

## Looking After China's Own Pressure to protect PRC citizens working overseas likely to rise

Numerous Chinese citizens are entering Africa and other conflict-prone areas, both as employees of large corporations and as individual entrepreneurs in pursuit of profit. There they face physical security problems including crime, terrorism, and fallout from internal conflicts. China's nascent but growing power projection capability raises pressure for Beijing to intervene when PRC citizens are threatened. Combatant commanders, advisors, and other personnel in CENTCOM, AFRICOM, PACOM and other regions with internal security challenges and growing contingents of PRC citizens living and working within their area of responsibility (AOR), as well as policy makers and strategists in the United States, must understand these emerging dynamics. This article assesses China's capabilities for intervening on behalf of Chinese citizens working overseas and the risks inherent in each option.

### Context

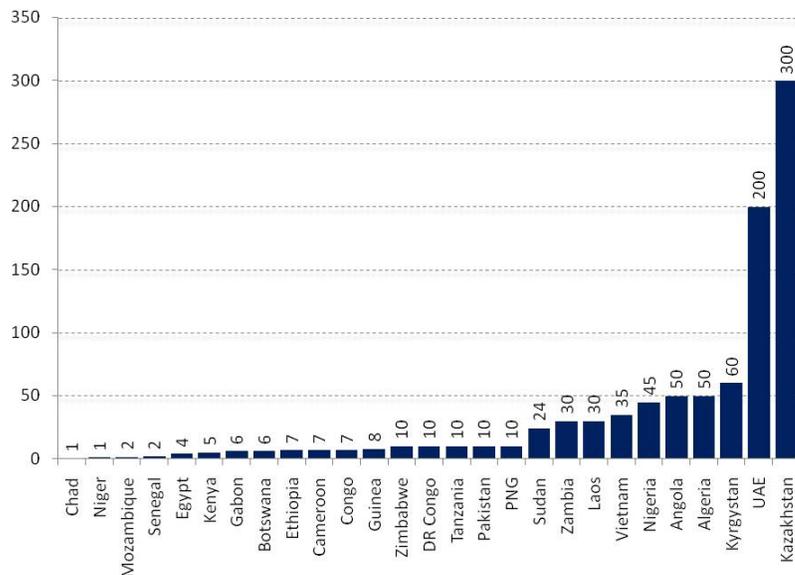
In April 2007, seven Chinese oil workers were killed in Ethiopia during an attack on Ethiopian forces guarding a Sinopec facility. In 2008 nine Chinese oilmen were taken hostage in Sudan's South Kordofan state; five perished in a failed Sudanese government rescue attempt. In April 2010, multiple bombs exploded at a dam construction site in northern Burma's Kachin state, killing four Chinese workers, according to *Reuters* and *Burma Rivers Network*.<sup>1</sup>

Several factors increase the likelihood that the Chinese government may be more able and willing to respond with force to future hostage situations or other targeted violence against PRC citizens. The first is the growth in the number of PRC citizens in these areas. China's Ministry of Commerce estimates that at the end of 2009, more than five million Chinese citizens were working overseas, up from just under 3.5 million at the end of 2005. The number of officially reported workers has grown at between 8.7 percent and 10.1 percent each year for the past four years. With 8 percent growth in 2010, there would be approximately 5.5 million PRC citizens working overseas.

We have canvassed a wide range of industry, media, and diplomatic sources to assemble a rough outline of the 'footprint' of PRC citizens working overseas. Of particular interest are countries with a significant risk of internal violence becoming serious enough that Beijing must

consider NEO operations or an intervention under conditions where use of force may be necessary (see **Exhibit 1**, below). Notable countries on the list include Nigeria with an estimated 45,000 PRC citizens and Sudan with an estimated 24,000 PRC citizens.

**Exhibit 1: PRC citizens in select countries, latest estimate**  
thousand persons



Source: Lexis-Nexis, *China Safari* (2009), local media, authors' estimates

Nigeria's oil-rich south remains unstable and the country's leadership is scrambling to prepare for elections in 2011. Sudan faces the potential for serious violence driven both by the situation in Darfur and the looming independence referendum in South Sudan, since Khartoum is unlikely to want the South to become independent and take substantial oil reserves with it. The Democratic Republic of Congo has an estimated 10,000 PRC citizens living and working in country and this number is probably rising as higher copper prices increase mining activity. Ethnic Indians' substantial economic influence in proportion to their numbers in Africa—especially Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya—has made them targets of economically-driven violence, and could portend similar trouble for the Chinese. To take the extreme example, in Uganda, Idi Amin dispossessed and expelled ethnic Indians in the early 1970s, and they had to wait decades before President Yoweri Museveni invited them back. Pakistan also hosts an

estimated 10,000 Chinese workers and has been the site of fatal attacks on Chinese workers in the past (2004).

The second factor is the PLA's nascent, but growing, force projection capacity. The Chinese Navy's ongoing anti-piracy deployment in the Gulf of Aden likely reflects the changing official attitude regarding the protection of Chinese citizens' commercial activities overseas. At least nine Chinese vessels have been hijacked by pirates operating from Somalia. In response, the PLA Navy has maintained an armed counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008. As of 30 June 2010, the PLA Navy had escorted more than 2,200 vessels in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean off of Somalia. This increasingly muscular effort to protect Chinese ships and their valuable cargoes has yet to be matched on land, with its very different political and legal realities, but China's increasing participation in UN PKOs may signal a shift toward greater comfort with distant land deployments.

As the PLAN anti-piracy mission continues, an open debate on China's need for overseas bases has emerged. For the first time, officially-sanctioned publications such as *Global Times* are carrying opinion pieces advocating the establishment of some form of overseas facilities for Chinese forces.<sup>2</sup> Some of the authors, such as Fudan University professor Shen Dingli, argue for an approach similar to the U.S. "places, not bases" concept, emphasizing facilities in strategic areas that can be quickly accessed but are low-cost and have a far lower profile than a large facility like Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa, which can galvanize local opposition.<sup>3</sup>

The third factor is the Chinese leadership's increasingly assertive worldview as the country emerges strongly from the deep global economic recession. Premier Wen Jiabao's stiff-arming of President Obama at the December 2009 Copenhagen climate talks was noteworthy. As Beijing senses that its power is increasing relative to that of other major global players, it may become less willing to rely on others to provide security for Chinese nationals living and working overseas in places that are strategic and resource rich, but also often suffer from chronic instability and internal violence.

Also relevant are strong nationalist pressures of the kind that brought protesters into the streets to stone the U.S. Embassy in Beijing after the accidental targeting of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during Operation Allied Force in 1999. The nationalistic outpouring from bloggers, e.g. that following the April 2007 attack on a Sinopec facility

in Ethiopia, in which nine Chinese workers perished, also reflects the rise of such pressures.

### **Intervention capabilities and risks**

In part to deal with these emerging challenges, China has established a new, reinvigorated overseas Chinese affairs office under State Council control. In May 2007 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a division of consular protection under the Department of Consular Affairs. It is the ministry's largest single department, with 140 staff in Beijing and more than 600 at China's overseas consulates. Beijing's present reliance on diplomatic channels to protect overseas workers can be seen in the cooperation between China National Petroleum Corporation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce to secure the release of nine of its workers after their kidnapping in Nigeria in 2007, and a similar, unsuccessful effort in Sudan in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

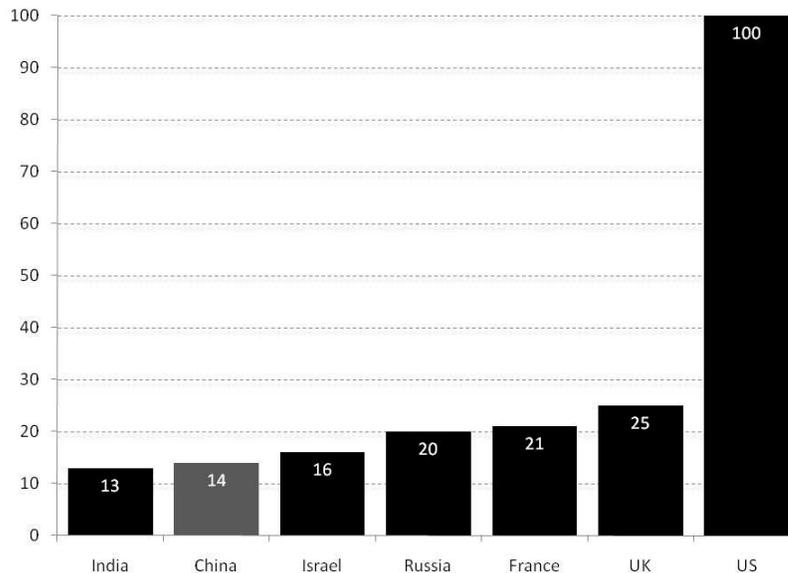
Over the last few years, Chinese embassy staff overseas have been designating rotating duty officers in charge of cell phones with their numbers posted on embassy/consulate websites, and land line backup at larger embassies. Emergency procedures have been established, which include consulting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing as necessary. Yet as Beijing faces further, perhaps more sophisticated attacks on its citizens overseas, other Chinese agencies may become involved, with attendant bureaucratic complications.

China's evolving policy of peacekeeping involvement (e.g., in Africa, where as of July 2010 some 2,013 Chinese military personnel, police and observers were serving on peacekeeping missions) serves as a means of at once demonstrating international good will (a soft-power objective) and showing a willingness to engage in out-of-area military operations (a hard-power goal), in addition to participating positively in the existing international system. Such precedence might give Beijing, on balance, more latitude for using military force for the protection and rescue of Chinese nationals.

As **Exhibit 2** indicates, China has less power projection capability than other countries with significant numbers of citizens living and working in areas with security challenges. This power projection index uses current U.S. power capabilities as the baseline against which other nations' are measured. Aerial refueling and long-range transport aircraft fleet size, deck aviation fleet size, number of naval medium

and heavy helicopters, and level of special operations forces (SOF) support are the metrics used in the rankings.

**Exhibit 2: Select militaries' power projection capability**  
relative to US, index, n=100



Source: FAS, Sinodefence.com, RAF, Royal Navy, USAF, USN, Aviation Weekly, authors' estimates

The type of security threat is a key factor in deciding possible PRC government responses. Our basic framework differentiates between a non-targeted threat such as the criminal attacks faced by Chinese in South Africa and more systematic violence that is either: 1) directed towards Chinese such as that seen in Zambia during 2007 and 2008, 2) carried out by terrorist or rebel groups such as the 2007 attack on oil workers in Ethiopia, or 3) caused by civil strife or other collapse of order, such as that which might result from a 2011 South Sudan independence referendum.

Following future attacks of a systematic nature, there may be a greater push within the government to deploy Chinese police personnel to protect workers at Chinese firms' overseas projects. In December 2009, China's *Global Times* carried an extensive discussion of the possibility of using Chinese police forces to protect Chinese copper mining assets in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> One complexity here is that much of China's security forces, especially those of the People's Armed Police, have tight links to the military and their deployment would

likely be viewed by local and international parties as tantamount to stationing of military personnel abroad.

Chartering commercial aircraft, as Beijing has done to evacuate citizens from Thailand and Equatorial Guinea during civil unrest in 2008 and Thailand and Kyrgyzstan in 2010, is still likely to be the lowest risk (and thus preferred) evacuation option. China's nationally-flagged airline, Air China, has more than 60 inter-continental range aircraft that might be pressed into service during an evacuation. The aircraft and their maximum ranges and passenger payloads are shown in **Exhibit 3**. So long as an area has suitable airfields, China already possesses indigenous air assets that could evacuate Chinese expatriates and assets from a nearby conflict zone. No aerial refueling would be needed—only landing rights at secure airfields as well as over flight clearance.

### Exhibit 3: China's long-range civilian aircraft fleet

Aircraft	Number	Range (km)	Passenger Payload
A330	16	12,000+	253
A340	6	14,000+	239
Boeing 747	20	12,000+	416
Boeing 767	10	12,000+	181
Boeing 777	10	13,000+	301

Sources: Boeing, Airbus, Planespotter.com, Air China

Large Chinese companies can also hire foreign private security providers. A prominent private security firm tells us it counts a number of large Chinese firms as clients and that *"in the last few years, we have definitely seen an increased interest by Chinese energy, natural resources and construction firms seeking expert advice on the political, operational and security risks associated with their investments/projects in Africa, Middle East and other far-flung locations."*<sup>6</sup> Another major security firm told us that it would like to increase its work for Chinese clients operating in high-risk areas.<sup>7</sup> Beijing might ultimately rather see private contractors engaging in sensitive activities than risk the diplomatic fallout that could result from sending military or paramilitary (PAP) personnel overseas to protect Chinese workers and assets.

Overall, private security providers are a logical solution for large companies facing threats in Sudan, Nigeria, and other volatile areas. That said, smaller firms and individual entrepreneurs in the same hot zones will likely not be able to afford private security. Commercial shippers were reportedly paying upwards of US\$25,000 per trip for armed security to escort them through the pirate-infested Gulf of Aden in early 2010. Longer-term contracts in regions with real, but lower, probability of attack will cost less on a time basis, but even a purely advisory relationship is cost-prohibitive for smaller firms facing tight margins and substantial price competition.

Chinese businesspeople who cannot afford private security services may choose to arm themselves, further escalating any confrontations that occur. Individual Chinese traders and businessmen in select countries will likely be largely invisible to Beijing until a high profile attack or systemic violence erupts, at which point China's government will be placed in a reactive position and face nationalist pressures to intervene on their behalf.

This leaves the intervention and evacuation options that are much more likely to require military force, and that with a few exceptions, are operations that only states can typically conduct. Situations in which Chinese working abroad are abducted are one such case. When the Qingdao-based coal carrier *Dexinhai* and its crew, which included 25 PRC citizens, was taken by pirates off Somalia in October 2009, the Chinese Defense Ministry said it would take "whatever measures are necessary" to free *Dexinhai* and its crew, presumably including military action since the PLAN had forces in the Gulf of Aden at the time.<sup>8</sup> The vessel was ultimately released in late December 2009 after the payment of a US\$4 million ransom, but military action abroad will be an increasingly realistic option as China's long-range transport and SOF capabilities improve.

Non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs) can be very demanding in terms of coordinating air and sea platforms operating far from their home bases and in potentially hostile areas. *Operation Sharp Edge*, a large-scale evacuation of American citizens from Liberia in 1990, involved four vessels and 2,100 Marines.<sup>9</sup> Yet China will likely continue to pursue increasingly significant NEOs, even if they do not approach this operational level. It has come a long way since its first NEO, from the Solomon Islands in 2000. There ethnic tensions threatened Chinese citizens, but Honiara then recognized Taipei, so Beijing had to run operations out of its embassy in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

Following its usual practice of working with local Chinese organizations and federations to collect information and disseminate advisories, diplomats obtained situational updates from local Chinese. Having obtained the telephone number of the local rebel leader and the section of the city he controlled, they called him and negotiated safe passage before dispatching a COSCO ship and evacuating approximately 120 Chinese, as well as arranging flights out of the country. Apparently the PLAN may have been asked to send a vessel but was unable to do so; today things might be completely different. Subsequently, China has organized a variety of NEOs, including from Fiji during the 2006 military coup.

### ***Sea Evacuation***

The Somali piracy problem has made the political climate for muscular major-power naval operations more permissive than it was before, and Chinese power projection capabilities are growing. China's Type 920 *Anwei* hospital ship, commissioned in 2008, might conceivably be used to support ill or injured Chinese in a crisis overseas (e.g., in Africa). Training vessel 082 *Shichang* can be configured into a hospital ship. It can support two helicopters, as can Type 071 landing platform dock 998 *Kunlunshan*. A number of Chinese destroyers and frigates can support up to two helicopters each, and could play a limited role in a NEO operation.

In the future, a dedicated helicopter carrier would be particularly useful for sea evacuation in a hostile area. A carrier offshore would offer better operational-security and -flexibility than would land-based alternatives that require permission from potentially hostile governments or risk exposure to mortar bombardment, IEDs, and other attacks.

Sea-based evacuation operations with rotary wing aircraft increase a commander's options, as the NEO is not tied to one airfield. In addition, a vessel relatively close to the evacuation area has more options in terms of time slots for launching aircraft. Finally, armed helicopters can accompany the evacuation helicopters if the situation dictates, providing a level of firepower that long-range military aircraft with embarked security forces lack. The PLA does not have the capability of the U.S. to conduct a helicopter NEO. In *Operation Eastern Exit* (1991), *USS Trenton* launched CH-53E choppers from more than 450 miles offshore at night and successfully evacuated the U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu.<sup>10</sup>

China's military is years from having this level of capability. The PLA(N) is still very weak in helicopters; most are short-range platforms that cannot carry many people. Its attack helicopters have short range and limited warloads. The PLA has mostly short-range Z-9Gs, and a higher level of joint cooperation would be required before ground force helicopters operated off a Navy platform.

To respond to a distant crisis on short notice, Beijing could requisition the Chinese-flagged merchant vessels nearest to the crisis zone and, in conjunction with chartered aircraft, could use them to help rescue Chinese expatriates. Beijing's ability to locate and summon PRC-flagged vessels benefits from the China Ship Reporting (CHISREP) System, which requires Chinese-registered ships over 300 GT engaged in international routes to report position daily to the PRC Shanghai Maritime Safety Administration.<sup>11</sup> This capability has been used before. In January 2008, following coal shortages caused by snowstorms, the Ministry of Communications requisitioned bulk carriers from China Shipping Group and COSCO and pressed them into service hauling coal to help replenish stockpiles.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Air Evacuation***

If the situation on the ground is too dangerous for a chartered commercial aircraft to safely land and embark passengers, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has 14 *Ilyushin* IL-76MD transport aircraft, which could probably evacuate at least 120 people apiece. An IL-76MD operating from China's westernmost airbase at Kashi could fly to Khartoum or Nairobi and then onward to and from any destination in Africa with 100 passengers without any need for aerial refueling. The IL-76MD could also carry up to 45 tons of vehicles and materiel if physical assets needed to be evacuated.

### **Conclusion**

While great uncertainties remain, the chances of Beijing using force to protect citizens overseas are rising. The growing presence of Chinese citizens in volatile areas potentially creates a number of scenarios that could inspire armed Chinese NEO operations, even near areas where U.S. forces may be based or operating. For all this progress, however, Beijing's acute sensitivity regarding sovereignty issues makes it highly unlikely to intervene on another nation's soil without explicit permission. In the event of a crisis, China is likely to supply intelligence, and its security personnel might work with their local

counterparts, with an emphasis on isolating and evacuating Chinese nationals. But it is at sea that we are already witnessing the most dramatic developments. China's ongoing anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden is arguably the first step in overseas military deployments to protect PRC citizens working overseas.

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The authors have published widely on maritime, energy, and security issues relevant to China. An archive of their work is available at [www.andrewerickson.com](http://www.andrewerickson.com).

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<sup>1</sup> "China Risks Backlash with Myanmar Investments—NGO," *Reuters*, 9 July 2010, <http://af.reuters.com/article/energyOilNews/idAFTOE66804H20100709?sp=true>

<sup>2</sup> Sun Li, "Naval Expert Yin Zhuo: Chinese Navy Can Explore Establishment of Long-Term Shore Supply Bases," *China National Radio*, 26 December 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Shen Dingli, "Don't Shun the Idea of Setting up Overseas Military Bases," 28 January 2010, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-01/28/content\\_19324522.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-01/28/content_19324522.htm).

<sup>4</sup> "Chinese Oil Workers Set Free in Nigeria," *Xinhua*, 5 February 2007, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn>.

<sup>5</sup> Jiang Sujing, "Chinese Police Can Bring Order to Wild Afghanistan," *Global Times*, 24 December 2009, <http://opinion.globaltimes.cn/commentary/2009-12/493967.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added. E-mail exchange with large global security advisor, February 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "'Dexinhai' Has Arrived in Somalia, Spare No Effort to Rescue," *Songxian County Website*, <http://www.sxw.gov.cn/xwkd.asp?id=2439>.

<sup>9</sup> Gary J. Ohls, *Somalia... From the Sea*, Naval War College Newport Paper No. 34, July 2009, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Adam B. Siegel, *Eastern Exit: The Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) from Mogadishu* in January 1991 (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, October 1991), p. 9.