How Does Djibouti Resemble the Small Tower from the Russian Folk Tale?

On the territory of a dwarfish (23,000 sq. km) East African country, Djibouti, located on the shores of the Red Sea, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean, the bases of the former overlords - France (essentially four bases - two neighboring land-based, on naval and airstrip), the United States and Britain have been preserved since it gained independence in 1977. The only overseas Italian base is located in Djibouti. And Japan beginning in 2011. The ships of the naval contingent of Germany and Spain use the facilities of the French base within the framework of the EU mission “Atalanta”, which, wishing to keep up with others, has housed its naval anti-piracy forces headquarters here.

However, the process of unprecedented settlement of Djibouti does not stop there - on August 1, 2017, a Chinese base was opened, whose soldiers for the first time were face to face with Americans on this tiny patch of land (and this is under the extremely complicated relations between Washington and Beijing). In the same year, Saudi Arabia began to equip its base in an attempt to seize the initiative from the Iranians after the chief of the General Staff of the Iranian Army, Muhammad Hussein Bakri, announced the probability of creating Iranian naval bases in the region. Following the Saudis announcement of a desire to obtain a place here, not only the UAE and Qatar, but also Turkey, which is trying to return to the region after a century of absence.

In early October 2017, Indian President Ram Nath Covind visited Djibouti, and the media immediately predicted the chances of the opening of an Indian Naval base in Djibouti (probably to spite China).

In general, the list of foreign objects here is amazing. And the super-density of their deployment has led in some
cases to dangerous incidents of probable collisions in the air or at sea. But the crowded bases allow foreigners to follow each other - the Chinese openly take pictures of American ships and equipment, and Japanese seamen spy for the Chinese.

Verily, the reasons for comparing Djibouti with the small tower of the Russian folk tale are 100% justified, which certainly requires the definition of roles of who is here; which “guest” is the rabbit, and who is the cunning fox or the evil gray wolf. But this is a joke, and their choice is individual. And at the same time, we need answers to much more serious questions: why is the demand for the territory of Djibouti growing? Why are local authorities going to clone foreign strongholds on their territory? In what way are they similar, in what are they different, just like the goals of their hosts?

Djibouti is a state deprived of resources (except sand and camels) with a population of 850,000-900,000 people, which, however, consists of more than 10,000 foreign legionaries. To survive, this very poor, but most militarized country in the world for many years has been successfully earning money due to its diverse advantages:

1. The main trump card is an extremely convenient strategic position in the center of maritime transit between the three continents - Europe, Asia and Africa. This allows one to monitor the passing of about 10% of world’s oil traffic and 20% of the commodity flow.
2. In fact, local authorities are speculating on tensions and instability in the surrounding region, where the sharp contradictions of too many states around Syria, between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran, are tightly woven.
3. In this regard, one cannot but note its central position in a way both surrounded by other countries and a little further away. Those same Emirates (the closest ally of the Saudis), like Qatar, have a military base in Eritrea. The aforementioned Turkey in 2017 received from the Sudanese authorities a lease for 99 years on the port of Suakin on the Red Sea, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, and in the same year opened a training center in neighboring Somalia. It can be expected that their bases will eventually be located in Djibouti.
4. This is an important platform from which multilateral actions are carried out against pirates off the coast of Somalia, Yemen, in the Gulf of Aden and in the waters of the Indian Ocean.
5. Here, the struggle for resources may well unfold (oil has been found off the coast of Somalia, Tanzania and Kenya) and for access to the biological riches of these waters.
6. It is a window on the African continent with its untold natural wealth and almost unlimited opportunities for investment, which only fuels the appetites of the authorities of Djibouti in their desire to turn the country into a second Singapore, Dubai or something of the kind. In general, the understanding of the strategic importance of Djibouti visibly deepens in the world and especially the Arab world, where, more recently, for example, in Egypt, they talked about the need to host its base here. It seems that the struggle for strategic control in this region is just beginning.

Undoubtedly, the bases of the United States and the People’s Republic of China are attracting the greatest attention and how and for what purposes they are being used. So, Camp Lemonnier for the Pentagon is a key base in Africa and in broader anti-terrorist and anti-piracy operations. In this connection, the US began to deploy numerous drones here, implementing especially secret missions in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Recognizing the growing strategic role of Djibouti on the one hand and the possible threat from the appearance of a Chinese base here, the White House announced at the end of 2017 a decision to extend the lease for 20 years and double its payment, as well as an investment plan of $1.4 billion for its further military and technical improvement.

The first overseas base of China in Djibouti and the military facilities that have been put into operation there is a kind of lens through which many global ambitions, growing opportunities and various goals of Beijing’s policy course can be seen. Of course, the key goal is military-strategic, which, specific to Djibouti, is due to a number of advantages of the country mentioned above, and does not require clarification. The Chinese were clearly disingenuous when, for years, they persistently insisted on the defensive nature of the base, its need to support Chinese anti-piracy actions in the Gulf of Aden and the peacekeeping force (2,400) in Africa, which actually saved 35,000 people in Libya in 2011 and over 600 in Yemen in 2015.

But Beijing intends to significantly further strengthen its navy, the first foreign base due to large infusions into the military budget (according to Jane’s Defense Weekly, by 2020 it will amount to over $233 billion, which is more than the budgets of European countries combined) and hopes to establish a second naval base in Vanuatu, if the 2018 negotiations on this issue with local authorities end positively.

But this is still very far down the road. Hence, they will look elsewhere, since the bases on both flanks are an
extremely important support for the implementation of Beijing’s immediate plan to deploy to the Indian Ocean a ship-based anti-missile defense system. China hasn’t lost sight of local infrastructure projects and invested a fantastic for such a tiny state amount of $14 billion over 2 years in them. Thanks to this action, by the year 2020 Djibouti will complete the construction of a modern highway and railroad to Addis Ababa, as well as the second stage of the port of Doraleh, the terminals in Gubet and Tajurah, thus bringing closer to realization the intention of local authorities to make Djibouti into a high-end hub. On the whole the Chinese base has become a real challenge and threat to the USA, many experts note.

Beijing, which has already reached a high level of military and technical equipment of its base and knowing the interest of the Russian Federation in Djibouti, considered it possible, according to foreign media reports, to offer the Russian side the use of part of it, but this hasn’t gone further than rumors. The Russian generals will sort it out on their own. In the past the USSR held the territory of Djibouti from 1953-1977, that is 24 years de jure and from 1977-1991, 14 years de facto. Historians argued that in 1889 there was an idea to found a Russian colony “New Moscow” in East Africa - on the territory of modern Djibouti. At one time even Emperor Alexander III supported it. In 2010, the Djibouti authorities offered the Russian Federation a port for use by warships participating in anti-piracy actions. So, perhaps, a “Russian bear” may appear, in Djibouti followed by an “Indian elephant”. There’s room enough for everyone in this dwarfish country, its leaders believe. But can all the “guests” get along peacefully in this “small tower”? - The tale had a different ending...

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