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Among Giants: The Military Bases' Impacts of Great Power Competition on Djibouti's National Security

Christo Ariel Mario Silaen, Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, Yermia Hendarwoto
Defense University, Indonesia
christosilaen@sp.idu.ac.id

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Abstract

This study addresses the limited research on the implications of great power competition for small states, with a particular focus on Djibouti's national security, political autonomy, and economic stability. Despite its strategic location and geopolitical significance, Djibouti remains underexamined in the context of rising global military rivalries. The study investigates how the presence of multiple foreign military bases affects Djibouti's internal and external security dynamics. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were drawn from official reports, scholarly literature, and strategic analyses, and examined using thematic content analysis to identify key patterns and trade-offs. Findings indicate that while foreign military bases contribute to national security through deterrence and provide economic gains via lease revenues and infrastructure development, these benefits are unequally distributed and come at the cost of growing dependencies that may limit Djibouti's foreign policy autonomy. The study concludes that Djibouti strategically adopts an omnidirectional hedging approach, maintaining balanced relations with competing powers to preserve its sovereignty and regional relevance. The research contributes to theoretical discourse on small-state strategies in international relations and offers practical policy recommendations

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for managing foreign military engagements while safeguarding national interests. It also highlights avenues for future research on the broader socio-economic and political implications of foreign base-hosting in strategically located microstates.

Keywords: Djibouti; Great Power Competition; National Security; Foreign Military Bases; Small-State Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of international relations in the post-Cold War era have increasingly been shaped by the resurgence of Great Power Competition (GPC). Scholars have noted that the current international order is no longer defined by the bipolar rivalry of the United States and the Soviet Union, but rather by the emergence of a multipolar system where multiple great powers, including the United States, China, Russia, and to some extent Japan and the European Union, actively compete for influence (Kihishen et al., 2023; Melese, 2022). This competition extends far beyond the military domain; it encompasses economic assistance, technological leadership, strategic investments, and diplomatic maneuvering. In particular, advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and maritime security infrastructures have become arenas where major powers attempt to reinforce their global dominance (Cabestan, 2020; Yeo & Kardon, 2024). From an international security perspective, this rivalry is not abstract but produces concrete implications for small and strategically located states, especially those positioned along vital global trade routes.

One of the regions most deeply affected by this renewed competition is the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, where geopolitical and economic interests converge. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a narrow passage linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, has been described as one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints due to its role in facilitating international energy flows and global trade (Ashine, 2024; Jatmiko, 2023). States that control or influence this corridor are able to shape not only regional but also global security and economic stability (Workman et al., 2023; Zoubir, 2016). As a result, global powers have increased their strategic presence in this area through military bases, naval patrols, and economic partnerships. This has transformed the region into a theater of

intense competition, where global security priorities such as counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and freedom of navigation intersect with great power rivalry. For smaller states located at these crossroads, the influx of foreign powers generates both opportunities and vulnerabilities, highlighting the complex intersection of sovereignty, security, and economic dependence.

Djibouti exemplifies this complexity with particular clarity. Located on the Horn of Africa at the mouth of the Bab el-Mandeb, Djibouti has become one of the few states in the world to host multiple foreign military bases simultaneously, including those of the United States, China, France, Japan, and other countries (Çalışkan & Aliyev, 2023; Nguyen, 2023). The United States, through Camp Lemonnier, conducts counterterrorism and maritime security operations; France, as the former colonial power, seeks to maintain its historical influence; China, by establishing its first overseas military base in Djibouti, signals its ambition to extend power projection into Africa and the Middle East; and Japan justifies its presence in the name of securing commercial routes and combating piracy (Ezeh & Ezirim, 2023; Fong, 2024). While this concentration of great power presence generates economic rents and infrastructure investment for Djibouti, it simultaneously raises critical concerns about the erosion of sovereignty, the instrumentalization of its territory for foreign strategic agendas, and the potential destabilization of domestic politics. National debates increasingly revolve around the tension between short-term economic benefits and long-term risks to sovereignty and stability.

Previous research has examined aspects of this issue, but notable gaps remain. For example, Almomani & Azmi (2024) analyzed the broader implications of foreign military bases in Africa, highlighting both their deterrent value and their constraining effects on local sovereignty. Luo (2021) studied the vulnerabilities of small states situated along maritime chokepoints, showing how they are frequently trapped between competing external powers. However, these studies often adopt a generalist perspective, failing to investigate the case-specific strategies employed by individual small states like Djibouti in navigating such rivalries. Moreover, much of the literature has emphasized military and economic dimensions, while less attention has been paid to the nuanced strategies of "hedging" or "entrepreneurial neutrality" that small states develop in order to manage external pressures. Thus, there remains a research gap in understanding how Djibouti conceptualizes and operationalizes its security in light of great power competition, particularly when viewed through the lenses of realism and small state security theory.

The novelty of this research lies in combining realist perspectives with Walter Lippmann's broader conception of security. Realism emphasizes the structural constraints of the anarchic international system, where small states are often categorized as weak actors unable to secure themselves independently (Domingo, 2016). Michnik (1982) broadened the definition of security by arguing that true security requires not only the absence of external threats but also the preservation of national identity, values, and interests without capitulation to foreign pressures. This framework allows for a more comprehensive evaluation of Djibouti's security, moving beyond the narrow focus on military survival. By incorporating concepts such as omnidirectional hedging and entrepreneurial neutrality, the study explores how Djibouti seeks to balance foreign military presence with its own autonomy and stability. This theoretical synthesis provides fresh insight into how small states negotiate great power rivalry, offering a contribution to both empirical and theoretical debates on small state security.

Based on these considerations, this paper focuses on analyzing the impacts of great power competition on Djibouti's national security. Specifically, it examines how the presence of multiple foreign military bases affects Djibouti's sovereignty, foreign policy autonomy, and domestic stability. By situating Djibouti's strategic choices within the broader context of GPC and applying a realist-Lippmannian framework, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dilemmas faced by small states in strategically contested regions.

METHODS

Research Type

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical orientation. A qualitative method is considered appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting social, political, and security dynamics rather than quantifying variables (Sugiyono, 2024). Creswell (2014) emphasizes that qualitative research is used when the aim is to explore complex phenomena and construct meaning from contextual realities. In the case of Djibouti, the phenomenon of great power competition and the presence of multiple military bases involves multi-layered issues of sovereignty, foreign policy autonomy, and security, which cannot be adequately captured through numerical data alone. Thus, the

qualitative approach provides a comprehensive framework to uncover how Djibouti navigates the pressures of competing global powers.

Research Design

The research adopts a single-case study design, with Djibouti as the primary unit of analysis. Rahmadhani (2023) highlights that case study design is suitable when the research investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. Djibouti represents a critical case due to its strategic location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and its role as host to military bases from multiple great powers, making it a unique setting for understanding the impacts of great power competition on small-state security. Unlike comparative studies on Singapore or Qatar, which emphasize economic hedging, this research underscores the intersection of foreign military presence and national sovereignty. This design enables a deeper, context-specific analysis while contributing to broader debates on small-state security strategies in international relations (Saputra et al., 2025).

Data Source and Sampling

Given the qualitative nature of this research, the data sources consist primarily of secondary materials (Aprila et al., 2023). These include policy documents, official government statements from Djibouti, publications by international organizations (e.g., United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund), think tank reports (e.g., Chatham House, Carnegie Endowment, RAND), and peer-reviewed journal articles on great power competition and small-state security. The study employs purposive sampling to select documents that are most relevant to the research questions. Sugiyono (2024) explains that purposive sampling is a technique where data sources are chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. In this case, the criteria include materials that directly address Djibouti's military base politics, its foreign policy responses, and the implications for national security.

Data Collection Instruments and Techniques

Data collection relies on systematic document analysis. According to Sugiyono (2024), document analysis is an effective technique in qualitative research to extract meaning and understanding from textual data. The documents analyzed encompass government white papers, bilateral and multilateral agreements, economic reports, and scholarly literature. Where available, speeches from Djiboutian officials and diplomatic communiqués are also included to capture national perspectives. This triangulation of

sources ensures that the research is not overly dependent on a single type of data and strengthens the validity of findings. To enhance credibility, the researcher applies source triangulation by comparing academic, institutional, and media-based documents, thereby minimizing bias.

Data Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the collected data. Creswell (2014) argue that thematic analysis allows researchers to systematically code and organize data into themes that reflect both explicit and implicit meanings. The analysis proceeds in several stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes related to Djibouti's national security (e.g., sovereignty, autonomy, stability), and interpretation of how these themes align with theoretical frameworks of realism and hedging. By Creswell (2014) concept of comprehensive security and realist assumptions of power asymmetry, the analysis situates Djibouti's strategies within broader international relations theory. The goal is not only to describe Djibouti's situation but also to critically assess how small states adapt and survive amid the structural pressures of great power competition.

RESULTS

Military Bases Presence in Djibouti

Djibouti hosts several foreign military bases from major global powers, reflecting its strategic importance despite its small geographic size. France maintains the oldest presence, dating back to colonial times, with approximately 1,450 troops and extensive docking and air support infrastructure. The United States operates Camp Lemonnier, established in 2002, housing around 4,000 personnel with UAVs, patrol aircraft, and naval assets. Japan maintains a smaller base of about 180 personnel, primarily focused on maritime security and trade route protection, while China established its first overseas base in 2017, consisting of 1,000 troops, UAVs, and warships, integrated with a 200-hectare logistics area and underground facilities. These military installations are situated in close proximity to one another, creating a unique concentration of foreign military presence within a small national territory. Base leases generate significant revenue for the Djiboutian government, estimated at millions of dollars annually, while also requiring the allocation of extensive land areas within the capital city and nearby regions.

Table 1. Military Bases in Djibouti

Country	Year Established	Primary Strategic Objectives	Number of Troops	Military Assets	Infrastructure	Annual Lease Fee
France	1883	Regional security, influence in East Africa	1,450	1 cargo aircraft, 10 fighter jets, 1 maritime patrol aircraft, 10 helicopters	Largest overseas base, docking facilities, air support infrastructure	$40 million
United States	2002	Counterterrorism, influence expansion, regional stability	4,000	UAVs, patrol aircraft, warships	Camp Lemonnier (202 ha)	$63 million
Japan	2011	Trade route protection, maritime security	180	1 warship, 2 P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft	12-hectare area, dock, aircraft hangar	$3.5 million
China	2017	Securing maritime routes, supporting BRI, protecting investments in Africa	1,000	UAVs, warships	23,000 m^2 underground facility, dock, 200-ha logistics area	$20 million

Geographic Location and Strategic Significance

Djibouti's strategic importance is largely derived from its location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Approximately 10 percent of global trade and a significant portion of global oil shipments pass through this maritime route annually. Djibouti borders Eritrea to the north, Ethiopia to the west and south, and Somalia to the southeast, situating it near politically unstable regions. This geography enhances its appeal to major powers seeking to monitor maritime trade, project military influence, and secure global energy corridors.

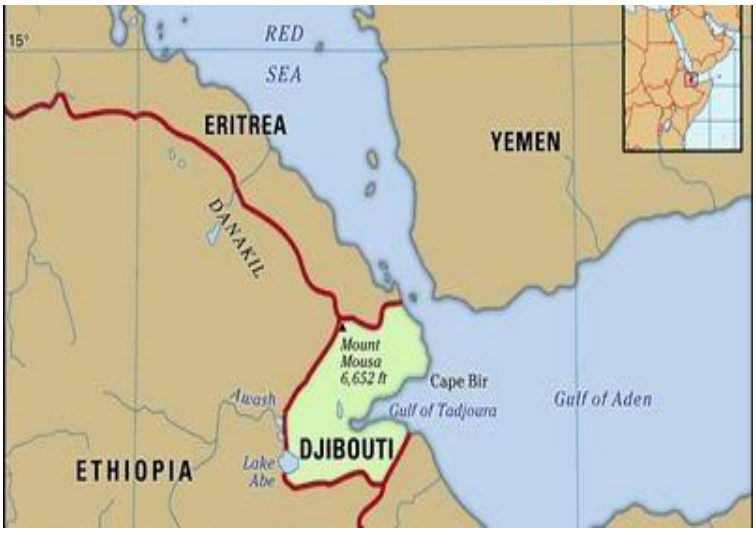


Figure 1. Map of Djibouti

Figure 1 illustrates the clustering of foreign military bases and their proximity to international shipping lanes. Djibouti functions as a maritime gatekeeper, enabling the control and surveillance of critical trade routes. The spatial distribution of bases demonstrates how multiple foreign powers occupy a relatively small area, reinforcing the country's strategic significance.

Economic Contributions of Military Bases

The foreign military presence contributes substantially to Djibouti's economy. Base rental fees form a significant portion of government revenue, while infrastructure investments improve logistics, port facilities, and local employment opportunities in construction and service sectors. Chinese-led initiatives under the Belt and Road framework, including the Doraleh Multipurpose Port and the Djibouti-Addis Ababa Railway, integrate military and civilian logistics, further enhancing economic activity. However, these benefits are concentrated in specific sectors, with a large portion of the population remaining marginalized due to limited distribution of wealth. Agriculture and industrial production remain underdeveloped, constrained by Djibouti's arid climate and scarce natural resources.

Security Implications

The presence of multiple foreign military forces enhances Djibouti's defense capabilities against external threats. Regional security concerns include the proximity of Eritrea and Somalia, as well as militant groups such as Al-Shabaab. The foreign bases

provide deterrence against aggression and opportunities for joint exercises and training with local forces. However, the concentration of competing powers also poses potential risks; the spatial proximity of US and Chinese forces, for instance, could create tension or accidental escalation. Djibouti's domestic security infrastructure relies heavily on external forces, limiting the government's capacity to address internal security challenges independently.

Sovereignty and Political Impacts

Hosting foreign military bases affects Djibouti's political autonomy. Economic dependence on rental income and infrastructure investment from major powers necessitates careful diplomacy, as decisions must balance foreign interests with national priorities. While foreign presence contributes to regime stability and provides defense support, it also constrains policy freedom. Strategic decisions may be influenced by the need to maintain relations with multiple, sometimes competing, powers, highlighting the trade-off between immediate security benefits and long-term sovereignty.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that Djibouti's geopolitical position at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait directly shapes its national security, economic structure, and political autonomy. The concentration of foreign military bases from the United States, China, France, and Japan reveals the country's strategic role as a hub for global military presence. Economically, these bases generate significant revenue through leases and infrastructure investments, yet the benefits are unevenly distributed among the population. In terms of security, while external military support provides deterrence against regional threats, it creates a dual dependency: Djibouti's protection is partially outsourced, and its domestic security forces remain comparatively underdeveloped. Politically, hosting multiple powers necessitates careful diplomatic balancing to maintain autonomy, as Djibouti must avoid aligning too closely with any single actor to preserve its sovereignty. These findings highlight a key tension: Djibouti benefits from economic and security support but must continuously navigate the strategic interests of competing powers. The clustering of foreign military bases within a relatively small territory amplifies both strategic advantages and vulnerabilities, making Djibouti a microcosm of great power competition where local governance decisions are directly influenced by external actors.

The observed patterns in Djibouti align with the findings of Almomani & Azmi (2024), who identify the Horn of Africa as a strategic arena for great power influence. Similar to their analysis, this study confirms that proximity to global trade routes, such as the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, drives foreign military presence. Additionally, prior research by Luo (2021) highlights the economic leverage foreign powers exert through base leases and investments, which is corroborated by the results showing that Djibouti derives substantial revenue from these arrangements. However, this study adds nuance to earlier work by providing a detailed mapping of troop presence, military assets, and infrastructure capacity, illustrating the concentration of competing powers within a small geographic area. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on strategic significance or bilateral relations, the present research emphasizes the multidimensional impacts security, economic, and political arising from simultaneous foreign military presence and the resulting need for Djibouti to practice omnidirectional hedging.

The findings contribute to existing scholarship on small state security and international relations by demonstrating how microstates can leverage their strategic location to maximize economic and security gains while navigating great power rivalries. Practically, the study underscores the importance of infrastructure investment, diversified partnerships, and careful policy balancing in maintaining national autonomy. Theoretically, the results support Realist and hedging frameworks: small states actively manage dependence on external powers to preserve sovereignty and avoid entanglement in conflicts. Djibouti's approach exemplifies omnidirectional hedging, where engagement with multiple powers mitigates the risks of over-dependence on a single actor while capitalizing on economic and security opportunities. Moreover, the findings highlight potential vulnerabilities, such as the risk of escalation between competing powers' forces, uneven economic benefits, and constraints on domestic policymaking. These outcomes reinforce Michnik (1982) broader conception of security, which emphasizes the preservation of identity, values, and interests beyond immediate military protection.

This study has several limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data for military base numbers, troop deployments, and infrastructure capacities introduces potential inaccuracies, as some information is sensitive or classified. Second, the research focuses exclusively on Djibouti and its major foreign military partners, limiting generalizability to other small states with different geopolitical contexts. Third, the analysis primarily addresses structural and strategic implications, without integrating local perspectives from

Djiboutian policymakers or communities directly affected by foreign bases. Finally, the study does not quantify long-term economic and political outcomes, leaving open questions about the sustainability of Djibouti's hedging strategy in the event of shifting global power dynamics. Future research could incorporate fieldwork, interviews, or longitudinal studies to address these gaps.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impacts of great power competition on Djibouti's national security, focusing on the presence of foreign military bases from the United States, China, France, and Japan. The results reveal that Djibouti's strategic location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait provides both significant advantages and complex challenges. Economically, the presence of foreign bases generates substantial revenue through leases and infrastructure investments, yet these benefits remain unevenly distributed among the population. In terms of security, foreign military support enhances deterrence against regional threats, but reliance on external powers limits Djibouti's ability to independently manage internal security and foreign policy. Politically, the country must navigate delicate diplomatic relationships, maintaining neutrality to preserve sovereignty while accommodating the strategic interests of competing powers. Overall, the findings demonstrate that Djibouti effectively leverages its geographic and strategic position, employing an omnidirectional hedging strategy to balance security, economic, and political considerations in a highly competitive international environment.

Despite these insights, the study has several limitations. The analysis relied primarily on secondary data, including reports and publicly available information on troop deployments, base infrastructure, and investment figures, which may not capture sensitive or classified aspects of foreign military presence. Additionally, the study focused solely on Djibouti, limiting the generalizability of findings to other small states. Perspectives from local policymakers or communities directly affected by the foreign bases were not included, leaving gaps in understanding the social and human dimensions of these impacts.

Based on these limitations and findings, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, incorporating fieldwork, interviews, and longitudinal analysis to assess both short- and long-term consequences of great power competition in small states. Comparative studies across other strategically located microstates could provide a broader

understanding of how small nations navigate similar challenges. Furthermore, research exploring the social and economic implications of foreign military presence on local communities would complement the strategic and political insights, offering a more comprehensive view of national security in contexts of great power rivalry.

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