



China's Military Base in Djibouti: Features and Motivations

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Republished in collaboration with the Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, Vol. 17, Issue 17, dated 22 December 2017, Edited for OE Watch.
For the full article, see: <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-overseas-military-base-djibouti-features-motivations-policy-implications/>

OE Watch Commentary: In November 2017, China's military conducted significant live-fire military exercises in Djibouti, marking an important turning point in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) overseas activities by conducting ground-based exercises in a foreign territory independent of a United Nations command. The exercises took place around the time of Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh's visit to Beijing, a visit that deepened China-Djibouti ties and saw economic and technical cooperation agreements inked between the two countries.

China's base in Djibouti, which is the country's first overseas military base, opened in July 2017 and represents China's deepening diplomatic and military inroads into Africa. The base marks an important development in the Chinese military's ability to provide logistical support to counterterrorism, anti-piracy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. As the first accompanying passage from the Chinese Ministry of Defense suggests, China has often played down the military significance of the base, emphasizing its support and logistics roles instead. However, the recent live-fire drills, along with reports that the base will host up to 10,000 troops, could indicate an enhanced military role for the base. Currently, it is unclear if the facility represents an effort for China to enhance its support and logistics capabilities, or suggests greater ambitions. If China opens more military bases in African and the Indian Ocean region, then the base would mark the start of a change in Chinese naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean region.

Located on the tip of the Horn of Africa, the Djibouti base sits at a strategic point between the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden. The 36-hectare (approximately 90 acre) facility will likely host several thousand troops, and have repair facilities for ships and helicopters. There is some evidence suggesting a large, underground storage facility around 23,000 square meters. The base lies approximately seven miles northwest of the US base, Camp Lemonnier, and is located in the general vicinity of the facilities leased by France and Japan in Djibouti.

To better understand the purpose and uses of the Djibouti base, it is helpful to examine three features of China's broader foreign policy: migration of Chinese citizens to Africa and Beijing's growing diplomatic engagement on the continent; a growing emphasis on maritime military power and safeguarding citizens abroad, and; the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China's base in Djibouti helps to support Chinese diplomatic efforts in Africa and provides an outpost to assist growing numbers of Chinese citizens in Africa. Over the years, there has been a steady increase in the number of Chinese citizens engaged in commerce and living abroad in Africa and South Asia, and the involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises in these regions. This increased Chinese economic engagement in Africa has been accompanied by enhanced diplomatic efforts—consisting of foreign aid—and over 2,000 Chinese soldiers serving as United Nations peacekeepers in Africa. China intends the base to serve as a support and logistics facility for peacekeepers, and also as a naval facility to support anti-piracy operations.

The Djibouti base also reflects a growing emphasis on maritime military interests. In its most clear articulation of a shift to prioritizing maritime power, China's 2015 Defense White Paper noted that China must protect its maritime rights and interests. Over the years, the PLA Navy has augmented its maritime capabilities, both in terms of rapid shipbuilding, and also operational learning and participation in joint exercises.

The Djibouti base is an important station along the Belt and Road Initiative's "belt," which is also referred to as the Maritime Silk Road. In Africa, China has invested in a railway linking Ethiopia with Djibouti, and has plans to construct a natural gas pipeline between the two countries as well. The Chinese government has trumpeted BRI as a peaceful endeavor that will spread economic prosperity, but analysts outside of China view it as a way for Beijing to create new spheres of influence at best, and as a gradual way to increase its military influence at worst.

Against this backdrop, the Djibouti base will likely fulfill several needs. As the second passage notes, it will provide re-supply and other support to facilitate the PLA Navy's anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, and the PLA's peacekeeping operations in Africa. The facility should also provide a hub for the PLA Navy's naval diplomacy in the region, could assist in future counterterrorism operations, and help with intelligence gathering. Additionally, it will help expedite evacuations of Chinese nationals in the region. On balance, its primary purpose in the near term will be to support China's economic interests along the Maritime Silk Road, and assist in military operations other than war. **End OE Watch Commentary (Fei)**

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Source: “中国人民解放军驻吉布提保障基地成立(People's Liberation Army Establishes Logistics Support Base in Djibouti),” Ministry of Defense of China, 11 July 2017. http://www.mod.gov.cn/shouye/2017-07/11/content_4785240.htm

The base will provide effective support to the Chinese military's naval escort, peacekeeping and humanitarian rescue missions in Africa and western Asia. It will also be used to better implement military cooperation, military exercises, protection of overseas Chinese, and emergency quick response duties, as well as relevant to preserve the security of international strategic lines of communication.

Source: “我军首个海外基地年内将启用，或部署“陆海空”合成部队 (Our Military's First Overseas Base Will Begin Operations Within The Year, Deploying a Combined “Land Sea Air”),” Unit QQ News, 7 March 2017 <https://view.inews.qq.com/a/20170307A04DFB00>

The base in Djibouti is part of the Haikou, Hainan Comprehensive Strategic Support Base. Its primary responsibilities are providing resupply to the Army and Navy. The base is approximately 36 hectares, not far from the port currently operated by a Chinese company.