upward of \$150 million in air surveillance systems to Venezuela, and donated military materiel to Bolivia, Guyana, Colombia, and Peru, such as uniforms, trucks, jeeps, field kitchens, engineering supplies, tents, gloves, and hats. Peru received a mobile field hospital and other equipment in 2010 worth \$300 million.

5. Technology transfer

The military technology transfer with Argentina is instructive. Argentina has produced sophisticated aircraft, including jets, since the 1940s and 1950s. The Fábrica Argentina de Aviones (located in Córdoba) was founded in 1927 and has manufactured over 1,300 aircraft of various types—including the excellent Pucara and Pampa—and today employs about 1,000 local workers, down from 9,000. Today, the Argentine government wants to resuscitate that capacity, and there may be a niche market for light multiple-use transport helicopters in South America, in addition to sales within Argentina.

In October 2011, Argentina announced an agreement with the China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation to produce the CZ-W11 ultralight helicopter. Apparently, a minimum production run of 40 will be necessary to make it economically feasible. The CZ-W11 is a reverse engineered version (with minor changes) of the Eurocopter AS 350B Ecureuil helicopter. A similar version of the latter, the Ecureuil 2, is being co-produced by Eurocopter subsidiary Helibras in Brazil.

Brazil is pushing hard on the technology transfer front to enhance both its civilian and military industry. Though there is no specific agreement with China on military technology transfer, the two countries have developed and launched three Earth resources satellites to benefit nations that do not have their own satellites to monitor natural resources, agricultural zones and urban development. Four more are planned.⁴

Brazil makes 50 percent of the satellite components. However, another effort at commercial collaboration foundered. Brazil's Embraer and Aviation Industry of China agreed to jointly manufacture the midsize ERJ-145 passenger jet in Harbin. According to defense analyst R. Evan Ellis, Embraer viewed the collaboration as necessary to gain access to the Chinese market, which China resisted. The "relationship," he added, "was also soured by the perception

within Embraer that the Chinese had used the partnership to steal Embraer's technology to support their own aircraft development."⁵

Venezuela paid a Chinese company, Great Wall Industries Corporation (GWIC), \$406 million to develop and launch a satellite, the "Simón Bolívar" in 2008. Similarly, Bolivia contracted with the GWIC to build the Tupac Katari satellite and launch it in 2013, at a cost of \$300 million, of which \$295 million would be financed by the China Development Bank.⁶

Implications for U. S. Hemispheric Strategy

U.S. officials are not publicly concerned about China's military activities. Frank Mora, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs, stated in 2009 that while the U.S. stands for transparency, China's arms and technology transfers are standard in the international community, and that some of the equipment can help Latin American governments improve security and counter drug trafficking.

Henry Kissinger, in his latest book, *On China*, calls for the new U.S. relationship with China to be built on strategic trust. The same advice applies to thinking about the evolving ties between China and Latin America.

Notes

1. Loro Horta, Asia Times Online, June 29, 2007.
2. Loro Horta, "In Uncle Sam's Backyard: China's Military Influence in Latin America," *Military Review*, September-October 2008, pp. 47-55. For a less alarmist reading, see: R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Military Engagement: Good Will, Good Business, and Strategic Position," Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011. A balanced perspective is: Cynthia Watson, "China's Arms Sales to Latin America: Another Arrow in the Quiver," Jamestown Foundation, February 18, 2010.
3. Rebecca Barrett, "The Military Market of Latin America," *Forecast International*, cited in *Defense Focus*.
4. "Brasil e China farã mais quatro satelites," *Valor Económico*, September 2, 2011.
5. Ellis, p. 32.
6. Ellis, p. 35.

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