

## **East Asia initiative next? Not so soon**

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Two Chinese destroyers and a supply ship last 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? Various signs indicate that the 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.

Overall, China's handling of its African mission was skilfully executed, reflecting growing Chinese confidence stemming from a number of factors. These include increasingly stable relations with other major powers (in particular the United States and Japan) and Beijing's strengthened naval capability. The African mission also reflects policymakers' awareness of the military means of protecting Chinese commercial interests.

Political and military confidence notwithstanding, it is notable that China acted with considerable caution before undertaking the mission. This reflects Beijing's concern that such naval action might be interpreted by other powers 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.

Only after sensing a relatively calm reaction from other states, and even encouraging signals from the US, did Beijing make the announcement. Official spokesmen justified the decision on the following grounds: international law; China being a victim of the Somali pirates; international maritime security; and the operations of other countries. A point that was constantly emphasised was China's desire to be a responsible power. Officials also stressed that the Chinese fleet will protect not only Chinese commercial interests but also vessels of other countries.

In the past few years, China has stepped up its participation in maritime cooperation in East Asia. These activities 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. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has conducted 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, the Chinese and US navies conducted two such exercises off the US west coast and in the South China Sea, respectively. In addition, two Chinese ports - Shanghai and Shenzhen - are part of the US Container Security Initiative.

In 2007, 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.

The increased naval interactions with other countries have had a positive impact on China. It is no longer an outsider in East Asian maritime cooperation.

Despite this growing activism and confidence, however, China's participation in any grand scheme of maritime cooperation in East Asia would be constrained by the geopolitical realities of the region. The lack of strategic trust between China and other major powers is likely to make China cautious in regional maritime affairs.

This lack of trust is affecting China's attitudes, as evident in its 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 limits allowed by existing international law. Another case is China's response to the US proposal for a Global Maritime Partnership (GMP) or Thousand-Ship Navy.

The US Navy has twice invited China to participate in the plan and did so again after China's Gulf of Aden decision. However, the Chinese harbour considerable suspicion of the US proposal. Many Chinese military analysts believe that the GMP is a US attempt to set up a global naval regime so as to continue dominating maritime affairs globally.

The Gulf of Aden operation has without a doubt demonstrated China's capability and confidence. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that the Gulf of Aden is not a 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 would be premature to expect China to strive for any leadership role in maritime affairs closer to home.

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