

**Bernard D. Cole, Ph.D.**  
**Professor, National War College**

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“China’s Military and Security Activities Abroad”

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*Introduction*

In this statement I will address the question that the Chinese navy—the People’s Liberation Army Navy, or PLAN—may be playing in “China’s Military and Security Activities Abroad,” the subject of today’s session. I will focus my remarks on the specific questions posed by the Commission. These are:

- (1) How does the PLA Navy’s expansion of its naval activities, to include ship visits and deployments, reflect the “historic missions” articulated by President Hu Jintao in 2004?
- (2) How are the new “historic missions” being implemented in the PLA Army and PLA Air Force, and what effect has this had on their training and activities abroad?
- (3) What is the impact of China’s military diplomacy on U.S. security?
- (4) Does China’s participation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden demonstrate a new outward-looking orientation for the PLA Navy? And
- (5) What is the potential effect on PLA capabilities of the recent deployment of the PLA Navy to the Gulf of Aden to conduct anti-piracy operations?

At the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2004, Hu Jintao, who is China’s president, General Secretary of the CCP, and Chairman of the Central Military commission, highlighted “scientific development” as an “important guiding strategy for national defense construction and army building.”<sup>1</sup> The Defense White Paper issued by Beijing in December 2004 noted that modernization priority had been “given to the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force” to strengthen the “comprehensive deterrence and war fighting capabilities” of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)<sup>2</sup>; these aims would seem to include the non-traditional military missions included in Hu Jintao’s concept of PLA employment, since in that same month, he delineated his four “new historic missions” for the PLA to, in effect, operationalize for the military’s implementation the ideological guidance of scientific development. These historic missions were then appended to China’s constitution at the 17<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress, in October 2007.<sup>3</sup>

These four missions, also known as the “three provides, and one role,” are (a) providing an important guarantee of strength for the party [i.e., the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)] to

consolidate its ruling position; (b) providing a strong security guarantee for safeguarding the period of important strategic opportunity for national development; (c) providing a powerful strategic support for safeguarding national interests; and (d) playing an important role in safeguarding world peace and promoting common development.<sup>4</sup>

The first application of the fourth of these missions for the navy has occurred in reaction to an alarming problem of maritime piracy. During much of the past two decades, this age-old crime has plagued the waters of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, especially the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Incidents of piracy in Southeast Asian waters have decreased dramatically since 2003, due both to improving economic conditions and to joint action by Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In 2008, however, the frequency of piracy in the waters off the Horn of Africa—in the Arabian Sea generally, and the Gulf of Aden in particular—increased dramatically, to the point where the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1851 in December 2008 authorizing international naval forces to combat the problem at sea and on land, where “hot pursuit” could be justified.<sup>5</sup>

In reaction to the seizure of Chinese merchant ships and in keeping with this resolution, Beijing in December 2008 deployed three PLAN ships to the Arabian Sea, on a mission to combat piracy in that region, particularly in the Gulf of Aden, near the coast of the Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup> This naval task group is manned by approximately 800 personnel, including 70 special operations force (SOF) troops; it is under the command of Rear Admiral DU Jingchen, whose current assignment is as Chief of Staff of the South Sea Fleet, one of the three operational fleets into which the PLAN is divided and which is based in Sanya, on Hainan Island. The task group is composed of two of China’s newest guided missile destroyers (DDG) and an oiler, all normally assigned to the South Sea Fleet. The DDGs, the *Wuhan* (hull number 169) and *Haikou* (hull number 171) are two of China’s newest, most capable surface combatants. Notably, *Haikou* is equipped with what appears to be an anti-air warfare system similar to the U.S. Aegis system, while *Wuhan* is reportedly armed with very capable anti-surface ship cruise missiles. Both ships are powered by similar combined gas turbine-diesel engineering plants and each has a Russian-designed Ka-28 helicopter embarked. The third ship in the task group is the *Weishanhu*, one of the PLAN’s three newest underway replenishment ships. This logistics ship is capable of providing the DDGs with fuel, ammunition, food and water, and spare parts.

Beijing announced that this task group would be deployed for three months, after which it would be relieved by a similar group of ships—“depending on decision by the UN Security Council and the situation at the time.”<sup>7</sup> Several reports of the task group’s operations indicate that it is performing in a well-planned, professionally competent fashion, having completed more than a dozen convoying evolutions.

### *Specific Points of Discussion*

1. How does the PLA Navy’s expansion of its naval activities, to include ship visits and deployments, reflect the “historic missions” articulated by President Hu Jintao in 2004?

China has deployed its warships on previous international deployments, ranging from the 1989 visit to Hawaii of the PLAN training vessel, *Zheng He*, to the 2004 circumnavigation of the globe by a two ship task group. These and other international deployments—to South and Southeast Asia, to North and South America—have demonstrated Beijing’s understanding of the naval mission known as “presence”: the use of naval vessels to “show the flag” and to exert diplomatic influence.

However, the PLAN task group currently operating in the Arabian Sea certainly is the first such mission demonstrably to prove the viability of Hu Jintao’s fourth mission: playing an important role in safeguarding world peace and promoting common development. Several other nations, most significantly the U.S. Navy, with its three ship Task Force 151, are conducting anti-piracy operations in the area, no doubt with at least informal exchange of information and perhaps operational cooperation. There have not been open source reports indicating that China’s naval ships are engaging in such exchanges and cooperation, although the requirement to maintain the safety of operations at sea indicates that they are occurring.

Perhaps most significantly, the deployment to the Arabian Sea is the first meaningful operational demonstration of PLAN dedication to a mission not directly related to a Taiwan scenario. That is, the very considerable expenditures of resources on the anti-piracy endeavor indicates a degree of confidence on Beijing’s part about the Taiwan situation, a perhaps increasing confidence that *de jure* Taiwan independence is no longer in the offing, and that the PLA (PLAN, in this case) may safely be dedicated to situations fitting China’s increasing role as a global power. From a naval planner’s perspective, this deployment provides both the conceptual framework and the demonstrated success to justify the continued modernization of the PLAN, even following peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue.

2. How are the new “historic missions” being implemented in the PLA Army and PLA Air Force, and what effect has this had on their training and activities abroad?

The concept of “diverse military tasks” was introduced at the National People’s Congress in 2006 as a category of tasks for the PLA that included both traditional (combat) and non-traditional (MOOTW) missions. The MOOTW theme was repeated at the 2007 17th CCP Congress, with the slogan to “raise the ability of the army to deal with all kinds of security threats and to complete diversified military tasks.”<sup>8</sup>

My focus today is on China’s navy, but I will note that Hu’s historic missions do apply to the Army and Air Force, perhaps even more than to the navy. The PLA historically has been touted by its political masters as the “army of the people;” Mao Zedong’s emphasis on the PLA as the people’s army included a consistent effort to alleviate problems and suffering resulting from natural disasters. Most recently—following the 2008 blizzards and earthquake—the PLA was mobilized in force to assist in ameliorating the damage and dangers. The navy’s role in these and the many other domestic relief efforts that have occurred has understandably been limited, but we can expect the PLAN to lead such efforts in the international arena. China’s relative inability to participate in the post-tsunami relief efforts in Southeast Asia due to the lack of suitable vessels, for instance, is no longer a

limitation. Today, the PLAN is able to deploy both a modern hospital ship and a large amphibious ship, both admirably suited to conduct relief operations in the wake of humanitarian and environmental disasters.

### 3. What is the impact of China's military diplomacy on U.S. security?

In his public testimony on 12 February 2009, Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair stated that “We judge China’s international behavior is driven by a combination of domestic priorities, . . . and a longstanding ambition to see China play the role of a great power in East Asia and globally. Chinese leaders view preserving domestic stability as one of their most important internal security challenges. . . . These same domestic priorities are central to Chinese foreign policy. China’s desire to secure access to the markets, commodities, and energy supplies needed to sustain domestic economic growth significantly influences its foreign engagement. Chinese diplomacy seeks to maintain favorable relations with other major powers, particularly the US, which Beijing perceives as vital to China’s economic success and to achieving its other strategic objectives.”

I agree that Beijing’s primary concern is domestic, not international. But I think that the PLA is viewed by Beijing as not merely an instrument to be used to defend Chinese borders or as the force of last resort for subduing domestic unrest, but rather as an instrument of foreign policy and military force, to be employed to strengthen Chinese interests or to protect them when threatened. Since, not surprisingly, Beijing reserves wholly to itself how to define those interests and threats, the deployment of PLA forces may be directed against U.S. interests or those of our allies. A current example is the relatively hard line being pursued by China in its disputes with Japan over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Daoyu Islands in the East China Sea and over the ownership of sea bed resources in the area.

China’s use of the PLAN as a diplomatic vehicle does not necessarily pose a zero-sum situation for the United States regarding our interests in Asia, but it does pose a challenge that we must meet in accordance with our we prioritize our own interests in the region and competition for our military resources.

### 4. Does China’s participation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden demonstrate a new outward-looking orientation for the PLA Navy?

Yes. This mission is the first time in the history of the PLAN that it has been tasked with an overseas deployment that is operational, rather than representational. Previous long-range cruises by the Chinese navy have occurred at rather long intervals—rarely more than once every two years—and have been conducted to “show the flag,” for diplomatic purposes. The current deployment of three of China’s newest ships is characterized by several factors that are “first timers” for the PLAN.

First, this is the first time since the PLAN was established in 1950 that Chinese warships have conducted combat operations in other than China’s littoral waters. Previously, the greatest distance from China’s coast that PLAN combatants have conducted operations was in 1973, when a brief conflict was conducted against Republic of South Vietnam naval forces

in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, approximately 560 nautical miles (nm) south of Hainan Island.<sup>9</sup> The three ships currently operating in the Gulf of Aden are based at Hainan Island, more than 3,000 nm away.

Second, this is the first time that the PLAN will have forces operating for an extended period of time at great distance from home port. Previous long-range deployments have been set cruises, with ships steaming from port to port on a predetermined schedule. The current operation in the Gulf of Aden is the first operational deployment, with a PLAN task group operating in a remote location for an extended period of time—three months, in the current case. The Chinese warships began counter-piracy operations on 06 January 2009 and by the middle of February had reported conducting sixteen escort missions, all successfully.

Third, the current deployment to the Gulf of Aden is the first time that the PLAN will have a task group operating in an environment of international naval forces, other than for a brief naval review. The U.S. Navy's Task Force 151 currently leads the international efforts to counter piracy in the North Arabian Sea (which includes the Gulf of Aden); other nations that currently have warships conducting similar operations in this area include France, Great Britain, Greece, India, Malaysia, Russia, and Turkey. Japan and South Korea have announced that they also will assign warships to this mission.

Fourth, the current deployment marks the first time that a PLAN task group will have to rely on foreign sources and/or entrepôts for logistics support for an extended period of time. The Chinese task group's oiler periodically will have to replenish its fuel supply, presumably from a local source. Food will have to be flown into a local port or purchased locally and spare parts resupply and personnel replacements will have to be transferred to and from a local airfield and port. These logistics requirements imply close coordination between the task group and local Chinese diplomatic and possibly commercial personnel. Employing the task group's two Ka-28 helicopters to ferry supplies and personnel to and from the shore will also require the diplomatic support necessary to obtain local flight clearances. These requirements in turn require a very long distance command and control capability among Beijing, its diplomatic posts, and naval forces far afield.

Fifth, China's naval deployment over an extended period of time—Beijing has announced that a second task group will relieve the first, on station, after three months—is arguably China's most significant, and certainly its most high-profile, contribution to a United Nations-sponsored peacekeeping mission. This indicates Beijing's increased responsiveness to international problems, but also serves China's own foreign policy goals, to project its image as a global power, and one essentially benign and non-threatening.

Sixth, Beijing's commitment of front-line naval forces to an operational scenario very far from home indicates an increased level of confidence with respect to the unresolved question of Taiwan's status, a confidence that the trend of relations between the mainland and that island is positive. This in turn may indicate Beijing's reordering or at least loosening of strategic priorities: if the PLA no longer has to devote its attention and resources almost solely to a Taiwan scenario, then it has forces available for Beijing to employ in military operations other than war (MOOTWA). This possibility may be supported by the China's

2008 Defense Whitepaper, in which Taiwan was mentioned only once and where significant attention was devoted to MOOTWA. The mission should also be popular with the PLA leadership, eager to demonstrate its capabilities and value to the nation on non-Taiwan missions.

Seventh, the counter-piracy deployment to the North Arabian Sea is the first occasion when Chinese and U.S. warships have coordinated non-exercise operations.

5. What is the potential effect on PLA capabilities of the recent deployment of the PLA Navy to the Gulf of Aden to conduct anti-piracy operations?

As noted above, the deployment will positively affect PLAN capabilities across the board, including increased expertise and experience in operations, logistics, command and control, and interagency cooperation.

What could be the effect on U.S. security?

The deployment will produce a number of PLAN ships and, more importantly, personnel with significantly enhanced operational experience, expertise, and confidence. The longer the counter-piracy patrols to the Gulf of Aden continue, the greater the effect of these factors. In other words, these deployments are contributing to the transformation of the PLAN from a coastal defense force to one capable of operating effectively at long ranges from home base.

What is the potential for U.S.-China cooperation in these operations, and what would be the challenges to such cooperation?

Some cooperation is occurring: in the words of one U.S. destroyer commanding officer in the Gulf of Aden: “[We] talk with the Chinese destroyers by VHF radio to coordinate search patterns and to exchange information on suspicious ships. [We] also have coordinated Chinese helicopter flight operations with the ScanEagle launches and recoveries. The exchanges are “professional, routine and positive,” he said. “They have someone who speaks very good English.”

### *Conclusion*

China’s naval deployment to the North Arabian Sea marks a milestone in the exercise of that country’s maritime power and is the first such foreign employment of naval force since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of Chinese combatants patrolling the waters of distant seas is evidence of the navy’s maturing capabilities and competence. It indicates Beijing’s confidence and willingness to engage in very long range military action, action with strong political and diplomatic components. It also demonstrates the government’s desire to depict China as “A responsible Great Power.”<sup>10</sup>

Implications for the United States are extensive, ranging across the military, economic, diplomatic, and political elements of our foreign policy and national security objectives around the Indian Ocean littoral and among nations throughout East, South, and Southwest Asia, as they observe a China capable of project military power off their shores.

Furthermore, although Beijing's decision to deploy this task group may reflect increasing confidence in a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue, the deployment will increase the capability of the PLAN that would be tasked with executing a non-peaceful resolution of that issue.

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion relies on James Mulvenon, "Chairman Hu and the PLA's 'New Historic Missions'," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 27 (Winter 2009), at: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/issues/37362924.html> (accessed 12 February 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Highlighted in Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Ground Force Modernization and Mission Diversification: Underway in All Military Regions," in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (eds.), *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007), p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Xinhua* (Beijing), 25 October 2007, cited in Mulvenon.

<sup>4</sup> Jia Yong, Cao Zhi, and Li Xuanliang, "Advancing in Big Strides from a New Historical starting Point—Record of Events on How the Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission Promote Scientific Development in national Defense and Army Building," *Xinhua* (Beijing) 07 August 2007, cited in Mulvenon.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9541.doc.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> See Map 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Chinese Navy Begins Landmark Somali Piracy Patrols," 06 January 2009, at: [http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp\\_asiapacific/view/400591/1/.html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/400591/1/.html) (accessed 12 February 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Mulvenon, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> One nautical mile equals approximately 1.15 statute miles

<sup>10</sup> Senior Colonel Huang Xueping, Ministry of National Defense Spokesman, "Press Briefing," Beijing (23 December 2008)

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