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SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR — El Salvador has suddenly become a focal point of growing “concern” to the U.S. government about China’s presence in Central America and alleged attempts to establish a military presence in the region.

ns over Chinese activities in the region were stirred up when U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Jean Manes warned of the possibility that the country's commercial shipping port, La Union, could be transformed into a "military base."



The accusation comes amid a raging trade war launched by Washington against Beijing, as well as efforts by El Salvador's left-wing FMLN party to counterbalance its relations with the United States amid ongoing controversy over U.S. authorities' abuse of migrant families and children from Central America.



Earlier this month, Manes alleged that China's investments and business ties in the Caribbean and Central America, which remain modest, had become a concern for the U.S. Department of State owing to the potential that they could mask a creeping "militarization of the region."

Manes said:

" They [the Chinese] are trying to find weak spots in the region, where they can make these kinds of arrangements ... we are concerned that it is not only investment in a port, but then they want to do something with their military and they want to expand Chinese influence in the region. It is a strategic matter and we all need to keep our eyes open to what is happening."

The ruling former Marxist guerilla party FMLN is currently looking into granting concessions for the Port of La Union to an international operator. According to

ment media, China is the country most likely to win the concession, although the process is still in a very early stage.



The port lies on the Pacific coast in the Gulf of Fonseca, where the maritime borders of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua all converge. The southeast of the country, where the port is located, may soon be designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) if a draft bill presented by the ruling party early this month manages to pass.

The U.S. Department of Defense had warned in February of a creeping Chinese presence in Central America, pointing to Chinese construction projects and port terminal management contracts along the Panama Canal. Yet even the Pentagon didn't raise the same accusations as Ambassador Manes, whose State Department is now overseen by Secretary Mike Pompeo, who has hawkish positions on China.

Last year, then-CIA Director Pompeo hyped the Trump administration's position that China poses a threat to the U.S. — claiming in an interview that, among China, Iran, and Russia, it is China that “has the capacity to present the greatest rivalry to America over the medium and long term.”

In a 2016 book published by the Council on Foreign Relations, authors Robert D. Blackwell and Jennifer M. Harris detailed the alleged Chinese threat to U.S. hegemony in the region, unfavorably comparing Washington's coercive power to Beijing's ability to assist industrial development and offer condition-free aid to increase its geopolitical leverage:

“ The United States has no coherent policies to deal with these Chinese geoeconomic actions — many of which are aimed squarely at America's allies and friends ... It gives China free rein in vulnerable African and Latin American nations. ”

Central America has long been “vulnerable,” unstable, and stricken with maldevelopment and poverty, stemming from a history of U.S. imperialist exploitation and political meddling in the region, ranging from its historic invasions of nations to its propping-up of



El Salvador's U.S.-loyal Hard-Right points the finger

Such claims of Chinese military activity in Central America should be taken with a grain of salt, at the very least, given the right-wing political forces and pro-U.S. business circles that are levying the accusations.

The hard-right ARENA Party, or Nationalist Republican Alliance – which enjoyed major backing from President Ronald Reagan during the brutal civil war in the country of the 1980s through the training and arming of right-wing death squads – has accused China of ulterior motives underlying its interest in the Port of La Union.

“What is there is a geopolitical interest, its medium- and long-term considerations: China’s objective is to interfere in the security zone of the United States,” ARENA Deputy Mauricio Vargas told Salvadoran newspaper ABC, echoing Pompeo’s talking points.

The National Association of Private Enterprise has also criticized the SEZ and El Salvador’s relations with the Chinese government, warning that the lack of transparency could be a cover for unfavorable loans, corruption, and an influx of Chinese workers.

Others have warned, without citing any evidence, of the possibility that China will interfere in next year’s elections and fund the FMLN’s campaign efforts under the cover of large infrastructure projects in the country.

The FMLN, for its part, has balanced its left-wing and anti-imperialist roots with a foreign policy that has preserved its collaboration with Washington on various security efforts aimed at drug interdiction or combating transnational organized crime. Unlike China, the U.S has significant military installations across the region, including an air base in Honduras and a radar station in El Salvador aimed at countering drug trafficking.



Deputy Nidia Diaz told Salvadoran reporters:



“ They are afraid of [Chinese] military expansionism, but the United States has military bases throughout Latin America. Here, they have an anti-narcotics base. There is nothing to worry about.

I don’t know what they base [the suspicion] on. I don’t know of a single Chinese base in this region, to this very day.”

The U.S. ambassador’s warning largely follows the anti-China orthodoxy that prevails in Washington and sees any Chinese business activities as a threat to U.S. imperialism’s dominance in its historic backyard.

Top Photo | An aerial image of the Port of La Union in El Salvador. Photo | Public Domain

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