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Chinese Continue Rampant Fish Poaching in Latin American Waters

Thursday, December 13, 2018 11:54 AM

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In March 2016, the Argentine coast guard [intercepted a Chinese fishing vessel](#) illegally operating in the waters of Argentina's [Exclusive Economic Zone](#) (EEZ). Such Chinese vessels had routinely violated the zone, as they had in numerous other countries in the region.

On this occasion, however, when the Argentine Coast Guard ship fired a warning shot to halt the perpetrator's attempted escape to international waters, the ship, the Lu Yan Yuan Yu, responded by attempting to ram its pursuer, obliging a defensive response by the Coast Guard ship that inadvertently [capsized the aged Chinese vessel](#). As the ship sunk and the Argentines shifted to rescue operations, most of the Chinese crew chose to swim to the numerous other Chinese fishing boats, observing from just outside the EEZ in international waters.

In recent months, U.S. authorities and the media have highlighted numerous ways in which Chinese economic engagement in the hemisphere has been [prejudicial to the region](#), including [commercial espionage](#) and [non-transparent contracts](#), in which Latin American elites [commit their countries to significant debt](#) to pay for projects of questionable economic value performed by Chinese companies and workers, sometimes guaranteed through critical national resources such as oil.

While the risks of Chinese economic damage to Latin America through [bad agreements](#) and secret commitments has received much attention in recent months, the Chinese are also gravely damaging the livelihood of traditional communities across the region in a less noticed but directly harmful fashion: large-scale illegal fishing by Chinese factory fishing vessels in Latin American waters.

Those vessels regularly operate outside laws and environmental norms, not only to feed China's ravenous appetite for fish, but also for profit. Not only are China's 1.35 billion people one of the world's principal consumers of fish (accounting for [35 percent of global demand](#)), eating fish in ever greater quantities with the PRC's growing per capita wealth, but the Chinese deepwater fleet has also become a [key vendor of fish](#). These fish are often obtained under questionable circumstances and sold to Europe and other parts of the globe. Globally, the Chinese catch an estimated [\\$7 billion](#) of fish annually.

The expansion of Chinese fishing activities during the last half-century [exhausted its four traditional fishing areas](#): Bohai, Zhoushan, the South China Sea coast, and the Gulf of Tonkin (complicated by [pollution of the waters](#) by Chinese industrial and agricultural activities). This has pushed the Chinese to ever more distant locations to satisfy the demand, on the high seas, in Asia, [Africa](#), and eventually Latin America. The PRC deep-water fishing fleet, established in 1985, has grown to an estimated [3,400 vessels](#) (17 times the size of its U.S. counterpart) operating in all parts of the globe,

and [accounting for 21](#) percent of the world's fish reported caught, and probably more.

The Chinese deepwater fleet is referred to as the “pariahs,” not only for the condition of their vessels and [working conditions of their crews](#). It is believed that some of the crews are [working off prison sentences](#) or are contracted in conditions of indentured servitude. The moniker also refers to the damaging and often illegal nature of their fishing activities.

Although an estimated [64](#) percent of Chinese deepwater fishing activities occur in Africa, the Chinese fleet is increasingly active in Latin America as well.

There, as elsewhere, the Chinese deepwater fleet systematically and continuously violates the region's EEZs.

EEZs refer to the area generally extending to [200 miles from a nation's coast](#). The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which the Chinese are a signatory, established such areas to ensure, among other things, that a country's own fishermen, and not others, can benefit from waters adjacent to it, unless their government explicitly makes other arrangements. The Chinese deepwater fleet routinely enters these areas without authorization, taking advantage of the limited ability of Latin American navies and Coast Guards to patrol the zones. They also frequently use techniques such as [trawl and sea nets](#), which sweep up younger fish and damage the environment, accelerating the decline of Latin American fisheries and put the livelihood of local fishermen at risk. Even where the Chinese fish outside the EEZs or with permission of the local government, they often use prohibited techniques, catch prohibited fish, or take in far more than their quotas (sometimes transferring their catch to other ships before putting into port). Indeed, globally, the PEW organization estimates that such vessels may take in [12 times more fish](#) than they report.

Cases of improper and damaging fishing activities by Chinese vessels abound throughout Latin America.

In Argentina, in 2012, the Coast Guard stopped two Chinese vessels, and found [10 metric](#) tons of illegally obtained squid and fish. In April 2015, the Chinese boat Hu Shun Yu 809 was boarded after it broke down, and was found to be carrying [600 tons of illegally obtained shrimp](#). In February 2016, the Chinese ship [Hua Li 8](#) was discovered illegally fishing in the mouth of Argentina's San Jorge gulf, but [escaped to international waters](#). In February 2018, the [Jing Yuan 626](#) was seized fishing in Argentina's EEZ, after a chase in which five other Chinese fishing ships tried to help the Jing Yuan to escape by maneuvering to block the Coast Guard ship, [putting the latter at risk](#).

In Ecuador, in 2016, when that nation's Navy [sent its sub, the Huancavelica, out](#) to the distant waters around its Galapagos Islands (thus achieving the element of surprise), it discovered an estimated [300 Chinese vessels](#) illegally fishing there. One of the vessels was the [Fu Yuang Yu Leng 999](#), which its patrol boat stopped within the Galapagos Islands Marine Reserve, and found it contained 300 tons of illegally obtained fish, including exotic, vulnerable species such as shark (valued in China for their fins, which are made into soup).

In Peru, the nation's capable Navy provides [some protection](#) against EEZ violations, yet there, the nation confronts a different challenge from Chinese fishermen: PRC-based fishing companies buying into the Peruvian fishing fleet, thus gaining rights to fish in national waters. China Fisheries Group owned a significant portion of the Peruvian fishing fleet until its bankruptcy. More recently, the Chinese group Dailan Huafeng has been expanding its presence, with the [purchase of the Spanish fishing company Arbumasa](#), which operates in Peruvian waters.

In Chile, Chinese vessels are not permitted to use the nation's ports because they are below standards, but they still reportedly illegally fish in Chilean waters from [Punto Arenas](#). While Chile has a capable Navy, it also has a very long coastline, and is challenged to protect against illegal fishing the entirety of the EEZ. In July 2015, for example, a Chinese boat was intercepted in Chile's EEZ 170 nautical miles offshore from the Chilean [port of Coronel](#), in the [Bio Bio](#) region.

In Uruguay, like Peru, the challenge of enforcing the nation's EEZ is complicated because part of the Chinese fishing fleet has obtained authorization to operate from the ports of [Montevideo and La Paloma](#), including a [Free Trade Zone and facility for fish processing](#), seen as a potential "[trojan horse for overfishing](#)." In June 2017, three months after the Uruguayan government authorized the arrangement, [12,000 people signed a protest](#) in Montevideo.

While Chinese fishing boats are not the only ones that violate the EEZs of the region, they are by far the most numerous and flagrant offenders. Ironically, the revenues from such violations ultimately flow into PRC-based enterprises and financial institutions, indirectly funding Chinese purchases of petroleum, mining, and other companies in the region. The fish that the Chinese take from Latin American waters thus not only deprive residents of the region of their livelihood, but ultimately pays for the transfer of that which generates value in the region from Latin American to Chinese hands.

The necessary first step for the region to respond to the challenge of the Chinese deepwater fishing fleet is greater public awareness and documentation of the problem, including greater dissemination of data on the threat by the Coast Guards and navies of the region, as well as greater attention to the problem by the region's media.

Governments of the region also need to raise the issue in a more serious fashion with their Chinese counterparts in multilateral dialogues such as the China-CELAC forum, the Organization of American States, and during bilateral dialogues, conditioning progress in other areas with PRC respect for the region's sovereignty, by exercising greater control over the activities of its deepwater fleet.

While the individual situations and needs of each Latin American nation are different, the relative impunity with which the Chinese deepwater fleet loots the region's fisheries argues for acquiring more extended-range patrol craft, supplemented by maritime patrol aircraft and possibly medium and long endurance UAVs to detect possible EEZ violations, and respond in a timely fashion. The U.S. has a potential role to play, both in helping its Latin American partners obtain such capabilities, and coordinating the use of its own, to include intelligence sharing where appropriate.

Responding to the challenge may also require reforms to Latin American judicial systems to facilitate the prompt and effective prosecution of violators, including the seizure of their ships, to discourage others.

In few areas of PRC engagement with Latin America do Chinese activities so flagrantly violate the sovereignty of Latin American nations and rob a segment of its populations of their livelihoods. There are also few areas in which a modest increase in government and media attention, regional pressure on the Chinese government, and U.S. security cooperation as a good neighbor, could make so much difference.

Dr. Evan Ellis is Senior Non-Resident Fellow at CSIS, and Professor of Latin American and Caribbean Studies. His work focuses on security and defense issues, including transnational organized crime, populism, and the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. Dr. Ellis has published over 210 works, including three books, and has presented his work in 26 countries across four continents. He has testified on multiple occasions regarding Latin America and the Caribbean before the U.S. Congress, and his work regularly appears in the media in both the U.S. and the region. Through his work, Dr. Ellis calls attention to the strategic importance of Latin America and the Caribbean for the United States through bonds of geography, commerce, and family, and how the prosperity and security of the U.S. are tied to that of its partners in the region. To read more of his reports — [Click Here Now](#).