

Djiboutian sovereignty: worlding global security networks

Introduction

Drawing on the case of Djibouti, the research problem this article addresses is whether the unique confluence of overseas security forces in a single territorial space through the leasing of land for foreign military bases compromises the state's sovereignty. Djibouti now hosts more extra-continental foreign military bases and multilateral forces than anywhere else in Africa, including troops from Japan, China, the USA, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and (prospectively) India.¹ Perceived as a fragile African state², Djibouti is reportedly compelled to collect revenue through leasing land for military bases to foreign powers.³ Situated at the Bab el Mandeb strait, a narrow shipping corridor through which oil and goods pass between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Gulf, Djibouti is restricted to developing geo-economic goals because it has a harsh climate where natural resources are limited, and only a tiny proportion of its 23, 180 km² land area is arable. As a result, the state described as 'The Eagle's Nest' in the Horn of Africa⁴, in reference to the US' military strategic deployment there, must use its only resource – its strategically situated land – to generate income. However, this runs a further risk of creating a congested sovereign territory, undermining the country's power, and hollowing out its significance as a sovereign state as it makes the most of its geostrategic location by renting territorial space to foreign powers.⁵

Alex Vines, Head of Africa Programme at Chatham House, makes clear that Africa is the focus of geopolitical competition, both in terms of strategies and business, representing something of 'a bit of a new scramble'.⁶ Djibouti is part of this new scramble through its strategic corridors and location. This language of 'scramble' to describe geopolitics, global politics, regional politics taking place on and across the African continent is not new and indeed persists.⁷ The continent,

¹ Peter Fabricius, 'AU summit 30: Should Africa worry about a growing foreign military presence?' Institute for Security Studies, 2018, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/djibouti-plays-the-west-off-against-the-far-east>.

² Ismaël Abdillahi Guirreh, '*Développement et dépendance des systèmes portuaires d'un état fragile ancrés dans la mondialisation: l'exemple de Djibouti*', Diss. Normandie, 2017, <https://hal.inria.fr/tel-03065829/>

³ Zach Vertin, 'Red Sea Rivalries', *Foreign Affairs*, 15, 2019.

⁴ Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, 'The Eagle's Nest in the Horn of Africa: US Military Strategic Deployment in Djibouti', *Africa Spectrum*, 51: 1, 2016, pp 111–24

⁵ Grace Easterly, 'From imperial port city to logistics hub: the production of strategic space in Djibouti (1859-2020)', *Crossroads* 19: 1, January 2021, pp. 74-98; Brian Gicheru Kinyua, 'How Djibouti is Maximizing its Strategic Position in Maritime Trade', *The Maritime Executive*, OCT 15, 2020 <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/how-djibouti-is-maximizing-its-strategic-position-in-maritime-trade>; World Bank, 'Land area (sq. km) - Djibouti', 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.TOTL.K2?locations=DJ>.

⁶ Rand Merchant Bank, *The Geopolitical Scramble for Africa – Neville Mandimika & Alex Vine - RMB Global Markets [Video]*. YouTube. 29 Nov 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=carAcSp1Pbk&ab_channel=RandMerchantBank.

⁷ *The Economist*, 'The UAE is Scrambling to Control Ports in Africa', 19 July 2018, <https://www.economist.com.uea.idm.oclc.org/middle-east-and-africa/2018/07/19/the-uae-is-scrambling-to-control-ports-in-africa>.; Viktor Marsai, 'Scramble for the Horn of Africa Al-Shabaab vs. Islamic State', *Nemzet És Biztonság: Biztonságpolitikai Szemle*, 12: 4, 2019, pp.14-29; Majla Mari, 'Iran in the Face of the International Scramble for Africa', *Journal of Iranian Studies*, 1: 2, 2017, pp. 56–69; Hicham Mourad, 'The scramble for the Red Sea', *Confluences*

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for instance, is considered ‘the final frontier’ for energy sources, precious metals, energy resources,⁸ as well as land grabs.⁹ Brexit, it is argued, will intensify, and not unravel, the ‘collective colonialism’ of *Eurafrica*¹⁰ - the geopolitical constellation of the European Union (or the European Economic Community, EEC, as it was called at its foundation) enabling a European colonial management of the African continent - as Britain competes with the EU-27 for their zone of influence in emerging African markets, provoking a ‘new scramble for Africa’.¹¹

While ‘sovereignty’ has consistently been at the centre of International Relations (IR) debates,¹² African states are habitually judged in line with essentialized characteristics of the so-called ‘Westphalian system’ as it relates to abstract ideals of the supremacy of state sovereignty, territoriality, and non-intervention, usually to the exclusion of other more nuanced meanings.¹³ Therefore, using ‘scramble’, a term that refers to the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, to explain current security and political economic processes in Africa renews, as clarifies Pourmokhtari¹⁴, colonial legacies shaping perceptions of the performance of sovereignty across Africa. The important analytical distinctions of what performing sovereignty could mean across postcolonial spaces are obscured as African states are referred to as ‘failed’ or ‘fragile’.¹⁵ While postcolonial critique challenges the identification of African states as ‘failed’,¹⁶ this term continues to refer to the supposed difficulty of certain African states to impose and maintain civil order, to manage the

Méditerranée, 110: 3, 2019, pp. 205-223; Ismail Numan Telci, ‘The Horn of Africa as Venue for Regional Competition: Motivations, Instruments and Relationship Patterns’, *Insight on Africa*, 2021: 09750878211034153.

⁸ Pierre Abramovici and Julie Stoker, ‘United States: the new scramble for Africa’, *Review of African Political Economy* (2004): 685-690; Michael Klare & Daniel Volman, ‘America, China & the Scramble for Africa’s Oil’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 33: 108, 2006, pp. 297-309

⁹ Sam Moyo, Praveen Jha, and Paris Yeros, ‘The scramble for land and natural resources in Africa’, *Reclaiming Africa*. Springer, Singapore, 2019, pp. 3-30.

¹⁰ Guy Martin, ‘Africa and the ideology of EurAfrica: neo-colonialism or pan-Africanism?’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 20: 2, 1982, pp. 221-238; Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson. *Eurafrica: The untold history of European integration and colonialism*. (Bloomsbury Publishing) 2014.

¹¹ Mark Langan, ‘A New Scramble for EurAfrica?’, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 16: 2, 2020.

¹² Karen Gevorgyan, ‘Concept of state sovereignty: Modern attitudes’, *Proceedings of Yerevan State University*, 2014, pp. 431-448; Sohail H Hashmi ed., *State sovereignty: change and persistence in international relations*, (Penn State Press, 2010); Torbjørn L. Knutsen, *A history of international relations theory*, (Manchester University Press, 2020); Stephen D Krasner, *Power, the state, and sovereignty: essays on international relations*, (Routledge, 2009); David A. Lake, ‘The New Sovereignty in International Relations’, *International Studies Review*, 5: 3, September 2003, pp. 303-323; Andreas Osiander, ‘Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth’, *International Organization*, 55: 2, 2001, pp. 251-287

¹³ Sebastian Schmidt, ‘To Order the Minds of Scholars: The Discourse of the Peace of Westphalia in International Relations Literature’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 55: 3, 2011, pp. 601-623

¹⁴ Navid Pourmokhtari, ‘A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: the contradictory legacy of a ‘West-centric’ discipline’, *Third World Quarterly*, [online] 34: 10, 2013, pp. 1767-1793.

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development of a national economy in a globalising world, or to govern their sovereign integrity against external forces.¹⁷

In this article we study Djibouti's practice of land renting to military powers from a diametrically opposite analytical position to the literature on the scramble for Africa, state failure, or the erosion of sovereignty. In that respect, we interrogate the following two central research questions: How does the (re)interpretation of the concept of sovereignty enable various practices in the same physical territorial space? How does the concept of sovereignty permit or enable different interpretations and practices by states to promote or advance national interests? In response to these research questions, we argue that the Djiboutian state's interpretation of sovereignty offers important insights into the ways in which, as Mbembe¹⁸ establishes, new forms of territoriality and unexpected forms of locality are appearing in Africa and that this reflects shifting ways of imagining space and territory more broadly. Using the concept of 'worlding', we maintain that instead of reading 'military base diplomacy' as eroding and undermining Djibouti's sovereignty, this case demonstrates the ways in which 'the art of being global' underpins new forms of territoriality and unexpected forms of locality in Africa. We believe that African experiences of sovereignty offer the challenges, along with the rewards, of greater analytical depth theoretically to IR scholarship while expanding our understanding of different empirical cases beyond the Western-centric accounts of sovereignty in line with an abstract ideal that does not tell us much about the world, postcolonial experiences, and global politics. In line with this, the sets of literature on the 'scramble for Africa' and the 'failure' or incapacity of African states – in this case Djibouti – to act in line with the narrow Western-centric perspective of sovereignty based on Westphalian ideal-types disregard ontological and epistemological pluralism reflected¹⁹ in the multi-layered and diverse performances of sovereignty, as both interpretation and practice, within the distinct landscapes of complex postcolonial African sovereignty.²⁰

¹⁵ Tiffany Howard, 'Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33: 11, 2010, p. 977; Karaman Mamand, 'Theoretical Interpretation: A Description of the Discourse Pathways Toward Weakness and Death in Failed States', *California Western International Law Journal* 51: 2, 2021, p.16; Simina Sava, 'The Failed States of the East Africa', *Annals Constantin Brancusi U. Targu Jiu, Letters & Soc. Sci. Series*, 2017, p.113.

¹⁶ See special issue Sonja Grimm, Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, and Olivier Nay. 'Fragile States': Introducing a political concept', *Third World Quarterly*, 35: 2, 2014, pp.197-209; Jonathan Hill, 'Beyond the Other? A postcolonial critique of the failed state thesis', *African Identities*, 3: 2, 2005, pp.139-154.

¹⁷ Abu Bakarr Bah, 'State decay: A conceptual frame of failing and failed states in West Africa' *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 25: 1, 2012, pp.71-89; Kevin R Cox, 'Failed States' in Question and the Case of Sub-Saharan Africa', *L'Espace Politique. Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique*, 32, 2017; Agaptus Nwozor, 'African Union, state-building and the challenges of state fragility in Africa', *AUSTRAL: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations*, 7: 13, 2018; Jonathan Di John, 'Failed States' in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of the Literature. Elcano Newsletter. 18: 73, 2011; Tiffany Howard, 'Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33: 11, 2010, pp. 960-988.

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, 'At the edge of the world: boundaries, territoriality, and sovereignty in Africa', *Public Culture*, 12: 1, 2000, pp. 259–284.

¹⁹ Schmidt, 2011

²⁰ Siba Grovogui, 'Postcolonial Criticism: International Reality and Modes of Inquiry' in Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2003); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (Revised edition), translated by Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2007); Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (3rd edition) (New York: Zed Books, 2015).

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This article's primary contribution to the literature is, therefore, to illustrate the extensive divergence between some of the most extreme performances of sovereignty being exercised by foreign powers and the Djiboutian state in the exceptional geopolitical and economic spatial reality of the country and its offshore waters. Instead of reading practices of sovereignty in Djibouti through narrowly defined and historically inaccurate accounts of sovereignty, this African state makes an empirical case study to recall historical practices of overlapping sovereignties and the ways in which several forms of territoriality intersect in any one given space. Through exposition of multiple forms of data, as outlined below, we demonstrate that the meaning of sovereignty in Djibouti largely amounts to an umbrella term for state-specific interpretations and performances. Here, we focus on three case studies to unpack how the empirical evidence suggests that competing agencies of, in these cases Japanese, Chinese and Djiboutian authorities, result in a diverse rather than uniform set of practices, all undertaken in supposed adherence to the notional principles of sovereignty. The specific cases studies of Japan and China, rather than established powers such as France and the US, have been selected to provide analysis of how Djibouti engages with the dynamic power relations of relatively new entrants in Africa. It also demonstrates how geostrategy enables Djibouti to play the West off against Asia.²¹

To ascertain the profile of each case study, a wide range of discursive data, ranging from government reports and briefings to NGO papers, international journalists' accounts, scholarly secondary literature, and semi-structured interviews have been synthesised in relation to the three states. Where possible, equivalent cross-comparable data, such as that directly articulating interpretations of law and practice ostensibly based on the concept of sovereignty have been examined and critically explicated. In the case of the Djiboutian authorities, understandings of the foreign military base leasing process and related performances, particularly with respect to the Japanese and Chinese facilities, are contrasted with opposing discourse on the implementation and stationing of military forces available from each of the two East Asian states, in addition to other comparable international examples where overseas bases have a major impact upon limited (nominally) sovereign space, such as on Okinawa - spotlighted here due its intersecting engagement with the contrasting performances of sovereignty exercised by Japan, China and the US on the Ryukyu islands, relative to their respective interpretations and practices in Djibouti.

In employing these interpretive methodological tools, the article advances from two theoretically informed angles: Firstly, this is in response to the mainstream of International Relations (IR), International Political Economy (IPE), and Security Studies literature, which dictates that when looking at foreign overseas military bases we are typically compelled to adopt some form of (structural) realist interpretation of sovereignty²² and judge that Djibouti is unable to secure its sovereign territory as Great Powers 'scramble' for desirous geopolitical space on the Red Sea. In this sense, the overseas military bases are pieces of land rented from a sovereign host with the result, in the context of this small African country, of diminishing the host's sovereignty. However,

²¹ Berouk Mesfin, 'Djibouti plays the West off against the Far East', Institute for Security Studies, 2017, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/djibouti-plays-the-west-off-against-the-far-east>.

²² Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Long Grove: Waveland, 1979); Daniel Maliniak and Michael Tierney, 'The American school of IPE', *Review of International Political Economy*, 6: 1, 2009, pp. 6-33; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Updated edition) (New York: Norton, 2003); Ahmed Waqas Waheed, 'State Sovereignty and International Relations in Pakistan: Analysing the Realism Stranglehold', *South Asia Research* 37: 3, 2017, pp. 277-295.

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in contradiction to this view, we expose that there are multi-fold, complementary, and mutually power reinforcing interpretations and practices of sovereignty being enacted on that territory, both land and sea. Djibouti is thus an important case study providing new evidence of multiple sovereignties co-existing in the same physical space as different interpretations, stemming from histories of postcolonial spaces. Critically, the Djiboutian state itself enables these divergent practices of sovereignty on its small territory.

Secondly, recognising that the exercise of non-Western agency has major impacts on global politics²³, we build on the postcolonial critique which challenges the assumption that African states lack agency via-a-vis global forces when diverging from supposedly global norms of state behaviour. That is, we transcend habitual claims that African states are being re-colonised, that this neo-colonialism is being led by Asian powers – namely China²⁴ – that their territorial spaces are up for grabs, that the continent is once again being carved up in-line only with foreign interests, and that African states lack agency and the power to shape their national interests in geo-political altercations. This critique recognises that all states involved exert agency, albeit with varying levels of power and desired outcomes. Along these lines, the empirical cases discussed below, buttressed by the following literature review, reveal that while Djiboutian, Japanese and Chinese states are all interpreting their sovereignty very differently, they are all exerting agency as they advance their respective foreign policies.

Sovereignty: essentialized Westphalian model to contemporary African interpretations and capabilities

Djibouti is of particular interest within scholarship on African international affairs given that international bodies recognise it as having ‘normal sovereignty’, despite the evident exceptionality of the overseas military and infrastructure projects within its *sovereign* territory.²⁵ Sovereignty is a highly debated concept.²⁶ However, as pointed out by Sarooshi with respect to general state sovereignty, the fact that such a list of what constitutes sovereignty will be ‘continually subject to contestation and change’ is perfectly in line with the idea of an essentially contested concept. While states put forward various readings of sovereignty, changing the content and subject matter of their claims as they assert, manage, and manipulate readings of sovereignty²⁷, the leading disciplines of IR, IPE, and Security Studies, continue to use a single explanation of ‘sovereignty’ to undergird

²³ John M Hobson and Alina Sajed, ‘Navigating beyond the Eurofetishist frontier of critical IR theory: Exploring the complex landscapes of non-Western agency’, *International Studies Review*, 19: 4, 2017, pp. 547-572.

²⁴ Reuters, ‘Macron Warns of Chinese Risk to African Sovereignty’, 11 March 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-djibouti-france/macron-warns-of-chinese-risk-to-african-sovereignty-idUSKBN1QS2QP>.

²⁵ UN, ‘The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Djibouti to the United Nations’, 2020, <https://www.un.int/djibouti/>.

²⁶ Stephen Krasner, ‘The Durability of Organised Hypocrisy’ in Kalmo Hent and Quentin Skinner (eds) *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept*, Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 96-113, p. 96; Dan Sarooshi, ‘The Essentially Contested Nature of the Concept of Sovereignty: Implications for the Exercise by International Organizations of Delegated Powers of Government’, *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 25: 4, 2003, pp. 1107-1141.

²⁷ Kathryn Hochstetler, Ann Marie Clark, and Elisabeth J. Friedman ‘Sovereignty in the Balance: Claims and Bargains at the UN Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 44: 4, 2000, p. 591.

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mainstream analyses.²⁸ Even though, as Mercier sets out, de-naturalising state sovereignty by emphasising its performative dimension was a key contribution of critical IR theory, IR remains fixated with the Weberian definition of the international as being composed of sovereign states each with the monopoly of legitimate force within their defined territories.²⁹ Scholarship thus establishes sovereignty and anarchy as “the two constituent principles in terms of which the field of international relations originally took form”.³⁰

Empirically and historically, this is fictitious. A uniform international system of sovereignty across space and time has never existed.³¹ IR’s identification of the internal and external dimensions of state sovereignty ignores the multiple dimensions and divisions of sovereignties within the same territorial space generated through imperialism, colonial land grants, or the significance of treaties regulating relations, for instance, between European and non-European rulers.³² Empires did not “cover space evenly but composed a fabric that was full of holes, stitched together out of pieces, a tangle of strings”.³³ The imagined imperial space, Benton goes on to explain, constructed sovereignty through merging ideas about geography and law. ‘Lumpy’ empires spawned irregular, porous, ill-defined, politically fragmented spaces of uneven governance.³⁴

Along these lines Mbembe³⁵ explains that sovereign borders across Africa are the fruit of multiple geneses reflecting commercial, religious, and military processes shaped by European imperial powers and Africans preceding the carving up of the continent. This critical analysis has largely been lacking when we assess postcolonial African states’ performance through the Westphalian system ideal-type - that probably really existed anywhere across the globe - of state sovereignty, territoriality, and non-intervention.³⁶ The multiple geneses referred to by Mbembe are often read as an incapacity to take up the Western-based political ethos and fully enter or adopt the principle of singular regime of sovereignty.³⁷ Arguing that precolonial sovereignty in Africa tended to be shared, Herbst suggests that Africans were ‘glad to be rid of the confused mixture of political institutions that characterized the precolonial period.’³⁸ The problem was, according to Weber’s definition of statehood and scholars that employ it, few Africa’s governments *really* qualify as states.³⁹ As to why this, postcolonial African states have failed to turn their juridical *de jure* performance into an empirical, *de facto*, reality despite being given membership in the

²⁸ Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 39; Ahmed Waheed, ‘State Sovereignty and International Relations in Pakistan: Analysing the Realism Stranglehold’, *South Asia Research*, 37: 3, 2017, pp. 277-295.

²⁹ Thomas Clément Mercier, ‘Resisting legitimacy: Weber, Derrida, and the fallibility of sovereign power’, *Global Discourse*, 6:3, 2016, p. 374.

³⁰ Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 41.

³¹ Siba Grovogui, ‘Regimes of Sovereignty: International Morality and the African Condition’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 8: 3, 2002, pp. 315–338.

³² William Brown, ‘A question of agency: Africa in international politics’, *Third World Quarterly*, 33: 10, 2012, pp. 1889–1908.

³³ Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Benton, *A search for sovereignty*, p. 2.

³⁵ Mbembe, 2000

³⁶ Schmidt, 2011

³⁷ Grovogui, ‘Regimes of sovereignty’, p. 328.

³⁸ Jeffrey Herbst, ‘Responding to state failure in Africa’, *International Security*, 21: 3, 1996, pp. 120-144.

³⁹ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, ‘Why Africa’s weak states persist: the empirical and the juridical in statehood’, *World Politics*, 35: 1, 1982, pp. 1–24.

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international.⁴⁰ The collapse of the African state is thus a self-inflicted problem caused by the abandonment of the principle of effectiveness during decolonization.⁴¹ Postcolonial critical theorists, on the other hand, situate the debate in terms of a colonial relations that continue to shape global debates on the practice of sovereignty.⁴² This European construct of the modern notion of sovereignty evolved through colonial discourses ‘that *vigorously* and *repetitively*’⁴³ consigned the ‘Oriental world’ to an ongoing inferior zone of otherness.

Building on this critique, and in line with the acknowledgement of Walker’s⁴⁴ assertion that there are spatialities, temporalities, politics, identities, and differences that are not, and cannot be, captured by the dominant analytical categories of IR, we put aside the more simplistic analyses of sovereignty as a container where a rigid binary framing separates two components, the internal/external, national/global, de facto/de jure sovereignty.⁴⁵ Instead we take up Sidaway’s invitation to analyse the supposed ‘weaknesses’ of certain African states as arising less from a lack or *absence* of connection, power, and capital, but by a particular form and experience (conceivably a *surplus*) of these.⁴⁶ In this view, Djibouti is not weak, failed, being scrambled by Great Powers or ‘hollowed out’, rather it is a state exercising power as it negotiates the presence, and overlapping sovereignties of foreign powers on *its* territory. Global political geography is more productively seen, as Sidaway suggests, as a series of variegated or ‘graduated’ *sovereigntyscapes*.⁴⁷ Drawing on Luke’s⁴⁸ description of the state as a scribe or draftsman, he proposes that the ‘-scape’ implies that sovereignty is a way of seeing, a perspective or visualisation. This offers an understanding of sovereignty that reflects historical and geographical complexities, as well as a perspective of the different and multiform sovereign visions held by states. Linking this ‘scape’ to Derrida’s calls to understand sovereignty as ‘capability’⁴⁹, sovereignty-scape is underpinned by the *ability* to enact visions of sovereignty. This, we establish in the next section, is precisely what Djibouti is doing. Its vision is a world security hub as it reaches out and embeds global security networks in its territorial space through a process of *worlding*. Consequently, we argue that African experiences of sovereignty offer the challenges, along with the rewards, of greater analytical depth theoretically to IR scholarship while expanding our understanding of different empirical cases beyond the Western-centric accounts of sovereignty in line with an abstract ideal that doesn’t actually tell us much about the world, postcolonial experiences, and global politics.

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⁴⁰ Jackson and Rosberg, ‘Why Africa’s weak states persist’, p.21

⁴¹ Gerard Kreijen and Robert Y. Jennings, *State failure, sovereignty, and effectiveness: legal lessons from the decolonization of sub-Saharan Africa* (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2004).

⁴² Navid Pourmokhtari, ‘A Postcolonial Critique of State Sovereignty in IR: the contradictory legacy of a ‘West-centric’ discipline’, *Third World Quarterly*, 34:10, 2013, pp.1767-1793

⁴³ Pourmokhtari, 2013, p.1785, italics in original

⁴⁴ Rob BJ. Walker, *Inside/outside: international relations as political theory*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁴⁵ Peter J. Taylor, ‘The state as container: territoriality in the modern world-system’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 18: 2, 1994, pp. 151–162.

⁴⁶ James Sidaway, ‘Sovereign excesses? Portraying postcolonial sovereigntyscapes’, *Political Geography* 22: 2, 2003, pp. 157-178.

⁴⁷ Sidaway, ‘Sovereign excesses?’, p. 161.

⁴⁸ Timothy W. Luke, ‘Touring hyper-reality: critical theory confronts informational society’ in P. Wexler (Ed.), *Critical theory now*, (The Falmer Press, London, 1991), pp. 1-26

⁴⁹ Friedrich Balke, ‘Derrida and Foucault on sovereignty’, *German Law Journal* 6: 1, 2005, pp. 71-85.

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Djibouti, ‘a playground for global powers’⁵⁰ or a state with resourceful strategies that situates the small country as the inescapable geopolitical position on the Red Sea?⁵¹ We argue that it is the latter and it accomplishes this through employing a *worlding* strategy.

Welcoming US forces in Djibouti, President Guellah asserts, demonstrates the country’s support for international and regional peace. Interestingly, why then is the ‘renewed international competition in Africa’ referred to as a ‘scramble’ and not as an outcome of skilful foreign strategies playing interested parties off one against the other? It is because Djibouti’s leasing of land to multiple foreign powers is mistakenly considered an erosion of its sovereignty, not an expression of its performance. Indeed, the country’s decade-long year-on-year GDP growth alone since hosting Japanese and Chinese bases demonstrates the gains it has made in this regard.⁵² In 2019 Djibouti was one of the fastest growing economies in Africa⁵³ with foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows standing at USD 265 million for the same year.⁵⁴

Historically, there is nothing unusual about Djibouti’s strategy to lease land for foreign military bases. The practice of establishing bases for foreign troops on the soil of independent countries has a long history.⁵⁵ We suggest another reading of this strategy by arguing that instead of reading this “military base diplomacy”⁵⁶ as hollowing out or eroding Djibouti’s sovereignty, it be understood as a *worlding* strategy, ‘the art of being global’.⁵⁷ Worlding strategies are ambitious practices put in place by governments to creatively imagine and shape alternative social visions and configurations through their leading cities.⁵⁸ While Roy and Ong’s concept of ‘worlding’ employs the perspective of cities to embody national ambitions of wealth, power, and recognition, we suggest Djibouti is employing ‘worlding’ strategies to the same ends through reference to security. In the case of Djibouti, the worlding strategy is not through an urban centre, like worlding African cities of Johannesburg or Lagos, but rather by reaching out and embedding global security networks in its territorial space. In fact, the concept of ‘worlding’ was initially put forth by AbdouMaliq Simone⁵⁹ in reference to worlding African cities and subsequently developed by Roy and Ong. Djibouti’s strategies, as outlined below, resemble these endeavours to place a central hub on a larger scale of the world through entering global networks of exchange.

Djibouti establishes substantive sovereignty as it navigates the presence of powerful, and often rival, sovereign states in its territory, alongside those of the world’s current hegemonic power, the USA, and the country’s former colonial power, France. Today, there are approximately 2,000 to

⁵⁰ Yan Wan, et al., ‘Djibouti: From a colonial fabrication to the deviation of the “Shekou model”’, *Cities* 97, 2020, p.102488.

⁵¹ Sonia Le Gourellec, ‘Djibouti’, *Diplomatie* 104, 2020, pp. 29-33.

⁵² Trading economics, 2021, ‘Djibouti GDP’, <https://tradingeconomics.com/djibouti/gdp>.

⁵³ African Development Bank, ‘African economic outlook’, 2019, <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/african-economic-outlook-aeo-2019-107319>

⁵⁴ UNCTAD, ‘World investment report 2019: special economic zones’ 2019, p. 213

⁵⁵ Lersch Dos Santos and J.S. Sarti, ‘The establishment of foreign military bases and the international distribution of power’, *Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul Model United Nations (UFRGSMUN)*, 2014, pp. 83-135.

⁵⁶ Karl Ragas, ‘Djibouti at a crossroads: China’s African engagement and an adversarial Beijing-Washington relationship’, *Future Directions*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/djibouti-at-a-crossroads-chinas-african-engagement-and-an-adversarial-beijing-washington-relationship/>.

⁵⁷ Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong, Eds., *Worlding cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global*, Vol. 42. (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

⁵⁸ Roy and Ong, 2011, pp. 12

⁵⁹ AbdouMaliq Simone, ‘On the worlding of African cities’, *African Studies Review* 44: 2, 2001, pp.15-41.

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3,000 French soldiers in Djibouti, making it France's biggest overseas naval base.⁶⁰ Today's most powerful country, the US, is now only one of several geopolitical actors as emerging powers increase their presence in the Horn of Africa.⁶¹ Upon renewing the long-term lease for Lemonnier in Washington DC in 2014, Djibouti's President Guelleh stated "our relation [with the USA] is a relation of strategic partnership".⁶² Having been secured via bilateral agreement with Djiboutian authorities in 2003, America's Camp Lemonnier amounts to its only enduring major military facility in Africa, which also guarantees access to the country's main port and airport.⁶³ But, US presence in Djibouti raises questions about the advisability of concentrating its African operations in this one country.⁶⁴

Speaking on the fortieth anniversary of the independence of the country in 2018, President Guelleh claimed that for a small African country with no natural resources, the state had done the best it could for its people.⁶⁵ Since rising to power in 1999, Guellah has drawn upon Djibouti's geopolitical advantage to situate the country within two realms of regional and global politics: the economy and security. The first is as a maritime logistics hub on the key global trade route of the Red Sea, the second is as a security hub offering international sovereign powers land for lease to build military bases for regional operations. This has given the state the wherewithal to take advantage of its geographic position. In line with the principle of being in command of the worlding strategies and defending its interests and sovereignty, in 2018 the Djiboutian state unilaterally ended a 30-year contract with Dubai based maritime company DP World for management of the Doraleh container terminal. The government made this decision, it said⁶⁶, to protect the sovereignty of the state, its economic independence, and the higher interests of the nation. The Dubai company had decided to create another corridor for imports to landlocked Ethiopia through the port of Berbera, Somaliland.⁶⁷ Djibouti argued that Dubai was protecting its own Jebel Ali port and preventing Djibouti from developing into a fully-fledged and versatile shipping hub.⁶⁸ In the same period, in 2019, Djibouti signed the Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes between States and Nationals of Other States (ICSID). Signing the ICSID

⁶⁰ France considers its former African colonies as its 'chasse gardée', literally a private game or hunting reserve, and sought to preserve its rule over the country.

⁶¹ Payton Knopf, 'South Sudan's civil war and conflict dynamics in the Red Sea', *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 431, September 2018, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/sr_431_knopf_south_sudans_civil_war_and_conflict_dynamics_in_the_red_sea2.pdf.

⁶² The White House, President Barack Obama, 'Transcript: remarks by President Obama and President Guelleh of Djibouti before bilateral meeting', 5 May 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/05/remarks-president-obama-and-president-guelleh-djibouti-bilateral-meeting>.

⁶³ US Department of State, 'US-Djibouti relations', 27 August 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-djibouti/>.

⁶⁴ Michael Rubin, 'It's Time the Pentagon Finds an Alternative to Djibouti', AEI, 25 August 2019, <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/its-time-the-pentagon-finds-an-alternative-to-djibouti/>

⁶⁵ Ethiopian News Network, 'Ethiopia: Interview with Djibouti's President Ismail Omar Guelleh – Fitlefit', 29 January 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBIk5Zk9Szs&ab_channel=ENNTelevision.

⁶⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Djibouti seizes control of Dubai-run Doraleh port', 24 Feb. 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/24/djibouti-seizes-control-of-dubai-run-doraleh-port>

⁶⁷ EABW Editor, 'DP World Wins Arbitration Case Against Djibouti In London', *Busiweek*, 15 Jan. 2020, <https://www.busiweek.com/dp-world-wins-arbitration-case-against-djibouti-in-london/>

⁶⁸ Abdi Latif Dahir, 'A legal tussle over a strategic African port sets up a challenge for China's Belt and Road plan', *Quartz Africa*, 28 Feb. 2019, <https://qz.com/africa/1560998/djibouti-dp-world-port-case-challenges-chinas-belt-and-road/>

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sends out a signal that Djibouti invites new foreign investors and will respect drawn up contracts.⁶⁹ Coupled with the DP World case, Djibouti however also signals that it is exercising its sovereignty on its terms.

This stance is reflected, as the following sections demonstrate, through Djibouti's worlding strategies that permit the sovereign, and rival, states of Japan and China to establish their first and sole overseas military bases within *its* sovereign's territory. This accomplishment is evidence of great diplomatic skill exerted in the execution of multi-fold practices. While Japan and China are in direct strategic competition across much of East (and Central) Africa, and certainly in terms of Djibouti's position relative to the Indo-Pacific, given heavy US and European presence in the Gulf of Aden, neither country can openly contest sovereign rights in Djibouti itself.⁷⁰ Djiboutian authorities, meanwhile, use their claims to overarching sovereignty as the lease holders for Japanese and Chinese installations to maximise economic advantage, mitigate disputes and promote continued stationing of overseas forces within their tiny geographical territory. Seemingly, all of this is achieved without jeopardising their own interpretation of sovereignty as a universal principle, to which the government of Djibouti officially adheres.

Djibouti: Japan's sole overseas base

Japanese state-level agency is largely determined by the perceived interests of its own domestic and foreign policy elites in broad, though fluctuating, alignment with US national interests, as a junior security alliance partner to Washington.⁷¹ The controversial initiative to operate in Djibouti through leasing part of the US Camp Lemonnier base passed through Japan's National Diet in 2010, stealthily enacted while the country's media and political elite were focused on the triple disaster of the Great East Japan Earthquake, ensuing tsunami and Fukushima nuclear power plant reactor meltdown.⁷² The establishment of a fully operational Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF) facility in Djibouti is an interesting case of atypical sovereignty performance in this regard, in terms of initially subletting space from the primary tenant, the US military, who in turn were leasing extraterritorial space from the sovereign owner, Djibouti. In other words, Japan entered Djibouti's sovereign territory through the outsourced conditionality of an American forces base, but in practice gained effective sovereign-style control over Djiboutian territory, albeit in a highly confined physical space. Tokyo now rents the land directly from Djibouti City. What has become Japan's only *de facto* overseas military base is nevertheless reliant upon the dubious claims made by US, Japanese and Djiboutian authorities that the principle of universal sovereignty is being upheld within Djibouti's national borders.⁷³ Such are further justified through the use of ODA to

⁶⁹ Olaoye Kehinde Folake, 'A Drop in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait: Djibouti Signs the ICSID Convention', *Ethiopian Yearbook of International Law* 2019. Springer, Cham, 2020, pp.141-162.

⁷⁰ Claire Amuhaya and Denis Degterev, 'Foreign aid as foreign policy tool: competition of projects aid allocation to Kenya between Japan and China', *Asia and Africa Today* 12, 2019, pp.68-74, p. 74.

⁷¹ Victor Teo, *Japan's arduous rejuvenation as a global power: democratic resilience and the US-China challenge* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), pp. 69-70.

⁷² Ra Mason, 'Djibouti and beyond: Japan's first post-war overseas base and the recalibration of risk in securing enhanced military capabilities', *Asian Security*, 14: 3, 2018, pp. 339-357, p. 342.

⁷³ Carolyn Presutti, 'US signs long-term lease for military base in Djibouti', *Voice of America*, 5 May 2014, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-signs-long-term-lease-military-base-djibouti>.

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exercise soft-power in winning over the local population.⁷⁴ This initiative was encouraged by the US as part of a drive to push Japan towards burden sharing in international extraterritorial security arrangements⁷⁵, through increased interoperability within the US-Japan Security Alliance.⁷⁶ These aspects of interpretation and performance are, however, mutually reinforcing, as Japan's former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led the government drive to further normalise the role of Japanese forces overseas, which are still officially termed only as Japan (Land, Air and Maritime) Self Defense Forces (JSDF), rather than as an active military.

Concordantly, Japan's performance of sovereignty from within Djibouti has transformed since its initial approval. The base, re-termed officially as such from its previous description as an "activities hub"⁷⁷, has exponentially expanded its personnel numbers and mission scope, including acting as a transit point to deploy service members into peace-keeping zones, even at the cost of some (constitutional) controversy, as in the case of embroilment in civil conflict in South Sudan.⁷⁸ Japan is, though, now using anti-piracy operations, PKO and the protection of vital energy supply lines via Djibouti as pretexts to expand its de facto military activities internationally. This facilitates the further blurring of constitutional interpretations, as Tokyo increases military interoperability with the US. Washington also exerts agency in the performance of Japan's sovereignty as it would like push Tokyo into burden sharing across its wider extraterritorial security activities in support of American forces, particularly in cooperation with its existing allies around the Indo-Pacific rim, of which Djibouti is at one edge.⁷⁹

Yet, despite the controversy alluded to above, this historically distinct – unprecedented during the post-war – use of overseas sovereign territory for military activities is little known or talked about inside Japan. It is evidently, notwithstanding legal loopholes that were used to justify the initial stationing of troops in Djibouti⁸⁰, in clear violation of the Constitution of Japan, which prohibits the possession of land, air or naval militaries, as well as their use to settle interstate conflict. Reinterpretation of the constitution, which has been unchanged for 70 years, has thereby been used to circumvent Article 9, under which these prohibitions are clearly stipulated.⁸¹ In that regard, low-

⁷⁴ Luke Austin, 'A long way from home: the unexpected smart power role of Japan Self-Defence Force Base Djibouti', Human Security Center (HSC), 10 February 2021, <http://www.hscentre.org/africa/a-long-way-from-home-the-unexpected-smart-power-role-of-japan-self-defence-force-base-djibouti/>.

⁷⁵ Hirofumi Shimizu and Todd Sandler, 'Recent peacekeeping burden sharing', *Applied Economics Letters*, 17: 15, pp. 1479-1484, p. 1481.

⁷⁶ Ministry of Defence (MOD) (2016) 'Medium term defense program (section 2): 4 measures for the strengthening of the Japan-U.S. alliance' (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2016).

⁷⁷ Ministry of Defense, 'Somalia oki – aden wan ni okeru kaizoku taisho' [Off the coast of Somalia: dealing with pirates in the Gulf of Aden], 2016b, <http://www.mod.go.jp/js/Activity/Anti-piracy/anti-piracy.htm#header>.

⁷⁸ Kayoko Kimura, 'Lawyers attempt to fill in the gaps in the GSDF's heavily redacted South Sudan PKO logs', *The Japan Times*, 6 August 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/08/06/national/crime-legal/filling-gaps-south-sudan-logs/#.XpiCRUBFw2w>.

⁷⁹ Marie Izuyama and Yusuke Ishihara, 'Australia, India and the Indo-Pacific concept' in National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), *East Asian Strategic Review* (Tokyo: NIDS, 2019), p. 32.

⁸⁰ Peace Studies Association of Japan, 'Kenpō heiwa shugi no gen dankai' [The current state of constitutional pacifism], 2016, <http://www.psj.org/2016/05/11/%E6%86%B2%E6%B3%95%E5%B9%B3%E5%92%8C%E4%B8%BB%E7%BE%A9%E3%81%AE%E7%8F%BE%E6%AE%B5%E9%9A%8E/>.

⁸¹ National Diet Library, 'The birth of the Japanese Constitution (Article 9)', 2003 <http://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c01.html#s2>, p. 2.

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level domestic opposition aside, Japan's political elite appear to be living in a state of deliberate denial, driven by bipartisan political immobilism within which no party, other than the relatively weak Communist Party of Japan (JCP), can be seen to counter such actions for fear of being labelled as soft on security. Indeed, opposition to such would ultimately risk being held accountable for exposing a threat to Japan's own sovereignty. In accordance, most leading political actors claim operations in Djibouti amount to the self-defence of Japan, to protect vital sea lanes from Europe and the Middle East to the heavily energy-dependent East Asian state.⁸²

Japan's presence in Djibouti therefore offers an extreme interpretation of sovereignty. Justification for spending on leasing the Djibouti base is validated because it is deemed to be directly protecting mainland Japan. In the first instance this was directed at Somali pirates who could intercept ships. That threat, if ever a serious one, has now been all but eliminated⁸³, but renting sovereign space has become more broadly tied in with the idea of acting responsibly overseas, as part of Japan protecting economically vital supply lines. This has now, however, become a practice in places like Djibouti that involves the increasingly recognised element of regional military strategy, far removed from most of Japan's post-war performances of the protection of sovereignty in areas surrounding Japanese territory. Indeed, spatially, the base in Djibouti has also helped in facilitating expanded regional reconnaissance and maritime protection missions that include information gathering and escort in an arc that stretches from the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Oman, all justified in terms of sovereign defence.⁸⁴

Under this reinterpretation of constitutionality, the spatial concept of Japan includes the ability to sustain itself, which facilitates the concept of self-defence's expansion globally. Self-defence is therein applied as an element of sovereignty even on and around the Horn of Africa. Moreover, as part of this, Japan has also mobilised the less controversial Japan Coast Guard (JCG) in the Gulf of Aden, amongst other far-flung locations, which is not deemed as part of the budget or operations of the JSDF. In other words, JCG activity, including within Djibouti's Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ), is categorised as outside of defence spending. Nevertheless, even if not officially part of a military, which indeed the JSDF are also not, the JCG acts as a means by which to bring armoured maritime forces into other sovereign spaces offshore of the Horn of Africa. It does so with the tacit approval of Djiboutian authorities and is effectively performing a form of Japanese sovereignty within the EEZs of other countries, including this small African state.⁸⁵

Importantly, this has become a primary site of competition over the exercising of extraterritorial sovereignty between Japan and China. In this regard, the constructed nature of the concept through a combination of discourse and physical performance – primarily in the form of defence forces' stationing and security exercises – demonstrates how, if the constellations of agency operating in a specific domain are conducive, in effect overlapping sovereignties can coexist. In Djibouti,

⁸² Naikakufu daijin kanbō seifu kōhōshitsu, 'Kaizoku taisho e no torikumi' [Approach to tackling piracy], 2012 and 2015, <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h20/h20-bouei/2-4.html>.

⁸³ Statista, 'Number of actual and attempted piracy attacks in Somalia between 2010 and 2019', 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250867/number-of-actual-and-attempted-piracy-attacks-in-somalia/>.

⁸⁴ *The Diplomat*, 'Japan to send warship and maritime patrol aircraft to Mideast', 27 December 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/japan-to-send-warship-and-maritime-patrol-aircraft-to-mideast/>, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Japan Coast Guard, 'Shogaikoku he no kaijō hoan nōryoku kōjō shien nado' [Support and such like for each foreign state in improving maritime security capacity], 2020, <https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/mission/kokusai/tounanajia.html>.

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moreover, they do so, yet without direct military conflict. This is facilitated by asymmetrical but largely aligned agency on the part of Japan, China, and Djibouti.

Djibouti: crucial to China's strategic interests

The Sino-Djiboutian partnership indicates that small countries can wield considerable agency.⁸⁶ As Styan asserts, Djibouti has the capacity to cut a deal with rival foreign powers each seeking access to the Bab al-Mandab's geo-strategic location.

China expanded its influential reach into Djibouti later than Japan, arriving in earnest in 2017 as part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), realised through the establishment of a large-scale military base on the other side of Djibouti City from Japanese and American military facilities.⁸⁷ Djibouti is a critical logistic and trading hub on the BRI maritime trade routes stretching from China to the Indian Ocean, then to the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean.

An upgraded Chinese base transforms Djibouti's coastline and effectively makes an extensive area of reclaimed land into Chinese extraterritorial sovereign territory, complete with razor-wire fences, reinforced approach ways and an exclusive maritime zone.⁸⁸ Conversely, the naval base increases trading through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea as a railway line from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia to Djibouti City boosts Djibouti's strategic position regionally in the Horn of Africa. Djibouti is leveraging China's BRI framework as a logistics hub that connects the hinterland to global shipping networks. In line with this, Beijing has constructed a new multipurpose port funded by China Merchant Group, a cross border gas line, and Djibouti's International Free Trade Zone, bringing combined Chinese investment to over \$14bn.⁸⁹

These developments in Djibouti mirror China's construction of contested installations in the South China Sea, where a similar competition over the performance of sovereignty plays out between Japan, China, and the US.⁹⁰ In the Djibouti case, however, the multi-layered manifestation of sovereignty, as both interpretation and practice, is uniquely intensified. This is in terms of both geographically constrained concentration and strategic significance as they are embedded within a complex dynamic of cooperation and competition acted out between multiple groupings of actors

⁸⁶ David Styan, 'China's Maritime Silk Road and small states: lessons from the case of Djibouti', *Journal of Contemporary China* 29: 122, 2020, pp.191-206.

⁸⁷ Gideon Elazar, 'China in the Red Sea: the Djibouti naval base and the return of Admiral Zheng He', *BESA Center Perspectives* 565, (Begin Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies, August 2017), <https://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/565-China-in-the-Red-Sea-Elazar-final.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Meziechi Nwogu, 'China's massive naval base in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa is getting bigger', *Dialogue and Discourse*, 2020, <https://medium.com/discourse/chinas-massive-naval-base-in-djibouti-on-the-horn-of-africa-is-getting-bigger-8b8bfd53398c>.

⁸⁹ Mordechai Chaziza, 'China consolidates its commercial foothold in Djibouti', *The Diplomat*, 26 January 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/china-consolidates-its-commercial-foothold-in-djibouti/>; Sébastien Seibt, 'Djibouti-China marriage 'slowly unravelling' as investment project disappoints', *France 24*, 9 April 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210409-djibouti-china-marriage-slowly-unravelling-as-investment-project-disappoints>.

⁹⁰ Shoji Tomotaka, 'The South China Sea: a view from Japan', *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security* 15 (Tokyo: NIDS, December 2014), p. 130.

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in and around designated Djiboutian sovereign territory.⁹¹ While the massive scale and scope of China's operations in-country have raised concerns in both Washington and Tokyo⁹², particularly with regards to the geostrategic implications of such a large-scale military installation, China plays an essential role in supplying essential infrastructure and investment.⁹³ That helps to facilitate the continued smooth running of international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, of which both Japan and the United States are active contributors.

China's reach extends beyond the kinds of realist-based levers of sovereign control that we have critiqued above, into areas such as cyber-security, internet provision and intelligence practices.⁹⁴ The means by which President Guelleh's security forces impose their version of lived sovereignty upon the domestic population has begun to mirror that of China's own internal governance structures.⁹⁵ This includes, for example, the sophisticated suppression of some forms of information and the deliberate dissemination of pro-government propaganda⁹⁶, as well as persecution of dissidents, and strict control over migration and labour patterns.⁹⁷ In this regard, while Djiboutian authorities in one sense retain a perhaps surprising degree of independent sovereign control over their citizens, the lived experiences of those individuals becomes highly constrained as a function of overlapping sovereignties performed, largely in authoritarian alignment, across this confined geographical space for the ostensible purpose of advancing the state interests of both China and Djibouti.

Djibouti: Worlding security

'Worlding' refers to the aspirations and practices of many developing and mid-sized cities around the globe which aspire to be a hub of connectivity or a 'global city' in an increasingly interrelated world. Djibouti's worlding strategy is currently less through the development of a future global city and urban centre, but rather more by reaching out and embedding global security networks in its territorial space. And we argue that instead of reading 'military base diplomacy' as eroding and undermining Djibouti's sovereignty, leasing land to foreign military powers is the art of being global. The multi-layered manifestations of sovereignty, as both interpretation and practice, as illuminated above, are expressed in a uniquely intensified way in this African country. We can

⁹¹ Kofi Annan, 'Two concepts of sovereignty' United Nations Secretary General, 18 September 1999, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/articles/1999-09-18/two-concepts-sovereignty>.

⁹² Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick de Gategno, 'China's military support facility in Djibouti: the economic and security dimensions of China's first overseas base', Arlington: Center for Naval Analyses (CNA China Studies), July 2017, VII.

⁹³ Council on Foreign Relations, 'China's strategy in Djibouti: mixing commercial and military interests', 13 April 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-strategy-djibouti-mixing-commercial-and-military-interests>.

⁹⁴ *South China Morning Post*, 'China has a grand, strategic plan: we don't': how Djibouti became a microcosm of Beijing's growing foothold in Africa', 31 December 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/africa/article/3044010/china-has-grand-strategic-plan-we-dont-how-djibouti-became>.

⁹⁵ Selen Duruskan and Ayse Atlay, 'China in Djibouti: global partner or neocolonial master?', working research paper, Bogazici University, 2019, p. 14.

⁹⁶ *Africa Intelligence: The Continent Daily*, 'How IOG intends to kill off his political allies', February 16 2018, https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa_politics/2018/02/16/how-iog-intends-to-kill-off-his-political-allies,108294517-eve.

⁹⁷ Sabine Dini, (2018) 'Migration management, capacity building and the sovereignty of an African state: international organization for migration in Djibouti', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44: 10, 2018, pp. 1691-1705, pp. 1691-2.

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read this extreme complexity and variations in forms and modes of sovereignty as layers or topologies of sovereignty that fold and stretch in different directions.⁹⁸

Djibouti hosts the first overseas bases for two Asian countries: Japan and China. As alluded to above, China's investment in-country now outstrips Japan's by more than ten-to-one, mirrored by military deployments estimated at approximately 2000 Chinese troops and 180 JSDF personnel, respectively.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, elements of Japan's sovereign expand into Djiboutian territory, serving to illustrate the ambiguity of sovereignty as an interpreted construction and real-world practice, particularly when compared to contrasting issues of extraterritorial practice on Japan's own islands, such as in the case of Okinawa.¹⁰⁰ Here, the "sovereignty game" is played out with overlapping agency and in competition between Japan and China, with US oversight. On the disputed off-islands of Senkaku/Diaoyu, for example, this involves performative displays of entering and exiting maritime territory and the declaration of exclusion zone.¹⁰¹ Crucially, however, unlike in the case of Djibouti, the US exercises extraterritorial sovereignty within the national territory of Japan, and despite opposition to such from Okinawan inhabitants, Japan's central government justifies what is essentially an occupying military force to operate within its sovereign territory in the name of self-defence – primarily against incursions from China. This would appear, then, to be the inverse of Japan's operations in Djibouti in terms of performance and yet both are interpreted as expressions of the same concept in terms of being justified uniformly as part of the same sovereign defence.

Both the ambiguity of interpretation and tangible difference in practice, then, serve to reinforce the Derridean understanding of sovereignty as being practiced in Djibouti amounting primarily to a function of capability rather than of legal authority, or at least that the latter is dictated extensively by the former. Significantly, in terms of how the dynamics of capability are changing for Japan in both regional waters and as far afield as Djibouti, these practices are increasingly calibrated in response to China. Both Beijing and Djibouti have constructed a parallel narrative of sovereignty that maintains outward alignment whilst playing to domestic and international audiences that are in many cases decoupled from one another and the very concrete realities of its practice on the ground.¹⁰² At the international level this is expressed through comparable public rhetoric that promotes the maintenance of sovereignty as a function of multilateralism, mutual gains, poverty reduction and increased equality of opportunity. In terms of domestic audiences, China looms a lot larger for Djibouti than vice versa, but the East Africa state nevertheless represents a pivotal entry point into a historically European-dominated continent and Beijing has been able to promote its in-country development as a flagship project that showcases how political, economic and security relations can be developed as to render rival would be investors and geostrategic partners relatively irrelevant.

⁹⁸ James Sidaway, 'The topology of sovereignty', *Geopolitics*, 18: 4, 2013, pp. 961-966.

⁹⁹ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, 'China's Djibouti naval base increasing its power', *East Asia Forum*, 16 May 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/16/chinas-djibouti-naval-base-increasing-its-power/>.

¹⁰⁰ Ra Mason, 'Okinawa narratives: delineating rhetoric, policy and agency', *Japanese Studies* 39: 2, 2018, pp. 191-212, p. 211.

¹⁰¹ O'Shea, 'Playing the sovereignty game', p. 208.

¹⁰² Omar Ismael Guelleh, 'Djibouti president addresses general debate', United Nations (74th Session), 26 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwmkdzkO6P4>; Jinping Xi, 'President Xi addresses UN General Assembly', United Nations (74th Session), 28 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xOt90jpGbM>

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This is particularly powerful in the case of China's advancement into mainland Africa via Djibouti, including eating into territory previously targeted by Japan.¹⁰³ This sends a direct message to both domestic political representatives and its primary international rival, the US, by effectively bypassing the global hegemon's single largest military installation on the continent – as well as her Japanese ally's sole regional military foothold – and taking control of a key choke point in the contested waters of the Bab al Mandab Strait.¹⁰⁴ Inland, meanwhile, China's development of rail, road and port links between Djibouti and Ethiopia, Africa's fastest growing economy, represents a replica of comparable models used for expansion across sovereign spaces in East and Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. In the same way that the Rasong Port in North Korea is used to link major production centres for Chinese industries reliant on ocean access to the Western Pacific via the leasing and (crucially) operation of transportation networks well outside of Beijing's official sovereign territory, this is now being applied to the resources of the African continent. And African countries, such as Djibouti, are using worlding strategies to elaborate a 'worlded' domain of operations¹⁰⁵ that include, in this case, both military bases and infrastructure corridors.

Conclusion

The research problem this article addressed is whether the unique confluence of overseas security forces in a single territorial space through the leasing of land for foreign military bases compromises the state's sovereignty. Described as a vulnerable African state overrun by Great Power politics in a geopolitically critical part of the world, Djibouti is construed as a casualty of a new scramble for Africa. Leasing of land for foreign military bases, as part of this scramble is typically deemed to have resulted in a unidirectional loss of sovereignty as Djibouti is hollowed out through external occupation. Taking a diametrically different analytical position, this article demonstrates that Djibouti is a highly illustrative case in terms of understanding both the shifting geopolitics and changes to the multi-layered practices and performances of sovereignty. Contrary to popular perceptions of a 'failed' or 'fragile' state, small countries, such as Djibouti, can exercise considerable agency in terms of how they engage with the great (military) powers – at times playing one off against another. Using the concept of 'worlding' we have therefore argued that instead of reading 'military base diplomacy' as gouging and eroding Djibouti's sovereignty, leasing land to foreign military powers is the art of being global.

The practice of state sovereignty in and around Djibouti shows not only that sovereignty is fluid, contestable, and malleable but that its loose principles can be wielded by diverse countries to great effect. This vision of sovereignty underpins new forms of territoriality and unexpected forms of locality as Djibouti's worlding strategy is currently less through the development of a future global city and urban centre, but rather more by reaching out and embedding global security and infrastructure networks in its territorial space. In the case of East Asian powers, the Djiboutian state has incorporated and worked with both Japanese and Chinese conceptions of sovereignty to maximise material and financial advantages for the country. These include the upgrading of essential infrastructure detailed above as well as securing billions of dollars of investment into the

¹⁰³ Kweku Ampiah, *The dynamics of Japan's relations with Africa: South Africa, Tanzania, and Nigeria* (Routledge: Abingdon, 1997), p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ Clive Schofield, 'Securing the World's most dangerous strait? the Bab Al-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden', in *Navigating straits: challenges for international law*, David Caron and Nilufer Oral (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 268-298, p. 268.

¹⁰⁵ Simone, 2001, p.36

Djiboutian sovereignty

country since 2010. Djibouti is on-course to see an extended period of high economic growth and has even been touted as the ‘next Singapore’.¹⁰⁶ It achieves all this by successfully managing the contradictions and perception gaps between, for example, Japan’s concept of “self-defence” and its stationing of air, land, and marine forces in a permanent base on the Horn of Africa. These developments point to the smoke and mirrors aspect of sovereignty exercised on all sides. Sovereignty, after all, is about power politics. So, while lip-service is paid to conventional interpretations enshrined within institutions such as the UN, sovereignty as a practice is performed according to local conditions and power dynamics, including assigning and exercising varying levels of agency across spatial and temporal dimensions.

Importantly, these findings challenge simplistic analyses of African states as victims of exploitative great powers, gradually and repeatedly being stripped of their sovereignty. Rather, as the case of Djibouti demonstrates, strategic instrumentalization of relationships with external powers, and in some cases emulation of practices and modes of governing sovereignty deemed to be effective, as witnessed in the case of Djiboutian authorities’ incorporation of Chinese-endorsed domestic security systems for example, enables African countries to beneficially reposition themselves in a world where geopolitics opens opportunities for new forms of action. The challenge for Djibouti and other states in the region looks set to remain how best to adjust and adapt such practices of sovereignty in the context of intensified great power rivalry and accelerating regional dynamism.

¹⁰⁶ Joshua Jahani, ‘Djibouti could be the next Singapore’, LSE (blog), 20 July 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/07/20/djibouti-could-be-the-next-singapore-trade-gdp/>.