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China's Military Base in Djibouti

Mordechai Chaziza



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 153

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China's Military Base in Djibouti

Mordechai Chaziza

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following decades of non-intervention policy in the MENA region, China is now establishing a permanent military base in Djibouti. This study analyzes the motivation behind China's decision to establish a permanent naval presence in Djibouti, and whether it reflects a fundamental change in its non-interference policy in the MENA region. The findings show that geo-economic interests are the primary consideration in China's decision, but there are also strategic military purposes. China's non-interference policy in the MENA is evolving, and establishing a regional military presence seems to be taking a further significant step, showing a clear departure from its traditional interpretations of non-interference. Consequently, the Djibouti naval base may be just the beginning of China's military expression of power in the MENA region.

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China's Military Base in Djibouti

Mordechai Chaziza

INTRODUCTION

China's decision to build its own naval base in Djibouti, representing the first time Beijing has sought a permanent military presence beyond the country's borders, has been greeted with deep concern that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region could suffer further instability. The delicate balance of power in the region already suffered one dramatic shift when the Obama administration decided to pivot away from involvement in the region, which encouraged Moscow to launch its military intervention in the Syrian civil war. Now there are growing concerns that the MENA region could suffer further instability following Beijing's decision to establish its military base in Djibouti, one of the most troubled hotspots in the world.

Officially, Beijing has been careful to avoid describing its facility in Djibouti as a 'military' or 'naval' base, preferring instead to use the terms 'support facilities' or 'logistical facilities.' China's Ministry of Defense spokesperson, Colonel Wu Qian, said the base in Djibouti will be used mainly for logistical support and personnel recuperation for Chinese armed forces who carry out international peacekeeping operations and perform humanitarian rescues.¹ Nevertheless, it is widely believed that the base in Djibouti would give China the experience to build more overseas military bases and to expand its sphere of influence in the MENA region as well as a permanent maritime and aerial springboard to deep operations in the northwest Indian Ocean region.²

In 2013, the *International Business Herald*, a paper published by the Xinhua News Agency, reported that Beijing would build 18 strategic support bases to protect its energy line in the Indian Ocean area.³ Moreover, in 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hinted that Beijing is planning more global bases after setting up its naval base in Djibouti: "We are willing to, in accordance with objective needs, responding to the wishes of host nations and in regions where China's interests are concentrated, try out the construction of some infrastructure facilities and support abilities."⁴

But more importantly, the naval base in Djibouti marks an important step in changing China's non-interference policy. Beijing's longstanding insistence on non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, its refusal to envision a foreign military presence, and its resoluteness that its primary focus is the development of mutually beneficial economic and commercial relations are increasingly falling short of what is necessary to safeguard its vital interests.⁵ So, despite claims to the contrary, China's plans to build its own naval base in Djibouti may be a proving ground for further expansion of its military intervention in the MENA region.

This development raises two key questions. First, what are the driving forces behind China's move to establish a permanent naval presence in Djibouti? And second, does China's decision to establish a military base in Djibouti reflect a fundamental change in its non-interference policy in the MENA region? The answer to these questions will have broad geo-economic and geo-strategic implications, not only for the MENA countries, but also for the broader Asia and Africa region in which the U.S. and China want to assert their sphere of influence.

CHINA'S MOTIVES IN ESTABLISHING THE DJIBOUTI BASE

The factors behind China's decision to establish a military base in Djibouti must be examined in the wider context of its key interests in the MENA region, as well as the potential challenges to the realization of those interests. These geo-economic and geo-strategic aims, which appear to be dual in nature, serve mainly commercial interests, but also strategic military purposes.

In addition to the obvious economic imperatives, Beijing also has a long list of strategic goals: guaranteeing the freedom of navigation for their maritime trade and oil imports and protecting heavy energy investments; facilitating cooperation with current and/or potential Mideast and African allies; maintaining a global posture and image in international politics; ensuring logistical support for Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) activities in the region; securing the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a strategic maritime transport chokepoint and one of the most trafficked waterways in the world; maintaining stability in the Horn of Africa; and carrying out counter-terrorism activities, non-combatant evacuation operations, and anti-piracy operations.

Geo-economic

Djibouti is a good choice for Chinese overseas investment and economic interests in the MENA region for several reasons. First, its geo-strategic location is an most important asset for Chinese economic interests, as it is located at the crossroads of one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. A significant percentage of Beijing's trade with the EU, valued at over \$1 billion a day, passes through the Gulf of Aden, and 40% of China's total oil imports pass through the Indian Ocean.⁶ Djibouti controls access to both the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean and links Europe, the Far East, the Horn of Africa, and the Persian Gulf. Its location at the mouth of the Red Sea makes Djibouti an ideal transshipment hub for cargo in and out of the MENA region and offers long-term growth potential as economic momentum in the proximity intensifies over time.⁷

Second, Djibouti is an ideal spot for inclusion in Beijing's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), which will stretch from China to the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and up the Red Sea through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. A Chinese base in Djibouti would enable an increase in trade through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea and make the country even more crucial for successful implementation of the BRI connecting Africa and Europe with Asia.⁸

Third, Djibouti is of general strategic importance for its heavily trafficked sea lanes, the waters of the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, although only 4% of China's natural gas imports and 3% of its crude oil pass through the strait.⁹

Energy security could be another reason behind China's desire to secure a permanent installation in Djibouti. Beijing has a growing dependency on Middle Eastern oil and needs access to the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf. It is also investing heavily in the oil sector in the region. The Djibouti base will facilitate the transport of crude oil through the strait and help to protect oil imports from the Middle East that traverse the Indian Ocean on their way back.¹⁰

Finally, China and Djibouti enjoy a friendship and collaboration that have grown steadily in recent years, with practical cooperation carried out in various fields.¹¹ More broadly, the strategic arrangement between the two countries is much more than the establishment of a naval base: It also strengthens Djibouti's position as a key entry point in terms of infrastructure, which will expand its trade and logistics capabilities. For instance, most of Djibouti's 14 major infrastructure projects, which have been valued at a total of \$14.4 billion, are being funded by Chinese banks, including the railway line that will halve transit times from Djibouti to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.¹² Beijing is also funding a pipeline that will transport natural gas to the port in Djibouti for export to China, and it recently signed an accord with Djibouti on the construction of a free-trade zone.¹³

Geo-strategic

The current Chinese investments in Djibouti infrastructure projects, while mainly economic, could also bring major strategic advantages to China. First, the naval base in Djibouti boosts the ability of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to project its power in the MENA region and beyond. A permanent military presence in Djibouti would be a new 'pearl' in China's 'string of pearls' strategy.¹⁴ A base in Djibouti, or any other location open to hosting PLAN vessels, can help boost the global potential of the Chinese navy, as well being necessary to project that power beyond China's immediate neighborhood. This is especially so, as for decades the Chinese navy has been investing in developing a blue water navy to give it a global reach – an objective that is likely to take decades more. Having regional naval bases provides an immediate boost to their capabilities.¹⁵

More importantly, a permanent base in Djibouti would give the People's Liberation Army (PLA) a formidable maritime and potentially aerial springboard deep into the northwest Indian Ocean region, as well as north, east, and central Africa.¹⁶ As the Djibouti foreign minister, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, said, China has the same right to use drones as the US or France. "The Americans have enough technology, enough fighter aircraft, enough drones [here] to control each and every piece of this land and even beyond. Why should the Chinese not have the right to also use those materials . . . to preserve and protect their interests in the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb?"¹⁷

Second, Djibouti's strategic location makes it an important hub for the Chinese navy to combat piracy. Since 2008, China has looked to Djibouti as a logistics base for its flotilla operating against piracy off the Horn of Africa, in the Red Sea, and in the Gulf of Aden. Chinese naval vessels have reportedly visited the port more than 50 times since the mission.¹⁸ Given the increasing frequency of PLAN operations in the region and the growing number of Chinese vessels transiting the waters off the Horn of Africa and the Arabian peninsula, a permanent military installation would help China support these missions.¹⁹ Moreover, Djibouti is an ideal base for the conduct of non-combatant evacuation operations, as was evident when China used the country to evacuate Chinese nationals and foreigners in March and April 2015 from Yemen.²⁰

Third, as Beijing aspires to become a global power and challenges the existing world order, permanent bases overseas hosting warships and long-range strategic aircraft help to project its power in the MENA region and beyond. China's naval presence in Djibouti will challenge U.S. geopolitical interests in the MENA region and Africa by giving China the capability to surveil or hack sensitive defense technology.²¹ That is because the Chinese base is in close proximity to Washington's only permanent military facility in Africa, Djibouti's Camp Lemonnier, which is used for covert, anti-terror, and other operations in Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere in Africa.²²

Additionally, China's growing global military presence challenges India with Beijing's plan to build a frictionless projection of power in the Indian Ocean.²³ A Chinese permanent military presence in Djibouti together

with its involvement in Pakistan's Gwadar port makes it a maritime player in the region that poses a threat to the Indian navy. Moreover, a military base in Djibouti enables Beijing to base its long-range naval air assets there, and these are capable of maintaining surveillance over the Arabian Sea as well as India's island territories off the Western coast.²⁴

Furthermore, China's base in Djibouti is an important component in implementation of the BRI. While it is clear that BRI is essentially an economic plan, it also has a strong military component wherein Beijing may attempt to exert dominance over global shipping routes, both economically and militarily. As Chinese President Xi Jinping said at a meeting with Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh, China welcomes Djibouti's participation in developing the Beijing-proposed 21st-century Maritime Silk Road.²⁵ For the PLA navy, that means a significant adjustment to their new role as a global maritime power.

Finally, the presence of a naval base in Djibouti will allow Beijing to respond more proactively and quickly to any regional crisis or security changes developing around Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. A Chinese military presence in Djibouti allows Beijing to deploy its air and naval assets, which could significantly improve its intelligence to conduct non-combatant evacuation operations, counter-piracy, and counter-terrorism operations.²⁶

CHINESE NON-INTERFERENCE AND THE DJIBOUTI BASE

For the past few decades, the concepts of sovereignty and non-interference have been central tenets of Chinese foreign policy. The non-interference principle was part of a Chinese grand strategy designed to defend the country from foreign interference during and after the Cold War. This non-interference policy is generally uncompromising, although it evolves in accordance with changes and challenges in the international and regional environment. Specifically, China does not involve itself in the internal affairs of other countries unless they are related to its vital national or economic interests.²⁷ Chinese leadership considers the Middle East the 'graveyard of great powers', and generally seeks to avoid becoming involved in the region's internal affairs or being perceived as aligning with particular countries or stakeholders.²⁸

Nevertheless, political upheavals have given Beijing the opportunity to enlarge its presence in the region, which it does using its diplomatic, military, and economic capabilities wisely and creatively.²⁹ It has participated in various intervention actions in the MENA region in different ways with variable intentions.³⁰

So despite its non-interference stance, China's rapid economic growth has made the region too important to ignore, due to the energy sources essential for maintaining its economic development.³¹ According to the Xinhua News Agency, over the past decade, China's economic ties with the Middle East increased from \$20 billion to \$230 billion, and that figure is expected to top \$500 billion by 2020.³² Moreover, China's oil imports have increased dramatically, and the region remains the largest source of its crude oil. In 2014, the Middle East supplied 3.2 million barrels per day (bbl/d) or 52%, although Beijing is attempting to diversify its supply sources in various regions.³³

Concurrently, according to the Fourth China-Africa Industrial Forum (CAIF), bilateral trade between China and African states has grown about tenfold over the past decade. In 2000, China's trade with Africa reached \$10 billion, while in 2014 that figure grew to \$220 billion, a record that made China the continent's top trade partner for the sixth straight year. The total value will likely hit \$300 billion, and Beijing seeks to raise the amount to \$400 billion by 2020.³⁴

Moreover, Chinese enterprises made a direct non-financial investment of \$3.5 billion in Africa, up 19% year on year. More than 2,500 Chinese enterprises operate on the continent in a variety of fields, including finance, telecommunications, energy, manufacturing, and agriculture,³⁵ and over a million Chinese have migrated to Africa to seek economic opportunities.³⁶ Furthermore, in December 2015, during the second summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Johannesburg, Chinese President Xi promised to invest \$60 billion in development projects, cancel some debt, and boost agriculture under a three-year plan that will extend Beijing's influence on the continent.³⁷

China's MENA foreign policy has never been articulated in terms of forging broader strategic partnerships or intentions other than its general drive to secure resources and investments and to expand its influence

through economic ties.³⁸ Despite this, Beijing has become more proactive on a number of Middle Eastern issues.³⁹ Its willingness to play the role of a neutral mediator and act as a force of persuasion in conflict resolution are driven by the need to ensure energy security, as well as key interests in the region that have expanded significantly beyond this narrow focus.⁴⁰

In January 2016, on the eve of President Xi's visit to the MENA region, the Chinese government issued its first Arab Policy Paper, which eschewed clearly spelling out Chinese strategic interests or intentions in the region. It states Beijing's overall vision for regional relations without getting into the complexities of how that vision will be realized and adding little to familiar policy trends. The paper reiterates the longstanding principle of non-interference and emphasizes that Beijing's interactions with the region are largely limited to the economic sphere.⁴¹

With that said, China's key interests in the MENA region have in fact expanded significantly beyond the narrow focus of energy or economic investment. Beijing has a strategic stake in the stability of countries across the Eurasian landmass because of BRI, and the threat of blowback in Xinjiang of unrest in the MENA region and Central Asia.⁴²

Furthermore, China has long sought to strengthen its military naval presence in places it considers strategic chokepoints. As such, it now has economic, political, and military agreements or strategic partnerships with a number of MENA states.⁴³ China has also created a string of ports that link Beijing to commercial and refueling facilities in the Indian Ocean or the Gulf of Aden and a network of railways that could play a key military transport and logistical role across Eurasia, as well as pipelines connecting it to Central Asia and the Middle East.⁴⁴

In recent years, Beijing has begun to take on a soft military naval presence in the MENA region and other international waters. For instance, since 2008, Chinese warships have participated in international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. According to the Chinese PLN, its naval vessels have escorted more than 5,670 ships in the region and rescued or aided 60 ships from China and other countries.⁴⁵ China has also conducted evacuation operations in the region. For example, in Libya, the Chinese Navy and Air Force evacuated 35,860 Chinese workers,⁴⁶ and they rescued hundreds of citizens in Yemen.⁴⁷

China also used its soft military naval presence overseas, specifically in the Middle East, to protect its expanding commercial interests and as a platform for military diplomacy.⁴⁸ For example, Beijing held joint anti-piracy and counter-terrorism exercises; paid naval visits to neighboring countries and regions; made interim technical service stops in Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan for ship fuel and material resupply; and agreed on short-term arrangements for reconnaissance aircraft.⁴⁹ In May 2015, Chinese and Russian naval vessels held joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean, the first in European waters in the Black Sea and Mediterranean and the farthest-ever from China's home waters.⁵⁰

China also seeks greater naval access to the Suez Canal and has invested heavily in the New Suez Canal project, which plays a key role in China's BRI due to its strategic location.⁵¹ According to President Xi, the first phase of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries in the Suez Canal area has been completed and attracted 32 Chinese investing companies with a value of \$426 million. The second phase of the project is expected to attract nearly 100 companies, with \$2.5 billion in investment. Both countries have also agreed to establish 15 projects, mainly in the fields of electricity, transportation, and infrastructure, worth \$15 billion.⁵²

Moreover, Beijing has adopted a dual-track approach by investing in ports and a rail line to ensure that its exports can travel through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. The Chinese approach is designed, on the one hand, to expand investment in the New Suez Canal project, and on the other, to invest in a rail line that links the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat with the Mediterranean Sea (Red-Med). The Red-Med rail line can serve as an overland alternative to the Suez Canal and ensure reliability of shipping from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea to China under any circumstances.⁵³ Chinese companies have also invested in ports along the Suez Canal Corridor, from the Gulf of Suez to Port Said in Egypt.⁵⁴ A Chinese company is building a new, privately owned port in Ashdod,⁵⁵ and a second has won a government tender to manage the Haifa port for 25 years.⁵⁶

Similarly, Beijing was obliged to establish a permanent naval presence in Djibouti as it offers unparalleled access to the Gulf of Aden-Suez Canal trade

route, situated as it is just beside the Bab el-Mandab strait. Djibouti's strategic location at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden makes it an important trade hub for the development of the regional and international economy,⁵⁷ as 20% of global exports and 10% of total oil exports transit annually. It also lies at the junction of three highly troubled regions: the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa.⁵⁹ According to Energy Information Administration (EIA) figures, 3.8 million barrels of crude oil per day pass through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, making it the world's fourth busiest maritime energy chokepoint.⁶⁰ At present, only 4% of China's natural gas imports and 3% of its crude oil imports are transported through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait.⁶¹

Beijing's decision to build a naval base in Djibouti represents a clear departure from China's traditional non-interference in the MENA region.⁶² Since the foundation of the PRC, ideological opposition to military bases overseas has been a cornerstone of Beijing's global posture and image in the international politics.⁶³ Nevertheless, the need to protect the rapid expansion of overseas investments and Chinese nationals abroad has become Beijing's key foreign and security policy priority.⁶⁴

During a press conference on the sidelines of the People's National Congress in March 2016, Foreign Minister Wang Yi indicated the motive for the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti. "You mentioned China's growing overseas interests," he said. "I think it is the key to understanding the matter. Like any major country that is growing, China's overseas interests are expanding... So it has become a pressing task for China's diplomacy to better protect our ever-growing overseas interests."⁶⁵

According to an anonymous Chinese diplomatic source, the idea for establishing a naval base in Djibouti first came up in March and April of 2015, when China's navy evacuated Chinese nationals and foreigners from Yemen.⁶⁶ This, together with PLAN anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, highlights China's growing exposure to security challenges in the volatile region.⁶⁷ Given the increasing frequency of PLAN operations in the MENA region,⁶⁸ and the growing number of Chinese vessels transiting the waters off the Horn of Africa and the Arabian peninsula, a permanent military installation in Djibouti would help Beijing support these missions.⁶⁹

A Chinese defense 'white paper' released in May 2015 outlined Beijing's ambitions to become a global maritime power. The PLA's role was significantly expanded to include protection of the rapid expansion of China's overseas interests.⁷⁰ The white paper emphasized Beijing's intention to improve and project its naval capabilities far beyond its coastline.⁷¹ Moreover, in November 2015, in his speech to senior military officers, President Xi outlined the need for reform of the country's armed forces by 2020 and refocused the military's ambitions beyond its traditional role. According to Xi, the aim is to build a firm defense and strong military commensurate with China's international standing and interests in security and development.⁷²

More importantly, the military reforms can be seen as concrete actions that turn the PLA into a global expeditionary force. Over the past decade, PLA actions have reflected significant changes in China's non-interference policy, with numerous non-combatant evacuation operations, involvement in UN peacekeeping combat missions, and anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.⁷³

Thus, the key question is whether China's decision to establish a military base in Djibouti reflects a fundamental change in its non-interference policy in the MENA region. First, the base can be seen as another milestone in the development of its non-interference policy that may offer use of military power as a foreign policy tool. For instance, the Djibouti base will provide China with experience in building overseas military bases in the MENA region and provide cutting-edge support for Beijing to guard its growing overseas interests and strategic priorities.⁷⁴ As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at the annual meeting of parliament, China and Chinese firms are helping to build and develop several African ports. While commercial in nature, they could all berth Chinese naval ships one day.⁷⁵

Second, the naval base in Djibouti will allow Beijing to respond more proactively to regional security challenges in East Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Djibouti's strategic location provides the Chinese army with a launching pad from which to quickly respond to any crisis developing around the Persian Gulf and North Africa region that might affect freedom of navigation for their maritime trade or oil imports.⁷⁶

Finally, Beijing's decision to establish a military base in Djibouti clearly shows a departure from its traditional interpretation of non-interference, which was opposite to the Western pattern of external military intervention and the setting up of foreign bases to project power.⁷⁷ The Djibouti naval base may be just the beginning of China's military expression of power in the MENA region, although Beijing denies any such plans.

CONCLUSION

The evidence in this study suggests that the driving force behind China's move to establish a permanent naval presence in Djibouti is strongly influenced by two key factors: geo-strategic and geo-economic interests. Beijing's decision to establish a military base in Djibouti should be seen in the wider context of Chinese economic interests and military activities that appear to be dual-use in nature, serving mainly economic, but also strategic military purposes. The naval base in Djibouti will be mainly for commercial purposes, but it will also provide a military base that will boost the ability of the Chinese navy to project its power and that will be upgradeable in the future.

Generally, since the end of the Cold War, Chinese foreign policy has been slowly shifting away from a strict interpretation of its non-interference principle and towards a pragmatic and incremental adaptation to new challenges to China's globalizing vital commercial and strategic interests. Although there has always been a degree of flexibility in China's non-interference stance, even during the Maoist period, the principle has by and large remained a key guideline for foreign policy practices and a major rhetorical instrument. Moreover, the expansion of economic and energy interests overseas, as well as the need to protect Chinese nationals abroad, have repeatedly underlined the limits of Beijing's traditional non-interference approach.⁷⁸

Since Beijing is seeking to expand its economic engagement and diplomatic leverage in the MENA region, China feels the pressure to acknowledge that it can no longer remain aloof to the multiple conflicts in the area and thus requires a military presence in Djibouti, one of the region's most important access points for trade and overseas military bases.

There are already preliminary signs of a change in China's non-interference policy in the MENA due to shifts in the country's growing dependency on Middle Eastern oil and the Xi administration's proactive approach to the core issues of the region.⁷⁹ This has resulted in deepening commercial relations, strengthening diplomatic ties, and offering mediation efforts as well as attempts to promote the ambitious BRI.

Still, it is hard to envision a unilateral deployment of the Chinese army in the hostile MENA environment. A permanent military presence in the MENA region remains low on the list of China's strategic priorities. The top diplomatic concerns will continue to be disputes in regions that are geographically closer to home (e.g., eastern and southern China or Afghanistan).⁸⁰ Thus, a dramatic change towards an interventionist policy in the MENA region is highly unlikely, at least in the short-to-medium term, though unexpected events might generate revisions as required. For the time being, a shift towards an interventionist policy that includes broad, constant, or unilateral deployment of the Chinese army remains highly unlikely. The difficult test for Chinese foreign policy is the need to strike the right balance between protecting its vital commercial and strategic interests in the MENA region without being sucked into the region's multiple conflicts.

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