



Chinese military on rise in Latin America

Linking with mafia, terrorists to present threat in backyard of U.S.

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By F. Michael Maloof

As China makes major investments in Latin America to acquire strategic materials, it is extending its military capability into the backyard of the United States.

China's military also has linked up with elements of Chinese organized crime elements as well as various terrorist organizations in Latin America.

"China's military planners have long advocated the dirty business of utilizing narcotics traffickers, international organized crime networks and terrorist organizations - such as the shadowy al-Qaida network - that could sap a great superpower of its financial strength, military confidence and national morale," according to Albert Santoli, president and director of Asia America Initiative.

"Latin America, and particularly Cuba's proximity to the United States and its radical leftist networks throughout the region, have provided Beijing the opportunity to utilize its strategic plan of 'unrestricted warfare' where the weak can defeat the powerful through unconventional means," he said.

With the Chinese military linked with Chinese organized crime, the Library of Congress in its report "Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America" echoed concerns of increased Chinese mafia activities in Latin America.

"Al-Qaida's activities in the TBA are reportedly linked to trafficking of arms, drugs and uranium as well as money laundering in association with Chinese mafia," the report said.

"The Hong Kong Mafia is particularly active in large-scale trafficking of pirated



products from mainland China to Ciudad del Este and maintains strong ties with Hezbollah in the TBA," the report added.

"At least two Chinese mafia groups in the TBA - the Sung-I and Ming families - engage in illegal operations with the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiyyah."

Also known as the Islamic Group, the al-Gama'a al-Islamiyyah belongs to the International Islamic Front for the Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, an organization established by al-Qaida in 1998.

Santoli expressed alarm that Chinese stevedore control by Hutchinson Whampoa Ltd over the Panama Canal under a 50-year lease helps facilitate the relationship among the Chinese military, Chinese Triad organized crime syndicates and terrorists groups.

Hutchinson is a giant Hong Kong-based shipping firm with ties to China's leadership and its armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

"The control of stevedoring of loading and offloading ships gives China the ability to bring weapons and countless illegal aliens into the hemisphere, including possible terrorists who, in partnership with Cuba and Venezuela, could prepare new terrorist cells to cross into the United States through our porous southern border with Mexico," Santoli said.

"The stevedoring also permits China to facilitate the transfers of sensitive dual-use military and hi-tech products and components back to China, and the transfer of weapons to guerrilla and narco-terror groups in the region without the scrutiny of U.S. Customs or intelligence agents," he added.

Peter Leitner, a Department of Defense senior policy analyst, underscored Santoli's concerns about Chinese control over the Panama Canal.

"If the Chinese mainland takes action against Taiwan, they will be able to manage the ability of the United States to move goods into the Pacific combat theater" as a result of controlling the Panama Canal on the Pacific and Atlantic sides, Leitner said.

Leitner also sees China's initiatives in Latin America as a way to offset U.S. influence in the Pacific Basin.

"We're definitely under siege on a variety of fronts by the Chinese," Leitner



declared. He said the Chinese are looking to be the undisputed power in Asia, to gain access to limited strategic materials while containing the U.S.

"Episodes will be on the increase to force the United States to redeploy from Asia and away from Taiwan and to uncouple our relationship with Japan," he said.

Santoli said the Chinese are engaging in "geo-strategic practices of asymmetrical warfare, using both ancient techniques and modern 'war by other means' targeting the 'weak exposed sides' of the United States."

He added that such activities have been going on for the past decade in Latin America.

"Chinese tactics are being used to gain political and economic influence, as well as military alliances and bases for cyber-electronic warfare," he added. "These developments are a critical challenge to the United States in a vulnerable resource-rich area on our doorstep that we have too often taken for granted."

In this regard, Santoli said China was using Cuba as a sensitive military listening post to monitor broadcasts and telecommunications in the U.S.

He added that China's new military doctrine calls for "total war of politics, finance, electronic communications, trade supremacy, manipulation of financial markets and control of critical natural resources, especially scarce resources such as oil, cobalt and nickel, which are found in relatively few regions of the planet."

In implementing this doctrine, China has begun to provide peacekeeping forces in Latin American trouble spots such as Haiti. It represents the first deployment of Chinese forces in the Western Hemisphere.

Senior Chinese defense officials also have had exchanges with Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile and provide military assistance to Jamaica and Venezuela.

According to Gen. Bantz Craddock, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, high level Chinese defense officials have made 20 visits to Latin America and the Caribbean while defense ministers and chiefs from nine regional countries have visited China.

Gen. Craddock added that entire military units from Latin America are increasingly training and spending time in China.



China is known to have established direct military-to-military relations with Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay.

In 1999, China began to provide rocket-launch expertise in exchange for digital optical technology and access to Brazil's space-tracking facilities.

Regional experts said it has been relatively easy for China to bond with nations with leftist governments such as Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela and Bolivia.

The observers add that leaders of these countries are ideologically inclined to favor China over what they perceive to be an imperialist America. For the Latin American leaders, China's opposition to a uni-polar, or U.S dominated, world pleases them.

Because China's own defense industry is growing rapidly, it will be looking to Latin American countries with worsening relations with Washington to market their products.

Venezuela, for example, is looking to China for fighter aircraft to replace U.S.-made F-16s for which the U.S. halted all spare parts. In addition, Venezuela recently purchased three military-grade radar systems from China. The systems include a sophisticated command center designed to significantly enhance Venezuela's ability to manage its airspace.

In addition, China has begun training increasing numbers of Latin American military personnel, especially in countries where U.S. military aid has been halted.

In all, some 11 nations in the Latin American region have been affected, due to passage of the American Servicemembers Protection Act of 2002. It calls for blocking U.S. military financing and training to nations that have not agreed to bar the extradition of U.S. citizens to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

"Some of these countries are critical - Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia," Gen. Craddock said. "We are losing the opportunity to bring their officers, their senior noncommissioned officers to the United States into our schools."

For the U.S., the prospect of a Chinese military presence at the U.S. backdoor will increase.



"This presence, coupled with China's growing political and economic influence, with its submarines now ready to be equipped with nuclear multiple-warhead missiles, pose an encircling military threat to the United States, never before seen in our nation's history," Santoli said.

One ominous sign of this potential threat occurred Oct. 26. In the Pacific, a Chinese submarine stalked the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk battle group. The submarine's torpedoes and missiles came within firing range, and it surfaced before it could be detected.

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