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China's first overseas military base in Djibouti - A step in it's emergence as a global military power

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On 26 November, China confirmed it was in talks with Djibouti to construct its first overseas military base. This represents a major symbolic and practical step in China's emergence as a global military power.

According to a Chinese spokesman [1], the new military 'support facilities' will provide logistics and R&R to Chinese troops and naval vessels. It 'will help China's navy and army further participate in UN peacekeeping operations, carry out escort missions in the waters near Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, and provide humanitarian assistance.'

China has been looking for a long term solution to its logistical needs in the Indian Ocean for several years. Since 2008, the Chinese navy has made almost continuous deployments to the Gulf of Aden in support of anti-piracy operations. This has involved 21 task forces totaling 60 naval vessels, which has allowed a fair proportion of the PLA Navy to familiarise itself with 'far seas operations' in general and the Indian Ocean in particular.

Now piracy incidents off the coast of Somalia have dropped to almost none, this justification for China's continuous naval presence in the western Indian Ocean is wearing thin. Beijing's claim last year it was deploying submarines to the Indian Ocean to chase Somali pirates was met with some amusement.

But China does want the capabilities to respond to a variety of contingencies that could arise in that part of the world. In the short term, its capabilities in the Indian Ocean will likely focus on 'military operations other than war' (MOOTW) [2]. In recent years we have seen large scale evacuations of Chinese nationals from Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015), among others. Demand for non-combatant evacuation operations will only increase with the growing number of Chinese nationals overseas, particularly in politically unstable countries. The Djibouti base will be invaluable in deploying Chinese naval and air assets to meet these needs.

The Djibouti base will also give China capabilities to respond to contingencies affecting freedom of navigation in and around the Persian Gulf, and could ultimately form the nucleus of a much bigger Chinese naval presence. China will not wish to rely forever on the US as the main security provider in the Indian Ocean, and in any event there are real question marks over the long term US naval commitment to the Gulf in light of its reduced dependence on oil imports. We are also seeing China beginning to develop limited sea denial capabilities in the Indian Ocean that could provide it with options in the event of interdiction of Chinese sea lines of communication (SLOCs) or other contingencies. This may include increased submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean and potentially limited anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) capabilities.

China is still struggling to come to terms with its perception that its foreign relations are unique and different to the US and others, in part because of the view it has no imperialistic designs beyond its borders. Over the last several years, senior Chinese officials have repeatedly denied any intention to establish any 'military bases' in the Indian Ocean region. China calls its new premises in Djibouti 'support facilities' [3]. Chinese analysts use the term *bújǐ zhàn* (补给站) (literally 'depot' or 'supply station') to describe China's needs in the Indian Ocean. In other words, the Chinese military is interested only in logistical support while other militaries are about projecting power.

For some, the announcement of the base at Djibouti is a vindication of long held suspicions that, despite Beijing's claims to the contrary, China plans to build a 'string' of naval bases to protect its SLOCs across the northern Indian Ocean and even to eventually achieve naval predominance in the region.

That may well be the case, but if Beijing has such a strategy, then it is certainly moving slowly and cautiously. China has so far steered conspicuously clear of developing any naval or military presence in newly-built ports such as Gwadar, in Pakistan, or Hambantota, in Sri Lanka that are often presented by commentators as candidates for Chinese naval bases. China seems to be moving one step at a time.

Some influential US naval analysts are skeptical about claims of a string of Chinese naval bases. They argue [4] China is more likely to pursue what is called a 'places not bases' strategy [5] in the Indian Ocean, rather than constructing dedicated military facilities for the purpose of supporting major combat operations. A 'places not bases' strategy would involve entering into arrangements with host countries to gain temporary access to port and other facilities in the event of certain contingencies. This would in theory be cheaper and less politically controversial than building naval bases, but it would also require friendly regimes that Beijing could rely on.

Despite much talk of China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean, the list of China's dependable strategic friends in the region is a short one. China could probably rely on Pakistan, but Beijing's recent experience in Sri Lanka and Myanmar suggests other governments are wary about getting too close.

Overall, the decision to site its first foreign military base in Djibouti was probably a good choice for Beijing. And for those concerned about China's intentions, Djibouti may be less worrying than other possible locations. Djibouti already hosts several foreign naval and military facilities, including French, US and Japanese, so it can hardly be said that China has Djibouti in its pocket. Previous reports [6] indicated that China plans to build new port and air facilities near the town of Obock, some distance from other foreign military facilities. Nevertheless the existence of these other bases in Djibouti might be viewed by some as reducing the likelihood that China would use its new facilities in opposition to Western interests in the region.

The distance of its new Djibouti base from China, more than 10,000 km by sea, is also indicative of the scope of China's ambitions to protect its interests far from its shores. China may also have been looking at naval facilities elsewhere in Africa [7]. Djibouti is likely to be just a taste of things to come.

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P.S.

* “China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti likely to be a taste of things to come”. The Interpreter. 2 décembre 2015 10:15:

<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/12/02/Chinas-first-overseas-military-base-in-Djibouti-likely-to-be-a-taste-of-things-to-come.aspx>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.reuters.com/article/china-djibouti-idUSL3N13L2XH20151126>

[2] <http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI-Hu%20Kamphausen.pdf>

[3] <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/china-has-no-plan-for-indian-ocean-military-bases/article3855313.ece>

[4] [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=36659&no_cache=1#.VmF6dIQsH4d](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36659&no_cache=1#.VmF6dIQsH4d)

[5] <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2014/10/not-an-idea-we-have-to-shun-chinese-overseas-basin-g-requirements-in-the-21st-century/>

[6] <http://www.chinasignpost.com/2015/07/11/djibouti-likely-to-become-chinas-first-indian-ocean-outpost/>

[7] <http://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=132572&page=archive-read>