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Why awarding Padma Vibhushan to Djibouti President matters to India

BY DIPANJAN ROY CHAUDHURY, ET BUREAU | JAN 26, 2019, 05.14 PM IST

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New Delhi: Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, the Djibouti national who was conferred [Padma Vibhushan](#), India's second highest civilian award, may be lesser known in this country but he is no ordinary citizen being the President of strategically located country along East Africa's coast for the past two decades.

[Djibouti](#) may not ring bells here but it is important for India as it is only country that hosts Chinese maiden military base abroad as of date. Japan's maiden military base abroad is also based in Djibouti, that plays a key role in combatting piracy in the Western part of the Indian Ocean region. Japan is India's key partner for projects in Eastern Africa as part of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor that seeks to balance China's BRI. In fact Djibouti is home to more foreign bases than any other country.

Therefore, when President [Ram Nath Kovind](#) chose to visit Djibouti in 2017 it was without no reason. Delhi wants to cultivate Djibouti not only as part of its rejuvenated Africa policy and Indo-Pacific strategy but also because of the reason that Djibouti was the base for evacuation of Indians from Yemen in early years of the current crisis.

Guelleh has visited India twice over past four years – first as part of the third edition of the India-Africa Summit and on that occasion he met PM [Narendra Modi](#) on the sidelines. Later he was here for the International Solar Alliance Summit. India has opened a centre of leadership and entrepreneurship in Djibouti at the request of its President. India reportedly has shown interest to set up a military base in Djibouti as India eyes maritime partnership with this strategically located nation in the Horn of Africa.

Situated on the northwestern edge of the Indian Ocean, at the southern entrance to the Red Sea, Djibouti controls access to the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean, home to some of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Djiboutian ports overlook waters that account for 25 percent of the world's exports that flow into Asian and Mediterranean markets.

In addition to hosting many Western military bases including those by France, Italy and USA, Djibouti has also become a focal point for counter-terrorism activities on the African continent and the training of special forces in neighboring countries. Saudi Arabia is also setting up a military base in Djibouti. While Djibouti has approached Turkey to set up a base, Russia has shown interests.



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