

Correspondence

Debating China's Use of Overseas Ports

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Wendy Leutert

To the Editors (David C. Logan and Robert C. Watts IV write):

Isaac Kardon and Wendy Leutert argue that China's influence in overseas ports is a "consequential form of state power projection" (p. 10) and an "attractive alternative" (p. 43) to overseas bases.¹ They compellingly document China's desire to support peacetime naval operations from People's Republic of China (PRC)-controlled commercial ports, but they overstate both China's "privileged access" (p. 10) to these ports and how the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has used them. Rather, we argue that access to foreign ports depends on host-nation permission (which is uncertain), and China has not demonstrated that these ports provide robust fleet support. These factors likely impose significant limits on the PLAN's ability to project power from PRC-controlled ports.

First, a PRC-controlled port can only support PLAN operations if the host country permits a warship to enter the port; this sovereign authority applies more universally than the authors acknowledge. It is untrue that in peacetime "a [commercial] terminal operator will generally have discretion to grant access for naval vessels seeking to call" (p. 29). Foreign warship entry is a state's sovereign decision, even in peacetime and even to foreign-controlled ports.² For example, Sri Lanka recently deferred a visit by a PLA Strategic Support Force vessel to Hambantota—a large and strategically located PRC-controlled port—disrupting the ship's employment and eliciting complaints from China of "gross interference."³ The ship docked a week late, only after the Chinese gov-

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1. Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (Spring 2022): 9–47, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00433. References to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. For U.S. guidelines, see "Clearance Procedures for Visits to United States Ports by Foreign Naval and Public Vessels" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Navy, February 8, 2022), <https://www.secnav.navy.mil/doni/Directives/03000%20Naval%20Operations%20and%20Readiness/03-100%20Naval%20Operations%20Support/3128.10H.pdf>. See also Nancy Youssef and Gordon Lubold, "China Denies U.S. Navy Ship's Request for Hong Kong Visit," *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-denies-u-s-navy-ships-request-for-hong-kong-visit-1537854797>.

3. Shan Li, "Sri Lanka Defers Visit from Chinese Ship over India's Concerns," *Wall Street Jour-*

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ernment intervened politically with the Sri Lankan government.⁴ The PRC-controlled terminal's commercial operator did not have discretion to admit this unarmed surveillance ship, even in a state over which China has significant influence. PLAN warship visits to PRC-controlled ports in Sri Lanka and elsewhere could face even greater scrutiny by host countries.

The authors further argue that, because of the networked nature of PRC-controlled ports, "neither just one nor several states can sharply limit the power projection capability that PRC firms' overseas port assets enable" (p. 45). But host nations' political access decisions could be interrelated. For instance, half of the thirty-two PRC-controlled ports that the authors identify as hosting PLAN visits are located in the United States or in the territories of U.S. allies.⁵ These host countries are likely to share security concerns about PLAN visits, and the United States may be able to influence host country decision-making.

Second, China's "ability to use its firms' overseas commercial port assets for military functions" (p. 44) is less sophisticated than the authors suggest. They argue that China has conducted "significant repairs" (p. 39) at some PRC-controlled ports, but the evidence is sparse.⁶ Cataloging PLAN stops at PRC-controlled ports since 2017, the authors recorded thirty-two "port visits" for resupply and diplomacy, of which nine were more complex "technical stops" for repair and overhaul (pp. 39, 44). The article also describes a PLAN destroyer receiving "specialized repairs in a dry dock" (pp. 9–10) in Egypt. Dry docking a deployed ship would demonstrate a robust repair capability. Attempting to validate the authors' assessment of the complexity of "technical stops," we found Chinese media accounts of fourteen "technical stops" from 2014 to 2019. These reports consistently show that "technical stops" are like unsophisticated port visits: ships docked for a few days merely to resupply, conduct ceremonies and ship tours, and organize crew trips ashore. None of these media accounts depict significant repairs, either pier side or in dry dock.⁷

If port control "enables vital military functions" (p. 11), then China should consistently use these ports. But overseas PLAN port calls have decreased substantially since 2020, even as the pace of PLAN deployments has remained steady.⁸ Since 2008, PLAN Naval Escort Task Forces (NETFs) have continually conducted counter-piracy patrols in

nal, August 8, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/sri-lanka-defers-visit-from-chinese-ship-over-indias-concerns-11659972910>.

4. Hafeel Farisz and Gerry Shih, "Chinese Military Ship Docks in Sri Lanka over Indian, U.S. Objections," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/16/india-china-navy-ship/>.

5. Analysis of data in table B in Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, appendix for "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," V1, May 12, 2022, Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LL9BKX>.

6. Although undefined in the article, "significant repairs" suggests work requiring outside industrial support.

7. For data and sourcing about PLAN technical stops, see table A in our online appendix, "Correspondence: 'Pier Competitor,'" V1, December 29, 2022, Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EM9EXR>. Our appendix attempts to validate technical stop data in both "Pier Competitor" (pp. 39, 44) and its online appendix.

8. Kenneth W. Allen, "The PLA's Military Diplomacy in Advance of the 20th Party Congress (Part

the Gulf of Aden.⁹ NETF ships also performed most of the 2014–2019 “technical stops.”¹⁰ Since 2020, NETF patrols have continued at the same rate, but their ships have not visited ports abroad.¹¹ This change indicates that PLAN warships face obstacles to using PRC-controlled ports. It also means that in the last three years the PLAN has neither gained experience supporting ships in PRC-controlled ports nor expanded the sophistication and scope of how it uses these ports.

Kardon and Leutert cogently illuminate China’s ambition to use PRC-controlled ports to project its quickly growing naval power “cheaply and without the geopolitical consequences [of bases]” (p. 43), but problems persist in pursuit of this goal. China’s “next best” alternative to bases hardly “creates new and expanded capabilities for China’s peacetime projection of military power” (pp. 44, 47). Instead, we suggest that China’s approach reflects relative weakness. By comparison, the United States, in addition to its global network of bases, routinely uses commercial ports (without controlling them) and repairs deployed ships in foreign shipyards.¹² Further research is warranted to determine why China has not yet employed PRC-controlled ports as desired. Reasons could include China’s lack of alliances, poor political relationships with some host countries, or PLAN organizational shortcomings. Understanding the factors constraining Chinese overseas naval operations will help analysts and policymakers better assess PLAN capabilities and effectively develop strategies to compete with China.

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2),” *China Brief*, October 4, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-military-diplomacy-leading-up-to-the-20th-party-congress-part-two/>.

9. Allen, “The PLA’s Military Diplomacy.”

10. See table A in our online appendix, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EM9EXR>.

11. Allen, “The PLA’s Military Diplomacy.”

12. Jonathan Masters, “Sea Power: The U.S. Navy and Foreign Policy,” Council on Foreign Relations, August 19, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/sea-power-us-navy-and-foreign-policy>; “NAVSUP’s New Husbanding Contract Offers Worldwide Support,” U.S. Department of the Navy, October 2, 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2369929/navsups-new-husbanding-contract-offers-worldwide-support/>; “Mid Deployment Voyage Repair: Through a Maintenance Lens,” U.S. Department of the Navy, August 3, 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/3115983/mid-deployment-voyage-repair-through-a-maintenance-lens/>; “Repair Done for U.S. Naval Ship in India,” *Times of India*, August 17, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/repair-done-for-us-naval-ship-in-india/articleshow/93622972.cms>.

Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert Reply:

We thank David Logan and Robert Watts for their correspondence and welcome the opportunity to further explain issues surrounding port facility access and use. We concur that host countries play an important role in determining how Chinese companies and PLAN utilize ports. We differ, however, on the nature and significance of the “privileged access” (p. 10) that overseas infrastructure assets owned and operated (p. 10n7) by Chinese firms afford the Chinese military.

Although host countries have the diplomatic authority to allow or deny a foreign naval port call, Chinese companies’ activities and China’s economic importance to many states create powerful incentives for their governments to cooperate with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). More fundamentally, variation in host country intent and capacity to limit access does not alter our core argument about the observable linkages between PRC firms and the Chinese Party-state and its military.

We agree with Logan and Watts’s assessment about the limitations of commercial ports for facilitating high-end naval operations. Like them, we also observe that assets such as container terminals (and other non-purpose-built facilities) lack certain capabilities and equipment required for a range of military uses. Our main finding, however, concerns the competitive capabilities of China’s maritime network in peacetime. Overall, their arguments support our contention that PRC firms’ ownership and operations of critical port infrastructure abroad significantly improve PLA global logistics and intelligence capabilities.

According to Logan and Watts, it is “untrue” that terminal operators generally have discretion to grant access for naval vessels seeking to call. It is indeed true that the firm operating a port terminal will not have sole discretion to authorize a visit by a foreign navy. States almost universally treat such military diplomacy as a government-to-government matter. Our emphasis on PRC firm discretion about naval port calls, however, concerns specifically whether and how the terminal operator *chooses* to allocate a commercial berth, equipment, labor, and other scarce resources for a warship.

Private firms operating ports have no special obligation to displace potential customers transporting large cargo volumes in order to instead accommodate a complex, low-throughput (and therefore low-profit) port call by a naval vessel. Chinese firms, on the other hand, evidently do have such a special obligation by virtue of their ties to the Party-state, and thus to China’s military deployed abroad. We make a transparent and well-substantiated set of inferences about PLA preferential access and support from Chinese companies and detail these ties in depth (pp. 31–39). The Chinese Party-state has taken explicit legal and political actions to fuse the military with commercial enterprises and their infrastructure assets—to the degree that a PLAN warship commanding officer could openly state: “As long as there are Chinese companies, there will be a forward transportation support point for warships” (p. 36).

The example that Logan and Watts provide to illustrate their claims about the constraints on port operators actually affirms our argument about Chinese enterprise linkages with the Party-state. They describe how Sri Lanka’s Foreign Ministry, reportedly under pressure from the Indian government, initially denied a previously scheduled

PLAN space and satellite tracking vessel's requested port call at Hambantota pending "further consultations."¹ Chinese Ambassador Qi Zhenghong then reportedly paid a visit to Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, after which Wickremesinghe relented and granted it.² While Logan and Watts rightly highlight this recent PRC government intervention, we interpret it quite differently.

In fact, the Chinese government's clear influence on Sri Lanka's decision illustrates exactly the tight coordination between the Party-state and enterprises that we observe throughout China's port network. Chinese officials leveraged their considerable political influence to alter how a sovereign country used its own critical infrastructure. That influence originates in part in the significant economic assets of the Chinese state-owned enterprise that owns and operates both Hambantota and terminals at Sri Lanka's main port of Colombo. Although analysis of particular bilateral relationships exceeds our study's global scope, this case shows precisely how China's position in commercial ports can be used to facilitate military power projection (of a specific type, a key qualification that we discuss in depth on pp. 15–19).

Ports are frequently the centerpiece of the PRC's economic presence in foreign countries, the necessary platform for highly lucrative trade with China.³ Ports often serve as hubs for follow-on Chinese company investments in other infrastructure such as roads and railways. Firms like China Merchants in Hambantota both support and benefit from Beijing's efforts to leverage their assets for state purposes. Counterfactually, had there been no PRC firm operating the port at Hambantota, would the Sri Lankan leadership have authorized the port call? We cannot say with certainty, of course, but the balance of evidence suggests that Sri Lanka changed its position in large part because of China's power position in Sri Lanka's critical infrastructure.

We further agree with Logan and Watts that complete integration of PLAN logistics into the operations of PRC firms' commercial ports remains a work in progress. "Robust fleet support" is a very high bar, and we are careful to define the limits on the military capabilities that China can expect to generate from nominally commercial facilities (pp. 14, 45). Detailed accounts of PLAN activities in port are generally limited to the official sources that we cite, but this reporting is sufficient to identify the growing frequency and sophistication of PLAN utilization of Chinese firms' facilities for peacetime logistics and intelligence purposes—not for high-end combat power. These are significant and necessary military missions that demonstrate real-world capabilities, which are often overlooked when considering power projection in the abstract.

PRC reporting on PLAN port calls explicitly distinguishes regular port calls from technical stops, during which specialized repairs and maintenance are performed on a

1. AFP, "Sri Lanka Relents, Asks China to Defer Ship Visit," *Hindu*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-asks-china-to-delay-visit-by-ship-say-sources/article65737556.ece>.

2. AFP, "China Seeks Urgent Meeting as Sri Lanka Defers Docking of High-Tech Vessel," *Hindu*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-seeks-urgent-meeting-as-sri-lanka-defers-docking-of-high-tech-vessel-report/article65741935.ece>.

3. Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, "Gwadar: China's Potential Strategic Strongpoint on the Indian Ocean," *CMSI China Maritime Report*, no. 7 (August 2020), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7/>.

ship and its systems. There is strong evidence that PLAN vessels and crews enjoy support from Chinese firms well beyond what is available to normal commercial users. Descriptions of a “technical stop” (*jishu tingkao*) at a foreign port are infrequent in Chinese media reporting on PLAN port calls.⁴ This reporting is carefully controlled and uses only deliberate and authorized terms about military activities. Even infrequent usage of this term is therefore significant, because it confirms that technical stops are indeed occurring, thereby corroborating our argument about the growing scope and sophistication of the support services that PLAN vessels now receive overseas.⁵

Finally, Logan and Watts helpfully update our data on naval port calls to identify diminished reporting after 2020. In our view, this likely reflects China's recent inward turn rather than any observable “obstacles to using PRC-controlled ports.” Since the pandemic began, the Chinese bureaucracy has prioritized its attention and resources toward domestic COVID control. Beijing has also grown more sensitive to publicity about military activities abroad. Routine and increasingly intensive PLA use of PRC commercial ports overseas remains the norm and, as we document extensively, the stated objective of China's central leadership.

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4. We identify only nine technical stops at PRC-owned and operated facilities. Logan and Watts count fourteen, but they include cases at locations not owned and operated by the PRC. We believe that our data and theirs are generally consistent, and we cite open-source satellite imagery from DigitalGlobe in which PLAN vessels are visible at various PRC and local facilities. For example, the authors looked at images from August 15–21, 2019, to observe the PLAN task force in Alexandria, Egypt. Further information about the satellite imagery from DigitalGlobe can be found at <https://evwhs.digitalglobe.com/>.

5. See, for example, the official Ministry of National Defense report on a 2018 PLAN technical stop at the COSCO terminal in Valencia, Spain, during which the three-ship task force underwent “equipment overhaul and maintenance” (*zhuangbei jianxiu baoyang*). Zhu Linlin, “Haijun di ershiba pi huhang biandui jishutingkao Xibanya” [The 28th Naval Escort Task Force made a technical stop in Spain], *China Military Network*, May 17, 2017, http://www.81.cn/rd/2018-05/17/content_8035002.htm.