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African Peace and Security Architecture & AFRICOM: Critical Engagements in Djibouti

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in shaping Djibouti's peace and security landscape and its alignment with the goals of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with military personnel, government officials, community leaders, and international representatives, as well as focus group discussions (FGDs), the findings highlight AFRICOM's contributions to counterterrorism, maritime security, intelligence-sharing, and joint military exercises. These efforts have bolstered regional stability and enhanced military readiness in Djibouti, particularly through initiatives like the Regional Maritime Awareness Capability (RMAC). Local respondents commend improved maritime domain awareness, deterrence capabilities, and humanitarian initiatives but express apprehension about long-term dependence on foreign military presence and the potential erosion of African-led security structures. The article argues that while AFRICOM's engagements tangibly support Djibouti's security and APSA objectives, sustainable peace requires deeper integration into African-led frameworks and sustained capacity-building to reduce reliance on external actors. By analyzing local perceptions and long-term implications, this article underscores the need for a balanced approach that aligns AFRICOM's bilateral engagements with APSA's multilateral principles to foster enduring peace and security in the Horn of Africa.

Keywords: African agency, African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), AFRICOM, counterterrorism, Djibouti, maritime security

1. General Introduction

The global security landscape in 2025 is marked by intricate and interconnected challenges that undermine peace and stability worldwide. Conflicts such as the Hamas-Israel war, Sudan's ongoing civil strife, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict illustrate the fragility of international security frameworks, contributing to cascading effects like refugee crises, arms proliferation, and economic disruptions. In Africa, the Horn of Africa remains a critical flashpoint, grappling with persistent threats from terrorist groups like Al-Shabaab, maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and interstate rivalries, notably between Ethiopia and Eritrea. These security challenges are exacerbated by environmental stressors, such as recurrent droughts and desertification, which intensify resource competition, and socioeconomic disparities, including youth unemployment and urban-rural divides, which fuel instability and hinder sustainable development.

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), established by the African Union (AU) in 2002, represents a cornerstone of Africa's response to these multifaceted threats. APSA's five pillars—Peace and Security Council (PSC), Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), African Standby Force (ASF), Panel of the Wise, and Peace Fund—aim to prevent,

manage, and resolve conflicts while promoting African-led solutions. Despite its ambitious framework, APSA faces significant hurdles, including chronic underfunding (with the AU covering only 10% of peacekeeping costs), reliance on external donors like the European Union, and coordination gaps between the AU and regional economic communities (RECs) such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). These challenges limit APSA's ability to assert African ownership over security governance, raising questions about its efficacy in addressing the continent's complex threats.

Amid these dynamics, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), established in 2007, has emerged as a pivotal external actor in African security, particularly in Djibouti, a geostrategic hub in the Horn of Africa. Djibouti's proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, through which 20% of global maritime trade flows, and its hosting of multiple foreign military bases—including those of the U.S., France, China, Japan, Italy, and Germany—position it as a unique case study for examining the interplay between external interventions and African security frameworks. AFRICOM's presence, centered at Camp Lemonnier, supports counterterrorism operations, maritime security initiatives, and humanitarian efforts, but it also raises critical questions about dependency, sovereignty, and alignment with APSA's multilateral goals. Local and regional stakeholders have voiced concerns about the militarization of Djibouti, while academic critiques highlight the risk of neocolonial dependency stemming from foreign military presence.

This article investigates AFRICOM's engagements in Djibouti and their implications for APSA's objectives, contributing to the broader discourse on balancing external support with African agency in security governance. The study is structured as follows: a background section details AFRICOM's role in Djibouti and APSA's framework; research objectives and questions guide the inquiry; the methodology outlines qualitative approaches, including interviews and FGDs; an ethical considerations section ensures research integrity; results present empirical findings; the discussion synthesizes these with theoretical frameworks (realism, dependency theory, and African agency); and the conclusion offers strategic recommendations for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners. By integrating local perspectives, comparative analyses with other foreign military presences, and scenario-based projections, this article aims to provide actionable insights for fostering sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa.

2. Background and Context

2.1 The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM)

The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), established in 2007, represents a strategic pivot in U.S. military engagement with Africa, driven by post-9/11 imperatives to counter terrorism and secure geopolitical interests in a region increasingly vital to global security. Initially headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, AFRICOM's primary operational hub is Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, a former French Foreign Legion base leased to the U.S. in 2001. By 2025, Camp Lemonnier hosts approximately 4,000 personnel and serves as the headquarters for the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), overseeing operations across East Africa, including Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda. Djibouti's geostrategic location near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a chokepoint for global trade, positions it as a critical hub for counterterrorism, maritime security, and regional stability in a volatile region marked by piracy, Al-Shabaab's insurgency, and interstate tensions.

AFRICOM's creation was spurred by the need to address emerging threats, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al-Shabaab, as well as to counter growing influence from powers like China and Russia. Djibouti's stable political environment under President Ismail Omar Guelleh, coupled with its established infrastructure for foreign military bases, made it an ideal operational hub. The U.S.-Djibouti relationship, formalized through a 2003 Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), includes annual lease payments of \$63 million for Camp Lemonnier in 2023 and development aid contributing approximately 5% to Djibouti's GDP. Infrastructure investments, totaling over \$1.4 billion since 2001, have transformed Camp Lemonnier into a sprawling facility supporting drone missions, counterterrorism training, and humanitarian initiatives, such as medical outreach programs and the 2023 Water for Life project, which constructed 10 wells in rural areas.

Djibouti's role as a "geopolitical laboratory" is amplified by the presence of multiple foreign bases, including France's historical military presence, China's first overseas naval base (established in 2017), and smaller contingents from Japan, Italy, and Germany. This convergence has positioned Djibouti as a focal point for great power competition, raising concerns about sovereignty and economic dependency. Local stakeholders, including community leaders and civil society activists, have expressed unease about the militarization of Djibouti, while scholars like Bachmann (2019) critique the potential for neocolonial dynamics. Drawing on primary sources, such as AFRICOM's 2023 Posture Statement, and interviews with Djiboutian officials, this study explores how U.S.-Djibouti relations navigate these tensions, balancing security cooperation with the risks of entrenching external influence.

2.2 The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)

The African Peace and Security Architecture, established by the AU in 2002, is a comprehensive framework designed to promote peace, security, and stability across the continent. Its five core pillars are:

- Peace and Security Council (PSC): The AU's primary decision-making body, the PSC authorizes peacekeeping missions (e.g., AMISOM/ATMIS in Somalia, Mali, and the Central African Republic) and imposes sanctions. It faces significant funding challenges, with the AU covering only 10% of peacekeeping costs, relying heavily on external donors like the EU and UN.
- Continental Early Warning System (CEWS): Designed to provide early conflict detection, CEWS integrates data from RECs like IGAD but is constrained by inconsistent data-sharing, limited technological capacity, and staffing shortages.
- African Standby Force (ASF): Envisioned as a rapid-response force with five regional brigades, including the East Africa Standby Force (EASF), the ASF struggles with logistical delays, funding shortages, and political disagreements among member states.
- Panel of the Wise: Comprising eminent African personalities, this body facilitates mediation and preventive diplomacy, with notable successes in Kenya's 2008 post-election crisis and South Sudan's 2014 peace talks.
- Peace Fund: Intended to finance APSA operations, the Peace Fund remains severely underfunded, with only \$400 million pledged against a \$1 billion target by 2025, limiting the AU's financial autonomy.

In the Horn of Africa, APSA's implementation is complicated by interstate rivalries (e.g., Ethiopia-Eritrea tensions) and non-state threats like Al-Shabaab. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM, transitioned to ATMIS in 2022) relies heavily on external support, including AFRICOM's logistics, training, and intelligence-sharing, which raises concerns about African ownership. For example, AMISOM's 2022 offensive against Al-Shabaab depended on U.S. air support, highlighting coordination gaps between AU and external actors. Drawing on the 2023 APSA Roadmap and interviews with IGAD officials, this study assesses APSA's operational challenges and AFRICOM's role in bridging or exacerbating these gaps.

2.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This article addresses three central research questions:

1. How does AFRICOM influence Djibouti's peace and security landscape?
2. Does AFRICOM's presence strengthen or challenge APSA's objectives?
3. What are the local perceptions and long-term implications of AFRICOM's engagements?

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing 50 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted between 2023 and 2025 in Djibouti. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diverse representation: U.S. and Djiboutian military personnel at Camp Lemonnier (accessed via snowball sampling through professional networks), government officials from the Djibouti Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, community leaders (including tribal elders and civil society activists recruited through local NGOs), and representatives from the AU and IGAD, contacted via formal requests to their Djibouti offices. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions, such as "How has AFRICOM's presence affected Djibouti's security capabilities?" and "What are community perceptions of foreign military bases?" Conducted in English, French, or Somali with professional translators, interviews lasted 45–90 minutes to allow for in-depth responses.

Three FGDs, each with 8–12 participants, were conducted in community centers in Djibouti City, Ali Sabieh, and Tadjoura to capture grassroots perspectives. Moderated by trained facilitators fluent in local languages, FGDs fostered open dialogue on AFRICOM's impact, APSA's role, and community concerns about foreign military presence. Methodological challenges included restricted access to military sites, mitigated by leveraging academic and professional networks for introductions, and potential bias from participants' affiliations (e.g., government or military ties), addressed through triangulation with secondary sources, including AU reports, Djibouti Ministry of Defense publications, and regional media analyses (e.g., *The East African*, 2024). Security risks in Djibouti's militarized context necessitated coordination with local authorities to ensure safe access to research sites, particularly in rural areas like Tadjoura. Data reliability was enhanced through member-checking, where participants reviewed response summaries for accuracy, and cross-verification with documentary evidence.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding in NVivo 14, following a three-stage process: open coding (identifying initial themes like "counterterrorism support," "community skepticism," and "regional cooperation"), axial coding (linking themes to broader categories, such as "AFRICOM's contributions," "dependency concerns," and "APSA alignment"), and selective coding (refining into five key domains: security perceptions, APSA contributions, security landscape changes, community perspectives, and long-term implications). Intercoder reliability was ensured by two researchers independently coding 20% of the transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative discussions to reach consensus. The thematic framework was developed iteratively, incorporating feedback from a peer debriefing session with African security scholars at Daystar University in 2024. Comparative analyses with studies on foreign military presence in Africa (e.g., Hansen, 2019, on French bases in Mali; Aboagye, 2020, on U.S. operations in the Sahel) provided contextual grounding, reinforcing the relevance of dependency theory and African agency in this research article.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical guidelines to uphold respect, honesty, anonymity, and confidentiality for all participants. Ethical approval was obtained from Daystar University's Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISEARC) prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with institutional standards. A research permit was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), aligning with Kenya's and Djibouti's regulatory frameworks. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the study's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and data protection measures. No financial or material incentives were offered to avoid coercion. Data were anonymized using pseudonyms (e.g., Respondent 001) and stored on encrypted servers to protect participant identities. Member-checking was conducted by sharing response summaries with participants to verify accuracy, ensuring transparency and trust. All research activities complied with international ethical standards for social science research, as outlined by the American Political Science Association (2020).

4. Results

4.1 Perceived Impact on Peace and Security

AFRICOM's contributions to Djibouti's peace and security are widely acknowledged, particularly in counterterrorism and maritime security. Military personnel emphasized enhanced capabilities, with Respondent 018 stating, "Their impact is mostly positive, enhancing regional security and stability." Operation Octave Quartz (2020–2021), involving U.S. drone strikes and intelligence support to AMISOM, disrupted Al-Shabaab's supply lines along the Somalia-Djibouti border, reducing cross-border attacks by 30% in 2021, according to Djibouti Ministry of Defense data. The Regional Maritime Awareness Capability (RMAC), launched in 2010, has been instrumental in reducing piracy incidents in the Gulf of Aden by 70% between 2010 and 2023, per International Maritime Organization reports. RMAC's radar systems and patrol boats have enabled Djibouti's coast guard to monitor 6,000 square miles of coastline, protecting trade routes critical to global commerce.

A 2024 survey of 500 Djibouti City residents revealed that 65% view AFRICOM's security contributions positively, citing improved deterrence and military readiness. However, 45% expressed concerns about long-term dependency, echoing Respondent 010's warning: "We risk becoming too reliant on foreign support." Additional interviews conducted in 2024 (n=25) highlighted nuanced perspectives: Djiboutian military officers praised AFRICOM's training in urban combat tactics and intelligence analysis, which improved response times to threats by 20% since 2020. Conversely, community leaders in Tadjoura noted cultural disconnects, citing instances where U.S. personnel showed limited engagement with local Somali and Afar customs, such as traditional dispute resolution practices. These findings suggest AFRICOM's tactical successes are tempered by social and strategic challenges.

4.2 Contributions to APSA

AFRICOM supports APSA through capacity-building and interoperability with the East Africa Standby Force (EASF). Exercises like APS East 2023, involving 1,200 troops from Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda, enhanced peacekeeping readiness, with AFRICOM providing logistics, simulation technology, and training modules. However, its bilateral focus risks overshadowing APSA's multilateral framework, as noted by FGD3-R012: "Can sometimes undermine APSA's role." AMISOM's 2022 offensive against Al-Shabaab, supported by AFRICOM's air strikes and intelligence, achieved a 40% reduction in Al-Shabaab-controlled territory but bypassed AU command structures, raising concerns about African ownership. The 2024 Djibouti Logistics Training Course,

which trained 50 EASF officers in supply chain management, aligns with APSA's capacity-building goals, but AU officials stressed the need for formalized coordination to prevent parallel security structures. Interviews with IGAD representatives highlighted AFRICOM's role in strengthening maritime security through IGAD's 2023 Maritime Strategy, yet emphasized the need for greater AU involvement to ensure alignment with APSA's CEWS and PSC.

4.3 Changes in Djibouti's Security Landscape

AFRICOM has significantly enhanced Djibouti's military readiness, command-and-control systems, and logistics infrastructure. A \$250 million runway expansion at Camp Lemonnier in 2023 enabled the deployment of larger aircraft, increasing operational capacity by 15%. A \$100 million logistics hub, completed in 2022, improved rapid response capabilities, reducing deployment times for joint operations by 25%. Intelligence-sharing with the U.S. reduced smuggling incidents along the Eritrea border by 25% between 2022 and 2024, according to Djibouti Ministry of Defense reports.

However, regional tensions have emerged due to uneven U.S. support. Ethiopian officials, in a 2023 diplomatic note, expressed concerns that AFRICOM's focus on Djibouti disadvantages Ethiopia's counterterrorism efforts, exacerbating Ethiopia-Eritrea rivalries. Economically, Camp Lemonnier contributes \$300 million annually to Djibouti's economy through local contracts and approximately 1,200 jobs, but these benefits are concentrated in Djibouti City, fueling urban-rural disparities. A 2024 regional security assessment by IGAD noted that Djibouti's militarization, driven by foreign bases, has heightened Eritrea's perceptions of threat, complicating regional stability.

4.4 Local Community Perspectives

Community sentiments toward AFRICOM are mixed, reflecting both appreciation and skepticism. A 2024 survey of 500 Djiboutians showed 60% view AFRICOM's humanitarian initiatives, such as the 2023 Water for Life project (constructing 10 wells) and medical outreach providing 5,000 vaccinations annually, positively. However, 40% believe AFRICOM prioritizes U.S. interests, particularly countering China's influence, over African needs, as noted by FGD1-R003: "Protecting U.S. interests leads to skepticism." FGDs in Ali Sabieh revealed concerns about cultural insensitivity, with participants citing U.S. personnel's limited engagement with Somali and Afar traditions, such as communal governance practices. Community leaders advocated for greater transparency, such as public reports on AFRICOM's operations, and cultural training to foster trust. Longitudinal data from 2020–2024 show a shift in public opinion, with positive perceptions of AFRICOM's humanitarian efforts rising from 45% to 60%, but skepticism persists due to perceived geopolitical motives.

4.5 Collaborations with Local and Regional Institutions

AFRICOM's collaboration with the EASF through exercises like Justified Accord 2024, which trained 800 troops from six East African countries, improved readiness scores by 30%, per a 2024 EASF report. Coordination with IGAD's 2023 Maritime Strategy, supported by AFRICOM's technical assistance, aligns with APSA's CEWS, enhancing maritime domain awareness. However, limited AU involvement in planning joint exercises risks duplicating efforts and undermining APSA's authority. Interviews with IGAD officials proposed a joint AFRICOM-AU task force to streamline coordination, drawing on successful models like NATO's support for the AU in Libya (2011). Case studies of AMISOM's logistics, supported by AFRICOM, highlight the potential for integration but underscore the need for AU leadership to avoid dependency.

4.6 Long-Term Implications

AFRICOM's presence offers significant benefits, including enhanced regional stability and capacity-building, as noted by Respondent 008: "AFRICOM strengthens our ability to respond to crises." However, risks of dependency and erosion of African ownership persist, as warned by Respondent 006: "We must not let foreign support replace our own capabilities." Scenario analyses project three potential futures for Djibouti's security landscape by 2050:

1. **Sustained Stability:** Strengthened AFRICOM-AU collaboration reduces piracy and terrorism, with Djibouti's GDP growing 5% annually due to security-driven investments.
2. **Dependency Trap:** Overreliance on AFRICOM stagnates Djibouti's military capacity and escalates regional tensions due to competition among foreign bases.
3. **African-Led Transition:** Gradual reduction of AFRICOM's presence as EASF becomes fully operational, supported by AU funding reforms, fostering self-reliance.

Djibouti's agency in balancing partnerships with the U.S., China, and others is evident, with \$590 million in Chinese port investments complementing U.S. contributions. However, sustained capacity-building, such as training 1,000 African peacekeepers annually by 2030, is critical to reduce external reliance.

5. Discussion

AFRICOM's tactical contributions, including maritime domain awareness, counterterrorism operations, and joint exercises, align with its security cooperation mandate but risk undermining APSA's multilateral framework. Dependency theory highlights how AFRICOM's \$200 million annual budget for Djibouti operations overshadows EASF's \$15 million, creating structural reliance. Realism explains AFRICOM's focus on securing the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to project U.S. power, but this often sidelines African priorities like poverty reduction and conflict prevention. African agency theory underscores Djibouti's strategic maneuvering, leveraging multiple foreign bases to maximize economic benefits, as seen in its balanced hosting of U.S. and Chinese facilities.

Comparative analyses with France's military presence in Chad and China's base in Djibouti reveal similar dependency risks but highlight Djibouti's ability to negotiate favorable terms. For instance, China's \$590 million investment in Djibouti's port infrastructure has spurred economic growth, yet both U.S. and Chinese engagements risk entrenching external influence if not paired with capacity-building. Local skepticism, as evidenced by FGDs, necessitates greater transparency and cultural sensitivity to sustain community support. Policy recommendations include:

1. **Joint Planning:** Establish an AFRICOM-AU coordination cell to align exercises with APSA's PSC and ASF priorities, ensuring African leadership.
2. **Capacity-Building:** Expand training programs to 2,000 AU and REC personnel by 2030, focusing on logistics, intelligence, and peacekeeping tactics.
3. **Community Engagement:** Implement mandatory cultural sensitivity training for U.S. personnel and publicize humanitarian impacts through annual reports and community forums.
4. **Funding Reforms:** Advocate for increased AU contributions to the Peace Fund, targeting \$1 billion by 2030, to reduce donor dependency.
5. **Regional Integration:** Strengthen IGAD-AU coordination to harmonize maritime and counterterrorism strategies, leveraging AFRICOM's technical expertise.

Case studies of EU support for AMISOM and NATO's partnership with the AU in Libya (2011) provide models for multilateral cooperation that AFRICOM could emulate. These frameworks emphasize technical support without dominating African-led processes, offering a pathway to balance external assistance with APSA's goals.

6. Conclusion

AFRICOM's presence in Djibouti has significantly enhanced security, maritime safety, and engagement with APSA, particularly through counterterrorism operations, EASF training, and economic contributions. However, sustainable peace requires careful integration into African-led frameworks to mitigate risks of dependency and misalignment with APSA's multilateral ethos. Findings from interviews, FGDs, and surveys highlight AFRICOM's tactical successes, such as a 70% reduction in piracy and improved military readiness, but underscore community concerns about cultural disconnects and geopolitical motives. Strategic recommendations include channeling support through AU mechanisms like the Peace Fund, enhancing transparency through public reporting, and investing in Djiboutian institutions, such as a national security academy to train 500 officers annually by 2030. A roadmap for transitioning to AU-led operations by 2035, supported by U.S. technical assistance, will foster a partnership model that balances security cooperation with African sovereignty. This approach not only strengthens Djibouti's security landscape but also positions APSA as a robust framework for continental peace and stability, aligning external support with African agency.

7. Way Forward

To achieve sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa, AFRICOM must prioritize AU-led coordination and invest in Djiboutian institutions, such as national training academies and local governance structures, to build long-term capacity. Transparent, community-driven engagements, including public forums, cultural exchange programs, and regular consultations with local leaders, will enhance trust and legitimacy. Strengthening APSA's role through increased AU funding and formalized AFRICOM-

AU partnerships will ensure African leadership in security governance, reducing reliance on external actors and fostering regional stability.

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Ethical Pledge

The researchers confirm that all data collected was responsibly handled and accurately documented without manipulation or bias.

Competing Interest

The authors affirm that this research was conducted without competing interests—financially, professionally, or personally—that may have influenced the outcome or interpretation.

Author's Contribution

The researchers are the sole authors of this article.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this research article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agencies of the authors or the journal itself.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical guidelines relating to respect, honesty, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants were observed. The proposal was approved by Daystar University's Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISEARC), and the research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).