

Geopolitics - Japan to expand Djibouti military base to counter Chinese influence

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Japan will lease additional land next year to expand a military base in Djibouti, eastern Africa, as a counterweight to what it sees as growing Chinese influence in the region, three Japanese government sources said.

China is seeking closer ties with African nations that could help it gain access to natural resources and provide new markets. Beijing said late last year it would pump \$60 billion into development projects on the continent, cancel some debt and help boost agriculture.

Earlier this year, Japan also pledged to increase its support to infrastructure, education and healthcare projects in Africa, committing an extra \$30 billion in public and private support.

“China is putting money into new infrastructure and raising its presence in Djibouti, and it is necessary for Japan gain more influence,” said one of the sources, with knowledge of the plan.

China in February began construction in Djibouti of its first overseas military facility, a coastal logistics base that will resupply naval vessels taking part in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions.

Djibouti, which is about the size of Wales, is strategically located at the southern entrance to the Red Sea on the route to the Suez Canal. The tiny, barren nation sandwiched between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, also hosts U.S. and French bases.

Since 2011, a Japanese Self Defence Force contingent of 180 troops has occupied a 12 hectare (30 acre) site in Djibouti, next to Camp Lemonnier, the U.S. base at the country’s international airport.

From there, the SDF have operated maritime patrol aircraft as part of an international force, including China, that hunts pirates in the seas of the Gulf of Aden and off the coast of Somalia.

A Japanese Defence Ministry spokesman confirmed discussions were taking place.

“In addition to the land Japan has borrowed, it is considering leasing the neighboring land to its east,” the spokesman said in response to a Reuters query. “Japan is now in negotiations with Djibouti government.”

Asked about the plans, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Japan’s military and security policies had garnered attention in Asia for historical reasons.

“We hope Japan can draw lessons from history, conform with the times, and truly follow the path of peaceful development,” Geng told a daily news briefing in Beijing.

Japan is considering deploying C-130 transport aircraft, Bushmaster armored vehicles and extra personnel to the base but has not yet decided on how many, the sources said.

The size of the extra leased land would be smaller than the existing base and was expected to cost around \$1 million a year, they added.

Tokyo will justify the expansion of personnel and aircraft in the Horn of Africa by pointing to a need to have aircraft there to evacuate Japanese citizens from nearby trouble spots or areas hit by natural disasters, the sources said.

Minister of Defence Tomomi Inada traveled to Djibouti in August, where she said Tokyo was considering expanding the “function” of the Japanese base. She didn’t, however, indicate that new land would be added.

A month earlier Japan sent three C-130 aircraft from Japan to stand by in Djibouti for the evacuation of Japanese citizens trapped by fighting in South Sudan’s capital, Juba.

The mission, only the second ever undertaken by SDF transport aircraft, showed the increasing ability of Japan’s military to conduct operations far from home.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is seeking to give the SDF a greater regional and global role as his nation steps back from seven decades of state pacifism.

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P.S.

* <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-military-djibouti-idUSKCN12D0C4>