

**Annual Award of Excellence 2019
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The PLAN's Anti-Piracy Missions in the Gulf of Aden, Africa

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This article, part of a bigger research project, is focused on the Chinese People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN)'s anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden (GofA) between 2008 and 2015. It demonstrates the evolution of the PLAN's task forces in force structure, capabilities, and logistics during the period. The dynamic of these deployments will be explained and how the PLAN's anti-piracy missions, initially concentrated on economic and security, ended up as a steppingstone for a future Chinese geostrategic plan.

Background

In December 2008, the Chinese government dispatched a naval taskforce to the Gulf of Aden (GofA). Its mission was to participate in the international anti-piracy

campaign led by the US and NATO. For China, it was the first mission outside its adjacent seas. For the US it was regarded as an indication of China taking a larger military role on the global stage.¹

The primary motivation behind this decision was to protect Chinese shipping passing through the GofA. With piracy activities reaching 120 confirmed attacks and 43 ships seized by Somalian pirates in 2008,² and 1,200 Chinese ships and forty-three percent of Chinese raw materials and goods passing through the GofA,³ the decision was clearly to defend Chinese national interests. As Wu Shengli, commander of the PLAN, announced: "It's the first time we go abroad to protect our strategic interests armed with military force."⁴ China depends on secure access to oil from the Middle East passing through the GofA. It was estimated that forty-six percent of the oil imports are from the Middle East and thirty-two percent from the Africa.⁵ Chinese energy security relies on the freedom of navigation on this region. The decision was clearly driven by Chinese energy security requirements.

Apart from protecting Chinese economic interests, broader diplomatic motives were at play. As a new power in Asia, China seeks to exert its power, interests and positive image to the world. It also signaled Chinese commitments to international cooperation. Scholars at the Center for Naval Analysis (CAN) indicated:

...a desire to enhance international prestige may be one driver for many countries' participation in anti-piracy operations. Piracy affects the trade and security interests of many nations, and thus participation in Horn of Africa (H of A) anti-piracy operations has become one way for a country to

¹ Dr. Alison A. Kaufman, *China's Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications* (CAN China Studies, July 2009).

https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/D0020834.A1.pdf (Accessed November 2018)

² Ibid.

³ Department of Political Science, *Explaining China's Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 2009).

https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/political-science/17-408-chinese-foreign-policy-fall-2013/assignments/MIT17_408F13_ExplinigChina.pdf (Accessed November 2018)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Report to Congress on China* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2009). See pages 4-5.

signal both its willingness and its ability to cooperate in issues of international concern...⁶

Becoming a responsible global actor means to join in more international activities and to be a good-will presence in crisis areas. In answer to Resolution 1851 of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which “encouraged member states to take a more active role in fighting pirates off the Coast of Somalia,”⁷ a naval task force was assembled to signal Chinese intention. The Chinese government argued that “participation in anti-piracy operations is fulfilling an international obligation and have justified their deployment by citing United Nations resolutions in government press releases and on government websites.”⁸ Significantly, while taking part in anti-piracy activities with a Western naval coalition, the PLAN decided to carry out its missions unilaterally, rather than directly within the coalition. As the PLAN Rear Admiral Du Jingchen made clear, China would not accept assignments from “other regional organizations or countries.”⁹

Evolution in Naval Capabilities and Objectives

Participating in the anti-piracy mission also provided an opportunity for China to demonstrate and practice its naval capabilities. This operation was the first time the PLAN’s ships sailed outside Chinese adjacent waters and it demonstrated new Chinese military capabilities. The PLAN deployed its most advanced ships to the GofA. The task force usually consisted of two destroyers and one replenishment ship. The destroyers initially included the Lanzhou-class (Type 52C) and the Guangzhou-class (Type 52B). Equipped with long range anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), surface to air missiles in a vertical launch system (VLS) and torpedo tubes. These vessels possess independent and fleet combat capabilities. One technical journal commented that:

...these destroyers may also have the capability to transmit information to other ships over data link or satellite communications, [...] greatly enhance

⁶ Dr. Alison A. Kaufman, *China’s Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations*.

⁷ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1851. S/RES/1851 (2008) <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1851> (Accessed November 2018)

⁸ Department of Political Science, *Explaining China’s Participation*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

the effectiveness of the anti-piracy mission [...] Each destroyer is also equipped with a Russian-built Kamov Ka-28 helicopter [...] greatly expanding coverage for the anti-piracy operations...¹⁰

The two destroyers were supported by the replenishment ship Weishanhu, the largest of its type in the PLAN fleet. The replenishment ship carried food, water, spare parts, and ammunition for the operations. To maintain strategic endurance, this ship, in turn, replenished at the port of Aden. It provided the PLAN “a beneficial trail of logistics support mode by the Chinese Navy in performing Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) abroad.”¹¹

The PLAN task force’s main objective was to escort Chinese ships traveling through the region. The task force adopted similar tactics as the NATO-led coalition. It included patrolling designated areas, responding to distress calls, investigating suspicious vessels, and repelling pirate attacks. As Rear Admiral Xiao Xinnian, deputy chief of staff of the PLAN shared:

...the Chinese naval vessels will generally adopt three methods when performing their escort mission: Upon finding suspicious ships at sea, the Chinese side will first send shipborne helicopters to conduct reconnaissance before sending its naval vessels to approach them. Second, if pirates are engaged in robbery and if our conditions and capabilities permit us to stop them, the Chinese side will adopt appropriate measures in light of the circumstances. If the Chinese side encounters unprovoked attacks by pirates, it will resolutely defend itself and ensure its own safety...¹²

By 2015, nineteen rotations of PLAN vessels had taken place.

In 2012, however, the situation in the GofA changed. The number of pirate attacks decreased substantially. Nonetheless, the PLAN maintained its task force in the region, with certain force-structure modifications. The three-vessel task force was now escorted by a Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock. This additional ship allowed the PLAN to deploy more helicopters in a campaign. This force arrangement allowed the

¹⁰ Department of Political Science. *Explaining China’s Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 2009).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² Department of Political Science *Explaining China’s Participation..*

task force to track several ships in multiple directions simultaneously, to expand the scope of recon missions and to practice offshore amphibious operations.¹³ The scope of the missions was also expanded. The PLAN began to provide escort for any merchant ship, regardless of nationality. Cooperation with other navies was expanded, including sharing intelligence information and communicating on same radio frequencies.

As the number of piracy attacks declined, the nature of the PLAN missions changed. The effort spent on counter-piracy decreased. In March 2011, the 7th task force escorted a ferry evacuating Chinese citizens from the Libyan crisis. Ships of the 16th task force also escorted the vessels conveying Syrian chemical weapons through the Mediterranean. As well, the 17th task force contributed to the search for Malaysian Airlines' Flight MH370 accident. In 2015, the 19th task force included a Han-class nuclear submarine, and the PLAN announced that future deployments with nuclear submarine will be a "standard exercise."¹⁴

Overall, the missions clearly demonstrated how the PLAN's power projection capabilities evolved over each deployment.

Implications for a Grand Chinese Geo-strategy

A matrix study carried out by the French think tank, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), revealed the contradiction between the duration of operations and the number of ships escorted by task forces at the same period. This result was collected and presented in Figure 3.1. While the recent task forces spent longer days on missions, the number of escorted ships declined.¹⁵

¹³ Jérôme Henry, *China's Military Deployments in the Gulf of Aden: Anti-Piracy and Beyond* (Institut Français des Relations Internationale (IFRI). 2016).

<https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/asiae-vision/chinas-military-deployments-gulf-aden-anti-piracy-and> (Accessed November 2018).

¹⁴ Jérôme Henry, *China's Military Deployments*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

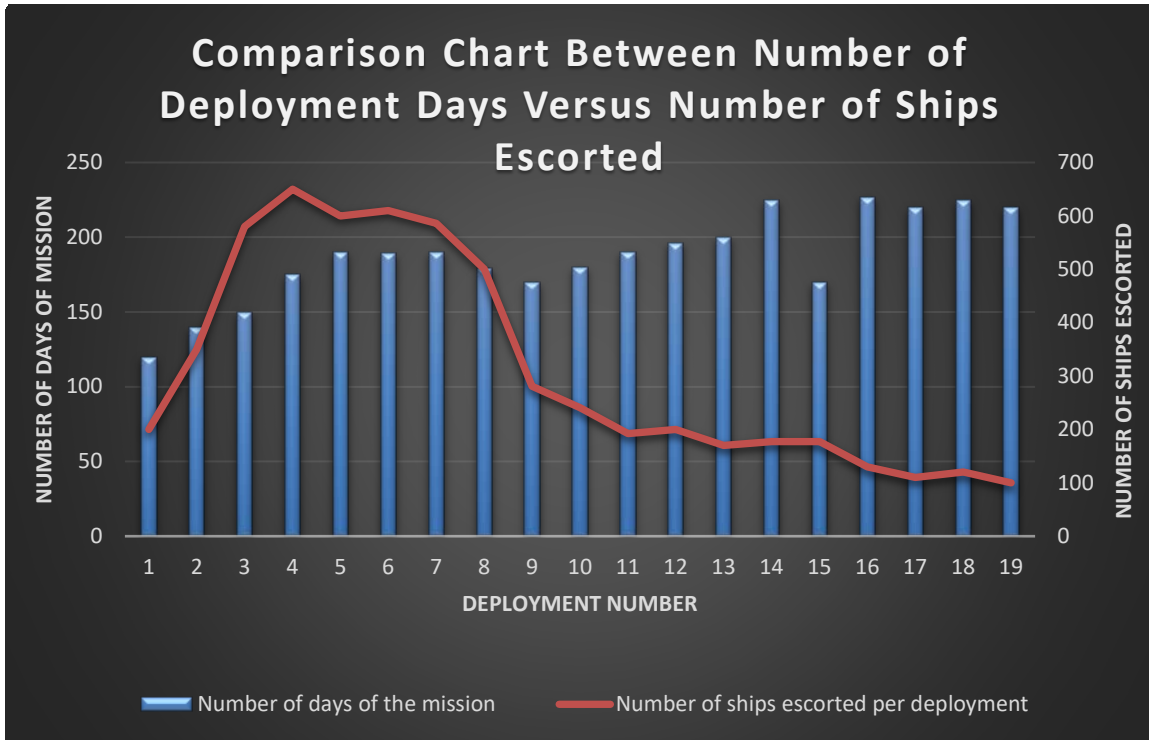


Figure 3.1: Comparison Chart - Number of Deployment Days Versus Number of Ships Escorted

After the nineteenth rotation of the Escort Task Force to the GofA, the initial objective to escort and protect merchant vessels from pirates faded. In its place, political, economic, and military objectives emerged: enhancing Chinese political posture, improving the PLAN’s offshore deployment capability, and protecting Chinese economic interests.

Having a naval presence in the region served two political aims for China. First, it presented a positive Chinese image to the world. China had proven itself to be a newly emerged superpower, and to exert its presence beyond its neighborhood. It also demonstrated to other superpowers as the US, and European that China was now ready to bear more responsibilities in world affairs. China also demonstrated its ability to protect its citizens and interests abroad. Second, by sending naval ships to the region, China signaled to the world that it is was able to reach far outside its borders in order to protect its national interests. In addition, the Chinese have now laid a foundation for

potentially new political relationships. The ports in the Indian Ocean now serve as political leverage for Chinese government. To meet the demands of these missions, the PLAN opened its first oversea naval base in Djibouti. The first PLAN vessel officially arrived there in August 2017.¹⁶ In so doing, Chinese ships can now join in different activities with local governments, such as disaster relief, humanitarian support, anti-terrorism, and enhancing cooperation with partners' navies.

China relies on oil and materials from Africa and the Middle East. These materials all pass through regional strategic choke points such as the Persian Gulf, the GofA, and the Strait of Malacca. While the PLAN has the capabilities to cover the Strait of Malacca, the Persian Gulf and the GofA are more challenging. Any upheaval, or crisis in these areas undermines China's energy security and require a Chinese presence. The proximity of the PLAN to these regions also serves China's diplomatic purposes. China has established many economic projects in the Indian Ocean and around the East Africa nations. These ships project a Chinese presence in the region, where Chinese workers, technicians and investments are situated. In the Libyan crisis, for example, ships from the task force assisted and provided escort to Chinese civilians evacuating operations.

The PLAN's evolution from a coastal force to a regional navy with certain power projection capabilities may be understood as the initial steps towards the creation of global capability. Deploying task forces to the Indian Ocean created an opportunity for the PLAN to test its new capabilities, developed over two decades. The anti-piracy missions justified a build up of long range naval assets like aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, and long-range replenishment ships. Newly built frigates, destroyers and nuclear submarines were able to practice within a combat task force. These deployments were real training situations for the PLAN, helping it accumulate experience, test new capabilities, and enhance coordinating among task forces and combat fleets.

The PLAN's anti-piracy missions might have started as an ordinary protection escort mission, protecting Chinese merchant ships passing through the region. However, the implications of these deployments have changed. The presence of the PLAN in the waters of East Africa and in the Indian Ocean in general had a wider aim. This switch in

¹⁶ Ben Blanchard, Michael Perry, (eds.), "China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti," *Reuters*, 1 August 2017). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E3> (Accessed October 2018).

Chinese behaviour indicates the PLAN is protecting China's interests on a bigger scale, which is coherent with their grand geo-strategy.