

Buildup resumed at suspected Chinese military site in UAE, leak says

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/26/chinese-military-base-uae/>

American spy services detected construction at a suspected Chinese military facility in the United Arab Emirates in December — one year after Washington’s oil-rich ally announced it was halting the project because of U.S. concerns, according to top-secret intelligence documents obtained by The Washington Post.

Activities at a port near Abu Dhabi are among several developments in the UAE involving the Chinese military that U.S. intelligence is monitoring out of concern that the Emiratis — a longtime U.S. security partner — are developing closer security ties to China at the expense of U.S. interests, according to the documents and related interviews with senior Biden administration officials. Sightings of Chinese military personnel around other sensitive construction sites have also disturbed U.S. officials.

Beijing’s efforts in the UAE are part of an ambitious campaign by China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to build a global military network that includes at least five overseas bases and 10 logistical support sites by 2030, says one of the documents, which features a map of other planned facilities in the Middle East and Southeast Asia and throughout Africa.

Chinese military officials call the initiative “Project 141,” the leaked materials say.

The Post obtained the classified documents, which have not been previously reported, from a trove of intelligence material leaked onto the Discord messaging platform. The disclosures, including details about Beijing’s aerial surveillance program and plans to develop supersonic drones, come at a time of heightened tensions between the United States and China as both countries vie for global influence and resources.

The level of concern about China’s actions in the UAE varies among U.S. officials, with some viewing the development as manageable and others seeing a significant threat that warrants more forceful pressure from the United States. There is also a lack of consensus about whether the UAE has made a strategic decision to deeply align with China or maintain a balancing act that includes the United States, its longtime protector.

“There are some people in the administration who think the UAE has fundamentally decided to work with us. I do not believe that,” said a senior administration official, who like others interviewed for this report spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive security matter.

The UAE’s leaders “think that China is hugely important right now and rising in the Middle East,” this person said.

The revelations coincide with China’s quest to expand its role as a global player — mediating a rapprochement between [arch-nemeses Saudi Arabia and Iran](#) last month and putting forward a 12-point peace plan in February to [resolve the war in Ukraine](#). The Middle East has become a

particular focal point of U.S.-China competition as Beijing strikes trade deals and forges closer political ties in a region previously dominated by the United States.

A UAE representative, alluding to the FBI's arrest of [a suspect in the leak case](#), declined to answer questions about the intelligence documents, saying that "our policy is not to comment on out-of-context material purported to have been criminally obtained."

A spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, Liu Pengyu, said U.S. concerns about China's military facilities abroad are misplaced.

"As a principle, China conducts normal law enforcement and security cooperation with other countries on the basis of equality and mutual benefit," Liu said.

"The U.S. runs more than 800 overseas military bases, which has caused concern by many countries around the world. It is in no position to criticize other countries," he added.

U.S. officials insist they will not allow a Chinese base to become operational in the UAE, saying that such a facility would jeopardize sensitive U.S. military activities in the Middle East.

"UAE is a close partner, and we are regularly engaged with its senior leadership on a number of regional and global matters," a second senior administration official said. This person said there were "no current indications" a Chinese base would be completed without a significant uptick in activity that would be noticeable.

U.S. officials are particularly focused on the Khalifa Port, about 50 miles north of the capital, where a Chinese shipping conglomerate operates. In December 2021, the UAE announced that it halted Chinese construction at that facility after U.S. officials argued that Beijing intended to use it for military purposes.

"We stopped the work on the facilities," Anwar Gargash, a diplomatic adviser to the UAE's leadership, said at a Washington think tank event as the country faced public pressure to address a Wall Street Journal [article](#) detailing China's activities.

But a year later, the PLA facility "likely was connected to municipal power and water" and "a walled perimeter was completed for a PLA logistics storage site," one of the leaked U.S. intelligence documents says. A second document warns that "the PLA facility" is "a major part" of Beijing's plan to establish a military base in the UAE.

The newly detected activity there has convinced some U.S. officials that the UAE is not playing it "straight" with Washington.

"I don't think that they've gone to the Chinese and said, 'It's over, we're not going to do this,' " the first administration official said.

The Biden administration also is concerned that PLA personnel have been observed at two UAE military bases in the country's interior, where the Arab ally operates drones and ballistic missile defense systems, said officials familiar with the matter.

In addition, U.S. officials believe the PLA has been involved in the construction and expansion of an airstrip down the coast from Abu Dhabi, though some in the administration contend the existence of PLA personnel at Chinese construction sites is not alarming in and of itself, noting their presence at Chinese construction sites in other countries that do not have a military outpost.

China's expanding foothold in the world's ports facilitates its intelligence-gathering on U.S. military movements and activities in those areas, said Camille Lons of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Under a Chinese law passed in 2017, even commercial Chinese companies are obliged to share information with the military if called upon to do so. "It's difficult to know if that happens, but it's a matter of concern," she said.

Like other experts interviewed for this story, Lons was speaking generally and had not seen the leaked documents.

Jacqueline Deal, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, said China's establishment of a base and associated facilities in the UAE would complicate the United States' ability to operate. One of the biggest U.S. bases in the Middle East, Al Dhafra Air Base, lies about 50 miles from the Khalifa port.

"If we have forces in the region and we're trying to move them or use them, they will have a base from which to observe and possibly interfere," she said. "And they'll have more influence with the local government."

The terminal at Khalifa port is part of a network of more than 100 strategically located commercial ports and terminals that China has invested in around the world. Beyond the UAE, U.S. officials have identified Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tanzania and Angola as among the locations where Chinese ports may serve a dual use, potentially enabling Beijing to "both interfere with U.S. military operations and support offensive operations against the United States," according to a 2020 Pentagon report to Congress.

In some parts of the world, such as Europe, it is unlikely port facilities would ever be turned to military use because the host countries would never agree. But China's Maritime Silk Road, as Beijing calls the network, offers other advantages.

Chinese stakes in at least a dozen European ports give Beijing a level of control over supply routes that would make it difficult for Europe to impose serious sanctions on China should they become necessary and could enable Beijing to disrupt or divert Western supply routes in the event of a confrontation, said Francesca Ghiretti of the Mercator Institute for China Studies, a German think tank.

U.S. officials believe China's expanding economic ties have given it an opportunity to establish a military foothold in new regions — though they acknowledge that Washington's network of global bases is far more extensive and powerful.

Currently, Djibouti is the only overseas location where China has an acknowledged base, officially opened in 2017 by the PLA Navy. There, according to the document, the PLA in February "almost certainly was nearing completion of an antenna operations building at Doraleh" for satellite spying over Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

Last June, The Post reported that China was moving ahead with secret plans to build a facility for exclusive PLA use at [a naval base in Cambodia](#) on the Gulf of Thailand. Both countries denied that was the case, with Cambodian officials saying that China was merely financing the base upgrade and helping train Cambodians in ship repair. But a Chinese official in Beijing confirmed to The Post that “a portion of the base” will be used by “the Chinese military.” One of the classified documents reinforces that, saying a portion of the facility would be designated a “division-grade” military base.

Elsewhere in the world, a Chinese working group had plans to visit both Equatorial Guinea and Gabon in February to assist with preparations to build a joint training center and to train Equatorial Guinean personnel on communications equipment, according to the leak documents.

But most of those projects have not carried the same alarm in Washington as China’s activities in the UAE because those host countries are not nearly as close with the United States. Since 2012, the UAE has been the [third-biggest purchaser](#) of U.S. weapons in the world. Its armed forces have fought alongside U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The country also hosts 5,000 U.S. military personnel at al-Dhafra and U.S. warships at the Jebel Ali deep-water port.

The United Arab Emirates is beginning to look ahead to a time when China may rival and even eclipse the United States as a military power, said Riad Kahwaji, who heads the Dubai-based Inegma security consultancy. “The Chinese have managed to replace you in every other thing, so why not security?” he said.

Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, an Emirati political analyst, said the UAE began exploring other security partners after what the nation saw as America’s slow response to missile attacks against Abu Dhabi by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. The UAE was part of the Saudi-backed coalition that waged a fierce air campaign against Houthi militants for years.

But two senior officials said they doubted the UAE would go too far in jeopardizing its security relationship with the United States, even if it prefers China’s agnostic stance on human rights and democracy.

Still, the UAE’s ties to China have strained plans to move forward on a planned \$23 billion sale of American F-35 fighter jets, Reaper drones and other U.S. weapons while prompting conjecture within the Biden administration over whether to prioritize preserving its legacy partnerships in the Middle East or countering the rise of China.

“There are people that believe that this is a very harrowing time in the Middle East, and the most important element of our diplomacy right now has to be a degree of patience,” a senior U.S. official said. “But there are debates, absolutely.”