

## China's Growing Naval Influence in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

**Current Chinese basing capacity and force commitment in the region seem insufficient to support the level of economic and diplomatic engagement that appears to be Beijing's new normal, so Washington should prepare for further expansion.**

Since sending its first naval escort task force (NETF) to the Gulf of Aden in 2008, China has steadily grown its naval footprint in the Middle East. Although the initial impetus of this presence—countering piracy—has waned, Beijing has put down roots and continues to employ its modernized navy to reinforce its interests in the region. As local ties deepen, the presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will probably deepen as well, with increasingly robust basing structure and maturing engagement with various Arab states. What might this expansion look like, and does it show any signs of halting or contracting in the near term?

### The PLAN's Role in Chinese Regional Strategy

Although many of China's ambitious global military projects are associated with President Xi Jinping's leadership, it was in 2008 under President Hu Jintao that these aspirations truly became evident. This was the year that Beijing launched its first modern naval mission abroad. As one of the "New Historic Missions" that Hu first announced four years earlier, the 2008 "Far Seas" deployment saw three PLAN warships sail to the Gulf of Aden as an independent counterpiracy task force.

Since then, the PLAN has [launched \(http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-12/05/content\\_10203387.htm\)](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-12/05/content_10203387.htm) forty-two NETFs for the ostensible purpose of combating piracy, despite the precipitous drop-off in attacks on shipping by 2015. Chinese state media [claim that \(https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1271933.shtml\)](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1271933.shtml) naval forces have escorted "more than 7,000 Chinese and foreign ships," "established informal sharing mechanisms" with foreign navies, and effectively deterred Somali piracy. Although the PLAN remains on the periphery of international counterpiracy coalitions, it does conduct naval exercises with countries such as Iran, [Pakistan \(https://navalpost.com/chinese-naval-escort-task-group-returns-home/\)](https://navalpost.com/chinese-naval-escort-task-group-returns-home/), and Russia.

Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army established its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017. Beijing initially described it as a logistics facility supporting its counterpiracy missions, then later acknowledged it as a [military support facility \(https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/dim-2017-u-015308-final2.pdf\)](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dim-2017-u-015308-final2.pdf) and "strategic strongpoint (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2020/04/cmsi-china-maritime-report-6-djibouti-chinas-first-overseas-strategic-strongpoint/#:~:text=China's%20first%20overseas%20strategic%20strongpoint%20at%20Djibouti%20is%20a%20secure,the%20Indian%20Ocean%20and%20beyond.>)". In addition to housing intelligence collection equipment, the base [was expanded \(https://news.usni.org/2021/04/20/africom-chinese-naval-base-in-africa-set-to-support-aircraft-carriers\)](https://news.usni.org/2021/04/20/africom-chinese-naval-base-in-africa-set-to-support-aircraft-carriers) to accommodate the PLAN's aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships—capabilities that are unnecessary for combating piracy and were added well after the specter of that threat had receded. The PLAN's interest in acquiring operational footholds in the [Indian Ocean \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/07/china-pla-military-bases-kiribati-uae-cambodia-tanzania-djibouti-indo-pacific-ports-airfields/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/07/china-pla-military-bases-kiribati-uae-cambodia-tanzania-djibouti-indo-pacific-ports-airfields/) and Persian Gulf regions suggests that the Djibouti base will not be the last.

China's NETFs have likewise included vessels not necessarily suited for maritime security missions, reinforcing the thesis that these deployments have a grander strategic purpose than simply securing commerce. A NETF deployed in 2010 [included \(http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/China-Maritime-Study-10-Chinese-Antipiracy-Operations-in-the-Gulf-of-Aden\\_Erickson-Strange\\_201311.pdf\)](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/China-Maritime-Study-10-Chinese-Antipiracy-Operations-in-the-Gulf-of-Aden_Erickson-Strange_201311.pdf) a Yuzhao-class landing ship, a vessel designed for amphibious assault, not chasing pirates. And in 2014, the PLAN [dispatched \(https://news.usni.org/2014/09/30/chinese-submarine-headed-gulf-aden-counter-piracy-operations\)](https://news.usni.org/2014/09/30/chinese-submarine-headed-gulf-aden-counter-piracy-operations) a Song-class diesel-electric attack submarine from Hainan to patrol the eastern Indian Ocean. Although this was not the first time a submarine was deployed by a state conducting counterpiracy operations (the Netherlands did so in 2010), China's deployment was a significant test of its capability to project power far from its shores and caused significant consternation in India. Tellingly, a Chinese strategic planner [previously referred \(http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/China-Maritime-Study-10-Chinese-Antipiracy-Operations-in-the-Gulf-of-Aden\\_Erickson-Strange\\_201311.pdf\)](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/China-Maritime-Study-10-Chinese-Antipiracy-Operations-in-the-Gulf-of-Aden_Erickson-Strange_201311.pdf) to task force missions as a way to boost "the navy's capability to conduct Far Oceans quasi-combat operations."

From its earliest days, the PLAN's presence in the Gulf of Aden was also viewed as an entrepot for enhancing ties with regional states. By 2010, its three-ship NETF had transited the Strait of Hormuz and conducted the PLAN's [first port visit to a Middle Eastern state \(https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/chinese-warships-make-first-visit-to-port-zayed-1.522618\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/chinese-warships-make-first-visit-to-port-zayed-1.522618), arriving at Abu Dhabi's Port Zayed that March. Eleven years later, U.S. intelligence [informed \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224) the United Arab Emirates of a secret Chinese facility being built at the capital's Khalifa Port. The PLAN has also sent vessels to Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and it continues to deepen ties with regional navies through exercises, including with Washington's [closest partners \(https://www.arabnews.com/node/1594821/saudi-arabia\)](https://www.arabnews.com/node/1594821/saudi-arabia). In time-honored fashion, the flag follows trade, but in Beijing's case they sometimes arrive together—PLAN port calls are conspicuously associated with [boosting regional interest \(https://apnews.com/article/4bc34119907c44db97fe586e5a8baf51\)](https://apnews.com/article/4bc34119907c44db97fe586e5a8baf51) in China's Belt and Road Initiative, facilitating large trade deals, and conducting projects aimed at developing the maritime infrastructure of multiple Gulf states.

## Grow, Contract, or Stand Pat?

In light of the above strategic and diplomatic benefits, the PLAN's regional presence is unlikely to contract anytime soon. Reducing it at a time when Beijing is driving its Arab charm offensive into high gear would not make sense. Moreover, the PLAN presence is rotational, minimal, and one of the only deployments in which Chinese sailors, marines, and special operations personnel can gain operational experience at sea. The PLAN may decide to decrease the size or adjust the composition of its NETFs, but even this move seems unlikely at present.

Reducing the number of army personnel stationed in Djibouti is unlikely as well. China's continued investment in that base is a clear indication that it views the facility as worth expanding. The base's utility in the PLAN's occasional noncombatant evacuation operations (e.g., in [Libya and Yemen \(https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinese-evacuations-and-power-projection-part-1-overseas-citizen-protection/\)](https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinese-evacuations-and-power-projection-part-1-overseas-citizen-protection/)) is reason enough to maintain it, since rescuing foreign civilians from conflict zones alongside Chinese citizens has garnered positive press coverage for Beijing. Indeed, the only outside shock that might force a major change in the PLAN's regional posture may be conflict with the United States or another naval power.

To be sure, the PLAN has maintained the current formula of three-ship NETFs in the Middle East for fifteen years now, so it is certainly conceivable that Beijing sticks to that size while prioritizing naval deployments in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Yet China's apparent regional ambitions make it unlikely that three ships will be sufficient for the next act. A host of imperatives will probably draw the PLAN further in, including security threats to Chinese citizens in Pakistan, commodities and infrastructure investments in Africa, and growing economic ties with Gulf states. Solidifying a military foothold in the western Indian Ocean would also give Beijing [critical leverage \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/04/india-china-ocean-geopolitics-sri-lanka-maldives-comoros/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/04/india-china-ocean-geopolitics-sri-lanka-maldives-comoros/) in its contest with New Delhi, allowing it to apply pressure on both sides of India's maritime neighborhood should friction in the Himalayas or with the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) flare up more seriously.

The rate of deployment for PLAN task forces in the region has increased over time, from an average of 2.6 deployments per year between 2008 and 2017 to 3.6 thereafter. Maintaining this increased deployment rate through the COVID-19 pandemic period highlighted the importance Beijing places on the region, as well as the PLAN's increasing operational acumen and ability to generate expeditionary forces even in a time of crisis.

Hence, expansion is by far the PLAN's most likely scenario in the Middle East. China's enlargement of the Djibouti facility and quest for new bases in Africa, Pakistan, and the Persian Gulf indicate an interest in sustaining greater numbers of larger ships in the region. The prospect of a permanent rather than rotational presence should not be discounted either. Beijing has long sought to contrast its foreign military presence with that of the United States, partly by [criticizing \(https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619\\_10706059.html\)](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html) the large number of U.S. forces based abroad. Yet as China's naval power status and global economic interests continue to grow, its leaders are seemingly coming to appreciate the value of basing forces in friendly, geostrategically important states.

Regarding the Persian Gulf in particular, establishing a persistent naval presence inside and outside that waterway would give Beijing more confidence in a sustained flow of oil and other trade. For their part, Arab Gulf states recognize that the hydrocarbon era has a shelf life and are keen to garner Chinese support for their respective economic transitions, as seen in Saudi Arabia's "[Look East \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-states-looking-east-reinforce-economic-ties-with-china-xi-visits-saudi-2022-12-06/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gulf-states-looking-east-reinforce-economic-ties-with-china-xi-visits-saudi-2022-12-06/)" strategy. Large-scale Gulf investments in telecommunications infrastructure will also ensure Beijing's continued attention given China's global leadership in 5G implementation and 6G research.

One potential sticking point is the fact that China has [never been interested \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/20/china-us-middle-east-relations-hegemon-saudi-iran/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/20/china-us-middle-east-relations-hegemon-saudi-iran/) in assuming the "security guarantor" responsibilities that are the stated purpose of America's bases in the Gulf. Yet the speculative Chinese base in the UAE may provide insight into how the PLAN hopes to build its presence: in secret.

Beijing will also need to balance its relations with Arab partners [and Iran \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-one-step-closer-sco-membership\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-one-step-closer-sco-membership). On one hand, its defense relationship with Tehran stretches back decades; on the other hand, [economic ties with Saudi Arabia \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-saudi-arabia-wants-president-xis-visit\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-saudi-arabia-wants-president-xis-visit), the UAE, and similar states promise to be much more lucrative than anything Iran could offer. There are no outward signs of friction yet, but managing expectations with Tehran and its Arab rivals may become an issue. Indeed, Riyadh has already shown its willingness to take action against great powers that partner closely with Iran (e.g., voting to condemn Russia's Ukraine invasion at the UN).

## Implications for U.S. Policy

Most Middle Eastern states [are uninterested \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/middle-east-multipolar-era\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/middle-east-multipolar-era) in choosing sides in the expanding U.S.-China competition. Arab states in particular can be expected to seek maximal utility from both relationships without incurring the ire of either partner. This hedging will manifest in a number of ways, but ultimately Washington will need to decide [when and how \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-security-presence-middle-east-redlines-and-guidelines-united-states\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-security-presence-middle-east-redlines-and-guidelines-united-states) to limit engagements with traditional security partners as their exposure to the Chinese military increases. Clear communication will be crucial in setting limits for [what defense equipment \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations) and support will be available if relationships with the PLAN mature into basing or operational access.

In addition, the U.S. Navy will need to get used to operating alongside the PLAN more frequently in regional waters. Interactions between the two are already common and will become more so as the PLAN moves further into the region. Although such interactions are unlikely to become as acrimonious as those in the South and East China Seas, some degree of friction seems inevitable, including potential tactics such as close approaches, helicopter and drone surveillance, and [lasing incidents \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43999502\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43999502).

More broadly, the next decade may bring significant changes to the naval balance in the Persian Gulf and surrounding waters. As dwindling U.S. forces are redirected toward Asia, China's navy is resurgent and focused on expansion into the far seas. Traditional U.S. economic and security partners are eager to increase their ties with China's markets and buy its [defense equipment \(https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/the-middle-east-an-emerging-market-for-chinese-arms-exports/\)](https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/the-middle-east-an-emerging-market-for-chinese-arms-exports/), while relations with Washington have whipsawed between administrations. Addressing Beijing's growing influence at the western edge of the Indo-Pacific region will therefore require deft diplomacy and defense engagement from Washington.

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