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Combatting Piracy – China’s Contribution

by Dr. Peter Roell

Difficult Decisions

The decision to deploy three ships, the DDG-171 Haikou and the DDG-169 Wuhan – two guided missile destroyers – and a supply ship, the Weishanhu, to the Somali coast and the Gulf of Aden, was not an easy one.

In the first instance Beijing sounded out possible reactions of the international community and announced at the United Nations that one was considering a deployment. China then started a media campaign in order to demonstrate that the deployment was in accordance with international law.

Prior to this the Liberation Army Daily published an article which explained that China’s international interest ranged far beyond the defence of the Chinese coastline and territorial waters¹.

It was China’s intent to demonstrate that it was a reliable partner in the maintenance of international shipping routes and was capable of protecting Chinese merchant ships.

¹ See Prof. Christoffersen, Gaye: China and Maritime Cooperation: Piracy in the Gulf of Aden, in: International Relations and Security Network (ISN), Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, 8 January 2010, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail?id=111041>

Problems

A number of problems became apparent during the first deployment of Chinese naval units in the Gulf of Aden on 6 January 2009:

- It was not possible to enter ports in the region resulting in ships being at sea for four months and suffering from lack of adequate stores such as food and fresh water;
- No secure communications to US and NATO units (VHF radio and open E-Mails);
- No exchange of intelligence;
- Inadequate coordination with other naval units.

Progress

The second and third deployment of Chinese naval units showed some improvement:

- Re-supply of Chinese naval ships is now possible in Djibouti, Oman and Yemen.
- China sits-in on the *Shared Awareness and Confliction Meetings* on a regular basis.
- Chinese naval units take part in joint exercises with Western naval units and exchange officers.
- China is learning from the experience of other navies in the fight against piracy.
- Establishment of intelligence exchange between the Chinese and Singapore Navies.

In July 2010 the Chinese navy deployed its largest vessel, the Kunlun Shan, a 17,000-tonne Type 071 Yuzhao class Landing Platform Dock (LPD) ship. On board, the Kunlun Shan carried a platoon of Chinese marines, the elite of the Chinese navy. The ship carried Z-8 helicopters, a new landing craft and two speedboats and was able to test the navy's expeditionary capabilities. In August 2010 helicopters and marines of the Kunlun Shan repelled three groups of pirates².

The Chinese Navy, however, could not prevent an attack on the Chinese freighter Yuan Xiang with 29 Chinese sailors on board in the night of 12 November 2010. Only two weeks prior 19 Chinese sailors returned to China following a four months imprisonment by pirates³.

² See China's Three Point Naval Strategy, in: IISS Strategic Comments, Vol. 16, comment 37, London, October 2010

³ Associated Press, 12 November 2010

Conclusion

The deployment of Chinese naval units to the Gulf of Aden opens up the possibility to work together with other partners to improve security in the region. NATO, the United States and the EU support this effort.

The deployment also shows China's increasing interest in international cooperation to improve maritime security. The protection of trade routes and flows of raw materials are a part of the core interests of Chinese foreign and security policy. The growth of the Chinese Navy together with the opening of new naval bases in the Pacific region will have a high level of priority. It has to be said, however, that China is still a long way away from having a true "Blue Water Navy".

For political analysts, private and state think tanks and governments will have to analyse and follow China's potential very closely and pass on any relevant recommendations to decision makers in Politics and in the Military.



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