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Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Djibouti

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SIZO NKALA, SEP 12 2023

The Indo-Pacific region – the vast maritime space that connects the Indian and Pacific oceans stretching from Africa’s eastern coastline to the western shores of the US – has become a hub of the global political economy. With over 50 percent of global trade passing through the sea routes of the two oceans, it is no wonder that this region has assumed strategic significance in global politics. As countries position themselves to protect their strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, an arms race has ensued. This is reflected in the 47 percent increase in military spending in Asia between 2011 and 2020. China’s military budget increased by over 50 percent during this period, India recorded a 34 percent increase, while for Australia it was 33 percent. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, Japan’s military budget reached the 1 percent threshold limit in 2020 (Nkala, 2021). According to Malhotra (2023) Japan has committed to spending US\$324 billion on its military capabilities in the next five years. The US, through its Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), also has a significant military presence in the region, with about 375,000 personnel, 200 ships and over 1500 aircraft at its disposal distributed across 36 military bases (Jochheim and Lobo, 2023). Military stand-offs over disputed islands have become increasingly common. France, a resident power in the Indo-Pacific with sovereignty over such islands as Wallis and Futuna, New Caledonia, and Réunion among others, also has security interests in the region, as evidenced by its not insignificant military presence. While the arms race is visible in the entirety of the Indo-Pacific, it is most concentrated around the strategic chokepoints such as the straits of Malacca, Taiwan, Hormuz, and the Bab el-Mandeb (Ibid). The militarization of the latter strait, located between Djibouti and Yemen in the north-western corner of the Indian Ocean, is the subject of this article.

The relentless quest for dominance in the Indo-Pacific region has been extended to the eastern shores of Africa, with Djibouti emerging as the focal point. Indeed, nowhere is the notion that Africa has become the so-called playground in the geopolitical competition of the world’s major powers more clearly borne out than in the tiny African state of Djibouti (Gurjar, 2021). The country now hosts a congregation of foreign military bases belonging to the great powers, namely China, France, and the US, and middle powers including Japan and Italy. Russia would have been in the mix had its request to set up a military base of its own been accepted by the Djiboutian government in 2014. Djibouti turned down Moscow’s request apparently at the behest of the US, whose relationship with Russia took a turn for the worse following the latter’s annexation of the Crimean province of Ukraine in 2014 (Klyszcz, 2020). Djibouti’s location along and with direct access to the Bab el-Mandeb strait, which connects the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and its relative political stability (since the end of the civil war in 2001) have made it a prime location for foreign military bases of those countries seeking to protect their strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and project their power. The Bab el-Mandeb strait lies along one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes which carries an estimated 10 percent of world trade (about a fifth of the trade that moves through the Indo-Pacific). Millions of tons of oil, petroleum and agricultural products pass through the Bab el-Mandeb headed for Europe, the US and Asia (Barden, 2019; Kuperman, 2021). This makes the corridor highly strategic as its disruption would have a devastating impact on the global economy. Yet, implicit in the description of Djibouti (and the broader African continent) as a playground for the great powers in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, is the assumption that it is not a player – thus divesting it of its agency. While such an argument does not lack merit, it is not an entirely accurate characterization of Djibouti’s position. Djibouti’s military base diplomacy is a deliberate foreign policy strategy that is more an expression than a capitulation of its sovereignty.

Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Djibouti

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Military Base Diplomacy: Djibouti's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Maintaining cordial relations with its neighbours in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, and the deliberate engagement of major global powers in both bilateral and multilateral settings, have defined the contours of Djibouti's foreign policy (Oxford Business Group, 2015). Djibouti's foreign policy is anchored on the maintenance of its sovereignty, the survival of the ruling bloc, and economic growth. The Djibouti Vision 2035 document outlines plans to transform the country into the lighthouse of the Red Sea and Africa's economic and logistics hub (The Republic of Djibouti, 2014). To that end, military base diplomacy – the leasing of land to the militaries of major Indo-Pacific powers – has emerged as Djibouti's instrument of choice in its interactions with powers like the US, China, France, Japan, and Italy. Cobbett and Mason (2021: 1775) argue that the military bases in Djibouti are part of its 'worlding' strategy, which entails "embedding global security networks in its territorial space" with a view to reap its economic and security dividends.

France

The leasing of land to foreign militaries is not a new policy: it has been at the heart of Djibouti's foreign policy since independence. The small country's very survival as an independent and sovereign state since attaining political independence in 1977 has been due in large part to the presence of the French military in its territory, the former colonial power. Djibouti and France signed a defence agreement in 1977 which allowed the latter to maintain its military presence. In return, the erstwhile colonial power undertook to come to Djibouti's defence should it be subjected to an external attack and to fund part of its budget (Styan, 2013). The newly independent state would probably have been swallowed by its larger neighbours, Somalia and Ethiopia, who, in addition to their desire to control Djibouti's ports, also had ethnic ties with its major ethnic groups, the Issa and the Afars, respectively. Thus, the 1977 defence agreement allowed France to protect its interests in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea while also protecting Djibouti from probable annexation (Darnton, 1977; Mormul, 2016).

Although the post-colonial Djibouti leaders could have easily tapped into the global anti-colonial sentiment prevailing at that time to evict France's military from their country, it was clear to them that they needed France's support. The defence agreement between the two countries was renewed in 1991, giving France's military a more active role than just being a guarantor against external aggression. The new agreement would see France assume responsibility for Djibouti's maritime and airspace security as well as monitoring of civilian traffic. The two countries renegotiated the defence pact in 2011. Another round of negotiations were commenced in 2021 following the meeting of the French President Emmanuel Macron and his Djiboutian counterpart Ismail Omar Guelleh.

Djibouti has enjoyed significant economic and security benefits as a result. In August 2003, the two countries agreed on a US\$36 million annual fee to be paid by France for the military base. This was followed by a US\$82 million aid commitment by the French government in 2006. However, trade between France and Djibouti remains highly unequal, with the latter receiving US\$80 million in imports from France while exporting just under US\$450,000 worth of goods. In terms of security, France played a crucial role in providing Djiboutian forces with logistical, intelligence, and medical support during the country's border conflict with Eritrea in 2008 (Mail & Guardian, 2008). However, the opposition parties in Djibouti who boycotted the 2021 elections on account of an uneven electoral environment, have been lobbying the French government to withdraw from the agreement (RFI, 2021).

The United States

Djibouti also managed to harness its cordial relations with the US and its geostrategic location to host what is now the US's only permanent military base in Africa. Several factors contributed to President Guelleh's decision to allow the US to establish a military base on its territory. Firstly, the two countries have enjoyed cordial relations since the country achieved independence in 1977. The US has maintained an embassy in Djibouti since 1980 and consistently provided millions of dollars in aid which helped cultivate good relations with the Djiboutian leadership. Its support for the US during the Gulf crisis Moreover, Djibouti had also supported the US during the Gulf crisis of the early 1990s. The history of cordial bilateral relations between the two countries meant that there was a high level of mutual trust which paved the way for military cooperation. Secondly, Djibouti had just emerged from a devastating ten-year civil

Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Djibouti

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war which ended in 2001. The government may have calculated that the presence of the US military would help maintain stability since any uprising would also put the US base in danger. Third, the Djiboutian government embraced the US to diversify its relations with great powers and reduce overdependency on France. The limitations of France's military capacity were exposed during the civil war as it was not able to stop the rebels. Also, the vicissitudes of France's domestic politics could result in a change of its defence policy which could see it withdrawing its soldiers, thus leaving its former colony exposed.

The presence of the US military base in Djibouti shields the increasingly authoritarian ruling party from Western criticism for its human rights abuses and corruption (Presutti, 2014). Although President Guelleh removed presidential term limits from the country's constitution to allow him to potentially remain president for life, he did not get any direct criticism from the US. Instead, because of mutual Indo-Pacific interests, Djibouti has enjoyed access to US aid and investment which are denied to other less strategic countries with similar human rights and authoritarian records. For example, it is one of the African countries considered eligible for participation in the US Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which grants its products duty-free access to US markets. Respect for democracy and human rights is one of the conditions for participation in the scheme.

Countries such as Zimbabwe, Mali, Guinea, and Ethiopia have been barred from AGOA on allegations of human rights abuses. However, Djibouti seems to be exempt. The US has sent over US\$330 million worth of official development assistance to Djibouti since the military base was opened. This is in addition to the US\$63 million in annual rent the US pays the Djiboutian government for the use of military facilities. This makes up a significant share of the government revenue. Moreover, the US spends hundreds of millions of dollars on local procurement, in wages to about 1200 local employees and the provision of social services (Sun and Zoubir, 2016). Thus, notwithstanding its highly asymmetric relationship with the US, Djibouti has managed to navigate its relations with Washington in a way that enhances its interests in the Indo-Pacific without sacrificing its sovereignty and autonomy.

Japan

Djibouti also leased military bases to Japan and Italy in 2011 and 2014 respectively. Japan's base, which hosts about 180 soldiers, was established following the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) it signed with Djibouti in 2009. The stakes could not be higher for Japan as 1700 of its commercial vessels carrying the country's automobile exports pass through the Bab el-Mandeb strait (Kamata, 2023). Moreover, the third biggest economy in the world gets the bulk of its oil imports from the Middle East, making a military presence in the region imperative. In 2016, Japan confirmed that it was going to expand its military base by 3 hectares in addition to the original 12 hectares to make room for extra personnel, additional aircraft, and armored vehicles (Ryall, 2018).

The SOFA has been criticized for undermining Djibouti's sovereignty since it exempts Japanese soldiers from being subjected to the Djiboutian legal system (Kamata, 2023). Perhaps this is something that the Guelleh administration was willing to trade for prospective Japanese investments, aid, and the annual fees for the military facility reported to be US\$30 million (Styan, 2013). Further, the additional security provided by the Japanese patrol boats makes Djibouti's ports all the more competitive. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been channeling significant amounts of aid to Djibouti. In May 2023 JICA availed a US\$4 million grant to be used to secure medical equipment for hospitals. In 2021, another US\$26 million grant was availed under the Maritime Security Capacity Improvement Plan, which included the building of two patrol boats and a floating pier for the Djiboutian Coast Guard. As such, Djibouti's foreign policy objectives of security and economic development are being realized in its interactions with Japan.

The People's Republic of China

Perhaps the most controversial part of Djibouti's military base diplomacy was its decision to allow China, the US and Japan's foremost geopolitical rival, to build its own military base in the country. China and Djibouti signed a defense and security agreement in 2014, the same year the US extended its lease, which paved the way for China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to refuel in one of Djibouti's ports. This move was, rather unsurprisingly, strenuously protested by the US (Jacobs and Perlez, 2017). In 2015, China and Djibouti agreed for the former to build its first

Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Djibouti

Written by Sizo Nkala

overseas military base, the PLA Navy and Logistics Support Base, which opened in 2017. Renting the base reportedly costs US\$20 million annually. The Chinese base is located about 10 kilometers northwest of the US military base and a stone-throw away from the Chinese-built Doraleh Multipurpose Port. It has the capacity to house 10,000 personnel and is endowed with state-of-the-art air, maritime and land capabilities.

Djibouti's decision to lease land to China knowing very well that the US, Japan, Italy, and France would not like the move was a demonstration of its foreign policy autonomy. It is evidence that in Djibouti's foreign policy, practical cooperation takes precedence over ideological considerations. When asked about the Chinese base in 2016, President Guelleh responded by saying that "China has a right to defend its interests just like everyone else". Mr Guelleh also claimed that his country would like to emulate Singapore in terms of being a logistics hub (Blair, 2016). China's insistence on non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and its appetite for investment in big infrastructure projects were enough to persuade Djibouti to accept its request for a military base.

However, one can only speculate how much Djibouti's over US\$1 billion debt to China was a factor in acceding to the Chinese establishment of a military base. Djiboutian leaders believed that Chinese finance would help them achieve their vision of Djibouti as the Red Sea lighthouse of Africa (Vertini, 2020). This seems to have paid off handsomely as China has brought in significant investments to Djibouti. Some of the big Chinese-funded infrastructure projects include the US\$4 billion Addis Ababa-Djibouti standard gauge railway completed in 2017, the building of the US\$580 million Doraleh Multipurpose Port in 2018, and the construction of the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DIFTZ), whose pilot phase was completed in 2018 at a cost of US\$370 million (Khanna, 2019).

There have been accusations that China is engaging in debt trap diplomacy with Djibouti where the latter would be forced to relinquish its sovereignty when it fails to service its debt. On his visit to Djibouti in 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron was quoted as saying his government "wouldn't want a new generation of international investments to encroach on our historical partners' sovereignty or weaken their economies" (Manek, 2019:6). However, no evidence has thus far been presented to prove that China has used Djibouti's debt to manipulate the Djiboutian government. The two countries' Indo-Pacific interests seem to be compatible. On the one hand, China feels it can protect its interests by establishing a strategic footing in Djibouti. On the other, Djibouti can benefit from China's unconditional financing to realize its vision of being the 'African Singapore'. Unlike China, the other countries with military bases in the country – France, Japan, Italy, and the US – simply do not have the means at their disposal to pump money to back up their geostrategic goals.

Conclusion

Djibouti's Indo-Pacific strategy, although risky, has thus far proved efficacious. The juxtaposition of the world's two biggest and mutually hostile militaries (the US and China), who frequently engage in military standoffs in the South China Sea, makes for an awkward and highly volatile situation. The US, Japan, and France perceive China as a threat to the freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific pursuing a revisionist and repressive agenda which could undermine their interests (Nkala, 2021). On the other hand, Beijing believes that Washington and its allies are intent on containing and suppressing its growth and keeping it within the confines of the US hegemony.

It did not take long for friction to emerge, as the US accused China of shining military-grade lasers at American pilots who were coming into land in 2018, only a year after the Chinese base was opened (Browne, 2018). However, there hasn't been any major incident yet. Djibouti has reaped enormous security dividends as piracy in its waters has all but disappeared, while the presence of major power militaries seems to be an effective deterrent against external attacks. The country has also enjoyed an economic windfall as it reportedly fetches close to US\$125 million (over 15 percent of government revenue) annually in rents from military bases. Its stability has been the foundation of the tremendous growth of its maritime sector which has driven the six-fold growth of its GDP from just US\$551 million in 2000 to US\$3.52 billion in 2022, making it one of the fastest-growing economies on the continent.

However, the economic bounty has only benefited the small elite. The country is still struggling with widespread poverty affecting almost 80 percent of the population while 42 percent is reported to be living in extreme poverty and the unemployment rate sits at 40 percent. This is why some scholars have argued that Djibouti suffers from an

Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Djibouti

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“unusual resource curse,” meaning that the enormous rents from the country’s intangible resources, namely stability and geostrategic location, have failed to eradicate poverty (Brass, 2008). It is important that the Djiboutian government distributes economic opportunities equitably if it is to avoid losing one of the trump cards of its Indo-Pacific strategy: stability.

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Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific: The Case of Djibouti

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