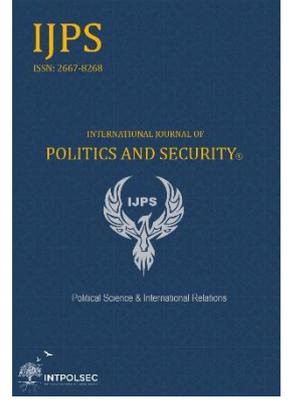


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Chinese Geoeconomics and Geostrategic Motives in a Changing International Order: Understanding the Significance of a Chinese Military Base in Djibouti

Habib Badawi*

Abstract

This study examines the geoeconomic and geostrategic motives driving China's establishment of a military base in Djibouti. From a geoeconomic perspective, it explores economic interests and opportunities in the Horn of Africa. Geographically, it addresses implications for global power dynamics, militarization of China-Africa partnerships, oil resource security, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, piracy, and the Maritime Silk Road. It also delves into China's Maritime Security Strategy within the Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on marine environmental protection, cooperative development, security alliances, knowledge promotion, and governance. A qualitative approach to research involves combining primary sources, such as official Chinese documents, with secondary sources, such as reports from the media and scholarly articles. Through a literature review and analysis, China's motives for the Djibouti military base are discerned.

Keywords: *Geoeconomics, Geostrategic Motives, International Order, Belt and Road Initiative, Maritime Silk Road, Indo-Pacific, Maritime Security Alliance, Maritime Governance.*

1. Introduction

By the beginning of the 21st century, China had shown significant enthusiasm for strengthening its global power position. This is after rapid economic growth over the past three decades. Based on its rapid economic and political escalation, Beijing has occupied the second global polar position after the United States. Beijing's rise as a second major polar region has implications for global order. First, it means that the United States will no longer be the sole superpower in the world. This could lead to a more competitive and unstable global order. Second, it means China will have a greater say in international affairs. This could lead to world governance changes. Third, it implies that the United States and China will need to cooperate on common interests. This could be a challenge, given the two countries' different political systems and interests. Overall, the rise of China as a second global polar power is a significant development that is likely to have a major impact on the global order. It is a development that will need to be carefully managed by the United States and China, as well as by other countries around the world.

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Beijing has emerged as the second global polar region after the United States due to several factors, including:

a. China's economic growth: China has experienced rapid economic growth in recent decades, becoming the world's second-largest economy. This economic growth has given China a greater say in global affairs and has allowed it to invest heavily in its military and infrastructure.

b. China's military power: China has been modernizing its military at a rapid pace, and it is now one of the most powerful militaries in the world. This military power gives China a greater ability to project its power around the world and defend its interests.

c. China's Soft Power Projection: China has been actively cultivating its soft power through various economic, cultural, and diplomatic initiatives in recent years. This strategic employment of soft power elements and tools aims to enhance China's global influence and shape a favorable narrative around its rise as a major power. However, some observers argue that this soft power push is a calculated attempt to create a sphere of influence and deflect criticism over human rights concerns and perceived hegemonic ambitions.

Beijing's soft power projection encompasses a multifaceted approach, leveraging its economic influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to foster infrastructure development and trade connectivity across multiple regions. Additionally, China has invested in cultural diplomacy programs, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide, to promote the Chinese language and culture. Simultaneously, China has sought to counter negative perceptions and criticisms by projecting a positive image through state-sponsored media outlets, academic exchanges, and strategic partnerships with other nations. This approach aims to cultivate a narrative that portrays China as a responsible global stakeholder and a viable alternative to Western dominance.

Critics, however, contend that China's soft power efforts are a thinly veiled attempt to expand its geopolitical influence and insulate itself from scrutiny over human rights issues, particularly in regions like Xinjiang and Tibet. They argue that economic incentives and cultural outreach programs are tools to coerce acquiescence and create a sphere of influence favorable to China's interests. Ultimately, China's soft power projection is a complex and multidimensional endeavor, intertwining elements of economic, cultural, and diplomatic



engagement. While it has undoubtedly elevated China's global prominence, the underlying motivations and potential implications remain subjects of ongoing debate and scrutiny within the international community.

As a result of its economic ascendancy and the subsequent creation of interdependencies through increased investment and trade ties, Beijing has emerged as a formidable global player in recent years. China's burgeoning economic clout has translated into significant political leverage, allowing it to project influence on a global scale. Consequently, China has solidified its position as the second-largest power pole in the world, trailing only the United States in terms of comprehensive national strength.

This dramatic rise of China as a preeminent force on the international stage has ushered in an era of heightened strategic competition with the United States, the incumbent superpower. The two nations find themselves locked in an unprecedented rivalry for global influence, with each vying to shape the contours of the emerging world order through their respective interests and values.

Sino-American power competition is a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing economic, technological, military, and ideological dimensions. It manifests itself in various theaters, ranging from trade disputes and technological decoupling to strategic posturing in regions of vital interest, such as the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic. This great power rivalry is likely to be a defining feature of the global landscape in the near future, profoundly influencing the dynamics of international relations, the trajectory of multilateral institutions, and the evolution of regional alliances and partnerships. As the two titans jockey for influence, their actions and interactions will reverberate across the globe, shaping the contours of the emerging global order for years, if not decades, to come.

Accordingly, the ability of other nations to navigate the complexities of this Sino-American rivalry and strike a delicate balance between the competing power poles will be critical to preserving their strategic autonomy and advancing their national interests in an increasingly multipolar world.

In June 2017, the Chinese government, through the National Development and Reform Commission in cooperation with the National Oceans and Oceans Administration, issued an authoritative document on coastal cooperation. The document was entitled "Vision for



Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative 一带一路”建设海上合作设想¹.

Chinese overseas expansion is most notable for its effort to establish its first military base abroad in Africa. This strategic effort was preceded by nine other countries, notably the United States², former colonial powers of Britain³, and France⁴, as well as emerging powers such as Russia⁵, India⁶, and Japan⁷.

China's decision to establish its first overseas military base in Djibouti is a strategic move that underscores the country's growing global ambitions and its desire to safeguard its expanding economic and security interests abroad. Several factors contributed to the selection of Djibouti as the location for this pivotal military outpost.

Firstly, Djibouti's geostrategic location at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint for global maritime trade, makes it an ideal staging ground for China's expanding naval operations⁸. This strategic position enables China to monitor and protect its vital shipping lanes and commercial interests in the region, as well as maintain a presence in the politically volatile Horn of Africa. Secondly, Djibouti's political stability and pro-investment policies have made it an attractive partner for foreign powers seeking to establish a military presence in the region. The country has cultivated close ties with China, as evidenced by the signing of a military pact in 2014⁹, which paved the way for the establishment of China's first overseas base. Furthermore, Djibouti's willingness to host foreign military forces, including those of the United States, France, and Japan, has

¹ Xinhua. 2022. August 15. China's fixed-asset investment expands 5.7 pct in first seven months. <https://english.news.cn/20220815/43ec8cb0b1d4485281e5bc965652874c/c.html>.

² Ariana. 2021. *Defending Our Sovereignty: US Military Bases in Africa and the Future of African Unity*. July 5, 2021 5. <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-42-militarisation-africa/>.

³ Makin-Isherwood, Laura. 2020. *How The British Military Are 'Opening Doors' In Africa*. March 10. <https://www.forces.net/news/how-british-military-opening-doors-africa>.

⁴ Vincent, Elise. 2022. *France forced into redefining military presence in Africa*. October 6. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/06/france-forced-into-redefining-military-presence-in-africa_5999420_4.html

⁵ Alden, Elizabeth Sidiropoulos and Chris. 2019. *Russia in Africa — post-Soviet re-engagement*. Jan Smuts House: South African Institute of International Affairs. : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25995.5>

⁶ Pham, J. Peter. 2011. *India in Africa: Implications of an Emerging Power*. US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11446>.

⁷ Kubo, Nobuhiro. 2016. *Japan to expand Djibouti military base to counter Chinese influence*. October 13. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-military-djibouti-idUSKCN12D0C4>.

⁸ Downs, Erica, Jeffery Becker, and Patrick DeGatengo. 2017. "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base." 84.

⁹ China, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of. 2019. *China's National Defense in the New Era*. China



contributed to its appeal as a hub for regional security operations. China's decision to establish a base in Djibouti allows it to operate alongside other major powers, facilitating potential cooperation and intelligence sharing while also serving as a counterweight to Western influence in the region.

In contrast, Yemen's ongoing political instability, civil war, and the presence of extremist groups made it a less desirable option for China's first overseas military base. The security risks and potential for entanglement in the country's complex conflicts likely deterred China from pursuing Yemen as a location for its initial overseas military foothold.

It is worth noting that while Djibouti currently hosts China's sole overseas military base, Beijing's growing global aspirations and the need to protect its expanding economic and strategic interests may prompt the establishment of additional military outposts in other regions in the future¹⁰.

Achieving its goal of completing its stations on the Silk Road, both onshore and offshore, China is working on its initiative “One Road, One Belt 一带一路”¹¹. Its station in Djibouti complements its strategy to “extend” its “String of Pearls” sea belt, stretching from the South China Sea across the Indian Ocean to Africa, to protect its trade and navy through establishing various military and logistical bases¹².

The Chinese navy set up a military base at Djibouti's upgraded port; in return, Beijing pays about twenty million dollars annually to Djibouti on a ten-year lease in exchange for the use of this military base¹³. The base can accommodate four hundred troops, but it can harbor about 10,000 marines, as it dedicates Djibouti as a defensive stronghold protecting the Silk Road's Sea routes.

¹⁰ Blanchard, Ben. 2015. November 27. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-nato-idUSKBN0TG08H20151127>.

¹¹ Jie, Wallace and Yu. 2021. *What is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?* September 13. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>.

¹² Marantidou, Virginia. 2014. “Revisiting China's ‘String of Pearls’ Strategy.” *Issues & Insights*, June. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182061/140624_issuesinsights_vol14no7.pdf.

¹³ Jeffrey, James. 2016. *China is building its first overseas military base in Djibouti*. May 3. <https://theworld.org/stories/2016-05-03/china-building-its-first-overseas-military-base-djibouti-right-next-key-us-one>.



The public announcement that the People's Liberation Army established this strategic facility in August 2017. China People's Liberation Army's in-Djibouti Support Base 中国人民解放军驻吉布提保障基地 consists of military barracks, paved areas, and eight runways dedicated to serving helicopters, drones, and jet fighters. The expansion of this base has continued through the ongoing construction of a maritime pier with an area of 450 meters. This pier can accommodate large warships. After these extensive developments, it is estimated that the base will be able to accommodate several thousand troops. Satellite footage of this base indicates the presence of many underground facilities in an area of about twenty-three thousand km²¹⁴. Since the opening of this base, there has been increasing tension between China and the United States. This is because of accusations that base personnel used lasers to blur American pilots' views while patrolling the Red Sea¹⁵.

The most crucial and imminent threat is the growing concern among American official circles regarding the possibility that the United States military base in Djibouti will be targeted in any future conflict due to China's control of the "Port of Doraleh"¹⁶. From a more regional perspective, NATO members alert that the establishment of the Chinese military base in Djibouti may be a precursor to the establishment of a network of other armed strongholds in the Indian Ocean as part of China's naval power projection¹⁷.

2. Chinese Geoeconomics and Geostrategic Motives in a Changing International Order

Geopolitics and geostrategics are two essential concepts in international relations and political geography. They offer distinct perspectives on how geographical factors influence states' behavior and strategies.

a. *Geopolitics*: It is the study of how geography and politics interact. It seeks to understand how geographical features, such as landforms, natural resources, climate, and

¹⁴ Nantulya, Paul. 2022. *Considerations for a Prospective New Chinese Naval Base in Africa*. May 12. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/considerations-prospective-chinese-naval-base-africa/>.

¹⁵ Browne, Ryan. 2018. *Chinese lasers injure US military pilots in Africa, Pentagon says*. May 4. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/03/politics/chinese-lasers-us-military-pilots-africa/index.html>.

¹⁶ Tritten, Travis J. 2018. *China may Assert Control of Djibouti Port, U.S. General Fears*. March 8. <https://tesfanews.net/china-control-key-us-military-port-djibouti-general-fears/>.

¹⁷ Castaldo, Fabio Massimo. 2022. *REPORT on a European Parliament recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the EU's strategic relationship and partnership with the H. European Parliament, Committee on Foreign Affairs*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0207_EN.html.



location, influence states' political behavior and decision-making. Geopolitics emphasizes that geography is not merely a passive backdrop but an active force shaping international relations¹⁸. In geopolitics, scholars analyze how territorial configurations, proximity to natural resources, and access to strategic waterways or chokepoints can impact a state's security, economic interests, and power projection capabilities. For example, control over vital sea lanes, like the Strait of Hormuz or the South China Sea, can give a nation significant leverage in global trade and influence.

Geopolitics examines how geographical factors contribute to alliances, power blocs, and regional dynamics. It also explores how states use geographical advantages to project power and pursue national interests on the international stage.

b. *Geostrategic*: Geostrategic refers to the strategic significance of specific geographical locations or regions in the context of broader political and military considerations¹⁹. It focuses on how states' and territories' geographical positioning can influence military planning, defense postures, and warfare conduct. Geostrategic thinking involves the assessment of critical chokepoints, natural barriers, and access to resources that impact a state's military capabilities and vulnerabilities. It also considers the potential threats and opportunities that arise from a country's location relative to its neighbors and potential adversaries.

For instance, a country with a favorable geostrategic position may enjoy a defensive advantage, secure borders, and control over key trade routes. A disadvantageous position may expose it to potential threats and security risks.

Accordingly, while geopolitics examines the broader relationship between geography and politics, geostrategic narrows the focus to the strategic implications of specific geographical locations. Both concepts play a crucial role in shaping states' and other actors' behavior in the global arena. They help policymakers and scholars understand international relations and strategic decision-making.

China's motives for establishing a military base in Djibouti are geoeconomic and geospatial:

¹⁸ Nicol, Heather, and Lassi Heininen. 2022. "The Evolving Geopolitics of Polar Regions." *Polar Cousins* 59-88.

¹⁹ Cohen, Benjamin. 2017. *Should China be Ejected from the SDR?* May 30. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-exchange-rate-imf-sdr-by-benjamin-j--cohen-2017-05?barrier=accesspaylog>.



2.1.1. Geoeconomic Motives

Djibouti is an excellent opportunity for Chinese investment abroad and economic interests in the Middle East and North Africa region. This is because China's trade with the European Union passes through the Gulf of Aden. This is estimated to be worth more than one billion dollars a day. Chinese oil imports pass through the Indian Ocean for 40% of their total imports²⁰. A Chinese base in Djibouti would allow increased trade through the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea. The Chinese government views the military base in Djibouti as supporting China's economic interests in the Horn of Africa. This is a pivotal role in the Belt and Road Sea Route, referred to as the Maritime Silk Road. This route links China's coastal regions with Africa, Asia, and Europe. It passes through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal.

2.1.2. Geostrategic Motives

The Chinese base has been described as a “logistical support base” and a “strategic strength”²¹ by Chinese experts and policymakers to indicate its role in supporting China's military capabilities in imposing long-range global polar. Being part of China's network of strategic strengths through the “pearl thread” strategy²², where each pearl in this strategy represents a port project on the coast of the Indian Ocean, and linking these ports, will create a series of military facilities as observation posts for the Chinese army.

This strategy aims to develop naval capabilities by establishing external garrisons and command posts. This will enable it to achieve its security objectives of challenging U.S. maritime dominance and eliminating U.S. international influence.

China's establishment of a military base in Djibouti serves several strategic purposes and aligns with its growing economic and political interests in Africa and South Asia:

²⁰ Indu Saxena, Robert Uri Dabaly, & Arushi Singh. 2021. *China's Military and Economic Prowess in Djibouti: A Security Challenge for the Indo-Pacific*. November 18. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2847015/chinas-military-and-economic-prowess-in-djibouti-a-security-challenge-for-the-i/>.

²¹ Wilhelm, Jan. 2021. *Djibouti's role in geopolitics*. August 4. <https://www.dw.com/en/tiny-but-mighty-djiboutis-role-in-geopolitics/a-57136069>.

²² Magnani, Enrico. 2022. *Rivals and partners in difficult waters*. August 1. <https://en.difesaonline.it/geopolitica/analisi/rivali-e-partners-acque-difficili>.



- The base aids the increasing numbers of Chinese nationals engaged in trade, residing, and working in these regions. As Chinese private and state-owned enterprises expand their operations in Africa and South Asia, enhanced security and support are needed for the growing Chinese community.
- The base serves as a crucial facility for Chinese national evacuation during various crises. This ensures the safety of Chinese citizens during times of emergency or conflict. It demonstrates China's commitment to safeguarding its nationals abroad and reinforces its image as a responsible global actor.
- The military base protects China's overseas assets, including critical infrastructure, investments, and trade routes. By establishing a secure foothold in Djibouti, China can ensure asset safety and maintain stability in the region. Furthermore, the base offers logistical support to the United Nations peacekeeping forces, in which China actively participates with more than 2,000 military personnel in Africa. This support reinforces China's commitment to peacekeeping efforts and its growing role as a contributor to international security.
- The military base provides a maritime facility to support anti-piracy operations in the region. With piracy being a significant concern in Africa's waters, China's presence in Djibouti enhances its capacity to protect its maritime interests. It also contributes to international piracy combat efforts.
- The military base supports China's broader diplomatic efforts in Africa. By maintaining a physical presence in Djibouti, China can strengthen its bilateral relations with African countries. It can also enhance its influence in regional politics and project itself as a significant player in African affairs.
- The proximity of the military base to Western military installations in Djibouti provides China with a strategic advantage. It allows China to gather intelligence on all air, land, and sea operations conducted by Western powers in the region. This intelligence-gathering capacity enhances China's situational awareness and ability to respond effectively to potential security challenges.

China's strategic decision to establish additional naval bases across Africa reflects a multifaceted approach to bolstering its diplomatic and geopolitical influence on the continent.



While Djibouti serves as China's flagship offshore naval base, the expansion into new locations underscores a broader ambition to solidify its presence and leverage in African affairs. The proliferation of naval bases allows China to diversify its strategic assets and mitigate the risks associated with relying solely on one location. While Djibouti provides a pivotal foothold in the Horn of Africa, establishing new bases in various parts of Africa enhances China's operational flexibility and resilience in the region. This decentralized approach ensures continuity of operations even in the face of geopolitical tensions or logistical challenges in specific areas.

Moreover, these new naval bases serve as vital hubs for China's maritime activities, including anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief efforts. By expanding its naval presence, China demonstrates its commitment to contributing to regional stability and security, which can foster goodwill and strengthen diplomatic ties with African nations. This proactive engagement aligns with China's broader narrative of being a responsible global actor and a dependable partner in addressing familiar challenges.

Furthermore, the establishment of additional naval bases underscores China's growing economic interests in Africa, particularly in securing key maritime trade routes and protecting its investments along the continent's coastline. As China's economic footprint expands across Africa through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, safeguarding maritime security becomes imperative to ensure the uninterrupted flow of goods and resources vital to China's economic prosperity. Additionally, with these bases, China could influence regional politics and shape Africa's geopolitical landscape. By strategically positioning itself across different maritime zones, China can actively participate in regional forums, engage in bilateral and multilateral negotiations, and project its image as a formidable maritime power. This diplomatic leverage enhances China's ability to advance its interests, forge alliances, and counterbalance the influence of other global actors in Africa.

Accordingly, China's decision to open new naval bases in Africa reflects its nuanced approach to advancing its diplomatic, economic, and strategic interests on the continent. By diversifying its naval presence, China seeks to bolster regional stability, protect its maritime interests, and enhance its influence in African affairs, all while projecting itself as a responsible global actor committed to fostering cooperation and development.



Eventually, China's military base in Djibouti serves multiple strategic purposes. These purposes range from supporting its economic interests and protecting its nationals to gathering intelligence and contributing to international peacekeeping efforts. The base signifies China's growing global power. It also signifies its commitment to securing its interests and contributing to regional stability in Africa and South Asia.

3. Chinese Maritime Security Strategy: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative

China's maritime expansion has garnered significant attention from the international community. One crucial aspect of this expansion is the establishment of a military base in Djibouti. This is a small but geopolitically critical country situated in the Horn of Africa. This move has raised numerous questions and concerns about China's intentions and role in global maritime security.

As part of the maritime component of the BRI, the Chinese government's decision to establish a military base in Djibouti has raised eyebrows among global stakeholders. Djibouti's strategic location at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean makes it a critical transportation hub. This has attracted various armed forces powers seeking to secure their interests in the region.

The significance of the Chinese military base in Djibouti and its potential implications for regional and global maritime security, based on these points:

- *China's Maritime Security Strategy*: Understanding the motivations and strategic objectives driving China's territorial expansion, including the need to protect vital sea lanes, ensure access to resources, and safeguard its interests in critical regions.
- *Djibouti's Geopolitical Importance*: Analyzing Djibouti's unique location and significance as a gateway to key sea routes, making it a hotspot for major world powers seeking a foothold in the region.
- *Regional and Global Implications*: Examining the potential consequences of China's military presence in Djibouti on regional stability, existing geopolitical dynamics, and its impact on global maritime security.
- *The Belt and Road Initiative's Maritime Component*: Unraveling the maritime dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative and how the establishment of the military base in



Djibouti fits into China's broader vision for strengthening marine cooperation and securing its economic interests.

The announcement of this landmark document came in the context of China's plans to manage Chinese cooperation with countries and regions along the route of the maritime component of the Belt and Road Initiative, but in fact, it reflects a Chinese orientation in the maritime field. The document contained an extensive list of ideas, divided into six primary areas.

3.1. Protection of the Marine Environment

The blueprint called for “taking green development together,” including:

- Building common marine ecosystem monitoring systems.
- Issue joint worldwide reports on the marine environment.
- Join building transboundary marine ecological corridors.
- Maintain the health and biodiversity of the marine ecosystem.
- Marine environmental services.
- Protecting island ecosystems and coastal wetlands, combating marine pollution, and treating marine litter.
- Protection and rehabilitation of marine environments.
- Strengthening the ratio in addressing climate change in the maritime field by providing Chinese support to small island countries along the Maritime Silk Road.

A subjective approach that links China's military presence in Djibouti to environmental concerns may potentially legitimize its military activities in the region. However, it is essential to recognize that environmental protection is a global issue that transcends political and military considerations. Therefore, while it may not be appropriate to link China's military presence to environmental concerns in Djibouti, it is pertinent for China, like any other nation, to demonstrate its commitment to environmental stewardship wherever it operates.

China's engagement in environmental protection efforts, as outlined in the blueprint you provided, reflects its recognition of the importance of safeguarding marine ecosystems and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Regardless of its military presence in Djibouti or elsewhere, China, as a responsible global actor, must contribute to environmental conservation efforts.



In the context of Djibouti specifically, China could leverage its presence to support local environmental initiatives, such as implementing measures to combat marine pollution, promoting sustainable fishing practices, or engaging in environmental education and awareness programs. By doing so, China can demonstrate its commitment to environmental protection while also addressing broader diplomatic and geopolitical objectives in the region. Ultimately, while it may not be appropriate to link China's military presence in Djibouti to environmental concerns, acknowledging and addressing environmental issues in the region can contribute to fostering goodwill and cooperation with local stakeholders, thereby enhancing China's overall reputation and influence in Africa.

International collaboration is aimed at meeting the challenges of global climate change and maritime disasters, the problems of sea level rise and shoreline erosion, marine ecosystem degradation, assessing the conditions of islands and coastal belts, and organizing an international forum on coastal wetlands.

China's "Maritime Silk Road Carbon Plan" goal is to monitor, calibrate, and propagate the blue carbon ecosystem in the seas and coastal areas²³. For that, joint reports on the subject, the convening of an international blue carbon forum, and the development of a mechanism to combat water pollution are necessary.

3.2. Cooperative Development Goals

These goals can be achieved by providing Chinese support to developed countries on the maritime route, depending on the industrial sector of port construction and management²⁴. The expanding undersea fiber optic cable projects raise the level of communication and interdependence between countries along the route²⁵.

Cooperative development goals are based on:

²³ Vidal, John. 2022. *Will China's plan for a 'green silk road' live up to environmental promises?* September 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/20/china-plan-green-silk-road-environmental-promises>.

²⁴ Blaubach, Thomas. 2022. *Connecting Beijing's Global Infrastructure: The PEACE Cable in the Middle East and North Africa*. March 7. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/connecting-beijings-global-infrastructure-peace-cable-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

²⁵ Zhang, Xin. 2021. "Investment value analysis of China's participation in port projects." *World Maritime University Digital Repository*. World Maritime University, August 27. https://commons.wmu.se/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2629&context=all_dissertations.



- Assisting developing countries on the road to developing marine resources investment plans
- Building shipping service networks between countries along the route by establishing international and regional shipping centers.
- Cooperation in the development and exploitation of marine resources along the Maritime Silk Road, starting with surveying these resources.
- Enhancement of maritime industry cooperation through the construction of marine industrial zones for economic and commercial cooperation.
- Enhancing connectivity by strengthening maritime transport cooperation.
- Establishing a directory and information database.
- Forming a seaport union.
- Promote tourism, set up exchange mechanisms, and exchange information.
- Provide local partners with technical assistance.
- Strengthening cooperation between ports on the route.

3.3. Maritime Security Alliance

The international collaboration on the concept of mutual benefit, according to the Chinese perspective in Africa²⁶, is based on:

- Assisting countries on the road to obtaining the technologies and equipment necessary for monitoring and controlling the seas.
- Building a seaport for monitoring and controlling the seas.
- Development in the field of maritime security and safety through the establishment of a mechanism for the management and control - bilateral and multilateral - of the security and safety of maritime navigation.
- Expanding the application of Chinese “satellite navigation” services (BeiDou) and enforcing other key regulations in this regard²⁷.
- Protect maritime navigation security and safety.

²⁶ Xinhua. 2021. *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan*. November 30. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China.

²⁷ Lague, David. 2013. *Special Report: In satellite tech race, China hitched a ride from Europe*. December 22. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-breakout-beidou-idINBRE9BL0CA20131222>.



- Strengthening international cooperation and developing port-related public services.
- The joint fight against sea crimes.

In addition, cooperation in the areas of information exchange and joint inspection and rescue work among countries along the route has been strengthened, including a mechanism for the exchange of visits between maritime inspection and rescue units, the sharing of information, the organization of qualification and training courses in this field, raising joint capacity to respond to emergencies, disaster management, and tourism security, and building an early warning system for forecasting marine disasters in the South China Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.

The strategy affirms China's readiness to assume “appropriate” legal obligations in this field, as well as cooperation in the implementation of the law of the sea, at the bilateral and multilateral levels, in the areas of fishing, combating terrorism, and violent activities at sea. It also establishes a mechanism for cooperation in this area.

3.4. Promotion of Knowledge and Innovation in Marine Science Research

The Belt and Road Initiative is a Chinese program designed to improve international connectivity and promote economic development. The initiative involves the building of infrastructure and links to countries along the route. Along with this, China also promotes marine science knowledge and innovation. This could be done through the development of programs for maritime scientific collaboration, implementation of surveys, construction of infrastructure facilities, promotion of cooperation through joint research institutions, development of maritime educational and cultural exchanges, and strengthening media cooperation²⁸. Such measures could improve marine science knowledge and innovation.

This will be done through the following:

- a. Construction of marine research infrastructure and facilities.
- b. Developing programs for marine scientific collaboration among countries along the route.

²⁸ Xu, Y., & Zhang, J. 2019. “Belt and Road Initiative: A Strategic Choice for China’s Maritime Science and Technology Development.” *Frontiers of Engineering Management*, 172-184. doi:10.15302/J-FEM-2019134.



- c. Development of maritime educational and cultural exchanges through the development of scholarship programs with countries on the path of the initiative and the organization of annual cultural events such as navy and maritime art festivals; cooperation in the field of spreading culture about maritime affairs.
- d. Implementation of the survey.
- e. Promotion of cooperation through joint research institutions in marine science between China and some countries along the route.
- f. Strengthening media cooperation.

3.5. Maritime Governance

In this context, the document proposes the establishment of the “Round Table of Ministers of Maritime Affairs of China and Small Island States”²⁹, the “China- European Maritime Cooperation Forum”³⁰, the “Global Blue Economy Partnership Forum”³¹, and the “International Forum for Marine Spatial Planning”³² in addition to emphasizing the issuance of periodic reports on the “Blue Economy.” This critical concept is based on:

- a. Expanding its fields through the establishment of a high-level dialogue mechanism for maritime cooperation between countries along the maritime path.
- b. Joint development of cooperation plans and implementation of various projects and areas.
- c. Signing maritime cooperation documents between governments.

3.6. Strategies Aimed at Improving Maritime Transport Facilitation

Maritime transport facilitation is a vital goal for many countries, as it allows for the efficient and safe movement of goods and services across oceans and borders. To achieve this goal, countries must cooperate and build systems that enable smooth, secure, and efficient

²⁹ Xinhua. 2022. May 25. Fact Sheet: Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries. http://mk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202205/t20220524_10691917.htm.

³⁰ Affairs, Directorate-General for Maritime. 2019. EU and China join forces to improve international ocean governance. September 10. https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-china-join-forces-improve-international-ocean-governance-2019-09-10_en.

³¹ Xinhua 2017. June 20. Full text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-06/20/content_41063286_3.htm.

³² Borja A, Pouso S, Galparsoro I, Manca E, Vasquez M, Lu W, Yang L and Uriarte A. 2022. “Applying the China’s marine resource-environment carrying capacity and spatial development suitability approach to the Bay of Biscay (North-East Atlantic).” *Frontiers in Marine Science*, September 20. doi:10.3389/fmars.2022.972448.



maritime transport. China's approach outlines strategies to improve maritime transport facilitation, including expanding cooperation in the areas of international transport market calibration, recognizing the results of port surveillance mutually, mutual assistance in law enforcement, building systems for the transfer, processing, management, and application of information, building a system of information security standards, and setting up a public platform for communication, networking, and information sharing.

The Chinese strategy explores the next steps:

- Building systems for information transfer, processing, management, and application
- Create a set of information security guidelines.
- Expanding cooperation in international transport market calibration.
- Mutual law enforcement assistance.
- Recognizing port surveillance results on a mutual basis.
- Setting up a public platform for communication, networking, and information sharing.

This included the establishment of a station to monitor the oceans' state and study climate and environmental changes and their effects. This provides forecasting services for shipping lanes in this region.

In this context, this strategy affirmed the Chinese government's readiness to support countries bordering the Arctic Ocean to improve transport conditions on Arctic shipping lanes. It also encouraged Chinese enterprises to participate in the commercial use of these shipping lanes. This would contribute to sustainable resource investment in the Arctic region. Finally, China called for multilateral cooperation to conduct comprehensive scientific surveys of Arctic shipping lanes.

4. The Militarization of China-Africa Development Partnership Objectives

China's move to militarize its development partnership by building a naval base in Djibouti seems to be a qualitative leap in Beijing's international relations as a rising economic pole. Through this strategic leap, Beijing strengthens its global position in an international system open to all possibilities. Global and regional power balances are changing at various levels.



Chinese investments are global but concentrated in Africa. China is the largest foreign investor in Africa, and its investments have grown rapidly in recent years. Chinese investments are global but concentrated in Africa. China is the largest foreign investor in Africa, and its investments have grown rapidly in recent years. In 2021, Chinese companies invested a record \$282 billion in Africa³³.

China's substantial investments in Africa stem from multifaceted motivations, prominently driven by the continent's resource abundance, burgeoning market potential, and strategic partnership opportunities. Analyzing the trajectory of China-Africa economic trade and investment over the past two decades through a table or graph would vividly illustrate this evolving relationship.

Primarily, Africa's vast reservoir of natural resources serves as a pivotal attraction for China, necessitated by its quest to sustain economic growth. Graphically depicting the steady rise in Chinese investment in African resource sectors, such as mining and energy, underscores China's imperative to secure access to vital commodities to fuel its industries and meet domestic demands. Simultaneously, the graphical representation would delineate the exponential growth in bilateral trade between China and Africa, mirroring Africa's emergence as a substantial market for Chinese goods and services. This upward trajectory reflects China's strategic pivot towards leveraging Africa's expanding consumer base and its role as a driver of global economic growth.

Moreover, the graph or table would vividly capture China's concerted efforts to deepen its engagement with Africa beyond mere resource extraction or trade. Over the years, China's investment landscape in Africa has diversified, encompassing infrastructure development, manufacturing, agriculture, and telecommunications. This diversification reflects China's recognition of Africa's potential as a vibrant investment destination beyond its resource endowment. Furthermore, the graphical representation would underscore China's strategic intent to cultivate Africa as a key ally and partner on the global stage. Through sustained investment and economic cooperation, China aims to bolster its influence and presence in Africa, forging closer diplomatic ties and garnering support for its geopolitical objectives.

³³ Nyabiage, Jevans. 2023. *China-Africa trade hits record US\$282 billion with boost from Beijing and soaring commodity prices*. January 19. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3207403/china-africa-trade-hits-record-us282-billion-boost-beijing-and-soaring-commodity-prices>.



In essence, a graphical depiction of China-Africa economic trade and investment patterns over the past two decades would not only underscore the economic dynamics at play but also illuminate the strategic imperatives driving China's deepening engagement with Africa. It would highlight China's evolving role as a major player in Africa's economic development trajectory and its broader aspirations for geopolitical influence on the continent.

Chinese investments in Africa have mixed effects. On the one hand, they have helped boost economic growth in some African countries. On the other hand, they have also led to concerns about debt, environmental impact, and labor rights. These investments in Africa are complex issues with both positive and negative aspects. It is imperative to carefully consider the benefits and risks of these investments before making judgments. Here are some specific examples of Chinese investments in Africa:

- *China-Africa Economic and Trade Cooperation Zones:* China has established over 25 economic and trade cooperation zones in Africa. These zones are designed to attract Chinese investment and promote trade between China and Africa.
- *The Belt and Road Initiative:* The Belt and Road Initiative is a massive infrastructure project led by China. The initiative includes plans to build roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure projects in over 60 countries, including many in Africa.
- *The China-Africa Development Fund:* The China-Africa Development Fund is a \$10 billion fund established by China in 2006. The fund invests in infrastructure, agriculture, and other sectors in Africa.

Eventually, China wants to achieve several strategic objectives through its recently established base in Djibouti, including:

4.1. Consolidating Chinese Influence and Crowding out Major Powers

Beijing's choice of the African continent as the starting point for this strategic change in its foreign policy is significant as it grows as a significant international player³⁴. Continental wealth heavily influences international powers' strategies. Africa is considered the future

³⁴ Wu, Yenna. 2019. "Recognizing and Resisting China's Evolving Sharp Power." *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, October: 129-153. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45216268>



continent, with its human and natural resources and promising investment and economic opportunities.

The tangible shift in Chinese foreign policy towards cooperation between the “military” and the “economic” shows its worth as an international pole, not just economically.

4.2. Safeguarding China's Economic Interests in Africa

The newly constructed base in Djibouti will enable China to preserve its economic interests on the African continent. China is Africa's largest trading partner compared with the major powers in the world, including the US, European Union, and Japan. This is due to the magnitude of trade exchange between the two sides, estimated at 254 billion dollars in 2021³⁵. Major global companies are vying for investment privileges in Africa's emerging markets in a frantic race. In addition to the United States, former colonial powers such as France, Britain, and even Italy are also considered leading players in this race.

China's presence in the region has allowed it to enter Djibouti through economic gates first, before establishing a military base. Since 2007, China's foreign direct investment has grown significantly, as it did not exist previously. For example, in 2022 China surpassed the United States' investments, as China invested an extra \$ 4.47 trillion³⁶. In contrast, American overseas assets increased from \$779.2 billion to \$35.21 trillion during the same period³⁷.

The most receiving Chinese investments and projects in the eastern and southeastern parts of the continent are:

a. China's Pledges at FOCAC Meetings:

- 2015: \$60 billion
- 2018: \$60 billion
- 2021: \$40 billion

b. Chinese Investments and Projects in Select African Countries:

- Zambia: 273 projects

³⁵ Sheehy, Thomas P. 2022. *10 Things to Know about the U.S.-China Rivalry in Africa*. December 7. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/10-things-know-about-us-china-rivalry-africa>

³⁶ Xinhau. 2022. November 11. *Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Jun, China's Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council High-Level Debate on 'Counter Terrorism In Africa*. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202211/t20221112_10973113.html

³⁷ BEA. 2022. *U.S. International Investment Position*. March 29. <https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/us-international-investment-position-fourth-quarter-and-year-2021>



- Ethiopia: 255 projects
 - Zimbabwe: 167 projects
 - Tanzania: 149 projects
 - Sudan: 148 projects
 - Kenya: 137 projects
- c. *Chinese Loans to Africa:*
- Total loan commitments (2000-2020): 1,188 worth \$160 billion
 - Top loan recipient countries:
 - Angola
 - Zambia
 - Ethiopia
 - Kenya
 - Nigeria
 - Cameroon
 - Most recently, the largest recipients included Ghana, South Africa, and Cote d'Ivoire.
- d. *COVID-19 Vaccines for Africa:*
- China has committed to providing 1.2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Africa.
- e. *Chinese presence in Djibouti:*
- There were an estimated 400 Chinese soldiers stationed at the base.
- f. *Zambia's Debt and Chinese Investments:*
- Zambia's external debt: roughly \$6 billion
 - Percentage of Zambia's external debt held by China: 65.8%
 - Two-thirds of China's heavily subsidized fishing vessels in West Africa operate illegally.
- g. *Huawei's Presence in Africa:*
- Huawei has constructed up to 70% of Africa's information technology infrastructure.
 - Huawei and ZTE have built more than 40 telecom networks in over 30 African countries.
- h. *China's Security Assistance and Arms Transfers:*



- China offered \$100 million in new military aid to the African Union over the next 5 years (as of 2017).
- Between 2017 and 2020, China transferred almost three times as many arms to sub-Saharan Africa as the United States did, according to CSIS analysis of data compiled by SIPRI.
- Nearly all Chinese peacekeepers are deployed in Africa, most notably in Mali and South Sudan³⁸.

Beginning in 2014, Beijing approved funding for large projects, including rail, water, and natural gas links to Ethiopia³⁹. Eventually, the two sides agreed to work together to build industrial parks and ports in neighboring Djibouti⁴⁰.

4.3. Securing China's Oil Resources

Another determinant of Beijing's quest to militarize its strategic orientation towards Africa is China's thirst for safe and continuous oil resources. This thirst is based on the urgent need for Chinese industries for oil. Beijing's oil imports from the African continent are estimated at 25% to 30% of its total oil imports from abroad, especially from the Middle East⁴¹. The Bab al-Mandab Strait is a corridor for 20% of global trade, with China having the largest share. More than half of oil imports to China come from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and South Sudan; this makes the corridor doubly critical strategically for Beijing⁴².

China's need to turn towards the African shore of the strait has been exacerbated by Yemen's turmoil after the Arab Spring in 2011. China has expressed a desire to invest in expanding the port of Aden in southern Yemen by more than half a billion dollars. This is to ensure a foothold in one of its most sensitive trade terminals. However, it has not yet been able to do so because of Yemen's turmoil. Beijing was not the first in its orientation towards establishing a military base in Djibouti under the pretext of protecting the strategic strait and

³⁸ GOP. 2022. "China Regional Snapshot: Sub-Saharan Africa." Committee on Foreign Affairs. November 21. <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/china-regional-snapshot-sub-saharan-africa/>.

³⁹ Bradley, Sandrine. 2014. *Ethiopian government signs \$865 mln railway financing*. October 27. <https://www.reuters.com/article/ethiopia-loans-idUKL5N0SM4SM20141027>

⁴⁰ Liben, Habtamu. 2018. *Chinese development endeavor in Ethiopia wins acclaim*. June 14. http://za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zfgxss/zyjw/201805/t20180518_7688541.htm

⁴¹ Editorial, AOW. 2019. *Understanding Chinese investment in African oil & gas*. September. <https://africa-oilweek.com/articles/understanding-chinese-investment-in-african-o>

⁴² Khanna, Parag. 2024. "The Red Sea Crisis Proves China Was Ahead of the Curve." *Foreign Policy*. January 20. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/20/url-red-sea-houthis-china-belt-road-suez-trade-corridors/>.



trade routes, as it was preceded by France, Italy, the United States, and Japan, in addition to the presence of forces from other Western countries that came to protect their countries' ships from the acts of piracy that the Gulf of Aden has witnessed since 2005.

4.4. Facilitating the Tasks of the Chinese Peacekeeping Forces

The People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) 中国人民解放军 plays an instrumental role in the United Nations peacekeeping efforts in Africa. 40000 Chinese soldiers participate in peacekeeping forces in Africa, most deployed in conflict-affected oil-producing regions⁴³. Therefore, building a Chinese command base in Djibouti would facilitate Chinese peacekeepers' tasks in Africa. This would provide them with a base to operate from and better manage their operations. The base would also provide logistical support, allowing them to respond quickly to crises. In addition, it would allow better communication and coordination between Chinese troops and other peacekeepers in the region. This would result in a more efficient and effective peacekeeping mission.

There is a remarkable increase in threats to Chinese interests in the African Horn due to the spread of fundamentalist movements and violent militias, such as Al-Shabaab Mujahideen, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, and Boko Haram⁴⁴. This has led China to insufficiently rely on the “symbolic” participation of its armed forces in United Nations peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions in some African countries. This prompted it to build a garrison in Djibouti to serve as a springboard for Chinese armed forces. This was to safeguard Beijing's vital interests.

Since 2015, Chinese naval forces have conducted several combat missions off Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden. These missions were part of international efforts to combat piracy⁴⁵. However, they have faced severe logistical difficulties regarding docking and supply stations. This motivated Beijing to build its first overseas base in Djibouti to avoid these difficulties.

Chinese want to establish a “maritime silk road,” linking the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea through the Bab al-Mandab gate and the Suez Canal, and the

⁴³ Xinhua. 2022. August 15. China's fixed-asset investment expands 5.7 pct in first seven months. <https://english.news.cn/20220815/43ec8cb0b1d4485281e5bc965652874c/c.html>

⁴⁴ Xinhua. 2022. July 28. Ambassador Zhou Pingjian: China to continue backing peace efforts in Africa. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202207/t20220728_10729497.html

⁴⁵ Blanchard, Ben. 2015. November 27. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-nato-idUSKBN0TG08H20151127>



countries surrounding those vital waterways, to secure China's global trade and oil supply lines from Africa and the Middle East⁴⁶.

President Xi Jinping announced two reforming foreign trade strategies in 2013: the Silk Road Economic Belt in September 2013 and the Maritime Silk Road Strategy in October⁴⁷. This makes the Chinese fortress in Djibouti a strategic goal for Chinese national security in the heart of the world. It may result in further bases being set up in the future as China gains ground on its competitors in the evolving world order.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China aims to aggressively export to specific countries in Central Asia and Europe. It also targets countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, as well as Kenya and Madagascar on Africa's east coast. Here it should be noted that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a comprehensive development strategy led by China that includes both the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” These two components together make up the BRI:

- *The Silk Road Economic Belt*: This component aims to connect China with Central Asia, Europe, and beyond through a network of roads, railways, and other infrastructure projects. It aims to facilitate trade and investment between China and countries along the ancient Silk Road land routes.
- *The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*: This component focuses on enhancing maritime trade and connectivity between China and countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. It seeks to improve port infrastructure and promote maritime trade routes⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Shahmohammadi, Julia Gurolo and Parisa. 2019. *Projecting Power Westwards. China's Maritime Strategy in the Arabian Sea and its Potential Ramifications for the Region*. November 11. <https://carpo-bonn.org/en/study-07-projecting-power-westwards-chinas-maritime-strategy-in-the-arabian-sea-and-its-potential-ramifications-for-the-region/>

⁴⁷ Xinhua. 2017. “Full text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.” The State Council of the People's Republic of China. June 20. http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm

⁴⁸ Mboya, Cliff. 2021. *G7's Global Infrastructure Initiative Will Have to Contend With China's Massive Lead in Africa*. August 19. <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2021/08/19/g7s-global-infrastructure-initiative-will-have-to-contend-with-chinas-massive-lead-in-africa/>



Both components of the BRI have ambitious goals of increasing economic cooperation, investment, and trade between China and the participating countries. BRI's scope is global, extending to various regions beyond Africa. Through these two strategies, Beijing aims to secure large markets for its products. It also creates economic alliances that contribute to China's stability and growth. Through these alliances, Beijing can secure its natural resource needs, which are abundant in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

China's economic strategy is accompanied by a political and military strategy, albeit one that warns against the risks of collapse of the economic strategy by establishing more military strongholds in the coming years, especially in countries along the sea route where China has invested in ports. Choosing Djibouti first due to its position on the map of ports in which China has invested, which seems central. This is because Türkiye has ports stretching north through Greece, Israel, Egypt, and Eritrea to Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique in southern Africa. In addition, there are other ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar.

In the next decade, China seeks to establish a fulcrum in the ports of Salalah in Oman and Karachi in Pakistan, which overlook the Arabian Sea, so that it will have a base near the strategic Strait of Hormuz after securing a base adjacent to Bab al-Mandab in Djibouti. Oceans and seas have become a major arena for international conflict. It involves the main rising power within the system, China, as well as the dominant power in the world order, represented by the United States.

In the evolving international system, especially in the maritime domain, the basic strategic assumptions revolve around the changing dynamics and strategic interests of major powers, mainly Beijing and Washington. As a result, China seeks to establish strategic footholds in Salalah, Oman, and Karachi, Pakistan. Both ports overlook the Arabian Sea. These locations are strategically significant as they provide China with a presence near the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for global oil transportation. This is after securing a base adjacent to Bab al-Mandab in Djibouti, which is a crucial maritime gateway linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The emerging competition and interests of major powers, such as China and the United States, in securing positions and influence in key maritime regions are seen as a significant shift in international order. This change has led to the development of the concept of the “Indo-



Pacific” as a geopolitical framework that expands the focus beyond just the Asia-Pacific region to encompass the Indian Ocean as well⁴⁹. The Indo-Pacific concept reflects the growing interconnectedness of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and acknowledges the increasing importance of maritime security and trade routes in major powers' strategic calculations. It recognizes that the oceans and seas have become crucial arenas for international conflict and competition. This involves both rising powers (China) seeking to expand their influence and dominant powers (the United States) seeking to maintain their position within the global order.

This change in basic assumptions was reflected in the emergence of the concept of “Indo-Pacific” as a key arena for international interactions taking place at the top of the global system and the subsequent emergence of new alliances⁵⁰. In 2017, the United States, India, Japan, and Australia participated in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)⁵¹, and the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom participated in AUKUS⁵².

Many factors explain the return of the seas and oceans as an arena for international interactions. Wealth can be discovered at an increasing rate and with greater opportunities than ever before. In addition, they include the escalating relative importance of water estuaries as connecting channels between regions of the world. However, the most influential factor is related to the growing relative importance of naval military capabilities as a key element in building armies and naval powers. This led to the increasing relative importance of oceans and seas as conflict arenas. This factor explains why the U.S.-China conflict is concentrated in the Indo-Pacific region and the emergence of the concept of “Indo-Pacific.”

China's relentless quest to build an alternative or parallel “maritime governance” to existing maritime governance must be understood. Maritime governance refers to the set of rules, institutions, and systems governing international interactions in the maritime domain.

⁴⁹ Kliem, Fredrick. 2022. *How the EU Can Still Succeed in the Indo-Pacific Despite the War in Ukraine*. May 28. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/how-the-eu-can-still-succeed-in-the-indo-pacific-despite-the-war-in-ukraine/>

⁵⁰ KOGA, KEI. 2019. “Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Strategy.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, August: 286-313. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26798855>

⁵¹ Chanlett-Avery, Emma. 2018. *Japan, the Indo-Pacific, and the “Quad”*. Chicago Council on Global Affairs. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17325>

⁵² Coşkun, Alper. 2021. *QUAD, AUKUS and the American Pivot to Asia: Implications for Turkey and a case for recalibration*. Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35887>



5. Concluding Remarks

China's primary goal in establishing internationally recognized military bases is to bolster its strategic presence and project power globally. The move is driven by the desire to compete with the United States, starting with one overseas naval base, which already maintains a vast network of military bases across several continents. By establishing its bases, China aims to challenge the US's armed dominance and assert itself as a major player in international affairs. China's military base expansion aligns with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure and trade project aimed at enhancing connectivity and influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe. The bases serve as strategic nodes along critical trade routes, securing China's trade lines from future sanctions. The BRI's extensive investment in ports in candidate countries further underscores the link between economic interests and armed expansion. Establishing naval and military bases in strategically significant countries provides China with significant intelligence advantages. By being present at these locations, China can gather crucial information about regional dynamics, potential threats, and other nations' movements. Such intelligence can inform China's decision-making processes and allow it to respond effectively to emerging challenges. The choice of candidate countries for military base construction reflects China's focus on securing its trade and resource interests. Countries like Sri Lanka, Equatorial Guinea, and Pakistan are strategically located along vital trade corridors and rich in natural resources. By investing heavily in infrastructure and trade exchanges, Beijing aims to ensure smooth access to resources and enhance its economic ties in these regions. China's approach to military bases differs significantly from traditional Western powers.

The People's Liberation Army does not seek formal military alliances with host countries, unlike the US and its NATO partners. Instead, China pursues a more discreet strategy, preferring to exploit its privileged coastal locations to maintain influence and safeguard its interests. Africa plays a pivotal role in China's global military base expansion. The continent is vital for Beijing's trade interests, particularly concerning crucial minerals and resources needed for electronic chip manufacturing. This is a sector where China competes strongly with the US. Additionally, Africa's strategic position and key trade corridors make it an essential battleground in China's bid to challenge US military dominance.

The establishment of a Chinese military base in Djibouti holds significant geopolitical and strategic implications for both China and the broader international community. Djibouti, a



small African country located at the entrance to the Red Sea and the gateway to the Suez Canal, is strategically positioned at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This location makes it a highly sought-after area for major powers seeking to expand their presence and influence in key maritime regions.

- *Competition and Security Concerns:* While the PLA's military base in Djibouti may be geared towards economic and strategic interests, it has raised concerns among regional and global players. The presence of multiple foreign military bases in Djibouti could increase competition and security risks. This is especially true when tensions arise between powers. Additionally, Djibouti's proximity to conflict-prone regions like Somalia and Yemen adds complexity to security dynamics.

- *Countering the US Presence:* Djibouti is already home to several foreign government bases, including the United States, France, and Japan. By establishing its base in Djibouti, China aims to challenge the United States' traditional dominance in the region. The US has maintained a significant military presence in Djibouti. This serves as a hub for counterterrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. China's presence in Djibouti provides it with a platform to monitor US military activities and potentially counterbalance American influence in the region.

- *Economic Interests:* Djibouti's strategic location also aligns with China's economic interests in the region. As Beijing's largest trading partner in Africa, Djibouti plays a significant role in facilitating trade between China and the African continent. China's increasing investments in Djibouti's infrastructure, such as ports and railways, are part of its efforts to strengthen bilateral ties and expand its political influence.

- *Enhancing Regional Diplomacy:* Beyond military considerations, this base in Djibouti allows diplomatic engagement with African and Middle Eastern countries. Beijing has been actively pursuing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure and economic development project spanning multiple continents. Djibouti's strategic location aligns with the BRI's objectives of enhancing connectivity and trade linkages across regions. The military base provides China with an opportunity to strengthen its economic ties with African and Middle Eastern nations. It also positions itself as a key partner in their development aspirations.

- *Facilitating Naval Operations:* The Chinese base in Djibouti provides logistical and operational support for the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). It serves as a



refueling station and repair facility, enabling the PLAN to sustain long-range deployments and conduct operations in distant waters. This ability is essential for China's blue-water navy ambitions, allowing it to protect its expanding overseas interests and support non-combatant evacuations during regional crises.

- *Geopolitical Significance:* Djibouti's proximity to the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the most critical maritime chokepoints globally, gives it immense geopolitical importance. The Strait connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. This makes it a crucial transit point for international trade and energy shipments, particularly for oil-exporting countries in the Middle East. Control over this strategic passageway provides a country with substantial influence over global trade routes and the ability to exert leverage on international commerce.

- *Projection of Power:* For the People's Liberation Army, the military base in Djibouti marks a significant milestone in its efforts to project power beyond its immediate borders. Historically, China has been a continental power, but with its growing global economic interests and maritime ambitions, it now seeks to establish a stronger naval presence to safeguard its trade routes and secure its interests in distant regions. Djibouti's location allows the PLA to extend its reach into the Indian Ocean and protect its sea lines of communication. This is especially true along critical routes like the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden corridor.

Accordingly, the establishment of a Chinese military base in Djibouti marks a significant step in China's efforts to expand its global influence. It also protects its maritime interests. Djibouti's strategic location at the crossroads of major trade routes and its existing network of foreign military bases make it a critical battleground in the geopolitical power struggle between China and the United States. While the base provides China with a platform to project power and protect its economic interests, it also raises concerns about potential competition and security risks in the region. The strategic importance of Djibouti as a key maritime outpost underscores its role as a vital element in China's broader vision for its future presence and influence on the global stage. As China's global influence grows, Washington will seek ways to counter Beijing's ambitions and prevent its unchecked expansion. However, the strong political and economic ties that candidate countries have forged with China through substantial investments in their infrastructure and trade exchanges could complicate the US's efforts to thwart China's military base strategy.



Finally, China's drive to establish naval and military bases across multiple continents over the next five years is a manifestation of its determination to compete with the United States on a global scale. With a focus on strategic locations, securing trade routes, and gathering intelligence, Beijing aims to project its power and safeguard its economic and resource interests. The intensifying competition between China and the US raises concerns about potential destabilization in regions hosting these bases. However, both sides seem keen on avoiding direct armed conflict. Instead, the battle for dominance is played out through strategic military maneuvers and economic investments. Africa is emerging as a critical battleground in this geopolitical power struggle.

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