

Welcome China

TO THE FIGHT AGAINST

Pirates

By Andrew S. Erickson, Naval War College; and Lieutenant Justin D. Mikolay, U.S. Navy

The Chinese deployment to the Gulf of Aden is historic and significant.



The ongoing deployment of Chinese naval vessels to the troubled Gulf of Aden signals an important step in the evolution of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Observers of China's growing naval fleet have long imagined sce-

their vulnerable ships through the Gulf of Aden.² China has already escorted a wide variety of Chinese and even some foreign ships in an area west of longitude 57 degrees east and south of latitude 15 degrees north.³

The United States, in accordance with its new maritime strategy, has welcomed China's participation as an example of cooperation that furthers international security. On 18 December at the Foreign Press Center in Washington, D.C., Admiral Timothy Keating, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, vowed to "work closely" with the Chinese flotilla, and use the event as a potential "springboard for the resumption of dialog between People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces and the U.S. Pacific Command forces."⁴

While the Chinese motivation to deploy to the Gulf of Aden clearly springs from a variety of factors, Beijing's contribution to maritime security should indeed be applauded. "This augurs well for increased cooperation and collaboration between the Chinese military forces and

U.S. . . . forces," Admiral Keating said. Counter-piracy contributions in the Gulf of Aden support Washington's vision of Beijing as a "responsible stakeholder" that contributes in proportion to the tremendous benefits it receives from—and growing influence it wields in—the international system.

This latest activity has offered a model for how the two great powers might cooperate to promote global security, by:

- Producing concrete, timely results at the UNSC
- Finding ways to coordinate separate interpretations of international law
- Jointly committing necessary resources to achieve shared objectives

This may ultimately allow the two countries to move beyond their tendency to compete and may promote a brighter future of cooperative co-existence. The United States and 16 other nations that participate in counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean region—including Indian, Russian, as well as NATO forces—should seek from this unprecedented deployment ways to generate lasting military cooperation with China.

But to accomplish this in a way that does not irritate Chinese sensitivities, we must

narios that might prompt the PLAN to exercise blue-water capability. Few predicted the precise series of events that has revealed this new era of Chinese maritime security.

From 16 to 18 December 2008, Somali pirates tried and failed to hijack a Chinese merchant vessel; the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) provided expanded authority to pursue pirates into sovereign Somali territory; and Chinese officials announced that the PLAN would send three naval vessels to support counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, off the Horn of Africa. The result: On 6 January 2009, Chinese destroyers joined a multinational constellation of naval vessels in cooperation with the Somali Transitional Federal Government to combat piracy.¹

Through its Ministry of Communications, Beijing now accepts applications from ship-owners in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan for the PLAN to escort

IMPROVISED SELF-DEFENSE Nine Somali pirates tried and failed to hijack the Chinese tanker *Zhenhua 4* in December 2008. The ship's crew, otherwise unarmed, created Molotov cocktails and defended themselves until a Malaysian military helicopter forced the attackers to retreat. None of the crew was harmed.



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LOWER TECH PREVAILS The pirates who boarded the *Zhenhua 4* (shown here) carried rocket-launchers and AK-47s, but the Chinese crew resisted them for hours and, with help, prevailed.

resist the temptation to exaggerate the deployment's significance. The Chinese effort does not represent, for instance, an immediate power shift in the Indian Ocean, or a Chinese power grab in Africa. To those who remain wary of Chinese ambitions, one important distinction should remain clear: China joined the international community to challenge piracy. It did not join the counter-piracy effort to challenge the international community.

Historical Significance

This is only the third Chinese deployment into the Indian Ocean in more than six centuries. From 1405 to 1433, Emperor Yongle and his successor, Emperor Hongxi, sent Admiral Zheng He and 27,000 men on seven voyages into the Indian Ocean as far as Mombasa, Mecca, and Mogadishu, with multiple stops at Aden. Zheng proclaimed the power and prestige of the new Ming dynasty, fostered tributary relations with kingdoms around the ocean, nurtured existing trade links, and, as a last resort, used force against enemies. In an interesting parallel to the PLAN's new mission, Zheng's forces captured and killed the "Great Pirate" Chen Zuyi at Palembang in southern Sumatra.⁵

But subsequently China turned inward and suffered a "Century of Humiliation" beginning in 1840, when it was invaded and partially colonized. Not until 2002 did the PLAN send the *Luhu*-class guided-missile destroyer *Qingdao* and composite supply ship *Taicang* and 506 crew members on a global circumnavigation. In 132 days they covered 33,000 kilometers, visiting nine countries (the PLAN has by now called on 40 in total). Yet following the 2004 Indonesian tsunami, Beijing was unwilling or unable to send ships, even as the United States, India, and Japan received significant appreciation for their sea-based assistance.

Now, it seems, Beijing can remain inactive no longer. On 14 November 2008, Somali pirates captured the fishing boat *Tianyu 8* and held its 24-member crew captive for three months.⁶ On 17 December, nine men clumsily seized control of the tanker *Zhenhua 4*, using makeshift rocket-launchers and AK-47 assault rifles. But an otherwise defenseless crew unnerved the pirates with improvised Molotov cocktails—long enough for a Malaysian military helicopter to force the attackers to retreat.⁷ Marauders such as these, from towns north of Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, but beyond its control, have attracted a disparate group of international naval vessels to protect the busy transit lane against their incursions. Now China is among those protectors, with two South Sea Fleet destroyers—*Wuhan* and *Hai-kou*—and the supply ship *Weishanhu* deployed 10,000-kilometers from their homeport in Sanya, Hainan Province.

Why Did China Join?

Thirty-odd pirate groups perforate the line of trade that transits the Horn of Africa region and joins the economic



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interests of all nations. History suggests that pirates need not be organized to attract organized attention, especially in modern times. Though Somali pirates remain woefully unsophisticated and seemingly indiscriminate, they also continue to be surprisingly effective. A crackdown on piracy will require more than a few ships.

The root cause of poverty in Somalia must be addressed. Otherwise, not even multinational efforts against piracy and terrorism can meaningfully answer these unique challenges. One Chinese source states that "Somali pirates are all 'little chicks' that don't stand a chance in the face of these 'sledgehammers.'"⁸ However, this ignores the impossibility of the sledgehammers' ability to cover all maritime areas simultaneously.

Of the 100 attempted piracies in 2008, 40 were successful. The costs of an effective international effort would almost certainly exceed the money spent on ransom demands absent any naval presence in the region.

This suggests that nations contribute to the effort for reasons beyond the immediate tangible benefits. Indeed, it is the intangible costs of friction and altered decisions about international economic activity, as well as the loss of credibility, that make intervention worthwhile for great powers such as the United States and China.

This is especially true of China today. Although its decision-making process appears to be long term and gradual, China's State Council and Central Military Commission



approved the Aden mission in part to exercise the PLAN's growing naval capability. China's presence in the Indian Ocean addresses interests that have outgrown its own waters, and now include expanded economic, resource, and energy ties with the Middle East and Africa.

Beijing appears ready to acknowledge publicly that its increasingly global interests will require a global presence—at least in the commercial and humanitarian dimensions. According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao, a fifth of the 1,265 Chinese-owned, -cargoes, or -crewed ships transiting Somali waters in 2008 “faced piracy,” and seven were attacked. “Piracy has become a serious threat to shipping, trade and safety on the seas,” he explained. “That’s why we decided to send naval ships to crack down.”⁹

For China, the timing is sublime: at the moment when it feels compelled to venture beyond its shores, the international community gives it ample space to do so. This allows China to move from its position as the only permanent member of the UNSC not to have contributed to international maritime security operations, toward becoming a responsible power that makes all types of contributions.

China undoubtedly senses a strategic opportunity in the relatively limited U.S. response to piracy in the Horn of Africa. “Apart from fighting pirates, another key goal is to register the presence of the Chinese navy,” states Professor Li Jie, a prominent expert at the Navy Research Institute

in Beijing. In this regard, the deployment should remind the Obama administration of an important reality: To the extent that we are not perceived to provide public benefits, such as reliable security for sea lines of communication, other nations will take matters into their own hands. The United States may increasingly find itself working with partners that joined the effort of their own accord.

In response to charges that China should do more to further collective security close to home, PLA spokesmen state that China is not similarly involved in southeast Asia because the situation in Malacca is different from that in the Gulf of Aden. Piracy in the Malacca Strait is already controlled through the joint efforts of the coastal states Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. In Somalia, by contrast, the problem is more rampant—with ten times as many attacks in the past year—and sea conditions around the Gulf of Aden are more complex.¹⁰

A Shift in Capability, Not in Policy

On 23 December 2008, Chinese officials held a news conference in Beijing at the News Release Office, Ministry of National Defense Public Affairs Bureau. Three PLA representatives presented conditions and answered reporters' questions on the PLAN's escort mission to the Gulf of Aden, including Rear Admiral Xiao Xinnian, Deputy Chief of Staff, PLAN; Senior Colonel Ma Luping, Director of the Navy Operations Department in the General Staff Headquarters Operations Department, PLAN; and Senior Colonel Huang Xueping, PLA, Ministry of National Defense Spokesman and Deputy Director of the National Defense Public Affairs Office. Senior Colonel Huang presided over the event.¹¹

The officials stressed that the primary goal of the mission—to safeguard Chinese shipping—did not represent a shift in non-interventionist foreign policy. Perhaps more important, they were careful to suggest that the deployment does not constitute a commitment to further blue-water operations. By serving the common interest to address piracy, China made clear its intention to support the international community and play by the rules.

To that end, Beijing reaffirmed the practical reasons for the deployment, and stressed that China has UN authorization for its presence in the region. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 provides specific legal authority for the international effort to fight piracy outside a coastal state's territorial sea. Affirmed under that umbrella, UNSC resolution 1846 authorizes participating states to engage pirates within the 12-nautical mile territorial waters off the coast of Somalia.¹²

Resolution 1851, passed unanimously by the UNSC, authorized international navies to pursue pirates from the Gulf of Aden to the shores of Somalia and—if conditions warrant—to engage in related activities “in Somalia” itself.¹³ Beijing also voted in favor of Resolution 1816, which authorizes members of the international community to “enter the territorial waters of Somalia for the purpose of repressing acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea.”¹⁴

INCREASINGLY CAPABLE The Chinese deployment is also a training exercise. Here, forces on board the destroyer *Haikou* drill in anti-piracy techniques.

But China's government simultaneously emphasized that international assistance "should be based on the wishes of the [Somali] Government and be applied only to the territorial waters of Somalia."¹⁵ China's official media constantly publish appreciation from Somali officials and civilians.¹⁶

The PLAN itself has pledged a cautious, reactive approach limited to defense of its three ships and any vessels under their escort. Chinese Rear Admiral Xiao Xinnian stressed: "[If] our naval vessels are ambushed by pirate ships, we will resolutely fight back to protect our own safety."¹⁷ But according to Senior Colonel Ma Luping, director of the navy operational bureau under the headquarters of the General Staff, PLAN forces will not "normally" enter another nation's national territorial seas (within the internationally recognized 12 nautical-miles limit) to chase pirates.¹⁸

At a press conference accompanying the departure of the Chinese destroyer contingent on 26 December 2008, the lead commander of the operation, Rear Admiral Du Jingcheng, said the ships would "independently conduct escort missions" and not land on Somali shores. Admiral Du said his forces would "not accept the command of other countries or regional organizations," but rather "facilitate exchanges of information with escort naval vessels from other countries."¹⁹

A Learning Opportunity

With counter-piracy as the immediate mission, China is attaining a new level of blue-water experience with a three-month operation that will likely be relieved by other ships. Their mission requires rapid response, underway replenishment, on-station information-sharing, and calls in foreign ports.

But the Chinese deployment is about far more than counter-piracy. It is also a public relations effort, and in many ways a training exercise for an increasingly capable PLAN. China's 2008 Defense White Paper for the first time treats the ground forces as a distinct service equivalent to the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Corps, suggesting that they are becoming less dominant within the military and that the PLAN may grow correspondingly over time in funding and mission scope.²⁰

President Hu Jintao has instructed: "As we strengthen our ability to fight and win limited wars under informatized conditions, we have to pay even more attention to improving non-combat military operations capabilities."²¹ Retired Major General Peng Guangqian, who played a



significant role in shaping PLA strategy as an adviser to China's powerful Central Military Commission and Politburo Standing Committee, states that deploying to Somalia will teach the PLAN how to operate with other navies.²² Major General Zhang Zhaoyin, deputy group army commander, Chengdu Military Region, argues that the PLA should use missions other than war to increase warfighting capabilities.²³

The PLAN chose some of its newest and most capable (and indigenously constructed) vessels to carry out this mission. The vessels are from the South Sea Fleet, closest to the theater of operations. This suggests that the Chinese are serious about using this opportunity to test some of their advanced systems and gain modern seafaring experience.

The flagship *Wuhan*, and even the newer *Haikou* (constructed in 2003), never previously dispatched this far, each displace 7,000 tons, can chase pirates at 30 knots, and carry a Ka-27 helicopter for patrol and surveillance.²⁴ The *Wuhan* boasts anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles and a close-in weapon system. The *Haikou's* first-generation phased-array radar and vertically launched long-range air defense missile system offer the fleet area air defense that was previously unavailable to the PLAN. The 23,000-ton *Weishanhu*, China's largest supply ship, has a maximum



speed of 19 knots, can carry two helicopters, and is armed with eight 37-mm guns.

The PLAN established two rendezvous points 550 nautical miles apart, at 100 nm north of Yemen's Socotra Island and 75 nm southwest of Port Aden, and seven patrol zones along the main shipping route in the sea area east of the Gulf of Aden.²⁵ The *Wuhan* and *Haikou* work around the clock and can escort multiple ships simultaneously in opposite directions.²⁶

Beyond these escort duties, the fleet pursues three modes of emergency operation:

- *On-call support*: Rapid and flexible actions that the fleet takes after receiving a request for support from vessels passing through high-risk zones or anticipating pirate attacks. If the PLAN detects a "suspicious vessel," it will deploy a helicopter for surveillance and reconnaissance. Only after that will the Chinese ship(s) approach the vessel in question.

- *Pirate deterrence*: After the fleet receives emergency rescue signals from vessels under attack but not yet controlled by pirates, it takes unspecified air and sea deterrence measures.

In the event that pirates are seizing a ship and the PLAN vessels are close enough to stop it, the fleet commander will give orders based on his evaluation of the situation.

- *Vessel rescue*: Sustained pressure and rescue actions that the fleet takes when it receives calls for help or instructions that pirates have seized vessels. Should pirates attack the PLAN ships, they will engage in self-defense.

The first two of these have been tested in practice. On 18 January 2009, the *Tianhe*, a vessel owned by China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), radioed to the *Wuhan* that two speedboats were chasing it and—following suspicious communications breakup—requested immediate assistance. Fleet commander Admiral Du Jingchen ordered the ships to assume battle formation, with helicopters readied. The *Wuhan* sped toward the speedboats with lights off, chasing them away. The fleet received a similar distress call earlier that day from a mainland cargo ship, which evaded speedboats without needing PLAN assistance.²⁷

Sending an 800 crew-member surface action group five time zones away, with 70 special forces personnel embarked and combat contingencies highly probable, presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities.²⁸ PLAN personnel continue to learn new techniques, test their equipment, and may well advocate improvements on their return.

This is likely to catalyze improvements in logistics, intelligence, and communications. Such routine operations as at-sea replenishment will allow Chinese sailors to develop best practices for use in future operations. According to Professor Zhang at China's National Defense University, a reportedly senior PLAN figure, "It is also a very good opportunity to rehearse sea rescue tasks and telecommunication with other military forces."²⁹

The value of air support will likely become clear, perhaps accelerating prospects for Chinese deck aviation development (e.g., ships that can accommodate larger numbers of helicopters). Even more important, the Aden deployment opens up new ideas and discussion that was unthinkable in PLA open fora even one year ago.

A Common Enemy

The thorn of piracy pierces particularly deep into the sides of China and the United States, two of the world's largest economies and major trading partners. Counter-piracy operations present a unique opportunity for military cooperation between Beijing and Washington.

China had been reluctant to revive bilateral naval ties with the United States in the Pacific, because of a recent arms-sales agreement between Taipei and Washington. In the months preceding the Aden deployment, Washington sought ways to reengage Beijing while

monitoring the implications of the PLAN's rapid modernization, a growing part of which is now indigenous.

Some sections of *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* appear to suggest that Chinese military im-

China did not join the counter-piracy effort to challenge the international community.



AP/GETTY IMAGES (STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN)

ONE OF THREE The *Haikou* was built in 2003 and never before sailed so far from its home waters. It can chase pirates at 30 knots and carries a Ka-27 helicopter. Here, the ship patrols in the Gulf of Aden on 19 January 2009.

provements constrain U.S. freedom of action. In particular, whereas the “ability to operate freely at sea” remains a core American capability, a “growing number of nations operating submarines” could limit the ability for the States to “impose sea control.”³⁰

But a piracy renaissance is an occasion to agree on the shared goal—as stated in the maritime strategy—to deny “conditions under which our maritime forces would be impeded from freedom of maneuver and freedom of access,” or an “adversary [from] disrupt[ing] the global supply chain by attempting to block vital sea-lines of communication and commerce.”

For now, it seems, China and the United States view piracy as more of a pressing threat to maritime security than they do each other. According to a mainland-owned Hong Kong newspaper, “the current expedition by Chinese naval vessels to Somalia has not stoked the ‘China threat theory’ in the West; quite the contrary, China is being seen as a ‘responsible global player.’”³¹ Two professors from Lanzhou University’s Central Asia Studies Institute have even linked piracy to terrorism.³² A mutual enemy has emerged that may trump existing disagreements in other areas.

In the context of piracy operations, the U.S. maritime strategy seems to promote a close partnership:

Expanded cooperative relationships with other nations will contribute to the security and stability of the maritime domain for the benefit of all. Although our forces can surge when necessary to respond to crises, *trust and cooperation cannot be surged*. They must be built over time so that the strategic interests of the participants are continuously considered while mutual understanding and respect are promoted [emphasis in original].

However, just as we need to be careful not to overemphasize the Chinese deployment, in order to parlay this opportunity into an ongoing naval partnership we must also

not downplay it. In other words, we must find balance.

It is not enough to merely accommodate the Chinese naval presence. American assets in the region should embrace the Chinese as equal partners in the fight against piracy. To build confidence, the United States should find a way to formally affiliate itself with the PLAN destroyers while on-station.

We have already sensed an opportunity to reduce pirate attacks in concert with foreign navies: On 8 January, Combined Maritime Forces, led by the United States, established Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) to directly combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden.³³ The Commander of CTF-151, Rear Admiral Terry McKnight, has indicated that he will continue to recruit partner nations to expand the current 14-nation, 20-ship effort.³⁴

Under the specific mandate of CTF-151, Rear Admiral McKnight now employs an appropriate framework to recruit Russian, Indian, Saudi Arabian, Malaysian, and, most important, Chinese ships to join the counter-piracy mission. A separate German-led coalition of NATO and European Union allies, along with other willing participants, will conduct maritime security operations in the region under the broader charter of CTF-150. By contrast, CTF-151 offers potential partners a vehicle to focus solely on counter-piracy efforts—a specific objective common to both the States and China.

Commanders should take pains to establish an open communications channel for U.S. assets to share information as appropriate and necessary with the Chinese units within the confines of CTF-151. We should offer logistical support for the humanitarian aspect of China’s planned mission to deliver goods on behalf of the United Nations World Food Program.

It is unclear how eager China will be to accept U.S. overtures for cooperation near Somalia. But Beijing “is ready to exchange information and cooperate with the warships of other countries in fighting Somalian pirates,”

according to Huang Xueping, spokesman of the Chinese Ministry of Defense.³⁵

In this regard, the deployment signals a new measure of international cooperation for China, one that may generate sufficient goodwill to brighten prospects for deeper foreign military partnerships. To the extent that the 2000 Defense Authorization Act permits, American commanders may push for expanded bilateral ties with China or even suggest a strengthened trilateral (U.S.-Japan-China) or multilateral (i.e., Global Maritime Partnership) approach to continued naval cooperation and diplomacy.

Cooperation Despite Self-Interest?

We often conclude our courses at the U.S. Naval Academy and U.S. Naval War College by asking our students to look ahead 15 years. Students expect to witness a major Chinese maritime presence later in their careers, but they struggle to explain how such a transformation could materialize. They mention that China has dispatched more UN peacekeepers than any permanent member of the Security Council (more than 11,000 on 18 UN missions). But students have difficulty linking this to naval power.

That is because until December 2008, no maritime equivalent existed. It does now—and it could be the first of many blue-water patrols that may one day familiarize our students with their Chinese counterparts via bridge-to-bridge radio. If we welcome China's contributions to international maritime leadership and China reciprocates, our students may patrol the seas of a more secure and prosperous world. ✨

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Dr. Erickson is an assistant professor at the China Maritime Studies Institute, Strategic Research Department, Naval War College. He is co-editor of *Defining a Maritime Security Partnership with China* (forthcoming, Naval Institute Press). Lieutenant Mikolay teaches national security policy at the U.S. Naval Academy. He served on the fast-attack nuclear-powered submarine USS *San Juan* (SSN-751) and holds a master’s degree in public affairs from Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School.