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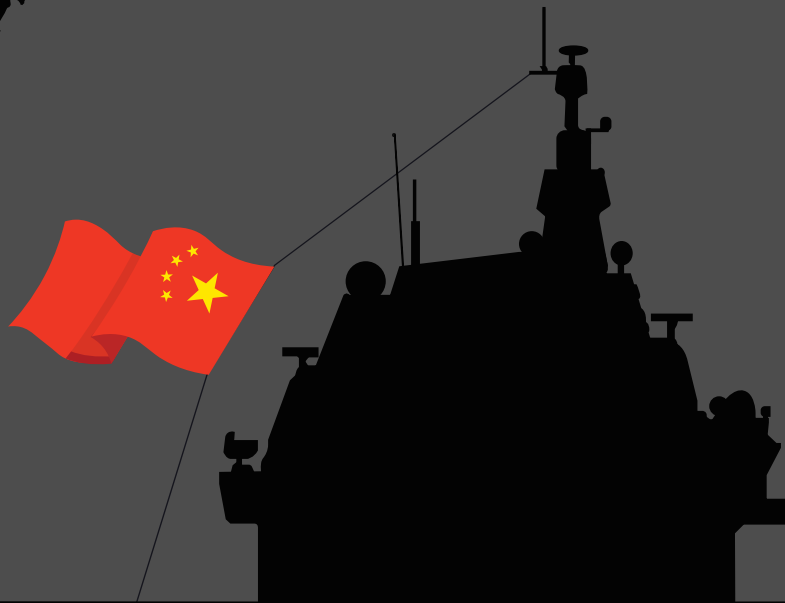
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NOTES: 8



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Aden Deployment Pattern**



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Recent Changes in the PLA Navy's Gulf of Aden Deployment Pattern

Dennis J. Blasko¹

Key Takeaways

- Since December 2008, the PLAN has deployed 46 counter-piracy escort task forces (TFs) to the Gulf of Aden on a UN-authorized mission.
- Most TFs have included two combatants—a combination of destroyers, frigates, and amphibious transport docks—and a supply ship. Starting with the 33rd TF, which departed China in August 2019, every TF has comprised one Type 052D destroyer, one Type 054A frigate, and one supply ship.
- One TF generally is on station near the Horn of Africa at all times, while for less than half that time another TF is either on the way to relieve it or returning home after completing its mission.
- Until recently, the PLAN had normally dispatched three TFs per year, at roughly four-month intervals.
- However, the 45th and 46th TFs departed China on five-month intervals, suggesting a shift in deployment patterns.
- The PLAN has not explained the rationale for this apparent shift in its deployment pattern. It is *possible* that more onerous requirements for its surface fleet in operations around Taiwan and in the South China Sea have forced the PLAN to draw forces away from the Gulf of Aden mission, at least temporarily. Or it is *possible* that the PLAN may be desirous of keeping its ships clear of waters threatened by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Introduction

Since the PLA Navy (PLAN) dispatched its first three-ship Gulf of Aden Escort Task Force in December 2008, it has maintained a permanent presence halfway around the world to protect civilian shipping from pirates on this UN-authorized mission.² To date, 46 task forces (TFs, called “escort formations,” i.e., 护航编队) have been rotated into and out of this mission. Over time, adjustments have been made in the manner these TFs are formed, deployed, and supported. However, a new wrinkle has appeared in the last two deployments.

TF Composition

While on station, each TF has comprised two combatants, a supply ship, a few helicopters, and a 70-man special operations force (or Marine) detachment. At least one submarine also has participated in this mission.³ The two combatants mostly have been a combination of destroyers and frigates, with three different Type 071 amphibious transport docks taking part in four rotations. Prior to the establishment of the PLA's first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017 to support "anti-piracy, UN peacekeeping, and humanitarian relief missions in both Africa and Western Asia," one supply ship frequently would stay in place to support two TFs in succession.⁴

For the first 32 TFs, the combination of destroyers and frigates varied considerably (sometimes one of each, often two frigates, but with two destroyers only on the first deployment). Starting with the 33rd TF, which deployed in August 2019, each task force has comprised one Type-052D destroyer, one Type-054A frigate, and a supply ship.⁵ (The first Type-052D did not deploy on this mission until five years after the first ship of its class entered service; none of the newer, larger Type-055 cruisers/destroyers have yet to participate in this mission.)

Responsibility for providing the ships for each task force has been rotated among the three fleets, with the Southern Theater (former South Sea) Fleet providing ships for 18 task forces, the Eastern Theater Fleet for 15, and the Northern Theater Fleet for 13. (The former North Sea Fleet was not assigned this mission until the 11th TF in 2012.⁶) According to my analysis of official Chinese military media reporting (which may be slightly off due to the renaming of ships and is subject to correction by professional naval analysts), a total of 67 distinct, individual ships (of all types) have participated in these missions, including 23 destroyers, 32 frigates, three Type-071s, and nine supply ships. Among that group, four destroyers, 12 frigates, one Type-071, and all the supply ships have been deployed with more than one task force. The number of individual ships that have participated in this mission is significantly lower than Chinese reporting of 150 vessels (as of last December) because nearly 30 ships have been assigned to multiple task forces.⁷ Nonetheless, roughly two-thirds of the PLAN's destroyers and frigates have been deployed on at least one rotation to the Gulf.⁸ See appendix below.

Recent Changes

For most of the years since the PLAN initiated its Gulf of Aden mission, task forces have departed China *three times a year, roughly four months apart*. Both en route and during redeployment to China, ships from the task forces could stop along the way for foreign port calls and exercises/events with foreign militaries. Thus, their total time away from home ports could vary considerably according to foreign visitation requirements. In general, one three-ship TF would be on station in or around the Gulf (perhaps with one or two of its ships leaving the immediate area for short diversions/emergency missions or replenishment) while another task force was returning to China or deploying from China usually taking several weeks in transit. A new TF routinely overlaps with the departing TF on station for a few days.

This general pattern for three task force rotations a year seemed to have been the system until the 45th TF left Qingdao in September 2023. However, the amount of time between the 45th TF's departure in September 2023 and its predecessor, the 44th TF's departure in April, was five months.⁹ Likewise, the 46th Gulf of Aden escort task force left Zhanjiang on its current mission

in February 2024, also five months after its predecessor.¹⁰ The 46th TF is now in its fifth deployed month and there has been no reporting about a 47th TF departing to relieve it.

Furthermore, the 46th TF dispatched one or two of its ships to conduct port visits to distant locations while it was still responsible for conducting the anti-piracy mission. In May, the frigate *Xuchang* made a three-day “technical stop” in Cape Town.¹¹ In July, two of its ships, the destroyer *Jiaozuo* and supply ship *Honghu*, traveled all the way to Casablanca for a five-day port visit and then to St. Peterburg for the celebration of the Russian Navy’s founding and a joint exercise in the Gulf of Finland.¹² For the duration of these extended diversions, the number of PLAN ships on station in the Gulf would have been below its normal operating level.

Conclusion

With no reporting to date about a 47th TF to relieve the 46th, the PLAN *might* be changing its operational deployment patterns for the Gulf of Aden mission, favoring longer intervals between TF’s departing China. This would result in the task forces remaining on station for longer periods of time, but also allow for ships to participate in more ancillary pre-planned or emergency missions while deployed or in transit. The Djibouti Base’s capabilities for in-region repair and maintenance and general logistics support (such as fuel, food, and uniforms) likely has contributed to the decision to extend deployment periods. Prolonged time on station would require fewer ships on average per year, but would also decrease the number of days when two task forces are in the Indian Ocean region (one on station and one in transit).

The PLAN has not offered any explanation behind these anomalous deployments—and may never do so. It is *possible* that the PLAN needs ships for more pressing missions closer to home, perhaps due to its other ongoing operational missions in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, East China Sea, and Philippine Sea. Or it is *possible* that the PLAN may desire to keep its ships clear of waters threatened by Yemen’s Houthi rebels.

Appendix: PLAN Gulf of Aden Escort Task Force Deployments

TF #	Dates	Fleet	Destroyer	Frigate	Amphibious	Supply
1	12/08-4/09	SSF	<i>Wuhan</i> * #169 (052B) <i>Haikou</i> * #171 (052C)			<i>Weishanhu</i> *
2	4/09-7/09	SSF	<i>Shenzhen</i> #167 (051B)	<i>Huangshan</i> *#570 (054A)		<i>Weishanhu</i> *
3	7/09-12/09	ESF		<i>Zhoushan</i> *#529 (054A) <i>Xuzhou</i> * #530 (054A)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> *
4	12/09-3/10	ESF		<i>Maanshan</i> * #525 (054) <i>Wenzhou</i> * #526 (054)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> *
5	3/10-7/10	SSF	<i>Guangzhou</i> #168 (052B)	<i>Chaohu</i> * (054A)		<i>Weishanhu</i> *
6	7/10-11/10	SSF	<i>Lanzhou</i> #170 (052C)		<i>Kunlunshan</i> *	<i>Weishanhu</i> *
7	11/10-3/11	ESF		<i>Zhoushan</i> *#529 (054A) <i>Xuzhou</i> * #530 (054A)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> *
8	3/11-7/11	ESF		<i>Maanshan</i> *#525 (054) <i>Wenzhou</i> * #526 (054)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> * (<i>Poyanghu</i> supports enroute)
9	7/11-11/11	SSF	<i>Wuhan</i> * #169 (052B)	<i>Yulin</i> * #569 (054A)		<i>Qinghaihu</i> *
10	11/11-	SSF	<i>Haikou</i> * #171 (052C)	<i>Yuncheng</i> * #571 (054A)		<i>Qinghaihu</i> * (<i>Poyanghu</i> supports enroute)
11	2/12-	NSF	<i>Qingdao</i> * #113 (052)	<i>Yantai</i> * #538 (054A)		<i>Weishanhu</i>
12	7/12-	ESF		<i>Yiyang</i> * #548 (054A) <i>Changzhou</i> #549 (054A)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> *

TF #	Dates	Fleet	Destroyer	Frigate	Amphibious	Supply
13	11/12	SSF		<i>Huangshan</i> * #570 (054A) <i>Hengyang</i> * #568 (054A) (former <i>Chaohu</i> , renamed 2/12)		<i>Qinghaihu</i> *
14	2/13	NSF	<i>Harbin</i> * #112 (052)	<i>Mianyang</i> #528 (053H3)		<i>Weishanhu</i> *
15	8/13	SSF		<i>Hengshui</i> #572 (054A)	<i>Jinggangshan</i>	<i>Taihu</i> *
16	12/13	NSF		<i>Luoyang</i> #527 (053H3) <i>Yancheng</i> * #546 (054A)		<i>Taihu</i> *
17	3/14	ESF	<i>Changchun</i> #150 (052C)	<i>Changzhou</i> #549 (054A)		<i>Chaohu</i>
18	8/14	SSF		<i>Yuncheng</i> * #571 (054A)	<i>Changbaishan</i>	<i>Chaohu</i> *
19	12/14 – 7/15	NSF		<i>Linyi</i> #547* (054A) <i>Weifang</i> * #550 (054A)		<i>Weishanhu</i> *
20/ TF 152	4/15	ESF	<i>Jinan</i> #152 (052C)	<i>Yiyang</i> * #548 (054A)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> *
21	8/15	SSF		<i>Liuzhou</i> #573 (054A) <i>Sanya</i> #574* (054A)		<i>Qinghaihu</i> *
22	12/15 – 6/16	NSF	<i>Qingdao</i> * #113 (052)	<i>Daqing</i> #576 (054A)		<i>Taihu</i> * #889
23	4/16	ESF		<i>Zhoushan</i> * #529 (054A) <i>Xiangtan</i> #531 (054A)		<i>Chaohu</i> *
24	08/16	NSF	<i>Harbin</i> * #112 (052)	<i>Handan</i> #579 (054A)		<i>Dongpinghu</i> * #960
25	12/16	SSF		<i>Hengyang</i> * #568 (054A) <i>Yulin</i> * #569 (054A)		<i>Honghu</i> *
26	04/17	ESF		<i>Huanggang</i> #577 (054A) <i>Yangzhou</i> * #578 (054A)		<i>Gaoyouhu</i> * #966
27	08/17	SSF	<i>Haikou</i> * #171 (052C)	<i>Yueyang</i> * #575 (054A)		<i>Qinghaihu</i> * #885

TF #	Dates	Fleet	Destroyer	Frigate	Amphibious	Supply
28	12/17	NSF		<i>Yancheng</i> * #546 (054A) <i>Weifang</i> * #550 (054A)		<i>Taihu</i> * #889
29	4/18	ESF		<i>Binzhou</i> #515 (054A) <i>Xuzhou</i> * #530 (054A)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> * #886
30	8/18	NSF		<i>Wuhu</i> #539 (054A) <i>Handan</i> #579 (054A)		<i>Dongpinghu</i> * #960
31	12/18	SSF		<i>Xuchang</i> * #536 (054A)	<i>Kunlunshan</i> * #998	<i>Luomahu</i> * #964
32	4/19	ESF	<i>Xian</i> #153 (052C)	<i>Anyang</i> #599 (054A)		<i>Gaoyouhu</i> * #966
33	8/19	NSF	<i>Xining</i> #117 (052D)	<i>Weifang</i> * #550 (054A)		<i>Kekexilihu</i> * #968
34	1/20	SSF	<i>Yinchuan</i> #175 (052D)	<i>Yuncheng</i> * #571 (054A)		<i>Weishanhu</i> * #887
35	4/20	ESF	<i>Taiyuan</i> #131 (052D)	<i>Jingzhou</i> * #532 (054A)		<i>Chaohu</i> * #890
36	9/20	NSF	<i>Guiyang</i> #119 (052D)	<i>Zaozhuang</i> #542 (054A)		<i>Dongpinghu</i> * #960
37	1/21	SSF	<i>Changsha</i> #173 (052D)	<i>Yulin</i> * #569 (054A)		<i>Honghu</i> *
38	5/21	ESF	<i>Nanjing</i> #155 (052D)	<i>Yangzhou</i> * #578 (054A)		<i>Gaoyouhu</i> * #966
39	9/21	NSF	<i>Urumqi</i> * #118 (052D)	<i>Yantai</i> * #538 (054A)		<i>Taihu</i> * #889
40	1/22	SSF	<i>Hohhot</i> #161 (052D)	<i>Yueyang</i> * #575 (054A)		<i>Luomahu</i> * #964
41	5/22	ESF	<i>Suzhou</i> #132 (052D)	<i>Nantong</i> #533 (054A)		<i>Chaohu</i> * #890
42	9/22	NSF	<i>Huainan</i> #123 (052D)	<i>Rizhao</i> #598 (054A)		<i>Kekexilihu</i> * #968

TF #	Dates	Fleet	Destroyer	Frigate	Amphibious	Supply
43	1/23	SSF	<i>Nanning</i> #162 (052D)	<i>Sanya</i> * #574 (054A)		<i>Weishanhu</i> * #887
44	4/23	ESF	<i>Zibo</i> #156 (052D)	<i>Jingzhou</i> * #532 (054A)		<i>Qiandaohu</i> * #886
45	9/23	NSF	<i>Urumqi</i> * #118 (052D)	<i>Linyi</i> #547* (054A)		<i>Dongpinghu</i> * #960
46	2/24	SSF	<i>Jiaozuo</i> #163 (052D)	<i>Xuchang</i> * #536 (054A)		<i>Honghu</i> *
# of Different Ships		Total 67	23	32	3	9
# of Ships in Type		82 DD+FF	33 (40) DD	49 (41) FF	7 (11) LHD/LPD	? (10) AOR/AORH

* Ship has performed more than one rotation (4 destroyers; 12 frigates, 1 Type 071).

¹ Dennis J. Blasko, Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army (Retired), served 23 years as a Military Intelligence Officer and Foreign Area Officer specializing in China. Mr. Blasko was an army attaché in Beijing from 1992-1995 and in Hong Kong from 1995-1996. He has written numerous articles and chapters on the Chinese military and defense industries and is the author of the book, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, second edition (Routledge, 2012). The views expressed in this CMSI Note do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense, the Navy, or the Naval War College.

² Nicolas Gros, Verheyde, "UN Resolution 1816 on Somalia (June 2, 2008)," June 3, 2008, <https://www.bruxelles2.eu/en/2008/06/un-resolution-1816-on-somalia-june-2-%2C-2008-the-text/>. See also Andrew S. Erickson and Justin D. Mikolay, "Welcome China to the Fight Against Pirates," *Proceedings*, U.S. Naval Institute, March 2009, http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/China-Anti-Piracy_Proceedings_2009-March.pdf.

³ Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, "Chinese submarine docks in Sri Lanka despite Indian concerns," Reuters, 2 November 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/chinese-submarine-docks-in-sri-lanka-despite-indian-concerns-idUSKBN0IM0LT/>.

⁴ "Djibouti Chinese Military's First Overseas Support Base," *China Military Online*, 23 April 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Features_209191/9485815.html; Wang Xuejing, "China's First Overseas Military Base Opens in Djibouti," *CGTN*, 1 August 2017, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d6b7a4e3241544e/share_p.html.

⁵ 劈波斩浪！中国海军第33批护航编队启航赴亚丁湾 ["Breaking Through the Waves! The 33rd Escort Task Force Sets Sail for the Gulf of Aden"] 央视网 [CCTV Online], 29 August 2019, <http://military.cctv.com/2019/08/29/ARTIZrUfd79bqlqKPEuiwHVt190829.shtml>.

⁶ 中国第11批护航编队青岛起航 ["China's 11th Escort Task Force Sets Sail from Qingdao"], 新华社 [Xinhua], 27 February 2012, https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2012-02/27/content_2077908.htm.

⁷ “Chinese navy’s 15-year quest for peace in Gulf of Aden, waters off Somalia,” *Xinhua*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202312/28/WS658ce2cea31040ac301a9f01.html>.

⁸ The PLAN’s commitment to the Gulf of Aden mission parallels the many of the principles the PLA Army has implemented in the decades it has conducted UN-authorized peacekeeping operations (PKO). For example, responsibilities for PKO missions are shared among the Theaters; currently Army units from three different Theaters support one or two missions each. This provides the Theater Army and Army headquarters experience in planning and supporting overseas operations. Within the Theaters, deployments, which last for a year, rotate among group armies. Like the Gulf of Aden mission, the size of units involved at one time is relatively small—for the Army, mostly engineer, transport, medical, and security companies or platoons, with one infantry battalion on one mission and a helicopter company with support on another. Many Army units and personnel have been deployed on multiple rotations. However, with such small units comprising the commitment, the percentage of total Army personnel and units that have ever deployed is a minor fraction of the percentage of the PLAN’s large combatant force that has been dispatched. The Djibouti Base supports both PLA Army and Navy operations in the region and in all cases PLA units must maintain situational awareness of, and perhaps engage in liaison with, foreign forces in the area conducting similar tasks.

⁹ “China’s 45th Naval Fleet Sets Sail for Escort Mission in Gulf of Aden,” *China Military Online*, 13 September 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16251812.html; 黎云 [Li Yun], and 徐巍 [Xu Wei], 中国海军第 44 批护航编队起航赴亚丁湾 [“Chinese Navy’s 44th Escort Task Force Sets Sails for the Gulf of Aden”], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], 28 April 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16220896.html

¹⁰ “China Sends New Naval Fleet for Escort Mission in Gulf of Aden,” *Xinhua*, 21 February 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/OverseasOperations/EscortMissions/16288253.html.

¹¹ “Chinese Naval Frigate Xuchang Makes Technical Stop in Cape Town,” *China Military Online*, 21 May 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/MOOTW/EscortMissions_209168/News_209169/16310297.html.

¹² 张大禹 [Zhang Dayu], 海军第 46 批护航编队离开摩洛哥卡萨布兰卡港 [“The 46th Chinese Escort Task Force Leaves the Port of Casablanca, Morocco”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 17 July 2024, p. 4, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-07-17&paperNumber=04&articleid=935485; “Chinese Naval Ships Attend Parade Ceremony Marking Russian Navy’s 328th Anniversary,” *China Military Online*, 30 July 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16328469.html; “Chinese, Russian Navies Hold Joint Exercises at the Gulf of Finland,” *China Military Online*, 1 August 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/BILINGUAL/News_209203/16328875.html.