

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 2, 2018

The Honorable John Bolton
Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Bolton:

We are troubled by recent reports illuminating China's immense influence over the Republic of Djibouti and the threat it poses to U.S. priorities and interests in the Horn of Africa. Between its One Belt One Road and String of Pearls initiatives, Beijing's brazen determination to obtain boundless global commercial and military dominance has found its latest partner in Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh. A comprehensive review of President Guelleh's tenure raises questions about his ability to serve as a reliable long-term partner. His authoritarian proclivities, rampant corruption, failure to respect the rule of law, and apparent willingness to sell his country to the highest bidder demand some tough questions to be asked regarding our bilateral relationship.

Unlike so many other African nations pillaged by China, Djibouti has no natural resources. However, its strategic location represents a unique resource - one Beijing is keen to control. In pursuit of establishing dominance in the Gulf of Aden, China initiated a campaign weaponizing the debt owed to it by Djibouti, drowning President Guelleh and leaving him and his country no choice but to transfer national assets -and sovereignty - as repayment. In short order, China finds itself on the precipice of controlling the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait - one of the most critical strategic locations in the world for both commerce and power projection.

As you know, Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti is the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa and is critical to U.S. counterterrorism and intelligence efforts against various groups to include ISIS, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaeda. As confirmed in AFRICOM's 2017 posture statement, Lemmonier is "essential to U.S. efforts in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula" and "serves as a hub for multiple operations and security cooperation activities, assuring access in the region, freedom of movement through the Gulf of Aden, and protecting U.S. interests." Recognizing the importance of Lemmonier to CENTCOM, Commander General Joseph Votel, told Congress, "The activities in Djibouti are not only important to AFRICOM, but extraordinarily important to CENTOM. When asked about the growing Chinese influence, General Waldhauser, AFRICOM Commander, confirmed the consequences are "significant." At

President Guelleh's invitation, China now enjoys a perch to surveil, interfere and potentially impede U.S. operations.

Emblematic of the strong Sino-Djiboutian relationship, last year witnessed endless celebrations between President Guelleh and Chinese officials to include the commissioning the Chinese-controlled Doraleh Multipurpose Port to the raising of the Chinese flag over Beijing's first and only overseas military installation. After ordering U.S. personnel to make room for the expected 10,000 man People's Liberation Army outpost, Djibouti pledged exclusive berths to accommodate China's growing naval presence. Located just a few miles from Camp Lemmonier, China's presence and unfettered control of the Guelleh regime is causing serious consternation in Congress and among senior DOD leadership.

China laid the foundation for its takeover of Djibouti by showering President Guelleh with billions and a sprawling palace they knew he could not repay and would not refuse. In 2017, China employed the same strategy and tactics in Sri Lanka. Unable to make due on its \$1 billion in debt, Colombo was forced to transfer ownership of the strategic port of Hambantota to China. On April 17, 2018, American data-driven research nonprofit C4ADS issued a report detailing China's globalport investment activities, which found, "China-funded vanity projects have demonstrably constricted Sri Lankan sovereignty. Unprofitable, debt-heavy projects like Hambantota Port give China enduring leverage over Colombo's foreign policy—leverage that Beijing has used to its benefit." The report's co-author found China to be "pursuing an ulterior motive" with its investments. The motive tracks Beijing's strategy to secure commercial interests, allowing their military to follow. Deng Xianwu, commanding officer of the People's Liberation Army Navy warship confirms, "Wherever there is Chinese business, warships will have a transportation support point." This same leverage is being applied to President Guelleh and his response suggests history is poised to repeat.

When Beijing called in its debt in late 2017, Djibouti, unable to pay, offered alternative means of repayment. Djibouti's Central Bank Governor, Ahmad Osman Ali, presented Guelleh with the proposal to transfer existing ownership of the Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT) as partial repayment. However, the DCT operated under a legal multi-decade agreement. After failing to wrangle control and ownership of the DCT through legal means, and losing before a Court in the United Kingdom, Guelleh drafted and implemented a new law allowing him to nullify any agreement by presidential decree. With a simple decree, Guelleh expropriated the DCT. This action not only highlights Guelleh's disdain for the rule of law, but reveals his ability to easily dispose of our similar agreement to operate Camp Lemmonier.

Since the illegal confiscation, preliminary contracts have been made between Guelleh's advisers and China Merchants Ports Holdings (CMPH) to transfer the port facility. This move would consolidate port operations under a Chinese state owned company. While the Chinese continue to complain about the level of corruption and incompetence with senior leadership, they recognize the strategic and commercial advantage Guelleh's debt affords them.

What was once considered a stable U.S. strategic partner, security experts and economists now warn is a country irreversibly falling under the control of an ascendant China. In a March

27, 2018 Asia Times analysis, Jon Connors warns, “the coming debt crunch in places like Djibouti presents problems for the US Navy – but it also promotes the idea that tinpot dictators like Guelleh are free to pursue their unsustainable dreams in exchange for pledging allegiance to Beijing.”

The insurmountable debt from China has fueled and encouraged Guelleh’s dictatorial tendencies. After joining the record books alongside Saddam Hussein for winning 100% of the vote, Guelleh pledged not to run for an unconstitutional third term. He reneged and changed the Constitution making himself President-for-life – behavior that was recently emulated by his patron Xi Jinping. As in China, Guelleh meets the mere whiff of opposition, sight of assembly, sound of speech, and ink from press with swift harassment and detention. These actions confirm what the State Department found in 2004, “Djibouti is less a country than a commercial city state controlled by one man, Ismael Omar Guelleh.”

As the U.S. National Security Strategy clearly identifies China as our top rival, we are concerned that China is continuing to expand its presence in close quarters to the home of the only U.S. permanent military base on the African continent. We join the growing chorus in Congress, in both chambers, from both parties, in expressing grave concerns over the behavior of President Guelleh. We strongly urge you to raise these concerns at the U.S.-Djibouti binational summit this spring.

Thank you for attention to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact members of our staff if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



James M. Inhofe
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Cc:

The Honorable James Mattis

The Honorable Michael Pompeo