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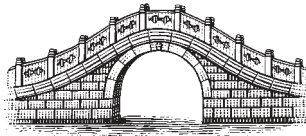


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# Ripples of Change in Chinese Foreign Policy? Evidence from Recent Approaches to Nontraditional Waterborne Security

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**KEYWORDS:** CHINA; FOREIGN POLICY; NONTRADITIONAL SECURITY; WATERBORNE SECURITY; GULF OF ADEN; MEKONG RIVER

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This article examines China's approaches to nontraditional security in the Gulf of Aden and on the Mekong River and explores the extent to which its behavior reflects a broader trend toward increasing flexibility in Chinese foreign policy.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

How China's foreign policy is evolving in the 21st century remains strongly debated. The maritime component of these discussions often focuses on traditional security issues such as disputes in the Yellow, East, and South China seas. Yet the two major cases to date of Beijing's involvement in international nontraditional waterborne security—the Gulf of Aden and the Mekong River—reveal broader context and important trends: China's decision-making in these regions is based less on traditional ideologies and principles than on pragmatic calculations of its national interests. This shift has potentially positive implications for the future of security governance in the maritime commons. Although China's approaches to nontraditional waterborne security represent a small sample of the country's foreign policy behavior, they nevertheless offer indications of China's incremental foreign policy evolution, particularly concerning its interests abroad.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- As China's stake in international maritime and riverine waterways grows, other states should convey that China will be recognized in ways commensurate with the means and scope of its provision of public goods in each region.
- Given that protracted ambiguity can generate uncertainty and suspicion, states should encourage China to reveal more specifics about its intentions and capabilities in various maritime regions abroad.
- In order to institutionalize coordination mechanisms in the maritime commons and other waters, China, the U.S., EU, and regional states can draw lessons from the Gulf of Aden and, to a lesser extent, the Mekong River.

Although debate persists over the precise extent to which the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has actually changed in recent years, it is clearly evolving.<sup>1</sup> Outside of the “near seas,” where China is largely perceived as increasingly assertive in its pursuit of core national interests, are Chinese foreign policy approaches becoming more flexible?<sup>2</sup> Some related discussions focus on the PRC's voting behavior on UN resolutions involving humanitarian intervention as well as its contributions to international security.<sup>3</sup> Its actions in waters abroad have also generated high levels of domestic and international interest, given their connection to Chinese politics, economics, military development, and diplomacy. Yet there is relatively little systematic analysis of whether Chinese foreign policy behavior is becoming more flexible with respect to nontraditional security challenges in the aquatic domain.<sup>4</sup> This makes it difficult to address questions about how Beijing's behavior here is related to broader Chinese foreign policy trajectories. Specifically, are Chinese approaches to nontraditional waterborne security indicative of a larger shift in the country's foreign policy toward greater flexibility and idiosyncratic dynamism?

This article offers two case studies on Chinese participation in nontraditional waterborne security since 2008: the Gulf of Aden and the

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<sup>1</sup> For notable contributions to this debate, see Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7–48; Thomas J. Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2011): 54–67 ~ <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67477>; Suisheng Zhao, “China's New Foreign Policy Assertiveness: Motivations and Implications,” Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), Analysis, no. 54, May 2011 ~ [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Analysis\\_54\\_2011.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/Analysis_54_2011.pdf); Linda Jakobson, “China's Foreign Policy Dilemma,” Lowy Institute, Analysis, February 2013 ~ <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Articles/Detail/?id=165222>; and Minxin Pei, “An Assertive China the ‘New Normal’?” *Diplomat*, November 24, 2010 ~ <http://thediplomat.com/2010/11/24/an-assertive-china-the-new-normal>.

<sup>2</sup> China's concept of the “near seas” encompasses the Yellow, East China, and South China seas, as well as the Taiwan Strait and the Gulf of Tonkin. On this issue, see Michael A. McDevitt and Catherine K. Lea, “China and the Yellow Sea Overview Essay,” in McDevitt et al., “The Long Littoral Project: East China and Yellow Seas,” CNA, September 2012, 11 ~ <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/iop-2012-u-002207-final.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, some scholars have recently examined China's views on foreign intervention. For example, see Yun Sun, “How China Views France's Intervention in Mali: An Analysis,” Brookings Institution, January 23, 2013 ~ <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/01/23-china-france-intervention-mali-sun>; and Johan Lagerkvist, “China's New Flexibility on Foreign Intervention,” *Yale Global Online*, May 29, 2012 ~ <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/chinas-new-flexibility-foreign-intervention>.

<sup>4</sup> In one of the few relevant examples of this analysis, Erik Lin-Greenberg finds that “coupled with increasing contributions of military observers and troops to United Nations peace operations, China's antipiracy deployment signals a shift in Chinese foreign policy behavior toward an increased willingness to employ PLA forces in military operations other than war (MOOTW) in regions distant from China's borders ostensibly to secure Chinese interests. These missions stand in stark contrast to past operations, which rarely saw forces deployed beyond China's periphery.” However, he offers no systematic evidence concerning China's behavior in nontraditional waterborne security. Erik Lin-Greenberg, “Dragon Boats: Assessing China's Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 26, no. 2 (2010): 213–30.

Mekong River.<sup>5</sup> These cases have presented critical tests for Beijing, not only operationally but also in terms of policy and symbolism. The Gulf of Aden and Mekong River differ fundamentally in their geographic characteristics and proximity to China, China's relative regional position, the degree to which Chinese foreign policy interests are threatened, the nature of China's involvement in operations, and the legal opportunities and constraints. These disparities are precisely why examining the cases together is helpful for understanding Chinese foreign policy trends. China's behavior vis-à-vis these two regions illustrates that Beijing is exploring flexible foreign policy tactics responsive to manifold factors in order to protect its interests. Addressing security challenges in these regions offers China opportunities to protect its economic interests abroad; allows Chinese military, paramilitary, and security forces to accrue experience and improve operationally; enables China to enhance its political image by performing successful missions and engaging in friendly diplomacy with other states before, during, and after operations; and lets China participate meaningfully—if thus far modestly—in the construction of a 21st-century architecture for nontraditional security governance that is commensurate with the country's relative power in a given region. Dynamic approaches to nontraditional waterborne security provide vital flexibility for a Chinese regime facing complex internal and external pressures while the PRC continues its ascent from a developing country to a global power. China will continue to expand the ability of its military and security infrastructure to perform nontraditional waterborne security missions outside China without necessarily altering the core framework of global maritime governance. This development should be welcomed by other states in the maritime commons. Further, while admittedly a small sample, China's security contributions in the Gulf of Aden and Mekong River demonstrate that the country's foreign policy approaches to nontraditional waterborne security are potentially compatible with, rather than inherently threatening to, existing security frameworks.

China's international economic, political, and social connections are unprecedented. The PRC relied on foreign trade for just under half of its 2012 GDP.<sup>6</sup> People flows are an outgrowth of economic interdependence: over 80 million Chinese citizens now travel abroad annually, a figure that

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<sup>5</sup> "Nontraditional security" in this article refers broadly to "soft" security threats. By contrast, in traditional concepts of security, military threats constitute the principal danger for states.

<sup>6</sup> "2012 nian Zhongguo waimao yicundu xujiang zhi 47%" [China's Reliance on Foreign Trade Declined Continuously to 47% in 2012], *Caixin*, February 7, 2013 ~ <http://economy.caixin.com/2013-02-07/100490638.html>.

is expected to rise to over 100 million by 2015.<sup>7</sup> China's workforce abroad, estimated at over 5 million in 2012 but likely substantially higher, is also expanding rapidly.<sup>8</sup> Beijing faces new pressure to protect not only its citizens and interests abroad but also the international system on which China increasingly depends, particularly as a significant percentage of its citizens work in relatively vulnerable regions abroad.<sup>9</sup> Internal and external audiences scrutinize Beijing's foreign policies—the former to gauge the regime's ability to protect Chinese interests, and the latter to ascertain China's capabilities and intentions given the general opacity of the government.

These growth patterns present immense challenges. The regime has staked its popular legitimacy on developing China as an economically dynamic world power, with increasing global interests, while managing considerable domestic instability. It retains, however, a stated policy of “noninterference” in other nations' domestic affairs. How China ultimately chooses to protect its international interests has important implications, not least of which for how its paramilitary forces will pursue “non-war military operations” outside China and how its foreign policy choices will affect the future of international security governance.<sup>10</sup>

This article is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 98–106 survey Chinese views on foreign policy dynamism and examine evidence as to whether such flexibility is actually occurring.
- ≈ pp. 106–23 then turn to the waterborne domain, focusing on Chinese foreign policy choices in two distinct environments: the Gulf of Aden and the Mekong River. We demonstrate how variables such as force capacity, China's relative position in a region, geographic considerations, economic incentives, legal frameworks, military aspirations, and internal

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<sup>7</sup> Li Xiaomin, “Zhongguo gongmin haiwai anquan baohu baogao” [Report on Protecting the Safety of Overseas Chinese Citizens], in *Zhongguo feichuantong anquan yanjiu baogao (2012–2013)* [Research Report on Chinese Nontraditional Security (2012–2013)], ed. Yu Xiaofeng (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 231–32. Additionally, the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports that Chinese travel abroad increased by 31% from the previous year during the first half of 2013. For more information on this topic, see “International Tourism Demand Exceeds Expectations in the First Half of 2013,” UNWTO, Press Release, PR13048, August 26, 2013 ≈ <http://media.unwto.org/en/press-release/2013-08-25/international-tourism-demand-exceeds-expectations-first-half-2013>.

<sup>8</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel and Bates Gill, “Overseas Citizen Protection: A Growing Challenge for China,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), February 12, 2012 ≈ <http://www.sipri.org/media/newsletter/essay/february12>.

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Haizhou, “Protection of Overseas Chinese Citizens and Assets Proposed,” *China Daily*, March 9, 2012 ≈ [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/09/content\\_14793164.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-03/09/content_14793164.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Michael S. Chase and Kristen Gunness, “The PLA's Multiple Military Tasks: Prioritizing Combat Operations and Developing MOOTW Capabilities,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 21, 2010 ≈ [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35931](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35931).

and external political imagery form a multidimensional calculus that has guided China's flexible decision-making in these cases.

- ≈ pp. 123–26 examine how China's behavior in the Gulf of Aden and Mekong regions manifests broader trends in the country's foreign policy, as well as what these trends mean for Chinese maritime security development and global maritime governance.

#### ADAPTIVE APPROACHES TO FOREIGN POLICY: CHINESE PERSPECTIVES AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In earlier decades, China's approach to foreign policy in the global commons was far more limited and predictable. Because the PRC was poor and more authoritarian, and had few international interests, domestic society did not generate significant pressure to intervene abroad.<sup>11</sup> Aside from China's involvement in several regional conflicts, sponsorship of revolutionary movements, and support for select foreign governments, its global presence was modest compared with today. Few foreign observers foresaw China's rise or the challenges and opportunities therein. These factors, combined with China's general opposition to Western norms, meant that Beijing was not asked to increase its limited provision of international public goods. U.S. leaders' opinions concerning the PRC's integration and contribution to international society have fluctuated dramatically over the past 50 years.<sup>12</sup> It was not until 2005 that then deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick argued that the United States needs "to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder in that system"—a statement that encapsulates the now prevailing U.S. and Western approaches toward China's contribution of international public goods.<sup>13</sup>

Today, two conflicting forces are complicating China's approach to foreign policy: the imperative to safeguard national interests and the desire

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<sup>11</sup> While this article later discusses humanitarian intervention in the context of Chinese foreign policy behavior, "intervention" here refers simply to Chinese foreign policy involvement and not necessarily to humanitarian intervention as defined by the United Nations or any other organization.

<sup>12</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?" *International Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2011): 539–53 ≈ <http://icps.gwu.edu/files/2011/05/China-Stakeholder.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" (remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York, September 21, 2005) ≈ <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

to avoid counterproductive assertiveness.<sup>14</sup> But as Deng Xiaoping's "going out" policy flourishes and China interacts with the outside world to an unprecedented degree, his policy of "keeping a low profile" in foreign affairs is increasingly strained.<sup>15</sup> As for military policy specifically, in 2004 Hu Jintao charged the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with "play[ing] an important role in maintaining world peace and promoting common development" as one of four "new historic missions."<sup>16</sup> Hu's successor, Xi Jinping, has called for a "strong army" and a People's Armed Police Force that "obeys the party's commands, is capable of winning wars, and has a good work style," but he has yet to promulgate major new military policies.<sup>17</sup> Although analogous dynamics shape the policies of other states with both interests and capabilities sufficient to justify bolder foreign policies, these states tend to be established democracies with more proven power-projection capabilities and fewer ideological barriers to external action. China, moreover, differs from most of these states in several key respects:

- Chinese foreign and military policies have evolved more rapidly, thanks to China's dramatic rise.
- Beijing experiences lingering difficulty in justifying pragmatic actions with sophisticated policy rhetoric, given its previous categorial ideology.

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<sup>14</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "Stability and Instability in Sino-U.S. Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong's Superficial Friendship Theory," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 1 (2011): 5–29; Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5–56; Bates Gill, "China's Evolving Role in Global Governance," in *China's Rise: Diverging U.S.-EU Perceptions and Approaches*, ed. Bates Gill and Gudrun Wackner (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2005), 9–15; and David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> For leading Chinese writings, see Yan Xuetong, "Cong Nanhai wenti shuodao Zhongguo wajiao tiaozheng" [Speaking to China's Foreign Policy Adjustment from the Perspective of the South China Sea Problem], *Shijie zhishi* 1 (2012): 32–33; Xing Yue and Zhang Jibing, "Taoguangyanghui zhanlue zai sikao: Jianlun ruhe shuli Zhongguo de guoji xingxiang" [Rethinking of the "Hide Our Capabilities and Bide Our Time" Strategy: On How to Construct China's International Image], *Guoji guancha* 6 (2006): 13–19; Ye Zicheng, "Guanyu taoguangyanghui he yousuozuowei: Zai tan Zhongguo de daguo wajiao xintai" [On Keeping a Low Profile While Getting Something Accomplished: Revisiting China's Great Power Foreign Policy Mentality], *Taipingyang xuebao* 1 (2002): 62–66; Zhu Weilie, "On the Diplomatic Strategy of 'Keeping a Low Profile and Taking a Proactive Role When Feasible,'" *Global Review* 6, no. 3 (2010): 1–11; Wang Yizhou, "Zhongguo wajiao shi tese: Jianlun dui wajiao yanjiu de qishi" [Ten Features of China's Diplomacy: Simultaneously Discussing Insights for Foreign Policy Research], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*, no. 5 (2008): 6–18; and Wang Jisi, "Zhongguo de guoji dingwei wenti yu 'taoguangyanghui, yousuozuowei'" [Positioning of China and the Strategic Principle of "Keeping a Low Profile While Getting Something Accomplished"], *Guoji wenti yanjiu*, no. 256 (2009): 4–9.

<sup>16</sup> "Earnestly Step Up Ability Building within Chinese Communist Party Organizations of the Armed Forces," *PLA Daily*, December 13, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> M. Taylor Fravel and Dennis Blasko, "Xi Jinping and the PLA," *Diplomat*, March 19, 2013  <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/xi-jinping-and-the-pla>.



- The leadership paradoxically exhibits a capacity for consistency in policy and messaging in some respects but susceptibility to domestic pressure in others. This is because the PRC's authoritarian political system lacks both checks and balances and political release valves. Citizens may develop particularly strong expectations for Beijing's ability to protect Chinese interests, which the Chinese Communist Party—responsible for all national policies since 1949, unlike other parties that share power and can blame problems on their political rivals—feels compelled to meet in order to preserve its legitimacy as the uniquely capable guarantor of the country's status and interests.

Some of China's most prominent foreign policy experts advocate that Beijing should adopt a new approach that allows China to protect its domestic and foreign interests more effectively and proactively. Beijing's voting behavior on recent UN resolutions provides partial evidence that it is indeed adopting more flexible foreign policies befitting its great-power aspirations. However, this voting record alone does not appear to provide conclusive evidence that China is necessarily becoming more proactive on international security issues related to intervention.

China's disapproval of employing force against sovereign nations is well-established. Yet as Chinese and foreign observers frequently mention, an urgency to address the motley nontraditional security threats in the post-Cold War international system generates friction between Beijing's traditional noninterventionist foreign policy and the need to protect Chinese interests abroad. The emergence of the term "responsibility to protect" (R2P) and China's stance thereto highlight this discord. First adopted in 2005 at the UN World Summit meeting, R2P builds on a notion of post-Westphalian norms contending that states must sometimes override other states' sovereignty in order to achieve humanitarian goals and maximize outcomes for the larger international community.<sup>18</sup> Mirroring the post-Cold War rise in cross-national, nontraditional security threats, the international community's view toward intervention has evolved, as manifested in the 1999 invasion of Kosovo, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the fight against Somali piracy since 2008. Sometimes, however, the term "intervention" is misinterpreted.<sup>19</sup> For example, there is no universally accepted definition of the concept of humanitarian intervention. J.L. Holzgrefe defines it as "the threat or use of

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of Chinese perspectives on R2P, see Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views of the Syrian Conflict," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 39 (2012): 1–18.

<sup>19</sup> Xu Yiming, "Libya, Syria, and China's Role in the International Community," *China Scope*, no. 77 (2012).

force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens, without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied.”<sup>20</sup>

China’s extreme sensitivity regarding sovereignty stems largely from its own modern history. Beginning with the First Opium War (1839–42), dynastic China suffered enormous damage from incursions into its maritime and continental territory by Western powers as well as Japan. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, including the brutal Japanese occupation before and during World War II, post-imperial China was ravaged by external invasions. This “century of humiliation” has resonated deeply with contemporary Chinese citizens and bolstered the case of leaders who are promoting the construction of powerful maritime security forces. Moreover, the strict adherence to sovereignty that this historical crucible fostered has arguably thwarted the emergence of more flexible foreign policies vis-à-vis state sovereignty that might usefully address China’s sprawling overseas interests.

Yet indicators are emerging of a subtle departure from strict adherence to nonintervention. In 2011, for example, Tsinghua University’s Yan Xuetong advocated a foreign policy combining elements of both nonintervention and intervention, which he contended were complementary based on principles from traditional Chinese strategic thinking.<sup>21</sup> Yan argued that strict nonintervention actually prevents China from behaving as a morally just great power that can mediate for the greater good. He also suggests that China’s long-standing reification of sovereignty was based less on principle than on pragmatic need: “Such Western values as state sovereignty were adopted as part of the government discourse because China had to build up its domestic power free from bullying by outside powers. But today, there is increased recognition of the fact that China must exercise positive influence on international affairs.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Yan believes that Chinese leaders increasingly realize that “international responsibility is mainly defined by

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<sup>20</sup> J.L. Holzgrefe, “The Humanitarian Intervention Debate,” in *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas*, ed. J.L. Holzgrefe and Robert Keohane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Yan Xuetong, “How Assertive Should a Great Power Be?” *New York Times*, March 31, 2011 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/opinion/01iht-edyan01.html>; and Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Yan, “How Assertive Should a Great Power Be?”

political responses to international crises, especially security issues, rather than simply economic aid to poor countries.”<sup>23</sup>

Other Chinese public intellectuals also call for China to rethink its foreign policy, specifically with respect to intervention and other forms of involvement in international security. Peking University’s Wang Yizhou introduced the concept of “creative involvement,” defined as “under specific circumstances, fully utilizing the dynamism and innovativeness of diplomats and various policymaking agencies of the national government, breaking traditional methods or fixed ways of thinking, [and] using ‘unconventional’ methods to promote higher levels of diplomatic improvement.”<sup>24</sup> Wang elaborates:

“Creative involvement” is a new kind of thinking in China’s foreign policy. It is neither a systematic ideological doctrine nor a logical assumption nor a traditional theory of international relations or diplomacy. Instead, it is a guiding thread somewhere between a metaphysical theory and an exemplified interpretation of policy. It is inspired by a number of success stories in China’s diplomacy in recent years. It takes its tone from Chinese traditional culture and the continuity of China’s diplomatic style. It respects international practices and development trends, and it synthesizes efforts to implant “Chinese characteristics” in the field of foreign affairs.

“Creative involvement” recognizes that the general trend towards world peace and development remains unchanged and, likewise, that the trend of China’s continuous rise and increasing external dependence will continue. It emphasizes leadership, initiative, and constructiveness in China’s diplomacy. It is aimed at “getting something done,” by shaping international rules and causing nations to accept China’s right to speak up for its interests. And it seeks the peaceful, co-operative, and win-win settlement of disputes. “Creative involvement” means refusing to be the prisoner of conventional thoughts and practices. Instead, it advocates more imaginative methods of mediation and ingenious thinking in the face of dilemmas and challenges, so as to avoid being trapped in hardline and oversimplified confrontational methods of dispute settlement.<sup>25</sup>

While Wang’s call for a more flexible stance on international involvement is broad and avoids declaring directly that China should intervene more assertively in foreign affairs, it does support fresh, creative thinking.

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<sup>23</sup> Yan, “How Assertive Should a Great Power Be?”

<sup>24</sup> Wang Yizhou, “Zhongguo shifou ying jiaqiang jieru guoji shiwu: ‘Chuangzaoxing jieru’ yu Zhongguo wajiaao pianduan” [Should China Strengthen Intervention in International Affairs? ‘Creative Involvement’ and a Segment of Chinese Foreign Policy], *Shijie zhishi* 2 (2012): 14–21.

<sup>25</sup> Wang Yizhou, *Chuangzaoxing jieru: Zhongguo zhi quanqiu juece de shengcheng* [Creative Involvement: The Evolution of China’s Global Role] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013); and English excerpt in Mark Leonard, ed., *China 3.0*, European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2012 ≈ [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR66\\_CHINA\\_30\\_final.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR66_CHINA_30_final.pdf).

Su Changhe at Shanghai International Studies University is another Chinese scholar who sees intervention, and bolder foreign policy more generally, as increasingly acceptable as the international system evolves. He states that China's active intervention in other countries' affairs does not constitute "interference" in the traditional foreign policy sense but rather is a necessary response to protect Chinese interests abroad in the era of globalization. Su further asserts that while China "resolutely opposes intervening in other countries' affairs under the pretext of human rights, political systems and values concepts," all the countries in which China has vested stakes—to the extent that they cannot protect Chinese interests—have a "limit on national sovereignty."<sup>26</sup> Specifically, Beijing has the right to press governments of countries where Chinese interests are threatened. Similarly, Su believes that nations must reserve the right of unilateral or collective interference or intervention regarding harmful conduct that may involve core foreign interests.

While new ideas continue to emerge, Beijing remains adamant that foreign intervention must not infringe on a state's sovereignty or occur outside of a UN mandate.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, however, its UN Security Council (UNSC) voting record on developments involving potential foreign intervention has varied throughout the Arab Spring. Beijing's stance has shifted between resistance to intervention, pro-intervention, and voting abstention. For example, China abstained from voting during the Libya uprising in 2011, but in February 2012 joined Russia in vetoing resolutions for intervention in Syria. China apparently felt betrayed by Western nations during the 2011 Libya intervention: it initially supported UNSC Resolution 1973 and a no-fly zone over the collapsing North African state but did not expect armed intervention to ensue. From Beijing's perspective, Western powers such as the United States, United Kingdom, and France abused UNSC Resolution 1973, and the resulting intervention and regime change cost China roughly \$20 billion of investments in Libya.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Chinese observers such as He Wenping note that France's armed intervention in Mali in January 2013, which was justified as an antiterrorism mission, subtly legitimized armed intrusion into a sovereign country's civil war.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Su Changhe, "Lun Zhongguo haiwai liyi" [On China's Overseas Interests], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* 14 (2009): 13–20.

<sup>27</sup> Swaine, "Chinese Views of the Syrian Conflict," 9.

<sup>28</sup> Sun, "How China Views France's Intervention in Mali."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Regarding the ongoing crisis in Syria, China believes the UN Charter does not give states or international organizations the right to use force. Seemingly having learned from its Libya experience, Beijing has since consistently vetoed UN resolutions that may enable armed intervention. Moreover, while China had to evacuate nearly 35,000 PRC citizens from Libya, there are reportedly fewer than 1,000 Chinese living and working in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

Generally, Beijing makes several major arguments for nonintervention:

- External coercion (vice private dialogues and incentives) is limited in terms of achieving lasting results.
- Western states use intervention (including humanitarian intervention) to pursue ulterior geostrategic motives.
- Interference with other states' sovereignty is often motivated by a desire for regime change and establishes unhealthy precedents that could be used against China.

However, there are several forces pushing Beijing toward a subtle accommodation of the possibility of intervention. Johan Lagerkvist outlines conditions potentially required for Chinese intervention in the sovereign territory of other countries:

- The issue reaches the UNSC.
- Regional organizations approve of outside intervention.
- Security developments could influence Chinese interests.
- The target area is abundant in one or more resources important to China.
- Chinese citizens' lives are at risk.<sup>31</sup>

Citing China's involvement in Sudan as an example, Lagerkvist contends that "while China still cherishes the principle of state sovereignty, Beijing has actually over time become more socialized into the framework of international norms." He further argues that the volatility in China's UNSC voting behavior is the result of the diffusion of Chinese interests and people flows throughout the world, including into economically and politically unstable regions. This somewhat mixed UNSC voting record may thus be seen as Beijing's attempt to balance the imperatives to assume additional responsibilities in international society and to recognize the increasingly prevalent R2P norm. Consequently,

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<sup>30</sup> Sun, "How China Views France's Intervention in Mali."

<sup>31</sup> Lagerkvist, "China's New Flexibility on Foreign Intervention."

Lagerkvist concludes that “further erosion of China’s principle on sovereignty and non-interference may lead to a flexible approach that suits Beijing.”<sup>32</sup>

While the debate over intervention remains inconclusive, other security developments have arguably demonstrated subtle shifts in Chinese foreign policy that afford greater flexibility in international affairs. More specifically, China’s contributions to peacekeeping operations in recent decades can be partially explained by Beijing’s desire to increase its involvement in international affairs and thereby improve its image as a capable, responsible power.<sup>33</sup> China first deployed peacekeeping forces in 1990 and is now the largest contributor of peacekeeping troops and police forces of all permanent UNSC members.<sup>34</sup> Nearly all these personnel have been noncombat specialists such as engineers, medics, and transportation professionals. This is why China’s summer 2013 decision to include infantry in its deployment of four hundred troops to the UN’s Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali is significant. It marks the first time that China has dispatched personnel who primarily provide security rather than logistics.<sup>35</sup> By enhancing its contributions of global public security goods in the form of peacekeeping, as well as through humanitarian aid and disaster relief and joint military exchanges and drills, all of which are considered military operations other than war, China is signaling that it understands the utility of exploring and developing foreign policy channels it had previously neglected due to capability or policy restrictions.

China’s policies concerning how to protect and promote its interests abroad thus no longer seem to be based on static ideology demanding rigid consistency across foreign policy activities. Perhaps Wang Yizhou’s idea of creative involvement is best described as an elastic approach to foreign policy in which domestic and international pressures and short- and long-term concerns shape the extent to which Beijing intervenes in a foreign security situation.

Sensitive issues involving territorial sovereignty and other contentious near-seas disputes have arguably diverted attention from the role of

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<sup>32</sup> Lagerkvist, “China’s New Flexibility on Foreign Intervention.”

<sup>33</sup> Bates Gill and Chin-Hao Huang, *China’s Expanding Role in Peacekeeping: Prospects and Policy Implications*, SIPRI Policy Paper 25 (Solna: SIPRI, 2009), 12–15 ~ <http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI25.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhongguo wuzhuang lilian de duoyanghua yunyong* [The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces] (Beijing, April 16, 2013) ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c\\_132312681.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm).

<sup>35</sup> Craig Murray, “China to Deploy ‘Security Force’ to UN Peacekeeping Operation in Mali,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Staff Research Backgrounder, July 9, 2013, 2–3 ~ [http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Backgrounder\\_China%20to%20Deploy%20Security%20Force%20to%20UN%20Peacekeeping%20Operation%20in%20Mali\\_0.pdf](http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Backgrounder_China%20to%20Deploy%20Security%20Force%20to%20UN%20Peacekeeping%20Operation%20in%20Mali_0.pdf).

farther-reaching maritime policies in Beijing's evolving foreign policy strategy. How, if at all, does Chinese foreign policy in waters other than the turbulent near seas show growing flexibility? The following section demonstrates that in recent years China's waterborne actions to protect its interests abroad have stimulated important discussion of evolving Chinese approaches to international affairs.

#### FLEXIBLE APPROACHES TO NONTRADITIONAL WATERBORNE SECURITY

Do China's recent nontraditional waterborne security operations indicate a more flexible foreign policy? China's growing maritime trade interests are increasingly vulnerable to disruption by piracy and other armed waterborne crimes, chiefly a result of China's rapidly expanding overseas interests. At sea, the persistence and complexity of modern piracy has created new challenges for the PLA Navy (PLAN), which is particularly unproven in what Chinese strategists term the "far seas," such as the Indian Ocean region and the Gulf of Aden.<sup>36</sup> China has maintained an active naval antipiracy presence in the Gulf of Aden for five years, incrementally deriving invaluable experience and operational knowhow while sending important signals about its participation in maritime governance. On the Mekong River, which is a relatively small but complex crime-infested environment much closer to China's borders, China's public security apparatus has faced as many legal as operational challenges in protecting PRC citizens abroad in a region where China is arguably expected to assume policy leadership. Since December 2011, the Yunnan Public Security Border Protection Command has intermittently conducted joint patrols along portions of the Mekong River inside and outside China and also led an international, continental police operation to capture the regional drug lord Naw Kham. Though entirely different in critical respects, these two cases of nontraditional foreign policy collectively showcase a greater dynamism in China's foreign policy geared to protecting the country's interests abroad.

#### *Gulf of Aden*

Nontraditional security threats such as piracy increasingly imperil vital international waterways on which China and other seafaring nations depend

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<sup>36</sup> The "far seas" and "far oceans" are defined by the PLAN as maritime regions near and beyond the second island chain. See Nan Li, "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From 'Near Coast' and 'Near Seas' to 'Far Seas,'" *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (2009): 129.

heavily for international trade. International pirate attacks peaked at 445 in 2010, 275 of which occurred in the Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Guinea.<sup>37</sup> In recent years, attacks originating near Somalia, in the Gulf of Aden, have had the highest success rate. For example, in 2010 Somali piracy represented over 90% of total ship seizures worldwide.<sup>38</sup> By late 2012, however, pirate attacks worldwide had plummeted, reflecting the success of antipiracy operations, particularly in the Gulf of Aden.

Yet despite this dramatic reduction in piracy, risk-taking pirate crews, often lacking domestic economic opportunities, are increasingly willing to venture farther offshore to attack merchant vessels. The net result is that an expanded maritime area is vulnerable to piracy, making the problem especially challenging and costly to combat. Moreover, China's leadership has learned on multiple occasions that specific attacks can generate media coverage that affects Beijing's domestic and international political image in ways that industry-wide statistical trends do not.<sup>39</sup> As long as the threat of piracy remains, China and other states will be wary of associated public-relations challenges that generate adverse economic and political consequences.<sup>40</sup>

*Precipitating events for intervention.* Several pirate attacks on Chinese crews preceded the PLAN's initial escort flotilla formation and deployment to the Gulf of Aden. Given China's mounting dependence on waterways vulnerable to pirate attacks, such as the Gulf of Aden, this is not surprising. For example, a reported 80% of all ships traversing this strategic passage, which is 530,000 square kilometers (km), are either Chinese or carry Chinese cargo or crew.<sup>41</sup> In 2008, 83 out of 1,265 Chinese ships transiting the gulf

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<sup>37</sup> "Report: 2010 Was Worst Year Yet for Piracy on High Seas," CNN, January 18, 2011 ~ <http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/18/report-2010-was-worst-year-yet-for-piracy-on-high-seas/>; and "2011 Piracy Attacks Totaled 439; 275 off Somalia: ICC/IMB Report" *Insurance Journal*, January 19, 2012 ~ <http://www.insurancejournal.com/news/international/2012/01/19/231822.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Shih Hsiu-chuan, "Government Limited in Fight against Piracy," *Taipei Times*, August 2, 2011 ~ <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2011/08/02/2003509739>.

<sup>39</sup> Huang Li, *Jianzhi Yadingwan: Zhongguo haijun yuanyang liangjian* [Sword Pointed at the Gulf of Aden: The Chinese Navy's Bright Far-Oceans Sword] (Guangzhou: Zhongshan University Press, 2009), 169.

<sup>40</sup> Zhang Yunbi et al., "Pirates-Held Hostages Finally Come Home," *China Daily*, July 25, 2012 ~ [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/25/content\\_15614291\\_2.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/25/content_15614291_2.htm).

<sup>41</sup> Mo Xiaoliang, Shen Shu, and Liu Wenping, "Hexie haiyang xieshou gongjian—Zhongguo haijun huhang biandui kaizhan huhang guoji hezuozongshu" [Hand-in-Hand Joint Creation of Harmonious Oceans—A Summary of Chinese Naval Escort Flotilla Expanding International Escort Cooperation], *Renmin haijun*, February 29, 2012, 2; and Yang Jingjie, "Captains Courageous," *Global Times*, December 24, 2012 ~ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/751957.shtml>.



were attacked by pirates,<sup>42</sup> and several vessels, including the PRC-flagged *Dajian* and Hong Kong-flagged *Stolt Valor* and *Delight*, were successfully pirated. Beginning in November 2008, Somali pirates held the fishing boat *Tianyu's* 24-man crew hostage for three months. Just a month later, the Chinese tanker *Zhenhua 4* came under attack from pirates, who withdrew only after a Malaysian military patrol helicopter arrived.

*Forces available.* Since December 26, 2008, China's fifteen escort flotillas have typically included two warships, one supply ship, and approximately 800 sailors, 10% of whom are typically special forces.<sup>43</sup> Flotillas require two weeks to sail 10,000 km from China to the Gulf of Aden.<sup>44</sup> The PLAN has deployed over 20 ships on over 40 occasions, carrying more than 30 helicopters. The destroyers, frigates, and landing vessels involved are some of China's newest, most advanced warships.<sup>45</sup> In over six hundred escorts, PLAN surface platforms have shepherded more than 6,000 commercial vessels and rescued or assisted over 50 ships (in each case roughly half domestic and half foreign).<sup>46</sup> Nearly 10,000 select personnel (roughly 4% of the PLAN's 235,000 members) have sharpened their skills, improved coordination mechanisms, and tested new platforms and technologies, yielding manifold benefits.

*Results from the mission.* The Gulf of Aden mission is China's longest military deployment overseas and protects the country's foreign interests in novel ways. Particularly noteworthy is the PLAN's rise from a regional navy to one with a nascent blue water reach, a process that has catalyzed ideological and operational innovation. Because deployed units need to solve logistical and equipment challenges, many of which cannot be fully anticipated, the mission has resulted in major technical and procedural breakthroughs. For instance, Chinese naval planners harbored considerable uncertainty over the precise financial costs of deploying major surface combatants to the

<sup>42</sup> Xu Jingjing, "Women wei shenme yao huhang: Zhuanfang jiaotong yunshubu guoji hezuosi sizhang Ju Chengzhi" [Why We Want to Escort: Interview with Ju Chengzhi, Head of the Ministry of Transportation's International Cooperation Department], *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan*, no. 3 (2009): 92–95 ~ <http://www.zsnews.cn/News/2009/01/16/1018431.shtml>.

<sup>43</sup> Jie He, "Suomali haidao shifang Zhongguo yuchuan" [Somali Pirates Release Chinese Fishing Vessel], *Nanfang zhoumo*, February 9, 2009 ~ <http://www.infzm.com/content/23443>.

<sup>44</sup> Guo Gang, "(Junjian huhang) Zhongguo haijun huhang biandui zhaoji beihu shangchuan daibiao jiaoliu zuotian huhang anquan" [Escort by Military Vessels: Chinese Naval Escort Formation Gathered Representatives of Escorted Merchant Ships Together to Exchange Views on and Discuss Escort Safety], *Xinhua*, October 26, 2009 ~ <http://www.chinesetoday.com/zh/article/315949>.

<sup>45</sup> The figure for PLAN deployments refers to the total number of times Chinese warships have been deployed to the Gulf of Aden, not the actual number of unique surface platforms sent. Many ships have served in two or three separate task forces.

<sup>46</sup> "China's 14th Escort Fleet Departs for Somali," *Xinhua*, February 16, 2013 ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-02/16/c\\_132172273.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-02/16/c_132172273.htm); and discussions involving one of the authors and several Chinese experts in August 2013.

far seas for extended periods, absent overseas basing agreements, and were unsure of best practices for maintaining sufficient potable water and other supplies.<sup>47</sup> The Gulf of Aden mission has necessitated the institutionalization of an overseas military support system whereby warships routinely combine at-sea and in-port replenishment. Moreover, antipiracy operations in the far seas have accelerated the maturation of civil-military coordination among the PLAN and other Chinese agencies. Such developments all facilitate, to varying degrees, China's contributions to global maritime governance.

Additionally, while PLAN antipiracy flotillas have replenished at several international ports—primarily in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, and Djibouti—they have also paid friendly visits to approximately three dozen countries. China's security contribution to the Gulf of Aden has also facilitated unprecedented coordination among the PLAN and other navies via shipboard exchanges, escort coordination, and low-level information sharing. These innovative achievements in diplomacy are significant in their own right.

There is ample evidence that the mission's unprecedented challenges for China's navy are fostering policy and operational flexibility. Operations in the Gulf of Aden have involved unpredictable situations that would be difficult for risk-averse PLAN forces to experience otherwise. In July 2012, for instance, China's navy briefly deployed special forces personnel on sovereign Somali soil to conduct a rescue pick-up mission after the missile frigate *Changzhou* received 26 sailors who had been taken hostage by Somali pirates while aboard the Taiwan-flagged fishing vessel *Shiuh Fu*. Although it did not involve combating pirates, the operation reflects adaptive tactics. PLAN Special Forces personnel were first dispatched on dinghies to the Somali beach where the crewmen had been freed, but choppy seas precluded retrieving them by boat. Flotilla helicopter units instead landed on Somali shores with support from special forces and transferred the freed sailors to the PLAN flotilla.<sup>48</sup> Such operations indicate growing Chinese adaptation to specific circumstances when intervening abroad. Perhaps more importantly, they suggest greater emphasis on open-mindedness within Chinese foreign policy, both in theory and practice.

*Future prospects for antipiracy missions.* While navies such as the PLAN continue to streamline antipiracy tactics, piracy persists because its terrestrial

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<sup>47</sup> This analysis draws from discussions involving one of the authors and several Chinese experts in August 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Wang Zhiqiu and Hou Rui, "Suomali haiyu da jiehui: Shier pi huhang biandui *Changzhou* jian jiehui 'Xufu yi hao' yuchuan chuanyuan jishi" [Big Escort Pick-up in the Gulf of Aden: Real Account of the Twelfth Naval Escort Flotilla *Changzhou* Warship's Pick-up and Escort of *Shiuh Fu* 1 Fishing Boat Crew Members], *Renmin haijun*, July 25, 2012, 3.

drivers remain unaddressed, its operational area is vast, and pirates are hard to identify in advance of active piracy attempts. Navies and security firms are prepared for potential increases in Somali pirate activity, which will likely remain a nagging security threat to sea lines of communication (SLOC) for the foreseeable future. To the extent that it deploys flotillas, the PLAN is poised to accrue further benefits, the scale of which will depend on China's operational choices. Of course, operational gains are only one component of China's decision-making process vis-à-vis piracy and other maritime nontraditional security threats.

Despite logistical innovations and corresponding gains in efficiency since 2008, Chinese planners are keenly aware of the substantial costs of sustaining antipiracy missions in the far seas. Given the immense logistical and operational benefits, it is understandable that Beijing was initially willing to pay a premium to dispatch forces. Absent antipiracy operations, there would have been no major near-term opportunities to project military power outside China's immediate maritime periphery. As the five-year mark of the PLAN's deployment approaches, however, the learning curve is inevitably flattening. Deployed naval officials are becoming increasingly adept as shipboard diplomats, completing numerous joint exercises and antipiracy operations with foreign navies. Collectively, these experiences raise a larger question of whether the benefits of future escort flotillas outweigh the costs, and if so, to what extent and using which metrics. Such assessments often depend on the subjective preferences of Chinese leaders, who weigh the relative value of economic costs—including the prolonged far-seas deployment of warships, auxiliary equipment, and thousands of crew—against the benefits, including greater domestic and international approval and incremental operational and tactical advancement.

The most obvious direct operational costs include fuel, food, and health supplies; equipment and ammunition used in training exercises and live fire; and vessel and equipment depreciation. Chinese naval planners must also consider the opportunity cost of deploying supply and landing ships to the Gulf of Aden when these platforms could instead be preparing for operations based closer to home, such as Taiwan-related scenarios, a militarized South China Sea dispute, or an escalation of tensions in the East China Sea. Even in this regard, however, Chinese strategist Liu Jiangping, long preoccupied with deployment cost-benefit analysis, sees profits in the antipiracy operations. Referring to the PLAN's evolving active-defense strategy for the near seas, Liu stated in 2009, shortly after the first flotilla deployment, that the benefits of antipiracy operations include not only

antipiracy experience “but also an experience for the navy’s capability to conduct far-oceans quasi-combat operations.”<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, the PLAN likely perceives certain aspects of its Gulf of Aden deployment as especially valuable. For example, it likely desires to continue to spread experience and operational gains from the mission more uniformly throughout its ranks, which explains the participation of vessels from all three fleets. Exposing the majority of destroyers and frigates to far-seas operations would require at least several more years based on current rates, although this is difficult to estimate precisely given China’s rapid warship production.

Similarly, the PLAN may wish to derive modest benefits by continuously tinkering with current operations—for example, by upgrading the role of Z-9 helicopters to increase opportunities for testing Chinese-made platforms. Rear Admiral (ret.) Yin Zhuo believes that helicopters are central to raising the productivity and dynamism of escort forces because they provide extended coverage that expands the PLAN’s operational range and affords it more choices for responding to nontraditional attacks.<sup>50</sup> Making escort forces more dynamic also promises operational discoveries applicable to other areas of PLA modernization. Moreover, PLAN tactics in the Gulf of Aden have been conspicuously conservative with regard to apprehending pirates in international waters. While China has agreements with Kenya and the Seychelles to arrest pirates and transfer them to local authorities, the PLAN has never detained a single pirate due to political and logistical concerns as well as the lack of Chinese laws that support arresting foreigners abroad and returning them to China for trial.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, the costs and benefits of antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden must be considered alongside alternatives. The PLAN could deploy other platforms to Somalia and pursue basing agreements with regional states, both of which would lower logistical costs but produce weighty political baggage. Chinese experts continue to debate the best approach. For instance, North Sea Fleet Commander Wang Dengping has questioned the current state of PLAN overseas logistics and asserted that during the next five years deployments

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<sup>49</sup> Liu Yanxun et al., “Yuanzheng Suomali beihou: Zhongguo haijun tingjin ‘shenlan’” [Background of Expedition to Somalia: Chinese Navy Pushes Forward to the Deep Blue], *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan*, January 5, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> “Duihua Yin Zhuo, huhang shi huashidai biao zhixing shijian” [Conversation with Yin Zhuo: Escorts Are an Epoch-Making Event], *Dangdai haijun*, December 2011, 22.

<sup>51</sup> This analysis draws on discussions involving one of the authors and several Chinese experts in August 2013.

should continue to improve logistical support in the far seas.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, a recent article by a Xinhua-controlled Chinese newspaper suggested that China could develop a three-tier support-point strategy in the Indian Ocean region to better protect Chinese interests there. The strategy would involve foreign ports providing various levels of service to Chinese naval escort forces on a regularized basis.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, some of the most important aspects of China's Gulf of Aden mission may soon become covert, if they are not already. It may be most convenient for Beijing to be truly innovative in security-related policies when others are not watching. PLAN flotillas, as well as those of other navies, may be innovating at the operational level without civilian authorities' explicit awareness and approval. Operational uncertainties, such as how to deal with pirates in idiosyncratic situations, facilitate improvisation, while the inability of authorities, both inside and outside China, to monitor specific PLAN operations might enable such innovation to go unreported. The PLAN may also proceed more autonomously as a result of protracted international deployments; navies typically behave more creatively with experience. Though not explicitly violating commands, they do not necessarily follow the script, since orders from above cannot possibly account for every contingency. Implicitly allowing such operational creativity could permit Chinese leaders to expand the PLAN's capacity to innovate without altering the party line.

*Evidence of policy flexibility.* Perhaps the most understudied aspect of the PLAN's antipiracy deployments has been their genesis, which required flexibility and creativity on the part of defense planners and PLAN crew operating in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>54</sup> In a telling example, representatives from the PLAN, PLA General Staff Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Transportation, and Chinese Overseas Shipping Company initially met to discuss potential escorts during 2007. Prior to the first deployment, there was no sense of the composition, cost, or duration of such an operation. Despite major uncertainty, the Politburo Standing Committee approved the mission, which commenced just three months later. Moreover, the PLAN was unable to calculate approximate costs and resulting

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<sup>52</sup> "Haijun jiangjun: Zhongguo haijun ying kaolu jiaqiang yuanhai houqin baozhang" [Naval Commander: Chinese Navy Should Consider Strengthening Far Seas Logistical Support], *Zhongguo xinwen wang*, March 9, 2011 ~ <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/03-09/2894268.shtml>.

<sup>53</sup> "Haijun jian shou pi haiwai zhanlue zhichengdian?" [Is the Navy Establishing the First Batch of Overseas Strategic Support Points?], *Guoji xianqu daobao*, January 10, 2013 ~ <http://ihl.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2013/0110/148665.shtml>.

<sup>54</sup> This and the following paragraph draw on discussions involving one of the authors and several Chinese experts in August 2013.

budget requirements until after the second escort flotilla and lacked a firm understanding of the comprehensive logistical requirements until the fourth. Even after fifteen flotillas, Chinese strategists continue to debate the legal basis for arresting pirates. The smoothness of top-level decision-making regarding deployments in the Gulf of Aden despite these major uncertainties suggests that the leadership is open to exploring new approaches to foreign policy, particularly in the field of nontraditional security, as the PRC's overseas interests proliferate.

Similarly, while far-seas deployments have imposed considerable costs over five years, Beijing remains willing to bear them. The lack of overseas bases that would mitigate logistical challenges has not diminished the PLAN's willingness to dispatch major surface combatants thousands of miles away. From their inception, these deployments have been viewed as critical for preparing warships for service in China's first carrier group. This perception demonstrates that Chinese planners are considering foreign policy issues on a multidimensional basis.

The international cooperation involved in China's deployments in the Gulf of Aden also reflects adroit foreign policy. While it maintains its status as an independent escort provider, the PLAN has progressively conducted joint escorts, information sharing, operational coordination, and academic exchanges with other navies. Much of this was done without detailed preparation: the PLAN accepted higher levels of exposure to international audiences with somewhat unpredictable consequences. While this decision certainly reflects Beijing's heightened confidence in PLAN capabilities, it also indicates flexibility to meet mission requirements. The PLAN and other navies face a common piracy threat, and China was willing to consider various integrated approaches to address the problem. Pragmatic cooperation between China and other navies, particularly those of the United States and Europe, has been greatly facilitated by Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE). SHADE is a voluntary mechanism designed and managed by antipiracy forces led by the United States and European Union that allows independent contributors such as China to link their contributions with multilateral actors in the Gulf of Aden while retaining their independent identity. More broadly, the mission demonstrates China's desire to pursue innovative solutions to nontraditional waterborne security threats abroad when states and organizations in the region are limited in their responses, particularly when SLOCs are destabilized.

## Mekong River

Like the Gulf of Aden and its adjacent waterways, the 2,700-mile (4,350 km) Mekong River is an important Chinese trade route. Although it spans China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, roughly half the river transits China. According to the Mekong River Commission, shipping volume between Yunnan and Bangkok topped 300,000 tonnes per annum in 2010 and is expected to increase by 8%–11% annually.<sup>55</sup> Water transport can save 40%–60% of overland costs, and one Chinese study estimates that 56,000 boats and 500,000 people are involved in Mekong waterborne trade.<sup>56</sup> Riverine crime has become a major problem, however, owing to a combination of factors, including lackluster policing and often challenging geography that contributes to poor communication among security forces. Criminals in this region are often heavily involved in drug trafficking and are armed with grenades, machine guns, and mortars that can easily overwhelm local security. In late 2011, one Chinese scholar suggested that the Mekong faced the threat of “Somalization.”<sup>57</sup>

Since the murder of thirteen Chinese merchant sailors in October 2011, China, Laos, Burma, and Thailand have actively conducted joint patrols. Sixteen rounds of patrols had been completed as of November 2013, with each round typically lasting three to four days. Initially commanded by Zhu Dehong, deputy chief of Yunnan’s provincial border police force, the joint patrols are based on the “Joint Statement of the Chinese-Laotian-Burmese-Thai Mekong River Joint Escort Patrol Law Enforcement Ministerial Meeting.”<sup>58</sup> Between December 2011 and August 2013, the four nations completed twelve patrols, rescuing 91 merchant ships and salvaging 2 others, while escorting 460 more ships.<sup>59</sup> More recently, the fifteenth joint patrol included 33 hours of patrols on the water over four days and covered

<sup>55</sup> Mekong River Commission, *State of the Basin Report 2010* (Vientiane: Mekong River Commission, 2010), 192 ~ <http://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/basin-reports/MRC-SOB-report-2010full-report.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Fu Zhiming, “Guanyu Lancangjiang-Meigonghe: Guojia hangyun jiankang anquan youxu fazhan de sikao” [Regarding the Lancang-Mekong River: Thoughts on the Ordered Development of Healthy, Safe International Shipping], *Zhongguo shuiyun*, January 2012, 17–19.

<sup>57</sup> Bu Yongguang, “Meigonghe, huhang shifou kexing?” [Are Ship Escorts Implementable on the Mekong River?], *Xiandai chuanbo*, November 2011, 32.

<sup>58</sup> “Zhong Lao Mian Tai Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa buzhangji huiyi lianhe shengming (quanwen)” [Joint Statement of the Chinese-Laotian-Burmese-Thai Mekong River Joint Escort Patrol Law Enforcement Ministerial Meeting (full text)], *Xinhua*, November 29, 2011 ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2011-11/29/c\\_111203893.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2011-11/29/c_111203893.htm).

<sup>59</sup> “Zhong Lao Mian Tai di 12 ci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa yuanman wancheng” [12th Chinese-Laotian-Burmese-Thai Mekong River Joint Patrol Enforcement Fully Completed], *Xinhua*, July 28, 2013 ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-07/28/c\\_116713126.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-07/28/c_116713126.htm).

512 km. China, Laos, and Thailand collectively deployed 8 law-enforcement vessels carrying 152 law-enforcement officials and 10 inspection vessels with 56 officials.<sup>60</sup> The sixteenth joint patrol included four-day patrols over the same distance involving 127 law-enforcement officials.<sup>61</sup> Former influential drug kingpin Naw Kham, fingered as the mastermind of the murders of the Chinese sailors, was captured in Laos and executed in Yunnan in March 2013. Although the operation to capture Kham was not waterborne and the region remains poorly governed, river patrols continue and the Mekong is now considered safer than it was in 2011. Importantly, China has demonstrated a willingness to intervene to secure its interests. At the time of writing, there was no public indication of if or when the multilateral patrols would cease.

*Precipitating event for intervention.* Beginning in 2008, Chinese police began to receive reports of murders along the Mekong River. Even before the events in October 2011, sixteen Chinese citizens had been killed and six were injured.<sup>62</sup> Then, on October 5, 2011, gunshots erupted along the Mekong in Chiang Rai, Thailand, and one Chinese citizen was killed. According to its own report, in early October 2011, after crossing the border from Sop Ruak, Thailand, into Burma and approaching Sam Puu Island (an area controlled by Kham), the Pha Muang Taskforce, an elite Chiang Rai-based Thai military unit, boarded two Chinese vessels. The taskforce discovered the deceased body of Chinese captain Yang Deyi on *Yu Xing 8*; the other ship, the *Huaping*, was deserted. The two ships were stocked with 920,000 methamphetamine pills worth approximately \$6 million.<sup>63</sup> According to Reuters, “the corpses of the 12 other crew members were soon plucked from the Mekong’s swirling waters. Their horrific injuries were recorded in a Thai police report.”<sup>64</sup> The aggressors were said to be working for Kham, who commanded a militant gang of over one hundred troops along the Mekong River. This gang—the most powerful of twelve major regional syndicates—alone killed sixteen Chinese citizens and wounded three others in 28 attacks over four years.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> “Di shiwu ci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa yuanman wancheng” [15th Mekong River Joint Patrol Enforcement Fully Completed], Xinhua, October 25, 2013 ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2013-10/25/c\\_117877806.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2013-10/25/c_117877806.htm).

<sup>61</sup> “Di shiliu ci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa qihang” [16th Mekong River Joint Patrol Enforcement Sets Sail], Xinhua, November 19, 2013 ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2013-11/19/c\\_118205390.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2013-11/19/c_118205390.htm).

<sup>62</sup> Liu Chang, “Manhunt for Deadly Drug Kingpin,” *China Daily*, February 19, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew R.C. Marshall, “Special Report: In Mekong, Chinese Murders and Bloody Diplomacy,” Reuters, January 27, 2012 ~ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/27/us-special-report-mekong-idUSTRE80Q00G20120127>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



Thai soldiers were also accused of tampering with the crime scene, but their role in the incident remains unclear.

While details are still disputed, the attack on the thirteen Chinese merchant sailors in October 2011 represents the nadir of deteriorating security in the Mekong. In recent years, Chinese cargo ships have been targeted by armed units smuggling narcotics and extorting merchant vessels by collecting protection fees. For example, a Chinese boat was attacked in 2008, and in April 2011, 34 crewmen from three Chinese ships were briefly held hostage.<sup>66</sup> In the days immediately following the discovery of the murdered sailors on the *Yu Xing 8* and *Huaping*, two M-79 grenades were lobbed unsuccessfully at four Chinese commercial ships and a Burmese patrol boat, and another Chinese ship was attacked unsuccessfully from the Laotian bank of the river.<sup>67</sup> As in the Gulf of Aden, nontraditional waterborne security threats began to undermine the safety of Chinese citizens abroad, thereby creating economic, political, and human security challenges for Beijing.

*Forces available.* To date, China's response to the Mekong attacks has been two-pronged, consisting of joint police river patrols and land-based domestic and foreign police work. Unlike the Gulf of Aden mission, China has deployed only police, not naval forces, to the Mekong. Still, its reaction to the murders reflects both the growing importance of Mekong regional trade and mounting pressure to protect Chinese citizens abroad. Beijing apparently seriously contemplated military intervention. Following the killings, General Liang Guanglie, a state councilor, defense minister, and member of the Central Military Commission, stated in an interview that "the actual operation will be led by the police, but if the need arises, we [the PLA] are ready to render assistance." He elaborated that "specific operations are for the Public Security Bureau to handle, [but] if needed we can provide support."<sup>68</sup> Liang's immediate and resolute response to the murders mirrored that of his civil counterparts, suggesting that the military also felt a sense of urgency to alleviate public pressure.<sup>69</sup> His response came amid profuse postings by Chinese netizens—the same type of pressure that helped motivate Beijing to

<sup>66</sup> "13 Chinese Crew Members Killed on Mekong River near Golden Triangle," *Telegraph*, October 10, 2011 ~ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8818063/13-Chinese-crew-members-killed-on-Mekong-River-near-Golden-Triangle.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Marshall, "Special Report: In Mekong, Chinese Murders and Bloody Diplomacy."

<sup>68</sup> Zhang Yan, "Zhongtai liangjun huiying Meigonghe can'an: Zhongfang yuan jieru, Taifang pie zeren" [Chinese and Thai Militaries Respond to Mekong Massacre: China Willing to Intervene, Thailand Neglects Responsibility], *Yicai*, October 31, 2011 ~ <http://www.yicai.com/news/2011/10/1169463.html>.

<sup>69</sup> "Zhi ge wei wu: Jianyue er bu jianan de fangwu huiying" [Armed Deterrence: A Straightforward and Unambiguous Defense Response], *Wen Wei Po*, November 9, 2011.

respond to Somali piracy in 2008.<sup>70</sup> The central government issued a strong public response, and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Security quickly dispatched teams to handle the incident. Both China's minister and deputy minister of public security made statements, and Premier Wen Jiabao discussed sending police personnel to Thailand to orchestrate a multilateral response with the other countries involved (Burma, Laos, and Thailand).<sup>71</sup>

In early November 2011, China, Laos, Burma, and Thailand agreed to collaborate to maximize joint patrol efficiency. China's Yunnan Provincial Border Control Corps, operating out of Port Guanlei on the Sino-Burmese border, is primarily responsible for participation in these joint patrols.<sup>72</sup> Beijing confirmed that it would send working groups to participate in quadrilateral joint investigations, and teams operating in other countries' sovereign territory—in particular, Burma's continental and riparian territory—were to perform evidence collection along the river.<sup>73</sup> Zhu Dezhong recalled in late 2012 that “at the beginning, some neighboring countries still had doubts. But after we explained, the patrols proceeded quite smoothly, and we made new ‘breakthroughs’ in every patrol.”<sup>74</sup> This statement suggests that China had urged its neighbors to join the initiative and that it valued obtaining explicit consensus before actually intervening along the Mekong.

According to a November 2011 statement by Cheng Jun, the press officer for the Yunnan Provincial Border Control Corps, China's patrol forces have been composed of a “special armed force” of the corps with one thousand armed police officers and five modified patrol ships.<sup>75</sup> Patrols escort both Chinese- and regionally flagged merchant ships. China's first patrol ships left port from Yunnan on December 10, 2011, and safely escorted two cargo ships before returning two days later. Headquartered in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, with satellite stations in the other participating countries, joint armed patrols commenced on December 15. Police departments of the four countries

<sup>70</sup> “Zhongguo shufu tai duo: Meigonghe can'an zui zhong zhi neng bu liao zhi” [China Is Too Constrained: Mekong Ultimately Can Only Be Left Unresolved], *Xilu dongfang junshi*, October 19, 2011 ~ [http://junshi.xilu.com/2011/1018/news\\_340\\_198591.html](http://junshi.xilu.com/2011/1018/news_340_198591.html).

<sup>71</sup> Tom Fawthrop, “Murder on the Mekong,” *Diplomat*, December 9, 2011 ~ <http://thedi diplomat.com/2011/12/09/murder-on-the-mekong>.

<sup>72</sup> “Zhong Lao Mian Tai wancheng 2013 nian shouci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa” [China, Laos, Burma, and Thailand Complete First Mekong River Joint Patrol Law Enforcement of 2013], *Xinhua*, January 28, 2013 ~ <http://finance.chinanews.com/gn/2013/01-28/4527522.shtml>.

<sup>73</sup> “Meigonghe can'an junfang ying jieru?” [Should the Military Intervene in the Mekong Massacre?], *Wangyi*, November 2, 2011 ~ <http://focus.news.163.com/11/1102/11/7HROCB0100011SM9.html>.

<sup>74</sup> “Mekong Security in Focus as China Tries Myanmar Drug Lord,” *Xinhua*, September 20, 2012 ~ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2012-09/20/c\\_131863265.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2012-09/20/c_131863265.htm).

<sup>75</sup> Zhang Yan and Cui Haipai, “China Readies Armed Patrols of Mekong,” *China Daily*, November 9, 2011 ~ <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/7639410.html>.

established coordination teams, and China trained and equipped police forces in Laos and Burma.<sup>76</sup> Patrols utilize eleven flat-bottomed passenger and cargo ships based in Guanlei, and units are armed with Chinese assault rifles. Meanwhile, a *China Daily* op-ed has suggested that language barriers and lack of proper communications equipment for patrol duties could hamper operations, while the Mekong itself could impose food, medicine, and other supply-line disturbances. Furthermore, patrol boats traversing Mekong chokepoints are susceptible to land-based attack.<sup>77</sup>

Officially, China claims that it led the manhunt because the governments of Laos, Burma, and Thailand said their forces were not available.<sup>78</sup> The complex hunt for Kham was the Chinese police force's first dragnet for foreign criminals abroad. Liu Yuejin, director of the anti-drug bureau in China's Ministry of Public Security, revealed that one of the contingency plans for capturing Kham was to bomb his alpine stronghold in northeast Burma using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).<sup>79</sup> As Kham had already escaped three times because China was "limited in what it could do overseas," UAV deployment offered an innovative option for deeper intervention. Liu's statements received heavy public scrutiny, as many interpreted them as evidence of increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy and weapons development.<sup>80</sup> Yet Liu also emphasized that China did not use the PLA and did not "harm a single foreign citizen."<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, according to Liu, the drone strike was rejected not because of the sovereignty issues associated with a military intervention but rather because authorities preferred to catch Kham alive. Equally significant, Liu suggested that China's Beidou navigation satellite system would have been employed to guide the UAV. Having achieved regional coverage in early 2013, Beidou is better able to support China's expanding international operations.

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<sup>76</sup> "China and Neighboring States to Patrol Mekong River," BBC, November 27, 2011 ~ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15908534>.

<sup>77</sup> Chu Hao, "Keeping a Vital Waterway Safe," *China Daily*, December 15, 2011 ~ [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-12/15/content\\_14268372.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-12/15/content_14268372.htm).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Liu Chang, "Jinduju juzhang jiangshu zhuibu Nuo Kang neimu" [Narcotics Control Bureau Head Explains Inside Story of Pursuing Naw Kham], *Global Times*, February 19, 2013 ~ [http://world.huanqiu.com/depth\\_report/2013-02/3652848.html](http://world.huanqiu.com/depth_report/2013-02/3652848.html); and Jane Perlez, "Chinese Plan to Kill Drug Lord with Drone Highlights Military Advances," *New York Times*, February 20, 2013 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/21/world/asia/chinese-plan-to-use-drone-highlights-military-advances.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Ernest Kao, "China Considered Using Drone in Myanmar to Kill Wanted Drug Lord," *South China Morning Post*, February 20, 2013 ~ <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1154217/china-considered-using-drone-myanmar-kill-wanted-drug-lord>.

<sup>81</sup> Perlez, "Chinese Plan to Kill Drug Lord with Drone."

The system is credited with providing “tremendous assistance in identifying and catching” Kham’s Burmese business adviser Zhan La.<sup>82</sup>

Liu’s revelations that China was considering deploying drones abroad also suggest that it is gaining confidence in its UAV technology. In the future, Beijing may gravitate toward drone strikes because of their cost-effectiveness and low visibility. China is rapidly developing a range of UAVs and employed one to survey damage after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.<sup>83</sup> Under the right conditions, a future Chinese drone operation abroad might be portrayed by Chinese authorities as having a precedent publicly established by Liu, and could thus potentially be defended as an institutionalized operation rather than a sudden shift in security policy.

*Results from the joint patrols.* Initial results from the joint patrols were mixed. On December 12, 2011, three Burmese officers were shot dead while patrolling the river; their killers remain unknown. Soon after, on January 4, 2012, a convoy of four Chinese merchant ships being escorted by Burmese patrol forces was attacked with rocket-propelled grenades. On January 14, another Chinese cargo ship steaming from Chiang Saen to Guanlei was ambushed in Laotian waters.

Since these incidents, however, safety has increased considerably. In April 2012, a total of 130 ships reportedly traversed the Mekong, 110 of which were Chinese-flagged.<sup>84</sup> As of February 2013, China had completed eight rounds of Mekong patrols with Laos, Burma, and Thailand, and four more patrols were completed intermittently over the next six months. The force’s political commissar, Liu Jianhong, described it as “a groundbreaking model of a police co-operation mechanism.”<sup>85</sup> After thirteen months, a total of 1,198 law-enforcement officials on 55 ships had been dispatched during eight joint patrols, which covered a total of 4,060 km over 333 hours. The four countries also conducted four joint drug-inspection operations, which searched 78 boats carrying 345 people and 3,400 tons of cargo. By November 2012, patrols had helped merchants recover over \$4.8 million in goods. The

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<sup>82</sup> Liu, “Manhunt for Deadly Drug Kingpin.”

<sup>83</sup> This finding is based on displays and videos at the Aviation Expo/China 2013, China National Convention Center, Beijing, September 25–27, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> Bu, “Meigonghe, huhang shifou kexing?” 32; and “Mekong River: Charming River with Hidden Dangers,” CNTV, October 11, 2011 ~ <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newshour/20111011/110705.shtml>.

<sup>85</sup> “China Begins Joint Patrols along Mekong River,” Al Jazeera, December 10, 2011 ~ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2011/12/2011121064129119613.html>.

eighth patrol, for example, covered 486 km over 80 hours.<sup>86</sup> In a typical inspection from early 2013, the patrol boarded a Chinese vessel for twelve minutes. Officers identified themselves, verified the Chinese captain's identity, and examined cargo and luggage.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, which have continued uninterrupted for over four years, the joint Mekong patrols are short-term, intermittent operations. Nonetheless, patrols have persisted for two years since late 2011. The patrols are especially noteworthy because they constitute China's first dispatch of police and security forces to other states' sovereign territory without a UN mandate. In particular, China's role in capturing Naw Kham has received unprecedented attention. Kham was captured during a joint Chinese-Laotian police operation in late April 2012 and extradited to Yunnan by Laotian security officials. Yet a March 2013 interview with a Chinese antinarcotics official suggests that China led the police operation.<sup>88</sup> Kham was eventually flown to Beijing, where he stood trial along with six collaborators.<sup>89</sup> In November 2012, Kham and three other suspects were sentenced to death by the Intermediate People's Court of Kunming, Yunnan, and they were subsequently executed on March 1, 2013, with the event broadcast on Chinese national television.<sup>90</sup> In addition, another suspect received a suspended death sentence and eight years in prison. The joint Mekong patrols thus represent a significant policy difference from the PLAN's operations in the Gulf of Aden, during which China has never tried a single pirate on Chinese soil.<sup>91</sup>

*Future prospects for joint security operations.* Despite the limited scale of operations, prospects for future Chinese contributions to Mekong security are bright, particularly with regard to multilateral cooperation. On January 26, 2013, over 30 officials from the four countries met regarding joint Mekong patrols. They agreed that while commercial shipping activities had returned to pre-2011 levels, the four parties should establish a working mechanism

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<sup>86</sup> Yang Jinfeng, "Meigonghe chuanmin: Meigonghe anquan geng you yikao le" [Mekong Boatmen: Mekong Security Gains Additional Support], *Fazhi zhounuo*, February 5, 2012 ~ <http://www.legalweekly.cn/index.php/Index/article/id/2038>.

<sup>87</sup> "Zhong Lao Mian Tai wancheng 2013 nian shouci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa."

<sup>88</sup> Jane Perlez and Bree Feng, "Beijing Flaunts Cross-Border Clout in Search for Drug Lord," *New York Times*, April 4, 2013 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/world/asia/chinas-manhunt-shows-sway-in-southeast-asia.html>.

<sup>89</sup> "Suspected Mekong Murder Mastermind Extradited to China," *GoKunming*, May 14, 2012 ~ [http://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2707/suspected\\_mekong\\_murder\\_mastermind\\_extradited\\_to\\_china](http://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2707/suspected_mekong_murder_mastermind_extradited_to_china).

<sup>90</sup> Stephanie Chen, "Death Sentences for Mekong River Murderers of 13 Chinese Sailors," *South China Morning Post*, November 7, 2012 ~ <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1076573/death-sentences-mekong-river-murderers-13-chinese-sailors>.

<sup>91</sup> Liu, "Manhunt for Deadly Drug Kingpin."

for sharing information and exchange and strengthen relevant intelligence collection along the river basin to better fight regional criminals collectively.<sup>92</sup>

Official Chinese media outlets have hailed the joint patrols as new forms of positive cooperation among China and its ASEAN partners, which was previously limited to economic development. The primary objective remains stabilizing the Mekong to ensure safe trade routes for China and its regional partners. Echoing the considerations of public perception that informed Beijing's approach to Somali piracy, Song Qingrun, a researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, declared that "the resumption of shipping along the river will help improve China's image as a responsible regional power and promote free trade between China and Southeast Asia."<sup>93</sup> Additionally, it is noteworthy that joint patrols have increasingly been used as platforms for broader exchanges. For example, during the fifteenth joint patrol, police personnel engaged in soccer matches and dialogues.<sup>94</sup> This is broadly similar to the way in which PLAN antipiracy flotillas have used the journey to and from the Gulf of Aden as an opportunity to conduct public relations activities with dozens of states.

Future joint patrols may extend onto land, which would mark another breakthrough in Chinese armed operations abroad. The current policy allows patrol boats to enter the territorial waters of other countries on the Mekong but forbids land operations. Huang Wei, an official in Yunnan's Provincial Border Control Corps, announced in September 2012 that China and Laos agreed to expand joint patrols to include "key spots" on land.<sup>95</sup> If actually implemented as an official policy, this would constitute the first instance of the PRC's sustained intervention inside a sovereign country without a UN mandate.

It must be emphasized that the Mekong and Gulf of Aden operations differ in significant respects that make the former more challenging: whereas the latter occur largely in international waters, the Mekong patrols occur in the territorial waters of riparian states. They thus confront unique legal, political, and operational obstacles. Beijing repeatedly emphasizes that not only does Article 7 of the UN Charter authorize operations in Somali waters, but Mogadishu requested Chinese deployments proactively. In contrast, patrol forces along the narrow Mekong River often encounter land-based attacks

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<sup>92</sup> "Zhong Lao Mian Tai wancheng 2013 nian shouci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa."

<sup>93</sup> Zhang and Cui, "China Readies Armed Patrols."

<sup>94</sup> "Di shiwu ci Meigonghe lianhe xunluo zhifa yuanman wancheng."

<sup>95</sup> "Mekong Security in Focus as China Tries Myanmar Drug Lord."

that are preventable only through terrestrial counterinsurgency, confronting countries desiring to intervene with complex legal issues. China and partner states have discussed land-based operations, but we are unaware of any such operations that have actually occurred on a normalized basis. In addition, a larger undercurrent that potentially precludes the levels of cooperation found in the Gulf of Aden is China's complex relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors. Recent reaffirmation by the United States of its robust presence in the region further complicates negotiations on how the six Mekong nations should address riverine crime collectively, if at all.

Another potential obstacle to enhancing Chinese involvement on the Mekong concerns the cost-benefit analysis. While the PRC cherishes its image as a protector of Chinese citizens abroad, the potential military gains from such operations are probably miniscule compared with the gains from the PLAN's far-seas antipiracy missions, as are the opportunities for learning from and conducting exchanges with the world's most powerful militaries.

Nonetheless, there are significant opportunities for Chinese riparian patrols. The Mekong nations' unanimous agreement on freedom of navigation in 2001 reflects shared economic and political interests within the Mekong community. In fact, the 2001 Lancang-Mekong River Commercial Vessel Passage Agreement contains a clause stating that multilateral cooperation will help reduce crime in the region, which is a potential foundation for multilateral patrols.<sup>96</sup> Growing levels of cooperation among Mekong states as a result of joint patrols are a positive step toward more meaningful cooperation in addressing regional nontraditional security threats in the future.

*Evidence of policy flexibility.* As stated above, the swiftness of China's response to the Mekong tragedy is notable because it represents the first protracted deployment of Chinese police forces abroad without a UN mandate. Kham's execution made it abundantly clear that China was not overly concerned with legal fallout that might result from putting to death the top criminal in a region where state security forces proved incapable of addressing nontraditional security threats.

In addition, Chinese planners exhibited dynamic thinking by considering the option of deploying a UAV to eliminate Kham. Conversely, of course, their decision to eschew such a tactic arguably indicates a preference for more traditional approaches involving ground-based police operations. Yet perhaps even more significant than China's contingency plan to employ a UAV in a foreign mission is its overt disclosure of such a possibility. This case suggests

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<sup>96</sup> Bu, "Meigonghe, huhang shifou kexing?" 32.

that the government is becoming more comfortable revealing dynamic approaches to nontraditional security, particularly in regions where China enjoys relative influence and leadership.

Statements by the PLA's top generals that military support was available further indicate a willingness to adapt new approaches to addressing nontraditional security threats. China has not yet integrated military forces into the Mekong operations, probably because it perceives its border security forces as more than capable of securing the underdeveloped region. From a legal perspective, the operations occur in China's immediate periphery, and all four countries involved explicitly have authorized the relatively small-scale joint patrols, even if there is no international mandate for them. Although China has traditionally assumed a leadership role in Southeast Asia, the fact that it promptly took the lead in organizing the operations is notable. Details are still emerging, but it appears that China is applying a flexible approach to foreign policy in the case of nontraditional waterborne security in the Mekong region. Similarly, Liu Yuejin's remarks referenced above suggest that public security authorities had at least two operational plans for capturing Kham—another sign that China is increasingly focused on adapting its foreign policy to the needs of idiosyncratic missions rather than following a static ideology.

## CONCLUSION

Although China's maritime security assets remain oriented toward the near seas, other regions in which China faces waterborne nontraditional security challenges offer important insights into its evolving foreign policy. In these areas Beijing is actively integrating dynamic platforms, personnel, and coordination structures to handle manifold nontraditional waterborne security contingencies. Although fundamentally different in terms of China's involvement, geographic scope, and international law, the Gulf of Aden and Mekong River cases demonstrate China's growing efforts to protect its interests abroad. Beijing is willing to contribute resources, leadership, and other public security goods commensurate with its interests and capabilities in a given region, contingent on the existence of what it perceives as acceptable international or regional legal backing. Moreover, although the sample size is small, these cases demonstrate that China's presence in global waterborne security can bolster existing maritime security structures rather than potentially undermining them.



While both cases create unique challenges for Beijing, they also share important commonalities: in each region, nonstate crime is motivated primarily by economic incentives, and China's intervention followed an attack on Chinese citizens or property. The nontraditional security challenges in these waters have generated a small but growing portfolio of Chinese operations to safeguard PRC interests abroad. They offer vital opportunities for China to experiment with new approaches and tactics while developing its policies on international maritime security. Moreover, in both regions, China has incentives to deploy more flexible and pragmatic approaches to foreign policy that involve working together or in parallel with other countries to secure common interests.

Comparing China's activities in the Gulf of Aden and Mekong reveals several patterns. As suggested by the joint patrols in the Mekong, Chinese foreign policy dynamism may be greater in China's periphery. In the manhunt for Naw Kham, Beijing actively intervened on foreign soil to catch a non-Chinese criminal, extradited him to China, sentenced him to death, and executed him there. By contrast, China's antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden remain primarily limited to deterrence-based escort flotillas, even after five years of continuous operations. Of course, Kham was charged with crimes other than piracy; trying Somali pirates would raise different legal issues. That said, some Chinese experts advocate greater assertiveness farther afield. For example, during a May 2011 speech at the U.S. National Defense University, General Chen Bingde, the PLA chief of staff, stated that "for counter-piracy campaigns to be effective, we should probably move beyond the ocean and crush their bases on the land."<sup>97</sup> Other Chinese experts concur that the solution to piracy lies on land, although they do not indicate what Beijing might do about this in the future.<sup>98</sup>

These cases reveal significant variation in Chinese approaches toward waterborne foreign policy: Beijing pursued disparate policies and tactics based on the unique circumstances and challenges presented by each situation. Additional examples are needed to determine conclusively whether true dynamism is emerging in Chinese policymaking, as well as whether the degree of flexibility is actually greater in regions closer to China. Nevertheless, Beijing's growing willingness to proceed according to circumstances rather than prewritten doctrine is abundantly evident. This active pragmatism

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<sup>97</sup> Chen Bingde (speech presented at the U.S. National Defense University, Washington, D.C., May 18, 2011).

<sup>98</sup> This analysis draws on discussions between one of the authors and several Chinese experts in August 2013.

effectively shields China as it crafts a new foreign policy model commensurate with its evolving domestic imperatives and international role.

Further evidence of this trend may emerge as nontraditional waterborne security threats continue to jeopardize China's and other states' interests. The pirate-infested Gulf of Guinea and the nontraditional security challenges it creates for maritime commercial states, for example, could provide a future platform for Chinese policy innovation. While the Gulf of Guinea is less central to China's maritime livelihood than the Gulf of Aden, Beijing is reportedly considering cooperation with states there—although it remains unclear whether such activities would involve direct involvement or more indirect tactics.<sup>99</sup> The former would almost certainly require an international mandate; if robust legal foundations were to be put in place, China might well be willing to cooperate against piracy with regional littoral states in the Gulf of Guinea as well as with other interested states. Similarly, while arguably far more complex because of territorial disputes among several states, the South China Sea could easily become another arena for Chinese waterborne nontraditional security responses if any of its latent threats, such as piracy and other maritime crime, were to materialize at higher levels. Either way, Beijing's creative involvement will likely continue to enter new dimensions and domains in the coming years and reshape China's role in the world.

Evidence to date suggests that its approach to international waterborne security allows China to bolster rather than undermine prevailing international-security mechanisms. Responding nimbly to unique circumstances helps China contribute where it is needed most. Sub-state threats along the poorly governed Mekong River, for example, may demand Chinese policy and operational leadership. Other regions, such as the Gulf of Aden, may demand operational contributions from China more than organizational leadership. Beijing appears flexible regarding the nature of its contributions so long as Chinese interests are secured. This pragmatism may facilitate the coalescence of security contributions by China, the United States, and other nations in future governance of international waterborne security.

Flexible policymaking helps the PRC shield itself from complex internal and external pressures while continuing its ascendance from a developing country to a global power. It suggests that China's security and paramilitary forces will expand their ability to conduct nontraditional security missions abroad, particularly in the maritime domain, where China and other states

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<sup>99</sup> This finding draws on discussions between one of the authors and several Chinese experts in August 2013.

are “in the same boat.” China’s increasingly dynamic maritime foreign policy suggests the following recommendations for policymakers in the United States:

- While less sensitive than China’s near seas, security in various dimensions of the maritime commons is hindered by suboptimal global governance. Established powers such as the United States should therefore welcome a robust Chinese security presence to help secure the commons.
- As the PLAN’s contributions in the Gulf of Aden demonstrate, China is increasingly willing to bolster its provision of international public goods in the maritime domain. Chinese efforts can be integrated into broader maritime and waterway security schemata, albeit imperfectly.
- Beijing is preparing to contribute leadership in degrees more closely approaching its relative influence in particular regions, based on its perceived security needs there. Other states should explore new ways to encourage greater Chinese participation in dialogues that result in agreements and frameworks underpinning security operations in the maritime commons. Disclosing more information about Chinese capabilities and intentions in relevant regions can be mutually beneficial for China and its partners.
- Incremental positive results increase the probability that China and other aspiring maritime powers will embrace existing governance models, thereby enhancing the efficiency of these models and raising the ceiling for cooperation among states vis-à-vis waterborne nontraditional security. ◆