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The Chinese fishing army: a threat to Latin America

Andrés González Martín, Lieutenant Colonel of the Spanish Army. Analyst at the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. He has studied at the Spain Armed Forces College (CESEDEN) and the Center for Advanced Studies of National Defense.

Translated by CIVIME and Claudia Iwasaki

The Chinese deep-sea fleet

In 2020, the Ecuadorian press, concerned about the presence of an unusual number of Chinese fishing boats off its coast, reported that the total Chinese high seas fleet (DWF) exceeded 3,000 vessels.[1] Recent assessments have estimated China's offshore fishing fleet at between 1,600 and 3,400 vessels, although it is unclear whether the Chinese government has a complete picture of their size.[2]

The Chinese administration acknowledges that its distant water fishing vessels total approximately 2,600 vessels. Beijing has stated that it aims to reach 3,000 DWF ships by 2020.[3] At the same time, the DWF fleets of the European Union, South Korea, the United States and Taiwan have significantly reduced their size.[4] According to official Chinese information, the sum of distant water fishing vessels from Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Spain would make up one third of the total Chinese fleet.

In 1985, China's first distant water fishing fleet set sail for West Africa with only 13 vessels. Since then, five-year plans and government officials for the fishing industry have expanded its potential and tonnage without known limits, reaching the world's number one position far ahead of its followers. Today, the large Chinese distant water fishing navy officially operates in 40 countries, in the Antarctic and in international waters around the world.[5]

China's fishing fleet, which plies the world's seas, is financed by annual subsidies from the Chinese government. Depending on the source, it ranges from $7.5 billion to $16.5 billion, with aid concentrated in tax exemptions, mainly on fuel and shipbuilding.[6]

In June 2020, the independent British think tank the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) published a comprehensive research report entitled "China's distant water fishing fleet scale, impact and governance."[7] The most relevant and striking conclusion from the exploratory and monitoring work on the Chinese DWF fleet is its estimated size. The research provides information that should alert countries around the world to the serious threat to the marine environment and the sustainability of fisheries. The number of ships identified in the ODI report is 5 to 8 times higher than previous estimates.

World fisheries and China's weight.

China has established itself as the world's leading country in capture fisheries.[8] In large part, its prominent position is related to the increase in Chinese cephalopod catches in the Southeast Pacific and Southwest Atlantic, close to the Latin American coasts, officially amounting to more than half a million additional tonnes.[9]

In 2001, the first Chinese campaign began in Latin American waters, mobilizing a total of 22 vessels. In 2015, the number of Chinese fishing vessels exceeded 250, and by the end of the current decade it exceeded 500. Some boats stay fishing off the Peruvian coast all year round, in search of other species such as horse mackerel or mackerel. Factory ships can remain at sea indefinitely, transferring the catch to other vessels that transport it to the destination ports. The Chinese distant water fleet catches between 50 and 70% of the world's total deep-sea squid catch. Chinese fishing methods and activities within the EEZ of Argentina, Ecuador and other Latin American countries are highly controversial.[10]

China does not fish only for squid. The Chinese distant water fleet alone caught two million tonnes, representing 40% of the world's total distant water fleet.[11] China fishes a lot but, fishing much more than anyone else, it fishes in proportionately large distant waters. This is especially true in underdeveloped regions, where there are insufficient controls, and in Latin America, where it is located at the limits of exclusive economic exploitation waters and, on many occasions, it violates these limits.

Since 1980, Chinese territorial waters have been overexploited.[12] Beijing's reaction has been to implement moratoria to reduce fishing within its waters, promote aquaculture development and encourage the development of its distant water fleet.

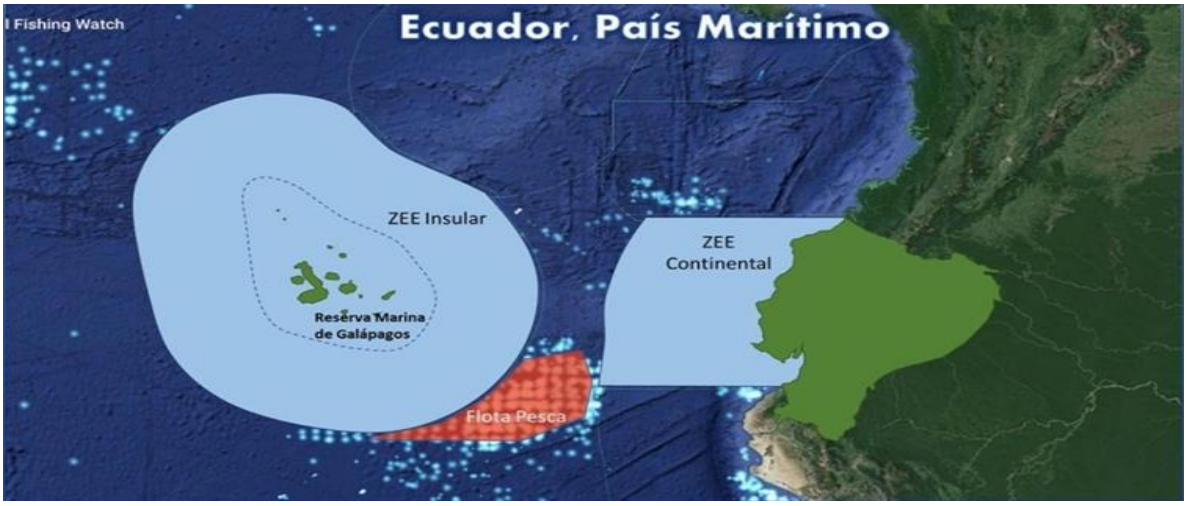
The excessive size of distant water fishing fleets, encouraged by subsidies, has meant that the state of marine fish stocks, based on long-term monitoring of stocks assessed by the FAO, has continued to deteriorate. The global percentage of marine species exploited at biologically unsustainable levels exceeded one third of the total in 2017. The most threatened seas are the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, with overexploitation accounting for nearly two thirds of the total number of species. In second place are the Latin American waters of the Southeast Pacific and Southwest Atlantic, with more than half of the species overfished.[13]

In September 2015, the United Nations launched the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The central element of Sustainable Development Goal 14, dedicated to underwater life, is to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for development. On the basis of current data and with ten years to go, it does not seem easy to achieve the targets set.[14]

China plunders the waters of the Ecuadorian archipelago of the Galapagos.

In early July 2020, the Ecuadorian navy issued a bulletin warning of the presence of a formidable Chinese fishing squadron of some 260 vessels fishing at the edge of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near the Ecuadorian Galapagos archipelago.[15] By the

end of the month, the number of vessels exceeded 340, mostly trawlers.[16] The Galapagos Islands are about 1,000 kilometers from the mainland. Therefore, the waters of Ecuador's exclusive economic zones on the mainland and the islands do not overlap, creating a corridor of international waters, where any country can fish.[17]



Source: Global Fishing Watch

One of the serious problems associated with the protection of the Galapagos marine reserve is that many of its species are migratory, so they move in and out of the protected area. Jorge Carrión, director of the Galapagos National Park, pointed out that it is essential to protect transboundary marine corridors for the conservation of highly migratory flagship species such as sharks, whales, rays and sea turtles".[18]

In the meantime, the Chinese distant water fishing fleet only has to wait outside for the right moment or turn off their fish finders to go inside. In one way or another, Chinese fishermen catch the species on their migratory journeys, inside or outside the exclusive economic zones of Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Costa Rica, Argentina and any other Latin American country where they might be interested in fishing.

Ecuadorian Defence Minister, Oswaldo Jarrín, reported that almost half of the Chinese fleet detected last summer had turned off their tracking and identification systems, a practice known as "marine radar evasion", which is common in illegal fishing. The ships disappeared from the radar for 17 days. Turning off the identification system is an offence if it is intentional.[19] The sudden mass disappearance of the vessels suggests that many of them decided to change their fishing grounds to concentrate within Ecuadorian waters, possibly in the Galapagos.

Conclusions

The pressure on China's arable land, its traditional fishing grounds and the size of its population favor an inclination to overexploit fishery resources in distant waters, especially on the high seas. Marine biological resources are considered the world's

largest protein reserve, so owning and mastering the ocean means guaranteeing China's food sovereignty.[20]

From the waters of Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines and North Korea to those of Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Argentina in Latin America, via the Gulf of Guinea, Angola, Senegal, Mozambique and Somalia in Africa, Chinese fishing vessels have become the new masters of the fishing grounds. Reduced catches in China's traditional fishing grounds have intensified the geopolitical importance of its distant water fishing fleet in accessing the world's fishing wealth.

Latin American countries must protect and defend their resources from overexploitation, which in many cases is illegal. The aggression of large factory vessels against the interests and sovereignty of Peru, Ecuador, Chile and Argentina is undoubtedly a problem with both national and international dimensions. It affects the entire continent due to the migratory nature of many species. The preservation of the marine environment is a goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Final notes

1. Paulina Garzon "China y los mares distantes,". *El Comercio* (Quito: December 24, 2020) https://www.elcomercio.com/opinion/china-mares-distantes-opinion-columna.html

2. Mervyn Piesse "The Chinese Distant Water Fishing Fleet and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing," *Future Directions International* (Australia: October 13, 2020) https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/the-chinese-distant-water-fishing-fleet-and-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing/

3. https://www.policyforum.net/fishing-for-sustainability/

4. California Environmental Associates, "Distant Water Fishing, " *Overview of Research Efforts and Current Knowledge* (California: October 2018), https://www.ceaconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/DWF-Research-Summary-Oct-2018pptx.pdf

5. Tabita Mallory, "Fishing for sustainability: China´s new metered approach to global fishing," *Asia Pacific policy society* (Australia: December, 19 2017),https://www.policyforum.net/fishing-for-sustainability/
Taiwan does not have a DWF fleet of more than 420 ships.

6. "The most recent estimate of the global fishing industry found that Asian governments subsidize their fleets the most at 43 percent. Complicating this further is the fact that the Chinese Bureau of Fisheries recently shifted the way it reports subsidies statistics, such that the statistics are now lumped together in broad terms, making it difficult to determine what types of subsidies Chinese DWF vessels may be receiving from the government." See Environmental Security Program, "Shining a Light: The Need for Transparency across Distant Water Fishing," *Stimson* (Washington, DC:2019),https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Stimson%20Distant%20Water%20Fishing%20Report.pdf

7. Miren Gutierrez, et al., "China's distant water fishing fleet," *ODI Report*, (Manila: June 2020),https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resourcedocuments/chinesedistantwaterfishing_web_1.pdf

8. In 2018, marine capture fisheries reached 84.4 million tons in the world. China remained the first country with 12.68 million tons, see Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la alimentación y agricultura, "El estado mundial de la pesca y la agricultura. La sostenibilidad en acción" *FAO* (Roma: 2020), 13, http://www.fao.org/3/ca9229es/ca9229es.pdf

9. ESPESCA Home page, https://espesca.com/principales-paises-pesqueros-del-mundo/

10. On May 4, the Argentine Naval Prefecture detained the Chinese fishing boat Hong Pu 16 while it was fishing illegally in the waters of that country's exclusive economic zone. The arrest forced the Argentine patrols to fire intimidating shots to stop the Chinese vessel that was trying to flee into international waters. The Ecuadorian Navy reported that Asian vessels were fishing near the Galapagos Islands, one of the richest and most diverse areas of the planet, which aroused the concern of the authorities and environmental groups, See Christian Mestanza, "Cómo opera la flota pesquera extranjera y qué es la 'ruta del calamari gigante' que ellos persiguen," *El Comercio* (Lima: September 24 , 2020), https://elcomercio.pe/peru/como-opera-la-flota-pesquera-extranjera-y-que-es-la-ruta-del-calamar-gigante-que-ellos-persiguen-nczg-noticia/

11. Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la alimentación y agricultura, "El estado mundial de la pesca y la agricultura. La sostenibilidad en acción, " *FAO* (Roma: 2020), 15, http://www.fao.org/3/ca9229es/ca9229es.pdf

12. The most conservative estimates suggest that a minimum of 30 percent of fish stocks in Chinese waters have completely collapsed and an additional 20 percent are overexploited. See Mervyn Piesse, "The Chinese Distant Water Fishing Fleet and Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing," *Future Directions International* (Australia: October 13, 2020), https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/the-chinese-distant-water-fishing-fleet-and-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing/

13. Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la alimentación y agricultura, "El estado mundial de la pesca y la agricultura. La sostenibilidad en acción," *FAO* (Roma: 2020), 49-56. http://www.fao.org/3/ca9229es/ca9229es.pdf

14. Organizacion de las Naciones Unidas Home Page, https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/oceans/
SDG14 target 4, by 2020, effectively regulate fishing exploitation and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices, and implement science-based management plans to restore fish stocks in the shortest possible time, at least reaching levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield according to their biological characteristics. SDG14, target 5, by 2020, conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas, in accordance with national laws and international law and based on the best available scientific information SDG 14, target 6, of by 2020, ban certain forms of fishing subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and refrain from introducing new subsidies of this nature, recognizing that the negotiation on fisheries subsidies within the framework of the World Trade Organization should include special and differential, appropriate and effective treatment for developing and least developed countries.

15. Armada del Ecuador, " Aproximadamente 260 buques de bandera extranjera se encuentran en inmediaciones de la zona económica exclusiva ecuatoriana," *Armada del Ecuador* (July 16, 2020) https://www.armada.mil.ec/?p=48604

16. Alessandro Ford, " La pesca ilegal de la flota china acecha a Ecuador, Chile y Perú," *Infobae* (Argentina: November 28, 2020) https://www.infobae.com/america/mundo/2020/11/28/la-pesca-ilegal-de-la-flota-china-acecha-a-ecuador-chile-y-peru/

17. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Convemar), to which both China and Ecuador have adhered, regulates that States have the exclusive right to resources in an area of 200 nautical miles (approximately 370 km) in front of to its shores. Beyond this limit, states have no rights. Therefore, the Chinese ships are not violating international law or the sovereign rights of Ecuador. This interpretation is the one that derives from the literalness of the definition of EEZ established by the Convention, but a comprehensive approach to the set of articles and the spirit of the norm could give rise to a broader interpretation. The Convemar defines the need to seek agreements on species protection problems and this case generates a conflict of interest.

18. Pacifico, " Estudiarán ruta de especies marinas migratorias entre las islas galápagos e isla del coco," *Pacifico* (Costa Rica: April 3, 2018) https://redpacifico.net/estudiaran-ruta-de-especies-marinas-migratorias-entre-las-islas-galapagos-e-isla-del-coco/

19. Luis Estaban Manrique " La flota pesquera china, corsarios del siglo XXI," *Política Exterior* (Madrid: November 18, 2020) https://www.politicaexterior.com/la-flota-pesquera-china-corsarios-del-siglo-xxi/

20. Naciones Unidas, " Corea del Norte viola sanciones de la ONU sobre derecho de pesca," *Fish Information and services* (Singapur: January 30, 2019) https://www.fis.com/fis/worldnews/worldnews.asp?monthyear=&day=30&id=101343&l=s&special=0&ndb=0