

## **ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S INTERESTS IN ESTABLISHING A MILITARY BASE IN DJIBOUTI IN 2023**

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### **ABSTRAK**

Pembangunan pangkalan militer Cina di Djibouti merupakan langkah strategis yang mencerminkan kepentingan ekonomi, politik, dan militer Beijing di kawasan tersebut. Lokasi Djibouti yang strategis di dekat Selat Bab-el-Mandeb, salah satu jalur pelayaran tersibuk di dunia, memungkinkan Cina untuk melindungi jalur perdagangannya serta mengamankan proyek-proyek infrastruktur yang merupakan bagian dari Inisiatif Sabuk dan Jalan (Belt and Road Initiative). Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi motif, implikasi, dan respon internasional terhadap pembangunan pangkalan militer Cina di Djibouti.

Kata Kunci: Tiongkok, Djibouti, Pangkalan Militer, Geopolitik.

### **ABSTRACT**

The construction of China's military base in Djibouti is a strategic move reflecting Beijing's economic, political, and military interests in the region. Djibouti's strategic location near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, one of the busiest shipping lanes globally, enables China to protect its trade routes and secure infrastructure projects that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative. This study explores the motives, implications, and international responses to the construction of China's military base in Djibouti.

Keywords: China, Djibouti, Military Base, Geopolitics

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade, China has been recognised as one of the world's superpowers. The phenomenon of nation-building has been studied from various perspectives: economic, military, political, and cultural. In international relations, the emergence of a superpower does not necessarily imply political and national interest tensions with neighbouring countries.

These political and economic reforms aim to unlock potential international trade opportunities. As a result, China has seen rapid political and economic growth. In response to international politics, China continues to enhance its capabilities, particularly in economics and security, while increasing its competitiveness on the global stage.

In this context, security remains a "hot topic" in international politics. The growing military budgets of China, the United States, Russia, South Korea, and several other

nations demonstrate that military power serves as a psychological weapon for delivering non-verbal messages to other countries. These non-verbal signals, such as increased military budgets, redesigned military equipment, and troop training, are efforts by states to assert their privileged position as major powers. This underscores the importance of the military, both for maintaining domestic stability and for exerting pressure on the international system. Given the intense international political competition, China aligns its security policies with its economic policies. Looking at China's geopolitical situation, with historical adversaries like Japan and South Korea, it becomes evident that China is keen not to repeat past mistakes. Given this history, China needs to strengthen its security sector as part of its national defence.

While China has achieved rapid economic growth and emerged as a new economic power, it still faces external threats. As China's economy grows, it also requires a robust security apparatus to support and stabilise its economic development. In this research, China seeks to develop plans in this area, with its defence budget increasing annually. China's impressive international relations require more strength than mere domestic power. One of China's international economic projects that has garnered global attention is the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at connecting the Eurasian economy through infrastructure, trade, and investment.

China selected Djibouti as the location for building a military base due to several strategic reasons. First, Djibouti's geographic location at the eastern tip of the Red Sea provides direct access to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a vital maritime trade route, and access to the Suez Canal. China's military presence in Djibouti enables it to expand its presence in the region and safeguard its strategic interests in maritime trade. Moreover, despite being in a potentially conflict-prone region, Djibouti is relatively stable compared to some of its neighbouring countries plagued by conflict. China's military presence can help reinforce stability and security in the region, which, in turn, supports China's interests in protecting its assets and enhancing maritime security.

Djibouti is also a key access point for China to natural resources in East and Central Africa and is part of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. By having a military base there, China can secure supply routes, safeguard its interests in resource exploitation in the region, and support OBOR projects. Considering these factors, Djibouti

becomes a strategic choice for China to establish a military base to support its strategic, security, and economic interests in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative consists of two main components: the Economic Silk Road and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The overland Silk Road, the Economic Belt, aims to connect China's underdeveloped western provinces with Europe via Central Asia. Meanwhile, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road aims to connect China's affluent coastal provinces with Southeast Asia and Africa through ports and railways. In this study, the military base construction plan will focus on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road because this route passes through waters that are more sensitive in terms of security. Xi Jinping envisions the Silk Road as vital to China's interests by linking China to various regions worldwide.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/New Silk Road Initiative, regional and international cooperation with other countries across continents has become a key focus for China. In its development, the Belt and Road has had a very positive impact on the economic, political, and security improvements of the countries cooperating with China, and the plan to build military bases to protect Silk Road trade among these countries is highly significant. When a country establishes a military base in another country, it is seen internationally as an effort to gain influence over that country.

**Strengthening China's Security Sector through Base Construction in Djibouti**

China's construction of a military base in Djibouti is viewed as a step to enhance its presence in the Middle East and Africa. This base ensures China's performance in all missions, including escorting, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance in Africa and West Asia. (Putten, 2011). A U.S. Department of Defense report predicts that China will "relocate" its military base to countries with trade ties. According to the report, military bases are established in countries with long-standing friendly relations and similar strategic interests. China's efforts have attracted widespread attention, especially from the United States, which views this as a threat to its hegemony.

Djibouti has a close relationship with the United States, particularly in the military and security sectors. The U.S. military base at Camp Lemonnier, previously a French base, signifies America's commitment to regional security in East Africa and the Red Sea. This

base is used for counter-terrorism operations, maritime security, and as a logistics hub for military operations (Kennedy, 2020).

China also has strong ties with Djibouti, primarily through infrastructure investments and its military presence. China established its military base in Djibouti in 2017, marking its first overseas military base. This presence signifies China's increasing role in global security and highlights its interest in protecting vital maritime trade routes. Economically, China has heavily invested in Djibouti through large infrastructure projects, including the Doraleh Port, the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway line, and the free trade zone. These investments have not only strengthened bilateral relations but also reinforced Djibouti's position as a logistics and trade hub in the region.

**The Strategic and Geopolitical Implications of China's Military Base in Djibouti**

Building a military base in Djibouti brings several strategic and geopolitical benefits for China. This base allows China to extend its military operational reach beyond Asia, granting it the ability to safeguard its interests in Africa and the Middle East, while also strengthening its presence in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, China can more efficiently carry out military operations, emergency evacuations, and military exercises in this region.

Moreover, the base is located near one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, the Bab-el- Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. China's military presence in Djibouti enables it to protect this trade route from threats such as piracy and regional conflicts, ensuring the safety of ships transporting goods to and from China.

In times of crisis or natural disaster, the base can serve as an operational centre to coordinate relief efforts and evacuations. Lastly, the Djibouti base provides China's armed forces with a location to conduct military exercises in environments different from those in China, thereby enhancing operational capabilities and combat readiness in international scenarios.

Although the construction of China's military base in Djibouti has been ongoing for several years, continued research is necessary for several important reasons. First, regional and international security is constantly evolving, so ongoing research helps monitor and analyse these changes and their impact on regional stability. Second, the

geopolitical competition between China and Western countries, particularly the United States, is continually developing, necessitating up-to-date analysis to understand its effect on the balance of power in the region. Third, the long-term evaluation of China's significant investments in Djibouti is needed to understand their economic and social impacts on the local economy and community.

Additionally, military operations and infrastructure development have significant environmental impacts that need to be continuously monitored to ensure the sustainability of the local ecosystem. Furthermore, policies and legal frameworks related to the presence of foreign military forces must be continually evaluated and adjusted to remain relevant and effective. Finally, the presence of foreign military bases can significantly affect regional stability making ongoing research crucial to monitor long-term impacts. Therefore, continued research on China's military base in Djibouti is essential to understand its long-term implications and develop responsive policies to changing conditions.

Besides the issues mentioned earlier, researchers are also trying to determine the potential implications of granting China access to establish a military base in Djibouti. The researchers believe that China carefully analyses all aspects of establishing a military base in Djibouti. China's national interest in building a military base in Djibouti has, to some extent, influenced both Djibouti and China, positively and negatively. Based on the above explanations, this study is titled "Analysis of China's Interests in Establishing a Foreign Military Base in Djibouti in 2023."

**Research Question**

What Are China's Interests in Establishing a Foreign Military Base in Djibouti in 2023?

**Literature Review**

**China's Interests in Building a Military Base in Djibouti (Military Support Hub)**

This study refers to a thesis written by Kiki Wiyanti Putri, published in the *Journal Paradigma* of UPN Veteran Yogyakarta. The article discusses China's national interests that prompted the establishment of a military base in Djibouti. One of China's efforts to secure its foreign interests is through the construction of a military base in Djibouti to protect China's oil imports from Africa and the Middle East. Besides economic benefits,

China also gains security advantages by constructing a military base, known as the Military Support Centre, in Djibouti. The foundation for this military construction is China's security interests, stemming from efforts to realise the Chinese Dream. This term, popularised by President Xi Jinping since 2012, aims to build a strong and solid China. The base's construction also aims to protect Chinese citizens and assets abroad, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, regions prone to conflict. China's military base in Djibouti is seen as part of realising its global ambitions. In conclusion, although both economic and security interests play a role, China's economic interests are more dominant in its decision to build the military base in Djibouti. The region where the base is located is vital to China, especially as exports are one of the key contributors to China's economy.

**Britain's Interests in Establishing a Naval Base in Mina, Bahrain, in 2014**

This study is based on an academic article analysing Britain's interests in establishing a military base, specifically a naval base in Mina, Bahrain, in 2014. The article, written by Rizky Mardatilla, discusses the agreement between Britain and the Bahrain government that allowed Britain to establish its first military base in Iran at Mina Salma in Bahrain. By doing this, Britain aimed to position itself militarily in the region, taking advantage of the opportunities created by the U.S.'s strategic military reorganisation in the area, particularly its shift away from Persia.

In conclusion, Bahrain's core issues were political, social, and economic problems. Social inequality and discrimination were the root causes of conflict in Bahrain. The constitutional monarchy system, dominated by the Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa government, became unstable due to democratic debates attempting to reform the government system. The aftermath of the February 2011 conflict in Bahrain (part of the Arab Spring), including foreign intervention to restore and create a conducive environment, enabled Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa to remain Prime Minister of Bahrain. Britain's military base in Mina marked the first reintroduction of military forces into the Middle East in 40 years.

**Main Argument**

China's development in Djibouti is closely tied to its efforts to strengthen its overall armed forces. The modernisation of China's military includes improving both the quality and quantity of its military equipment, enhancing combat capabilities, and developing new, more offensive military doctrines. Military bases established both

domestically and abroad have become an integral part of this strategy, allowing China to place significant military power in strategic locations that support its national interests.

Overall, the construction of military bases by China reflects its efforts to expand geopolitical influence and strengthen military capabilities. Although it has raised concerns and tensions with other countries, China continues this effort as part of its long-term strategy to become a dominant global power.

### **Article Writing Objectives**

This research has several objectives: First, to explain China's motives for establishing a foreign military base in Djibouti. Second, to analyse the specific interests China has in setting up a foreign military base in Djibouti. Third, to assess the advantages and disadvantages of China's decision to build a foreign military base in Djibouti.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Neo-Realism**

This study uses the theory of neo-realism. This theory is based on the premise that relations between countries, whether in cooperation or conflict, can be explained using the concept of neo-realist anarchy. The balance of international power is determined by changes in the distribution of capabilities, which is essentially the distribution of economic and military power. Neo-realism tends to focus exclusively on the policies of major powers because these states have the authority to shape the international system.

Neo-realism is an important theory in international relations, contributing to a deep understanding of the dynamics of the international system. The theory emerged in response to the traditional understanding of relational studies, which emphasised the role of states and human factors in international relations. Neo-realism shifts the focus to the structure of the international system itself, highlighting the importance of systemic factors in determining state behaviour on the global stage.

Kenneth Waltz, a key exponent of neo-realism, explains that there is no central authority in the international system governing interactions between states. In this chaotic world, each country must rely on its own power to protect its security and national interests. He argues that anarchy is the fundamental premise of the international system. In such a world, states strive for power and security in order to survive in a system full of uncertainty.

However, in a unipolar system, there is one dominant country with significant advantages in shaping global affairs. This also explains why, in a unipolar international system, dominant countries do not have strong incentives to form alliances. Still, other countries will seek ways to limit the dominant country's power.

From a neo-realist perspective, this is not solely about human factors like government policies or the intentions of leaders. Instead, state behaviour is judged not based on individual motives or characteristics but on the structure of the international system.

**National Interest Concept**

The concept of national interest has multiple meanings. According to Hans J. Morgenthau, national interest is about survival, which involves protecting the national identity, politics, and culture from external interference (Waltz, 1979).

According to Charles Lersch and Abdul, national interest is the most important, long-term, and sustainable goal of a state, its people, and the government. On the other hand, Mr. Vernon from Dyke College explains that national interest refers to the efforts of states to protect and build relationships with one another.

A military base is a facility established to support military logistics and operations, and a foreign military base is one located within the territory of another country. The concept of military bases was first mentioned in the writings of Thucydides, who fought in the Peloponnesian War in the 5th century BC. Foreign military bases have continued to develop over time, particularly from the 15th to the 20th century, as colonial powers frequently expanded their territories. The establishment of foreign military bases peaked during World War I and World War II, justifying the actions of countries like the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and other major powers to establish military bases in sovereign states.

A case study that researchers use to understand the previously mentioned statement is the Khmeimin military air base in Syria. The Syrian government decided to invite Russia to establish a permanent military base in Kmeymin to curb U.S. influence in supporting the Syrian government's opposition. As a result, Syria came under direct influence from Russia, which sought to limit U.S. influence in the region (Yasuhiro, M., 2006).

Foreign military bases are also war infrastructure that supports military operations, including wartime and non- wartime operations conducted abroad. Based on this definition, researchers argue that any military facility, logistical support, or military operation conducted overseas, like China's military base in Djibouti, is a military base, even if the Chinese government refers to it differently.

**Rational Choice Theory**

In this analysis, the researcher uses Rational Choice Theory, developed by Graham T. Allison, as the main lens for analysing the issues at hand. When applying Allison’s Rational Choice Theory, the researcher uses the theory's dimensions: goals and objectives, choices, consequences, and options. Once the data is prepared, the researcher analyses the data one by one using each aspect within Allison’s Rational Choice Theory (Waltz, K. N. (1979).

Rational Choice Theory is a theory of international relations that assumes international actors make decisions through a rational approach. According to Andrew H. Kydd, actors are assumed to have preferences over the available choices and outcomes, which are classified based on the actor’s level of desire for that decision. Specifically, Kydd explains that information about the decisions made by the actors must be continuously updated because there may be uncertainties regarding the values and consequences of their preferences and decisions.

According to Allison, the concept of Rational Choice Theory is divided into four elements: national actor, problem, static selection, and action. The national actor, in Allison’s concept, indirectly asserts that the main subject in this theory is the nation-state. The problem refers to issues that prompt stakeholders to take immediate action. Static selection refers to a series of government actions related to an issue, and these actions are understood as solutions to the problem. Action refers to the steps taken by an actor, which consists of several components. Action components in Allison’s Rational Choice Theory are: (1) goals, (2) choices, (3) outcomes, and (4) options.

To analyse this thesis, the researcher breaks down the problem using Rational Choice Theory. The researcher applies the components found in the conceptualisation of Graham T. Allison’s Rational Choice Theory. The researcher will analyse the goals, choices, consequences, and decisions of the Djiboutian government in accepting China’s

military base. Subsequently, the researcher will search for all relevant information and facts related to the topic being studied, as this theory suggests that valid and up-to-date information influences the decision-making process of the parties involved.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research methodology. In essence, qualitative research is aimed at understanding and comprehending the phenomena and events experienced by a subject within a social interaction in society, in order to search for and determine meaning within that context.

In qualitative research, researchers seek to understand and explain events directly or indirectly, studying them comprehensively. Qualitative methodology is often referred to as a naturalistic method because it essentially explains realities and wholes that cannot be understood or separated from their context. Thus, in line with the explanation of qualitative research methodology, this study produces descriptive data in the form of writings and information that the researcher gathers to derive meaning from the study related to China's interests in establishing a military base in Djibouti.

This research uses a descriptive-analytical research type, which is a method used to search, record, gather, and explore an event in depth based on the necessary data or information, using detailed data collection procedures over a specified period of time, to create a systematic, factual, and accurate description or depiction of the facts and realities in the relationship between the phenomena or events being studied. Therefore, the researcher will collect data and information according to the facts to explore China's interests in establishing a military base in Djibouti.

The researcher engages in several processes of presentation and analysis of relevant aspects. The following are some characteristics of descriptive-analytical research: (Moleong, L., 2010).

1. Providing a descriptive explanation of social phenomena or events that occur in real-time and based on facts.
2. Offering a descriptive explanation of the research subject being discussed, managed concerning the research group, within the specified research period.

3. Descriptive research does not test hypotheses but instead engages in an interpretive process or understanding of the events that have occurred in the research object influenced by related factors.
4. The process of searching for data considered to provide interesting and current information is carried out in detail, so that problem identification is justified by the event taking place. (Creswell, J. W.2007).

Qualitative research methodology involves discussions that prioritise or focus on the research topic, i.e., events or phenomena within the context of relevant data that differ to demonstrate different research possibilities and benefits or to discuss the researcher's point of view on certain cases (Fraenkel and Wallen).

In addition to providing an overall picture of the situation, this type of research uses a methodology aimed at providing an accurate and detailed description of the event, allowing an understanding of the event or situation being investigated. In this research, the author uses naturally related data tied to the research questions posed in the study. It is essential to use qualitative and descriptive research approaches when collecting data in this scenario. In this research, the author uses a literature study data collection technique, where the researcher collects secondary data or scientific references such as scientific articles, theses, and studies that contain previously researched and valid information.

The data analysis technique is the process of systematically organizing data from interviews, field notes, and other materials so that the results can be understood and communicated to others. The data analysis method used in this research, according to Miles and Huberman, is qualitative analysis, which is conducted interactively by the researcher through the process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Data reduction involves simplifying data by selecting, sorting, and focusing on data to become useful information, making it easier for the author to draw a conclusion. Testing the validity of the data is a process to ensure the accuracy of the research. Cresswell believes that researchers can use existing strategies to determine the accuracy and reliability of the research by including references. In this aspect, the researcher makes comparisons with other writings or studies that have a similar approach in various respects, such as research topics, methods, approaches to problems, and improved aspects.

**DISCUSSION**

China has strengthened its military presence by building military bases in various strategic locations, particularly in the South China Sea. The construction of these bases is part of China’s strategy to expand its geopolitical influence and enhance its military projection capabilities in the region. The Spratly and Paracel Islands are key focuses of this development, with various military facilities supporting China’s naval and air operations.

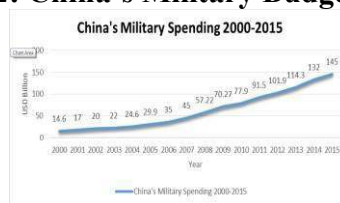
The bases in the South China Sea are equipped with advanced infrastructure, including long runways, aircraft hangars capable of housing fighter jets and surveillance aircraft, and ports that can accommodate large warships. In addition, advanced communication and radar facilities have been installed to enhance China's surveillance and monitoring capabilities in the region. This demonstrates how serious China is about securing its territorial claims in the South China Sea.

The presence of Chinese military bases in the South China Sea has also heightened tensions with neighbouring countries and the United States. Countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, which also have claims to the region, feel threatened by China’s growing military presence (Putri, K. W. 2017). The United States, which has interests in maintaining freedom of navigation in the region, frequently conducts freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) around China’s bases to challenge its claims.

Beyond the South China Sea, China has expanded its military presence outside the Asia- Pacific region. China’s first overseas military base was built in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. This base aims to support anti-piracy operations in the waters surrounding Africa and the Middle East, as well as provide logistical support for Chinese naval vessels operating in the region. The construction of this base signals China’s ambition to become a global maritime power.

China is highly ambitious in continuing to improve and advance its defence and military security capabilities. In 2016, it experienced an increase of 7 to 8 percent, adjusted to China’s national defence needs and fiscal revenue.

**Figure 2: China's Military Budget in 2000**



(Source: ASEAN Studies Centre, Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2016)

Other efforts by China to increase its military strength include diplomacy as a form of soft power. As stated by Xi Jinping in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is committed to contributing to global peace efforts. In line with the policy set by Hu Jintao's administration, China's "Peaceful Rise" aims to maintain a peaceful approach in its ascent as a global power. (Lisbet, 2012)

In addition to increasing its military personnel and continuously upgrading military equipment, the Chinese government has crafted policies to establish military cooperation with other countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally. This military cooperation is one of China's efforts to realise its commitment as a nation with superior military capacity on a global scale.

Another objective of such military cooperation is to demonstrate China's serious participation in realising global security and stability. China has reached military cooperation agreements with several countries in Latin America and Africa, including Djibouti, Nigeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe (Enuka, 2012). Other influential countries in the Middle East have also signed military cooperation agreements with China.

### **Analysis of the Chinese Government's Interests**

Djibouti is a small country located on the African continent, specifically on the northeastern coast of Africa. This country is strategically positioned as a transit area for migrants heading to Middle Eastern countries. Djibouti and China established diplomatic relations on 8 January 1979, about a year and a half after Djibouti gained independence. The relationship between the two countries is considered close, with frequent visits from government officials of both nations. In 2017, Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh became the first African president to attend the Chinese Communist Party Congress.

**Figure 3: Map of Djibouti**



(Source: VectorStock.com)

China’s consideration of building a military base in Djibouti is strongly influenced by its strategic geographic location, particularly in maritime trade. The military cooperation agreement between the two countries represents a form of mutual benefit, supporting and facilitating both nations. Prior to China, other countries such as the United States (Camp Lemonnier), France (Les Forces Françaises Stationnées à Djibouti), and Japan (Maritime Self- Defense Forces) had already established military bases in Djibouti.

It can be argued that the presence of military bases from various countries in Djibouti served as a motivating factor for the Chinese government to build its military base, aimed at securing stability and asserting hegemonic influence in the region.

The figure below illustrates the annual tax or lease fees paid to Djibouti. The United States pays the highest amount, \$63 million, followed by France at \$36 million, China at \$20 million, Italy at \$26 million, while Japan's fees are not listed.

**Figure 4: Foreign Military Bases in Djibouti**



(Source: Twitter @ThomasVLInge)

In early 2014, China and Djibouti agreed to sign a military cooperation agreement. This agreement was signed by China’s Minister of Defence, Chang Wanquan, and Djibouti’s Minister of Defence, Hassan Darar Houffaneh, on 25 February 2014.

Construction of the Chinese military base in Djibouti began in early February 2016 and was completed in 2017.

The close cooperation between the two countries is further strengthened by the military base. This cooperation enhances Djibouti's position as a key point for infrastructure, which can expand trade and logistics capabilities. It is known that China pays Djibouti \$20 million annually as rent for the construction of its military base, according to Djibouti's Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf. One of the terms of the agreement between the two nations is that China agreed to a 10-year contract with an option to extend the contract for another 10 years. It is estimated that China has spent around \$590 billion on building its military base.

China has also funded major infrastructure projects in Djibouti to the tune of \$14 billion, including a railway that links Djibouti to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. China also provided financial assistance for the construction of pipelines to transport natural gas to Djibouti's port for export to China.

The construction of China's military base in Djibouti reflects various strategic interests that Beijing seeks to achieve. Djibouti, located at the entrance to the Red Sea and at the crossroads of key maritime routes between Europe, Asia, and Africa, holds a highly strategic location. This base allows China to secure its vital trade routes, which are essential to the country's economic sustainability.

According to an article in *China Daily* (March 2016), the idea of building a military base in Djibouti was first conceived in March and April 2015, during which time the Chinese Navy was evacuating Chinese nationals and foreigners from Yemen.

However, the construction of this military base has also raised concerns among Western countries and regional neighbours. They worry that China's growing military presence may lead to increased tensions and power competition in the region. In line with Rational Choice Theory, as proposed by Allison, the first step is to analyse the objectives of the Djiboutian government in accepting China's foreign military base.

The researcher argues that rejecting the construction of China's military base could have led to a decline in diplomatic relations between the two countries. China has several key interests in its cooperation with Djibouti:

**Geographic Interests**

One of Djibouti’s key assets is its geographic position. Djibouti serves as a gateway for landlocked countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda. To maximise this potential, Djibouti requires adequate infrastructure, such as maritime and land infrastructure, to connect these landlocked countries to Djibouti’s maritime territory.

In addition, the military base provides China with the ability to offer humanitarian aid and a rapid response to crises in the region. Africa frequently faces natural disasters and humanitarian crises, and China’s military presence in Djibouti allows for faster and more effective responses in delivering aid.

**Economic Interests**

The diplomatic relationship between China and Djibouti is closely tied to economic interests. There was a risk of missing out on economic opportunities from the China-Djibouti diplomatic relationship if Djibouti had rejected China’s request to establish a military base. With an ambition to transform into a service- oriented economy similar to Singapore, as Djibouti’s President Ismail Omar Guelleh stated, “We want to follow the path of Singapore,” Djibouti needed investments to support this ambition, estimated at around USD 124 billion. This funding is required to rejuvenate existing infrastructure and build new facilities. China eventually agreed to help Djibouti realise its ambitions by providing loans to support its infrastructure programmes.

The Chinese government has provided loans amounting to USD 14 billion through the Belt and Road Initiative, representing about 9% of Djibouti’s required funding. Djibouti needed fresh capital from China. The loans provided by China, totalling USD 14 billion, are equivalent to 75% of Djibouti’s GDP, which is approximately USD 17 billion. Djibouti's government expressed its interest in the military cooperation during a CGTN interview with President Ismail Omar Guelleh, where he stated, “And we are also very pleased to host the first base of the People’s Liberation Army in Djibouti for international security to fight against piracy, extremism, and terrorism.”

Similarly, the military base allows China to protect its extensive economic interests in Africa. China has invested heavily in infrastructure, energy, and natural resources projects across the continent. The Djibouti base adds an additional layer of security for these projects, including China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which

aims to improve connectivity and economic cooperation between countries. The East African region and its surrounding waters have frequently been the target of terrorist groups and pirates, threatening the security of maritime routes and international trade. With this military base, China can more effectively conduct maritime security operations. Economically, the base strengthens China’s position in trade negotiations and investment in the African region. By demonstrating a strong military presence, China can enhance its influence in shaping economic policies in African countries. Djibouti, as a small country with a relatively weak economy, relies heavily on revenue from leasing military facilities to foreign nations. This arrangement strengthens regional defence and security relationships while improving interoperability between China’s armed forces and those of other countries.

**Geopolitical Interests.**

The establishment of a military base in Djibouti marks a significant shift in China’s foreign policy, highlighting its global ambitions. For decades, China’s military policy has been primarily focused on defending its own territory. However, China now shows a clear intent to protect its interests overseas. China’s military presence in Djibouti is also part of its effort to counterbalance U.S. military influence in the region. A military analyst, Zhou Chenming, noted, “The Chinese and U.S. bases in Djibouti are really close, so one could disturb the other if the two sides don’t have a proper communication mechanism.”

The United States has a large military base in Djibouti, and China’s presence introduces a new balance of power in the region. The Djibouti military base also bolsters China’s diplomatic presence in Africa. This military presence signals China’s long-term commitment to stability and development in the region, strengthening diplomatic ties and fostering bilateral cooperation with African nations.

Moreover, the base provides logistical advantages for China. Djibouti offers port facilities that can be used for resupplying and maintaining Chinese naval ships operating in the region, including anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden.

**Defence and Security Interests**

China’s military base in Djibouti is crucial for conducting anti-piracy operations by the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Gulf of Aden, a region with

heightened conflict risks. The growing number of Chinese ships transiting from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula is one of the main reasons behind the establishment of a permanent military base in Djibouti.

Djibouti is also a key point for United Nations peacekeeping missions and other international military operations in Africa. By establishing a base there, China can more easily support and participate in these missions, enhancing its role as a responsible global power.

Additionally, the base allows China to conduct military exercises and improve operational capabilities beyond its domestic territory. This is a critical step in modernising China's military to become a more modern force capable of operating in various regions around the world. The Djibouti military base also provides a platform for China to gather intelligence and strategic information on military movements and maritime activities in the region, essential for planning more effective defence and security strategies.

On the other hand, the Chinese government argues that the presence of the base is aimed at supporting stability and peace in the region. They emphasise that the base will be used for peaceful purposes, including humanitarian missions and disaster relief operations. The Djibouti military base also provides China with opportunities to improve its military technology and operations. By operating bases abroad, China can test and develop new military technologies in real-world conditions.

China is committed to the principle of win-win cooperation. The Chinese armed forces will fulfil their international responsibilities and obligations by providing more public security goods to the international community to the best of their abilities. China actively participates in UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO), vessel protection, and international efforts in humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR). They also strengthen international cooperation on arms control and non-proliferation, playing a constructive role in resolving political hotspot issues, jointly safeguarding international security routes, and responding to global challenges such as terrorism, cyber security, and major natural disasters.

### **China's Military Power Projection and Strategic Importance**

China's military power projection tends to focus on strengthening its external capabilities, particularly in relation to its national defence policies. China's defence

strategies are largely defensive in nature, with the emphasis on securing its territorial and national interests. China asserts that it will not engage in military aggression unless attacked first, reflecting its defensive posture.

China’s land-based defences have received significant attention due to the country’s numerous land borders with other nations, including Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Nepal. Hence, land-based security is of paramount importance to China, aimed at safeguarding its sovereignty from external threats.

On the maritime front, China’s defence capabilities have seen slower growth since 2018 (Melvin, N., 2019). However, the country is currently developing an aircraft carrier built entirely by its domestic engineers as part of efforts to enhance its naval capabilities.

The construction of China’s military base in Djibouti can be examined from two perspectives. First, China’s military and naval presence is closely linked to its ambitions regarding the Maritime Silk Road. Djibouti is located near the Gulf of Aden, which is highly susceptible to piracy, particularly from Somalia. Moreover, Djibouti sits on an international trade route that leads directly to the Suez Canal (Melvin, N., 2019). China’s military presence signals that it has considerable military power and significant interests in this region.

This military presence can alter the geopolitical landscape of the Indian Ocean. The long-standing presence of other major powers, such as the United States, will undoubtedly feel challenged by China’s growing influence. To support the increasing number of military bases China plans to establish, it will need to enhance its domestic defence sector, including raising defence budgets, expanding military assets, and increasing military personnel.

In terms of security, China’s construction of the Military Support Hub in Djibouti serves its broader national security goals. China’s security interest in building the Djibouti base stems from its goal to realise the “Chinese Dream,” a term popularised by President Xi Jinping in 2012, which aims to transform China into a modern, prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious nation by 2049.

## CONCLUSION

The construction of a military base represents China's response to the international system's influence, which compels it to establish a strong defence by leveraging its economy. Through the establishment of military bases, China seeks to create regions with strong Chinese influence. Geopolitically, China's presence in Djibouti reflects its global ambitions as a growing power in Africa and surrounding regions.

In conclusion, China's interests in building a military base in Djibouti reflect a complex combination of strategic, national security, economic, and geopolitical considerations. China aims to leverage Djibouti's strategic location to enhance its global influence, secure its trade routes, and protect its investments while contributing to regional stability and participating in international security efforts.

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