



## CHINA'S PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN: BEYOND ONE BELT, ONE ROAD

China's One Belt, One Road policy has focused global attention on Chinese infrastructure development projects throughout the nations of the Middle East and Western Indian Ocean. But China's involvement in the region goes well beyond building ports, power plants, railways and roads. Beijing has also strategically expanded its diplomatic, military, informational and economic presence in the region. This growing influence has implications for the U.S. Navy and U.S. national security interests more broadly.

CNA's China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs division has examined these implications in a new report: *China's Presence in the Middle East and Western Indian Ocean: Beyond Belt and Road*. The study also analyzes the drivers, approaches and messages behind China's growing presence in 23 nations in this region. Citing evidence that China's presence will continue to grow, it recommends that the United States take a three-pronged approach in response.

The report identifies five key drivers behind China's security and economic presence in the region:

- The region's global strategic importance as a nexus connecting North America and Europe to Asia
- Access to important maritime chokepoints in the Middle East, especially for oil imports
- Supporting domestic economic objectives, including upgrading industry and reducing overcapacity in certain domestic industries
- The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's mandate to protect growing numbers of Chinese citizens and investments in the region
- Combating domestic terrorism through bilateral agreements that could deny external support to Chinese separatists


To accomplish its goals, China has engaged in a wide range of political-military activities. The best-known example is the opening of its first overseas naval base in the East African nation of Djibouti in 2017. However, the People's Liberation Army has engaged in other actions that have expanded its presence throughout the region.

These include:

- A nearly continuous three-ship naval presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 to protect its maritime trade from pirates
- Protecting interests and personnel in the region, especially the evacuation of roughly 800 Chinese and foreign nationals from Yemen in 2015
- Conducting routine naval presence operations in the region, including submarine deployments

Many of these political-military engagements have involved strengthening ties between Beijing and regional governments, including:

- Training regional military personnel in China in order to develop ties with current and future military leaders
- Arms sales — most notably to Pakistan — to develop institutional ties and to support China as an alternative arms supplier to the United States
- Counterpiracy port visits and visits by the Chinese navy hospital ship Peace Ark to showcase how PLA modernization can benefit the region
- Engagement with foreign militaries to provide opportunities for intelligence collection on regional actors, including the U.S. Navy



China's presence in regional port facilities is also growing. Chinese state-owned firms have concessions to develop and operate terminals and other facilities at six commercial ports in Pakistan, Egypt, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates and Djibouti. The emergence of Chinese firms as global port terminal operators has raised questions about the implications for the U.S. Navy's access to facilities run by Chinese firms, especially in Djibouti. The report provides a framework for considering how Chinese firms might go about influencing operations at ports where Chinese companies have a presence. Specifically, the report identifies potential targets and tools of influence and restraints on their use.

Looking ahead, the report sees reasons why the Chinese navy's ability to operate in the Middle East and Western Indian Ocean will likely increase in the near to medium term. China is commissioning more modern naval ships, some of which may be deployed to the Indian Ocean. The PRC government has taken steps to leverage China's large commercial shipping fleet to support military operations. And China can use its Djibouti base as a logistics center — and possibly as a command-and-control hub — in the future. China may even look for a "second Djibouti" in the region, and the report analytically examines several likely locations for such a base.

As a result of this comprehensive analysis of China's presence in the region, the CNA authors make three sets of recommendations:

**Prepare for a changing operational environment** with an increased likelihood of PLA intervention in unstable states or unplanned encounters between the U.S. Navy and the Chinese military or civilians. One option would be to establish regular channels of communication with the PLA to help mitigate the potential for accidents to escalate.

**Track Chinese regional activities** to help plan a targeted response. Key indicators can point to where China is focusing its presence. As a starting point, the study outlines Chinese activities in several states identified as focal points: Kenya, Tanzania, Djibouti, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and United Arab Emirates.

**Develop a three-pronged approach** to countering China's messaging:

- **Continue to highlight the positive aspects of U.S. presence** in the region, especially the fact that only the U.S. Navy — with its coalition of partners and allies — can safeguard the region's waterways.
- **Avoid giving the impression that the United States expects countries to "choose sides,"** especially overly critical public statements about China's activities that could be perceived as a scare tactic.
- **Highlight the United States' respect for national institutions and the rule of law** as the foundation for long-term engagements with countries in the region.

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