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Djibouti is Jumping

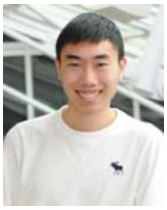
Joseph Braude , Tyler Jiang March 2016

E-Notes

Joseph Braude is a Senior Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East and Adviser to Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai.

Tyler Jiang, an International Studies major at Rowan University, is a Research Intern at FPRI.

China and Saudi Arabia are building military bases next door to US AFRICOM in Djibouti—and bringing the consequences of American withdrawal from the region into stark relief.



Djibouti, a resource-poor nation of 14,300 square miles and 875,000 people in the Horn of Africa, rarely makes international headlines. But between its relative stability and strategic location—20 miles across from war-consumed Yemen and in destroyer range of the pirate-infested western edge of the Indian Ocean—it is now one of the more important security beachheads in the developing world. Its location also matters greatly to global commerce and energy, due to its vicinity to the Mandeb Strait and the Suez-Aden canal, which sees ten percent of the world's oil exports and 20 percent of its commercial exports annually.[1] Since November 2002, the country has been home to Camp Lemonnier, a U.S. Expeditionary base—the only American base on the African continent—along with other bases belonging to its French, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese allies.

But now there are two new kids on the block: On January 21st, the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry announced an agreement with Djibouti to host its first-ever base beyond the South China Sea, and construction commenced days later.[2] Though Beijing called the installation a "logistics and fast evacuation base," the Asian power's "near-abroad" rivals, such as Taiwan, opined that it is more likely the beginning of a new, aggressive military buildup to rival the United States. Six weeks later, Saudi Arabia declared that it too would construct a base in Djibouti,[3] apparently as part of its newly assertive policy of countering Iranian proxies politically and militarily throughout the region.[4]

Both new players have made substantial economic and soft power investments in the country to boot. Since 2015, Beijing has poured over $14 billion into infrastructure development.[5] Saudi Arabia, itself a prominent donor to Djibouti's public works, has spent generously on social welfare projects for the country's poor; built housing, schools and mosques for its swelling Yemeni refugee population; and dispatched teachers and preachers from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, long a pillar for the promulgation of Saudi-backed interpretations of Islam. Augmenting Saudi aid, moreover, has been further spending by some of its Arab military allies. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have poured millions into charitable work over the past few months—and the UAE in particular is working to spur economic development along the lines of the "Dubai model." Even cash-poor North Sudan, newly returned to the Saudi orbit after a years-long alliance with Iran, began construction of a hospital in Djibouti in early February.

Neither the timing nor the confluence of these projects is mere coincidence. America's diminishing global military footprint has begun to affect the calculation of allies and rivals alike, and the outsized role Djibouti is poised to play in its neighborhood presents a case in point of the consequences. An examination of the changing role the country plays in American, Chinese, and Arab security policy offers a glimpse into potential conflicts as well as opportunities arising from the shift—and some steps Americans can take to prepare for both.

The American Posture

As the only American base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier serves a vital function for US AFRICOM. Housing 4,000 military and civilian personnel, it is the nerve center of six drone launching stations across the continent, which have attacked targets as far-flung as Al-Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Yemeni-based

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. U.S. Special Forces, the CIA, and Air Force surveillance craft converge to process and pool intelligence at the camp. It also serves as headquarters to Task Force 48-4, a counterterrorism unit that targets militants in East Africa and Yemen.[6] Special Forces rely on it too: In 2012, when Navy SEALs rescued American and Danish hostages from Somalia, they brought them to safety in Camp Lemonnier.[7] And as a springboard for American-led anti-piracy operations, Camp Lemonnier helps the U.S. maintain its role as the primary guarantor of mercantile security in the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean. The significance of the base grows only greater amid regional conflagration: The U.S. has been using it to meet its pledge of technical and intelligence assistance to Saudi Arabia in its war against the Iranian-backed Houthi militia in Yemen.

In 2014, the U.S. signed a new 20-year lease on the base with the Djiboutian government, and committed over $1.4 billion to modernize it in the years to come.[8] This significant expenditure bucks the overall trend of diminishing American military commitments overseas. For example, President Obama has announced plans to reduce the number of active naval vessels to 1917 numbers, possibly including aircraft carriers.[9]

As the segments below will show, America's status in the country stands to be affected by the activities of the Chinese and Saudi bases. It may also be affected by the two countries' soft power deployments, each aiming to influence the cultural and political fiber of the country and, by extension, the policies of its government. America's own soft power commitments have been minimal: the U.S. supplies $3 million worth of food aid annually through USAID as part of the U.N. World Food Program, runs modest health and education projects, and netted only $152 million in trade in 2015.[10] Nor is there any concerted effort to enter the public discussion in Djibouti in the service of American goals or values.

The Chinese Posture

By contrast to the U.S., China has never previously established a base beyond its "near abroad." Thus the Djibouti project, however modest, fuels the perception that China's military footprint is growing. Sending such a message may itself be among Beijing's goals. David Shedd, former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told us that "[The Chinese] want to signal to the world that they have a worldwide presence. Part of the mission is simply defined as being seen. That in and of itself is defined as an interest."[11]

With respect to its potential operational significance, the Chinese Foreign Ministry says, "Facilities will mainly be used for logistical support and personnel recuperation of the Chinese armed forces conducting such missions as maritime escort in the Gulf of Aden and waters off the Somali coast, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance." It would also enable fast evacuation for any of the million Chinese citizens now living in the Middle East and Africa should they require it.[12] The need to prepare for such eventualities became clear to China in the bloody aftermath of the Arab Spring: It evacuated 35,680 nationals employed mainly in Libya's oil industry, and 629 more from Yemen soon thereafter.[13] During the Libya evacuation, China had only one frigate available in the vicinity, so most of the evacuees had to be flown out of the country on chartered commercial planes.

But from Washington to Taipei, observers suspect that the project is more ambitious than the Chinese let on. In an interview on the national news network *Taiwan Today*, political analyst Lai Yueqian said, "[The base] can be used to pin down the United States and any U.S.-led organizations, and if [the U.S.] wants to intervene against China's interests, they will have to think carefully, because China will use their military to protect their citizens and their property."[14] In the following clip, Yueqian elaborates on this analysis, bespeaking Taiwanese concerns about the base:

Yueqian's assessment, shared by most Chinese "near-abroad" allies of the United States, is also the view of prominent members of the political class in Washington. At a December hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs in which rumors about the base were discussed, Senator Chris Coons (R-De.) stated in relation to the Djibouti base, "[The US has to be] vigilant in the face of China's growing ambitions."[15]

Beijing's outlook toward nearby North Africa and the Middle East differs with American policies. As Taiwan's Lai Yueqian described in the video above, the U.S.- and NATO-led military intervention in Libya angered China. At

the U.N. Security Council, Beijing subsequently blocked attempts to engineer a Western military intervention in Syria. With respect to the region-wide conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, America's tradition of siding with Saudi Arabia -- or, for that matter, its more recent tendency to tilt toward Iran -- may conflict with Chinese policies: Guided by the need to quench its substantial thirst for oil, Beijing mostly seeks to avoid irking either oil-rich nation. A new military base in boating range of North Africa as well as the Arabian peninsula promises to bolster any Chinese political stance—however modestly—with a measure of force. The base, to be located near the small port city of Obock on the northern coast of Djibouti, lies 20 miles closer than Lemonnier to the conflict in Yemen, to which Washington has committed resources in support of Saudi Arabia's war with the Houthis.

But China's strategic goals cannot be explained solely in terms of a perceived reaction to Western policies. According to Beijing's most recent defense policy paper, released in May 2015, "China's armed forces will work harder to create a favorable strategic posture with more emphasis on the employment of military forces and means."[16] This formulation is widely believed to allude to China's "String of Pearls" and "One Belt, One Road" initiatives. "String of Pearls" is a metaphor for an envisioned network of naval ports of call, predominantly along the Indian Ocean, to secure sea lanes of transit, commerce, and communication from mainland China to Sudan. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative seeks to strengthen Chinese exports through commercial land and sea roads, largely along the historic "silk road," straddling Europe and the Middle East. The Djibouti base would be vital in ensuring the success of the latter goal, since most of China's $1 billion in daily exports to Europe traverse the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal.[17] With respect to the former plan, Toshi Yoshihara, Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies at the U.S. Naval War College, has been mapping the intersection of Chinese naval and commercial ventures across the Pacific region. Arrayed together, he told us, they "certainly do look like a string of pearls."[18] Djibouti, home to both the nascent base and extensive Chinese economic investment, would clearly amount to a new pearl on the string (see Figure 1).[19]

Figure 1. PLA Navy Ports of Call in Support of the Gulf of Aden Counterpiracy Task Force

Are Chinese and American pursuits in the vicinity of Djibouti necessarily a zero-sum game? Some of China's stated goals do not conflict with American aspirations, and to the contrary, may benefit both superpowers as well as their allies: Both the growing Chinese capacity to evacuate citizens from war-torn areas and its further enhancement of anti-piracy operations are each a "public good." On the other hand, a different term in Beijing's political vocabulary raises more disturbing possibilities. In our conversation with FPRI Senior Fellow June Teufel Dreyer, she stressed the principle of "All Under Heaven"—rooted in Chinese imperial history—which places Chinese central authority at the epicenter of a tributary system of dominance over lesser powers. Some analysts of China see the country's recent installation of surface-to-air missiles and fighter jets on Woody Island in the South China Sea as a manifestation of this supremacist tendency.[20] According to Professor Yoshihara, one might also view the construction of a Djibouti base as an extension of "All Under Heaven" far beyond China's traditional orbit.[21]

At a time of rapid Chinese construction of aircraft and aircraft carriers and more serious competition with American military industries, the base in Djibouti could indeed reflect a Chinese aspiration to eventually meet and surpass the United States as a military and economic power in the area. In January 2016, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a 72-hour exercise involving thousands of marines and the navy special operations regiment in the Gobi Desert in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The area's topography and climate resemble much of North Africa and the Sahel.[22] Between "All Under Heaven" and China's stated goal of housing up to 10,000 Chinese servicemen in Djibouti, such exercises offer ample basis for concern.[23]

Beijing's hard power initiative in Djibouti is meanwhile accompanied by its soft power initiatives to build ties with state and society alike. The $14 billion in Chinese support for infrastructure development, widely publicized in Djibouti, has generated enormous goodwill with the population. Far exceeding U.S. spending, the injection is

also an investment in the government of President Isma'il Omar Guelleh. There are also cultural ventures, such as the new Confucius Institute in Djibouti City, which Beijing typically uses to cultivate personal ties and "assets" within the society.[24] Add to all this China's $1.1 billion in trade in 2014—roughly ten times that of the United States.[25] As Chinese influence grows in Djibouti, its ability to influence the government's foreign policy and security strategies promises to grow along with it.

The Saudi Posture

From a Saudi perspective, stationing troops in Djibouti is both a defensive and a potential offensive measure in its pan-regional conflict with Iran, with particular bearing on the nearby war in Yemen. The defensive aspect was on display in mid-February, when Saudi intelligence officials, tracking the flow of munitions from Iran to its Houthi proxy militia in Yemen, discovered that the Islamic Republic was using Djibouti as a waystation. A ship en route to Yemen carrying encrypted military communication equipment and other hardware had originated in the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. The Kingdom intercepted it en route, and recognized the importance of strengthening its capacity to act in and around Djibouti.[26] In terms of "offense," Ben Ho Wan Beng, a military analyst in Singapore, speculates that given the Houthi presence in western Yemen, Riyadh could use the base to "open up a new front against the Houthis, who [would] then face the prospect of being attacked from another axis."[27]

By contrast to the U.S. and its Japanese and Western allies, for which the establishment of a base in Djibouti is a matter of paying rent on a discrete strip of land, Saudis view their own barrack walls as permeable. Djibouti is an Arab League member state, bound to its brethren by ties of blood, culture, and faith. It has also joined the 34-member, Saudi-led "Islamic coalition" against Iran-sponsored terror announced by Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in December.[28] Thus from Riyadh's perspective, *all* of Djibouti is a kind of "base"—and the Kingdom feels it has a right to weigh in on any of the country's non-Arab military installations. It was hardly a coincidence when the Djiboutian government recently rejected a Russian proposal to establish its own base in the country: Moscow, a staunch ally to the Iran-backed Assad regime in Damascus, would have been at best unhelpful to Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war.

Saudi soft power activity in the country serves to intensify this bond. One of the state-backed organizations spearheading it is the Riyadh-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). The group historically served as a primary exporter of Islamist preaching across the globe—a mission that enabled both Salafi jihadists and the Muslim Brotherhood to politicize and radicalize Muslim communities. But the Kingdom more recently purged the organization of jihadist preachers, and streamlined WAMY's religious line to follow "Salafi traditionalism," which holds that only the head of state has the right to declare "jihad." Moreover, clerical elites who traditionally controlled the group now share authority with stalwarts of the government—call them "lay leaders"—who have their own direct line to the royal family. In Djibouti, WAMY funds and staffs health and human services for the indigenous population, and tends to the needs of Yemeni refugees. Other goals determined by the state appear to take precedence over preaching: provide disaster and poverty relief; back the government of President Isma'il Omar Guelleh; instill an ethos of Djiboutian nationalism that insulates the population from trans-state ideologies; build person-to-person relationships between Saudis and Djiboutians; engineer support for the Kingdom's specific regional objectives. Some of these goals are subtly on display in the following excerpt from a March 21, 2016 report by WAMY on its Djibouti bureau:

To be sure, the positive aspects of WAMY's programs should not diminish the concern that Salafi missionary activity may still promote a profoundly sectarian worldview in Djibouti, casting the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict in existential, rather than political, terms.

As to the presence of 30,000-and-counting Yemeni refugees in Djibouti, Saudis view it as both a humanitarian concern and a strategic opportunity. Twenty-five years ago, in the aftermath of the "Gulf War" to repel Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia established a refugee camp in the northern town of Rafha to host 33,000 Iraqis fleeing persecution by Saddam. The installation served Riyadh and some of its international allies as an intelligence listening post—hundreds of Iraqis were debriefed about the situation inside the country—and as a platform for cultivating Iraqi assets.[29] Though the Yemeni and gulf wars are far from analogous, the presence of a substantial number of newly departed Yemeni civilians in a safe environment far

from the battlefield presents the opportunity to tap a similar wealth of information and human networks.

In deepening their security and intelligence presence in Djibouti at a time of unease between Riyadh and Washington, they will be keen to explore potential security partnerships with China. As recently as 2014, Beijing sought to forge joint counterterrorism training programs with the Yemeni government that Saudi Arabia is now fighting to reinstall.[30] More recently, Beijing made a rare break with its policy of neutrality between Iran and Saudi Arabia to express support for the Saudi position in Yemen. In January 2016, King Salman hosted a landmark visit to Riyadh by Chinese President Xi Jinping, together with high-level meetings between senior security and intelligence officials of both countries. The strengthening of these ties may serve to lessen Saudi reliance on American support.[31]

The importance of Djibouti has become a popular topic of discussion throughout the Saudi-allied Arab world. Prominent voices in Egypt, for example, are talking about building a base there too, while other Gulf allies are ramping up their own soft power projects in the country. The following video montage begins with a clip from Tawfiq Okasha—an eccentric, ultranationalist Egyptian pundit known for his fondness of Israel—in which he makes the case for a Djibouti base. In perhaps a sign of the times, he bolsters his argument by saying that Djiboutians are one of the lost tribes of Israel, and therefore “good people.”

Grappling with New U.S. Challenges

In a February letter to Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, Representatives Dana Rohrabacher (R-Ca.), Chris Smith (R-N.J.), and Duncan Hunter (R-Ca.) raised alarms about China’s rising influence in Djibouti: “[We are] worried that our own strategic interests around the Horn of Africa, specifically our critical counter-terrorism operations, will be impacted by China’s growing strategic influence in the region.” Recognizing Beijing’s soft power gains, they castigated the Djibouti leadership for its “cozy relationship with China,” and dubbed the government of Ismail Omar Guelleh a “corrupt and repressive regime.” Guelleh is indeed a human rights violator, and the lawmakers’ criticism have been echoed repeatedly by the White House in recent months. Doing so has of course done little to improve Washington’s relationship with Guelleh: Judging from the angry reaction in Djiboutian state media, he reads the American denunciations as support for his political opponents. When Djibouti holds its presidential elections on April 8, the incumbent’s likely victory will bring the government another step closer to China—and a step away from the United States.

America’s shifting circumstances in Djibouti—and, by extension, the Horn of Africa and southern Arabia—are a symptom of its broader political and military withdrawal from conflicts in which longtime Asian and Arab allies have a stake. The situation also reflects the weakness of Washington’s commitment and capacity to wield soft power in politically contested foreign environments. It will ultimately be difficult for Washington to address the concerns about Djibouti raised by American lawmakers and Taiwanese analyst Lai Yueqian without restoring its support for longtime allies in the Middle and Far East, as well as deploying American soft power alongside military might. To be sure, the U.S. should welcome efforts by China to help protect civilians from the region’s tumult and secure the sea lanes for international trade. But it should also be prepared for a formidable new presence in the area capable of challenging American objectives politically and militarily.

Meanwhile, the growing presence of Saudi Arabia alongside China in the country promises to strengthen security ties between Riyadh and Beijing, potentially at Washington’s expense. It is but one example of the increasing interplay between China and the Arab world, for which it behooves Americans to prepare. A first step toward doing so is to address an American gap in studying the phenomenon. From government to think tanks and the academy, Arab affairs specialists have long been institutionally separated from their counterparts in Asian affairs. As the leaders, peoples, and armies of these diverse environments begin to intermingle, the Americans who study and engage them must do the same.

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