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The Implications of BRI in Djibouti: A Critical Geopolitical Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Djibouti, located at the horn of Africa, is a part of China's multibillion-dollar program 'Belt and Road Initiative'(BRI) which aims to achieve geostrategic and commercial objectives. An emerging market opportunity to fuel economic growth, the quest for raw material resources has drawn Chinese attention to the African region. Djibouti is situated on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait which connects the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and for China this will help to connect Africa with the Maritime Silk Route of BRI as an important dot. The strategic location has urged China to invest largely in this area to gain geopolitical advantage. Djibouti was lured into borrowing excessively from China for the sake of development, which pushed them towards a debt trap. The objective of the paper is to analyze the geopolitical importance of Djibouti as a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. This paper will also attempt to explore the underlying reasons behind Chinese interests in Djibouti and explain the debt-trap narratives. Lastly it presents Djibouti government's response to deal with the implications of BRI.

KEYWORDS: BRI, Djibouti, Geopolitics, Narrative, Debt-trap

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative is the master plan of Xi Jinping to connect China to the rest of the world to create a network for economic co-operation and trade. Even though China has been insisting upon the adoption of the 'Peaceful Rise' strategy, Western countries feel a moral panic about the increasing influence of China. This moral panic has forged the western narrative of debt-trap diplomacy, which explains how China has enticed developing nations in the debt trap. China is also trying to develop an alternative economic order by rejecting the previous order created by the Western nations and BRI is the tool to do so. Beijing has always viewed Africa as a uniquely promising ground as it provides geostrategic depth and potential market. Due to BRI, China has become a major loan provider to Africa in such a short period of time that raises questions about China's intention in the continent.

Djibouti, a tiny nation in the Horn of Africa, has become a playground for foreign powers to project their influence over this region. Djibouti is strategically a crucial hub for any nation with global ambitions, also the proximity to key global shipping routes is a bonus for China. The extensive lending of China has helped to revive the economy of Djibouti, but it can backfire in the long run. Apparently, Chinese assistance has proved to be faster and more responsive, but it creates a question of unsustainable development. As witnessed by China's eagerness to "settle" the debts of Sri Lanka, rings a bell for Djibouti to stay on alert for avoiding the same fate as Sri Lanka. China can use its economic muscle in the foreseeable future for political leverage, where indebted nations have to comply with the terms set by China.

Geostrategic implications of Djibouti

Djibouti, a country on the west coast of Africa, sits at the crucial chokepoint Bab el-Mandeb strait which connects the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Indian ocean. Due to its geostrategic importance, China as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) invested $9.8 billion in developing infrastructural megaprojects (Edens 2015). Doraleh Multipurpose Port is the signature investment in Djibouti and beside this port, there is a military base for China (Zhou 2017). Djibouti is a turning point for China's foreign and security policy.

Maritime Silk Road (MSR) of BRI aims at global connectivity through shipping routes and ports to increase trade and economic growth and Doraleh Multipurpose Port (DMP) in Djibouti connects another important dot of MSR. This port was jointly financed by China Merchant Holdings Intl. (CMHI) and Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority (DPFZA) (Breuer 2017). Doraleh port is the signature investment of China in Djibouti which will work as a strategic hub for trading purposes. With capabilities to encompass container, general and bulk cargo facilities this port was inaugurated on 24th May 2017 (Styan 2019, 6). As a booming industrialized country, China needs safe and secure routes for trading and energy security. Around 3.8 million barrels transfer through Bab-el Mandeb strait and with Doraleh Multipurpose Port, China will be able to take this advantage to fulfill the energy needs (F. GRESH 2017, 39). This port will also work as a hub for logistical support to ships that operate to and from the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea. China has already established a stronghold in the Indian Ocean which is in Gwadar port. From Doraleh port Chinese vessels can enter the Indian Ocean directly through the Gulf of Aden which will help them to connect with Gwadar port thus connecting the world through MSR will be fulfilled. DMP is surrounded by Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DIFTZ) which encompasses a large area of 4,800 hectares (Styan 2019, 6). With the largest free trade zone DIFTZ and Doraleh port, Djibouti has become a key strategic arena for China.

Djibouti, home to several foreign military bases, signed an agreement with China to establish a military base for People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) which sits on a strategic route linking the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean (Kleven 2015). This is the fourth foreign military base in Djibouti after the bases of the US, France and Japan (Chien-Peng 2019). Though the overall cost of DMP was announced, the cost of making the military base was kept confidential (Cabestan 2019, 8). China got a 10-year lease and has to pay US$ 20 million annually for this port which can accommodate 10,000 personnel (Cabestan 2019, 7). Rather than calling it a military base China prefers terms like support facilities or logistical facilities (Headley 2018). Xi Jinping's decision to build a base is influenced by many factors like USA's established foreign forces, to conduct anti-piracy operations, secure the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and there is no better guardhouse than Djibouti to keep an eye out. For China Djibouti was the perfect choice to gain a strategic advantage over the region and also to check other superpowers like the USA and France. US officials have raised concerns about the PLA's presence in Djibouti which poses a risk of friction and counterintelligence threat among the US army (Vertin 2020, 7-8). China has invested heavily in Africa and to protect and support the projects this base will help significantly. With the ever-expanding economic interest, PLAN wants to secure and protect China's transportation routes and SLOC. From this base, China can cover the Arabian Peninsula, Northern and Central Africa with Shaanxi Y-8 maritime patrol aircraft without the need for refuelling (Kleven 2015). In 2011 during the war of Libya China was unable to evacuate its citizens from the war zone without the help of the westerns and the same scenario occurred again in 2015 but this time Chinese forces were well prepared (Styan 2019, 9). This port will eliminate this vulnerability in the above-mentioned region and China will be able to create a sphere of influence also. With the ability to harbour vessels drawing up to 18 meters of water this port will be able to harbour China's aircraft carrier or the largest warship the Type 071 LPD (Kleven 2015).

China is aware that Chinese cargo ships traveling to and from Europe have to pass the Gulf of Aden which is dominated by pirates and to complement the ongoing anti-piracy operation in these water bodies PLAN will be using the military base in Djibouti (Chien-Peng 2019). It takes around 124 days for anti-piracy operations and PLAN sailors need rest and recuperation during this period and also PLAN ships will be able to repair and maintain their ships in this base (Cabestan 2019, 6). China has been participating in a growing number of peacekeeping operations of the UN in Africa like in 2017, 1000 peacekeepers served in South Sudan, 600 and 400 respectively in Liberia and Mali (Styan 2019, 9). Beijing is expected to increase the number of peacekeepers and the military base in Djibouti will help in this cause. From this port Beijing will be able to secure MSR in the Indian Ocean Region, East Asia and Europe (Cabestan 2019, 10). In the early 2000s, Djibouti became crucially important for the USA as the U.S. Military base was established to support the regional operations in the post 9/11 world and also to fight the rising Somali Piracy (Gresh 2017, 44). The geopolitical sphere of that region was controlled by the USA and when China tried to establish its Military base, USA opposed it heavily (ZiroMwatela and Changfeng 2016, 14). But China had a cordial relation with Djibouti, took this advantage and set up that military base which helped to balance the US's strategic position in the region. Again, with China's base in the country, Djibouti could use this to leverage foreign policy with the western countries like the USA, France.

DMP and the military base are not the only projects of China's BRI in Djibouti. China also invested in rebuilding the Addis Ababa- Djibouti railway. This railway will connect Djibouti to Ethiopia and China will be able to establish connections with the inlands of Africa also. China has also invested in other infrastructure projects. Another project, the Ethiopia-Djibouti Water pipeline is capable of piping 100,000 m2 water per day which will help to lessen Djibouti's water crisis (Styan 2019, 7). China also helped in the construction of Ghoubet port, International Free Trade Zone around DMP and Damerjog (Cabestan 2019, 3).

Understanding the Debt trap narrative

The "debt-trap diplomacy" has created a discourse in the media and international community referring to the notion that China is deliberately extending loans, which pushes the developing countries into a debt trap. Even though China claims to increase regional connectivity through economic cooperation in Asia, Africa, and Europe, it has spiralled a debate among scholars about China's intention. Debt-trap diplomacy is where a state deliberately lends an excessive amount of money to a borrower nation with the aim of extracting financial or political concessions, when the borrower can't repay. Brahma Chellany, an Indian scholar, first used the term 'debt-trap diplomacy' to explain the perilous strategy of China (Maluki and Lemmy 2019, 9). According to Chellaney, if projects don't do well in developing nations, it works in favour of China as they get a major share of assets in lieu of payment (Chin 2018).

China is dispensing a big amount of development loans to countries to achieve the goal of the Belt and Road Initiative, which over time turns into a debt trap. China's use of debt-trap diplomacy is systematic. It exploits many vulnerable countries for its own benefit, to advance its economic, political, and military interests across the world. China grants billions of dollars in the form of concessional loans for infrastructural projects to developing countries. The generous amount of loans are given to targeted low- and middle-income countries. China has used the concessionality factor as they offer interest rates well below the market price and provide long grace periods (Mehta 2020). These developing nations get lured into the debt trap for the sake of development and have to surrender before China resulting in the potential weakening of sovereignty and loss of strategic assets. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has raised concerns in the international arena about the risk of debt problems in developing countries. Many developing countries are falling prey to the debt trap, being saddled with burdensome debt leaves them under the total control of China. In exchange for debt relief, Beijing demands concessions or other arrangements securing economic gains, thereby increasing its overall influence in a given country (Czirják 2019). The narrative that China is engaged in debt-trap diplomacy has taken off since the very beginning of the BRI. Western concerns over BRI-related projects as a tool to initiate debt trap diplomacy are particularly acute in terms of less developed nations.

US media have surmised Chinese lending as a 'weapon' to fight the trade war by using the debt factor as a 'firepower' to win the battle against others (DeBoom 2019, 3). The officials from the western states have also warned the borrowers to be aware of the debt trap scheme of China. US State Secretary, Mike Pompeo gave a warning to African and Latin American countries about the predatory economic activity of China (Ferchen and Perera 2019, 1). The United States (US) Secretary of the Navy has claimed that Chinese lending has been a microcosm of "weaponizing capital" (Chin 2018). While conducting an investigation the International Monetary Fund (IMF) found that China's lending to indebted nations in terms of debt has multiplied from 6.2 percent to 11.6 percent from 2013 to 2016 (Green 2019).

The Hambantota project is often used as an example of China's debt trap diplomacy. Sri Lanka had to hand over the Hambantota port to China under a 99-year lease in 2017 (Lim and Mukherjee 2017, 8). Similarly, the African countries are becoming a victim of debt-trap diplomacy and remain under a high risk of debt distress. China has been labelled numerous times as an 'aggressor' and African states as the 'victims' in western geopolitical narratives (DeBoom 2019, 3). These persistent narratives help to build the annotation that if countries fail to repay the burdensome loans, it works in favour of China by falling into the debt trap. Kenya is flagged as the latest victim of debt-trap strategy, as China accounts for 66% of the country's bilateral debt (Were 2018, 4). The Mombasa port might get under the thumb of China if Kenya fails to repay the loan. Kenya Railways Corporation has stated that the Mombasa port's assets remain unprotected due to a waiver in the deal with China (Miller 2018). The total debt of Djibouti is around 80 percent of its GDP and mostly is under China (Green 2019). In a similar way, Mozambique, Zambia, Burundi and Chad are either paying off debts or at a debt-related risk. A report published by the Centre for Global Development finds that almost 8 of the 68 countries involved in BRI are facing unsustainable debt levels which include Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives (Cheng 2018). The story of Chinese lending is a contentious issue that many scholars argue that it is the hidden agenda of China through the implementation of BRI.

Djibouti under Debt trap

The West has criticized China's increasing engagement in the African continent and expressed concern about the African countries that they will fall into a debt trap because of the Asian Dragon. The African countries are full of failed development programs and infrastructure projects, funded by numerous donors for the development of the continent. Djibouti is located on the northeast coast of the Horn of Africa, consisting of high value for all maritime nations. Djibouti and Sri Lanka are strategically lying face to face in the Indian Ocean, situated 2,500 miles away, and both countries have fallen prey to China's debt-trap diplomacy (Cheng 2018). Chinese-financed ports and other infrastructure projects are gathering steam in Djibouti, drawing Washington's scrutiny and heightened tensions that the tiny East African nation is falling into a debt trap (Ferchen and Perera 2019, 4). Chinese loans have multiplied Djibouti's public debt from 50% of GDP in 2015 to 91% in 2017. (Carmody 2020, 4) At the end of 2017, the debt of Djibouti is 77% of its annual GDP where China owns the lion's share (Cabestan 2019, 3).

Within less than two years, the Doraleh port was completed and it was connected with Djibouti's major trading partner and resourceful neighbor, Ethiopia (Breuer 2017, 4). With the help of Chinese financing, CM port was behind the Doraleh port project to make it functional and display as a 'port–park–city' (Brautigam 2019, 11). The Doraleh Multipurpose Port cost around $590 million, which was jointly financed by China and Djibouti (Styan 2019, 6). The port remains under the control of China and Chinese companies are its main users. The officials have stated that most of the shipping comes from China to the Doraleh port (Bearak 2019). Another $3.5 billion dollar project is initiated by China in cooperation with the government to build a free trade zone, the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DIFTZ) (Tobita 2020). China made a significant investment in Djibouti, apart from the port they have heavily invested in infrastructure projects, including a $492 million loan for the 756-km long Ethiopia-Djibouti railway and $322 million cross border water project with Ethiopia (Vertin 2020, 10). China has also established a military base in Djibouti, which is more of a consequence rather than a coincidence, as it wouldn't happen if Djibouti hadn't borrowed a substantial amount of finance. China opened its first military base overseas in August 2017, even though previously it had opposed the idea of setting up a base elsewhere and denied any intention of doing so (Cabestan 2019, 1).

The hefty amount of loan to Djibouti lets China hold a significant chunk of share in the projects. Although Djiboutian authority insists on holding a majority of shares in each project, if this continues then Chinese influence can be costly for Djibouti in the long run. In the meantime, Beijing's loans have facilitated the construction of the port and other infrastructure projects in a country with a small economy that led to rising debts, resulting in a possible loss of strategic assets if they can't repay (York 2019). Djibouti's foreign minister, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf has said, "Yes, our debt to China is 71% of our GDP, but we needed that infrastructure," to explain the scenario at home (Bearak 2019). He further added that China willingly agreed to contribute to the development project of Djibouti, and it is much needed since other donor states weren't ready to comply in terms of building infrastructure projects (Bearak 2019). The officials are declining the debt distress and remain stiff-necked about repaying China back, but the 8% GDP growth projects a different scenario for Djibouti (Vertin 2020, 13). Due to COVID-19, the shutdown of business has spiralled down the growth of the economy which leaves the country vulnerable to external shocks and delays in the Chinese payment. Even though the officials insisted that they will not sell out the country to China, however, Chinese firms own a majority of shares in a variety of ventures (Vertin 2020, 15). China's growing profile in Djibouti provides a fertile ground for concern about the debt distress, it could be the next domino to fall to China's influence, like Sri Lanka. China's grand strategy to connect Asia, Africa and Europe, Belt and Road Initiative comes with some burdensome conditions attached to it. Chinese lending to less-developed nations raises concerns about Beijing having any interest in engineering a debt-for-equity swap. Having said that, BRI tethers some benefits as well, for example, the loans generate short-term economic growth and new infrastructure projects for the development of the state (Carmody 2020, 4).

Official response to Chinese involvement

Djibouti's relationship with China can be explained in three phases: one is the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, second is the beginning of the Chinese anti-piracy mission in the region and the last one is the relation in the Belt and Road Initiative era. The strongman of Djibouti, Ismael Omar Guelleh, shares strong bonds with China. But the ties between these two countries got much stronger and deeper when China included Djibouti as a strong hub for MSR in BRI. China came to serve as a saviour for Djibouti as infrastructural development is a crying need for them. Western countries have criticized Chinese loans in Djibouti. But the Djiboutian officials mentioned the hypocrisy of western countries as Djibouti went to the western countries first for infrastructure development as the French, Americans have been there for a very long time but these western countries did not come forward for the development (Vertin 2020, 12). The officials of Djibouti frequently assure that they will be able to repay the loan and won't get sold out to China (Vertin 2020, 12). But Chinese control of ports and having a Chinese military base will affect US interest in Djibouti. To justify the statement officials in Djibouti state that the control is in the hands of them as there are only 700 Chinese nationals working in the projects and none of them is in a leading position (Vertin 2020, 15). China's strong ally, President Gulleh also assured that he held "no intention of selling out to China" (Vertin 2020, 15). Chinese officials also have assured that in the military base, capable of accommodating 10,000 personnel, China will not deploy more than 2,000 officers (Cabestan 2019, 7). DP World has blamed CM Port for luring Djibouti into a new deal by coaxing them to break the 30-years exclusive concession agreement, which was terminated in 2018 (Brautigam 2019, 11). It is true that China offered lucrative deals to Djibouti which was essential for the national infrastructure development. Djiboutian officials for the sake of development accused DP World as they (DP World) were not interested in investing in Djibouti rather they were just keeping the potential investors out (Brautigam 2019, 11). But the perceptions of ordinary people of Djibouti differ a bit as they do not feel any gain for themselves and believe that Chinese involvement is reinforcing the corrupt government (Vertin 2020, 12). Djiboutian nationals aren't happy with the Chinese presence as the loans are contributing to the growth of GDP, but the benefit is not trickling down to all spheres of society. Ilyas Moussa Dawaleh, the finance minister of Djibouti has stated that Chinese financing was necessary to create employment, as Djiboutian nationals will be working for infrastructural development (Manek 2019). This way, the employment opportunities will be increased, and social cohesion will remain unsullied (York 2019). The amount of loan is so enormous that Djiboutian officials are trying to negotiate debt forgiveness and restructure the repayment terms to reduce the weight of the debt.

Conclusion

To maximize China's interest on a global scale, Xi Jinping aims for a more robust and assertive policy approach by pushing BRI. Africa by some margin has always been an aid-dependent region in the world. The western countries were the major provider of loans and aids to this continent but now China has changed the dynamics by providing extensive levels of loans which creates suspicions. China-Africa relation has intensified concerns among the international community and media. The COVID 19 outbreak has slowed the economic growth of African countries and increased debt distress on the macroeconomic prospects of the region. As a part of G-20's debt moratorium during this global pandemic, China will grant an eight months payment suspension to Djibouti (Kuo 2020). The region is very fragile and often the foreign aids and loans do not work in an expected way due to corruption. There is a probability of Djibouti falling into the 'debt trap' pit, resulting in loss of assets and a downturn in economic development. In the near future, there is a chance that Djibouti might face the same fate as Sri Lanka and lose the control of the port and this will be very unfortunate for Djibouti.

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