

Uncharted Waters: the Chinese Navy Sails to Somalia

by Phillip C. Saunders

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China's deployment of a three ship naval task force to conduct counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia is a milestone for the Chinese military. The Chinese Navy's first operational deployment outside Asia highlights the rapid expansion of China's global economic interests and the gradual emergence of military capabilities that can help protect them.

Western and African governments have welcomed China's decision to send ships as a positive contribution to stability in a dangerous area. However, the task force's narrow mission, conflicting political objectives, and apparent reluctance to work directly with other naval forces deployed in the area highlight some of the challenges in integrating China into international security cooperation efforts.

Two People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) destroyers and a replenishment ship arrived on Jan. 6 and have begun to escort Chinese merchant ships through the Gulf of Aden. The task force consists of about 800 personnel (including 70 special operations troops); the two destroyers each carry one Russian-built Ka-28 helicopter. The three-month mission is focused on escorting Chinese vessels and personnel (including ships from Hong Kong and Taiwan).

The decision to deploy the PLA Navy ships reflects a mix of domestic and international considerations. One factor is a real threat to Chinese shipping. More than 1,200 Chinese merchant ships passed through the Gulf of Aden in 2008. Seven were attacked by pirates, and one fishing vessel (with a crew of 18) is still being held. The government's inability to protect Chinese ships and overseas workers from piracy, kidnapping, and attack has generated significant domestic criticism; the deployment should address these concerns.

The Chinese military also seeks to demonstrate returns from a surge in military spending over the last decade. In recent years, PLA officers have discussed roles for the military in defending China's expanding economic interests and overseas presence. The deployment provides an opportunity to put this argument into practice and underline the connection between military power and Chinese economic growth.

Chinese leaders want to use the deployment to demonstrate that China is meeting its international obligations, behaving as a responsible major power, and that the Chinese military can make positive contributions to international

security. The Chinese media is giving extensive coverage to the deployment (including interviews with the ship commanders) and the task force carries Chinese reporters on board. Extensive pictures and video from the operation are available on the internet in both English and Chinese.

At the same time, Chinese leaders are sensitive to potential criticism that China is acting in an imperialist manner or violating Somali sovereignty. Chinese official statements have highlighted the importance of United Nations Security Council authorization for countries to conduct counter-piracy operations in accordance with Article VII of the UN charter and the Somali government's request for international assistance.

This complex mix of motives and concerns has shaped the nature of the Chinese response. The PLAN task force's exact rules of engagement are unclear, but it appears likely to concentrate on independent escort missions to protect Chinese merchant ships rather than patrolling in the maritime security patrol area, participating in international convey operations with European Union forces, or conducting more aggressive operations against pirates.

Defining the mission narrowly reduces the need for PLAN ships to engage in risky operations that might backfire and limits the amount of coordination required with other naval forces. This will help the PLAN ensure that its first extra-regional deployment is viewed as a success. The Indian Navy's experience in sinking a Thai fishing trawler that had been captured by pirates (with loss of almost all the captured crew) probably reinforces this sense of caution.

China's desire to portray itself as a champion of the developing world that fully respects national sovereignty may be another reason for its apparent reluctance to work too closely with U.S. or European Union counter-piracy task forces operating in the area. Nevertheless, China did participate in the initial meeting of a newly established Contact Group on Piracy Off the Coast of Somalia in New York on January 14th. The Contact Group is intended to serve as a mechanism to share information, coordinate counter-piracy activities, strengthen judicial frameworks for handling pirates, strengthen commercial shipping awareness and self-protection capabilities, improve diplomatic and public information efforts, and track financial flows related to piracy.

China's growing global interests and expanding economic and military power give Beijing greater motivation and new capabilities to help address international problems. However, the current deployment offers a reminder that China will act for its own reasons and on its own terms. Integrating Chinese actions with those of other international players to maximize effectiveness is likely to be an enduring diplomatic and military challenge.