

China's Military Is Planning for Combat in Latin America

A recent wargame shines new light on China's extensive dual-use infrastructure in the region.

By **R. Evan Ellis**

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On [December 19](#), an affiliate of the state-run China Central Television (CCTV) ran a story about a recent Chinese military wargame in the city of [Xuchang, Henan Province](#), involving the simulation of combat operations by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Western Hemisphere. Images of the wargame carried by CCTV clearly showed [simulated interactions](#) between Red (Chinese) and Blue (Western) forces near [Cuba, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean](#).

The screens shown by CCTV from the wargame, which also depicted PLA operations in the [Sea of Okhotsk and near Taiwan](#), illustrate how Beijing is thinking about conducting military activities in the Western Hemisphere in the context of a broader war with the West.

Such evidence lends credence to numerous statements by senior U.S. military officials, including former heads of U.S. Southern Command General [Laura Richardson](#) and Admiral [Alvin Holsey](#), regarding the risks of China's [“dual-use” infrastructure](#) – including ports, space, telecommunications, and other projects – in times of war.

For example, there has long been concern about China's military use of its “Deep Space Radar” in Neuquen, Argentina. The radar is

operated with [little Argentine government oversight](#) by an organ of the PLA, and uses communications frequencies [commonly used by the Chinese military](#).

Another dual-use concern is the “exclusive” operation of the Peruvian port of Chancay by China Overseas Shipping Company (COSCO), which the U.S. government has [sanctioned for its close ties to the PLA](#), as well as China’s insistence that [COSCO be given a controlling stake](#) in any change of ownership of ports in Panama.

The PLA’s wargaming of operations in Latin America also gives new meaning to the presence of the PLA Navy ship Silk Road Ark, which showed up in the Caribbean in December 2025. Silk Road Ark made [port calls in Jamaica](#) and [Barbados](#), with the approval of their governments, which brought the PLA Navy vessel within miles of major U.S. military operations in the region under [“Operation Southern Spear.”](#)

China has sought diplomatic advantage by proclaiming Latin America a [“Zone of Peace.”](#) Reciprocally, many Latin American political and business leaders seek economic benefit from China without involving themselves in [“great power competition.”](#) Nonetheless, during a major conflict with the West, China

would have virtually irresistible incentives and opportunities to conduct [military operations in Latin America](#), even without formal alliances or basing agreements.

During such a war, important U.S. military facilities in Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, and the U.S. East Coast would potentially be within range of China's [operation of electronic intelligence](#) (ELINT) facilities in Cuba. There is public evidence, [confirmed by the U.S. government](#), such facilities in multiple sites across Cuba, including [Bejucal, Salao, and Wajay](#).

Similarly, vital U.S. combat forces and military supply ships would logically transit from U.S. bases, through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal, en route to the Indo-Pacific. The Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico are precisely the sites of the PLA military operations being rehearsed in the exercise depicted by CCTV.

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China could seek to leverage the political and economic sway it has gained [over Caribbean governments](#) – like those of [Antigua and Barbuda](#), Grenada, Dominican, Jamaica and Barbados – through years of gifts, hotel and port operations, and military exchanges with governments in the region. If successful, China could be allowed to stage special operations forces out of those countries, putting U.S. forces at risk.

Similarly, the ability of China to close down the Panama Canal through the [physical access, technical knowledge, and relationships](#) it has there, could make the difference in Taiwan holding out against a [PLA invasion](#) or [blockade](#).

During a hypothetical war, China's access to space from the Western Hemisphere, through facilities it controls or has access to in [Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile](#), and elsewhere, could allow it to locate Western satellites in order to [blind, jam or destroy them](#), gravely impairing global combat operations by the United States and its NATO and Asian allies.

During later stages of such a conflict, the ability of the PLA-affiliated COSCO to use its

exclusive control of Chancay to [resupply PLA Navy warships](#) with armaments could contribute to Chinese combat operations against the United States in the Eastern Pacific. COSCO previously hosted PLA Navy vessels in its Hambantota port in [Sri Lanka in 2022](#) and [again in 2024](#). China's access to the [Port of Corinto](#) in anti-U.S. Nicaragua could bring the wartime PLA Navy threat even closer to the continental United States.

China may not even necessarily use PLA Navy vessels to launch an attack. Recent reports of a Chinese commercial cargo ship that has been equipped [to launch missiles](#) illustrate how China-operated commercial routes and ports from [Tijuana, Mexico](#) to [Tierra del Fuego, Argentina](#), could be used in wartime to threaten U.S. strategic targets and chokepoints.

Although a [major war with China in the Indo-Pacific](#) is not inevitable, worrisome recent developments – including the PLA's new military exercises [focused on Taiwan](#), and the cutting of an alarming number of Taiwan's [undersea data cables](#) – highlight that war is a realistic possibility that U.S. planners must seriously consider.

The new 2025 [U.S. National Security Strategy](#) recognizes the strategic importance of

Taiwan's survival, and pushing back against China's military presence, control of military-relevant infrastructure, and influence that would limit U.S. access in the Western Hemisphere. China's inclusion of Western Hemisphere targets in its wargame in Xuchang shows that the effective implementation of those good intentions, working with U.S. partners in both regions, is vital to U.S. national security.

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