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China's anti-piracy effort

Why has China engaged in anti-piracy operation in the Western Indian Ocean but not in the South China Sea?

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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that this thesis “China’s anti-piracy effort”, is my own work and my own effort and that it has not been accepted anywhere else for the award of any other degree or diploma. Where sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

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Date: 02/07/2020

Abstract

Maritime security is vital for many states, and it is undermined by many acts, one of which is piracy. This threat is acknowledged by the extensive anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, in which China partakes. Even though piracy occurs in the South China Sea as well, China does not have a military anti-piracy operation in this area. Nonetheless, this area is vital for the operation of its economy. It is, therefore, important to analyze how the differences in these policies can be explained. By using different theoretical explanations (realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism), the objective of this thesis is to analyze which theory carries the most explanatory power, or if a combination of explanations could provide a better explanation to the seemingly contradictory policy. This is done through a method of congruence analysis, combined with process-tracing. After tracing China's actions and developments in the Western Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, this thesis finds that constructivism provides the best explanation for China's different approaches, as anti-piracy cooperation merely served as a tool of statecraft.

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Abbreviations

ARF:	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CTF-151:	Combined Taskforce 151
CUES:	Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea
DOC:	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea
ETF:	Escort Taskforce
EUNAVFOR:	European Union Naval Force
IMB:	International Maritime Bureau
IMO:	International Maritime Organization
MOOTW:	Military Operations Other Than War
MoU:	Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security Issues
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLAN:	People Liberation Army Navy
PRC:	People's Republic of China
ReCAAP:	Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia
SHADE:	Shared Awareness and Deconfliction
SUA:	Convention for the Supression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation
SLOC:	Sea Lines of Communication
UN:	United Nations
UNCLOS:	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNSC:	United Nations Security Council

Chapter I: Introduction

Maritime security is vital for any state and is undermined in many ways. One such example is the act of piracy. Though piracy is often associated with Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, countries bordering the South China Sea, and especially those countries around the Strait of Malacca, struggle with these acts too. Piracy is conventionally defined by article 101 of the UNCLOS as “illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship”, against another ship on the high seas. This, however, excludes most acts of piracy we observe today, as pirates operate predominantly in the territorial waters of states, which extends up to 12 nautical miles from a country’s shoreline (Prins & Daxecker, 2017). Therefore, this thesis uses a broader definition, developed by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), which includes attacks within a country’s territorial waters (normally referred to as armed robbery at sea), and ship attacks that occur at port anchorage. This definition greatly broadens the applicability of the term ‘piracy’. In 1999 for example, a Japanese cargo ship named the *Alondra Rainbow* got hijacked by pirates in territorial waters, whilst it carried cargo worth about \$20 million (Richardson, 1999). These cases of hijacking are often just for economic purposes and the lives of the crew are normally not endangered because the pirates seek ransom in exchange for their safe return. Nonetheless, when the chemical tanker *Dewi Madrim* got hijacked in 2003, it changed how we view piracy and maritime security. Though this incident ended with the payment of a ransom to pirates, the fact that ship full of chemicals was taken over by hostile entities could have created an entirely different scenario. If the chemicals were used intentionally to create an environmental disaster, it could harm countries by destroying reefs, causing oil spills, and depleting fish stocks (Bradford, 2005; Menkhaus, 2009). Another possible scenario could have been that the ships carrying these amounts of chemicals would be used to paralyze important trade routes or docks by using it as an ‘enormous vehicle bomb’ (Bradford, 2004). This moves the issue from piracy to terrorism. As these examples show, piracy is mostly committed out of economic motives, but the potential impact and destruction of these doom-scenarios could be so substantial that policy-makers have to consider their possibility. This is what is seen as the ‘piracy-terrorism nexus’ (Luft & Korin, 2004; Mak, 2006; Chalk, 2008).

Whether realistic or not, the ‘piracy-terrorism nexus’ has put piracy on the international agenda. Interestingly, international attention, especially from the US, has increased significantly after the events of 9/11 (Bradford, 2005), but China has not been very

active in engaging with piracy in its region. Instead, the Gulf of Aden has been the main topic in recent discussions on PLAN anti-piracy operations (Erickson & Strange, 2014), even though the South China Sea represents an even more crucial economic passageway where piracy has historically been left unchecked. This is surprising since a 2015 white paper of China's Ministry of National Defense stated that: "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests" (PRC, 2015b). This research puzzle leads this thesis to ask the following question: Why has China engaged in anti-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean but not in the South China Sea? Scholars have focused on China's mission in the Gulf of Aden extensively, but failed to explain the absence of a piracy mission in the South China Sea. This thesis therefore aims to compare the different theoretical explanations as to why China deploys its army in certain regions by conducting a congruence analysis.

This thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter summarizes the three main theoretical frameworks which are used to explain the differences in policy between the South China Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which are realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. The third chapter will provide a brief overview of the methodology used in this paper, to guide the reader through the process of thought. The fourth chapter will trace the anti-piracy developments in the Western Indian Ocean, whilst the fifth chapter will do so for the South China Sea. The sixth chapter will compare the explanations to the two sub-questions, and finally, in the conclusion, this thesis will claim that constructivism provides the best explanation for China's anti-piracy operation in the Western Indian Ocean, and the absence thereof in the South China Sea. Now that the structure is clear, it is important to first summarize the academic debate surrounding China's anti-piracy efforts.

Chapter II: Existing explanations and IR theory

There are multiple explanations as to why Chinese anti-piracy efforts differ between the South China Sea and the Western Indian Ocean. The first refers to the idea that the levels of piracy are perceived to be much higher in the latter as opposed to the former. A second explanation focuses on the institutional arrangements which facilitate a counter-piracy operation, whereas sovereignty issues hinder it. The third explanation focuses on signaling and image-building as explanations for China's policy decisions.

Levels of piracy

The first explanation focuses on the levels of piracy and argues that levels in the South China Sea are much lower compared to those in the Gulf of Aden, and the broader Western Indian Ocean. Piracy is seemingly controlled through the efforts of the littoral states of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Erickson & Strange, 2014). Malaysia, in light of the linkage of piracy and terrorism, enhanced its maritime capabilities to show the international community that it was capable of protecting its waters to prevent foreign navies from intervening (Xu, 2017). Another contribution to this was that public threat perception towards maritime terrorism had increased in recent years, and Malaysia wanted to show that it could secure the strait (Balakrishnan & Varkkey, 2017). Approximately the same sentiment was shared by Indonesia and it too strengthened its control over this area. Moreover, Singapore sought to play an active role in furthering maritime security cooperation. For example, it took the initiative to host the information-sharing center of the ReCAAP and the Shangri-la Dialogue meetings and cooperated with other littoral states to promote burden sharing notions (Xu, 2017). What all these efforts have in common is that they have resulted in a stark decrease in piracy activities. For example, in 2007 there were only 3 successful and 4 attempted pirate attacks in the Malacca Straits, and this trend continued into 2008 (Raymond, 2009), though there has been a significant rise in recent years (ReCAAP, 2019).

On the contrary, in Somalia, the problem appeared more rampant, with 10 times as many attacks leading up to 2012, combined with more complex sea conditions. Additionally, hijacking of bigger vessels occurred frequently in the area, as opposed to stealing from small fishing vessels, or docked boats like in the South China Sea. Because of this, the Chinese might have felt the need to protect their ships in this area, since it heavily relies on maritime trade (Erickson & Strange, 2014). Moreover, it is highly dependent on its energy supply from the region, which might also have inflated the threat piracy posed to China's energy security.

Nonetheless, the difference between these situations cannot fully explain why China does not have an existing anti-piracy mission in the South China Sea. The fact that piracy levels are low now, does not mean that instances will not occur, or even increase again. In 2010, for instance, the Singaporean navy warned about possible attacks conducted by a terrorist group on oil tankers and large ships (Erickson & Strange, 2014). Furthermore, the reduction in piracy was mainly caused by the efforts of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, which requires many resources, and thus might fall victim to "patrol fatigue" (Erickson & Strange, 2014). Finally, they might even be unable to sustain these missions financially. The

2007 global financial crisis drained these states of their resources, whilst piracy increased due to deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, which is one of its primary causes. (Ho, 2010). The bottom line is that the South China Sea is vital to the operation of China's economy. Even when piracy seems to be at an all-time low, China needs to be prepared for the incidental incident or even a resurgence of the levels of piracy.

Institutional arrangements and sovereignty issues

China has always been very careful about issues surrounding sovereignty. According to Elgebeily (2017), China has practiced a foreign policy of non-intervention, which implied that according to the "five principles of peaceful co-existence" there would be mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. This notion of non-intervention is a grounded principle that dominates regional politics in general (Bradford, 2005). Moreover, Chinese foreign policy asserts the inviolability of sovereignty, explicitly limiting the right of intervention in the domestic affairs of foreign states because of China's 'Century of Humiliation' (Black & Hwang, 2012). This makes anti-piracy operations in the South China Sea extremely difficult, as important parts like the Malacca Strait belong to Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. China's ability to cooperate with these countries in anti-piracy operations is limited since they object to the internationalizing of the Strait, and hamper multilateral cooperation in these areas (Chong, 2017). Unilateral action is impossible here as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is only applicable if the act of piracy is committed on the high seas, and is thus seen as a weak tool in this region (Beckman & Davenport, 2014). So even though the IMB's definition of piracy includes acts within territorial waters as piracy, there are no international legal instruments to deal with this. The other parts of the South China Sea, like the Nansha islands, are still territorially disputed (Wu, 2013) even at the time of writing this thesis, and China might see a multilateral anti-piracy campaign as an encroachment on its sovereignty. In addition to these territorial disputes, interstate security relations are further compromised by China's military build-up (Minjiang, 2015). This complication is made very clear by PLA Chief of General Staff Chen Bingde when he stated:

"if we continue to build new ships we will have constraints of national defense budget. And what is more, it will lead to the issue of hype of the 'China threat' again because of our growing capabilities. On the other hand, if we stop building those new ships, we will not only be unable to send more ships to

the Gulf of Aden, but we will find it even difficult to protect and maintain our own maritime interests.”
(Chen in Erickson & Strange, 2014, p. 184)

Consequently, China’s military build-up might complicate security relations in its region and its ability to negotiate security relations. Many regional states have welcomed the US presence to rebalance this “China threat” which is a testament to this (Minjiang, 2015).

As demonstrated, sovereignty and territorial integrity is a substantial issue in South East Asian politics and a barrier to anti-piracy operations and cooperation. This issue is less prevalent in the Gulf of Aden, as these waters do not belong to any country. Consequently, there are international legal instruments that enable anti-piracy efforts. This might explain why China has deployed the PLAN in this region as opposed to the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the extent to which China fights piracy here is also limited because of its non-interventionist attitude. Chen admitted that “for counter-piracy campaigns to be effective, we should probably move beyond the ocean and crush their bases on the land” (Chen in Erickson & Strange, 2014, p.184), and this breach of Somali sovereignty would likely set the wrong precedent for China, as it clashes with its foreign policy doctrine.

International and domestic political considerations

In 2008, the Chinese government confirmed that it would send the PLAN to the Gulf of Aden as a response to a spike of piracy incidents in this region. Fighting piracy on the high seas is not without its problems. Since there is minimal jurisdiction, it necessarily brings into question matters of international engagement, cooperation, and partnership (Cusumano & Ruzza, 2018). China mostly acted unilaterally in its anti-piracy mission (Erickson & Strange, 2014), which is understandable as the CTF-151 was under US command. This was also a reason for Russia to act unilaterally (Cusumano & Ruzza, 2018). China did demonstrate a willingness to facilitate exchanges of information and to escort ships with foreign flags through the SHADE mechanism, which is remarkable because it normally did not work together with other navies such as those of the US, Japan, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India (Brown, 2012). Some scholars have argued that this is not a strange development, but a logical one. China was the last permanent member of the UNSC to deploy its navy to the region, and as it grows in power, it desires to be seen as a cooperative and responsible state. The PLAN antipiracy mission is a highly visible way of doing so to balance other states’ concerns about China’s relation to international law and internal policymaking (Erickson & Strange 2013a). In other words, it shifts more attention to China internationally, effectively

reducing commentary on its internal consistency with international law. Furthermore, the deployment sends a signal that China is capable and ready to protect its assets throughout the world, and it is an opportunity to showcase its naval ability (Erickson & Strange, 2014). This is a non-exhaustive list, but it shows how the far-away mission in the Western Indian Ocean could make sense from an international point of view, namely legitimizing itself globally. Concerning the South China Sea, it cannot do much as the Chinese leadership understands that the deployment of blatant military force in this region undermines its regional relations and international image (Mingjiang, 2015).

Domestically however public opinion in China holds that the government has been too weak in handling the territorial disputes in the region (Mingjiang, 2015), but they do not seem to understand the position of the government regarding the issues with sovereignty and non-intervention. Diverting attention might also be an explanation as to why China deployed its navy to the Western Indian Ocean, as opposed to the South China Sea. Moreover, acts of piracy make a government vulnerable to criticism if it is unable to handle security threats to economic, environmental, and human security. If China is unable to cope with these problems, it might create domestic pressure or undermine legitimacy to which the Chinese leadership is not immune (Erickson & Strange, 2013a), especially since domestic forces expect China to act assertively (Mingjiang, 2015). Regarding economic security, China relies on sea lines of communication (SLOC) for 90% of its overseas trade, of which 60% transits the Strait of Malacca. If such a SLOC were to be blocked because of an act of piracy, it could hamper with China's export-driven growth model and therefore undermine political legitimacy (Erickson & Strange, 2014). Furthermore, politically China faces pressure domestically to protect its citizens overseas and to protect its interests abroad, something over which it has been criticized (Erickson & Strange, 2014). Therefore, its mission in the Gulf of Aden might provide an opportunity to satisfy these domestic demands, to safeguard trade, and to demonstrate its capability and responsibility to the international community. Moreover, through the process of zonation for the cause of maritime security, which inherently turns inclusionary zones into exclusionary places, (Ryan, 2019), China might want to expand its sovereignty on the international waters. This process has also been named "deterritorialization", as it destabilizes spatial boundaries (Bueger, 2018), and demonstrates the ulterior political considerations behind the deployment of the PLAN.

Expectations according to IR theory

The previous paragraphs have identified three explanations in the existing literature, which aim to explain the regional difference in China's approach towards piracy. These explanations were related to the levels of piracy, institutional arrangements and sovereignty issues, and international and domestic political considerations. According to a realist framework, we should expect China to behave reactively to differentiations in levels of piracy and adjust the size of its response accordingly. Quite a few of China's ships in the Gulf of Aden consisted of oil tankers, and therefore begs the question; did Beijing deploy the PLAN to protect their energy security as the threat was perceived to be bigger than in the South China Sea? If so, this hypothesis would be consistent with realist explanations that states balance against their immediate threats, rather than power capabilities (Walt, 1987).

The second explanation focuses on the institutional arrangements and the importance of sovereignty issues. According to this explanation, we should expect China to behave more aggressively on the open seas, as opposed to territorial waters, as international legal instruments enable such a response. This hypothesis resonates with an institutional liberalist framework, which claims that international institutions and organizations aid cooperation between states, and even increase it. Moreover, as anarchy hinders cooperation and unilateral cheating in international arrangements is unlikely; the outcome is to cooperate (Lee, 2005). Put into context, we should expect China to operate in the Gulf of Aden because international legal instruments enable it, whilst fear of other Southeast Asian countries of Chinese hegemony prevents China from establishing a navy presence in the region, as it is unlikely to unilaterally deviate from the norm of non-intervention.

The third and final explanation, namely international and domestic political considerations, concentrates on China's image. These arguments follow a constructivist kind of reasoning which sees the interests and identities of states as constructed by social interaction over time (Wendt, 1992), and attach importance to the phenomenon of signaling. According to this constructivist framework, we should expect China to behave responsibly and cooperative, regardless of high or low levels of piracy. The issue of piracy would merely be an excuse to showcase China's role as a responsible actor, and a global power. Proof for constructivism as an explanation would be a continuation of the deployment of the PLAN, despite drops in the levels of piracy, as it claims that piracy was never the main concern. Instead, it is used as a tool of statecraft to change China's image.

What has become clear from this literature review is that different theoretical explanations exist as to why China might have employed the PLAN to the Gulf of Aden as opposed to the South China Sea, such as realist, liberal institutionalist, and constructivist explanations. Before analyzing which one holds the most explanatory power, or whether it is a combination of explanations, it is important to briefly explain the methodology of this thesis.

Chapter III: Methodology

This thesis aims to answer the question: Why has China engaged in anti-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean but not in the South China Sea? Since it seeks to analyze which theoretical explanation, or which combination of explanations, is best suited to answer this question, it will do so through the use of a controlled comparison. This can create both internal and external validity if the arguments are crafted on general variables or mechanisms, seek representative variation, and select cases that offer many alternative explanations (Slater & Ziblatt, 2013). As has already been made clear in the literature review, the cases on which will be focused are those of the PLAN mission in the Western Indian Ocean as opposed to China's policy concerning the South China Sea. Thus, this is a between-case analysis as it would otherwise be impossible to explain the differences between the two missions. About the sub-questions, this thesis will also rely on within-case analysis, which is done through the method of process-tracing, as it is an important tool to demonstrate causality. The aim is to trace the sequence of events that resulted in different outcomes (Lamont, 2015). So the first sub-question will trace why China became active in the fight against piracy in the Western Indian Ocean, whereas the second sub-question will trace the decisions that kept Beijing from becoming involved in the South China Sea. By tracing these policy decisions in the two different cases, this thesis offers a systematic congruence testing of the existing explanations.

The literature offered three explanations. First, when the threat of piracy is to be perceived bigger in the Gulf of Aden than the South China Sea, it would require a larger response, as is in line with realist explanations. Second, China might focus solely on the international arrangements that facilitate cooperation, which would align with liberal institutionalist explanations. Finally, China might care about its image as a capable and hegemon, and important international player, which would be suggested by constructivist explanations. Consequently, the method of congruence provides an effective method to compare these different explanations. It offers a 'modus operandi' explanation, with key parts characterized without relying on a completely theorized causal process. It does not aim to rule out certain theories but rather aims to showcase the comparative value these theories have to

offer (Wauters & Beach, 2018). This creates a multicausal explanation of China's decision-making. In other words, it resembles "pattern matching" which implies that when the "pattern" applies to one of the offered theoretical explanations, it therefore provides insight into the case (Yin, 2011). Consequently, what counts is comparing the relative explanatory strength of different theories (Wauters & Beach, 2018), namely realism, institutional liberalism, and constructivism.

This thesis will use a triangulation method to assess the validity of the different theoretical explanations (Lamont, 2015). It will do so by comparing official government white papers, statements by Chinese government officials, military officials, media sources, and secondary sources such as academic journals. As some statements of Chinese officials often do not reveal the entire truth, triangulation offers a more complete picture by including other perspectives and therefore increases the contribution of this thesis.

In spite of all the above, the list of theoretical explanations is not exhaustive. Other factors might have influenced decision-making in Beijing. Some scholars have for example suggested that the military often acts independently of the leadership in Beijing (Minjiang, 2015). Additionally, the real reason behind the decision might not be revealed by the Chinese for strategic reasons. These limitations, however, are beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, the comparison of different theoretical explanations might provide insights as to how the decisions were made and contribute to the academic debate, as this has not yet been done.

Chapter IV: The Western Indian Ocean

To uncover which theory provides the most explanatory power, this case will be analyzed through the method of process-tracing, as explained in the previous chapter. As such, this chapter will demonstrate the causal mechanism between the cause and the outcome. In the case of the PLAN mission to the Western Indian Ocean, this cause is the sudden spike in cases of piracy in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, as demonstrated by this statement by Vice Minister He Yafei at a UNSC Meeting:

"Piracy off the coast of Somalia has become increasingly rampant and is now an international menace posing a grave threat to international shipping, maritime trade, and security at sea. China is also one of its victims... China is seriously considering sending naval ships to the Gulf of Aden and waters off the Somali coast for escorting operations in the near future."(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2008).

Even though China had not yet sent warships to the region, the fact that it was “seriously considering” it, indicates that piracy in the Gulf of Aden had been put on their agenda. The outcome of the process is that the PLAN remains in the region as of today, despite the apparent sustained drop in piracy cases since 2012. In 2011 there were 176 attacks recorded, whereas there were only 35 in 2012, and none in 2015 (Henry, 2016). Consequently, what this chapter tries to uncover is what chain of events enabled this outcome.

Evidently China’s involvement in the Western Indian Ocean started with the speech by He Yafei, on the 16th of December 2008. This might seem like a delayed response to the problem. Other navies like those of NATO deployed warships in October 2008, and the EU Naval Force Somalia (Operation Atlanta) started early December 2008 (Singh & Bedi, 2016). Nevertheless, China’s foreign policy is heavily dictated by the “five principles of peaceful coexistence” (as mentioned earlier). Since one of those principles is non-interference, it makes sense that China awaited the proper legal instruments for engaging in counter-piracy, as not to violate Somalia’s sovereignty. This is clearly demonstrated in He Yafei’s speech where he states that:

“The international community should cooperate on the basis of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Security Council resolutions. All anti-piracy operations should be conducted in full compliance with the mandate of Security Council resolutions, and particularly with full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of littoral countries and prior consent from the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2008).

In this statement, there is a direct referral to UNSC resolutions 1846 and 1851, which were both adopted in 2008, and seem to be dependent on authorization from the transnational government of Somalia (Prins & Daxecker, 2017). Since he explicitly stresses the importance of full compliance with those resolutions, and respect for the sovereignty of Somalia, it explains why Beijing did not deploy the PLAN earlier to the Gulf of Aden. This line of reasoning is confirmed by PLAN deputy chief of staff, Xiao Xinnian, as he argued that the dispatch would showcase:

“[China’s] positive attitude in fulfilling its international obligations and the country’s image as a responsible power ... It also shows the positive role of the PLA in maintaining world stability and peace as well as the PLAN’s confidence and capability of handling multiple security threats and fulfilling diverse military tasks.” (Xinnian in Black & Hwang, 2012, p. 440).

He thus mentions that China does not only want to live up to international obligations, but also appear as a responsible and capable international actor. Consequently, other political considerations preceded the decision to deploy the PLAN, and countering piracy might therefore not have been the main objective.

Besides possible ulterior motives, the decision to dispatch the PLAN “anti-piracy taskforce” on the 26th of December was an obvious one, as the Gulf of Aden was and remains a key area for the Chinese economy. Not only had piracy become “increasingly rampant... [and posed] a grave threat to international shipping” (Xinnian, 2008), but the global security discourse also associated piracy with terrorism in this region (Singh & Bedi, 2016), partially due to the existence of Al-Shabaab. Moreover, attacks in the Western Indian Ocean involved violence in 85% of the cases (Prins & Daxecker, 2017). Therefore, it is likely that China saw piracy as a direct threat at the time. The taskforce was composed of two combat ships, supported by an oiler. The operations of the taskforce were fairly limited, as it only escorted Chinese vessels, did not cooperate with other navies present, did not include any port visits, and were relatively short compared to other navies, as the mission took 124 days (Henry, 2016).

Gradually, however, China increasingly started escorting foreign-flagged ships, and cooperated more and more with other navies. This occurrence was due to the “Harmonious Seas Symposium” in April 2009, which celebrated the 60th anniversary of the PLAN, and included 14 other nations’ navies. The reason for the inclusion of other navies in this inherently Chinese celebration became apparent in the keynote speech by Admiral Wu Shengli, which focused on maintaining peace and stability on the high seas. Wu claimed that international maritime cooperation would build “harmonious oceans and seas” (Wu in Christoffersen, 2009). Accordingly, this statement signified the maintenance of peace on the oceans through comprehensive co-ordination and co-operation (Black & Hwang, 2012). This is an important event, as it resulted in a shift in PLAN activities and mindset. Instead of operating by itself, it resulted in the unprecedented occurrence of cooperating with other navies, and escorting ships other than Chinese vessels. It demonstrated that China wanted to behave as a responsible player. Moreover, by including other navies in its celebration, the PLAN demonstrated a willingness to eliminate misgivings and promote understanding (China Daily, 2009). It is likely that the PLAN did not cooperate for the first 4 months of deployment, because the PLAN was inexperienced as a blue-water navy, and wanted to gain experience before engaging with other navies.

The following year, in 2010, a defense white paper was published by the Chinese

government. Admittedly, as with any white paper, it had been published for the general public, and its message might therefore not reflect actual Chinese foreign policy. It does, however, demonstrate how China wants to be seen by the international community, and therefore does provide some interesting insights. Firstly, China continued with the trend of stressing the importance of cooperation, in line with the previous year's harmonious seas symposium. It highlighted four main goals and tasks of national defense, one of which was "maintaining world peace and stability", which entailed that:

"China adheres to the concepts of openness, pragmatism and cooperation, expands its participation in international security cooperation, strengthens strategic coordination and consultation with major powers and neighboring countries, enhances military exchanges and cooperation with developing countries, and takes part in UN peace-keeping operations, [and] maritime escort" (PRC, 2010).

As it was categorized alongside the goals of "safeguarding sovereignty" and "accelerating the modernization of national defense", it displays the importance China attached to this goal. Clearly, the continuous mentioning of the term "cooperation" benefited the goal of portraying itself as a responsible, inclusive actor on the international stage. Moreover, the fact that "maritime escorts" were included in this goal, demonstrates the purpose of the PLAN mission; it served to better China's image, which corresponds with constructivist explanations. The signaling of this new image was part of a new foreign policy, as the recurring term of the white paper was "military operations other than war" (MOOTW). China wanted to be seen as a responsible player, not as an aggressive one. The blue-water expansion of the PLAN served to fight non-traditional security threats, not other states. The document is filled with reference to MOOTW, combined with statements like "China will never seek hegemony... no matter how its economy develops" (PRC, 2010). The "MOOTW" missions benefited the Chinese narrative of a responsible stakeholder and thus became a tool of statecraft (Henry, 2016), serving the goal of steering the international opinion of China away from the 'China threat'.

Secondly, the document also functioned to explain the mission in the Gulf of Aden, and its progress, to other international actors. According to the Chinese government, it served to "develop training models for MOOTW missions" and "develop its capabilities in conducting operations in distant waters" (PRC, 2010). Furthermore, the white paper was a highly visible way to boast about its achievements, by stating that "the Chinese Navy has provided protection for 3,139 ships sailing under Chinese and foreign flags, rescued 29 ships

from pirate attacks, and recovered nine ships released from captivity... and has exchanged 24 boarding visits of commanders with fleets from the EU, the multinational naval force, NATO, Russia, the ROK, the Netherlands and Japan” (PRC, 2010).

Finally, the legitimacy of the PLAN mission, and China’s responsible image, was further justified by referral to international law. Statements like “In line with relevant UN resolutions, China dispatched naval ships to conduct escort operations in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia” and “Naval ships performing escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and in waters off Somalia... strictly observe international treaties like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea” (PRC, 2010), directly demonstrate the importance China attached to justifying its mission as legitimate. This once again resonates with its “five principles of peaceful co-existence”, which include non-interference and non-aggression. Moreover, it also aligns with liberal institutionalist arguments about cooperating in international arrangements.

The statements in this white paper were immediately backed up the same year, as China won approval to lead the co-ordination of anti-piracy patrols off Somalia. This decision was made during a SHADE meeting, which was chaired by the US. It implied that the PLAN would have to cooperate with the navies of NATO, the EU, and Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). China’s new foreign policy of MOOTW, and behaving cooperative and responsible, seemed to have planted its seeds, as Chambers (a US naval commander) stated that: “there has been major progress in communication and co-operation... China will get a chance to chair the SHADE... it is a very positive development” (South China Morning Post, 2010a). Despite the claims in these statements, China did not join the SHADE mechanism yet, as a PLAN official stated that it had to await “political approval” (SCMP, 2010b). Nonetheless, the importance of cooperation was once again reiterated in a 2011 white paper that focused on “peaceful development” and “[taking] active part in international cooperation...and deploy naval escort fleets to combat piracy” (PRC, 2011). These are important developments, as they resonate with the argumentation in the previous paragraphs about China wanting to change its image, and adhering to international cooperation arrangements.

Interestingly, these anti-piracy efforts proved to be very effective, to the extent that piracy incidents rarely occurred in 2012 in the Gulf of Aden. This was not a sudden drop, but the result of years of anti-piracy efforts by all relevant actors. In fact, the number of ships which the PLAN escort taskforce (ETF) had to assist, had been dropping for quite a while since its deployment, as can be seen in figure 1. Even though the need for escorts strongly reduced, the year 2012 proved to be a turning point for explaining the PLAN mission to the

Western Indian Ocean. From a realist point of view, the deployment of the PLAN to this region in 2008 made sense. Piracy incidents threatened access to China’s SLOCs, on which it heavily relied for its energy security and export market, and therefore posed a direct threat. Nonetheless, realism fails to account for the continued expansion after 2012, as this threat had diminished. Some realist explanations of Great Power responses to maritime piracy justify this by arguing that the massing of naval forces is a kind of “beauty pageant” which displays their military capabilities (Black & Hwang, 2012), but it is not sufficient in explaining the expansion of the mission during and after 2012. If the continuation of the mission was about displaying military might, China would have sent more ships. Instead, the composition of its mission remained the same as in 2008, with two destroyers and a supply ship. It did, however, extend the duration of its mission, with 191 days instead of 124 in 2008 (as can be seen in figure 2), and it included many more port visits, respectively. These port visits might indicate the diplomatic nature of the mission. Moreover, the PLAN continued to diversify its activities, and engaged in many cooperation exercises with other navies. In other words, with its mission expanded, and the number of ships escorted reduced to a minimum, it seemed that anti-piracy efforts had become a secondary concern (Henry, 2016).

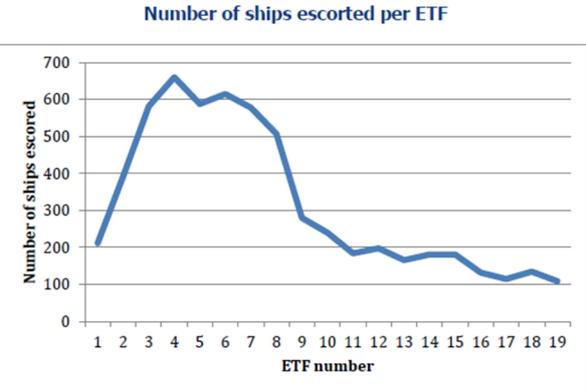


Figure 1: The number of ships set out against the ETF number. As can be seen, the drop in number of ships escorted has been reached after the 9th taskforce.

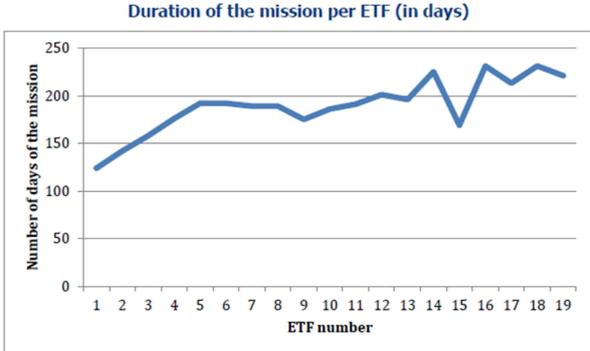


Figure 2: The number of days of the mission set out against the ETF number.
 Source: Erickson & Strange, 2015.

As described in the previous paragraph, it is contradictory that China kept expanding its mission, despite the sustained drop in piracy incidents. Another occurrence that year is that China acquired membership in the SHADE mechanism. It had already attended some of these meetings in Bahrein, and lead escort operations, but rejected to chair the SHADE because it had to await ‘political approval’. This begs the question: why join the SHADE now? It could be argued that joining SHADE advanced the Chinese narrative of a responsible stakeholder. Moreover, as participation is voluntary and does not place any navy under the authority of another (unlike many other multilateral forces), it is clear that this model of cooperation aligned with Beijing’s interest, as it provided the PLAN with considerable freedom to alter its mission whenever it wanted to (Erickson & Strange, 2013b), and more importantly, for whichever purpose. These arguments, however, also applied in 2010 when it was given the opportunity to chair the SHADE meetings. It is possible that the sustained drop in piracy incidents forced Beijing to find new justifications for its presence in the Western Indian Ocean, and that joining the SHADE mechanism served that purpose.

In 2014 China continued its narrative as a responsible stakeholder in the Gulf of Aden, as it utilized the PLAN for diplomatic purposes. In July, it conducted a joint counter-piracy drill with the European taskforce, which according to PLAN commander Xinjian: “deepen[ed] friendly exchanges and cooperation between the Chinese and European navies, and is an embodiment of trust and friendship” (Ministry of National Defense, 2014). In September, it sent the 17th escort fleet to an Iranian port “for peace, and to strengthen understanding and naval exchanges” (PRC, 2014a). Finally, in December, it held a joint anti-piracy exercise with the US Navy, to minimize chances for misunderstanding (PRC, 2014b), which indicates that the mission focused on building trust with other countries.

When the Chinese government published a defense white paper in 2015, the importance of cooperating and building trust was reiterated, just like behaving responsibly and respecting international law. It continued to practice this policy, as indicated when China increased cooperation and coordination with Denmark the same year (PRC, 2015a). In this sense, China’s new national defense policy repeated many of the same points as the 2010 white paper. Notwithstanding, some interesting and critical additions were made. The document directly stated that: “The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests” (PRC, 2015b). This was an extremely important development, as it implied a scaling-up of China’s maritime presence, which signified a

decisive shift in Chinese foreign policy. What it implied for the PLAN mission to the Western Indian Ocean is that:

“the PLAN will gradually shift its focus from “offshore water defense” to the combination of “offshore water defense” with “open seas protection”, and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient maritime combat structure” (PRC, 2015b).

Hence, as the paper is directed at national defense, pursuing to become a global maritime power could come across as aggressive to other actors. This directly clashed with China’s usual foreign policy which focuses on “the five principles of peaceful co-existence”. China tried to justify it by claiming that “its national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy...” and that is “has become an imminent issue” (PRC, 2015b). However, as piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden abated, with 0 recorded in 2015 (Prins & Daxecker, 2017), this justification was hard to believe. Instead, it highlighted possible ulterior motives for the new policy of “open seas protection”.

One event that triggered even more suspicion was when China announced its plans for building a military naval base in Djibouti, which it finished in 2017. As it was the first Chinese overseas base for permanent military deployment, it clearly demonstrated what the new role “open seas protection” of the PLAN entailed. Historically, the PLAN served to protect borders and territory, and a permanent operation 7,700 km from Beijing does therefore not fit that description (SCMP, 2015). From China’s point of view, the naval base makes sense, as its strategic location borders the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, and it is the gateway to the Western Indian Ocean. These are some of the most important SLOCs on which China relies for overseas trade and most of its energy supply, as mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, other countries like India and Japan also rely on these trade routes, and do not have a naval base. Therefore, China’s permanent military presence in Djibouti could feel asphyxiating, as it has the potential to cut off those trade routes in the event of war. In other words, it could be seen as an act of interference, or even aggression which does not align with its “five principles of peaceful co-existence”.

Shortly after the initial announcement of the plans for the naval base, China’s Defense Ministry tried to counter these fears as it confirmed that “what needs to be stressed is that China upholds a path of peaceful development... and has never engaged in an arms race or military expansion. This will never change” (SCMP, 2016). This quote demonstrates that China wants to signal its commitment to those principles of non-interference. Furthermore, it upheld that “it’s mostly used in non-war military operations... so as to safeguard regional

peace and stability” (Ministry of National Defense, 2019a), as in line with its MOOTW policy. Besides, the base was solely set up for logistical support of the navy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018), thus not for economic, or any other purposes. A spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense claimed that “facts proved that China’s establishment of necessary overseas logistical facilities is a way to fulfill its international responsibilities and obligations and to promote the building of the community with a shared future for mankind” (Ministry of National Defense, 2019b), which once again resonate with institutional liberalist explanations, as China claims to be adhering to international cooperation arrangements.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that China’s response was justified as the levels of piracy in 2008 were high. However, as the issue of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and the wider region, fades away, it becomes harder for China to justify its presence. It could be argued the PLAN mission served as a smokescreen. Whilst it made China appear responsible and cooperative, it could have masked other ulterior motives. The naval base in Djibouti supposedly only serves to enhance counter-piracy and humanitarian efforts, but it is not unlikely that it is also advanced other purposes. It could function as an extension of China’s sovereignty with the goal of protecting its SLOCs (or threaten others), advancing its maritime silk road, countering US presence in the region, or even projecting its power capability. Whilst other countries’ navies have started to reduce their participation since 2016 (Henry, 2016), China might have to start rethinking the justification for its presence in the region.

Chapter V: The South China Sea

As mentioned earlier, China’s anti-piracy efforts in the South China Sea precede those in the Gulf of Aden. Nevertheless, China has never deployed the PLAN for these purposes in its own region. As with the previous chapter, this phenomenon will be explained through the method of process tracing, to uncover how this outcome can be explained. Still, it is hard to pinpoint the exact starting point for China’s anti-piracy efforts within its region, as they can easily be traced back to the Ming & Qing dynasty in the 17th century (Xu, 2006). Accordingly, this chapter will focus on contemporary efforts, which start with the MV CHEUNG SON trials in 2000. Prior to this event, it was common policy for China to release pirates after their capture, since proving their criminal responsibility proved to be a difficult task (Scott, 2014), as was confirmed by IMB deputy direction Abhyankar, who stated that “China is one of those countries that lets pirates go” (Ung, 1999). This mentality, however, shifted with the MV CHEUG SON case, which covered the murder of 23 Chinese seamen,

whose bodies were thrown overboard, and whose ship was hijacked. China responded by capturing the pirates, naming and shaming them, and eventually publicly hanging them (Sweeney, 2000), which demonstrated a decisive shift away from capturing and releasing pirates. Hence, this is the justification for choosing these trials as the starting point for analyzing China's contemporary anti-piracy effort. Moreover, the case had a notable discouraging effect on piracy in China (Prins & Daxecker, 2017), even though it remained rampant in the South China Sea. Importantly, the capture of these pirates was performed by the Ministry of Public Security and the coast guard (Xu, 2006), and the PLAN was not involved.

In 2002, China broadened its anti-piracy efforts by signing a multilateral declaration with the ASEAN, namely the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). It stated the importance of the UNCLOS, and specifically stressed the necessity of cooperating in "combating transnational crime, including but not limited to drug trafficking, piracy, and armed robbery at sea" (ASEAN, 2002). This was a key moment in anti-piracy cooperation, as territorial disputes in the South China Sea have often hampered such efforts. Since acts of piracy can legally only occur in international waters, and China's "claim" over the islands made this arbitrary for many countries, this often prevented them from taking action. Even though it took until 2017 to eventually reach consensus on a binding code of conduct, the development demonstrates that the importance of fighting piracy was recognized by China, as it admitted that cooperation against transnational crime was necessary for the region.

This trend of multilateral cooperation was continued in 2003, when China adopted the ARF statement on Cooperation Against Piracy and Other Threats to Security. The statement focused on enhancing cooperation against piracy, and achieving effective implementation of international instruments. Signatories to the statement had to sign and adhere to all the relevant international instruments, like the UNCLOS and the SUA convention, and comply with the IMO's recommendations and guidelines. On the one hand, this aligns with liberal institutionalist explanations, as international institutions or organizations like the UN and the IMO clearly fostered cooperation between these states, although the region was, and remains, territorially disputed. On the other hand, the ARF's goal of improving actors' attitudes towards each other, and facilitating cooperation, could be explained from a constructivist point of view as a process of social learning (Heller, 2005). Put differently, through ARF meetings, members are continuously exposed to mutual contact, which facilitates this process. Moreover, the statement recognized piracy as a direct threat, and even linked it to terrorism,

as it stated that “piracy and armed robbery against ships, and the potential for terrorist attacks on vulnerable sea shipping threaten the growth of the Asia-Pacific region” (ASEAN, 2003), which would resonate with realist explanations. The piracy-terrorism nexus was logical, as 9/11 occurred just two years prior to the ARF statement, and piracy, which like terrorism is stateless, seemed like an enemy against whom the whole world could unite (Singh & Bedi, 2016).

As piracy got linked to terrorism in the region, it sparked more cooperation efforts. In 2004, China signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security Issues with the ASEAN, which included piracy as a threat. It went beyond the ARF statement of the previous year, as the MoU entailed a commitment to cooperation through information exchanges, personnel exchange and training, law enforcement cooperation, and joint research. The Chinese vice-minister of public security stated that “transnational crimes... have posed great challenges to the region’s peace and development” (China Daily, 2004), and therefore demonstrated that piracy was still perceived as a threat, despite low levels in China. Interestingly, piracy in China mostly occurred against stationary ships in docks, and only involved violence in 30% of the cases (Prins & Daxecker, 2017), which meant that the coast guard was the most effective response, not the PLAN. Moreover, the cooperation efforts above focused on enhancing counter-piracy efforts, but did not discuss joint military operations, which would have been the most effective. This then poses the question; if levels of piracy in China were low at the time, why did it join these cooperation efforts? It could be argued that cooperation would display China as an ally, instead of an enemy in the eyes of its neighbors, especially due to China’s defensive behavior concerning the South China Sea. This line of reasoning is strengthened by the fact that China declared that it would pay for the expenses of training personnel under the MoU (ASEAN, 2004), which could be interpreted as a gesture of good faith, i.e. a form of signaling which resonates with constructivist explanations. Furthermore, the MoU requires a yearly meeting from its signatories, which continuously exposes the parties to mutual contact, facilitates social learning, and has even been renewed in 2010 due to its apparent success.

Another more pessimistic argument about China’s anti-piracy cooperation efforts is that they could be aimed at strengthening its hold over the islands in the South China Sea. By inflating the threat of piracy, especially by linking it to terrorism, these multilateral agreements could serve to exert pressure on weaker states to sign the 1988 SUA Convention (Singh & Bedi, 2016). In turn, the convention could be expanded to allow maritime forces of other nations into territorial waters to fight piracy and terrorism (Young & Valencia, 2003),

which would give China an excuse to send the PLAN to the islands in the South China Sea, under the guise of an anti-piracy operation. This could be the reason why as of today, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore have not signed the convention, even though they play a hugely important role in anti-piracy efforts in the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca.

Therefore, it is more likely that cooperation on a common security issue served to advance China's narrative as a responsible stakeholder through building mutual trust. This image was strengthened when China joined the ReCAAP in 2006 as one of the sixteen founding members. This multilateral counter-piracy campaign focuses on sharing information to better combat piracy. Furthermore, information sharing in the ReCAAP is on a voluntary basis, as well as its contributions (Huang, 2008). Therefore, China could demonstrate a willingness to cooperate by joining the mechanism, without having to share sensitive information. Moreover, despite voluntary contributions, China is one of the few countries that has consistently contributed funds (ReCAAP, 2016), which further served to enhance its positive image. Even though joint naval cooperation would be more effective, territorial disagreements, sovereignty issues, and disputes over exclusive economic zones continue to frustrate full ReCAAP participation (Prins & Daxecker, 2017). In 2007 China also joined the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, which is attended by defense ministers and senior military officers, and discusses intergovernmental security. As China has continued to attend these yearly meetings ever since, and both deepened and broadened its participation, it could be argued that China became "more socialized" because of it (Bisley & Taylor, 2015). As has been argued earlier this chapter, these meetings facilitated a process of social learning, as important actors are continuously exposed to each other's views, which could facilitate the process of building mutual trust, and display China in a positive light. This resonates with constructivist explanations. Nonetheless, these multilateral efforts also align with liberal institutionalist explanations that focus on international organizations that aid cooperation between states, as both the ReCAAP and the Shangri-La Dialogue fulfill this purpose.

At this point of the analysis, it should be acknowledged that this thesis reiterates many of the same points. This, however, is not a flaw in the argumentation. Instead, it strengthens it, because it proves the continuity of liberal institutionalist and constructivist explanations in China's statements and actions. These in turn demonstrate a pattern, which showcases the relative explanatory strength of the different theories, and therefore provides insight into the case.

Despite China's participation in the anti-piracy efforts listed above, it is interesting that there was no mention of piracy issues in the South China Sea in the 2010 national defense

white paper. This resonates with the argumentation in the previous paragraphs that these multilateral cooperation efforts are more likely tools of statecraft aimed at the building of mutual trust, and that the issue of piracy was not a direct concern of China. This argumentation is confirmed by statements like:

“China attaches great importance to defense and security consultations with neighboring countries... Such consultations and dialogues play a positive role in promoting mutual understanding, consolidating good neighborliness and friendship, deepening mutual trust and cooperation, and maintaining regional peace and stability” (PRC, 2010).

Thus piracy provided an issue at which China could unite with other states, as it remained rampant in the wider region. Nevertheless, piracy in the Gulf of Aden fulfilled the same purpose, namely advancing the narrative of a responsible stakeholder, and sending your navy arguably demonstrates a deeper commitment than signing a few statements. However, as previously mentioned, the extent to which China could cooperate within its own region is limited due to the sovereignty issues surrounding the South China Sea. This is visible in the white paper, as it continuously referred to the importance of “[respecting] the sovereignty, rights and interests of coastal states” and strictly complying “with the UN Charter, the UNCLOS, and other universally recognized norms of international relations” (PRC, 2010). These statements functioned as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they were meant to enhance China’s image as a responsible actor, who would never behave aggressively, nor default on international arrangements, and who respects the sovereignty of other countries. On the other hand, when China stated that sovereignty must be respected, it also implied that other countries cannot violate China’s “claim” over the islands in the South China Sea, which further complicates the extent to which counter-piracy cooperation is possible. Accordingly, China cooperated as much as possible, whilst avoiding any measures that would impede the sovereignty of their own, or that of another state, as the goal of cooperation against piracy was building mutual trust.

This importance of building mutual trust and improving its image is additionally affirmed, as the white paper stated that “suspicion about China, interference and countering moves against China from the outside are on the increase” and “[China pursues] an independent foreign policy of peace and a national defense policy that is defensive in nature” (PRC, 2010). An anti-piracy operation in the South China Sea would be contradictory to this statement, as it would establish a permanent naval presence, which could come across as aggressive. In turn, such aggression could annul the progress made of building a positive

image with its neighboring countries in the previous years, and increase the ‘China Threat’ perception, which does not resonate with China’s “five principles of peaceful co-existence”. For these reasons, despite the lack of reference towards piracy in the South China Sea, this white paper is important in explaining the function of these multilateral anti-piracy cooperation efforts, as it reveals that the goal of cooperation was building mutual relationships and trust, and advancing China’s narrative as a responsible stakeholder.

In 2011, another white paper reiterates this importance, and states that “[China has] done its utmost to uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea... by pursuing bilateral cooperation and participating in regional and sub-regional cooperation” (PRC, 2011). The quote demonstrates the sensitivities concerning the South China Sea, and that implies that cooperation serves to eliminate those. It also explains the absence of an anti-piracy PLAN mission, as this would escalate those sensitivities, and therefore destabilize the accomplishments China has made thus far through cooperation. In the same year, China continued its trend of increasing cooperation with other countries, as China also expanded anti-piracy cooperation with Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, as it set up a joint command of armed police forces on the Mekong River. This initiative was established after 13 Chinese sailors were murdered that year (Ashkar, 2020), which shows that China does respond to direct threats. Moreover, it indicated an important progression, as a joint command entailed an unprecedented international level of anti-piracy cooperation in the region. This could be explained by constructivist explanations, that social interaction over time results in the deepening of relationships between these countries.

An important development concerning the sovereignty issues occurred in 2014, when China and 19 other states signed the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), which served to prevent misunderstanding between navies. Even though it is not directly related to piracy, it provides interesting insights into explaining the absence of an anti-piracy mission. Admiral Wu Shengli called the CUES a “milestone document” and stated that “the People’s Liberation Army navy will unswervingly adhere to peaceful development and sincerely hopes to maintain the peace and stability of the region together with other navies” (Shengnan, 2014). This aligns with China’s policy of building trust with other countries, and in this case, other navies. Nonetheless, shortly after signing the CUES, there was a misunderstanding as to how the CUES functions in practice. As part of avoiding unplanned encounters, the code provides certain routes for navies to reduce the possibility of meeting another navy. Nevertheless, this was interpreted differently by China, as a deputy commander of the PLAN stated that:

“it is wrong that some countries intend to misinterpret and take advantage of the code to set barriers for the Chinese navy from protecting its maritime interest in the East and South China Seas... The Chinese navy is determined to safeguard our territorial integrity, maritime rights and security” (Zhendong & Shengnan, 2014).

The quote demonstrates how the sovereignty issues frustrate further cooperation in the South China Sea; China aims to use cooperation as a tool of statecraft to advance its image as a responsible player in the region. At the same time, however, it also wants to avoid that these forms of cooperation enable other states to take advantage of China. Therefore, cooperation can never get a real transnational character, as China always wants to remain in control of decisions that might harm its territorial integrity. If you apply this reasoning to explain the absence of an anti-piracy mission, it is evident that a multilateral anti-piracy campaign would also infringe too much upon China’s “territorial integrity” in the South China Sea. Simultaneously, a unilateral campaign would undo the progress made of building a positive image, and increase the “China threat” perception, as explained earlier. Therefore, the CUES provided an interesting insight into the dynamics of how the sovereignty issues hamper deeper forms of multilateral cooperation. Nonetheless, in 2016, China and the ASEAN adopted a joint statement to apply the CUES specifically in the South China Sea, which demonstrated a strong political symbol (Collin, 2017), and aimed to further enhance China’s image. In practice, it was nothing more than a symbol, as it did not entail anything new, which aligns with constructivist explanations about signaling. Eventually, in 2018 the CUES did result in joint naval drills, which also focused on anti-piracy, and reflected the desire of China to improve trust with regional players (Zhou, 2018). Accordingly, it can be argued that the CUES functioned as a signaling tool to advance China’s image.

The next year, in 2015, China released a new defense white paper, which also failed to acknowledge the issue of piracy in China’s region. It only mentions the word piracy once, which was in relation to the Gulf of Aden. The most recent white paper (2019) continued this trend and also made no mention of piracy in the South China Sea. This echoes with the previous explanations, that piracy is not perceived as a threat by China, and that cooperation on the issue instead serves to advance its image in the international arena. Later in 2015, Minister of National Defense Chang proposed to deepen security cooperation with the ASEAN, including in the field of anti-piracy, which is illogical due to the low levels of piracy, and the fact that it is seemingly unimportant for China’s national defense. This therefore leads to the belief that anti-piracy cooperation served to facilitate the goal of building mutual trust.

In conclusion, it has become clear in this chapter that China never really acknowledged the issue of piracy in the region. Instead, cooperation in anti-piracy mechanisms served to enhance mutual-relationships, and remove suspicion towards China. The extent to which cooperation can really transform into a multilateral campaign is however extremely limited due to issues of sovereignty. Nonetheless, as piracy is on the rise again (ReCAAP, 2019), an effective response might become necessary, but it appears likely that territorial disputes surrounding the islands in the South China Sea will continue to frustrate deeper forms of cooperation.

Chapter VI: Comparative analysis of the regions

In the previous chapters, this thesis has systematically and thoroughly explained China's anti-piracy involvement in the Western Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea. These were both within-case studies, which through process-tracing provided a clear overview of China's anti-piracy efforts. Nevertheless, it is still important to assess which theory provides the most explanatory power. Moreover, it is necessary to compare these two cases to create external validity, as a generalization is otherwise not possible. It is important to keep in mind that congruence analysis does not aim to rule out certain theories, but rather aims to showcase the comparative value these theories have to offer. What counts is the relative explanatory strength of different theories (Wauters & Beach, 2018). Therefore, this chapter systematically compares the explanations for both regions to analyze which holds the most explanatory power.

Realism

Starting with the framework of realism, it seems like piracy in both regions was not seen as a direct threat. For the Western Indian Ocean, it can be argued that even though piracy posed a significant threat in 2008, China's continued deployment of the PLAN anti-piracy taskforce after 2012 cannot be explained by realist arguments, as the threat of piracy in the region had diminished. Realist explanations also failed to account for the permanent establishment of a Chinese naval military base in Djibouti, as an expansion of the mission was contradictory to the dissipating threat. Regarding the South China Sea, it became clear that realism does not provide an answer to this question, as it assumes that states balance against direct threats, and China still engaged in anti-piracy cooperation with other countries, despite low levels of piracy since 2000. From a realist point of view, there is no need for cooperation if there is no threat, which the defense white papers continuously stressed. Realism, therefore, cannot

explain why China has cooperated in anti-piracy mechanisms, whilst refusing to send the PLAN to the region. These phenomena demonstrate that realism is unable to explain China's policy in both cases, which leads to the conclusion that this theory is not useful in explaining the main research question.

Liberal institutionalism

When analyzing the previous chapters and the prevalence of liberal institutionalism, some interesting insights can be found. On the one hand, in the Western Indian Ocean, liberal institutionalism explained the operation by focusing on the fact that China continuously justified its anti-piracy operation by stating that it strictly observes international arrangements and international law. To a certain extent, this is true, as China's deployment of the PLAN was enabled because of international legal instruments. Since most acts of piracy in the region are committed on the High Seas, outside of any state coastlines, the UNCLOS applies. Moreover, the territorial waters of Somalia are governed under UNSC Resolution 1846 and 1851, which legalize the pursuit of pirates onto Somali territory, both land, and water. Furthermore, adhering to international arrangements aligned with China's policy of the "five principles of peaceful co-existence", to which it constantly referred in its statements and white papers. However, this theory does not fully explain the PLAN mission, as China did not cooperate unconditionally, but instead only cooperated when cooperation suited its narrative. Institutional liberalism is therefore necessary for explaining China's PLAN mission in the Western Indian Ocean, as it facilitated its narrative as a responsible stakeholder, but it is not sufficient. On the other hand, in the South China Sea, liberal institutionalism focused on the fact that international organizations foster cooperation, which was useful in explaining how these cooperation efforts came to pass, as the ASEAN was the main driving force behind most of them. However, it failed to explain the absence of a PLAN anti-piracy operation. It could be argued that the lack of an institutional environment prevented China from establishing an effective anti-piracy mission, as the acts of piracy in the South China Sea occur in territorially disputed waters in the region which fall outside the jurisdiction of the UNCLOS. Nonetheless, this does not explain why China has not sought other ways to deepen its anti-piracy commitment. Therefore, in terms of generalizability, liberal institutionalism fails to account for China's defense policy in general, but did provide interesting insights into what enabled or disabled the deployment of the PLAN, and strengthens the relative explanatory power of the last theory, namely constructivism

Constructivism

In both the cases, constructivism provided a good explanation for the somewhat contradictory phenomenon this thesis tried to explain, namely why China would have an anti-piracy operation so far from home, despite the absence thereof in its own region. When looking at China's behavior in the Western Indian Ocean, its cooperation efforts in different international arrangements, combined with its policy of MOOTW, served to change its image. China had always been seen as a regional power, and it wanted to portray itself as a global power. It was one of the very last UNSC permanent members to deploy its navy to the region, which suggested that it could not lack behind, and resonates with the constructivist theory of social learning and interaction between states. Moreover, constructivist arguments about signaling also applied to the case. The anti-piracy operation provided a highly visible way to showcase itself as a responsible and cooperative player in the international arena, especially with its participation in combined naval escorts. Throughout the years, China became increasingly cooperative through joint-exercise drills, and by gaining membership the US chaired SHADE mechanism. These all advanced the Chinese narrative as a responsible stakeholder, which aligns with constructivist explanations about signaling, and how state identities are socially constructed through interaction with other states. Even when China opened its military base in Djibouti, it insisted on protecting its image as a non-aggressor, by referring to it as a logistical base. Therefore, China's counter-piracy operation in the Western Indian Ocean is best explained as a tool of statecraft to demonstrate itself as a responsible and cooperative player that adheres to international arrangements, which aligns with constructivist explanations. When looking at the South China Sea, constructivism (and especially its model of social learning) also provided explanatory power as to why China has engaged in limited anti-piracy cooperation, without deploying the PLAN. As China was continuously exposed to other countries' views in e.g. ASEAN, ReCAAP, and Shangri-La meetings, it facilitated a process of building mutual trust, which made China engage in cooperation efforts. It also worked the other way, as social learning improved actors' attitudes towards each other, it also served to change how other states view, and behave towards China. In that sense, China's participation in these cooperation efforts functioned as a tool of statecraft to remove suspicious attitudes towards China and enhance its image as a responsible player. Nevertheless, a multilateral anti-piracy campaign which included the PLAN would have demonstrated an even deeper commitment, and therefore further advanced its narrative as a responsible stakeholder. It is, however, not as clear cut, as advancing its image is not China's

only interest. China has, and continuously, to be cautious with the extent to which it cooperates, as it must thread a careful balance between cooperation and sovereignty. If the cooperation efforts become too transnational (as demonstrated with the example of the CUES), it might provide other countries with an excuse to interfere with China's "sovereignty" in the South China Sea. A multilateral anti-piracy campaign like in the Gulf of Aden is therefore not an option. On the other side of the same coin, a unilateral anti-piracy mission neither provided an alternative as this would have come across as aggressive towards its neighbors, which does not align with its "five principles of peaceful co-existence", and there is no legal framework (like the UNCLOS) to justify such a mission. Furthermore, it would have counteracted the progress China has tried to make in changing its image through the process of social learning. Thus, whether unilaterally or multilaterally, an anti-piracy PLAN campaign in the South China Sea would have frustrated China's interests in the South China Sea. Signaling in constructivist theory therefore provided the explanatory power for the absence of an anti-piracy operation, whilst still explaining China's engagements in other forms of anti-piracy cooperation. This proves that constructivism provides the best 'modus operandi' explanation for comparing the regions, and drawing conclusions about China's anti-piracy effort, as it characterizes the key parts of China's defense policy, without relying on a completely theorized causal process.

One constructivist explanation of Chinese foreign policy by Black & Hwang (2012) explains this projection of China's image as a responsible and benevolent Great Power. According to them, it can be explained by the Chinese conception of *Tianxia*, which means "under one heaven". Consequently, it implies the creation of a single institution to manage global affairs, ensuring that all needs are met, and entails a foreign policy based on attraction rather than coercion from the center (Black & Hwang, 2020). Therefore, the concept of *Tianxia* directly aligns with the developments in the previous paragraphs. In both regions, counter-piracy is used as a way to counter the view of the 'China threat', which aligns with the idea of attraction instead of coercion. In the Gulf of Aden, the 'harmonious seas symposium' and cooperation with other navies like the EUNAVFOR facilitated this goal. In the South China Sea, anti-piracy cooperation also sought to reduce the 'China Threat', which also explains the absence of a PLAN anti-piracy taskforce, as the deployment of the PLAN for that purpose would be seen as coercion instead of attraction. Another facet of *Tianxia* is China's role to promote the principle, whereby people do not owe their primary allegiance to their nation or state but must assume responsibility for the whole world (Black & Hwang, 2012). As argued in the previous paragraph, China saw itself as this single institution that

could take responsibility for the whole world. China's involvement in anti-piracy mechanisms served to advance its image as a responsible leader, and as a global power instead of a regional power. Accordingly, to the principle of *Tianxia*, China would not just be a global power, but the greatest global power.

In conclusion, a comparison of China's approach to anti-piracy in both regions has demonstrated that constructivism is the most useful in theory in answering the main question, and the concept of *Tianxia* provides another useful explanation for interpreting the motives behind China's choices in the Gulf of Aden and the South China Sea.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, it has become clear that China's involvement in anti-piracy is best explained by constructivist explanations. In order to answer the main question, this thesis first traced the process of China's involvement in the Gulf of Aden. It found that the PLAN anti-piracy taskforce served to advance China's image from a regional power to a global power and showcase itself as a responsible stakeholder in the international arena. The deployment of the PLAN was dependent on the existing legal frameworks of the UNCLOS and relevant UNSC resolutions. By tracing the developments in the South China Sea, it could be seen that China's involvement served the same purpose, but was limited because of the absence of such a legal framework, as the acts occurred in territorially disputed waters. Since China claims these waters as its own territory, it avoided any form of multilateral cooperation which could provide other countries with an excuse to operate in this region. Therefore, it never developed a multilateral legal framework like that in the Gulf of Aden, which prevented the deployment of the PLAN. This could be explained by the idea that state identities are also historically constructed, and China's attitude towards inviolability of sovereignty might be so strong due to its "century of humiliation". These two cases provided valuable insights to answer the main question: Why has China engaged in anti-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean but not in the South China Sea? This thesis has argued that sovereignty issues in the South China Sea hindered the deployment of the PLAN, whilst these issues were almost non-existent in the Gulf of Aden. Though it could be argued that institutional liberalism explains this phenomenon, by stating that international arrangements facilitated the deployment of the PLAN in the Gulf of Aden, whereas the absence thereof prevented it in the South China Sea, it only explains a part of the puzzle. The main reason was that cooperation against piracy served to advance China's image as a responsible stakeholder and a global power. China had

to send the PLAN to the Gulf of Aden, because other countries had done so. For the same reason, it would be counter-productive to send the PLAN to the South China Sea, as this would only increase other countries' views of the "China threat". Instead, limited anti-piracy cooperation in the form of agreements and statements facilitated the enhancement of its image as a responsible and trustworthy stakeholder in its own region. It is therefore not institutional frameworks that enabled or disabled the deployment of the PLAN for the purposes of counter-piracy, but continuous social interaction between states and state identity. This can only be explained by constructivism.

Piracy, and generally maritime security, is an often-neglected topic in IR research. As argued by Bueger and Edmunds (2017), IR suffers from "seablindness", which entails that security at sea has mainly been interpreted from conservative viewpoints like realist and liberalist theory. Constructivist thinking or critical studies have hardly influenced the debate, whilst they could provide interesting insights into novel forms of governance at sea, and new forms of international order. Moving beyond seablindness could have implications for the way we study global politics as a whole (Bueger & Edmunds, 2017). This is exactly the debate to which this thesis has sought to contribute. As demonstrated, constructivism provided an extremely useful lens for explaining China's policy towards counter-piracy, and also shed light on some of the broader repercussions of China's "anti-piracy operation", as it showed us that it might be a cover to expand sovereignty and claim trade routes for its other projects. The blue economy is becoming increasingly important, and with the advancement of China's maritime Silk Road, we should not take China's intentions for granted. That is however beyond the scope of this thesis, but it opens up possibilities for future research, and therefore shows that the seas should not be neglected. In that sense, IR researchers can learn from China's new national defense policy, which states that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned".

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