

CHINA'S BLUE SOFT POWER

Antipiracy, Engagement, and Image Enhancement

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On 3 September 2014, almost six years since Chinese warships first entered the Gulf of Aden to fulfill antipiracy duties, China Central Television (CCTV)-8 aired the first episode of “In the Gulf of Aden” (舰在亚丁湾).¹ The multidozen-episode program, designed to “ignite raging patriotism” (燃起熊熊爱国心), given evening prime-time status, and attracting a popular audience with a star-studded cast, explores in dramatic fashion Beijing’s experience

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fighting modern piracy. Produced by the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Political Department’s Television Art Center (海军政治部电视艺术中心) over three years, the series offers a unique window into how the PLAN has conducted its antipiracy mission and seeks to portray its experience to a Chinese audience.

In the first episode’s action-packed beginning, PLAN Vessel 168 deploys special forces by helicopter to repel Somali pirates boarding the crippled China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company vessel *Zhanshan*. Meanwhile, Electro-Mechanical Branch squad leader Sun Weimin helps fix the ship’s stalled engine, enabling it to rejoin the escort formation.² Political commissar Xiao Weiguo subsequently grants Sun a twenty-minute phone call home—twice his previous allocation. Later episodes intersperse the glories of Gulf of Aden operations with the privations of being away from

families, who are separated from service members by thousands of miles and by limitations in information transmission.³ Gripping scenes portray PLAN personnel constantly checking food quality, averting phytosanitary disaster by switching in-port suppliers, refueling under way, weathering storms, exercising with foreign navies and receiving their officers aboard, adjusting plans rapidly to handle unexpected challenges, using special weapons and techniques to dispel pirates nonlethally, saving wounded merchant seamen with emergency medical treatment, and receiving gratitude from domestic and foreign ships they protect.

While some aspects of helicopter operations, weapons firing, and special forces engagement with pirates appear embellished for cinematic effect, the series uses real PLAN personnel and PLAN and civilian ships.⁴ Many details match realistic documentation in China's state and military media. Human experiences are personified uniquely—as when a PLAN marine, Fang Xiaoba, pays respects at the grave of his father, who died rendering medical assistance in Tanzania—but collectively represent actual struggles and triumphs of sailors and families. A few scenarios exceed actual events to date. Most prominently, on a small forested island off Somalia, Team Leader Mao Dahua leads his special forces in a sixteen-hour battle replete with exchanges of fire to evacuate thirteen Taiwanese fishermen cornered by pirates.⁵ Yet such heroics are not utterly fanciful and might well foreshadow future PLAN operations.

Beyond simply serving as a blockbuster image engaging domestic dreams of a strong military, however, since 2008 China's antipiracy escorts have provided important soft-power benefits for Beijing on a truly international stage. For the first time in its modern history China has deployed naval forces operationally beyond its immediate maritime periphery for extended durations, to protect merchant vessels from pirates in the Gulf of Aden. Over a six-year span beginning in December 2008, China has contributed over ten thousand navy personnel in nearly twenty task forces. In nearly eight hundred groups, these forces have escorted over six thousand Chinese and foreign commercial vessels and have “protected and helped over 60” of them.⁶ As the PLAN's commander, Admiral Wu Shengli, informed one of the authors, the mission has achieved “two ‘100 percents’ [两个百分之百]: providing 100 percent security to all ships under escort, while ensuring PLAN forces' own security 100 percent.”⁷

Although it is uncertain how many task forces will be deployed and for how long, China's presence in the Gulf of Aden has extended through 2014, and the PLAN appears almost certain to continue efforts through 2015;⁸ it will likely persist for still longer if the United Nations further extends its mandate for navies to fight piracy off Somalia.⁹ The probability of this is arguably even higher following the announcement in late 2014 that East Asian rival Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force will soon take command of a major international antipiracy

coalition. While Admiral Wu acknowledges that new piracy challenges have emerged in the Gulf of Guinea, “a concerning trend for all world navies,” he nevertheless maintains, “As long as Gulf of Aden pirate activities continue, so too will the escort missions of international navies.” Six years ago, under United Nations authorization, China began to dispatch antipiracy task forces to the Gulf of Aden. At the beginning, China planned for only one year of antipiracy operations. This period was then extended for another year, and another, and so on. “So far,” Wu declared, “there is no end in sight for the mission.”¹⁰

China’s naval antipiracy mission represents an unprecedented instance of conduct by the PLAN of sustained long-distance operations. It provides a rare window through which outside observers can see how the naval component of China’s “going out” strategy transects economic, political, and strategic dimensions. While many of China’s other maritime activities damage its international image, antipiracy operations in the far seas project soft power and a constructive image. Likely in part because of this positive publicity potential, Beijing has distributed copious details on its antipiracy operations via official media, including in English.¹¹

The Chinese navy’s antipiracy missions provide much-needed support for Chinese overseas interests. But the PLAN has also crafted its antipiracy missions to portray blue-water operations positively abroad. Increasingly, the PLAN’s antipiracy mandate is oriented toward broader international security objectives. Commercial escort statistics exemplify this trend: initially China’s navy was only allowed to escort Chinese-flagged ships through the Gulf of Aden, but now in some cases over 70 percent of ships in given Chinese escort flotillas have been foreign flagged. Similarly, to secure the maritime commons Chinese commanding officers and sailors serving off Somalia have worked increasingly in the framework of bilateral exchanges with other navies as well as in multistakeholder settings.

This article explores the soft-power dimension of China’s far-seas antipiracy operations. It addresses the extent to which Gulf of Aden deployments might increase the PLAN’s prospects for cooperation with other navies and also the impact of these missions on the role the navy plays within China’s larger diplomacy. Finally, it assesses how these deployments might shape future Chinese naval development.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A sharp increase in piracy attacks off Somalia threatened to interfere with China’s foreign trade. Several well-publicized pirate attacks prior to the PLAN’s antipiracy deployment in 2008 demonstrated Chinese vulnerability. *Tianyu 8*, a fishing boat with twenty-four crewmen; the Chinese tanker *Zhenhua 4*; and the

Sinotrans-owned cargo ship *Dajian*—as well as two Hong Kong–registered ships, *Stolt Valor* and *Delight*—were all pirated prior to the PLAN’s deployment.¹² Over 1,200 Chinese merchant vessels transited the Gulf of Aden during the first eleven months of 2008, and of this number eighty-three were attacked by pirate groups. Direct threats to China’s economic interests and citizens abroad were thus important drivers of the PLAN’s first antipiracy deployment.

As the PLAN’s initial deployment prepared to set sail in December 2008, Senior Colonel Huang Xueping, Ministry of National Defense secondary spokesman and deputy director of the ministry’s Information Office, convened a news conference in which he clarified the points that, first, the mission’s primary objective was to protect Chinese shipping interests, and that, second, it did not represent a change in Chinese foreign policy or a desire to project greater blue-water naval capabilities.¹³ Idealistic and realistic interpretations of China’s antipiracy operations differ greatly. The former focuses on China’s desire to contribute meaningfully to regional and international security, while the latter includes a “desire to protect Chinese shipping, expand China’s influence, and to provide opportunities for realistic training that will enhance the PLAN’s capabilities in military operations other than war.”¹⁴

In line with the realists, economic interests in the Gulf of Aden had perhaps the greatest impact on pragmatic Chinese policy makers. As Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao explains, “Piracy has become a serious threat to shipping, trade and safety on the seas. . . . That’s why we decided to send naval ships to crack down.”¹⁵ China’s overseas maritime trade is highly dependent on vulnerable sea lines of communication (SLOCs), such as the Bab el Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Indian Ocean, Strait of Malacca, Strait of Singapore, and South China Sea. China currently relies on just five SLOCs for roughly 90 percent of its overseas trade. In particular, approximately 60 percent of all commercial vessels that transit through the Strait of Malacca are Chinese flagged.¹⁶

For China, therefore, the economic benefits of protecting its international trade are abundantly clear. China’s leadership continues to emphasize the PLAN’s imperative to secure Chinese overseas maritime interests. Specifically, energy supplies transported via international SLOCs will constitute a larger percentage of China’s aggregate energy consumption. Having become a net oil importer in 1993, for example, China now relies on seaborne oil imports for over 40 percent of its oil consumption.¹⁷ China’s oil import dependence will rise substantially between now and 2030, by some estimates to as high as 80 percent.¹⁸

Oil and other energy imports constitute just one of many sectors in China that face growing dependence on the sea. *China Daily* reported that as early as 2006, maritime industries accounted for \$270 billion in economic output, nearly 10 percent of China’s gross domestic product.¹⁹ In 2009, over 260 companies, across

various industries, reportedly engaged in international maritime shipping.²⁰ In 2010 it was reported that each year over two thousand Chinese commercial vessels were transiting the Gulf of Aden.²¹ In 2011, more than two years after the PLAN's first antipiracy deployment, a professor at China's National Defense University observed, "From the current situation, ocean lifelines have already become a soft rib in China's strategic security."²²

China's growth as a sea power has been rapid. It currently has more seafarers, deep-sea fleets, and ocean fishing vessels than any other nation. It has become, in the words of Ju Chengzhi, of the Ministry of Transport, a "great maritime shipping power" (海运大国). In 2009 China's merchant maritime fleet reportedly consisted of over 3,300 vessels and forty thousand crewmen.²³ *People's Daily* reported in 2011 that China surpassed South Korea as the world's largest ship-builder in terms of capacity and new orders.²⁴ China's maritime responsibilities are huge, since it has thirty-two thousand kilometers of coastline and claims over three million square kilometers of offshore waters.²⁵

Public awareness of the importance of maritime issues is increasing. In 2008, two Chinese media outlets reported separate public surveys in which 86 percent and 91 percent of Chinese citizens polled supported the PLAN's antipiracy deployment.²⁶ Simultaneously, many Chinese "netizens" (frequent Internet users) criticized their government for its inability to ensure Chinese sailors' safety.²⁷ Domestically, in the period before deployments began Beijing thus faced strong political incentives to intervene decisively to protect its shipping.

These political concerns at home paralleled international expectations. Such deployments, it was predicted, would enhance China's image as a "responsible stakeholder" in international society, particularly in the domain of maritime security.²⁸ In the years since, China's antipiracy operations have already aided the PLAN substantially in developing its blue-water capacity.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENT AND BLUE-WATER ASPIRATIONS

Beijing's deployment of PLAN antipiracy forces appears to be spurring on Chinese military development. As the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* puts it, over five years of deployments to the Gulf of Aden have transformed PLAN antipiracy forces from "maritime rookies to confident sea dogs."²⁹ Since China has not fought an actual war since its 1979 conflict with Vietnam, this experience of maintaining multiyear, distant deployments of warships is extremely valuable.³⁰ It has brought PLAN vessels into what previously were—for China—literally uncharted waters. China's Navy Press has had to perform "nautical chart support tasks" for the Gulf of Aden missions.³¹ In 2011, a PLAN senior captain effectively summarized the multidimensional benefits of distant sea antipiracy operations: "The experience definitely would be unprecedented not only for officers and sailors, but also for

the durability and function of the ships.”³² Some of the PLAN’s most advanced ships and personnel have gained valuable experience in the Gulf of Aden, and officers serving with distinction there have enjoyed subsequent promotions.³³

Furthermore, antipiracy operations have positioned the PLAN as China’s most active service. By proving its effectiveness against threats to Chinese overseas interests, the PLAN has ensured that it will continue to procure some of the military’s newest and best technology.³⁴ More broadly, the persistent threat of piracy in international waters has enabled China to expand its far-seas security operations under the umbrella of benign international cooperation.³⁵

Close analysis of PLAN antipiracy activities reveals four primary conduits for projecting soft power: the escort of commercial ships and other direct operational aspects of PLAN antipiracy missions; navy-to-navy meetings, combined training, and other exchanges and instances of cooperation with foreign navies; participation in multistakeholder dialogues on land and at sea related to international antipiracy operations; and, perhaps most significantly, a growing number of port visits conducted by PLAN warships for replenishment and diplomatic purposes before, during, and after service in the Gulf of Aden. Exploiting these channels has positioned the PLAN as an important and highly visible player in China’s comprehensive quest for international soft power.

Antipiracy services provided by the PLAN to commercial ships have primarily included area patrols, escorts, and on-ship protection.³⁶ Wang Yongxiang, deputy commander of the tenth escort task force, explains that specific tactics depend on multiple idiosyncratic factors: “the schedules of the merchant vessels to be escorted, their characteristics, and how well our warships have rested. We want to not only ensure the safety of our charges, but also improve the efficiency of escort protection.”³⁷ Area patrol—monitoring certain maritime zones in and around the Gulf of Aden—is the approach least employed by the PLAN. When China’s navy does engage in area patrols, it typically maintains two base points 550–600 nautical miles apart—for example, one a hundred nautical miles north of Yemen’s Socotra Island and the other seventy-five nautical miles southwest of Aden Harbor.³⁸ On a normal mission PLAN vessels travel between these points, typically taking two to three days to do so.³⁹

Of all the services provided by China’s antipiracy forces, the escort of civilian ships is the most common; it has become a daily practice for PLAN task forces in the Gulf of Aden. Task forces consist of two warships, usually a combination of destroyers and frigates. They are typically accompanied by either a replenishment or landing ship. However, since the first task force, two or more warships concurrently stationed in the Gulf of Aden have led separate flotillas of merchant ships, sometimes in opposite directions, through an area west of longitude fifty-seven east and south of latitude fifteen north.⁴⁰

PLAN escort efficiency has improved significantly since 2008. As a 2010 *Liberation Army Daily* article states, “From the first escort to the escort of the 1,000th ship the Chinese naval task force used over 300 days, from the 1,000th to the 2,000th ship used over 220 days, and from the 2,000th to the 3,000th ship only used over 180 days’ time.”⁴¹ As early as 2011, approximately 70 percent of ships escorted by China’s navy at any given time were foreign.⁴² In terms of aggregate escorts over the first four years, roughly 50 percent of PLAN-escorted commercial vessels were foreign flagged.⁴³ *People’s Navy* reported in mid-2011 that China had provided escort services to ships from over fifty foreign countries, and this figure has likely increased over the past three-plus years.⁴⁴ *People’s Daily* emphasizes that escort services are provided gratis for Chinese and foreign commercial ships.⁴⁵ That is, PLAN escort services are being provided as a complimentary public good to the international community.

Foreign civilian ships can apply online to join a PLAN escort convoy via the China Shipowners’ Association website. Zhai Dequan, deputy secretary-general of the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, has asserted, “China shoulders responsibility for foreign vessels based on growing national strength and a friendly policy”; many other states do not send escort forces, because of limited interest and the enormous costs. In Zhai’s opinion, “such international cooperation and exchanges also help the rest of the world to know more about China and accept it.”⁴⁶

Given the international context in which China’s antipiracy operations take place, the PLAN has taken steps to professionalize its services. For example, the use of the English language is important while conducting international operations; the twelfth task force had an on-duty translator on board the frigate *Yiyang* to liaise with foreign naval and merchant counterparts.⁴⁷ Each PLAN task-force member receives four “pocket books” covering the psychological aspects of deployment, security, international law, and the application of international law to military operations. Also, naval officers specializing in international law provide full-time legal support to officers and crews in meetings with ships of other nations.⁴⁸ These efforts have assisted China’s internavy exchanges.

INTERNAVY EXCHANGES AND DIALOGUES AT SEA

Chinese and international commentators greatly value the unprecedented exposure of PLAN vessels and crews to foreign navies.⁴⁹ Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt, USN (Ret.), articulates the historical significance of the PLAN’s deployments in this way: “In terms of international engagement, the first decade of the 21st century should be divided into a pre-anti-piracy operations period and a post-anti-piracy period, because once the PLAN began to conduct anti-piracy

operations, the entire nature of its approach to international naval engagement changed appreciably.”⁵⁰

The missions have had an undeniable impact on Chinese naval diplomacy; interaction with foreign navies that was novel in 2008 is now routine in the Gulf of Aden and adjacent waterways. In just a few of countless examples, in 2011 Han Xiaohu, commander of China’s eighth escort task force, visited in March the flagship, a frigate, of NATO’s Operation OPEN SHIELD; in May, hosted the Singapore navy’s Rear Admiral Harris Chan, then commander of U.S.-led Combined Task Force (CTF) 151, on a PLAN warship; and in June hosted the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) commander on board the frigate *Wenzhou*.⁵¹ The PLAN and Singapore navy conducted bilateral exchanges in September 2010 in the Gulf of Aden, sending personnel on board each other’s ships.⁵² A similar exchange occurred in those waters in June 2014.⁵³ China’s navy conducted additional exchanges with CTF-151 in July 2012 and with NATO in April and July 2012.⁵⁴ An article in *People’s Daily* stated in 2012 that Chinese naval escort task forces continue to inform the outside world about the “activities of suspicious ships through network mailbox and radio station every day and shared information resources with 50-odd warships of 20-plus countries and organizations.”⁵⁵ In July 2014, the PLAN’s seventeenth escort task force conducted the VENUS NO. 2 joint antipiracy exercise with EU Combined Task Force 465 in the western Gulf of Aden. The guided-missile destroyer *Changchun*, the comprehensive supply ship *Chaohu*, and a Z-9 shipborne helicopter participated in task-force maneuvering, maritime replenishment, flashing-light signaling, and main gun antiship firing drills.⁵⁶

China’s naval diplomacy in the region goes well beyond shipboard interactions with Western antipiracy forces. For example, PLAN task forces off the Horn of Africa have also been active in a variety of bilateral exchanges. The PLAN and the Russian navy executed joint antipiracy escorts for the first time in October 2009, during the PEACE BLUE SHIELD 2009 (平蓝盾—2009) exercise.⁵⁷ Similarly, China’s navy held extensive joint exercises with Russian navy BLUE SHIELD units in May 2011 and conducted similar antipiracy joint exercises in both 2012 and 2013.⁵⁸ Amid comprehensive Sino-Russian joint maritime exercises in 2012, Chinese and Russian naval forces performed extensive piracy-deterrence and rescue joint training off the coast of Qingdao.⁵⁹

The Chinese navy is not interacting only with large navies. During November 2009, PLAN military officials met with Dutch counterparts to perform on-ship inspections and exchanges, and during 2010 PLAN forces collaborated with South Korean naval units in antipiracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden.⁶⁰ In 2012, China and South Korea conducted joint antipiracy exercises in which helicopters of the two sides landed on each other’s warships for the first time.⁶¹ In April

2011, China's eighth escort task force sent *Wenzhou* and *Qiandaohu* to conduct joint antipiracy exercises with the Pakistani guided-missile destroyer *Khyber*.⁶² These combined drills followed the Pakistani-hosted PEACE 11 multinational maritime exercises, which included naval ships from, among other states, China, the United States, Britain, France, Japan, and Pakistan. China sent guided-missile frigates *Wenzhou* and *Ma'anshan*, two helicopters, and seventy special forces commandos.⁶³ More recently the PLAN conducted joint antipiracy training with the Ukrainian navy in the Gulf of Aden. All of these efforts support China's growing naval diplomacy.

CHINESE NAVAL DIPLOMACY

At-sea engagements with other navies are crucial for establishing a positive image of China's growing global maritime presence. These engagements are complemented by a growing focus by the PLAN on establishing effective relationships with littoral states in and adjacent to the Indian Ocean region. Indeed, since 2008 the nature and scope of Chinese naval visits have expanded continuously. Growing port calls bolster China's far-seas soft-power projection by facilitating interaction and dialogue between China and the many countries whose ports and geographic locations heighten the strategic value of these relationships.

The PLAN is increasing port visits (see the table) as its far-seas antipiracy presence matures. A small sample reveals the dynamism with which the PLAN is engaging the navies, governments, and citizens of littoral states in connection with its antipiracy missions. For example, during September 2012, *Yiyang* of the twelfth escort task force arrived in Karachi for a second cycle of rest and replenishment, during which it held seminars and other exchanges with Pakistani naval counterparts.⁶⁴ Later that year Rear Admiral Zhou Xuming and members from the twelfth escort task force met with Commodore Jonathan Mead, acting commander of the Australian Fleet, in Sydney on an official visit. The Australian chief of navy, Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, remarked, "I welcome the continued opportunity for our navies to share their experiences today as we exchange lessons learned in the conduct of counter-piracy operations."⁶⁵ More recently, in late 2013 the fifteenth escort task force, in addition to holding friendly exchanges with fleets from the EU, United States, and NATO, docked for friendly visits in Tanzania, Kenya, and Sri Lanka.⁶⁶ The sixteenth task force conducted antipiracy duties and dispatched the guided-missile frigate *Yancheng* to escort Syrian chemical weapons to their destruction;⁶⁷ it then "paid consecutive visits to eight African countries for the first time."⁶⁸ It conducted antipiracy exercises with the navies of several of those countries, including Cameroon, Namibia, and Nigeria.⁶⁹

Clearly, uninterrupted operations in the Gulf of Aden have helped to facilitate PLAN maritime engagement with other countries in the vicinity as well as those

strategically situated on the route from China to Somali waters. China has effectively increased the role of naval diplomacy as a component of its antipiracy deployments in a number of world regions. *People's Daily* reports that "since the 2nd Chinese naval escort task force, the Chinese navy has established a new mechanism of organizing escort warships to pay friendly visits to foreign countries, and the Chinese naval escort task forces have successfully paid friendly visits to more than 20 countries, such as India, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Singapore."⁷⁰

Whereas in all of 2009, PLAN task forces berthed in foreign ports in just five states, Chinese antipiracy flotillas have, among them, stopped in over ten countries every year since 2010. Moreover, the nature of port calls has evolved dramatically during the past six years. In 2009 and 2010 most Chinese port calls were conducted for replenishment, rest, and relaxation. But by 2012 Chinese antipiracy escort task forces had begun making several port calls for friendly visits (i.e., goodwill exchanges with diplomatic elements) before, during, and after their service in the Gulf of Aden. This trend has continued over the last two years and demonstrates a growing share of Chinese naval resources devoted to diplomacy. More importantly, it illustrates the efficiency with which the PLAN is deriving soft-power capital from its contributions to international maritime nontraditional security.

China has also bolstered international exchanges by hosting foreign navies at Chinese ports and cities. In mid-May 2011 China invited twenty representatives from eight African nations, including Algeria, Cameroon, and Gabon, to participate in a twenty-day maritime law enforcement program in Zhejiang Province.⁷¹ At the first International Symposium on Counter-Piracy and Escort Cooperation, in February 2012 at the PLAN Command College in Nanjing, Navy Military Studies Research Institute senior researcher Cai Weidong stated, "The Chinese navy hopes to build up a platform for international cooperation that will allow naval forces of different countries to familiarize themselves with each other. I hope the platform well serves our antipiracy goals."⁷²

As these examples illustrate, China has derived incrementally greater soft-power benefits from its antipiracy operations by boosting the number of both midmission port calls and goodwill visits en route home. Chinese scholar Wang Yizhou has called for a higher degree of "creative involvement," a foreign policy concept that identifies and adapts creative and flexible modes of foreign engagement on a case-by-case basis.⁷³ The PLAN seems to be applying Wang's concept in the far seas, perhaps most notably through its antipiracy operations, without changing their fundamental form. Adding more stops before and after antipiracy service in the Gulf of Aden has allowed the PLAN to accumulate larger soft-power gains. This practice reflects the PLAN's greatest lesson from far-seas antipiracy

SELECTED PORT VISITS BY PLAN ANTIPIRACY FORCES

<p>ALGERIA Algiers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2–5 April 2013, friendly visit <p>AUSTRALIA Sydney</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18–22 December 2012, friendly visit <p>BAHRAIN Manama</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9–13 December 2010, friendly visit <p>BULGARIA Varna</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6–10 August 2012, friendly visit <p>BURMA Rangoon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29 August–2 September 2010, friendly visit <p>DJIBOUTI Djibouti</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 January 2010, replenish/overhaul • 3 May 2010, replenish/overhaul • 13 September 2010, replenish/overhaul • 22 September 2010, replenish/overhaul • 24 December 2010, replenish/overhaul • 21 February 2011, replenish/overhaul • 5 October 2011, replenish/overhaul • 24–29 March 2012, replenish/overhaul • 14 May 2012, replenish/overhaul • 13–18 August 2012, replenish/overhaul • 1–6 December 2012, replenish/overhaul • 6–8 June 2013, replenish/overhaul • 28 July 2013, replenish/overhaul • 7–9 October 2013, replenish/overhaul • 22–26 February 2014, replenish/overhaul 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–5 April 2014, replenish/overhaul and friendly visit <p>EGYPT Alexandria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26–30 July 2010, friendly visit <p>FRANCE Toulon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23–27 April 2013, friendly visit <p>GREECE Crete</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 March 2011, replenish/overhaul <p>Piraeus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9–13 August 2013, friendly visit <p>INDIA Cochin</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 August 2009, friendly visit <p>ISRAEL Haifa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14–17 August 2012, friendly visit <p>ITALY Taranto</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2–7 August 2010, joint drills and friendly visit <p>KENYA Mombasa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2–5 January 2014, friendly visit <p>KUWAIT Shuwaikh</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27 November–1 December 2011, friendly visit <p>MALAYSIA Port Kelang</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 December 2009, friendly visit <p>MALTA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26–30 March 2013, friendly visit <p>MOROCCO Casablanca</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9–13 April 2013, friendly visit <p>MOZAMBIQUE Maputo</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29 March–2 April 2012, friendly visit <p>OMAN Masqat</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–8 December 2011, friendly visit <p>Salalah</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21 June–1 July 2009, replenish/overhaul 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 August 2009, replenish/overhaul • 2 January 2010, replenish/overhaul • 1 April 2010, replenish/overhaul • 8 June 2010, replenish/overhaul • 10 August 2010, replenish/overhaul • 8 January 2011, replenish/overhaul • 19 January 2011, replenish/overhaul • 10 April 2011, replenish/overhaul • 8–11 June 2011, replenish/overhaul • 23 June 2011, replenish/overhaul • 7–10 November 2011, replenish/overhaul • 21–24 February 2012, replenish/overhaul • 1–3 July 2012, replenish/overhaul • 9 July 2012, replenish/overhaul • 28–29 March 2013, replenish/overhaul <p>PAKISTAN Karachi</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–8 August 2009, joint drills and friendly visit • 7–13 March 2010, joint drills and friendly visit • 13 March 2011, joint drills • 8 September 2012, replenish/overhaul <p>PHILIPPINES Manila</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13–17 April 2010, friendly visit <p>PORTUGAL Lisbon</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15–19 April 2013, friendly visit <p>QATAR Doha</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2–7 August 2011, friendly visit <p>ROMANIA Constanța</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31 July–3 August 2012, friendly visit
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SELECTED PORT VISITS BY PLAN ANTIPIRACY FORCES CONTINUED

<p>SAUDI ARABIA Jidda</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27 November–1 December 2010, friendly visit • 3 September 2011, replenish/overhaul • 17 June 2012, replenish/overhaul • 1–6 January 2013, replenish/overhaul • 5–28 April 2013, replenish/overhaul • 14–18 September 2013, replenish/overhaul • 2–6 November 2013, replenish/overhaul <p>SEYCHELLES Port Victoria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 April 2011, friendly visit • 16–20 June 2013, friendly visit <p>SINGAPORE Changi</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–7 September 2010, replenish/overhaul and joint drills • 18–20 December 2011, replenish/overhaul and friendly visit • 5–10 September 2013, friendly visit 	<p>SOUTH AFRICA Durban</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4–8 April 2011, friendly visit <p>SRI LANKA Colombo</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–7 January 2010, friendly visit • 7–12 December 2010, friendly visit <p>Trincomalee</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13–15 January 2014, friendly visit <p>TANZANIA Dar es Salaam</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26–30 March 2011, joint drills and friendly visit • 29 December 2013–1 January 2014, friendly visit <p>THAILAND Sattahip</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16–21 August 2011, joint drills and friendly visit • 21–25 April 2012, friendly visit • 12–16 September 2013, friendly visit <p>TURKEY Istanbul</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–8 August 2012, friendly visit 	<p>UKRAINE Sevastopol</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 31 July–3 August 2012, friendly visit <p>UNITED ARAB EMIRATES Abu Dhabi</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24–28 March 2010, friendly visit <p>VIETNAM Ho Chi Minh City</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13 January 2013, friendly visit <p>YEMEN Aden</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21 February 2009, replenish/overhaul • 25 April 2009, replenish/overhaul • 23 July 2009, replenish/overhaul • 28 September 2009, replenish/overhaul • 5 February 2010, replenish/overhaul • 16 May 2010, replenish/overhaul • 26 July 2010, replenish/overhaul • 1 October 2010, replenish/overhaul
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missions: there is no substitute for experience, and six years of continuous operations have allowed China gradually to become more effective in securing its comprehensive interests through the deployment of antipiracy task forces.⁷⁴

Arguably even more than foreign port calls, other nontraditional maritime security operations facilitated by Beijing’s Gulf of Aden antipiracy presence contribute to China’s “blue soft power.” Escort of foreign vessels carrying Syrian chemical weapons through the Mediterranean and active participation in search and rescue operations during the frantic search for Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 in early 2014 are just two examples of how the PLAN has leveraged antipiracy resources to contribute to international security.⁷⁵

Some commentators are less sanguine about China’s attempts to expand its maritime relations; it is important to note that there are objections to the notion that China’s antipiracy missions are benign. In that view, self-interested economic and security calculations are arguably the largest drivers of the PLAN’s deployment of warships to the Gulf of Aden, and viewing port visits as diplomatic exchanges risks oversimplification, since many states may view them as

harbingers of creeping Chinese power projection.⁷⁶ For example, the tiny island-state Seychelles is one of several coastal and island African states in which China has actively sought to enhance its soft power.⁷⁷ China could be using antipiracy operations to support an expansive naval development policy, as well as to pursue a more active grand strategy that involves overseas access facilities and a long-term trend toward a greater overall global presence.

CHINESE NAVAL DEVELOPMENT

The PLAN is just one of several “independent” providers of antipiracy assets in the Gulf of Aden. While the majority of naval antipiracy forces fight pirates under the aegis of multilateral commands, several states—including China, India, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and Russia—have primarily operated on a unilateral basis rather than under the command of multinational antipiracy forces such as CTF-151, NATO’s Operation OPEN SHIELD, or EU NAVFOR. This posture suggests that China is trying to learn as much as it can from other navies without revealing much about its own operations, while also, clearly, maintaining ideological independence in foreign policy.

China’s preference to abstain from combined operations is driven by several factors. First, greater independence allows the PLAN to conduct its preferred method of antipiracy operations—relatively low-risk escort operations aimed at deterring, rather than actively searching for, pirates. It also offers China an individual identity as a provider of maritime public goods, rather than as just another state operating within Western-led security mechanisms. Moreover, if China joined the existing security structure, potential frictions might arise that would preclude meaningful integration, such as sensitivities related to information sharing and technology theft. Some Western defense experts have questioned the U.S. Navy’s invitation for the PLAN to participate in the historic 2014 RIMPAC exercises and other joint maritime cooperation activities for such reasons.⁷⁸

These concerns notwithstanding, China’s antipiracy operations over the past several years have made meaningful contributions to Gulf of Aden security. In addition, they have achieved unprecedented coordination between China and other antipiracy maritime forces in the region, such as those of the United States. While suspicions abound regarding China’s motives, antipiracy cooperation may contribute to more positive outside perceptions of China and its international status. China has been “ready to exchange information and cooperate with the warships of other countries in fighting Somalian pirates” since its inaugural deployment in 2008.⁷⁹ One PLAN antipiracy task force commander, Admiral Du Jingcheng, has recalled that he was eager to “facilitate exchanges of information with escort naval vessels from other countries.”⁸⁰

In the nearly six-year period beginning December 2008, the PLAN has coordinated information with over twenty nations, including the United States.⁸¹ Li Faxin, associate professor (and lieutenant commander) at the Naval Marine Corps College, states that PLAN antipiracy forces have established “high-trust partner relations” (高度信任的伙伴关系) with many nations operating in the Gulf of Aden.⁸²

Positive results have also been facilitated by Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE), a voluntary multistate antipiracy information-sharing mechanism. SHADE meetings occur quarterly in Bahrain and regularly host naval and industry leaders from various states. Willingness on the part of independent navies, China’s in particular, to synchronize their antipiracy operations with those of Western forces within the SHADE mechanism is a historic achievement for twenty-first-century maritime commons governance.

China was denied SHADE chairmanship in 2009 but, notwithstanding, coordinates its antipiracy escorts with those of other SHADE members. For example, China has participated in SHADE’s Convoy Coordination Working Group and coordinates its monthly escort schedules with other navies providing independent escorts. China, India, and Japan reportedly began coordinating their antipiracy operations as early as 2011.⁸³ They mutually arranged escort schedules twenty-nine times between January and March 2012, with China acting as the coordinator for ten escorts, India for ten, and Japan for nine.⁸⁴

For six years the PLAN’s antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden have symbolized China’s burgeoning out-of-area naval activity. They also showcase Beijing’s growing ability to achieve soft-power objectives while concurrently promoting its overseas interests and military development. Important components of these missions include escort of commercial ships, navy-to-navy meetings, participation in multistakeholder dialogues on antipiracy operations, and, most significantly, the growing number of port visits undertaken by PLAN warships. These position the PLAN as an important and highly visible player in China’s recent soft-power diplomacy.

China’s ongoing antipiracy operations in the far seas have generated many positive assessments. In contrast to the contentious near seas, where Beijing is consistently embroiled in sovereignty disputes that show no signs of abating, antipiracy missions represent the most significant positive component of China’s naval engagement to date, particularly with regard to the degree to which Chinese vessels and sailors are interacting with the outside world. This interaction not only enhances China’s maritime image in the eyes of its antipiracy partners but may help alleviate fears that China’s naval rise might one day threaten twenty-first-century maritime prosperity in regions beyond the near seas. The United

States and China reportedly planned over forty visits, exchanges, and other engagements for 2013, double the number in the previous year, and successfully carried out joint antipiracy exercises in 2012 and 2013.⁸⁵ In July–August 2014, China participated in RIMPAC for the first time, the U.S.-hosted forum that is currently the largest naval exercise in the world.⁸⁶ There, four PLAN vessels drilled with international counterparts off Hawaii, on such subjects as antipiracy.⁸⁷

China has received well-deserved credit for helping to reduce piracy dramatically in the Gulf of Aden. In 2007–2008, as Admiral Wu told one of the authors, the area suffered about a hundred pirate attacks annually, of which between fifty and sixty “hijackings” (piratings) were successful. In 2014, by contrast, there were only seventeen attacks through September, none successful. China’s contribution entailed “major costs in forces, human resources, and money.” Admiral Wu continued, “The U.S. Navy and other top-level U.S. leaders are very happy that this is continuing. They are satisfied that China expends significant resources to make a contribution,” thereby reducing the resource burden on the United States. “There are just some members of Congress who remain opposed to the missions.” Admiral Wu added that he wants to invite U.S. congressional representatives to PLAN ships in the Gulf of Aden.⁸⁸

The PLAN’s experience fighting piracy in distant seas is thus a benchmark that can be used by Beijing to cement its positive image in the international arena. Antipiracy operations prove that the PLAN can be a provider—not merely a consumer or, worse, a disrupter—of maritime commons security. International society largely perceives Chinese naval contributions to fighting piracy as positive developments, perceptions that stand in sharp contrast to China’s hard-power naval approaches in the East and South China Seas. Scholars constantly scrutinize the nature and perceived efficacy of China’s soft power.⁸⁹ While it is too early to speculate exactly how Beijing’s contributions to antipiracy today will bolster its future soft-power influence, the results should be at least moderately positive. More generally, the Gulf of Aden case suggests that China will continue to reap international political benefits commensurate with its contributions to international maritime security.

NOTES

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A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine, forthcoming from the Naval War College Press as Newport Paper 42.

1. “舰在亚丁湾今晚央八启航 钟雷演绎侠骨柔情” [“In the Gulf of Aden” Sets Sail from CCTV Tonight: Zhong Lei Plays Chivalrous Role], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 3

September 2014, news.xinhuanet.com/.

CCTV-8 is China's state television drama channel, whose involvement indicates that a mass audience is being targeted.

2. Each PLAN vessel is organized into a command staff, which consists of the commander, political officer, and executive officer, plus various operational and administrative "branches" (部门). Each branch has a chief (部门长), and each branch chief serves as a duty officer when the vessel is in port or as a watch officer when the vessel is at sea. In the U.S. Navy, "branches" are called "departments," each of which has subordinate divisions. (The authors thank Ken Allen for his invaluable inputs concerning this and the following point.) Sun's position as a noncommissioned officer (NCO) offers one of many realistic, instructive examples in the series. He is a badly needed technical specialist in a navy working hard to emulate international "gold standards" but still in transition. Sun is forced to spend an additional six months in the Gulf of Aden when his equivalent in the next task force's Vessel 570 suddenly falls ill. While failure to fly out a relief may be a useful plot device to allow Sun's exuberant wife, Yang Ling'er, to open a Hunanese restaurant and play a central role in the Yulin Naval Base community that represents the program's "home front," it also suggests the PLAN's reliance on a still-small pool of NCOs. Sun's position results from a process in which the PLA began turning over more than seventy junior-officer billets, including some on vessels, to NCOs in 2004. These "acting" (代理) NCOs are filling officer billets up to the company-leader-grade level (正连制), which should technically be assigned to officers. As the number of NCOs has increased, one vessel squadron (大队) pioneered creation of an "NCO leader" system (士官长制度). Each vessel holds a meeting of all personnel to select three third-grade NCOs as "NCO leaders" on the basis of their political qualities, management capabilities, and prestige within the crew. Once they are selected, the NCOs are required to meet as a group once a week individually with the commanding officer, executive officer, and each branch chief for training on basic vessel knowledge. The NCOs are then to use this information as a basis for speaking with the other enlisted crew members. If the NCOs discover problems, they are to solve them. This is precisely the spirit that Sun exemplifies. 人民海军 [People's Navy], 3 June 2003, p. 2.
3. The first episode is available at 《舰在亚丁湾》01, www.youtube.com/. The series may be viewed at 舰在亚丁湾 (完结), www.youtube.com/.
4. The series is filmed in and around the Chinese military ports of Zhanjiang and Sanya, as well as the civilian port of Qinzhou. Shooting near Qinzhou during typhoon season allowed for depiction of high winds and waves (sea states 6–7). Eighteen advanced container-ships, bulk carriers, and various foreign vessels of ten thousand tons and above were mobilized. These and countless other details are documented in the "舰在亚丁湾" entry at baike.baidu.com/.
5. A less dramatic but still challenging and unpredictable rescue likely inspired this episode. In July 2012, twenty-six Chinese and foreign crew members from the Taiwan fishing vessel *Shiuh-fu 1* were released after 571 days' captivity in Somalia. Retrieving hostages from shore in high winds and with the possibility of pirate attack necessitated innovative special forces planning and preparations so that a helicopter could approach the wave-lashed beach and ferry individuals in five batches back to frigate *Changzhou*. 王志秋 [Wang Zhiqiu] and 侯瑞 [Hou Rui], "索马里海域大接护--十二批护航编队常州舰接护'旭富一号'渔船船员纪实" [Big Escort Pickup in the Gulf of Aden: Real Account of the Twelfth Naval Escort Task Force Changzhou Warship's Pickup and Escort of "Shiuh-fu 1" Fishing Boat Crew Members], 综合新闻 [General News], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 25 July 2012, p. 3.
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7. Adm. Wu Shengli, discussion with author and small group of Harvard administrators, faculty, and students at Wadsworth House,

- Harvard University, 20 September 2014 [hereafter "Adm. Wu Shengli, discussion with author"].
8. Japan's unprecedented contribution, enabled by its historic reinterpretation of its constitution, will be more impressive to Western navies than China's well-established efforts in critical respects, given the JMSDF's willingness and ability to integrate directly with the other forces and (at least by sensitive Chinese standards) assume operational command over them. "Japan to Send SDF Officer to Take Command of Int'l Antipiracy Force," *Kyodo News International*, 18 July 2014, www.globalpost.com/.
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 10. Adm. Wu Shengli, discussion with author.
 11. Xinhua, *China Daily*, *Global Times*, and CCTV have been the primary providers of English-language information on PLAN antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. For a representative article, see Zhao Shengnan, "Navy Protects Ships from Pirates," *China Daily*, 29 December 2012, usa.chinadaily.com.cn/.
 12. "4艘香港货船申请解放军护航3艘被劫商船2艘已获释" [4 Hong Kong Cargo Ships Apply for People's Liberation Army Escorts, 3 Vessels Have Already Been Hijacked, 2 Vessels Have Already Been Released], 人民网--港澳频道 [People's Net: Hong Kong & Macau Channel], 1 January 2009, hm.people.com.cn/.
 13. China Ministry of National Defense News Conference, 23 December 2008, available at military.people.com.cn/ and www.gov.cn/.
 14. Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Dragon Boats: Assessing China's Anti-piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden," *Defense and Security Analysis* 26, no. 2 (2010), pp. 213–30.
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 17. China's dependence on imports as a proportion of total oil consumption had reportedly risen above 55 percent during 2011. See "Experts Warn of China's Rising Imported Oil Dependence," 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 14 August 2011, news.xinhuanet.com/.
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40. Sun Zifa, “Chinese Navy Escort Fleet to Adopt Three Modes of Action in Escort”; Fu Zhiwei, “China's Escort Fleet Will Set Up Seven Patrol Zones.”

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