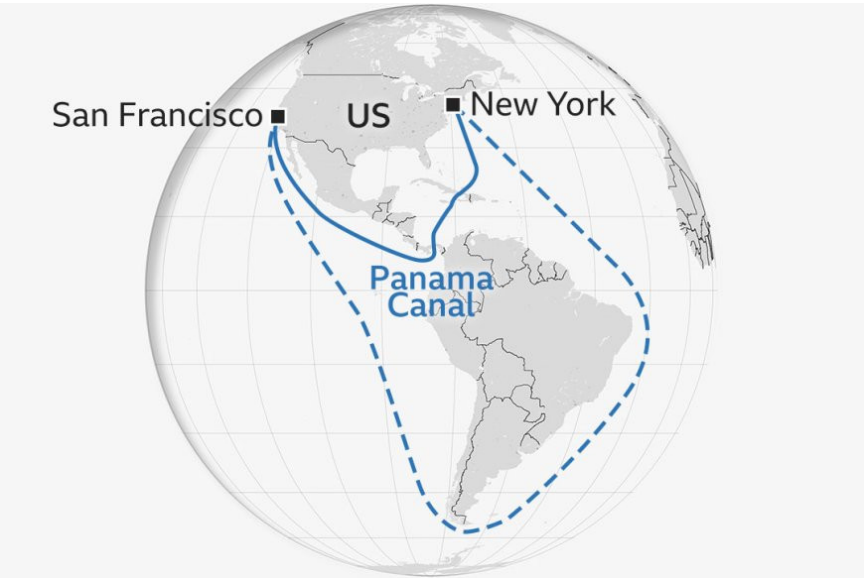
Mapping China's influence around the Panama Canal



President Donald Trump has made repeated claims that China "operates" the Panama Canal in recent weeks and has threatened to take back the waterway to block what he sees as Beijing's increasing influence.

Verify analysis shows that the US remains the main user of the canal, but Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects around the waterway - which is operated directly by Panama - has grown in recent years.

Up to 14,000 ships use the 51-mile (82km) passage each year. It links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans across the Central American country, avoiding an otherwise lengthy and costly trip around South America.

The waterway cuts the amount of time it takes goods to flow from Shenzhen in China to the US east coast, or between San Francisco and New York , by weeks.After Panama signed up to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017 - where Beijing invests in infrastructure across the globe - Chinese companies were more active around the canal. Panama left the partnership earlier this month amid US pressure.

However, much of Trump's ire has been focused on Chinese control over ports which There are five container ports around the Panama Canal. All of them are operated by foreign companies.Three of the canal's main container ports - Colon, Rodman and Manzanillo - are operated by companies based in Singapore, Taiwan and the US.While the company is a private corporation based outside the Chinese mainland, experts have told the BBC that the Chinese national security law introduced in 2020 could allow China to exercise influence over Hong Kong-based companies in the event of a conflict.

"In terms of the day-to-day, I'm sceptical as to whether there's a direct line between Beijing and CK Hutchison, but in a time of a crisis or a conflict it would be relatively trivial for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to say we're going to use the ports," Henry Ziemer, an Americas specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), told the BBC

This view was echoed by the former commander of the US military's southern command, Gen Laura J Richardson. She told lawmakers in 2023 that "in any potential global conflict, the PRC [China] could leverage strategic regional ports to restrict US naval and commercial ship access