

Title: Djibouti: small state strategy at a crossroads.

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Abstract: Geography and politics indicate Djibouti would be a particularly weak and ineffectual 'small state'. Located on a bridgehead between the poorest parts of Africa and Arabia, it is continental Africa's smallest state by population and is devoid of natural resources. The text demonstrates that Djibouti has been able to transform weakness and liabilities stemming from its geo-strategic location, sandwiched between large neighbours and key maritime shipping lanes, into a lucrative 'resource'. This has been achieved via creative diplomacy, fostering ties with a diverse range of states, translating acute dependence into economic and diplomatic capital. The text focusses primarily upon diplomatic strategies, while addressing broader concerns of small states' energy, infrastructure and development policies.

Key words: Djibouti, small states, Horn of Africa, foreign policy, francophone Africa

Introduction: a “dynamic actor on the international scene”?

The objectives this article are twofold; firstly to provide evidence drawn from a little known empirical African case-study, that of Djibouti, the Red Sea port which has many attributes of a city-state. Secondly to examine the conceptual and comparative questions posed in the editors’ introduction to this special issue on small states via the prism of Djibouti.

In terms of this volume’s focus on the comparative study of small states, Djibouti is unusual in several respects. Despite being a relatively young, small and manifestly poor state, with a minuscule population, resource-base and economy, it is arguably now relatively successful in terms of its regional and international diplomatic influence. Continental Africa’s smallest state has an astonishingly diverse array of regional and international allies, with whom it has partly reversed what we might term ‘normal’ small state relations of dependency within the international system.¹

Djibouti *has* in recent years sought to learn from other small states. This has been particularly in terms of studying the successful economic development strategies of states such as of Singapore and Dubai.² The latter has particular resonance for Djibouti, which has close economic ties with the diminutive Emirati state. Dubai thus acts as a partial, albeit highly problematic, template, which has been explicitly cited for emulation by the current Djiboutian administration. The latter has, in a series of conferences and policy initiatives, recently explicitly sought policy lessons from comparable small states elsewhere, both in the region and more widely³.

The article also highlights the manner in which Djibouti illustrates how some common academic assumptions about small statehood prompting alliances with other such states, may need rethinking. There is little evidence that Djiboutian leaders seek diplomatic alliances specifically with other *small* states, as part of a ‘safety in numbers’, or ‘shelter’ approach. Nor indeed that that the nation’s narrow cadre of politicians and diplomats particularly work within a paradigm of perceived weakness due to being “small”.

As such, Djibouti may be viewed as an outlier to Bailes, Thorhallsson and Thayers’ ‘alliance shelter’ theory.⁴ Djibouti’s recent diplomatic experience suggests that ‘small states’ is not a particularly meaningful category in terms of foreign policy

formulation, either regionally or internationally. Notably Djibouti doesn't appear to particularly seek diplomatic 'counterweights'. This is particularly true vis-à-vis Ethiopia. Here, in the absence of suitable counterweights or allies, a 'strategic embrace' appears closer to the reality of asymmetrical ties. It is also significant that relations are mediated through highly personalised (and in certain cases specific "ethnicized" or linguistic ties; Afar, Somali, Arab etc) relations. The article will return in its conclusion to the notion of an 'alliance shelter'.

The fact that small does not necessarily mean impotent is a point acknowledged by the terms of reference for the workshop on small states from which the work in this special issue is drawn. This notes that: *[...] there are numerous examples showing that non-Western small states, whether apparently internationally 'isolated' or economically and politically 'dependent', are dynamic actors on the international scene. [We...] will explore how this agency expresses itself, what strategies, policies and tools it relies on and where it places non-Western small states within the international arena.*⁵

The article is split into four subsequent sections; the following part provides some background detail on both Djibouti's status as a 'small state' and new opportunities which emerged from 2000. We then examine the diplomatic strategies pursued by the state to exploit such opportunities and new objectives. A third section then assesses the strategies and agencies employed by the state. Overall we seek to illustrate a) how, and where, such agency manifests itself; and, b) the strategies, policies and tools that those working for the state have used. The article closes by considering some of the political and personnel constraints facing the state, and what light it may shed upon the notion of an "alliance shelter".

Background: (neo-)colonial dependence and new opportunities

In 2017 Djibouti will mark four decades of political independence. This was gained in 1977, considerably later than in most Francophone African colonies, who celebrated their *cinquantenaire* in 2010.⁶ Not only has the state survived the predatory territorial aspirations of its neighbours, but has also overcome initial paternalism, and

then the progressive diplomatic and military disengagement, from its former colonial power, France.

Djibouti owes its improbable existence to the specific contours that the 'Scramble for Africa' took in the Horn of Africa, where rivalries played out between British, Italian, Abyssinian and French imperial ambitions. A former French colony, the state owes its existence largely to its role as a railhead and port for neighbouring Ethiopia. French finance and colonialism secured the maritime staging posts of Obock and Tadjourah in the Gulf of Aden, en-route to French *Indochine* and Madagascar. It then established Djibouti-ville as the port and terminus for a railway constructed to Ethiopia's capital, Addis-Ababa. It was always a somewhat anomalous French colony, it was never part of the CFA Franc Zone, had only tenuous links to other French possessions in the Indian Ocean (Mayotte and Réunion, both still formally part of the French Republic, as well as Madagascar).

For the first 15 years of independence the French army provided the Djibouti government's core finance, and guaranteed external defences in exchange for military bases and extensive training facilities. Although, as explained below, external military ties have since extensively diversified, Djibouti nevertheless remains home to France's largest military base in Africa. Regional volatility was constant, culminating in the overthrow of authoritarian governments in Ethiopia and Somalia in 1991. The creation of two new neighbouring states, Eritrea to the north and Somaliland (*de-facto* an autonomous state, despite lack of *de-juré* international recognition) to the south, was a watershed for Djibouti. Djibouti's population shares clan and linguistic affinities with Afars in both Ethiopian and Eritrea as well as several Somali clans in Somaliland. Upheaval in Yemen, which lies barely 30 kilometres from Djibouti's northern coast and has extensive historical ties with the country, further complicates regional foreign policy. In 2015 Djibouti acted as a key evacuation point for foreign nationals from Yemen, and the state now hosts several tens of thousands of Yemeni refugees. Despite, or perhaps because of, these idiosyncrasies and upheavals, there is an exceedingly sparse academic literature on Djibouti, and virtually nothing on its foreign policy strategies.⁷

Is Djibouti a small state?

Evidently there are complex and contested sets of debates as to what exactly constitutes a “small state”.⁸ Yet by any African or international standards, Djibouti is a small state; it has a population of well under a million and a minuscule GDP, in both absolute and per-capita terms. While geographically it is incorrect to call it a ‘city-state’ yet at least 80% of Djibouti’s population (officially put at c.900,000, but probably far smaller) live in and around the eponymous capital city. On most indices it is comprehensively dwarfed not just by its neighbours, but by all other members of the two regional bodies of which it is a particularly active member.⁹ Comparisons within both the African Union and Arab League are of some significance, in that both organisations are important theatres for the deployment of Djibouti’s influence.

However, irrespective of which indices or definitions are used, in terms of its status as a small state, the introduction to Archer et al notes that:

*“...rather than continue the search for universal characteristics of small states and their behaviour, the ‘small state’ concept is best used as a ‘focussing device’ for highlighting the characteristic security problems and foreign policy dilemmas of the weaker actors in asymmetric power relationships’.*¹⁰

While one of our key conclusions will be that – in foreign policy terms – Djibouti is a rather atypical ‘small state’, clearly the country did face a series of such “*security problems and foreign policy dilemmas*”, due to its size, location and large neighbours. More specifically, albeit somewhat schematically, five such problems and dilemmas can be identified. Firstly not only is it small, but is also much younger than most independent African states. As such, it also had extremely limited human resources at independence. Secondly, as already noted, it exists in a particularly inauspicious regional political environment. Its two large neighbours, Ethiopia and Somalia, both had historical claims to its territory, compounded by the fact that Djibouti shares ethnic and linguistic ties with both, making the forging of a nascent national identity particularly fraught. Having fought each other in 1977-78, in 1990-91 both Ethiopia and Somalia fragmented in the face of secessionist movements. This resulted in the *de-facto* creation of two new states (Somaliland and Eritrea) each of which border Djibouti. The wars which accompanied the creation of these states triggered refugee flows into Djibouti, where some remain to this day. In addition, the

current phase of Yemen's protracted civil wars continues to generate refugee flows¹¹.

Thirdly, it was partly this unstable regional security environment which explains the fact that Djibouti's fledgling state was almost entirely dependent upon France. French troops guaranteed external security of the state, and French aid paid the bulk of the state's monthly bills. French troops intervened repeatedly to defend the state's borders, and played a role in quashing a low-profile civil war in the 1990s. Weaning the state off such military dependence on the former colonial power's forces is a fact faced by many small post-colonial states, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

The fourth factor, being overshadowed by a giant neighbour, on which your own economy is largely dependent, is a characteristic shared by many small states. Neighbouring Ethiopia's population is over 80 times larger than Djibouti's. However, in what may be characterized as an ambiguous inter-dependence, since 1998 virtually all of Ethiopia's foreign trade has transited via Djibouti's ports. As is explored in more detail below, this gives Djiboutian officials a degree of leverage vis-à-vis Ethiopia. Fifthly and finally, the state now finds itself sandwiched between two war-torn states, Somalia and Yemen, each of which has in recent decades, become home to powerful Islamist groups with the declared intention of advancing their political goals via transnational violence. As a small, cosmopolitan state with an open economy hosting an array of western military bases, diminutive Djibouti's leaders face a rather specific, tangible security threat.

With such an array of security and foreign policy dilemmas, how did, indeed does, the new state cope? The policy responses to these challenges were initially very cautious. With very limited indigenous personnel, the presence of French staff in state structures initially remained significant during the 1980s. Thus under the presidency of Hassan Gouled Aptidon (1977-1999), the state's foreign policy rested on two principles. Firstly maintaining a low profile and playing what one might term the role of 'honest broker' in the region, particularly between sparring Ethiopia and Somalia. As wars wracked the Horn of Africa in the late 1980s, Djibouti agreed to host the Inter-Governmental Agency for Drought and Development (later dropping the 'drought' to become known simply as IGAD). Initially a vehicle to reconcile

Ethiopia and Somalian interests, this has grown to become the Horn of Africa's principal forum for regional integration ¹².

Secondly, Djibouti sought to compensate for small size via a membership of international bodies. At independence Djibouti joined both the African Union and the Arab League, and has played an active role in these and many other international fora, including the specialised agencies of the United Nations and *la Francophonie* grouping of largely former French colonies ¹³. Following the accession of Ismael Omar Guelleh to the presidency in 1999, the state has sought to exploit opportunities to diversify sources of support, and wean itself off French civil and military assistance. Subsequent sections of this text will explore the specific policies and tools which have been used.

However, we should note from the outset that the current successes in diversifying economic and diplomatic support stem from the state's astute exploitation of two external events, one global, the other regional. The global opportunity came in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the United States, and the US's subsequent launch of the 'war on terror' in East Africa and Arabia.¹⁴ The second, regional, event was the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998-2000, and its considerable ramifications upon Djibouti, particularly economically as Ethiopia diverted its trade away from the Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab and began to use Djibouti as the principal external commercial gateway.

Strategic location; strategy and spheres of diplomacy

In a simplified form, Djibouti can be seen to have had two primary strategic objectives in the early 21st century; firstly to reduce economic and military dependence on France, secondly to ensure a manageable 'balance' of power with Ethiopia.

In essence Djibouti has been able to transform what appears as weaknesses and liabilities stemming from its highly vulnerable geo-strategic location, sandwiched between large neighbours, continents and key maritime shipping lanes, into a lucrative 'resource'. It has been able to do this by constructive diplomacy; gradually fostering close ties with a wide variety of states, diversifying away from initial

dependence on France, and ensuring it maintains an independent negotiating strategy within its highly asymmetrical relationship with Ethiopia.¹⁵

In terms of the first objective, diversification of military support, it has turned location into both a substantive income stream for the patronage-based state coffers, and an important source of international political capital. As such it has been able to leverage not only material resources, but also considerable intangible political gains internationally relating to the perceived status of the country. The notion of a state's "status" goes beyond the scope of this article, but there seems little reason why the diplomatic strategies of a small, relatively poor state such as Djibouti could be not be analysed with tools similar to those explored recently by Iver Neumann, Benjamin de Carvalho and their authors in relation to Norway in their collected work, *Small state status seeking*.

Military alliances and foreign bases

Bi-laterally, Djibouti has successfully diversified away from dependence upon France to encompass a variety of new military alliances. Predominant among these is the relationship with the United States, resting upon the fact that Djibouti hosts the US's only permanent military facility on the continent.¹⁶

The United States' Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) has been based in Djibouti since 2002. Originally conceived as part of the US response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, with the creation of AFRICOM in 2008 it became the US military's only permanent military facility on the African continent, based at a former French military facility, Camp Lemonnier, where it shares runways with French forces and Djibouti's sole international airport, Ambouli. Over the subsequent decade the US presence in Djibouti has progressively taken on a more complex and permanent character. In December 2011 the US inaugurated a large new embassy complex to the south of Camp Lemonnier. In 2013 it announced plans and contracts to significantly expand airstrips and facilities in Djibouti. President Guelleh visited Washington in May 2014, signing a further ten-year rental agreement on the military facilities (with the US having an option on a further 10 year extension). This is worth around \$60m p.a. to Djibouti.¹⁷ In March 2015, the first of a series of meetings on a broader "strategic partnership" was held in Washington.¹⁸ Djibouti's strategic location, wedged between Yemen and Somali and astride one of the world's key

shipping lanes, provides the US with proximity to Al-Qaida affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and East Africa. It allows both monitoring of, and direct attacks against, individuals and groups hostile to the US.

The growing US military presence has complemented the French facilities in Djibouti. While the latter have been reduced in scale over the past decade, it is facile to view the US as simply displacing French power in Djibouti. Even with the further reduction in France's military presence in 2011, there remain more frontline French troops, aircraft and firepower based permanently in the city-state, than those of the US. France is still reportedly the external guarantor of Djibouti's security, including its air and maritime space. As such, it is involved in extensive intelligence and logistical cooperation with the US, as well as the growing array of multilateral forces operating in and around the port. These roles are enhanced by its de-facto status as the logistical anchor for the vessels and personnel of the European Union's anti-piracy force, known as EUNAVFOR. Changes in the profile of France's military presence, and the presence of other European and Asian armed forces in Djibouti are due in large part to its central role in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean since 2008. In 2009 Djibouti became the operational base for the EU's anti-piracy mission EUNAVFOR Atalanta, the first ever joint-EU naval operation and as such a key operational element of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). EU naval forces make use of both EU and US facilities in Djibouti, adding an additional layer of military and maritime intelligence sharing. Atalanta has now been extended to December 2016, and since July 2012 has been complemented by a new naval mission dubbed EUCAP Nestor, designed to strengthen local maritime capacities.

Anti-piracy missions have acted as a catalyst for a deepening array of maritime cooperation initiatives, in turn enhancing the strategic importance of Djibouti at the heart of the Bab al-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean crossroads. The fact that Japan opened its first ever post-1945 overseas military facility in Djibouti in 2011, and that China is now widely reported to be seeking a similar facility in the country, highlights the degree to which the strategy of seeking what we might term a "geo-strategic dividend" as widely as possible, has been a success.

Ethiopia: complex interdependence

Negotiating Djibouti's relationship with Ethiopia has been less straightforward than relations with the US and other global powers who in recent decades have obtained, and pay handsomely for, military facilities in Djibouti. Even prior to 1998 Ethiopia was a key client for Djibouti's ports. However, the war with Eritrea (formally 1998-2000, but still unresolved) dramatically increased Ethiopian use of Djibouti's port facilities, on which it has since become almost entirely dependent for foreign trade. The opening of Djibouti's Doraleh container terminal in 2009, and the adjacent ENOC petroleum terminal, were largely premised on the requirements of Ethiopian trade, which is set to further increase from 2016 when the - Chinese financed and constructed – rehabilitated Djibouti-Addis railway line opens. However, Djibouti has been wary to manage the relationship in a way to avoid economic dominance by its large neighbour. Djibouti has resisted Ethiopian equity stakes in port facilities. Despite the lack of Ethiopian-Djiboutian joint-ventures in private-equity, economic interdependency between the two further deepened from 2011 when Ethiopia began to supply hydro-electric power to Djibouti. Electricity in Djibouti has hitherto been expensively produced by aging and unreliable oil-fired generators. In a climate where air-conditioning is crucial for offices, housing and industry, high electricity costs have been a barrier to economic growth. Following Djibouti's connection to Ethiopia's electricity grid, retail and industrial domestic electricity tariffs were cut significantly, easing pressures on both household and business budgets.

While clearly hydro-electric imports accentuate Djibouti's economic and political dependency on its vast neighbour – it appears a price worth paying. For Ethiopia there are multiple benefits, including increased exports revenues and significantly reduced energy costs at the port. For Ethiopia, it is also the first stage in what is envisaged as a major regional export strategy for its abundant hydro-electric power. A further element of bi-lateral infrastructure integration was added in January 2013 when ministers signed a contract to construct a water pipeline to supply drinking water from a source 70km within Ethiopia to Djibouti-ville, and a second-phase of electricity supply is now under way. So, in terms of energy and development policies, Djibouti is far more dependant now upon Ethiopia than ever before; Addis can, literally, pull the plug on Djibouti, generating acute vulnerability were current leaders and alliances to shift dramatically, a point we will return to in conclusion

Such substantive engagement with Ethiopia, particularly on both broad economic and energy policies, are in part counterbalanced by active multilateral diplomacy, and selected aspects of this are examined in the subsequent section.

Agency: Djibouti's diplomatic strategies and tools

Schematically, we can say that the state has adopted an activist foreign policy strategically spanning four spheres. These are i) regional relations in the Horn of Africa, ii) broader African diplomatic fora, iii) Arab groupings (and to a lesser extent partially overlapping bodies such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), and iv) Francophone groups. In each of these, distinct Djiboutian agency is evident. In doing this, Djiboutian officials have exploited the state's cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic make-up, drawing on the diverse linguistic and political ties of its population; thus educated personnel are able to elaborate a multi-faceted national identity which is 'Arab', African, Islamic, francophone and *laïque/republican*

The first, as indicated in the section above, has been at the regional level. Thus as host to IGAD Djibouti is able to present itself as at the fulcrum of regional diplomacy. Despite hosting the secretariat of the organisation, there is little evidence that it has sought, or been unable, to decisively influence the somewhat lacklustre body, which in recent years has been hamstrung both by lack of resources and the Ethio-Eritrea stalemate. However, at least symbolically, Djibouti can present itself as being centre-stage in regional affairs. This is similarly the case in the second sphere, that of the African Union. Since 2012 Djiboutian troops have participated in the AU's Somalia mission, AMISOM, which effectively bridges the Djiboutian state's very specific foreign policy concern (over the reconstruction of neighbouring Somaliland and the rump-Somali state, plus associated anti-piracy and counter-terrorism initiatives) and their multilateral commitments to the African Union.

The third sphere, of inter-Arab diplomacy, is articulated primarily, although not exclusively, via membership of the Arab League. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of Djibouti's Arab League diplomacy, but it has been an important source of both symbolic and material resources from the state. This strand has also helped the state in diversifying away from its former 'Francophone' dependency. As an economically poor Arab League member, Djibouti is able to access substantial development funding from Gulf Arab states and their multilateral funds. (A similar

strategy was adopted by Somalia and Comoros islands, the other two sub-Saharan African members of the Arab League ¹⁹). The Arab League presence complements Djibouti's principal bi-lateral Arab links; with Yemen, Dubai (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. The relationship with Dubai in particular has been important since the mid-2000s, when contracts were signed for infrastructure development financed, and - in the case of the Dubai Ports World's container port at Doraleh, just outside Djibouti-ville - managed by Dubai-based companies.

In both the Yemeni and Dubai cases, bi-lateral ties have been strengthened by financial links, often blending together personal and commercial interests. Dubai is also a key financial centre for Somali (including Somaliland-based) capital, some of which transits via Djibouti, and is just one element of a broader pattern of Gulf-Arab: Horn of Africa ties.

The fourth and final diplomatic sphere is that of francophone Africa and *La Francophonie* more broadly. In reality this comprises two, somewhat contradictory, elements; on the one hand the inherited French post-colonial diplomatic baggage, on the other the formal institutions of *La Francophonie*. Firstly the reality of having been a former French African colony means that at independence the newly independent Djiboutian state found itself automatically inscribed in the international system with certain structures, perceptions and expectations, essentially as part of what is generally termed a *pré-carré* of French influence in sub-Saharan Africa, with diplomatic relations centred on Paris, guided largely by French foreign policy priorities, including voting patterns in the OAU and UN for example. (Over the past two decades, this system and milieu has increasingly been referred under the pejorative, catch-all term *France-Afrique*) Such diplomatic continuity was mediated in part via French and francophone civil servants and personnel, (until the 1990s the elite was almost entirely French-trained) as well as the francophone media. Thus RFI, *Marché Tropicaux*, *Jeune Afrique* and, crucially for Djibouti, the Paris-based *La lettre de l'océan indien* all shaped diplomacy. Djiboutian diplomats and politicians were thus perceived, and indeed may well have perceived themselves, first and foremost part of Francophone Africa.

While still clearly active in such French-speaking circles, during Ismael Omar Guelleh's successive presidencies, the Djiboutian state has worked to distance itself

from this particular heritage (while still using it instrumentally....).²⁰ The second element here is the formal structures of the organisation *La Francophonie*, in which Djibouti does play a role, and – along with broader cultural, sporting and educational ties – remains important for the state’s standing in the world.

Working across all four of these spheres has given Djibouti greater diplomatic reach, and mobilised far more resources – both material and symbolic – than if its activities were restricted to just one or two such spheres. Alongside its geostrategic resources, they have meant that the small state has often been able to play-off diverse interests against each other to its benefit.

Conclusion: elite visions, vulnerabilities and ‘alliance shelters’

Djibouti’s - perhaps idiosyncratic - case of small state agency can be used to emphasize two additional points. Firstly we’ll briefly highlight the issues of political leadership, diplomatic vision and the crucial issue of the actual human resources and personnel available to small states. Secondly we’ll conclude by considering the degree to which Djibouti’s diplomatic standing and actions can be understood by modified theories of small state behaviour, notably that of ‘alliance shelters’ as proposed by Bailes et al in their essay in this volume.

What of political leadership, diplomatic vision and the - banal but vital - issue of small states’ human resources and personnel? While there is a near total lack of critical literature on the state’s foreign policies (‘though this may gradually be remedied by publications from the Chinese-funded Institute of Diplomatic Studies²¹) this article has attempted to present plausible narrative of Djiboutian foreign policy, Yet the abstract talk of “the Djibouti state”, while unavoidable, in practice misses a crucial point about the realities of operating within and behalf of a “small-state”. We are dealing with a young, narrow state apparatus linked to a highly dualistic economy. It is controlled by a minuscule political class which operates within a highly personalised, patronage-driven political system.

The current President is now nearing the end of his third term, and is standing again for election in 2016. While there has been a renewal of the political class in recent years, bringing in younger, more technically able personnel, we are still talking about a very small number of ministers and presidential confidants. What is therefore

crucial is the ability of the executive to elaborate a political vision, and then have the means, through both formal and informal channels, to implement it. Political agents need to be mindful both of the domestic political constraints, and the need to generate both material and symbolic resources from international relations.

Two prominent examples of personalised foreign initiatives serve as illustrations of this. Firstly, Djibouti's relationship with Japan has been driven by highly personalised ties between a tiny Djiboutian team, led by an experienced and entrepreneurial ambassador, and their interlocutors in Tokyo. Similarly Djibouti's crucial relationship with Dubai was heavily personalised, and mediated through just a few key individuals.²² We may well here be in the realm of individual initiatives and decisions to seize opportunities when they present themselves, while ensuring that their actions are 'covered' by the presidential networks in which are embedded the levers of real power and resource allocation.

As noted earlier, in one way Djibouti has made the best of its very limited human resources, in particular deploying one of its citizens' key attributes - as cosmopolitan polyglots - extremely well as a diplomatic tool. However, there are limits (including those of political legitimacy and leadership) to such processes, and a need for such strategies to be planned and maintained, given limited resources. Thus in 2012 a complete overhaul of Djibouti's diplomatic tools and foreign policy strategies was launched. This was aimed in part at consolidating the state's break from predominantly Francophone spheres of diplomacy.²³ Similarly, in the economic domain, active strategy and vision is required. Thus while it is easy to deride some of the hubristic elements of Djibouti's current, highly ambitious, "Vision 2035" medium-term economic plan, it does at least set a series of goals and objectives for the transformation of the state. Again, this kind of policy rests on the ambitions - and both organisational ability and political will - of a very small number of qualified personnel, in this case within the Ministry of Finance and the Presidency.²⁴ Evidently the narrow elite and interrelationships between leading personalities and families raises the broader question of the link between the foreign policies sketched here and Djibouti's domestic political structures. This issue is largely beyond the scope of this short comparative study, however, two brief observations are of relevance. Firstly the Djiboutian polity rests largely upon patronage among long-standing elites, most of whom have extensive family, political and commercial ties

with neighbouring Ethiopia and Somaliland (and to a lesser extent Yemen). Thus foreign policy orientation *per-se* is little contested, particularly given the structural constraints upon the generation of rents and wealth outlined earlier. Much of what passes for domestic politics, particularly in the formal political arena of elections etc, relates to the *distribution* of wealth, rather than its foreign origins. This appears true in terms of Afar-Somali cleavages as much as intra-clan rivalries for access to Presidential patronage. Secondly, clearly this trait does not immunise governing elites from rival political visions, most obviously from Islamist groups seeking violent change. Yet precisely because of the small size of the state, to date it has proved relatively easy to monitor and control such threats. Whether this can last is a different matter, particularly as the 2016 elections, and the state's apparent inability to generate meaningful youth employment opportunities, further polarise domestic opinion.

Let us finally turn briefly to the comparative and theoretical questions raised in the BISA workshop and this special issue's introduction. A key question is whether international relations theories and concepts are of use in making sense of non-Western small states' agency on the international scene? Based on our brief survey, a neo-realist approach of the state acting upon a specific interpretation of its own 'national-interest' appears to fit rather well Djiboutian actions. However, the category of 'non-Western' almost certainly needs problematizing further in the Djiboutian case. If we do stick with a variant of realism we should, ask 'whose national interest'? One of the most striking aspects of Djibouti's 'success' is that 'stability' and extraordinary incomes from both port revenues and military base rents, have brought meagre benefit to the bulk of the population. Few jobs have been created; income remains concentrated among a tiny, largely state-salaried elite. Although the ever-closer linkages with Ethiopia, engendered by the increased scale of transit trade and revived railway links, may boost Djibouti's economy, there is little evidence of wealth being shared widely.

A second question raised was what types of cooperation strategies are pursued by non-Western small states, and how can we best understand the alliances established by and between non-Western small states? As we said at the outset, the Djiboutian case suggests that neither non-Western, nor 'small states' are

particularly meaningful categories in diplomatic terms, either regionally or internationally. However, where clearly the 'small state' notion does feature in Djiboutian discourse, is in terms of the search for a medium-term economic 'model' and plan for development; hence economic planners' interest in Dubai, Singapore and other such successful 'port-state' models of growth. Equally, Djibouti doesn't particularly seek links with other small states, or seek to create 'counterweights', particularly vis-à-vis its most influential neighbour, Ethiopia. Rather relations with Addis Ababa are mediated through highly personalised (and in certain cases specific "ethnicized" or linguistic ties; Afar, Somali, Arab etc) ties.

As such, the case provides limited evidence to evaluate Bailes, Thorhallsson and Thayers' six arguments regarding the pertinence of 'alliance shelter(s)', outlined in their essay for this special edition. At first glance, it would appear that it is now Djibouti's ties with Ethiopia which are of principal concern in terms of this notion of 'alliance' and 'shelter', given Djibouti's role as a conduit for Ethiopian trade, and Djibouti's growing dependence on water and electricity supplied from its larger highland neighbour. However, both historically (in terms of France as the colonial power and then post-1977 de-juré guarantor of military defence), and currently in terms of a range of powers who use Djibouti as a military base (first and foremost the US and France), we can see that Djibouti presents any attempt at comparative theorizing of regional "alliance shelters" with two problems. Firstly, Djibouti's sovereignty and ruling elite is protected by extra-African powers, greatly diminishing its potential dependence upon the de-facto regional hegemon, Ethiopia. (Of course this is not unique to Djibouti, whose defence accords with France are but a variant of the pacts France signed with all her former African colonies.)

Secondly, Djibouti's contemporary alliance with an economically resurgent Ethiopia appear to demonstrate several unusual specificities vis-a-vis the notion of small states' 'alliance shelter'. The most obvious is that in trade terms, it is Ethiopia which is dependent upon Djibouti, (i.e. for access to ports for her trade...) not the other way around. Thus successive Ethiopian governments have been cautious to ensure continuity of ties with Djibouti's ruling elites, both for vital reasons of trade, and in relation to dossiers of regional policy and diplomacy (notably over armed multilateral intervention in Somalia and the diplomatic isolation of Eritrea). Notwithstanding this

trait, Djibouti's small-state vulnerability clearly remains. Clearly this would particularly be the case in the event of a significant shift in the nature of priorities of ruling elites in either Addis or Djibouti. Yet such shifts currently appear improbable, not least given the current balance of regional and international forces sketched in the paper, and for related reasons of material interests, both personal and political, in both Ethiopian and Djiboutian elites. If anything, current regional and international trends, above all the entry of China into the Greater Horn, are further enhancing the unusual inter-dependency between the Addis and Djibouti.

Nevertheless, Bailes, Thorhallsson and Thayers' third point *is* clearly of relevance to the Djiboutian example. They state that "paradoxically, it may be that the lack of capabilities of small states allows them to benefit disproportionately from international cooperation in a manner denied to larger states."²⁵ The importance that Djibouti places on its presence in numerous for a (IGAD, the African Union, Arab League etc) clearly underscores this. Thirdly and finally, the editors ask if small states are all equal, whether they belong to the Western sphere (and adhere to its norms) or not? Self-evidently, not all small states are equal, our argument has been that Djibouti has greater influence than many other small states in Africa, and indeed elsewhere. While this is partly down to geo-strategic location, there is nothing inevitable about the manner in which such location is used by local politicians and political entrepreneurs, be it in government or opposition.

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Notes

¹ Well illustrated by the fact that Djibouti is the only place in the world where you will find separate American, French, European Union and Japanese military bases side by side. It is probable that they will shortly be joined by a Chinese naval base in the Gulf of Tadjoura.

² World Bank, "Djibouti Turns to its Peers". (Nov. 5 2014) <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/11/05/djibouti-turns-to-its-peers-for-advice-on-reaching-its-goals> Accessed February 2016.

³ Dubai-based companies has provided considerable finance for infrastructure. This includes the country's only 5 star hotel (Kempinski), the oil terminal (ENOC) and the Doraleh container terminal. This is run (and partially owned) by Dubai Ports World (DPW). It is currently the subject of complex litigation in the London courts.

⁴ Bailes, Thorhallsson and Thayer, *Alliance Theory*.

⁵ Gibert and Grzelczyk. "Non-Western Small States

⁶ Chafe and Keese, *Francophone Africa at Fifty*.

⁷ Literature includes: Styan, *Djibouti's changing influence*; Bezabeh, 'Citizenship and sovereignty'; Mesfin. *Elections, politics and external involvement*; Chiré, *Djibouti contemporain*.

⁸ See "definitions" in Hey, *Small States*.

⁹ Formally speaking, in terms of population, Djibouti is the 5th smallest state in Africa; only the Seychelles, (97k), Sao Tome & Principe (200k) Cap Verde (525k) and the Comoros (780k) are smaller. Yet all these are island micro-states. In continental Africa, it is comparable to land-locked Swaziland and Lesotho, each dependent on S.Africa. Of the 22 members of the Arab League, only Comoros is smaller. However, it is perhaps worthy of note that neither of next smallest Arab League states, Bahrain (1.3m) and Qatar (1.7m) have that many more people than Djibouti. It does have a larger land-mass than these, far wealthier Arab micro-states. However, it is for example twice the size of Qatar, larger than Bahrain or Singapore, and - as officials occasionally point out - its land-mass is 23,200km², larger than Israel, or indeed Wales.

¹⁰ Archer, Bailes and Wivel. *Small States*, p.9.

¹¹ Around 5-10 % of Djibouti's population can trace their families' origins back to Yemen. Relations with independent Eritrea have been fraught, particularly since an Eritrean incursion into

Djibouti in 2008, partially resolved only after Qatari mediation and the establishment of a Qatari monitoring force on the joint-border

¹² For details of IGAD, see: www.igad.int/. Accessed May 2015.

¹³ For example, in 2014, a Djiboutian candidate was proposed to head UNESCO

¹⁴ In reality, Djibouti's role in contemporary US foreign policy pre-dated 2001; the 2000 attack on the USS Cole off Aden prompted the switching of both US assets and attention to Djibouti.

¹⁵ The bi-lateral Ethio-Djibouti relationship now also had to be mediated in large part via Chinese partners that are building and managing ports and the new railway linking the two states.

¹⁶ The subsequent paragraphs draw on Styan's *Djibouti's changing influence*.

¹⁷ <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-expands-presence-in-strategically-located-djibouti/1907900.html>. Accessed May 2015.

¹⁸ <http://www.globalpolicywatch.com/2015/03/u-s-and-djibouti-hold-first-strategic-dialogue/> Accessed May 2015.

¹⁹ Pointedly, at *de-juré* independence in 1993, Eritrea chose not to join the Arab League, despite having similar credentials to both Somalia and Djibouti.

²⁰ Jeune Afrique, *Affaire Borrel*.

²¹ L'Institut des études diplomatiques de Djibouti (IED), which was paid for by China and opened in mid-2014.

²² A single businessman and close confidant of the President, Abdourahman Boreh, was central to the DPW deal over Doraleh. The two subsequently fell-out and the "Boreh Affair" was the subject of a protracted court case in London (running 2013-16, it was unresolved at the time of writing)

²³ Jeune Afrique, *Djibouti; operation seduction*.

²⁴ World Bank, *Djibouti turns*.

²⁵ Bailes, Thorhallsson and Thayer, *Alliance Theory*, [Edit note: will need page no in final m/s]