

China establishes military base in Djibouti

By Peter Symonds
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Two Chinese naval vessels set sail from the southern Chinese port of Zhanjiang last week with an undisclosed number of military personnel, including marines, for Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa where China is establishing its first overseas military base.

Djibouti, the former French colony known as French Somaliland, is strategically located adjacent to the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea—one of the world’s busiest and most important shipping routes.

China will join the US, France, Japan, Germany, Italy, Spain and soon Saudi Arabia in maintaining a permanent military presence in Djibouti. Since 2012, the Chinese navy has been part of the international anti-piracy force that has patrolled the seas off neighbouring Somalia alongside warships from a host of other countries, including the US, many European powers, Japan and India.

Beijing has been at pains to downplay the military deployment. The state-owned Xinhua newsagency declared that the Djibouti base would perform a variety of functions, including “military cooperation, joint exercises, evacuating and protecting overseas Chinese and emergency rescue, as well as maintaining security of international strategic seaways.”

A *Global Times* editorial last week highlighted the importance of the new facility, stressing that it was a military, not a commercial, base that “can support the Chinese navy to go farther, so it means a lot.” At the same time, after pointing to the navy’s anti-piracy and so-called humanitarian functions, it emphatically declared: “It’s not about seeking to control the world.”

The last remark indicates the sensitivity in Beijing to criticism of China’s rapidly expanding economic presence in Africa—both within Africa and by various pundits voicing the concerns of rival powers, above all the United States.

The Chinese military base in Djibouti is dwarfed by the global network of American bases and alliances that enables Washington to project military force anywhere in the world. This military infrastructure has underpinned US-led wars of aggression over the past quarter century in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Nevertheless, Beijing’s decision to play a more active military role in Africa does signal a shift in policy, which was triggered in particular by the debacle for China of the US-led military intervention in Libya in 2011. The US and European bombing of Libya compelled China to mount the long-distance evacuation of more than 35,000 Chinese citizens for which it was not prepared.

The ousting of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi compromised billions of dollars of Chinese investment and virtually ended China’s efforts to secure oil supplies from the North African country. At the same time, China was in no position militarily to further its interests by joining in the US-led assault on the regime and therefore sharing in the spoils.

The subsequent debate in Chinese ruling circles has resulted in a shift away from the longstanding policy of “non-interference” that has served Chinese capitalism in establishing economic ties in Africa and around the world. Beijing provided investment, loans and other forms of assistance to countries without regard for so-called “human rights” that the US and European powers have exploited to further their own interests in the region.

The Chinese military dispatched its first contingent of combat troops overseas as part of the UN peacekeeping force in South Sudan where China has significant interests in securing oil supplies. China now has 750 UN peacekeepers in South Sudan and more than 2,000 troops in Africa as a whole, including in Liberia and Mali.

A European Council on Foreign Relations report

noted that in 2015 Chinese President Xi Jinping committed 8,000 troops to the UN peacekeeping standby force—one fifth of the total of 40,000 troops committed by 50 countries. It has also promised \$100 million to help fund the African Union standby force.

China's military involvement in Africa takes place amid rising geo-political rivalry that threatens its considerable investment in, and trade with, Africa. China's massive manufacturing industries rely heavily on Africa for raw materials, especially energy and strategic minerals, which, in turn, bring Beijing into competition with the major existing powers that have dominated the continent.

Speaking at the National People's Congress in March, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi justified the establishment of the Djibouti "support base" by pointing to China's interests that "are constantly expanding overseas" and involve "30,000 Chinese enterprises all over the world." While declaring that China does not "pursue hegemony," he declared that the military base was "not only reasonable, but also in line with international practice."

China's economic interests in Africa are huge and growing. Figures cited by the *Financial Times* last month showed that China-Africa trade had risen from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$220 billion in 2014—a 20-fold increase. Over the same period, China's cumulative foreign direct investment in the continent rose from 2 percent of the US total to 55 percent. China now contributes one sixth of all lending to Africa.

Beijing has already incorporated Africa in its ambitious One Belt, One Road plans that will link the continent into the network of ports, rail, road and communications proposed to integrate the Eurasian landmass and consolidate ties between China and Europe. There are an estimated one million Chinese citizens in Africa engaged in various business enterprises and working on a variety of infrastructure projects, including rail links and port facilities.

The establishment of a military base in Djibouti is clearly a first step in protecting Chinese economic and strategic interests not only in Africa, but the Middle East and more broadly. In addition to the emergency withdrawal of Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011, Beijing has also had to evacuate its citizens from Yemen following the escalation of the Saudi-led military intervention, backed by the US, in that

country.

An extensive article in the *New York Times* in February reflected concerns in American military and intelligence circles that China's new base could compromise the major US base in Djibouti. Analyst Gabriel Collins told the newspaper: "It's like having a rival football team using an adjacent practice field. They can scope out some of your plays." The article also speculated that Chinese financial aid to Djibouti might undermine Washington's own position in the country and the region.

In a visit to the US base earlier this year, head of the Pentagon's Africa Command, General Thomas Waldhauser, stressed that "this particular piece of geography is very, very important to our strategic interests." Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent American military base in Africa, was established as part of the "war on terror" following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US. It houses some 4,000 personnel and is used by naval warships, as well as to carry out drone killings and mount special forces operations across the region.

The presence of Chinese military personnel in Djibouti underscores the geo-political rivalry that is deepening in response to Washington's militarism and wars to secure its dominance in key strategic regions and across the globe.

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