

Evaluating the Risk of China's Port Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- China's port footprint in Latin America and the Caribbean is far more expansive than previously understood. A new database finds 37 port projects linked to China, nearly triple previous estimates.
- Ports at the Panama Canal have dominated the news, but they do not rank among the most concerning in the database. Kingston, Jamaica, ranks as the highest-risk port due to its strategic location and Chinese operational control, followed closely by Manzanillo and Veracruz in Mexico.
- The United States may remain exposed at former Chinese-operated ports—even under new ownership. Several ports in the region utilize Chinese-made surveillance and cargo-handling equipment, which poses persistent security risks.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

China is rapidly expanding its influence over maritime ports across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). By building, financing, and buying up key ports, Chinese firms have become deeply embedded in the physical infrastructure connecting the region's dynamic maritime economy. While these investments bring commercial opportunity, they also open the door for Beijing to gain strategic leverage, collect sensitive data, and expand its geopolitical influence closer to U.S. shores.

A new database compiled by CSIS examining 37 Chinese-involved port projects in LAC assesses the level of risk for each project by looking at how much the United States relies on each port and the level of influence China can exert over any given project. The findings show China's influence over regional ports to be more widespread and the risk more varied than previously known.

REDEFINING RISK

Much of the alarm around China's growing influence over global port infrastructure has focused on the Chinese navy's push to establish overseas naval bases. In places like Djibouti and Cambodia, China first poured billions of dollars into civilian infrastructure projects before establishing military facilities—a playbook it could seek to emulate elsewhere. Yet, the risk is far more nuanced with LAC ports. In the near term, Beijing is unlikely to overtly establish naval facilities so close to the continental United States, given the risk of blowback from Washington.

Still, gaining influence over strategic ports could provide China with critical advantages short of a formal military presence. Control or deep involvement in port operations can enable intelligence collection on U.S. and allied naval movements, privileged access to maritime logistics data, and the ability to deny or delay access during a crisis. Foreign-controlled port infrastructure could also serve as a platform to enable covert attacks like those observed with Ukraine's recent Operation "Spider's Web." Influence at ports could help ensure systems like these arrive where they need to be and evade inspection until they are ready to use.

This study assigns each of the 37 ports a risk score that is a composite of two risk factors:

1. The extent to which the United States relies on a particular port in the LAC.
2. The degree to which China can accrue an advantage by influencing the operation of the port, particularly during a time of crisis on the verge of armed conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- We recommend three ways the United States, along with regional partners, can minimize risk surrounding China's port projects.
- 1. Support port buybacks and buyouts:** The Hutchison-Blackrock deal shows there is space for market-driven efforts to dilute China's port footprint. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation can play a critical role in quietly supporting such efforts—particularly where they align with commercial interest and strategic value.
 - 2. Assess and reduce strategic exposure:** The United States should continue evaluating where its logistical and military interests most intersect with foreign-controlled ports in the Western Hemisphere. An interagency effort to better understand U.S. exposure at LAC ports can help guide both policy planning and future risk mitigation.
 - 3. Strengthen oversight and resilience at key ports:** Improving inspection protocols and increasing visibility into port operations can help reduce vulnerabilities. The Department of State and Department of Defense can provide support to partner nations' port authorities to guard against surveillance, deter illicit activity, and mitigate China's efforts to gain deeper strategic influence.

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LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

China's influence in Western Hemisphere ports has drawn scrutiny in Congress. In 2024, the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party found ship-to-shore cranes supplied by a Chinese company contained communications hardware capable of transmitting data, raising concerns that the equipment could be used for espionage or to disrupt port operations during a crisis. On February 11, 2025, the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security convened a hearing that underscored the risk China's port investments in LAC posed to U.S. economic and national security.

The United States has a major opportunity to reduce China's influence over port infrastructure as Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings is in talks with U.S.-based BlackRock to sell 43 of its overseas ports. This includes both the ports along the Panama Canal, as well as the strategic Mexican ports of Manzanillo and Veracruz. If completed, the sale would meaningfully reduce Beijing's foothold in the region's port infrastructure. However, recent reports indicate that the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) is seeking to acquire a stake in the 43 ports currently up for sale. If China manages to secure a place for COSCO in the deal, it could leave Beijing with more, not less, influence over LAC ports.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Henry Ziemer, Jaehyun Han, Aidan Powers-Riggs, "No Safe Harbor: Evaluating the Risk of China's Port Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean," CSIS, June 25, 2025, <https://features.csis.org/no-safe-harbor-china-ports/>.
- Jennifer Jun and Henry Ziemer, "Surveying Hutchison's Port-portfolio in Latin America: Strategic Vulnerability or Business as Usual?" CSIS, *Commentary*, April 17, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/surveying-hutchisons-port-portfolio-latin-america-strategic-vulnerability-or-business-usual>.
- *Open: Examining the PRC's Strategic Port Investments in the Western Hemisphere and the Implications for Homeland Security, Before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security*, 118th Cong., 1st sess. February 11, 2025 (statement of Ryan C. Berg, Americas Program director), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/examining-prcs-strategic-port-investments-western-hemisphere-and-implications-homeland>.