

From Launching Economic Projects to Building Military Bases: Chinese Influence in the Horn of Africa

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Summary

In recent years there has been a remarkable Chinese presence in Africa in general, and in the Horn of Africa in particular, especially after establishing the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. China announced its new Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. This initiative focuses on strategic areas in both land and sea and links China with the rest of Asia, as well as with Africa and Europe.

China managed to expand its relations and strengthen its presence in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. There have also been important changes in China's foreign policy. China began to change its isolationist foreign policy in favor of a slow and gradual open policy marked by involvement in the international military and political scene. This tendency has culminated in the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, one of the most important countries in the Horn of Africa. This move was preceded by intensive evaluations of Chinese foreign policy. The study discusses Chinese influence in the Horn of Africa by focusing on the most important shift in Beijing's strategy, and the beginning of its involvement in international competition in areas of strategic influence, as well as the foundations, evidence and some repercussions of this presence in light of the developments in the region over the last decade.

The study also examines China's new vision of Africa in general and the Horn of Africa in particular, and its strategic importance in light of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The study also takes into account current developments and challenges in the region, especially since some countries of the Horn of Africa experience political and military conflicts that affect the pace of development.

Introduction

Significance of the Horn of Africa in China's New Vision

The term 'Horn of Africa' is variously defined. To anthropologists, it refers to the land of the Somalis in Somalia, Djibouti, Ogaden in Ethiopia, and the northmost provinces of Kenya. Geographers define the Horn of Africa as that land extension, which takes the shape of a horn to the west of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In other words, the term encompasses Eritrea, Ethiopia and Kenya. Politicians and economists broaden the term to include the Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda under the name of the 'Great Horn of Africa'. Based on the above definition, the Horn of Africa covers the eastern region of Africa, which controls the sources of the Nile, the southern entrance to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab. ¹

Sometimes, Yemen is added to the countries of the Horn of Africa because it is linked to the southern entrance to the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden, despite the fact that it is an Asian country.

The Horn of Africa region, in its narrow scope— Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia— has an estimated area of 1.9 million square kilometers. It has a population of about 200 million. The maritime domain of the Horn of Africa contains natural resources, such as oil and gas reserves, fisheries, shipping and port services. ² The Horn of Africa has about 10 ports, 4 of which are in Somalia, 2 in each of Kenya and Eritrea, and one port in each of Sudan and Djibouti. The last port is of great regional and international importance because it is located near Bab al-Mandab Strait. China relies heavily on it as it is one of the main ports of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Horn of Africa has drawn the attention of many regional and international powers due to geopolitical and strategic considerations. It is a major transit of international trade as its waterways extend from Bab al-Mandab to the Red Sea. It is also considered a transit of the security forces of some of the major powers heading to the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. The region has also received the attention of a group of international powers, including the United States, Russia and China because of its strategic significance besides being a source of wealth that makes it one of the most important regions in the world.³ Inasmuch as conflicts in the region have contributed to weakening its countries, they also contributed to sharpening external competition for control and influence in the region for the above-mentioned factors. Chinese foreign policy in the 21st century has paid attention to establishing a responsible Chinese force worldwide. The Chinese leadership has stressed the need to increase China's involvement in world affairs, without orchestrating a sea change at once, but rather in slow gradual steps in line with the philosophy of peaceful rise. Chinese strategists and international relations experts are currently busy drawing the appropriate plans. Expert Wang Yessi has proposed a strategic plan entitled "Heading West," which aims to draw a map of creating China's capabilities for political intervention in the western regions, including the Arab world, to gain influence that allows China to impose its pivotal interests there and to impose a new balance of power with the United States of America. Another expert, Lee Yongho, suggested that China should adopt a dual approach and establish good relations with the existing major powers, in parallel with improving its relations with neighboring and developing countries within the framework of what he called "strategic surroundings belt." ⁴

In the same context, diplomatic cooperation between Africa and China has expanded. Beijing has adopted a new policy aimed at penetrating deep into Africa through establishing the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which has been held periodically since 2000, to enhance China-Africa relations in line with geopolitical and economic transformations and the fluctuations in Africa,⁵ and in order to face the common challenges of economic globalization. Unlike the American discourse, Chinese discourse focuses on equality and cooperation in a South-South game, as China views itself as part of the southern hemisphere.⁶ China has started to implement its expansionist policy, create a strategic balance with the United States, and search for alliances to consolidate its presence and influence in order to secure oil. It even goes farther. It has sought to be a strong and competitive partner of the United States and France in Africa. It can be said that the China-US competition in the Horn of Africa is of an economic nature. China has an important logistical base in Djibouti, but this differs from the vision of the United States, which sees that the Chinese presence carries with it a security factor, and therefore, this expansion comes at the cost of the US presence in the Horn of Africa.⁷

With China's economic and military rise, it has obviously been able to assert its presence on the world stage, and has been successful in this respect. Hence, its aspirations towards a more assertive role as a major power against the West led by the United States grew. With its vast, unexploited wealth and governments that look for aid and foreign investments, Africa comes at the heart of this Chinese aspiration of practicing its newly assumed role. Washington's preoccupation with its war on the so-called "terrorism" since 2001 has pushed China to seize this opportunity to step into large areas in the world. Beijing has bolstered its presence and huge economic investments in Africa.⁸ In particular, the East Africa region, which comprises the Horn of Africa, is of great importance to China and other superpowers. China constantly seeks to get a foothold there and views it as a strategic extension for China.⁹

Given the geostrategic importance of the Horn of Africa for the superpowers, in terms of controlling the Strait of Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden, its importance increases for the economically rising China. For China, it represents a vital and strategic location for achieving its economic aspirations in Africa to secure the Belt and Road Initiative, since it is the gate that Chinese trade transits in its way to Europe.¹⁰

China's Foreign Policy from Isolationism to Involvement

Since current President, Xi Jinping, assumes his post in March 2013, China has pursued a balanced foreign and security policy, especially from a strategic geographical point of view. In the White Book, President Jinping has further developed the theory of former Chinese President, Hu Jintao, while maintaining the hierarchical sequence of the strategic goals contained in the previous white books since 1995. He highlighted the concepts of comprehensive security, joint security, and security-based cooperation, where mutual trust, reciprocal advantages, equality and cooperation are linked to military interventions other than war, to counter security challenges and threats posed by hostile powers." ¹¹

That there have been important transformations in Chinese foreign policy is confirmed by evidence. Instead of withdrawal and isolation, Beijing began to move gradually towards participation and integration with the international community. Yet, this move is still curbed by cautious behavior and abides by several principles and determinants of Chinese policy, which focuses primarily on protecting China's interests and improving its relations in a way that enhances its economic openness and protects its political presence. According to China's vision of comprehensive and common global security, foreign intervention is determined by protecting Chinese interests and trade and evacuating Chinese citizens abroad.

In 2013, Chinese President Jinping proposed the One Belt, One Road Initiative or the New Silk Road, which is also known as the Road and Belt Initiative. This project aims to enhance international economic cooperation against the backdrop of declining globalization, and tops China's priorities of global development in the future. ¹²

In the three white books of 2008, 2013 and 2015, China's defense policy was defined as follows: protecting national security and unity, comprehensive and sustainable modernization of the military apparatus, boosting skills of the armed forces, establishing an active defense, strengthening the nuclear armament strategy to defend the country, strengthening a security environment that contributes to peaceful development, containing separatist forces, protecting borders and territorial and coastal airspace, protecting maritime and national rights and interests on the ground and in the cyberspace.¹³ Based on that, Chinese geopoliticians seek to create a balance between their strategy of global economic openness and their strategic interests, particularly in areas of interest.

Chinese leaders have realized that interdependence in the international community does not allow for the policy of isolation that China has pursued in the time of Mao Zedong, and that incorporating the Chinese economy into the global economy is inevitable.¹⁴

Regarding the role of the Middle East in the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese President explained during the sixth ministerial conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in June 2014 that China and the Arab states have mutual understanding and an old friendship dating back to the Silk Road. He stressed that the two parties are natural partners in a joint Belt and Road construction project.¹⁵

Elements of Chinese foreign policy towards the Middle East can be summarized in a number of points. China views the region, both its location and wealth, as an area of conflict between global powers in their competition for influence. China thinks that it is possible to achieve maritime security, so it shows its interest in maritime interests, especially ports and international waterways. There are a number of Chinese projects of development and expansion of several Arab ports in Egypt, Oman, Yemen and Sudan. Consequently, China can work in this region to enhance its presence and influence and expand cooperation with all countries, in addition to securing energy supplies, achieving Chinese support and modifying its position in the world order.¹⁶

The Belt and Road Initiative includes 41 out of 55 African countries, most of which are located on the eastern coast overlooking the Indian Ocean—the most prominent of which are countries in the Horn of Africa. This confirms that it has become increasingly important for the strategies of the great and rising powers in the world order, including China. For China's global policy, as is the case for the United States, European countries and Russia, the vital Horn of Africa requires the preemption of any possible formation of anti-China power centers and hostile alliances in the future. As for the multiple economic interests, it has always been a specific factor of China's foreign policy. Accordingly, the goal of protecting Chinese national interests is the main determinant of China's foreign policy in the Horn of Africa,¹⁷ especially as it has become a key region where China seeks to protect the implementation of the Belt and Road initiative, to enhance its presence and achieve its foreign gains and interests by establishing a Chinese military base in Djibouti. It also built a 750 km railway line in 2017, linking Djibouti and Addis Ababa to facilitate the transport, and ensure the safety and speed of the flow, of Chinese goods. China built the 55 mw Garissa Solar Power Station in Kenya, which was inaugurated in 2019, becoming the largest renewable energy project in the Horn of Africa.¹⁸

China inaugurated its military base in Djibouti in 2017. This is China's first base in Africa, and houses 10,000 troops. It was established with the aim of protecting China's big and increasing interests in the region, in addition to contributing vessels that participate in peacekeeping operations and humanitarian tasks on the coasts of Yemen and Somalia, in addition to the military goals.¹⁹

Pillars of Chinese Influence in the Horn of Africa

China has economic and commercial relations with Africa and the Middle East. Its presence and relations are reflected in the countries of the Horn of Africa in particular. In the context of the new Chinese approach towards the region, China sought to enhance its presence and bolster its influence, based on the common grounds, understandings and previous agreements. Chinese presence is also demonstrated in some countries in the region in the form of economic and investment projects and various loans.

Many of the implications of important transformations in China's foreign policy can be understood through its strategic Belt and Road Initiative, in light of the strategic vision of China, especially its vision towards the Middle East, including the Horn of Africa. In March 2015, about two years after announcing the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese government released its vision of the joint project for building the Silk Road, the Economic Belt Road, and the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road. According to that vision, this belt will link China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea across Central Asia and West Asia. The Silk Road was designed to extend from the Chinese coast to Europe, across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. This means that the Middle East is not only an important part of the project, but also the focal point of the two roads and plays a pivotal role in the project.²⁰

Economic Cooperation as a Prelude to Political Influence

In the commercial and economic aspects, there is a remarkable Chinese presence, whether at the level of the countries of the Middle East and Africa in general or the countries of the Horn of Africa in particular. In 2000, China and African countries established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation with the aim of enhancing cooperation between China and Africa.

One of the most important pillars of the forum is that it is a domain for political dialogue and a ground for economic cooperation and commercial integration. It constitutes a space for diplomatic consultation and strengthening China-Africa relations, especially bilateral relations between China and various African countries.²¹

According to statistics on trade exchange between China and the countries of the Horn of Africa, China is the biggest economic partner of these countries. This fact prompts Beijing to engage in politics and invest in economic influence to expand the security and political aspects of its influence.²²

It may be noted that there are a number of Chinese economic and investment projects in the Horn of Africa, which account for 25% of the value of Chinese investments in Africa.²³ According to experts, the fast development of China's economic relations with Africa is based on several factors. China's economic vision of the overall conditions in the Horn of Africa in particular and Africa in general is based on the belief that these countries adopt a set of measures that facilitate openness to international trade, and its view of the countries of the Horn of Africa as an important market for Chinese exports, in addition to China's insistence on gaining access to the natural resources in Africa.²⁴

Chinese investments in Djibouti consist of 4 projects to develop ports and a 750 km railway line with Ethiopia. The latter project will greatly facilitate the movement of goods to a land-locked country. In Kenya, China built a 742 km railway line linking the capital, Nairobi, with the coastal city, Mombasa, on the Indian Ocean. The \$3.8 billion project was funded by the Exim Bank of China (90%), while the remaining 10% was contributed by the Kenyan government.²⁵

In Ethiopia, China was a major commercial partner over the past decade. The two countries enjoy strong relations that constitute an opportunity for many Chinese investments. Moreover, the Ethiopian market is characterized by the low cost of manufacturing. As for Eritrea, it has become part of China's economic policy and a pivotal player in the Belt and Road Initiative. The two sides have signed economic deals that included the abolition of customs tariffs on Eritrean products exported to China, a partial cancellation of Eritrea's debts, providing loans and financing a number of development projects.²⁶

Expanding Diplomatic Relations and Building Military Bases

During the past few years, China has begun to move to the practical implementation of the new vision. It cemented its presence in the Horn of Africa with multiple agreements and projects with the countries of the region, foremost of which was the agreement with Djibouti to build a military base that constitutes the beginning of the Chinese military presence in this strategic region.

In January 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, announced the appointment of a special envoy for "Promoting permanent stability, peace and prosperity" in the Horn of Africa, which witnesses regional conflicts and civil wars, during his tour of Eritrea, Kenya and the Comoros, a tour that came within the framework of the Chinese diplomatic tradition that extends for more than 30 years. Chinese foreign ministers go to Africa in their first external visit each year.²⁷ On this tour, the Chinese minister put forward the idea of "the peaceful development of the Horn of Africa." This comes from a new Chinese strategic vision, based on the idea that Beijing is no longer a spectator of the crises of the Horn of Africa, but rather plays a great role in resolving them by supporting peace talks and promoting political agreements between African countries. In other words, political tools and strategic mechanisms are no longer limited to achieving China's economic ambitions of having access to Africa's wealth. China is cognizant of the fact that the stability of African countries is a prerequisite for ensuring its economic interests in Africa in the future.²⁸ Political experts and analysts believe that there are a number of motives behind China's appointment of an envoy in the Horn of Africa, including the strategic importance of the region, competition with the Western influence in the region, and protection of Chinese investments.²⁹ In addition, the appointment of a Chinese envoy in this region conveys several messages, including the increasing Chinese interests in Africa and the growing Chinese influence at the international level.³⁰

The pillars of Chinese presence and influence in the region were consolidated with economic projects in the countries of the Horn of Africa. In turn, the economic presence boosted political and security influence. This paves the way for "deployment of Chinese fleets off the Somali coast, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, through mechanisms of bilateral cooperation with the countries of the Horn of Africa, specifically, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia, and its attempts in the future to find solutions to internal and regional crises,

such as the pending crisis between Ethiopia, Egypt and the Sudan on the Grand Renaissance Dam, which constitutes a qualitative Chinese transition from the proceeds of economy to the paths of politics. These Chinese moves in the region are inspired by Beijing's resolve to take advantage of the preoccupations of traditional global powers, the US and the EU Group, to enhance its presence in Africa.³¹

Regarding the establishment of the first Chinese naval base in Djibouti, Xinhua News Agency announced that the aim of this base was to "ensure China's performance in peace and humanitarian aid in Africa and West Asia. The base will help in external tasks, including military cooperation, joint training and protecting China's security abroad, in addition to maintaining joint security of international strategic maritime corridors."³²

Analysts believe that the establishment of this base reflects China's move away from its traditional focus on the East Asian and Pacific region as a result of its increasing interests in Africa and the Middle East. This development can also be seen within the framework of the Chinese project, the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese base reflects the other face that Beijing wants to wear, especially within the framework of its global competition with Washington, which was annoyed by China's building of this base, which is only a few miles away from the American base in Djibouti.³³ Undoubtedly, for the US, the growth of Chinese military presence represents a risk concealed behind the economic activity in the region, and poses a threat to its interests and alliances, even though China justifies its military presence as directed towards reducing unconventional threats. Inarguably, China's military presence is linked to its economic agenda, especially its Belt and Road Initiative, of which the ports in the region constitute an important pillar. Apparently, the American belief in a Chinese military threat is exacerbated by the persistent parades of Chinese military fleets in the Gulf of Aden since 2008, a development that increased during the period 2020-2022, in light of establishing a large military base in Djibouti.³⁴

Building a Chinese military base in Djibouti means abandoning the "policy of non-intervention," which has long been a fixed feature of China's strategy. However, this change does not mean that China has presented itself as a military power capable of challenging and confronting other major powers, paramount of which is the United States. Rather, it prefers to present its military base as defensive. This is evident in changing the function of its military base in Djibouti from "supporting military logistics" to serving as a "preventive base".³⁵

Clearly, the preventive aspect here means protecting Chinese investments in the region from any regional crises, such as the Tigray War, or the external threat that may come from the West. Therefore, China's intervention in the region is not only a manifestation of political competition, but also an economic competition protected by its troops stationed in Djibouti. In other words, Beijing's military base in Djibouti aims to defend its multi-billion-dollar investments in the region, especially in Ethiopia.³⁶

Through this base, China also seeks to protect the flow of oil. Half of Beijing's oil imports pass through Bab al-Mandab Strait and most Chinese exports to Europe transit the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal. China incurred great losses as a result of developments in Libya, and this accounts for increasing its military presence in the region. It should be noted that the Chinese navy conducted training with its Russian counterpart in the Mediterranean in 2015, and has conducted other military exercises in the Mediterranean in July 2017.³⁷

Challenges to China's Influence in the Horn of Africa

Despite its presence and influence in the Horn of Africa, China faces a number of challenges and difficulties, some of which are related to internal turmoil in some countries of the region, and others to external regional and international factors. External challenges include the international; i.e., American, influence countering Chinese influence as the former still represents a major challenge to the latter. For the US, the Horn of Africa has acquired a major strategic geopolitical importance. The US has established its military base (Camp Lemonnier) in Djibouti in 2007. The base, which houses approximately 4,000 troops, is responsible for operations and military relations with African countries, and serves as the headquarters of AFRICOM troops. Its mission is to conduct surveillance in Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya and Yemen. The US also established a base in Somalia: Baledogal Airfield, which President Biden decided to bolster with 500 troops to help government forces in their "war on terror". Sources reported secret American military bases in and around the Horn of Africa and naval bases in Kenya (Mombasa and Nabluk). In Ethiopia, a drone air base was inaugurated in 2011, and its mission is to surveillance and spy task in East Africa³⁸. Washington is still working to enhance its presence in the region in anticipation of any security or military development, especially after the escalation of Iranian threats to Bab al-Mandab Strait through its Houthis proxies in Yemen.

From the point of view of the American strategy, the Red Sea represents the western side of the increasingly important Pacific-Indian Ocean field, a vast area that extends from the western coast of the United States to the East Coast of Africa, the main theater in which China will be dealt with. This region contains vital maritime transport lines between east and west and the largest part of the world's population, gross local product, maritime trade and huge ports.³⁹

In 2018, the US military changed the name of the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) to United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), in recognition of the increasing interdependence of these two oceans. A year later, the Pentagon issued a strategy for the Indo-Pacific Ocean, in which the trans-ocean border is considered the "most important region for the future of the United States," and considered China the first threat to American interests and "free and open" development in the region. The United States keeps more than 24 bases across the Indo-Pacific, 2,000 aircrafts, 200 ships and submarines, and nearly 370,000 troops.⁴⁰

In addition, challenges are not restricted to American influence in the Horn of Africa. There are also European opponents who have influence in the same region, particularly France and Britain, the countries that make up the axis of old European colonialism. France has the largest foreign military base outside its territorial borders. About 1,500 troops are deployed at the French base in Djibouti, and are tasked with fighting "terrorism" and securing navigation in maritime corridors. Britain keeps a military base in Baidoa, and trains Somali troops. It still seeks to build another base in the Republic of Somaliland, which declared independence in the 1990s, but failed to get international recognition.

In April 2022, the US Naval Forces announced the formation of the Combined Task Force CTF 153, whose mission was to patrol the Red Sea and combat "terrorist activities and smuggling." It is the fourth force of the Combined Military Force (CMF), which also includes CTF 150, CTF 151, CTF 152. The mission of this force is to preserve maritime security and build the capabilities of states, in direct cooperation with the CTF 151, whose water crafts are deployed in the Gulf of Aden, and off the coasts of Somalia.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, these alliances seek to undermine any presence that challenges Western (American and European) influence, even if they claim otherwise. If political and military conflicts in the Horn of Africa have paved the way for international competition in this region, it may at the same time constitute a challenge to any external influence and presence, including Chinese influence.

This depends on the nature of the conflicts that arise there and on their outcomes in view of the rising regional and international competition in this region.

Conclusion

Ever since the Chinese President announced the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the Chinese presence in Africa, particularly in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, has been growing steadily. China has shown much attention to this region, putting it at the top of its strategic interests due to its important location overlooking the Red Sea on the one hand and the Indian Ocean on the other.

China began to enhance its presence through economic relations and boosting diplomatic and political action, as well as building a military base in Djibouti. These developments reflect a significant shift in China's foreign policy, based on engagement and playing an active role in the regional and international scene outside its borders and familiar field. As far as the Horn of Africa is concerned, Beijing achieved its goals of securing open markets for its products over the last two decades, strengthened its relations with African countries and consolidated its presence in a way that guarantees its economic and political influence and interests in the future.

However, China's influence in the region faces several obstacles and internal challenges that have to do with the troubled situation in each of the countries of the Horn of Africa. It also faces external challenges, posed by the presence of powerful competitors who consider China's presence in the region a threat to their interests, particularly the US which has the highest number of land and naval military bases in East Africa, including bases very close to the Chinese base in Djibouti. This hints at possible escalation in the future, depending on internal, regional and international developments.

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