

An Analysis of Chinese Naval Deployments in International Waters

Is There a Significant Policy Change with the PRC's Recent Deployment of Ships to the Gulf of Aden?

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The

central aim of this paper is to try and understand the significance of China's recent naval activity off the coast of Somalia. To do this, we will first examine

the extant literature concerning previous naval deployments. Secondly, we will scrutinize the Gulf of Aden deployment to a greater degree. Finally, we will comparatively analyse these deployments to see if there are any significant differences. The importance of conducting this investigation lies with the potential to contribute to a body of knowledge: that of the PRC's shifts in foreign policy. We might gain a better understanding of how China has used its navy in foreign policy and perhaps what this means for the future of international security, political economy, and humanitarianism with the growth of the Beijing Consensus.

Historical Deployments into "Blue Water"

Lo (1955) argues that, for one, previous understandings of China as being a land-based country with weak naval power is largely a misrepresentation of history. This argument, as will come to be seen, could also be used today as several publications in the literature depict China's navy as being comparatively weak to the USA's. I do not feel that China's main purpose is the global domination of this world's "blue water" but rather the protection of her strategic interests, the furthering of her humanitarian and diplomatic goals, and the desire to participate at the global scale more effectively in many ways (trade, development, research and security for example) [1]. This however, is not meant to reflect any naiveté on my part as we are all aware of the PRC's dealings with Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (I am critical of the PRC in all of these situa-

tions) as well as her imperialist and often hawkish history. What is meant to be said is that perhaps any fear-mongering in the literature (a Europe or USA versus China approach, see Kristof, 1993, for an older example) is misplaced and parochial, but that is an argument for a separate forum.

Our focus here is to try and explore China's previous naval deployments so as to gain a sense of this country's foreign policy themes when it comes to the navy. To get back on track with Lo (1955), he argued that "China was a naval power during the late Sung, Yüan and early Ming periods" which went beyond "coastal wars [designed] to carry out invasions of Korea and Indo-China..." (Lo, 1955: 489). We see that, at least during the Southern Sung period (early 12th century) the Sung had a navy capable of patrolling and protecting her territory between the Han and Yangtze rivers. This navy apparently held support from the population it protected and drew extensively not from land-men, but sea-farers from a sea-going merchant class. But this was a considerable amount of time ago and probably does not reflect modern events very well.

Should we skip ahead to 1909, we see that the "decrepit imperial Chinese government announced... the impending departure for Europe and the United States of a naval commission" (Braisted, 1968: 51). This apparently led to economic contracts between the USA and China concerning the sale from the former and delivery of naval materiel to the latter. "The most significant consequence of Liang's mission was an undertaking by Peking to purchase warships in the United States valued at \$15,000,000 and to request the services of American naval officers in a model squadron" (Braisted, 1968: 53). The turbulence of the 1911-1912 revolution in China did affect relations between the USA's sanctioned companies, like Bethlehem Steel, selling goods but did not apparently shift the reason the former or succeeded Peking governments wanted a navy: it was to try and strengthen the sovereignty of China most likely against the USA, rapidly industrialising Japan, Korea, Russian growth in the "East," and European powers encroaching in Indo-China [2]. It would, of course, do little if nothing to fight dissent within China.

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This type of regional focus was apparently still being conveyed in the 1980s as can be seen in this quote:

The author [Howarth, 2006] notes that the Commander-in-Chief of the PLA Navy from 1982 until 1988, Liu Huaqing played a very important role in naval modernization. In the 1980s, when setting up the blueprints for PLA Navy's modernization, Liu determined that PLA Navy should aim to be capable of controlling the "first chain of islands" by the year 2000, the first phase of the strategy for PLA Navy's development, and the "second chain of islands" by 2020. The third phase of Liu's maritime strategy was to create a blue-water navy capable of exercising a global influence [not domination] by 2050. (Lijun, 2006)

But as can now be seen with PLAN's (People's Liberation Army Navy) activities in the Indian Ocean, Huaqing's aims are perhaps ahead of schedule. It seems that analysts outside of China also may have underestimated the PRC's capacity for rapid naval development. Rae (1993) for example stated

The doctrinal underpinnings of China's naval modernisation programme are low-level warfare, the development of rapid deployment forces, and the pursuit of a blue water navy status. The objective underpinning this emphasis is the protection

of China's claims to sovereignty over disputed maritime areas. (Rae, 1993:53)

Although much of this can be said to have happened, we see that the PLAN is now operating strategically in blue water for purposes that might be said to be beyond concerns over sovereignty. These two quotes might give us an indication of what some of the purposes and intents of the PLAN are. They also give us an indication of how China used and wished to use its navy: for strategic local defence and eventually blue water operability. But this, it appears, has changed. We see for example that China's need for natural resources, especially rare metals, is growing and that its economy is increasingly dependent on these resources. Perhaps this provided the incentive for PLAN's deployment to the Gulf of Aden. The PRC needed its sea lanes protected from pirating. It needed to show other African states its commitment to their security, and



as Antony Ou suggested in personal correspondence, perhaps China needed to deploy because traditional “blue water police” (USA and Britain) were overcommitted elsewhere which left a gap to fill.

To finish and bring us up to date on possible reasons for PLAN’s modernisation and current actions, O’Rourke (2009) is central. O’Rourke argued that as of 2009 deliberations concerning the USA’s need to counter the growth of PLAN were very much underway. This report indicates that PLAN is perhaps not seeking to develop a fleet the size of the USA’s, but rather develop a strategic, small and technologically cutting-edge fleet which could do immense damage to US ships: including perhaps the greatest fear, bringing down an aircraft carrier. This O’Rourke says, would be a “national catastrophe” (O’Rourke, 2009: 20) and is perhaps one reason why PLAN may not be developing in what might be called the “traditional” sense. Why build massively expensive ships which would risk the loss of large numbers of life and perhaps be contrary to the strategy of the “Beijing Consensus”?

The Gulf of Aden Deployment

It appears that this deployment of ships to the coast of Somalia and along the trade routes of goods through other high risk pirating areas is an unprecedented move. Going beyond much of the literature focusing on the security threats of the PLAN’s growth, Guoxing (1998) argues that China’s policy in the South China Sea (and perhaps now elsewhere) is not simply its desire to defend its sovereign territories and interests. It is also the development of a navy that “has sought to adopt a conciliatory and flexible attitude, which includes ‘shelving

the disputes and working for joint development’, and the peaceful settlement of these disputes...” (Guoxing, 1998: 101). Some might ask how the PLAN could contribute to development, and I think the answer lies specifically with the geopolitics of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Should we take Figures 1 and 2 into consideration, and the circled regions within them (commonly known high risk pirate zones) [3] we can see that much of China’s trade necessarily traverses some risky waters. Whether boats are transporting goods from east Africa, western Latin America, or Australia, there are Somali, Burmese, and Samoan/Tongan/Papua New Guinean pirates to contend with. We should also consider that other countries dependent on sea trade face the same difficulty which is an area the PLAN could assist in: simply keeping pirates at bay by policing trade routes could have positive impacts on economic development. This could significantly improve the development of countries trading through their ports and might be a big factor for PLAN’s deployment off the coast of Somalia and in the Arabian Gulf.

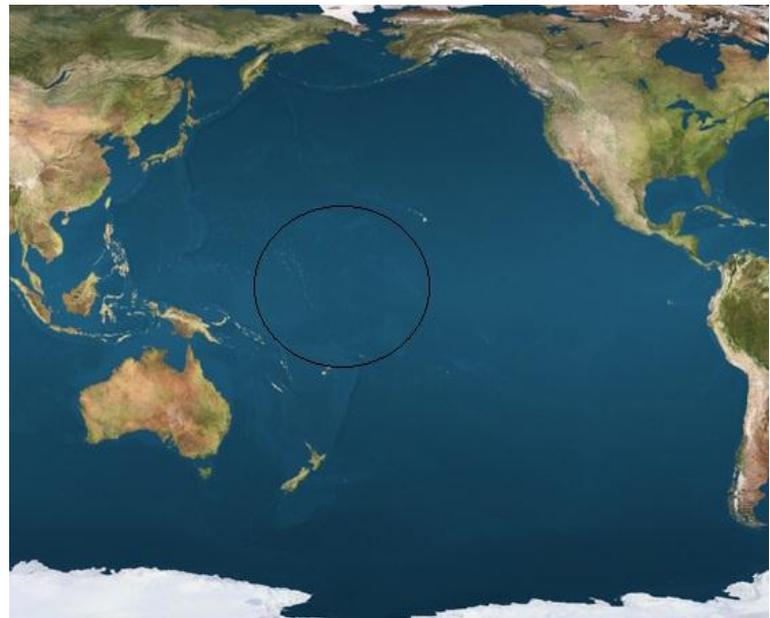
Illustrating this potential new change of policy are two quotes. The first concerns China’s UNSC (United Nations Security Council) vote supporting naval deployment off the coast of Somalia. The second is probably the most important as it shows that there are growing calls (thought to be unprecedented) within the PRC for offshore support for their navy.

- 1) The United Nations Security Council has unanimously voted to allow countries to send warships into Somalia’s territorial waters to tackle pirates...China, Vietnam and Libya

Pirating Zones in the Indian Ocean



One Pirating Zone in the Pacific



said they voted for the measure because it only applies to Somalia, and does not affect the sovereignty of other countries (Africa Research Bulletin, 2008: 17583)

- 2) Due to self-imposed policy, the People's Republic of China (PRC) does not base military forces in foreign countries, and PRC officials have used this as evidence of China's peaceful development. However, China's growing global economic and political interests are causing Beijing to take a more nuanced approach to its policies regarding the deployment and employment of military force. Specifically, the ongoing deployment of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships to the Gulf of Aden, now in the sixth rotation of combatants, to guard international shipping against pirates operating from the Horn of Africa has highlighted the need for shore-based logistics support for PLAN forces operating in the Indian Ocean. Over the past year, public statements by Chinese academics and government officials have indicated that there is a debate going on in China over the need to establish some sort of overseas infrastructure to support deployed naval forces. Rear Admiral Yin Zhou (Retired), chairman of the Chinese Navy Informatization Experts Advisory Committee, opined during an interview on China National Radio in December 2009 that China requires a "stable and permanent supply and repair base." (Kostecka, 2011: 59)

Conclusion

As can be seen, China's navy or the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is apparently in a phase of expansion. McVadon (2006) argues that the PRC is both trying to have a more sophisticated navy to act as a deterrent (a US technique during the Cold War) and to apparently deter Taiwan's movement toward independence which the PRC considers to be a threat to Chinese sovereignty [4].

While the capability to thwart Taiwan's aspirations of independence remained central, he revised the definition of the navy's 'offshore defence' strategy to encompass not only coastal-defence missions, but also what could be termed as 'sea-denial' missions far into the ocean. Since then, Chinese naval strategists have articulated a broad range of objectives: to provide greater defensive depth for China's coastal cities; to pro-

tect its maritime rights and interests; and to defend its sea lanes, particularly those across the Indian Ocean which provide a crucial gateway for energy imports and commercial exports. Together, these strategic themes have been translated into new doctrines to conduct either single-service operations, like anti-ship or sea-traffic defence, or joint deployments, such as anti-surface operations. These were encapsulated in the New Generation Operations Regulations in 1999. (Nicoll and Delaney, 2008: 1)

Erickson (2008) also argues that the growth and maturation of the PLAN largely concerns the protection of its sea-going trade routes: especially in the Indian Ocean which was seen to be a widely held opinion in the literature (see Kaplan, 2009, [5] for one example or the quote above for another). We also covered the argument that the PLAN might currently be, or could eventually be, a useful tool for development and humanitarian aid à la Beijing Consensus. Most importantly, we saw in a rather brief discussion, that this deployment of the PLAN to the Gulf of Aden is perhaps the most significant move in the history of Chinese naval activities (or what I have come to call "Ou's Hypothesis").

Traditionally, the navy was probably concerned solely with the strategic interests of its coastal waters, of defending its sovereign territory, of keeping its imperialistic options open with concern to India, Korea, Japan and eventually the Indian Ocean. This was not only a matter of security, but also of trade. However, perhaps due to the speeding of globalization and the recent sustained high growth of the Chinese economy, the PLAN is operating far from its territorial waters. It is perhaps doing so not only for security and trade, but also for humanitarian and diplomatic reasons. We also see, perhaps for the first time publicly, the intention to have support for its navy in international waters outside of Chinese territory which is something that might eventually come to compromise the sovereignty or security of countries near these bases.

To end, it appears that "Ou's Hypothesis" has proven correct and that we are entering a new phase of the PLAN. I feel that China does not have an intention to follow the militarization path of the USA which is increasingly proving highly unpopular and the PLAN might be said to be trying to help humanity through its own methods of development. But there is, as perhaps always, the dark side of the coin that we must consider. Will this new PLAN seek to defend the PRC's unethical dimensions of



trade which some argue are at the expense of human rights and democratization in Africa for its own domestic needs? **PR**

Notes:

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- 1) Cole (2001) supports this argument.
- 2) Wright (2008), Richards (2002), Naranarayan (1981), Downs (1968) and Xi (2010) remind us of the British and American opium trade in China and its neighbouring regions. The memory of the opium wars and popular opposition to opium in China could have been a factor in wanting to strengthen China's navy: water travel was the primary method of entry and departure of opium.
- 3) See ICC (2011) for high-risk pirating zones.
- 4) We also learn, from the same source, that China is not only developing but diversifying its nuclear submarines. For example two classes of nuclear submarines, the Jin and the Shang, are both in service where "from a few years ago...serving on troubled Chinese nuclear submarines was thought by some to be as much a joke as a job" (McVadon, 2006:103).
- 5) Kaplan (2009) convincingly notes the growing importance of understanding the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. With the rise of China and India, as well as the central importance of Africa and Latin America for rare metals and natural resources, it seems reasonable that we should heed to this call.

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