

## **China's gunboat diplomacy**

Rory Medcalf

International Herald Tribune

December 29, 2008

P. 8

On Friday, two destroyers and a supply vessel departed on China's first long-range naval expedition since 1433. The decision to join the global armada in the pirate-plagued waters off Somalia is a momentous step in China's rise as a world power.

It is also a precious chance for others - especially the United States and India - to build maritime security cooperation with China before Beijing forms any risky habit of solo military forays.

China has long been a free rider on the ocean highways. It has enjoyed the benefits of maritime trade and energy routes, so vital to its economic boom, while other countries' navies have kept them open.

Yet with growing wealth, pride and ambition come expectations that Beijing will contribute to the safety of an interdependent world. It was only a matter of time before China, along with the other awakening giant India, joined the club of maritime security providers, using their fleets simultaneously for self-interest and the common good, whether fighting piracy, interdicting smuggling or delivering disaster relief.

That day was hastened when the sea-brigands of Somalia caught Chinese vessels, cargoes and sailors in the net of their brazen raids. Press photos of Chinese mariners squatting at gunpoint on their hijacked trawler provided an incentive that was hard to resist. New Delhi's idea that the Indian Ocean was India's Ocean, plus its assertive policing, was another.

The Somali piracy crisis makes the ideal platform for China's debut on the high seas. It gives Beijing every justification for easing its doctrine of non-intervention: Chinese lives and interests are in danger, the United Nations has blessed action in Somali waters, most everyone else is in the game, and what passes for the Somali government has invited China in. And in times of economic pain, a show of military strength can be a politically smart distraction.

There is also a deeper logic to China's experiment in gunboat diplomacy. China's strategists worry at the vulnerability of their economy to maritime corridors, such as the Strait of Malacca, which they think America's superior navy could choke at will.

The primary mission of the People's Liberation Army Navy remains stopping Taiwan from declaring independence, as well as keeping U.S. forces at bay in any ensuing war. But some new or projected capabilities are meant to give Beijing wider options, whether thwarting energy blockades, deterring other powers, or protecting Chinese nationals and interests far away. Large amphibious assault ships, nuclear submarines, refueling vessels, a huge hospital ship and proposed aircraft carriers all fit ocean-going or "blue-water" roles.

After decades in which China had just a rusty coastal force, the expansion of Beijing's seafaring clout since the 1990s is vexing the United States, Japan, India, Australia and others. After all, even if there is no reason to doubt China's claims that it wants to be a harmonious society in a harmonious world, nobody knows how a formidable China might one day behave.

Yet prudence about the China of 2030 is no reason to neglect trying to engage today's Chinese military in providing for the global good.

China has as much right as any trading nation to guard itself in the lawless waters off the Horn of Africa. Warships from European Union nations, the United States, India, Russia and even Malaysia are already on patrol; there is talk of South Korea and Japan joining in. It was inconceivable that China would forever outsource its maritime security to the United States or India.

The challenge now is to forge operational cohesion in a motley multinational flotilla. The Chinese presence is a critical opportunity for China, the U.S., India and others to shape the rules and habits of cooperation and communication at sea that could be crucial to future peace. As things stand, these navies lack even a basic agreement to stop accidental clashes, like the treaty that helped keep the Cold War cold.

The Chinese role off Somalia could help Washington persuade Beijing that confidence-building military dialogue is too important to be suspended at every diplomatic spat over Tibet or Taiwan. India could prove that it is not paranoid about China, by offering rest and fuel stops for the Chinese ships as they

steam west. By saying yes, Beijing would weaken theories that it wants to ring India with bases and client states.

It took the pirates of Wall Street to compel international cooperation in finance. If China's naval excursion can raise trust among the sea powers of the Asian century, the world may yet thank the pirates of Somalia.

*Rory Medcalf directs the international security program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney.*