

CHINA'S NAVAL ESCORTS

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Executive Summary

1. China has been contributing to the international effort to fight piracy and armed robbery off the coast of Somalia since December 2008. It has so far dispatched 17 escort task force groups involving more than 42 navy vessels and 13,214 personnel.
2. To allay concerns that it is on an expansionist track, China has stated on numerous occasions that its contribution is a response to relevant UN resolutions. In other words, China is carrying out its international obligations.
3. While looking after the safety of commercial vessels, the Chinese navy has also ensured the safe delivery of humanitarian aid to Somalia under the United Nations World Food Program.
4. The Chinese navy was further involved in escorting vessels evacuating Chinese citizens from Libya at the height of the crisis there in February 2011, marking its first humanitarian escort mission abroad.
5. Interestingly, after its tour of duty off the coast of Somalia, each escort task force, starting from the second escort task force, conducts goodwill visits to the ports of different countries. There is a conscious effort to play up China's softer image through such visits.
6. Chinese naval personnel would invariably put up cultural performances to "woo" local audiences. They would also try to reach out to the local community by visiting orphanages and schools.
7. Taking the soft appeal further, the Chinese navy has highlighted the contribution of its female service personnel. Much publicity surrounded the participation of eight female naval personnel in their first combat roles in the 14th Chinese escort task force.

8. China also deployed its medical ship *Peace Ark* off the coast of Somalia to offer medical services to its naval personnel in 2010. In another mission to the area in 2013, *Peace Ark* extended medical services to foreign naval personnel.
9. Beyond its anti-piracy role, China has been providing assistance to ensure the safe destruction of Syria's chemical weapons since January 2014.
10. By carrying out these international obligations, China seeks to portray itself as a responsible and constructive player on the world stage. It is in a better position to counter criticisms that it is not doing enough in the interest of the common good.
11. The Chinese navy has established a regular presence in not only the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia but also the Mediterranean Sea and to some extent the Black Sea. China is likely to look out for other obligations to take on at a pace it is comfortable with.