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Why Argentina's military is deploying to surveil hundreds of Chinese fishing boats off its coast

By Avery Schmitz, Isaac Yee, [Yong Xiong](#) and Betiana Fernández Martino, CNN
🕒 8 minute read · Updated 2:31 AM EDT, Mon March 10, 2025



Fishing vessels off the coast of Argentina, as seen on February 20. Argentine Defense Ministry

Buenos Aires (CNN) — The P-3 propellor plane banks sharply, silhouetted against dozens of shimmering lights in the sea against an Argentine sunset. As the camera pans across the scene, it becomes clear: the glaring lights come from dozens of fishing vessels dotting the ocean below.

The footage, shared by the Argentine military in late February, shows the overwhelming scale of a flotilla near a marine boundary which separates the country's more restrictive exclusive economic zone from less-regulated international waters.

This area, about 200 nautical miles off the coast of southern Argentina, is notorious for illegal and unregulated fishing — often carried out by Chinese vessels, according to the

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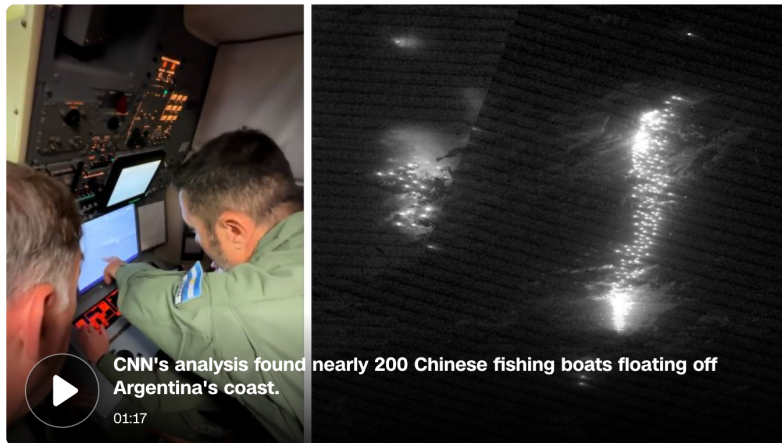


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illegal and unregulated fishing — often carried out by Chinese vessels, according to the Argentine Navy.

Most of these ships hunt for squid, which are abundant along the Argentine coast and a vital food source in the marine ecosystem.

The Argentine military is now ramping up efforts to combat these fishing operations in a region experts warn is on the brink of environmental collapse.



The military's footage shows an advanced P-3C "Orion" surveillance plane — designed for anti-submarine and maritime surveillance — approaching the fishing fleet. The aircraft took part in the Argentine military operation in January alongside a smaller C-12 surveillance plane and two corvette warships, according to the Argentine navy.

This surveillance mission was conducted to address ongoing concerns that the fishing vessels may cross into the country's more restricted EEZ, according to a spokesperson for Defense Minister Luis Petri.



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The mission identified a total of 380 fishing vessels just outside Argentina's EEZ, many of which sailed from Asia to richer waters, the military says.

The video, alongside satellite imagery and historical ship tracking data analyzed by CNN, illustrates a broader pattern of Chinese-flagged fishing vessels potentially engaged in harmful fishing in or near Argentine waters. Experts warn that exploitative fishing practices pose catastrophic risks to the marine environment while also affecting the trade of local fishermen.

Since September, the Argentine Navy has acquired multiple planes designed for maritime surveillance, which Petri said will help "control and monitor" the country's coastline "in light of the enormous challenge we face with the possible intrusion of fishing vessels into our Exclusive Economic Zone."

Petri described the existential threat earlier this year, arguing that "the (natural) resources of all Argentines are at stake."

A 'floating city' off Argentina's coast

By analyzing open-source data from watchdog non-profit Global Fishing Watch days after the Argentine military posted video of the surveillance mission, CNN identified 198 named fishing vessels in the area in late February.

More than 80% of the 198 vessels identified by CNN were sailing under the Chinese flag. Nearly 10% of the vessels were Spanish, and a further 5.5% were registered in either the United Kingdom or Malvinas/Falkland Islands, according to CNN's analysis.

The cluster of ships, stretching approximately 150 miles from north to south, raised concerns over illicit fishing. At night, many of these fishing vessels turn on bright lights to lure squid to the surface, where they are harvested using a large net. The lights are on

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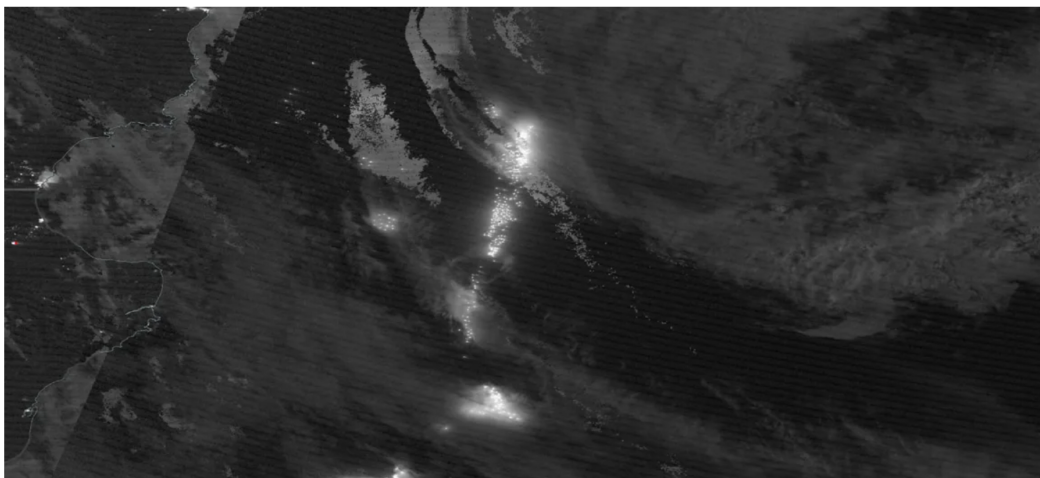


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ture squid to the surface, where they are harvested using a large net. The lights are so strong that they can be seen from space.



An image captured by NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System and first identified by open-source researcher @giammai02 shows the scale of the fleet off Argentina's coast. NASA

Further CNN analysis revealed that the Chinese fishing vessels identified were far more likely to have their location beacons — known as an Automatic Identification System (AIS) — turned off. When ships disable these systems, they disappear from publicly available ship tracking platforms.

Of approximately 500 instances when these fishing vessels had their tracking systems turned off over the past year, CNN found that over 92% involved Chinese-flagged ships.

Argentina's Navy has noted a pattern of foreign fishing vessels turning off their tracking systems to avoid detection when illegally fishing inside the exclusive economic zone — an area where Argentina maintains sovereign rights to its natural resources, according to international law.

Historical ship tracking data corroborates the pattern and reveals these abundant waters off Argentina's coast as a hotspot for lapsed vessel beacons.

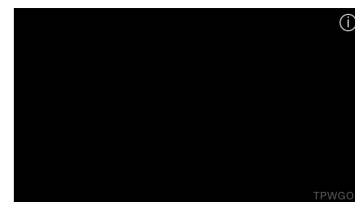
Ship tracking data shows the scale of Chinese fishing off Argentina's coast

CNN identified more than 140 Chinese fishing vessels concentrated near the edge of Argentina's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in late February.



Sources: CNN analysis of data from Global Fishing Watch and MarineTraffic; Flanders Marine Institute (2023) Maritime Boundaries Geodatabase: Maritime Boundaries and Exclusive Economic Zones
Graphic: Renée Rigdon, CNN

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Seven of the identified vessels — all sailing under China's flag — were operating under US sanctions, according to a Treasury Department database.

These ships are linked to Fujian Provincial Pingtan County Ocean Fishing Group Co., Ltd., a Chinese fishing company which was sanctioned by the US in 2022 for its involvement in "serious human rights abuses" and illegal fishing, including operations in the protected waters of the Galapagos Islands and the transport of more than 6,600 shark carcasses, according to a US Treasury Department press release.

The company also received a \$19 million subsidy from China's government as an incentive to develop its deep-water fishing capabilities, according to the statement.

The US Treasury Department [press release](#) detailed reports of forced labor, physical abuse, and extreme isolation among crew members. In one case, a Pingtan crew member who tried to leave a vessel after learning of unpaid wages was allegedly denied permission and deprived of food for three days, according to the [statement](#).

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement to CNN that China is a "responsible fishing country" that "strictly abides by fishing rules on the high seas and in the exclusive economic zones of coastal countries," and has "zero tolerance for illegal fishing and insists on cracking down hard."

It added that China has "actively participated in the formulation of international rules related to fishery subsidies" and has made "contributions to the conservation and sustainable use of fishery resources and the maintenance of a fair and reasonable international maritime order."

Pingtang Fishing Group stated that it "has endeavored to ensure that its fishing methods are in compliance with international standards and the laws and regulations of the operating waters" in a [letter](#) responding to the Treasury Department's 2022 sanctions.

CNN has reached out to Pingtan for additional comments.

Satellite imagery obtained from Planet Labs and captured in the area surveilled by the Argentine military offers a glimpse into this fleet.



Satellite imagery obtained from Planet Labs shows Ning Tai 52, a fishing vessel sailing under the Chinese flag, on February 28. A former crewmember accused the ship's parent company of employing forced labor practices. [Planet Labs](#)

By cross-referencing the imagery with historical ship tracking data from just days after Argentina's surveillance operation, CNN identified numerous ships that have reportedly utilized illicit fishing practices according to [data](#) aggregated by the [Outlaw Ocean Project](#), a US-based nonprofit reporting on human rights, labor, and environmental concerns on the high seas.

In one case, a former crewmember on one squid fishing vessel, Ning Tai 52, accused its parent company Zhoushan Ningtai Ocean Fisheries of employing forced labor practices, according to a 2021 Greenpeace [report](#).

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CNN identified the fishing vessel in satellite imagery captured on February 28 and shared by Planet Labs.

In response to the allegation in Greenpeace's report, Zhoushan Fisheries said they were "perplexed to be receiving this kind of complaint... we assure you that no such thing as forced labor has occurred."

CNN has reached out to Zhoushan Fisheries for additional comments.



An Argentine P-3C "Orion" flies above the fleet of fishing vessels. Argentine Military

Illicit fishing has plagued coastal Argentina for decades, experts say, with the Argentine Navy saying that Chinese vessels are frequent violators of the exclusive economic zone.

Squid, a primary target of fishing vessels in the region, plays an important role in the food chain in Argentine waters, illicit fishing expert and conservationist Milko Schwartzman told CNN. "Any impact (on) squid has an impact on the whole ecosystem."

According to the United Nations, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing can undermine efforts "to manage fisheries sustainably (and) conserve marine biodiversity." In some cases, it can lead to the "collapse" of local fisheries, according to the UN.

A wider issue

The problems faced in Argentina are part of a wider pattern of unregulated fishing conducted by Chinese fishing fleets across the globe. Having depleted its own domestic fishing resources, similar Chinese flotillas have been spotted off the coast of Western Africa, in parts of the disputed South China Sea and around South America.

Driving the expansion of China's global fishing footprint is the ever-growing demand. As China grows richer, its appetite for seafood has also soared. Once a luxury reserved for coastal elites, shrimp, squid, and saltwater fish have become everyday dishes in inland Chinese cities. The country is now the world's largest seafood consumer and, by one estimate, is expected to drive 40% of the world's seafood consumption growth by 2030.

Argentine authorities say China's distant-water fishing fleet routinely travels thousands of miles in search of commercially valuable fish species. Meanwhile, the total number of fishing vessels at the border of international waters and the EEZ, known as "milla 200," has increased by nearly a third since 2010, from 400 vessels to about 550, Schwartzman told CNN.

Approaching the fleet of fishing vessels at night is akin to watching a sunrise, Schwartzman recounted. Others have described the flotilla as a "floating city" which fills the entire field of view, he recalled, having spent over a decade monitoring overfishing off the coast of Argentina.

"(Only) when you get closer, you find that each light is... a vessel with hundreds of very powerful lights used to fish squid," Schwartzman says.

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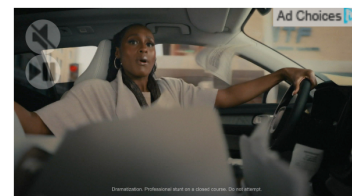
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Seen from the cockpit, an Argentine warship patrols near "milla 200" on February 20. Argentine Defense Ministry

By comparison, the Argentine fleet that was authorized to fish inside the EEZ consists of between 70 and 75 ships, according to Dario Sócrate, the executive director of the Argentine Chamber of Squid Jig Owners.

This imbalance harms Argentine fishermen, Sócrate says. He estimates that local fishermen only catch half of what they could have because of the foreign fishing activities.

When these vessels operate so close to the EEZ, they endanger the livelihoods of thousands of Argentine fishermen and threaten the marine environment, Sócrate told CNN.

"You don't have any place in the world where in a short strip of ocean, you have more than 550 vessels fishing without any regulation," Schwartzman said. "And the environmental impact is because (of) this."

Even when fishing vessels stay outside Argentina's exclusive economic zone, overfishing and other harmful practices can damage the marine ecosystem, Schwartzman explains. "A fish doesn't understand (these) imaginary borders we invented," he told CNN.

"For the species, for the ecosystem, it doesn't matter if the vessel is one mile farther or closer... the impact is the same."

CNN's Nectar Gan and Natalia Valle contributed reporting.

Video reporting by Mackenzie Happe and Avery Schmitz.

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