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CHINA

China brings to an end its long-standing policy against a permanent military presence abroad

China is set to create a naval base in the African state of Djibouti bringing to an end its long-standing policy against the establishment of a permanent military presence in other countries. The decision is in accordance with Beijing's new international strategy announced by president Xi late last year and it is a clear signal that China is steadily becoming a full-fledged great power with significant political, economic and military implications for world order.

Located in a key position at the junction between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, Djibouti is already home to a U.S. base with 4,500 military personnel. Although its main function is to serve as an intelligence-gathering post for the Arab world and East Africa, it also houses Special Forces, fighter planes and helicopters, as well as being a major operational centre for drone operations in Africa and the Middle East.

China's decision is being looked at with concern by the U.S. government which recently announced a \$1,4 billion plan to expand the Djibouti base. Washington is worried that the Chinese military installation could interfere with its counterterrorism activities and destabilize a geopolitical reality which is already fraught with problems. Beijing, on the other hand, says that its intent is, first and foremost, to assist the Chinese

Navy in fulfilling its international obligations and in carrying out its peacekeeping missions under the auspices of the UN.

As a matter of fact the U.S. have openly supported China's participation in international maritime security efforts particularly in the nearby waters off the Somali coast where recurring episodes of maritime piracy have been hindering sea freight traffic. Since 2008 China has deployed many vessels to protect cargo ships and, according to a spokesman for China's foreign ministry, it has "encountered real difficulties in replenishing soldiers and resupplying fuel and food." Hence a genuine necessity to have a close and efficient logistical support.

Nevertheless the Pentagon believes that the establishment of a permanent Chinese facility in this region is a further proof of China's ambition to contest Washington's command of the seas, as it is doing in the South China Sea. One can hardly doubt China's growing eagerness to affirm its military power yet the Djibouti initiative, more than an act of military expansionism, responds to Beijing's determination to create a new system of trade and, therefore, security that will reflect China's interests.

The port at Djibouti, the largest in the African east coast, is one essential element of a multibillion dollar belt trade project which aims to create a new Chinese-guided system of global trade and commerce, linking China's ports with those of the Asian subcontinent, the Arabian peninsula, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the port of Piraeus – now run under contract by a Chinese company, the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco).