

China's National Interests Expanding Overseas to Africa

This text is a part of the FOI report *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*. Twelve state actors are included in the report: China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and United States.

China opened a naval outpost in Djibouti, its first overseas military base, in 2017. The large facility forms part of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) efforts to safeguard maritime shipping lanes, which are inextricably linked to China's economic development and energy security. Moreover, access to a permanent base can contribute to the PLA's protection of Chinese national interests overseas, including investments as well as enterprises and their personnel. China's military presence in Djibouti is not, however, without controversy. Indeed, it has fuelled concerns among other world powers that China's military capabilities are bound to grow at the expense of others.

Securing maritime trade routes

In 2013, China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest trading nation. Since then, China's economic security has become increasingly dependent on maritime sea routes, which carry approximately 80 per cent of its total trade by value. As a result, the Chinese government has to a greater extent begun to assert its interests in maritime trade corridors through the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, the South Pacific, and the Arctic Ocean.

The opening of a base in Djibouti was in part motivated by the PLA Navy's (PLAN) need for logistical support as it began counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in late 2008. When the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced plans in November 2015 to establish a base (referring to it as a 'logistical support facility'), it also said that the facility would contribute to supporting Chinese peacekeepers in UN missions and humanitarian efforts.

The base is located near the Chinese-operated

commercial port and just west of the Doraleh Multi-purpose Port, one of the key ports in Africa for China's trade with the continent. A railway financed and built by Chinese state-owned enterprises connects the port – and the base – with Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

Counter-piracy efforts

Since late 2008, PLAN has deployed counter-piracy escort task groups to the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, protecting both Chinese and foreign merchant vessels. The mission has led PLAN to identify a need for logistical support in order to be able to replenish soldiers and resupply fuel and food needed for the mission. Chinese military analysts argue that the PLAN's escort mission in the Gulf of Aden should be regarded as a permanent engagement, and that the mission therefore needs a permanent logistical support base.

The construction in 2018 of a 330-metre-long pier at the base is also motivated by a need to 'better fulfil China's international responsibilities including anti-piracy work,' according to the Chinese Ministry of Defence. Interestingly, Chinese military analysts have suggested that counter-piracy efforts are in fact often merely a pretext used by great powers to control vital energy shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean.

Investment in infrastructure

In recent years, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have made significant investments in port infrastructure in waters from China to Africa and onwards to Europe. This vital component in China's overseas expansion underlines its dependency on stable maritime transport routes. As of September 2017, Chinese companies – mainly SOEs

– had confirmed port investments or full ownership of ports in 34 countries globally, and were planning port investments in another eight countries.

Fu Xiaoqiang, director and researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), argues that the Chinese government needs to build up a protection system for overseas interests. In such a system, controlling ports will be important, but having access to overseas military bases may be crucial.

In addition to ports, Chinese SOEs are developing transport infrastructure inland and are often engaged in road and railway construction as well as the development of industrial zones linked to port facilities. The Doraleh multi-purpose port in Djibouti is one of a vast range of Chinese-invested infrastructure projects, which are bound to grow further as the Chinese government continues to stress the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ as a crucial part of its foreign policy.

In June 2017, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China’s top economic planner, launched the concept of three ‘blue economic passages’ (*lanse jingji tongdao*), which will link China with (1) the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Mediterranean Sea; (2) Oceania and the South Pacific; and (3) Europe, via the Arctic Ocean.

Nevertheless, the control of overseas ports can also contribute to meeting China’s goal of projecting power far from its shores – in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. It may well improve the Chinese armed forces’ ability to deter potential rivals from disrupting its energy supplies in the case of a conflict. While ownership of ports can decrease the risk for interruptions in maritime trade and make China less vulnerable, stakeholders, including the US and India, are concerned that the PLA will utilise the Chinese-owned ports for military engagement that challenges the status quo in the Indo-Pacific.

PROTECTION OF NATIONAL INTERESTS

In its most recent white paper on the Chinese armed forces, the 2015 China’s Military Strategy, the Chinese government asserts that ‘the growth of China’s national interests’ has made it more vulnerable to challenges overseas, including social unrest, terrorism, and piracy. The document explicitly states that it is the PLA’s task to safeguard China’s interests abroad against such threats, and

goes on to name some specific national interests: natural resources and strategic sea lines of communication, as well as enterprises, personnel, and assets. It can be noted that Chinese official estimates put the total number of overseas Chinese in Africa at roughly one million.

Evacuation missions

China’s deployment of the PLAN to protect citizens overseas is a new and rare phenomenon. In February 2011, it dispatched warships to Libya for its first evacuation mission. Under the protection of frigate *Xuzhou*, some 35,000 Chinese nationals were evacuated, mainly by chartered merchant vessels. Again, in 2014, hundreds of Chinese workers were evacuated from Libya as unrest escalated in the country.

Amid Saudi Arabian air strikes on Yemen in March 2015, the PLAN arranged for the evacuation of hundreds of nationals from Yemen. Of those removed, 122 were taken to Djibouti, from where they were to return to China. Scholars have raised these three cases as evidence that China was still lacking a permanent facility to assist in civilian rescue manoeuvres.

Counter-terrorism

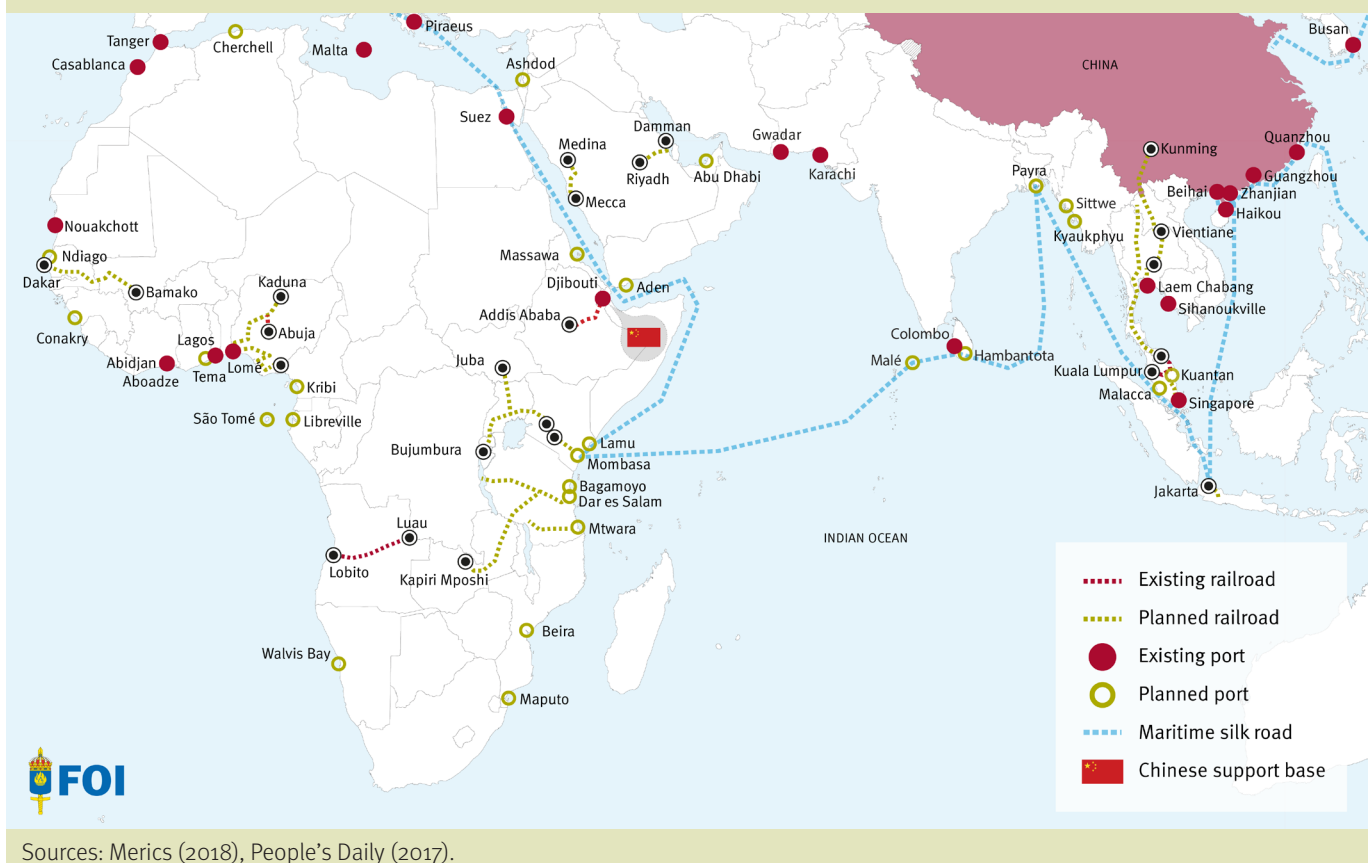
China has until recently refrained from engaging openly abroad in the sphere of counter-terrorism, citing concerns that such engagement would make Chinese assets and overseas Chinese a target for terrorist groups. Nevertheless, one of the stated objectives behind the Djibouti base is to be able to conduct counter-terrorism operations. The PLA troops at the Djibouti base conducted live-fire counter-terrorism exercises and several live-fire military drills in 2017 and 2018. Nevertheless, Chinese media and authorities consistently assert that the facility is but a logistical hub, and that it should not be characterised as a military foothold.

SUPPORT TO PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS

The Chinese government has stated that one purpose of the base in Djibouti will be as a facility for UN peacekeeping troops. China has contributed substantial contingents to United Nations peacekeeping operations since the early 2000s. As of September 2018, China’s contribution amounted to 2,408 troops. The majority of Chinese troops were deployed to Africa, of which 1,020 were to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

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Ports involving Chinese investment and/or construction



Until recently, China's military presence on the continent has, by and large, been limited to its contingents to UN missions. This has changed with the establishment of the naval base in Djibouti.

BASIC FACTS ON THE DJIBOUTI BASE

China formally opened its 'support base' (*baozhang jidi*, 保障基地) in Djibouti on 1 August 2017, marking the 90th anniversary of the PLA. It was the fifth country to open a base there, trailing France, the United States, Japan, and Italy. China will pay 20 million USD a year for a 10-year lease on the 36-acre plot, with an option to extend it for a further 10 years. The agreement reportedly does not include any precise limit on Chinese troop numbers. However, according to reports citing Djibouti's foreign minister, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, the outpost cannot house more than 2,000 troops and is likely to have only 300 marines – and neither ground nor air troops.

Nonetheless, Chinese media reports have put the potential troop count at 10,000 – a number that has not been officially confirmed – and suggested that it will in fact comprise troops both from the PLA navy *and* the army. It will have a single berth for ships and possibly a

helipad, but reportedly no runway. Thus far, the PLA has neither confirmed the details shared by the Djibouti foreign minister, nor clarified when the base will be fully operational.

In its annual report to Congress on China's military, the US Department of Defense concludes that the base extends the reach of China's armed forces. According to the report, the base includes barracks, an underground facility, a tarmac and eight hangars for helicopter and unmanned aerial vehicle operations. However, PLA ships still have to dock at Djibouti's commercial port, as the base currently lacks a dedicated naval berthing space.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The establishment of the Djibouti base is hailed by Chinese military analysts as part of Xi Jinping's concept of China's 'national rejuvenation', which includes the objective of becoming a great sea power. There are, indeed, many signs that the base will serve China's strategic interests in ways far beyond military logistics. For example, Chinese military experts note that the base provides the PLA with an opportunity to dispatch troops to the Arabian Peninsula and countries in sub-Saharan Africa.



China is likely to establish bases elsewhere in Africa and the Middle East in the coming years. During a visit to Djibouti in November 2016, Fan Changlong, then vice chairperson of the Central Military Commission, asserted that China needed to speed up the establishment of overseas military support bases and facilities in order to better support the PLA's missions abroad. The US Department of Defense expects any new Chinese military bases to be established in countries such as Pakistan, with which China has a close bilateral relationship and shared strategic interests.

Nevertheless, China may not rely solely on military bases as a means for pushing its strategic objectives in the future. As suggested by Chinese military scholars, Chinese-owned port facilities overseas could be used for military access, or otherwise strengthen Beijing's ability to wield political influence. The Chinese-invested facilities that have been mentioned for their possible military application include the Gwadar port in Pakistan, the Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar's Rakhine state, the Chittagong port in Bangladesh, the Piraeus port in Greece, and the Hambantota and Colombo ports in Sri Lanka.

As China modernises its navy and develops its expeditionary capabilities, concern among other naval powers is likely to grow. That said, if Chinese authorities and the PLA are able to establish the confidence of international partners, showing at least a willingness to be transparent about China's objectives, some of these concerns could be assuaged. The participation of the Chinese navy in the counter-piracy escort operations off Somalia's coast can be seen as such a precedent.

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