

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

March 5, 2018

The Honorable James Mattis  
Secretary of Defense  
Department of Defense  
The Pentagon  
Washington, DC 22202

Dear Secretary Mattis:

Last week, the Republic of Djibouti illegally seized control of the Doraleh port terminal by presidential decree. According to reports, Djibouti plans to gift the facility to the Chinese government. While Beijing's aggressive expansion into Africa is not new, I am concerned our military and intelligence assets and ability to operate in this strategic choke point are increasingly under threat due to China's growing influence with President Guelleh's government.

As you well know, Djibouti is a key location for U.S. power projection and operations. According to the Department of Defense, Camp Lemonnier is the only U.S. permanent base on the entire African continent and is "essential to U.S. efforts in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula." The base hosts 4,000 military and intelligence personnel and serves as a key outpost for counterterrorism operations targeting AQIP, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Lord's Resistance Army and ISIS. Home to Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), Djibouti hosts Special Forces, UAVs, helicopters, planes, and a 150-member rapid response force. Established in the wake of the fatal attack on our mission in Benghazi, this unit is tasked to support and protect U.S. diplomatic personnel working in austere environments across the region.

With these sensitive operations based out of Djibouti, I am troubled by President Guelleh's decision to allow the Chinese to obtain land to build a massive base just miles from Camp Lemonnier. Roughly the size of New Jersey, Djibouti is the only country in the world to host both a U.S. and Chinese naval base. With the completion of Beijing's first foreign military base, Djibouti is primed to host up to 10,000 troops from China – more than double the U.S. presence. As confirmed by AFRICOM commander General Thomas Waldhauser, this is the closest to a U.S. installation that a rival has been able to build a base, raising significant "security concerns."

President Guelleh's willingness to accommodate China is further illustrated in recent reports requesting U.S. forces leave the port town to make way for the Chinese. Many in Congress, the intelligence community, and military have warned of the impact this growing foothold will have in the region. During testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on February 27<sup>th</sup>, CENTCOM commander General Votel confirmed "the new military base and port allow China to project forces more permanently within the region and influence strategically valuable trade waterways."

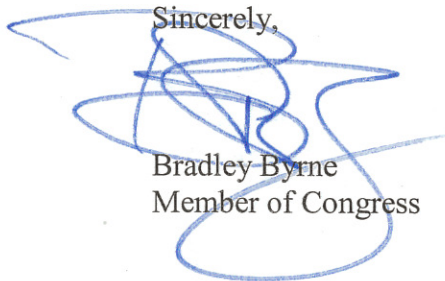
However, China's purchase of influence doesn't stop at the port. Beijing has financed two international airports, a rail line linking Djibouti and Ethiopia, and a new presidential palace for Mr. Guelleh – rumored to be “free of charge.” Improper bilateral business dealings in the region represent such a challenge, AFRICOM addressed them in its 2017 posture statement: “Whether with trade, natural resource exploitation, or weapons sales, we continue to see international competitors engage with African partners in a manner contrary to the international norms of transparency and good governance. These competitors weaken our African partners’ ability to govern and will ultimately hinder Africa’s long-term stability and economic growth, and they will also undermine and diminish U.S. influence.” It is becoming clear what Chinese influence has bought today. The concern is what will it buy tomorrow.

If Djibouti is willing to confiscate a port terminal operating under a legal 30-year agreement, what is to stop President Guelleh from reneging on the twenty-year lease the U.S. signed in 2014 for Camp Lemonnier? The growing correlation between the billions spent by Beijing and actions taken by Djibouti harmful to the interests of the U.S. and our allies raises serious questions. In his 2015 *Foreign Affairs* piece “China Comes to Djibouti: Why Washington Should be Worried”, China scholar Dr. John Lee provides a prescient answer: “Money talks, especially in small and underdeveloped states run by authoritarian governments such as Djibouti—and soon Beijing, not Washington, may have the strongest voice.”

Your April 2017 visit to Djibouti sent a strong signal about the strategic significance and need for a robust U.S. presence. I appreciate your statements highlighting the need for long-established international norms to be followed in and around the increasingly congested country. As you engage your Djiboutian counterparts, I respectfully request you continue to ensure our presence and ability to operate unimpeded are respected.

Thank you for your steady leadership of the Department and continued selfless dedication to our country.

Sincerely,



Bradley Byrne  
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State  
The Honorable Larry Andre, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Djibouti  
Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs