

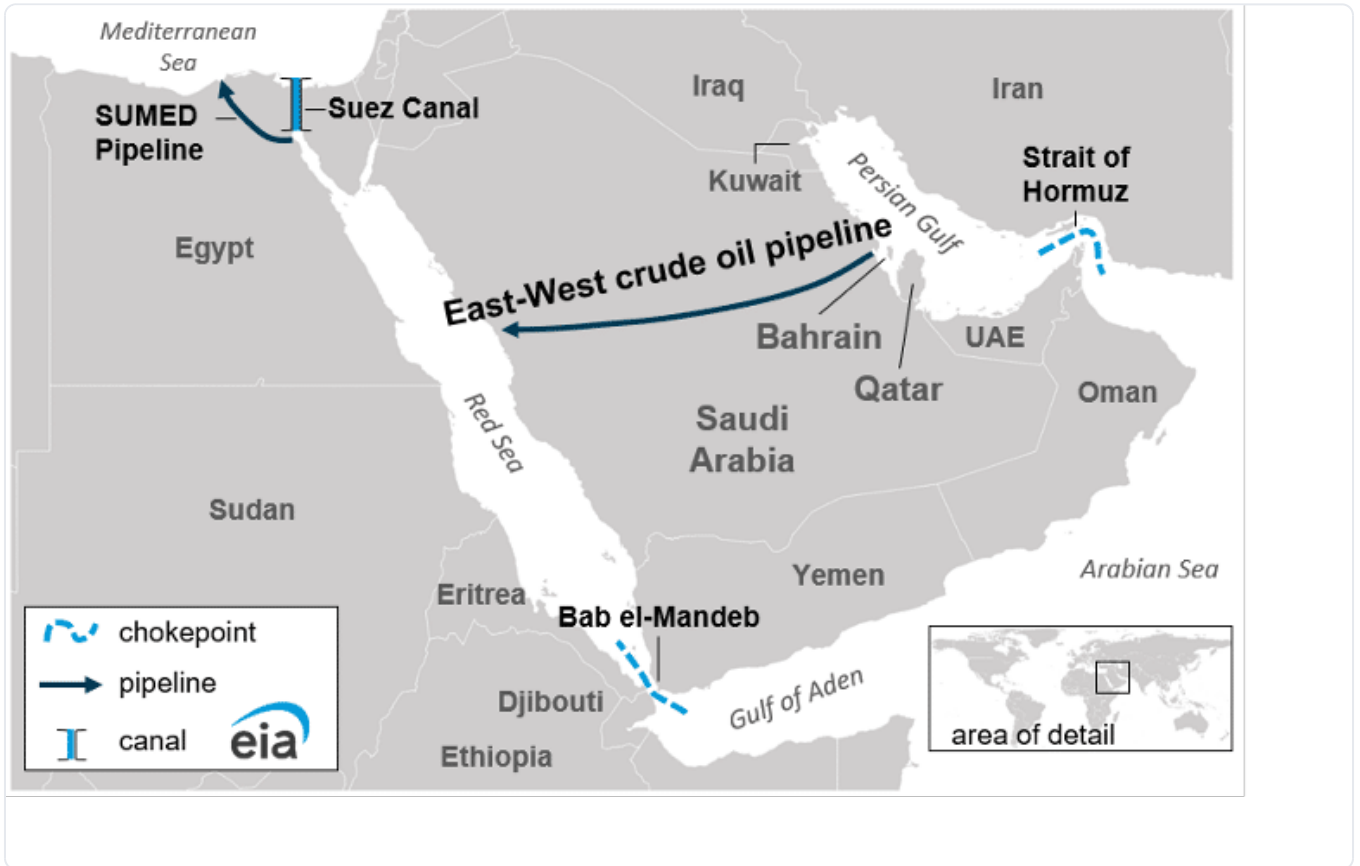
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# Reinforcing U.S. Power in the Horn of Africa: The Case for a Base in Somaliland

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Amidst threats to U.S. interests in the Red Sea and competition for regional influence, the United States must reassess its military posture in the Horn of Africa.

The [Horn of Africa](#), which includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, sits at the junction of global trade and strategic competition, commanding access to the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden. Approximately [30% of oil and 40% of dry goods](#) are transported via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. This region is not only vital to international trade, but also a key platform for counterterrorism, maritime security, and influence across the region. For over two decades, the United States has relied almost exclusively on [Camp Lemonnier](#) in Djibouti to sustain its regional presence. But that model is under growing strain: [China](#) now operates its own military base just miles away, and Djibouti's deepening ties with Beijing have introduced serious operational, intelligence, and strategic vulnerabilities. At the same time, the region is becoming more volatile, with conflict in the [Red Sea](#), persistent threats from [Al-Shabaab](#) in Somalia, and mounting instability in Mogadishu, where even the [U.S. Embassy](#) faces potential closure due to deteriorating security conditions. If the U.S. intends to stay ahead of its adversaries, it must move decisively to strengthen its military footprint and reassert control over this critical region.



In the face of evolving threats throughout the region, [Somaliland](#), a self-declared state in northern Somalia, presents a critical opportunity. A stable, self-governing, democratic state with access to the strategic port of Berbera, Somaliland offers the United States an alternative location, outside of Djibouti, to strengthen its military posture in the region. However, Somaliland is not internationally recognized.<sup>[i]</sup> Despite this, the U.S. is [reportedly in talks](#) with Somaliland leaders, considering making a deal: providing [long-sought international recognition](#) in exchange for U.S. access to both the port and airstrip in Somaliland. These talks support the premise that continued reliance on Djibouti alone, the only U.S. military base in Africa, is no longer sufficient in protecting U.S. interests. Establishing a base in Somaliland would expand the U.S. military footprint across the region, enable rapid response to the growing Houthi threat impacting major global trade routes, combat China's expanding influence along one of the world's most vital maritime corridors and throughout East Africa, and enhance counterterrorism operations against organizations like Al-Shabaab.

The question is not whether the United States should expand its presence — but how the U.S. can accomplish this task without disrupting security in the region.

## **Djibouti**

While Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti has served as the basis of U.S. military operations in Africa [since 2002](#), continued dependence on this single location presents its own set of challenges. Most notably, China's military base, located just a few miles from the U.S. facility, poses concerns of increasing Chinese influence in East Africa and their ability to conduct intelligence gathering operations against the U.S. [Operational](#) constraints also persist. Djibouti's [limited](#) size and [competition](#) for operational space limit opportunities for U.S. expansion. In addition, Djibouti has exploited its geographic position by increasing [lease prices](#), with the U.S. paying tens of millions annually for lease and operations. These concerns are compounded by Djibouti's authoritarian-style government, which creates a volatile environment where U.S. access could shift based on external influences. As the geopolitical landscape in the Horn of

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Africa shifts, these vulnerabilities make a compelling case for diversifying the U.S. footprint, including the establishment of other U.S. military bases in more stable and cooperative environments, like Somaliland.

## **Somaliland**

Somaliland has demonstrated a consistent interest in making a deal with the United States: providing the U.S. control of both the port and airstrip in Somaliland in exchange for the international recognition they have long desired. In contrast to Djibouti, [Somaliland](#) offers a more stable alternative where the U.S. would have more autonomy as the only foreign military. Somaliland has a **functioning, democrat government** with its own constitution, security forces, and institutions, and has operated independently from Somalia since declaring independence in 1991 despite lacking formal international recognition.

Somaliland's **Berbera Port** is located on the Gulf of Aden, near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. This [port](#) offers quick access to essential global trade routes and an ability to quickly counter threats to U.S. maritime interests. In addition to the Berbera port, the U.S. would have access to the Berbera airfield, which was originally built by the [Soviet Union](#). This airfield has one of the [longest runways](#) in Africa, capable of accommodating heavy cargo aircraft, bombers, and surveillance drones. This would allow the U.S. to respond more rapidly and effectively to threats across the region without the inherent risks associated with shared airspace, as is the case of Djibouti. Establishing a base in Somaliland would also allow the U.S. to project power more effectively along the Red Sea corridor, and counter Houthi threats to international trade routes. By expanding its military capabilities and partnering with a cooperative government, the U.S. would mitigate risk and strengthen its position in an increasingly contested region.

## **Implications of Providing International Recognition to Somaliland**

Despite the strategic advantages, offering international recognition to Somaliland in exchange for military access carries considerable implications. Formal recognition may strain U.S. relations with Somalia's government, which still claims Somaliland as part of its sovereign territory. It could also complicate broader U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Somalia, where cooperation with Mogadishu is essential in combating Al-Shabaab and stabilizing southern

Somalia. Additionally, recognizing Somaliland could set a dangerous precedent, encouraging other secessionist movements across Africa. There is also the risk that formal recognition could make Somaliland itself a target for new political and military pressures from hostile neighbors or extremist groups. Any move toward recognition must be weighed carefully against both the immediate benefits and the potential long-term impacts on regional stability and U.S. standing in the region.

### **The U.S. Embassy in Somalia**

The fragility of the situation in Somalia itself further complicates these risks. Recent reports indicate that the United States is considering closing its [embassy in Mogadishu](#) due to heightened security threats, including ongoing attacks by Al-Shabaab and concerns about the Somali government's ability to provide security to Americans located there. An embassy closure would signal a significant change to U.S.-Somalia relations and bring international attention to the current security situation in Somalia. However, the potential of closing the U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu also highlights the urgent need for other stable partners in the region. In this context, Somaliland's stability, democratic governance, and willingness to cooperate with the United States stand in contrast to the instability that continues to plague Mogadishu and southern Somalia.

### **Responding to Threats on U.S. Interests: The Houthis and International Trade**

Since November 2023, Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, and the impact this has had on global trade, has highlighted the importance of securing reliable U.S. access to the region. Using drones, missiles, and small boats, the Iranian-backed Houthis have targeted [international vessels](#), disrupted critical trade flows, and forced rerouting of global shipping. The Bab al-Mandeb Strait, adjacent to Somaliland's coast, is one of the world's most vital maritime chokepoints. Sustained Houthi attacks have triggered a nearly 50% drop in shipping traffic through the Red Sea, forcing vessels to divert around the [Cape of Good Hope](#) and adding 10 or more days and significant costs to global supply chains. These [disruptions](#) have contributed to higher insurance rates, rising consumer prices, and greater instability in international commerce.

However, President Trump and the Houthis struck an agreement on May 6<sup>th</sup>: the Houthis will [halt attacks in the Red Sea](#) in return for the [U.S. ending air strikes](#). President Trump said airstrikes ceased immediately. The agreement did not include a promise by the Houthis to discontinue attacks on Israel. Instead, a [spokesperson](#) for the Houthis [confirmed](#) that such strikes will continue. While Houthi activities continue in Israel, regardless of the current ceasefire, the U.S. should continue to monitor the situation and continuing making plans for strengthening our posture in the region. Maintaining a U.S. military base in Somaliland would allow for close monitoring of the conflict in the Red Sea and allow for a quicker response should the Houthis not uphold their side of the agreement. Relying solely on Djibouti limits flexibility and leaves critical vulnerabilities that adversaries are already exploiting.

### **Responding to Threats on U.S. Interests: China's Increasing Regional Influence**

China's expanding military and economic presence across Africa and the Red Sea further stresses the importance of the United States to expanding its regional presence. China's first overseas military base, established in [Djibouti in 2017](#) just a few miles from Camp Lemonnier, provides the China with direct access to the Red Sea and critical global trade routes. Beyond Djibouti, China has [invested](#) heavily in [infrastructure projects](#) across East Africa and is actively seeking additional naval access agreements along maritime routes. Since 2013, China has invested an estimated [\\$5.6 billion in infrastructure projects in Kenya](#) and [\\$2.5 billion in Uganda](#). In Kenya, China invested in the Standard Gauge Railways, connecting the port city of Mombasa to Nairobi, which was completed in 2017. In Uganda, China funded the Entebbe-Kampala Expressway, which connects the capital city and its international airport. Both projects improved the transportation network in East Africa, reducing trade costs, stimulating economic activity, and attracting further foreign investment. Failing to counter this expansion risks relinquishing critical influence over global trade chokepoints and regional security infrastructure. Establishing a U.S. presence in Somaliland could hinder China's further expansion in the Horn of Africa.

### **Current Threat Posed by Al-Shabaab**

Al-Shabaab continues to pose a significant threat to regional stability and security, particularly in Somalia and neighboring countries. [The group](#), which seeks to establish an extremist interpretation of Islamic law, conducts frequent terrorist attacks, including military-style assaults, kidnappings, and assassinations. Their presence in Somalia destabilizes the wider region through its continued [campaign of violence](#). The group's ability to disrupt trade routes, incite violence, and foster extremism poses a serious risk to the region's security and stability.

## Conclusion

The United States needs to consider whether it can continue to rely solely on a single, overburdened military base in Djibouti—especially with China operating just miles away, international trade routes under threat from the Iranian-backed Houthis, and the Somali government struggling to ensure even the security of U.S. diplomatic personnel in Mogadishu. Establishing a military presence in **Somaliland** offers the U.S. a unique advantage to responding to threats in the region—from terrorist and insurgent threats to the threats posed by China. The **Berbera Port and airfield** provide quicker access to key maritime chokepoints, and are backed by a **stable, democratically governed partner**. While formal recognition of Somaliland carries diplomatic complications, the strategic benefits of a diversified and more readily available U.S. presence in the region are clear.

\*image credit: VOA.

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction or the U. S. Government.*

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