

China and U.S. Anti-piracy Engagement in the Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean Region

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Introduction

While achieving U.S.-China security cooperation seems challenging in today's geopolitical atmosphere, just 10 years ago it seemed that the U.S. and China could organize regular joint humanitarian aid operations and exercises. The driving factor for the latter came in 2008, when the international community found urgent necessity in countering the rampant acts of piracy originating from Somalia. The anarchic conditions in Somalia—and the eventual rise of piracy as a reaction to illegal fishing and industrial waste dumped off the Somali coast—featured a unique case of U.S.-China maritime security cooperation. While this cooperation was mostly limited to mutually reinforcing actions, there was coordination between U.S. and Chinese naval forces on an ad hoc basis.

Somalia has a shoreline of more than 3,800 kilometers, making effective anti-piracy activities challenging and costly. Meanwhile, the Gulf of Aden is at the juncture of sea routes that connect East Asian and North American nations, especially China and the U.S. As a strategic transit route for international commerce, the Gulf of Aden also oversees the oil transport lifeline from the Persian Gulf to Western Europe and North America. So far, more than 10 countries have fought piracy in Somalia, showing how apolitical crises—primarily threats to the international community—can lead to successful multinational cooperation and cost-sharing.

State Collapse and the Resulting Maritime Security Vacuum

After the fall of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia descended into anarchy as rival factions and warlords fought for power throughout the country. This resulted in the total collapse of Somali maritime security forces. Taking advantage of Somalia's lack of maritime enforcement capacity, there was a dramatic increase of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) as well as toxic waste dumping in Somali territorial waters by foreign vessels.

Reaction to IUU and toxic waste dumping—combined with poverty and lack of economic opportunities for coastal communities—played an instrumental role in the rise of Somali piracy. Disaffected Somali farmers initially formed “coast guards” to chase away foreign vessels engaged in IUU and toxic waste dumping. It eventually became evident that capturing ships and ransoming crew was a profitable alternative. The U.N. Security Council Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported that attacks by pirates and armed robbers in Somali waters developed from a domestic problem of illegal fishing vessels into a sophisticated industry from 2006 to 2009. Consequently, rates of piracy have since soared.

According to the International Maritime Organization, in 2008 a total of 135 attacks resulted in 44 seized ships and more than 600 seafarers' being kidnapped for ransom. In 2009, Somalia pirates even extended the piracy operation from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, Bab el Mandab Strait and the Western Indian Ocean toward the Seychelles and off the coast of Oman. According to the International Maritime Bureau, Somali pirates hijacked 49 ships and took more than 1,000 hostages in 2010.

Somalia was ranked first in *Foreign Policy*'s annual Failed States Index between 2008 and 2011. Somali pirates and armed robbers are often closely connected to clan-based coastal fishing communities. Piracy also appears to be connected to systematic corruption of local officials.

The International Response to the Crisis

The European Union's Operation Atalanta, NATO's Operation Ocean Shield, and Combined Task Force 151 led by the United States are the three multinational operations currently deployed in the area. Despite most parties' acting in coordination with the multinational coalitions, several states have opted to operate independently, including Japan, China, Russia, India, Malaysia, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Yemen.

Contemporary international treaty provisions on piracy are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that grants maritime forces the general authority to conduct anti-piracy enforcement actions. In acknowledgement of the fact that Somalia's state collapse precluded its maritime forces from countering piracy and maintaining maritime peace and security, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1846 calls upon states and regional organizations to cooperate to deter piracy and armed robbery at sea off the Somali coast. UNSC 1851 further requires that the Somali Transitional Federal Government provide advanced notice to the secretary-general of the operational terms of any state that wants to operate in Somalia's territorial waters or on the land.

The European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation Atalanta was established by a council joint action on November 10, 2008. Its mandate is to protect vessels chartered by the World Food Program. Other actions that EUNAVFOR are authorized to take include using force to deter, prevent, and intervene to counter acts of piracy and to arrest, detain and transfer suspects. It may also seize pirate vessels at sea as well as any equipment, weapons, and goods that pirates use. According to the Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1846, Atalanta offered 47 escort missions and contributed to the safe arrival of all World Food Program and United Nations related shipments from January 1 to October 31, 2009.

In 2009, The European Union completed a list of Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs), a framework for all armed forces that operate in a foreign country to enjoy rights and privileges in the foreign jurisdiction. In addition to Status of Forces Agreement, the European Union also approved an Exchange of Letters that regulate the transfer of piracy suspects to regional states.

After a period of declining piracy incidents from 2013 to 2015, a new spate of hijackings has taken place off the coast of Somalia since 2016. According to the NGO Oceans Beyond Piracy (OBP), attacks increased along the east coast of Africa from 16 incidents in 2015 to 27 incidents in 2016 as vigilance by the shipping community dwindles. Chris Farrell, group commercial director of private security group Neptune Maritime Security, points out a lack of coordination between naval fleets and security forces such as EUNAVFOR, which have a range of priorities in addition to piracy including counternarcotics and anti-human trafficking.

NATO Operation Allied Provider, Operation Allied Protector and Operation Ocean Shield are the three NATO operations that were deployed in Somali waters. Requested by the United Nations secretary-general on September 25, 2008, Operation Allied Provider took place from October 24 to December 2008 and was based on Security Council Resolutions 1814, 1816 and 1838. During this period, it provided naval escorts eight times for ships chartered by the World Food Program and safely delivered 30,000 metric tons of humanitarian aid to Somalia. Conducted between March 24 and August 2009, Operation Allied Protector also patrolled in crime-susceptible areas to deter other maritime criminal acts. Helping to significantly reduce piracy in the region, Operation Ocean Shield was launched on August 17, 2009, and terminated on December 15, 2016.

The Combined Maritime Forces are an international naval coalition led by the United States to uphold maritime peace and security. The Combined Task Forces (CTF) 150, 151 and 152 are three forces working on combating piracy off the coast of Somalia.

As the consequence of Security Council Resolution 1846 and 1851, several multinational organizations such as the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) group, and the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) have been created. CGPCS is a forum where participant nations meet to discuss relevant issues to repress piracy and armed robbery at sea off the coast of Somalia and was formed after the passage of UNSC1851. SHADE is an international voluntary military group that promotes multinational operations to combat piracy. MSCHOA is an initiative established by EUNAFVOR to monitor merchant vessels, alert authorities on incidents of piracy, provide guidance to shipping companies and operators, and register their movements through the Gulf of Aden.

Rationale of China's Decision to Participate in Antipiracy Patrols

China's antipiracy deployment signals a shift in Chinese foreign policy toward more military operations other than war (MOOTW). Although China is geographically far from the Gulf of Aden, the country was severely affected by piracy in the region. In November 2008, Somali pirates captured two Chinese commercial vessels and took many Chinese crew members as hostages. Since then, China felt compelled to take steps to strengthen security at sea and enhance Somalia's maritime security capacity. Motivating factors include desire to secure Chinese interests abroad, expand China's influence, and provide opportunities to train the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

First and foremost, economic interests were the foundation for China's decision to engage in multinational collaboration on the Gulf of Aden piracy issue. China hopes to secure Chinese shipping lanes against piracy. Every year, more than 1,200 Chinese merchant ships pass through the Gulf of Aden, and 40% of all goods and raw materials are shipped to China. This route is an important sea route for China's oil, grain and container transportation. China also exports a large percentage of construction materials, electronics, textiles, shoes, pharmaceuticals and toys to Somalia. The trade volume reached US \$485 million in 2017 with an annual growth rate of 20 percent. Moreover, since Somalia officially joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in August 2018, bilateral trade volume is expected to increase in the future.

Additionally, the mission helps China create a positive image on the global stage, demonstrating that China is capable of protecting global shipping. Every day, around 4.8 million barrels of crude oil and refined petroleum products passed through the Gulf of Aden to Europe, the U.S., and Asia in 2016. During the escort mission in 2011, Chinese navy forces were sent to the Mediterranean Sea, helping the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya. They also went to Yemen to evacuate more than 600 Chinese citizens and over 200 citizens of 15 other countries. Those maritime actions not only enhanced the national self-confidence and cohesion, but also projected an image of a responsible superpower. These actions signaled to the rest of the world that China is one of the leading actors in promoting maritime security in Somali waters.

Thirdly, working with foreign maritime groups can also enhance the military capacity of China. PLAN can receive more training in operating in hostile environments and reduce the gap with the U.S. Navy and other peer naval powers. Additionally, joining multilateral and coalition-based operations is comparatively low-risk. By actively engaging in antipiracy operations, PLAN not only proved its effectiveness against threats to its national interest, but also enhanced its knowledge of advanced naval tactics and technology.

Accomplishments and Global Perceptions of PRC's Antipiracy Activities

Under UNSC authorization, China dispatched its first naval fleet from Sanya, Hainan Island, to the Gulf of Aden for three months on December 26, 2008, and the fleet arrived on January 6, 2009, with the mission to assist CGPCS. Since then, any Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and China-invested foreign ships could apply for naval escorts. As of June 2019, China has sent 32 naval task forces to escort over 6,600 ships both domestically and abroad. The Chinese Navy's 32nd naval escort fleet consists of one destroyer, one frigate, and a supply ship—all designed and made in China, and with over 700 crew members. In addition, in the second half of 2010, China sent a hospital ship to the Gulf of Aden.

Uncertain about the attitudes of other nations, China was initially cautious about escorting vessels in the mandated mission area. According to the report from Nanfang Daily, the EU and French maritime fleet first contacted Chinese counterparts and shared detailed information with them, and they expected PLAN to notify them about their escorting missions. Operation Atalanta's CTF-465 also offered PLAN relevant information on anti-piracy best practices and tactics. Gradually, PLAN began reaching out to foreign vessels. Through mutual exchange of information, China realized that building trust enables participant states to deploy their naval forces to the optimal level.

Nevertheless, China's anti-piracy actions were primarily conducted unilaterally rather than under the banner of a multinational task force. Initially, China's escorting mission did not include any non-Chinese ships. However, on October 19, 2009, PLAN failed to deal with the seizure of a Chinese ship, the *De Xin Hai*. After the incident, the Chinese government attached high importance to cooperative rescue operations. Since January 2010, it began to harmonize its operation with other nations. China has increased the exchange of information by responding to more distress calls from non-Chinese vessels.

In January 2010, China first formally pledged to support the Contact Group, a move welcomed by the other coalition members. In the same month, American and European officials asked China to accept a rotational chair of SHADE. In December 2010, Operation Atalanta also asked China to assist European Union vessels in escorting World Food Program aid convoys in Somali waters.

In some cases, more than 70 percent of ships escorted by Chinese flotillas were foreign flagged. China's first action to save a foreign vessel hijacked by pirates was on April 9, 2017. As of that date, PLAN had rescued 20 foreign ships chased by pirates in 15 missions, against a total of 43 ships in 32 missions. Sharing sensitive information with other anti-piracy actors such as the U.S. and Japan also gradually became acceptable. Regardless, PLAN would like to adopt its own way of combating piracy. Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange explain in the International and Strategic Studies Report that the Chinese methodology features low-risk actions instead of proactively searching, capturing, and punishing pirates according to UNCLOS.

Despite the increasing presence of China's navy to waters off the Horn of Africa, China's model is largely nonmilitary. It mainly outsources logistical services to Chinese companies that are largely influenced by the state. China also develops close diplomatic relations with nations adjacent to Somali waters in order to use commercial ports and deploy military assets. In July 2017, the Chinese Defense Ministry opened a naval logistics center in Djibouti as its first overseas military base. The PRC has claimed that unlike bases of other countries in Djibouti, this supply center is designed to support China's escort task forces instead of combat operations.

The establishment of the base raised considerable concern from certain members of the international community, including the U.S. They viewed the base as a way to support China's strategic decision to increase its presence in the Indian Ocean and the gradual rise of China as a blue-water naval power.

The most notable case for China to participate in multinational deployments is SHADE. In late 2009, China expressed its wish to follow the model of the EU and the U.S. to rotate SHADE's chairmanship by 2012. The U.S. initiated SHADE in 2008 intending to strengthen its connectivity with other counterpiracy task forces. The most recent meeting was the 42nd SHADE conference co-chaired by EUNAVFOR and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in Bahrain in April 2019. It continuously offered participants the chance to share strategic and tactical information. It also supported the use of Best Management Practices (BMP5), which emphasizes a series of measures allowing maritime actors to safely pass through the high-risk area. Though an independent deployer, China declared its intent to remain a firm partner in maritime security operations. However, according to reports from the Indian media, China has not yet chaired SHADE due to Indian objections.

Even though SHADE serves as a fundamental tool to facilitate intelligence exchange, the European side has been hesitant to share more information. As viewed by some European naval officials, China seems to benefit more from this cooperation than the EU. China and the EU hold different perceptions of and standards for human rights, which obstructs collaboration in capturing and trying piracy suspects.

China adopted the EU's Mercury communication network in 2009, which allows China to share real-time data about vessels that are tracked. This system boosts operational information exchange. All ships that do

not have access to the classified systems of the established naval forces can get information from other on-duty ships at the same time without security concerns. China can also use it to understand how NATO members coordinate in sea warfare such as planning, implementation, and evaluation. Another novel antipiracy technology embraced by Chinese fleets is long-range acoustic devices (LRADs), which give warnings and produce a deterrent effect on pirates.

U.S.-China Interaction in Gulf of Aden Antipiracy

In 2003, China joined the Container Security Initiative launched by the U.S., a program enhancing participant countries' incoming shipment security. China also participated in the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and Megaports/Secure Freight Initiative, focusing on port and container security. Those preliminary engagements established the basis for future cooperation in counterpiracy operations. The U.S. would allow Chinese helicopters to land or take off from U.S. vessels during emergencies. Sino-American interactions in this operation strengthen law enforcement, facilitate military exercises, enhance all-level communications, and put aside contentious issues in the South China Sea.

Firstly, the U.S. and China cooperate actively to deter the practice of illegal fisheries. USCG and the China Maritime Safety Administration (CMSA) have established working relations to regulate civilian maritime businesses. Chinese law enforcement officials temporarily serve on U.S. anti-smuggling ships to lend Chinese legal authority and operational support during boarding operations targeting Chinese vessels engaging in illegal fishing. In July 2014, USCG vessel *Morgenthau* and China Coast Guard (CCG) 2121 jointly blocked a Chinese illegal fishing boat *Yin Yuan* in the East China Sea. This event demonstrated the pragmatism of law enforcement in fisheries.

Secondly, training on search and seizure protocol has been extensively conducted. On September 17, 2012, guided-missile destroyer USS *Winston S. Churchill* and other U.S. Navy assets took part in an anti-piracy drill with PLAN frigate *Yi Yang*. The training was beneficial to both parties in developing bilateral interoperability. In August 2013, China and the U.S. staged larger joint military exercises. From July to August 2014, China participated in Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), the largest international maritime exercise. It was the first time that China sent ships from PLAN to a large-scale naval drill led by the U.S. However, China was not invited to RIMPAC 2018 due to U.S. objections to China's attempts at militarizing islands in the South China Sea. The U.S. believes Chinese actions such as deploying and expanding military assets in the South China Sea hinder China from fostering its responsible leadership role in multinational cooperation and regional peace and security.

Thirdly, despite the growing tensions between the U.S. and China over the South China Sea, the communication between the two navies over antipiracy cooperation, especially in all-level dialogues, has improved. When Beijing has vowed to work with foreign navies operating in the region, the U.S. reportedly provided China with information on antipiracy operations. The U.S. also believes the cooperative mission could resume the dialogue between PLA forces and the U.S. Pacific Command forces. Admiral Wu Shengli, PLAN commander, promised that PLAN fleets would call their U.S. counterparts immediately through bridge-to-bridge radio in English, and they would solve any

miscalculations quickly. Cooperation between the U.S. and Chinese navy forces also extends to academic exchanges. In February 2015, Chinese combat naval officers visited the Naval Academy, the Naval War College, and the Surface Warfare Officers School to learn how U.S. vessels respond to hostile foreign counterparts. This tour also reduced miscommunication and trained both parties to collaborate on Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Response.

Additionally, the cooperation in antipiracy activities could act as a buffer against the escalation of disputes in Taiwan and the South China Sea. In October 2008, China announced that military communication between China and the U.S. had been cut off because the U.S. sold arms with a total value of US \$6.5 billion to Taiwan. After Washington sold arms to Taiwan in September 2011, Beijing also canceled combined exercises with the U.S. Navy in the Gulf of Aden planned for the end of the year. Those reactions signal that antipiracy operations are ultimately subordinate to China's national security interests. Thus, cooperation in antipiracy operations provides opportunities for the two countries to avoid aggressive approaches and resume military exchanges.

Gulf of Aden vs. Gulf of Guinea Piracy

While piracy in the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean region has been at record low levels, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has skyrocketed. According to the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre, in 2019 there have been 35 attempted or successful attacks in the Gulf of Guinea, versus none in the Gulf of Aden and Eastern Indian Ocean region.¹ These attacks have significantly hampered maritime security and trade in the Gulf of Guinea, and have had a deleterious impact on the economic prosperity of states in the region. U.S.-China cooperation to address piracy in the Gulf of Aden seems to suggest that cooperation in addressing the rampant piracy in the Gulf of Guinea would not only be possible, but a likely and logical next step. Yet there are several critical differences in the piracy situation between the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Guinea that complicate, if not preclude, U.S.-China cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea.

Perhaps the most significant difference is the special set of circumstances which facilitated the global antipiracy effort in the Gulf of Aden. Somalia's state collapse directly threatened one of the busiest and most vital shipping lanes in the world, leading to UN authorization for a global response. In contrast, the Gulf of Guinea encompasses the coast of 14 states² with various levels of maritime security capacities, ranging from relatively well-resourced maritime enforcement authorities (e.g. Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, etc.) to relatively weak ones (e.g. Togo, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, etc). More crucially, none of these states is facing state collapse like Somalia, thus making UN authorization for global enforcement highly unlikely if not impossible.

Additionally, while the security and economic impact of piracy in both regions has been similar, the nature of the illicit activities themselves is significantly different. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and eastern

¹ There was a "suspicious vessel" spotted, but no attacks.

² Including the island nation of São Tome and Principe

Indian Ocean region is designed to capture crew for ransom, with a significant incentive for pirates to keep captured sailors and passengers alive. In contrast, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is designed to capture ships and cargo rather than people, and pirates often view the latter as disposable hindrances to their goals.

As a result, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea tends to be far more violent and dangerous. Given that the Gulf of Guinea also represents a far less strategic transit route for global shipping than the Gulf of Aden and east Indian Ocean region, the risk-reward calculus seems to discourage direct enforcement actions from the U.S. and China. Consequently, maritime security cooperation in the Gulf of Guinea is conducted on a bilateral and capacity-building level, such as through train-and-equip programs, rather than through multilateral enforcement frameworks.

Finally, the state of U.S.-China relations when antipiracy cooperation was launched in the Gulf of Aden was significantly more positive than the current bilateral relationship. There was far more political capital available to allow for U.S.-China cooperation in maritime security—including conducting joint humanitarian operations—than there is today. Thus, even if the nature of the piracy threat in the Gulf of Guinea were similar or even identical to that in the Gulf of Aden, it is much more difficult to envision U.S.-China maritime security cooperation to address it given the heightened tensions between the two countries.³

Avenues for Broader Cooperation

China has been criticized for facilitating human rights abuses in Sudan and has been accused of transferring arms to Africa in exchange for minerals in 2008. For instance, Chinese military arms have been used by Sudanese regime forces against rebel forces and civilians in Sudan. China's noninterference policy was heavily challenged by the international community during the run-up to the Beijing Olympics. In response, China engaged in several peace and security operations in Africa, including participating in several areas under United Nations Missions including antipiracy operations.

Joint exercises among various militaries can bridge divisions and achieve the multidimensional unity so vital to combating piracy, trafficking, and other maritime illicit activities. The Chinese logistics center in Somalia conducted a joint exercise of medical relief with Operation Atalanta's CTF-465 on October 12, 2018. It marked the first time that the supply base deployed helicopters to assist in medical relief. After receiving the signal for aid, the Chinese base and CTF-465 formed a joint medical assistance team. This exercise reviewed seven crucial steps, including distributing emergency signals and delivering information effectively. Collaborating naval forces with air forces to promote communications among various actors could be replicated in Sino-American cooperation. It is possible that such joint medical

³ Even if the trade dispute is resolved, it is uncertain whether an improvement in the trade relationship would translate into an improvement on mil-mil relations and the reduction of geopolitical and geostrategic tensions between the two countries.

humanitarian aid missions helped both Chinese and American militaries and public health professionals develop interoperability capabilities and experience to cooperate during the 2014-2016 Ebola crisis.

The naval cooperation between China and the U.S. has a spillover effect on other aspects of security cooperation such as terrorism. For instance, the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons reported that a Chinese Task Force joined Russia in escorting chemical weapons from Syria to a U.S. naval ship in the Mediterranean Sea and oversee their destruction via the Field Deployable Hydrolysis System.

Outstanding Challenges for Broader U.S.-China Mil-to-Mil Exchanges

Perhaps the biggest obstacle toward further mil-to-mil exchange between the U.S. and China stems from the U.S.' suspicion of China's growing influence in Africa. While China is a relative newcomer in Djibouti, the United States established a base in the country following the September 11, 2001, attacks. Since then, the U.S. has continued building up maritime, aerial, and ground security assets in the Gulf of Aden region to counter terrorism. After China's supply base in Djibouti opened on May 2018, the U.S. accused Chinese base personnel of using lasers to blind U.S. pilots, with China denying this accusation. China is carrying out its Maritime Silk Road project with the prospect that it not only connects more trade via waterlines, but also assists in developing African countries' economies. Many locations in Africa are attractive to China as overseas supply ports. As Chinese strategists are contending for more naval bases to secure interests abroad, China hawks in the U.S. have been calling on more restricted cooperation to contain China.

In addition, the differences between Chinese and U.S. escorting strategies would also hinder seamless cooperation. In January 2010, China proposed to divide the Gulf of Aden into separate sea areas, each led by a separate antipiracy actor. Aiming at increasing PLAN escort efficiency and reducing the risk of hijackings, China stressed the importance of identifying the responsibility of each actor in countering piracy. In contrast, the U.S. advocated jointly monitoring the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC), a route for navy patrolling in the Gulf of Aden proposed by EU navies and MSCHOA in 2009. The UN Contact Group meeting regarding piracy off the coast of Somalia on January 28, 2010, confirmed both China's proposal and IRTC.

When discussing the mechanism of coordination, China, instead of cooperating with other multinational alliances closely, is more willing to work independently under the coordination of the UN resolution. Although China agreed to take part in the IRTC system in 2009, it had not joined as of this writing. This case shows that China has been hesitant to work with other coalitions.

Additionally, the criticism for PLAN's lack of transparency⁴ would implicitly increase mistrust between the U.S. and China. It would be helpful if PLAN can record its antipiracy activities and update them on

⁴ There are also transparency issues within the U.S. military, including with military spending. See Idrees Ali, Mike Stone; "Pentagon fails its first-ever audit, officials say" (Reuters, Nov. 15, 2018),

their website in English. Due to language barriers and distinctive tactics, Chinese navy was assigned to a separate area by its U.S. and European counterparts. Also, some tactical reports are time-sensitive. Failing to send them immediately will reduce the impact of counterpiracy operations. Conducting more combined exercises can increase interoperability and familiarity with each other.

Although China does not join any coalition, officials from China's Ministry of National Defense (MND) said that China is "willing to strengthen intelligence and information exchange, and when necessary, take part in humanitarian relief operations with all countries, including the United States." Published on May 2015, China's Military Strategy White Paper announced that China's armed forces will keep escorting in the Gulf of Aden according to international obligations, enhancing communications with naval forces of other nations, and securing SLOCs jointly.

Preliminary Recommendations

Looking beyond current U.S.-China counterpiracy cooperation, cultivating operational trust and working with nonmilitary logistical supplies are possible ways to enhance communication and expand mutual benefits between the U.S. and China.

As China and the U.S. have been holding divided views on sensitive issues, their cooperation did not necessarily result in conflict because of competitive coexistence. Via confidence-building measures (CBMs), it is possible that the U.S. and China can continuously collaborate on maritime security. As indicated by Erikson, CBMs help build operational trust between China and the U.S. that can be leveraged for larger-scale cooperation. Unlike political trust, which is often expressed in an abstract way, operational trust focuses on more specific details and habitual rules. For instance, from September 6 to September 9, 2013, PLAN took part in a search and rescue exercise with U.S. counterparts. Three PLAN vessels arrived at the Pearl Harbor naval base to work with their U.S. counterparts in joint practices such as maritime medical treatments, telecommunications, pipelines repair, and fire safety. This exercise played an important role in sharing information in maritime safety operations, reducing the chance of misinterpretation, and enhancing transparency. If military drills are routinely conducted, Sino-American naval partnership could work seamlessly in threatening situations.

In addition, China and the U.S. can build up a multilateral dispatch service. Due to logistical difficulties, the escorting fleet is not able to stay in the task zone for a long time. Replenishing supplies during the mission is challenging due to lack of auxiliary ships. If the U.S. and China can coordinate with nearby foreign supply ships, escorting missions will be more durable and long-term. By protecting vessels and stationing security teams onboard, local governments along the coast can also help both parties reduce logistical problems. Thus, the U.S. and China can provide logistical services by coordinating with foreign auxiliary ships and local governments.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pentagon-audit/pentagon-fails-its-first-ever-audit-official-says-idUSKCN1NK2MC>.

The U.S. has recognized that China's naval presence has grown faster than anticipated. However, by understanding the development of China's naval operations and foreign security policy, the U.S. can further engage with China and other maritime powers to strengthen multinational cooperation and further burnish its own maritime image.

Conclusions

The current operations in the Gulf of Aden demonstrate the important role of collective action in all dimensions. During more than 10 years' involvement in the Horn of Africa, China has maintained that it is a responsible sea power with an independent status to secure the maritime interest of the international community. The interaction in countering illegal civilian fisheries, executing search and seizure protocols, and improving all-level dialogues fosters the mutual trust between U.S. and Chinese naval forces. However, fundamental constraints of U.S. and China cooperation in counterpiracy efforts appear to stem from different governing standards, China's growing maritime influence and presence, and inadequate transparency in terms of information exchange. While acts of piracy are no longer perceived as a severe threat in the Gulf of Aden, other military forces and operations, humanitarian assistance, and Sino-American relations in general can benefit from analyzing trilateral cooperative experience. Foreseeing future cooperation in East Africa, the U.S. and China can continue to build operational trust through routine military exercises, and to strengthen relationships with local governments and other cooperating nations to enhance logistical coordination and maritime security capacities.

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