LISTENER

Exclusive: International investigation exposes China's world-dominating fishing tactics

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The superpower of seafood dominates more than just the high seas.

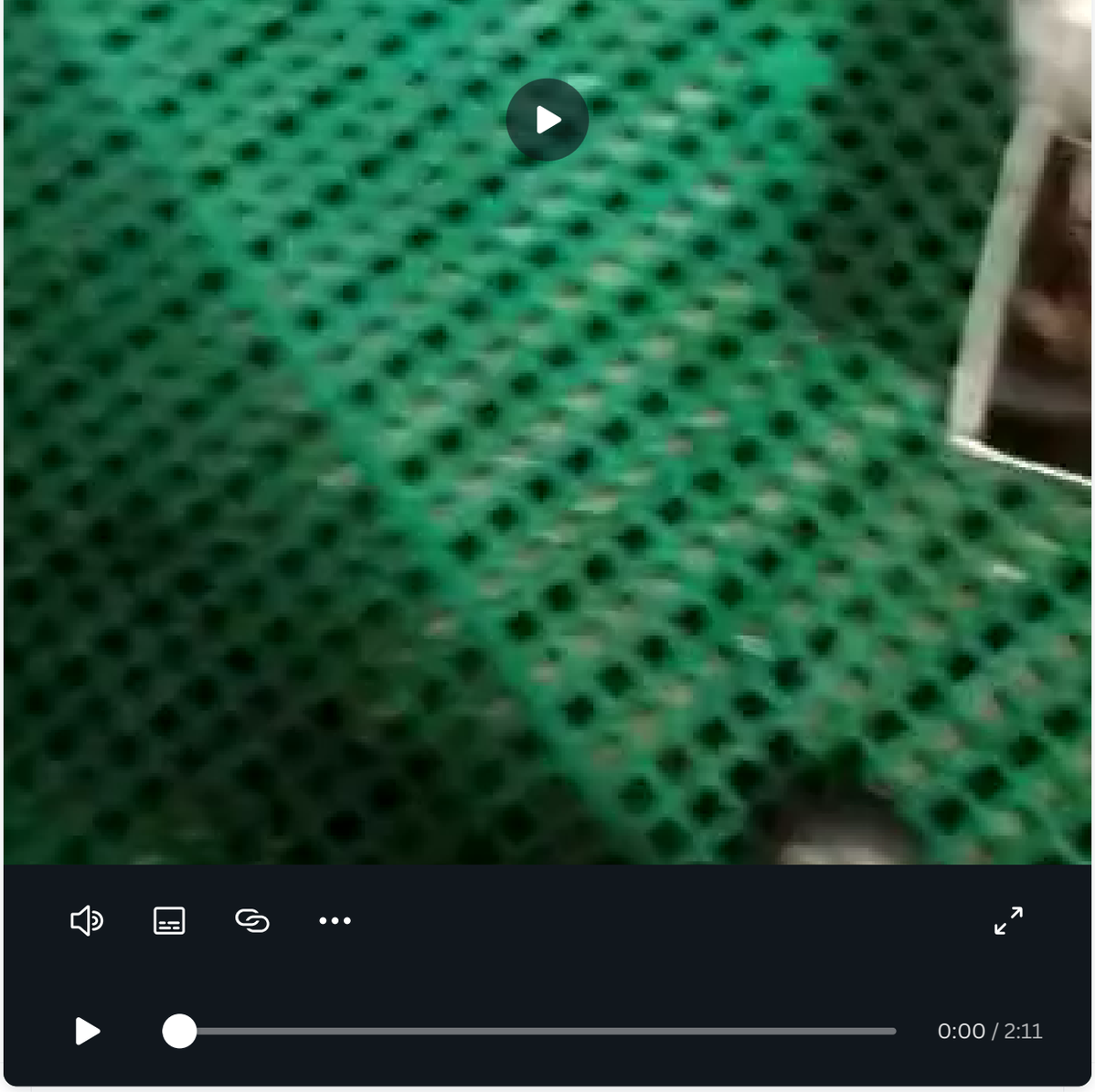
On March 14, 2016, in the squid grounds off the coast of Patagonia, a rusty Chinese vessel called the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10 was fishing illegally, several miles inside Argentine waters. Spotted by an Argentine coast-guard patrol and ordered over the radio to halt, the specially designed squid-fishing ship, known as a jigger, fled the scene. The Argentinians gave chase and fired warning shots. The Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10 then tried to ram the coast-guard cutter, prompting it to open fire directly on the jigger, which soon sank.

Although the violent encounter at sea that day was unusual, the incursion into Argentine waters by a Chinese squid jigger was not. Owned by a state-run behemoth called the China National Fisheries Company, or CNFC, the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10 was part of a fleet of several hundred Chinese jiggers that makes annual visits to the high-seas portion of the fishing grounds that lie beyond Argentina's territorial waters. During their visits, many of these jiggers turn off their locational transponders and cross secretly into Argentine waters, where they are not permitted. Since 2010, the Argentine navy has chased at least 11 Chinese squid vessels out of Argentine waters for suspected illegal fishing, according to the government.

A year after the illegal incursion and sinking of the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10, Argentina's Federal Fishing Council issued a little-noticed announcement: it was granting fishing licences to two foreign vessels that would allow them to operate within Argentine waters. Both would sail under the Argentine flag through a local front company, but their true "beneficial" owner was CNFC.

This decision was noteworthy because it seemed to violate Argentine regulations that not only forbid foreign-owned ships from flying Argentina's flag or fishing in its waters but also prohibit the granting of fishing licences to ship operators with records of illegal fishing in Argentine waters. "The decision was a total contradiction," said Eduardo Pucci, a former Argentine fisheries minister who now works as a fishing consultant.

Clearing out the freezer: Deckhands on the Lu Qing Yuan Yu 280...



Clearing out the freezer: Deckhands on the Lu Qing Yuan Yu 280 cleared squid out of the freezer to dump overboard in February 2020. Credit: Juan Ortiz

China buys in

The move by local authorities may have been a contradiction, but it is an increasingly common one in Argentina and elsewhere around the world. In recent years, from South America to Africa to the far Pacific, China has been buying its way into restricted national fishing grounds, primarily using a process known as “flagging in”. This method typically involves the use of business partnerships to register foreign ships under the flag of another country, thereby allowing those vessels to fish in that country’s territorial waters.

Chinese companies now control at least 62 industrial squid-fishing vessels that fly the Argentine flag, which constitutes most of the country’s entire squid fleet. Many of these companies have been tied to a variety of crimes, including dumping fish at sea, turning off their transponders, and engaging in tax evasion and fraud. Trade records show that much of what is caught by these vessels is sent back to China, but some of the seafood is also exported to countries including the United States, Canada, Italy and Spain.

China now operates almost 250 of these flagged-in vessels in the waters of countries including Micronesia, Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, Morocco and even Iran, according to an investigation by The Outlaw Ocean Project.

Fishing in NZ waters

New Zealand has had its own shocking experiences of human rights and fisheries management abuses with foreign fishing crews. Until 2016, foreign-owned vessels were routinely chartered by local fishing companies with rights to take commercial species under our quota management system. Research revealed a pattern of labour abuses on South Korean-flagged ships chartered by New Zealand companies to fish in this country's waters. These revelations prompted the John Key government to require fishing vessels operating within our waters to be "reflagged" to New Zealand, making them subject to New Zealand employment, health and safety and fisheries management laws from 2016.

Despite the law change, the association of seafood with illegality remains. In 2022, New Zealand imported $23.4 million in fish from China, among the largest providers. Much of the seafood exported by China has been tied to slavery in processing plants, including the use of North Korean or Uyghur workers, which is banned by many countries. Labour advocates have called on New Zealand to adopt legislation that would require companies to address the presence of forced labour in their supply chains.

And recent investigations have documented a pervasive pattern of labour and environmental abuses tied to the Chinese fleet. In the Pacific, China's fishing fleet grew by more than 500% between 2012 and 2021 and its vessels are the most common sources of illegal or unreported fishing in the region. Consequently, concerns about the growth and conduct of China's fleet are particularly pressing for New Zealand and other Pacific nations.

Most national fisheries require vessels to be owned locally to keep profits within the country and make it easier to enforce fishing regulations. Flagging-in undermines those aims, said Duncan Copeland, the former executive director of Trygg Mat Tracking, a non-profit research organisation specialising in maritime crime. And aside from the sovereignty and financial concerns, food security is also undermined by the export of this vital source of affordable protein, added Dyhia Belhabib, a principal investigator at Ecotrust Canada, a charity focused on environmental activism.

These hundreds of industrial fishing ships also complicate China's ocean conservation goals. In 2017, after pressure from environmental groups about overfishing, Beijing announced that it would cap the size of its distant-water fleet at 3000 vessels. But that tally does not take into account the growing number of industry ships that China owns and flags into other countries.

In 2017, an inspection by the Union of Argentine Construction Workers found three unregistered workers housed in an unsanitary shipping container at the Ian Fish Patagonian Seafood processing facility in Puerto Madryn, owned by Xu Hai Jun. He was subsequently fined by the province's Ministry of Labor for inhumane treatment. Photos / LU17 Radio Station

Modern slavery

China is not the only nation whose fishing industry has engaged in human rights and marine crimes. In addition to the South Korean abuses experienced in New Zealand before 2016, Greenpeace in 2018 documented extensive modern slavery on Taiwanese vessels operating in the Pacific. Nonetheless, China's distant-water fishing fleet is the world's largest, with more than 6000 Chinese-flagged vessels operating across the globe. This is more than triple the size of the next-largest distant-water fleet.

In the past, when it came to targeting other countries' waters, Chinese fishing ships typically sat "on the outside", parking in international waters along sea borders, then running incursions across the line into domestic waters. In recent years, China has increasingly taken a "softer" approach, gaining control from the inside by paying to flag in their ships so they can fish in domestic waters. Subtler than simply entering foreign coastal areas to fish illegally, the tactic – which is often legal – is less likely to result in political clashes, bad press or sunken vessels.

China has not hidden how this approach factors into larger ambitions. In an academic paper published in 2023, Chinese fishery officials explained how they have relied extensively on Chinese companies, for example, to penetrate Argentina's territorial waters through "leasing and transfer methods", and how this is part of a global policy.

Flying the Ghanaian flag

The trend is especially pronounced in Africa, where Chinese companies operate flagged-in ships in the national waters of at least nine countries on the continent – among them, notably, Ghana, where more than 135

Chinese fishing ships flying the Ghanaian flag are fishing in national waters, even though foreign investment in fishing is technically illegal. Nonetheless, up to 95% of Ghana's industrial trawling fleet has some element of Chinese control, according to a 2018 report by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), an advocacy group.

China has also displaced fishing vessels from the European Union, right on its doorstep, in the waters of Morocco. In the recent past, dozens of vessels, most of them from Spain, fished with the permission of the Moroccan government inside the African country's exclusive economic zone. The agreement lapsed, however, in 2023 and China now operates at least six flagged-in vessels in Moroccan waters.

China has also established a growing presence across the Pacific Ocean. Chinese ships comb the waters of Fiji, the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, having flagged-in or signed access agreements with those countries, according to a report released in 2022 by the Congressional Research Service in the US. "Chinese fleets are active in waters far from China's shores," the report warned, "and the growth in their harvests threatens to worsen the already dire depletion in global fisheries."

In August 2019, a reporting team inspected a Chinese fishing vessel off the coast of West Africa. Photo / Fábio Nascimento / The Outlaw Ocean Project

Depleting fish stocks

As global demand for seafood has doubled since the 1960s, the appetite for fish has outpaced what can be sustainably caught. Now, more than a third of the world's stocks have been overfished. To feed the demand, the proliferation of foreign industrial fishing ships, especially from China, risks collapsing domestic fish stocks of countries in the global south, as well as jeopardising local livelihoods and compromising food security by exporting an essential source of protein. Western consumers, particularly in Europe, the US and Canada, are beneficiaries of this cheap and seemingly abundant seafood caught or processed by China.

“It’s a net transfer from poorer states which don’t have the capacity to protect their fisheries, to richer states which just want cheaper food products,” says Isaac B Kardon, senior fellow for China Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

But ocean sustainability and food security are by no means the only concern tied to the growth of China’s control of global seafood and penetration into foreign near-shore waters. Labor abuses and other crimes are a widespread problem with Chinese fishing ships.

On board the squidders

In January 2019, as part of a four-year investigation, a team of reporters from The Outlaw Ocean Project boarded a Chilean fishing ship in Punta Arenas, Chile, where the crew recounted recently, watching a Chinese captain on a nearby squid ship punching and slapping deckhands. Later that year, the same team of journalists was reporting at sea off the coast of the West African nation of Gambia, where they boarded a Chinese ship called the Victory 205. There, they found six African crew members sleeping on sea-soaked foam mattresses in a cramped and dangerously hot crawl space above the engine room of the ship, which was soon detained by local authorities for these labour and other violations.

In February 2022, the reporters boarded a Chinese squid jigger on the high seas near the Falkland Islands, where an 18-year-old Chinese deckhand nervously begged to be rescued, explaining that his and the rest of the workers’ passports had been confiscated. “Can you take us to the embassy in Argentina?” he asked.

Roughly four months later, the reporting team climbed onto another Chinese fishing ship in international waters near the Galapagos Islands, to document living conditions. As if in suspended animation, the crew of 30 men wore thousand-yard stares. Their teeth were yellowed from smoking, their skin ashen and their hands spongy from handling fresh squid. The walls and floors were covered in the slippery ooze of squid ink. The deckhands said they worked 15-hour days, six days a week. Mostly, they stood shin-deep in squid, monitoring the reels to ensure they did not jam, and tossing their catch into overflowing baskets for later sorting. Below deck, a cook stirred instant noodles and bits of squid in a rice cooker. He said the vessel had run out of vegetables and fruit – a common cause at sea of fatal malnutrition.

In June 2023, the same reporters were contacted by Uruguayan authorities seeking help after a local woman stumbled across a message in a bottle, washed ashore, apparently thrown from a Chinese squidder. “I am a crew member of the ship Lu Qing Yuan Yu 765 and I was locked up by the company,” the message said. “When you see this paper, please help me call the police! Help, help.”

For most of the past decade, one dead body has been dropped off every other month, on average, in the port of Montevideo, Uruguay, mostly from Chinese squid ships. Some of the workers on these ships have died from beriberi, an easily avoidable and reversible form of malnutrition caused by a B1 vitamin deficiency that experts say is a warning sign of criminal neglect. It's typically caused on ships by eating too much white rice or instant noodles, which lack the vitamin. At least 24 workers on 14 Chinese fishing ships suffered symptoms associated with beriberi between 2013 and 2021, according to a recent investigation by the Outlaw Ocean Project. Of those, at least 15 died. The investigation also documented dozens of cases of forced labour, wage theft, violence the confiscation of passports and deprivation of medical care.

Many of these crimes have taken place on the high seas, beyond any country's territorial jurisdiction. But increasingly, Chinese-owned vessels are fishing in the local waters of nations where policing is little better because governments lack the finances, the coast-guard vessels or the political will to board and spot-check the ships.

Several fishing vessels owned by an Argentine company with significant Chinese investment lie at dock in Buenos Aires. Two of the vessels have records of disembarking dead crew members in Montevideo, an Uruguayan port. One of the vessels previously fished in international waters around Argentina and has a record of disabling its automatic identification system: an indicator of potential illegal fishing. Photo / Pedro Soto

China's geopolitical reach

To help create jobs, make money and feed its growing middle class, the Chinese government heavily supports its fishing industry with billions of dollars in subsidies for things like fuel discounts, ship building or engine purchases. The Chinese fishing companies flagging into poorer countries' waters are also eligible for these subsidies.

“The reason why the Chinese subsidise these fleets could be not only for the fish,” says Fernando Rivera, chairman of the Argentine Fishing Industry Chamber. “It has a very important geopolitical aspect.”

As US and European fishing fleets and navies have shrunk, so, too, has Western development funding and market investment in Latin America, Africa and the Pacific. This has created a void that China is filling as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing’s global development programme. Between 2000 and 2020, China’s trade with Latin America and the Caribbean grew from US$12 billion (NZ$20b) to $315b, according to the World Economic Forum. China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China, two major state-owned Chinese banks, provided $137b in loans to Latin American governments between 2005 and 2020. In exchange, China has at times received exclusive access to a wide range of resources, from oil fields to lithium mines.

The maritime domain is an important front in China’s growth plans, which includes exerting power not just over the high seas and contested waters like those in the South China Sea but also consolidating control over shipping, fishing in foreign coastal waters and ports abroad. Chinese companies now operate dozens of overseas processing plants and cold-storage facilities and terminals in more than 90 foreign fishing or shipping ports abroad, according to research by Kardon.

Though most of these business ventures go unnoticed, some of them have sparked controversy. Starting in 2007, China extended more than a billion dollars’ worth of loans to Sri Lanka as part of a plan for a Chinese state-owned company to build a port and an airport. The deal was made based on the promise that the project would generate more than enough revenue for Sri Lanka to pay back these loans. By 2017, however, the port and airport had not recuperated the debt and Sri Lanka had no way to pay back the loan. China struck a new deal, extending credit further. The deal gave China majority control over the port and the surrounding area for 99 years.

In 2018, a Chinese company bought a 28-hectare plot of land in Montevideo, Uruguay, to build a “megaport” consisting of two half-mile-long docks, a tax-exempt “free-trade zone”, a new ice factory, a ship-repair warehouse, a fuel depot and dorms for staff. The plan was eventually cancelled after local protests, but the Uruguayan government later announced that it would build the port itself, with foreign investment, and China’s ambassador, Wang Gang, expressed interest in managing the project.

More recently, in May 2021, Sierra Leone signed an agreement with China to build a new fishing harbour and fishmeal processing factory on a beach near a national park. In response, local organisations pushed for more transparency around the deal, which, they said, would harm the area’s biodiversity, according to a 2023 report by The Stimson Center.

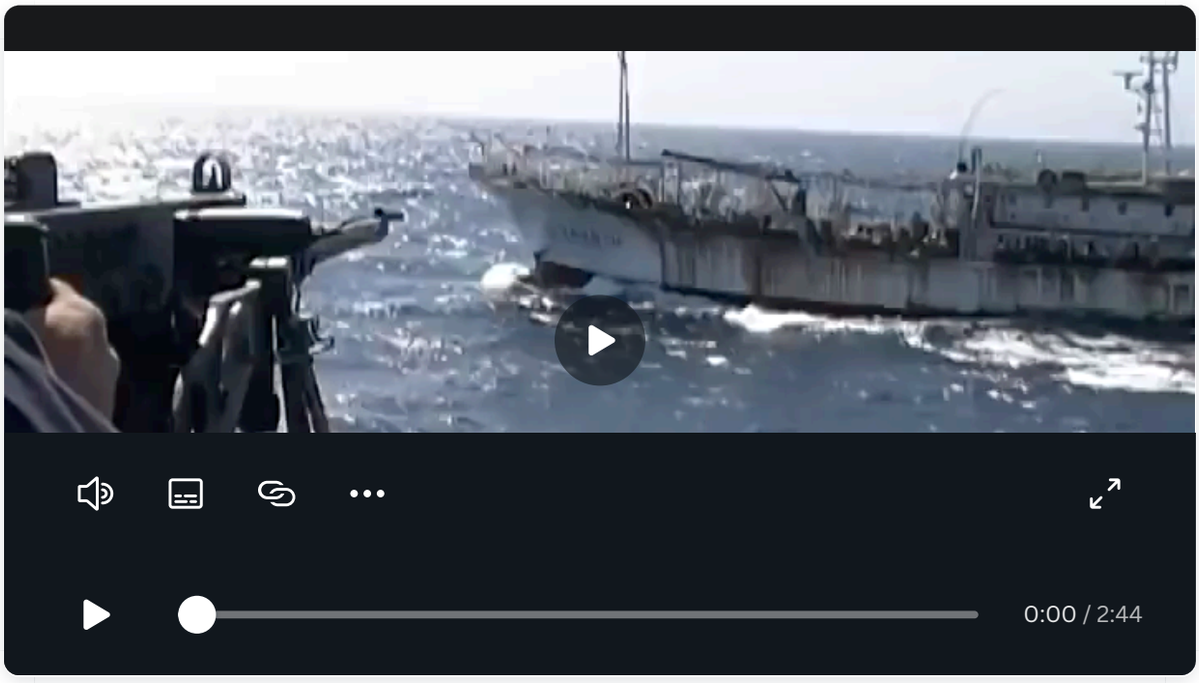
Pacific influence

The growth of China-connected fishing in the Pacific is especially concerning given growing worries by the US, Australia and New Zealand about the country's efforts to build influence in the region. Their main concern is that China may build a military-capable port in the Solomon Islands, which has signed several deals with Chinese state-owned enterprises that would substantially expand China's presence in its fishing industry (the most concerning of those agreements, which would have seen a Chinese state-owned enterprise take over an entire island, was subsequently disallowed).

Concerns about potential Chinese military bases have also focused on two other Pacific nations where the country is dramatically expanding its fishing presence: Vanuatu and Kiribati.

In Argentina, China has provided billions of dollars in currency swaps, providing a crucial lifeline amid skyrocketing domestic inflation and growing hesitancy from other international investment or lending organisations. China has also made or promised billion-dollar investments in Argentina's railway system, hydroelectric dams, lithium mines and solar and wind power plants.

For Beijing, this money has created a variety of business opportunities. But it has also bought the type of political influence that became crucially important for the crew of the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10, which Argentine authorities sank in 2016 for illegal fishing. All 29 of the men on the Chinese jigger were rescued from the water that day. Most of the men were scooped up by another Chinese fishing ship, Zhong Yuan Yu 11, which was also owned by CNFC and had its own history of illegal fishing in Argentine waters. These men were immediately taken directly back to China. Four of the crew, however, including the captain, were rescued by the Argentine Coast Guard, brought to shore, and charged with a range of crimes, including violating fishing laws, resisting arrest and endangering a coast-guard vessel, and put under house arrest.



Caption: The Prefecto Derbes, an Argentine Coast Guard vessel, shot at the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10 when it attempted to evade arrest for illegal fishing. Credit/Argentine Coast Guard

Roberto Wyn Hughes, a lawyer who frequently defends Chinese fishing companies, said that in these years, Argentine authorities typically did not prosecute the companies involved. Instead, they normally allowed the Chinese companies to pay a fine, after which their crew would be released. The sinking of the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 10 was different, however, because it sparked a media storm in Argentina and could not be handled as discreetly. Local news outlets described the ramming by the Chinese and showed footage of the sinking.

Argentina backs down

Hugo Sastre, the judge handling the case, initially justified the charges filed. The Chinese officers had placed “both the life and property of the Chinese vessel itself and the personnel and ship of the Argentine Prefecture at risk”, he said. But China’s foreign ministry soon pushed back. A spokesman told reporters that he had “serious concerns” about the sinking and that his government had been engaged on behalf of the crew.

Three days later, the posture from the Argentine government began to shift. Susana Malcorra, Argentina’s foreign minister, told reporters that the charges had “provoked a reaction of great concern from the Chinese government”. She explained that she had reassured China that Argentina would follow local and international laws. “We hope it will not impact bilateral relations,” she told reporters. Several weeks later, the Argentine judiciary also fell in line. “Given the doubt that weighs on the facts and criminal responsibility” of the captain, he and the three other sailors would be released without penalty, the court announced. On April 7, the four Chinese crew members were flown back to China.

By May, Argentina’s foreign minister was on a plane to Beijing to meet the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi. After their meeting, China’s foreign minister hailed their countries’ “voyage of overall co-operation” and promised another surge of Chinese investment to Argentina. Yi added: “China will continue its support to the efforts made by Argentina in safeguarding its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

Covid on board

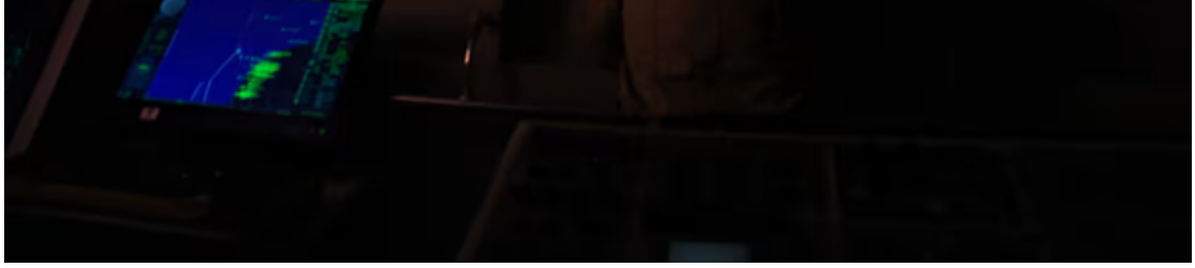
Chinese political influence shows up on board the fishing vessels as well. The case of Manuel Quiquinte is illustrative. In the spring of 2021, Quiquinte, an Argentinian crew member on a squid jigger called the Xin Shi Ji 89, contracted Covid while at sea. Owned by the Chinese, the ship was flagged to Argentina and jigging in Argentinian waters. Its crew was a mix of Argentinian and Chinese workers. Several days after Quiquinte fell ill, the Argentine captain called the Chinese owners to ask if the ship could go ashore in Argentina to get medical care. Company officials said no and to keep fishing. Quiquinte died on the ship shortly thereafter, in May.

In court papers tied to Quiquinte's death, several of the ship's Argentinian crew members explained that despite Argentine law forbidding non-Argentinians from being the captains or senior officers on these fishing ships, the reality is that the Chinese crew on board make the decisions. Even when they are designated on paper as lowly deckhands, the Chinese decide whether the ship will enter port to drop off a sick worker, like Quiquinte. The Argentinians might be designated as the engineers on board but they are not supposed to touch the machines when the vessel leaves port. "The only thing we do is to assume responsibility for any accident," Fernando Daniel Marquez, the engineer on the Xin Shi Ji 89, said in the court documents.

When contacted by reporters about the death, the vessel's parent company Zhejiang Ocean Family said that the crew member had tested negative for Covid-19 before working on board but had indeed contracted the illness on the vessel and died after his condition deteriorated rapidly. Ocean Family said the vessel belonged to a local Argentine company in which Ocean Family had invested, and this local company had handled the situation.

On land and at sea, the Chinese use a variety of approaches to gain access to foreign waters and circumvent rules meant to protect local interests. In some countries, they sell or lease their ships to locals but retain control over decisions and profits. In other places where the governments forbid foreigners from fishing their waters, Chinese companies pay fees through "access agreements". Elsewhere, China has gone around the prohibitions on foreign shipowners by partnering with local residents and giving them a majority ownership stake.

Typically, about a quarter of the workers on fishing ships owned by the Chinese operating in Argentinian waters are Chinese nationals, according to a review of about a dozen crew manifests published by local media. Jorge Frias, president of the Argentine fishing captains' union, explained that on Argentine-flagged ships, the Chinese call the shots. The captains are Argentinians, but "fishing masters", who are Chinese, decide where to go and when.



From the bridge of the Prefecto Derbes while it conducts a night patrol, the lights of the foreign fishing fleet can be seen. Photo / Milko Schvartzmann / The Outlaw Ocean Project

Western 'hypocrisy'

The scourge of illegal and overfishing did not originate with China, of course. Western industrial fleets dominated the world's oceans for much of the 20th century, fishing unsustainably in ways that have helped cause the current crisis, explained Daniel Pauly, a marine biologist at the University of British Columbia.

China's expansionist methods are also not historically unique. The US has a long and infamous record of intervening abroad when foreign leaders begin erecting highly protectionist laws. In the past several decades, the tactic of "flagging in" has been used by American and Icelandic fishing companies. More recently, as China has increased its control over global fishing, the US and European nations have jumped at the opportunity to focus international attention on China's misdeeds.

Still, China has a well-documented reputation for violating international fishing laws and standards, bullying other ships, intruding on the maritime territory of other countries and abusing its fishing workers. In 2021, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, a nonprofit research group, ranked China as the world's biggest purveyor of illegal fishing. But even frequent culprits can be easy scapegoats: a country that regularly flouts norms and breaks the law can also at times be a victim of misinformation. When criticised in the media, China typically pushes back, not without reason, by dismissing their criticism as politically motivated and by accusing its detractors of hypocrisy.

Regulations violated

China's sheer size, ubiquity and poor track record on labour and marine conservation is raising concerns. In Ghana, for instance, industrial trawlers, most of which are owned by China, catch more than 100,000 tonnes of fish each year, according to the Environmental Justice Foundation in 2017, and the country's fishing stocks are now in crisis, as local fishermen's incomes have dropped by up to 40% over the past two decades.

"Fishing vessel owners and operators exploit African flags to escape effective oversight and to fish unsustainably and illegally in sovereign African waters," wrote TMT, the nonprofit organisation that tracks maritime crime, adding that the companies were creating "a situation where they can harness the resources of a state without any meaningful restrictions or management oversight".

In the Pacific, an inspection this year by local police and the US Coast Guard found that six Chinese flagged-in ships fishing in the waters of Vanuatu had violated regulations requiring them to record the amount of fish they catch.

And in South America, the increasingly foreign presence in territorial waters is stoking nationalist worry in places like Peru and Argentina. "China is becoming the only player, by displacing local companies or purchasing them," said Alfonso Miranda Eyzaguirre, a former Peruvian minister of production. Pablo Isasa, a captain of an Argentinian hake trawler, added: "We have the enemy inside and out."

This story was produced by The Outlaw Ocean Project with reporting contributed by Maya Martin, Jake Conley, Joe Galvin, Sue Ryan, Austin Brush and Teresa Tomassoni. Bellingcat also contributed reporting. The Outlaw Ocean Project is a Washington DC-based non-profit journalism organisation dedicated to investigative stories about sea-related human rights, labour and environmental concerns.

Map showing the Chinese-owned foreign-flagged fishing vessels around the world. Image / supplied

Who rules the high seas?

In Argentina, four Chinese fishing companies loom largest: Shanghai Ocean Fisheries, the Zhejiang Ocean Family, the Shandong Bodelong Group and the China National Fisheries Company, or CNFC. Through local subsidiaries, these companies operate more than two dozen ships that are flagged to Argentina and that fish its coast. They have also been extensively tied to labour abuses at sea and illegal fishing in Argentine waters or abroad.

At least 15 of these Argentine-flagged ships belong to Shanghai Ocean Fisheries, a subsidiary of the state-owned Bright Food, a multinational conglomerate that owns fishing companies and processing facilities in countries including Canada, Spain, Australia and the Marshall Islands. The conglomerate has long ties to Xinjiang and a state-run paramilitary organisation, called Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, which has been sanctioned by the US for labour abuses. The conglomerate signed a co-operation deal with the paramilitary organisation in 2007 and owns farms and processing facilities in the province. Two of Bright Food's vessels disembarked dead crew members in Montevideo in 2022; one of those vessels, the Hu Shun Yu 07, also has a history of disabling its transponder, a violation of Chinese law and a common indicator of possible illegal fishing. The conglomerate has apparent ties to the use of North Korean labour in China, which is a UN sanctions violation. A video posted to Douyin [Chinese TikTok] in June 2021 shows North Korean women in a truck loading squid from one of Bright Food's Argentina-flagged vessels, the Hu Yu 962.

The Zhejiang Ocean Family operates at least 12 squid jiggers that fly the Argentine flag and fish local waters. Workers on another dozen ships owned by the same company and that mostly fish in Pacific waters reported that they were physically and verbally abused, sexually assaulted, forced to work shifts of between 18 hours and two days. These workers also said that they had their identification cards confiscated and lacked sufficient medication, food or water, according to an EJF report published in 2024. In at least two cases, workers killed themselves or died after medical neglect.

Between 2015 and 2019, according to EJF researchers, Chinese-owned ships engaged in at least 42 cases of illegal fishing in Argentine waters. The Zhejiang Ocean Family declined requests for comment.

The Shandong Bodelong Group is the parent company of an Argentine-flagged ship called the Lu Qing Yuan Yu 280, which in 2020 dumped overboard thousands of pounds of fish from Argentine waters, according to footage shared by Luis Antonio Ortiz, an Argentine engineer from the ship who recorded the incident on his cellphone. Ortiz said that the captain had ordered the dumping to make space for new catch in the ship's freezer, an illegal practice called "highgrading" that circumvents catch limits. After learning of his footage, Patagonia Fishing, the local company that operates the Lu Qing Yuan Yu 280, fired Ortiz. EJF found that the Shandong Bodelong Group was involved with 10 cases of illegal fishing between 2015 and 2019. Patagonia Fishing and Shandong Bodelong Group declined requests for comment.

CNFC, which operates four ships flagged to Argentina, is the largest fisheries company in China and has a long history, having dispatched the first vessels in the country's modern distant-water fleet in 1985. As the owner of at least 250 fishing boats and fuel carriers, and more than 15 refrigeration vessels that carry the catch back to shore, CNFC forms the connective tissue for much of the Chinese fishing industry. The company also owns many of the worst scofflaw ships. In West Africa, reporters identified more than three dozen cases of CNFC ships fishing without licences or in prohibited areas, using forbidden net types and underreporting their catch in the past decade.

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