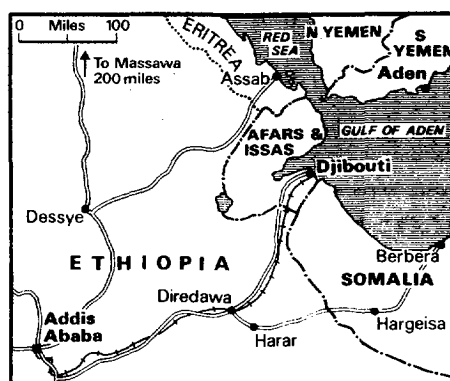




independence the following year; others want a longer transition period. And many of his fellow-Afars suspect he has done a deal with Ethiopia, which has trouble with its own Afars—no cross-border infiltration to help Ethiopia's Afars, in return for Ethiopian support for himself.

In recent weeks both Ethiopia and Somalia have been waging a propaganda war with each other over the territory's future. Officially both countries have renounced their respective claims to Djibouti. But on December 5th Ethiopia cast the only vote against the UN trusteeship committee's resolution calling on France to give the territory immediate independence and to withdraw all its troops. Ethiopia suspects that Somalia wants control over Djibouti and that it plans to get it by insisting that the thousands of Somalis expelled from Djibouti by the French should return before any referendum takes place.

Somalia, which is thought to be host to some 1,500 Russian military advisers at the missile base in Berbera, claims that Mr Aref's deal with Ethiopia means the retention of the French naval and military base in Djibouti after independence. From Ethiopia's point of view a continued French presence would protect its railhead in Djibouti. This line to the sea would become even more vital if the ports at Massawa and Assab were lost to the Eritrean rebels.

Where does all this leave the French? Sitting pretty, probably. Mr Aref says publicly that the French military presence (some 6,000 men) is a *sine qua non* of independence. Otherwise, he says, Somalia might attack and Ethiopia counter-attack. For the French, the old colonial coaling station is no longer as important as it once was, but it provides a useful anchorage for ships on the way to Réunion in the Indian Ocean and a useful airfield from which to overfly the Soviet build-up in Somalia. With luck, and at a price, France and Mr Aref may have their way. It all depends on how Somalia, or rather Russia, decides to play it.

Djibouti

Afar and asunder

FROM OUR PARIS CORRESPONDENT 3 Jan 76

The French may well be about to demonstrate that even in an Africa exposed to Soviet and Chinese colonialism a western country can grant independence and still keep a strong presence, including a military base, by popular request. The Territory of the Afars and the Issas, commonly called Djibouti after its capital, is France's last real bastion in Africa. It is strategically situated on the Horn of Africa, hemmed into a tiny space by politically unpredictable Ethiopia and by Russian-influenced Somalia. The problems of how and when to proclaim its independence were discussed in Paris on Tuesday by President Giscard d'Estaing and Djibouti's boss, Mr Ali Aref.

The easiest and the most probable course is to leave power in the hands of Mr Aref, a staunch friend of the French for the past 15 years. In theory he controls all 40 seats in the Djibouti legislature (the opposition boycotted the last election) but his position has been eroded by the secession of 13 deputies from his party, the National Union for Independence. The party is split on the timing of independence. Mr Aref, who recently escaped an assassination attempt, wants a referendum in 1977 and