

Chinese navy to combat piracy off Somalia

Written by Anton Barnard

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An anti-piracy task force of the Chinese navy set sail Friday for Africa, state media said, in the nation's first potential combat mission beyond its territorial waters in centuries.

The three vessels, decorated with coloured ribbons, flags and flowers, weighed anchor at the Yalong Bay naval base on south China's tropical Hainan island at 1:50 pm (0550 GMT), heading for Somalia, the Xinhua news agency said.

"It's the first time we go abroad to protect our strategic interests armed with military force," said Wu Xhengli, commander of the Chinese Navy, in a ceremony to see off the approximately 1,000 sailors, according to Xinhua.

"It's the first time for us to organise a naval force on an international humanitarian mission and the first time for our navy to protect important shipping lanes far from our shores." Dressed in white naval uniforms, the crew of the two destroyers and one supply ship saluted crowds on land amid waving flags and as a military marching band played.

It marks a new chapter for the modern Chinese navy, which has focused on the defence of coastal waters, combined with the occasional friendly port call. Only in 2002 did it circumnavigate the globe for the first time.

Indeed, a Chinese fleet has not fired a shot in anger near Africa since the 15th century, when a Ming Dynasty armada sailed to the continent and back.

The navy has been drawn back to Africa by an escalation of pirate attacks on merchant ships, including Chinese vessels, plying the crucial shipping route linking Asia and Europe.

The three vessels on the mission -- the missile-armed destroyers DDG-171 Haikou and DDG-169 Wuhan and the Weishanhu supply ship -- are among China's most sophisticated and have all entered service this decade, Xinhua said.

They will operate alongside other international warships patrolling the area near the Gulf of Aden, part of the Suez Canal route.

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"Since this is the navy's first overseas mission, we could encounter unforeseen situations. But we are prepared for them," the commander of the force, Rear Admiral Du Jingcheng, told the China Daily earlier.

"All crew members have full confidence in their ability to fulfil the escort mission.

The fleet will mainly protect Chinese vessels, including those from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, but will also escort foreign ships passing through the area that request protection, Xinhua said.

After three months, the ships will be replaced by another flotilla depending on UN Security Council decisions and the situation in the gulf at the time, it added.

"Our pride is too strong," said 21-year-old Ding He, a sailor on board the Wuhan. "It washes away the pain and rigours of training." The mission includes a special forces detail that has spent the past days in intensive training in maritime tactics and diving, said one of their commanders, Lieutenant Commander Xie Zengling.

"If the pirates make direct threats to the warships or the vessels we escort, the fleet will take counter-measures," he told Xinhua, bragging that one member of his unit "could handle several enemies with his bare hands".

China has said its warships will investigate any suspected pirate vessels, and approach them and demand that they show their relevant documents and certificates.

Two helicopters accompanying the flotilla will be used during such tasks, military officials said earlier.

The UN Security Council last week gave nations a one-year mandate to act inside lawless

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Somalia to stop the rampant piracy.

"It is a huge breakthrough in China's concepts about security," said Li Wei, director of the anti-terrorism research centre at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, according to the China Daily.

"(It) sends a strong political message to the international community that China with its improved economic and military strength is willing to play a larger role in maintaining world peace and security."