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**The Dragon's Tail at the Horn of Africa:
A Chinese Military Logistics Facility in Djibouti**
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On November 26, 2015 it was reported that the Chinese and Djibouti governments had signed an agreement for both the construction in Djibouti territory of a Chinese logistics support base for naval operations, and its operation for a decade. This development, which took some of the media by surprise, should be seen in broad contexts as part of the long term trends in China, the Middle East, and in the international theater. These contexts include China's grand strategy in the world, Africa, the high seas, and maritime lines of communications; its strategic culture; its military strategy; its policy tools and strategic enterprises; and the significance of all those aspects for the relations between major powers and the respective buildups of their forces.

As a global economy, China depends on the security of global navigation, which provides for the transport of most of its raw materials, energy, and finished products. Over the past decade, the threat of piracy off the Somali coast has disrupted marine traffic to China, causing economic damage to the country and harming its reputation, following the hijacking of Chinese ships and the demands for ransom for their release. In December 2008, China sent a naval force to the Gulf of Aden for the first time in the framework of international efforts to combat piracy. Since then, China has sent more than 20 task forces consisting of more than 60 warships to escort merchant ships of China and other nations. This mission enables China to defend its citizens, ships, and commercial and economic interests, but also to accumulate invaluable operational experience in long term and prolonged naval missions alongside the world's best navies.

The Chinese interest in the security of the sea lines focuses its attention on the crucial marine passageways, such as the Straits of Taiwan, Malacca, Hormuz, and the Suez Canal. Djibouti is located at a critical place on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the main shipping route connecting the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and Asian markets.

In addition, Djibouti provides convenient access to Africa, for which China is the leading trading partner, with annual trade totaling approximately \$300 billion. China's activity in Africa includes investments, infrastructure projects, diplomatic relations, military ties, and peacekeeping operations. Djibouti also provides proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, from which China receives about half of its imported crude oil. In recent years, China has purchased approximately one quarter of Djibouti Port, and is involved in the multibillion dollar construction of port, energy, and railway infrastructures; manufacturing; and free trade in Djibouti itself and in neighboring Ethiopia.

The signing of the naval facility agreement comes as no surprise, since it was preceded by visits to China by the president of Djibouti, the signing of a defense and security agreement between China and Djibouti at the ministerial level in April 2014, reports of progress in talks in May 2015, a visit by the Chinese Chief of the General Staff to Djibouti in early November 2015, and agreement on a range of spheres in military cooperation.

Djibouti already hosts bases of France, the United States, Germany, and Japan in its territory for the purpose of combating piracy and terrorism. Given China's strong economic interests (and soft power) in the region, its dearth of military tools (hard power) such as forces and military bases stands out. For China, the acquisition of a base in Djibouti, which these other countries already have, is a useful asset enabling it to support prolonged naval and land-based missions, as well as gaining political prestige. In addition, a grip on the western side of the Indian Ocean improves China's position vis-à-vis India, its main Asiatic competitor for influence there. At a time when the United States is declaring a pivot to Asia, China is signaling its ability to pivot westward somewhat – even if only symbolically at this stage.

When Japan established a headquarters in Djibouti for naval operations in the region in 2010, China's official response was chilly (Xinhua News Agency: "by establishing the base, the Japanese government is exploring how far it can go in increasing its military clout in the world"), and it rejected proposals to establish its own base at that time, leaving this as a future option. It appears that that China now believes that the conditions are ripe for this measure, and to explore the enhancement of its military clout in the region, on the high seas, and worldwide, while sending a counter signal to Japan, its eastern rival, and to other major powers.

Beyond the local and regional dimensions, however, the move in Djibouti stems from broader and deeper trends in Chinese strategy. China's Military Strategy white paper dated May 2015 begins with China's "endeavor to realize the Chinese Dream of great national rejuvenation...to maintain peace, pursue development and share prosperity." For

this purpose, China depends on the stability of the global economy and a flow of energy products and raw materials through secure shipping routes. China's endeavor to construct an infrastructure, economic, and trade bridge between Asia and Europe and Africa also reflects the economic and strategic vision of One Belt, One Road (OBOR) launched two years ago, as reflected in China's large scale investments in port facilities along the shores of the Indian Ocean.

The same Chinese document states: "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned....It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power."

In this context, the naval base in Djibouti should be seen as a step, albeit a modest one, in a longer and more significant journey toward realizing China's national, global, and military aspirations.

Is the new facility a military base or logistics facility? While senior officials in the United States and Djibouti regarded the facility as a "Chinese naval base," China's official spokespersons were careful to call it a "logistics support facility" for its military forces engaged in international missions in the region. Three main points stand out:

- a. China's military strategy emphasizes "civilian-military integration" (CMI), for a combination of purposes, efforts, infrastructure, and standards, with an explicit mention of "building civilian-military infrastructure and its joint operation." It therefore follows that the distinction between civilian, dual-purpose, and military facilities is of no help in understanding the Chinese operational rationale or the precise purpose of the facilities.
- b. China is seeking to differentiate itself from the major powers of the past, whose policy was based on "expansion and the politics of force" utilizing military force and bases, and is therefore adopting a "civilian" style.
- c. Maintaining secrecy about intentions in order to avoid arousing opposition from complacent rivals to one's plans plays a key role in ancient Chinese strategic military theory. Therefore, even when China makes military use of its facilities, it will have no interest in stating officially that they are military. Understanding of the implicit hint by the relevant parties will be sufficient.

Significance for Israel

The construction of the Chinese naval infrastructure in Djibouti has no immediate significance for Israel, as it does for other states, since it is just a step, and not the first one, on a long journey. Nevertheless, there are several points of interest in these developments and trends for Israel.

China's presence in Africa in the economic and infrastructure sphere outlines potential for tripartite Chinese-Israeli-African commercial, economic, and scientific cooperation, given the parties' fields of interest and relative advantages, such as agricultural crops and technology.

“Connected vessels”: The integrative and gradual nature of Chinese foreign policy, in which economic, diplomatic, infrastructure, and military efforts are interwoven in systemic long term beams also requires Israel to conduct an integrated multidimensional analysis of China's endeavors in Israel, especially concerning the non-economic aspects of projects involving strategic national infrastructure, such as port, energy, and transportation facilities.

As a long term trend, a gradual and patient increase in China's military presence and activity in Israel's strategic environment should be expected, certainly in sea lines of communication, but also in the more proximate surroundings, according to the map of China's economic interests. This presence can be expected to assume Chinese strategic characteristics (in international missions and with a “soft” profile), and continued contacts in military diplomacy channels. It is therefore recommended that the IDF and the security establishment deepen their understanding of China, its strategic culture, and its armed forces, and develop their contacts with it on the basis of this learning.

In view of the added value China is deriving from its participation in international missions against piracy, the IDF should continue taking part in international naval operations or evacuation and rescue missions around the world, which are useful in both accumulating international goodwill and improving operation capabilities.

