



Issue Brief

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Chinese Naval Base in Djibouti: Possibilities and Implications

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The Chinese inaugurated their first overseas military base on August 1, 2017 with a flag raising ceremony in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa.¹ China claims it to be a logistics support base for their antipiracy operations along the Horn of Africa. The base is on a 9-year lease, with a capacity of up to 10,000 soldiers. China already has 2400 peacekeepers on the continent.² However, Chinese boots on ground in Djibouti, which itself is a host to two other foreign nation bases (including United States and France) has more than one dimension to it. One obvious dimension is the notion of 'String of Pearls' in Chinese military strategy linked to their national interest of protecting those Sea Lanes of Communications (SLCs) from where it ensures energy and economic security at home.

From an African perspective, growing international economic and strategic interests in the African continent will help "Rising Africa" realise its potential. However, developments such as the above will surely have implications including, most importantly, those on the African society, resulting from increased



competition among external powers for African resources. In addition, volatile security situation in African needs to be addressed before any progress is consolidated, which would entail a cooperative mechanism among external powers in Africa and adjoining Oceans.

Djibouti is a relatively stable country in a volatile region. Its geostrategic location next to Bab-el-Mandeb (a critical maritime chokepoint) and its seaport access for landlocked Ethiopia and other growing East African economies makes it a strategic choice for Chinese and other military bases.³ China is also seeking new opportunities in East Africa. It is heavily involved in the development of infrastructure and aims at other such construction projects for its overtly huge industrial base at home.

¹ <http://www.africanews.com/2017/08/01/djibouti-hosts-first-chinese-overseas-military-base/>

² <http://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-base-in-djibouti-near-camp-lemonnier-africa-us-concern-2017-3>

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33115502>

Whereas Djibouti needs Chinese assistance in infrastructure, it also aspires on becoming a commercial hub in the region, connecting East Africa to Middle East and Indian Ocean.

The much debated notion of 'String of Pearls' was coined by Booz-Allen (2005) in their report on "Energy Future of Asia".⁴ It adhere to the projection of Chinese military power from the South China Sea to Indian Ocean to Africa and the Middle East. There have been instances reported in the media where Chinese submarines were spotted nearby ports along this 'String of Pearls' as they call it.⁵ Chinese facility in Djibouti will be able to serve five missions including counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, intelligence collection, peacekeeping missions and non-combat evacuation operations.⁶

The unclassified satellite imagery as of July 2017 (illustrated below) shows a lot of construction work underway. The imagery shows that China is building a new aviation facility, with 7 structures that look like hangers connected by a 1300 apron for planes.⁷ Official pictures showed a two ship flotilla consisting of the Jingangshan, a Type 071 landing platform dock, and Donghaidao leaving for Djibouti. These ships are illustrative of Chinese Naval aspirations for blue water military capability.⁸



⁴ https://books.google.no/books/about/Energy_Futures_in_Asia.html?id=5En2PgAACAAJ&hl=en

⁵ <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/where-is-the-string-of-pearls-in-2015/>

⁶ Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker and Patrick de Gategno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base", CNA China Studies, July 12, 2017.

⁷ <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/07/12/chinese-personnel-set-sail-for-first-african-military-base.html>

⁸ <http://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/12482/heres-what-you-should-know-about-chinas-new-african-base>

It will be interesting to watch how Chinese will develop their overseas military capability in Africa which is a host to seven other foreign military forces. Notably more than 4,000 US personnel are stationed at Camp Lemonnier, the largest US permanent base on the African continent in Djibouti, and it has long hosted sensitive US drone and air operations.⁹

The ability to use this base for hardcore military and other purposes is possible, but at present not that probable. More so, China faces international resistance from other nations who fear Chinese power projection in their region, especially in the Indian Ocean. However, China's national interest reign supreme and it will protect them at all costs. Also, there is a need to strengthen the cooperative framework under which different military forces could undertake joint operations.

With regard to China's new naval strategy of "near seas defense, far seas protection", Chinese presence in Djibouti is another pearl added to the Chinese 'String of Pearls'. At the very least, it is a symbolic Chinese presence in an increasingly crowded and active region. Or importantly, it is a strategic step towards a blue water capability of Chinese navy, as well as increased self-reliance on protecting their economic and security interests abroad. However, for Africa, and Djibouti, these strategic maneuvers will have implications, most importantly including, an increased competition for space and resources in Djibouti and adjoining areas. As the cargo traffic at the port increases and economic activity trickles down, socio-economic and political transformations will unfold to favorably or adversely impact the Horn of Africa and Sahel region. It can be expected that the G5 countries including France and United States will be working to pro-actively counter this increased competition from China in Africa. In the short to medium term, Djibouti would need to learn its lessons from the ports in Singapore and Dubai and focus on a development-centered approach for uplifting its socio-economic status, developing itself as a hub of future economic connectivity in the African continent.

The geostrategic location of Gwadar port enhances Pakistan's and Chinese capabilities of an active participation in the global trade and energy market. Pakistan should develop mutual understanding with its international partners for the use of these seaports and military facilities for conducting peacekeeping and safeguarding trading routes. It should also sign sister port agreements with other ports that come along SLCs and specifically under Chinese initiative of Belt and Road. Doing so will help Pakistan enhance its cooperation with other nations at bilateral and multilateral forums and infuse socio-economic growth in Pakistan under the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor.

⁹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-base-in-djibouti-near-camp-lemonnier-africa-us-concern-2017-3>