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Westward Ho: Expanding Global Role for China's Navy?

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

China has recently deployed a frigate in support of multinational efforts to dismantle and dispose of Syrian chemical weapons. Will this herald an expanding global role for the People's Liberation Army Navy?

Commentary

CHINA HAS recently joined multinational efforts to dismantle and dispose of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. It has deployed a frigate of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the escort mission with ships from Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States. Under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), this mission marks another milestone in the PLAN's westward forays since 2008 when it committed the first task force to counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

That major initiative was followed in 2010 by the PLAN hospital ship Peace Ark embarking on the first "Harmonious Mission" voyage to countries worldwide, including Africa. In the same year, PLAN warships entered the Persian Gulf for the first time.

Strategic underpinnings

Since 2011 the PLAN's exposure in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has increased, mostly within the multinational context. In February 2011, a PLAN frigate Xuzhou was deployed to "support and protect" the evacuation of Chinese nationals from then Libyan civil war zone – the PLA's first humanitarian mission abroad. A month later, a PLAN frigate *Maanshan* provided the first Chinese armed escort for the UN World Food Programme shipments to refugees in Somalia.

The expansion of PLAN's participation in international security operations dates back to the concept of New Approach to Security first promulgated by Beijing in the 1990s, which envisages a "3C" approach - common security, comprehensive security and cooperative security. In no small part, this is due to its security interests particularly vested in the crucial sea lines of communication through the Indian Ocean as well as mineral and hydrocarbon resources. Indeed China has always regarded the geopolitically volatile MENA as strategically important.

The PLAN made its first-ever port calls to Indian Ocean littoral states back in 1985, and only further afield to

Africa for the first time in 2000. It steadily enhanced its capabilities to project force farther in the recent two decades. This facilitated expanded PLAN forays into MENA, where it increasingly participates in multinational security operations.

The expanded PLAN presence in MENA is part of the overall broadening of PLA contributions to international security operations, including the deployment of servicemen to join the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) – marking the first time the PLA deployed security forces for peacekeeping operations, albeit for the purpose of providing area security for MINUSMA headquarters and living areas of the peacekeepers.

PLAN participation in such operations essentially facilitates Beijing's contributing more "public goods" for international security – in contrast to the backdrop of recent tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, where Beijing is involved in various disputes with its neighbours and its deployment of vessels tends to create suspicion.

Capability considerations

With its new shipbuilding programmes proceeding unabated, the PLAN will possess sufficient bluewater-capable naval capacity in the future to keep up with an expected increase in "out-of-area" participation in international security operations. The Type-054A Jiangkai II-class frigates in particular have so far proven their worth during recent missions in MENA. They will most likely continue to remain primary workhorses for the PLAN's international security involvements, with 16 of these warships already commissioned by the end of 2013, with more under construction.

The PLAN remains lacking in the area of replenishment ships necessary for providing logistical support for warships' operations far away from home bases for a sustained duration. However, it appears that the PLAN is gradually rectifying this shortfall, having commissioned a pair of new, 23,000-tonne *Type-903 Fuchi-class* replenishment ships in 2013. Judging from the present trajectory of PLAN buildup, it is likely that future Chinese naval shipbuilding programmes will encompass the construction of even more capable replenishment ships that will enable the PLAN to carry out prolonged "out-of-area" operations.

These vessels, together with a more sizeable fleet of bluewater-capable warships entering service, will not just equip the PLAN to undertake operations within China's immediate Asia-Pacific security milieu but also create surplus capacity to facilitate its expanding global role. As seapower theorists put it, the ability of navies to project and sustain force further afield is also dependent on the availability of surplus physical capacity.

Mitigating negative image

From the strategic standpoint of its overarching global security interests, Beijing is steadily expanding its naval force projection capabilities to enhance its reach. Towards this end, we can expect the PLAN to maintain its current level of involvement in international security operations and even expand its global role.

Undoubtedly the foremost fungible instrument of Beijing's diplomacy, this development will strengthen China's role as a positive stakeholder in the maintenance of regional and international order.

Not only will the PLAN expand its physical commitment to international security operations, but it will most likely build on the foundation of existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with partner navies in MENA. This expanding global role for the PLAN, couched within the multinational context, will help mitigate negative perceptions of China's rapid naval modernisation.

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