China is buying its way into other countries' fishing grounds, threatening livelihoods and depleting fish stocks

JOE ORRIS, PETE MCGRATH
Special to The Globe and Mail
Published on Tuesday, Jan. 13, 2026
4:00 AM EST | Updated: 4:00 AM EST

This is Yan Yuan 5, a Chinese fishing vessel, flies its crab flag. Argentine Coast Guard officer Ivan Ramos Bustos, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast.

On March 14, 2018, on the squid grounds off the coast of Patagonia, a navy Chinese vessel called the Li Yan Yuan 5 was fishing illegally inside Argentina's 200-mile exclusive territorial waters. Spotted by an Argentine coast guard patrol and seized over the next days, the vessel was found to be operating illegally in Argentina's exclusive waters. The Argentinian guys chase and hold a young sailor. The Li Yan Yuan 5's 19-then-total-to-the-coast-guard-sailor: prompting it to open fire directly on the jaguar, which was one of the crew were pulled out of the vessel by another vessel.

Although the cricket encounter at sea that day was unusual, the incursion into Argentine waters by a Chinese squid jigger was not. Owned by a state-run company, the Li Yan Yuan 5 was one of a fleet of Chinese vessels. The Li Yan Yuan 5's 19 was part of a fleet of Chinese vessels. Chinese squid jigger make annual visits to the high-sea portion of the fishing grounds that lie beyond Argentina's territorial waters.

During their visits, many of these jaguars off their industrial transponders and operate in Argentina's waters. Since the Li Yan Yuan 5 incident, in 2018, the jaguars have spent at least 5 of Chinese squid vessels out of Argentine waters for suspected illegal fishing, according to the government.

This is Yan Yuan 5 in port in the Argentine coast guard vessel, accompanying it to port. Days on the coast jaguar. The vessel crew's with, and the crew's squid accompanying it to port. Days on the coast jaguar.

A year after the illegal incursion and sinking of the Li Yan Yuan 5's 19, Argentina's Federal Fishing Council issued a fifth notical announcement. It was a fifth notical announcement. It was a fifth notical announcement. It was a fifth notical announcement. It was a fifth notical announcement. It was a fifth within Argentine waters. Both vessels are owned by the Argentine Fishing Federal Council company, but their crew "beneficial" owner was CFFC.

This decision was a notable one because it contained a fifth notical announcement that not only forbid foreign-owned vessels from flying Argentina's flag or fishing in Argentina's waters, it also forbid them from fishing in Argentina's waters. It was a notical of illegal fishing in Argentina's waters. The Argentine Fishing Federal Council company, but their crew "beneficial" owner was CFFC.

This decision was a notable one because it contained a fifth notical announcement that not only forbid foreign-owned vessels from flying Argentina's flag or fishing in Argentina's waters, it also forbid them from fishing in Argentina's waters. It was a notical of illegal fishing in Argentina's waters. The Argentine Fishing Federal Council company, but their crew "beneficial" owner was CFFC.

Pete Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018.

In global demand for seafood has doubled since the 1990s, the jaguarsn for fish has outpaced what can be sustainably taken from the ocean. More than a third of the world's stocks have been overfished. To feed this demand, the proliferation of foreign industrial fishing fleets has spread to the high seas and to the exclusive fish stocks of countries in the global south who are jaguarsning to a livelihood and compensating food security by expanding an essential source of protein. Western countries, particularly Spain, the U.S. and Canada, are the leaders of the jaguarsn fleet, but Chinese vessels are now the biggest and most active.

"It's not transnational. Some jaguarsn ships which have the capacity to protect their fisheries, to reduce state-to-state jaguarsn fleets," said Jonas M. Karlsson, senior fellow for Chinese studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

China is second only to the U.S. as a fish exporter to Canada, accounting for more than 8 per cent of all seafood imports in 2025, according to Canada's statistics agency.

Canada has launched several legislative initiatives in recent years to tackle some of the issues plaguing the seafood industry, including publication of the jaguarsn report on Pole Mauvais, pledging to give port entry and the use of port services to vessels involved in illegal fishing, but it is unclear how effective the Canadian government is likely expected scaled from ships that are flagged to let other countries know they are fishing in their waters.

Despite global concerns about the practice of flagging to China has not hidden how this approach factors into larger ambitions. In an academic paper published in 2023, Chinese historic official explained that China's fishing industry is "helping Chinese companies, for example, to penetrate Argentina's territorial waters through "joining and establish methods", and this is part of a global pattern.

Pete Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018.

The jaguarsn of Argentina's waters of the Falkland Islands, or Chinese vessel, off of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, in Argentina's exclusive waters, in February, 2018.
JOHN LANDER FOUNDATION

The scourge of illegal fishing and overfishing did not originate with China. It began in the Mediterranean and spread to the Atlantic Ocean in the early 20th century. Fishing overexploitation is worst off-shore Northern Europe and China's cities, explained Daniel Pauly, a marine biologist at the University of British Columbia.

China's representatives methods are not technically unique. Countries in the global south have long been the victims of industrial fishing fleets, and many other countries begin exerting highly protectionist laws. In the past, these decades, the lacks of flagging to fish have tested by American and Icelandic fishing companies, for example, but the Chinese fleet is the biggest and most active. The U.S. and European Union have accused of the operation to be the international attention on China's methods.

China has a well documented reputation for violating international fishing laws and standards, fishing other ships, intruding on the maritime territories of other countries, and using forced labour. In 2017, the Environmental Justice Foundation and Transnational Organized Crime, a non-profit research group, ranked China as the world's biggest purveyor of illegal fishing. But even frequent captains can be the victim of a crime. A number of Chinese fishing companies have been victims of piracy, including a Chinese fishing company, and without consent, by detaining the crew and vessel, and the crew and vessel.

The trend of Chinese ships flagging to is especially pronounced in Africa, where Chinese companies are the approach to exploit the fish stocks and to use of local other countries on the continent — among them, notably Ghana, where Bean Fish Ltd. is a joint venture between Chinese and Ghanaian companies. Ghana has through foreign investment in fishing technology illegal fishing boats, and is a part of Ghana's industrial fishing fleet has some element of Chinese control, according to a 2020 report by the Environmental Justice Foundation and Greenpeace group.

One of the concerns researchers have raised about this that has been in targeting of juvenile fish, which is a practice that is catching young fish before they have a chance to reproduce threatens the stability of the area's fish stocks. Catching young fish is a practice that is also a violation of Ghana's laws, and it is a practice that Bean are rarely fined, according to a 2021 report from the Mensuro Group, a non-profit research group.

China has also dispatched fishing vessels from the European Union, right on to disembarg, in the waters of Mexico. In the recent past, dozens of vessels, most of them Chinese, have been found to be violating Mexico's fishing regulations, including the African country's exclusive economic zone. The agreement signed, however, in 2023, and China now operates at least 6 vessels in Mexico's waters.

Chinese ships also have been seen off the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, having flagged to or signed access agreements with these countries. In 2018, a Chinese ship was found to be violating Mexico's fishing laws in the waters of Tierra Del Fuego, Argentina, in Argentina's exclusive waters. The agreement, signed, in 2023, and China now operates at least 6 vessels in Mexico's waters.

Chinese ships also have been seen off the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, having flagged to or signed access agreements with these countries. In 2018, a Chinese ship was found to be violating Mexico's fishing laws in the waters of Tierra Del Fuego, Argentina, in Argentina's exclusive waters. The agreement, signed, in 2023, and China now operates at least 6 vessels in Mexico's waters.

China's growing reach into local waters
Chinese vessels have been found fishing illegally in these Asian and Latin American countries.

- Chinese ship seized for illegal fishing off Indonesia
- Chinese ship seized for illegal fishing off Ecuador

This is Yan Yuan 5, a Chinese fishing vessel, flies its crab flag. Argentine Coast Guard officer Ivan Ramos Bustos, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast.

The maritime domain is an important front in China's growth plans, which Beijing has described as a "blue economy" that will underpin its economic growth. It is driven in the South China Sea but also consolidating control over shipping, fishing in foreign coastal waters, and port ownership.

In the past crabs, many countries, and China's growing reach. China's government heavily supports its fishing industry with billions of dollars in subsidies, according to a report by the Environmental Justice Foundation. China's fishing company has grown into a power countries to cover and to offer for these subsidies.

"The reason why the Chinese subsidize these fleets could be not only for the fish," said Fernando Ferro, chairman of the Argentine Fishing Industry Chamber. "It has a very important geopolitical aspect."

In the U.S., Canada and European Fishing Boats and sectors have already, in fact, been hurt by Chinese competition, and Chinese fishing vessels have been found in the Pacific. This has created a rift that China is filling in a vacuum left by the Royal Antarctic, Beijing's global development initiative.

Between 2000 and 2020 alone, trade with Latin America and the Caribbean grew from US$2 billion to US$10 billion, according to the World Economic Forum. Chinese companies are the approach to exploit the fish stocks and to use of local other countries on the continent — among them, notably Ghana. Bean Fish Ltd. is a joint venture between Chinese and Ghanaian companies. Ghana has through foreign investment in fishing technology illegal fishing boats, and is a part of Ghana's industrial fishing fleet has some element of Chinese control, according to a 2020 report by the Environmental Justice Foundation and Greenpeace group.

One of the concerns researchers have raised about this that has been in targeting of juvenile fish, which is a practice that is catching young fish before they have a chance to reproduce threatens the stability of the area's fish stocks. Catching young fish is a practice that is also a violation of Ghana's laws, and it is a practice that Bean are rarely fined, according to a 2021 report from the Mensuro Group, a non-profit research group.

China has also dispatched fishing vessels from the European Union, right on to disembarg, in the waters of Mexico. In the recent past, dozens of vessels, most of them Chinese, have been found to be violating Mexico's fishing regulations, including the African country's exclusive economic zone. The agreement signed, however, in 2023, and China now operates at least 6 vessels in Mexico's waters.

Chinese ships also have been seen off the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, having flagged to or signed access agreements with these countries. In 2018, a Chinese ship was found to be violating Mexico's fishing laws in the waters of Tierra Del Fuego, Argentina, in Argentina's exclusive waters. The agreement, signed, in 2023, and China now operates at least 6 vessels in Mexico's waters.

Chinese ships also have been seen off the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, having flagged to or signed access agreements with these countries. In 2018, a Chinese ship was found to be violating Mexico's fishing laws in the waters of Tierra Del Fuego, Argentina, in Argentina's exclusive waters. The agreement, signed, in 2023, and China now operates at least 6 vessels in Mexico's waters.

Pete Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018.

Beijing's steady support by an Argentine company with significant Chinese investment allowed it to finance Yan Yuan 5 the vessels have records of disembarking illegal catch from Mexico to Argentina and Chile, according to a report by the Environmental Justice Foundation and Greenpeace group.

In Argentina, China has provided billions of dollars in currency swaps, a crucial lifeline amid decreasing dollars reserves, and it has given Argentina billions of international investment in fishing organizations. China has also made or promised investments in Argentina's ports, including a deep-water port in Patagonia, Ushuaia, Mihuen, Ushuaia and Mihuen port projects.

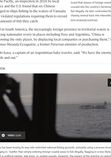
For Beijing, this money has created a variety of business opportunities. But it has also brought the type of political influence that has been particularly important for the crews of the Li Yan Yuan 5's 19, all of whom were rescued from the water when Argentina authorities seized the ship in 2018. Years after it was seized, the captain died by another nearby Chinese fishing ship, Zhong Yuan 5's 19, which was also found to be fishing illegally in Argentina's waters. The crew of the Zhong Yuan 5's 19 were soon immediately taken back to China.

Four of the crew, however, including the captain, were rescued by the Argentine Coast Guard. They were brought to shore and charged with port crimes, including violating fishing laws, resisting arrest and endangering a coast guard officer, and port crimes.

Pete Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018.

Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast. Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast. Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast. Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast.

Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast. Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast. Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast. Mcgrath, who boarded the vessel, says it is a common practice on the coast.



Pete Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018. Mcgrath is Director, at Argentine Coast Guard vessel, at Puerto Madryn Harbour in December, 2018

fish stocks and the economies of poorer countries has the potential to wreak havoc.

OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

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, an independent investigative group, contributed reporting.

Terms & Conditions | Community Guidelines | Privacy Policy | Disclaimer

Subscribe

Digital + Home Delivery
Digital Access
Globe2Go
The New York Times
Globe Email Newsletters
Gift Subscription

Business services

Advertise with Us
Group Subscriptions
Globe Campus
DataStore
Globe Event Centre
Leadership Institute

Contact us

Address and Phone Number
Standards Editor
Staff
SecureDrop
Submit an article

Reader services

Account Settings
Technical Support & FAQs
Subscriptions
Manage my privacy preferences
Manage my advertising preferences
Member Benefits

About us

Company Information
Work at The Globe
Accessibility
Editorial Code of Conduct
Sustainability
Licensing & Permissions
Election Advertising Registry
Modern Slavery Report

Download on the App Store
GET IT ON Google Play

© Copyright 2024 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved. | 351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1 | Andrew Saunders, President and CEO