

Chinese military

China denies building naval bases but fear of its military reach grows

Beijing is assembling a network of overseas port facilities to protect its global interests

Kathrin Hille and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Singapore and **John Paul Rathbone** in London YESTERDAY

Cambodian defence minister Tea Banh took great pains this month to convince western military officials and diplomats that China was not building a military base in his country. His remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum matched Beijing's insistence that the People's Liberation Army was not trying to build a global network of bases.

But the US and its allies are unpersuaded. Derek Chollet, a top US state department official, said Washington was "convinced" China was [building a base at Ream](#) on Cambodia's Gulf of Thailand coast. "We have indications that China is seeking an exclusive military facility," Chollet said in an interview.

Over the past year, alarm bells have rung every few months in the US and among its allies over alleged Chinese plans for new military bases. But paradoxically, fears about the PLA acquiring a global footprint and China's denials that it is building many bases may both be justified.

Just a few days before Tea Banh's Singapore speech, the minister attended a groundbreaking ceremony for Chinese-financed construction at Cambodia's existing naval base at Ream. In March, [news broke of a draft agreement](#) between China and the Solomon Islands that some western governments believe could pave the way for Beijing to build a base in the Pacific country. Last year, US suspicions were leaked that China was building a secret military facility in the United Arab Emirates and might have similar plans in Equatorial Guinea.

While Beijing dismisses concerns about its intentions, [its military](#) has started creating a network of what it calls strategic strong points along important maritime trading routes to protect China's growing global interests.

China's 2019 defence white paper stated that the military's tasks included protecting cargo ships and evacuating Chinese citizens abroad and that the PLA would develop "overseas logistical facilities".





Cambodian defence minister Tea Banh swims in the sea with Chinese ambassador Wang Wentian this month to 'strengthen closer brotherhood and co-operation' © Gen Tea Banh/Facebook

But in stark contrast to the US military, with its hundreds of dedicated bases around the world, the PLA mostly relies on facilities at overseas ports that are [owned or operated by Chinese state enterprises](#).

“Even if Cambodia and the UAE and Equatorial Guinea were all going to come online in the next few years, the PLA is not on its way to a US-like global network of bases,” said Isaac Kardon, an assistant professor at the China Maritime Studies Institute of the US Naval War College.

“[Unlike] the US, a country that fought in a world war and then sustained that position in the cold war, China is only beginning to build an overseas military presence and it is leveraging its global economic footprint for that,” Kardon said.

According to a report co-authored by Kardon and published in April, Chinese companies own or operate at least one terminal in 96 ports in 53 countries, and that network of port infrastructure is rapidly becoming the backbone of the PLA’s far seas operations.

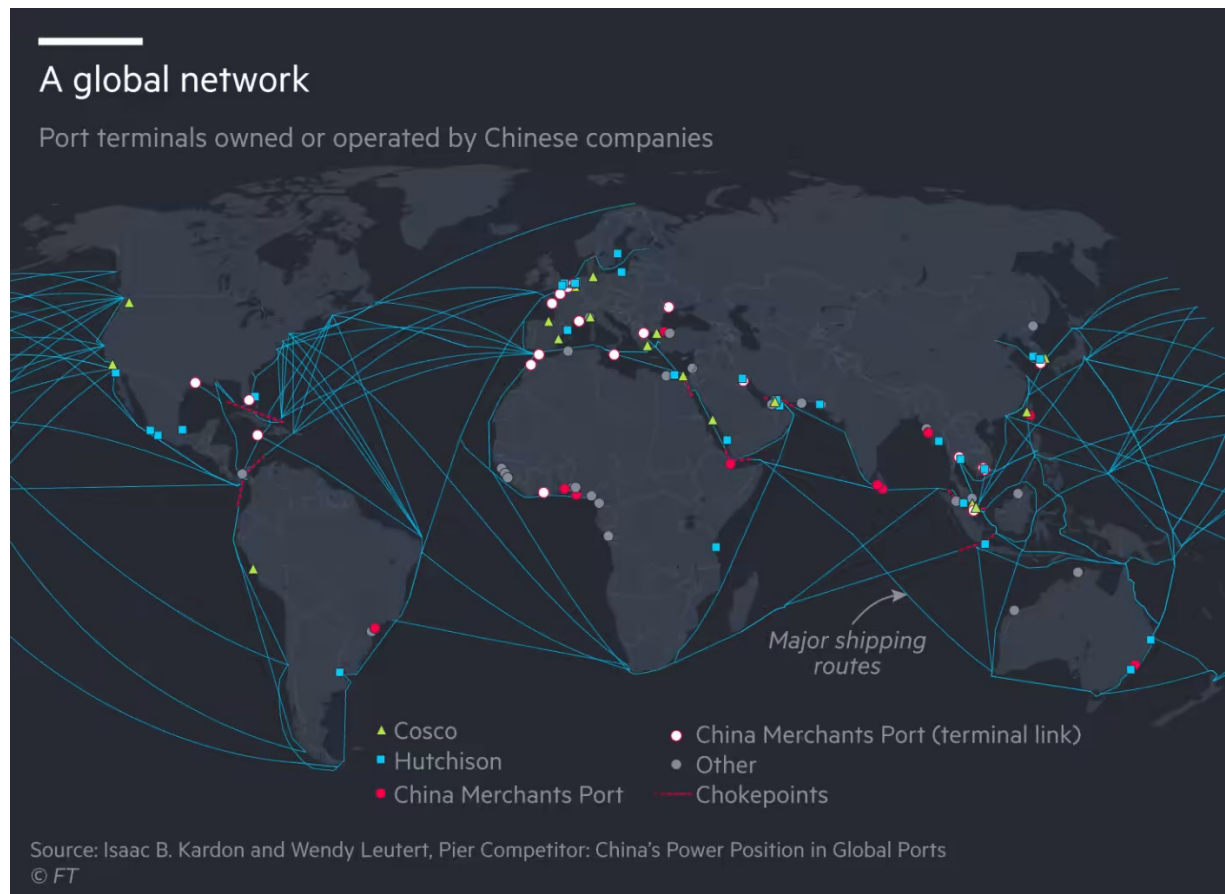
PLA Navy ships called at one-third of those ports for resupplies or naval diplomacy, had maintenance done at nine of them, visited 69 for exercises with their host nations and went into dry docks for repairs at 47, the report said.

This dual-use model of port infrastructure pits China’s strength in overseas economic infrastructure assets against Washington’s powerful network of allies.

“The US is used to building bases on the territory of their allies. We don’t do that

because we are against building blocs against others,” said a Chinese military scholar, who asked not to be named because he had not been authorised to discuss the topic.

“Our model is focused on development. It has now become part of our military’s mission to protect that development overseas, but we can also use the fruits of that development to fulfil this mission,” the person said.



Chinese experts said the “civil-military fusion” policy — a push to make the assets and capabilities of civilian companies available to the armed forces or even to integrate military and civilian companies and institutions — helped the PLA protect Chinese investments and trade.

Laws adopted in recent years require overseas transport infrastructure to be built to military specifications, and debate in military publications indicates that PLA personnel are being placed in some of the companies that own or operate ports overseas, such as Chinese state shipping company Cosco.

Chinese-built modern port facilities can accommodate a broad range of naval ships including the largest ones. Still, dependence on Chinese-owned dual-use ports abroad strictly limits what the PLA can do.

“They will run up against limits pretty quickly. Sustaining combat operations over an extended period of time or conducting other expeditionary operations would be a very hard ask with this model,” said Kristen Gunness, an expert on the PLA at Rand Corporation, a Washington think-tank.

Beijing’s decision to set up its first full military base suggests the PLA realises the limits of dual-use ports. In 2017, it moved to open a base in the east African country of Djibouti, which was already hosting a handful of other militaries, including that of the US. The decision came after almost a decade of escorts to protect Chinese and other civilian ships from pirates off the Horn of Africa, through which the PLA Navy learned what was required to sustain prolonged far seas missions.

“The establishment of the base in Djibouti was a momentous change of policy,” said Kardon, pointing to Beijing’s traditional wariness about the kind of open military expansion that could fuel fears about China’s rise as a global power.

“The civilian leadership has a broader set of objectives, but from the PLA’s standpoint, having bases is certainly the best option,” he added. “The goalposts may move over time.”

Western officials stuck to their doubts over Chinese base denials. “Beijing’s aim is to build a global network,” said a western intelligence official, suggesting China was moving gradually to avoid provoking too much of a reaction. “It’s a boiling frog situation.”