



RCAS Commentary

Beijing Helps Safeguard Maritime Commerce

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October 1, 2026

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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Long before the Strait of Hormuz became a critical and highly vulnerable choke point for global energy trade, the maritime world witnessed the threat posed by non-state actors engaged in piracy off the Gulf of Aden in the Arabian Sea starting around 2008.



▲ Guided-missile destroyer Tangshan sets sail at a port in Qingdao, East China's Shandong province, Oct. 11, 2025. A new fleet of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy set sail from a military port in Qingdao, East China's Shandong province, to take over an escort mission from the previous fleet in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia. This 48th navy fleet comprises a missile destroyer, a missile frigate and a supply vessel -- with two helicopters and dozens of special forces members on board [Photo/Xinhua].

The Gulf of Aden became a focus of attention due to the activities of a small group of Somali pirates. A large number of merchant vessels that were engaged in legitimate maritime trade were attacked, many were hijacked, and billions of dollars were lost through ransom payments, increased insurance premiums and the rerouting of vessels around the Cape of Good Hope.

No single navy in the Indian Ocean region could handle this maritime security threat on its own. In view of the grave threat to freedom of maritime commerce, the United Nations Security Council adopted several resolutions authorizing international naval cooperation against piracy. Numerous naval forces — including those of the United States, the European Union, NATO, India, Japan, Russia, the Republic of Korea and China — deployed warships to safeguard freedom of navigation in the region.

Toward the end of 2008, China dispatched its first escort task force comprising two guided-missile destroyers and one replenishment ship to the pirate-infested Gulf of Aden to protect Chinese commercial ships and those of other countries. This marked the first operational deployment of Chinese naval forces beyond the first island chain in modern history and initiated one of the longest continuous overseas naval missions undertaken by any navy.

The People's Liberation Army Navy also provided humanitarian assistance and medical support and conducted search-and-rescue operations in the region. Thanks to the efforts of the PLA Navy and other navies, incidents of piracy gradually declined and maritime trade resumed.

These anti-piracy operations helped transform the Chinese Navy into a blue-water navy capable of projecting power far from home and playing a crucial role in protecting and helping govern the Indian Ocean as part of the global commons. Through this uninterrupted, long-term deployment, China has demonstrated a high level of operational sustainability and logistics management. Chinese Navy vessels have reportedly safely escorted more than 7,000 merchant ships from many countries. In addition to conducting anti-piracy operations, the Chinese Navy successfully evacuated citizens of several countries who were trapped by the worsening security situation in Yemen in 2015. This humanitarian operation received widespread international recognition and illustrated China's expanding role as a provider of maritime public goods.

Maritime security and safety are increasingly becoming a grave concern for maritime trade, and collaborative mechanisms are needed to ensure them. China's contribution to protecting international maritime trade, maintaining global supply chains, facilitating energy transportation and supporting humanitarian shipping has clearly demonstrated that China is acting beyond its own national and commercial interests. It has supported international maritime governance and demonstrated its ability to work closely with multinational maritime forces as well as individual countries outside China's territorial waters.

During these escort missions, China engaged in protecting transit corridors, information exchange, deconfliction mechanisms, communication protocols and joint search-and-rescue coordination. Such practical cooperation has reduced operational risks while strengthening international maritime governance. These long-term, sustained operations far from China's shores have also provided the PLA Navy with experience in long-distance navigation, fleet replenishment, maintenance at sea, extended crew endurance, overseas logistics, operational readiness and capabilities for expeditionary maritime operations. The operations have also helped the PLA Navy develop command skills and expertise in the rules of engagement, international communication, crisis management, boarding operations and maritime law enforcement.

A significant development was the establishment of China's support facility in Djibouti in 2017. This is China's first overseas logistics base, operating alongside bases run by Japan, the United States, France and Italy. The base has facilitated the replenishment of PLA Navy ships deployed for extended periods and provided repair and maintenance services, medical facilities and rest areas for crews. The base has substantially reduced the logistical constraints associated with sustained deployments for the PLA Navy.

From the Chinese perspective, the Gulf of Aden is a vital part of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, China is a net importer of oil and depends heavily on energy shipments passing through the region. Hence, the escort missions have broader implications for China. Protecting ships engaged in maritime trade also enhances China's global trade connectivity and investment security. It is a win-win situation for China and the wider world. China is also leading by example in line with its Global Security Initiative, which advocates common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.

The escort missions demonstrate China's evolution from a regional maritime power into a country assuming greater responsibility for maintaining international maritime stability. Furthermore, China has proved to the world its commitment to contributing to a community with a shared future for humanity, particularly in areas where international cooperation is essential.

The article was first published at China Daily, Jul.31, 2026, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202607/31/WS6a6c0360a310986e2b4684f5.html>.

About Author



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