
18. Djibouti: A Maritime Crossroads at the Heart of Global Naval Rivalries and Alliances¹

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Abstract

The paper analyzes Djibouti as a strategic maritime crossroads where global naval rivalries intersect. Tracing Cold War legacies and post-9/11 security dynamics, it shows how counterterrorism and anti-piracy transformed Djibouti into a hub for foreign bases. The growing presence of Japan and China highlights renewed great-power competition, reaffirming classic sea-power logic in contemporary geopolitics.

Keywords: Djibouti, maritime crossroads, naval rivalries, foreign bases, China, Japan

1. Introduction

“Geostrategy is first and foremost a struggle for bases, in both peacetime and wartime.”

Djibouti is one of the rare places on our planet where one can observe, over the long term, the

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deployment and evolution of the world's principal naval and maritime strategies. The country's port facilities and the areas adjacent to the Republic of Djibouti regularly attract and host the world's major naval forces. This maritime crossroads—previously frequented exclusively by European navies emerging from the era of confrontation between the communist and Western blocs—is today coveted by the navies of emerging powers, almost all of them Asian, such as India and Communist China, as well as, unprecedentedly, by a normalized Japan seeking to reclaim its status as a naval power.

2. Stages in the Naval Power Race in the Region Since 1869

Without dwelling on a geo-maritime positioning that has been repeatedly emphasized, it is nevertheless useful to recall a few reference points in order to grasp this essential maritime dimension of the country, which is often overshadowed by the dynamism of its port infrastructure. At the beginning of the 1970s, one observes an extension of Cold War tensions to the Red Sea–Horn of Africa region. The proliferation of so-called progressive regimes aligned with Moscow in countries such as Egypt, the former South Yemen, Somalia, and later Ethiopia—as well as in Madagascar and Mozambique—prompted the countries of the Atlantic Alliance to strengthen their naval presence in order to counter any action likely to threaten their strategic interests. This period was marked by an intensification of security concerns and by destructive violence that, as usual, relegated legitimate popular aspirations and the right of peoples to self-determination to a secondary position. Thus, crucial issues of the time—such as the desire to unify territories predominantly inhabited by Somalis, or the granting of sovereignty unanimously

sought by the Eritreans—were swept aside and crushed in the relentless grip of fratricidal wars fueled by the two blocs in this part of the world. The navies of the two camps then engaged in a merciless struggle, resulting in the generalized militarization of the Indian Ocean–Red Sea zone, accompanied by the multiplication of bases of all kinds. Djibouti was thus described as a “service station” for the French Navy and became the most important and effective base of the Western bloc in the region. It would remain so well beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, followed by its withdrawal from all operational theaters in the region. That said, it must be acknowledged that the end of the Soviet “bear” did not lead to global security. Worse still, the world’s most significant arc of crisis today lies precisely within this vast area stretching from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Unsurprisingly, the most devastating wars of the past two decades have unfolded within this space. The disintegration of the Somali state in 1991, with the collapse of President Siyaad Barre’s regime, proved to be the gravest blow to both human security and state security, as it gave rise to two transnational and global threats: terrorism and piracy. Moreover, the international community’s determination to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has now placed the issue of Iran’s nuclear program at the center of international security concerns.

3. Regional Cooperation in Maritime Security Since 2001

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Djiboutian territory as a whole has been transformed into a reception and service platform for all international security missions designed to prevent, eradicate,

and resolve factors threatening global peace and security. The establishment in Djibouti of the headquarters of the CJTF-HOA—the United States' joint counterterrorism task force in the Horn of Africa since 2002—opened a new chapter in the history of foreign military deployments in Djiboutian territory. Indeed, unlike the presence of French forces, whose continued deployment had been guaranteed in advance by defense agreements prior to the country's accession to international sovereignty, the United States officially established itself in Djibouti within the framework of a broader objective unanimously shared by the international community: the fight against terrorism. It was in this context that the U.S. Navy was the first to set up operations in Djibouti, where it continues to operate actively alongside other branches of the American defense establishment represented within this joint command, which in effect constitutes the field extension of the central headquarters of U.S. Africa Command based in Frankfurt, Germany. This historic turning point occurred during the past decade, while at the same time the member states of the European Union began work on the well-known European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

The most recent state actor to establish itself—equally significant symbolically in the Djiboutian context—is Japan, which in July 2010 inaugurated its first overseas base since its defeat in 1945 at the hands of the United States, citing the need to combat the resurgence of piracy in international waters of the Red Sea–Indian Ocean zone since 2006. In the long term, the Japanese air-naval base is expected to be equipped with ultra-modern surveillance capabilities, such as the new PX four-engine maritime patrol aircraft. Although belated, the arrival of Japan's so-called Self-Defense Forces in the Republic of Djibouti translated, for the first time, into the significant development of civilian components of cooperation in

maritime security and safety. Japan is set to play an important role in establishing a coast guard force in Djibouti and to contribute substantially to the creation of a regional maritime training and instruction center, currently under construction in Doraleh. This initiative was instituted within the framework of anti-piracy efforts through the Djibouti Code of Conduct, signed in January 2009. This innovative agreement brings together some twenty countries bordering the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean and constitutes a powerful instrument and foundation for building genuine, sustainable cooperation aimed at consolidating regional security over the long term in the interest of all. In reality, Japanese diplomacy is merely extending to Djibouti and its region an anti-piracy approach already tested in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries bordering the Strait of Malacca, through which its hydrocarbon supplies transit.

Two factors explain Japan's growing involvement and its discreet quest for leadership in improving regional maritime security. First, Tokyo no longer seeks to strictly limit its diplomacy to the promotion of its economic potential and appears intent on extending its political influence across all regions of the globe, including through a more tangible presence. Second, the rise of Communist China and its growing economic successes have, in recent years—and for the first time in over a thousand years—translated into the assertion of naval power perceptible beyond the confines of the Southeast Asian seas. The facilities granted to the frequent port calls and stopovers of Beijing's navy in Djibouti appear to be a perfect illustration of these new realities. Djiboutian space thus undoubtedly remains one of those exceptional locations where the military navies of the two Asian "brother enemies" can concretely experiment with the famous policy of peaceful coexistence so dear to Mao. The resurgence of Sino-Japanese naval rivalries—against a backdrop of competing claims over disputed islets in Asia

and the fight against piracy—reminds us that the concept of Sea Power, formulated by the founder of American naval strategy, Admiral Alfred Mahan, remains highly relevant. As he declared at the beginning of the last century:

“Military power has always followed commerce, in order to help it prosper and to protect it.”