

Japan's First Overseas Base Aimed at Expanding Military Boundaries

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BEIJING — Japan is building its first overseas military base in Africa's Djibouti on the Gulf of Aden in an attempt to probe what waters its military can legally reach farthest, analysts say.

In the name of better combating notorious Somali pirates, Japan is busy setting up a 40-million-U.S.-dollar military base, which is expected to be completed early next year.

Currently, some 150 Japanese soldiers battling piracy are stationed in a U.S. base in Djibouti, which is at the southern end of the Red Sea.

The Japanese authorities say some 2,000 Japanese vessels, accounting for 10 percent of the world total, sail through the Gulf of Aden each year. Some 90 percent of Japanese exports rely on the crucial sea lane, which has been overrun by rampant piracy.

On occasion, Japanese vessels have been hijacked by pirates.

The Japanese base, undeniably, would add momentum to the country's anti-piracy efforts in the region.

But observers say that by establishing the base, the Japanese government is also exploring how far it can go in increasing its military clout in the world.

According to the Peace Constitution ratified in 1947 after World War II, Japan, to abstain from waging war, couldn't have a standing army and its warships couldn't operate overseas.

But in October 2001, soon after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Japanese lawmakers approved the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law, which allowed the dispatch of Japanese warships and soldiers overseas.

Moreover, in July 2009, Japanese lawmakers passed the Anti-Piracy Law, which provided Japanese self-defense forces with more mobility to use military power. It also stipulated that the Japanese prime minister could send troops overseas to conduct "anti-piracy" operations without approval of the parliament.

The base in Djibouti is Japan's latest effort to increase its military influence in the world, analysts say.

Many countries are watching closely, and hope the base can play a constructive role in cracking down on Somali pirates and contribute to regional peace and stability.

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