

Air University Advanced Research: Next-Generation ISR Dominance
The Case of China and Djibouti

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August 31, 2021

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Introduction

China has taken aggressive measures to ensure the loyalty of developing nations, especially in Africa, while denying the United States the same. A key nation of interest is the small yet significant Republic of Djibouti. Djibouti is a natural chokepoint of trade between the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. It is a highly strategic point for the United States Government (USG), its allied armed forces, and global maritime trade. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) already holds a significant percentage of Djibouti's debt, has a formidable military base, and is building massive infrastructure projects to tap into inner-Africa's natural resources. Should China leverage its economic and military power onto Djibouti, the CCP could take de facto control of the port and extort or deny US shipping there. While the CCP has the monetary advantage, it has done little to help Djibouti's one million people. In order to diminish CCP influence, the US must expose the CCP's indifference to the Djiboutian people while simultaneously investing in US-Djiboutian relationships at the government and grassroots levels.

This paper will first discuss the relationship between Djibouti and Beijing. The paper will then use the DIME model (diplomatic, information, military, economic) to weigh the uses of each instrument of power for a whole-government approach to loosen the CCP's grip on Djibouti. While each instrument is necessary, utilizing informational power is currently the USG's best option.

The Beijing-Djibouti Relationship

China and Djibouti first established official diplomatic relations in 1979. Almost immediately, China began working on Djibouti's infrastructure by donating city facilities, including hospitals, government buildings, and sporting arenas. While China donated almost no humanitarian aid (on which Djibouti and its people are heavily dependent), its infrastructure

contributions are evident (Wana et al., 2020). Despite these early infrastructure initiatives, the diplomatic and economic relations between the Chinese and Djiboutian governments were relatively sparse. The late Djiboutian president Hassan Gouled Aptidon visited Beijing three times between 1979 and 1999.

However, since the early 2000s, diplomatic interactions have significantly increased. Yemen's port of Aden became increasingly less safe for commercial trade. After Eritrea broke from Ethiopia, cutting its growing economy from the Red Sea, Djibouti entered the 21st century by becoming the sole gateway port to both inner Africa and the Red Sea. China had already increased its maritime trade presence in the Middle East significantly and used the anti-piracy narrative to increase its naval presence in 2008. This initiative was welcomed openly by the current Djiboutian president, Ismael Omar Guelleh, who has been in power since 1999. In addition to welcoming anti-piracy, Guelleh was very welcoming of Chinese aspirations in the region. After his second Beijing visit in 2012, Guelleh secured a "Joint Ministerial Commission" with China, allowing China to increase its naval presence and investments exponentially (Styan, 2020). President Guelleh dubbed Djibouti "Africa's Singapore" and has aspirations to mimic Singapore's commercial success (Brautigam, 2020).

While Djibouti receives significant infrastructural aid from China, Beijing also holds more than three-quarters of Djibouti's debt. To the CCP, Djibouti is a long-term investment for both its Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Since 2012, China has been Djibouti's most prominent investor (Styan 2020). Because of this investment, the CCP has negotiated with Djibouti to allow state-owned companies, mainly China's state-owned company China Merchants Group (CMG), to purchase and build on Djiboutian land at a reduced cost (Wana et al., 2020). It is noteworthy that China's construction endeavors do not include hiring

Djiboutian nationals; CMG has brought most of its labor from China (Styan, 2020). Therefore, details regarding construction remain internal to CMG, allowing China to build quickly and without Djiboutian interference. With cooperation from the Djiboutian and Ethiopian governments, CMG renovated and electrified the century-old French railway into Ethiopia, fully operational since 2018. Moreover, CMG has begun constructing a water pipeline from Ethiopia to address Djibouti's growing water shortage (Cabestan, 2020). CMG also modernized the Doraleh Multipurpose Port (DMP) when other foreign investors refused (Wana et al., 2020).

Given Djibouti's strategic importance, China has included Djibouti in the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). China has also elevated Djibouti in a diplomatic status above nations with similar GDPs. The CCP officially recognizes Djibouti as a "strategic partner" and formed bilateral agreements in economic and military realms (Sun and Zoubir, 2021). In September 2018, Djibouti officially became a partner in the MSR (Styan, 2020). The DMP is now one of the largest commercial ports in Africa but has increased Djibouti's debt to China to over \$1.3 billion. To pay this debt, it is within the realm of possibilities that Djibouti could hand significant control of the port to China, making it a direct threat to US military operations in the region (Brautigam, 2020). The CCP and President Guelleh have dismissed these concerns as Western paranoia (Styan, 2020).

Luckily, there is a shred of truth in their sentiments; China cannot exercise total control over the DMP (at least not yet). President Guelleh and his party maintains near totalitarian power over Djibouti and has handled its foreign affairs well since 1999. He understands Djibouti's strategic importance and is keenly aware of the Chinese-American tensions. Naturally, he uses this rivalry to his advantage and negotiates higher rates for land usage to both sides. Unlike other developing nations with unstable governments that have fallen into debt-trap diplomacy with

China, Guelleh is an unopposed authoritarian with direct control over Djibouti's debt. He can facilitate trade agreements to offset debt traps without worrying about domestic discourse. This arrangement has proven beneficial for both governments; China and Djibouti recently negotiated an extended debt repayment over thirty years instead of ten. Therefore, China does not yet need to force its economic clout as heavily as it would with other developing nations (Styan, 2020).

Most notably, the Chinese military opened its first foreign military base in August 2017. It is conveniently located roughly seven kilometers from the US expeditionary base, Camp Lemonnier (Brautigam, 2020). While Djibouti charges the Chinese military \$20 million per year to use this base, Djibouti's debt to China easily eclipses it. The base is highly fortified against both surface and aerial attacks. It shows indications of ample fuel and ordnance storage, helicopter and unmanned aerial vehicle launch and control facilities, as well as other sophisticated facilities that appear compatible with conducting electromagnetic and cyber warfare. However, the Chinese have denied that the base would be used to spy on American activities. The CCP claims that the base is a logistical hub for the MSR and a closer port for its navy's counterpiracy operations (Cabestan, 2020). Since China is so interested in building up Djibouti's infrastructure, the Djiboutian government has allowed the base to become more sophisticated and hardened. Moreover, the Djiboutian government sees the Chinese base as a means to balance Western influence and maintain its power (Sun and Zoubir, 2021).

Opportunities to Weaken Relations between the CCP and Djibouti

Despite the current closeness between Djibouti and the CCP, there are some opportunities that require using the DIME model to create rifts between them. For brevity purposes and to emphasize informational power, this paper will first consider military options, weigh diplomacy and economics concurrently, and conclude with the information warfare strategy.

Military Opportunities

The US already holds a considerable military presence in Djibouti for counterterror and counterpiracy operations along the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Drastically increasing a US military presence to counter the Chinese navy would present a poor international image and waste other military resources that could be better allocated for other strategic locations. Instead, it would be beneficial for the US military to modernize its facilities on Camp Lemonnier without giving the perception of a buildup. Particularly, these facilities should be able to counter both kinetic and non-kinetic attacks through defensive structures and offensive electromagnetic and cyber warfare facilities (Haugh et al., 2020).

The US should also encourage partner nations that usually side against China to increase their military presence in Djibouti. Two prime examples are India and Japan. China and India have exchanged deadly blows over Himalayan border disputes (Biswas, 2020). These melees are primarily due to the CCP slowly encroaching along India's less secure borders in the region (Pandey, 2020). India has shown interest in establishing a military base in Djibouti and is currently negotiating with the Djiboutian government. India has also agreed with Japan (who established a small military outpost in Djibouti—its first foreign base since WWII) to share foreign military facilities, giving India a springboard to start base construction (De Faakto, 2019). Japan has openly spoken in a defense white paper that it seeks to expand its presence in Djibouti to “counteract China.” In 2017, Japan expanded the size of its base by three hectares as “a direct response to the opening of China's base in Djibouti the same year” (Di Santo, 2018). Both nations have also made bilateral agreements to expand their efforts to offset Chinese influence, especially in Djibouti (Woody, 2018). The USG should encourage this expansion. A coalition of US, Japanese, and Indian forces would create a more substantial military presence to

counter China without the perception of US escalation. However, military power alone will not drive China from Djibouti.

Diplomatic and Economic Opportunities

Djibouti's government structure is stable, but it is also stove-piped. Therefore, money is often tied with diplomacy. Investing capital and infrastructure in Djibouti will likely be welcomed by President Guelleh, provided that the price is right. More importantly, as long as the investment is beneficial to Djibouti, it will not be overtaken if China tries to intrude on an established contract. For example, the Chinese government attempted to move a European Union-sponsored desalination plant to make way for its base's deep-water wharf. However, the Djiboutian government did not allow it (Cabestan, 2020). Therefore, strategically placed American investments in Djibouti's infrastructure could hinder Chinese assertions into the country and pull the Djiboutian government towards a more US-friendly stance.

A temporary method to win over the Djiboutian government is through superior vaccine diplomacy. In March 2021, the CCP's vaccine company, Sinovac, delivered its COVID-19 vaccine earlier to Djibouti in mid-March 2021 (CGTN, 2021). This spurred a race to assist the Djiboutian people. In July 2021, the US donated and delivered 151,200 Johnson & Johnson vaccines to the Djibouti Ministry of Health (US Embassy, 2021). Since Djibouti has a relatively small population of one million, the US could easily donate enough vaccines and ample medical supplies to cover the rest of its population, thus branding the US as a humanitarian agent.

Information Opportunities

While a potential US strategy might attempt to give the Djiboutian leadership more than the CCP provides, this method is not necessarily sustainable nor likely to gain continuous domestic support. Currently, both the Chinese and Djiboutian governments have largely ignored

the plights of the Djiboutian people, many of whom are desperately poor and have dire living conditions. Djibouti has a low literacy rate and high food insecurity (CIA World Factbook, 2021). As of 2017, Djibouti's unemployment rate was 47%, and one in five Djiboutians live on less than \$2.17 (USD) per day (World Bank, 2019). Naturally, Djibouti heavily relies on foreign aid. Roughly 80% of its food comes from foreign aid (CIA World Factbook, 2021). This ignorance could be China's Achille's heel in Africa.

While sending material foreign aid showcases American generosity, it would not likely help the Djiboutian people directly. In reality, most humanitarian aid is often bribery with extra steps and does more damage than it helps. Aid is often sent to a central government, which is often siphoned off by corrupt government officials first. On the other hand, education is not material and thus far more difficult to exploit (Simons et al., 2011). Suppose the USG invests in American citizens educating the Djiboutian people (especially children and young adults) with employable skill sets, methods that allow people to become self-sufficient, and enforce individual property rights and the rule of law. In that case, the US could slowly exert its informational power in Djibouti.

The educational solution is significantly easier said than done; Djibouti and China hold a tight grasp on information dissemination and are quick to censor anti-government sentiments (Styan, 2020). While this censorship cannot be sidestepped explicitly, it can be circumvented implicitly. Winning the hearts and minds of people does not come through large government projects but rather snowballs from the individual level. A vital aspect of this education operation would be to send American citizens to interact with the Djiboutian people directly and without a barbed-wire fence between them. There has never been a Peace Corps mission to Djibouti (Peace Corps, 2021). Now would be the best opportunity to change that.

Additionally, the United States could message that while Americans help the Djiboutian people directly, China cannot be bothered. While China wishes to portray itself as a global power, it does not wish to look like an imperialist nation, hence its downplaying of military operations (Sun and Zoubir, 2021). Showcasing its military fortress and Chinese people living in luxury in Djibouti and simultaneously showing Djibouti's dire state could bring global outcry and drum up anti-imperialist movements against China.

It would also behoove the USG to keep a close eye on Chinese infrastructure projects in Djibouti. While the BRI and MSR are ambitious and send a strong message of Chinese power, portions of the railways and roads in Ethiopia have already encountered numerous maintenance issues, unpredictable schedules, unreliability, and limited capacity. Moreover, the railway appears to only appease Chinese economic interests while ignoring the interests of Djiboutians, to include its inability to integrate with already established roadways and local public transportation, and lack of interest to allow common people to use the railroad (Tarossy and Vörös, 2018). Collecting and openly disseminating imagery on corner-cutting and infrastructure pieces in grave disrepair could make Djiboutian leadership (and by extension, African leadership) reluctant to accept future Chinese investments.

Conclusion

While China is currently winning the battle over economic influence, the US can use all of its instruments of power to influence the developing world. Most importantly the US must dominate through superior information dissemination and encourage investments that subvert Chinese aspirations. The next generation in information dominance will not solely come from the ability to see, hear, and exploit military assets. Rather, it “will reward those who can leverage information for strategic advantage” (Haugh et al., 2020).

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