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Smart Power at Sea and China’s Dual Use Maritime Operations in Latin America

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Executive Summary

China’s growing maritime presence in Latin America reflects a broader strategy of employing humanitarian and research vessels with dual-use potential to expand influence and operational familiarity in the Western Hemisphere. While publicly framed as medical diplomacy or scientific cooperation, these deployments provide opportunities to cultivate regional goodwill, normalize repeated port access, and collect environmental and seabed data relevant to naval operations and undersea infrastructure awareness.

The Silk Ark Road hospital ship illustrates how humanitarian naval diplomacy can deepen defense engagement and increase Beijing’s maritime domain familiarity across Latin American ports. Concurrently, research vessels such as Tan Suo Yi Hao demonstrate the dual-use implications of oceanographic missions, including the potential to gather acoustic and seabed data relevant to submarine operations and undersea cable networks. Together, these activities suggest an effort to expand China’s maritime domain awareness and strategic access in a region central to intensifying great power competition.

This paper argues that such deployments, while not overtly military, may contribute to China’s long-term options to challenge regional maritime governance. It

recommends enhanced vessel tracking capability via integration, stronger regulatory frameworks for foreign research and humanitarian vessels, and expanded U.S. interagency, public, and private support to Latin American partners to strengthen oversight, sovereignty protection, and undersea infrastructure security.

Introduction

China’s expanding maritime presence in Latin America represents a strategic effort to shape the regional security environment through ostensibly civilian and humanitarian platforms that possess clear dual-use potential. For policymakers in the United States and Major non-NATO allies such as Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, these activities should be understood not as isolated engagements, but as components of a broader pattern of state competition in the Western Hemisphere.

Beijing increasingly employs hospital ships, research vessels, and scientific expeditions as tools of “smart power” that simultaneously advance diplomatic outreach, operational familiarity, and military-relevant data collection. This approach blurs the boundary between benign engagement and strategic positioning, gradually normalizing the presence of People’s Liberation Army (PLA)-affiliated maritime assets in areas historically aligned with U.S. security interests.

More importantly, PRC humanitarian vessels operate differently from the U.S. Navy's Comfort ship. Firstly, the USNS Comfort conducts humanitarian missions in response to a crisis such as being sent to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria and to Haiti in 2010 after the earthquake apart of Operation Unified Response. Also, USNS Comfort deploys as part of initiatives such as the Partnership for the Americas and Operation Continuing Promise, visiting nations such as Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Jamaica, and Peru. The USNS Comfort ensures regional stability through building partner nation capacity and spheres of humanitarian influence.

On the other hand, Beijing's humanitarian missions center around political goodwill. Beijing's Peace Ark, although newer and larger, is often used by Beijing for "the mission is part of a global campaign by Beijing to portray its rapidly growing military as a responsible power." The PRC conducts these missions through their regular "Harmonious Mission" aiming to project smart power dominance over Latin American nations through military and humanitarian capabilities.

From a policy perspective, China's maritime deployments offer Beijing multiple advantages: cultivating goodwill through humanitarian assistance, deepening defense-to-defense contacts, and collecting environmental and seabed data relevant to naval operations. While framed as medical diplomacy or scientific research, these missions can facilitate the mapping of critical undersea infrastructure, the analysis of conditions relevant to anti-submarine warfare (temperature, salinity and sea floor landscapes), and the identification of logistics nodes that could support future contingency operations. When combined with China's expanding commercial

footprint in regional port infrastructure, these activities collectively enhance Beijing's potential operational reach and strategic access across Latin America and the Caribbean.

These trends are particularly salient as great power competition intensifies, Latin America for external actors to entrench their assets from U.S. influence. The growing tempo of Chinese naval-affiliated maritime activity suggests a deliberate effort to contest U.S. influence and establish a persistent, normalized presence under non-military pretexts. White-hulled vessels, including coast guard ships, research vessels, and other government-operated platforms, often operate in a gray zone between civilian and military activity. While these vessels are not inherently military assets, they can provide states with opportunities to expand maritime presence, conduct environmental data collection, and build operational familiarity in contested or strategically sensitive waters without the political signaling associated with deploying naval warships.

China's maritime presence in Latin America also includes growing activity from the China Coast Guard (CCG), which similarly operates gray-zone maritime operations under ostensibly civilian authority. In recent years, Chinese distant-water fishing fleets operating near Peru have been accompanied by coast guard vessels that provide logistical support and reinforce China's presence in regional waters. These deployments mirror broader global patterns in which the CCG increasingly operates far from Asia, demonstrating Beijing's ability to project maritime governance influence while avoiding the appearance of traditional naval deployments. Like humanitarian and research vessels, these activities blur the

boundary between civilian maritime activity and strategic state presence.

As seen in prior assessments, Beijing has already incorporated dual-use infrastructure and maritime platforms into wargaming scenarios focused on the Western Hemisphere. In 2025, China Central Television aired a program depicting a wargame involving PLA operatives operating in the region, underscoring how humanitarian and research vessels may be conceptualized within future operational planning. Collectively, these activities expand China's maritime domain awareness, operational familiarity, and potential contingency options in the Western Hemisphere.

Dual-Use Humanitarian Maritime Activity

As of early February 2026, China's Silk Ark Road has four stops left in its 220-day journey through Asia and Latin America. Of its 14 port calls, 10 have occurred in Latin America, underscoring the smart power and potential dual-use nature of Beijing's Silk Ark Road.

In total, China has built three hospital ships, which have been deployed to advance national interests and expand operational presence globally. For example, this recent deployment of China's Silk Ark Road, focuses on Latin America, potentially signals a counteraction to recent U.S. activity in the Western Hemisphere.



China's Silk Ark Road in Chile, 2026- Private Archive

The Silk Ark Road is the second-largest maritime hospital vessel, built by Guangzhou Shipyard International Company Limited, weighing ten thousand tons with almost fourteen clinical departments and seven diagnostic units, serving as both a humanitarian platform and a tool that supports Beijing's evolving defense doctrine centered on dual-use maritime operations. Additionally, retired Brazilian Army Colonel, Rafael Almeida, suggests the Silk Ark Road contains a large array of sensors, antennas, and radar systems, signaling its purpose well beyond medical functions. Also, the unit's medical personnel are primarily from the PLA's Navy Southern Theater Command, including the Joint Logistics Support Force, Northern Theater Command, and the Naval Medical University. Its current mission focuses on humanitarian assistance but also with diplomacy in mind. For example, when landing in Nicaragua, the vessel received military honors and was formally approved to be a part of an exchange with the national army, illustrating the diplomatic and defense engagement function of such deployments.

Beijing's Silk Ark Road demonstrates China's growing influence among regional powers, seen most clearly when docked at Brazil's port of Rio de Janeiro from January 8th to 15th, 2026. Firstly, the docking request reportedly raised suspicions due to limited transparency regarding mission objectives at Rio de Janeiro, yet stated the humanitarian

vessel stated it was conducting no research related activities. Also, Brazil's ministry of Foreign Affairs and Brazilian Naval Officers were concerned about the geopolitical implications of the visit since the U.S. is prioritizing Latin America. For Brazil, a visit by the Silk Ark Road highlights concerns that dual-use deployments could provide Beijing with greater leverage to advance its own strategic interests. Brazil is economically dependent on China but remained close security partners with the U.S. for decades, illustrating the strategic balancing many regional states face between economic dependence on China and longstanding security ties with the United States.

Furthermore, the presence of the Chinese navy in the Caribbean coincides with renewed U.S. strategic prioritization of Latin America, reflecting Beijing's top priority in Latin America to deny U.S. interests and influence. As stated in Washington's National Security Strategy (NSS) aims at growing Latin America through expanding partnerships and securing supply chain resilience from foreign actors. As stated by Trump at the Shield of Americas Summit, "we will not allow hostile foreign influence to gain a foothold in this hemisphere that includes the Panama Canal."

On the other hand, Beijing contains one of the world's largest research and humanitarian maritime fleets, potentially collecting oceanographic and environmental data with both civilian and military relevance. These activities show how the PLA expands operations in Latin America with both an operational reach accompanied by port capabilities such as Beijing's commercial involvement in port infrastructure such as Chancay or Manzanillo. More importantly, visits by the Silk Ark Road and other humanitarian

vessels help normalize the presence of Chinese naval-affiliated ships in ports that might otherwise be unlikely to host PLA-linked vessels.

While China's priority will always be in Asia, the construction of a blue-water navy over the past two decades makes it essential to have a detailed knowledge of the world's oceans, both of what is on them, around them, and under them. Visits by EPL destroyers and frigates to South American countries, as in the 2010-2020 decade, are unlikely to be repeated, because the PLA seems to understand the need to maintain a low profile, as the Trump administration has focused more attention on Beijing's maritime and port activities in the Western Hemisphere, starting with considering the Panama Canal as critical infrastructure for strengthening U.S. supply chains.

China's Maritime Research Vessel Activity

China's deployment of research vessels in Latin America reflects a broader global pattern in which Beijing uses scientific expeditions to expand maritime domain awareness in strategically significant regions. Similar concerns have emerged in the Arctic, where Chinese research vessels have conducted oceanographic surveys that may contribute to seabed mapping, environmental monitoring, and future navigation planning. Analysts have noted that such research can support long-term strategic objectives by improving the understanding of underwater terrain, acoustic environments, and resource distribution in areas of geopolitical importance. Latin America's deep-sea trenches and undersea cable routes present comparable opportunities for data collection with both civilian and potential military relevance.

As mentioned prior, China relies on research vessels to conduct dual-use oceanographic research which could generate data relevant to undersea infrastructure, including fiber optic cable routes against Latin American nations. In January 2026, the Chinese research vessel known as “Tan Suo Yi Hao”, owned by the Institute of Deep-Sea Science and Engineering of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, conducted a port call at the port of Valparaiso. Also, the research vessels is under China’s Institute of Acoustics, which is tied to Beijing’s armed forces, raising the possibility of military-relevant tasking due to institutional affiliations. More notably, Tan Suo Yi Hao states its purpose in Chile is to conduct scientific research to analyze the Atacama Trench.

However, Tan Suo Yi Hao has significant dual-use implications and has been consistently described by some analysts and media reports as having potential intelligence-gathering capabilities after traveling to the coast of the Philippines, India, and Australia. One of the main factors is Tan Suo’s Fendouzhe submarine is one of the only bathyscaphes capable in the world to dive into the deepest parts of the ocean. In the civilian world, this submarine contributes to better understanding oceanographic and bathymetric fields. Yet militarily, the submarine could allow for identification of sonar environments and ocean temperature layers, shaping the acoustic nature of the underwater environment. This understanding can aid military submarines during wartime to identify acoustically quiet regions and maximize anti-submarine operations. Furthermore, these research vessels can map undersea cable routes and potentially identify vulnerabilities in undersea cable networks relevant to future disruption scenarios. In fact, the visit of this vessel coincides with a proposal from a consortium

of Chinese companies interested in laying a submarine fiber optic cable between Hong Kong and Valparaíso, which would connect the Asian country with Chile and from there to other South American countries.

Recently, the Tan Suo Yi Hao visited at the Atacama Trench in Chile contributing to Beijing’s “Deep Sea Fighting” concept, which emphasizes expanding operational capabilities in extreme underwater environments. The Atacama Trench becomes an ideal testing ground for relevant technologies such as unmanned underwater vehicles or other sensor-related technologies. Moreover, it allows Beijing the ability to map mineral resources that China might want to access or control in the future.

In 2023, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) reported that the Tan Suo Yi Hao’s route through Australia shared similar concerns over the Diamantina Trench, pausing daily for 12 to 17 hours over the Trench. During the time and potentially in Chile as well, the Fendouzhe submarine could have deployed or serviced acoustic arrays on the seabed near the trench to gather military intelligence on acoustic signatures of passing vessels. Also, from 2016 to 2024, the research vessel has made its most port calls at the Sanya port in China. Sanya port is considered a “military-affiliated facility”, suggesting a pattern of interaction with research projects that may intersect with PLA-affiliated institutions.

In total, these maritime research vessels raise serious concerns regarding regional security and maritime governance for Latin American nations by allowing potential surveillance operations in critical commercial and military seabed. These operations allow Beijing to potentially understand and document fiber optic cables

and record areas for PLA submarines to operate in the region. Finally, these abusive practices by Tan Suo Yi Hao may be interpreted by Chilean, Argentine, and the U.S. government as a preliminary strategic preparation for future conflict. Moreover, the continuation of opaque data collection increases suspicion of strategic intent.

Policy Recommendations

For Latin America, it is imperative to find new ways to expand vessel tracking systems of data using real-time monitoring and strengthen regional maritime regulations. U.S. Southern Command and Latin American navies must increase integration of AIS and satellite tracking to focus on dual-use vessels for the purpose of maintaining a list of high-interest of Chinese ships, similar in concept to FIU's IUU Fishing Dashboard. This will allow Latin American Governments to pinpoint Beijing activities including critical undersea cables and seabed infrastructure through partnering with telecommunication and defense stakeholders.

Furthermore, The U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) may support Latin American nations through capacity-building programs that enhance maritime domain awareness within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). This support could include training, surveillance equipment, and technical assistance that enables partner navies and coast guards to independently monitor foreign research vessels operating near their maritime infrastructure. Moreover, the U.S. Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs may be able to coordinate undersea cable protection and governance for the Western Hemisphere to strengthen transparency norms governing foreign scientific research vessels operating in EEZs.

Latin American host nations should also adopt stricter disclosure requirements for foreign vessels in response to the normalization of Chinese humanitarian vessel visits. host nations in the Western Hemisphere should build stricter regulatory frameworks including declared mission scopes, onboard equipment manifest, and research intent statements before the ship operates within their territorial waters for any foreign vessels. Also, they should increase resources at ports for regular and non-intrusive inspection of sensor arrays and erratic communication equipment. To create this, the U.S. DSCA and U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) should help to create legal frameworks and analyze how Beijing's humanitarian deployments shape regional perception of China as a security partner. Finally, Latin American maritime authorities should expand the use of air and surface patrols to directly observe the activities of foreign research and humanitarian vessels operating near their EEZs. This can be conducted through heightened aircraft patrols, unmanned aerial systems, or naval patrol vessels. These tools will provide greater visual confirmation of onboard equipment, and potential deployment of survey instruments such as increased monitoring of Beijing's Tan Suo Yi Hao's submarine. Most importantly, active monitoring may serve as a deterrent by signaling that host nations are capable of closely observing maritime activity within their own jurisdiction.

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