

China dispatches warships to Somali waters

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China has used attacks on Chinese ships by pirates off the coast of Somalia, and the authorisation by the UN Security Council to fight piracy, to launch itself as a blue water naval force on the international scene.

As it seeks to become a major economic power, China is compelled to project its military forces around the world to protect its trade, investments and supplies of raw materials. Like its rivals that already have warships patrolling the strategically vital sea lanes through the Gulf of Aden connecting Asia and Europe, China's naval presence is not so much about fighting the pirates, but protecting its own economic interests.

On December 26, two destroyers and a supply ship carrying 800 troops, including special forces, guided missiles and helicopters set sail from a new naval base on Hainan Island off the south China coast. The three-month mission is being given considerable prominence with state television reporters on board to broadcast the operations back home.

The state media is comparing the operation to the fifteenth century voyages of Chinese navigator Zheng He, who sailed a vast fleet through the Indian Ocean and reached Africa. China's failure to follow up on Zheng's voyages by expanding trade and establishing colonies is often held in ruling circles to be the reason why it failed to become the major capitalist power. They are determined not to miss out this time.

The official *China Youth Daily* called on the Chinese navy to follow Zheng He's methods of attacking on land and sea to root out the pirates in the Strait of Malacca at the time, then bringing "captured leaders back to the Celestial Empire [to face justice]". Zheng's aim was actually to force the "barbarians" to be subservient to the "Middle Kingdom". The newspaper called for troops to land in Somalia to destroy pirate bases—in essence, an aggressive, interventionist policy.

The *Peoples Liberation Army Daily* commented on January 4: "Today, overseas trade has become absolutely vital to our economy, sea lanes and major choke points have become the important 'lifeline' of our economic and social development. Using naval forces to protect national maritime interests is an important measure for our military to defend the national interests..."

As China became an economic power, the newspaper continued, national interests went beyond the traditional

territories of air, sea and land, and "expand towards the ocean, outer space and cyber space. Wherever are our expanded national interests, the duties of our military will be expanded there".

Trade with Europe, Africa and the Middle East has vastly expanded. Around 1,265 Chinese commercial vessels passed the Gulf of Aden last year, including tankers carrying 60 percent of China's imported oil from the Middle East, as well as shipments of raw materials from Africa. Europe is now China's largest trade partner, with much of the trade passing through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao reported last month that Somali pirates had attacked one fifth of Chinese vessels passing through Somali waters from January to November last year, hijacking 15 vessels.

The region is one of great power rivalry. The US has repeatedly intervened in the Horn of Africa, a region next to Sudan, where China has major oil interests. Both the US and European powers have repeatedly accused China of protecting the Sudanese regime and failing to exert pressure to halt ethnic cleansing in the Darfur area.

There will be minimal cooperation between the Chinese and other navies in the area, apart from routine communications with the other warships, including those from the US, Europe, India and Russia. The Chinese vessels will not be part of any multinational command and will protect mainly Chinese ships. Hong Kong and Taiwanese ships will also be eligible for escort. So far the fleet had carried out six escort missions.

China is clearly flexing its military muscle. Li Wei, director of the anti-terrorism research centre at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, told the *China Daily* last month: "China's military participation sends a strong political message to the international community, that a China with its improved economic and military strength is willing to play a larger role in maintaining world peace and security."

The US, Japan, India and Europe are watching the development with unease. China has emerged as a new power, rapidly penetrating into Africa, Latin America and now the Indian Ocean.

The London-based *Times* summed up the concerns in the West: "In an era when China is playing a much larger global role in commerce and politics, the deployment [of warships to the Gulf of Aden] redefines it as a nation prepared to spill

blood protecting its diverse stakes in the world economy."

The Chinese military budget for 2008 saw another sharp increase after a major jump in 2007. The budget increased by 17.6 percent to \$US58.8 billion, although the US Defence Department claims that Beijing's real military spending is two to three times that figure.

Much of this military expenditure went to the navy. China now possesses 57 attack submarines, half a dozen of which are nuclear-powered, 74 major surface vessels (destroyers and frigates) and 55 large- and medium-sized amphibious ships. A few nuclear-powered strategic submarines are armed with long-range ballistic missiles. A significant portion of this naval force has been built since 2000. China is now the world's third largest shipbuilder—building one fifth of the world's ships—and thus has a considerable industrial basis for further naval expansion.

A strategic report published this month by the right-wing US think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, pointed out that the rapidly expanding Chinese submarine force has taken "American intelligence experts by surprise". Since 1990, China has initiated five submarine programs and, since 1995, has added 37 submarines to its navy, including nuclear-powered ones. By adding three new subs a year, China could have up to 85 submarines in eight years. "Never since the period between the two world wars has a nation undertaken a comparable level of submarine development," the study stated.

Although the Chinese navy has been aimed primarily against Taiwan, the US is deeply concerned that China will challenge its dominance in the Pacific Ocean. In October 2006, a Chinese submarine followed the USS Kitty Hawk without being detected and surfaced close to the aircraft carrier, causing dismay in US naval circles about China's advances in submarine technology.

A major concern for China's rivals is recent preparations to build aircraft carriers. At the news conference announcing the dispatch of warships to Somali waters, Chinese defence ministry spokesman Huang Xueping said China would use aircraft carriers to "defend sovereignty over coastal areas and territorial seas". His comment came just after Chinese general Quan Lihua told the *Financial Times* in November that China was considering the construction of one to two aircraft carriers. China has negotiated to order 50 Su-33 fighters from Russia, specifically designed for carriers.

The Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* reported on December 31 that sources in the Shanghai municipal government and Chinese military had indicated China would start to build an aircraft carrier at the Shanghai shipyard this year, to be completed by 2015. The two 50,000-60,000-ton carriers are to be conventionally-powered vessels and therefore much smaller than their US counterparts. They will be assigned to the Southern Fleet in the South China Sea and possibly to the Indian Ocean to protect oil shipments from the Middle East. Well aware of the potential threat to Japan's sea lanes, *Asahi Shimbun* warned that these carriers "could significantly impact

the delicate military balance in East Asia".

Although still the leading naval power in Asia, Japan is acutely aware of China's growing economic and military strength. Since World War II, the Japanese constitution has banned the use of military force in settling international disputes, and this has inhibited the building of obvious offensive weapons such as aircraft carriers. However, in recent years, the Japanese navy has undergone significant changes, circumventing the pacifist clause by building helicopter carriers labelled "destroyers". Some analysts believed these carriers could be converted to carry fixed-wing aircraft.

Reacting to the news of Chinese warships heading for the Gulf of Aden, Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso immediately instructed the defence ministry to "quickly participate in counter-piracy measures". However, this deployment is likely to face a protracted political process before being approved. Japan's ongoing refuelling operation in the Indian Ocean to support the US-led war in Afghanistan has provoked considerable political opposition, creating political crises for the Liberal Democratic Party government.

India, another Chinese rival, is also concerned about Beijing's Somali mission, even though China and India held joint naval exercises in 2008 and counter-terrorism exercises in 2007. China has established ports in Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and conducted naval exercises with Pakistan, creating fears in New Delhi that China is seeking to penetrate the Indian Ocean, long regarded by India as its sphere of influence. Already operating one aircraft carrier, with one more under construction and buying a second hand one from Russia, India is spending billions of dollars every year to beef up its navy to protect its own economic and strategic interests.

A comment in the *Indian Express* last month warned that Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean are "bound to constrict India's own freedom of naval action in the Indian Ocean. China's strategic re-entry of the Indian Ocean after nearly five centuries demands a sophisticated Indian response that simultaneously cooperates with the PLA navy on shared maritime objectives and pre-empts any Chinese moves to establish a permanent base in the Indian Ocean... As China's shadow darkens over the Indian Ocean, the government must get its diplomats and sailors to work together as never before."



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