

CHINA'S NAVAL DEPLOYMENT TO SOMALIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Executive Summary

1. In December 2008, China deployed its naval force to the Aden Gulf with the UN's mandate. A second deployment was sent in April 2009 to relieve the first mission.
2. The first objective for China's naval deployment is to protect its merchant ships passing through the Gulf of Aden from pirate attacks. The success of this deployment may increase China's resolution to protect its overseas interest in the future.
3. The second objective is to improve China's international image by contributing to international security, raising its international profile and integrating with the international system.
4. The third compelling objective would be the overall military benefits. The Chinese Somalia expedition has been the country's first combat naval mission in waters far away from home since the Zheng He voyage. While the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has never defined this escort task in terms of combat it is well prepared for the action to evolve into small scale armed conflicts.
5. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)'s Somalia task group provides the basic form upon which its future expedition fleets are organized. If they are joined by a few more specialized warships, such as Anti-Submarine Warship (ASW) and air defense frigates and a few submarines, a standard maritime battle group would be in order.
6. The immediate response from the international community is benign. The *International Herald Tribune* for example, calls for the world, especially U.S. and India, to use the opportunity to engage China, in the belief that the pirates of Somalia might compel international cooperation and raise trust. Other western sources such as the *World Tribune* was cautious of China's rising

military power but admitted that there was no convincing reason to reject China's participation.

7. Japan and India displayed a greater concern over China's deployment. India's newspaper warned of a restriction on Indian's own naval freedom while Japan sped up its own deployment to Somalia.
8. There will now be four naval powers in Southeast Asia. The United States, Japan, India and China will be active in a region locked in a paradoxical entanglement of competition and cooperation.
9. The increasingly Mahanian characteristic of China's naval strategy is likely to spark off an alarm within the community, especially when there are already at least three other foreign naval powers active in the region.
10. China's rising naval power can be a potential contributor to regional security for Southeast Asia if the region engages China along with other naval powers. For example, China can participate in regional anti-piracy operation. For the purpose of integrating China's rising military into the international community, China and ASEAN should explore Confidence Building Measures.

CHINA'S NAVAL DEPLOYMENT TO SOMALIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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China's naval milestone – deployment of naval vessels to Somalia

- 1.1 China has deployed its naval forces to the Aden Gulf to participate in anti-piracy operations. After its deployment in December 2008, a second batch of naval vessels was deployed in April 2009 to replace the first deployment.
- 1.2 China's deployment is to protect its overseas interest, as well as to improve its international image as a responsible rising nation and gain invaluable military operation experience.
- 1.3 China's deployment is a milestone in Chinese military history as this would be the first time that China had deployed naval vessels overseas for combat operations. This is a signal to many that China wishes to participate more actively in international security.
- 1.4 Due mainly to the severity of the Somalia piracy problem and a clear UN mandate, China's deployment received generally positive response even from its strategic competitors. However, there are still reports that caution against a growing Chinese naval strength.
- 1.5 With a growing and more engaging Chinese military, Southeast Asian states can expect another active naval force in the region in the intermediate future. This may not necessarily contribute to instability via the traditional

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understanding of gunboat diplomacy. On the contrary, an increasing Mahanian Chinese navy may contribute to regional security and stability if they are engaged positively.

China's naval deployment to Somalia

- 2.1 On the 20th of December 2008, the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Liu Jianchao, announced that China is officially deploying its naval force to the Aden Gulf with UN's mandate. China had expressed its interest in sending a naval force into the region following several pirate attacks on Chinese ships and the passing of UNSC Resolution 1851 on 16th of December 2008, which authorises states to use land-based operations in Somalia.
- 2.2 The naval task force consists of 2 warships, Destroyer 169 (Wuhan 武汉) and Destroyer 17 (Haikou 海口), and a resupply vessel, Refurnishing Vessel 887 (Weishanhu 微山湖)¹. The task force set sail on the 26th December of the same year. On the 2nd of April, a second task force was deployed to replace the destroyers in Aden Gulf as part of its routine rotation. The second task force consists of 2 similar warships, Destroyer 167 (Shenzhen 深圳) and Corvette 570 (Huangshan 黄山) in replacement of 169 and 171.
- 2.3 Prior to its initial deployment, China tested domestic and international reaction by hinting of a possible deployment. On 28th November 2008, an interview with a prolific military officer, Major General Jin Yinan,² was arranged and broadcasted in China's official broadcasting network. As a member of the military's senior management, Major-General Jin was unable to reveal anything to the country's official news agency without clearing it first with the

¹ "Chinese Navy sends most sophisticated ships on escort mission off Somalia", retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-12/26/content_10565179.htm on 1st Feb 2009.

² Major-General Jin Yinan is the Vice Director of Strategic Institute at the National Defense University of China; he is a frequent guest to TV and Radio interviews and is a celebrity in his own ways.

top brass. The interview gave clues to China's official stand and explained why it was possible for China to deploy its navy to Aden Gulf.

- 2.4 There are three main objectives for China's deployment, namely, protecting direct national interest such as merchant ship's safety, gaining military experience and enhancing China's international image. The objectives overlap each other and the means of meeting the objectives is producing equally complex implications.
- 2.5 The single most obvious reason for China's naval deployment is to protect its merchant ships passing through the Gulf of Aden. When asked for the reason for agreeing to a Chinese deployment, the Major-General replied that failure to do so might further endanger Chinese nationals' lives and compromise China's strategic interest in the region.³ However, given that only a fraction of ships that passed through Aden Gulf was attacked and that an even smaller fraction flew the Chinese flag, China could have easily chosen to rely on the Western states for the region's security as it has always practised. This objective might therefore not be a particularly strong one.
- 2.6 So far, there has been little report on how China has fared in fulfilling this objective, but a preliminary observation on People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)'s military strength suggests that the pirates are not likely to pose a major challenge.
- 2.7 The broader implication suggests that China now possesses the ability and willingness to use its military might to protect its overseas interests. With increasing investment and trade overseas, China needs a military force that could be deployed beyond the East Asian region. The success of this deployment may increase China's resolution to protect its overseas interest in the future.

³ Broadcast Interview of Major-General Jin Yinan, transcript available at <http://cn.chinareviewnews.com/crn-webapp/search/allDetail.jsp?id=100818788&sw=所要>

Improving China's international image

- 3.1 The second objective is to improve China's international image by contributing to international security. The more important objective might have been China's desire to raise its international profile and to better integrate with the international system. This is explicitly spelt out in Major-General Jin Yinan's rebuttal to objections of high cost that one cannot merely consider the economic aspect while forsaking the international image benefits.⁴ Major-General Jin also went on to say that it is the duty of China as a rising nation to contribute to international security.
- 3.2 This objective is likely to be the main objective and there are signs that China is working hard towards that end. Well aware of its much publicised double digit growing defence budget, China does not wish to trigger another round of "China Threat" talks due to its deployment.
- 3.3 Mishandling the deployment can generate a backlash so serious that it might be a diplomatic suicide to China. India, another rising Asia power, who readily sent off a warship to Somalia at first notice, had sunk a hijacked Thai fishing boat by mistake.⁵ China is unlikely to walk away with the same mistake without being crucified by international media. Hence despite China's, especially the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s, eagerness to raise its international profile, it waited patiently for a clear UN mandate and took pains to test and analyse possible international reaction before committing to the cause.

Military implications

- 4.1 The third compelling objective would be the military benefits. Analysts argue that the Chinese Somalia expedition has been the country's first combat naval

⁴ Broadcast Interview of Major-General Jin Yinan, transcript available at <http://cn.chinareviewnews.com/crn-webapp/search/allDetail.jsp?id=100818788&sw=所要>

⁵ "Pirate 'mothership' was really Thai fishing boat" retrieved from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article5235404.ece> on 1st Feb 2009.

mission in waters far away from home since the Zheng He voyage. While the PLA has never defined this escort task in terms of combat it is well prepared for the action to evolve into small scale armed conflicts.⁶ This dispatch can be defined somewhere in between a police mission and a military operation other than war. It is in the category of security making against non-traditional threats.

- 4.2 From the Chinese perspective, the deployment follows Mao Zedong's three principles of "justification, interests/advantages and constraints (有理, 有利, 有节). The UN 1815 Resolution and China's prior agreement with the Somalia government provided the just ground for the escort. The escort gives the navy the rare opportunity of pursuing deep ocean combat training and proscribed engagement. At the same time Beijing has limited the operation to defensive status and not to conduct amphibious assault.
- 4.3 This is the PLAN's first real action in implementing China's revised blue water maritime strategy.⁷ When this strategy was proposed in 1987, Admiral Liu Huaqing identified operations around the second islands chain in the West Pacific and in the South China Sea (SLOCs) as the priority for naval development before 2020. The main purpose was to protect Chinese sovereign islands.⁸
- 4.4 Since the 1990s, China's rapid increase in foreign trade has placed a heavy onus on the navy to protect the sea lanes of communications elsewhere, especially in the Indian Ocean. China's mounting dependence on sea-borne trade requires the PLAN to add a new focus to Liu Huaqing's strategy. Now the PLAN has to position itself as a regional navy but with the beyond-region power projection capabilities that can be deployed in any area where China's

⁶ Major-General Peng Guangqian's remarks, *Phoenix TV*, 4 January 2009.

⁷ On this strategy, see You Ji, "In Search of Blue Water Power: the PLA Navy's Maritime Strategy in the 1990s", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 4, no. 2, 1991.

⁸ Liu Huaqing, *Liu Huaqing Huiyilu (The memoirs of Liu Huqing)*, Beijing: PLA Publishing House, 2004.

economic security is under threat.⁹ The deployment to the Gulf of Aden testifies how this strategic adjustment has been implemented.

- 4.5 The building blocks for such a blue water navy are task fleets capable of operating beyond the navy's normal area of activities, that is, the West Pacific. PLAN's Somalia task group provides the basic form upon which its future expedition fleets will be organized. Destroyer 169 (7,000 tons), the flag ship for the South Sea Fleet with the navy's best C4ISR systems, specializes in sea control missions such as anti-submarine warfare. Destroyer 171 (7,500 tons) is one of the only two naval surface combatants that has the Chinese *Aegis* systems capable of area air defense. Refurbishing ship 887 is the PLA's largest and newest logistical vessel (22,000 tons) designed for long range logistical missions. These ships form the core components for an ocean-going flotilla. If they are joined by a few more specialized warships, such as ASW and air defense frigates and a few submarines, a standard maritime battle group would be in order.
- 4.6 The combat challenges of the Somali pirates do not warrant the deployment of China's top notch warships such as 169 and 171 as any major surface combatant in the South Sea Fleet can do the job. However, PLAN's best destroyers (typically deployed to bear the first brunt in the event of a sea battle) have little opportunities for deep ocean tasks as they are not allowed to make diplomatic port calls. Diplomatic port calls customarily require arrangements for public visits which may be a potential source of military secrets leak. The lack of sustained ocean training has undermined these ships' combat readiness. The escort mission is therefore a windfall for PLAN's elite units, as they have to stay away from home base and be on the alert for action for a period of over three months.
- 4.7 The Somalia task force has benefited much from the mission. It has increased rapid reaction capability when ships or helicopters on board the ships were hurriedly sent to spots where the commercial ships were being harassed by

⁹ Liu Yijian, *The command of sea and the strategic employment of naval forces*, Beijing: The PLA National Defence University Press, 2004, p. 233.

pirates on a number of occasions. Their engagement with the pirates was close to real combat situations.

- 4.8 The three ships were in constant communications with other escort fleets, especially from NATO. They had thus gained good access to shared intelligence information and tele-communication/radar signals of advanced navies.
- 4.9 This multilateral effort to safeguard the SLOCs helps the PLAN to improve its capability of international coordination and cooperation with different countries.
- 4.10 Probably the most valuable experience for the Chinese warships is their constant encounter with near combat situations. For instance, the Chinese fleet has been constantly followed by “unknown planes, surface ships and submarines” throughout the sailing route to the Gulf of Aden. It is reported that they once forced a submarine, allegedly from the Indian Navy, to surface after being tailed for over a long distance in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ This training for combat readiness can also be seen in the unprecedented challenge of long range logistical supply, real time C4ISR connection with PLA headquarters in Beijing and Haikou. In short the PLAN has been a big beneficiary from the international efforts against the Somalia piracy.

International Responses

- 5.1 The immediate response from the international community is benign. The *International Herald Tribune* for example, calls for the world, especially U.S. and India, to use the opportunity to engage China, believing that the pirates of Somalia might compel international cooperation and raise trust.¹¹ Other western sources such as the *World Tribune* caution against China’s rising

¹⁰ *Huanqiushidao*, 4 February, 2009; *Qingdaochenbao*, 4 February, 2009; *CCTV*, 4 February, 2009; and *Phoenix TV*, 4 February, 2009.

¹¹ China’s Gunboat Diplomacy, Rory Medcalf, retrieved from <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/12/28/opinion/edmedcalf.php> on 1st Feb 2009.

military power but admit that there is no convincing reason to reject China's participation.¹²

- 5.2 While most do not object to China's deployment *per se*, many reports still carry a cautionary tone on the increasingly active Chinese military, especially the growth of PLAN. Many articles do not report China's deployment without mentioning other China naval activities such as the growth of its fleets of submarines, China's construction of aircraft carriers and the evolvement of its brown water navy into a blue water navy.¹³
- 5.3 China's decision did raise anxiety levels of its closer neighbours, India and Japan. Warnings of China's intrusion into India's geo-political space were voiced in various India writings. The *Indian Express* for example, painted a dim picture in which China's "will to use military force far beyond its shore... .. is bound to constrict Indian's own freedom of naval".¹⁴
- 5.4 China's immediate neighbours like Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan also felt compelled to send their own naval forces. So far, only the Japanese navy had set sail for Somalia. The response from these countries reflects a sense of competition and lack of trust. Nevertheless, given that China's deployment is in accordance with international law and legitimised by the United Nation, the China threat theory can only be speculated and there was no substantial protest over China's decision.
- 5.5 There is no current indication that China's new gunboat diplomacy has backfired. With due care, the Somalia piracy might prove to be an invaluable opportunity for China to achieve an astounding diplomatic victory by putting PLAN in a positive light and shaping China's international image as a responsible rising nation.

¹² The sea-going Chinese navy and its rapidly-expanding submarine fleet, Sol Sanders, retrieved from http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2008/s0823_12_26.asp on 1st Feb 2009.

¹³ See for example *International Tribune* or *Christian Science Monitor*.

¹⁴ Blue water marks, The Indian Express, retrieved from <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/blue-water-marks/401259/> on 1 Feb 2009.

Implications for Southeast Asia

- 6.1 There are now four naval powers in Southeast Asia. The United States, Japan, India and China will be active in a region locked in a paradoxical entanglement of competition and cooperation. The increasingly Mahanian characteristic of China's naval strategy¹⁵ is likely to spark off an alarm within the community, especially when there are at least three other foreign naval powers active in the region.
- 6.2 Southeast Asian states have yet to verbally voice their concern over a rising PLAN; the instinctive worry is in the stability of the region and in the possibility of the region being caught in the crossfire of competing naval powers. Beyond doubt, China's deployment signals the beginning of its gunboat diplomacy and as one of the busiest sea lanes in the world, the Straits of Malacca will be one of the targets of China's gunboat diplomacy.
- 6.3 There is however, much less to fear about gunboat diplomacy today than it was fifty to hundred years ago. Gunboat policy of the past was used to intimidate smaller nations into submission while modern gunboat policy aims to impress smaller partners into cooperation. India's most substantial gunboat diplomacy in the region in recent years for example, was their timely and appreciated participation in the disaster relief of the Asian tsunami while Japan's gunboat diplomacy contributed to the curb on piracy in the Straits of Malacca.
- 6.4 The competition is there, but competitors are not longer able to remove each other by force. Gunboat diplomacy competition used to be akin to thugs competing for territories, but modern competitors resemble suitors in a courtship where excessive and unnecessary use of force only serves to irk the courted. This is due to the evolvement of a growing international consensus against the use of force for territorial gain and the presence of United States

¹⁵ James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century The Turn to Mahan*, Routledge, New York 2008.

(the world's superpower with a military budget larger than the next fifteen largest defence spending states combined) in the region.

- 6.5 The choice of Somalia piracy as China's first overseas military reflects China's prudence with regards to international opinion. Few UN authorised operations had stood so undivided – in China's case, resolutions were passed unanimously without a single voice of objection from any member of the UN. International consensus is overwhelming and China's rivals will have extreme difficulty in opposing China's deployment.
- 6.6 Opportunities that are identical to that of the Somalia pirates are, however, few. China's only choice of continuing overseas military deployment without infringing its non-intervention doctrine is for disaster relief. But a natural disaster with the magnitude of the Asian tsunami is rare and smaller scale disaster hardly justifies military deployment.
- 6.7 Hence, if the international community, especially neighbours such as Japan and India continue to be wary of China's military rise, China will be forced to partake in operations that are less agreeable than the Somalia piracy. Frictions between China and other countries are thus inevitable.
- 6.8 On China's part, it remains sensitive to western media reports and this might hinder constructive engagements. News articles on Chinese websites reconstructed western media reports and made them appear Sino-phobic.¹⁶ For example, an article widely circulated on Chinese news websites bears the headline that "NATO will be spying on Chinese vessels". The article was partially translated from another article published by Stratfor (a private intelligence firm in Texas), which was written in a much more neutral tone and had no reference to whatsoever of spying.

¹⁶ See for example, Chinese translation of an article from Stratfor available at http://military.china.com/zh_cn/dljl/Somali/08/11072990/20090303/15351685.html, compared to the original available at http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/129778/analysis/20081231_china_naval_deployment

6.9 In anticipation of potential conflicts, it will be beneficial for Southeast Asian states to facilitate the engagement of Chinese military with other existing naval powers for the purpose of confidence building. An invitation of a joint military exercise for example, will offer PLAN deployment opportunities which will be viable temporary alternatives to potentially controversial operations. Eventually, confidence building measures should be implemented to give naval powers the opportunity to learn to accommodate to the naval deployment of other countries in the region.