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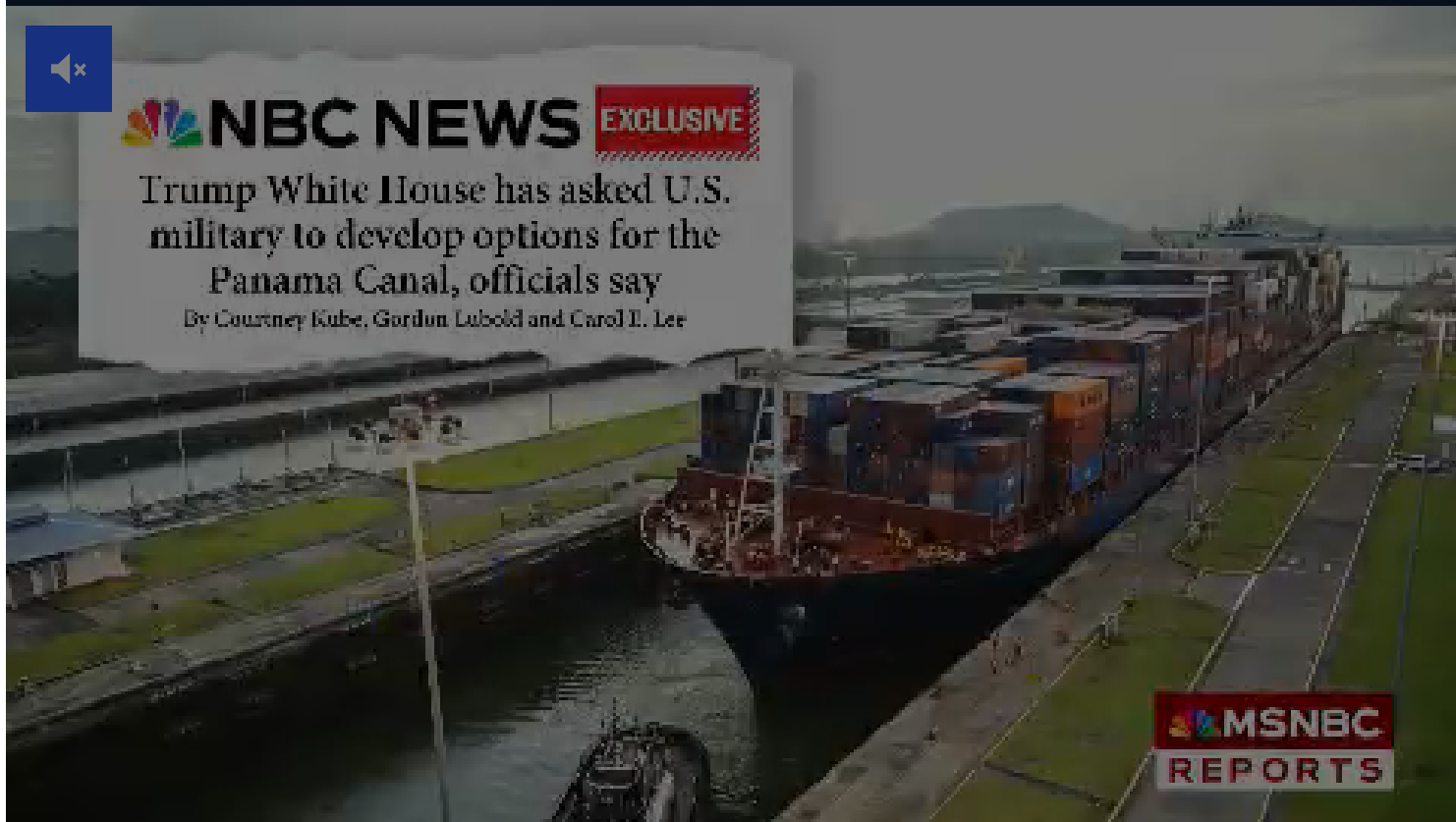
Potential plans range from partnering more closely with Panamanian security forces to a less likely option of U.S. troops' seizing the canal by force, U.S. officials told NBC News.



NBC NEWS EXCLUSIVE

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By Courtney Kube, Gordon Lubold and Carol E. Lee



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By Courtney Kube, Gordon Lubold and Carol E. Lee

WASHINGTON – The White House has directed the U.S. military to draw up options to

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In his joint address to Congress last week, Trump said that "to further enhance our national security, my administration will be reclaiming the Panama Canal." Since then, administration officials have not said what "reclaiming" means.

U.S. Southern Command is developing potential plans from partnering more closely with Panamanian security forces to the less likely option of U.S. troops' seizing the Panama Canal by force, the officials said. Whether military force is used, the officials added, depends on how much Panamanian security forces agree to partner with the United States.

The Trump administration's goal is to increase the U.S. military presence in Panama to diminish China's influence there, particularly access to the canal, the officials said.

Panama and China [deny there is any foreign interference](#) in the 50-mile canal, whose neutrality is enshrined in Panama's Constitution. Chinese officials have [accused the United States of using "coercion"](#) to pressure Panamanian officials to block Chinese aid projects.

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— The Chinese container ship Cosco Shipping Rose transits the Panama Canal in 2018.

Luis Acosta / AFP via Getty Images file

The U.S. officials told NBC News that the commander of U.S. Southern Command, Adm. Alvin Holsey, presented draft strategies to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth this week. Hegseth is expected to visit Panama next month.

The officials cautioned that a U.S. invasion of Panama is unlikely and would come under serious consideration only if a larger American military presence in Panama does not achieve Trump's goal of reclaiming the waterway, the officials said.

Neither the Pentagon nor the Panamanian Embassy in Washington immediately responded to requests for comment.

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administration.

Privately, Trump has told his advisers that he sees a U.S. military presence in Panama and on the canal itself as critical to that effort, the U.S. officials said. Trump has also made it clear that he wants U.S. service members to be visible in the canal zone as a show of force.

Trump administration officials have argued that China has too large a presence near the canal. In the event of a conflict, they say, Beijing could shut down the canal to American shipping, including military ships.

During a visit to Panama last month, Secretary of State Marco Rubio told Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino that “[the status quo is unacceptable](#)” regarding China’s presence in Panama. Mulino said the Panamanian government [alone administers](#) the canal and denied ceding operation of the canal to China in any way.

After Panama declined to renew a key infrastructure agreement with China, Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian [said that the projects](#) were part of Beijing’s Belt and Road development initiative and that China “firmly opposes the U.S. smearing and undermining the Belt and Road cooperation through means of pressure and coercion.”

Last year, Army Gen. Laura Richardson, now retired, then the commander of Southern Command, testified to the House Armed Services Committee that China is “playing the long game.” Richardson warned that Chinese government-backed economic development projects are “dual-use sites and facilities” that can be quickly flipped and used for military purposes.

“The PRC messages its investments as peaceful, but in fact, many serve as points of future multi-domain access for the PLA and strategic naval choke points,” she said, referring to the People’s Republic of China and the People’s Liberation Army. “In Panama, PRC-controlled state-owned enterprises, SOEs, continue to bid on projects related to the Panama Canal – a global strategic choke point.”

Possible U.S. strategies

The U.S. military has more than 200 troops in Panama, but the number fluctuates as troops rotate in and out, according to a defense official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Some

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options under consideration include using the U.S. military to secure existing ports in Panama, build new ports in Panama or use the Army Corps of Engineers to operate the canal's locks, officials said.

There are also discussions about opening Army Jungle Schools, or training camps, in Panama, like the ones where U.S. troops were trained in jungle warfare until the canal was formally handed over to Panama in 1999.

Another focus of the ongoing planning is potentially positioning U.S. military forces near Panama in the event of a regional war or a threat to the United States. In that scenario, the U.S. military would aim to secure the canal and eliminate China's access to it. American officials cautioned that the United States would block Chinese transit through the canal only in the event of war.




U.S. soldiers search suspects in front of the home of a business associate of Manuel Noriega in Panama

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would have to transit around South America, sharply increasing the cost and time of each voyage.

The United States constructed the canal from 1904 to 1914 after a failed French effort. In 1977, after long-running protests by Panamanians, President Jimmy Carter signed a treaty that turned control of the canal over to Panama. In 1989, during the George H.W. Bush administration, U.S. forces invaded Panama and ousted its leader, Manuel Noriega, who was later convicted of drug trafficking.

In his joint address to Congress last week, Trump said the United States was already moving to limit Chinese presence in the canal. “Just today, a large American company announced they are buying both ports around the Panama Canal and lots of other things having to do with the Panama Canal and a couple of other canals,” he said.

The U.S. investment company BlackRock is part of a group buying a [90% stake in the Panama Ports Company](#), which operates the ports of Balboa and Cristobal on the Pacific and Atlantic ends of the canal. The stake is being purchased from a Hong Kong-based firm, CK Hutchinson, for \$22.8 billion. 



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