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An Overseas Naval Presence without Overseas Bases: China's Counter-piracy Operation in the Gulf of Aden

Susanne KAMERLING and Frans-Paul VAN DER PUTTEN

Abstract: This article aims to assess how China is using its navy to secure its interests in the Gulf of Aden, and what this means for the European Union. The analysis of how China's naval presence in the Gulf of Aden has evolved since early 2009 suggests that China's increasing interests and involvement in Africa do not necessarily lead to the establishment of Chinese naval bases in or close to the continent. To supply its ships, the Chinese navy may well continue using the commercial-diplomatic model that China has been developing. This model is based on China's close diplomatic relations with countries in the region and the extensive presence of Chinese companies to whom logistical services can be outsourced and who are under a greater degree of state influence than most Western multinationals. One of the consequences of this approach is that although China may not establish overseas military bases, it may be able to keep expanding its naval presence in or around Africa.

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Keywords: China, Gulf of Aden, piracy, Chinese navy, European Union

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Introduction

The Chinese counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden involves the first expeditionary deployment by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy, or PLAN). The mission, which became operational in January 2009, offers a perspective on how China uses its navy to protect its interests far outside its own region. Although it does not take place on African soil – contrary to most of the UN peacekeeping missions in which the PLA is involved – the Chinese counter-piracy expedition is relevant to China's response to security threats in Africa in several respects:

- First, the mission is a response to a piracy threat that emanates from Somalia, Africa's most notorious failed state.
- Second, although mandated by the UN Security Council, the PLA Navy operation is not part of a UN peacekeeping mission but rather was initiated and is conducted directly by the Chinese government.
- Third, the operation involves warships as well as the use of special forces.

Unlike Chinese contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in Africa – which typically involve only non-combat-related tasks – the PLA Navy's counter-piracy mission has a distinct capability of employing force.

The aim of this article[1] is to assess how China is using its navy to secure its interests in the Gulf of Aden, and what this means for the European Union (EU). Although several naval experts based in the United States have recently published very useful analyses of the Chinese counter-piracy mission (Erickson 2010a; Kostecka 2010), these studies have mainly attempted to elucidate how the PLA Navy is developing. What this article seeks to add to the existing – still limited – literature on Chinese counter-piracy is what China's naval activities imply for its future involvement in African security, and how this is relevant for the EU. The analysis is based mainly on English-language written sources and is intended to provide a preliminary picture of how the PLA Navy's operation in the Gulf of Aden has been developing. This article first outlines how Somali piracy relates to China's interests, then it indicates how Chi-

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at a workshop on China's response to security threats in Africa, held at the Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies (BICCS), 17–19 May 2010. The authors are grateful to Jonathan Holslag, Sara van Hoeymissen and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

na uses its navy to protect these interests, and finally it identifies what this implies for the EU.

Somali Piracy and Chinese Interests

Beyond the East and South China Seas, the Indian Ocean is the maritime region on which China's security strategy is predominantly focused (Holmes and Yoshihara 2008: 123). Access to energy (Singh 2005: 177) and other raw materials from the Middle East and Africa, as well as to the European market, depend on the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean (Kaufman 2009: 8). The key choke points for Chinese shipping are the Malacca Strait to the east and the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to the west. In terms of great power relations, the Indian Ocean offers more opportunities for maritime newcomers such as China than do the Pacific or Atlantic Oceans. India excluded, the Indian Ocean's littoral states are not regarded as major maritime powers (Singh 2005: 176-177). At the same time, several international security issues, most notably piracy and terrorism, are linked to the Indian Ocean region. More so than the other two major oceans, the Indian Ocean is a region for the great powers to show responsibility and leadership in international maritime security.

For China, there is however a fundamental gap between its interests and influence in international maritime security. The country's long-term programme of military modernisation aims to limit this gap. The maritime component of the modernisation seeks to both deal with a Taiwan contingency and – in the longer term – enable missions to protect China's maritime and economic interests "beyond Taiwan" (Erickson 2008: 107; Holmes and Yoshihara 2008: 43). But military means are only part of Beijing's approach. Analysts of China's strategic thinking have pointed out that Chinese strategists strongly favour security solutions that preclude the need for military engagement (Newmyer 2009: 205-219). It is therefore likely that even when Beijing's military reach spans the globe, it will still favour non-violent means to protect its maritime security interests (Till 2009: 332). However, the degree to which China will actually be able to avoid the use of military means remains to be seen. At any rate, the general preference of the Chinese government for non-military means of exerting influence should not be taken to mean that military assets are absent from China's strategy, even at present: Military means complement China's non-military means.

Beijing has close economic and diplomatic ties with many countries in the Indian Ocean region. Relations are particularly close with Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and South Africa – all of which have great strategic importance for China. The Chinese defence industry supplies weapons to the governments of several of these countries (Saferworld 2011). Moreover, in Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, the Chinese government is involved in the development of major port facilities. As pointed out by American observers, in the future these facilities could, in theory, be used by Chinese commercial ships as well as naval ships (Pehrson 2006), although this has not yet occurred. It is moreover unclear whether Beijing really sees these facilities as having a major military purpose (Blazevic 2009: 63). In any case, what China lacked until recently was a naval presence in this part of the world.

That changed on 6 January 2009, when the first taskforce of the PLA Navy's escort mission, consisting of two destroyers and a supply ship, arrived in the Gulf of Aden (Saunders 2009). The first taskforce has since been succeeded by several further ones, each consisting of two warships and a replenishment vessel. The main tasks of the escort mission are

> to protect the safety of the Chinese ships and personnel navigating across the Gulf of Aden and the waters off [the] Somali coast, [and to ensure] the safety of ships carrying humanistic materials of such international organisations as the World Food Programme[;] and, if the need arises, the taskforce will jointly conduct humanistic rescue operations with the escorting ships of other countries (Wu and Bai 2008).

A number of Chinese- or Hong Kong-flagged ships have been attacked by pirates (ICC 2009). The Chinese navy ships in the Gulf of Aden are equipped with helicopters, and each taskforce carries circa 70 special forces commandos able to engage in on-board counter-piracy operations (Saunders 2009).

When the Chinese navy began escorting commercial vessels, it did so without participating in the International Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC), which was established in early 2009 (Van Ginkel and Van der Putten 2010). This corridor runs through the Gulf of Aden and is patrolled by the EU (through the EU NAVFOR Mission Atalanta), NATO (through Mission Ocean Shield), and the US-led Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) of the Combined Maritime Force (CMF). Remaining outside the IRTC system allowed the PLA Navy to operate fully

autonomously; as such it was able to avoid other nations exercising any degree of influence over its warships and focus on protecting Chinese ships. Moreover, joining the IRTC would have required an advance invitation to do so from the Western countries, which China requested and obtained only in late 2009 or early 2010.

The Chinese government has several interests in sending warships to Somalia. Although the PLA Navy's presence in the Gulf of Aden is small, it has made China highly visible as one of the great powers in the Indian Ocean and in African security (Pham 2009). According to Xu Weizhong, Africa specialist at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR),

> given the potential penetration of major powers' influence in counter-piracy operations in Somalia, China's active engagement will guarantee the maintenance of the current diplomatic advantages in Africa (Liu Dong 2010).

This deployment, which involves some of China's most modern warships (Weitz 2009a: 27-42; Pham 2009), has allowed Beijing to participate in several multilateral initiatives. These include membership in the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) and its various working groups, and the monthly Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings in Bahrain. SHADE, co-chaired by the EU and the Combined Maritime Force, is an inclusive structure that brings together representatives from countries and organisations that have deployed military assets in the region, as well as from the shipping industry and INTERPOL (Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia 2009). It was solely designed to coordinate military efforts off Somalia's coast at the tactical and operational level, recognising the reality of the strategic differences between all key actors.

To some degree – for instance, by participating in the SHADE meetings – the Chinese are coordinating their activities in the Gulf of Aden with the other navies present (Holmes and Yoshihara 2009: 4). In a speech in 2009, President Hu Jintao launched the "harmonious ocean" concept, which emphasises China's cooperation with other countries in the field of maritime security. The commander of the PLA Navy, Wu Shengli, referred to counter-piracy cooperation as a good example of this concept (Van der Putten 2011a: 5). Through being visible and involved, Beijing increases its ability to lead new developments in maritime security in a direction that suits its needs (Weitz 2009a: 32; Sakhuja 2009: 13). As Sakhuja points out, China was not a member of the core group of na-

tions (with the US, Australia and India) during the 2004 tsunami disaster relief operations. Not having been part of that core group may have been an extra stimulus for the PLA Navy to join multinational initiatives on maritime security. Indeed, China had already stepped up its maritime cooperation with other Asian countries prior to the counter-piracy mission (Li 2009; on the relationship between disaster relief and geopolitics in Asia see Chandran et al. 2009). This allows the Chinese government to contribute to effective measures against Somali piracy. On a more general level, it also strengthens China's image as a responsible power (Rajasimman 2009: 9; Li 2009; Kaufman 2009: 9). Moreover, it can lead to a gradual development in multilateralism in maritime security, which limits the traditional model in which security on the high seas is primarily provided by a dominant great power, currently the United States. This can be illustrated by an early attempt by the Chinese to have all military forces conducting counter-piracy missions off the coast of Somalia working under direct UN command. China presented this idea at both SHADE and CGPCS forums, but the plan was not politically acceptable to any other significant actor. However, it should also be noted that at the operational level, the degree of actual cooperation between the PLAN and other navies remains limited mostly to the exchange of information via the Internet and bridge-to-bridge radio.

A second interest served by the mission is the increased protection of Chinese economic activities. It remains unclear how much damage Somali piracy causes to international shipping (Kaufman 2009: 2). On the one hand, insurance costs have risen and slow-moving ships have had difficulty obtaining naval protection. On the other hand, piracy attacks affect only a very small proportion of total shipping in the Western Indian Ocean directly. Another question is to what extent it is really necessary for Chinese ships to make use of Chinese naval protection, as alternative sources of protection are available. At a more general level, however, the Chinese counter-piracy mission can be seen in the same light as China's participation in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. These troop deployments are a legitimate means for Beijing to achieve "a level of tactical and operational familiarity" with a region where it has crucial economic interests (Pham 2009).

Third, China's government has an interest in showing its own population that it is capable of protecting Chinese nationals and Chinese-flagged ships abroad (Kaufman 2009: 7). However, according to some analysts, only one Chinese- and one Hong Kong-flagged ship were

seized by pirates as of late 2008, and this alone was unlikely to suffice as a reason for Beijing to dispatch warships (Rajasimman 2009). Still, rather than merely relying on the protection of foreign navies, the PRC feels the urge to show that it can do no less than the other great powers (Erickson 2010a: 300). Historically, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has derived its legitimacy from its ability to make China strong enough to be able to withstand foreign powers. The counter-piracy mission is a good opportunity for the Chinese government to show that at least in this regard it is in the same league as the other maritime powers (Ross 2009: 64). At the same time, hijackings of Chinese vessels represent a major threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese government. The hijacking in October 2009 of the Chinese bulk carrier *De Xin Hai*, with 25 crewmembers, by Somali pirates highlighted the fact that the presence of Chinese warships in the waters off Somalia is insufficient to prevent attacks on Chinese vessels (Deng, Zhang, and Liang 2009). The *De Xin Hai* was released by the pirates in late December, reportedly after China paid a ransom (Guled 2009).

The incident seems to have raised pressure on the Chinese government to show that it is capable of protecting Chinese shipping, and to seek closer international cooperation. In November 2009, China hosted an international conference to better coordinate anti-piracy efforts (Christoffersen 2009: 17). The *De Xin Hai* incident also may explain why Chinese representatives at a SHADE meeting in Bahrain in November 2009 expressed their country's willingness to play a leading role – alongside the EU and the US-led CMF – in chairing future SHADE meetings (Weitz 2009b: 10; Guled 2009). In late January 2010, following a meeting of the SHADE grouping, China, the US, the EU and NATO reached an agreement that China would join the rotating task of coordinating the international counter-piracy effort (Gelfand 2010: 5). This seemed to relate to China's chairing the SHADE meetings in Bahrain, as well as a possible greater involvement for China in the IRTC (*Global Times* 2010). Moreover, according to the Chinese scholar Zhao Lei, to act as international coordinator would require that China increase the number of its ships in the area (Zhao 2010: 97). However, by mid-2010 China had not yet acted as chair of SHADE. According to Ranjit Raj, who is vice-president of the Indian Maritime Foundation, a Pune-based think tank, and who was present at the SHADE meeting where the issue discussed, this was because the Indian government had objected to China taking up this role (Mitra 2010).

A fourth interest is strengthening China's claim on Taiwan. The Chinese government has stated that it regards Taiwanese-flagged vessels as Chinese. Consequently the PLA Navy also escorts Taiwanese ships (Pham 2009). Any involvement by Taiwan in maritime security in the Indian Ocean would run counter to China's efforts to isolate the island militarily and diplomatically. Diplomatic isolation – combined with economic incentives – is the main tool of the PRC to push Taiwan toward reunification with the mainland. Any display of Taiwan's *de facto* independence by joining international maritime security initiatives would be highly unwelcomed by the Chinese government. Because the Taiwanese navy has no presence in the Gulf of Aden (*Taipei Times* 2009), this further emphasises the political isolation of Taiwan, while at the same time showing China's resolve and ability to act on behalf of Taiwan in international security.

Finally, the process of military modernisation that China is undergoing also benefits from the mission (Liu Dong 2010). The Chinese navy is still underdeveloped in terms of operating far from its own shores, and operating in an international setting. The counter-piracy mission potentially provides the PLA Navy with valuable experience in this regard (Rajasimman 2009; Li 2009; Weitz 2009a: 34). As Table 1 shows, both the South China Sea Fleet and the East China Sea Fleet have contributed to the escort mission, giving both fleets the opportunity to gain experience. For the Chinese navy, it is beneficial to establish contacts with highly advanced navies, such as those of the United States and various European countries (Sakhuja 2009: 13; Pham 2009). According to the Chinese government, by the end of 2010 the PLAN had participated in a visitors' exchange of a total of 24 commanders from foreign fleets, including from the EU and NATO. Moreover, it had conducted exercises with Russian and South Korean ships, and exchanged officers for onboard observations with the Royal Netherlands Navy (Information Office of the State Council 2011: 40).

Table 1: Escort Mission Taskforce 1–9 Background

Task-force	Fleet	Commander
1	South China Sea Fleet	Rear Admiral Du Jingchen (chief of staff, South China Sea Fleet)
2	South China Sea Fleet	Rear Admiral Yao Zhilou (deputy commander South China Sea Fleet)
3	East China Sea Fleet	Rear Admiral Wang Zhiguo (deputy commander East China Sea Fleet)
4	East China Sea Fleet	Sr Captain Qiu Yanpeng (deputy commander East China Sea Fleet)
5	South China Sea Fleet	Sr Colonel Zhang Wendan (deputy commander South China Sea Fleet)
6	South China Sea Fleet	Rear Admiral Wei Xueyi (chief of staff, South China Sea Fleet)
7	East China Sea Fleet	Rear Admiral Zhang Huachen (deputy commander, East China Sea Fleet)
8	East China Sea Fleet	Sr Captain Han Xiaohu (deputy chief of staff, East China Sea Fleet)
9	South China Sea Fleet	Rear Admiral Guan Jianguo (deputy chief of staff, South China Sea Fleet)

Sources: *Xinhua* 2009; Tang and Liu 2011; Yang and Li 2011.

China's Use of Its Navy to Protect Its Interests

The PLA Navy is at the forefront of China's military modernisation programme (Wong 2010). In the long run, it seems likely that China will acquire a full blue-water (ocean-going) naval capability with a global reach. This goal was formulated as far back as the 1980s by then PLA Navy Commander – and founding father of China's modern naval strategy – Liu Huaqing. In late 2006, President Hu Jintao stated that China should move toward blue-water capabilities (Erickson 2008: 72). Currently the Chinese navy operates mainly in the Yellow, East China and South China Seas (Holmes and Yoshihara 2008: 124). The Chinese navy has long been trained to deal with situations within the region – namely, how to respond to a potential Taiwan crisis. As a result, it has been building up capabilities to deter the United States Navy – in the event of a crisis – from operating near Taiwan. The main combat potential of the PLA Navy remains focused on the East Asian region (Holmes and Yoshihara 2008: 122).

Recently, the Chinese navy has increasingly been developing means that can be used for missions that are not restricted to China's own region (Erickson 2010b). According to China's 2008 Defence White Paper, the PLAN began to develop capabilities of conducting "cooperation" in distant waters only after 2000 (Information Office of the State Council 2009: 7). Such means relate predominantly to secondary naval activities, such as disaster relief missions, SLOC protection, and anti-piracy efforts. The 2010 White Paper links activities in distant waters to the aim of being able to conduct non-combat – rather than combat – missions ("military operations other than war", MOOTW) (Information Office of the State Council 2011: 19). China's first operational aircraft carriers – the PLAN is currently conducting tests with its first carrier, which was purchased from Ukraine and completed in China – are likely to be deployed for such secondary missions rather than as a deterrence against US sea power (Erickson 2008: 92). American foreign policy experts do not believe that in the short term China's carrier ambitions constitute a threat to US interests (Glaser 2011). China's newest destroyers are able to provide long-range SLOC protection (Erickson 2008: 80). Geographically, the main direction in which Chinese maritime activities are expanding is toward and throughout the Indian Ocean (Holmes and Yoshihara 2008: 124).

However, regardless of which expeditionary capabilities the PLA Navy may acquire in the coming years, the Chinese government is unlikely to regard military means as a primary tool to secure overseas interests. On a general level, China relies heavily on its diplomatic and economic influence to protect its foreign interests. Deploying military means should be seen as complementary to diplomatic and economic tools. When deploying troops abroad, the Chinese government strives to avoid using force. The emphasis is geared toward non-combat contributions to UN peacekeeping missions, humanitarian missions, and – in the case of Somali piracy – on deterring rather than fighting pirates. The Chinese operation in the Gulf of Aden is appropriately referred to by the Chinese government as an escort mission rather than a counter-piracy operation. By October 2011, nine consecutive taskforces had been sent from China, each one replacing its predecessor and remaining in the Gulf of Aden for about four months. In late August 2010 – in a mission separate from the escort mission – China dispatched a hospital ship, Peace Ark, with 428 personnel members on board, to tour various African countries, including Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania and the Seychelles (*Xinhua* 2010). In 2011,

as part of the deployment for the eighth PLAN taskforce to the Gulf of Aden, the Chinese navy for the first time escorted one of the UN World Food Programme's ships (EUNAVFOR 2011).

The Chinese navy escorts groups of merchant vessels through the Gulf of Aden, both on east–west and west–east routes. The escort routes run a few miles north of and parallel to the IRTC. The PLAN taskforce primarily protects Chinese vessels, but vessels from other nations can also join the convoys. The PLAN carries special forces teams and personnel specialised in acquiring evidence. These personnel board some of the Chinese merchant vessels that are being escorted (Zhang and Cao 2010a). In order to repel piracy attacks when these begin to unfold, the Chinese navy fires warning shots from its ships and helicopters. The PLA Navy seems to avoid using not only special forces but violence in general to free ships that are under attack from pirates. Moreover, they try to refrain from detaining any piracy suspects.

The PLA Navy's escort mission in the Gulf of Aden is a multi-year mission that takes place at a great distance from China. So far, the destroyers or frigates involved have typically been away from their home base in China for four or five months. Each supply ship has stayed in the Gulf of Aden during two consecutive taskforce deployments. China currently has only a very limited number of supply ships that are suitable for long-range missions (Erickson 2008: 106), and the country has no overseas naval bases. Consequently, the logistical dimension of operations poses great challenges to any Chinese expeditionary activity.

For its escort mission in the Gulf of Aden, the PLA Navy has obtained fuel, water and food supplies from ports in the region (Kostecka 2010: 4; see Table 3). The first two supply visits were made by the supply ship *Weishanhu* to the Port of Aden in Yemen. To make the necessary preparations and procurements, each port visit by the *Weishanhu* ship was prepared for by an advance team from the PLA Navy and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A third supply visit was made, also by the *Weishanhu,* to Port Salalah in Oman. The ship's commander stated the following as the reason that Port Salalah was selected for the third visit:

> [to] further explore and perfect the way of large-batch comprehensive replenishment on a commercialised model by relying on foreign commercial ports, so as to accumulate experience for the PLA Navy in carrying out oceanic logistics support during military operations other than war (ChinaMil 2009).

Table 2: PLA Navy Taskforce 1–9 Composition

Task-force	Period	Ship name	Ship type
1	Jan.–Apr. 2009	171 Haikou	Missile destroyer (type 052C)
		169 Wuhan	Missile destroyer (type 052B)
		887 Weishanhu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
2	Apr.–Aug. 2009	167 Shenzhen	Destroyer (type 051B)
		570 Huangshan	Frigate (type 054A)
		887 Weishanhu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
3	Aug.–Nov. 2009	529 Zhoushan	Missile frigate (type 054A)
		530 Xuzhou	Missile frigate (type 054A)
		886 Qiandaohu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
4	Nov. 2009–Mar. 2010	525 Ma'anshan	Missile frigate (type 054)
		526 Wenzhou	Missile frigate (type 054)
		886 Qiandaohu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
5	Mar.–July 2010	568 Chaohu*	Missile frigate (type 054A)
		168 Guangzhou	Missile destroyer (type 052B)
		887 Weishanhu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
6	July–Nov. 2010	998 Kunlunshan	Landing Platform Dock
		170 Lanzhou	Missile destroyer (type 052C)
		887 Weishanhu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
7	Nov. 2010–Apr. 2011	529 Zhoushan	Missile frigate (type 054A)
		530 Xuzhou	Missile frigate (type 054A)
		886 Qiandaohu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
8	Apr.–July 2011	526 Wenzhou	Missile frigate (type 054)
		525 Ma'anshan	Missile frigate (type 054)
		886 Qiandaohu	Supply ship (Qiandaohu class)
9	From July 2011	169 Wuhan	Missile destroyer (type 052B)
		569 Yulin	Missile frigate (type 054A)
		885 Qinghaihu	Supply ship (Nancang class)

Note: * The guided missile frigate *Chaohu* had arrived in the Gulf of Aden in December 2009 and thus took part in both taskforces 4 and 5.

Sources: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2009: 119; Li and Liu 2011; Xu 2009; Xu and Zhang 2010; Ministry of National Defense 2010; Tang and Liu 2011; Yang and Li 2011.

Table 3: Port Visits in the Gulf of Aden and Persian Gulf and on the East African Coast by Taskforce 1–9

Task-force	Month and year	Port visit in Gulf of Aden region
1	February 2009	Yemen (supply ship, Port of Aden)
2	April 2009	Yemen (supply ship, Port of Aden)
	June–July 2009	Oman (all ships, Port Salalah)
	July 2009	Yemen (supply ship, Port of Aden)
3	August 2009	Oman (all ships, Port Salalah)
	October 2009	Yemen (supply ship, Port of Aden)
4	January 2010	Oman (all ships, Port Salalah)
	January 2010	Djibouti (*Ma'anshan*)
	March 2010	United Arab Emirates (*Guangzhou* and supply ship, Port Zayed, Abu Dhabi)
	March 2010	Yemen (supply ship, Port of Aden)
5	April 2010	Oman (*Guangzhou*, Port Salalah)
	May 2010	Yemen (supply ship, Port of Aden)
	May 2010	Djibouti (*Guangzhou*)
	June 2010	Oman (all ships, Port Salalah)
6	October 2010	Oman (*Kunlunshan*, Port Salalah)
	November 2010	Saudi Arabia (all ships, Jeddah)
7	April 2011	South Africa (*Zhoushan* and *Xuzhou*, Durban)
8	July 2011	Qatar (*Wenzhou* and *Ma'anshan*)
9	August 2011	Oman (*Wuhan*, Port Salalah)

Sources: Erickson 2010a: 315; Kostecka 2010; Hsiao 2010; *Xinhua* 2009; Xia and Hou 2009; Zhang and Cao 2010b; Liu 2010; Li and Liu 2011; Tang and Liu 2011; Yang and Li 2010.

In this context it should be noted that the main port for China to support its naval deployment in the Indian Ocean is not in the Gulf of Aden but in Karachi, Pakistan, which has repair facilities suitable for China's warships (Kostecka 2010: 4).

In April 2010 Japan made an arrangement with Djibouti according to which it will establish a *de facto* base (although the term "base" is not used) in the African country to support the counter-piracy activities of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force in the Gulf of Aden (Night Watch 2010). Given this development – and much speculation in recent years about a suspected Chinese "string of pearls" strategy in Western and Indian media – the question arises of whether China might attempt to acquire its own naval base(s) in the region. The supply strategy that the PLA Navy has followed so far suggests that China is aiming to use its commercial and diplomatic means to solve the logistical challenge of operating in the Gulf of Aden. Based on close diplomatic relations with many countries in the region and the organisational capabilities of major Chinese firms (Erickson 2010a: 319), it may not be necessary for China to have a permanent base. The advantage of this approach would be that China will be able to keep a low profile and avoid being accused of going down the paths previously taken by great powers such as Great Britain and the United States. It also makes it less likely that China will become entangled in the domestic political affairs of other countries. Beijing strongly promotes the notion that it will not interfere in the affairs of other countries and that it poses no military threat. Establishing overseas military bases would undermine these notions, which play a central role in China's approach to developing countries (Van der Putten 2011b), and would therefore diminish China's image.

In both Aden and Salalah, the Chinese advance team was assisted by the regional subsidiary of state-owned COSCO, China's largest shipping company (Xia and Hou 2009). Also, in China itself, the PLA Navy has been experimenting with outsourcing logistics to the private sector (Erickson 2008: 94). Although working with private firms to support logistics operations is a common practice for many navies, especially when operating far from home, China is able to rely on such civilian means to a greater extent than Western countries can. Relations between the state and the business sector are particularly close in China, especially in the case of China's large state-owned enterprises – which include the country's main shipping lines. The CCP controls the armed forces, the government, and the state-owned enterprises. Consequently, civil–military cooperation has a broader applicability in China than in the West. In the Chinese case, this goes well beyond the military contracting specialised firms, as mainstream logistics companies can also be dependable partners for the PLA Navy. Moreover, China also has the economic and diplo-

matic clout to persuade other countries to be supportive. As a result, more so than is the case for many other countries, the commercial model provides an alternative means for China to solve its logistical problems, other than by establishing overseas naval bases or relying entirely on replenishment ships sent from China.

According to Daniel J. Kostecka, it is likely that China will rely on commercial methods for now (Kostecka 2010: 5). In the longer run it remains to be seen for how long China can avoid setting up naval or air facilities in Africa to protect its rapidly expanding interests in this part of the world (Chase and Erickson 2009: 10). As the number of Chinese citizens and companies in Africa increases, the need for the Chinese government to protect them in crisis situations also grows. The Chinese navy and air force participated in the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya when civil war erupted there in March 2011 (Colins and Erickson 2011). The naval part of the operation was possible because of the presence of Chinese warships in the Gulf of Aden. An important question for China now is whether a combination of state-controlled shipping/ airline companies and close diplomatic ties throughout the region is a sufficient alternative to setting up overseas military facilities to protect Chinese citizens and economic assets. Given the approach followed by China so far, it seems likely that it will avoid establishing a permanent military presence in Africa as long as alternatives are available.

There are indications that from the start the PLA Navy has been confident that overseas bases are not a requirement for operating in the Gulf of Aden. Late November 2008, General Major Jin Yinan, the vice director of the Strategic Research Institute of PLA National Defence University, gave an interview on China National Radio. The broadcast took place several weeks before the Chinese government formally announced that it would send navy ships to the Gulf of Aden. In the interview, Major General Jin pointed out that overseas bases are not necessary as navy vessels can make use of commercial ports in order to get supplies. He also referred to the fact that in 2002 a destroyer and a replenishment ship had completed the PLA Navy's first circumnavigation of the world – the Gulf of Aden being part of the itinerary – without having used overseas bases (*People's Daily Online* 2008). The interview suggests that the PLA Navy set out with the intention to use and presumably further develop the commercial-diplomatic model.

In certain ports, such as Salalah and Aden, the commercial approach used so far could eventually be supplemented with formal agreements that guarantee access and support for the PLA Navy (Kostecka 2010: 5). In December 2011 China was reportedly considering an invitation from the Seychelles to make use of its port facilities to supply Chinese navy ships engaged in counter-piracy on a continuous rather than an *ad hoc* basis (Li and Li 2011). In general, China developing military cooperation with other countries, like it has with Pakistan, could increase the number of ports in the Middle East and/ or Africa where Chinese naval ships can make use of repair facilities. The viability of an approach without bases would further increase if China were to participate in anti-piracy patrols off parts of Africa other than Somalia, as this would increase the area where the Chinese navy is active.

Implications for the EU

The European Union – as well as European countries operating under a NATO or CMF flag – has been involved in the anti-piracy efforts since they were initiated in late 2008. For Europe, the three most critical maritime security interests relate to safeguarding its sea lines of communication; preventing and countering global security threats that manifest themselves at sea; and positioning itself in the shift in great power relations that is taking place in the Indian Ocean. In light of both this and the fact that the Indian Ocean is the strategic gateway for Europe, Eurasian SLOCs are of growing geopolitical importance.

The main security issue in the maritime sphere is protecting the critical and vital flows of resources, trade and commodities from Asia and the Middle East to Europe. Disruption of the SLOCs would have disastrous effects on the stability of the European economy as a whole. Europe's economic security depends heavily on the imports and exports of energy and trade from and to Asia and the Middle East that go through the Indian Ocean. Europe is a maritime power with 90 per cent of its external trade and 40 per cent of its internal trade carried by sea. European maritime regions account for 40 per cent of the EU's total GDP, and Europeans own or control 40 per cent of the world's merchant fleet (European Commission 2006). The EU's cargo trade with Asia accounts for 26 per cent of the global container shipping traffic, one of the most important trade routes on earth (Rogers 2009: 21-22). Moreover, along this route through the Indian Ocean, seven of the 15 biggest trading

partners of the EU, including China, can be found, with imports of 437.1 billion EUR and exports of 223.6 billion EUR in 2007 (Rogers 2009: 21-22).

Another concern that has more recently presented itself is that maritime security is now becoming one of Europe's first lines of defence against contemporary regional threats (drug smuggling, human trafficking and illegal immigration) as well as global security threats (maritime terrorism, piracy, and proliferation of conventional and unconventional weapons). The worst-case scenario is a maritime 9/11, in which both the economic and security environments would be strongly affected (López-Calderón 2008: 9). While the maritime infrastructure of world trade is robust enough to withstand attacks on its structure, the system's interconnectedness may mean that any attack or any conflict will affect Europe's prosperity and security as such (Willett 2008: 19). This is a fundamental security concern for Europe. The risk that global security threats like the proliferation of WMDs, the scenario of a terrorist attack or a combination of these two originate and manifest themselves in the Indian Ocean is ever more likely. The Indian Ocean region is therefore also from a security perspective an important region for Europe to take into account, and not only for defence reasons.

Given that the European Union's traditional focus has been primarily on the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, strategic thinking about the role and ambitions of the EU outside its own waters remains relatively limited (Rogers 2009: 8, 31-33). The EU's Green Paper of 2006 and Blue Book and accompanying Action Plan of 2007 have most recently enunciated Europe's maritime policy. However, these documents mainly focus on the economic perspective of an integrated European maritime policy (SDA 2009: 9). Although these policies recognise the cross-border character of maritime challenges and the potential of a maritime Europe, they neglect to reflect on parts of the maritime domain other than Europe's directly neighbouring waters.

Europe's security strategy, as outlined in the 2003 document "A secure Europe in a better world" (European Union 2003), recognises the following as primary objectives of the EU: bringing about a ring of well-governed countries around its borders, establishing strategic partnerships with emerging powers such as China and India, and striving for effective multilateralism. However, the EU still needs to find a way to approach maritime security in a broader and more global sense, and it lacks a comprehensive maritime security policy that takes into account (security)

challenges of other regions than just its own. The Indian Ocean region is not taken into account sufficiently in the EU's strategy and policies. If the EU wants to play a role there and be "more effective and visible around the world", as the 2008 "Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy" states, it has to work toward – among other things – a maritime security strategy that takes its interests in the Indian Ocean region into account. It is clear that Europe has important maritime security interests outside its own region.

The growing interests of other great powers like China – but also India and Japan – in maritime security in the Indian Ocean provide the EU with an opportunity to establish the contacts enunciated in its security strategy. As a military power, the EU has a relatively strong potential to do so. The naval capabilities of EU member states together account for 8 carriers, 24 assault ships, 58 submarines, 26 destroyers and 108 frigates. Compared to China, which has no carriers, 1 assault ship, 62 submarines, 28 destroyers and 50 frigates, the EU is still in the lead (Rogers 2009: Annex 2, 42; IISS 2009). The EU, like China, prefers non-military means of involvement in international maritime security, if only because it has no comprehensive security strategy as a basis of its military (maritime) power and capabilities. But as the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) advances, counter-piracy missions like Atalanta can complement the EU's non-military means, and thereby form a combined response of civilian and military components to counter threats like piracy (Gullestrup and Stumbaum 2010).

As the European Union currently has a more extensive counter-piracy presence in the Western Indian Ocean than other actors, this should be seen as an opportunity for the EU to establish contacts with other great powers (see also Kamerling and Van der Putten 2011a, 2011b). The EU has so far used this opportunity by cooperating with China in SHADE and by participating in short-term exchanges of liaison officers between the operational commanding frigate of Atalanta and the PLA Navy warship *Zhoushan* (Zhu, Xu and Yu 2009). The EU – through its counter-piracy mission – is now an important player in maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean. This could be of help when other (maritime) security threats occur in the future. But perhaps more importantly, the EU has proven a reliable partner to all major actors currently present in the Indian Ocean region in combating piracy – not just the United States and China, but also Japan and India. For the great

powers involved in Asian geopolitics, however, the EU remains a neutral and more low-profile player.

China's counter-piracy mission is not regarded by the European Union as a threat, but rather a welcome contribution to the international effort to combat Somali piracy. So far there has been a certain degree of Sino-EU cooperation, in terms of the two sides exchanging some information on a tactical and operational level. SHADE has also served as an operational forum in which counter-piracy activities between all the actors present (the EU and China included) have been coordinated. In fact, from a Chinese perspective, the Gulf of Aden is the only area in Africa where the EU is really visible as a security actor. Consequently there is a strong interest in China to further strengthen cooperation with the EU, especially in the fields of intelligence-sharing and putting pirates on trial. However, the European side has so far remained reluctant to share more information. The perception that China is gaining more from this cooperation than the EU plays an important role in this reticence (Interview 2010). Another obstacle to working together on detaining and bringing piracy suspects to trial is also the fact that China and the EU have conflicting standards with regard to human rights.

It is necessary for the EU to closely follow the further development of China's military presence in order to understand at what speed and in what direction China's capabilities of addressing security threats are developing. If China's civil–military supply model works well in the eyes of the Chinese navy and government, the Chinese military presence in Africa – other than UN peacekeeping missions – could develop much faster than the EU has anticipated. The global reach of China's diplomacy and multinational corporations has already created a solid groundwork. That fact notwithstanding, the EU's involvement in counter-piracy is helping Europe increase its visibility and involvement in terms of African and Asian security issues. This, in turn, provides the EU with a means to strengthen maritime security governance in a way that also involves the other leading maritime powers.

Conclusion

The Chinese government has multiple interests at stake when it comes to addressing Somali piracy.

1. The presence of the Chinese navy signals to the rest of the world that China is among the leading actors regarding maritime security in the Indian Ocean.
2. It contributes to Beijing's ability to protect its interests in a region of great economic importance. Both shipping lanes at sea and the countries in the Middle East and Africa play a major part in China's external economic relations.
3. Beijing has shown its own population that it is capable of protecting Chinese property and lives from piracy attacks, and that Chinese vessels need not rely on foreign navies for their protection. In other words, this shows that China is a great power, and the leadership of the CCP is taking up this responsibility.
4. The counter-piracy mission serves to underscore the fact that China – not the Taiwanese government – protects Taiwan's shipping interests. Thus the Chinese claim that Taiwan is part of China is bolstered.

The way China has used its navy to respond to Somali piracy has shown that the Chinese government is able and willing to deploy military means far beyond China's borders to secure its interests. China has done so before – through UN peacekeeping missions – but the naval escort mission is different in that it is not integrated into a UN-led operation (although the operations are UN-mandated) and that it involves military assets suitable for combat actions (warships and special forces). However, the continuous element in China's policy on expeditionary military activities is that the Chinese military engages only in missions of humanitarian, peacekeeping and non-combat natures. China's military presence in and near Africa poses a threat neither to countries in the region nor to other great powers; on the contrary, it contributes to greater security and stability. Continuity can also be found in China's aim to use military means to protect its overseas interests merely as a complement to its very considerable – and ever-increasing – economic and diplomatic means.

In the near future, the expansion of China's naval presence to waters off the Horn of Africa will not necessarily lead to the establishment of Chinese naval bases in or near Africa. To supply its ships, the Chinese

navy may well continue using the commercial-diplomatic model that China has been developing. This model is based on China's close diplomatic relations with countries in the region and the extensive presence of Chinese companies to whom logistical services can be outsourced and who are under a greater degree of state influence than most Western multinationals. So far, China seems very reluctant to establish overseas military bases to protect its economic interests. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the Chinese military will not increase its presence in places such as the African region in the near future. Through enlarging its fleet and through the use of commercial ports in friendly countries, the PLA Navy may be able to deploy military assets also to other waters around Africa (or elsewhere) where piracy or natural disasters occur.

One of the consequences of this approach is that although China may not establish overseas military bases, it may be able to keep expanding its naval presence in or around Africa. For the European Union this means that although China's counter-piracy mission does not pose a military threat, it should take into account that the Chinese overseas military presence may advance more quickly than the EU has anticipated thus far, due to China's potentially different *modus operandi*. It is important for the EU to note the close interaction between diplomatic, economic and military means in China's foreign security policy in order to understand how this is developing. The EU should also consider how it can further engage with China, and other powers, to strengthen multilateral maritime security governance. With that, the EU should also strengthen its own maritime position, given its interests at stake.

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