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STRATEGIC TRENDS

March 2015

CHINA

Yemen and the not only humanitarian Chinese intervention

China's successful rescue mission in war-torn Yemen has drawn gratitude from across the world. The operation brought to safety, together with 600 Chinese citizens who were working in Yemen, over 200 nationals from several other countries. For a rising world power eager to portray itself in non-aggressive terms, an operation like this is a concrete signal of its intention to become a provider of humanitarian aid in times of crisis.

Before this episode, China's military expansionism was a source of growing concern given China's maritime and territorial disputes with its Asian neighbours and its perceived contest with the United States for maritime dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. However, though serving as a reassurance of China's goodwill, the Yemen operation is a further sign of China's growing geopolitical power and it may actually reflect an important strategic purpose to extend China's influence in the Middle East.

China's interest in Yemen goes back decades but the relationship clearly deepened in 2013, when President Xi Jinping invited Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi to Beijing for an official visit. China's aims were clear. Yemen oil production could provide energy for its booming economy, and Yemen's geographical location would help China protect its interests in the region. In fact, the ships that took conducted the rescue mission were part of an international anti-piracy operation that China has been involved in since 2008.

Ever since Yemen fell into chaos in early 2015 and President Hadi was forced out, Beijing has kept its economic interests in Yemen. Oil shipments continued flowing from the country – Reuters reported that oil shipments in the first two months of 2015 had more than tripled compared to the same period in 2014. Hence the evacuation of almost all the Chinese citizens in Yemen does not mean that China has renounced pursuing its interests in that country even if it requires coming to terms with the enemies of President Hadi. As a matter of fact, according to recent reports Chinese officials met with the Houthi rebels who took control of the capital of Sanaa earlier this year, to discuss economic partnership.

In an opinion article published by the Chinese press agency Xinhua, writer Wang Bowen said that the rescue operation demonstrated the “responsibility” and “humanism” of the Chinese government. This may be true but it does not outline the full picture of the story.