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The Chinese Navy's Budding Overseas Presence

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As 2009 drew to a close, a senior Chinese naval officer raised the idea that the People's Republic of China (PRC) might be interested in establishing a permanent base in the Gulf of Aden area in support of anti-piracy missions. Admiral Yin Zhuo, a senior researcher at the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Equipment Research Center, suggested that such a base would facilitate a sustained Chinese presence in the region as part of ongoing anti-piracy efforts.

A base in the Gulf of Aden area would constitute the first formal Chinese overseas military base. (China established ostensibly non-military overseas facilities in Namibia and Kiribati in the early 1990s as support for the manned Shenzhou space program.) It reflects China's growing overseas interests, as well as its expanding military capabilities, including a growing ability to operate far from its shores.

The Chinese Presence. As has occurred historically with other rising powers, the most concrete manifestation of expanding interests, resources, and military capabilities is an expanding navy. Over the past two decades, the PLAN has grown from a primarily coastal defense force to a green- and blue-water navy. Indeed, the current Chinese anti-piracy task force is in its fourth rotation, marking a full year of escort operations off Somalia.

For Beijing, the anti-piracy patrols are an opportunity not only to display Chinese military capabilities but also to fulfill the "New Historic Missions" of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as outlined by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. These new missions include securing Chinese interests overseas.

The decision to dispatch the PLAN is clearly an effort to engage in public diplomacy. Yin notes, for example, that the Chinese spent a great deal of time considering the size of the vessels that should be deployed, balancing sea-keeping and sustainability with the impression that larger combatants would generate.

Once on-station, Chinese naval vessels have escorted foreign as well as Chinese merchant ships, laying claim to credentials as a responsible international power. Moreover, as Admiral Yin has observed, their presence as part of the multilateral anti-piracy task force has also acclimated regional states to a Chinese naval presence. He also notes that the Chinese presence has led major naval powers such as France and the United States to view the Chinese as counterparts and allowed for informal interactions among the various naval contingents.

Establishing a Beachhead. At the same time, the active participation of the PLAN in the anti-piracy patrols has allowed Chinese naval officers to gain valuable experience. According to Admiral Yin, the establishment of a long-term Chinese naval base in the region is due largely to logistical considerations, including access to fresh food, secure communications, and the ability to rotate personnel.

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Yin compares the Chinese experience unfavorably with that of his French and American counterparts. In a very real sense, then, the PLA is learning about the logistical demands of extended, distant operations without necessarily appearing to be a burgeoning naval power.

Similarly, the Chinese navy is expanding its experience base in littoral warfare. The PLAN has long focused on waging littoral combat in defense of Chinese shores. By deploying to Somalia, however, it is now engaging in *expeditionary* littoral warfare. This will likely provide important lessons not only in helping the PLAN to counter piracy elsewhere (e.g., the South China Sea) but also in how to wage littoral warfare more effectively against more advanced naval forces (e.g., the U.S. Navy).

PLAN Ahead. For the United States, the extended Chinese naval deployment in the Gulf of Aden, as well as discussion of the creation of a Chinese naval base in the region, should serve as a reminder that the U.S. Navy will encounter the PLAN more and more—and not solely in the Taiwan Straits, South China Sea, and other waters off China's coast. Given the global nature of China's economic interests, it is inevitable that the Chinese military will also have a more global presence. Nor is there anything that the United States can reasonably do to prevent this.

Rather than trying to forestall the inevitable, U.S. policymakers should recognize the Chinese competitive potential and stay ahead of the game even as the U.S. tries to manage China's emergence to its own advantage. This will entail three key initiatives.

1. More Adroit Diplomacy. While the Chinese are still finding their feet on the world stage as a major power, the United States has been the sole superpower for nearly two decades. This means that the U.S. possesses levers and longstanding relationships that the PRC cannot, at present, hope to match.

U.S. diplomacy needs to be reinvigorated through a “whole of government” approach that would better exploit these advantages and allow the

U.S. to attract diverse support for international coalitions from other countries more effectively. In such a position, it should spearhead the development of anti-piracy measures, including a legal regime for dealing with captured pirates as well as both military and non-military measures that would reduce support for pirates in their home villages and tribal areas.

2. Smarter Interactions with the PLAN. The interview with Admiral Yin makes clear that the Chinese are hoping to learn more about extended operations through their interactions with foreign naval contingents. So long as the Chinese and Western naval forces maintain a presence in this area, such exchanges are inevitable.

Moreover, it would appear petulant, even reckless, for the United States to refuse to operate with their Chinese counterparts, especially when other Western navies are doing so. Under such circumstances, the United States should instead seek to influence the Chinese through these interactions.

At a minimum, there should be a consistent effort to foster the development of an operational code of conduct at sea so as to avoid repetitions of the USNS *Impeccable*, USNS *Victorious*, and USS *John S. McCain* incidents.¹ Some measures would include maintaining minimum safe operating distances and adherence to common international norms of maritime navigation. Moreover, dangerous Chinese behavior at sea elsewhere should lead to a curtailment of interactions in places such as the Gulf of Aden.

3. Maintaining the Qualitative Edge of the U.S. Navy. While the U.S. military is currently focusing on counterinsurgency, it is essential that it not lose sight of the importance of the ability to wage high-intensity conflict. The reality is that the Chinese, rather than deploying their substantial littoral combat forces (including dozens of small fast attack craft) to Somalia, have instead deployed their most advanced warships. The experience they are gaining, moreover, is applicable to the full spectrum of conflict, not just littoral warfare.

1. These incidents involved Chinese vessels maneuvering dangerously while in close proximity to U.S. Navy vessels that were operating within the Chinese exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The PRC claims that it can prohibit foreign naval vessels from operating within its EEZ. The United States, citing international law, does not recognize this claim.

Given the range of missions that the U.S. Navy is responsible for addressing, sustaining research and development into high-end capabilities and training in traditional high-intensity warfare areas—as well as maintaining robust numbers of combatants—is essential.

The Influence of Sea Power upon the Future.

For all the discussion of Chinese aircraft carriers and anti-ship ballistic missiles, the United States remains the predominant and preeminent naval power. That situation is unlikely to change so long

as Washington is prepared to commit the requisite resources to sustain that capacity. Expanded encounters with the Chinese at sea can therefore serve as an opportunity to signal U.S. strength, resolve, and commitment—or declining capabilities and reduced will. The choice is as much Washington's as Beijing's.

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