

# International rescue

## China looks after its interests abroad

*With millions of Chinese citizens travelling and working around the globe and significant remittances being sent back every year, China is developing the capacity to protect its assets abroad. **Andrew S Erickson** assesses its preventative and protective capabilities.*

### KEY POINTS

- China's naval deployment to the Gulf of Aden in December 2008 is an indicator of the country's growing willingness and ability to engage in overseas operations.
- Such missions are likely to increase in coming years, focusing on protecting commercial interests and civilians.
- However, a lack of military capabilities and desire to appear benign should deter any significant deployments of land forces for the foreseeable future.

This article was first available online at [jir.janes.com](http://jir.janes.com) on 27 February 2009

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) dispatched three naval vessels to support international counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in December 2008. This muscular effort is the clearest sign so far that Beijing is growing in its willingness and capacity to deploy military assets overseas to protect Chinese citizens and commercial interests.

This trend is likely to continue. Given China's need for natural resources to fuel its economic growth and the penetration of more stable markets by Western European and United States businesses, Chinese firms have begun operating in some of the least stable, resource-rich areas in the world, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. In these areas they have increasingly encountered physical security problems including crime, terrorism and the risk of being drawn into internal conflicts, which has increased domestic and commercial pressure on Beijing to protect its operations and personnel.

However, there are limits to what Beijing is willing to undertake in the current environment. China's rhetorical reticence to intervene directly in the sovereign affairs of another state means it is unlikely to deploy significant land forces to another country. China also lacks rapidly deployable

military assets to field in multiple crisis situations in a short period of time.

Further, Beijing's desire to avoid criticism of its foreign policy and international concerns over its rapid economic and military development should ensure that wherever possible it will work within international security frameworks or in collaboration with other militaries.

Nonetheless, the probability of increasing Chinese deployments overseas and a growing willingness by Beijing to undertake civilian or military missions to protect its interests will concern competitors and potential rivals in Northeast Asia and beyond.

### Expanding reach

The migration of Chinese citizens overseas for commercial purposes, both temporarily and permanently, has been happening since the 1300s.

Today, migration of Chinese citizens has increased markedly as the country's economy has grown. Chinese and Western sources estimate that somewhere between 500,000 and four million Chinese nationals currently work abroad. When travellers and students were added, the number of Chinese citizens rose to 32 million in 2006 alone. This figure is expected to increase to 100 million by 2020, according to state-run media.

Unlike their predecessors, current overseas migrants, whether managers, technicians, skilled workers, traders or labourers, tend to remain Chinese citizens and will ultimately return. Their welfare is therefore unambiguously Beijing's responsibility. Moreover, the value of these workers to the Chinese economy means Beijing is more eager to protect these people: Chinese overseas workers sent home nearly USD26 billion in 2007, the second highest global remittance total behind India's USD27 billion.

### Dangerous liaisons

In contrast to the bulk of US and Western European expatriates, who tend to work in financial and service jobs in each others' countries, the current wave of Chinese economic expatriates are gravitating to often volatile developing

countries where they work as traders or small business owners, build infrastructure and extract resources. Chinese-operated assets are therefore far more likely to come under attack in these volatile areas.

The perception of ethnic Chinese investors assuming a disproportionate influence in developing economies has also led to local resentment. For example, in Zambia where China owns and operates copper mines and other enterprises, Michael Sata, opposition candidate in the 2006 presidential election, made China the central focus of his campaign. He declared: "The Chinese are not here as investors, they are here as invaders."

Sata lost, but in 2007 protests forced visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao to cancel some public appearances. In 2008, 500 Zambian miners allegedly attacked a Chinese manager, prompting a July 2008 report on National Public Radio to claim: "Chinese workers came out with all sorts of weapons."

Beijing has publicly condemned such events, but no evacuation or stabilisation policies have been implemented as yet. However, with more Chinese citizens overseas, action by Beijing should become more likely. With a greater capability to deploy overseas and exert diplomatic pressure, and higher levels of information dissemination given China's ranking as the biggest internet user in the world, there are likely to be growing domestic demands on the government to intervene in crises. The nationalistic outpouring from bloggers following the April 2007 attack on a China National Petroleum Corporation facility in Ethiopia, in which nine Chinese workers died, was one such example. Despite filtering, one Chinese blogger asked: "If you want to make money there, why shouldn't you send your own troops to provide security?"

### Diplomatic responses

Such calls for action are likely to become stronger as attacks on Chinese citizens overseas continue to increase. Since the turn of the century, Chinese citizens or commercial interests have come under attack in countries across Africa, the Middle East

and South and Central Asia, from South Africa through Kenya to Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. According to *Jane's* figures, abductions and insurgent activities comprise more than half of the attacks on Chinese expatriates since June 2002.

Beijing is already reacting to this spate of attacks on Chinese workers overseas, through largely diplomatic and bureaucratic means. China has established a new, reinvigorated overseas Chinese affairs office under State Council control. The duties of this office and those of consular offices more directly involved in keeping Chinese nationals secure overseas currently diverge, but its rejuvenation may still reflect a shift in thinking about how actively Beijing should look after its citizens overseas. In addition, 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.

The ministry has also begun to emulate the approach of other foreign ministries, posting travel advisories on its website so that outbound Chinese citizens can quickly assess major risks in their destination country.

Following the June 2004 murder of 11 Chinese construction workers in Afghanistan, the ministry began posting security suggestions on its websites. For example, the site of the Chinese consulate in Houston suggests that companies working overseas enclose construction sites, install surveillance systems, insert bulletproof glass in vehicles and building windows facing streets, avoid hoisting flags and stock bullet-proof vests. The posting also recommends that companies in volatile areas seek local military and police protection and that companies place greater emphasis on community relations.

China's Ministry of Commerce, which has offices in foreign embassies and consulates, is also taking action. In April 2007, it established a telephone hotline that gives prospective workers information on overseas investment projects. This includes background information on the company concerned and its projects, as well as the application procedures for working there. A month later the ministry, in co-ordination with the China Insurance Regulatory Commission, began working to create tailored insurance packages for Chinese expatriate workers.

Amid these immediate, limited and primarily bureaucratic measures, a range of possible options exist for further action. Having studied strategies previously pursued by Japanese companies, Chinese academics Chu Shulong and Lin Xinzhu maintained in a June 2008 article in the *Global Times* that Chinese overseas actors should devote "one per cent of spending to social infrastructure", including the development of schools and other local needs. These policies are currently



*A ceremony is held before a Chinese naval fleet sets sail from a port in Sanya city on Hainan Island in the South China Sea on 26 December. The deployment of People's Liberation Army Navy ships for anti-piracy duty off Somalia is indicative of China's increasing willingness and capability to protect its assets abroad.*

being implemented.

This is in line with the current preventative approach that includes renewed efforts by the ministries of foreign affairs and commerce to improve overseas Chinese corporate social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, security training, regulation of workers and working closely with local officials.

In a more direct manner, both ministries were integral in co-operating with the China National Petroleum Corporation to secure the release of nine of its workers after they were kidnapped in Nigeria in January 2007. The ministries were also involved in a similar, less successful effort in Sudan in October 2008, in which four workers were rescued but five were killed.

As Beijing faces further, perhaps more sophisticated attacks on its citizens overseas, other Chinese agencies may become involved. The difficulty may then become managing the attendant bureaucratic complications that arise when several departments and agencies are involved.

### Air evacuation

So far, all Chinese interventions to protect its citizens and commercial interests abroad have been diplomatic.

This is likely to continue for the foreseeable future; because of China's presently limited military capabilities, its focus on domestic development and its sensitivity toward sovereignty infringement, it would be highly unlikely to conduct large military deployments to defend Chinese expatriates in a conflict zone.

For this reason, private security companies are

likely to find willing customers among Chinese firms operating overseas. While Chinese firms tend to dislike hiring outside consultants, Beijing might ultimately encourage this option, as it would rather see private contractors engaging in sensitive activities than risk the diplomatic fallout that could result from sending military or paramilitary personnel overseas to protect Chinese workers and assets.

Nonetheless, Beijing will retain the contingency plans of military intervention in case a serious enough situation occurs. Given that the most probable case would be the need to evacuate Chinese citizens after a natural disaster or amid ethnically targeted rioting or lawlessness, the most feasible options would be an evacuation operation in close co-operation with the host country, using Chinese civil flag air and sea assets.

Beijing could charter third-party aircraft for evacuation operations, but it is most likely that it would want to use indigenous assets (military or civilian) to evacuate Chinese expatriates from danger zones. This has been the case in recent years; Chinese embassy and consulate staff arranged evacuation by charter plane of more than 1,000 Chinese citizens from the Solomon Islands (following rioting in April 2006); East Timor (following intra-Timorese rioting in May 2006); Lebanon (in July 2006 during the Israel-Hizbullah war); Tonga (amid pro-democracy riots in November 2006) and Thailand (in November and December 2008 amid anti-government protests).

Such operations could possibly be protected by People's Liberation Army personnel, but for

the foreseeable future China is likely to avoid unilateral ground force deployments of more than 100 soldiers to protect its citizens. Even with the PLA Air Force's long-range air transport capacity, Beijing is still likely to prefer chartering civilian aircraft for evacuation operations. Doing so would help avoid the concern that could arise from potential rivals if it demonstrated the ability to perform a long-range air operation during a time of crisis.

In terms of civilian aircraft, China's national-flag airline, Air China, has more than 60 inter-continental range aircraft that might be pressed into service during an evacuation. As long as an area has suitable airfields (runways 2,000 m long and capable of handling heavy aircraft), China already possesses substantial domestic air assets that could be used to evacuate Chinese expatriate workers and physical goods from a conflict zone. No aerial refuelling would be needed, only landing rights at secure airfields as well as overflight clearance. While this would disrupt commercial traffic elsewhere, in a time of crisis China's leaders would be likely to find such costs justified.

If the situation were so grave that Beijing felt military transport aircraft should be used, the PLA Air Force also currently operates 14 Ilyushin IL-76MD transport aircraft. The IL-76MD would be an excellent evacuation platform as, according to the manufacturer's website, it can carry a 20-tonne payload for more than 7,000 km without refuelling. In practical terms, this means an IL-76MD operating from China's westernmost airbase at Kashi could fly to Khartoum or Nairobi, then onward to and from any destination in Africa, with 100 passengers without any need for aerial refuelling. The IL-76MD could also carry vehicles and materiel up to its maximum payload of 45 tonnes if physical assets needed to be evacuated.

**Sea evacuation**

To respond to a distant crisis on short notice, Beijing might also launch a sea evacuation operation by requisitioning the Chinese-flag merchant vessels nearest to the crisis zone and using them to rescue Chinese expatriates. The Ministry of Communications already has the authority to requisition Chinese-flagged vessels to serve the state.

In January 2008, following the paralyzing snowstorms that caused many parts of China to run short on coal, the Ministry of Communications requisitioned bulk carriers from the state-owned China Shipping Group and China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and pressed them into service hauling coal to help replenish stockpiles that were depleted during the storms. Beijing's ability to locate and summon Chinese-flag vessels would benefit from the China Ship Reporting

<b>Air China Long-Range Fleet</b>			
<b>Aircraft</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Range (km)</b>	<b>Passenger payload</b>
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
Source: <i>Jane's All The World's Aircraft</i>			

(CHISREP) system, which requires all Chinese-registered ships over 300 gross tonnage engaged in international routes to report their positions daily to the Shanghai Maritime Safety Administration. In addition, military maritime assets, particularly those with deck aviation capability, could be used to help with non-combatant evacuation operations or to deter attacks on Chinese citizens overseas.

The December 2004 tsunami demonstrated to Beijing the value of such vessels, but the PLAN

reticent for the foreseeable future about engaging in significant protective operations, given its foreign policy of non-interference in sovereign affairs and unwillingness to be seen as aggressive in its handling of diplomatic issues.

Nonetheless, China's current capabilities will certainly facilitate logistical support, evacuation, deterring attacks and even ameliorating crises that might inspire those attacks in the first place. In the longer term, more substantial deployments, perhaps including land or special forces,

could become commonplace as Beijing seeks to secure its overseas interests. The difficulty for Beijing is that it may feel pressured by domestic popular opinion or commercial lobbying into such operations earlier than it is capable. According to Beijing University professor Zhu

Feng in March 2008: "State-owned companies have become very powerful interest groups. They even hijacked China's foreign policy in Sudan."

While such operations do not necessarily indicate more aggressive behaviour on China's part (the Gulf of Aden operation enhances international security co-operation rather than detracting from it), Beijing's growing willingness and ability to engage in expeditionary operation in pursuit of its own commercial interests will be of concern to potential economic and military rivals in the US, Western Europe and Japan. ■

**'The value of overseas workers to the Chinese economy means Beijing is more eager to protect these people'**

currently has only a few relevant platforms. The Type 920 hospital ship, commissioned in 2008, might conceivably be used to support ill or injured Chinese citizens in a crisis overseas. Training vessel 082 Shichang can also be configured into a hospital ship, supporting 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 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 land-based alternatives that would require permission from potentially hostile governments or risk exposure to low-tech attacks.

**Conclusion**

President Hu Jintao in 2004 placed increased emphasis on defence of economic interests and peacekeeping contributions. Combined with the December 2008 deployment of destroyers to the Gulf of Aden, this suggests a growing willingness to engage in military operations to protect citizens and commercial interests overseas.

For the time being, China lacks many of the necessary capabilities to deploy significant assets to crisis areas. Moreover, Beijing will remain

**RELATED ARTICLES**  
WWW.JANES.COM

1. Japan considers maritime deployment to Somalia
2. China to send warships to Somalia
3. Sentinel: Navy/China

**Author**  
Andrew Erickson is a professor in the China Maritime Studies Institute at the US Naval War College.

**Search for these articles at**  
[www.janes.com](http://www.janes.com)