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China in the Red Sea: The Djibouti Naval Base and the Return of Admiral Zheng He

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 567, August 23, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Last month, the Chinese established their first-ever military-naval base outside the Asia-Pacific region, in Djibouti. The establishment of the base is an expression of the "Maritime Silk Road" policy intended to exert Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and into the Mediterranean. The establishment of the Djibouti base also reflects Beijing's recent celebration of Zheng He, the 15th century admiral, whose voyages in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean have come to symbolize Chinese power and a Chinese-led global order.

On July 11, ships carrying military personnel set sail from the Chinese naval base in Zhanjiang for the Horn of Africa. Their destination was Djibouti, where China has opened its first overseas naval base. According to the Chinese Xinhua news agency, the base is intended to "ensure China's performance of missions, such as escorting, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid in Africa and west Asia. The base will also be conducive to overseas tasks including military cooperation, joint exercises, evacuating and protecting overseas Chinese and emergency rescue, as well as jointly maintaining security of international strategic seaways." According to the agreement between Beijing and Djibouti, which is valid at least until 2026, the base may contain as many as 10,000 troops.

The establishment of the Djibouti base is an important steppingstone in China's departure from its traditional focus on the East Asian-Pacific region and an expression of its expanding interests in Africa and the Middle East. It may also be seen as a culmination of Premier Xi Jinping's "One Road-One Belt" strategy, which seeks to establish land and sea routes across Asia and the Indian Ocean. More specifically, it corresponds with China's initiative to construct a "Maritime Silk

Road" built around "a string of pearls": a series of Chinese footholds around the Indian Ocean and into the Persian Gulf and Red Sea.

While the "One Road-One Belt" initiative is usually understood to be primarily economic in nature, the Djibouti base is clearly an act of Chinese power projection. The military nature of the base has been emphasized by the *Global Times*, a Chinese state-run newspaper. A recent editorial stressed the fact that the base "is not a commercial resupply point" but rather a military installation containing Chinese troops.

At the same time, the Chinese media have been careful to note that the establishment of the base does not imply a drive towards world hegemony, laying their emphasis instead on its potential role in protecting Chinese peacekeeping missions. News of the Djibouti base has nevertheless been the cause of some alarm in Washington as the base is located only a few miles from Camp Lemonnier, the largest American base in the region and the only permanent American base in Africa.

The establishment of the base follows several years of increasing Chinese involvement in Africa and the Middle East. Clearly, it is crucial for Beijing to protect its flow of resources. Half the oil imported by China goes through the Mandeb Strait, and most Chinese exports to Europe are transported through the Gulf of Aden and Suez Canal. Chinese funding is being used across the region to build infrastructure, such as a modern rail link between Nairobi and Mombasa.

In addition to Beijing's economic aid and commercial involvement in Africa, the region is also home to thousands of Chinese workers. In 2013, China sent a warship and military transport aircraft to evacuate some 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya following the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi. According to Taiwanese political analyst Lai Yueqian, the Libyan crisis was a major element leading to the decision to establish the Djibouti base.

The relatively swift overthrow of Qaddafi by the western powers (against China's will) meant that Beijing was faced with the urgent task of evacuating its citizens as well as the loss of over \$1 billion of investment. As a result, China began to increase its presence in the region. In 2015, the Chinese navy conducted exercises with its Russian counterpart in the Mediterranean. This year, while en route to another joint Russian-Chinese exercise in the Baltic, Beijing conducted a live fire drill in the Mediterranean.

The Chinese vision of a new maritime Silk Road is closely related to the official celebration of Zheng He, the early 15th century admiral who brought China fame and power through his voyages in Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean to Africa. According to Christina Lin, the building of land and sea

bridges across Eurasia and Africa contains a deeply symbolic element, referred to by Lin as the "Zheng He narrative." Zheng He's voyages are frequently noted as a symbol of a world order based on trade rather than violence and controlled by the benevolent hegemony of the Chinese Imperial court.

In Chinese publications of recent years, Zheng He's fleets are glorified as a tool of regional economic growth, scientific research, peaceful cultural exchange, and universal friendship. It is worth noting that while Zheng He's voyages collected treasures (such as the famous giraffe brought back for the Imperial Court from Africa), its main objective was to display Ming power and dominance and to collect tribute from local rulers. Indeed, a number of rulers who refused to recognize the hegemony of the Chinese Emperor were punished and taken back to China as prisoners.

Zheng is particularly poignant as he is often perceived as both a testament to Chinese greatness and a symbol of China's missed opportunities. The dismantling of his ships and shipyards by the Ming emperors is widely perceived as one of the causes of the gradual decline of Chinese power and the eventual rise of the West. The reference to Zheng He and the Silk Routes can therefore be seen as an implication that the mistake made 500 years ago is now being corrected, as the Middle Kingdom returns to its former centrality.

Thus, it would seem to be more than a coincidence that the recent embarkation of ships to Djibouti occurred on the same date that Admiral Zheng He first set sail on his famous voyages over 600 years ago. While the supremacy of Zheng He's fleet may still be far off, the new base on the coast of Africa seems to mark a declaration of larger intentions.

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