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China's Gulf of Aden Expedition: Stepping Stone to East Asia?

Li Mingjiang

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The Gulf of Aden expedition is likely to prompt new Chinese activism in maritime non-traditional security issues closer to home. But will China initiate or join any grand scheme of maritime cooperation in East Asia?

TWO CHINESE destroyers and a supply ship this week sailed into the Gulf of Aden and the waters off Somalia on an anti-piracy mission -- widely described as a watershed event since Admiral Zheng He's voyage to East Africa in the 15th century.

Will the African expedition lead to a significantly more active Chinese role in maritime affairs nearer to China's own shores in East Asia? Various signs in the decision-making process this time and China's policy on maritime cooperation in East Asia indicate that the African mission is likely to prompt new Chinese activism in maritime non-traditional security issues closer to home. But it remains to be seen whether this will lead China to initiate or join any grand scheme of maritime cooperation in East Asia.

Confidence and Caution

Overall, China's handling of its Gulf of Aden mission has been skillfully executed, reflecting growing Chinese confidence that stems from a multiplicity of sources. These include what is perceived as the largely quenched "China threat" rhetoric; the increasingly stable relations with other major powers (in particular the United States and Japan); and Beijing's strengthened naval capability. The decision also reflects the policy-makers' growing awareness of using military means for the protection of Chinese commercial interests on the seas, besides the opportunity to gain naval battle experience.

Political and military confidence notwithstanding, it is also notable that China acted with considerable caution before the official decision was executed. This reflects China's concern that such naval action might be interpreted by other powers, especially regional states, as a harbinger of Chinese assertiveness. The Chinese strategic community first made the proposal in the media to test how other parties would respond. Then Chinese diplomats at the United Nations followed up with a statement

that Beijing was considering the possibility of using its naval force to deal with piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

Having sensed a relatively calm reaction from other states and even encouraging signals from the United States, Beijing officially made the announcement and followed up with high-profile public relations campaigns. Spokesmen at the foreign and defence ministries as well as prominent Chinese analysts strenuously attempted to justify China's decision on the following grounds: international law (the UN Security Council resolutions in particular); China being victims of the Somali pirates; China's commercial interests; international maritime security; and the operations of other countries. A notable point that Beijing constantly emphasized was that the naval action signifies China's intention and behaviour to be a responsible power. Various Chinese statements also stressed that the Chinese fleet will protect not only Chinese commercial interests but also vessels of other parties in that area. All these were aimed at forestalling any negative international opinion on China's naval expedition.

China's Growing but Limited Maritime Cooperation

In the past few years, China has stepped up its participation in maritime cooperation in East Asia. It was these cooperative activities that have gradually changed the Chinese mindset, provided useful experience for the Chinese naval force, and contributed to China's confidence in embarking on the Gulf of Aden expedition.

Take joint search and rescue exercises as an example. In recent years, China has had joint naval search and rescue operations with a range of countries. The PLA Navy has had at least two such exercises with India. In July 2005, China, South Korea, and Japan held a joint search and rescue exercise in China's offshore area. In September and November 2006, Chinese and American navies conducted two search and rescue exercise off the US west coast and in the South China Sea respectively.

The year 2007 witnessed Chinese activism in these exercises. China participated in the first ASEAN Regional Forum maritime-security shore exercise hosted by Singapore in January; the multinational four-day sea phase of "Peace-07" exercises in the Arabian Sea in March; the Western Pacific Naval Symposium exercise in May; and joint search and rescue operations with Australia and New Zealand in October 2007.

The increased naval interactions with the outside world have had a positive impact on China's participation in regional maritime affairs. China is no longer an outsider in East Asian maritime cooperation, particularly in projects such as joint oceanic research, environmental protection, and many sea-based non-traditional security issues with neighbouring countries.

These major projects include various United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) initiatives in East Asia. China joined the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum in 2004 and now actively participates in its six areas of cooperation: anti-drug trafficking, joint actions, counter-illegal immigration, maritime security, information exchange, and law enforcement on the sea. In addition, two Chinese ports -- Shanghai and Shenzhen -- are part of the US Container Security Initiative.

Lack of Strategic Trust

Despite the growing activism and confidence, China's vision and policy on any grand scheme of maritime cooperation in East Asia are restrained by the strategic and geopolitical realities in East Asia. The lack of strategic trust between China and other major powers, even between China and some smaller regional states, is likely to make China cautious in maritime affairs in the region.

This lack of strategic trust is affecting China's attitude in maritime cooperation, as evident in China's objection to the US Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). China supports the objectives of the PSI but

argues that the PSI includes the possibility of taking interdiction measures at sea beyond the permission of existing international laws. Another case is China's response to the US proposal for a Global Maritime Partnership (GMP or Thousand-Ship Navy).

The US Navy had twice invited China to participate in the plan and did so again in the wake of China's Gulf of Aden decision. However, the Chinese military harbours considerable suspicion of the US proposal. Many Chinese military analysts believe that the GMP actually signals US intention to set up a global naval regime to continue to dominate maritime affairs at the global level.

Gulf of Aden not the South China Sea

The Gulf of Aden operation has without a doubt demonstrated Chinese capability and confidence. With the milestone decision of the African expedition and its first large medical ship in service, it is quite likely that China may seek to play a more active role in maritime non-traditional security issues, such as disaster relief, anti-piracy in the South China Sea, and the safety of sea lines of communication in East Asia.

Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that the Gulf of Aden is a much less sensitive region for China. In East Asia, China still has territorial disputes with many of its maritime neighbours. In addition to scrutiny by external powers, regional states keep a close watch over China's activities in regional maritime affairs. It is still premature to expect China to strive for any leadership role in maritime affairs closer to home – its immediate Asian neighbourhood.

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