

# Djibouti

## The Organizing Principle of the Indo-Pacific

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The making and remaking of geographic imaginations are a function of military and economic interests. Asian economic resurgence in the era of globalization has made older geopolitical concepts irrelevant. The “Asia-Pacific,” for example, served as a useful framework to analyze regional security and political affairs during the Cold War. After the Cold War, however, rapid technological developments, which resulted in the compression of geographic distances, coupled with the economic rise of Asia necessitated the fashioning of a new geographic concept: that of the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific transcended the confines of subregions and, in fact, was a call to think about the broader region between India and the Pacific Ocean as a single continuum. Global shipping, economic interdependence, and geostrategic interests accelerated the creation of this new framework. However, the Asian economic resurgence was intricately linked with energy and resource supplies from the Middle East and Africa. The growing power of these emerging Asian states was being projected into Africa and the Indian Ocean to protect their vital interests as well as to expand their influence. Therefore, subregions of the Indian Ocean beyond India’s western coast had become integral parts of the strategic considerations of rising Asian economies. As a result, the definition of the Indo-Pacific must expand to include the eastern and southern African seaboard, and the region can be defined as the one stretching from Kilimanjaro to California.

Including East Africa in the Indo-Pacific was not a smooth process. Although diplomatic and military professionals were acting within a framework of the Indo-Pacific that considered Africa as an important theater of strategic rivalries, the remaking of official definitions took some time. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe’s two speeches, presented nearly a decade apart: the Confluence of the Two Seas speech delivered in 2007 in India, and the unveiling of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy in 2016 in Kenya; were instrumental to making and remaking the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, the economic and military interests of major global powers (and including rising Asian economies) had compelled them to pay greater attention to the developments in the East African maritime and continental space and had made active efforts to regularize their military

presence through antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, which includes the coastline of Djibouti.

Four major Indo-Pacific powers—the United States, France, China, and Japan—now operate military bases in Djibouti. The French and American bases serve as a vital cog in protecting their interests in the Indian Ocean and Africa. The Chinese and Japanese bases enable greater diplomatic, economic, and military presence in the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Middle East. Other East Asian navies such as South Korea are routinely deployed to the Gulf of Aden, and Taiwan is deepening ties with the breakaway region of Somaliland. Russia has established a base in Sudan and is now increasing its military presence in the Western Indian Ocean.

India has historically been an important player in eastern and southern Africa. Growing economic and military capabilities and interests are pushing India to play an increasingly influential role in the region, which stretches from Djibouti to Japan. Therefore, the Western Pacific–East Asia strategic rivalries are being played out in Djibouti, and the developments in and around Djibouti have been of interest for major powers ranging from India and Russia to Japan and China. Therefore, Djibouti has emerged as a lens through which the international politics of the Indo-Pacific can be observed and analyzed. In that respect, Djibouti is the organizing principle of the Indo-Pacific and is likely to assume increasing strategic importance as rivalries sharpen.

This article is divided into seven parts. Following the introduction, the article locates Africa in the Indo-Pacific. It then explains the strategic importance of Djibouti and underscores how the tiny East African nation is now emerging as a playground for major powers. The bases of France and the United States at Djibouti were operational even before the reality of the Indo-Pacific became apparent. The key role in this regard is played by China's and Japan's military bases in Djibouti and their naval presence in the Gulf of Aden. The article considers the military and economic presence of these two Pacific Ocean powers in the Indian Ocean as facilitated by their bases in Djibouti. The article then moves to Russia and South Korea, two other important Pacific Ocean powers who have devoted considerable resources and energies to the Western Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, Taiwan's deepening ties with Somaliland also add an interesting dimension to the evolving geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. Then the article considers the role of India, as it remains pivotal to the making and remaking of the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the conclusion ties together all the arguments presented here.

## **Locating Africa in the Indo-Pacific**

Shinzo Abe, Japan's former prime minister, was one of the earliest and most enthusiastic proponents of the idea of the Indo-Pacific. He imagined the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic geography as far back as August 2007, when he delivered what is now widely believed to be the first articulation of the concept of the Indo-Pacific by an influential policy maker, the Confluence of the Two Seas speech in the Indian parliament. In that speech, Abe had referred to the coming together of the "Pacific and the Indian Oceans," which was "now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity." He called it the "broader Asia" that "broke away geographical boundaries" and was "now beginning to take on a distinct form." Abe believed that "this 'broader Asia' will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely." The speech, despite acknowledging the interests of India and Japan in the security of the sea lanes, which "are the shipping routes that are the most critical for the world economy," did not include the eastern and southern African seabords as part of this evolving geography.<sup>1</sup> However, the speech was important, as it initiated a process of introducing a new geopolitical concept to the lexicon of international politics.

The Indo-Pacific gradually replaced the familiar Asia-Pacific organizing principle and emerged as a primary strategic concept when discussing the geopolitics of the region between India and the Western Pacific. It was implicit that economic, military, and political interconnections in this vast strategic space were unifying several subregions, as expressed in the membership of the 18-nation East Asia Summit, and was fast emerging as a more appropriate framework to pursue the foreign policy objectives of regional states. The rapid economic rise of India, China, and other East Asian economies, coupled with their critical dependence on the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean for Middle Eastern energy supplies, accelerated the process of integrating the geopolitics of the Western Pacific with the Indian Ocean and enabled the emergence of the Indo-Pacific. However, defining the geographic extent of the Indo-Pacific remained a work in progress.

Nearly a decade after the Confluence of the Two Seas speech, on 27 August 2016, PM Abe unveiled Japan's strategy of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" at the opening session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on Africa's Development (TICAD) in Nairobi, Kenya. Abe noted that, "when you cross the seas of Asia and the Indian Ocean and come to Nairobi, you then understand very well that what connects Asia and Africa is the sea lanes." He argued that "the enormous liveliness brought forth through the union of two free and open oceans and

two continents” will “give stability and prosperity to the world.” In this pursuit, Abe believed “Japan bears the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous.”<sup>2</sup> The choice to unveil the strategy in Kenya and the content of his speech were significant: they signaled the inclusion of East African littoral states located on the Indian Ocean as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific in the Japanese view.

As the construct of the Indo-Pacific has assumed wider acceptability, its boundaries have been redefined to include Africa. Among the participating countries of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, better known as the “Quad,” India and Japan were the first to recognize the necessity of bringing Africa into the matrix of the Indo-Pacific. When India launched its Indo-Pacific policy in June 2018, PM Narendra Modi’s speech referred to the region as “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas.”<sup>3</sup> Just before Modi’s speech, the US Pacific Command was renamed as the Indo-Pacific Command. It was a recognition of the growing interconnections between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and an acknowledgment of India’s critical role in the Indo-Pacific. Australia and the United States initially did not consider Africa as part of the Indo-Pacific, and their definition included the region between India and the Western Pacific. However, the growing strategic convergence between the four countries in the framework of the Quad, along with the recognition of the evolving geopolitical realities of this strategic geography, has resulted in the United States redefining its conception of this region. The United States now defines the Indo-Pacific as the region stretching from Kilimanjaro (Tanzania) to California, and this definition is likely to shape the view of other actors regarding the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, as a result of the United States’ aligning of the “definition of Indo-Pacific to match that of Japan and India and Australia,” Quad countries now “have a common vision, at least geographically, of the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, while there have been debates at the official level regarding the geographic shape of this region, the increasing range of economic, military, and diplomatic activities of major Pacific Ocean powers in the East African maritime and continental space were already fashioning the geostrategic reality of the Indo-Pacific. Since 2008, China, Japan, and South Korea have sent their naval warships for the counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and southern Red Sea. They have also deployed their militaries for peacekeeping operations in the Horn of Africa and over the years have steadily strengthened defense and economic relationships with African littoral states. China and Japan even established military bases in Africa and acquired a firm foothold in the region.<sup>5</sup> Besides those nations,

global powers including the United States, France, and India—all of whom have substantial interests in the Indian and Pacific Ocean—are also active in the geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean. As a result of the growing presence of major global powers in the eastern and southern African seaboard, strategic rivalries between these powers are being played out in the Western Indian Ocean region. These processes have played a major role in making African littorals an integral part of the Indo-Pacific strategic matrix with the broader Western Indian Ocean region forming the western flank of this dynamic geopolitical space. No other country in the eastern African seaboard signifies the evolving shape of regional geopolitics as does the tiny state of Djibouti.

### **Djibouti and the Indo-Pacific**

Djibouti, the third-smallest African state with a population of less than a million, enjoys an enviable strategic location. The tiny nation sits at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean. It is a member of the Arab League, the African Union, and La Francophonie and therefore is considered as within the Arab world, the broader African continent, and Francophone influences. Djibouti shares borders with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somaliland (Somalia) and is located just 18 miles across the sea from Yemen. It is positioned off the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, which connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden. The Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb is critically important for global energy security, international shipping, and the world economy.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, any power that has a foothold in Djibouti can monitor the maritime traffic and international trade passing through the strait. The port of Djibouti is a primary access point to sea for Ethiopia, the second most populous African state. Since independence in 1977, Djibouti has been a stable state in an unstable neighborhood.<sup>7</sup> Djibouti has assumed increasing strategic importance in the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

Djibouti was a French colony from 1889 until 1977 and even now hosts the largest French overseas military base.<sup>8</sup> The opening of the Suez Canal, its location near the Middle East (an energy heartland of the world), the rise of terrorism in East Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula, and the rapid economic growth of countries such as Ethiopia have all contributed to dramatically increasing the strategic importance of Djibouti in world politics. In the past, Djibouti and the port of Aden (in Yemen) were important relay points for Western navies going to the Far East. For France, Djibouti served as the critical strategic point for refueling ships and maintaining communication links with its colonies in the Indian Ocean and South Pacific.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in French strategic calculations Djibouti, in effect, served as the most significant outpost for protecting French interests in the geopolitical space that is now known as the Indo-Pacific. It also helped France to

project its influence in the Western Indian Ocean, East Africa, and the Middle East. (It now plays a similar role in Chinese strategy.) Djibouti's indispensable role in French global strategy continued even after its decolonization and France continued to preserve a great deal of influence in this tiny country. Until 2001, Djibouti remained the most important French outpost in the northwestern Indian Ocean.

The importance of Djibouti's location heightened after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in the United States. As the United States launched the "Global War on Terror," it decided to establish a military base at Djibouti in 2002. It is the only permanent US military base in Africa. The base hosted the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa and also aided US troops in their operations in Iraq. The base, with its 4,000 troops and substantial air, naval, and ground assets, proved useful in conducting antiterror operations in Somalia and Yemen and in keeping a close watch on the developments in the Horn of Africa—especially Sudan—and the southern Arabian Peninsula. Djibouti also proved useful in expanding the US footprint in the northwestern Indian Ocean and linked up the United States' interests in the Indian Ocean and Africa as several smaller military installations were established in Indian Ocean African countries like Kenya, Somalia, and Seychelles. It emerged as a crucial logistics point for the US military and remains a centerpiece of a network of drone and surveillance bases.<sup>10</sup> However, until 2007–08, the strategic importance of Djibouti was limited primarily to monitoring and influencing developments in the geographic space spanning East Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East.

The emergence of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Somalia's inability to contain it combined to form a turning point in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Pirates operating out of Somalia threatened the maritime space between the southern Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. This maritime space was critical for global shipping, as it linked Europe with the economically dynamic Western Pacific. (The recent episode of accidental blockage in the Suez Canal highlighted the importance of this sea lane for the global economy.) The Arabian Sea is a principal sea route for transporting Middle East energy supplies to East Asia. Therefore, maritime piracy threatened the economic well-being of the major trading nations of the Western Pacific as well as those of Europe and North America. In response, multinational maritime security efforts were launched. European navies along with the United States, in the framework of Combined Task Force-151, began to engage in antipiracy operations. Other major global powers including India, China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia also sent naval warships to patrol the piracy-affected region.<sup>11</sup>

Maritime piracy provided an excellent, albeit benign, opportunity for China, South Korea, and Japan to regularize their military presences in the region. Even Russia sensed an opportunity and returned to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, even though instances of piracy declined after 2012, these states continued to deploy navies to the region. The regular military presence of Pacific Ocean powers in the northwestern corner of the Indian Ocean signaled the rise of the Indo-Pacific construct in the domain of security. The clearest expression of the amalgamation of security concerns of the Indian and Pacific Oceans arrived when Japan and China opened military bases in Djibouti in 2011 and 2017, respectively. Therefore, from a relatively insular French colony, Djibouti came to be known as the Indo-Pacific's "most valuable military real estate," with major powers competing with each other to project maximum influence in the region.<sup>12</sup>

As of now, Djibouti hosts military bases belonging to France, the United States, Japan, and China. It is the only country in the world that hosts both US and Chinese military bases. The French military base also hosts German and Spanish military units. India, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have also demonstrated interest in opening bases at Djibouti.<sup>13</sup> Rent paid by these bases is a major source of Djibouti's national income. Djibouti has succeeded in leveraging its geostrategically important location to deftly play major powers against each other for its own benefit. Interestingly, major powers came to Djibouti to fight nontraditional security threats such as terrorism and maritime piracy and, after entrenching their military presence in the region, now engage in traditional major power rivalries.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the military presence in the region deals with a large spectrum of threats from terrorism to major power rivalries and is emerging as a principal instrument of power projection. Consequently, Djibouti has been transformed into the key strategic hotspot in the evolving geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. As the establishment of a Chinese base in Djibouti has intensified major power strategic rivalries, it is necessary to focus on the Chinese base in Djibouti.

### **China in Djibouti**

The year 2017 was seminal in the Chinese strategy toward the world in general and the Indian Ocean in particular. In May that year, China hosted the first summit of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Beijing, which was attended by 30 world leaders. The BRI is an ambitious economic and foreign policy initiative of Chinese president Xi Jinping with clear strategic implications. The BRI seeks to link Asia with Europe and Africa through an overland and maritime network of trade, industrial, and connectivity corridors. The summit was a demonstration of growing Chinese power and signaled the wider acceptability of the Chinese initiative.<sup>15</sup> In August, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti.<sup>16</sup> In

fact, Djibouti became the pivot around which evolving Chinese military strategy was manifest. And finally, in December 2017, it was announced that Sri Lanka would hand over the strategically important, Chinese-built port of Hambantota to China in a debt-for-equity swap.<sup>17</sup>

China's military base at Djibouti is a culmination of a decade-long, ever growing security engagement with the Horn of Africa. Since 2008, China has sent its naval warships to conduct antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. These antipiracy deployments have continued ever since and facilitated China's expanding military presence in the Western Indian Ocean. In 2011, in a major operation involving the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China evacuated 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya, which was engulfed in a civil war.<sup>18</sup> Since 2013, China has deployed nuclear submarines to the Indian Ocean under the pretext of antipiracy operations, and the region has been emerging as a key theater for Chinese power projection as China attempts to undermine the influence of regional powers such as India.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, China also managed to evacuate hundreds of its nationals from war-torn Yemen. Chinese troops have been participating in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).<sup>20</sup> The growing array of complex and difficult military activities far away from the mainland necessitated that China obtain a forward military foothold to support its increasing security-related engagements in the region.

China's military strategy, which was released in 2015, took note of China's growing security interests in the Indian Ocean region, especially in the maritime domain, and noted that it needs to "develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests" to "safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power."<sup>21</sup> As per the strategy, China's "armed forces will continue to carry out escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and other sea areas as required" and will "enhance exchanges and cooperation with naval task forces of other countries, and jointly secure international SLOCs [sea lanes of communications]."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, "China's armed forces will engage in extensive regional and international security affairs."<sup>23</sup> For a nation that had no maritime strategic orientation for the previous 500 years, the aspiration to build a modern maritime military force and the willingness to conduct military operations to protect overseas interests underscored the growing role of seaborne international trade in national economic prosperity. It also drew attention to emerging vulnerabilities within the Chinese economy.<sup>24</sup>



The base at Djibouti was an indication that China is going to ensure forward military deployments in regions that are of critical strategic importance. China holds considerable economic interests in the regions that are in proximity to Djibouti. Middle East powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran are major sources of oil for China, and Sudan and South Sudan have been recipients of massive Chinese investments in their oil industry.<sup>25</sup> Africa and the Middle East account for about 80 percent of Chinese oil imports.<sup>26</sup> In a big infrastructure push, China has been developing large ports in Djibouti, Kenya, and Tanzania and has built modern railway lines in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti.<sup>27</sup> It is a close economic and defense partner for other important states in the Western Indian Ocean region such as Seychelles and Madagascar.<sup>28</sup> China has been engaged in defense diplomacy in the Indian Ocean through naval port visits and arms supplies. It is also increasing its activities in the region as could be seen with the two naval exercises carried out in the Western Indian Ocean with Russia, Iran, and South Africa in 2019.<sup>29</sup>

Energy and mineral resources imported from countries in Africa and the Middle East underpin Chinese prosperity, which is intimately linked with its domestic social and political stability. Therefore, China has to stay engaged with resource-rich countries for continued economic growth.<sup>30</sup> Many African countries have also welcomed Chinese infrastructure investments, as they come without conditionalities to promote democracy and human rights. Sea lanes of the Indian Ocean facilitate the flourishing engagement with the Middle East and Africa, and therefore it was no surprise that China took an active interest in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. China has also been dependent on the Strait of Malacca, which links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific, for its trade and energy supplies and is making efforts to reduce its dependence on the narrow waterway.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, developing ports and building energy pipelines in Pakistan and Myanmar are of crucial strategic importance, as they will contribute in mitigating China's so-called Malacca Dilemma. However, given the fragile security situation in Pakistan and Myanmar and heightened concerns for stability in the Xinjiang region of China, which will be connected to the Indian Ocean through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, greater engagement in securing these infrastructure projects is necessary.<sup>32</sup>

Looked at through a strategic prism, China has built a dual-use web of ports, energy pipelines, and railway infrastructure in the littoral states of Indian Ocean, extending from Tanzania in East Africa to Myanmar in Southeast Asia, with the base at Djibouti facilitating military protection and political support. These states are part of different subregions and yet have to be considered together for comprehending a clear and complete strategic picture of Chinese strategic engagements. The framework of the Indo-Pacific is useful in this regard, and in this

context the long-delayed extension of the definition of the region to include the eastern and southern African seaboard was necessary. The base at Djibouti and regular deployments of PLAN (at any given time there are a half-dozen or more Chinese warships operating in the Indian Ocean) are enabling gradual expansion of China's footprint in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>33</sup> The base at Djibouti coupled with the upcoming base at the Chinese-developed deep-sea port of Gwadar in Pakistan and the already acquired foothold at Hambantota in Sri Lanka are likely to enable China to loom large over the strategically important waters of the Western Indian Ocean.

China's growing engagement with Djibouti has had an ominous impact on the tiny country's strategic position. Djibouti has become a playground of strategic rivalries between major powers. To boost its power projection capabilities, China has expanded the capabilities of its base to host an aircraft carrier.<sup>34</sup> In the last few years, coinciding with the deepening of China–Djibouti partnership, Djibouti's debt has grown to an alarming level as a result of Chinese loans extended to the country. Djibouti owes more than half of its total debt to China, and the inability to pay back loans can result in a situation similar to Hambantota, where a country might be forced to surrender control over a strategically important asset.<sup>35</sup> Under Chinese pressure, Djibouti has also kicked out the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from the Doraleh port development project. The growing closeness between Djibouti and China, and consequently China's increasing influence, have served to highlight the role of other major powers who have also acquired a foothold in the country.

### **The Japanese Base in Djibouti**

Japan is probably the first country that recognized the strategic reality of the Indo-Pacific. Acute dependence on Middle East energy supplies, the consequent necessity of ensuring security of the sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean, and the meteoric economic rise of China were key drivers behind the articulation of the framework of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>36</sup> Japan considered the eastern and southern African seaboard as part of the Indo-Pacific and became the first East Asian power to establish a military base in Djibouti. Just like other major global powers, Japan had been sending its naval warships and air assets for antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2009. By 2011, Japan realized the need to acquire a permanent foothold in the region, through which it could monitor regional security affairs and secure its vital interests, and decided to open a base in Djibouti. It is the first overseas base of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) since the end of World War II.

Japan had supported antipiracy efforts in Southeast Asia as well and throughout the 2000s gradually expanded its strategic horizons.<sup>37</sup> It funded the establishment of the Djibouti Code of Conduct, which has now become an important regime in the Western Indian Ocean for antipiracy and maritime security-related activities.<sup>38</sup> Japan assisted Djibouti's coastguards in augmenting their capabilities, as insecurity in the waters around Djibouti was not in Japan's interests.<sup>39</sup> The base at Djibouti plays a major role in Japan's diplomatic and military strategies toward the Middle East and Africa. In the context of China's growing presence, US-Japanese cooperation in Djibouti is likely to assume increasing strategic importance. Japan had contributed troops to UNMISS, and the base at Djibouti proved useful in providing logistical support, as the country is located close to South Sudan. In 2013, Japan sent medical assistance to Algeria, which was hit by a terrorist attack. In 2016, when Japanese diplomats and nationals were to be evacuated from South Sudan, the base at Djibouti proved invaluable.<sup>40</sup> As military-diplomatic activities expanded, Japan has been thinking of deploying a long-range C-130 military transport aircraft and armored vehicles to Djibouti, which demonstrates the changing priorities of Japanese base.<sup>41</sup>

When China opened its base in Djibouti in 2017, the importance of the Japanese base went up considerably. Meanwhile, Japan had also started to expand the operational scope of its base to train and exercise with other regional militaries. Underlining the strategic importance of the base, Japan appointed a former Maritime SDF (MSDF) admiral as the ambassador to Djibouti in 2020. The admiral views the military presence at Djibouti, which enjoys domestic support in Japan, as essential for global peace and security.<sup>42</sup> As the base completes a decade, it is also expected to serve as the gateway for the Japanese investments in the economically vibrant markets of eastern and southern Africa. Japan already has invested about \$9 billion in Africa, and a foothold in Djibouti is critical for protecting and enhancing these trade and investment linkages.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of the Indo-Pacific, for Japan, India is probably the most important strategic partner in the Indian Ocean region. Japan views India as central to the geopolitical frameworks such as the Confluence of the Two Seas and the Indo-Pacific as well as security initiatives such as the Quad. Over the years, Japan has deepened its strategic partnership with India, engaged in military-to-military exchanges, and established several high-level dialogues involving ministers. Both countries recognize the challenge posed by China and are enhancing their economic, technological, and defense cooperation.<sup>44</sup> It is expected that by signing the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement for military logistics, the Indian navy would be able to access the Japanese base at Djibouti.<sup>45</sup> Japan is also a regular participant in the Indo-US Malabar naval exercises.<sup>46</sup> In 2017, while China

was busy launching the BRI, India and Japan had also launched the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), which was widely seen as the counterweight to China’s BRI. Although so far, the AAGC is yet to demonstrate any concrete progress, a deepening Indo–Japanese partnership and the Japanese presence in Djibouti certainly would be beneficial if and when the AAGC takes off.<sup>47</sup>

Japan has also stepped up its engagement with other Western Indian Ocean states such as Mauritius and Kenya. In fact, Japan’s FOIP strategy was launched in Kenya. Japan’s regular deployment of MSDF warships to the Indian Ocean and its increasing focus on defense diplomacy conducted through port visits reflect the growing realization in Japan of maintaining forward naval presence in the maritime space that is of utmost importance to Japan’s economic and political interests.<sup>48</sup> Consolidating the Japanese military presence in the Indian Ocean is also intricately linked to the wider effort of playing an activist role in regional and international security efforts and projecting Japan as a benign actor. The base at Djibouti is a critical element in this strategic imagination, and the importance of the base is set to rise even further as Indo–Pacific rivalries sharpen in the coming years. Apart from China and Japan, Russia, South Korea, and Taiwan have also been expanding their engagements with the Indian Ocean littorals of Africa.

## **Russia**

Owing to its vast geography, Russia is as much a Pacific Ocean power as it is a European power. Russia’s second largest port of Vladivostok is located in the North Pacific, and the country is a major stakeholder in the security affairs of Northeast Asia. It is a member of the East Asia Summit, which brings together all the major stakeholders in the geopolitics of the East Asia–Western Pacific region.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Russia’s increased activities in the Western Indian Ocean can be viewed through the Indo–Pacific framework. The Russian navy has been active in the antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2009, and Russia is keen on opening a base in the Western Indian Ocean.

Russia had demonstrated interest in opening a base in Djibouti. However, Djiboutian officials refused to host a Russian base to avoid getting entangled in major power rivalries.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Russia turned to Sudan to establish a military base at Port Sudan. The base would be located on the Red Sea and would represent Russia’s return to the Indian Ocean. The Russian base would be able to host four warships and 300 soldiers.<sup>51</sup> Russia has emerged as a strong strategic partner for the terror-affected Mozambique and reportedly had also sent mercenaries to support the regime in its battle against terrorists. Russian operatives had also been spotted in Madagascar in 2018 and apparently were sent to prop up the regime of President Hery Rajaonarimampianina before the elections.<sup>52</sup>

Russia was considering establishing a base in Yemen before it plunged into civil war, as the strategic location of this Arab country would have facilitated greater Russian presence in the Gulf of Aden. Russia is engaged with Eritrea to open a logistics support facility.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the Russian navy has been conducting military exercises in the region. In 2019, Russia conducted naval exercises with China, Iran, and South Africa and in 2021 with Iran and Pakistan.<sup>54</sup> These steps point toward growing Russian engagement with Indian Ocean littoral Africa. Interestingly, Russia is opposed to the framework of the Indo-Pacific, as it believes that the concept is being deployed to contain China; currently Russia attaches great value to its relationship with China. However, just like China's activities, Russia's activities in Indian Ocean littoral Africa underscore the growing relevance of the framework of the Indo-Pacific.

### **South Korea**

In 2008–09, South Korea also began to send naval warships to the Gulf of Aden for antipiracy patrols. Just like Japan, it is keen on protecting the region's vital SLOCs, as its economic prosperity and energy security depend on them. South Korea is also interested in projecting its growing military power in strategically important regions. Since 2013, along with China and Japan, South Korean troops have been participating in UNMISS.<sup>55</sup> It has also deployed special forces units in the UAE for the purpose of training.<sup>56</sup> Unlike China and Japan, however, South Korea has not established a permanent military base in the region, but the South Korean navy has succeeded in regularizing its presence in the Gulf of Aden. The country seeks to play a role that is proportionate with its economic muscle, and anti-piracy operations as well as peacekeeping missions provide seemingly benign opportunities to do so.<sup>57</sup>

### **Taiwan**

Taiwan has emerged as an interesting actor in the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa and needs to be considered in the discussions of Africa in the Indo-Pacific. In 2020, Taiwan established diplomatic relations with Somaliland, a breakaway region of Somalia. Taiwan is engaged in competition with China for recognition. It is recognized by only a handful of countries, whereas Somaliland does not even enjoy that recognition.<sup>58</sup> However, many important players maintain unofficial contacts with both countries through their trade offices or other such mechanisms. Somaliland's geostrategic position, which is probably as attractive as that of Djibouti, is of immense value for the evolving geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean. The port of Berbera, which was once an important port in the northwest-

ern Indian Ocean and even hosted a Soviet naval base, lies in Somaliland and is being developed by the UAE.<sup>59</sup> Once developed, it will compete with Djibouti.<sup>60</sup>

Just like Djibouti, Somaliland can also leverage its location for economic and political benefits. In the evolving geopolitics of the region, a Taiwanese presence in Somaliland may perhaps prove useful, as China's rivals may seek to utilize Somaliland's location, which is close to Djibouti, to keep a watch on Chinese activities in the Horn of Africa. Somaliland can also be helpful in monitoring terrorist activities in Somalia. Therefore, strengthening ties between Taiwan and Somaliland adds an interesting dimension to the strategic rivalries in the region. Moreover, it also contributes to the inclusion of African littorals in the Indo-Pacific as a smaller Pacific Ocean power such as Taiwan establishes its presence in the Indian Ocean.

### **India, Djibouti, and the Indo-Pacific**

India's growing economic and military capabilities and consequently expanding interests were major reasons behind the rise of the unified, geopolitical space of the Indo-Pacific. For India, the idea of the Indo-Pacific included the Indian Ocean in its fullest—including the eastern African seaboard. India and Japan were the two strongest proponents of expanding the definition of the “Indo-Pacific,” and China's growing presence in Africa provided a sound strategic logic for doing so. India has always maintained robust ties with Africa, and the eastern and southern African seaboard remain an integral part of the Indian navy's area of primary interest. India had also sent its navy to combat piracy and ensure maritime security in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. India is, in fact, considered to be the net security provider for the region; when required, the Indian navy has provided maritime security and other related assistance, including food and medicines, to states in the region such as Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Mozambique.<sup>61</sup>

Owing to India's growing military capabilities and economic links with countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, it has emerged as a major stakeholder in the security and stability of the Western Pacific as well. India has demonstrated its interest in the region through naval deployments, military exercises, and the operationalizing of its Act East (which was earlier known as the Look East) policy.<sup>62</sup> More than half of India's international trade passes through the South China Sea, and some of India's strongest strategic partners, including Japan, are located in the Western Pacific region.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, India's imagination of its core strategic interests spans the entirety of the Indian Ocean, including Africa, and extends into the Western Pacific, thereby making India one of the linchpins of the Indo-Pacific framework.

India has reasons to worry about the growing Chinese presence in the Western Indian Ocean, and in fact it is bolstering its strategic presence in the region. India was reportedly keen on establishing a base at Djibouti. It has established several listening posts in Indian Ocean littoral countries to track and monitor the activities of China.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, due to the signing of logistics support agreements, India is likely to obtain access to the French, American, and Japanese bases at Djibouti. Given India's naval prowess, such access will boost its presence even further. India has recently opened a diplomatic mission in Djibouti, and Indian navy ships, which were sent to provide food assistance to the Horn of Africa (including to Djibouti) in October 2020, made a port call at Djibouti.<sup>65</sup>

As China's PLAN becomes more active in the Indian Ocean, the strategic importance of the Indian navy's deployments, especially in the Western Indian Ocean, is likely to increase even further. In fact, when India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar visited Kenya recently, the joint statement that both sides issued contained a reference to the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the growing prominence of Africa in the Indo-Pacific for India's foreign policy. As Africa and the Indo-Pacific assume prominence in foreign and strategic policies, India's economic and military capabilities and diplomatic willingness will be key contributing factors to the evolving trajectory of the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

## **Conclusion**

As originally conceived, the Indo-Pacific did not include the eastern and southern African seaboard; instead, the region was described as spanning "Bollywood to Hollywood," that is, from the western coast of India to the West Coast of the United States. However, the launch of Japan's FOIP strategy, which was unveiled in Kenya in 2016, was perhaps the turning point in bringing Africa into the Indo-Pacific. India also considered Africa as integral to the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, India along with Japan were the two strongest supporters of the logic of viewing the eastern African seaboard in the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific as they had more holistic view of the Indian Ocean. Their collaborative effort of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor also signaled Africa's relevance to the Indo-Pacific. The United States, at the policy level, harmonized its geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific in 2020 with India, Japan, and Australia, and now all these four Quad countries are on the same page when it comes to defining the geographical outlines of the Indo-Pacific. However, the US military still faces challenges, as the geographic boundaries of the Indo-Pacific Command still does not incorporate Africa.

The rise of piracy in the Gulf of Aden in 2007–08 and the consequent launch of antipiracy efforts by major global powers provided an excellent opportunity to regularize their naval presence in the region. Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea were the major beneficiaries of this opportunity. Prior to antipiracy patrols, the economic presence of East Asia powers in East Africa was already rising. The combined effect of military and economic activities indicated the integration of the geopolitical space from the Western Pacific to the Western Indian Ocean. Global shipping and geostrategic considerations played a major role therein. The rise of India and China, and the resulting enhanced economic links between the Western Pacific and Eastern Africa, accelerated the process of emergence of a definitive framework for the Indo-Pacific.

Djibouti, located at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, hosts military bases of four powers—the United States, France, China, and Japan—all of whom have major stakes in the geopolitical space from the Western Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Djibouti has become an important space for major powers and is now a key location for their ascendance over the Indo-Pacific. Signaling the rising prominence of Djibouti's location astride the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, India, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have reached out to the nation to host military bases. As the military presence of major powers in and around Djibouti intensifies, the strategic importance of this tiny African state is set to rise even further.

As a result of evolving strategic rivalries, Djibouti is no longer an insular French outpost in East Africa. It is perhaps the “most valuable military real estate” in the world. Djibouti demonstrates the clearest manifestation of the integration of the eastern African seaboard in the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. China has emerged as the major economic and strategic partner for Djibouti, and there are concerns about the political impact of Chinese loans to Djibouti. In Chinese strategy, Djibouti along with Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka are enabling a larger Chinese strategic naval presence in the Indian Ocean, which is likely to undermine the influence of regional powers including India. For France, Japan, and the United States, their bases at Djibouti are useful to increase their reach into the Middle East, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. In coming years, how those military bases fit into the major powers' global strategies will determine the future course of geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. ★

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## Notes

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