

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

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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 international

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 Chinese citizens in 2011.

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 (t )JTJ -0.004 Tc n54 (. vn)-10 urw41 ( to)2en4-10 (e)nflu9 tel f(th)nrisu6 (n)lno2 (ie)w(pl)-9 0 Td



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.<sup>1</sup> 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 states<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> There was a "suspicious vessel" spotted, but no attacks.

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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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