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Djibouti's stability may be at risk

Djibouti is one of the smallest countries in Africa and yet, its strategic location provides this former French colony with a key importance on the global political chessboard. Being the exclusive access point to the sea for its much bigger neighbour, Ethiopia, and bordering the main artery of international maritime trade, the Bab el-Mandeb strait, Djibouti catalyses the interests of both regional actors and global superpowers.

In the last decade, the Somali and Yemeni conflicts spreading right next to it made the country even more interesting. Within the general political volatility affecting the Horn of Africa and the Gulf, Djiboutian overall stability stands out as an exception and ensures a peaceful playground for world powers in a turbulent area. Surrounding the capital, Djibouti city, one can count military bases from five different countries – US, France, Japan, Italy, China – all committed to the surveillance of shipping lanes and the assistance in containing regional conflicts.

Some emerging trends urge questions to be raised, though: will this young small country with less than one million population and a low-productive local economy be able to bear such a complex foreign presence on the long term? Is the variable mix of external interests and international political assertiveness in the area jeopardising Djibouti's stability and sovereignty?

Indeed, while the immediate outcome of hosting foreign countries' outposts has been a major currency flow into the government's coffers due to the lease of land – the sole cost of the US military base is estimated at around \$63 millions a year – and a strong financial aid in the implementation of Djiboutian infrastructural system, further implications may not be as favourable for the African state.

On one hand, discontent is raising among the poorest who are blaming the government for its corrupted administration and inequalities in wealth distribution. On the other, that same administration is developing an ever growing economic dependency on China – which is now challenging US soft power in the area.

Contrary to the other Western actors in Djibouti who remain more focussed on anti-piracy and counter-terrorism activities, Beijing has in fact put in place a much wider investment plan in order to secure its own access to the internal African trade: the electric railway linking Ethiopia to Djibouti, the project of a pipeline system carrying fresh water from the former to the latter, and the renewed Doraleh port are the most important initiatives financed by Chinese concessional loans – costing, respectively, \$4, \$300 and \$590 million [see Monica Wang, *China's Strategy in Djibouti: Mixing Commercial and Military Interests*, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 April 2018]. As a matter of fact, Djibouti will struggle to refund such loans, likely incurring the risk of a forced supply of the same infrastructures' management to Beijing.

Beyond internal discontent, corruption and potentially disrupting foreign influences, Djibouti may also soon have to deal with an increasing regional competitiveness concerning new ports in the Horn of Africa: its status as a reliable and strategic regional trading hub can not to be taken for granted anymore. A list of the ports and a chart follow [see *UAE and the Horn of Africa: A Tale of Two Ports*, Stratfor, March 13, 2018].

Djibouti: Doraleh Container Terminal (formerly run by DP World); Doraleh Multipurpose Port (China); U.S., French, Japanese, Chinese, Saudi military and naval bases.

Assab, Eritrea: UAE military and naval bases.

Berbera, Somaliland: DP World port project; UAE naval base under construction.

Puntland, Somalia: P&O Ports, a Dubai-owned port operator, has secured the rights to develop the port of Bosaso; UAE trained and equipped Puntland Maritime Police Force.

Mogadishu, Somalia: Turkish military base; UAE-funded special forces training centre; Port of Mogadishu operated by Turkish company Albayrak.

Barawe, Somalia: DP World in talks with the regional government over developing the Barawe seaport.



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