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## Places and Bases

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## PLACES AND BASES

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### The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean

*Daniel J. Kostecka*

**D**ue to self-imposed policy, the People's Republic of China (PRC) does not base military forces in foreign countries, and PRC officials have used this as evidence of China's peaceful development.<sup>1</sup> However, China's growing global economic and political interests are causing Beijing to take a more nuanced approach to its policies regarding the deployment and employment of military force. Specifically, the ongoing deployment of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships to the Gulf of Aden, now in the sixth rotation of combatants, to guard international shipping against pirates operating from the Horn of Africa has highlighted the need for shore-based logistics support for PLAN forces oper-

ating in the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Over the past year, public statements by Chinese academics and government officials have indicated that there is a debate going on in China over the need to establish some sort of overseas infrastructure to support deployed naval forces. Rear Admiral Yin Zhou (Retired), chairman of the Chinese Navy Informatization Experts Advisory Committee, opined during an interview on China National Radio in December 2009 that China requires a "stable and permanent supply and repair base."<sup>3</sup> Rear Admiral Yin's interview was picked up by the international press circuit and has generated a great deal of excitement, although in reality he did not say anything that has not already been said by other Chinese government officials and academics. Despite an immediate retraction

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by the Ministry of Defense, it is even possible that Rear Admiral Yin's statements and similar statements by other officials are indications that Beijing is preparing to announce that it has reached an agreement with a nation or nations in and around the Gulf of Aden to provide logistics support to PLAN forces deployed to the area. Public statements from Chinese officials regarding this issue suggest an effort to "test the waters," to gauge and shape international reaction to such a move prior to announcement. Chinese officials and academics made similar statements during the fall of 2008 prior to the announcement by Beijing that PLAN ships were deploying to the Gulf of Aden to participate in counterpiracy operations.<sup>4</sup>

Despite public statements indicating that the issue of shore-based logistics support is being debated in China, port calls for rest and replenishment by PLAN ships deployed for counterpiracy operations, negotiation of defense agreements, and military engagement through goodwill cruises and exercises show that a regional support network is already taking shape. It can even be argued that it is no longer an issue of whether China will seek out friendly ports from which to support its forces, because those locations are already being used by the PLAN. For example, Salalah in Oman is serving as a regular supply port for Chinese warships operating in the Gulf of Aden; every ship in the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth rotations called into Salalah for resupply between June 2009 and August 2010 (see map).

At the same time, statements by Chinese officials do not indicate that Beijing is considering building financially and politically costly American-style military bases, with the attendant infrastructure to support thousands of deployed and in some cases permanently assigned personnel. Much of the discussion outside of China regarding future support infrastructure for Chinese forces in the Indian Ocean has revolved around the "string of pearls" strategy that Beijing is alleged to be pursuing. This theory, a creation of a 2004 U.S. Department of Defense contractor study entitled *Energy Futures in Asia*, has since become popular, particularly in the United States and India, and is accepted as fact by many in official and unofficial circles.<sup>5</sup> However, while the study in its entirety is not baseless, certain elements of it have been selectively quoted as evidence of Beijing's strategic intent. This has led to an interpretation of Chinese grand strategy that is often presented with dark overtones hinting at an aggressive reading on Beijing's part of Alfred Thayer Mahan's writings. As part of this strategic construct it is claimed that Beijing is building a comprehensive network of naval bases stretching from southern China to Pakistan. The past several years have seen rampant speculation in the press and even some U.S. government publications regarding future Chinese naval bases at such locations as Gwadar in Pakistan, Sittwe in Burma,

Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Chittagong in Bangladesh, with only superficial evidence to support such claims.

Despite the furor it has generated, the “string of pearls” does not represent a coordinated strategy on the part of China, and there is no substantive evidence in Chinese sources or elsewhere to support the contentions of commentators, academics, and officials who use it as a baseline for explaining Beijing’s intentions in the Indian Ocean. Reality is shaping up to be quite different. The current debate in China is revolving around the establishment of what are commonly referred to in the U.S. military as “places,” as opposed to bases.<sup>6</sup> This type of strategy involves securing with friendly governments diplomatic agreements allowing access to those nations’ facilities in order to obtain essential supplies, such as fuel, food, and freshwater, for deployed forces.<sup>7</sup> Such agreements can also involve reciprocal guarantees of military support in such areas as training, equipment, and education. One example is the United States–Singapore Memorandum of Understanding, which permits the U.S. Navy access to Changi Naval Base while providing the use of Air Force bases and airspace in the continental United States for training by the Republic of Singapore Air Force. What the Chinese are currently debating is whether deployed PLAN forces need places to which regular access is guaranteed by formal diplomatic agreements, or whether the current ad hoc system of calling in friendly ports when necessary is sufficient for the accomplishment of current and future missions.<sup>8</sup>

### ONGOING DEBATE

China’s stated policy of noninterference is a significant element of its national security policy, and a lack of Chinese military bases abroad is often cited as an example of Beijing’s adherence to its position of noninterference and nonalignment. As the official daily of the Communist Party of China put it in 1999,

China adheres to an independent foreign policy as well as to the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence in developing diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries. China consistently opposes imperialism, hegemonism, and colonialism, works to strengthen unity with the people of other countries, supports the oppressed nations and the developing countries in their just struggle to win and preserve national independence and develop their national economies, and strives to safeguard world peace and promote the cause of human progress.<sup>9</sup>

Chinese official documents and statements are replete with references to this issue, serving as a not so subtle signal that despite its rise to economic and political prominence, along with its military modernization, China is not a conquering,

imperialistic power along the lines of, the Chinese would say, the United States, the great powers of Europe, or even Japan.<sup>10</sup> China's 2000 white paper on national defense states, "China objects to any country imposing in any form its own political system and ideology on other countries. China does not seek military expansion, nor does it station troops or set up military bases in any foreign country."<sup>11</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed in a 1997 address at the U.S. Army War College by Lieutenant General Li Jijun, then vice president of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Academy of Military Science (AMS): "China has not occupied a single square inch of foreign soil, nor has it possessed any overseas military bases. Furthermore, China has not retained any military presence beyond its own territory."<sup>12</sup> He added, most likely in order to emphasize the differences between China and other, more aggressive foreign powers, "Even though parts of Chinese territory are still occupied by its neighbors, China has shown great restraint and patience as it calls for peaceful solutions to the territorial disputes left by history."<sup>13</sup> More recently, in a June 2009 article Senior Colonel Zhou Chen of AMS stated that while China's new national interests pose challenges to the tradition of not establishing overseas military bases, China "will still not establish a large global network of military bases and station forces in overseas areas on a large scale like some countries do."<sup>14</sup>

Though China's global economic interests are growing and Chinese citizens working abroad are sometimes threatened and even killed, Beijing still avoids basing troops in foreign countries, even where its interests are at risk. Senior Colonel Zhou noted that the new requirements of China's national security strategy pose challenges to the traditional notion of not dispatching soldiers overseas or establishing bases in foreign countries.<sup>15</sup> The policy of noninterference, then, has remained in place as an essential component to China's foreign policy; nonetheless, Beijing has shown a capacity to adjust its definition of noninterference to fit changes in China's security dynamic. One notable example is UN peacekeeping operations. China once criticized such missions as violations of a nation's sovereignty. However, since 1992, when Beijing sent four hundred PLA engineers to Cambodia for peacekeeping duty, over fifteen thousand total Chinese peacekeepers have served abroad, while the policy of noninterference remains in place.<sup>16</sup> In December 2008, shortly before Beijing announced it would send warships to the Gulf of Aden, Pang Zhongying, a professor of international relations at Renmin University, stated, "Nonintervention is the principle of China's foreign policy, which has not changed." He added, however, "China is now trying to balance its old principles and the new reality."<sup>17</sup> In a similar situation, Japan has deployed forces to the Gulf of Aden for counterpiracy patrols and has even signed a status-of-forces agreement with Djibouti securing support facilities for its forces in a

manner that does not violate article 9 of its constitution, which permits the use of military force only in self-defense. Should China sign an agreement guaranteeing access to port facilities by PLAN warships and even a small number of deployed personnel for logistics and administration, Beijing will no doubt go to great lengths to do so consistently with its policy of noninterference. It might emphasize that its forces had been invited by the host country specifically to support Chinese forces engaged in internationally sanctioned missions, such as the international counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.

Beijing's noninterference policy aside, there appears to be a debate in official Chinese circles regarding the need to enhance the PLA's ability to support its forces deployed abroad. In December 2008, just before Beijing's announcement that it would deploy ships to the Gulf of Aden, Major General Jin Yinan of the PLA's National Defense University admitted that the lack of bases in the Indian Ocean was a problem, although he expressed confidence in the PLAN's at-sea replenishment capabilities.<sup>18</sup> In February 2009, in what is likely the most forward-leaning statement by any Chinese official, Senior Colonel Dai Xu of the PLA Air Force, an outspoken military strategist, stated that establishing overseas bases is a logical extension of the PLAN mission to the Gulf of Aden and a necessity if China is to protect its overseas interests and participate in peacekeeping, humanitarian, and disaster-relief operations.<sup>19</sup> Senior Colonel Dai even went so far as to declare, "If we make things difficult for ourselves in this matter by maintaining a rigid understanding of the doctrines of nonalignment and the nonstationing of troops abroad, then it will place a lot of constraints on us across the board."<sup>20</sup> Dai's comments were reinforced in May 2009 by Senior Captain Li Jie of the navy, who stated that over the long term China should consider establishing land-based supply facilities in order to conduct its overseas missions. Senior Captain Li discussed the importance of Djibouti to U.S., French, and Japanese forces in the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa and suggested that China establish a support base of its own in East Africa, where it has excellent diplomatic relations.<sup>21</sup>

This debate did not receive much attention until late December 2009, when Rear Admiral Yin Zhou, interviewed on China National Radio, asserted that a stable and permanent supply and repair base would be appropriate and that shore-based supply was important for the rest and exercise of sailors, treatment of sick and injured crewmen, and replenishment with fresh fruit, vegetables, and drinking water. He pointed out that other nations, notably the United States and France, already have extensive facilities in the region, including a large presence in Djibouti by both nations.<sup>22</sup> What is noteworthy is that while Rear Admiral Yin's comments have generated a great deal of attention, they were in fact less provocative than those of Senior Colonel Dai and Senior Captain Li. It is clear

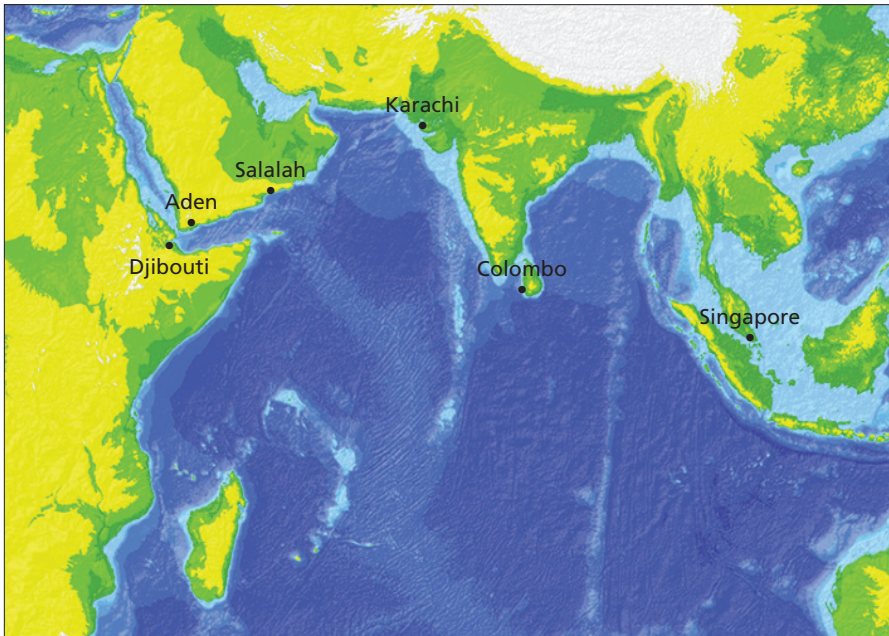
that the admiral was stating his personal opinion on the issue; such a decision, he stipulated, was ultimately for the Chinese Communist Party, the Central Military Commission, and the State Council.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, unlike his colleagues' earlier comments, Rear Admiral Yin's interview was picked up by the international press, and the reaction was both rapid and predictable. The BBC reported the concern of other nations about signs of increasing assertiveness in China's foreign policy; Dr. Arthur Ding, a professor at National Chengchi University in Taiwan, called Rear Admiral Yin's proposal a clear step by Beijing toward the completion of the "string of pearls."<sup>24</sup> The PRC Ministry of Defense immediately issued, on 1 January 2010, a clarification of Rear Admiral Yin's comments, declaring that an overseas supply base was not an urgent concern and that the PLAN would continue to employ its current supply and replenishment system—although, the ministry added, a supply base might be an option for the future.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, other Chinese commentators weighed in on the issue. Senior Captain Li reaffirmed his comments from May 2009 stating that China should consider setting up a supply base, noting that such facilities and arrangements are a common way for navies to ensure that their forces are supplied and their crews are provided opportunities for rest. Jin Canrong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University, dismissed as overreaction the negative responses to the personal views of Rear Admiral Yin. At the same time, he concurred with Yin that China should not rule out an overseas supply base: "China's national interests have extended beyond its border, so it is necessary to have the ability to protect them."<sup>26</sup> The Ministry of Defense on 10 March reiterated Beijing's position that China has no plans to establish overseas military bases; other officials, including the deputy chief of staff of the PLAN, made similar statements.<sup>27</sup>

## PLACES FOR THE PLAN

The ongoing debate in China over whether or not to formalize logistics support agreements for its naval forces in the Indian Ocean reflects the evolution of the PLA's expanding missions in the region. As China maintains a task group of warships off the Horn of Africa to conduct counterpiracy patrols, as well as expand its overall military footprint in the Indian Ocean through such other means as exercises, goodwill cruises, and foreign sales, it also continues to cultivate the commercial and diplomatic ties necessary to sustain its forces deployed abroad. While government officials and academics debate the extent to which China should formalize support arrangements with other nations, a supply network is in fact taking shape. As Professor Shen Dengli of Fudan University states, "Whether the overseas military base has a proper name is not important. What is important is to contact the host countries which would allow our navy soldiers to take a

## PORTS OF CALL



rest.”<sup>28</sup> Whether the PLAN develops its support network through a series of formal agreements that guarantee access or continues to supply its forces as it has been, a support network is developing, and it will continue to grow. The existence of this support network can be seen in the ports in the Indian Ocean where the PLAN has quietly called. The list of these ports is an indicator of not only where the PLAN prefers to replenish its ships and rest its crews but also of where it is likely to develop formal arrangements should it choose to do so. Song Xiaojun, Beijing-based military expert and editor of *舰船知识* (*Naval and Merchant Ships*) magazine, has even stated that the Omani port of Salalah and the Yemeni port of Aden are both excellent supply points due to their locations and the fact that through multiple dialogues China and the host nations have already formed relationships of mutual trust.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Salalah, Oman***

The PLAN ships deployed to the Gulf of Aden have utilized Salalah more than any other port, with nineteen port calls through August 2010, and it can be argued that Salalah is already a “place” for the PLAN in fact if not in name. The PLAN counterpiracy patrol units began using Salalah during the second rotation. Between 21 June and 1 July 2009 the three ships then on duty—*Shenzhen* (DD 167), *Huangshan* (FFG 570), and *Weishanhu* (AOR 887)—made individual port visits there for rest and replenishment. According to Rear Admiral Yao Zhilou, the mission commander of the second PLAN counterpiracy rotation, the ships coordinated their



port calls to ensure that five groups of fifty-four total merchant vessels still received escort over the eleven-day period in which the port visits took place. The port visits to Salalah also represented the first rest ashore for PLAN personnel deployed to the Gulf of Aden. According to the *PLA Daily*, the officers and sailors went on group shopping and sightseeing trips in Salalah and engaged in such recreational activities as tug-of-war and table tennis matches with civilians.<sup>30</sup> Since then the ships of the third counterpiracy rotation called in Salalah during the second half of August 2009, the ships of the fourth counterpiracy rotation called in Salalah in early January 2010, those of the fifth rotation called in Salalah in the first half of April 2010 and in June 2010 as well. The ships of the sixth rotation replenished in Salalah in August 2010, which included the first foreign port call by *Kunlunshan* (LPD 998), the newest and most modern amphibious assault ship in service with the PLAN.<sup>31</sup>

Overall, Oman and China have a stable and positive relationship. China has been the largest importer of Omani oil for several years; oil accounts for over 90 percent of all bilateral trade between the two.<sup>32</sup> Over the past decade, Chinese oil imports from Oman have fluctuated between 250,000 and 300,000 barrels per day, representing over 40 percent of Oman's annual oil exports. As China has diversified its sources of imported oil, Oman's share in China's total imports has decreased significantly since 2000, when it provided 30 percent of China's imported oil.<sup>33</sup> However, China is also looking to Oman as a supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and in September 2008 China National Offshore Oil Corporation signed a master purchase and sale agreement with Qalhat LNG of Oman. China is considered to be one of the fastest-growing LNG markets in the world; its first LNG purchase from Oman was in April 2007, which was also China's first-ever spot-cargo LNG purchase.<sup>34</sup> Although Oman does not represent a significant market for Chinese military hardware, the Omani Royal Guard did purchase fifty WZ-551 armored vehicles from China in 2003.<sup>35</sup>

Given the stable oil trade and growing LNG trade between Oman and China, along with the economic benefits to the host nation of foreign sailors spending time ashore, there is no reason to believe that Oman will not continue to permit PLAN vessels to utilize Salalah as a place for rest and replenishment. In fact, the PLAN's successful use of Salalah suggests that its current system for sustaining its forces is sufficient. Gu Likang, the deputy commander of the fourth counterpiracy task group, even pointed out that the successful resupply of PLAN forces in Salalah is a reflection of the strong support to the deployment of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese embassy, and other agencies, like the China Ocean Shipping Company.<sup>36</sup> However, it should not come as a surprise if current arrangements evolve into a formal agreement. Even if China curtails

or ends its involvement in the counterpiracy patrols, Salalah's status as one of the top containerports in the region and its strategic position at the nexus between the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea—less than a hundred miles from key shipping lanes—make it a useful port for PLAN forces operating in or transiting the Indian Ocean.<sup>37</sup>

As evidence of the enduring geo-economic significance of the Omani coastline, the ports in the Dhofar region of southern Oman (where Salalah is located today) were visited by the fifth, sixth, and seventh of Admiral Zheng He's treasure fleets that sailed the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433, during the Ming dynasty.<sup>38</sup> Zheng He's mariners traded silk and porcelain for Arab pharmaceuticals, such as myrrh, aloe, and storax, and an ambassador from Dhofar even traveled to China to pay tribute to the emperor.<sup>39</sup> While the connection between the voyages of Zheng He's ships to Dhofar and the use of Salalah by PLAN warships today is probably nothing more than an interesting historical coincidence, in April 2008 China's ambassador to Oman saw fit to mention the visits by the treasure fleets as evidence of the long history of trade and friendship between the two nations.<sup>40</sup> Further, historical accuracy aside, the official Chinese narrative of the voyages of Zheng He's treasure fleets emphasizes their peaceful nature, their focus on trade and diplomacy, in contrast to European conquest and colonization.<sup>41</sup> Should Beijing pursue a formal arrangement with Oman for the support of PLAN warships operating in the Indian Ocean, there can be no doubt that public statements from Beijing discussing the agreement will cite Zheng He as evidence that the people of Oman and the region at large need not fear the presence of the PLAN in their waters.

### ***Aden, Yemen***

Aden was the first port utilized by PLAN ships during their ongoing deployment to the Gulf of Aden. The initial call was from 21 to 23 February 2009, during the first counterpiracy rotation, when *Weishanhu* loaded diesel fuel, freshwater, and food stores with which to replenish the task force's destroyers.<sup>42</sup> On 25 April 2009, *Weishanhu* made a second visit to Aden to take on stores after the arrival of the second counterpiracy task force, and a third on 23 July 2009 to take on stores prior to returning to China with the *Shenzhen* and *Huangshan*.<sup>43</sup> During the third and fourth counterpiracy rotations, according to press reports, *Qiandaohu* (AOR 886) called into Aden in October 2009 and March 2010, while *Weishanhu* made a five-day port call in Aden beginning on 16 May 2010, during the fifth rotation, and a late July 2010 port call during the sixth rotation.<sup>44</sup>

At first glance, Aden should be an ideal place for the support of PLAN operations in the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean, as it is strategically located at the western end of the Gulf of Aden, near the Bab el Mandeb. As with Oman,

China is a significant trading partner for Yemen. At approximately forty thousand barrels per day, China is the top customer for Yemen's limited oil sales, and the Chinese oil giant Sinopec signed a \$72 million contract with Yemen in January 2005.<sup>45</sup> There are even ancient trade links between the two nations. In the twelfth century, the Muslim merchant Shereef Idrisi noted Chinese junks laden with spices in the port of Aden, and detachments from Zheng He's fifth, sixth, and seventh expeditions visited Aden.<sup>46</sup> Given its internal challenges and need for economic and security assistance, Yemen is probably more than willing to provide support to the PLAN on either a formal or informal basis for as long as the PLAN desires.

Nonetheless, due to the active presence of al-Qa'ida in the area, China likely prefers additional options for supporting PLAN operations in the Indian Ocean. In December 2009 Yemen's foreign minister acknowledged, "Of course there are a number of al-Qa'ida operatives in Yemen including some of their leaders."<sup>47</sup> It is also certain that the December 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* (DDG 67) while docked in Aden is in the thoughts of Chinese leaders charged with planning and executing PLAN operations in that part of the world. Additionally, the December 2009 attempt to attack a Detroit-bound Northwest Airlines flight by Yemen-based al-Qa'ida operatives has probably served as a reminder of the potential dangers of using Yemen as a place from which to support deployed PLAN warships. Senior Captain Yang Weijun, the commanding officer of *Weishanhu*, stated that the primary reason for the expansion of Chinese ashore support operations in Salalah was to explore further methods of replenishment based on the commercial model, but it is likely that concerns over security and stability in Yemen influenced the decision as well.<sup>48</sup> Further reinforcing the likelihood of PLAN skepticism toward Aden are the descriptions in official PLA press reports of the visits as strictly for replenishment, whereas articles detailing port visits to Salalah also describe the recreational opportunities enjoyed by the ships' crews.

In this sense it is no small irony that the PLAN is relearning a lesson of centuries past: in 1432 two of Zheng He's ships attempted to unload cargo in Aden but were unable to do so due to the instability that gripped the great trading port during the waning days of the Rasulid dynasty.<sup>49</sup> While the PLAN will probably continue to employ Aden as a place for the replenishment of its forces operating in the Gulf of Aden, it is unlikely to make Aden its preferred resupply port in the region.

### ***Djibouti***

Unlike Salalah or even Aden, Djibouti may not be an established place for the resupply of Chinese naval forces operating in the Gulf of Aden but it still represents a significant port of call. To date, four PLAN ships engaged in counterpiracy

patrols have called into Djibouti, *Ma'anshan* (FF 525) on 25 January 2010, *Guangzhou* (DDG 168) on 3 May 2010, and *Kulunshan* and *Lanzhou* (DDG 170) in September 2010.<sup>50</sup> In addition to the September 2010 port calls by ships engaged in counterpiracy patrols, in late September 2010 the PLAN's most modern hospital ship, *Anwei* (AH 866), made a highly publicized goodwill port visit to Djibouti, where the ship and its crew provided onshore medical services, as part of its fall 2010 deployment to the Indian Ocean. In public statements on the need for China to set up an overseas supply base to support naval and air forces operating in the Gulf of Aden, both Senior Captain Li Jie and Rear Admiral Yin Zhou discussed the importance of Djibouti. Senior Captain Li even called for the establishment of a facility somewhere in East Africa.<sup>51</sup> In late December 2009, Djibouti's foreign minister traveled to Beijing for a three-day visit to mark the thirtieth anniversary of formal relations between Djibouti and the PRC and for talks aimed at strengthening bilateral relations. On 2 March 2010, a Chinese delegation headed by Major General Li Ning, the defense counselor for the Chinese mission to the European Union, visited the headquarters of European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Somalia in Djibouti.<sup>52</sup>

Djibouti would be an excellent choice as a place for the PLAN, and it should not come as a surprise if its ships begin to visit the East African nation on at least a semiregular basis. A presence in Djibouti would accommodate Beijing's reluctance to appear too forward leaning with regard to the Indian Ocean, because other major powers have already secured access there. France and the United States both maintain substantial forces in the former French colony, and in April 2009, Japan signed a status-of-forces agreement with Djibouti that provides for the support of warships deployed to the Gulf of Aden and permits Japan to base P-3C maritime patrol aircraft there for the counterpiracy mission.<sup>53</sup> The facilities at Djibouti are also utilized by the naval forces of other nations, such as Germany and South Korea. France's Base Aérienne 188 is home to the headquarters of EU NAVFOR Somalia/Operation ATALANTA, the European Union naval force tasked with protecting and escorting merchant ships in the gulf.<sup>54</sup> It would be difficult for governments whose forces are engaged in counterpiracy operations to be critical of any form of bilateral cooperation or agreement that involves the use of Djibouti by the PLAN. Additionally, like Aden, Djibouti is strategically located astride key shipping lanes near the Bab el Mandeb, while unlike Aden it is, given the large multinational military presence there, relatively safe and secure.

One final element that could make Djibouti attractive as a place for the support of PLAN ships operating in the Gulf of Aden is its proximity to Sudan and Ethiopia. At this time, over 40 percent of China's UN peacekeepers are in Sudan, and Chinese oil workers have been killed in both countries. Given the potential

for future instability in East Africa, there will likely be increased public pressure on the Beijing government to protect Chinese citizens abroad. At some point, China could decide to conduct a noncombatant evacuation operation to extract its citizens from Sudan or Ethiopia, either unilaterally or in cooperation with other nations. If this were to happen, even a minimal presence in Djibouti could facilitate the deployment of PLA forces to the region as well as help ensure coordination with the forces of other nations conducting similar operations.

Conversely, despite its advantages it is possible Djibouti will not become the primary resupply port for PLAN forces operating in the Gulf of Aden. The large foreign naval presence in Djibouti could make the PLAN uncomfortable, with one Chinese commentator stating, "They have built military bases with the existence of armed forces. A Chinese supply point would only be a hotel-style peaceful presence. There is no need to be grouped together with them."<sup>55</sup> Given Beijing's desire to present its operations as different from those of the Western powers and their large-scale and almost neo-imperial presence in the area, the PLAN could be ordered to limit the amount of time its ships spend in ports where there is a significant foreign military footprint. Such an approach is consistent with China's white paper *China's National Defense in 2008*, which calls for the PLA to develop cooperative relationships with countries that are nonaligned.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Karachi, Pakistan***

China's investment in the construction of the port of Gwadar in western Pakistan has fueled speculation for almost a decade that Beijing's ultimate goal is to turn the port into a Chinese version of Gibraltar or even Pearl Harbor, a shining jewel in the "string of pearls."<sup>57</sup> But the reality does not come close to matching speculation. First, despite Chinese investment in its construction, in February 2007 management of the port was awarded instead to Port of Singapore Authority, calling into question just how involved China will be in its future.<sup>58</sup> Second, analysis of photographs of Gwadar and commercial satellite imagery available through Google Earth reveals that in comparison to other regional ports it is a rather unimpressive and exposed facility, lying in an underdeveloped part of Pakistan with only a poor road network leading to more developed areas. Third, the Baluchistan region of Pakistan, where Gwadar is located, is rife with instability; Chinese workers have been attacked there on at least three separate occasions. Fourth, the Pakistani press reports that much of the equipment at Gwadar—gantry cranes, navigation lights, a refrigerated container-stacking facility, and harbor tugs—is in dilapidated condition, due to lack of regular maintenance.<sup>59</sup> Beijing's decision in August 2009 to pull out of funding an oil refinery at Gwadar, following a January 2009 decision by the United Arab Emirates to suspend funding for a refinery in the same area, calls into question Islamabad's designs

for a \$12.5 billion oil city in Gwadar, further undermining Gwadar's economic future.<sup>60</sup> Fifth, if Gwadar's near-term commercial viability appears questionable, its military utility is nonexistent. The port terminals occupy a small peninsula connected to the mainland by a narrow land bridge about half a mile wide. Unless China or Pakistan is willing to make the necessary investments in air defenses, command and control, and hardened structures, Gwadar will remain vulnerable to air and missile strikes.<sup>61</sup> Such upgrades would not be necessary if the PLAN desired to use Gwadar only for basic logistics support, but the other factors make it unlikely that the PLAN views it as viable at any level.

For all the hype about Gwadar, it is far more likely that Beijing would send its warships to Karachi, Pakistan's largest port and primary naval base, if it were to seek a facility in Pakistan to support its forces. In its twenty-five years of goodwill cruises and exercises with foreign navies, the PLAN has visited Karachi more often—seven times, including three in the past three years—than any other port. The PLAN is also now a regular participant in the Pakistani-sponsored multilateral AMAN exercises, having sent warships to AMAN '07 and AMAN '09. Additionally, substantial ship construction and repair facilities, including dry docks, are available at the Pakistan Naval Dockyard and the Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works (KSEW). Karachi is also where the Pakistani navy bases its three Chinese-built F-22P frigates; the fourth, which will also be based at Karachi, is being built by KSEW with Chinese assistance.<sup>62</sup> These warships, which most likely enjoy some degree of parts commonality with PLAN frigates, and extensive repair facilities, make Karachi a strong candidate as a friendly port where China would seek to repair any ships damaged operating in the Indian Ocean. The possibility of PLAN ships seeking repairs at Karachi was stated as fact by Senior Captain Xie Dongpei, a staff officer at PLAN headquarters, in June 2009, while in July 2010 the Pakistani naval chief of staff, Admiral Noman Bashir, stated that Pakistan can provide ports, logistics, and maintenance to the Chinese navy.<sup>63</sup> That Admiral Bashir called attention to Pakistan's ability to provide logistics and maintenance to the PLAN indicates that he was referring to the robust dockyards of Karachi as opposed to the limited facilities of Gwadar. One final advantage offered by Karachi is its proximity to PNS *Mehran*, Pakistan's primary naval aviation facility. The Pakistani navy bases at PNS *Mehran* six Chinese-made Z-9EC helicopters, the aircraft the PLAN primarily employs on its own destroyers and frigates. Should the helicopters of any Chinese ships operating in the Indian Ocean require significant repairs, necessary facilities and spare parts could be found at PNS *Mehran*.

Karachi's distance from the Gulf of Aden, over a thousand nautical miles, makes it unlikely to be utilized by the PLAN for rest and replenishment on a regular basis. However, there is no doubt that PLAN ships will continue to visit

Karachi for goodwill purposes, for bilateral and multilateral exercises, and in transit to and from the Gulf of Aden, as *Huangshan* and *Weishanhu* did on their voyage home in August 2009.<sup>64</sup> Given the close relationship between Beijing and Islamabad, Pakistan will likely grant PLAN ships access to the repair facilities at Karachi if needed.

### ***Colombo, Sri Lanka***

China's relationship with Sri Lanka has received a great deal of attention recently, due to Chinese financing in the construction of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota and military aid in the fight against the Tamil Tigers, including the early 2008 delivery of six new-build F-7G fighter aircraft.<sup>65</sup> It is even argued that Hambantota, like Gwadar in Pakistan, is one of the key "pearls" that China is developing along the shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. However, beyond Chinese financing there is little to support this contention except perhaps ancient trade links between China and Sri Lanka. From that standpoint the issue is intriguing, because for centuries Sri Lanka served as a key nexus of China's maritime trade in the Indian Ocean along the "Porcelain Route" (as the maritime counterpart of the Central Asian "Silk Road" is known to historians). Sri Lanka was visited by all seven of Zheng He's treasure fleets, and it is one of the few places where Zheng led troops in combat—against a rebel leader seeking to overthrow the Sinhalese ruler of the kingdom of Kotte, with Zheng's intervention ensuring Kotte remained a loyal tributary to the Ming dynasty.<sup>66</sup>

On a map, a Chinese-funded naval base in Sri Lanka looks like a dagger pointed directly at India. In reality, its very proximity to India would make such a base a liability in any serious conflict without substantial air defenses, command-and-control facilities, and hardened infrastructure, which Sri Lanka certainly cannot afford to provide. At the same time a robust base at Hambantota or anywhere else in Sri Lanka would represent a costly investment that would be unnecessary for the support of forces engaged in counterpiracy patrols, peacetime presence missions, or naval diplomacy and would inflame China's already complicated relations with India.

While it is unlikely, for these reasons, that Hambantota will be developed into a naval base, the PLAN is not a stranger to Sri Lanka; Colombo, Sri Lanka's largest port and primary naval base, is becoming a popular mid-Indian Ocean refueling stop for Chinese warships.<sup>67</sup> In 1985, Colombo was one of the ports of call during the PLAN's first foray into the Indian Ocean. More recently, in March 2007, the two *Jiangwei II*-class frigates steaming to Pakistan for AMAN '07, the first multilateral exercise in which the PLAN participated, stopped in Colombo to refuel, on the same day the Sri Lankan president was visiting China.<sup>68</sup> In March 2009, *Guangzhou* also stopped in Colombo to refuel during its voyage to Pakistan for

AMAN '09, and again on its way back to China.<sup>69</sup> Finally, in January 2010 *Wenzhou* (FF 526) made a three-day stop in Colombo after escorting the merchant ship *Dexinhai*, which had recently been freed by pirates off the coast of Somalia. The port call was highlighted by a visit to the ship by both the commander and the chief of staff of the Sri Lankan navy.<sup>70</sup>

Beijing will probably not seek a formal agreement with Sri Lanka for the use of Colombo as a place to replenish its naval forces operating in the Indian Ocean. It is more likely that PLAN ships transiting the Indian Ocean will leverage Beijing's stable and friendly relationship with Sri Lanka to continue using Colombo as a refueling location, in order to establish a presence along key shipping lanes and help sustain positive relations with a key regional ally. Should Beijing pursue a more general agreement with Colombo on use of Sri Lankan port facilities by the PLAN, it will probably be similar to the January 2008 arrangement between China and Singapore calling for increases in exchanges, education opportunities, and port visits.<sup>71</sup> Such an arrangement would be sufficient to support PLAN operations, with the added benefit of strengthening military relations between China and Sri Lanka without needlessly antagonizing India.

### *Singapore*

In the speculation about future Chinese facilities in the Indian Ocean, Singapore has been largely ignored by pundits and military analysts. This is somewhat puzzling, given Singapore's friendly relations with Beijing and its strategic position on the Straits of Malacca, which Chinese strategists consider a critical gateway to the Indian Ocean. PLAN vessels have made five calls to Changi Naval Base, including the May 2007 participation of a South Sea Fleet *Jiangwei II* frigate in the multilateral exercise IMDEX '07, a December 2009 visit by *Zhoushan* (FFG 529) during its transit home from patrol duty in the Gulf of Aden, and a September 2010 port visit by *Chaohu* (FFG 568) and *Guangzhou* during their transit home from the Gulf of Aden.<sup>72</sup> During their port visit, *Chaohu* and *Guangzhou* exercised with a warship of Singapore's navy. The defense agreement of January 2008 noted above also points to Singapore's close relation with China, and in May 2010 Singapore's prime minister stated his nation would continue to strengthen its military ties with Beijing.<sup>73</sup> In addition to port visits by ships returning from counterpiracy duty, another recent element of strengthening military ties between Singapore and Beijing is a September 2010 exchange visit in the Gulf of Aden between *Kunlunshan* and the Republic of Singapore Navy warship *Endurance* (LPD 207). However, the fact that Singapore also has close relations with the United States puts the island nation in a delicate position. Also, the littoral states of the Straits of Malacca—Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia—are all sensitive to foreign military operations in the vital waterways. Offers from the



United States, Japan, India, and most recently China to assist with naval patrols in the area have been rebuffed.<sup>74</sup> It is thus unlikely that there will be a formal agreement between Beijing and Singapore along the lines of the United States–Singapore Memorandum of Understanding, which guarantees the use of Changi Naval Base, as such a move would alarm Washington. At the same time, there is no reason for Singapore to deny increased use of its facilities to PLAN ships transiting to or from the Indian Ocean or patrolling in the South China Sea. Further, Chinese warships will likely call in Singapore more often, for a combination of goodwill visits, bilateral and multilateral exercises, and fuel. This prospect, combined with good relations with Beijing, a large ethnic Chinese population in the region, and the 2008 defense agreement, should allow the PLAN to establish an increased presence in Singapore in an unobtrusive manner, without objections from the other Malacca littoral states.

### CHINA'S GROWING PLACE IN THE WORLD

The ongoing debate in China and statements from public officials and academics regarding the need for shore-based logistics support for PLAN forces has generated a great deal of attention, as well as confusion. It is clear that China is not seeking to establish large, American-style bases, which for Beijing would be financially and politically costly and of questionable strategic value. China's investment in the construction of commercial port facilities in such locations as Gwadar and Hambantota is presented as evidence that China is seeking to build naval bases in the Indian Ocean. However, converting these facilities into bases, viable in wartime, would require billions of dollars in military equipment and infrastructure. Even then, their exposed positions would make their wartime utility dubious against an enemy equipped with long-range precision-strike capability.

Nonetheless, China is developing in the Indian Ocean a network of, not bases, but “places” in order to support forces deployed for nontraditional security missions like the counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. Most of these places will be used on an informal basis; the PLAN will continue to rely on strictly ad hoc commercial methods to support its forces, as it has been doing for over a year. Arguably, any port along the Indian Ocean littoral where China enjoys stable and positive relations is a potential “place” in this sense, although factors such as location, internal stability, and recreational opportunities for sailors on liberty will certainly influence decisions on whether, exactly where, and how often PLAN ships visit. The visit to Abu Dhabi by *Ma'anshan* and *Qiandaohu*, the first by PLAN warships to the United Arab Emirates, is evidence of this sort of approach.<sup>75</sup>

At the same time, ports that are important to the PLAN's missions and overall posture in the Indian Ocean—such as Salalah, Aden, Djibouti, Singapore, and

possibly Karachi—could become the subjects of formal agreements that guarantee access and support to PLAN forces operating in and transiting the Indian Ocean, in order to provide secure and regular sources of rest and supply. As pirates operating off of the Horn of Africa expand their attacks, particularly to the south toward the Mozambique Channel, the PLAN, like other navies engaged in counterpiracy patrols, could expand its operating areas. Such a move would likely necessitate an extension of the network of ports the PLAN visits for rest and re-supply, perhaps to Mombasa in Kenya and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.<sup>76</sup>

The development of a support network by China for its naval forces operating in the Indian Ocean represents a natural outgrowth of the ongoing counterpiracy mission and the PLAN's tentative yet very real steps away from home waters and into the global maritime domain.<sup>77</sup> Beijing's official policy of noninterference is seemingly a stumbling block to formal agreements for logistical support to PLAN ships in the Indian Ocean. However, legal nuance probably can be written into any agreement to ensure consistency with official policy. Just as Japan is tailoring and adjusting its laws governing the employment of its military forces to a changing international dynamic, there is no reason to believe that China cannot and will not seek to achieve a balance between maintaining its policies and principles, on one hand, and on the other adjusting to its growing place in the world.

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#### NOTES

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Navy or Department of Defense.

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