

India-Djibouti Relation: A Beginning of New Era

Afroz Ahmad

Research scholar Centre for Research and Security Studies, School of International Studies
Central University of Gujarat, Gandhi Nagar, India

Abstract

This paper would try to attempt two important questions. Firstly, what is the historical linkage of India-Djibouti relation and second, why Djibouti is important for India. Recently, the Indian president Ram Nath Kovind's first abroad trip as Head of State to Ethiopia and Djibouti is an example of India's commitment towards re-engagement with international community especially the prolonged neglected region of Africa. In the wake of growing commercial success, India intensified its focus on Africa as a vital economic partner. In the new millennium India's national interests has not been limited to the subcontinent but stretches till Aden and Malacca. Especially under Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, the foreign policy of India emphasized on development and good governance under the motto Shared Efforts: Progress for All *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* (Collective Efforts Inclusive Growth).

Keywords: Relation, Commitment, Re-engagement, Commercial, National Interests.

1. Introduction

The new Indian President Ram Nath Kovind chose Djibouti as first leg of his visit to Africa. This is after 45 years that any Indian president visited Ethiopia. The last Indian president to visit Ethiopia was VV Giri in 1972 and to Djibouti there has been no visit. Though the earlier visits only limited to Ethiopia and neglected other countries of Africa. The president Kovind's first visit as head of state is also a first ever visit to Djibouti by any Indian Head of State since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two states. This visit thus ended the prolonged neglect of Djibouti by India. The significance of the Ethiopia and Djibouti lies in the geopolitical importance of the region better known as Horn of Africa comprises Somalia and Eritrea apart from these two countries. This region sideways with Yemen across the Red Sea has known as one of the world's pivotal regions.

2. India-Djibouti Relation

A former French colony Djibouti got independence in 1977 but the historical linkages and cultural affinities along with people to people contact between Djibouti and India dates back to pre-independent India. The honorary counsel of India has been in function in Djibouti since 1969 while Djibouti opened its Embassy in New Delhi in 2004. Djibouti extended extraordinary support during Operation Rahat in April 2015 in the evacuation of Indians and other nationals from war-torn Yemen.¹ India is grateful to Djibouti due to these long standing historical links and India's contribution in the field of education and training, especially for the Somali speaking population many of whom have been taught by Indian teachers, Djibouti is keen to improve its bilateral relations with India especially in the area of capacity building. The Djiboutian government on the other hand, expressed appreciation for the contribution of the Indian community towards Djibouti's economic development and promotion of bilateral relations. They underlined the need for promoting greater cultural exchanges. Appreciating the scholarships and *training programmes* offered by India under Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), India Africa Forum Summit, Indian Council for Cultural Relation, etc. the Djiboutian government called for further expanding these programmes.²

2.1 Economic and Commercial Relations

The bilateral trade stood at US\$284.54 million in 2016-17, out of which India's exports to Djibouti were US\$281.71 million and imports were US\$2.82 million. Exports from India consist mainly of cereals, iron & steel products, plastic products, sugar, mineral fuel and footwear etc. During 2016-17, major imports by India from Djibouti were hides and skins, metal scraps and leather. Bilateral trade is in India's favor. Most of the trade with Djibouti actually serves the growing market in Ethiopia. The main items which have shown increase in Indian exports are: iron and steel products, paper and plastic products.³

India recognised that Africa and Indian Ocean region are key pillars of the Indian foreign policy. Enhancing trade and investment linkages remains one of the key focuses of Presidents visit. The visit to Djibouti will lay the foundation for future growth in bilateral relations. It was recognized by both the sides that the leaders need to

¹ Sinha, Neha (2017) "Presidents First Foreign Trip to Djibouti: Why It Matters?", 31 Oct, 2017 *Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi*, <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/october/31/presidents-first-foreign-trip-to-djibouti-why-it-matters>

² Ministry of External Affairs (2017) "India-Djibouti Relations", Government of India New Delhi, http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Djibouti_September_2017_en.pdf

³ The Embassy of India Ethiopia and Djibouti(-----) "Bilateral brief India-Djibouti", <http://indembassyeth.in/political-bilateral-relations-djibouti/>

meet at regular intervals for timely execution of various projects and have a sustained focus on timely completion of the projects started and implementation of the agreements reached. To further strengthen the relationship, a significant role can be played by the establishment of an Indian Embassy in Djibouti. The opening of an Indian Embassy will give India an edge in the nation and facilitate the bilateral movement of people, goods. This, in the long run will propel and promote business relationships between the two nations.

3. Why Djibouti is important for India

The population of Djibouti is around one million and its land is largely unfertile. Djibouti is located at the mouth of the Strategic Strait of Bab al-Mandeb, between the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, the crossroads link Africa, the Middle East and Asia. The recent inter and intra state conflicts in this region made it a very attractive piece of geopolitical real estate. Djibouti under the government of President, Ismail Omar Guelleh, adopted an open strategy to all nations, turn Djibouti's strategic location into economic fortune. Guelleh's "all are welcome" tactic has pinched several state to set up military bases in Djibouti. Djibouti's location in Africa and around the Middle East makes it an ideal location for establishing military bases for superpowers. The US permanent naval base located at the Djibouti airport for helping military support, forming investigation center for drones across Africa and supporting aerial surveillance of the Persian Gulf.

Moreover, China also kept an eye to get hold in the region for a long time. It is believed that Chinese government working on infrastructure projects in the region, would get benefit from the proximity of a military base in the region. China is also interested in securing a long-term grip on the continent and Djibouti is at the core of such a strategy. It is where China chose to build its first overseas military base, which would also help it realise its ambitious plan of a "Maritime Silk Road" a vast international network of sea infrastructure aimed at securing its trade routes, ensuring the undisturbed travel of China-bound raw materials and energy vessels, as well as of its transformed products back to Europe through the red sea. China's first overseas military outpost ostensible to provide logistical support for Chinese interests in the region along with the possibility to start a base for its submarines.

In addition, the Djibouti port has become strategically important and handles heavy traffic particularly since Ethiopia has to rely on it for all its trade after Eritrea broke away and left Ethiopia landlocked without access to the Red Sea. China's increased role in Djibouti first seen in terms of supporting humanitarian missions. China first considered in 2008, Djibouti as a prospective logistical base for its naval flotilla, providing security to Chinese shipping convoys in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden. Afterwards in 2013, China began investing heavily in infrastructure projects including a Presidential building, the national war memorial, two sports complex, main administration building, new port and two new airports.

Additionally, on 22 November 2015, One of the visible infrastructure projects in the region has been the 750 km-long rail link between landlocked Ethiopia and Djibouti being constructed by two Chinese companies China Railway Group (CREC) and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) was opened when 1125 tons of wheat from Djibouti arrived in Merebe Mermersa, approximately 112 km south of Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa.¹ China's investments in Djibouti formally materialized when Beijing signed a Defense and Security Agreement with the Horn of Africa state already home to military facilities of the United States, France, and Japan. In exchange for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) use of its port, Djibouti's government requested that China assist in the development of military capabilities, including patrol boats and airplanes, as well as the establishment of a civilian maritime complex. Soon, Beijing arranged for the delivery of a MA-60 plane and a Norinco WZ 551 APC to the Djiboutian Air Force.²

China's Djibouti strategy based on promoting Beijing's commercial interests. Given China's economic penetration in Africa and Central Asia, Beijing is giving high priority to its commercial investments in the Indian Ocean. As China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative gathers momentum, however, the focus is also increasingly on developing political influence in Indian Ocean rim states. Beijing needs the cooperation of the regional political elites to allow the PLAN access to critical Indian Ocean littorals for the protection of Chinese investments. A military base in Djibouti is a useful asset for China, as it denotes both geopolitical heft and economic stakeholder ship in the Indian Ocean. Its location, next to the new port terminal at Obock, ensures Chinese military forces can be rapidly mobilized to protect China's commercial investments and efficiently deliver military assistance.³

Many regional powers are now trying to establishing the strategic landscape of the Horn through military bases and armed interventions. Djibouti, for example, is reported to host military facilities of Saudi Arabia and Qatar; Eritrea has bases for UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar; UAE and Turkey have facilities in different regions of

¹ Singh, Mandip (2016) "Port de Djibouti: China's First Permanent Naval Base in the Indian Ocean", *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, New Delhi, http://www.idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib_port-de-djibouti_msingh_230216.pdf

² Singh, Abhijit (2017) "China's military base in Djibouti strategic implications for India", Observer Research Foundation, New delhi, <http://www.orfonline.org/research/military-base-china-djibouti-strategic-implications-india/>

³ Ibid

Somalia. India, being a significant identity in the Indian Ocean region as its name suggested, is somewhat late in joining the scramble for political influence in this critical corner. New reliance on the sea lines of communication for India's economic growth saw the rejuvenation of India's maritime sensibility. Therefore, Djibouti can provide an important transit port for regional and international shipping as well as a base for refueling.¹

4. Areas of Cooperation, India-Djibouti Joint Statement during the State Visit of President to Djibouti

During the official level talks, both sides acknowledged the long-standing excellent bilateral relations between India and Djibouti and re-affirmed the mutual desire to deepen economic, commercial, technical, educational, scientific and cultural cooperation between the two countries. Both the leaders acknowledged the significant role of Djibouti and its strategic importance as well as India's role for the maintenance of peace and stability in the Horn of Africa region. They underlined the need to engage both India and Djibouti on regional and international issues of mutual concern.²

Both the leaders shared the views that terrorism is a greater threat to mankind and global peace and stability. They expressed their willingness to join hands with the International Community in eradicating the menace of terrorism from the society in order to prevail peace and tranquility in the world. They agreed on the need to take strong and stringent measures against terrorists, terror organizations and their networks. The leaders called for an urgent need for the reform of the UN Security Council, including its expansion, to make it more representative, accountable, effective and responsive to the geo-political realities of the 21st century.

Both the countries agreed to work closely to intensify their cooperation in the United Nations and other multilateral fora in order to address current global challenges such as climate change and to foster international and regional peace & security and sustainable development. The two leaders underscored the need to hold regular consultations on bilateral issues in order to further diversify the agreed agenda of cooperation and welcomed the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Foreign Office Consultations between India and Djibouti to the effect during the visit. Underlining the potential for deepening relations in the economic arena, the Djiboutian Government called for greater role for India in the economic development in Djibouti, with a focus on small and medium scale industries. Djibouti also appreciated Lines of credit/grants extended by India towards this purpose. Appreciating the scholarships and training programmes offered by India under *Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC)*, *India Africa Forum Summit (IAFS)*, *Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)* etc. the Djiboutian government called for further enhancing and diversifying these programmes.

The two leaders welcomed the launch of International Solar Alliance (ISA) as a common platform for cooperation among solar resource rich countries, and expressed their commitment to work closely to deepen bilateral and regional cooperation in this arena. The Djiboutian government expressed appreciation for the contribution of Indian community towards Djibouti's economic development and promotion of bilateral relations. They underlined the need for promoting greater cultural exchanges. Both sides encouraged regular exchanges at Ministerial level visits to further intensify bilateral relations between the two countries.

Conclusion

Africa is a region that India cannot afford to ignore. Six of the world's ten fastest growing economies are located in Africa. Huge complementarities exist to strengthen bilateral collaboration in diverse areas and upgrade India-Africa engagement. President Ram Nath Kovind's first visit to Africa is timely and portentous. It will strengthen political, strategic, security, economic, and people-to-people ties with these countries and also with the whole continent. This will give an impetus to security, stability, peace and prosperity in the region and the world. The idea that India must take larger responsibility for regional stability helped restore the proposition that India is a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean. During Africa summit held in New Delhi in 2015, most of the participating leaders expressed desire for expansion of security and defence cooperation with India. The current Chinese strategic advances in the Horn have helped put Djibouti back on India's political radar. The President's visit will hopefully lay the foundations for a comprehensive engagement with Djibouti and the Horn of Africa.

¹ C. Raja Mohan(2016), "Raja Mandala: India and Djibouti's geopolitical scrum", Indian Express, 03 October 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/raja-mandala-india-and-djiboutis-geopolitical-scrum-ram-nath-kovind-abroad-visit-4871697/>

² Ministry of External Affairs (2017) "India-Djibouti Relations", Government of India New Delhi, 04 October 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28999/IndiaDjibouti_Joint_Statement_during_the_State_Visit_of_President_to_Djibouti_October_04_2017