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.¹ 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.² 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

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.³

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.⁴ 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.\(^5\)

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.\(^6\)

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.\(^7\)
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 it’s 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”.\(^8\)

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.\(^9\) 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])

Notes


\(^3\) Djibouti’s Strongman President Faces Strongest Cross-Examination of His Career, 28 Sep 2015, http://allafrica.com/stories/201509281515.html


\(^6\) No. 3, ibid.


\(^9\) Amrita, No. 01.