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## DJIBOUTI – CHINA’S GATEWAY TO INDIAN OCEAN

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While the entire world was busy discussing implications of the Chinese String of Pearls strategy, the recent disclosure that the PLA Navy is planning to set up a base in Djibouti has come as a big surprise. Decision to establish a naval base, its first overseas military outpost in the Indian Ocean region, has given a new impetus to the ongoing debate over the Chinese strategy of maritime expansionism. Giving the official status, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Hong Lei said that 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.<sup>1</sup> But, is it the sole reason for China to set its foot in this small country more than 7000 km away from its shores?

In the last few decades, China’s maritime ambitions were limited to protection of its ‘near seas’ and coastal areas. However, the White paper on military strategy released in May 2015

clearly brought out the departure from the old continental outlook. It is well known that the Chinese leadership has now decided to devote its attention to the ‘far seas’ with active defence posture. Most visibly, since 2008, China had started active participation in the anti-piracy missions off the Somalian coast. During these years the PLA Navy’s ships, comprising amphibious landing ships, guided missile frigates, and logistic vessels, have been taking part in these escort tasks. In addition, in 2015 China even sent its submarines into the Indian Ocean on long deployments. The ongoing development of carrier based aviation capabilities and acquisition/ indigenous development of multi-mission destroyers, amphibious and logistic ships has demonstrated the Chinese intent to become a blue water naval power.<sup>2</sup> Establishment of naval support bases in far flung areas, though out of fashion as per few strategists, is now considered necessary by the Chinese leadership to support its ongoing anti-piracy naval missions off the Somalia coast. Lack



of geographical proximity as well as logistical support base in Indian Ocean could be termed as a big strategic disadvantage for China to safeguard its economic and security interests in this region.



Source:

[http://www.blackagendareport.com/us\\_vs\\_china\\_in\\_djibouti](http://www.blackagendareport.com/us_vs_china_in_djibouti)

Djibouti, a tiny nation in the Horn of Africa has become a favourite place to have an operational support base by many countries. The US, France and Japan already hold military bases in this state. Djibouti, a poor country of about 900,000 and a former French colony, is strategically located close to the choke point of Bab el Mandeb on the trade sea route between the Suez Canal and the Arabian Sea. It has also assumed importance due to its proximity with the volatile Middle East and restive Africa. The next door neighbour, Somalia has been a hotbed of unrest resulting in piracy affecting global maritime trade. On the other hand, Yemen, just about 20 nm north-east across the Bab-el-

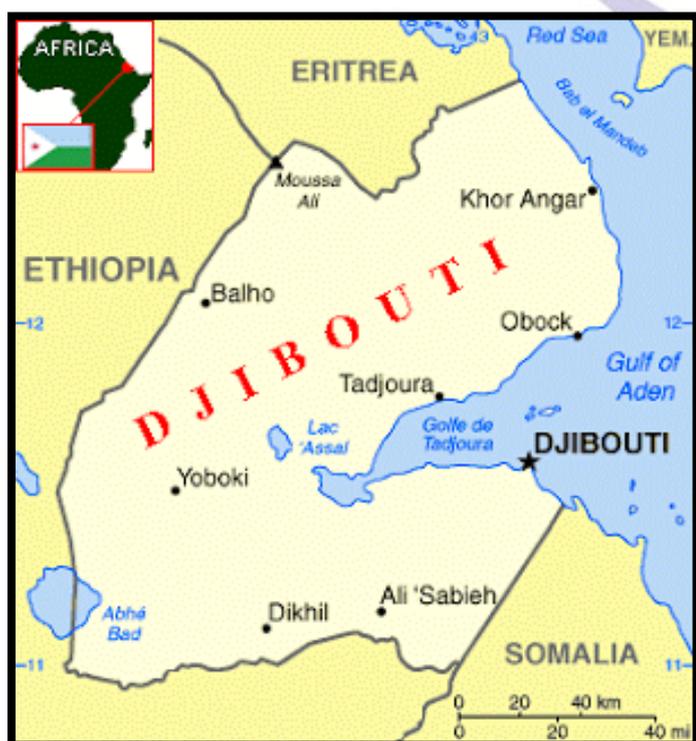
Mandeb Strait is also struggling due to the ongoing conflict. Apart from being holding the geo-strategic advantage, Djibouti is ideally suited as a convenient operational base to combat piracy at sea, which has become a severe threat to shipping and trade in Indian Ocean.

Djibouti got independence in 1977 but France continued to look after its needs for defence and finance for the next two decades in exchange for a military base. France still retains about 2,000 military troops in Djibouti. France is still legally the external guarantor of Djibouti's security, including its air and maritime space. French forces pay an annual lease of \$30 million to the Djibouti authorities for its facilities.<sup>3</sup>

As part of US–French military cooperation, the US established a Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) at Camp Lemonnier, a former French military facility, a year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In 2008, this was integrated into the newly created US Africa Command (AFRICOM). The base covers an area of about 500 acres and houses around 4000 personnel.<sup>4</sup> The US military shares runways with French forces and Djibouti's international airport, Ambouli. This US base in Djibouti is also the launch-pad for UAV surveillance and attacks by the CIA in the ongoing 'war on terror'. Being located at the mouth of Gulf of Aden, the base is also used for anti-piracy and other multilateral missions of the US forces in the region. The US

government pays Djibouti \$63 million a year for the use of Camp.<sup>5</sup>

Although, Japanese naval ships have been operating for escort missions from the US facilities at Djibouti prior to 2011, a dedicated Japanese base was established in the vicinity of Camp Lemonnier in July 2011. The base provides logistic facilities for about 600 members of its Maritime Self-Defence Forces to man and operate naval vessels from Djibouti. For this purpose they pay an annual rent of \$30 million to the local authorities.<sup>6</sup>



Source: <http://pacificsentinel.blogspot.in/2015/08/news-story-pla-base-in-djibouti-to.html>

China, in Nov 2015, had unveiled ambitious plans for development of their naval base at the small northern port town of Obock. In fact, Camp Obock is being utilised by the American military as a secondary base, that they have to vacate

now. China plans to station about 10,000 Chinese troops and establish necessary infrastructure to support its ongoing anti-piracy missions and other military tasks. By having this facility, China will not only save money in ships fuelling/logistic supplies etc. but will also enhance Chinese influence over global maritime trade by providing adequate protection to its SLOCs between Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Djibouti, because of its strategic location, will also provide PLA Navy a launch pad to quickly respond to any crisis developing around the Persian Gulf region affecting freedom of navigation for their maritime trade/ oil import. Keeping in mind China's current maritime strategy, by having a dedicated military base in the IOR region, China can now afford to deploy its submarines for long durations in sea denial role. This capability will add to its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy.

China has signed a 10 year lease and will pay a rent of \$100 million for the facilities in Obock. But this strategic arrangement is much more than the establishment of a naval base. Beijing has entered into agreements with Djibouti to build a free trade zone and trying to establish a legal framework to allow Chinese banks to operate in the country. China is already financing several major infrastructure projects estimated to total more than \$9 billion (8 billion euros), towards improving port, airport and railway lines to landlocked Ethiopia, for whom Djibouti is a lifeline port.<sup>7</sup>

The decision to establish a military base far away from its mainland clearly shows a departure from China's previous line of thinking, which was just opposite of the western concept of setting up foreign bases to project power. By going in for an aircraft carrier earlier and now choosing a strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean to extend its maritime reach are the two signs which clearly indicate that China is using the good old conventional methods to become a formidable sea power.

Taking into consideration China's huge investments and expanding trade networks in the African heartland, its critical dependence on oil from the Middle East and its ambitious 'One Belt, One Road strategy', it makes sense to establish a military base in the Indian Ocean region. Moreover, this initiative also contributes towards China's new vision of building the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road".<sup>8</sup>

In the distant future, even if the intensity of the ongoing anti-piracy missions decline, the Chinese will have enough reasons to retain Djibouti as an important military base, and in fact may add another base. With this initiative, China's limited role in IOR is deemed to get fresh impetus in terms of a greater and stronger military presence in the region.<sup>9</sup> It will be interesting to see the manner in which China uses this gateway to flex its muscles to further its interests in the Indian Ocean.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Amrita Jash, China in Djibouti : Setting the Strategic Foot in Indian Ocean Region, 17 Dec 2015, <http://www.indrastra.com/2015/12/OPINION-China-in-Djibouti-Setting-Strategic-Foot-Indian-Ocean-Region-0548.html>

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Till, China and its Navy, 27 Jan 2016, [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)

<sup>3</sup> Djibouti's Strongman President Faces Strongest Cross-Examination of His Career, 28 Sep 2015, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201509281515.html>

<sup>4</sup> David Styan, Djibouti: Changing Influence in the Horn's Strategic Hub, April 2013, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Africa/0413bp\\_djibouti.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Africa/0413bp_djibouti.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> China to take over strategic US military base in Djibouti, 18 Aug 2015, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2015/08/18/425206/Africa-Djibouti-US-military-base-Obock-China-military-Camp-Lemonnier-Guelleh>

<sup>6</sup> No. 3, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Djibouti President: China Negotiating Horn of Africa Military Base, 10 May 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/mideast-africa/2015/05/10/djibouti-president-china-negotiating-horn-africa-military-base/27082879/>

<sup>8</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, China Has 'Reached Consensus' With Djibouti on Military Base, 23 Jan 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/china-has-reached-consensus-with-djibouti-on-military-base/>

<sup>9</sup> Amrita, No. 01.