

Foreign Engagements in the Horn of Africa: Diversifying Risks and Maximising Gains

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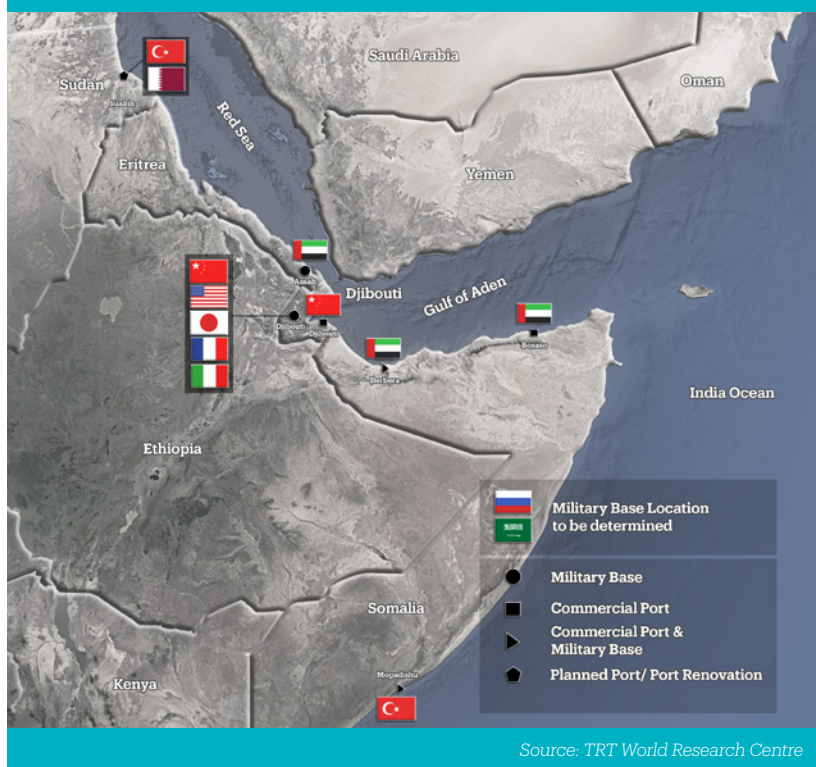
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Introduction

The strategic location of the Horn of Africa has resulted in international and regional competition for influence and control. During the colonial era, the region was caught in the famous 1884-5 Berlin Conference, infamously known as 'the Scramble for Africa', in which European colonial powers met in order to divide the African continent among themselves. The British Empire controlled British East Africa (present-day Kenya and Uganda), Anglo-Egyptian Sudan as well as British Somaliland (currently a region in Somalia) on the Red Sea. Britain was primarily interested in livestock meat supply from the Horn of Africa to its garrisons in its Aden colony en route to British India. Italy also took Eritrea on the Red Sea as well as Southern Somalia. Unlike Britain, the Italians were in search of crops and agriculture, thus occupying the riverine areas in Somali territories. France, which had trade aspirations with the Ethiopian Empire, had occupied the Côte Française des Somalis (French Coast of the Somalis, present-day Djibouti) on the mouth of Bab el Mandeb strait. Furthermore, the region became a hotspot of superpower rivalry during the Cold War. Somalia and Ethiopia initially embraced the communism and became Soviet allies. However, the two

countries fought a border war in 1977-8, which resulted in Somalia leaving the communist bloc following Moscow's ditching of the former in favour of Ethiopia. The United States seized this opportunity to develop ties with Somalia and finally establish U.S. naval facilities at Berbera, on the Red Sea, and Mogadishu, on the Indian Ocean. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, superpower rivalry in the Horn of Africa disappeared. However, the Horn has recently once again become a contested region between international as well as regional actors. There are currently about 10 foreign military bases in the region belonging to France, the U.S., China, Japan, the UAE, and Turkey. While Eritrea and Somalia host some of these bases, most of them are located in the small Red Sea nation of Djibouti (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Foreign Military bases and ports in the Horn of Africa



Source: TRT World Research Centre

The Relevance of the Horn

The Horn of Africa remains geo-strategically significant due to the location of Bab el Mandeb—one of the major global maritime chokepoints. The strait borders the African nations of Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, as well as Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula. More than 40 per cent of the world's oil vessels sails through the Bab el Mandeb, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea and Suez Canal (Davis et al., 2007). A disruption of the seaborne trade passing through the strait would necessitate directing ships around the Cape of Good Hope or moving goods through Saudi Arabia at a significantly increased cost. For this reason, the smooth operation of Bab el Mandeb is considered lifeline for the countries relying on oil from the Arabian/Persian Gulf.

According to Alem Hailu (2007), the Horn of Africa's strategic location has made the region 'a major theatre where governments, movements and political groups ...have sought to intervene in the internal affairs of the area', leading to rise of instability. Similarly, Christopher Clapham in his 2017 book, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*, argues that

external powers... have been absorbed into the existing structures of the region, and have contributed to conflict (and in some cases also to peace) in ways that owe more to their configuration to local circumstances than anything inherent in those powers themselves.

The foreign engagements in the Horn has also lots to do with the region being a potential market. Once considered as one of Africa's most unstable and treacherous regions for foreign investments, a host of international and regional powers are currently competing to gain a foothold. According to African Development Bank (2018), "the Horn of Africa is a large and dynamic market – with a total GDP of \$188bn ... and most economic activity and wealth concentrated in Sudan and Ethiopia." Access to this market, most notably to Ethiopia's large and growing market, has been a considerable reason, albeit not defining, for the recent foreign engagements in the Horn. Furthermore, the Horn's strategic location as the main entry to other African markets, including the huge central African market has increased the region's strategic relevance.

Geographically, the Horn of Africa is part of at least three other regions, the first of which being the Red Sea region. The Red Sea is both divider and connector of the African and the Arabian Peninsula. In his 1985 book, *The Red Sea Region: Local Actors and the Superpowers*, Roberto Aliboni argues that the "Red Sea is at the heart of an area which constitutes the link between two civilizations and two worlds.... and could serve as a model for Afro-Asian as well as Afro-Arab cooperation." Similarly, Ali Mazrui (1986) described Africa's Arab-Islamic culture as one of the major three characteristics that create the continent's religious-cultural tradition. He went on to argue, "The most pernicious sea in Africa's history may well be the Red Sea. This thin line of water has been deemed to be more relevant for defining where Africa ends than all the evidence of geology, geography, history and culture." In fact, three of the four coastal states of the Horn of Africa sitting on the western shores of the Red Sea (i.e. Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia) identify themselves as Afro-Arab and are members of the Arab League organisation. Following the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Bab el Mandeb strait gained greater strategic and economic relevance. It effectively determined a significant portion of the relations between the East Asia and Mediterranean region through its provision of a trade route between the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

Secondly, the Horn of Africa is a sub-region of the Indian Ocean—home to 2.7 billion people. All the coastal Horn nations border the Indian Ocean although only Somalia and Kenya are members of the Indian Ocean Rim Association—an inter-governmental body representing 21 Indian Ocean states. Politically, the Horn of African nations have common membership in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) regional block as well as the African Union (AU). Furthermore, some of these countries, including Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti, are members of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Contextualising Foreign Involvement

As seen above foreign involvement in the Horn region is not a new phenomenon, and reflects historically rooted drive to protect economic and security interests of global and regional powers in the region. This article considers the recent foreign engagements from a security (both maritime and national) perspective in a bid to unravel the major factors driving these powers.

Security is a multifaceted process encompassing different ideas, objectives and interpretations. Various theories of International Relations (IR) provide different explanations of world politics. Realism—one of the oldest schools of IR—concludes that stronger powers dominate weaker states, dubbing the bigger powers as 'selfish actors'. From the point of view of the realist school, the most significant objective of states is to minimise challenges and risks while maximising their leverages (Mearsheimer, 2009). This school also contends the world politics is anarchic in nature, and therefore, states would be compelled to maximise their military power projection and concentrate on matters vital to their very survival (Waltz, 2001).

Under anarchist power structure, states lack trust among each and competition for power is prevalent. Proponents of realism claim that global politics are given in nature, meaning that external threats and challenges are inherent in the system. For this reason, states would have to constantly mitigate external risks and threats to their independence and sovereignty (ibid). Opponents of realism, however, claim this system considers security from a very narrow viewpoint with ambivalent emphasis on the military aspect, excluding other important factors such as political, cultural and social (Sutch et al., 2007).

The Liberalism paradigm of international relations assumes domestic policy as the single most significant factor shaping the political and economic ties among the states and that democracy is the most important factor for the development of peace and security between states. Liberalism in the context of International Relations theory holds that war and conflict can be curbed, and ultimately eliminated, through economic interdependence between states

(Burchill, 2005). Opponents of liberalism argue it over-relied on soft power policy and underrates the hard power of countries (Genest, 2004).

Constructivists opine that international power politics is socially constructed, meaning that social interactions, as well as shared ideals and values, have been driving global politics and determining the impact of societal links on international politics. According to constructivists, state actors shape their identities and interests based on their social structure while shared values and ideas develop peace and security between the countries (Wendt, 1992). For this reason, state actors could initiate inter-state cooperation and avoid conflicts by creating common ideals and shared identity.

In conceptual terms, there are three different distinctive discourses of the security concept. Firstly, the traditional discourse—the state is the most important body and there is no superior power—contends the state can only protect its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity through military means. Military power is a prerequisite for state survival and this can be achieved through state-centred policy (Siradag, 2018). The second approach places less importance on the military and focuses on a human-centric dimension of global politics and places emphasis on issues such as illegal immigration, terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational criminal syndicates. It gives more relevance to how state actors could prevent these threats without shifting the balance between development, freedom and security (ibid). The final conceptual discourse on security deals with a combination of traditional and modern theories, thus seeking to find a balance between the two. This approach assumes that states need to strike a balance between the military and non-military dimensions of the security: strength the military as well as societal, economic, and political security (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011).

The Return of the Superpower Competition

Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the U.S. under the guise of the so-called global war on terror has dominated the region and remained unchallenged until recently. In 2017, China established its first overseas military base in the tiny Red Sea nation of Djibouti where the U.S., France, Japan and some EU members maintain military bases. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) maritime route passes through the Horn of Africa and Beijing has been funding BRI projects in this region, for example, Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway and Mombasa-Nairobi railway. Forty-seven African countries, including the Horn states, have signed Memorandums of Understanding with China during the 2018 Beijing summit on China Africa Cooperation on BRI development.

Another newcomer to the Horn of African politics is Russia. Africa has recently attained greater importance from the Russian foreign policy. Moscow's trade with the different African countries have increased during the last ten years. The Russian army provides personnel to several UN-led peacekeeping missions in Africa and last year, the Kremlin struck a deal with Eritrea to establish a military and naval logistics centre, which will provide the Russian navy access to the Red Sea.

China

During Africa's anti-colonial resistance in the late 1950s, the continent became a signpost of China's ideologically driven anti-colonialism, revolution and Third World solidarity campaign. Chinese authorities provided moral and material assistance to anti-colonial movements across the continent. Ties further increased following Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to 10 African nations between 1963 and 1964. Among these countries were three Horn nations, namely Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan. In Mogadishu, Somalia, Enlai announced the "Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries" and "Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries"¹, both of which would serve as the foundation of Sino-African relations. The documents articulated that ties would be guided by "equality, mutual interest and non-interference," based

on China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence." These principles have laid the foundations of the current Chinese 'non-interference' foreign policy towards Africa (Hanauer et al., 2014).

China is increasingly proving its role as a significant foreign actor in the Horn of Africa. Since the mid-1990s, the Chinese leadership has cultivated close relations with countries in the Horn of Africa. A driving motivation for Beijing's increased engagement in this economically backward region has been resource extraction for its growing economy.² Since the early 2000s, Chinese companies have been exploring oil and gas in the Ogaden—a restive region in Ethiopia's eastern desert. In 2007, nine Chinese workers from the Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau were killed and seven others were kidnapped by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which is seeking autonomy for the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region in Ethiopia (Gettleman, 2007). This event proved China's resolve in doing business in Africa. The Chinese were quick to declare that fear of risk will not deter their operations. Following this tragic event, a senior executive of one of the companies involved in the exploration asserted, "there is no way we will withdraw from Africa due to the fear of risk" (Kurlantzick, 2009). In fact, Poly-GCL Petroleum Holdings Investment Ltd, another Chinese oil and gas exploration company, has recently made test-productions of crude oil in the Ogaden (Kiprop, 2018). Moreover, Ethiopia has been regarded as embracing the Chinese model of economic development. To accelerate its economic growth, Addis Ababa has introduced reforms similar to those that Beijing adopted in the past four decades (Cabestan, 2012). These reforms include an enhancement of the business climate via launching of new and/or special economic zones, a campaign for foreign direct investment, a prudent liberalisation of financial markets and exchange rates as well as piecemeal integration with the global economy (ibid).

In 2013, China unveiled its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—an ambitious connectivity and cooperation plan that spans over three continents, representing 62 per

cent of the world's population, 75 per cent of world's known energy reserves and 30 per cent of global GDP (The World Bank, 2018). The BRI maritime route passes through the Horn of Africa and Beijing has been funding BRI projects in this region, such as Addis Ababa-Djibouti and Mombasa-Nairobi railways. Forty-seven African countries, including the Horn states, have signed Memorandums of Understanding with China during the 2018 Beijing summit on China Africa Cooperation on BRI development. Following the 2018 FOCAC summit, Somalia—the country with mainland Africa's longest coastline—has granted fishing rights to Chinese companies. Although Somali authorities hope this will increase the sustainability of the sector, critics claim the move could deplete the fishing stocks, threaten the livelihood of fisheries-dependent communities, thus resulting the revival of piracy in the Somali coast (Dahir, 2018).

Beijing plays a significant role in the humanitarian and peacekeeping missions in both Sudan and South Sudan. In 1997, Chinese companies, including the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation, secured an oil development with Sudan, thus prompting friendly bilateral ties between Khartoum and Beijing. In response to criticisms from human rights organisations that China was complicit in Sudan's support for militias in Darfur, which included a call to boycott the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China deepened its ties with Sudan. Leveraging on its role in the UN Security Council and its ties with Khartoum, China secured the deployment of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation (UNAMID) peacekeepers to Darfur in 2008.

Following the 2013 outbreak of South Sudan civil war, China has pushed for UN Security Council action, sent Chinese peacekeepers to the UN South Sudan Peacekeeping Mission (UNMISS) and actively participated in the IGAD-led peace talks between the conflicting South Sudanese parties (ICG, 2017). In 2017, 1000 Chinese troops served in South Sudan under the UNMISS, 600 in Liberia and 400 in Mali.

Beijing has also provided over \$49 million in humanitarian assistance, mostly in-kind aid and emergency cash, to South Sudan in a timely manner to produce maximum impact (Hang, 2014). China's assistance, albeit small compared to other P5 countries,^{iv} to Juba seems to be unconditional and free from restrictive regulations and local media scrutiny.

Beijing's peacekeeping policy in South Sudan as well as other African conflicts, such as Mali, has helped China expand its diplomacy across the developing world. These highly visible actions have served to augment China's political capital in the region as it continues to push forward with the BRI (Lanteigne, 2018).

Chinese authorities continuously emphasise the significance of seaborne trade for the nation's overall development. In fact, around 90 per cent of China's exports and imports depend on maritime transportation, thus giving the Chinese navy more responsibility and growing mission (Erickson, 2010). The rise of piracy off the coast of Somalia in 2008, and the subsequent UN Security Council resolutions designed to fight piracy provided an unprecedented opportunity for China's People's Liberation Navy (PLA Navy) to deploy a naval force to the Gulf of Aden (ibid). Since then China maintained a naval presence in the Horn of Africa region.

In 2017, the PLA Navy established its first -and so far only - naval and military logistics facility outside of China in Djibouti. The Chinese Foreign Ministry described the move as enabling "China to better fulfil its international obligations" in handling humanitarian aid, peacekeeping as well as conducting escort missions.

In terms of Chinese engagements in the Horn of Africa, Djibouti is a leading nerve centre within Beijing's extensive 'Maritime Belt and Road Initiative' plan. The particularity of Djibouti's significance is the reality that it hosts China's first overseas military facility. President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti initially indicated a possible Chinese military foothold in Djibouti to press in April 2015. The Djiboutian President finally unveiled the Chinese military plan in May 2015, just seven days after former US Secretary of State John Kerry had visited the tiny African country. Five months later, on November 8, General Fang Fenghui of the PLA General Staff inked an official deal for the base. Following the agreement, US AFRICOM head General David Rodriguez acknowledged that, sadly, US forces would actually soon be sharing Djibouti with the Chinese troops.

Increased military ties did not come unexpectedly. Eighteen months prior, in May 2014, Djibouti sealed a limited military cooperation agreement with Beijing, granting the PLA Navy mooring and bunkering

facilities. Chinese military hardware, including armoured vehicles and weaponry were publicly displayed in Djibouti shortly afterwards (Singh, 2016). On July 11, 2017, the PLA Navy deployed ships from its South Sea Fleet to the Djibouti base, which in essence is a heavily-militarised extension of the Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port (see figure 2). It can accommodate about 400 military personnel and contains ammunition depots, an office complex, and a heliport with a short airstrip among other things (Bhat, 2017). The facility, which the Chinese navy and media consistently referred to a '36-hectare logistics base' for the PLA Navy, was formally opened on August 1, 2017 and was followed a month and a half later with live fire exercises. The Chinese media coverage of the naval base heavily emphasised Djibouti's connection to China's Maritime Silk Road framework and the greater Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).^v

The strategic rationale of the military base is to protect Beijing's rapidly expanding portfolio of investments across the Horn region. The military base in Djibouti seems a reasonable analogue to the increased activities of Chinese companies operating strategically important projects in Ethiopia, Kenya and the entire horn region. Anti-piracy efforts have been pivotal to China's activities in the Horn of Africa; the base augments technical assistance to Chinese anti-piracy mission and other naval and merchant vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. In light of this, another crucial objective of the base is the increased presence of Chinese nationals in Africa and the Middle East. During the Arab Spring uprisings and its subsequent conflicts, especially in Libya in 2011 and in Yemen in 2015, the Chinese government found it difficult to evacuate its citizens without help from western actors when war broke out.^{vi} With an increasing number of Chinese nationals working and living in all the countries of Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, the military base in Djibouti bridges this potential gap. The military logistics base in Djibouti is also central in facilitating China's arms trade and shipment of Chinese weapons and military equipment to the Horn of Africa and other regions of the continent (Exx Africa, 2018).

Russia

Throughout the Cold War, the Horn of Africa was a contested region. Both US and Russia developed relations with the Horn of Africa countries following their independence in the 1950s and 1960s. In course

of the 20th century the US and the Soviet Union engaged in increased competition for influence and military control on the African side of the strategic Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Americans were primarily interested in securing strategic waterways (e.g. the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal) and prevent any expansion of the Soviet influence in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean (Mesfin, 2011). During the Cold War, the USSR pursued a foreign policy based on forward military presence in the Horn of Africa. Between 1955 and 1972, the USSR provided some \$65 million USD of military aid to Sudan, with an arm sales deal that equipped the Sudanese army with tanks, MIG fighter jets as well as air defence systems.

The Soviet's major breakthrough in consolidating an influential position in the Horn of Africa was in Somalia in 1963 when Moscow successfully outbid a Western (US, Italy and Western Germany) military assistance offer of \$18 million USD by providing \$30 million USD. Somalia was further pushed into the Soviet orbit after the military sized power in 1969 and the adoption of a Soviet-style "Scientific Socialism" by the regime. Somalia's geostrategic location provided the Soviets with unprecedented military leverage against the US. In fact, Moscow established a naval base, which contained a communications post to link Moscow with its Indian Ocean fleet and a tactical missile handling and storage facility at Somalia's Red Sea Berbera port. The Soviet's advantage in the Horn of Africa skyrocketed in 1974 when the Ethiopian army overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie and aligned the country with the USSR by declaring Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology.

However, the Soviet's foothold was weakened following the 1977-8 Somalia-Ethiopia border war. During the war, Moscow sided with Ethiopia, resulting in Somalia leaving the communist bloc entirely and ordering an end to Soviet use of naval bases and instructing all Soviet military advisors to leave the country. The US was quick to seize this opportunity to develop ties with Somalia and finally establish U.S. naval facilities at Berbera, on the Red Sea, and Mogadishu, on the Indian Ocean. Additionally, Sudan expelled Soviet military advisors in 1977 amid a consequent worsening of relations with the USSR, primarily resulting from the Soviet support to Ethiopia. Following the deterioration of relations with the Soviets, Sudan, which had been supporting the Eritrean resistance movement, requested US military aid.

The abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union led to Russia close nine embassies, four consular offices and most of its cultural centres across Africa, thus leaving "Africa to the mercy of fate" (Deich, 2009). The demise of the USSR resulted in the US domination of the region over the following two decades. The US spearheaded a UN humanitarian military operation in Somalia following the collapse of the central government and the ensuing civil war. Additionally, the Horn was on the receiving end of further US action following the bombing of American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, the Al-Qaeda terrorist attack on the USS Cole while it was refuelling in Aden in 2000 as well as the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington D.C. The Darfur Conflict, Somali civil war, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and terrorism in Somalia and Yemen led the US to open its only permanent U.S. military base in Africa in Djibouti in 2001. The base was originally under CENTCOM (United States Central Command) and was transferred to AFRICOM in 2008. From this base, the U.S. flies aircraft and drones for missions in Yemen and Somalia. Washington has six other drone bases in the Horn, notably in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya that it stages surveillances and counter-terror operations. Occupying the strategic location adjacent to the Bab el Mandeb strait and neighbouring Somalia, Eritrea, and Yemen, tiny Djibouti has become an oasis of foreign military bases. France has maintained a colonial era base, which also hosts troops from Germany and Spain.

Under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia has revived its relations with Africa and began projecting both soft and hard power on the continent again. While Moscow has significantly increased its trade with Africa in recent years, its army also participates in a number of UN peacekeeping missions on the continent. Russia's long-term foreign policy towards Africa could be described as seeking a multi-polar global order aimed at opposing the uncontrolled influence of superpowers in Africa, namely the US and China. In terms of its relations with Africa, Moscow's veto at the UN Security Council gives it a leverage to oppose sanctions and arms embargos on African regimes, thus allowing it to penetrate Africa's arms markets. Currently, Russia's key interests in Africa include trade, natural resources, arms sales, security as well as power projection. The Horn of Africa has become a natural magnet of Russian involvement, holding the potential to re-establish its geopolitical influence in the critical Gulf of Aden basin and the Red Sea region.

Even though reconstituting relations with the Horn of Africa has gained significance for the Kremlin, the particular state representing Moscow's priority has become a matter of speculation due to an increased rivalry within the Horn itself. While Sudan and Eritrea have boosted their economic and political links with Moscow, succeeding in Ethiopia would be an indication of moving in the right direction in the rest of Sub-Sahara Africa. Ethiopia, one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, is the principle seat of the African Union—the continental body—and hosts the Africa offices of many regional and international organisations, including the UN.

The Red Sea coastal states of Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti could host a Russian military facility, so that it could deploy its navy to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean region on short notice. Djibouti has reportedly refused to host Russian naval base on grounds "that is not used in the conflict in Syria," (al-Rayyes, 2018) but China has allowed a Russian aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, to dock at its base in Djibouti. In fact, Russia has recently unveiled plans to open a naval "logistics centre" at a port in Eritrea (Dahir, 2018). Other unconfirmed reports have previously claimed Kremlin was willing to establish a naval base in Somalia's Red Sea port of Berbera. In 2016, Somalia officially asked Russia for help to strengthen the Somali army in tackling the fight against the Al-Qaeda affiliated terror group of Al Shabaab. A military cooperation with Somalia and potential Russian military base there could make the region a theatre of Russia's anti-ISIS/Al-Qaeda campaign (Ramani, 2016).

The U.S. Hits the Ceiling

Over the last two decades, the US has engaged in overt and covert actions in the Horn of Africa as part of its so-called global war on Terrorism. Somalia has been a major location for anti-terror operations and there are currently over 20,000 African Union peacekeepers battling the Al Shabaab insurgency. Additionally, Washington has been spearheading counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. For many years, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti—the only permanent United States Naval Expeditionary Base in Africa—has been a launch pad of airstrikes against Al-Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia as well as a base of counter-piracy naval action. However, the increased Russian and Chinese engagements in the Horn of Africa are ingredients of a throwback to increased great power rivalry in the region. In December 2018, the Trump administration unveiled its new US Africa Strategy, which

seeks US supremacy on the continent by countering China and Russia. According to remarks by John Bolton, Trump's National Security Advisor, regarding the new Africa policy "Great power competitors, namely China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their financial and political influence across Africa...They are deliberately and aggressively targeting their investments in the region to gain a competitive advantage over the United States," (The White House, 2018). In regards to the Horn of Africa, Bolton argued that China might take over the Doraleh Container Terminal, a strategically-located shipping port on the Red Sea, due to Djibouti's debt owed to China. According to Bolton, if this happens:

The balance of power in the Horn of Africa—astride major arteries of maritime trade between Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia—would shift in favour of China. And, our U.S. military personnel at Camp Lemonnier, could face even further challenges in their efforts to protect the American people (Ibid.).

Furthermore, China is reportedly soliciting a tender for the biggest port in Djibouti and if Beijing wins, that would mean that the supply route to the US base and

mobility of US Navy ships would be under China's control (see figure 2).

As a result, American policymakers have advocated for a new US military base in neighbouring Eritrea as an alternative to the one in Djibouti (Solomon, 2017). Additionally, the US has reportedly begun building land-based supply routes from the Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti to other U.S. camps across the Horn of Africa. The move is part and parcel of a broader American military entrenchment in Africa aimed at countering Beijing and Moscow (Sperber, 2019). In November last year, the US Congress approved \$60 billion in loans for governments in Middle East, Asia and Africa to fund infrastructure projects. The decision is an apparent attempt to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, which has small segment of its projects in the Horn of Africa. While the Horn of Africa may benefit from these engagements, the competing Chinese, Russian and U.S. interests may also put the region in the frontline of superpower rivalry and may lead to destabilisation as the provocations between these powers rise. For instance, in May 2018, the Pentagon accused the Chinese military of attacking U.S. military positions in Djibouti with military-grade lasers, causing injuries to two American soldiers (Dahir, 2018).

Figure 2: U.S. and Chinese bases in Djibouti



Source: TRT World Research Centre

Rivalry From the Other Side of the Red Sea: The Gulf States

The Horn Africa shares centuries of cultural, social and economic relations with the Arab Gulf. The Red Sea—the connector and divider of the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula—historically and today, is a pathway for goods, mostly Gulf oil to Europe, and marine cargo from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal. Gulf-Horn relations have been recently growing stronger. Gulf Countries are trying to expand their reach militarily, politically and commercially into the Horn. The Gulf leaders consider the control of this area along the Red Sea coast to be essential for the delivery of goods as well as their security. However, there are certain main factors that have led the increased Gulf States involvement in this region.

2008 Food Crisis

Gulf-Horn economic relations were more or less dormant during the 1990s. However, in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008 and the rise of food prices, the Gulf States became concerned about food security—primarily resulting from their lack of arable land and adequate freshwater resources for agriculture. While Qatar announced it would produce 70 percent of its food consumption by 2023 through utilising new technologies of water desalination and hydroponics (TWN, 2015), some others in Gulf looked abroad. Gulf rulers encouraged both public and private investment in agriculture abroad, particularly in Asia and Africa (Shepherd, 2013). According to Land Matrix, Africa is the most targeted continent for land investment, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are among the top ten investor-states (Nolte et al., 2016).

Even though it is hard to get accurate data regarding land agreements, estimates indicate that Saudi Arabia has the most agricultural investment (roughly 70 percent) in Sub-Sahara Africa among Arab states, primarily in Ethiopia and Sudan (African Farming, 2012). Saudi Arabia has reportedly invested in Ethiopia's agriculture more than any other country during the last six years. This includes 10,000 hectares of land leased for 60 years and additional 290,000 rented along with US\$2.5 billion investment agreement set to come into play in 2020. Similarly, Saudi Arabia is the leading foreign investor in Sudan, with investments

totalling approximately 50 per cent of the foreign direct investment in the country (Ibid). The United Arab Emirates is second to the Saudis, with over 28,000 hectares of land and agricultural investments in Sudan (Mhlanga, 2010). Likewise, Qatar was negotiating with Kenya to obtain 40,000 hectares of land in Tana Delta as part of a contract to enlarge Lamu port—east and central Africa's largest port—on the Indian Ocean (Rice, 2008). Human rights agencies have decried the investments as 'land grabs' (Al Jazeera, 2014) because the deals entail alterations of indigenous communities' lifestyle, dislocation of communities without compensation as well as environmental degradation, which may ultimately result in social fragmentation (Pascal, 2014).

Between 2000 and 2017, the Arab Gulf States invested approximately \$13 billion across the Horn of Africa (Verhoeven et al., 2018). Foreign investments are a lifeline for the economically poor Horn nations. The two largest countries in the region, Ethiopia and Sudan, have been suffering from a shortage of foreign currency, leading to economic stagnation and domestic unrest. One of the first moves the new Ethiopian Prime Minister did following his election was to secure \$3 billion in investments and aid from the United Arab Emirates, including a \$1 billion deposit in the country's central bank. Despite being the fastest growing African economy during the last 10 years, a lack of foreign hard cash has been a constant stress for the Ethiopian economy, which heavily depends on imports. Sudan has suffered a lack of foreign currency following the breakaway of the South Sudan in 2011 and faced severe economic crisis since then. It have recently received Gulf cash assistance, including \$1.4 billion deposit in its central bank by UAE in early 2018.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring uprisings that started in early 2011 across many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have influenced the decision-making circles across Arab capitals in general and in the Gulf in particular. It was declared in a conference organized by the Doha institute in November 2011, at the height of the uprisings, that "examining relations between

the Arab world and the Horn of Africa occupied an even more important place in the context of ongoing changes in the Arab world”.

Following the deposal of long-time rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya and the continuation of the uprising in Syria, most of the Gulf States took immediate decisions to resist the popular demand for change. They perceived the uncontrollable chain of demonstrations and the demand for democracy in the Middle East as a threat to their security, and ultimately on their grip on power. One of the primary concerns of the Gulf States was that the Arab uprisings would pave the way for the rise of political Islam. The Gulf rulers considered groups with political Islam backgrounds in the MENA region, such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisian Ennahda Party, as direct threat to their regimes. For this reason, the Gulf States supported the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's democratically elected president and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2013 (Steinberg, 2014). The Gulf States' anti-political Islam campaign have also influenced the Horn of Africa, which has significant number of groups with Islamist backgrounds associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (Hanse et al., 2009). The political sphere in Somalia is dominated by Al-Islah—an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood organization established in Saudi Arabia in 1978. Currently, about 30 percent of Somali parliamentarians subscribe to groups ideologically rooted in political Islam (Yusuf, et al., 2017). Like Somalia, Sudan has Islamist constituency and has hosted large numbers of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members who fled the 2013 military takeover in Egypt. The Gulf countries have since been more engaged in the Horn in pursuit of containing the influence of the Islamist groups.

The Yemen Conflict

When the Houthi rebels overpowered the Yemeni Government and seized much of the country in 2015, the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia formed an anti-Houthi military coalition. At the beginning of the military offensive, it became categorical that Gulf States needed additional boots on the ground as well as conveniently located ports and bases. Consequently, Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti, located across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and geographically closer to most of Yemen than Gulf capitals, willingly lent a hand in exchange for monetary compensation.

Since then, Sudan has contributed as many as 14,000 men—mainly comprising the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, a tribal militia previously known as the Janjaweed—to the coalition (Kirkpatrick, 2018). On the other hand, Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea have supplied the infrastructure to execute the war by authorising the use of their ports, airspace and territorial waters for coalition bombing attacks (Taylor, 2016). Since 2015, the United Arab Emirates has had a military base in Eritrea and plans to build another in Somaliland—a breakaway region in northern Somalia. The UAE is driven by concerns over maritime security followed by an ambition to project power and influence through the Horn and the Red Sea region. Saudi Arabia is currently constructing a military base in Djibouti and is primarily driven by rivalry with Iran. In 2014, Riyadh pressured Sudan and Eritrea, both former allies of Iran, to sever ties with Tehran and expel Iranian diplomats. In 2016, Somalia followed by cutting ties and ejecting Iranian diplomats.

The Qatar-Gulf Crisis

In June 2017, three Gulf States—Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain—together with Egypt, cut off ties with Qatar and imposed a full land, sea and air blockade. They accused Qatar of supporting terrorism and of being too cosy with Iran. Following the rift, competition to win allies in the Horn has intensified. Djibouti and Eritrea threw their weight behind the blockading Quartet by downgrading their diplomatic links with Doha. Others, such as Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, preferred to stay neutral in the intra-Gulf rift by urging the conflicting sides to resolve the impasse diplomatically—a position endorsed by the African Union (AU). Some countries have been more vulnerable than others to the realpolitik of the Gulf States. Somalia, a country recovering from two decades of civil strife with a violent home-grown insurgency, has proved notably vulnerable. Mogadishu has adopted a neutral position and attempted to preserve relations with Qatar. Moreover, Somalia has expressed its support for Kuwaiti mediation efforts.

Traditionally, Somalia has pursued a pro-Arab unity foreign policy and backed Saudi Arabia against its rivals. For instance, Somalia, along with Sudan and Djibouti, cut relations with Iran in 2016 after the Saudi embassy in Tehran was stormed by demonstrators protesting Riyadh's execution of a prominent Shiite cleric. In 2015, Somalia also sided with Saudi Arabia against Sweden after the latter criticised Saudi's record on women's rights and human rights more generally. However,

the current rift has had a negative impact on Somalia. Even though the majority of Somalis supported their government's stance towards the Qatar-Gulf crisis, most of its federal member states openly sided with the anti-Qatar camp, causing a political crisis in the country. As a result, the Somali Government relieved some key cabinet ministers from their duties, unseated a regional state leader, deposed a parliament speaker and cracked down on some opposition MPs and parties. Additionally, although the inter-Gulf competition has brought cash and eased the inter-Horn tensions (i.e. Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement and Djibouti-Eritrea mediation), it continues to challenge Horn leaders. For example, many Ethiopians think that Prime Minister Abiy has traded the country's sovereignty for Gulf cash and that Ethiopia seems to be tilting towards the Saudi camp at the expense of Qatar and Turkey (The Economist, 2019).

The Red Sea Forum

During the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Egypt proposed their own version of "Arab lake" policy—alternatively known as the Red Sea forum. The establishment of the Arab Lake idea was initially introduced by Egypt's Nasser as a means to set up sea blockade on Israel during Arab-Israeli conflicts. However, the idea was later expanded to a Red Sea Forum encompassing all the states along the Red Sea coast. Its materialisation proved unsuccessful partly due to Cold War frictions and questions over membership of Israel. In response to the initiative, Israel partnered with Ethiopia, which controls around 85 per cent of the Nile River that serves as a lifeline for Egypt and Sudan, to inhibit the formation of an 'Arab lake' on the Red Sea and lessen the potential of the body water being used as a weapon against it. Consequently, Israel encouraged Addis Ababa to build a dam as well as irrigation projects along the Nile, thereby decreasing the water flow to Sudan and Egypt (Alkim, 2011).

However, a proposal to re-establish the Red Sea forum has recently been promoted as a means of countering common security challenges. Firstly, by the European Union, concerned with security of important sea lanes to the European economy. According to the Council of the European Union (2018):

The absence of an organised and inclusive regional forum for dialogue and cooperation around the Red Sea impedes progress on a wide range of issues, including economic integration and regional

peace and security. The importance of the Red Sea shipping route, the spill over effect of the Gulf crisis and the conflict in Yemen, and a continued fragility across the Horn of Africa demonstrate the need for such a forum. Given Europe's longstanding commitment to and investment in prosperity and stability in the region, we encourage the creation of such a forum as a matter of urgency.

Most recently, new U.N. Security Council member Germany, along with other EU leaders, convened a gathering of Red Sea countries on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in 2018. The meeting reportedly failed to launch a forum due to, among other things, disagreements over whether the West should be included at all (Vertin, 2019).

Secondly, by Egypt, which has the Red Sea's longest mainland coastline and is home of the Arab League—a body that all (except Eritrea and Israel) the Red Sea coastal states subscribe to. Cairo considers the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea as extension of the Suez Canal and critical for its smooth operation.

Finally, by Saudi Arabia, which is more interested in confronting regional rivals, most notably Iran. In December last year, representatives from Red Sea riparian countries (Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) gathered in the Saudi capital Riyadh to discuss the initiative. Through this initiative Saudi Arabia aims to "protect its interests and those of its neighbours and ... to stabilise the region that we live in and to try to create synergies between the various countries" (Al Jazeera, 2018). Barely two weeks after the Riyadh summit, naval forces from the participating countries begun drills in the Red Sea. All these countries are members of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance—alternatively known as the Islamic NATO—established in Saudi Arabia in 2015 to combat terrorism and extremism in the Muslim world. Despite all these efforts from the EU, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, questions over who should participate in the Red Sea forum remain. Should the littoral state of Israel be included? Should the coastal states of Eritrea and Oman as well as other non-coastal nations with major interests in the Red Sea (e.g. UAE and Ethiopia) be included? As a result, the African Union (AU) started discussing a "Red Sea Arena" in which stakeholders of this area can "find out a mechanism whereby they can dialogue on their common concerns over the Red Sea area," (Mohammed, 2017). Additionally, the United Nations Secretary-General

earlier this month has appointed a special envoy for the Horn of Africa tasked with facilitating cooperation and dialogue between countries in the region.

From the Horn of Africa perspective, the Red Sea is strategically essential for regional security as well as the overall economic development of the Horn states. Eritrea controls the longest Red Sea coast—over 2,000 KM—on the Horn of Africa side followed by Sudan with more than 800 kilometres. Landlocked Ethiopia—Africa's second most populous nation and the Horn's largest in terms of landmass and economy—mainly relies on the Djibouti Port on the Red Sea for its trade. The conflict in Yemen has already negatively affected the maritime trade in the Bab el Mandeb Strait. Piracy, terrorism, arms smuggling, illegal trafficking and irregular migration controlled by criminal syndicates and their networks is a growing complex phenomenon in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa (Aregawi, 2015). A disruption or collapse of Red Sea shipping does not only affect Europe and Middle East countries but would immediately impact the economy in the Horn region.

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa remains geo-strategically significant due to the location of Bab el Mandeb—one of the major global maritime chokepoints. The strait borders the African nations of Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti and Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula. More than 40 per cent of the world's oil vessels sail through the Bab el Mandeb, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

Since the end of the Cold War in early 1990s, the U.S. under the guise of the global war on terror has dominated the region and remained unchallenged until recently. In 2017, China established its first overseas military base in the tiny Red Sea nation of Djibouti where the U.S., France, Japan and some EU members maintain military bases. Russia, which had lost its influence in this strategically important part of the world, has recently proved its willingness to engage with the Horn of Africa by establishing a naval base on Eritrea's Red Sea coast. Since the start of the Yemen conflict in 2015, Saudi Arabia and UAE have been using ports and bases along the Horn of Africa to persecute the war against the Houthis. Inter-Gulf rivalry (i.e. Qatar Crisis) as well as competition with Iran have also

Therefore, the geopolitical dynamics in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden necessitated the Horn states to assume greater responsibility and take a leading role—according to a recent decision of the IGAD Council of Ministers 2019—in the establishment of a Red Sea forum. Following its Ministerial-level meeting on the 27th of February 2019 in Djibouti, the Council committed to adopting “a collective approach to challenges in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden by strengthening regional cooperation, and establish a regional platform for IGAD Member States with a view to promote dialogue with other stakeholders including the AU and other international partners,” (IGAD Council of Ministers, 2019). During the meeting, the mandate of the IGAD envoy for Somalia, Mr. Mohamed Ali Guyo, was also expanded to include the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea in coordination with the AU as may be appropriate. The Ministerial decision, if properly implemented, could be a signpost of an IGAD regional coordinated effort to reverse the current deeply asymmetric relationship with the wealthy Gulf States towards an equal footing.

fuelled the Gulf States foray into the Horn of Africa. Currently, the UAE has a military base in Eritrea and is building another in Somalia. Riyadh, too, is reportedly developing a military base in the tiny Red Sea country of Djibouti.

While many of these powers consider the Horn of Africa as a base from which they can project their power, there are also transnational security threats in the region, which have engendered external intervention. These include piracy, terrorism, illegal trafficking and irregular migration. However, the recent increase of foreign involvement has revived the age-old drive of global and regional powers to dominate the Horn of African countries in order to safeguard security and commercial interests alike. The revival of great power competition in the Horn may put the region in the frontline of superpower rivalry, leading to destabilisation. While rivalry from the other shores of the Red Sea (i.e. The Gulf) may contribute to a short-term regional development (e.g. Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement), it may at the same time exacerbate intra-Horn tensions and result long-term regional instability.

Notes

ⁱ The eight principles are listed in this website: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-08/13/content_11149131.htm

ⁱⁱ The principles are listed in this website: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/China-Africa/82054.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia have rich, mostly unexploited natural resources including oil, gas, and fish and minerals.

^{iv} P5 are United States, United Kingdom, Russia, China and France.

^v For instance: Chinese News Agency: http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-07/12/content_4785301.htm and, Russia Today, <https://www.rt.com/news/404593-china-military-drills-djibouti/>

^{vi} The 2018 Chinese drama film “Operation Red Sea” loosely reflected China’s evacuation of its citizens from Yemen in 2015.

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