



### ENGAGING AFRICA: GROWING DIPLOMATIC TIES BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND DJIBOUTI

By

Areeba Arif

Research Associate

Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI

Edited by

Najam Rafique

January 27, 2021

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



In a meeting with a 12-member parliamentary delegation of the African Union (AU) in Islamabad on December 30, 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that Pakistan is going to establish its resident diplomatic mission in Djibouti.<sup>1</sup> The AU delegation was led by President National Assembly of Republic of Djibouti, Mohamed Ali Houmed.

The delegation was on a week-long official visit to Pakistan. During the visit, both sides expressed their shared desire to broaden bilateral cooperation in diverse fields like public sector reforms, technical cooperation, infrastructure development and private investment.<sup>2</sup> The two sides also exchanged views on importance of peace and security in neighboring regional context of both Pakistan and Djibouti. Houmed, for his part, appreciated Pakistan's "historical" support and expressed hope that this visit of parliamentary delegation would help further consolidate Djibouti-Pakistan relations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anadolu, "Pakistan to Open Diplomatic Mission in Djibouti", *Global Village Space*, December 31, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistan-to-open-diplomatic-mission-in-djibouti/>

<sup>3</sup> "Pakistan to Open Diplomatic Mission in Djibouti", *Anadolu Ajansi*, Accessed January 14, 2021.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-to-open-diplomatic-mission-in-djibouti/2094111>

<sup>3</sup> Anadolu, "Pakistan to Open Diplomatic Mission in Djibouti", *Global Village Space*, December 31, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021.

<https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistan-to-open-diplomatic-mission-in-djibouti/>

President Dr. Arif Alvi also held a meeting with the AU Parliamentary Delegation.<sup>4</sup> In his discussions with the delegation, the President said that Pakistan and Djibouti are eager to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the areas of commerce, culture and defense. He appreciated the visit of parliamentary delegation and hoped that it would further strengthen the existing foundation of strong bilateral relations between the two countries.<sup>5</sup> The President sought the support of the Government of Djibouti to expeditiously process and clear Pakistani goods at Djibouti port meant for Ethiopia and other destinations in the Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Djibouti is an important country of the African continent. It is situated beside the maritime chokepoint of Bab el-Mandab, and it is a key node in the Gulf of Aden-Suez Canal trade route.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, owing to the country's strategic importance, it is becoming a key focus of great power competition in the Red Sea. It is important to note here that Indian investments in Djibouti are rapidly increasing and it also considers the country as an important node for actual implementation of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Djibouti is a country of immense strategic importance and must occupy a higher place in Pakistan's policy approach towards the African continent.

Under its 'Engage Africa' policy, Pakistan is aiming to foster stronger economic and diplomatic ties with African nations by expanding its diplomatic footprint and deepening economic engagement and this visit is a step in that very direction. Under this policy, trade between Pakistan and Africa has increased by 7%, and during 2019-2020, the level of bilateral trade between Pakistan and Africa reached up to \$4.18 bn.<sup>9</sup>

At this stage when world is facing a severe economic crunch due to COVID-19, it is extremely encouraging that Pakistani exports to Africa are increasing and new avenues of cooperation are

<sup>4</sup> Maqbool Malik, "Pakistan, Djibouti Vow to Strengthen Bilateral Coop", *The Nation*, December 30, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/31-Dec-2020/pakistan-djibouti-vow-to-strengthen-bilateral-coop>

<sup>5</sup> Staff Reporter, "12-member AU Delegation to Arrive in Pakistan Today", *The Nation*, December 28, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/29-Dec-2020/12-member-au-delegation-to-arrive-in-pakistan-today>

<sup>6</sup> Maqbool Malik, "Pakistan, Djibouti Vow to Strengthen Bilateral Coop", *The Nation*, December 30, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/31-Dec-2020/pakistan-djibouti-vow-to-strengthen-bilateral-coop>

<sup>7</sup> Ben Ho Wan Beng, "The Strategic Attractions of Djibouti", *The Interpreter*, February 27, 2017. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/strategic-attractions-djibouti>

<sup>8</sup> Admin. "Djibouti Welcomes India: The Strategic Motivations for India's Visit." *IOA*, February 8, 2018. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://www.inonafrica.com/2017/11/28/djibouti-welcomes-india-strategic-motivations-indias-visit/>

<sup>9</sup> App, "Pakistan's Trade with Africa Reaches \$4.18 Billion in 2019-20: Razak Dawood." *The Nation*, December 27, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://nation.com.pk/28-Dec-2020/pakistan-s-trade-with-africa-reaches-dollar-4-18-billion-in-2019-20-razak-dawood>

opening up. Besides this closer cooperation between these two nations will help devise special package for Pakistani investors and entrepreneurs to invest and extend quality services for Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DIFTZ) as it has also been attracting investments from China, Italy, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other countries.<sup>10</sup>

In the past, despite the cordial relations, very little attention has been paid to Djibouti in terms of enhancing and nurturing diplomatic ties. But now, under practical implementation of 'Engage Africa' policy, this will be an opportune time to build closer cooperation between the two countries. This can be done in diverse fields like Information Technology (IT), education, banking, diplomacy, infrastructure, and sports linkages since Pakistan has already been providing training facilities to Djibouti in the fields of banking and railways. Moreover, Pakistan can also assist Djibouti in providing military training and equipment manufactured in Pakistan.

In the same way, investors from Djibouti can explore prospects of investment in Gwadar which is developing as a trade hub not only for this region, but would also facilitate trade with African countries. Because of its strategic importance, Gwadar is a lucrative prospect as it can serve African countries for their trade with China through this channel. Such cooperation will help enhance the trade volume between Pakistan and African countries manifold.

The decision by Prime Minister Imran Khan to establish a diplomatic mission in Djibouti is a reflection of a proactive approach by Pakistan to implement its Engage Africa policy and outreach to African countries and increasing its economic and diplomatic relations with the African continent. Both countries must now utilize these channels to foster stronger economic ties between the two countries.

---

<sup>10</sup> Written By Neil Ford, "Djibouti Is 10 Years Ahead of Rivals", *New African Magazine*, April 5, 2020. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://newafricanmagazine.com/22626/>