

(Elizabeth Larus)

## **"Hades," the submarine base with which Beijing will shake the South China Sea (Agencia EFE)**

Named after the Greek god of the underworld, "Hades" is the submarine base that China plans to build in the Manila Trench, a location that, by its nature, at 5,400 meters deep and very close to the Philippine coasts, poses a double scientific and diplomatic challenge for Beijing.

The macro project, announced by the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing in November, aims to create the world's first underwater artificial intelligence base, with which China will study the ocean floor, collecting minerals and analyzing life forms unknown to date.

This idea of erecting the first "Atlantis" of history came last April after a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Marine Science and Engineering Institute of Sanya in Hainan. "There are no roads in the depths of the ocean, we do not have to convince other countries," said the communist leader.

According to researchers working on the initiative, "Hades" will cost around 1.1 billion yuan (about 140 million euros), the majority dedicated to the development of technology capable of working in extreme weather conditions, due to pressure and continuous seismic activity in the area.

However, the scientist is far from being the main obstacle for the project to go ahead: China has set as its preferred location the Manila Trench, very close to both the Philippines and the Bajo de Masinloc, a sandbank for which Beijing and Manila had a dispute two years ago.

"China will not hesitate to militarize the artificial intelligence base in the Manila Trench, in fact, it has already militarized the artificial islands it has built, despite promises that it would not," says Elizabeth Larus, professor at the University of Mary Washington and an expert on Asia-Pacific conflicts.

For several years, the South China Sea has witnessed continuous territorial disputes in several countries, including China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam, which is why it is one of the areas with the highest military activity in the country, world.

In fact, in 2013 the previous Philippine government, chaired by Benigno Aquino III, took China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration of the UN, which ruled that Peking had violated the fishing and oil exploitation territories of Manila, as well as built "illegally" artificial islands in its waters.

In this sense, China, which did not accept the resolution, has defended the construction of the submarine base as a "project in which everyone wins", presenting it as a mechanism to warn, for example, of the frequent earthquakes in the area.

"It is possible that Duterte gives the green light to the initiative if China promises enough aid and infrastructure projects, if it refuses, Beijing can refuse to offer more aid or suspend other types of collaborations, such as licenses to send tourist groups to the Philippines," holds Larus.

Despite the good relationship between Duterte and Xi Jinping, which at the end of November agreed to advance in the economic collaboration and in the exploitation of oil and gas, the Philippine public opinion does not welcome the project, points out Efe Calla Wiemer, professor at the University of the Philippines.

"Although Duterte is very popular, people do not approve of his approach to China, he has public support in almost everything he does, but not in this, there is a lot of discomfort due to the loss of territory," he says.

"Honestly, I do not think Duterte will end up accepting it, even if he wants to, the Philippine Constitution itself prevents it," the expert added.

In any case, the Chinese authorities trust that the collaboration on data and technology will convince the other countries of the viability of "Hades," an intention that, according to Larus, "should not be taken seriously" if Beijing finally militarizes the base.

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