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The Eagle's Nest in the Horn of Africa: US Military Strategic Deployment in Djibouti

Degang Sun and Yahia H. Zoubir

Abstract: Djibouti is the only country in the world in which US, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese military forces are stationed simultaneously; China will soon have a presence there as well. The US military deployment in Djibouti has shifted from a soft military presence to an arrangement of significant strategic import, and from a small outpost to a large garrison in the past two decades. The internal dynamics of the US deployment are geopolitical, as the US presence facilitates the carrying out of its strategies regarding antiterrorism, anti-proliferation, the protection of energy investments, and anti-piracy. The external dynamics of the US deployment are geo-economic: the government of Djibouti, as the host nation, reaps economic windfalls from the US presence in this strategically located country. Given that the United States has failed since 2008 to persuade any country on the continent to host AFRICOM, the base in Djibouti is likely to remain the only one in East Africa. Djibouti may be part of a pattern whereby some small African nations, such as São Tomé and Príncipe, collect revenue through the provision of military bases to big powers.

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Geographically, the Republic of Djibouti is surrounded by larger states, either of concern to US policy (Somalia, Sudan, Yemen) or US allies (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya), which have played – and will continue to play – critical roles in US-led antiterrorist strategies in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf region (hereafter: “the Gulf”). Largely ignored by the United States throughout the Cold War, since 9/11 this small city-state has gained pivotal importance in US military strategy in terms of power projection in the Horn of Africa, the Gulf, and the Sahel. Dubbed the “Bahrain of Africa,” Djibouti has seen its strategic importance expand exponentially to become the only avowed, sophisticated US base in Africa¹ from which the United States has conducted important antiterrorist operations, using troops and drones to eliminate specific targets. The Lemonnier base has become a strategic US military facility which now serves as a substitute for an African-based headquarters for the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) created in 2008 (United States Africa Command 2012). Djibouti has obtained a considerable geopolitical status, for not only the United States, but also other powers (Schmitt 2014).² As scholar David Styan (2013) has correctly pointed out,

in a largely unplanned, incremental manner, Djibouti has become a laboratory for new forms of military and naval cooperation among and beyond NATO and EU forces.

Owing to this international deployment, Djibouti, a small, impoverished country, can now count on assured long-term revenues that will guarantee some modicum of stability.

Why Has Djibouti Risen to Prominence?

Djibouti is a former colony on whose military, political, legal, and educational sectors France has exerted far-reaching and unique influence. After World War II, the Djiboutian national liberation movement fought

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- 1 The United States has an unconfirmed military presence in Mali, Niger, and southern Tunisia and access to a number of small security facilities in Algeria, Botswana, Gabon, Ghana, Namibia, Sierra Leone, and Zambia (Vine 2015: 308f.; Ploch 2011: 10).
 - 2 Russia had been interested in obtaining military facilities in Djibouti, but authorities in Djibouti rejected the request to avoid alienating the United States (Schmitt 2014). China also has a major interest in Djibouti, in areas such as the protection of its commercial ships from pirates, and has successfully negotiated with Djibouti the first Chinese overseas military base. On China’s interest in having a presence in Djibouti, see Lee 2015; Kostecka 2011.

an anticolonial war which resulted in France's granting Djibouti independence in 1977. However, France attached political strings: the new Djiboutian government was compelled to allow the French to maintain military bases and large military training facilities. Throughout the Cold War period, Francophone African countries, including Djibouti, were regarded as France's *chasse gardée* ("preserve"); the United States, meanwhile, was not interested in managing African affairs, let alone sustaining tiny Djibouti, especially since the former European colonial powers were still present on the continent. Even after the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution (1979) and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the United States ignored Djibouti and used instead the Berbera military base in Somalia to intervene in the Red Sea and East Africa, to guard against the vagaries of the conditions in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, and to prevent the possible expansion of the Soviet Union and revolutionary Iran. According to a high-level Djiboutian official, "the United States had long ignored Djibouti's strategic location. However, this has changed since the 9/11 terrorist attacks" (Interview, Addis Ababa, 27 January 2014; Diop 2011). Indeed, Washington has since then attached greater importance to Djibouti and has not only increased its military presence in the tiny country, but also built its only military base on the African continent this century.

The US military base in Djibouti is unique, not least because the Americans have closed a number of military bases in Europe and East Asia since the end of the Cold War³ and pulled out substantial numbers of troops from the two regions. So, why has the United States established its military presence in Djibouti and built the first significant garrison in Africa? And why has it established a military base in a country hitherto considered as part of France's sphere of influence? Concomitantly, why has Djibouti agreed so readily to grant the United States such easy access?

First, most US overseas military bases are located on allies' territory: Japan, Australia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Turkey, among others. Until quite recently, Djibouti had not been considered a US ally.

Second, since the end of the Cold War, most of the countries hosting US military bases have been regional economic or military powers, and almost all of the advanced economies host US military bases. In the

3 In January 2015, the United States announced that it would close 15 more military bases across Europe. The decision was based on cutting costs, but it also derived from changes in US strategy, one of which being the focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

Middle East, the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries' combined per capita GDP leads the world, and almost all of those countries house US military bases. By contrast, Djibouti is economically and militarily weak, and one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of per capita GDP and the Human Development Index (HDI); in 2013, its HDI ranked 170th out of 187 countries and territories (UNDP 2014: 159). One is tempted to ask whether a new pattern is emerging whereby failed states allow for military bases to be built on their soil in order to wrest revenues from bigger powers and thus play the role of proxies in the so-called "Global War on Terror" (GWOT).

Third, since the end of the Cold War, global US military bases have purportedly aimed to deter potential enemies. For instance, US military bases in Europe seek to prevent the growth of Russian military might; US military bases in the Asia-Pacific strive to confront nuclear North Korea, China's rising economic and military power, and the potential revival of Japanese militarism; US military bases in Turkey and the GCC countries aim to confine Iran. But the US military base in Djibouti does not aim to curb direct threats from Djibouti's neighbouring countries, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Eritrea, as these are important US allies and partners in the GWOT. This begs the question as to why Djibouti has taken on so much strategic importance.

Fourth, the US military deployment is also due to Djibouti's long-term adherence to traditional Islam, which lessens the political risks of basing. Throughout the Islamic world, US military bases frequently face political risks, such as those in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, often forcing the closing of those bases or their transformation into civilian facilities.

Despite all of this, the current literature on US military deployment in Djibouti is sparse. Most information comes in the form of media coverage and AFRICOM policy reports on Djibouti's role in US strategic policy; scholarly research remains scant. Articles have generally focused on bilateral relations between the United States and Djibouti from a diplomatic angle (Gu et al. 2006); the geostrategic significance of Djibouti from the perspective of US global military deployment (Arkin 2005); and Djibouti's role in US global antiterror strategy (Davis and Othieno 2007). By and large, the current literature lacks up-to-date analysis of the US military base deployment in Djibouti, particularly its dynamics, functions, processes, and prospects.

In order to execute the GWOT, the US launched wars in five regions: South Asia, the Gulf, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and, now, North Africa. The Pentagon has built a series of forward operating bases

to sustain the GWOT. In South Asia, Pakistan became the major host nation of US military bases to target Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan; in the Gulf, the United States stationed troops in the GCC countries to target radical Islamists; in the Horn of Africa, Washington deployed troops in Djibouti to ostensibly neutralise terrorist groups in Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen; in the Sahel, the United States is said to have negotiated a military presence in Algeria to prevent terrorist attacks in the Maghreb (Barth 2003: 679; Zoubir 2009: 977); and, in Libya, it has launched air campaigns to destroy Islamic State positions, the latest one in February 2016. Also in the Sahel, the United States launched a number of security programmes, such as the Pan-Sahel Initiative (2002), the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (2005), and annual, international joint military manoeuvres, including the Pentagon's Operation Juniper Shield, which increased support to Mauritania and Niger in the wake of Mali's coup d'état in early 2012 and following the terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso in January 2016. The most recent international Flintlock manoeuvre took place in Senegal in February 2016 and involved 2,000 troops from 30 African and Western European countries. Djibouti has acted as the "Pakistan" of East Africa, playing a pivotal role in the US military campaign against jihadists in the region.

Seeking to engage in multilateralism, the Obama administration has endeavoured to utilise Camp Lemonnier as a standard model of cooperation with Western countries to counter Somali piracy, something of a "Horn of Africa NATO." For instance, encouraged by the United States, the European Union established the Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150), based in Bahrain, a centre to fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden; US allies in Europe, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain have deployed ad hoc forces, such as Sea King helicopters, and built facilities in Djibouti. In January 2012, US Navy SEALs successfully rescued an American woman and a Danish man in Somalia; both were sent to Camp Lemonnier for medical treatment (*The Guardian* 2012).

The renewal of the lease for the base in May 2014 and the continued incremental military deployment of forces demonstrate the strategic importance of Camp Lemonnier, which today hosts 4,000 US military and civilian personnel. Indeed, during a meeting with Djibouti's president, Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, Barack Obama stated, "Obviously, Camp Lemonnier is extraordinarily important not only to our work throughout the Horn of Africa but throughout the region" (The White House 2014). Undoubtedly, the United States wishes not only to consolidate its presence in Djibouti, but also to make the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn

of Africa (CJTF-HOA) in Djibouti a model to be replicated in other locations in Africa.

External Conditions of US Military Deployment in Djibouti

As has become obvious in this analysis, US military deployment in Djibouti in the past two decades has been driven mostly by geopolitical considerations: ensuring logistical support for wars in the Gulf; securing the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a strategic maritime transport choke point and one of the most trafficked waterways in the world; maintaining stability in the Horn of Africa; carrying out counterterrorism activities, military training, humanitarian intervention, and anti-piracy measures; guaranteeing the flow of oil and the protection of energy investments; facilitating cooperation with current and/or potential Western and African allies; and conducting public diplomacy. These are the internal dynamics that have prompted the United States to build a military base in Djibouti. Obviously, the Djiboutian government's decision to welcome US military deployment derives from different considerations: Djibouti's own geopolitical concerns; its geo-economic calculations; and, its fears of radical Islamism, which runs counter to the country's adherence to the traditional Islam practised by 95 per cent of the population.

First, due to geopolitical considerations, Djibouti has embraced foreign forces on its soil as a counterweight to what it perceives as a dangerous geopolitical environment. Djibouti has great concerns about its neighbours – namely, Eritrea in the north and Somalia in the south. Eritrea has had border disputes with Ethiopia, from which it became independent in 1993. In order to destabilise Ethiopia, Eritrea provided support to extremist groups in Somalia opposed to the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its Ethiopian supporters (Interview, Addis Ababa, 27 January 2014). Djibouti and Eritrea were on the brink of war in 1998, and their militaries clashed in 2008. Eritrea seeks to undermine Djibouti's close ties with Ethiopia, although Djibouti is resentful of Ethiopia's role in Somalia (Shinn 2012). Today, Djibouti continues to receive US arms and partake in military training programmes.

Second, regarding Djibouti's geo-economic goals, as a weak state in sub-Saharan Africa, Djibouti has limited economic power, so striving for economic aid has been the government's principal reason for permitting the deployment of US (and other foreign) troops. Djibouti, as indicated above, remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with an aver-

age life expectancy of only 61.8 years, and an average number of years of schooling of only 3.8 (UNDP 2014: 162).

In the past two decades, US assistance to Djibouti has been second only to that of France, the main contributor to Djibouti's state revenues. Before 9/11, total US aid to Djibouti was a mere USD 12.4 million. However, since 9/11, this number has risen dramatically: in 2003 US economic and military aid rose to USD 26.37 million, and in 2004 to USD 37.37 million (*InsideGov* 2016). The terms of the new agreement on the military base and facility services that the two sides signed in 2012 grant the United States the military base for 99 years, guaranteeing Djibouti a steady rent throughout this century. Prior to 2014, the rental of the base, including the use of Ouaramous Island, amounted to USD 38 million annually (*The Washington Post* 2013; Lostumbo et al. 2013: 156). France's base, located outside the city, costs EUR 30 million a year; the amounts the United States and France pay are second only to the USD 700 million in transit fees paid by landlocked Ethiopia to export its products through the Djibouti seaport (*Reuters* 2012). In May 2014, President Obama and President Guelleh met and agreed to nearly double the annual rent of the base to USD 70 million, of which 7 million is allocated to development assistance.

Apart from the lease, since 2010 the United States has spent between USD 300 million and 500 million annually on the base (Ploch 2011), providing employment, allowing for procurement (such as construction material and food supplies), and facilitating other social services (health and dental care for the population). Approximately 1,200 local employees and foreign labourers work on the base. The unemployment rate in Djibouti has been between 50 and 60 per cent since 2007 (CIA 2016), and from 1991 to 1997 Djibouti's GDP growth rate remained negative but became steadily positive from 2001 on, attaining 5.8 per cent in 2008 and standing at 5.5 per cent in 2014 (*Trading Economics* 2016). The rent from the US base and its spillover effects, combined with rents from other foreign powers, accounts for much of the steady economic growth.

In order to attract revenues, Djibouti has generally offered a welcoming environment and been tolerant of foreign military presence. As President Guelleh said, the Djiboutian nation is "African at heart, Arabist in culture, and universalist in thought" (cited in Schermerhorn 2005: 53). Indeed, Djibouti's pragmatic diplomacy has resulted in friendly relations with almost all of the world powers, whatever their ideological position. The city-state has hosted US, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese forces, and it has negotiated military cooperation agreements with the Chinese, who bought a sizable share of the Port of Dji-

bouti for USD 185 million and plan on spending USD 420 million to modernise the port facilities (Lee 2015). Djibouti has also embraced investments from India, which helped in the rehabilitation of the Ethio-Djibouti railway in 2011; it has welcomed economic and educational aid from the GCC countries; and, it has allowed ships from any country to use its seaports' dry docks.

Yet, this seemingly friendly, stable environment does not necessarily mean that the US military deployment, or that of other powers, such as France, has entailed "zero cost" and come at "zero risk" for Djibouti. While hopeful that foreign powers could bring benefits to the weak state, the Djiboutian authorities' major concern is that US presence might incite terrorist attacks or cause discontent within the population that could provoke the rise of jihadist Islam. Ilyas Moussa Dawaleh, Djibouti's minister of Economy, Finance, and Planning, asserted during an interview in 2012 that, though the local radical groups in Somalia and Al-Qaeda affiliates may not be able to launch attacks against the US military facilities, they could still sabotage the vulnerable Djiboutian infrastructure (*Reuters* 2012). However, in spite of the presence of US and French troops, jihadist militants have, in fact, succeeded in carrying out attacks on Westerners, as was the case of the deadly bombing of La Chaumière café, a hangout for foreign military personnel and tourists, by the Somali Al-Shabaab on 24 May 2014, which resulted in the deaths of French army chiefs (Goldman 2014). Furthermore, Djiboutian authorities seek to convince the population that the US base is not intended as a launching pad for attacks against Muslims and that those attacks against jihadists are launched from bases in Ethiopia (Interview, Addis Ababa, 27 January 2014).

For Djibouti, the economic rewards have always outweighed the risks of terrorism, but the government has not succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of the population, let alone improving the living standards for most. An officer from AFRICOM who served at the Djibouti base put it bluntly:

The US faces similar challenges as in Iraq and Afghanistan: a highly militarised presence that for many Djiboutians is the first encounter they have had with Americans. Rather than being introduced to Americans through the Peace Corps or USAID, Djiboutians' first encounter is often with an aggressive US posture that is often very ignorant of their society and culture. (Phone Interview, 16 October 2013; Brooks 2012)

In addition to the discontent with the lack of genuine political reforms and the absence of tangible economic benefits for the population, anger over the drones and the heavy military presence may erupt. The US has

deployed sixteen Predator drones in Djibouti since 2010, five of which crashed in 2013; the potential of unmanned aircraft colliding with passenger planes provoked resentment among Djiboutians (Whitlock and Miller 2013). In 2013 the Pentagon was compelled to transfer the large quantity of drones from the crowded city to a desert location many miles away (Ramirez 2013) to avoid such an occurrence.

Given the dire socio-economic conditions in the country and the potential consequences of heavy US presence in the tiny city-state, it is not surprising that the authorities have now decided to seek other sources of revenue. Thus, just a few months after John Kerry's visit to Djibouti in May 2015, the Djiboutian government apparently asked the United States to vacate its secondary base in Obock and turn it over to the Chinese, who have made Djibouti a much more attractive offer. Indeed, the Chinese provided USD 3 billion to build a railroad (completed in 2015) from Addis Ababa to Djibouti and plan to modernise Djibouti's small port (PressTV, 18 August 2015). This followed the security and defence agreement signed with Beijing in early 2014 (Lee 2015). Government officials argue that Djibouti is not simply switching the source of its dependency from the United States and other Western powers to China (Interview, Addis Ababa, 29 January 2015). This might be true; what is more likely, though, is that Djibouti is taking part in the Cold War-era game of playing would-be patrons/powers against each other to wrest additional advantages. In this case, in view of its iron-fist rule, the Djiboutian regime seeks to deter Washington from exerting pressure regarding the government's authoritarian rule.

Conclusion and Outlook

In a number of respects, tiny Djibouti can be considered "the Bahrain of Africa." US failure to resolutely condemn the Guelleh regime's brutal repression during the "Arab Spring" is in line with Washington treating the Djiboutian government with kid gloves, and even actively supporting it (Bloice 2011). This is reminiscent of US policy during the Cold War and its aftermath, when it supported authoritarian regimes that provided it with strategic military facilities. But, as seen above, when the United States seeks regime change, the client can turn to the patron's rival – in this case China, which has considerable economic leverage in Africa. The regime in Djibouti is quite concerned about US rhetoric on democracy promotion, especially since the city-state's human rights record is dismal (United States Department of State 2014); therefore, finding new sources

of revenue with less stringent conditions has become a major priority for the Djiboutian elite.

This article on US military deployment in Djibouti reveals four findings: First, since the end of the Cold War, although US military deployment in Europe has shrunk, it has expanded in Djibouti as a result of a shift in the US global defence–offence posture. The increasing US military deployment in Djibouti over the past two decades has served as a hub to project US military power in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf for offensive purposes.

Second, although Djibouti and the US have not entered into a formal alliance, they have committed, through the base in Camp Lemonnier, to a quasi-alliance, metaphorically a “marriage without a certificate”: their all-inclusive security cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism, has consolidated their quasi-alliance, but it is not an exclusive relationship.

Third, while most US military bases are deployed in developed and/or relatively wealthy countries, this is not the case with Djibouti, which is economically and militarily fragile. This exception can be explained by Djibouti’s heavy dependence on the windfalls it collects from the great powers’ bases on its territory and, to a lesser degree, its citizens’ adherence to traditional Islam. Djibouti’s geopolitical and geo-economic goals combined with the US strategic requirements have created a seemingly mutually beneficial relationship.

Fourth, in the past two decades, most US overseas military bases aimed to counter traditional threats, but the base in Djibouti, in addition to serving purposes related to humanitarian relief, addresses non-traditional threats – including terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, piracy, and drug trafficking. The base also allows the United States to intervene in wars when needed. Ultimately, the objective is to maintain US hegemony.

Will Washington transfer its AFRICOM headquarters from Stuttgart to Djibouti? There are actually four potential candidates for the new headquarters. The first is Djibouti because the country boasts the only US military base in Africa and because the Djiboutian government habitually pursues “moderate” and pragmatic policies; but, US officials have said that this is highly unlikely (Interview, New York, 16 October 2013). The second possibility is Morocco, because of its long-lasting security cooperation with the United States and because of its geographical proximity to the Sahel, where numerous extremist groups operate. Yet, the demand that Morocco made in exchange for hosting – that Washington recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (RITIMO 2012) – is unacceptable to the United States, which has developed close

security relations with Algeria, a strong supporter of Western Sahara's independence (Zoubir and Zunes 2016). The third candidate is Ethiopia, because it boasts the headquarters of the African Union and is favourable to strong US cooperation with Africa. However, this will be nearly impossible, as it, like most African countries, fears the backlash that such a presence might generate (e.g. radicalism, anti-Americanism). The fourth is Liberia, which was eager in 2008 to host AFRICOM's headquarters, but the domestic controversy it had caused killed off that possibility. No matter whether, when, or where AFRICOM eventually establishes its headquarters in Africa, Djibouti will remain the most important and possibly the only US military base in Africa for the foreseeable future. But, should some strategically located failed states decide to emulate Djibouti, then perhaps the US search for an AFRICOM headquarters in Africa might materialise.

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Das Adlernest am Horn von Afrika: der US-Stützpunkt in Dschibuti

Zusammenfassung: Dschibuti ist der einzige Staat der Erde, in dem gleichzeitig US-amerikanische, französische, deutsche, italienische, spanische und japanische Streitkräfte stationiert sind; in naher Zukunft wird auch China präsent sein. In den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten wurde die zunächst schwache US-Präsenz in Dschibuti zu einer großen Garnison von beträchtlicher strategischer Bedeutung ausgebaut. Für die USA ergeben sich geopolitische Vorteile, denn der Stützpunkt in Dschibuti erleichtert die Umsetzung von Strategien gegen Terrorgruppen, Proliferation und Piraterie sowie zum Schutz von Investitionen im Energiesektor. Für die Regierung Dschibutis ergeben sich geoökonomische Vorteile: Die gastgebende Nation in strategisch günstiger Lage zieht ökonomische Einnahmen aus der Präsenz des US-Militärs. Nachdem es den USA seit 2008 nicht gelungen ist, einen afrikanischen Staat zur Stationierung von AFRICOM zu bewegen, wird die US-Basis in Dschibuti voraussichtlich die einzige in Ostafrika bleiben. Das Land könnte zum Vorbild für einige kleinere afrikanische Nationen, wie São Tomé und Príncipe, werden, über Militärbasen von Großmächten Einnahmen zu generieren.

Schlagwörter: Dschibuti, Vereinigte Staaten, Militärischer Stützpunkt, Geostrategische Lage, Globale strategische Konzeption