The Chinese growing presence in Latin America: are there relevant security implications?

Layla Dawood

Department of History and International Relations
Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ)
Seropédica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Email: layladawood@hotmail.com

Paper prepared for the ISAC-ISSS Annual Conference on Security Studies
November 14th - 16th, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA

(Draft. Please do not quote)
1. Introduction

Chinese military modernization can be theoretically framed as a process of regional hegemony building (LIM, 2014). According to Mearsheimer (2001), a regional hegemon dominates its region in face of superior latent (population and economics) and concrete (military) power. Consequently, a regional hegemon is in a comfortable position to interfere in regions other than its own without fear of being attacked by neighbors while doing so. This paper assumes that China is not yet a regional hegemon since it still faces regional competition from countries like Japan and India. Nonetheless, China is undoubtedly a candidate for regional hegemony (LIM, 2014).

Thus, this paper’s main argument is that the Chinese presence in Latin America prepares the ground for future military engagement in case China turns into a regional hegemon in the future. It is also argued that there are not yet relevant security implications of China’s presence in Latin America in the sense that China cannot yet provide security to potential allies in the region. In addition, U.S. security relationships with key Latin American states have not been challenged by China’s engagement with these countries.

To support that argument, this paper begins by presenting a theoretical framework that will provide a foundation for the discussion about regional hegemony and international political change. Secondly, Chinese military modernization is discussed briefly, since it allows us to think of China as a regional hegemon candidate. The last section of the paper seeks to summarize China’s possible security interests in the Latin American region and its current security relationship with various Latin American states.

2. Theoretical framework

After the end of the Cold War, Mearsheimer (2001) characterized the international system as one in which there was only one regional hegemon: the U.S. The scholar argued that this was the best situation a country could feasibly achieve since global hegemony was impeded by what he referred to as the “stopping power of waters” (namely the difficulty of projecting power across the oceans) and the low probability of absolute nuclear superiority. According to Mearsheimer, being the only hegemon in the system is an especially safe position in the sense that this country figures as the only one that can interfere in other region’s balances of power without fear of being threatened by its neighbors in the process.
In order to reach regional hegemony, Mearsheimer (2001) claims that a country has to acquire superior land power since ground forces are the ones responsible for occupation in case of a regional war. Nonetheless, in a review of Mearsheimer’s theory, Lim (2014) argues that offensive realism should be amended for its lack of emphasis in naval power. In nowadays international system, any candidate for regional hegemony faces competition from its neighbors but it might also face resistance from the current sole regional hegemon. The U.S. might operate as an offshore balancer trying to deter the emergence of a second regional hegemon in the world. According to Mearsheimer (2001), being the sole regional hegemon means that there is no other power in the world which can interfere in this hegemonic regional balance without facing challenges in its own region. Therefore, in case China rises as a regional hegemon in Asia, the configuration of the current international system would suffer significant consequences and the new regional hegemon, by definition, would have the ability to interfere in the U.S. region.

In turn, rising regional hegemons are “likely to put together a balanced two-pronged strategy that simultaneously aims at gaining definitive supremacy over regional adversaries and isolating its region from external interference” (LIM, 2014, p. 21). To fulfill those aims: “The strategy and armed forces of a potential regional hegemon should therefore reflect strong preference for access denial – though the need for limited power projection at a local level should not be entirely excluded” (LIM, 2014, p. 22).

Accordingly, Lim (2014) argues that China’s current naval forces’ modernization is a sign of a quest for regional hegemony. This is due to the fact that potential regional conflicts might involve naval military encounters. India and China both import energy resources and use the same sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for that. On the other hand, the Taiwan issue and the possible interference of the U.S. might also demand sea power, as well as an eventual conflict with Japan.

However, as a result of playing different roles, the pool of capabilities needed by a distant power and a potential regional hegemon are somewhat different:

For distant great powers, membership to a region is never granted; it has to be conquered. To state the obvious, a distant great power is able to make its weight felt only in the regions that remain open to its military forces. The primary concern for any great power with more or less expansive extra-regional ambitions is therefore to secure access to the regions in which it wants to maintain or expand its influence. Obtaining unimpeded access to a region is, of course, not sufficient to guarantee superiority over local players. It nonetheless the sine qua non condition to the implementation of extra-regional hegemony or offshore balancing (LIM, 2014, p. 20-21).
In other words, the quest to influence another region’s balance of power is not an easy one. To Mearsheimer (2001) and Lim (2014), that is something to be pursued by the current sole regional hegemon. China, as a regional hegemon candidate, would be limited to securing non-access by external powers to its own region.

Nonetheless, this paper extends Lim’s argument further by defending that: in the process of becoming a regional hegemon in its own region, China might seek to establish a broader influence in the U.S. region (the American hemisphere, which, of course, includes Latin America). For that purpose, seapower would be essential. In that sense, the next section investigates the state of the art of China’s seapower in order to verify how far this country has come on the path to becoming a regional hegemon in Asia and of establishing an offshore balancing strategy towards Latin America.

3. China’s Military Modernization

China’s military modernization involves all branches of its armed forces. However, there is an unprecedented new focus on seapower. Although there is no consensus on the exact year of the inception of China’s naval modernization efforts, scholars tend to agree that it began sometime during the 1990’s. Scholars also agree that it was reinforced after 1996, when the United States deployed two aircraft carriers to Taiwan's surroundings in response to Chinese missile tests and naval exercises near Taiwan (O’ROURKE, 2012, p. 3).

Surely, this new focus on seapower would be better characterized if we could show increases in spending with the navy over the years, but no official breakdown of spending by service is available for China. Nonetheless, various Chinese publications seem to confirm this new emphasis. According to Fravel and Liebman (2011), scholars who have analyzed a series of articles from Chinese specialized journals such as the PLA Daily electronic archive (available from 1987 to 2005), the People’s Daily (a CCP newspaper), the Modern Navy (published by the PLAN’s party committee) and the National Defense, Chinese navy officials are increasingly casting the PLAN as the protector of China’s economy, in order to legitimize the increasing demand for resources for the navy.

Yao Wenhuai (a two-star Admiral and vice-head of the PLAN political department) argued in the July 2007 issue of the National Defense that China should gradually increase the proportion of resources devoted to naval capabilities. He states that for long Chinese military’s main task was to protect territorial borders and this justified the priority given to the army.
However, he advocated that the world political situation has changed, making it inadequate for China to have a “big land force”. In addition, he stated that the heart of China’s economy is more and more concentrated in coastal areas and that this state's dependence on maritime shipping is growing, turning the protection of China’s sea lines of communication (SLOCs) to a priority (quoted in FRAVEL; LIEBMAN, 2011, p. 74-75).

Likewise, Hartnett and Vellucci (2011) highlight that the concept of seapower has been heavily debated in the Chinese press and that Chinese writings reveal a general consensus that it is now important for China to concentrate resources on naval capabilities. However, these scholars argue that Chinese publications show a lack of consensus on the actual definition of seapower. Even though there was a broad agreement among the articles surveyed by these scholars that the operational range of the PLAN needed to be expanded, there was divergence on how much expansion was necessary. The majority of Chinese authors agreed that the PLAN's should be able to operate on China’s claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the continental shelf at a minimum. There was disagreement as to how much farther the navy should go.

Chinese official sources also point to this new focus. China's Defense White Paper of 2006 states that the country aims at extending the strategic depth of offshore defensive operations and at enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations. In addition, the Defense White Paper of 2008 for the first time referred to the ground forces as a service equivalent to the navy, air force, and second artillery. Moreover, it emphasizes the objective of developing the navy's capabilities of conducting cooperation in distant waters (ERICKSON; GOLDSTEIN, 2009, p. 47-48).

One of the most important features of the Chinese naval modernization efforts is the improvement of the submarine force. The 1950 Romeo-class submarines (of Russian design) were the basis of Chinese fleet until the beginning of the 2000's. Since then, China has built new classes of non-nuclear attack submarines (SS) such as the Ming-class, the Yuan-class and the Song-class and improved the Romeo-class design. It also has acquired from Russia twelve Kilo-class submarines (which are also non-nuclear attack submarines) (COLE, 2010; O’ROURKE, 2012).

In what comes to nuclear-powered submarines, China is believed to have built a new nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) (the Jin-class or Type 094) and a nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) (the Shang-class or Type 093). The various submarine building programs contributed to significant changes in the composition of China's submarine force during the past two decades. In especial, the new submarines are regarded as quieter
and, consequently, less detectable. According to a compilation made by O'Rourke (2012) of the figures presented annually by Jane’s Fighting Ships, China went from having two (2) modern attack submarines in 1995 to having thirty four (34) in 2012 (O'ROURKE, 2012, p. 13-14).

Regarding surface combatants ships, in the 1950's the majority of the Chinese fleet was composed of vessels directly acquired from the Soviet Union. In the 1960's and 1970's, there was indigenous production of Soviet models in China. Subsequently, the Chinese moved on to the acquisition of the Sovremenny class from Russia and the indigenous construction of the Luhu and Luhai classes. The years 2000's were marked by the construction of three new classes of destroyers in China (DDG 51C, 52B and 52C). China has also deployed new generations of frigates, corvettes and a missile-armed fast attack craft that uses a stealthy catamaran hull design (O'ROURKE, 2012; COLE, 2010). In numbers, China went from having one (1) destroyer and four (4) frigates in 1994 to having fourteen (14) destroyers and twenty eight (28) frigates in 2012 (O'ROURKE, 2012, p. 23-25).

Observers state that the improvements in quantity and quality of those surface ships represent a step towards overcoming long lasting deficiencies in anti-air warfare (O'ROURKE, 2012). Nonetheless, Cole (2010) emphasizes that those vessels have components bought from Russia, Ukraine, France and even the U.S, what might pose difficulties concerning maintenance. In addition, Cole states that those ships were envisioned by their designers to operate together with different types of ships in a network strategy and, therefore, will only serve the Chinese Navy if operating in a formation together with the adequate ships.

Finally, there is also a lot of speculation regarding China's plans to acquire aircraft carriers. Observers state that the Chinese are completing the ex-Ukrainian aircraft carrier Varyag purchased as an unfinished ship in 1998. In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense believes that China is building its first indigenous aircraft carrier. China is also believed to be developing its own carrier-capable fighter (the J-15) inspired on the Su-33 (O'ROURKE, 2012, p. 17-20).

Improvements can also be observed in what comes to naval weapon systems. In this regard, observers point out China's anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), a sign that the Chinese have developed the capability of designing and manufacturing cruise missiles with state-of-the-art features (supersonic speed, complex maneuvers, and submerged-submarine-launch capability) (COLE, 2010; O'ROURKE, 2012). Furthermore, many analysts believe that China has been developing and testing an anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM): a theater-range ballistic missile equipped with a maneuverable reentry vehicle (MaRV) that could theoretically hit moving ships at sea. This is believed to be directed to improving the PLAN ability to attack aircraft
carriers. If true, this innovation is said to represent a “game changer”, posing great difficulties to American forces in Asia. This is because the ability to change course would make this ASBM more difficult to intercept than non-maneuvering ballistic missile reentry vehicles (O’ROURKE, 2012, p. 7-8).

Although the improvements of Chinese naval capabilities are evident, for the purposes of this paper, it is important to inquire whether this new focus is enough to empower China to act in the Latin America region to guarantee the security of eventual allies. China is a long way distant from that both in what regards capabilities and strategy.

In terms of strategy, China is believed to be adopting an “anti-access strategy”, which aims at deterring or at least delaying a potential U.S. intervention in a conflict between China and Taiwan. It is important to say that “anti-access” and “area denial” are U.S. terms and not Chinese ones. Those terms, first employed by the U.S. Department of Defense in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, are often used interchangeably by analysts to characterize the attempt to prevent a U.S. military intervention if China attacks Taiwan. In particular, the assumed Chinese objective is to impede U.S. aircraft carriers from getting within tactical aircraft operating distance from China (McDEVITT, 2011, p. 192).

The Chinese sea-denial strategy is also referred to as near-seas active defense (in opposition to the near-coast defense strategy adopted during the Cold War), since the aim after the late 1980's is to cover a much larger sea area and not only the coast. Under this more recent strategy, the PLAN is regarded as a “strategic service,” meaning that it operates more independently, possessing its own geographical bounds of operations. The near-seas active defense covers the first island chain (which stretches from the Kurile islands through the islands of Japan, Ryukyu Archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippines to Borneo Island), the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea, or the three near seas within the inner rims of the first island chain, and sea areas adjacent to the outer rims of this island chain, and those of the north Pacific. However, the concept does not cover the south Pacific nor the Indian Ocean (LI, 2011, p. 116).

Although more focused on the use of seapower in a possible Taiwan conflict, Chinese writings on maritime security reveal a new focus on missions beyond that. The need to defend maritime rights, for instance, has been mentioned repeatedly (HARTNETT; VELUCCI, 2011, p. 103-104). In view of that, some observers claim that China is moving towards the adoption of a different maritime strategy. According to this line of thinking, the Chinese strategy has progressed from a “near-coast defense” strategy prior to the mid-1980's, to the “near-seas active defense” after the mid-1980's, and finally to a “far-seas operations strategy” by the mid-
2000’s (LI, 2011).

But does China have the capabilities to execute far-seas operations? The first time that China’s navy operationally deployed forces beyond its immediate maritime periphery (in opposition to just sending vessels to represent the country abroad) occurred in December 2008, when Chinese forces were deployed to the Gulf of Aden with the task of performing a counter-piracy mission. The goal was to escort merchant ships from China and other nations, protecting them against pirates. At that time, China deployed two South Sea Fleet destroyers and a supply ship 10,000 kilometers from their home base in Sanya. Later on, other ships were sent to replace the destroyers, but the supply ship used remained the same. The logistics and supply requirements were handled by underway replenishment and port visits. These deployments show that the PLAN has begun moderate blue water operations in the form of counterpiracy missions, but the PLAN is far from being able to support a substantial SLOC security posture (ERICKSON, 2010).

China has been working to overcome some of its limitations. For instance, the amphibious force is being modernized, but that has not expanded China’s capacity in this area yet: the PLAN is still limited to being able to transport only one mechanized division of fully equipped troops. Moreover, China has been slow to increase its navy’s ability to remain at sea for extended periods. Only two of the PLAN’s five oilers are less than twenty years old, and only one (Nancang) is capable of providing more than a single major fueling to a task groups of four or more ships. This indicates that at least the logistic focus of maritime thought in Beijing remains on Taiwan and other regional situations such as the East and South China seas (COLE, 2010, p. 107). Therefore, in what concerns the need for investments in amphibious and replenishment capabilities, there is consensus among specialists both that those capabilities are needed if China wants to project power to distant waters and that this country is not there yet.

Therefore, in spite of recent improvements in seapower, China’s capabilities are not enough to provide security to potential allies in Latin America. In addition, China’s military strategy does not seem to contemplate Latin American countries.

4. China’s prospective security interests in Latin America and current security related activities

Clearly, China has geopolitical interests in Latin America. Due to its energy security problems, the availability of commodities such as petroleum in Latin America makes the region attractive to China as a means to secure energy supply. In addition, the proximity with the U.S.
makes Latin America countries potential allies and providers of military bases in the future in case conflict with the U.S. arises.

Although China is not yet able to project military power to Latin America, other security related activities have been pursued by the Chinese in the region. Horta (2009) states that the trade of military assets between China and Latin America has not been significant. Nonetheless, other military activities have been increasing such as educational exchange between the armed forces of China and many Latin American countries, official visits paid by defense authorities, joint participation in military exercises and United Nations missions, and defense related services provided by China to the region.

China has provided Latin American armed forces with specialized personnel such as engineers, doctors and telecommunication experts, deploying military doctor teams to Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela and engineers to Ecuador and Bolivia. Since 2006, China provides Bolivia’s armed forces with non-lethal material such as transportation trucks. In addition, an agreement between China and Bolivia has resulted in a transfer of 1.2 million dollars from the first to the second in the year of 2007 and 2 million dollars in 2008. Caribbean countries also received non-lethal material such as uniforms and vehicles (HORTA, 2009, p. 33-34).

Firms connected to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) are another component of China’s defense diplomacy. The China Northern Industries (Norinco) has investments in Latin America in areas such as infrastructure, naval companies and automobile companies in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador (HORTA, 2009, p. 35).

China has also growing defense relations with Venezuela. In 2005, these two countries signed a contract in which China was to provide Venezuela with radars, a command and control system, as well as to lend a communication satellite for the price of 150 million dollars. According to Horta (2009), Beijing had no intention to financially profit from this deal, aiming instead at opening a new market and creating trust and good will among Latin American countries.

With Brazil, China developed and launched satellites; 70% of this project costs were paid by the Chinese. Moreover, American defense reports state that Brazil and China cooperate on a secret ballistic missile project. Finally, the number of Brazilian officers that attend the National Defense University (connected to the PLA) has been growing (HORTA, 2009).

Last but not least, agreements for defense cooperation have been signed with important countries such as Brazil and Argentina. China even recognized Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina as strategic partners. That might be seen as a means to establish trust relationships with key countries in the region. In Ellis words: “[…] the ‘special treatment’ that the PRC gives
to these four key powerbrokers as strategic partners may be seen as a vehicle for China to increase its influence by working through the current political power dynamics of the region” (ELLIS, 2009, p. 17).

Moreover, China has been supporting states that sustain animosity rhetoric against the U.S.: 

China’s support for populist regimes in the region, including those of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, may also be regarded as a type of strategic positioning. While it is doubtful that China wishes to establish client states in Latin America in the near term, as the Soviet Union did with Cuba and Nicaragua during the Cold War, supporting states in the region that verbally and materially oppose the US presence there ultimately serve the interests of the PRC because it prevents the United States from establishing unquestioned control over the region’s financial and political institutions. Xiang Lanxin, for example, argues that China sees the Bolivarian revolution of Hugo Chavez as a potential vehicle to move countries in the region away from the Monroe Doctrine and reduce the region’s dependence on the North American market (ELLIS, 2009, p. 17).

In turn, China’s political and economic model is attractive to some countries in the region. A “Beijing Consensus” seems to be emerging in what comes to growth and development policies:

In addition to "purely" economic interests, Latin America is interested in China because of the possibility that the Asian giant will help the region to offset the traditional political, economic, and institutional dominance of the United States, giving it greater freedom of action to pursue a more autonomous course politically. China's ability to transform itself, within the span of a generation, from a relatively impoverished nation to a rising power that challenges the United States in the global economy is a source of inspiration for many Latin Americans [...] The term "Beijing consensus," referring to the example of China, is a derisory allusion to the "Washington consensus" and policies pursued during the 1990s that failed to address – and, in the eyes of some, may have deepened – Latin America’s deep-rooted problems of inequality, corruption, and stagnant growth (ELLIS, 2009, p. 28).

Nonetheless, the U.S. remains the main arm supplier to Latin America. Chinese weapons have a reputation for bad quality, which contributes to discourage Latin American potential buyers. However, it is unquestionable that China’s security related activities in Latin America have been growing and key countries such as Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina have been targets of Chinese endeavors.

In Horta’s words:

Although the Chinese military presence in the American continent is insignificant in comparison to the U.S, China rises rapidly as a military actor in a region where it was once absent. Chinese military forces carefully developed a multidimensional and sophisticated defense diplomacy, aiming to create a political environment for more ambitious initiatives in the medium and longer run (HORTA, 2009, p. 35).
5. Final remarks

This paper meant to function as an introductory reflection on China’s security role in Latin America. For that, the works of Mearsheimer (2001) and Lim (2014) were used to illuminate the dynamics of regional hegemony rising. The first scholar helped us to discuss China’s role in Asia and U.S. interference in this region. It is clear that the process of China’s rise cannot be understood apart from U.S. activities in the region. In turn, Lim’s work emphasizes the role of seapower in regional hegemony construction. This paper extended Lim’s argument and defended that, in the process of becoming a regional hegemon, China could have begun to influence the American region, in face of the current improvements in Chinese seapower. Nonetheless, a revision of China’s current efforts in the naval field showed that it is not able to provide security to potential allies in the region. This is because China’s Navy has many difficulties related to power projection beyond the so called first island chain. In addition, China’s naval strategy does not mention Latin America. Nonetheless, China’s defense diplomacy towards the region involve agreements for cooperation in defense, official visits, transference of non-lethal material and educational exchanges among the armed forces of Latin American countries. Moreover, China has chosen important countries as strategic partners such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Venezuela. Finally, countries with strong anti-American rhetoric have been targets of China’s defense diplomacy. Therefore, China’s defense activities in Latin America can be thought as paving the way and building trust to more significant security relations in the future.

References


