

Djibouti: A strategic choke point in the Bab el-Mandeb region

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Abstract

Djibouti's strategic position at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a crucial maritime chokepoint, linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, underscores its geopolitical significance. This narrow strait is essential for global trade, with a significant share of the world's oil and commercial shipments passing through. Djibouti's location at this juncture enhances its role as a pivotal hub for international maritime traffic and naval operations.

The geopolitical landscape in Djibouti is currently influenced by its relationships with global powers. The country hosts military bases for the United States, China, France, and Japan, each seeking to secure their interests in this vital region. The establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti signifies a notable shift in the balance of power, emphasising Djibouti's strategic importance on the global stage. These bases are crucial for safeguarding maritime routes, countering piracy, and managing regional conflicts. At the same time, they also prove to be a potential source of power struggle between great powers.

In the contemporary period, it is important to reevaluate the importance of this region in resonance with China's rising influence through trade relations and investments. The intersection of military, economic, and geopolitical interests in Djibouti along with its regional dynamics certifies its enduring strategic importance. The resurgence of piracy, involvement of the Houthi rebels and the ongoing Israel Hamas conflict also reassure the shift of power relations in the Arab region from the lenses of global security.

Keywords: Military base, Bab el-Mandeb, Arab state, Global trade, China, Balance of power.

Introduction

Djibouti, a small nation located in the Horn of Africa, has emerged as a critical geopolitical actor due to its strategic location at the confluence of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The

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country is also located at the epicenter where highly conflicted regions of the Middle East and the Horn Africa join together. It is only 30km from war-torn Yemen. In comparison to most countries, this location is relatively very small in area, comprising roughly half the size of Denmark and comparable to that of New Jersey, this region is predominantly arid, resulting in 90% of its land being uninhabitable. As a result, 77% of its population lives in urban areas. Since the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, this water lane has been vital for world trade. It is located along world commercial life-line where the Red Sea and Indian Ocean are connected through Bab El Mandeb Strait (Gate of Tears). Every year, over 20,000 ships and 30 percent of world trade pass through this important shipping lane on their way to Europe or the Americas. Despite its modest size, its geographical position has far-reaching implications for global trade, military strategy, and regional security.

It could be said that Djibouti has become strategically significant in the last few years due to two major developments. The first is the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which left Ethiopia reliant on the port of Djibouti as its maritime exit. Through Djibouti, more than 90% of Ethiopia's trade is conducted. It gains significance as the railway connecting their respective capitals is finished. Other Chinese-led infrastructure projects, such as the construction of ports and airports, are underway in this region, as they are throughout Africa. The second is the international campaign against war on terror and the Somalian coast-based piracy. Somalia continues to face turmoil due to the presence of pirates and al-Shabab Islamic terrorists. Along with that, Djibouti's closeness to volatile regions in the Middle East and Africa makes it strategically advantageous for military superpowers to establish bases here. With the resurgence of Houthi rebels in targeting American and British vessels as a counter measure to the Israel bombings on Gaza, hence such acts of terror and piracy deems the necessity to be dealt through military engagements by world powers to maintain stability in the region. (Sankalp, 2022)

The need to analyse and reevaluate the importance of this region stems out from the fact that the new multipolar world order has seen a rise in non-traditional and indirect warfare mechanism on the basis of trade wars between great powers and deterrence measures through military base installments in foreign regions. The day-to-day developments in the region makes it necessary to understand the need of how Djibouti plays a foundational role in trying to maintain stability in the Horn of Africa and becomes to be displayed as a location of strategic importance. The other question in hand would be how the major powers try to establish their

bases in the region as a form of ensuring dominance, which further intends to become a zero-sum game of power.

Djibouti's strategic significance as a chokepoint in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is underscored by its growing role in global geopolitics and economics. Sankalp, (2022). in 'The Superpowers' Playground: Djibouti and Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific in the 21st Century' explores how Djibouti has become integral to the global strategies of major powers such as the US, China, Japan, and France, linking the Indo-Pacific with Eastern Africa and the Americas through its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other geopolitical trends. This strategic importance is further examined in the article by Redie, Bereketeab (2016) titled 'Djibouti: Strategic location, an asset or a curse?' which details the economic and security advantages of its position in a major shipping lane, while also highlighting the potential long-term drawbacks, including militarization and regional instability. The paper also examines on the domestic conditions of the state and the benefits obtained by the ruling elite through these political conditions. The article China's 'Military and Economic Prowess in Djibouti: A Security Challenge for the Indo-Pacific' adds another layer by discussing China's unprecedented military and economic investments in Djibouti, including its first overseas military base, which has intensified debates over Beijing's global ambitions and the implications of its developmental approach versus the US's security-focused strategy. This combination of military presence, economic investment, and geopolitical maneuvering highlights the complexity of Djibouti's role on the global stage and its impact on regional and international dynamics. The insight provided by John Drysdale in his article, 'The problem of French Somaliland' on how the French maintained control over Djibouti through acts of colonialism in a historical evolution perspective.

Historical context

Djibouti was a colony of France and a brainchild during the scramble for Africa. It was called French Somaliland and remained as a colony under the France dominion until 1977. Situated between the uncolonized Ethiopia and the English and Italian possessions, the colony provided France with crucial territory. Djibouti played a crucial role in keeping England from having a firm hold on power across the Red Sea in an area that was predominately controlled by the British Empire. Despite the tide of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s, France vehemently wanted to hold onto its military base, which it had created in the 19th century. Hence, the French soldiers stayed in Djibouti after it gained its independence in 1977. France was granted

permission to establish a permanent military station for its army, navy, and air force in return for aiding the newly formed nation in establishing an operational administration. As time went on, other nations began to adopt the concept. Instead of a colonial ambition to rule the area, foreign countries looking for military sites were now driven by global geopolitics. Therefore, they started initiating agreements and negotiations with Djibouti to establish their own military presence in the region. Djibouti presents evidence that a nation lacking in resources is capable of utilizing its advantageous location to generate tangible benefits. But this advantageous position is more than just a benefit. It might even be a curse. Ismail Omar Guelleh's autocratic regime has alliances with a number of foreign nations. However, he has failed to secure the continuity of basic democratic principles and human rights in the state, which has led to a condition of increased political unrest, unemployment and poverty.

Bab el-Mandeb region and Suez Canal

The name Bab el Mandeb means 'Gate of Tears' or 'Gate of Grief' in Arabic, from 'bab' meaning 'gate' and 'mandeb' meaning 'lamentation'. For ages, the Bab el Mandeb was known as a difficult sea crossing at the tip of the Mediterranean world (Tom, 2024). The riches of India and the Far East were thought to lie beyond it, but the straits were an awful barrier, and overland approaches were considered to be safer. The "Gate of Grief" gained a new global significance after 1869, with the opening of the Suez Canal in Egypt, which connected the Gulf of Suez in the northwest of the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. In 1858, the Universal Suez Ship Canal Company (La Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez) was formed and given the right to construct a canal and operate it for 99 years. After that time, the Egyptian government was said to have control over the canal. Hence, in 1869, the Suez Canal was finished under Ferdinand de Lesseps's leadership. The canal caused a significant rise in trade in the Red Sea and through the Bab el Mandeb, and it quickly became the favored commercial route between Europe and Asia opening the world to a significant boost with the east side of the world. France always wanted to establish a shipping route that connected the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. France believed that they would have an advantage over England if they could set up a shortcut from Marseilles to the Orient (John, n.d.). Thus, the opening of Suez Canal excited the colonial powers.

Evolution of Djibouti

The Issa-Somali ethnic expansion into the Horn has been studied extensively, but little is known about the confrontation between the Afars and the Issas who spread north into Djibouti.

Historians claim that increased population moves into the interior were brought about by the entry of outsiders, including Turks, Egyptians, British, French, and Italians. The region had limited trade connections and a low population before French colonial administration. A majority of the inhabitants voted yes in the 1958 referendum on membership in the French Community. Moreover, 95% of Djiboutian people voted for De Gaulle in the French presidential election of 1965. But on his arrival, dissatisfaction with the administration in French Somaliland boiled up into pro-independence demonstrations. Hence, there was nothing then to suggest that France's last colonial possession in Africa could become politically embarrassing.

During decolonization, when France entertained the idea of considering Djibouti's independence, the military regime in Ethiopia at the time revisited the claim and expressed its intention of annexing the territory. The presence of French military forces in Djibouti soil and French commitment to Djibouti's independence saved it from being swallowed by Ethiopia. The French army provided financial assistance and guaranteed to safeguard Djibouti from any kind of external interferences in exchange for setting up its own military bases and training facilities. In 1991, this agreement between France and Djibouti bore fruit when France used its base for operations during the Gulf War and also during the intervention in Somalia in 1992 (Styan, 2013).

Military bases and Great power politics in Djibouti

Camp Lemonnier, the sole French military facility outside of France, has recently become home to a number of military personnel. The rise of Al Shebab following the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 and the emergence of piracy in 2003 have threatened the shipping lane, attracting military presence in the region virtually from the whole world. In reality, Djibouti provides a window into the developing geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific area. There are now around 20 naval forces operating in the region. This little East African country is situated at the intersection of Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Djibouti lacks resources and so relies on the rents paid by big global powers for their military outposts. The military presence in Djibouti is critical to the expansion and reinforcement of the US, France, Japan, and China's strategic footprint in the western Indian Ocean. At the same time when Djibouti relies on the rent of these major powers for running its state machinery, the Djiboutian authorities denied the proposal of Russia to create a military facility. It could be noted that in 2014, Susan Rice, the US national security advisor, traveled to Djibouti to deter a bid by Russia to open their own

base in the country. Rice reportedly promised to double the US annual lease from \$ 30 million to \$ 63 million, in exchange. At the same time, Djiboutians were in negotiations with China over their military base, unbeknownst to Washington. The United States finds the station useful for a range of purposes, from conducting anti-terror operations to preserving its interests as great power politics intensify in the region. The USA has more than 4000 of its personnel at Camp Lemonnier, becoming the largest military force in Djibouti. It has been operational since 2002 and is America's sole permanent military base in Africa. When the South Sudan crisis started in 2013, the US repositioned a special crisis response team of marines to the Djibouti facility. Camp Lemonnier is a host to many of the military forces. Djibouti became the first base for AFRICOM and Germany also established a military presence at the French naval airbase in Djibouti. Since 2008, Germany has engaged in the EU Naval Force ATALANTA (EU NAVFOR), with the aim of protecting shipping traffic from piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Despite the decline of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, Japan had initiated plans to expand the base in 2018. Besides this, military presence at Djibouti is useful for the evacuation of citizens trapped in the conflict zones in Africa by the major powers. Djibouti's proximity to conflict-affected nations such as Yemen, Somalia, and Ethiopia, as well as its ability to give access to one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, highlight its strategic significance. Djibouti's location allows for easy air and sea evacuation efforts. The Japanese station was used as a logistics support and transit center for Japanese forces during the deployment in South Sudan from 2012 to 2017 (Sankalp, 2023). The base also helped in securing medical supplies for Japanese citizens during the terrorist attack at Algeria natural gas station.

It also hosts NATO and joint international military forces aiming to combat piracy, and numerous countries, including Russia, India, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, are attempting to create military bases in the country. China's first and only overseas military base was constructed in 2017 as a naval "support facility" that Beijing claimed will be utilized for anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia as well as responding to maritime incidents. Djibouti is a critical link in China's growing military strategy for the Indian Ocean. As said by Dr. Sankalp, 'Djibouti is a crucial link in the emerging Chinese military strategy towards the Indian Ocean'. The Djibouti base along with the strategy of the so called 'String of Pearls', which entails developing and acquiring the ports in South Asian waters, is likely to prove useful in its attempts to undermine India. The Chinese military presence has not meshed well with others. The reporting of frivolous claims and actions continue between the major powers. One

such major incident would be that, in 2018, American officials accused China of targeting military planes with lasers, causing minor eye injuries to pilots (Browne, 2018).

Table 1: List of Countries with a military base in Djibouti

Country	Annual fee paid to Djibouti (USD)	Number of military personnel stationed	Detail description of the military
France	40,000,000	1450	450 Set up in 1883 (located in Heron district and Camp Lemonnier). Number of people deployed: 4,300 in 1978, decreased to 2,400 in the 2000s and decreased to the current level of 1,450, which is the minimum stipulated in the 2011 treaty.
US	63,000,000	4000	Set up in 2002. Annual payments doubled in 2015 (and a plan of 1BUSD upgrade).
Japan	3,500,000	180	Set up in 2011 and added information gathering activities in the Middle East in 2019.
China	20,000,000	1000	Set up in 2017.

Italy	2,500,000	80	Set up Oct 2013 and fully operational from March 2014.
Germany	NA	30-80	Operation Enduring Freedom (EU) (2001-). Operation Atlanta (EU) (Camp Lemonnier). Spain (NA) 50 Operation Atlanta (EU) (2005-) (Camp Lemonnier).

Source: Kanako Masuda, Competition of foreign military bases and the survival strategies of Djibouti, JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development.

Domestic politics and Economic security

From 1999, Djibouti has been under the rule of Ismail Omar Guelleh. Despite being a republic, his rule is not subject to term restrictions. The political conditions of Djibouti are in decay with heavy crackdown being imposed on the opposition party, media and activists in lieu of any form of criticism against the government. For a country that practically produces nothing, the income from military bases has become a lifeline of the country. Even though, Djibouti stands to benefit from this measure; there are certain conspicuous negative consequences. The engagement of the military powers in providing security and socio economic benefits to the state reduces the legitimacy of the government in power. The influence of these powers in state functions has a hit on the sovereign power and legitimacy of the state (Bereketeab, 2016). For instance, AFRICOM will show that the forces are involved in providing such basic services as building clinics, digging water wells, rural education to Djibouti. By doing this, AFRICOM is dragging the legitimacy carpet off the feet of the state. The supply of these services by foreign agents significantly erodes the relationship between the state and society.

The benefit of course goes to the political elite. It has not trickled down to benefit common people. The gap between the majority poor and the very few rich is rapidly growing. Soaring inflation is another social malaise adversely affecting the poor. Djibouti has a fragile economy, lacking the basic ingredients for agricultural development, lacking a solid industrial base, and limited investment in mining, which has made it heavily dependent on the service sector

(International Monetary Fund, 2012). Though the major powers contribute in crisis aid, it is not consistent and does not help in uplifting the local economy. Food security also remains a major concern for the region. The US camp fly in all its supplies for its personnel and it does not even buy the local bottled water. This results in a situation where there is very little cooperation between the military and civil society. The coffers of the government are also filled by official development assistance from other countries. China is recently pouring a lot of money into the country. Djibouti received USD590 million for developing the port. About 80 percent of national revenue comes mainly from port services. China also invested USD 4 billion in railway connecting Djibouti and Ethiopia. The countries have signed a deal that allows China to set up a free trade zone for Chinese companies. The deal also allows Chinese banks to operate in Djibouti and a daily water pipeline from Ethiopia to Djibouti. Many Djiboutians, however, perceive Chinese entry in the game as positive sign in balancing US influence. (Vertin, 2020)

According to the World Bank, annual GDP per capita in Djibouti has more than doubled, to \$3,136, between 2010 and 2022. Water and electricity links with Ethiopia have ensured more reliable access to basic utilities for a growing number of Djiboutians. Its total foreign direct investment as a percentage of GDP expanded significantly, from 0.6% in the early 2000s to 5-6 percent between 2015 and 2022.

By allowing its territory to be used by major military powers, it is seen in a way that Djibouti has traded its sovereignty for security. Located in a highly conflict ridden region and squeezed between bigger hostile states, Djibouti is completely dependent on external support for its security and survival. Djibouti is also used as conduit for geo-strategic interest of global big powers serving as Trojan-Horse in the region. The military bases are used by big powers to spread their geo-strategic influence in the region and beyond. There were also reports that the Air Force finally stopped launching unmanned drone flights from Camp Lemonnier after the country's government expressed concerns about the drones' proximity to populated areas and instances wherein the drones dysfunction in midair and damage life and property of local people. Acts of espionage and surveillance of the region are also becoming frequent features. In the early 20th century it was Oslo, in the 1940s it was Casablanca and in the 50s it was Berlin. Today one could argue that the world's spy capital is the little known African nation of Djibouti.

The border dispute between Djibouti and Eritrea has been a source of contention for decades, dating back to the colonial era. The two countries have argued over ownership of the area called

Ras Doumeira. When UAE wanted to open their own naval base, it was rejected because of their close ties to Djibouti's rival. Qatar helped to end the clashes between Djibouti and Eritrea and kept its peacekeepers there for almost a decade. These troops were pulled off when Djibouti and Eritrea decided to side with the four Arab states, including UAE, that imposed an embargo on Qatar (Sansom & Sultan, 2017). Capitalizing on the opportunity, Eritrea soon seized the disputed territory from Djibouti. Djiboutian officials say that Eritrean troops took control of Dumeira Mountain and Dumeira Island a day after Qatar removed 450 soldiers who had controlled the territories for the past seven years. The UAE's role in the Red Sea corridor became increasingly significant, when DP World won a 30 year concession to upgrade and operate Djibouti's Doraleh port (Al Jazeera, 2018). The company saw the port as a chance to prove itself in the global ports market. In 2016, Djibouti seized Doraleh – after trying, unsuccessfully, to remove DP World via legal means in 2014. Djibouti unilaterally terminated the contract with UAE's DP World, nationalized the container terminal, and transferred the concession to CM Port. Following the end of DP World's concession, CM Port began expanding the port facilities, which, once completed, is estimated to provide Chinese-flagged vessels preferential processing and lower docking costs.

Table 2: Revenue and Donations of Djibouti (in million USD)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Revenue and donations	464	539	527	638	651	650	678	770	719
Total budget revenue	349	475	435	519	609	600	619	640	589
Tax revenue	269	308	310	367	363	371	397	420	364
Direct tax	118	128	144	150	155	154	164	175	153
Indirect tax	119	141	147	175	181	195	202	211	191
Other tax	32	40	18	42	27	22	31	34	20
Non tax revenue	80	166	125	152	245	230	222	220	225

Donations	115	64	92	118	42	50	59	131	130
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Source: Djibouti Ministry of Economy and Finance in charge of Industry, “Annual Statistics,” 2017-2021

India and Djibouti

India highlighted Djibouti's importance as a crucial hub for citizen evacuation and rescue when, as part of 'Operation Raahat', it evacuated Indian citizens as well as residents from 41 other nations stranded in Yemen in 2015. In March 2019, the President of the Republic of Djibouti, Ismail Omar Guelleh, received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian decoration. Since November 2008, India has sent naval ships to the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea on a regular basis to conduct Operation Turn Round (OTRs) during counter-piracy operations. India's exports to Djibouti rose from \$347 million in FY 2020-21 to \$713.33 million in FY 2021-22 and \$1.16 billion in FY 2022-23. India's imports from Djibouti totaled \$41.68 million in 2020-21. India's exports mostly include rice, sugar, engineering goods, fruits and vegetables, paper and plastic products, machinery, metals, yarns and fabrics, and culinary items. India is providing capacity-building assistance to Djibouti through the ITEC initiative. Since 2007, 163 Djiboutian officials and professionals have benefited from it. The Indian Diaspora in Djibouti is quite tiny, numbering around 1,000 people. The oldest Indian community is made up of Gujarati traders and entrepreneurs from Rajkot and Jamnagar. (India, 2024).

Conclusion

Djibouti's strategic importance is multifaceted, encompassing its critical geographic location, economic role, and military significance. As a key player in global maritime trade and regional security, Djibouti's role will continue to be pivotal in shaping geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa and beyond. Future developments in regional stability, economic growth, and international relations will increasingly influence its strategic importance on the global stage. With the increasing influence of China and its competition with the US, the arena gives potential for another zeros sum game in this region. Hence, it would be high time for Djibouti to leverage its advantage by prioritizing the development of its economy and building up its democratic institutions to regain sovereignty and legitimacy of the people within the state before it becomes too late.

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