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## China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East

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Sun Degang



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**Abstract**

China's military relations with the countries of the Middle East have become increasingly close in recent years. To protect its commercial interests and contribute towards international security, China has built up a soft military presence of various forms in the Middle East. Such overseas military forces are deployed either within the framework of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) or independently, and carry out military as well as civilian missions, especially in areas such as the evacuation of nationals, humanitarian relief, search and rescue, protecting expatriates, escorting, logistics supply, peacekeeping, and conflict prevention. The soft military footprints are not for geopolitical rivalry, but rather for mission-oriented tasks.

## **I. Dynamics of China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East**

The necessity of China's soft military footprints overseas can be detailed on three levels: the political dimension, the interest dimension, and the technical dimension.

**The political dimension concerns the diplomatic principle of China's soft military footprints overseas.** Soft military footprints are less aggressive than the hard footprints of military bases. In this manner, Beijing is able to adhere to the principles of traditional diplomacy and peace, namely, nonalignment, noninterference in the internal affairs of other nations, non-violation of the sovereignty of others, no sphere of influence, and no hegemony or power politics. Therefore, soft military footprints are compatible with traditional Chinese diplomatic principles. In August 2017, China began to use its first overseas logistics base in Djibouti. It is actually a supporting site for its convoy fleets in the Somali waters, not for geopolitical rivalry with the Western powers. However, United States (US) Army General David Rodriguez, the head of the US Africa Command, expressed concern about a possible hidden motive for China's soft military presence in Djibouti.<sup>1</sup>

Through the deployment of soft military forces, China wants to assure the international community that it has no "foreign military bases" and that its diplomatic principles are contrary to the "sphere of influence" mentality, but Chinese diplomatic principles do not ban the deployment of soft military footprints when its interests are under threat. China's soft military presence is the reflection of its projection of power within its surrounding areas, as Beijing claimed. Moreover, the military forces carry out the tasks of international peacekeeping, such as rescuing, combating piracy, safeguarding the security of the marine channel, maintaining maritime rights, and shouldering other military and civilian missions: in other words, providing public goods.

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(1) "China Retools Its Military With a First Overseas Outpost in Djibouti," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2015.

**The interest dimension is the need for maintaining soft military footprints to protect China's overseas interests.** The projects, such as Gwadar seaport in Pakistan (under Chinese construction), China-Myanmar energy transport lines, the high-speed railway construction projects between China and its neighbors, China's increasing numbers of energy projects overseas, and others, require the necessary military forces to ensure operational security. In the volatile Middle East, and particularly in Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, China's overseas investment projects are especially fragile. In 2015, Sino-Arab trade volume reached a new height of US\$250 billion, and in 2017, China was the largest investor in the Middle East, so Chinese efforts to protect its energy, investment, and trade interests in the region are quite formidable. On July 26, 2015, Chinese policymakers were shocked by a suicide attack at the Jazeera Palace Hotel in Mogadishu, which killed more than a dozen people and injured others. A Chinese security guard at China's embassy was killed and three embassy staff were wounded.<sup>2</sup>

Since the end of the cold war, the overseas trade lines of China have seldom been threatened directly. Although the sea power of China is facing challenges in the West Pacific, marine threats have never stopped China from expanding its interests globally. This geoeconomy-oriented strategy has always been the cornerstone of China's diplomacy. In 2013, the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), developed by President Xi, employed the logic of geoeconomic development as the priority. In June 2014, at the sixth ministerial conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, Chairman Xi highlighted the "1+2+3" cooperation pattern between China and the 22 Arab states. Under this plan, China proposed to make energy cooperation the principal axis; infrastructure construction and trade investments the two wings; and nuclear power, aerospace and satellites, and new energy areas as breakthroughs; all of these are based on the geoeconomic strategy.<sup>3</sup> China's

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(2) "China Strongly Condemns Attack in Somalia," *Xinhua*, July 27, 2015: [http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/27/c\\_134450934.htm](http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/27/c_134450934.htm).

(3) Xi Jinping, "Carry out the Silk Road Spirit, and Deepen China-Arab State Cooperation," *People's Daily*, June 5, 2014: <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0605/c1024-25109531.html>

military presence is designed to protect such commercial interests in the Middle East.

**The technical dimension is the feasibility of building a soft military presence.** It determines where, for what purpose, and in what forms the military will be deployed. Soft military footprints are the functional extension of the user nations' domestic military bases. In terms of China's soft military footprints in the Middle East, it has to solve the problem of where to station troops, how to provide logistic supplies to the military personnel in the region, and similar issues.

## **II. China's Long-term Soft Military Presence in the Middle East**

In 2015, China issued its first *National Military Strategy* (a white paper), which defines the major missions of its troops: to tackle all kinds of contingencies and military threats against its national territorial integrity and space and maritime sovereignty; to resolutely support national reunification; to maintain the nation's new forms of security and interests and preserve the safety of overseas interests; to keep up strategic deterrence and prepare for nuclear counterstrikes; to participate in regional and international security cooperation for regional and world peace; to strengthen its anti-penetration, anti-secession, and anti-terror efforts; to safeguard national political security and social stability; to participate in disaster relief; to safeguard the rights and interests of the Chinese people; and to support national economic and social development.<sup>4</sup>

Chinese military footprints in the Middle East can be classified into two categories: long-term and ad hoc military deployment. The former seeks relatively stable and long-term objects, such as the counterpiracy endeavor, the use of logistic military bases, and the UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East, while the latter aims to pursue relatively short-term and dynamic

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(4) Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "The White Paper of China's Military Strategy, 2015," Ministry of Defense, PRC, May 26, 2015: [http://www.mod.gov.cn/auth/2015-05/26/content\\_4586723.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/auth/2015-05/26/content_4586723.htm).

goals. The two forms of military deployments aim to protect Beijing's commercial, rather than its geopolitical, interests, as described previously. At present, the soft military footprints are an important part of Chinese military diplomacy. The main forms are listed next.

**First, the Chinese convoy fleet in the Gulf of Aden.** According to the International Cooperation Agreement of China's Ministry of Transportation, in October 2008, it lobbied the Foreign Ministry, requesting the Chinese government to dispatch convoy fleets to protect Chinese and other countries' commercial vessels adjacent to the Somali waters. By analyzing the overall situation at home and abroad, China's Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Defense jointly submitted a proposal to the central government, which facilitated the Chinese deployment of convoy fleets near the Gulf of Aden.<sup>5</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, a dozen ports in Pakistan, Singapore, Oman, Yemen, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Seychelles, and Tanzania were visited by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, as a measure for Beijing to select "places" or "far ocean footholds" to be used as informal bases to support forces deployed for non-traditional security missions like the counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>6</sup> From 2009 to 2015, China dispatched 20 convoy fleets to the Gulf of Aden and the Somali waters at large. They visited Port Djibouti, Mombasa in Kenya, Port Sultan, Qaboos in Oman, Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, Abbas in Iran, Karachi in Pakistan, and other sea ports near the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean, as a component of China's military diplomacy.

For a long time, the US has been concerned about Beijing's possible ambition to grab and even monopolize the Middle East oil, and indeed, China's congenial relations with all Middle East oil exporters including Iran has enhanced its advantage in any potential rivalry with the US.<sup>7</sup> China's

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(5) Tom Pember-Finn, "China and the Middle East: The Emerging Security Nexus," *Greater China*, 11, no. 1, (Summer 2011): 38.

(6) Andrea Ghiselli, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army 'Post-modern' Navy," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 50, no. 1 (2015): 126.

(7) Michael Klare and Daniel Volman, "America, China and the Scramble for Africa's Oil," *Review of African Political Economy*, 33, no. 108 (2006): 297-309.

convoy fleets in the Somali waters are perceived as a probing attempt to expand its foreign military presence in the near future. Nevertheless, China so far has been reluctant to build permanent military bases in the Middle East. The floating convoy fleets have offered a golden opportunity for China to interact with other great powers. According to China's 2013 *Defense White Paper*, which was released in December 2012, China had dispatched 34 convoy fleets, 28 helicopters, and 910 special forces, and had completed 532 convoy missions for 4,984 commercial vessels in four years, including 1,510 vessels from Mainland China, 74 from Taiwan, and 1 from Macao; China also rescued 2 Chinese commercial vessels from pirate attacks and 22 vessels that were being pursued by pirates.<sup>8</sup> With intensive multilateral cooperation and the improvement of international regimes, China is bound to expand the new realm of military presence.

**Second, the Chinese navy's logistics bases in the Middle East.** In March 2014, one of China's nuclear submarines entered the Indian Ocean to patrol those waters, indicating that China is exploring its military "going-global strategy," which caused grave concern in India and the US. China relies on logistics bases (technical stops) in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean at large, which can be categorized into three types.

The first type is that of the ship fuel and material supply points, such as Port Djibouti, Aden in Yemen, Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, Mombasa in Kenya, Salalah in Oman, and so on. In August 2010, the Chinese naval hospital ship *Peace Ark* visited Port Djibouti. In May 2015, Djibouti's president Ismaïl Omar Guelleh announced that China was in talks to establish a military base in the northern Obock region of the country, implying that it will overlook the US military installations there. The base's installation will also bring in \$100 million, slightly more than the annual \$63 million of the US base.<sup>9</sup>

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(8) Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, *China's 2013 Defense White Paper* ("The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces"), p. 20, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2013-04/16/content\\_4442839.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2013-04/16/content_4442839.htm).

(9) "Is China Building a Military Base in Djibouti?" *Sputnik*, June 26, 2015:<http://sputniknews.com/africa/20150625/1023858381.html#ixzz3e9iVivWj>

The second is the relatively fixed supply ship berthing and fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft takeoff and landing point, such as the Seychelles, which is based on a short-term agreement. The governments of the Seychelles and Djibouti both offered China technical layovers and even military bases to support Beijing's military maneuvers in the Middle East and Africa,<sup>10</sup> but the Chinese government declined, arguing that the current logistics bases near the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the West Indian Ocean are sufficient to support China's convoy fleets and expatriate evacuation operations.

The third is a more complete recharge center, for rest and weaponry and large ship repair, such as Gwadar Port of Pakistan, which is in accordance with the long-term agreement.<sup>11</sup> Should a crisis erupt in the western Indian Ocean, Gwadar Port might be transformed from a commercial seaport to a cooperative security site between China and Pakistan, which will offer an ideal foothold for Beijing.

**Third, China's peacekeeping forces in the Middle East.** As of 2016, China has become a very important contributor of troops (3,072) and the second largest country financial donor (10.29%) to UN peacekeeping missions. In the Middle East, China has participated in the following UN peacekeeping missions: (1) in Jerusalem, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (2 observers); (2) the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (343 soldiers)<sup>12</sup>; (3) the United Nations Mission in the Sudan, located in South Sudan (444 soldiers, 18 police, and 12 military observers); (4) the United Nations – African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (321 soldiers); and (5) the United Nations Mission in Western Sahara referendum (12 military observers).<sup>13</sup>

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(10) "China Considers Seychelles Military Base Plan," *The Telegraph*, December 13, 2011; "Why Has the Djibouti Government Offered a Military Base to China?" *International Herald Leader*, May 21, 2015.

(11) "China's Overseas Military Base Is Just over the Horizon," *Wanxia*, no. 2 (2012): 25.

(12) Bonny Ling, "China's Peacekeeping Diplomacy," *China Rights Forum*, no. 1 (2007): 2: [http://www.hrichina.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/CRF.1.2007/CRF-2007-1\\_Peacekeeping.pdf](http://www.hrichina.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/CRF.1.2007/CRF-2007-1_Peacekeeping.pdf).

(13) Xulio Rios, "China and the United Nations Peace Missions," *FRIDE* (October 2008): 1: [http://www.fride.org/download/COM\\_China\\_peace\\_operations\\_ENG\\_oct08.pdf](http://www.fride.org/download/COM_China_peace_operations_ENG_oct08.pdf).

Before 2012, China's peacekeeping forces consisted mainly of engineering corps, as well as a certain number of military observers, police, doctors, nurses, and logistic personnel. In January 2012, China dispatched combat troops for the first time, aiming to provide a security guarantee to Chinese peacekeeping forces and medical personnel, and these troops were affiliated with the No. 162 Motorized Infantry Division of the No. 54 Group Army of Jinan Military Area.<sup>14</sup> The No.162 Motorized Infantry Division is Chinese first emergency maneuvering combat unit and rapid deployment force. Chinese peacekeeping forces in South Sudan, for instance, have expanded their content of service, conducive not only China to building its image as a responsible power, but also conducive to building a China-proposed "new model of great-power relations" to strengthen partnerships with the US, the European Union (EU), and Russia, among others. In October 2014, China dispatched 700 infantry battalion troops to the South Sudan for the first time in the history of UN peacekeeping missions.

### **III.China's Soft Ad hoc Military Presence in the Middle East**

Unlike the previously mentioned long-term military presence, which aims for relatively stable objectives, China's ad hoc military presence in the Middle East has more multidimensional functions, such as arms sales and military-training programs, the deployment of security contractors, joint military rehearsals, evacuation of overseas nationals, and participation in other temporary UN Security Council missions, among other efforts.

**First, China's military exchanges and arms sale have become increasingly extensive in the Middle East.** In recent years, with its expansion of arms sales to the developing countries, China has intensified its military exchanges with over 150 countries and established over 100 military representatives, either independently or inside Chinese embassies. From 2009 to 2011, the PLA dispatched high-level delegations to over 40 countries and

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(14) Daniel M. Hartnett, "China's First Deployment of Combat Forces to a UN Peacekeeping Mission-South Sudan," Staff Memo, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2012, p. 3.

received about 60 defense ministers and chiefs of general staff, including those from the Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

According to statistics from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the countries of the Middle East have the fastest growing rates of military budgets in the world. As early as the 1980s, China was one of the major suppliers of weapons to both Iran and Iraq, including the selling of the Type 69/WZ-121 main battle tank to Iraq and the Silkworm missiles to Iran. In return, China obtained MG-23 Floggers from Iraq and F-14 Tomcats from Iran. In 2012, the total defense budgets in the Middle East reached US\$100 billion, an increase of 8.4% since 2011. Compared with arms sales by the US, the EU, and Russia, China's arms sales to the Middle East are insignificant. In 2012, for instance, China's arms sales to the region amounted to only US\$753 million, while the US sales under the Obama administration were as high as US\$28.5 billion, according to *Phoenix Weekly*.<sup>16</sup>

In 1988, China sold DF-3 strategic ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia, and in the twenty-first century, China reportedly sold MBT-2000 tanks to the Kingdom. According to another report, China signed a contract with the Kingdom to sell it Pterosaurs-1 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in April 2014, after the PLA deputy chief of staff Wang Guanzhong visited Riyadh.<sup>17</sup> In September 2014, Anwar 'Ishqi, a consultant of the Saudi Joint Military Commission, confirmed that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had purchased DF-21 missiles from China to protect Mecca and Medina and the lesser Arabian monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Beijing justified its arms trade with Riyadh, and the spokesperson of its Defense Ministry highlighted the fact that China adheres to three principles in exporting its arms: it is open to strengthening the defensive capabilities of the importers; it will not harm

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(15) State Council Information Office, PRC, *China's 2010 Defense White Paper* (Beijing: People's Press, 2011).

(16) See Xiao Xiao, "China's Weapons Have Got Involved in the Middle East Turmoil," *Phoenix Weekly*, no. 26 (2013).

(17) "China and Saudi Arabia Reportedly Signed a Contract on UAV Sales," *Guancha*, May 5, 2014: [http://m.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2014\\_05\\_05\\_226875](http://m.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2014_05_05_226875).

world or regional peace, security, and stability; and it will not interfere in other nations' internal affairs.<sup>18</sup>

Turkey, which is the only NATO member in the Middle East or the Islamic world, abruptly declared that in September 2013 it would purchase China's FD-2000 missile defense system, which undercut the US PAC-3, EU SAMP-30, and Russian S-300 in bid, with a sale price of only US\$4 billion. Although the system is incompatible with the NATO one, Turkey is quite interested. Besides, in recent years, the Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, have been quite interested in China's Pterosaurs-1 UAV, which is able to carry BA-7 and YZ-212 missiles.<sup>19</sup> Although researchers have limited knowledge about the inside stories of China's arms sales to the Middle East, arms sales to the region will definitely surge in the years to come.

**Second, China has sent out security contractors to the war-torn states in the Middle East.** In recent years, about 1 million Chinese expatriates have taken up residence in the countries of West Asia and North Africa. In 2014, for instance, there were about 15,000 Chinese employees and staff in war-torn Iraq and Chinese-contracted projects in the country reached US\$5.25 billion.<sup>20</sup> However, according to Chinese Security Service Management Regulations, Chinese officials at all levels, as well as public servants, are prohibited from establishing government-run security service companies, which compels Chinese enterprises to hire US and British security contractors and Chinese private security contractors for protection. The notorious US security company Blackwater (renamed Xe Services in 2009 and known as Academi since 2011) was an influential security service in the Middle East. It hired over 100,000 retired soldiers from the US Defense Department in 2011–2013, with total contracted projects of over US\$1 billion.<sup>21</sup>

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(18) "There Exists Puzzles on China's Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia, and It's Different from the On-Line Report," *Global Times*, September 22, 2014.

(19) "China Is Opening the Middle East Market" *Qiyue*, December 5, 2013: [http://www.qiyue.gov.cn/news/20131205\\_11154.html](http://www.qiyue.gov.cn/news/20131205_11154.html).

(20) Lai Jingchao, "The Overseas Security Contractors from the Private Companies: Chinese Body-Guards Abroad," *Southern Weekly*, April 17, 2015.

(21) Lai, "Overseas Security Contractors."

For a long time, China has lacked security service companies like Blackwater. Moreover, according to Chinese law, China's nationals are banned from going abroad if they carry weapons, but Chinese expatriates suffer from all sorts of harassment and assaults in the target countries of investment. In June 2004, 11 Chinese workers were shot and slaughtered in Afghanistan; in early 2012, 25 Chinese workers were kidnapped in Egypt; several months later, 29 Chinese employees were kidnapped in Sudan as well;<sup>22</sup> in August 24, 2014, one of Chinese working sites bordering Turkey and Iraq was attacked, and three Chinese engineers went missing; and as noted above, on July 26, 2015, the Jazeera Hotel in Mogadishu, Somalia, was attacked and at least 15 people were killed and several others injured. A security guard at China's embassy was killed and three embassy staff were wounded.<sup>23</sup> A similar tragedy happened in Mali, where three Chinese citizens were killed in terrorist attacks in 2015. Usually Chinese workers are geographically dispersed in different regions and work sites, making them hard to protect in case of armed attacks from the local rebels or terrorist groups.

There are three layers of the "firewall" protecting Chinese workers in the Middle East. The outer layer is comprised of troops from US, UN, or the other great powers, which are deployed in the countries or regions; the second layer consists of the host nation's oil police or armed police force; and the third layer is made up of the security contractors employed by Chinese companies, such as Huawei Security Group. Different from the US troops and the Middle East oil police or armed police, Chinese security contractors are not allowed to carry guns in foreign lands. There are two reasons behind that. First (as mentioned), according to Chinese law, Chinese citizens are not allowed to travel abroad with guns; and second, China would like to avoid political ventures in the host nations, and bringing in weapons is politically sensitive. In Iraq, for instance, China has established substantial investments in the country. SINOPEC,

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(22) "Overseas Chinese Companies Are Increasingly Reliant on Private Security Contractors," *Financial Times*, November 26, 2014.

(23) "China Strongly Condemns Attack in Somalia," *Xinhua*, July 27, 2015: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/27/c\\_134450934.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/27/c_134450934.htm).

SINO Petroleum (which has oil investments at several locations), Lvzhou and Daqing Petroleum, and other firms have established a presence in the war-torn state and dispatched a group of retired special troops for the protection of the workers. The special forces have served the special warfare brigade in certain military areas of China. These include the “Sirius” assault team of the PLA; the “Snow Leopard” commandos, which are affiliated with China’s armed police; the Tibet Armed Police Corps; and others. They are mostly senior noncommissioned officers who can boast a rich combat experience and have received special training on the target country’s cultures, religions, and customs, and they are all experienced at getting along well with people with different backgrounds.<sup>24</sup>

For example, the Chinese security company Tianjiao Teweï (GSA) was founded in 2008 and consists of retired PLA soldiers. The security service is one of the most experienced and professional organizations for “very important people protection operatives” (VPOs). Through partnership with Israeli International Security College, GSA has established the first training institute for the protection of international VPOs in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, China.<sup>25</sup> Another case in point is Huaxing Zhong’An Security Service Ltd., which is consistently exploring overseas business opportunities in the Middle East.

**Third, China has participated in joint military rehearsals with the pivotal states of the Middle East.** In April 2009, then air force commander Ma Xiaotian paid a visit to Turkey and reached an agreement with his counterpart, Hassan Aksayi, the Turkish Air Force commander. From September 20 to October 4, 2009, the two sides launched a two-week-long joint military training in Turkey.<sup>26</sup> On February 4, 2012, China joined with Russia to veto UN Security Council (UNSC) draft resolution S/2012/77, which was then tabled

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(24) “Disclosing Chinese Security Contractors in Iraq, Who Are Mostly Retired Special Forces,” *Global Times*, June 23, 2014.

(25) “GSA” (in Chinese), <http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=xddy6Te6jhBOPRO83QDkvBF-Prlw4gA3DF8hnoewqlgaLeeMW5KZ1iGujkDmvuKhmcchp3fmG3S6uVPIUwpJra>.

(26) “Does China-Turkish Joint Military Rehearsal Offend Anyone?” [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-10/12/c\\_12648521.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2010-10/12/c_12648521.htm).

by Morocco. In addition to these diplomatic efforts, China was also more assertive militarily, including sending Chinese warships to the Mediterranean Sea in a “show of flags” along with the Russian naval presence near Syria.<sup>27</sup> During its stay in the Mediterranean Sea, China’s Yangcheng missile frigate carried out a joint drill with the Russian nuclear-powered cruiser *Pyotr Veliky*, on January 25, 2015, “to raise the level of operative compatibility between the Russian and Chinese warships.”<sup>28</sup> In May 2015, Chinese convoy fleets consisting of a Linyi missile frigate, a Weifang missile frigate, and a comprehensive logistic missile frigate launched joint military rehearsals with their Russian counterparts. The three missile-carrying frigates entered the Mediterranean Sea for the joint military exercises, which were named the China-Russia Joint-Maritime 2015, following their joint commemoration of the World War II victory in the Black Sea.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the PLA Navy convoy fleets have held two joint anti-piracy drills with the US, in 2012 and 2013, and one with the EU Naval Force Operation (NAVFOR) in 2014.<sup>30</sup> In September 2014, Chinese convoy fleets including the Changchun Missile frigate, the Changchun Missile frigate and the Changzhou missile frigate (Mission 17) paid a visit to the Abbas Port of Iran and the two naval forces initiated joint military rehearsals near the Gulf on counterpiracy and joint rescue.<sup>31</sup>

**Fourth, China’s military forces are used to support the evacuation of Chinese citizens from the Middle East.** From 2008 to 2015, due to local emergency issues such as civil wars, terrorist attacks, antigovernment riots, uprisings, and other armed conflicts, China was compelled to withdraw over

(27) C. Lin, “As ISIS Grows, China Upgrades Ties with Iran and Kurdistan,” *The Times of Israel*, October 25, 2014; Xinhui Jiang, “From Nonintervention to What?: Analyzing the Change in China’s Middle East Policy,” *Middle East-Asia Project (MAP) Bulletin*, August 2015.

(28) Andrea Ghiselli, “The Chinese People’s Liberation Army ‘Post-modern’ Navy,” *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 50, no. 1 (2015): 133.

(29) “The West Is Paying Close Attention to the China-Russia Joint Military Rehearsal,” *Global Times* (China), May 7, 2015; Ghiselli, “The Chinese People’s Liberation Army ‘Post-modern’ Navy,” 133.

(30) Ghiselli, “The Chinese People’s Liberation Army ‘Post-modern’ Navy,” 132.

(31) “Chinese Fleet Launched the First Joint Military Rehearsal with Iranian Counterpart,” *Southern Daily*, April 17, 2015.

50,000 Chinese expatriates from Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among other regions. The evacuations from Libya and Egypt were conducted without adequate logistics, which forced China to rely on foreign shipping companies, and the operation was run by the Foreign Ministry instead of the Ministry of Defense; such a situation can hardly be sustained in the long run. In April 12, 2015, Zhai Leiming, deputy director of the Department of Consular Affairs in China's Foreign Ministry and director of the Consular Protection Center told reporters that China's consular protection is faced with an overwhelming task. Each official needs to protect 200,000 workers abroad, while the US proportion is one official for every 5,000 workers, and the Japanese proportion is one for every 12,000.<sup>32</sup> In 2012, for instance, with the worsening of the conflict between North and South Sudan, over 200 Chinese workers were pulled out from the working oil sites of South Sudan, resulting in a direct economic loss of at least US\$3 billion.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from Djibouti and the Republic of Seychelles, China has taken advantage of its military presence in the Somali waters and Port Sudan, and pulled out 35,860 overseas nationals from war-torn Libya to security regions in 2012.<sup>34</sup> Beijing made the best use of the Ministries of National Defense, Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and Civil Administration, under the combined leadership of a government task force led by vice premier Zhang Dejiang (currently chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee) and state councilor Dai Bingguo. The objective of the task force was to manage and coordinate efforts for evacuating Chinese citizens from Libya.<sup>35</sup>

Since the eruption of the Yemen's crisis in early 2015, China stood ready to remove expatriates from that country. In four operations since March 29, 2015,

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(32) Lai, "The Overseas Security Contractors from the Private Companies."

(33) "Chinese Fleet Launched the First Joint Military Rehearsal with Iranian Counterpart," *Southern Daily*, April 17, 2015.

(34) State Council Information Office, PRC, *China's 2013 Defense White Paper ("The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces)*, 20: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-04/16/c\\_115403491.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-04/16/c_115403491.htm).

(35) Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, "China's Response to the Revolts in the Arab World: A Case of Pragmatic Diplomacy," *Journal of Mediterranean Politics*, 19, no.1 (2014): 8.

a total of 629 Chinese nationals and 279 foreign citizens were successfully evacuated from Yemen aboard Chinese vessels (including the Linyi missile frigate). By lending a helping hand to its nationals as well as citizens of 15 other countries in need, China has done its part as a major responsible country and demonstrated the spirit of humanitarianism.<sup>36</sup>

**Finally, China has engaged in other ad hoc UNSC operations in recent years.** For instance, taking into account the decision of the Syrian government to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the commitment of the Syrian authorities to provisionally apply the convention prior to its entry into force, the US and Russia express their joint determination to ensure the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons program in the fastest and safest manner possible. China worked with Russia, Denmark, and Norway on the shipment of Syria's chemical weapons for destruction, an effort known as "returning chemical weapons for peace."<sup>37</sup> The following day, the director-general of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Ahmet Üzümcü, submitted a plan for the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons to the organization's Executive Council. Following that, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi announced that a PLA Navy missile frigate had joined the Danish, Norwegian, and Russian frigates to escort the weapons from the Syrian port of Latakia to Italy. On December 31, 2013, the Yancheng, a Type-054 frigate, which was part of the 16th counterpiracy task force, was rerouted to the Mediterranean Sea and docked at Limassol, Cyprus, on January 4, 2014.<sup>38</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

To avoid being demonized through the "Cina threat" narrative, Beijing emphasizes that it is a responsible rising power and that its soft military

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(36) Gu Liping, "China Completes Evacuation from Yemen, Assisting 279 Foreigners," *Xinhua*, April 7, 2015: <http://www.ecns.cn/2015/04-07/160875.shtml>.

(37) China Radio International Online, "The Destruction of Syrian Chemical Weapons Has Entered the Third Stage; China Takes Part in Multi-lateral Missions," January 9, 2014: <http://news.cri.cn/gb/42071/2014/01/09/5931s4384282.htm>.

(38) Ghiselli, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army 'Post-modern' Navy," 133.

footprints are different from the hard-military bases of the Western powers because they are a contribution to the “security public goods” enjoyed by the international community and compatible with the Western hard military bases in the Middle East. The BRI is based on Beijing’s policies of geoeconomics, and its soft military footprints suggest the government has no intention of putting a “String of Pearls” acquisition strategy into effect.

**First, China’s soft military footprints in the Middle East are located around the relatively concentrated areas of China’s overseas interests.** In Saudi Arabia, 70 Chinese-funded enterprises employ 16,000 Chinese workers engaging in commercial activities. In Dubai, the “China–Middle East Investment and Trade Promotion Center” covers an area of 150,000 square meters. There are 3,000 Chinese enterprises and representative offices, and there is a total of 200,000 Chinese expatriates living in Dubai, making it the largest non-permanent resident overseas Chinese community in the world. Unsurprisingly then, the Chinese permanent and ad hoc military deployments are concentrated around the Gulf, Sudan, and the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

**Second, the Chinese convoy fleet in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters and other soft military footprints will play a “bridgehead” role in case of crisis, such as disaster relief, expatriate evacuation, and other dangerous events.** It is responsible for the maintaining the safety of up to 5,000 km of maritime trade and transport lines, along with the security of investment projects from the South China Sea to the Gulf. The Middle East is not only a locus of trade relations with China, it is also a market affecting the Chinese expansion of its business to Africa and Europe. It has thus become a Chinese transit site for the country’s saturated domestic industries and commodities, and it has served as the middle ground connecting the European and African economic zones with China.

**Third, China’s soft military footprints in the Middle East are compatible with traditional Chinese diplomatic principles—that there will be no overseas military base deployments and no hegemony or**

**power politics.** Also, it meets the reality of the practical needs of protecting China's interests in the Middle East and serves as the foundation for building up the new model of great power relations. In the twenty-first century, the US, Europe, and Japan have formed the "traditional core area," while China, India, and Brazil have forged a "new core area," as Thomas P. M. Barnett, the author of *The Pentagon's New Map*, described it. These two core regions have a higher degree of globalization than other parts of the world, and thus have become the two engines of human development. In contrast, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa have been marginalized. They pose direct and indirect threats to the core areas and bring about many challenges, which makes them key areas for global governance.<sup>39</sup>

In short, geoeconomic strategy will be the long-term strategy of Beijing. China will rely on soft military footprints to realize the BRI and to provide security public goods, not only for China, but also as a contribution to the common fate of the people of the Middle East.

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(39) See Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004).



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