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U.S.-China Strategic Competition in the Horn of Africa and Implications for Regional Security

Nasir M. Aliⁱ

Abstract

The Horn of Africa is one of the most significant and contested geopolitical regions in the world, next to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The region is vital for the global supply chain, accounting for approximately 12% of global trade; furthermore, oil and gas, along with approximately 30% of global container traffic, pass through this crucial sea route. Also, digital infrastructure and seabed cables carrying data between Europe, Africa, and Asia are heavily concentrated in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean alongside the coast of the Horn. For these reasons, the Horn of Africa was a battleground of the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Currently, there is a renewal of the Cold War rivalry predominantly due to power competition between the U.S. and China, as both countries have a military presence in Djibouti. On the other hand, there are powers from the Middle East interested in having a foothold in the region. For example, Turkey established its first military base outside Turkey in Mogadishu, Somalia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) built a base in Berbera, Somaliland. This study employs realism theory as a framework of analysis to examine the multi-layered competition that exacerbates security dilemmas across the region, which has long been synonymous with conflict and crisis in the international discourse. The study underscores the need for revised national policies in dealing with foreign powers and stronger regional institutions to avoid a potential proxy war.

Keywords: Horn of Africa, U.S.-China rivalry, strategic competition, regional security, military bases, Djibouti, Belt and Road Initiative, realism, geopolitics, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, proxy conflict, Middle East, UAE, Turkey, Somaliland, maritime security, great power competition, foreign policy, Cold War.

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa is one of the most geopolitically significant regions in the world, next to a critical maritime route through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This critical corridor is one of the most important shipping routes globally, where a significant portion of global trade, energy, and submerged fiber-optic cables pass (Juned & Saripudin, 2025).

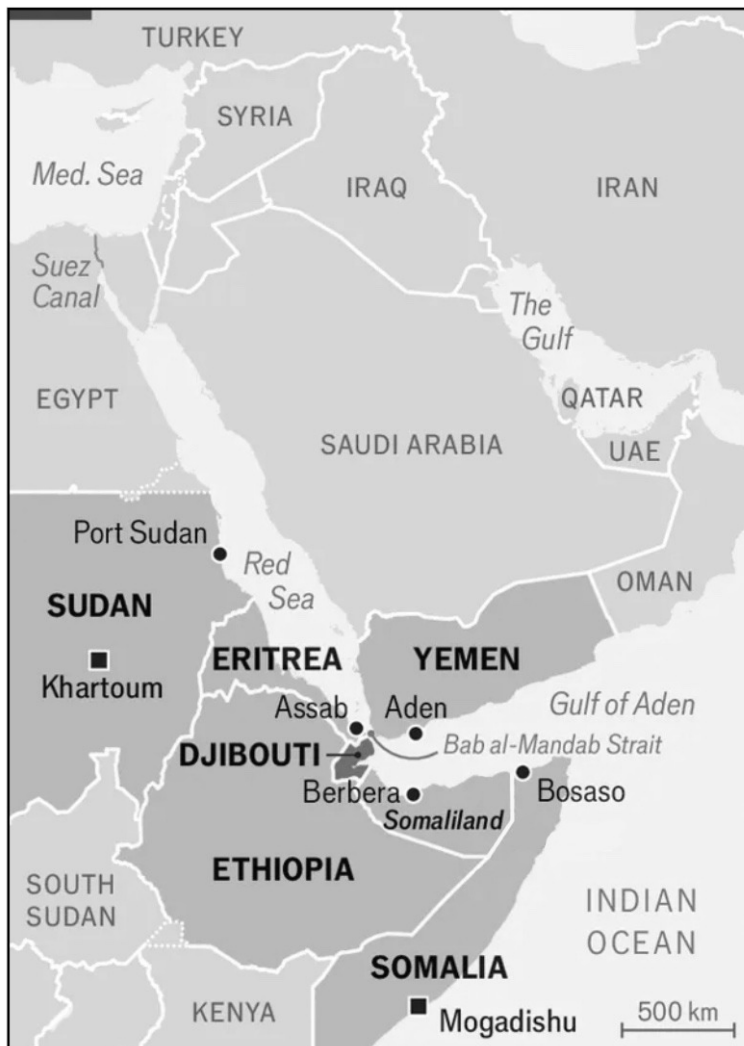


Figure 1. Map of Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean (RCF)

This trade route has served as a nexus of commerce, culture, and empires for centuries, connecting the Mediterranean region to the Indian Ocean and beyond (see Figure 1). Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, connecting the Mediterranean and Red Sea, its significance increased. The Suez is a primary passage for vessels navigating between Europe and Asia, transporting significant quantities of oil and natural gas from the Middle East vital to the global economy (Alcaide et al., 2024; Ylönen, 2024; Ganguly & Gupta, 2025). The security of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East, however, are intertwined. Security threats are compounded by significant geopolitical factors, including their geostrategic locations, natural resources availability, such as oil and gas important for the world economy.

Due to a combination of geopolitical factors, the involvement of external actors has consistently aggravated the conflicts in the Horn of Africa (Kanet, 2006). The Horn was a battleground of the superpowers during the Cold War, where both the United States and the Soviet Union armed the regional countries, particularly Ethiopia and Somalia, and built the strongest militaries across the Sub-Saharan Africa region (Bienen, 1982). Conversely, the Horn of Africa states exploited the attention, leveraging military assistance and bases to advance their own political and security objectives (Perlez, 1989; Lefebvre, 1998). However, the strategic significance of the Horn of Africa for the West declined after the end of the Cold War, with geopolitical attention shifting to Eastern European countries and Asia (Carrozza, 2018). This period was short-lived; by the end of the 1990s, a confluence of new security threats, and especially the emerging powers from the East, had triggered a resurgence of Western engagement.

The decision to return to the Horn of Africa was precipitated by the 9/11 attacks in the United States, as the U.S. subsequently established a military base in Djibouti. The stated objectives of the base were counter-terrorism and maritime security, but the fundamental driver was to secure maritime corridors and reassert America's geopolitical influence and hegemony (Woodward, 2006). The rise of China as an economic and political power, and its intention to project power to the global important corridors such as the Horn of Africa has further complicated this

geopolitical landscape. While China's official foreign policy mandate is economic, centered on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects—seaports, highways, railways—establishing a military base in Djibouti signaled a new beginning of strategic competition with the U.S. in an already fragile region (Igbinoba, 2016; Chaziza, 2018).

Furthermore, Middle Eastern actors like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, have become increasingly involved in the region's political dynamics, exploiting this great power rivalry to advance their interests and further complicating the regional power structure. Hosting these rival powers creates new vulnerabilities, placing the region at the nexus of competing political, economic, and military interests. Wallerstein's world-systems theory (1976) is relevant in this analysis. This theory describes a single global capitalist economy structured into a fixed hierarchy. This means that wealth flows directly from the poorer, weaker regions to the wealthier and richer ones, which makes the poorer dependent on the wealthier and the powerful. In other words, the dominant core consists of developed and advanced countries that exploit the underdeveloped periphery. From a world-systems perspective, the global economy is structured in ways that consistently advantage core states. In this context, Middle Eastern actors function as semi-peripheral intermediaries, while the Horn is positioned as a site through which core economic and strategic interests are advanced, shaping regional dynamics without conferring comparable power to local actors.

This article argues that U.S.-China competition exacerbates pre-existing regional conflicts, creating a complex proxy landscape that ill-equipped regional states cannot adequately manage. The article also analyses the impact of emerging powers in neighboring regions—such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—attempting to establish a foothold in the region. This multi-actor competition is causing securitization of the region and threatening peace. This article, therefore, attempts to examine these contending powers—core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral— and proceeds as follows: First, it outlines the theoretical framework of the study by adopting realism as a framework of analysis. Second, the article details the U.S.-China

strategies in the Horn of Africa and their drivers. Third, it analyzes the complicating players from the Middle East. Fourth, it discusses the consequences of those competitions on the regional security dynamics, and finally, the conclusion that basically underlines the importance of the Horn of Africa and the implications that competition for power could have on it.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the intricate relationship between regional security dynamics and external power competition within the region. This geographical area is of significant geopolitical interest due to its strategic location along major international shipping routes and its emerging role as a vital node in regional supply chains. The qualitative approach was selected to facilitate a deep, contextual understanding of the complex political, security, and economic interactions that shape the region. The methodology is primarily grounded in an extensive review and synthesis of existing academic literature, policy reports, and geopolitical analyses concerning the Horn of Africa, the involvement of external actors such as the United States, China, and handful of states from the Middle East, and the region's developmental and political trajectories.

This desk-based research is significantly enriched by key informant interviews with academics, diplomats, and security analysts, both in the region and beyond. For ethical purposes, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All interviews and discussions were done with the participants' consent after the study's goals and results were explained. All data were securely stored to build trust and safeguard participants' identities. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights regarding the study topic. The thematic analysis process began with systematic transcription of interviews and discussions, followed by repeated readings of the transcribed data to enable close familiarity with participants' narratives. This combination of secondary source analysis with primary data ensures a nuanced and empirically grounded analysis of how

global and regional power competition manifests in and shapes the future of this strategically and geopolitically critical region.

Theoretical Framework: Realism and State Power in a Fragile Region

This article adopts realism theory, a dominant paradigm in international relations, as a framework of analysis. Scholars like John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz remark that it is a philosophical position comprising various competing theories, including classical, neo-realism (structural realism), offensive, and defensive realism (Snyder, 2002). Notwithstanding their distinctions, these theories possess common fundamental assumptions: states are the principal actors in an anarchic international system, and their actions are influenced more by external factors than by internal political ideologies; and, as rational actors, their primary motivation is survival, which compels them to seek power in a competitive, zero-sum environment (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca, 2017). Thus, power constitutes the fundamental element of international politics, necessitating those states continually gauge one another's economic and military strengths to either expand their own relative power or inhibit others from achieving dominance (Ibid). Realists contend that the primary goal of every state is to guarantee its security in a hostile, anarchic context. Therefore, state policy is influenced by calculations of power and national interest, resulting in shifting alliances where old allies may be deserted and former adversaries welcomed according to strategic necessities (Rochester, 2010). This emphasis favors subjects such as military strategy, diplomacy, and components of national power over international law frameworks.

As has been noted, the fragile and geopolitically contested Horn of Africa provides a compelling case to study growing securitization using realist theory, which effectively explains how states and great powers, driven by security and strategic advantages and interests, engage in competition and intervention (Khadiagala, 2008). The framework of Kenneth Waltz, who highlights the structural limitations of the international system, and John Mearsheimer, who concentrates on the aggressive ambitions of great powers to gain regional supremacy (Donnelly,

2000; Snyder, 2002; Rochester, 2010), are particularly useful for analyzing this state practice and behavior. However, the region also exposes realism's key limitations. The theory's state-centric focus struggles to account for influential non-state actors such as the African Union (AU) and Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). It also underestimates and undervalues critical factors such as economic interdependence, soft power, and ideational forces like political Islam and Pan-Somalism ideology in the Somali context, for example. While its status quo bias makes it better at explaining conflict than meaningful cooperation or political transformation in the Horn of Africa.

Many critics of realism find fault with its foundational assumptions regarding the 'balance of power' – a dynamic where states continuously strive to enhance their own capabilities while weakening those of others (Donnelly, 2000). Realists are often accused of neglecting consideration of non-state actors such as international organizations and regional institutions, overemphasis on military power, and finally, status quo bias. Alternative theoretical frameworks like constructivism, then, emphasizes state identities, norms, and shared beliefs and may examine the influence of conceptual factors such as political Islam or Pan-Somali nationalism in the Somali context, for example. Liberalism, on the other hand, may emphasize possibilities for cooperation via international institutions and interdependence in world politics.

While liberal perspectives maintain that peace is preserved by ethical norms or formal institutions (either state or non-state), realists argue that a stable balance of state power or coalitions of states willing to counter aggression are necessary to achieve and maintain peace (Rochester, 2010). The latter perspective prioritizes consideration of national interest, and views international rules and institutions with skepticism, seeing them as unable to truly transcend the prevailing logics of nationalism and power politics (Donnelly, 2000). Realism remains a highly relevant theory for analyzing contemporary inter-state rivalries, including competition among core global powers, emerging semi-peripheral powers from the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa.

The primary determinants of the geopolitical rivalry in the Horn of Africa are most clearly explained by the competitive and

state-security-centric principles of realism. The anarchic nature of the international system necessitates that states of all sizes—from the core global powers of the U.S. and China to the emerging regional powers of the UAE, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia—feel the need to prioritize their own survival and interests. States' use of realist logic is evident in the continuous consolidation of power via military facilities, economic investments, and diplomatic strategies, transforming the Horn of Africa into a key battleground for conflicting national interests. The growing security concerns, the exploitation of local tensions, and the prioritization of strategic necessity over normative goals are defining characteristics of a realist paradigm. To comprehend the significant and dangerous militarization of the region by foreign countries, along with the complex network of alliances and rivalries that characterize it, one must start with the enduring principles of realist theory, which explain the foundational structure of power and interest underlying the intricate dynamics of current events in the Horn of Africa.

The strategic race between the U.S. and China in the Horn of Africa exemplifies classical power politics, where the U.S., the prevailing global hegemon, seeks to sustain its supremacy by controlling critical sea routes like the Red Sea corridor. China, on the other hand, is an expanding power, and wants to project its political and economic influence into the region. This is evidenced by the militarization of Djibouti, which hosts both America's sole permanent African base and China's only overseas naval base (Kamski & Schröder, 2025). The U.S. security alliances and the state's enduring military presence are strategically aimed at countering China's growing influence, for one hand, and safeguarding the critical maritime routes, on the other. Conversely, China's extensive BRI infrastructure investments serve as tools of geo-economic influence compounded by political factors to foster dependencies and secure supply routes (Kamski & Manek, 2022; Tarrósy & Vörös, 2025). This great power interaction creates a dilemma, where actions by one state to enhance its security—such as China establishing a naval base or the U.S. intensifying its regional presence—are perceived as threats by the other, provoking a cycle of countermeasures and escalating tensions. This is true not

only in the Horn of Africa, but also there are similar regions, such as the Indo-Pacific (Swaine, 2019; Lin et al., 2020; Fong, 2024). This cycle has led to a proliferation of foreign military bases in the Horn region that remains a fragile and geopolitical contested landscape.

This contestation is further complicated by emerging Middle Eastern powers—notably the UAE, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia—whose involvement is driven by a realist pursuit of national and strategic interests in an anarchic international environment. These states actively view the Horn of Africa as an extension of their regional security premises and complex. The UAE has projected power by establishing a temporary military facility in Assab, Eritrea, for its war against Yemen and by securing a strategic port concession agreement with Somaliland (ICG, 2019; Verhoeven, 2018; Vertin, 2019). Turkey, guided by its strategic depth doctrine, has cultivated a strong partnership with Somalia, including building its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu and making substantial infrastructure investments (Alekseevich, 2018). Saudi Arabia seeks to secure the Red Sea, a vital route for its oil exports, and counter the influence of rivals like Iran and Turkey. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has pursued establishing a military foothold in Djibouti, and revived the Red Sea Council in a conference hosted by Saudi Arabia in 2020, a regional security alliance with countries that face the Red Sea (Melvin, 2019; Feierstein, 2020). From a realist perspective, these actions are fundamentally motivated by a desire to project power, control critical maritime access points, and neutralize the influence of regional adversaries.

In combination with these contending positions of those competing powers in the region, a realist lens exposes the Horn of Africa's fragile states as spaces for external competition, resembling Cold War-era proxy dynamics. Their internal weaknesses and vulnerabilities—governance deficits, economic deficiencies, and internal conflicts—make them prone to manipulation and exploitation by dominant powers pursuing national interests in an anarchic system similar to the Cold War era (Schwab, 1978; Makinda, 1982; Woodward, 1996). This dynamic is evident in the UAE's dealings with Somaliland and Somalia and also Turkey, which works with both. External

involvement in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict and the war in Sudan, where both Turkey and the UAE are involved differently, provides further evidence of how the two Middle Eastern states are competing in the regional political dynamics (ICG, 2019; Kurtz et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that this study does not disregard the agency of periphery actors like Somaliland, Somalia, and Sudan. These countries are also, according to realism, acting according to their political and security interests to gain power. However, core states further this vulnerability by prioritizing strategic interests over local principles and needs (Wallerstein 1976). The U.S. has securitized regional alliances, countering both terrorism and Chinese influence, while compromising its advocacy for democracy, human rights protection, and infrastructure development. Conversely, China's policy of non-interference, often criticized for enabling authoritarian regimes, is a strategic choice some periphery states make to secure resources without Western political conditions (Tull, 2006; Kamski & Manek, 2022). Similarly, the actions of Middle Eastern powers are driven by their own security and economic agendas, not necessarily a commitment to the Horn's stability, underscoring the pervasive realist pursuit of national interest.

The Logics of Core Power Engagement

The following subsections provide a detailed analysis of the distinct yet intersecting strategies of the U.S. and China in the Horn of Africa. Both countries, from a realist perspective, are struggling to secure supremacy in pursuit of national interests. This section examines the military basing of both countries, their security alliances, and the investments driven by their national policies, such as China's BRI infrastructures. It also analyzes how both powers leverage these tools to secure influence and counter each other in this strategic region.

The United States: Securing Hegemony

The United States' foreign policy toward the Horn of Africa combines a number of elements. For decades, the Horn of Africa has been a region of sustained U.S. attention, during which time the United States cultivated a cadre of regional specialists whose

expertise and on the ground experience were developed specifically to advance U.S. national interests (Woodward, 2006). Early interest of the U.S. in the region goes back to the beginning of the Cold War in the 1950s, when the region was the site of proxy Cold Wars. However, the global political change of 1989, concluding the Cold War, fundamentally reshaped the Horn of Africa (Ali, 2019). Once a key battleground for the U.S. and Soviet Union proxies, the Horn of Africa's strategic significance initially appeared to decline (Carrozza, 2018). This strategic shift resulted in dramatic changes in the region, where longtime military rulers of the "frontline states," namely Ethiopia and Somalia, collapsed in 1991 (Lefebvre, 1998). Ultimately, the region's importance did not decline, but instead transformed. The U.S., the remaining superpower, found itself navigating a new, complex landscape defined by state collapse, regional conflicts that have both inter- and intrastate dimensions, and emerging non-state threats such as terrorism and piracy.

U.S. security in the post-Cold War era took various forms. U.S. security strategy increasingly centered on asymmetric threats, as policymakers and military planners anticipated challenges from weaker actors employing unconventional tactics, such as terrorism and/or threats of weapons of mass destruction, to target the U.S. Although the U.S. military forces and civilian facilities overseas did face asymmetric threats, defense analysts in the 1990s, both within and outside the U.S. government, voiced concern that a key area of weakness was the nation's ability to protect itself at home. A tragic validation of this argument occurred on 11 September 2001 (Sloan, 2005). This act of terrorism returned the Horn of Africa to the center of global strategic attention. The U.S. established a critical military facility in Djibouti, yet its strategy has frequently prioritized short-term security cooperation with authoritarian leaders over consistent support for democratic governance, human rights protection, and development initiatives (Mampilly & Stearns, 2020). A case in point is, America's excessive support for Ethiopia, despite its documented human rights abuses (Felbab-Brown, 2021). This inconsistency in the U.S. foreign policy gave a gap for rival states to enhance their influence, altering alliances and economic dependencies throughout the region.

The U.S. inconsistent foreign policy approach was exploited by emerging powers. China, Turkey, and the UAE increased their engagement with the region through infrastructure investment, ports development, and security agreements, directly challenging America's historical supremacy in the geopolitically significant region (ICG, 2019). The current situation underlines that the U.S. confronts the problems of adjusting to a multi-polar Horn of Africa region, where American power and influence are no longer unmatched (Negatu, 2022). This changing political landscape can force the U.S. to reconcile its security interests with sustained support for political and economic stability, democratic institutions, and conflict settlements across the region.

The U.S.-China rivalry is multi-faceted and extends beyond the Horn of Africa, such as to the Indo-Pacific region, where both powers are involved in a complex rivalry over economic and military influence (Swaine, 2019; Lin et al., 2020; Fong, 2024). The confrontations between these two superpowers recently shifted from the Horn of Africa to the South China Sea, where the U.S. attempts to contain China, leveraging countries that claim the South China Sea, and strategically reversing the 'aggressive expansion of China into Third World countries' (*interview with professor of political science and international relations in Ethiopia*). In a nutshell, the strategic nature of the confrontations between the two powers in the Horn centers on safeguarding trade routes in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

While the Horn of Africa has been a strategically important region for the United States, the arrival of Taiwan into the region bolsters the United States' presence. In 2020, Somaliland and Taiwan forged a formal relationship. This new relationship, particularly with implicit U.S. support, introduces significant security challenges to the Horn of Africa. The region is already a focal point of international competition, and the Somaliland-Taiwan connection intensifies this on the one hand and secures the U.S. hegemony on the other. In response, China, which has a major military base in neighboring Djibouti, is working with Somalia to undermine the partnership, including through involvement in local conflicts, such as the Las Anod conflict in eastern Somaliland in 2022 and 2023 (Rubin, 2023). Conversely, the U.S. has shown support through advocates in Congress, and

the U.S. Africa Command (Africom) is negotiating with Somaliland to use Berbera Airport for military purposes (Bhardwaj, 2024). This external backing transforms the bilateral tie into a potential flashpoint. Therefore, any pressure from China to sever Taiwan-Somaliland relations now risks not only regional instability but also a direct confrontation with American political, economic, and military interests in the Horn. Consequently, what began as a bilateral partnership has escalated into a microcosm of broader geopolitical rivalry, bringing the contest between the U.S. and China to the Horn of Africa and raising the stakes for regional security.

On the other hand, establishing a military facility in a stable region, like Somaliland, could offer the U.S. strategic advantages in monitoring key maritime corridors and countering the growing influence of both China and Russia for one hand (Ducharme, 2025). On the other hand, the potential use of the Somaliland Berbera port's infrastructure to support military logistics, particularly for any U.S.-led war against Yemen, risks drawing Somaliland directly into an external war. This militarization could make Berbera a legitimate target for adversarial forces, such as Yemen's Houthi rebels, thereby importing a foreign conflict onto Somaliland's borders and undermining its hard-won advances in internal security and stability (Ali & Nyelade, 2025).

America's involvement in the Houthi conflict and the war against terror negatively impact America's image in the region. For example, drone attacks under American auspices cause casualties, including civilians, and create negative perceptions of the U.S. across the region. Therefore, the arrival of Africom in Somaliland may invite terrorist actors to penetrate Somaliland and target critical infrastructure in the country. In sum, a Somaliland-U.S. military partnership might offer both opportunities and profound risks. The long-term survival of the state is more important than short-term benefits for those politicians running the state institutions, not only in Somaliland but also across the regional countries. Realists view U.S. global military presence as essential for maintaining security and balancing rivals, seeing it as a pragmatic strategy to preserve state power in an anarchic world. Critics, however, frame this as imperialism or liberal hegemony, arguing it projects power to

secure economic interests, shape global norms, and entrench U.S. dominance, often at the expense of other nations' sovereignty.

The current U.S. policy to the region is reactive and security-centric, primarily countering terrorism and maritime security. For decades, the United States has served as the primary guardian of maritime security of the Red Sea waters. A paradigm shift from this approach is essential. The U.S. must acknowledge and recognize that counter-terrorism and maritime security across the Red Sea waters alone cannot safeguard America's long-term strategic goals nor lessen China's steadfast expanding influence, which has both economic and political dimensions. The U.S. strategy must thereby combine security collaboration with substantial economic statecraft, providing alternatives to Chinese financing that are transparent, sustainable, and corresponding with local development aspirations. However, the domestic-focused "America First" foreign policy of the Trump administration can no longer serve the U.S. broader national interest; for example, the dismantling of essential agencies such as USAID created a strategic vacuum. China is now poised to fill that gap, potentially leading to its dominance in the Horn of Africa and other critical regions globally.

The National Security Strategy released by the U.S. in November 2025 addresses America's position towards Africa, and the Horn of Africa in particular:

The United States should transition from an aid-focused relationship with Africa to a trade- and investment-focused relationship, favoring partnerships with capable, reliable states committed to opening their markets to U.S. goods and services. An immediate area for U.S. investment in Africa, with prospects for a good return on investment, include the energy sector and critical mineral development. Development of U.S.-backed nuclear energy, liquid petroleum gas, and liquified natural gas technologies can generate profits for U.S. businesses and help us in the competition for critical minerals and other resources.

In sum, the dissemination of aid to Africa is of less interest to the Trump administration, while the U.S. recognizes the growing securitization and investment possibilities in the region.

The People's Republic of China: Projecting Power

After the Cold War, many African countries changed their foreign policy toward China, allowing Chinese goods and investments to enter their markets. This development has made China a large economic power in the region, competing with the U.S. and European countries involved on the continent. China is now Africa's top trading partner. China uses soft power, especially by making non-stringent investments and financing infrastructure projects, to further its geopolitical goals. As China-Africa relations expand, the questions of why African countries prioritize engagement with China and the possible long-term repercussions of this alliance becomes increasingly significant. Western donors often make their aid conditional on reforms in governance, respect for human rights, and open government procedures. On the other hand, China does not interfere in the political and policy issues of African countries, which is appealing to African governments (Ali, 2025). Therefore, as African governments seek quick infrastructure development and economic growth, they are interested in the non-stringency of Chinese investments. The growing interests of China in economic, diplomatic, and security (including armaments) matters in Africa increasingly result in formal relations, as China seeks to expand the BRI and its influence to the extent that it will continue to provide the resources to maintain its strategic relationships (*interview with professor of political science and international relations at Addis Ababa University*). Western powers have given attention to such developments, and have even publicly expressed their concerns. The reaction of regional African powers to China's growing influence is unclear, as these inter-state relations often lack transparency.

Djibouti, a small state on the Red Sea basin, has become the gateway of China to Africa. Djibouti occupies a strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital shipping lane linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and, by extension, the Indian Ocean (Telci, 2018; Melvin, 2019). Djibouti hosts China's first-ever overseas military base. Furthermore, China helped finance Djibouti 2018 confiscation and nationalization of the Doraleh Container Terminal port in Djibouti, whose infrastructure was

initially financed by UAE's Dubai Ports World (DP World) in the late 2000s.¹

Djibouti's decision to terminate the DP World contract and bring in a Chinese partner was driven by several factors. Djibouti argued that the agreement with DP World violated the sovereignty of the state and the best interest of the nation (ICG, 2018). From regional geopolitical perspectives, the tensions were exacerbated when Somaliland leased the Port of Berbera to the DP World (Cannon, 2017; Vertin, 2019). The Port of Berbera, 135 nautical miles southeast of Djibouti, is a potential competitor to the Port of Djibouti, which had monopolized Ethiopia's import-export activities since 1998, when the border war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea (Humza & Irrum, 2025).² Therefore, the investment of a Chinese partner in the case of the Doraleh Container Terminal was not purely economic but also had political and security elements.

Chinese investment in Djibouti is connected to its overarching political objectives, aimed at enhancing the geopolitical and strategic influence of China throughout the Horn of Africa and beyond (Yu, 2016). Djibouti sees Chinese investments as a responsive solution to its developmental needs and infrastructural gaps. Yet, from China's perspective, it positions itself as a Global South leader, an equal and neutral partner in the development of Africa (Alam & Asef, 2020; Mazzucco, 2023). However, it seems more likely that China seeks to advance longer-term strategic objectives. In Djibouti alone, China has financed port infrastructure and railways connecting Djibouti with Ethiopia, built the Djibouti Economic Free Trade Zone to serve as an African hub for the BRI, and established a military base. The establishment of China's military base in the Horn of Africa, alongside the expansion of its naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, indicates a preparedness to contest the influence of traditional Western allies and powers in the region.

¹ A move DP World called an illegal seizure and challenged (Záhořík, 2025). DP World filed the case in a London court, in which it lost.

² When Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia, Ethiopia became land-locked and no longer had direct port or water access.

China's involvement has a dual purpose, significant investing in essential infrastructures coupled with an expanding military presence. China also seems to be involving in the internal regional conflicts, such as the two years conflict in Ethiopia's restive Tigray region; when the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) marched towards the capital of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia used sophisticated Chinese drones to crush the approaching army (Zelalem, 2025). On the one hand, many analysts warn that China and other external actors are manipulating vulnerabilities during times of conflict and unrest in the Horn. On the other hand, some argue that China's involvement is positive. China is actively building a new system of partnerships and connectivity through the BRI, which appears to be aimed at circumventing the communication networks and flows shaped by the post-Bretton Woods global order (*interview with professor at the University of Djibouti*). Rather than merely pursuing military or overtly political dominance, China may be positioning itself as an alternative (non-western) pole of global attraction by developing a comprehensive network of ports, logistics hubs, and trade routes. Such arguments underscore the contending positions of the regional governments and scholars in dealing with the foreign powers in the Horn of Africa.

The Complicating Factor: Middle Eastern Powers as Players

The battle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union for strategic domination in the Horn of Africa left a legacy of conflict, security, and instability that continues to shape the region today. This historic conflict can be directly linked to contemporary flashpoints, such as persistent state fragilities and failures, conflicts, and endless wars in the region; for example, the ongoing civil war in Sudan, the Ethio-Egyptian impasse over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the persistent tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea despite their 2018 rapprochement, the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute, and the unsettled status of Somaliland and Somalia (Dizolele et al. 2025; Ferragamo & Klobucista, 2025). All those factors show the vulnerabilities and multi-dimensional problems of the region, which has long been synonymous with conflict and crisis in the international discourse since independence.

Despite internal tension and conflict dynamics ravaging the region, Middle Eastern states are scrambling to establish military bases across the Horn of Africa. The emerging strategic order challenges the region's already fragile security (Ali, 2019). The vacuum left by the U.S. was exploited by the regional powers, such as Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and others (*interview with professor of political science and international relations*). Ethiopia positions itself as a sub-regional power and aligns with Middle Eastern powers. Similarly, Eritrea, which has consistently viewed Ethiopia as a threat, has aligned itself with Egypt—an ally that also has strained relations with Ethiopia regarding the Nile—and is attempting to rally support from other Horn countries and Middle Eastern regional powers. The UAE has made significant investments in the Berbera airport in Somaliland and is actively seeking to establish another facility in Assab, Eritrea, in light of the Yemeni war. In the Puntland State of Somalia, the UAE has a small deployment of special forces near Bosaso airport to support the region's maritime police force (IISS, 2024). Reports suggest that the UAE has provided airlift support to the Rapid Response Forces (RSF) in Sudan by using this facility in Bosaso. This military involvement reveals a dual-faced strategy: one that invests in port infrastructures and another that actively intervenes in the internal dynamics of regional conflicts. Such foreign involvement complicates the situation in the region rather than resolves it.

Other Middle Eastern countries, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, are also significantly involved in the Horn's internal security and political affairs (ICG, 2019; Dizolele et al., 2025). Saudi Arabia has negotiated with Djibouti to establish a naval base, adding to the dense concentration of foreign military bases in Djibouti (Melvin, 2019). The Saudi interest in establishing a military facility in Djibouti could be linked to Saudi's plan to invest and construct a monumental bridge across the Red Sea connecting Saudi Arabia with Egypt. This megaproject, planned to be exclusively funded by Saudi Arabia, serves as Saudi Arabia's tool to project its power over the littoral states of the Red Sea basin (Ardemagni, 2024). Djibouti already hosts bases for the U.S., China, and France (Záhořík, 2025).

Turkey has emerged as another key actor in the Horn of Africa's regional politics and security dynamics, particularly in Somalia. Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey has pursued a foreign policy aimed at reviving its historical influence in the Muslim world (Taguia, 2011). Following the severe 2011 famine that hit Somalia, Turkey invested heavily in Somalia's reconstruction, but this humanitarian engagement served as a broader strategic agenda (Ahmed et al. 2017; Den Berg & Meester, 2019). Turkey then established a military base in Mogadishu, built the world's largest Turkish Embassy there, and now manages the city's seaport and airport. Turkey's objectives are twofold: to maintain a physical foothold in Somalia that challenges the influence of traditional Western donors, and to rebuild and train the Somali national army which collapsed in 1991 (Asiedu, 2017). However, Turkey's maneuvering has also fueled mistrust, particularly in the troubled relationship between Somaliland and Somalia, and has raised skepticism among other regional and international powers. The Turkish engagement with Somalia has pushed Somaliland to seek support from the UAE and finally lease the Berbera airport to the UAE to establish a military facility.

There is a scramble for the Horn of Africa, as Middle Eastern states have rushed to establish military facilities and infrastructure projects in the region. As seen historically in the region and contemporarily in neighboring Yemen—where conflict directly spills over into the Horn of Africa—the intervention of external powers presents a profound threat to the region's security and long-term stability (ICG, 2019). Turkey and the UAE are particularly positioned in opposition to one another. Turkey aligns with Somalia and supports the Sudan Armed Forces, while the UAE has strong relations with Somaliland and supports the RSF, a warring party in Sudan opposing the Armed Forces. This form of scramble and intervention exacerbates the internal fragility of the regional states and further destabilizes the security of a changing and fragile region. Such opposing positions serve to threaten the region's security architecture.

Consequences for Regional Security

The rivalry between the U.S. and China in the Horn of Africa represents a significant external pressure that profoundly complicates the region's fragile security landscape. This rivalry, while not the sole source of instability and fragility, acts as a potent accelerant to pre-existing conflicts, distorting local political economies and creating new trajectories of risk. The implications of this great power contest are multi-faceted, driving militarization, exacerbating internal divisions, and presenting regional governments with a complex set of short-term temptations and long-term perils.

The most visible manifestation of this competition is the rapid militarization of the region, particularly in Djibouti. The proximity of the Chinese and American military facilities transforms the Horn of Africa into a potential flashpoint for escalation (Záhořík, 2025). While both powers justify their military presence with public goods like maritime security and counter-terrorism operations, their underlying objectives are inherently competitive. For China, the base is a crucial node for security of its Maritime Silk Road and projecting power as a blue-water navy, protecting its huge infrastructure investments (Chaziza, 2018; Vertin, 2019; Mazzucco, 2023). For the U.S., Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti remains a cornerstone for counter-terrorism and power projection in the East African region and the Middle East.

Beyond the military footprint, the competitive engagement models of the U.S. and China have deep, often destabilizing consequences for regional governance. China's principle of "non-interference" and its focus on large-scale, state-to-state economic deals offer an attractive alternative to African governments wary of Western conditionalities tied to human rights and democratic reform (Du Plessis, 2014). This approach, however, can embolden authoritarian tendencies and reduce incentives for inclusive politics or peace settlements. By providing loans and diplomatic cover without pressing for governance reforms, China's strategy can fuel internal tensions. The U.S., meanwhile, struggles to match China's economic weight and investment in the region and America's security-centric approach often lacks a coherent, competitive economic vision. This imbalance forces the

U.S. to lean harder on its security partnerships, further militarizing its regional engagement.

Many Horn countries used the alignment and backing of the U.S. to suppress local opposition and opt to advance their party's narrow interest (*interview with professor of political science and international relations in Ethiopia*). Likewise, China, as it has made it clear, does not intervene in the internal affairs of countries but supports those countries whose interest goes with them. The absence of direct confrontation between the two powerful countries enabled many countries to peacefully undertake infrastructural developments and without offending the hegemony. Nonetheless, in both cases, Horn leaders serve the interests of their parties rather than the majority of their constituencies, thereby creating instability.

This dynamic creates a dangerous opportunity for regional governments to engage in playing rival powers against each other to secure maximum rent from military base leases or diplomatic support. While this can yield short-term fiscal benefits, it is a dangerous long-term strategy. It encourages elite capture of state resources and allows regional governments to externalize their legitimacy, relying on foreign backing rather than addressing internal vulnerabilities like youth unemployment, poverty, and political exclusion. This external patronage can intensify internal divisions, as seen in the Tigray conflict, where perceptions of competing Eastern and Western support for the federal government and the TPLF respectively added a destructive geopolitical layer to an already devastating civil war.

Furthermore, the U.S.-China rivalry provides a platform for semi-periphery powers in the Middle East—such as Turkey, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—to expand their own influence, further complicating the security architecture of the region. These actors exploit the great power competition to advance their own economic and strategic agendas, often backing different factions within regional conflicts and creating a multi-polar, and often contradictory, field of external interventions. For example, Turkey and China, for distinct strategic reasons, are involved in the Las Anod conflict in Somaliland. Turkey seeks to establish a foothold in the Red Sea basin, aligning itself with Somalia and refusing to recognize Somaliland. Turkey advocates for SSC-

Khatumo—a region in the eastern part of Somaliland, which claims to be a member of Somalia Federal Government—by seeking a potential station in Las Qoray town, a coastal town in the Sanaag region claimed by Somaliland. While China has also supported the SSC-Khatumo, it is for different reasons. China's involvement is a direct response to the formal relations between Somaliland and Taiwan. The meeting between the Turkish and China ambassadors and the SSC-Khatumo leader in Mogadishu underscores the direct involvement of both Turkey and China in the Las Anod conflict (Ali & Nyelade, 2025). The situation in the Horn of Africa is dangerously similar to Cold War-era proxy conflicts (Makinda, 1982) where local disputes were amplified and militarized by external patrons, with devastating consequences for the region's citizens.

Ultimately, the U.S.-China contest risk returning to a Cold War-era style escalation where the Horn of Africa becomes a theatre of external initiatives that prioritize strategic advantage over local stability (Ali et al., 2025). States in the Horn of Africa that leverage this competition for short-term gain risk becoming entrapped in debt dependencies and compromising their sovereignty. For the Horn of Africa region, the greatest danger is that this external rivalry will institutionalize a form of transactional politics that deepens internal fractures. The path forward requires a difficult but essential recalibration. Regional states must develop cohesive bargaining strategies that prioritize long-term stability and economic development over renting out strategic real estate. For the U.S. and China, a sustainable approach would involve aligning their engagements—however competitively—with the imperative of conflict settlement and institutional resilience. Without a coordinated international effort that balances development, conflict settlement, and respect for self-determination, the Horn of Africa faces a future where great power competition guarantees chronic instability, with severe consequences for both its people and global security.

Regional leaders must think creatively to develop policies and strategies that could help their countries; nobody gives you money for nothing, there is always something for them to gain (*interview with professor of history at the University of Juba, South Sudan*). This gain can result from political and economic

influence, or it could also be pure business. There has been a long relationship between Africa and Western nations, but who has been benefiting all these many years? Western nations led by France and the UK. It is high time African countries matured and made friends where there is a win-win situation.

Conclusion

The U.S.-China contest in the Horn of Africa, far from being a simple return of the Cold War, represents a more complex and economically intertwined rivalry that is fundamentally reshaping the region's security architecture. This article, using a realist lens to analyze how state policy is influenced by calculations of power and national interest, argues that great power contests act as potent multipliers of the Horn's inherent fragilities, exacerbating existing conflicts and creating new, dangerous trajectories of instability. Although regional states are playing with both sides to maximize their advantages, their internal vulnerabilities render them prone to external manipulation. Therefore, the analysis reveals that the primary security vulnerabilities are threefold: the dangerous militarization of strategic spaces, the erosion of accountable governance, and the empowerment of a multi-polar field of external actors.

The most tangible consequence of these three vulnerabilities is the rapid proliferation of foreign military bases, epitomized by the proximity of U.S. and Chinese facilities in Djibouti. While justified under the banner of public goods like maritime security and counter-terrorism, these bases are fundamentally instruments of power projection for competing strategic visions—American hegemony and Chinese global ascendance. This proximity creates a persistent risk of miscalculation, potentially transforming the Horn into a flashpoint for direct confrontation. Furthermore, the competitive engagement models of both powers have profound destabilizing effects on regional governance. China's doctrine of non-interference and massive, state-centric infrastructure financing provides an attractive alternative for African governments seeking to avoid Western conditionalities such as improving human rights profiles of the African states and promoting democracy, thereby emboldening authoritarian tendencies and reducing incentives for inclusive political

settlements. Conversely, the U.S. reactive, security-dominated approach, coupled with its inability to match the appeals of China's economic statecraft, forces it to prioritize short-term security cooperation over the consistent proliferation of democratic principles, further securitizing its engagement. Ethiopia, for example, worked with the United States in its war against terrorism despite Ethiopia's poor records in human rights protection.

Crucially, the U.S.-China rivalry does not occur in a vacuum but provides a platform for Middle Eastern powers like the UAE, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to advance their own agendas. This multi-layered competition has turned the Horn into an arena for proxy conflicts and allows regional governments to play external powers against each other for short-term rent and diplomatic support. This strategy, while lucrative for state leaders from the Horn of Africa region in the short term, is dangerous for long-term stability of the regional states. It encourages the externalization of legitimacy, allows regional governments to bypass addressing core internal vulnerabilities like youth unemployment and political exclusion, and intensifies internal divisions by adding a geopolitical dimension to local conflicts, as witnessed in the Tigray war and the civil war in Sudan.

Ultimately, without a fundamental recalibration of strategies, the Horn of Africa is destined for a future of chronic instability facilitated by external rivalries. In today's world, in an age of deepening globalization and the integration of the world economic system, all countries of the world have become part of a "global village." The integration of world economies has proven to be a powerful means for countries to promote economic growth, development, and poverty reduction. Therefore, this article issues a clear call for responsibility from all actors: the U.S. must integrate robust economic engagement with its security priorities to offer a sustainable alternative to Chinese financing, while China must move beyond a debt-trap investment model and its rigid non-interference policy to ensure the long-term viability of its partnerships and investments. Most importantly, the responsibility is on regional states to develop cohesive national strategies and strengthen their institutions to negotiate from a position of strength, ensuring that external engagements serve

long-term developmental and security interests rather than short-term elite gains. Failure to do so will result in the Horn of Africa's descent deeper into cycles of dependency, debt, and conflict, with repercussions that will extend far beyond its borders.

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