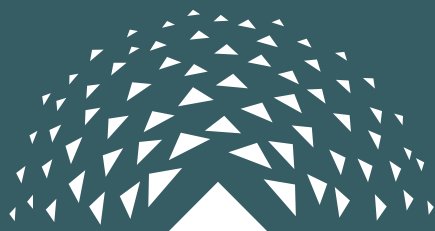


## China's Military Base in Djibouti

Kína katonai bázisa Dzsibutiban

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# KKI Policy Brief

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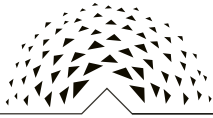
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**Abstract:** The Horn of Africa is one of the most important regions in the world, and the multitude of military bases in the region seems to support this fact. It is no wonder that the Bab-el-Mandeb is an important strait in international trade, serving as the true end of the Suez Canal. China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, a small country already oversaturated with the military bases of various countries, could therefore show the increasing assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its ambition in establishing itself as a global superpower. This analysis provides a brief overview of this naval base and explores what functions it has, how it compares to its neighbouring military bases, and what potential there is to it.

**Keywords:** China, Djibouti, Naval Base, Bab-el-Mandeb, Suez Canal

**Összefoglalás:** Afrika Szarva a világ egyik legfontosabb régiója, ezt a tényt a térségben található katonai bázisok nagy száma is alátámasztani látszik. A Szuezi-csatorna valós végeként nem csoda, hogy a Báb el-Mandeb szoros fontos helyet tölt be a nemzetközi kereskedelemben. Kína első tengerentúli katonai támaszpontja Dzsibutiban – egy kis országban, amely már amúgy is túltelített különböző országok katonai bázisaival – tehát megmutathatja a Népköztársaság növekvő magabiztosságát és ambícióit, hogy globális szuperhatalommá váljon. Jelen analízis rövid áttekintést kíván nyújtani a haditengerészeti bázissal kapcsolatban, és igyekezik megválaszolni néhány lehetségesen felmerülő kérdést, például, hogy milyen funkciói vannak, mennyiben hasonlítható a szomszédos katonai bázisokhoz, és hogy milyen potenciál rejlik benne.

**Kulcsszavak:** Kína, Dzsibuti, Haditengerészeti Támaszpont, Báb el-Mandeb, Szuezi-csatorna

## INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Djibouti, an ex-colony of France, is a small Muslim country in the Horn of Africa. It is barely larger in size than Wales and has a third of its population, yet today it harbours a handful of military bases of various, mainly Western countries due to its location. It is situated right next to the Bab-el-Mandeb (meaning "Gate of Grief" in Arabic), a strait between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, which serves as the end point of the Suez Canal, ensuring its important role in international trade.

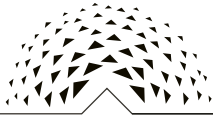
As a colony, Djibouti was used as a [coaling station](#) for ships, and given its proximity to the trade route going through the Canal, it quickly became a strategic location of military importance as well. The Horn of Africa has

accommodated bases from France, Italy, Japan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The People's Republic of China (PRC) also sought to have a base of its own in the region, and in 2015, [negotiations](#) began between Beijing and Djibouti. The two parties reached a [consensus](#) in early 2016, and China joined the above-mentioned list of countries with bases in the region. The station [cost](#) approximately USD 590 million to build, with an [annual lease](#) estimated to be USD 20 billion. The base, called the Chinese People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti, was [opened](#) on 1 August, 2017, and it was officially designated as a [replenishment station](#) for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) for assistance in international [anti-piracy](#) efforts in the Gulf of Aden and Somalia, the region most notorious for pirate attacks on international vessels. From its height in 2011 with 160 recorded attacks, and 358 total attacks during the 2010-2014 period, [piracy in this region](#) had decreased to just 8 in the next five-year period, when it reached a [25-year low](#), after which it saw a [resurgence](#) in reports again in 2020 and 2021, with 47 and 38 cases, respectively. Apart from this, the base also has [other uses](#), including counter-terrorism, intelligence gathering, and helping Chinese citizens in distress in Africa. After its opening, the [first live-fire exercises](#) followed in September. The [current commander](#) of the base is Liang Yang.

The establishment of this naval base has raised some questions regarding the ambitions of the People's Republic both in Africa as well as globally. With this move, Beijing appears to be increasingly assertive in its strategy. It has become quite apparent that China intends to occupy a more meaningful position on the international stage, and the establishment of military bases, similarly to what the United States, the current global hegemon, has been doing, can be regarded as one of the first steps in accomplishing this aspiration.

Djibouti's stance towards China is quite favourable. Not only is the PRC one of its [largest](#) trade partners, but in 2018 they also signed an agreement establishing the [Djibouti International Free Trade Zone](#) on 4,800 hectares for USD 3.5 billion, with the prospect of effectively turning the small East African country into the largest free trade zone on the continent. It is therefore no surprise that Beijing is welcome to having its own base in the country as well.

This paper gives a brief overview of the Chinese military base in Djibouti by examining its capacities and capabilities, comparing it with the military bases of other countries found in the Horn of Africa (i.e. Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia) and the capabilities of these bases, and analysing the potential of the base regarding the possibility of its future expansion.



## THE CAPACITIES AND CAPABILITIES OF THE BASE

Figure 1.  
The Port of Dolareh in Djibouti with the Chinese naval base.



Source: [Zoom Earth](#)

The Port of Dolareh is located about five kilometres west of Djibouti City (Figure 1). Its northern part is a multi-purpose port, and the south-eastern area is the Chinese military base. Approximately [1.5 million containers](#) go through here every year. The port serves as an important trade hub for both Djibouti and Ethiopia, as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, which connects the Ethiopian capital with this port, provides sea access to the otherwise landlocked country. In 2015, it was called the [most technologically advanced port](#) in all of Africa.

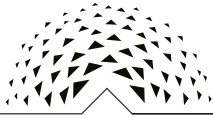
Figure 2.  
The layout of the Chinese naval base.



Source: [USCC](#)

Figure 2 shows the layout of the naval base, as interpreted by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. They [identify](#) several key parts of the base, including:

- 1 pier, two-sided: 370 m left, 330 m right,
- 1 heliport with a 400-meter runway,
- 8 hangars, 7 of them 27 m×30 m, 1 of them 35 m×49 m,
- hardened bunkers for possible ammunition storage,
- a hardened underground complex,
- a support complex (medical, logistics, etc.),
- barracks for the personnel,
- construction support area for possible future expansion.



According to the Commission's analysis, this base in its current state can accommodate all major PLAN surface vessels. It can house either four Type 054A frigates, or six Type 056A corvettes, or one Type 001/002 aircraft carrier with two Type 052D destroyers. The pier went through an [extension](#) in 2019, and with this, the harbour has gained the ability of berthing both of China's carriers, although not at the same time. The harbour is thus fully capable of serving its official purpose of anti-piracy missions and the replenishment of PLAN ships near the coast of East Africa.

The exact number of the military personnel stationed here is unknown, although estimates put the number between [1,000](#) and [2,000](#), and the facility could have a potential capacity of up to [10,000](#) troops according to some sources. Additionally, several armoured military vehicles are stationed here.

The runway, being 400 meters long, is too short for aircraft to use. Therefore, it stands to reason that it is rather only a heliport for helicopters to use. Moreover, the hangars appear to have been built to accommodate helicopters rather than aircraft. Helicopters have a shorter range than aircraft, thus they would play a support role in China's naval activities rather than carry out independent missions on their own.

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER REGIONAL BASES

Figure 3 provides an overview of all the active military bases in the region, where they are located, the countries they are leased to, when they were put into use, their capabilities, and lastly, active personnel. The data is based on internet sources and satellite imagery.

Camp Lemonnier is a US naval expeditionary base in Djibouti, established in 2002. The base was originally part of the [garrison](#) of the French. It shares its airfield with the Djibouti–Ambouli International Airport, with a 3,150-meter runway with 7 hangars and many open airplane and helicopter parking spaces, and it also uses the [Chabelley Airport](#) with a 2,600-meter runway with 9 hangars south of Djibouti City since 2013. The base houses [4,000](#) military personnel and employs a further 1,000 local civilians. It is used for aerial surveillance and other anti-terrorist operations in the area with the help of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), the latter launched from a separate airstrip. Another US base in the region can be found in Baledogle Airfield, Somalia with about [500](#) personnel, established in 2016. It has a runway of about 3,100 meters and five hangars. Its purpose is to combat terrorism in the surrounding regions with the help of UAVs.

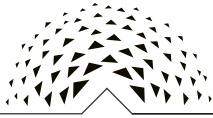
France currently has [1,450](#) troops deployed in Djibouti on its only base in East Africa, officially called "The French Forces in Djibouti", which was downsized from 1,900 troops in 2018. The base has two parts: one airfield is shared with other bases, and one naval base in the northern part of Djibouti City is used for equipment transports and countering piracy in the region. France's interest in the region partly

stems from its colonial past and the fact that Djibouti used to be a French colony employed for coaling ships. Unlike the US troops, the French personnel may leave the base and [interact](#) with the locals.

Figure 3.  
Comparison of active military bases in the Horn of Africa.

Base	Location	Country	In Use Since	Capabilities	Personnel
Chinese People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti	Djibouti	China	2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ harbour</li> <li>▪ heliport</li> <li>▪ 8 hangars</li> </ul>	1,000-2,000
Camp Lemonnier & Chabelley Airport	Djibouti	United States	2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 2 runways (one shared)</li> <li>▪ 7+9 hangars</li> <li>▪ heliport</li> </ul>	4,000 (+ 1,000 locals)
The French Forces in Djibouti	Djibouti	France	1977	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ harbour</li> <li>▪ 1 runway (shared)</li> <li>▪ heliport</li> <li>▪ 6 hangars</li> </ul>	1,450
Japan Self-Defense Force Base Djibouti	Djibouti	Japan	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 1 runway (shared)</li> <li>▪ 2 hangars</li> </ul>	600
National Support Military Base	Djibouti	Italy	2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 1 runway (shared)</li> <li>▪ 3 hangars</li> </ul>	100
Baledogle Airfield	Somalia	United States	2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 1 runway</li> <li>▪ 5 hangars</li> </ul>	500
Camp TURKSOM	Somalia	Turkey	2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ training facility</li> </ul>	200





Japan Self-Defense Force Base Djibouti is the first Japanese post-war overseas base for the East-Asian island nation. Approximately [600](#) troops serve there. Similarly to the French and US bases, it shares its runway with the Djibouti–Ambouli International Airport and has two hangars.

Italy also has a small base next to the three mentioned above, sharing the same runway. The base can accommodate [300](#) personnel, but only [100](#) are deployed there on average. Additionally, it has three hangars for UAVs.

The Turkish base in Mogadishu, Somalia, called Camp TURKSOM, was established in 2017 to train Somalian soldiers. It houses [200](#) Turkish military personnel. It is not equipped with any naval or aerial capabilities.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) also used to have several bases in the Horn of Africa. Similarly to Turkey, the UAE had a training facility in Mogadishu, Somalia established in 2014 to train the Somalian military, although the programme was [cancelled](#) in 2018. The biggest UAE base was in [Assab, Eritrea](#), with a harbour, a runway, 14 hangars, a deployable battalion, and an additional [800-1,400](#) personnel stationed there, which served as a staging ground for UAE troops fighting in the [proxy war](#) in Yemen in coalition with Saudi Arabia against the Houthi rebels backed by Iran. As the UAE's efforts in Yemen lessened, Abu Dhabi decided to partially [dismantle](#) the Assab base. There was also a base planned and under construction in Berbera, Somaliland to aid the base in Assab, but the plans were officially [cancelled](#) in 2020. Another attempt at a military base was made in Bosaso, Puntland, although Somalia [heavily protested](#) this – both Somaliland and Puntland are [conflict-ridden regions](#), they are *de facto* sovereign states but *de jure* part of Somalia as recognised by most states. No other information could be found about the Bosaso base, but since the UAE is pulling out of the region, it is probable that this plan has also been scrapped. Because of this, none of these bases were included in the analysis.

There are also [several other countries](#) that maintain some sort of military presence in the region, be it a support role in an operation or gathering intelligence independently, and most of them have a presence thanks to other countries [hosting](#) them. For example, the US base hosts British military personnel, the French base hosts Spaniards and Germans, and Japan has an agreement of cooperation with India. As for future bases, Riyadh has also signed an agreement with Djibouti, who will host yet another base, this time the first overseas military base of [Saudi Arabia](#), sometime in the near future. These were also not included in the analysis, since they do not have a comparable current presence.

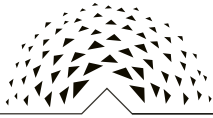
In comparison to other bases on the list, the Chinese base, along with the French one, is the only base that possesses any kind of naval capacities. The Chinese base is expressly used for replenishment and countering piracy, so it makes sense that maritime operations would be in the focus. The harbour of the French naval base is smaller than the Chinese one and is located in the city proper, thus expansion is not really possible. The Chinese base, on the other hand, could see further expansion in the future. When it comes to aerial capacities, however, it should be mentioned

that most bases share the same exact airfield, which could lead to problems with independent missions. Additionally, this is where the PLAN base is lacking, as it does not have an adequate runway for aircraft, and the one it has is only useable by helicopters. There is also no way to extend the runway, as it is located in the middle of the compound. The competition in the aerial aspect is clearly won by the United States, as it has the most runways (three) at hand in the region.

## THE POTENTIAL OF THE BASE

China's naval base in Djibouti may be a novelty, but it most certainly is no surprise. Even before the establishment of the base, China had been rapidly increasing its economic footprint on the African continent. Trade between China and Africa has soared and multiplied about [tenfold](#) since 2002, and with economic interest comes the importance of security and stability. To this end, China has been increasing its commitment to global peacekeeping with both monetary and troop pledges over the years, and it has become [one of the largest contributors](#) in both categories, especially on the African continent. And now it has opened a naval replenishment station for its navy. This is a trend that cannot be denied, and it is highly likely that it will continue.

There are several key reasons this naval base is advantageous for China in one way or another. Perhaps the most obvious one is the protection of its economic interests in this region, especially given that several of its biggest [trade partners](#) are to be found in Europe, thus the stability of the trade route through the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb is understandably important to Beijing. The security of the port itself is also of importance to China, and both Djibouti and Ethiopia rely on it, as does the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, [funded and built](#) by China, both significant economic [partners](#) of the PRC. Additionally, China can contribute to global interests to increase the stability of the region by having a military base there, and indeed, since the establishment of the base, piracy in the Gulf of Aden has decreased. Although the region is already oversaturated with bases, most of them are only used for aerial operations and, except for one, they do not possess harbours. The Chinese base fills this gap, and the results seem to justify it. However, this is plausibly mainly a move on Beijing's part to establish itself overseas militarily and show that China is not dependent on other countries to safeguard its interests abroad, in open rivalry with, e.g. the US. Moreover, the base is [portrayed](#) by China as a contribution to regional stability and carrying out its international humanitarian obligations. The base therefore serves two purposes, one implicit, focusing on China's long-term interests, and one explicit, swaying the international opinion about the PRC.



Another key advantage for China is that it facilitates building and maintaining geopolitical relations with countries from the region. In January 2020, [ten medical personnel](#) of the PLA stationed in the base received the Djibouti Independence Day medal, the “highest medal awarded to Djibouti’s citizens and friends” for “humanitarian relief operations including public welfare in assisting impoverished students, medical assistance, as well as rescue and disaster relief, bringing about genuine help to the Djiboutian people”. Under [Operation Bright Eyes](#), the Joint Logistics Support Force of the PLAN carried out a [special medical service operation](#) in Djibouti, treating cataract patients in December 2019. These acts go a long way in deepening relations with specific countries and showing off China’s generosity to the outside world, playing into the previously mentioned dual-purpose strategy.

As stated before, the base has already undergone an expansion since its opening in 2017, which is very likely to happen again in the future, since there is plenty of room and equipment on site for a further expansion of the docks, should Beijing see a need to do so. As for land expansion, unless the leased territory is enlarged in an agreement, there is no way to increase the land and air capacities of the base. It would also be the only way to acquire a runway usable by aircraft, but should that happen, it would probably be built somewhere else, and not near the port. The Djibouti–Ambouli International Airport could also host a secondary Chinese base and serve it along with the other bases, at least in theory. However, these countries, especially Japan and the United States, would probably never agree to this and would apply pressure to Djibouti to turn the idea down, similarly to how Washington [blocked](#) Russia’s attempt at a Djibouti base in 2014. The harbour of the base could in theory be further expanded to play a more important role in China’s ambitions in the Indian Ocean, a prospect that India [fears](#), and it could also be used to stage further military expansion into Africa and perhaps the Middle East in the form of more military land and naval bases, especially an airfield, since the Chinese base currently lacks full aerial function.

As a result of the coexistence of the military bases of two strategic competitors (the United States and China) in Djibouti, only about ten kilometres apart from one another, the US is in an [uncomfortable position](#), since it has no experience handling such situations. There has also been an incident when Washington accused the Chinese military personnel in Djibouti of [pointing lasers](#) at US planes, causing minor eye injuries to the pilots, which Beijing has denied. Apart from this, there is also the possibility of military espionage, given the incredible proximity of the bases, but this can go both ways. Nevertheless, China may still stand to win this rivalry politically, even if not militarily due to the fact that the base cannot be expanded, thanks to its successful political manoeuvring, such as its above-mentioned peacekeeping, stabilising, and humanitarian efforts.

## CONCLUSION

The Djibouti base of the PLAN is fully capable of serving its official objective, supporting and carrying out anti-piracy missions in the region as well as replenishing its vessels that carry out similar missions in the Indian Ocean. In fact, it is one of only two bases with naval capabilities and is perhaps the best-equipped base for this purpose among the military bases in the Horn of Africa. By contributing to the anti-piracy efforts, China not only ensures regional stability, it also guarantees the security of its own economic interests both in East Africa and in Europe.

Its aerial capacities, being limited to helicopters only, are subservient to its maritime objectives, acting in a support role rather than being capable of carrying out independent missions in neighbouring regions, unlike, for example, the United States, which has two bases with three airfields in the Horn of Africa focusing on exactly that. The Chinese base cannot compete in this regard, nor will it be able to in the foreseeable future due to its inability to expand its airstrip.

It is clear that the base furthers China's ambitions both in Africa as well as internationally, as it aids Beijing in both its short-term and its long-term goals. The success in carrying out its main purpose as well as its "side activities", for example its increasing peacekeeping efforts in UN missions and the medical assistance provided by the personnel stationed in the base, help build good relations with the countries in the region and legitimise the Chinese base in Africa, and it may also lead to the construction of several other bases all over the continent and beyond.

The establishment of this base has some serious security implications for some countries. For India, the Djibouti base is regarded as one of the key points in Beijing's "string of pearls" strategy, with which it is assumed to endeavour to surround the sub-continent in many aspects – militarily and otherwise. For the United States, having the base of its nemesis in very close proximity to its own may be perceived as a threat to its regional military capabilities in the short term, and its global hegemony in the long term. For European countries, having the military base of a global aspirant to superpower placed next to one of their most important trade routes, let alone their own bases, is also a significant security concern.