



APRIL 2020

Outpost of Empire

Base politics with Chinese characteristics

China's first overseas military base in Djibouti represents a shift in Beijing's foreign and security policy, as it indicates China's increasingly flexible approach to its traditional non-interference principle. The base in Djibouti not only signifies its expanding military presence in Africa and the Indian Ocean Region, but also its securitisation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, the infrastructure network developed under the BRI illustrates China's security ambitions of protecting its global trade and communication routes. Beijing is establishing itself as a global maritime power by financing and building dual-use ports and infrastructure in strategic littoral states along the Indian Ocean. This strategic basing of overseas facilities has a historical familiarity to it, as aspects of it resemble American post-World War II base politics.

Shifting Sands in Policy

As China develops a strong economic and political presence on the global stage, it is also seeking to develop a corresponding military presence. In August 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, signifying a fundamental shift in Beijing's foreign and security policy.¹ China's policy has long adhered to a principle of non-interference.² In line with this principle, Beijing adamantly opposed and criticised the concept of military bases on foreign soil due to the hegemonic and neo-colonialist implications they hold.

The recent 2019 White Paper 'China's National Defence in the New Era' states that "history proves and will continue to prove that China will never follow the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony".³ The absence of Chinese overseas military bases has often been used by China's leaders to distinguish the country's economic development from that of Western powers.

However, over the past two decades, the Chinese government is taking an increasingly flexible approach to its traditional non-interference principle as its overseas interests have expanded.⁴ With its deepening economic involvement in Africa, China realises the difficulty of distancing

1 Downs, Erica, Jeffrey Becker & Patrick de Gategno. ['China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base'](#), *Center for Naval Analyses*, July 2017, p. iii.

2 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. ['China's National Defense in the New Era'](#), July 2019, p. 8.

3 Ibid.

4 ['China's Evolving Role in African Security'](#), *Strategic Comments*, vol. 24(1), February 2018, p. v.

itself from regional conflicts with economic and political issues being inextricably linked.⁵ As a response, China is becoming more willing to intervene militarily in Africa in order to adapt to the regional threats of piracy, terrorism and civil war. In 2009, the first expeditionary deployment of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) took place to counter piracy off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden.⁶ China's involvement in Africa and the Indian Ocean region developed further through its role in United Nations peacekeeping missions and humanitarian assistance as well as its growing economic presence in these regions.⁷

Beijing, initially cautious in terming the military base in Djibouti as such, stated that the Djibouti base was purely a logistical support facility to aid China's capabilities in its overseas missions by providing rest and recuperation for the Chinese troops and vessel repair and maintenance.⁸ However, stationing a base in Djibouti was not purely out of logistical necessity for the PLA. The naval base in Djibouti signifies China's growing military presence in Africa and its assertive securitisation of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁹ The BRI, which Xi Jinping launched in 2013 as a response to slower economic growth at home, aims to connect Chinese markets with Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe by building an intercontinental infrastructure network. This infrastructure network not only further develops and globalises China's economy,

but it also warrants China's outward-looking security ambitions of protecting its trade and communication routes.¹⁰ Though China maintains that Djibouti is a logistical facility mainly used for non-military activities, this base is considered the first Chinese overseas military base used to protect Chinese interests overseas, and most likely not its last.¹¹

The main pull towards basing in Djibouti is its geostrategic location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Horn of Africa, one of the world's most important and busiest trade lanes which connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Besides Djibouti's geostrategic location, China has several reasons to set up its first overseas military base in Djibouti. Firstly, having built close relations with Djibouti since 2009 through many Chinese-funded projects, China received strong support from Djibouti's political and economic elite to establish a military base in Djibouti.¹² Djibouti and China have complementary economic and security ambitions, as Djibouti seeks to become a commercial hub and China has the means to finance this aspiration while serving its own interest of establishing regional presence.

Secondly, Djibouti hosts several military bases from six other countries (France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, US) which makes China's additional military presence uncontroversial.¹³ Thirdly, in contrast to its neighbouring countries, Djibouti is an island of stability in the midst of a conflict-ridden region which is primarily attributed to the presence of foreign bases. Moreover,

5 Conteh-Morgan, Earl. 'China's Non-Interference Dilemma', *Asia and the Pacific Policy Society*, August 2018.

6 Kamerling, Susanne & Frans-Paul van der Putten. 'An Overseas Naval Presence Without Overseas Bases: China's Counter-Piracy Operation in the Gulf of Aden', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 40(4), December 2011, p. 120.

7 'China's Evolving Role in African Security', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 24(1), February 2018, p. v.

8 Cabestan, Jean-Pierre. 'China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity', *Journal of Contemporary China*, December 2019, p. 10.

9 'China's Evolving Role in African Security', *Strategic Comments*, vol. 24(1), February 2018, p. vi.

10 Economy, Elizabeth C. Blog post: 'China's Strategy in Djibouti: Mixing Commercial and Military Interests', *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 2018.

11 Cabestan, Jean-Pierre. 'China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity', *Journal of Contemporary China*, December 2019, p. 8.

12 Downs, Erica, Jeffrey Becker & Patrick de Gategno. 'China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base', *Center for Naval Analyses*, July 2017, pp. v-ix.

13 Ibid., p. 4.



China’s military base provides the PLA with all the necessary capabilities for countering piracy, intelligence collection, non-combat evacuation operations of Chinese nationals from conflict regions and peacekeeping and counter-terrorism operations in the region.¹⁴ Lastly, the base is an important economic node in China’s BRI under which maritime cooperation will be facilitated and developed into a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.¹⁵

The base in Djibouti signifies China’s growing military presence in Africa and a securitisation of the Belt and Road Initiative

A Maritime Silk Road

In order to develop the Maritime Silk Road under the BRI, China is gradually building an economic chain of ports and infrastructure in strategic littoral states along the Indian Ocean. China’s maritime ambition of developing the Maritime Silk Road has been criticised by predominantly American and Indian scholars and dubbed the ‘String of Pearls strategy’. The String of

Pearls strategy is a geopolitical theory which theorises that China will build a connected string of commercial ports and logistics facilities to protect its maritime interests and encircle India.¹⁶ In this, Beijing’s foreign and security policy with its increasing international ambitions, of which the overseas military base in Djibouti is a telling example, is considered part of China’s grand strategy of becoming a global superpower.¹⁷

Over the past three decades, China has rapidly developed itself from a poor developing country into a global economic power. This development is in line with China’s ambitions to realise Xi Jinping’s so-called ‘Chinese Dream’ of national rejuvenation by 2049, the centenary of the People’s Republic of China. Since 2013, Xi Jinping has promoted his dream, developed against the backdrop of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ following China’s defeat in the First Opium War (1839-1842), as a restoration of the Chinese grandeur of past dynasties.¹⁸ The Chinese consider this period of defeat as a historical anomaly and,

14 Headley, Tyler. ‘China’s Djibouti Base: A One Year Update’, December 2018.
15 Mengjie, ‘Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative’, *Xinhua*, June 2017.

16 ‘String of Pearls – The World is Worried About China’s Military Ambitions’, *Belt and Road News*, January 2019.
17 Von Hein, Matthias. ‘Xi Jinping and the ‘Chinese Dream’’, *Deutsche Welle*, May 2018.
18 Ibid.

as reiterated in China's 2019 Defence White Paper, it is Xi Jinping's ambition to strengthen the Chinese military and to reinstate China's powerful position in the world.¹⁹

China's latest Defence White Paper explicates three broad strategic goals, namely mechanisation with enhanced informationisation, modernisation and transformation into a "world-class force".²⁰ Further, it emphasises China's commitment to the principle of win-win cooperation, the defensive nature of its national defence policy and the need for a strong Chinese military to promote world peace and stability.²¹ In the context of China's strategic framework with developing countries, China balances its aspirations of becoming a global military power with its emphasis on the principle of win-win cooperation, mutual trust and equality. As evidenced in the White Paper, China aims to assure its people of the active pursuit in realising the Chinese Dream on the one hand while it attempts to avoid Western accusations of hegemonic aspirations on the other.

The successful implementation of soft power instruments to further its foreign and security policy, such as the BRI, creates opportunities for Beijing to pursue its hard power instruments. China's growing hard power is demonstrated by the make-over of the PLA, its global military expansion and its global military engagement from the South China Sea to East Africa. The overseas military base in Djibouti is perhaps most illustrative of China's growing hard power, as it establishes a military presence to protect economic and security interests in Africa and the Indian Ocean Region.²²

China's infrastructure network developed under the BRI illustrates its expanding economic, political and military power

19 'The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. ['China's National Defense in the New Era'](#), July 2019, p. 37.

20 Ibid., pp. 9-10.

21 Ibid., pp. 6-10.

22 ['China's Evolving Role in African Security'](#), *Strategic Comments*, vol. 24(1), February 2018, p. vi.

The Bases of Empire

The growing number of Chinese-financed dual-use ports and infrastructure plays an important role in China's grand strategy. It has a certain historical familiarity to it, as aspects of it resemble American post-World War II base politics.²³ Base politics is defined in the literature as the "interplay between basing nations and host nations on affairs relating to the operation of local military facilities in host nations".²⁴ These military facilities can take various forms including administrative, communications and logistics facilities, naval ports or airfields. By serving a multitude of strategic and geopolitical ends, overseas military bases have historically been the product of empires and subsequently disappeared with the liberation of the host nation.²⁵ Historically, overseas military bases primarily served to assure territorial control and maritime supremacy, but they currently serve a multitude of political-economic functions, such as stabilising trade, investment and maintaining alliances. The concept of foreign military bases on the soil of independent nations outside of empires appeared in the mid-20th Century, as demonstrated by the vast increase and persisting presence of American bases since World War II.

23 Bitar, Sebastian E., 'U.S. Military Bases, Quasi-Bases, and Domestic Politics in Latin America', Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Calder, Kent E., 'Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism', Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007; Cooley, Alexander, 'Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas', Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008; Lutz, Catherine (ed.), 'The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts', New York: New York University Press, 2009; Vine, David, 'Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World', New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017.

24 Gresh, Geoffrey. 'Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing', Redwood City: *Stanford University Press*, 2015, p. 5.

25 Calder, Kent E. 'Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism', Princeton and Oxford: *Princeton University Press*, 2007, p. 1.

American base politics served a geopolitical dual containment purpose in which the US could neutralise security threats while also expanding its global presence and leveraging its position vis-à-vis third-party adversaries, such as Russia and China.²⁶ With approximately 800 American military bases in more than 70 countries, the amount of American military bases and defence expenditure far exceed that of any other nation.²⁷ American base politics is embedded in the structure of American foreign and security policy and has proven vital to its strategic aim of establishing a global military presence.²⁸

While China wants to distinguish itself from Western powers, it is behaving like any other great power by developing the military power to correspond with its expanding economic influence. China's reasons to establish overseas military bases are similar to that of the US since China aims to respond to threats, reinforce alliances, develop a system of military power and protect its trade routes. Both China's current strong economic position in the world and its increasing self-confidence in this phase of its development resembles that of the US in the post-World War II period.²⁹ However, while its plan of establishing a network of ports and logistics facilities does have elements of American base politics, Beijing shapes it to conditions unique to China.

In contrast to American base politics, China is not developing a global network of bases with the aim of projecting power.³⁰ Rather, China's primary aim is to ensure continued national economic growth by means of establishing partnerships that

are primarily based on economic relations. These partnerships can gradually evolve into a stronger presence and provide strategic leverage. Chinese base politics opt for agile leasing agreements with host states and for building light-touch facilities as these are easier and cheaper to develop, maintain and operationalise compared to the American style of fully-fledged military bases.³¹ In contrast to the American basing strategy, the Chinese approach is more cost-efficient as it involves dual-use and public-private facilities that can be easily converted into military facilities when necessary. Furthermore, Beijing uses a different narrative when developing overseas bases, as it positions itself as a benevolent power that provides the necessary investments in host countries to facilitate global stability. Rather than China imposing its military presence on unwilling countries, the infrastructure and trade networks resulting from Chinese investments necessitate their military presence for the protection and security of these networks.

Chinese base politics opt for light-touch facilities compared to the American style of fully-fledged military bases

A Maritime Great Game

Djibouti has given prominence to the growing strategic rivalry between China and the US, or more broadly, between China and the West in an increasingly bipolar world order.³² The growing strategic rivalry with the US has become an important component in China's military thinking.³³ In the context of the growing US-Sino Rivalry of competing power blocs, it is understandable that China seeks to gradually expand its influence by establishing foreign military bases outside

26 Ibid., p. 18.

27 Vine, David. 'Where in the World is the US Military?', *Politico Magazine*, July/August 2015.

28 Calder, Kent E. 'Embattled Garrisons: Comparative Base Politics and American Globalism', Princeton and Oxford: *Princeton University Press*, 2007, p. 18.

29 Bland, Dan, Dennis Wong & Darren Long. 'Why Djibouti is Home to China's First Foreign Military Base', *South China Morning Post*, August 2018.

30 Dreyfuss, Leah & Mara Karlin. 'All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas', *Brookings*, September 2019, p. 1.

31 Ibid., p. 6.

32 Cabestan, Jean-Pierre. 'China's Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China's Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity', *Journal of Contemporary China*, December 2019, p. 12.

33 Duchâtel, Mathieu. 'China Trends #2 – Naval Bases: From Djibouti to a Global Network?', *Institut Montaigne*, June 2019.

of its own region. By establishing a military base in Djibouti, China negates the possibility of the US containing China in Southeast Asia if the US-Sino Rivalry deteriorates. The continuing American military presence in the Asia-Pacific Region slows the rate of expansion of China's influence, but the American tendency towards isolationism creates opportunities for China to expand it.³⁴ If the US can no longer provide a buffer against Chinese influence, or limit Chinese dominance in the Asia-Pacific, this will create a fundamental power shift in favour of China.

While China's 2019 Defence White Paper states that China never seeks hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence, its actions indicate otherwise.³⁵ China's intercontinental infrastructure network developed under the BRI illustrates its expanding economic, political and military power. In its pursuit of developing a Maritime Silk Road, China has built or is planning to build ports in Cambodia (Sihanoukville), Myanmar (Sittwe and Kyaukphyu), Bangladesh (Chittagong), Sri Lanka (Hambantota and Colombo) and Pakistan (Gwadar), encircling India. China regards India as a direct competitor in the maritime domain and is responding by building a network of overseas facilities to curtail its maritime power.

It is safe to assume that China's military base in Djibouti will not be its last

Outlook

China's military base in Djibouti presents a concrete manifestation of China's outward-looking foreign and security policy in contrast to its traditional non-interference principle. As demonstrated in Djibouti, China is capable of strategically translating its expanding economic development into political influence and military presence. China's dominant economic influence in

Djibouti gives it advantageous leverage over other basing nations which may result in increased competition for space and resources.³⁶ With a single military base versus 800, China is nowhere near the magnitude of the American bases in numbers or influence, however, it is working systematically towards surpassing American power. In the context of the US-Sino Rivalry, the EU must conduct a balancing act in which it reaffirms the US as an ally while securing its trade intensity with China.³⁷ A bipolar world order of competing US-Sino power blocs would not be conducive to the EU's economic and political stability.

Overall, it is safe to assume that China's military base in Djibouti will not be its last, since China seeks to systematically execute its plan of strengthening its national defence and military capacity in the New Era. Moreover, China is adept in cooperating with countries that have complementary economic and security ambitions which will provide opportunity for establishing overseas military bases. The Djibouti base functions as a useful testing ground for China to learn best practices on combining its commercial and military interests.³⁸

China's economic, diplomatic and military power will become more prominent on the international stage with each additional overseas military base it establishes. China will likely select basing locations based on their geostrategic location and their level of indebtedness to Chinese state-owned banks. Other important factors include whether China has already invested in the country's economy and infrastructure and whether China receives support from the host nation to base. The most likely locations for China's

34 Frangopoulos, Alexia. 'Modernising the Military: China's Path to Hegemony?', *Harvard Political Review*, September 2019.

35 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 'China's National Defense in the New Era', July 2019, pp. 7-8.

36 Downs, Erica, Jeffrey Becker, Patrick de Gategno. 'China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base', *Center for Naval Analyses*, July 2017, p. vii.

37 Esteban, Mario & Miguel Otero-Iglesias et al. 'Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry', *European Think-tank Network on China*, January 2020, p. 15.

38 Becker, Jeffrey & Erica Downs. 'China's Djibouti Military Base the First of Many', *East Asia Forum*, June 2018.

next military bases are reportedly in in Pakistan, Cambodia and Namibia.^{39, 40, 41, 42}

It would be an oversimplification to state that China is copying the expansive American basing strategy enforced in the post-World War II period, as China adapts its foreign and security policy to factors unique to its own country. However, China's aspirations of becoming the largest global power and its financial capabilities can be considered to mirror the American post-World War II situation. American base politics has shown that overseas military bases are key to becoming a dominant power on the international stage. While China disapproves of the American pursuit of military superiority that undermines the international security system, China itself appears to be pursuing a similar dream.

39 Gertz, Bill. '[China Building Military Base in Pakistan](#)', *The Washington Times*, January 2018.

40 Dreyfuss, Leah & Mara Karlin. '[All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas](#)', *Brookings*, September 2019, p. 5.

41 Page, Jeremy, Gordon Lubold & Rob Taylor. '[Deal For Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China's Quest for Military Network](#)', *The Wall Street Journal*, July 2019.

42 Nantulya, Paul. '[Chinese Hard Power Supports its Growing Strategic Interests in Africa](#)', *Africa Centre for Strategic Studies*, January 2019.

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