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**HOW DOES THE GEOPOLITICAL POSITION OF
DJIBOUTI INFLUENCE ITS RELATIONS WITH GREAT
POWERS?**

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Abstract

Djibouti gained independence in 1977 after being ruled by France for nearly a century. However, Djibouti remained under French influence for a long time due to both the military agreement with France and the economic aid provided by this country. Moreover, it had to act more distant when establishing relations with other countries. However, under the leadership of Omar Guelleh, who came to power in 1999, a new process was entered in foreign policy with the adoption of the principle of multilateralism in diplomatic relations. Djibouti, which has become a center of attraction for great powers such as the USA, China and Russia, as well as France, has started to cooperate with these countries in different fields. This study points out that Djibouti's geopolitical position is the main factor that determines its relations with these great powers and prompts these countries to cooperate with Djibouti. It is also observed that Djibouti has turned its geopolitical position into a tool of its development strategy.

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CİBUTİ’NİN JEOPOLİTİK KONUMU BÜYÜK GÜÇLERLE İLİŞKİLERİNİ NASIL ETKİLİYOR?

Öz

Cibuti, yaklaşık bir yüzyıl boyunca Fransa tarafından yönetildikten sonra 1977 yılında bağımsızlığını kazandı. Ancak Cibuti, gerek Fransa ile yapılan askeri anlaşma gerekse bu ülkenin sağladığı ekonomik yardımlar nedeniyle uzun süre Fransız etkisi altında kalmaya devam etti. Üstelik diğer ülkelerle ilişki kurarken daha mesafeli davranması gerekti. Bununla birlikte 1999 yılında iktidara gelen Omar Guelleh liderliğinde diplomatik ilişkilerde çoktarafılık ilkesinin benimsenmesiyle dış politikada yeni bir sürece girildi. Fransa’nın yanında ABD, Çin ve Rusya gibi büyük güçler için bir çekim merkezine dönüşen Cibuti, bu ülkelerle farklı alanlarda iş birlikleri yapmaya başladı. Bu çalışma, Cibuti’nin jeopolitik konumunun bu büyük güçlerle ilişkilerini belirleyen ve bu ülkeleri Cibuti ile iş birliği yapmaya sevk eden ana faktör olduğuna dikkat çekmektedir. Ayrıca Cibuti’nin jeopolitik konumunu kalkınma stratejisinin bir aracına dönüştürdüğü gözlenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrika Boynuzu, Cibuti, Büyük Güçler, Jeopolitik Konum, Çoktarafılık.

Introduction

A great power means a state that plays an important role in international politics which is considered to possess economic, diplomatic and military power and influence, and its interests extend beyond its borders. The term was firstly used for Austria, Russia, Prussia, France and Great Britain after the Congress of Vienna in 1815. After the First World War, the United States of America (the USA) emerged as a new great power in international politics. Following the Second World War, their industrial power, global influence and nuclear capabilities led the USA and the Soviet Union to be referred to as “superpowers”. In 1991, the collapse of one of the superpowers, the Soviet Union, left the United States as the sole superpower in international politics. Russia, however, entered a rapid recovery process

and became one of today's great powers. China has also become one of the great powers by rapidly increasing its economic and military power. France, on the other hand, although its former great power status has weakened, is still among the countries with veto power in the United Nations Security Council (Oxford Reference 2023). These great powers follow strong strategies to strengthen their political, economic and military presence in many parts of the world. Djibouti is one of the countries where these great powers want to expand their sphere of influence.

In the second half of the 19th century, Djibouti came under the rule of France and declared its independence in 1977, but following this independence, French influence did not disappear immediately. The military agreement Djibouti signed with France and its need for French economic support limited its ability to follow an independent foreign policy. Only after Omar Guelleh became president in 1999, this country was able to adopt and implement the principle of multilateralism in its foreign policy. Djibouti's diplomatic opening were made feasible by certain events that happened in France, including the country's economic difficulties, the waves of migrants that came after the fall of the Soviet Union, the social unrest brought on by the reform plans, the conflicts in Eastern Europe, and the issue of European integration.

Especially in the 2000s, it is observed that the interests of great powers such as the USA, China and Russia has become more visible. Great powers have entered into a race to obtain military bases in Djibouti, and have intensified their attempts to plan and finance projects of vital importance for this country. Moreover, the recent efforts of France to develop a different discourse towards Djibouti in its foreign

policy is noteworthy. The Djibouti administration, on the other hand, seeks to turn these initiatives in favor of the country. In this context, Djibouti, which tries to keep its relations with great powers such as the USA, China and France at a good level, tries to improve its economy through the investments or base leases of these countries. Djibouti shapes its future vision through its relations with these countries.

Although many studies have been conducted on Djibouti, previous studies have mostly been limited to the competition between these powers in establishing a military base in Djibouti or the US-China rivalry. However, this study touches on Djibouti's relations with the great powers, not all countries, on the one hand, and on the other hand, not only the military dimension of these relations, but also their political, diplomatic and economic dimensions. In this respect, the study is expected to contribute to the literature.

In this regard, the aim of this study is to analyze how Djibouti's geopolitical position influences its relations with the great powers such as the USA, China, Russia and France. In addition, one of the important issues of debate is whether French influence in Djibouti, with which it has established deep-rooted political, economic, and cultural relations since the 19th century, has diminished. Thus, whether or not French influence is declining in Djibouti will be also addressed within the frame of this study. Finally, it will be emphasized how the strategic position is instrumentalized by Djibouti. At this point, it will be discussed the "Vision Djibouti 2035" development initiative.

1. Strategic Importance of Djibouti in the International Arena

Great powers have been strengthening their relations with the countries in the Horn of Africa in recent years. Among these countries, Djibouti, attracts the attention of great powers due to its distinctively stable structure in a politically turbulent and unstable region (Oladipo 2015).

This country is located on the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, which serves as a gateway to the Suez Canal, one of the world's busiest maritime routes. The Bab al-Mandeb strait is a major passage for ships traveling between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. It is a significant geography in terms of global energy politics because some of the oil commerce passes through this route. Thanks to its ports, Djibouti also plays a significant role in enabling landlocked countries to import and export. Djibouti, which is situated at the edge of the horn, serves as both the entrance to Africa and the link between it and the Arabian Peninsula (Leboeuf 2019, 7).



Source: Britannica.

Another factor that makes Djibouti attractive for great powers is its closeness to high-risk countries in Africa and the Middle East. Because of the security risk caused by sea pirates and Al-Shabaab militants, Somalia has turned into a source of conflict. Yemen, a country in the northeast of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, is home to ongoing fighting (Oladipo 16 June 2015). Piracy operations persist despite of resumption of the “Atalanta” operation (Le Gouriellec 2018, 236). These crises necessitate the establishment of a military base in the region by international actors. This type of base is employed by countries to illustrate their power, intervene in regional affairs, spread their culture, and increase their political influence (Sun & Zoubir 2011, 82-104). Thus, Djibouti currently has the property of being a crucial

military base for great powers such as France, the USA and China because of its geographic position. There are also British troops in the country.

2. Djibouti-France Relations

Beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, the French developed an interest in the geography of Djibouti. In 1869, the Suez Canal was constructed, necessitating the formulation of French policy for this region. The Suez Canal's construction, particularly as maritime trade became more significant, encouraged the Europeans to establish bases in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The French Empire had to be more active in the Horn of Africa due to its strategic imperatives in the Far East and Southeast Asia, or Indochina (Stratfor 2017). In this regard, the French initially arrived in the present-day territory of Djibouti in the 1860s to establish a gateway to their colonies at Southeast Asia and a base to counter the British naval force in Aden (Abdallah 2008, 269-271). France maintained its presence in Djibouti from the final quarter of the 19th century to the final third of the 20th century for nearly 100 years under different administrations.

During this time, attempts were made in what is now Djibouti to gain independence. The increase in Somali nationalist activity, particularly in the country's neighbors, fueled Djibouti's desire for independence, but the majority of participants in referendums held in 1959 and 1966 preferred to remain under French rule (Abdallah 2008, 269-272; CIA, n.d.). Its land, which was regarded as France's traditional protected territory, was considered a fortress in the west, guarded by Paris (Lasserre 2011). Djibouti, under the control of Paris,

was both protected against regional powers and supported economically.

It was nearly hard for an African country to receive support from several powers at once, particularly during the Cold War era (Taher 2015). To lessen its security and economic vulnerability and reduce the threat from its neighbors, Djibouti strengthened its connections with France through a defense agreement and began to gain from French budget aids to meet its obligations as a state and consolidate its sovereignty. Furthermore, the preservation of the pro-Western political regime in Djibouti, whose neighbors consisted solely of communist bloc countries, increased the importance of this country in the eyes of France (Idle & Lasserre 2021).

The French were forced to concede Djibouti's independence after political turmoil and pressure from surrounding countries. Under the leadership of Hassan Gouled Aptidon, Djibouti thus became the 49th sovereign state of Africa on June 27, 1977 (Abdallah 2008, 272-273). The French influence in Djibouti was not abruptly ended by this independence, though. Since 1932, Djibouti has housed a French military base, and the two countries signed a mutual defense agreement in 1977. This allowed France to keep a military garrison in Djibouti as well as a number of military installations. The most significant permanent French force deployment in Africa is still found in Djibouti.

On May 1, 2014, a new defense cooperation pact negotiated between France and Djibouti in December 2011 came into effect. The security provisions of the agreement reiterate France's dedication to the Republic of Djibouti's independence and territorial integrity. The agreement signed in 2011 is significant because it emphasized that the

relations are between two independent and sovereign states while also providing operational facilities to the French forces, despite the fact that it is obvious that France is more profitable and maintains its old colonial habits in the agreement with Djibouti (Lasserre 2011).

A special forces detachment from France has deployed in Djibouti. This detachment is expected to respond in the case of a crisis in the Horn of Africa or to be sent to the Middle East or the Indian Ocean as needed. French civilians will be protected in their permanent region of responsibility by a reserve force that will respond to regional crises. In accordance with the agreement, French personnel are deployed at a number of locations in Djibouti City, including the Chabelley Airport and the Djibouti-Ambouli International Airport (Melvin 2019, 6-7).

In accordance with the defense cooperation agreement, the French Forces headquartered in Djibouti (FFDJ) is charged with defending Djibouti's territory and airspace as well as assisting member states of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in their activities in the Horn of Africa. The EU Naval Atalanta, the EU's anti-piracy mission, is supported logistically by Spanish and German detachments at the French base (EUNAVFOR, Operation Atalanta). The FFDJ supports French involvement in bilateral and multilateral foreign military presence in the Horn of Africa, as well as training with African armed forces. It also supports French participation in UN and EU multilateral military missions.

These military missions include ones like France's Operation Barkhane, which has been taking place in the Sahel since 2014 and involves 3000 French soldiers. The naval base serves as a strategically

significant point for France to dispatch its nuclear attack submarines to the Indian Ocean and performs a significant logistical role in supporting the French and allied warships in the area. The garrison has a squadron of Mirage fighter planes, helicopters, and heavy machinery to support infantry formations (Melvin 2019, 7-8).

The largest permanent French force stationed in Africa is the **FFDJ**. There are 1,350 soldiers at this forward operating base in East Africa (4,300 in 1978 and 2,000 in the mid-2000s). The operation was carried out by French soldiers in a string of operations, including “Barkhane,” “Tamour,” and “Chammal” in Jordan and Iraq (2014–2015), “Sangaris” in the Central African Republic (2014), and “Artémis” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2003). Beyond external operations, the capability to intercept marine communication links and counterterrorism are the two main strategic goals of this structure today. The Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) attack on Charlie Hebdo emphasizes the importance of French involvement in Djibouti, which is a cutting-edge component of the country’s national security system. In the region, there is a serious threat from terrorism. Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which carried out an attack in Djibouti in 2014, also kidnapped French feminist activist Marie Dedieu in 2011 and Denis Alex, an employee of the General Directorate of Foreign Security (DGSE), in 2009. For France, the organization’s ties to radical groups in the Arabian Peninsula are concerning (Le Gouriellec 2018, 232-234).

However, Djibouti has more than just a military significance for France. Due to its proximity to Bab al-Mandeb, Djibouti is in the position of controlling access to the Red Sea from the South. 95 percent of France’s trade with outside the EU is conducted by sea, and Asia is

becoming more significant in this. Every day, about 5 million barrels of refined goods and crude oil pass through this region. Every year, 15 per cent of all traded goods in the globe transit via Bab'ul Mandeb. This small area makes it possible to maintain a maritime communication line across the Gulf, Reunion Island and Mayotte, the Indian Ocean and beyond (Le Gouriellec 2018, 233).

The agreement signed in 2011 ended the protection system, but this doesn't mean Djibouti's significance to France has diminished. The French President Emmanuel Macron's trip to Djibouti in March 2019 might be considered as a component of a strategy to improve bilateral relations between the two countries (Semo 2019). President Macron's visit was viewed as an attempt to reestablish French influence in the face of China's expanding influence thanks to its military presence and billion-dollar investments (Ismail 2019).

During his visit to Djibouti, President Macron emphasized that the country is not only historically significant, but also strategically important in terms of military, sea routes, geopolitical and strategic levels, commercial and economic levels, and hence footprints in Djibouti are absolutely vital (Ministère des Armées, n.d.). In line with this approach, France has continued to provide development assistance to its former colony since its independence. Marks (1974, 95-104) describes Djibouti as "France's strategic stronghold in Africa." Le Gouriellec (2018, 238) claims that French presence in Djibouti will be crucial if it wants to keep a strong ability to intervene in Africa.

3. Djibouti-China Relations

Le Gouriellec (2018, 238) argues that Djibouti, a small country with big aspirations, has evolved, but China, not France, is a responsible

for these changes. In particular, with infrastructural projects that would promote development, Djibouti has undergone dramatic change. China's desire to establish in Djibouti, also its first military base in Africa, has drawn international attention to this small country in the Horn of Africa. Djibouti is significant to China since it is located along the route for international trade. Because of its location in the Bab'ul Mandeb Strait, close proximity to the Middle East, and strategic importance in energy transit routes, this country is regarded as strategically significant by great powers like China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.; Çalışkan 2021).

Due to China's financial interests and overseas investments on the African continent, Djibouti is seen as a commercial hub by Beijing. It is located on one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. It is easy to understand the importance of Djibouti to Beijing when one considers that Beijing conducts more than \$1 billion in daily trade with European Union (EU) countries, that a significant portion of this trade passes through the Gulf of Aden, and that at least 40% of China's total oil imports pass through the Indian Ocean (Chaziza 2021). 90 per cent of China's exports and imports consist of maritime trade, so securing trade and promoting economic growth are now essential to the regime's survival (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 127-128).

Djibouti reached the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean as part of the Belt and Road project, which began to be realized in 2013. From there, it has become a logistics hub on the trade routes leading to the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Djibouti is also crucial to China's energy security at this time. Even though the Bab-ul-Mandeb Strait is used for only 3 per cent of Beijing's crude oil imports

and 4 per cent of its natural gas imports, China, along with its army base in Djibouti, eases the way of oil and natural gas through the strait and guarantees the security of these resources (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 127-128).

In this context, one of China's top priorities in Djibouti is to deepen economic relations. Beijing has assumed an important role in the region as a result of China's expanding economic interests in Africa and the need to safeguard these interests, principally in the Horn of Africa, which is situated in the Gulf of Aden and is one of the most crucial bottlenecks and waterways for Chinese trade. To address the rising demand for raw materials and natural resources that China cannot meet domestically, thousands of Chinese enterprises have made investments abroad in accordance with the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese state-owned corporations and private businesses, as well as an expanding number of Chinese citizens on the continent, all started to trade in greater numbers. More than 10,000 Chinese merchants are thought to be present in the area. More than a million Chinese people conduct business there. Their commercial interests have come under threat as a result of the instabilities and conflicts in the area, and the PLAN-Liberation People's Army Navy has been conducting evacuation operations for Chinese citizens. As a result, security and terrorist concerns have emerged as critical factors in Sino-African collaboration. Because of these attacks, the Chinese people are putting pressure on their governments to protect Chinese citizens abroad and to protect China's economic interests (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 127-129).

The goal of the White Paper on China's relations with Africa is to advance security and peace in the continent by aiding African

countries in their fights against terrorism and piracy and by participating in infrastructure and development initiatives aimed at eradicating poverty. While socio-economic issues are viewed as the primary cause of instability in the continent, the Chinese feel that development is the cornerstone of security and peace in Africa. This strategy is consistent with China's military diplomacy for African security and peace and the new security concept for the continent. In this context, China plans and builds infrastructure projects through Chinese companies, such as the Ethiopia-Djibouti Water Pipeline, Ethiopian-Djibouti Railway, Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port, airports, shopping centers, roads, and new ports, and provides substantial financial support for such investments. The majority of Djibouti's \$14.4 billion in infrastructure projects are funded by Chinese banks. On the other hand, it is intended to develop a currency system, a transit trade center, and a unified customs system between China and Djibouti (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 131-132).

Western businesses have frequently been hesitant to support infrastructure and development projects in Africa out of concern over high maintenance costs. On the other side, African countries have drawn to China because of their policies that link security and development, follow the win-win concept, and promote involvement in the continent's infrastructure project (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 132). Furthermore, China doesn't meddle in the internal problems of African nations; instead, its foreign policy towards them is centered on the connection between development and security.

The Ethiopian market in particular is crucial to Djibouti's economy. The Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, the airport, the banking

industry and the commercial and maritime activities of the port of Djibouti all contribute to the country's main economic activity. This railroad was built to replace the French line established in the 1890s. During the Ogaden War (1977-1978), Somali forces invaded Ethiopia and claimed control of the railway to Dire Dawa (Watson 1986, 167). During this period, the railway suffered extensive damage. The Development Bank of China, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China contributed to the financing of the project, which accounted for 70 per cent of the total project cost (Global Infrastructure Hub 2020). The Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway is significant because it is the first and only cross-border railway in Africa that is both the longest and most electrified. Less than ten hours are needed to travel by train from the capital of Ethiopia to the port of Djibouti. With this investment, Djibouti's position in the Belt-Road Initiative is strengthened. It is asserted that this initiative has led to a gradual rise of China's influence in Djibouti at the expense of France (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 129-132).

The groundbreaking ceremony for the 23-story twin tower, which will serve as the future headquarters of the Chinese construction company, was held a few days after the celebration of the railway project in 2017. In the presence of representatives from Togo, Azerbaijan and South Africa, the cornerstone of the new 4,800-hectare free economic zone next to the Chinese base and the new port was laid in the same week (Le Monde 2017). In 2018, the first phase of the project will be inaugurated. Once the project is completed, Djibouti will become the largest free trade zone in Africa and improve its status as a commercial hub. By 2025, it is also expected to create around 50,000 new jobs for the people of Djibouti (Jincui 2019).

The Djiboutian government and people therefore have a very good attitude toward China. However, there are a sizable number of individuals who are concerned about being reliant on China. The main cause of concern is specifically the issue of how loans from China will be repaid.

Near the Port of Djibouti, located at the southern entrance to the Red Sea and on the western coast of the Gulf of Aden, are two of the world's three busiest shipping lanes. The project provides a strategic platform for maritime activities linking Asia, Africa and Europe. The port is vital to the economies of other East African countries as well as Djibouti. 90% of Ethiopia's international trade passes through the port of Djibouti. The port began operations in 2014 with a total investment of \$590 million (Jingjing 2016). China Merchants provided the financing, invested US\$185 million and acquired 23.5 per cent of Port de Djibouti (PDSA) (Africa News 2017). The China Export and Import Bank lent \$344 million for the first phase of the construction of the Doraleh multipurpose port (Darras 2021). China State Civil Engineering Corporation and China Civil Engineering Corporation implemented the project.

After the Europeans and Japanese established bases in the country in the early 2000s to protect the commercial interests of the USA under the threat of piracy, as part of the fight against terrorism, the Chinese also embarked on such a quest (Le Gouriellec 2018, 231). While cooperation between the two countries has been developing steadily since 1979, the two parties signed an agreement in 2017 that launched a new era in relations and aimed to establish a strategic partnership (China Daily 2017).

Following the deal, the Beijing administration opened its first foreign military base in Djibouti. The Chinese base is seen as the embodiment of the Belt and Road project (Le Gouriellec 2018, 231). China's establishment of a military base is also an indication of its search for a new and permanent military presence beyond its borders. After the establishment of the military base by Beijing, Djibouti became the focus of attention for Western countries. However, a number of Western actors already have military bases in the country. But the establishment of a military base by China has meant that a new player has been brought into the game. This was noticed by Western players. Although it has been predicted that China intends to use the military base to increase its influence in the country, the Beijing administration is currently claiming that the base will provide protection and logistical support for Chinese merchant ships and officials using the Gulf of Aden.

China's logistics base will serve its interests in promoting and consolidating stability along the coast of Somalia, the Indian Ocean region and the Gulf of Aden. Djibouti's main economic assets rely on the shipping routes between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Djibouti is strategically located on the western bank of the Bab-ul-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, is a major container transit port. China plays a critical role in countering piracy and ensuring economic stability and international maritime security. By securing port access for supplies, China ensures greater flexibility and fuel autonomy. The entire East African region will be positively impacted by the security of strategic shipping lanes. In addition, the Chinese base will support Chinese peacekeepers in counter-terrorism activities, intelligence gathering, humanitarian aid

operations, and enhance the security of cooperation between China and African countries. Increasingly, it will serve alone or with African governments that contribute troops to African peacekeeping forces. This would be cheaper than training African peacekeepers in China (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 132-133).

The great powers began to fight more than ever for control of the Red Sea with China's new Silk Road project and a base in Djibouti to protect its trade-logistics network (Le Point 2021). In fact, Djibouti also hosts the military bases of Western countries such as the USA, France and Italy. But these countries are not interested in investments in Djibouti. In fact, the USA, which has the largest number of troops in Djibouti with 4,000 soldiers, has established a base in the region. It has acted in accordance with its geopolitical interests, using the terrorist activities in Yemen as a pretext. On the other hand, France has the second largest base in the country with a military unit of 1,000 soldiers. Djibouti is also largest French military base in Africa (BBC 2015).

The Western countries pay rent to Djibouti in exchange for the bases, but they do not invest. China, on the other hand, is moving to build up the infrastructure involved in the Belt and Road Project. Beijing's government does so for its own economic interests. However, investing also creates opportunities for Djibouti to develop. This is welcomed by Djiboutian leaders. Economic growth surpassed the 5 percent range, reaching 6.7 percent in 2017 (Fellah Trade, n.d.), thanks to Chinese investment and aid in the country. Infrastructural projects, many of which were financed by loans from China, began to be implemented in 2015, and this has contributed to Djibouti's growing economy. Ethiopia (59,1 per cent), China (16 per cent), the USA (7,1

per cent), India (6,4 per cent) and Jordan (1,4 per cent) are the leading countries to which Djibouti exports in 2022. The country from which it imports the most is China with 47 per cent. China is followed by India with 12,6 per cent and Türkiye with 7,9 per cent. France ranks 8th on the list with 1,3 per cent (T.C. Ticaret Bakanlığı 2023). China and the USA stand out as non-regional actors in exports, and China ranks first in imports. On the other hand, it is seen that France lags behind in Djibouti's foreign trade list.

4. Djibouti-USA Relations

The USA first established its consular representation in the French colony of Somaliland in 1929. Official diplomatic relations between the USA and the Republic of Djibouti started in 1977, when the country declared its independence. The first official USA embassy in Djibouti was opened in 1980. Djibouti is a key partner for the USA in security, regional stability, and humanitarian efforts throughout the Horn of Africa, strategically located at the mouth of the Red Sea. Djibouti is home to the USA base at Camp Lemonnier, which was established under a formal agreement in 2003 and is the only permanent U.S. military presence in Africa (U.S. Department of State 2022). Camp Lemonnier is also critical to the security and public access of the 16 USA embassies in the region. From this base, counter-terrorism operations are conducted against al-Shabaab in Somalia in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qaeda in the region (Le Point 2021).

Recognizing the strategic value of Djibouti, the Obama administration has taken steps to develop the bilateral partnership. The USA President Barack Obama welcomed President Guelleh at the White House in May 2014, and during his visit, a new "Implementation

Arrangement” was signed between the two countries, extending the lease agreement at Camp Lemonnier and other facilities in the USA with an option for another ten years. The regulation envisaged doubling the USA annual rent payment to Djibouti to \$63 million. The two governments also established the USA-Djibouti Bilateral Forum (BNF), a mechanism for regular bilateral talks on economic and regional security issues. The first meeting was held in Washington in February 2015 with the high-level participation of both parties (Kelly 2015). According to this agreement with the Djibouti government, the USA also provides access to Djibouti’s port facilities and airport. The importance of Djibouti for the USA can be understood from the words of former USA Defense Secretary James Mattis during his visit to Djibouti in 2017. The former minister described this country as “an important geographical crossroads” (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 127).

Over time, the steps of the Obama administration to strengthen the USA presence in Djibouti also revealed the importance that the USA attaches to Djibouti. Because the USA is making aid to Djibouti and developing the base it has established here in order to protect its own economic activities and to operate militarily in the region. The ability to operate with maximum operational flexibility in the Horn of Africa is considered extremely important to the USA. The USA has several foreign policy obligations in this regard. These are counterterrorism, maintaining a diplomatic presence in insecure areas, and strengthening skilled partners in the Gulf of Aden and the African continent.

The base agreement between the USA and Djibouti was signed for ten years, then extended for another ten years. The terms of agreement can be extended for another ten years without renegotiation,

and for another ten years (until 2044) after renegotiation. The agreement also gives the United States the right to give one year's notice of any evacuation of its military facilities. However, it does not formally envisage the USA obligation to inform the host country about personnel present and activities carried out at military installations. In other words, information about the content of the activities carried out is kept confidential from Djibouti. In addition, the USA controls this base by sending soldiers to hot conflict areas that are problematic in the Middle East and Africa in general. The aim of the USA in the East African Horn is to fight Al-Shabaab by keeping Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya under its influence. The base initial importance for operations in the Sahel and Horn of Africa region, especially in Yemen and Africa.

Two of al-Qaeda's four subordinate organizations, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and Al-Shabaab in Somalia are located right next to Djibouti. The access of the USA to Djibouti can be seen as a step towards fighting against these organizations and preventing attacks. Its proximity to Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula and especially to Africa enables the USA to take steps against terrorist activities in this region.

Using Camp Lemonnier as a base, Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) works with partner countries across East Africa, beyond the Horn of Africa and up to the Indian Ocean, and Central African countries such as Rwanda and Burundi. The CJTF-HOA team also collaborates with American embassies in the region to coordinate security and counter-terrorism policy. In partnership with US embassy country teams in the region, CJTF-HOA also conducts joint operations with the African Union's Mission to Somalia.

The USA provides ongoing humanitarian, health, security, and education assistance to Djibouti, with the exception of the annual rent for the base. Members of a relatively small USA military force based in the Horn of Africa are referred to as “armed aid workers”. American troops drill wells, vaccinate livestock, build school facilities, and carry out various humanitarian missions in Djibouti. Local people in the predominantly Muslim region welcome the aid.

The Humanitarian Bureau (BHA) of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) operates a pre-positioned food aid warehouse in Djibouti, which serves as a hub for immediate response across Asia and Africa. USAID provides assistance and support to strengthen the regulatory framework and enabling environment in the energy sector, while also enhancing the capacity of the Geothermal Energy Development Office (ODDEG). Additionally, USAID ensures access to reliable electricity and clean drinking water for the people of Djibouti. The International Broadcasting Bureau facilities in Djibouti broadcast programs in Arabic, and Voice of America’s Somali Service reaches audiences across the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

Djibouti is confronted with a swiftly expanding workforce that lacks the skills required to fulfill the country’s economic requirements, leading to elevated unemployment and unoccupied high-skilled occupations. The impediments to growth consist of costly electricity, persistent water shortages, indicators of inadequate health, food insecurity, and governance complications. A portfolio of programs is being supported by the United States aimed at hastening economic progress with their assistance. The United States asserts that it provides assistance to establish a dynamic civil society, decrease unemployment,

and foster development with the aim of supporting Djibouti's development objectives.

One of the primary shared goals of the Djibouti and US administrations is to enhance Djibouti's economy and widen economic partnership and collaboration by augmenting workforce employment in Djibouti. Washington has prioritized enhancing the standard of vocational education programs, fostering sustainable connections between vocational education centers and job providers, and bolstering employment-placement services. The program for workforce development aids in nurturing the entrepreneurial and English language skills of younger individuals.

The United States fully supports the Ministry of Education and Professional Development (MENFOP) of Djibouti in enhancing the standard of primary education nationwide with its aid. The country is channeling its US-funded support toward upgrading the reading and literacy competencies of its 55,000 primary school students by upgrading reading curriculums, instructing both pre-service and in-service teachers, and creating a better policy environment that promotes reading (US Department of State 2022). The USA government has provided substantial assistance to support Djibouti in its endeavors to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. This assistance includes the donation of substantial quantities of COVID-19 vaccine doses, amounting to several hundred thousand.

The USA assistance provided by the BHA addresses persistent issues of drought, climate change, and food insecurity in rural Djibouti on an annual basis. Additionally, the US government in Washington maintains its position as one of the primary contributors of food aid to

impoverished communities in Djibouti. Throughout 2021, USAID and BHA agencies provided over \$8.5 million in support for refugee economic recovery, market system programming, food and nutrition aid, and humanitarian and information management coordination in Djibouti (US Department of State 2022). The United Nations World Food Program is the largest partner for food safety in Djibouti with the United States.

Modern port facilities in Djibouti foster the growth of the logistics and service sectors. By 2035, Djibouti aims to finish numerous critical infrastructure undertakings such as constructing the natural gas pipeline, liquefaction plant, export terminal, geothermal power plant, renewable energy projects, and the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone, the most extensive free trade zone in Africa. Subsequently, in early 2018, Ethiopia launched a brand-new railway connecting Djibouti City to Addis Ababa (Global Infrastructure Hub 2020). These initiatives form part of the ambitious plan of the Djibouti Government to develop Djibouti as a significant trade and shipping hub in East Africa.

American exports to Djibouti comprise vegetable oil, wheat, machinery, and foodstuffs. The ports of Djibouti are utilized by the United States for exports and imports with numerous countries in East Africa. Furthermore, the USA has entered into a trade and investment framework agreement with the Eastern and Southern Africa Common Market, of which Djibouti is a member. If Djibouti completes the aforementioned projects, it will become a larger economic market and further expand its economic relations with the US. As of 2022, the trade volume between the US and Djibouti stands at only \$213.9 million, with

\$171.6 million consisting of exports from the USA to Djibouti (US Census Bureau 2023).

The partnership between the two nations is founded upon a mutual dedication to securing East Africa. Nevertheless, the region's prosperity and development are crucial components of this equation. Furthermore, Djibouti's stability and lack of conflict contributes to the USA's greater sense of ease within the area.

5. Djibouti-Russia Relations

Russia, which acted with the aim of spreading socialism in the Horn of Africa during the Cold War, is now acting far beyond this ideological framework. Today, it is claimed that Russia's geopolitical presence in the region has begun to revive. In September 2019, Somalia's Ambassador to Russia Abdullahi Mohamud Warsame stated that the Somali people wanted to see the Russians return to Somalia, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed established strong ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Egypt-Egypt regarding access to the Nile River. Russia's role as a facilitator in the conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan is interpreted as signs of this revival.

Arms sales have an important place in Russia's Horn of Africa policy. According to SIPRI's data between 2015 and 2019, it reveals that Sub-Saharan African countries purchased 36% of their weapons from Russia. Russia was followed by China with 19% and France with 7.6%. Traces of Moscow's fame in this regard can also be seen in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia imported \$71 million worth of weapons from Russia in 2019. One of the strategies followed by Russia is debt forgiveness. Ethiopia's cancellation of its \$163.6 million debt helped facilitate arms deals with Addis Ababa. On the other hand, after the UN

sanctions against the Eritrean defense industry were lifted in November 2018, Russia quickly entered the Eritrean arms market.

One of the countries with which Russia has an arms contract is Djibouti. However, arms sales to Djibouti by France, China, the United Kingdom and the USA prevent Russia from dominating the arms market. However, it is also claimed that Russia's presence shakes the balance of global geopolitics in the Horn of Africa. On the other hand, in 2012, Russia stated that it wanted to establish a military base in Djibouti, especially for its air force. But Djiboutian authorities have refused to host the Russian base to avoid becoming embroiled in great power rivalries. Russia's initiatives in this regard ended due to the Ukraine crisis in 2014 (Klyszcs 2020).

Due to Russia's increasing profile in sub-Saharan Africa, which emerged with the Sochi summit, and the increase in Russia's arms sales to the region, speculations regarding Russia's desire to establish a naval base in the Red Sea have increased. This base would allow Russia to establish a sphere of influence near Chinese and US bases. Following these speculations, the Kremlin stated that they did not intend to establish a military base in the port of Berbera. However, the military build-up and Moscow's desire to avoid being left out of the international competition for influence in the Horn of Africa may lead Russia to establish a base in the Red Sea (Klyszcs 2020).

On the other hand, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, at the diplomatic talks attended by Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Djibouti, who was on a working visit to Moscow, stated that Russia is ready to make coordinated efforts to increase bilateral economic

cooperation with Djibouti. The Russian Foreign Ministry said the agenda includes Russia-Djibouti cooperation in the fields of politics, trade, economy, investment activities, education and health, including the implementation of potential joint projects in Djibouti. Djibouti also follows a line towards developing cooperation with Russia and shows interest in deepening interstate dialogue and expanding cooperation in commercial, economic, cultural and other fields. Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the two countries should create conditions that will promote trade and economic ties for mutually beneficial projects in the fields of energy and agriculture. According to the Russian Foreign Minister, many Russian companies are interested in working in Djibouti and want to find partners there (Klomegah 2021).

6. Djibouti’s Development Strategy: “Vision Djibouti 2035”

Djibouti, which has been under the influence of France for many years, started to adopt a multilateral approach in foreign policy and to take more independent steps after the change of power in 1999 (Prunier 2020). It develops multi-sectoral relations with many countries within the framework of a multipolar approach. Djibouti is very determined to be visible on the world stage and follows policies that will enable it to participate actively in the international game (Le Gouriellec 2016, 11). The Djibouti government is leveraging its geostrategic position to develop East Africa into a trade and logistics hub, connecting it with the Middle East and Indian Ocean markets, with destinations including Dubai and Singapore. To this end, the country has established its “Vision Djibouti 2035” development initiative, which includes several infrastructure projects (Downs, Becker & de Gategno 2017, 20-21). In addition, it is foreseen that new job opportunities will arise, poverty will

decrease and Djibouti will turn into a middle-income country thanks to the infrastructure projects (Elmahly & Sun 2018, 129). The Djibouti administration's active and cooperative foreign policy that prioritizes the win-win principle has been an important factor facilitating the establishment of close relations between great powers and the country.

Thanks to its location on Bab-ul Mandeb, this young country presents itself as the watchdog of the world's fourth most important strait, the key gateway for world trade, and describes itself as the facilitator of maritime links between Europe and Asia (Leboeuf 2019, 7). Djibouti considers itself an island of stability in a disputed region (Le Gouriellec 2018, 236). Djibouti, which is financially supported by China, the US and France in particular, takes advantage of its strategic position and implements strategic plans in order to become a logistics, finance and telecommunication center. While aiming to be the Singapore of Africa, the microstate imagines itself as the "lighthouse of the Red Sea".

The Djibouti Vision 2035 is based on five principles that will trigger transformations and set the country on a new path of progress and development. These five principles of the 2035 Vision; national peace and unity, good governance, diversified and competitive economy, consolidation of human capital and regional integration (Vision Djibouti 2035 2014, 37). Another target is to reduce the unemployment rate, which was 48.4% in 2012 to approximately 10% in 2035. A new growth model will be created in order to take advantage of the numerous opportunities in sectors, especially in fisheries, tourism, logistics, New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT), finance sector and all manufacturing sectors where

development will be achieved. New sectors supported by exports such as fishing products, tourism and offshore will contribute to growth with the diversification of the economy. By 2035, the average annual growth rate of exports will reach 14% and the openness rate will reach approximately 132% of GDP (Vision Djibouti 2035 2014, 38-42). Increasing its growth rate, the Djibouti administration has also carried out various projects in the country, enabling the country to become an important market.

The five important principles of the 2035 Vision plan, which was published and put into practice by the Djibouti government in 2014, are briefly described below.

National Peace and Unity: In domestic politics; peace, unity and solidarity will be consolidated by 2035. In line with this plan, the government will take steps to maintain and strengthen institutional and traditional frameworks of reconciliation, consolidate social cohesion, and promote national solidarity.

Good Governance: Joint initiatives, notably from Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) member countries and the African Union, will support peace in the sub-region. In addition, the presence of many foreign military forces, particularly French, Chinese, US, British and Japanese military bases, and future foreign military bases will provide full surveillance and strengthen security in the fight against terrorism and piracy. Furthermore, the border conflict in Ras Doumeira will be resolved definitively.

Diversified and competitive economy: Djibouti 2035 aims to raise living standards in proportion to an annual growth of 10% of GDP per capita (Vision Djibouti 2035 2014, 39). The pursuit of strong, stable

and sustainable growth is the main pillar of the plan. This requires a deepening of liberalism, a greater appreciation of the capacities of national wealth-creating sectors, a larger role of the private sector, and the construction of an economic model based on diversification of income and employment sources. In this perspective, all existing factors of production will be valued and economic growth will be ensured to reach an average of 8% to 10% per year in real terms (Vision Djibouti 2035 2014, 40-42).

Consolidation of Human Capital: Ensuring the well-being of Djiboutians is the goal of long-term development. Welfare is based on the deep aspirations of societies and includes health, education and employment, housing, hobbies and living conditions, aims to meet their needs in an appropriate way. Developing human capital through appropriate initial training, specialized development programs and the importation of qualified international expertise is necessary not only to achieve the vision but also to establish a knowledge and skill center, specifically in the scientific and technological fields. In this view, the 2035 Vision will ensure that steps are taken to consolidate and develop human capital.

Regional Integration and International Cooperation: Djibouti 2035 will strengthen the country's openness. The geostrategic position of the country enables global trade between the African continent, especially Europe, Asia, and the Middle East on the one hand and the Horn of Africa on the other. Furthermore, liberal economy will make it easier to achieve this goal in terms of making better use of global trade and Foreign Direct Investment. Djibouti 2035 aims to participate fully

in driving transformations and establishing regional groupings, regional integration and globalization.

Conclusion

This study examined Djibouti's relations with the United States, China, France and Russia and focuses on how its strategic position is reflected in its relations with these great powers. In addition, it was focused on whether the French influence in Djibouti decreased or not and finally how the strategic position was instrumentalized by Djibouti.

It is seen that France as one of the great powers is gradually losing its influence and former position in Djibouti, which is one of the smallest countries in terms of surface area of the African continent, which is known as the backyard of France, and has an extremely important place in international politics due to its geographical position. Great powers such as China, the USA and Russia are strengthening their political, military and economic presence in the country as well as in the Horn of Africa. It is observed that especially China and the USA generally emphasize the development-security relationship. In this perspective, the emphasis is predominantly on bringing the development in Djibouti to a certain level and the security of the stated geography draws attention in the investments and aids made. In this sense, it is observed that development in Djibouti is connected to the basis of security, that is, development is securitized.

Djibouti controls access to the Indian Ocean and then to the Red Sea via the Bab-ul Mandeb Strait as one of the world's most heavily traded sea routes. Moreover, the multitude of security issues plaguing the Middle East and North Africa region, such as piracy, terrorism and interstate tensions, once again underline the country's increasing

importance as a focal point in regional security assessments over the past two decades.

Currently, the rivalry between the USA-France and China in Djibouti holds significance. Each country has military base located in Djibouti, which are vital for their interests in the region. Therefore, each country attempts to maintain their relations with Djibouti at a particular level to serve their own objectives. Furthermore, the Djibouti administration benefits from its situation by capitalizing on the attention of all three countries. Therefore, preserving stability in Djibouti is pivotal for these three prominent powers. The militarization of Djibouti, that is, its militarization (filling with bases), does not have negative consequences on its political and economic development and sovereignty. However, the effect of this situation is variable and may lead to positive or negative consequences in the future. As long as economic and diplomatic independence and security are artificially strengthened by the presence of other country's armed forces, this will open new and positive doors for Djibouti.

The growth in military base density also slightly expands Djibouti's dependence on the tenant states but underscores its autonomy on the international stage at the same time. This small state in the Horn of Africa can benefit from its relations with its partners and their relations with each other in order to increase its decision-making capacity. Thus, the political authorities of Djibouti develop unique diplomatic positions and show their desire to equip themselves with a suitable military vehicle in the shadow of these military bases.

France appears to have experienced a decline in its influence within Djibouti, its former colony, over time. This waning influence has

been supplanted by great powers including the USA and China as well as other nations such as Japan and India. Despite possessing the largest African base in Djibouti and benefitting from a protection agreement with Djibouti, France's degree of influence is being diluted due to the presence of USA and China bases. Djibouti may seek to reduce French influence by establishing relationships with other significant powers.

The US, China, and France all have relations with Djibouti that intersect with both its geopolitical and strategic position, as well as its trade. Djibouti's strategic position enables swift intervention by France and the US in Africa's terrorist hotspots, while nurturing China's African projects and safeguarding its high-sea traffic passing through Bab-el Mandeb Strait. Hence, Djibouti's bases hold high significance for security and trade for the three aforementioned nations, and their liaison with Djibouti remains essential for such reasons. Djibouti holds a strategic position with respect to security policies in North Africa and the Middle East due to its control of the Bab-ul Mandeb Strait, a gateway to the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. This enhances its significance for trade and security, and thus, its indispensability in global affairs is expected to rise.

Finally, Djibouti's transformation into a global hub is orchestrated by the government, which has developed strategic plans. The Vision 2035 document is the most crucial of these strategies, setting out the Djibouti administration's aim to become a logistical and commercial center in the region. Furthermore, Djibouti aims to achieve significant objectives, including boosting the country's economy, attracting more foreign direct investment, rectifying infrastructure issues, and enhancing the country's transportation, urbanization,

energy, communication, and sewerage networks. Additionally, Djibouti strives to maintain strategic relationships and cooperate with key great powers like China, France, and the United States, as well as other important nations such as Japan, India, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Italy.

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