

China's Military Deployments in the Gulf of Aden: Anti-Piracy and Beyond



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Executive summary

The reason for the deployment of a People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) "anti-piracy task force" in the Gulf of Aden (GoA), a key area for the Chinese economy, was obvious in 2008. However, as the pirate activity has faded away since 2012, the objectives of the PLAN in GoA became unclear. This article seeks to understand those objectives and how the anti-piracy missions have evolved from protecting Chinese shipping interests in GoA to a strategic forward deployment, contributing to the rise of Chinese sea-power in the Indian Ocean.

With the development of its economy, China has shown growing interest in the sea for both political and economic reasons. In that context, its navy should play a key role, which explains the Chinese government efforts to modernize its fleet, seeking to turn its historical coastal navy into a blue-water navy with global ambitions. The purpose of the modernization of the PLAN into a blue-water navy is, first, to develop a military tool that can contribute to the reunification with Taiwan, impose the Chinese view on contested territories in the China Sea, and counterbalance US Navy superiority in this part of the world. Second, the role of the Chinese navy is to secure national economic interests in the world, and especially the sea lines of communication (SLoC) vital for the export market and for energy supply. For that reason, the development of a power projection capability became a priority for the PLAN. In the light of PLAN modernization, the GoA deployment seems in line with China's intention to extend the reach of its navy and to develop power projection capability. In that context, Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy to secure Chinese economic interests abroad and especially his Maritime Silk Road initiative was a strong accelerator in the evolution of the PLAN objectives in GoA.

After six years of deployment in GoA, the PLAN has shown that anti-piracy was not its main objective. PLAN modernization has allowed China to start building up a blue-water navy designed to project power in the Far Seas. If the development of such a capability is mainly designed to face contingencies in the China Sea, among which Taiwan remains the priority, expanding PLAN's reach toward the Indian Ocean has also grown in importance under Hu's and Xi's mandates. Thus, China's escort task force (ETF) deployment in GoA contributed to fulfill different objectives related to this context. It aimed first at protecting Chinese shipping interests against piracy. However, it also contributed to the development of a

Chinese blue navy, enhancing power projection capability and acquiring Far Seas experience. Furthermore, improving China's image was part of the objectives pursued by the PLAN in GoA with the protection of Chinese vital interests in the Middle East, North Africa, and East Africa. The growing political willingness to increase China's influence, embodied by the Maritime Silk Road, suggests a progressive increase of the PLAN's presence in the region. The start of construction of a Chinese base in Djibouti recently appears to confirm this assumption. The current building-up of an indigenous carrier strike group would be the next step in the power-projection capacity-building.

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Introduction

Six hundred years after Zheng He, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is back in the Indian Ocean, conducting counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (GoA) and off the Horn of Africa (HoA). Deployed since December 2008 among ships from several other nations, the PLAN "anti-piracy task force" has been patrolling the Indian Ocean without any interruption or indication of an imminent end to the mission.¹ But while the piracy threat seems to have faded since 2012, and despite the difficulties encountered in operating far from home, China has not reduced its involvement in the region.² During the last six years, 20 escort task forces (ETFs), each composed of two combat ships supported by an oiler, have been patrolling the GoA and beyond. More than 15,000 sailors have spent between 120 and 220 days far from home. Since February 2016, rather than slowing down its activity in HoA, China has started to build a naval base in Djibouti.³ Considering the importance of GoA for maritime economy and especially its energy, sea lines of communication (SLoCs) have made some scholars assert that the counter-piracy operations might be a pretext used by great powers to control those vital SLoCs.⁴ In such a context, it seems relevant to question the possible objective for the deployment of the PLAN in GoA since 2008.

Evidence seems to show the objectives of the anti-piracy missions have evolved from protecting Chinese shipping interests in GoA to a strategic forward deployment, contributing to the rise of Chinese sea-power in the Indian Ocean.

To demonstrate this assertion, we examine first the context of the deployment, focusing on the modernization of the PLAN; the evolution of the political context since 2008; the evolution of piracy off HoA, and the growing importance of the sea in the Chinese economy. The second section

1. L. Willett, "Strategic Crossroads: Maritime Security and the Indian Ocean", *IHS Jane's Navy International* 118, No. 8, October 2013, p. 27; A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, "China's Blue Soft Power: Antipiracy, Engagement, and Image Enhancement", *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, December 2015, p. 72.

2. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, "No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden", *China Maritime Study*, No. 10, Newport, China Maritime Studies Institute/U.S Naval War College, 2013, p. 9, available on: www.usnwc.edu.

3. B. Edmund, "China to Start Work Soon on Naval Base in Djibouti – Guelleh", February 2, 2016 (accessed October 7, 2016 on: <http://uk.reuters.com>).

4. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

studies the PLAN anti-piracy deployments, focusing on three periods (the beginning, three years later, and currently) to measure the evolution of the nature of the missions. Finally, the third section analyses the possible objectives of the anti-piracy deployment based on the elements studied in the previous sections.

This paper is based on English-language sources only. It uses official US sources and some official Chinese sources, academic publications, and a few news articles about recent relevant events. The difficulties encountered in accessing Chinese sources (other than the official ones written in English) and the secrecy cultivated by the Chinese government limit understanding of China's real strategy. Thus we acknowledge that assumptions here may be subject to bias, due to the majority of sources being American.

Deployment of the anti-piracy task force – the context

The crucial role played by the sea in its economy convinced China to turn seaward

Developing its national economy is the first reason for China to focus its attention on the sea. The difficulties faced by the communist ideology in China have constrained the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to base “its legitimacy on the twin pillars of economic performance and nationalism”.⁵ For that reason, Chinese leaders have made economic development a matter of regime survival.⁶ Therefore, maritime commerce, which counts for 90% of its imports and exports and ensures economic development, has become a priority.⁷ In addition to maritime commerce, Chinese economic growth heavily relies on imported natural resources, especially oil: “China relies on seaborne oil imports for over 40 percent of its oil consumption”, and this dependence is likely to keep rising.⁸ The security of the SLoCs, providing access to Europe and to the Middle East (ME), has thus become crucial in ensuring China’s development.⁹ The number of choke points along those SLoCs made Beijing very concerned about the security of its “uninterrupted flow of energy, ore and food”.¹⁰ Moreover, the growing number of Chinese investments and the associated population of “overseas Chinese”, estimated at more than 100 million in 2014, have increased

5. C. Bartholomew *et al.*, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, Washington D. C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007, p. 6, available on: <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/>.

6. T. Yoshihara and J. R. Holmes, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan*, United Kingdom, Routledge, 2007, p. 3.

7. A. S. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action: The Counter Piracy Mission in the Gulf of Aden and Beyond,” in R. Kamphausen, A. Scobell and D. Lai (ed.), *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military*, Strategic Studies Institute, 2010, p. 296.

8. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, “China’s Blue Soft Power: Antipiracy, Engagement, and Image Enhancement”, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

9. S. Kamerling and F.-P. van der Putten, “An Overseas Naval Presence Without Overseas Bases: China’s Counter-Piracy Operation in the Gulf of Aden,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40, No. 4, February 6, 2012, accessed on April 24, 2016, <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de>, p. 121.

10. M. Vego, “China’s Naval Challenge,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 137, No. 4, April 2011, p. 39.

China's vulnerability.¹¹ The need to secure Chinese interests and nationals has increased proportionally.¹² In this context, the PLAN has positioned itself as the "protector of China's economy".¹³

The second reason for China to turn seaward is political. As a growing power, China sees its navy as an instrument of statecraft. Through port visits and deployments, Beijing is using the PLAN as a tool to improve its "great power" image and enhance its comprehensive national power.¹⁴ Another political driver for Beijing is the protection of its extensive coastlines (32,000km), where its main industrial cities and harbors are situated, Chinese officials bear in mind that the "century of humiliation" was made possible by China's inability to protect its shores.¹⁵ However, the main political concern of Beijing that justifies growing interest in the sea is the resolution of its territorial disputes: first of all, restoring its territorial integrity through reunification with Taiwan, and, second, the numerous ongoing disputes in the China Sea.

Thus China has shown growing interest in the sea for both political and economic reasons. In that context, its navy should play a key role. The study of its modernization will help us to understand this role and eventually assess the objective of the ETF deployment.

Continual extension of the PLAN missions

The lack of transparency of the PLAN makes it difficult to analyze the objectives of the modernization that has underpinned an increase in its budget for 22 consecutive years.¹⁶ However, the first objective officially approved is defending the homeland against a maritime assault. The second is to restore territorial integrity; in other words, being able to conquer Taiwan. The third objective identified is the reduction of US superiority. By improving its technology, the PLAN expects to reduce the gap with the US Navy, challenge it in the China Sea and the western Pacific,

11. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence*, Washington D.C., The Jamestown Foundation, 2015, p. 18.

12. L. Jakobson and R. Medcalf, *The Perception Gap: Reading China's Maritime Strategic Objectives in Indo-Pacific Asia*, Sydney, Lowy Institute, 2015, www.lowyinstitute.org, p. 18.

13. C. D. Yung and P. C. Saunders (eds), "Introduction," in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, Washington D. C., National Defense University, 2011.

14. E. A. McVadon, "The PLA Navy as an Instrument of Statecraft," in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

15. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, "China's Blue Soft Power", *op. cit.*, p. 75.

16. I. E. Rinehart, *The Chinese Military: Overview and Issues for Congress*, Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service, 2016, www.fas.org, p. 10.

and encourage its withdrawal.¹⁷ The fourth objective consists of asserting China's regional power.¹⁸ To achieve these goals, the PLAN has to extend its range and its capacity to operate along the SLoCs.

In this context, the “New Historic Missions” articulated by Hu Jintao in 2004 changed deeply the defensive, inward-looking orientation of the PLAN. Those missions refer to a speech given by Hu in December 2004 reassessing the strategic guidelines and giving new tasks to the People's Liberation Army (PLA): consolidating the ruling status of the Communist Party, ensuring China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, supporting China's expanding national interest, and helping to maintain world peace. Hu changed the orientation of the modernization toward Far Seas defense and a contribution to world stability.¹⁹ The creation of the New Historic Missions demonstrates an increasing political will to employ the PLAN in distant regions to secure Chinese interests.²⁰ However, the objective of expanding the PLAN offensive capability is moderated by the introduction, by Hu, of the “Military Operations Other Than War” (MOOTW) such as peacekeeping, anti-piracy, disaster relief, medical support, and counter-terrorism missions. Those missions serve the Chinese narrative of “responsible stakeholder” and thus become a “tool of statecraft”.²¹

This shift from Near Seas to Far Seas missions is an evolution of the modernization of the PLAN that is essential for understanding the objectives of the deployment of the ETF in GoA. Since the beginning of the modernization in the late 1980s, the PLAN evolved from a coastal force to a high-seas force capable of projecting power throughout Asia Pacific and beyond. The PLAN's strategy evolved from active defense inside the first island-chain, then expanded gradually its area of operation under Hu Jintao's mandate to reach the second island-chain, and is now enhancing “blue-water capabilities” to carry out international operations, and secure national interests abroad.²²

17. “White Paper: China's Military Strategy”, People's Republic of China. The State Council Information Office, Beijing, May 2015, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn>.

18. R. O'Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress”, Washington D. C., Congressional Research Service, 2016, p. 7-8, www.fas.org.

19. C. H. Sharman, “China Moves Out: Stepping Stones toward a New Maritime Strategy”, *China Strategic Perspectives*, No.9, Washington, D. C., National Defense University Press, 2015, p. 3, www.dtic.mil.

20. E. Lin-Greenberg, “Dragon Boats: Assessing China's Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 26, No. 2, June 2010, p. 213.

21. R. Kamphausen and T. Tanner, “Introduction,” in R. Kamphausen, D. Lai, and T. Tanner (eds), *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2015, p. 3.

22. C. H. Sharman, “China Moves Out”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

In 2010, Erikson suggested that the best indicator of Chinese intentions in building up a blue-water navy would be the acquisition of overseas bases, which would change its international image in relation to “non-interference”.²³ In 2012, Horta was arguing that China was “trying to establish a naval base abroad.”²⁴ Finally, the first Chinese overseas base is now at an advanced stage of construction.²⁵ This shows that China has decided to stretch the rule of “non-interference” in favor of the development of its sea-power.

In the light of the PLAN modernization, the GoA deployment seems in line with Chinese intentions to extend the reach of their navy and to develop their power-projection capability. This deployment is an important “test case” for the New Historic Missions and Far Seas operations.²⁶ If the modernization has improved the PLAN capability to sustain operations far from home, this operation is the first of its kind in addressing the complexity of a Far Sea deployment.²⁷

Xi Jinping's policy

The policy of the new Chinese leader, with its focus on interests abroad and the importance given to the Indian Ocean, is key to understanding the reasons for the enduring Chinese deployment against piracy. Xi has accelerated the modernization of the PLAN since his arrival in November 2012, urging the PLA to “sharpen its combat readiness to fight and win the next war”.²⁸ In this reform of the PLA, the PLAN is playing a major role. Indeed, the 2012 Chinese defense white paper “decisively elevates the maritime domain in China's strategic thinking” as Beijing considers that the most likely scenario of conflict will occur at sea.²⁹ Compared to the previous papers, the 2015 white paper shifted from a focus on “offshore water defense” to “open seas protection”, confirming a new turn in the PLAN's modernization toward a blue-water navy and power projection.³⁰

23. A. S. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action”, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

24. L. Horta, “China Turns to the Sea: Changes in the People's Liberation Army Navy Doctrine and Force Structure,” *Comparative Strategy* 31, No. 5, November 2012, p. 397 (doi:10.1080/01495933.2012.711117).

25. “Territorial Disputes,” *Military & Defense*, May 7, 2016, accessed on October 7, 2016, <http://asiamaritime.net>.

26. A. S. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op.cit.* pp. 5, 24.

27. F. K. Chang, “China's Naval Rise and the South China Sea: An Operational Assessment,” *Orbis* 56, No. 1, January 2012, p. 26 (doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2011.10.002).

28. Y. Ji, *China's Military Transformation*, Hoboken (NJ), Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, p. 1.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

Since 2012, Xi has achieved “a higher degree of control over foreign policy than his predecessors and is pursuing a more active role for China in regional and international affairs”.³¹ According to You Ji, Xi is convinced that “passivity in dealing with external challenges would not guarantee a continued ‘opportunity period’”; thus he has proceeded to implement a “strategic adjustment” of China’s foreign policy in response to the US “pivot to Asia”.³² However, Xi’s assertiveness in the China Sea contrasts with his foreign policy in the rest of the world, where the objectives seem to be a combination of demonstrating the role of China as a responsible stakeholder and the need to protect its interests abroad.

Xi’s main concern is the preservation of the conditions necessary to continue Chinese economic development, and those conditions depend on access to the Indian Ocean.³³ Thus, Xi has taken a strategic initiative called “Belt and Road”, defining China’s interest in accessing Europe “through a northern land passing Central Asia and to Africa through a southern maritime route connecting the ME”. The maritime part of this strategy is referred to as the “Maritime Silk Road” (MSR).³⁴ The MSR represents China’s most vital SLoCs, while the active efforts to develop strategic and economic relationships along the MSR provide China with an opportunity to break US encirclement created by the “pivot to Asia”, according to Beijing.³⁵ Xi’s initiative, embodying his focus on “peripheral diplomacy”, has set an enlarged scope for the PLAN into the Indo-Pacific region.³⁶

Thus, the mission of the PLAN in GoA cannot be isolated from Xi’s foreign policy and especially from the MSR initiative. Before studying the case of the PLAN anti-piracy deployment, it is necessary to look at the context of the anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa.

Anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa

Exploiting the lack of stable government in Somalia, piracy started to develop off Somali shores in the first decade of the century, rising to such a level that the UN Security Council adopted a resolution in June 2008 (UNSCR 1816) condemning piracy in HoA. This resolution was followed by UNSCR 1838, 1846, 1851, requesting nations to fight piracy in the high seas

31. D. C. Shea *et al.*, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, Washington D.C., US Government Printing Office, 2012, p. 266, <http://origin.www.uscc.gov>.

32. Y. Ji, *China’s Military Transformation*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

33. M. Clemens, “The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA”, Arlington, Virginia, CNA Conference Facility, July 28-29 2015, p. 3, www.cna.org.

34. Y. Ji, *China’s Military Transformation*, p. 137. See annex 3.

35. M. Clemens, “The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA”, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

36. Y. Ji, *China’s Military Transformation*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

off Somalia, with permission to act against piracy camps in Somalia. Following the UNSCR, the European Union responded with Operation Atalanta in December 2008, and NATO with Ocean Shield, while US-led coalition the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) deployed Task Force 151 (TF151) in January 2009.³⁷ In addition to those three coalitions, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia and India participated independently. According to the statistics of Atalanta, piracy was almost completely eradicated by 2012: while 176 attacks were recorded in 2011, there were only 35 in 2012 and none in 2015.³⁸ Hence, the success of the anti-piracy operations addressed the question of the “post-Aden era of China’s Far Seas deployment”.³⁹

China started to participate in operations against piracy in December 2008, after more than “a fifth of the 1,265 Chinese-owned, -cargoes, or -crewed ships transiting Somali waters in 2008 faced piracy, and seven were attacked”.⁴⁰ The PLAN deployed an ETF unilaterally to escort ships in GoA. In spite of improved cooperation with the other task forces, the ETF never participated in any coalition. An explanation of this reluctance was the desire to be able to alter operations without needing to refer to the other members of the coalition.⁴¹ Another argument is that China wanted to avoid exposing its capabilities to an “uncomfortable degree”.⁴² However, the PLAN’s increasing participation in the coordination entity in GoA called Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) and improved cooperation with the other navies demonstrated the Chinese wish to be seen as a responsible stakeholder vis-à-vis piracy.⁴³ Since the first escort mission in January 2009, the PLAN has never stopped sending ETFs to GoA, reaching its 20th deployment in July 2015. However, the configuration, the duration, the tasks accomplished, and the areas covered by the ETFs changed radically between 2009 and 2015.

37. “CTF 151: Counter-Piracy,” Combined Maritime Forces, September 17, 2010, accessed May 6, 2016, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com> ; “Countering Piracy Off the Coast of Somalia,” 2016, accessed May 6, 2016, <http://eunavfor.eu>.

38. *Ibid.*

39. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 152.

40. S. A. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action”, *op. cit.* p. 298.

41. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

43. B. Barton, “The EU’s Engagement of China in the Indian Ocean,” *The RUSI Journal* 158, No. 6, December 2013, p. 68-69 (doi:10.1080/03071847.2013.869725).

The evolution of China's ETF missions over six years

This chapter studies the evolution of China's ETF deployment, with a focus on the first mission serving as a reference; the missions in 2012 when the piracy started to decline, and finally the current missions.

The first ETF deployment, learning the constraints of Far Seas missions

The first ETF started on 26th December 2008 and ended on 28th April 2009, except for the supply ship which remained deployed for the next ETF.⁴⁴ The duration of the mission was 124 days, with no port visit, which is significant compared to the NATO standard (the other Western anti-piracy units pull in to port every 15 days). The ETF escorted 41 groups comprising 212 ships.⁴⁵ The task force performed only escorts of Chinese vessels; it did not participate in any other kind of operation and did not cooperate with the other navies present in GoA.

This mission was the first operational deployment of the PLAN outside of the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁶ The task force was composed of the PLAN's newest indigenous combatant units equipped with all the panels of blue-water combatants: anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air systems, torpedoes and the associated sensors.⁴⁷ The supply ship was the most experienced in the PLAN, having participated in a deployment in Europe in 2007 that included exercises with the French and British navies.⁴⁸ The ETF was commanded by Rear Admiral Du Jingcheng, Chief of Staff of the South Sea Fleet (SSF).⁴⁹ In addition to a senior flag officer, the PLAN selected highly experienced helicopter pilots and senior commanding officers. The manning of this first deployment showed PLAN's concern with mitigating

44. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 68.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.* p. 5.

47. E. Lin-Greenberg, "Dragon Boats: Assessing China's Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden", *op. cit.*, p. 215.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

49. C. D. Yung and R. Rustici, "China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions", in Phillip C. Saunders (ed.), *China Strategic Perspectives 3*, Washington D. C., National Defense University Press, 2010, p. 5.

the risks inherent in this new mission. Furthermore, Beijing imposed severe restraints on the ETF through restrictive rules of engagement (RoE). The ETF was constrained to not search for “captured vessels and personnel at sea or carry out armed rescue”.⁵⁰ The use of forces was limited to self-defense cases only.⁵¹ These cautious RoEs show a concern to avoid both legal and political issues.⁵² Indeed, China was very concerned about the risk of losing both domestic and international legitimacy; while its foreign policy had until then been based on non-interference, it was highly aware of being perceived as an aggressor in the Indian Ocean.

In terms of logistics, interestingly, the support was provided by the West Asia division of COSCO Logistics.⁵³ The logistic network of the company was used to support the ETF during its deployment, providing both logistic delivery and points of contact in GoA.⁵⁴ To make this partnership possible, the Ministry of Transport (MoT) provided the legal framework allowing the supply of the PLAN by COSCO, a private Chinese company; such cross-government cooperation was also a remarkable “first” for China.⁵⁵

The first deployment highlighted several issues to the Chinese leadership. First, the Chinese were concerned about the legitimacy of this intervention, which might have been seen as contradicting their traditional non-interference policy. However, in 2008, China's government was under national and international pressure to intervene.⁵⁶ Hence, before deciding to deploy ships, China exhausted all other possible diplomatic solutions.⁵⁷ Weitz underlines how the four UNSCRs, added to the “invitation of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia for the UN's action”, helped Beijing to decide to intervene “without compromising their doctrine of non-interference in other countries' affairs”.⁵⁸ Given Beijing's reluctance to deploy the PLAN in GoA, naval officials cautiously announced the deployment, specifying that the PLAN would only escort Chinese vessels.⁵⁹

50. S. A. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action”, *op. cit.* p. 307.

51. C. D. Yung and R. Rustici, “China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

52. S. A. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action”, *op. cit.* p. 309; S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.* p. 49.

53. S. A. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action”, *op. cit.* p. 319.

54. J. Lewis, “China Extends Its Reach,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 136, No. 7, July 2010, p. 63.

55. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 56.

56. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.* p. 51.

57. N. Li, “The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From ‘Near Coast’ and ‘Near Seas’ to ‘Far Seas’”, in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding capabilities, Evolving Roles*, p. 22.

58. R. Weitz, “Operation Somalia: China's First Expeditionary Force?,” *China Security* 5, No. 1, December 2009, p. 31.

59. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 39.

Conscious of taking a calculated political risk, Beijing kept tight control of the “operational scope” of the first ETF deployment.⁶⁰

The most remarkable characteristic of the first Chinese deployment is the experience acquired. The operation provided the knowledge to improve ship design, especially in terms of stability.⁶¹ The PLAN gained experience in the use of helicopters to patrol and protect merchant ships and Special Forces as boarding teams. Chinese satellite communications (SATCOM) benefitted also from this first deployment, which seems to have been a major step forward for the PLAN.⁶² The PLAN made important advances in improving the morale of sailors during a long period at sea.⁶³ Medical experience was gained through the conduct of the first operational medical evacuation (MEDEVAC).⁶⁴ In terms of sustainment, the PLAN discovered the difficulties of being deployed at sea for a long period. Above all, the PLAN perceived the need to build more supply ships.⁶⁵ This deployment was an invaluable field test for Chinese equipment, which explains why many of the new commissioned ships were sent to GoA during the following deployments.⁶⁶ GoA deployments provided experience transferable to other contingencies such as Taiwan or SCS.⁶⁷ To sum up, during this deployment, the PLAN learned about the complexity of blue-water deployments, especially in terms of logistics.⁶⁸

The first ETF deployment was driven by a need to participate in regional peace and security, improving China's image as a responsible stakeholder. It also provided reassurance at home about the ability of the CCP to protect Chinese sailors. Focusing on the escort missions, the PLAN learned how to deploy in blue water for an operational mission.⁶⁹ In this context, the cross-government cooperation to prepare the mission and support the ETF was remarkable: for the first time, the MoT, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PLAN worked jointly with COSCO to manage the mission.⁷⁰

60. C. D. Yung and R. Rustici, “China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles, and Potential Solutions”, p. 35.

61. C. D. Yung and R. Rustici, *op. cit.* p. 17-18.

62. S. A. Erickson, “Chinese Sea Power in Action”, *op. cit.* p. 319-322.

63. M. McDevitt, “PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners” in *Learning by Doing*, p. 107.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

65. C. D. Yung and R. Rustici, “China's Out of Area Naval Operations”, *op. cit.*, p. 17-18.

66. W. A. Reinsch *et al.*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D. C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013, p. 233, <http://origin.www.uscc.gov>.

67. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.* p. 30.

68. R. Kamphausen and T. Tanner, “Introduction,” in *Learning by Doing*, p. 4.

69. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, p. 98.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 51 ; Lewis, “China Extends Its Reach”, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

The situation in 2012: extending the mission range despite fading piracy

In 2012, the number of attacks dramatically decreased; the PLAN was now experienced in such operations, with more than 8,000 sailors having been deployed in GoA.⁷¹ The PLAN did not face the difficulties of the first deployment related to its legitimacy.

Since 2008, the composition of the ETF has almost never changed, continuing to consist of three ships (two combat ships and one oiler). In 2012, the replenishment ship was *Fuchi*-class while the combat units were *Jiangkai*-class frigates or *Luyang*-class destroyers. All those ships were indigenous products, and the combat units were commissioned fewer than four years before their deployment. The only exception was the deployment of a relatively old *Luhu*-class destroyer in 2012 (11th ETF), commissioned in 1994, and a *Yuzhao*-class amphibious transport dock in 2010 (6th ETF).⁷² The deployment of the *Luhu*-class might indicate the PLAN's difficulty in having constantly deployed new ships in the Far Seas for long periods since 2008. The use of an amphibious transport might have been an attempt to deploy more helicopters to escort merchant vessels, or it was an opportunity to share the experience of long-distance deployments with the amphibious units. Until 2012, only two oilers have supported the ETF, demonstrating the enduring lack of replenishment ships in the PLAN.⁷³ In 2004, the PLAN had only two *Fuchi*-class replenishment ships; the delivery of these oilers was resumed in June 2013, and, since then, six new ships have been delivered (up to July 2016). This amazingly fast production of oilers is the result of the lesson learned in GoA concerning the support of a task force in the Far Seas.

In terms of equipment, the major change since 2008 was the use of Z-9C helicopters, which provided better situational awareness, and were better suited to special operations forces in counter-piracy operations (fast roping, precision shooting).⁷⁴ The improvement of SATCOM allowed the 11th ETF to use, in June 2012, the SATCOM network for “organizational command, intelligence acquisition, information sharing systems, and logistics and supply security”.⁷⁵ The high seniority and strong experience of the ETF's commanders up to 2012 show that the PLAN's interest in this mission had never declined.

71. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 68-74.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

75. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.* p. 152.

In terms of RoE, the PLAN remained cautious and never changed its restrictions concerning armed rescue, prisoners or searches for captured vessels. However the PLAN was now escorting any kind of merchant vessel without considering the nature of her flag. Furthermore, it was cooperating with the other navies in GoA through the SHADE, or by direct VHF contact. Since January 2012, the PLAN had started to coordinate its action in GoA with the other navies, taking the lead among the independent participants of the anti-piracy operations (India, Japan and Republic of Korea).⁷⁶

Since the first ETF, the scheme of the anti-piracy mission has dramatically changed. The deployments are much longer (191 days in 2012; the first deployment was 124 days longer) and include more port visits (5 port visits for the 11th ETF in 2012; none for the first deployment).⁷⁷ However, the number of convoys escorted has decreased, the PLAN having improved its escort tactics since 2008 (better use of helicopters, deployment of vessel protection teams, increasing the number of ships per convoy).⁷⁸ The changes can be explained by an evolution of the tasks conducted during the mission. While the first deployment was dedicated to escorts alone, the ETFs started to diversify their activities, engaging in cooperation exercises with other navies and in naval diplomacy in the Mediterranean Sea. For example, following its escort mission, the 11th ETF sailed for the first time into the Black Sea via the Suez Canal, the Dardanelles, and Bosphorus straits.⁷⁹ The addition of a growing number of port visits far from GoA reveals Beijing's increasing appetite to use these missions for diplomatic purpose, improving the image of China as a responsible great power. The PLAN has made "considerable strides" in naval diplomacy since 2008. The 11th ETF did not take specific actions against pirates, which can be explained by a decreasing interest in anti-piracy activity, but more probably, as previously mentioned, because the number of incidents of pirate activity dramatically decreased in 2012. However, Chinese participation in the World Food Program escorts and the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) demonstrated a will to both improve Chinese participation in counter-piracy operations within international organizations, and to improve its image as a responsible stakeholder.⁸⁰ Between 2008 and 2012, Chinese cooperation with the other navies present in GoA has also increased to a surprising

76. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

77. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 74.

78. *Ibid.*

79. D. C. Shea *et al.*, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, Washington D. C., US Government Printing Office, 2012, p. 135, <http://origin.www.uscc.gov>.

80. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

extent. By cooperating with those navies, the PLAN discovered that it could study the equipment and tactics of some of the most advanced navies in the world.⁸¹

Since 2008, the Chinese ETF has demonstrated a new ability to cooperate with other navies on a daily basis, improving both its knowledge and its confidence. Once the PLAN had proven to itself that it could sustain Far Seas deployment, it began to extend the scope of the mission of its ETF to conduct diplomacy missions around the Indian Ocean littoral and into the Mediterranean Sea.⁸² The ETF deployments improved China's image while Beijing was embroiled in sovereignty disputes in the SCS.⁸³

The ETF today, from anti-piracy escort to strategic deployment to secure Chinese interests

The 19th deployment (December 2014–July 2015) is the most recent ETF deployment studied here. No successful pirate attack had been reported since 2012, and there was no piracy attempt in 2015.⁸⁴ However, at this stage, the PLAN had already started to diversify the missions given to the ETF: in March 2011, the 7th ETF escorted the ferry that evacuated Chinese citizens from Libya; a ship of the 16th ETF escorted the vessels in charge of conveying Syrian chemical weapons in the Mediterranean, and the 17th ETF contributed to the searches for Malaysian Airline Flight 370.⁸⁵

The 19th ETF respected the proven format of two *Jiangkai II*-class frigates sustained by a supply vessel supplied by a *Fuchi*-class ship.⁸⁶ The real evolution of the ETF deployment in 2015 was the support of a submarine, announced by Beijing. A *Han*-class nuclear submarine entered the Indian Ocean for two months, up to April 22, 2015.⁸⁷ According to an official announcement, this would become a “standard exercise”.⁸⁸

The duration of the mission has continued to increase, and the number of ships escorted to decrease; with 109 ships escorted in

81. M. McDevitt, “PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners”, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

82. *Ibid.*

83. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, “China's Blue Soft Power,” *op. cit.*, p. 84.

84. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, “China's Global Maritime Presence: Hard and Soft Dimensions of PLAN Antipiracy Operations,” *China Brief* 15, No. 9, May 1, 2015, p. 3, accessed on May 8, 2016, <http://www.jamestown.org>.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

86. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

35 convoys, the anti-piracy efforts seem to have become secondary.⁸⁹ However, the 19th ETF deployment was rich in activities, notably the evacuation of Chinese nationals in Yemen. On March 29, the ETF halted its anti-piracy escorts for 109 hours to evacuate from Aden 571 Chinese and 225 foreign citizens from 10 other nations.⁹⁰ The responsiveness of the PLAN during this event showed also the degree of professionalism and the ability to improvise and adapt acquired by the navy after six years of deployment in GoA. Concerning naval diplomacy, the 19th ETF continued in the wake of its predecessors with port visits in Djibouti, Croatia, Turkey, Italy, and to Novorossiysk in Russia.⁹¹ The last important fact of this deployment was the announcement in May 2015 of ongoing negotiations on the construction of a Chinese base in Djibouti.⁹² This negotiation led to the start of construction of support facilities in Obock, which showed how the PLAN had progressively settled in GoA.

The 19th ETF thus contributed to development of experience in: submarine deployments, Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO), and adaptability. The deployment of a submarine for two months in anti-piracy provided a very valuable experience for submariners, who learned the difficulties of long deployments far from home in an unknown and unfriendly environment. Concerning NEO, this operation provided experience for the PLAN in a domain critical for Beijing, given the number of nationals settled overseas.

Study conclusion: how anti-piracy has become secondary

At the end of the 19th ETF deployment, the PLAN had escorted around 6,000 Chinese and foreign merchant vessels, while more than 15,000 Chinese sailors had improved their skills in GoA.⁹³ The following matrix is based on the statistics relating to the 19 deployments of the PLAN in GoA.

89. *Ibid.* p. 78.

90. *Ibid.* p. 147.

91. "China's Anti-Pirate Fleet Returns from Somali Waters," Ministry of National Defense, People's Republic of China, July 11, 2015, accessed May 8, 2016, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn>.

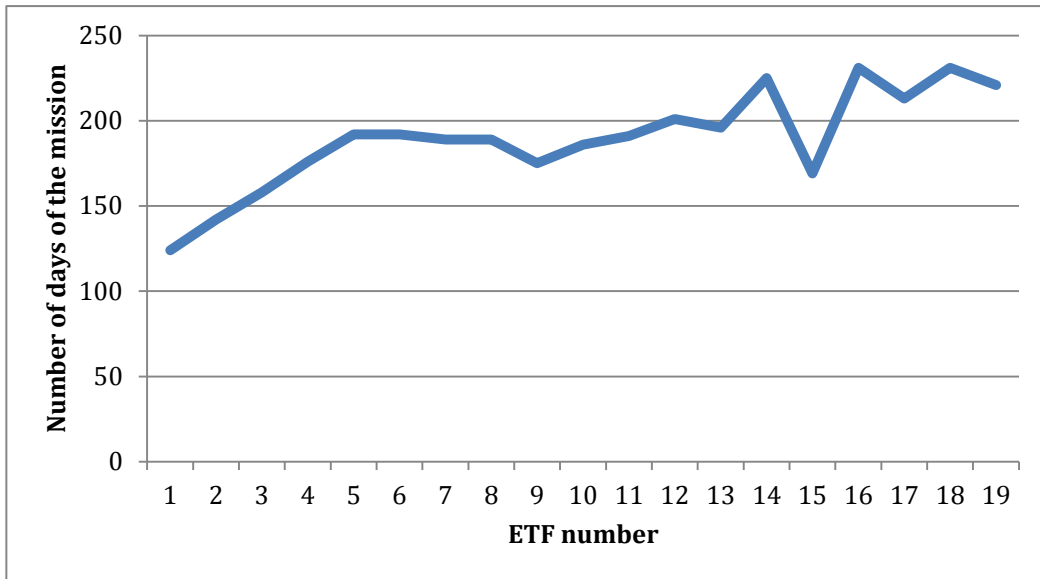
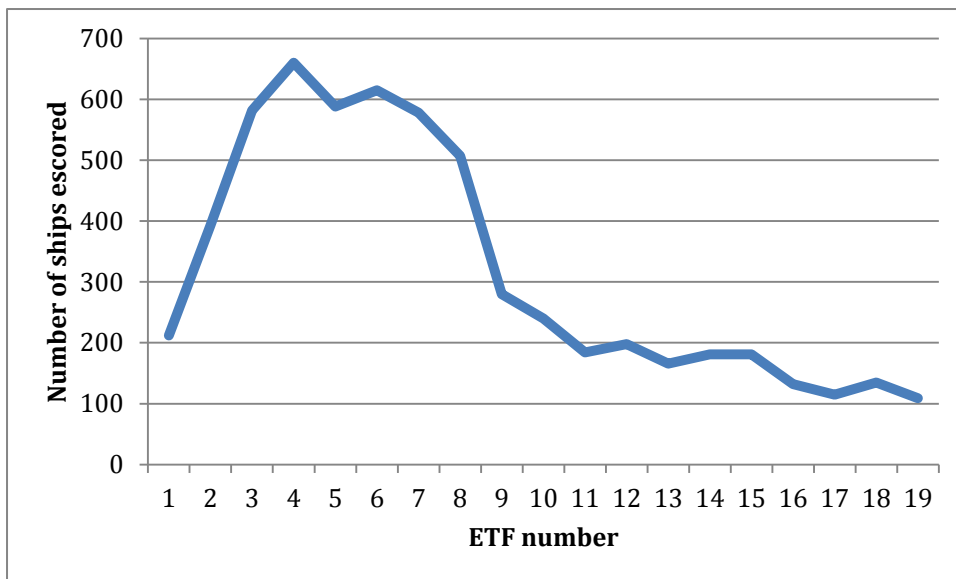
92. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

93. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 11-13.

Type of units	DDG and FFG Class	Fleet	Age since commissioning
DDG: 10	DDG	SSF: 9	More than 4 years: 18
FFG: 27	Luyang I or II: 7	NSF: 4	Less than 4 years: 41
AOR: 19	Luhai: 1	ESF: 6	
LPD: 3	Luhu: 2		
	FFG		
	Jiangkai I or II: 25		
	Jiangwei II: 2		

*DDG: Destroyer – FFG: Frigate – AOR: oiler – LPD: Landing Platform Dock
SSF: South Sea Fleet – NSF: North Sea Fleet – ESF: East Sea Fleet*

The study of the matrix indicates that the PLAN's favorite unit for conducting escorts in GoA is the *Jiangkai* frigate. This modern unit, able to conduct any kind of warfare, is large enough to endure long deployments but is less expensive than a destroyer. This choice shows the confidence acquired by the PLAN after six years of deployment in the Far Seas. The use of the recently commissioned LPD can be explained by a need to test new units in an operational context and by the desire to improve Chinese amphibious knowledge, which is crucial for conducting potential operations in the Spratly or Paracel islands and off course in Taiwan. Finally, the distribution of the mission among the three Chinese fleets shows that the PLAN is eager to share the GoA experience widely across the whole navy.

Duration of the mission per ETF (in days)**Number of ships escorted per ETF**

Source: Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*

The comparison of the duration of deployment and the number of ships escorted shows clearly that the protection of merchant shipping against piracy has become secondary. While the number of piracy events was still high during the 8th deployment in 2011, the number of ships escorted by the PLAN has dramatically decreased. The contrast in these figures is the most obvious evidence of the fact anti-piracy did not remain

the main objective of the ETF deployments. However, if the number of escorts decreased between 2008 and 2015, the ETFs remained busy. Participation in many exercises with other navies has already been mentioned, as well as the numerous diplomatic port visits in Europe, east and west Africa, and the Middle East. Finally, the PLAN participated in many other operations: NEO in Yemen and in Libya, chemical disarmament in Syria, and the search for Malaysian Airline Flight 370.

The main improvement made by the PLAN during this deployment concerned its ability to adapt and improvise. A major lesson learned from those deployments was “experience with unscripted, unpredictable situations”, which is unusual for a risk-averse service like the PLAN.⁹⁴ The 19th ETF deployment showed that the PLAN is now relatively experienced in military operations other than war (MOOTW) such as anti-piracy and non-combatant operation (NEO). After six years of continuous deployment in Far Seas, it has acquired enough experience to adapt to new or unexpected situations. The undersea experience is further evidence, showing how the PLAN is improving its ability to project power in the Far Seas. The deployment also underlines that anti-piracy operations are no longer the main focus of these missions. However, as the main contributing nations to anti-piracy operations plan to reduce their participation after 2016, Beijing might have to rethink the justification of its presence in the Indian Ocean.⁹⁵

94. A. S Erickson and A. M Strange, “Learning the Ropes in Blue Water,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 139, No. 4, April 2013, p. 35.

95. A. S Erickson and A. M Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 5.

The potential objectives of the GoA deployments, explaining China's enduring involvement in Indian Ocean anti-piracy

Based on the previous case studies, it appears that the GoA piracy context has become only a justification for the deployment of ships in this key area for the Chinese economy. Four main objectives, from the more military to the more political, can be identified to explain the ETF deployments: improving Chinese power-projection capability, acquiring operational experience in a real operational environment, protecting Chinese interests abroad, and improving China's image on the international stage.

Improving power-projection capability

Since 2004 and Hu Jintao's New Historic Missions, the modernization of the PLAN has been intended to develop power projection. By providing an opportunity to improve power-projection capability, the anti-piracy operation dovetails with Chinese ambitions to increase its sea-power.

First, ETF deployments enabled the PLAN to improve its strategy in the Far Seas. They gave the PLAN "the opportunity to refine fundamentally its doctrine and practices for "blue waters"".96 They helped Chinese naval planners to understand how to address Far Seas maritime security issues.97 In particular, GoA missions allowed the PLAN to make huge strides in logistic support. In addition, the sustainment issue raised the question of overseas bases, a sensitive topic, never really discussed before, in spite of its importance in developing sea-power.98 Anti-piracy seems to have alerted the Chinese to the necessity of developing overseas support

96. A. S. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

97. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.* p. 163.

98. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, "Chinese Sea Power in Action", *op. cit.* p. 330.

facilities, in spite of ideological reluctance based on “China’s traditional stance of non-interference”.⁹⁹

The enhancement of power-projection capability was also achieved through the testing of new platforms in GoA. The ETF provided a valuable field test for new ships, which explained why the PLAN deployed mostly new commissioned units in GoA. The deployment of new types of units, such as the amphibious ship *Jingangshan* or submarines since 2013, confirmed that China has not finished using GoA to test its power-projection capabilities. Last, according to Weiss, these missions seem to have provided the PLAN with information needed to develop its aircraft carrier capability.¹⁰⁰ After the testing of the newest frigates, destroyers, amphibious ships and submarine in GoA, the deployment of an Chinese aircraft carrier would be the logical continuation of those missions.

The PLAN leadership has recognized the role of “dramatic accelerant” played by the ETF missions in developing the PLAN capability to project power.¹⁰¹ They have contributed to the acquisition of the knowledge necessary to operate in Far Seas. Finally, they boosted the confidence of the PLAN in its ability to operate in blue water.¹⁰² However, if the PLAN is now able to deploy a task force in Far Seas, it is not yet a global navy able to project power anywhere in the world. It lacks global intelligence and support facilities. The task groups deployed so far were small and relatively simple. Deploying an amphibious task force or a carrier strike group requires much more knowledge in terms of logistics, intelligence, communications systems and command and control (C2). Finally, from the NATO navy point of view, the operations conducted by the PLAN during the ETF are considered as basic operational activity. Nevertheless, they have been an important step toward global navy standards.

Acquiring operational experience

Since the beginning of the operations in 2008, more than 15,000 sailors and officers and more than 1,300 marines and Special Forces have participated in the anti-piracy deployments.¹⁰³ Furthermore, flag officers

99. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.* p. 135; D. J. Kostecka, “Places and Bases: The Chinese Navy’s Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean,” *Naval War College Review* 64, No. 1, December 2011., p. 59.

100. R. Weitz, “Operation Somalia”, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

101. M. McDevitt, “PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners”, *op. cit.* p. 102.

102. A. A Kaufman, *China’s Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications Conference Report*, Alexandria (VA), Center of Naval Analysis, 2009, p. 11, www.dtic.mil.

103. A. S Erickson and A. M Strange, “China’s Global Maritime Presence”, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

from the three Chinese fleets have commanded the ETF during the past six years, helping to spread the GoA experience through every level of the PLAN. Chinese efforts to offer the opportunity to participate in anti-piracy missions to a maximum number of people in the navy demonstrate the importance attached by PLAN leaders to the acquisition of operational experience.

Crews are developing naval skills in a real operational environment, which is a unique opportunity for the PLAN to improve its combat readiness after almost three decades away from maritime theatres of operation.¹⁰⁴ A growing number of flag officers, commanders, and officers have learned how to operate independently in a combat situation by cooperating with the other experienced navies present in GoA.¹⁰⁵

The importance of the acquisition of experience for the PLAN can be assessed by the efforts deployed by the navy to spread the knowledge around the service. A growing number of officers have experienced frontline Chinese diplomacy with the ETF, and the command of a task force in a “real dynamic environment”.¹⁰⁶ Those officers could become the elite of the PLAN, able to boost the training and formation of the rest of the navy. Indeed, most of the present top leaders of the PLAN have participated in ETF deployments.¹⁰⁷

Participation in such a relatively low-risk mission has provided the opportunity to train a generation of officers and sailors in a real and demanding environment. Erickson considers this experience to be vital for the future of the PLAN, in building its confidence in operating in blue waters and potentially preparing the crews of future carrier strike groups.¹⁰⁸ The confidence acquired in GoA allowed the PLAN to participate in international exercises such as Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC). Furthermore, it is highly probable that the ETF generation of sailors will influence the evolution of the PLAN for decades to come. The next step for the PLAN should be to multiply operational deployments in different theatres of operations. It has already started with missions such as the first combat-readiness patrol in the Indian Ocean in 2014 or the Chinese patrol in the Pacific Ocean that entered US territorial waters in the Aleutian archipelago in September 2015. Increasing and diversifying operational experience is the most obvious path the PLAN should follow to develop a global navy in accordance with its sea-power ambition.

104. A. S Erickson and A. M Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

105. M. McDevitt, “PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners”, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

106. *Ibid.* p. 115.

107. A. S Erickson and A. M Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

108. A. S. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.* pp. 133, 187.

Protecting interests abroad

As mentioned in chapter one, the Gulf of Aden is ideally sited for accessing some of the key areas of economic interest for China: the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and the Mediterranean Sea. The deployment of PLAN units allowed Beijing to rapidly react to protect its interests and citizens in those areas.

Clearly, the risk of disruption of SLoCs posed by the pirates justified the deployment of the first ETF to protect trade, energy flow and Chinese shipping.¹⁰⁹ However, the intervention in 2011 to support evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya would not have been possible without Chinese warships already deployed in GoA.¹¹⁰ This idea of using the anti-piracy deployment to be ready to respond to contingencies in a key part of the world is shared by Erickson and Strange, who consider the mission as a “springboard for China to expand its maritime security operations”, enabling participation not only in the evacuation from Libya but also in the destruction of chemical weapons off Syria, and the search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.¹¹¹

PLAN deployment in GoA served China's interests well not only by providing available deployed units able to respond to contingencies, but also by supporting its influence in a region where it has made important investments. Anti-piracy operations seem to show an evolution from the Chinese cautiously protecting their interests toward a more assertive policy of defending their positions overseas. This context explains the Chinese concern about the development of logistic facilities in Africa and the Middle East, as shown by the building of a Chinese base in Djibouti.¹¹² However, the assumption of growing Chinese assertiveness in the region must be mitigated by China's desire to appear as a responsible stakeholder. Furthermore, there is a gap between having support facilities in Djibouti and developing an operational command for a fleet comparable to the US Fifth Fleet command in Bahrain. The evolution of the Chinese base in Obock will provide indications about the PLAN ambitions in the region. In particular, the settling of C2 and intelligence capabilities would indicate a transition toward the development of a permanent naval power in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 216-217.

110. R. D. Kamphausen, “China's Military Operations Other Than War: The Military Legacy of Hu Jintao,” in SIPRI conference “The Hu Jintao Decade in China's Foreign and Security Policy (2002–2012), Assessments and Implications”, Stockholm, SIPRI, 2013, p. 5; S. Kamerling and F.-P. van der Putten, “An Overseas Naval Presence Without Overseas Bases”, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

111. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 24.

112. W. A. Reinsch *et al.*, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2015*, p. 248-249 ; L. Horta, “China Turns to the Sea”, *op. cit.*, p. 398-399.

Improving China's image

Often criticized for its lack of participation in global security despite its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China saw in the anti-piracy operation an opportunity to improve its image as a responsible stakeholder.

Fulfilling international obligations and improving its image are part of the objectives China set when it started its deployment in GoA.¹¹³ In a sense, this mission is fulfilling Jintao's 2004 intent to participate in global security. The desire to take part in global security explained the swift participation of the ETF in other security missions such as the search for the missing Malaysian Airlines flight, or the neutralization of Syrian chemical weapons. The PLAN's cooperation with the other navies in GoA confirms a willingness to appear as an active participant in the security of the global commons.

In addition to the desire to appear as a responsible stakeholder, the GoA deployment offered China a chance to counterbalance the negative image projected by its territorial disputes in the China Sea.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the cooperation of the PLAN and the US Navy in GoA helped to maintain a constructive relationship between the US and China, with the aim of achieving the "new type of great power relations" advocated by Xi Jinping.¹¹⁵

According to Erickson, the ETF deployments are contributing to "the construction of twenty-first-century global governance architecture".¹¹⁶ But other authors, such as Lin-Greenberg, are less optimistic, and don't see any evidence guaranteeing that China will play an increasing cooperative role in global security.¹¹⁷ However, this objective of improving the Chinese image, like the three former objectives mentioned in this chapter, shaped the evolution of the PLAN deployment in GoA. Furthermore, the Chinese government seems to have realized the power of naval diplomacy, which explains why the number of port visits has increased in deployment after deployment. The focus on specific parts of the world such as Europe, the Mediterranean countries, the Middle East and West Africa shows that the port visit plan was intended to increase Chinese influence in its areas of

113. A. A. Kaufman, *China's Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations off the Horn of Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

114. S. A. Erickson and A. M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea and Counting*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

116. S. A. Erickson, *No Substitute for Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

117. E. Lin-Greenberg, "Dragon Boats", *op. cit.*, p. 219.

interest. Like any other great maritime power, China is now able to use its navy to support its politics.

Conclusion

China has turned seaward to protect its economy and to assert its position as a great power. In that context, the evolution of the modernization of the PLAN has allowed China to start building up a blue-water navy designed to project power in the Far Seas. If the development of such capability is mainly designed to face contingencies in the China Sea, among which Taiwan remains the priority, expanding the reach of the PLAN toward the Indian Ocean has also grown in importance under Hu and Xi's mandates. Thus, the deployment of the ETF in GoA contributes to the fulfillment of different objectives related to this context.

The continuous deployment of the PLAN in GoA since 2008 was aimed, first, at protecting Chinese shipping interests against piracy, but it also contributed to the development of a Chinese blue navy in charge of protecting broader economic interests overseas.¹¹⁸ Enhancing power-projection capability, acquiring Far Seas experience, and improving China's image were part of the objectives pursued by the PLAN in GoA, along with protection of Chinese vital interests in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) and East Africa.

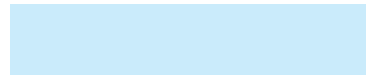
Those objectives explain why Beijing continues to deploy warships in the Indian Ocean even though piracy has almost completely vanished since 2012. This "forward strategic deployment" could be compared to the presence of the US 5th Fleet or the enduring presence of the British and French navies in this strategic region for at least three decades. The growing political willingness to increase China's influence, embodied by the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), suggests a progressive increase in the PLAN's presence in the region. The recent commencement of the construction of the Chinese base in Djibouti appears to confirm this assumption.

In less than three decades, the PLAN has developed a blue-water navy capable of conducting enduring low-intensity missions in the Far Seas. The rapidity with which the PLAN has evolved is remarkable. The current build-up of an indigenous carrier strike-group capability led Clemens to consider that the next step of the PLAN deployment in GoA will be the securing of the Indian Ocean SLoCs by aircraft operated from a Chinese

118. A. S. Erickson and A. M. Strange, "China's Blue Soft Power", *op. cit.*, p. 74.

carrier.¹¹⁹ But the ability to deploy a three-ship task force falls far short of operating a carrier task group, the ultimate power-projection capacity. The PLAN has a long way to go before it reaches such a goal. Logistics, C2, intelligence, air operations, and combined warfare will be the focus of the PLAN as it seeks to acquire carrier strike-group capability. However, although studying the PLAN's objectives in GoA reveals the impressive evolution of Chinese sea-power, Taiwan and the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas remain Beijing's principal preoccupations – limiting the resources available for any kind of expansion westward.

119. M. Clemens, "The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA", *op. cit.*, p. 6.



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