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Chapter 9

Djibouti: bridging the Gulf of Aden? Balancing ports, patronage and military bases between Yemen's war and the Horn.¹

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Abstract: This chapter examines intra-Gulf rivalry in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa through the prism of Djibouti's foreign policy. As a member of the Arab League how does one of Africa's smallest states defy diplomatic gravity, balancing intra-Arab regional competition alongside diverse local logistical and political pressures within the Horn of Africa, as well as global rivalry between US and Chinese naval powers? The text argues that part of the answer reflects the manner in which Djibouti's leaders have generated political capital and lucrative rents from intensifying superpower surveillance of shipping lanes, piracy and islamists in neighbouring Yemen and Somalia. Djibouti now hosts military bases of the US, China, Japan, France and the European Union. Recent Chinese rail and port projects consolidated Djibouti as the fulcrum of Asian, Arab and western commercial rivalry and geostrategic cohabitation in the region.

In this context, the chapter analyses how the government manages the ongoing reconfiguration of Gulf commercial and military engagements in the Red Sea and Horn. Gulf ties and Yemen's war generate strong cross-currents: Djibouti is a corridor for illegal migration from the Horn to Arabia and had allies in both camps in Yemen. It has hosted Yemeni refugees since 2015, and an influential minority of its own population has historic family ties with Yemen. Central

to the analysis of Djibouti-Gulf ties are the state's formerly close relations with Dubai and the UAE. These soured as Dubai Ports World's investment in Djibouti's main port became embroiled in political and legal disputes. A rupture of ties in 2015 in turn prompted UAE to diversify their air and naval facilities in the Horn. These new Arab military outposts in neighbouring Somaliland and Eritrea further contort the kaleidoscope of conflictual regional and global interests, in and around Djibouti, which the chapter seeks to analyse.

INTRODUCTION

Djibouti is an enigma; it is one of the poorest and smallest member states in both the Arab League and the African Union. Yet its President, Ismael Omar Guelleh, appears to be courted by superpowers and regional decision-makers alike. This includes governments from the Gulf, whose policies towards the Horn of Africa are the focus of this volume. Contrary to theories of dependency or small-state vulnerability, he apparently wields considerable autonomy and influence, eschewing the notion that small states require “strategic partnership” and protection from a larger power (Styan 2016). This appears true both on a global stage where Guelleh plays-off the US and China, and regionally in terms of relations with rival Gulf Arab powers which are the subject of this chapter. The chapter’s central argument is that Djibouti’s policies towards Gulf Arab powers replicate the state’s broader diplomatic strategy. This aims to maximize financial and political benefits from rivalries between powerful states seeking ties with Djibouti. The growing number of states establishing maritime and military facilities in Djibouti primarily reflect its geo-strategic position at the southern gateway of the Red Sea. However, the text analyses how failure to manage tensions with its main Gulf commercial partner, the United Arab Emirates, has dented this strategy, significantly altering Gulf-Djibouti dynamics in the Horn

Geographically, linguistically and ethnically Djibouti is clearly African. Yet its physical proximity to Yemen, membership of the Arab League and long-standing economic and human ties to Arabia give it a unique role in recent Arab divisions both over the Yemen war, and since 2017 between Qatar and the GCC. This singular status is accentuated by both the recent, fraught, wrangling between Djibouti and the government of the United Arab Emirates examined in this chapter, and the broader context of the manner in which Dubai has become an ‘African’ economic hub, particularly for Somali-speakers, from which Djibouti’s elite are largely drawn. While not the focus of this chapter, this human dimension, of personal ties and two-way migration between the Horn and Arabia is all too often neglected, and epitomises Djiboutians’ linkages with Arabia every bit as much as the diplomatic, trade and military issues examined by the chapter.²

This chapter attempts to focus on the regional dimensions of Djibouti’s foreign policy, with an emphasis on its ties with the Gulf states. However, it does so within a view to highlighting how these ‘regional’ dynamics interact with local and global actors – thus part of the aim of the chapter is to explore the linkages between local, regional and global forces, viewed through the

specific prism of Djibouti. In doing so, we hope to shed some light on the complex interlinkages underpinning Gulf States' involvement in East Africa, including the oft-neglected maritime dimension of interactions between states surrounding the Bab Al-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden and southern Red Sea coasts.

By 'local' dimension we mean Djibouti's bilateral ties with neighbouring states in the Horn of Africa itself, Eritrea, Somali(a/land) and above all Ethiopia, for whom Djibouti provides its principal trading outlet to the sea. Taxes and fees on Ethiopian trade account for much of the Djiboutian state's revenues. Global powers' own military ties with the Gulf states are also refracted militarily via their ties with Djibouti, primarily due to Djibouti hosting military bases belonging to leading western and Asian powers.

Djibouti's location overlooking the western approaches to the Bab Al Mandab means it is the principal port of call for both civilian vessels transiting the Red Sea via the Suez canal, as well as the world's navies who monitor the sea lanes. As such it is the operational base for the myriad of anti-piracy forces surveying and policing the Red Sea and Somali coasts. Indeed the 'Djibouti Code of Conduct' which guides much anti-piracy activity underscores quite how central Djibouti's port is to the anti-piracy industry.³

Until recently Djibouti's government maintained close relations with Dubai and the UAE. Yet a five-year falling-out between 2013-18 culminated in the seizure of Dubai Ports World's (DPW) key asset in the country, the Doraleh Container Terminal in early 2018. This rupture with the UAE prompted several knock-on effects, accelerating the "re-militarization" of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, with the UAE hastening the expansion and construction of military facilities in Assab to the north and Berbera just to the south-east of Djibouti. In turn, Turkey, which under Erdogan has explicitly sought an expansion of its influence in the Horn of Africa, has intensified its military and economic ties with the Federal Republic of Somalia government in Mogadishu, and has strengthened ties with the government of (northern) Sudan. Both trends have been reinforced since Turkey sided with Qatar in the GCC split.

This chapter examines intra-Gulf rivalry in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa through the prism of Djibouti's foreign policy, focussing in particular on the implications of the protracted rupture between Dubai and Djibouti. As a member of the Arab League and home to the Horn's regional body (the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, IGAD), the chapter asks how does one of Africa's smallest states appear to defy diplomatic gravity, balancing intra-Arab rivalries

alongside competing logistical and political pressures, both from within the Horn of Africa itself and increasingly between long-time ally the United States and China? A secondary question is, since the opening in 2017 of China's first ever overseas naval 'logistics facility' - a military base in all but name - how and why has Beijing has promoted Djibouti as being a key global hub on its resurgent 'Maritime Silk Road Initiative'?

As noted in the opening paragraph, part of the success of Djibouti's successful diplomatic juggling lies in its ability to extract political capital and lucrative rents drawn from intensifying superpower surveillance of strategic shipping lanes, piracy and islamists in neighbouring Yemen and Somalia. Djibouti now hosts military bases of the US, China, Japan, France and the European Union. In 2017 the completion of major Chinese rail and port projects linking Ethiopia and the Gulf of Tadjourah consolidated Djibouti as the fulcrum of Asian, Arab and western commercial rivalry and geostrategic cohabitation in the region.

The structure of the chapter

Following this introduction, the chapter is structured in five sections. The first section provides some basic factual background on Djibouti itself and its foreign policy. The second section focuses on Djibouti's privileged ties with UAE and the ruling family of Dubai in particular, while noting Qatar's arbitration role vis-à-vis Eritrea. Section three examines the most substantive element of the bi-lateral relationship with Dubai, the investment of Dubai World Ports in Djibouti's container terminal, providing details as to how the investment soured and prompted a rupture between Djibouti and Dubai between 2015-18.

Section four then looks at the manner in which the split with Dubai has influenced the activities of other regional powers, particularly Turkey and Qatar. An initial rupture of ties in 2015 had already prompted UAE to diversify their air and naval facilities in the Horn. These new Arab military outposts in neighbouring Somaliland and Eritrea further contort the mosaic of conflictual regional and global interests in and around Djibouti analysed here. Both Turkey and Qatar have intensified their patronage of Somali politicians, with Turkey and the UAE in turn both consolidating military cooperation and the construction of military facilities in the region; effectively a regional arms race and 'base-race'. The latter is linked to UAE's intensified engagement Yemen's civil war in 2017-18. The final, fifth section looks at the global dimension of Djibouti's status. Having long been an outpost of French military influence

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in the region, over the past two decades Djibouti has accommodated first the US, and, most recently, China as military partners, hosting key facilities for both.

Overall, the chapter seeks to analyse how the government manages the current renewal and reconfiguration of Gulf engagement in the Red Sea and Horn.

Section one: Historical context: how a small, patronage-based polity benefits from its geo-strategic location.

This first section provides a basic factual and historical background to Djibouti itself and sketches the contours of its foreign policy.

Djibouti gained political independence from France only in 1977; like the key Gulf states, it is thus both a very young as well as a small state in terms of population, by any African or international standards. It has a population of under a million and a minuscule GDP (under USD\$2bn), in both absolute and per-capita terms. While geographically it is incorrect to call it either a 'micro-state' or a 'city-state', at least 80 percent of Djibouti's population (officially put at 900,000, but probably far smaller) live in and around the eponymous capital city. On most indices it is comprehensively dwarfed not just by its neighbours, but by all other members of the two regional bodies - the Arab League and African Union - of which it is an active member and from which it draws considerable diplomatic influence and legitimacy. 4

Similarly, in terms of its Red Sea and Gulf of Aden maritime neighbours, Djibouti is the regional minnow; to the east, Somaliland has a population of around 4m, including Gadaboursi and Issa Somali sub-clans which constitute over half of Djibouti's own citizens; (the rump, Federal Republic of Somalia to the south claims a population of 15m). The population of Djibouti's northern neighbour Eritrea is around 5m. However, Eritrea's port of Assab and the Danakil littoral which lie just across Djibouti's northern border are sparsely populated, primarily with Afars who share linguistic and clan ties with Djibouti's own northern populace. All these coastal states are dwarfed by highland Ethiopia's 100m population and, across the Gulf of Aden, Yemen's 28m beleaguered inhabitants. Gulf ties and Yemen's war generate strong cross-currents: Djibouti is a corridor for illegal migration from the Horn to the Gulf and had allies in both camps in Yemen. It has hosted Yemeni refugees since 2015 while an influential minority of its own population has historic family ties with Yemen and Arabia. Several thousand Djiboutians, many drawn from influential trading families, are descended

from Yemenis (Bezabeh 2011). Since 2015 Djibouti has also hosted around 3000 Yemeni refugees in a camp in the northern port of Obock, with many also lodging in Djibouti-ville.

Geo-strategic location as a diplomatic resource

The Djiboutian state owes both its existence, and its current diplomatic significance to its strategic location. Its territories both overlook the southern entrance to the Red Sea, and as such are close to Yemen's western coast, and provide a natural port and railhead for its giant neighbour Ethiopia. All three factors are central to understanding the pivotal position that the small territory plays in the current rivalries between Gulf Arab states in the region. Evidently the state's strategic location, at a pinch-point on sea lanes between the Suez Canal and Indian Ocean, is also the reason for US, EU - and now Chinese - military involvement in the state. These global players are briefly considered in section five below.

Prior to the construction of the Suez canal and France's incursion into the region, the Gulf of Tadjourah, around which modern-day Djibouti nestles, provided anchorages for Dhows trading between the Gulf, East Africa and Red Sea ports. While the ports of Tadjourah and Obock provided outlets for slaves, coffee and other goods from Ethiopia's highlands, their significance in Africa's trade with Yemen and other Arab ports beyond was less than Zeila, which at different historical epochs fell under Egyptian, Ottoman and Omani spheres of influence.

France ruled Djibouti from the late 19th century to 1977. For the first 15 years of independence the French army provided the Djibouti government's core finance, in exchange for military bases and extensive training facilities. While French forces were scaled back in the 1990s, Djibouti nevertheless remains France's largest military base in Africa.⁵ Although a legacy of imperial rivalries, French military presence at the southern gateway to the Red Sea assumed was significant during the Cold War. Heightened Cold War tensions in the Horn from the late 1970s saw the Soviet Union back first Somalia, then from 1977 Marxist Ethiopia. The Berbera naval base, constructed by the Soviets, then became a key US installation in the Gulf of Aden.

In terms of domestic politics, power is largely a personal affair; President Ismael Omar Guelleh's control rests on patronage. 'Rent' accrues from foreign military bases and access to economic assets - foreign direct investment, trade licenses, forex - and revenues are redistributed to ensure legitimacy. This personalised, patronage-based political system may in part account for Djibouti's unusual flexibility and innovation in terms of foreign policy. Nimble foreign policy has generated significant political and economic capital from inauspicious

foundations – most recently in relation to China. Thus Djibouti's power and influence is disproportionately greater than the state's small size and ostensibly 'dependent' roles would suggest (Le Gouriellec 2018, Styan 2016).⁶

Schematically, Djibouti's regional and foreign policy roles can be conceptualized in four distinct ways; firstly bilaterally purely as a bridge (perhaps more accurately, a conduit) providing access to the sea for the Horn's regional hegemon, neighbouring Ethiopia, whose foreign trade overwhelmingly transits via Djibouti. Secondly, corresponding more closely to the vision currently promoted actively by Djibouti itself, as a corridor to the region as a whole. 7 Here Djibouti's port facilities are envisaged as providing port services and pipelines not simply in terms of bilateral ties with neighbouring Somaliland and Ethiopia, but as a catalyst for broader regional economic growth and integration, encompassing all the Horn's states, including Southern Sudan and all of Somalia (for which Djibouti has always been a key conduit of livestock exports to Arabia). This vision promotes Djibouti as the Horn's natural regional and logistical hub, buttressed by the regional body IGAD, the Inter-governmental Authority on Development, which it hosts.

Thirdly, most explicitly since 2009 and the opening of Dubai World Ports (DPW) container port at Doraleh, just to the west of the capital, Djibouti's Ports and Free Zone Authority (DPFZA) has aggressively pursued the revival of its status as a logistical hub for transshipments. This positioning and explicit marketing of Djibouti as a global port and hub emphasizes Djibouti's centrality to trade flows between Asia, Africa and Europe. This role is not new, and was central to DPW's investment in the country a decade ago. Yet its profile has been considerably heightened by the significant investment of China in infrastructure within Djibouti and Ethiopia, with a clear shift perceptible between Djibouti's Arab and Asian partners in terms of who is promoting this vision .

The fourth aspect of foreign policy is Djibouti's unique role as a military hub. Several years ago this author argued Djibouti was fast becoming an "*international maritime and military laboratory*" spawning new networks of naval, military and surveillance cooperation, both among NATO forces (above all US, French and EU's EUNAVFOR contingent), and between them and diverse Asian powers (Styan 2013). Two factors have served to intensify this trend since; firstly the expansion of Chinese naval power in tandem with Beijing's "Maritime Silk Road Initiative" (Styan 2020); secondly the latest phase of Yemen's civil war which has intensified the military engagement of Arab and other mid-range actors in the Horn of Africa.

Section 2: Economic considerations: DPW & Dubai's privileged ties with Djibouti⁸

This second section provides an overview of Djibouti's privileged ties with the United Arab Emirates, and the ruling family of Dubai and the Dubai Ports World (DPW) maritime group. While these have ruptured in recent years (the reasons for which are analysed in section three below) what appeared to be a solid Djibouti-UAE axis established by 2010 is crucial for understanding the background of Gulf ties with Djibouti and East Africa more broadly. The section then briefly notes Qatar's engagement with Djibouti in providing arbitration with a belligerent Eritrea, following the latter's incursion into Djiboutian territory in 2008.

Djibouti as the 'Dubai of Africa', DPW's port investments.

This chapter does not seek to provide a detailed evaluation of the roots of Dubai:Djiboutian ties, rather it briefly sketches the contours of bi-lateral ties. The souring of initially close ties has been the subject of lengthy legal-wrangling and arbitration; in due course London court records and interviews may provide will ample source for a full evaluation.

Dubai investors began putting money into Djibouti after President Ismael Omar Guelleh came to power in 1999, providing an alternative source of capital from French investors, hitherto the dominant foreign actors in Djibouti's diminutive economy. The Emirati National Oil Company, ENOC, runs the main petro-chemical importation facility, the Horizon oil terminal, in Doraleh. This is used primarily to import petroleum products into Ethiopia, although also serves Djibouti as well as foreign naval vessels and bases using the port. Dubai financed the state's first top-flight, luxury Kempinski Hotel and also undertook some more modest real-estate ventures in the mid-2000s. An ambitious, some would say hubristic, set of urban-development plans also circulated in this period, most notably prior to the 2011 elections. These included a project to build a bridge across the Red Sea, and digital blueprints to transform Djibouti's sleepy down-town area (today still characterised by two-story Ottoman and French colonial buildings) with a series of Burj Khalifa-style skyscrapers. Two factors ended this fleeting vision of transforming Djibouti into a 'second Dubai'. Firstly the financial crisis and reversals in Dubai's own economy in 2008, Secondly a more local issue, the falling-out between President Guelleh and the man who played a pivotal role in brokering Djibouti-Dubai ties, Abdourahman Boreh, discussed further below.

Unquestionably, measured by value and economic impact, Dubai's key development in Djibouti is the Doraleh Container Terminal. Lying 12 km to the west of the capital city and its

congested old port facilities, until February 2018 the container terminal was managed, and partly financed, by DPW, who also owned a third of the port's equity. With its 1050m quayside and natural, 18m-depth anchorages, the port was the most advanced in East Africa. Both it and the Horizon oil terminal, which sits alongside it, were needed and made financially viable largely as a result of the 1997-98 Ethio-Eritrean border war. This closed the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa to Ethiopian trade, meaning that *de-facto*, Djibouti became land-locked Ethiopia's sole outlet to the sea. The port also became the home anchorage for the vessels of Ethiopia's state-owned shipping line.

Negotiations and plans for the DCT date back to the mid-2000s, with construction undertaken from 2006, and the port facility opening in 2009. For DPW it was hailed as a key element in their expansion into African ports, following their take-over of P&O. Djibouti provided the group not only with a key hub, also a transshipment 'spoke' from DPW's home-port of Jebel Ali. In 2009 DPW also appeared poised to take a leading role in the expansion of Djibouti's Free Zone development plans, and briefly also managed Djibouti's airport. Meanwhile Dubai itself (which hosts a very significant Somali population and acts as a hub for Somali financiers) became an increasingly attractive travel and retail destination for Djibouti's small, but wealthy and influential, middle-class.

By 2009, Dubai had overseen the construction, financing and management of Djibouti's key economic infrastructure – the oil and container ports at Doraleh. An apparently strong bond established between Guelleh and the Al-Makhtoum entourage, in part via DPW. As such it appeared that Djibouti had secured a key Arab ally, with Dubai prepared to back the economic transformation of the economy, while Djibouti would benefit from DPW's global reach to bolster their trade ties and aim to emulate in the Horn of Africa the Emirate's rapid transformation of the Gulf.

Djibouti-Qatari ties: mediating the 2008 Eritrean border conflict

Unlike UAE, Qatar has not played a particularly prominent or significant role in Djibouti, beyond limited project funding and maintaining a prominent embassy and regular diplomatic ties with a fellow-Arab League member. Qatar's relatively low profile partly reflected Djibouti's limited economic potential, and the 'first mover' advantage of UAE investors.

However, once relations with Eritrea ruptured in 2008, Qatar added Djibouti to the roster of conflicts in which it negotiated (Darfur, Yemen, Libya etc), Doha playing a pivotal role in

mediating between the two states. As part of the agreement signed in 2010, Qatar provided troops to oversee the contested border post, which overlooks the Bab Al-Mandab straits. Djibouti's relations with neighbouring Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, reached a new low when Eritrea deployed troops into Djibouti territory at Ras Doumeira, in the far north-east of the country, in April 2008. The Eritrean incursion comprised as many as 4,000 Eritrean soldiers and Djibouti committed some 8,000 military personnel to the area, representing about two-thirds of its total armed forces at the time. The Eritrean advances into Djibouti in June were strongly condemned by the UN Security Council, the Arab League, the AU and IGAD. Following months of negotiations, mediation under the auspices of the Government of Qatar succeeded in securing the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Djibouti territory in June 2010.

In June 2017 Qatari troops, which had been monitoring the border, were abruptly withdrawn in the wake of the rupture between Qatar and other Arabian Gulf states. Djibouti protested to IGAD, the AU and the UN that Eritrean troops had immediately seized the disputed territory, on the headland and the nearby island of Doumeira. Although considerable attention was given to the possibility of renewed Eritrean aggression at the time of Qatar's withdrawal, in reality almost nothing has leaked as to who actually now controls Ras Doumeira. France, the ultimate guarantor of Djibouti's borders under a bilateral defence accord, is believed to have maintained an observation post. If so, given its proximity to the current Yemeni frontline, it seems probable that French or US forces would maintain the observation post.

Section 3: Djibouti breaks with Dubai: personal and commercial recriminations with strategic implications

The escalation of tensions, culminating with the rupture of relations, with the United Arab Emirates is a clear break with Djibouti's otherwise pragmatic diplomatic policy. As we have seen, this seeks to systematically balance rival powers to bolster both the material and symbolic aspects of the state's broader diplomatic strategy.

Djibouti's privileged ties with Dubai began to sour even before the flagship Doraleh Container Terminal had opened. In 2008–09 there were considerable domestic political tensions as Guelleh pushed through constitutional amendments in order to be eligible for a third term as

President in 2011. In a move that was to have far-reaching implications for Djibouti's relations with Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, Guelleh also broke with Abdourahman Boreh, the friend and business associate who played the central role in brokering Dubai Ports World contract for the container terminal at Doraleh. Following allegations of corruption, Boreh fled into exile in Dubai and London. He was pursued, at considerable expense, by the Djiboutian authorities on corruption charges linked to the DPW agreement in a series of court cases.

While DPW continued to manage the port until February 2018, relations with Djibouti became increasingly strained from 2013 onwards. Boreh was subsequently convicted - on evidence which later proved controversial - of both tax and terrorist charges in Djibouti. Between 2012 and 2016 the Government pursued a protracted series of legal actions against Boreh in commercial courts in London. However, in March 2016 Boreh was acquitted of all charges, in a judgment that was highly critical of the Djiboutian government's case. Meanwhile, in a separate but parallel legal case in London, UK, in July 2014 Djibouti's Port Authority sought to nullify its existing management contract with DPW, alleging malpractice by Boreh. After protracted hearings, this too was rejected in a February 2017 ruling. In both cases, the Djiboutian authorities were ordered to pay full costs.

Meanwhile bad-blood over the DPW-Doraleh deal - which started at root as effectively an intra-Djiboutian (President Guelleh vs his ex-advisor and confidant Boreh), personal dispute - spilled-over into the military sphere in April 2015 in a somewhat quixotic manner. With the start of Saudi-led bombing of Yemen in 2015, Djibouti's close diplomatic ties with NATO allies of Saudi meant that from the outset Saudi and GCC aircraft used Djibouti for surveillance and bombing of Houthi positions in Yemen. In large part due to the proximity of Djibouti's extensive military facilities and airstrips to Yemen, and their close ties with UAE

In April 2015 a senior Djiboutian military figure remonstrated with the pilot of a GCC-UAE fighter that he was parking his jet in the wrong place (according to some accounts to avoid landing fees...); an altercation erupted which ended in fisticuffs. To understand this incident which prompted the 2015 rupture with UAE, one has to first appreciate quite how congested the runways at Djibouti's main airport, Ambouli are. The same strips serve civilian airlines, US forces of the Lemonnier base opposite Ambouli, as well as those of Japan, plus the flight-support arm of the EU's EUNAVFOR anti-piracy force. Add to this from early 2015, GCC aircraft refuelling and rearming en-route to Yemen.

A few days after the incident Dubai broke diplomatic ties with Djibouti and cancelled all flights and visas for Djiboutians. At the time, certainly as viewed by senior members of the Djiboutian government, this incident appeared to rapidly become entangled in the broader DPW-Boreh dispute.⁹ While visa and flights were eventually restored several months later, trust and relations never recovered.

Almost three years later, on 22 February 2018 Djibouti's government unilaterally terminated the Dubai Ports World (DPW) management contract and shares in the Doraleh Container Terminal. The port's seizure thus brought the increasingly embittered, six-year legal and commercial dispute between the Emirati-owned DPW and Djibouti's President to a climatic end. In turn this reconfigured alliances in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea.

DPW vowed to push hard for compensation through the courts in London. Bi-lateral ties with Djibouti and the government of the UAE DPW's owner, will remain fractious. However, UAE's ability to censure Djibouti diplomatically, bilaterally or via the Arab League, are limited given broader Arab disarray.

The seizure was the culmination of four months of, acrimonious eleventh-hour divorce negotiations between Emirati and Djiboutian delegations. The talks followed legislation passed in Djibouti on 8 November 2017, allowing the government to nationalize of "strategic assets" in the event of management disputes. Disagreement focussed on three core issues: unequal voting rights; low transshipment volumes and a hitherto obscure clause which allegedly gave DPW's exclusive control of Djibouti's overall port development. Managerially the fact that although DPW holds only 33% of DCT's equity, the contract gave it a two-thirds share of boardroom votes, was a running bone of contention.

Djibouti's authorities also regularly complained of the failure of DPW to adequately utilise Doraleh for regional transshipments of containers, arguing that DPW systematically privileged their home hub of Dubai's Jebel Ali, allegedly depriving Doraleh of lucrative trade. DPW was replaced as port managers by Singapore-based Pacific International Limited, who will manage the port with the Djibouti Ports and Free Zone Authority (DPFZA) with the aim of boosting transshipments of container traffic.

However, in one of the most commented-upon repercussions of this Africa-Gulf spat, as Dubai-Djibouti ties soured, in May 2016 DPW had announced a \$440m, 30 year deal to develop Berbera, neighbouring Somaliland's dilapidated port, just 250km east of Djibouti on the Gulf

of Aden . Ethiopia has been long keen to diversify access to ports. On 1 March 2018, just days after Djibouti's seizure of DPW's stake in Doraleh CT, the Ethiopian government announced that it would take a 19% stake in the Berbera port development, alongside DPW (51%) and the Hargeisa government (30%). However, the move was planned for many months; it was not a response to Djibouti's nationalization of DCT.

Section 4: Broader regional 'security' considerations; the Yemeni war and the UAE's Somaliland and Eritrea bases

Given this narrow, African-Gulf dispute, pitting Djibouti's President and entourage against his ex-advisor and DPW, the matter might be dismissed as being as much about pride and personalities than hard-nosed commercial rivalry or geo-politics. However, Djibouti's domestic ports' dispute with the Emirates evolved in an exceedingly fraught regional context. This meant that UAE/DPW's problems over their Doraleh port, and DPW's linked move to also invest in neighbouring Somaliland's dilapidated port of Berbera, have wider implications and require broader interpretation.

By 2020, the regional and global context in the lower Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is that regional rivalries and alliances on both sides of the Red Sea coast, as well as global rivalries - above all between China and the United States - , appeared to be being played out in a race for military and commercial port infrastructure spanning almost 1,200 kilometres of the Horn of Africa coastline.

The scramble for military and commercial influence and facilities contributes to political volatility and associated foreign policy choices facing the states in the Horn of Africa. This is most pronounced in terms of the implications of foreign government involvement in Somali politics, and how other actors, particularly the other Somali states (quasi-autonomous Puntland and the *de-facto* independent Somaliland), view Gulf Arab involvement. It is also of concern to Ethiopia and Djibouti, both of whom contribute troops to the AU mission in Somalia, AMISOM. The African Union also expressed unease about the impact that growing Middle Eastern rivalry had upon Somalia; Chad's Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairperson of the African Union Commission, voicing concern on in May 2018 at what he termed "increasing instances" of interference by "non-African actors"; a veiled reference to UAE, Turkey and Qatar.¹⁰

This in turn appears inextricably linked both to the GCC military campaign in Yemen, and the splits within the GCC dealt with in other chapters in this volume.

Wider schisms: Egypt-Saudi-UAE vs Turkey-Qatar in the Horn?

The military and commercial rivalry between disparate Gulf and other powers in the Horn also complicates western strategic responses to the rapid increase of Chinese naval power in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. In the short term, developments at the end of the second decade of the 20th century pointed to a gradual hardening of positions into increasingly concrete and fractious regional blocs. In the longer term, US and EU concerns about strategic shifts in the region will remain focused primarily on Chinese plans and the containment of Islamist threats emanating from Yemen and Somalia, rather than regional tussles between local powers, or indeed the fate of the Yemeni nation and peoples. As such what Saudi, its allies and Qatar do in the Horn of Africa is only peripheral importance to US, European and Chinese stances to the splits in the GCC as a whole.

Nevertheless, the escalation of war in Yemen in 2015 and the blockade of Qatar in 2017 have had a profound impact on regional geopolitics in the Horn of Africa, as competition and patronage increasingly fell along an Egypt-Saudi-UAE vs Turkey-Qatar fault-line have disrupted old patterns of patronage and positioning.

As noted in section four, amidst Dubai's DPW problems in Djibouti, in 2016 it decided to invest in Berbera's civilian port infrastructure. Subsequently, in March 2017, Somaliland's parliament approved plans for the UAE to construct a separate naval facility in Berbera, which in the Cold War had harboured first a Soviet, and then US naval facility. The facility will be separate from Berbera's merchant port, which as noted is the focus of a 400-million-dollar refurbishment by the Emirati state-owned firm DP World, in a joint-venture between Somaliland, Ethiopia and DP World. Commenting on the naval construction in April 2018, Somaliland's ambassador to the UAE claimed that UAE troops "*will protect our coastline [...] train our security forces [and] also use the base to launch attacks on Yemen*". Berbera lies approximately 300 kilometres due south of Yemen's strategic southern port-city of Aden.

In November 2017, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported that the UAE had already constructed a 400-metre jetty to the west of Berbera's main port, the facility apparently aiming to support the GCC's naval blockade, and aerial bombardment of Yemen.

It was in part the spat over GCC landing rights in April 2015, narrated above, which spurred the UAE to invest in the mothballed Eritrean port of Assab, which lies just 60 kilometres west of the Yemeni port of Mocha. Once the principal port for Ethiopian trade, Assab had fallen into

disuse after trade routes closed as a consequence of the 1998 Ethio-Eritrea war. Assab also had the dual advantage of being even closer to Yemen's Houthi-controlled coastline than Djibouti and, being utterly isolated and located in a country with tight information controls, obscuring the GCC's devastating Yemen campaign from public scrutiny.

Commented [A2]: We need to be consistent with Houthi pls.

UAE and Saudi aircraft and ships enforcing an ongoing naval blockade of Houthi-controlled Yemen make extensive use of Assab's proximity to Yemen; the Saudi's navy home base of Jizan being 400 kilometres further to the north.

Assab's utility meant the UAE has shelved plans for a three-kilometre airstrip on Perim Island. While Perim lies just two kilometres off Yemen's coast, this close proximity also made it particularly vulnerable to Houthi attack. In February 2018, satellite imagery indicated that earlier construction works had ceased and equipment had been removed from Perim.

Turkey's investment in Somalia; renovating Sudan's Suakin; Qatar's countermoves?

The most visible aspect of the expansion of Turkey's ambitious strategy in the Horn of Africa has hitherto rested on substantial investment in Somalia. Following several years of humanitarian and commercial activity by Ankara, in September 2017, the Turkish government opened a military base in Mogadishu, providing extensive funds and training for the nascent Somali National Army. Subsequently, during a high-profile visit to Sudan in December 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared Turkey would rehabilitate part of the abandoned Ottoman port of Suakin and construct new naval facilities nearby.

Egyptian and Saudi alarm at Turkish expansion into the Horn was aggravated by the announcement in March by Qatar that it would provide 4 billion dollars for a broader Suakin and Port Sudan venture, to be twinned with the Qatari Gulf port of Hamad. However, the plans to date appear vague; Port Sudan itself, lying 50 km south of Suakin, is congested and lacks investment. As noted above relative to their arbitration and monitoring role in the Eritrean-Djiboutian border dispute, to date, Qatar's role in the Horn of Africa has been primarily diplomatic rather than military, such as, for example, the role Qatari diplomats played in negotiating Sudan's Doha Document for Peace in Darfur.

However, more recently Qatar has also provided patronage for key Somali politicians in Mogadishu's federal government, including, allegedly the president. This was likely a major factor behind the rupture in April 2018 between the UAE and Somalia, prompting the UAE to

precipitously close their Hospital in Mogadishu and withdraw from military training programmes for the Federal government.

In terms of ramifications in the upper Red Sea, while, in theory, a Qatari-funded, Turkish-built expansion of either Port Sudan (or - less probably - Suakin) could provide berths for Turkish or Iranian vessels seeking to break the Saudi-UAE naval blockade of Yemen, at present the Suakin project appears one of symbolic intent, aimed more at giving practical substance to Erdogan's ("neo-Ottoman") strategic ambitions in East Africa, while strengthening the Turkey-Qatar alliance across the region.

Section 5: Superpowers and GCC-Horn dynamics; nascent US-China rivalry and regional divisions over Yemen and Arabia.

This overspill of Middle Eastern rivalries also complicates the long-term strategic repercussions of China's new naval presence in the Red Sea. The fulcrum of China's long-term policy in the region is the consolidation of its 'naval logistics facility' in Djibouti, a key link on Beijing's 'Maritime Silk Road Initiative' (MSRI).

Since 2013 China has invested heavily in Djibouti's infrastructure, moulding the Red Sea state into a key logistical hub for China's trade, investment and naval activities in the region. Djibouti's privileged status was reflected in Xi Jinping's high-profile reception of the Djiboutian President Guelleh in Beijing in November 2017, and the signing of bi-lateral accords enhancing the two states' 'Strategic Partnership'.

Since 2012 China's has become Djibouti's largest inward investor, thanks largely to the two major MSRI infrastructure projects; the rail link to Addis Ababa, with its associated infrastructure; and the Multi-Purpose Port (MPP) at Doraleh, with its adjacent Free Trade Zone. The slashing of container transportation times between the Red Sea and Ethiopia's burgeoning highland manufacturing zones, (from 2-3 days of unreliable truck journey, to 8-12 hours by rail) is set to radically transform the manufacturing potential of Ethiopia. China constructed its 'naval logistics facility' at Doraleh between 2015 and 2017, its first overseas military base. This came in the wake of an upsurge in Chinese civil investment in port, rail and industrial infrastructure in the Horn of Africa. The base shares berths with the far larger civilian Multi-Purpose Port at Doraleh, run by the state-backed China Merchants Holdings (CMH) conglomerate. Since 2013, CMH have owned 23.5% of Djibouti's Ports and Free Zone Authority, which manages all of Djibouti's ports.

China is just the latest global power to establish a presence in Djibouti, which has, over the past 15 years, embraced a spectrum of new military partnerships and alliances. Prior to Chinese troops debarking in July 2017, Djibouti's most striking 'new' relationship was with the United States, diversifying dependency away from France (Styan 2013). The US's Combined Joint Task Force in the Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) has been based in Djibouti since 2002. Originally conceived as part of the US response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, with the creation of AFRICOM in 2008 it became the US military's only permanent military facility on the African continent, based at a former French military facility, Camp Lemonnier, in Ambouli, a southern suburb of the capital. US military investments in Djibouti have since grown steadily. President Guelleh visited Washington in May 2014, signing a further ten-year rental agreement on the military facilities, worth around \$60m per annum to Djibouti. ¹¹

Thus it is primarily the swift expansion of Chinese presence and power, embodied in the opening of the Peoples Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) facility in Djibouti in August 2017, which challenges the established patterns of US and European presence. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) has its only military base on African soil in Djibouti, which also hosts the EU's anti-piracy force EUNAVFOR Somalia, as well as a Japanese naval base and France's largest garrison in Africa.

While this much is clear, what is far less certain is what, if any, impact the presence of so much global firepower in the Gulf of Aden has upon the regional dynamics surrounding both Arab involvement in Yemen, and the broader rivalries of regional powers, since mid-2017 aligned along the Qatar-GCC divide, which seek influence in the Horn of Africa. China's own policies towards the Middle East as a whole are now the subject of extensive study, and are dealt with elsewhere in new literature and this conference (Reardon-Anderson 2018).

China's involvement in Djibouti, the Red Sea and Horn of Africa.

In terms of the new ties with China, Djibouti is an influential hub on the 'Maritime Silk Road'. The specificity of Djibouti's role is the fact that it harbours China's first, and so far only, naval and military logistics facility outside of China. President Guelleh first hinted at a possible Chinese military presence in Djibouti to journalists in April 2015. Just a week after US Secretary of State John Kerry had made his inaugural visit to Djibouti that May, Guelleh

confirmed the Chinese plan and on 8 November a formal agreement was signed by General Fang Fenghui of the People's Liberation Army General Staff.

Military ties did not come out of the blue; eighteen months before, in early May 2014, Djibouti had signed a limited military cooperation agreement, providing China with mooring and bunkering facilities in exchange for military supplies. Chinese armoured vehicles and weaponry were displayed in Djibouti shortly afterwards.¹² The naval base, which in practice is a heavily-militarized annex of the Doraleh civilian Multi-Purpose Port, was officially inaugurated on August 1 2017. During construction, the Chinese navy and media routinely referred to a '36-hectare logistics base' for the PLAN. The facility can accommodate up to 400 marines and comprises ammunition depots, an office complex, a heliport with a short airstrip and other facilities.¹³ Both the opening ceremony, and the first live-fire exercises by Chinese troops operating from the base the following month, were publicised widely in both western and Chinese media, with the coverage in China emphasizing Djibouti's links to the MSRI and the broader One Belt One Road framework.¹⁴

China's new military presence is largely driven by Beijing's global commercial maritime ambitions and economic investments in the Horn of Africa, secured through a network of global shipping lanes with expanding Chinese investment in East African ports. Evidently this nascent, ongoing strategic reconfiguration of the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean has been fuelled by new regional enmities forged on the anvil of Yemen's disintegration.

Yet these rivalries provide only a partial picture of the shifting strategic balance of power in the region. US, European and Asian naval forces all retain a very significant presence in the Horn, predating both Yemen's war and the GCC split, and largely reflecting the ongoing vital strategic importance of the sea lanes through Egypt's Suez Canal.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to highlight selected regional factors' impact upon Djibouti's foreign policy. It focussed in particular on the evolution of its convoluted ties with Dubai and the United Arab Emirates. Failure to manage tensions with the UAE, its main Gulf commercial partner, marks a reversal for Djibouti's established diplomatic practice. This has invariably sought to maximise financial and political benefits by from rivalries between states seeking bi-lateral ties and a military or maritime presence in the city-state. In the case of the UAE, the

highly personalised roots of the rupture, originating within the presidential entourage, overrode diplomatic principles and priorities, prompting significant damage to Djibouti's regional standing and Gulf ties.

The chapter has also sought to sketch how these broader 'regional' dynamics interact with local actors in the Horn of Africa, notably in neighbouring Somaliland and the Federal Republic of Somalia, where the UAE, Qatar and Turkey all play influential roles.

Given the chapter's focus on Djibouti, we have not evaluated Eritrea's ties with Arabia and Yemen's civil war, beyond noting the expansion of the UAE's military facility in the Eritrean port of Assab, whose role in policing the blockade of Yemen's western ports is central. Eritrea itself, like several other African states, was believed to have contributed troops to the Saudi coalition in Yemen, while Ethiopia has been cautious to avoid direct entanglements. The UAE's Assab base is an important source of foreign exchange for the beleaguered Asmara authorities. Given its utility for the blockade of Houthi supply lines, notably around the key port of Hodeida in the fighting of 2018, it will remain important, even if the UAE accelerates construction of its military facility at Berbera, in Somaliland to the south and consolidates its hold on Socotra. In the long-term, rapprochement between Ethiopia-Eritrea from mid-2018 should alter regional power dynamics, notably as trade routes reopen. A preliminary peace-deal between Eritrea and Djibouti, signed in September 2018, coupled with renewed Ethio-Eritrean ties, also shifts the outlook for Arab, Turkish and Asian third parties whose presence in the Horn has increased so sharply in recent years.

The chapter has attempted to provide a specific Djiboutian perspective on the complex interlinkages underpinning Gulf State's involvement in East Africa, outlining how the Djiboutian government manages the current renewal and reconfiguration of Gulf engagement in the Red Sea and Horn. It has not sought to delve into the *maritime* dimension of interactions between states surrounding the Bab Al-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden and southern Red Sea coasts. Clearly the Saudi-led naval blockade of Yemeni ports, coming amidst ongoing and intense anti-piracy

Commented [A3]: what's their status? DS: Asmara routinely denied any troop presence, but credible Eritrean sources suggest small numbers of Eritreans were deployed.

surveillance in the region, has prompted increased awareness of the dangers of the waters to the north and south of the Bab al-Mandeb itself.

However, it is the expansion of Chinese power – underscored by the opening of Beijing’s military facility in Djibouti in August 2017 - which challenges the contours of US and European presence in and around the Horn, despite wariness of China. Given the nature and rationale of the activities of the United States Africa Command and the EU’s anti-piracy force EUNAVFOR Somalia, they are unlikely to be altered by the activism of the Gulf states and Turkey in the Horn. Evidently the US base in Djibouti also hosts non-Africom US military units. These oversee attacks on Islamist and other targets in both Somalia and Yemen. In the latter case, attacks in Eastern Yemen against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP), like the escalating war along west Yemen’s coast may well have involved the US liaising with Emirati troops. Whether one views this as distinct from Emirati actions in Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti, largely depends on one’s reading of the UAE military and foreign policy rationale and processes.

More broadly, it is less certain what impact the presence of so much global firepower in the Gulf of Aden has upon the regional dynamics surrounding both Arab involvement in Yemen, and the broader rivalries of regional powers. Since mid-2017, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain at loggerheads with Qatar, with the GCC split in turn reconfiguring regional powers’ influence in the Horn of Africa. Western (and Indian) media will continue to focus on the expansion of China’s naval and military facilities, while the regional arms and base races narrated here will in practice continue to revolve around the evolution of the Yemeni quagmire. However, it is likely that it is the acceleration of Chinese trade and investment in the Horn, and the increase of their maritime power in the region, that will largely determine the shape of long-term port expansion in the Gulf of Aden.

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¹ This text was originally presented to the Gulf Research Center Conference, Cambridge, July 31-August 3, 2018, as part of a workshop on “The Gulf States in East Africa: Security, Economic and Strategic Partnerships?”

² On recent migratory trends, see: Research and Evidence Facility (REF) Consortium, *Migration Between the Horn of Africa and Yemen, A Study of Puntland, Djibouti and Yemen*. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/research-chapters/file122638.pdf> , November 2017.

³ For details of the ‘Djibouti Code of Conduct’, regulating anti-piracy operation, see - <http://oceansbeyondpiracy.org/matrix/djibouti-code-conduct>. See also C. Bueger and T. Walke. ‘*From Djibouti to Jeddah, the Western Indian Ocean Needs Security*’, (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2018)

⁴ Formally speaking, in terms of population, Djibouti is the 5th smallest state in Africa; only four island micro-states of Seychelles, Sao Tome & Principe, Cap Verde and the Comoros are smaller. Of the 22 members of the Arab League, only Comoros is smaller.

⁵ French forces in Djibouti were reconfigured in the 1990s, then in June 2011 troop numbers fell significantly with the transfer of the 13th Demi-Brigade of the French Foreign Legion from Djibouti to the UAE.

⁶ See Gouriellec, Sonia. ‘Djibouti’s Foreign Policy in International Institutions: The Big Diplomacy of a Small State’, in Warner, Jason, Shaw, Timothy M. (Eds.). *African Foreign Policies in International Institutions* (London: Palgrave, 2018) and, Styan, ‘Djibouti: small state ... ‘.

⁷ This aspect is central to the “Vision 2035” developmental blueprint adopted by the Djiboutian government.

⁸ This section draws on the author’s work for Africa South of the Sahara and Oxford Analytica.

⁹ Personal communications; Djibouti April 2015.

¹⁰ Al Jazeera, External actors urged to stop meddling in Somalia's affairs, 29 May, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/external-actors-urged-stop-meddling-somalia-affairs-180529180345722.html>

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¹² Mandip Singh, *Port de Djibouti: China's First Permanent Naval Base in the Indian Ocean*, New Delhi: The Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), February 23, 2016, p.5

¹³ Vinayak Bhat, Col. (retd), “China’s mega fortress in Djibouti could be model for its bases in Pakistan, September, 27 2017. <https://theprint.in/2017/09/27/china-mega-fortress-djibouti-pakistan/> - provides a detailed analysis of aerial surveillance photos of the base taken in Sept 2017.

¹⁴ For example: Chinese News Agency: http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-07/12/content_4785301.htm and, Russia Today, <https://www.rt.com/news/404593-china-military-drills-djibouti/>