

Special Report

China's 'Peaceful' Invasion

Latin America attractive as market for arms sales

By Kelly Hearn, The Washington Times

BUENOS AIRES - China, striving to match the superpower status of the United States, is boosting military contacts throughout Latin America and eyeing the region as a market for its growing arms industry, U.S. officials say.

Chinese military officials made 20 visits to counterparts in Latin America and the Caribbean last year, says Gen. Bantz Craddock, who heads the U.S. Southern Command.

Gen. Craddock, in congressional testimony, reported that nine Latin American defense ministers visited Beijing during the same period.

"An increasing presence of the People's Republic of China [PRC] in the region is an emerging dynamic that must not be ignored," he said.

"The PRC's growing dependence on the global economy and the necessity of protecting access to food, energy, raw materials and export markets has forced a shift in their military strategy," he told the House Armed Services Committee.

Gen. Craddock added that Beijing's most recent outline of military strategy "departs from the past and promotes a power-projection military, capable of securing strategic shipping lanes and protecting its growing economic interests abroad."

The military dimensions of China's economic push into Latin America have grown since Gen. Craddock gave that assessment in March, U.S. officials say.

"Chinese strategic thinking, from the writings of Sun Tzu to classic games such as 'go' emphasize the value of setting the stage, as much as the battle itself," says Evan Ellis, a Latin American analyst with Booz Allen Hamilton.

"The idea is to position oneself at an advantage in all possible realms -- politically, militarily or physically -- so that if a tangible confrontation must occur, the adversary simply cannot prevail."

New arms sales

China appears to be pushing to sell arms and technology to Latin America, especially to Venezuela, a key ideological partner that is working to reduce dependence on the U.S. as a primary weapons supplier.

China recently offered to sell Venezuela its new FC-1 fighter, a potential follow-up on its failed bid in 2001 to sell Caracas its low-tech K-8 training aircraft, one U.S.-based intelligence source says.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez signed deals to purchase long-range defense radars and a modern communication satellite from China.

In August, Venezuelan Defense Minister Orlando Maniglia and Qu Huimin, vice president of China's state-owned Electronics Import and Export Corp., signed a deal for the purchase of three Chinese JYL-1 mobile air-defense radar systems.

The contract provides for radars, a command-and-control center, technical support and leased access to a satellite communication network.

At least two of the radars will replace two U.S.-made models, according to Jane's Defence Weekly, a leading defense industry publication.

The radar deal and other technology transfers threaten to lock Venezuela into technological platforms that increase its dependency on Chinese technology, says Richard Fisher, a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation in Washington.

"We can anticipate that Chavez will soon be buying Chinese weapons," Mr. Fisher says of the Venezuelan president.

On Nov. 1, Mr. Chavez signaled a deepening military relationship with Beijing during a ceremony announcing a deal in which China will manufacture a communications satellite for Venezuela and train its technicians there.

Mr. Chavez also indicated he was looking for non-U.S. replacements for American-made F-16 fighter jets.

"Maybe we'll have to buy Russian or Chinese planes to defend ourselves," he said, complaining that the United States was blocking Venezuelan efforts to acquire spare parts for the planes.

U.S. officials deny his contention, saying they have kept to agreements to supply spare parts.

Mr. Chavez suggest he may give China and Cuba some U.S.-made military jets so they can study the technology.

The new communications satellite is to be launched in 2008 from China, and Venezuela says it will be used for peaceful purposes. But analysts warn that commercial technology deals could help both nations gather intelligence on the United States.

Spying and space

Analysts voice similar concerns over cooperative aerospace deals between China and Brazil.

The two nations jointly built and launched two earth-research satellites; they plan two additional launches in 2008.

The China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CIBERS-1) was launched in 1999 and its successor last year.

CIBERS-1 was an environmental monitoring satellite that did not have significant military utility, according to a recent report prepared by Mr. Ellis for the U.S. Army War College.

However, the deal did "assist China in developing real-time digital photo technology, thus increasing the capabilities of Chinese military ... satellites and arguably helping China to gain a

more comprehensive picture of the flight paths of U.S. satellites," Mr. Ellis wrote.

Rogelio Pardo Maurer, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Western Hemisphere affairs, recently told Congress that officials had no evidence "that Chinese military activities in the Western Hemisphere, including arms sales, pose a direct conventional threat to the United States."

But Mr. Maurer warned that the United States should be alert "to rapidly advancing Chinese capabilities, particularly in the field of intelligence, communications and cyberwarfare, and their possible application in the region."

Peter Brookes, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense, underscored the threat of China's using Latin America as a base to spy on the United States.

"The Chinese are undoubtedly active in Latin America and the Caribbean," Mr. Brookes says. "They are using Chinese front companies, students, visitors and professional intelligence officers to steal and exploit technology and commercial and industrial secrets of interest to enhance their growing military-industrial and military prowess, as well as their commercial economic competitiveness."

Cuban connection

One long-standing concern is that the Chinese are using key intelligence-gathering facilities in Cuba to intercept U.S. communications.

Rep. Connie Mack, Florida Republican, worries about intelligence on the United States flowing from Cuba to Venezuela.

"I am concerned that China will rebuild intelligence-gathering capacity that Cuba lost after the Cold War and then share intelligence with Chavez," Mr. Mack says.

Al Santoli, president of the Washington-based Asia-America Initiative and an author on military history, connects some of the dots.

"China's growing military ties in Latin America have a direct link to their international quest for energy and other vital natural resources," Mr. Santoli says, "as well as their efforts to reinforce the growing reach of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez to create a counterweight to U.S. influence in the region."

The most significant military threats to the United States are the Russian electronic and cyber-warfare bases in Cuba, Mr. Santoli says.

"These bases not only permit enhanced electronic surveillance of broad areas of the U.S. at present," he says. "In the future they can be used to disrupt critical U.S. strategic communications during a period of conflict."

Exploiting a vacuum

Analysts suspicious of China's regional designs worry that it is expanding military ties to fill a vacuum: A U.S. law cuts military aid to nations that refuse to exempt U.S. soldiers from the International Criminal Court.

Gen. Craddock warns that the law, the American Service Members Protection Act, has cost the

U.S. key contacts with Latin American militaries. Of the 22 countries cut off from the Pentagon, 11 are in Latin America, he told Congress.

In 2004, Chinese Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan visited Brazil, the region's largest and most populated country, calling for expanded military cooperation.

Also last year, the vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, Xu Caihou, traveled to Cuba and Mexico, visiting troops and military academies in both countries.

In October, Mr. Cao met in Beijing with Antonio Justiniano, commander in chief of the armed forces of Bolivia. The Chinese defense minister called for increased ties between the two nations' armies, according to a Chinese newspaper.

The ban on U.S. military aid to countries that refuse to exempt American soldiers from the International Criminal Court stems from fears that the court will be used for politically motivated prosecutions.

"While Latin American states are disappointed in the ban and frustrated by it, militaries in the region are significantly less important than they were a decade ago or longer," says Cynthia Watson, a former associate dean at the National War College.

"Both for budgetary and political reasons, militaries have been put back in the barracks," she says. "Their roles in their individual societies are not nearly as important as they used to be."

But others worry that nations whose armed forces once were trained by the Pentagon, especially Venezuela, are in the position to pass along U.S. military procedures to Chinese soldiers.

Earlier this year, Venezuela ended a 35-year military relationship with the United States that included Special Operations training.

The Jamestown Foundation's Mr. Fisher warns that Venezuelan officers are in a position to instruct Chinese counterparts in what they learned.

"It is clear that Venezuelan Special Forces instructors are able to convey a deep familiarity with U.S. special-operations doctrine and operations," he says.

"As a consequence, PLA Special Forces will gain the benefit of this U.S.-developed and funded knowledge base," he adds, using the acronym for China's People's Liberation Army.

The Taiwan factor

Part of China's interest in Latin America stems from rival Taiwan's success in maintaining diplomatic relations with several nations in the region.

China continues to refashion its military for a potential attack on Taiwan, the democratic island nation that it regards as a breakaway republic. Officials and analysts widely agree that China's key political goal in the Western Hemisphere is to strangle Taiwan diplomatically.

"China is also interested in matching its economic power with political influence in the region," Charles Shapiro, deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, told Congress in recent testimony. "China's desire to compete with and ultimately isolate Taiwan diplomatically is a key factor in Latin America."

Mr. Shapiro expressed concern that Chinese weapons could wind up in the hands of insurgencies and criminals in the hemisphere.

The United States, he told lawmakers, "will apply our general policy of seeking transparency and accountability in these sales."

Beijing began making economic and cultural inroads about five years ago into Latin America -- in particular South America, which is rich in oil and other natural resources key to feeding China's growing economy.

A year ago, Chinese President Hu Jintao toured six countries, including Cuba, promising \$100 billion in infrastructure investments to Argentina, Brazil and Chile, among others.

Among goals of the visit was to weaken Taiwan's diplomatic presence in the region.

Six nations of Central America -- Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala -- retain full diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Starting with Chile in 1970, however, all but one South American state, Paraguay, have moved to recognize Beijing.

Last year, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing.

Eyeing the threat

U.S. trade with Latin America exceeded \$445 billion last year, 10 times China's level, U.S. officials say.

Possibilities for U.S.-Chinese cooperation exist in the region, says Mr. Ellis of Booz Allen Hamilton, because "both nations have an interest in reducing political instability, criminality and violence."

"Nevertheless," he cautions, "China may be tempted to support destabilizing movements where it feels that the prevailing government is blocking it from achieving important economic or strategic objectives."

Others stress the economic and political dimensions of China's regional rise, deflecting military concerns.

Bates Gill of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says China's military gestures in the region, including contribution of a contingent of troops to the U.N. peacekeeping force in Haiti, should be read as part of a broadening of Beijing's multinational profile, not as a specific attempt to gain hegemony in Latin America.

V. Manuel Rocha, a former U.S. ambassador to Bolivia, agrees.

"The current number one priority of Chinese government is economic and commercial," Mr. Rocha says. "It is, in my view, completely premature and alarmist to be highlighting military links."