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Editorial: The African Border Paradox - A Necessary Curse or a Missed Benediction?

Jama Musse Jamaⁱ

In July 1964, the founding fathers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) gathered in Cairo to make a decision that would define the destiny of a continent. Faced with the chaotic potential of overlapping ethnic, linguistic, and historical claims, they adopted the principle of *uti possidetis*: the recognition and preservation of the borders inherited from the colonial era for sake of preventing interstate and community conflicts. For decades, scholars have debated whether this was a moment of supreme African statesmanship or a fatal surrender to a colonial architecture designed for extraction rather than coexistence. To understand the modern African state, we must ask: why did our forefathers maintain these lines, and what price are we paying for that stability today?

The Pragmatic Trap: Why the Forefathers Chose Maintaining the Status Quo

The decision to uphold colonial borders was not a "benediction" born of affection for European cartography; it was a survival tactic. Leaders like Julius Nyerere and Jomo Kenyatta understood that the "scramble for Africa" had been a reckless vivisection of the continent, but they feared an even more violent "scramble by post-independent African nations" for the remains.

The consensus in 1964 was driven by the fear of a vacuum: if one border were questioned, every border would be questioned. The founding fathers chose the 'geographic cage' of the colonial state to avoid a 'political abyss' of secessionist wars, prioritizing the preservation of the state entity over the organic cohesion of the nations within. In their view, a flawed stability was preferable to a just chaos, hoping that a shared flag and a seat at the UN would eventually forge a common identity. Yet, beneath this pragmatic

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caution lay a profound and defiant hope. Their vision in establishing the OAU was anchored in a faith that transcended the immediate fear of choice; they believed in a spirit of togetherness that would eventually render these colonial scars obsolete. For them, the ultimate destiny was not a continent of divided countries, but a united Africa where these artificial lines would dissolve, replaced by a single continental horizon.

The Human and Structural Cost: The Colonial Scar

However, the problems birthed by this "pragmatism" are profound and persistent. Colonial borders were rarely drawn with geography, ecology, or anthropology in mind. They were lines of administrative convenience and imperial competition.

The Linguistic and Ethnic Vivisection: Perhaps the most painful legacy is the slicing of homogeneous communities into multiple states. Groups like the Somali, the Saaho, the Afar, and the Ewe found themselves citizens of three or four different countries. This created "transborder identities" that modern states often view with suspicion. Instead of being seen as bridges between nations, these communities are often treated as security risks, leading to what we might call a "standardization bias," where central governments suppress regional linguistic and cultural nuances in favor of a singular, often artificial, national identity.

Economic Strangulation: Structurally, these borders were designed for extraction toward European ports, not for intra-African integration. This is why, even in 2026, it is often more expensive to trade between two neighboring African cities than it is to ship goods to Europe or Asia. The borders have become economic bottlenecks that stifle regional markets and prevent the continent from achieving the economies of scale necessary for industrialization.

Why the Topic is Timely: The 2026 Geopolitical Shift

Why revisit this now? The year 2026 marks a period of profound global realignment. The "Westphalian" model—the idea of a rigid, centralized state with absolute control over its borders—is under immense pressure from both within and outside.

The Failure of the Centralized State: In many parts of the continent, the state's inability to provide security or economic opportunity within its colonial "cage" has led to marginalisation of minorities and in turn a revival of regionalism and local identity movements. The supranational governance models that lent support and legitimacy to the unitary state, United Nations are themselves facing increasing challenges both in funding and recognition of merits of their role in past cold war world. We are seeing a global move toward multipolarity and transactional diplomacy, where regional or even individual country agency is replacing the old multilateral rules in pursuit of national or group interest.

The Case for "Incremental Recognition": Somaliland offers a unique modern case study. Ironically, those opposed to Somaliland's self-declared independence found themselves in a dilemma because, Somaliland's quest for international recognition is based on the maintenance of colonial borders—specifically the British Protectorate lines—rather than their destruction. Somaliland's independence pursuit is indeed re-engineering of the Somali union that was wrongly created by amalgamating two very different colonial administrative and geographic entities on ethnicity lines. By arguing for the sanctity of its 1960 borders, Somaliland suggests that the path to stability is not found in ignoring the 1964 OAU principle, but in applying it consistently with no exceptions. This challenges the continent to rethink how we define "territorial integrity" in an era where functional governance matters more than technical status.

Conclusion: From Curse to Integration

Colonial borders are a "necessary curse" that Africa has yet to fully transcend. They provided the skeleton for modern governance, but they have also become "cognitive borders" that limit the African imagination. The challenge for the next generation is not necessarily to redraw the lines with ink, but to render them irrelevant through deep integration.

Through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the embrace of digital sovereignty, we can move toward a future where a border is a porous membrane for trade and culture rather than a brick wall for the soul. The

benediction of the future will not be the borders we inherited, but the connections we choose to build in spite of them.

When Clare Bath agreed to edit this special issue of *Dhaxalreeb*, "Contested Sovereignities: Legitimacy, Power, and the Negotiation of Postcolonial Borders," the editorial board seized upon the opportunity for a timely debate, and we are grateful to her for bringing together seven comprehensive contributions that place this highly relevant topic under the magnifying glass of academic debate.

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Contested Sovereignities: Legitimacy, Power, and the Negotiation of Postcolonial Borders

An introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This special issue brings together scholars who explore the consequences of the postcolonial political-economic world system, illuminating how borders are made, contested, and lived in different contexts. Collectively, these contributions move beyond descriptive accounts of postcolonial borders to investigate their ongoing production through power, economy, and mobility. I argue, and the articles in this issue illustrate, that postcolonial states continue to grapple with the location and (in)permeability of inter-state borders, a process that informs states' position in the global economy and shapes the politics of citizenship. Furthermore, these state dynamics are embedded in broader transnational processes, as borders are transcended by donors, NGOs, social movements, diasporas, and (il)licit economic networks that frequently navigate and contest the formal boundaries of state power. In sum, borders are far less fixed than they are often portrayed; they are continually reshaped and negotiated amid securitization, economic dependencies, and shifting geopolitical alliances. The articles in this issue invite readers to rethink borders not as static boundaries but as dynamic processes that reflect the enduring entanglements of sovereignty, legitimacy, and belonging in the postcolonial world.

Keywords: World Systems Theory, Africa, Postcolonialism, Decolonialism. Postcolonial borders, sovereignty, border politics, legitimacy, world-systems theory, Africa, transnationalism, citizenship, global inequality, border contestation

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Scholars contemporarily operationalize borders as dynamic, socially-constructed boundaries used to designate zones of political authority,¹ regulate economic relations,² and organize nations.³ However, the modern system of inter-state borders and state sovereignty is a relatively recent development. The 1648 Peace of Westphalia is widely credited with establishing the legal right of states to secular sovereignty, particularly in the European context.⁴ Yet, Westphalian sovereignty was not universally afforded. As European powers negotiated and consolidated their own nation-states and borders in the imperial core, they simultaneously constructed a global system of colonial domination. The dissolution of much of the formal British Empire, for example, did not begin in earnest until the 1960s; for much of the world, therefore, state sovereignty is less than a century old.

The enduring legacy of this colonial system continues to deny self-determination to much of the world today. Colonizers drew boundaries with perfunctory regard for pre-existing ethnic, political, and religious groups⁵ to facilitate the systematic extraction of resources instrumental for developing and industrializing the European and North American economies.⁶

¹ Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, "The political sociology and political geography of borders," in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Sociology: Two Volume Set* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018).

² David B Carter and Paul Poast, "Why do states build walls? Political economy, security, and border stability," *Journal of conflict resolution* 61, no. 2 (2017): 239-270.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, in *The new social theory reader* (Routledge, 2020).

⁴ Derek Croxton, "The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty," *The International history review* 21, no. 3 (1999): 569-591.

⁵ Tayyab Mahmud, "Colonial cartographies, postcolonial borders, and enduring failures of international law: The unending wars along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier," *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 36 (2010): 1-52.

⁶ Navid Hassanzadeh, "Africa in Du Bois's internationalist thinking," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* (2024): 1-20; W. E. B.

When the era of direct colonialism largely ended in the mid-twentieth century, newly independent states inherited and were left to govern, inhabit, and negotiate these externally-imposed and often contested borders and territories. Now, postcolonial economies typically remain dependent on raw material exports and are relegated to peripheral positions in a world system shaped by hegemonic institutions.⁷ So, while the world system privileges recognized states and treats border stability as the core requirement for full participation, colonialism constructed a global hierarchy in which these same borders force many states into subordinate political and economic positions in the world order today. This dual political *and* economic structural subordination is exemplified in the case of Somaliland, where the journal *Dhaxalreeb* is located. Although Somaliland has functioned as a de facto independent democracy with a strong national identity for more than thirty years, it remains unrecognized and legally enclosed within Somalia's *de jure* borders, impacting its economy, politics, and global position.⁸

While this special issue, *Borders Unbound: Power, Identity, and the Making of Boundaries*, was inspired by research from and about Somaliland, this reckoning with borders and global powers is not relegated only to de facto states. As the articles in this issue illustrate, *de jure* states also continue to grapple with the location and (in)permeability of inter-state borders. In this introduction, I conceptualize borders as relational sites where power is continually exercised and contested across local, national, and transnational spheres. I argue, as evidenced by the contributions of this special issue,

Du Bois, "The realities in Africa-European profit or Negro development," *Foreign Affairs* 21 (1942): 721.

⁷ Paul Almeida and Chris Chase-Dunn, "Globalization and social movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2018): 189-211; John Walton and Charles Ragin, "Global and national sources of political protest: Third world responses to the debt crisis," *American Sociological Review* (1990): 876-890.

⁸ For more on Somaliland, see the work of Jama Musse Jama, Tirsit Yetbarek, and Scott Pegg. Interested readers should also follow the burgeoning diplomatic relations between Somaliland and Israel, a case of sovereignty being negotiated and contested in real time.

that the politics of sovereignty and belonging are fundamentally *unbound*, controlled and defined not only by great state powers and economies, but also shaped by a complex ecosystem of multi-scalar actors navigating, fortifying, and contesting formal boundaries.

Here, territorial boundaries are understood to be contested and sustained by relational networks of economic, military, political, and ideological power.⁹ For example, the placement of borders has direct implications for states' access to resources (e.g. oil, gas, or shipping ports) and, as a result, economic development.¹⁰ Even those postcolonial states with access to such resources remain disadvantaged by global economic dependencies that perpetuate unequal trade with wealthier states.¹¹ Economic inequalities are maintained by military and political power. Core states' geopolitical relations and inter-state alliances serve to maintain global political and economic hierarchies, which at times threaten regional stability and national sovereignty.¹² Then, these relations are justified and bolstered by core-power leaders' leveraging of ideological power, as political rhetoric of the leaders of core powers impacts the perceived value of peripheral states' passports and national citizenship. Still, citizenship in a country of residence is not a given, as postcolonial conflicts and identities shape the politics of belonging, as some are refused citizenship while others enjoy the rights and privileges of legally belonging to a state, from access to healthcare to safety and political representation.¹³ Then, these state dynamics are both enabled and contested by

⁹ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 3, Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945*. Vol. 3. (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Raege Omar, "Understanding the Malawi and Tanzania border dispute on Lake Malawi (Lake Nyasa)," *Dhaxalreeb* 21, no. 2 (2026): 35-56.

¹¹ John Walton and Charles Ragin, "Global and national sources of political protest"; Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Modern World System" *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* 427 (1993).

¹² Nasir Ali, "U.S.–China Strategic Competition in the Horn of Africa and Implications for Regional Security," *Dhaxalreeb* 21, no. 2 (2026): 91-122.

¹³ Aimee Watkins, "A Mirage of Protection: Statelessness and Legal Failures in Côte d'Ivoire," *Dhaxalreeb* 21, no. 2 (2026): 57-86.

broadier transnational processes and actors. Borders are transcended by donors and inter-governmental organizations;¹⁴ NGOs and social movements;¹⁵ diasporas, refugees, and immigrants;¹⁶ states executing transnational repression;¹⁷ and (il)licit economic networks that frequently navigate and contest the formal boundaries of state power.¹⁸

State-to-state entanglements offer perhaps the most visible examples of border contestation and fortification. Disputes regarding the placement and permeability of borders implicate states at all echelons of the world economy and, at times, escalate into violence. We see this dynamic play out in Africa, from Sudan and South Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, to Somaliland and Puntland, and beyond, between Pakistan and India (Kashmir) and in the ongoing conflict following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Africa, in particular, has long been a central site of such contestation. The continent has a history of postcolonial border disputes, and critical scholars argue that Africa has served as a testing ground for international law and Western intervention,¹⁹ or, perhaps as an overcorrection to prior

¹⁴ John Walton and Charles Ragin, "Global and national sources of political protest"; Philip McMichael, "Globalization: myths and realities," *Rural sociology* 61, no. 1 (1996): 25-55.

¹⁵ Clare Bath and Philip Gamaghelyan, "Benefits and Challenges of Institutionalizing Peacebuilding and Activism in a Post-Liberal World," *International Negotiation* 29, no. 1 (2024): 164-191; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn A. Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky, "Transnational migration studies: Past developments and future trends," *Annual Review Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2007): 129-156.

¹⁷ Dana M. Moss, "Transnational repression, diaspora mobilization, and the case of the Arab Spring," *Social Problems* 63, no. 4 (2016): 480-498.

¹⁸ Thèa Klement, "Review of 'Smugglers, Spectators, and the City in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands,'" *Dhaxalreeb* 21, no. 2 (2026): 87-90.

¹⁹ Kerstin Bree Carlson, *The justice laboratory: International law in Africa* (Brookings Institution Press, 2023); Zubairu Wai, The empire's new clothes: Africa, liberal interventionism and contemporary world order, *Review of African Political Economy* 41, no. 142 (2014): 483-

involvement, its subsequent neglect, as was most starkly demonstrated during the Rwandan civil war and genocide.²⁰ While states do assert authority to reposition or fortify borders, states also hesitate or refrain from acting, either out of respect for sovereignty or fear of political backlash, even amid urgent crises, revealing the uneven and uncertain norms for exercising power across borders. In sum, borders delineate ill-defined spheres of power, as states vary in their willingness and capacity to assert authority and the norms of engagement are insufficiently established. Such dynamics determine who is protected, who is governed, and who is excluded.

While direct interstate conflicts establish and contest borders through force, securitization reproduces them through law, bureaucracy, and the managed exclusion of non-national 'others.' States often frame borders as sites and sources of insecurity and violence²¹ in order to bureaucratize and deploy them as tools of political, social, economic, and ideological control.²² We see this, for instance, at the borders between the

499; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign intervention in Africa: From the cold war to the war on terror*, No. 7. (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁰ Kathleen Margaret Vogel et al., "Rwanda and Burundi Genocide: A Case Study of Neglect and Indifference (1977)," in *Milton Leitenberg: Pioneering Work on Weapons of Mass Destruction, Wars and Arms Control* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025); A. Walter Dorn and Jonathan Matloff, "Preventing the bloodbath: Could the UN have predicted and prevented the Rwandan Genocide?" *Journal of Conflict Studies* 20, no. 1 (2000): 9-52.

²¹ Daniel Béland, "Right-wing populism and the politics of insecurity: How president Trump frames migrants as collective threats," *Political Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2020): 162-177; Chiara Brambilla and Reece Jones, "Rethinking borders, violence, and conflict: From sovereign power to borderscapes as sites of struggles," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 2 (2020): 287-305; Maja Korac-Sanderson, "Bordering and rebordering Security: Causes and Consequences of Framing refugees as a 'Threat' to Europe," *Towards understanding of contemporary migration Causes, Consequences, Policies, Reflections*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, ISI FF (2017): 25-40.

²² Chiara Brambilla and Reece Jones, "Rethinking borders, violence, and conflict"; Daniel Béland, "Right-wing populism and the politics of insecurity."

United States and Mexico, Poland and Belarus, and Ethiopia and Somalia. Furthermore, these networks of power extend beyond the physical borderline, as states craft laws and agreements that outsource their authority to foreign territories. For example, it is increasingly common for core states to outsource prison and migrant detention centers to countries in the global periphery and semi periphery– the US exports migrants to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and Italy their migrants to Albania.²³ As states transcend their own borders, sovereignty becomes an increasingly transnational and relational phenomenon, allowing some states to further accrue disproportionate power in the global system. These phenomena underscore a central claim of this introduction: borders are not merely static lines on maps, but relational sites through which sovereignty and power are exercised, negotiated, and projected.

The growing prominence of transnational non-state actors further complicates state-centered understandings of borders and sovereignty, as these actors both reinforce and contest sovereign power across territorial lines. Today, the world becomes increasingly connected via nonstate actors: global capitalist and banking institutions,²⁴ global cities and borderlands,²⁵ the internet and digital communication,²⁶ and cross-border travel

²³ Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Borders, territory, law," *International Political Sociology* 2, no. 4 (2008): 322-338; Giuseppe Campesi, "The 2023 Italy-Albania protocol on extraterritorial migration management. A worst practice in migration and asylum policies," In *CEPS Papers on Liberty and Security* (2023): 1-23.

²⁴ Kimberly Kay Hoang, *Spiderweb Capitalism: How global elites exploit frontier markets* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

²⁵ Victoria Reyes, "Global borderlands: A case study of the Subic Bay Freeport Zone, Philippines," *Theory and Society* 44, no. 4 (2015): 355-384; Saskia Sassen, "Overview of global cities," *Cities and Society* (2005): 81-90.

²⁶ Kennedy Chi-Pan Wong, "Sowing hate, cultivating loyalists: Mobilizing repressive nationalist diasporas for transnational repression by the people's republic of China regime," *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no.12 (2024): 1655-1678; Dana M. Moss, "The ties that bind: Internet communication technologies, networked authoritarianism, and 'voice' in the Syrian diaspora," *Globalizations* 12, no.2 (2018): 265-282).

and tourism.²⁷ On the one hand, transnational non-state actors and phenomena serve to consolidate state power by perpetuating neoliberalism, facilitating surveillance, and reinforcing core-periphery inequalities.²⁸ On the other, they create pathways for resistance and alternative forms of social and political belonging. Scholars have documented transnational social movements that challenge both repressive states²⁹ and entrenched international norms,³⁰ transnational labor organizations advocate for robust worker protections,³¹ and collaborative projects that cultivate cross-national solidarity and empathy.³² Politics, profit, and community remain geographically ambiguous rather than territorially contained. Taken together, these dynamics point beyond any single causal actor or mechanism, underscoring the need to understand borders as outcomes of intersecting, multiscale processes and actors.

Borders are far less fixed than they are often portrayed, which has implications both for global governance and the study of hegemony and inequality. They are continually reshaped and negotiated amid securitization, militarization, economic

²⁷ Gary Adler, *Empathy beyond US borders: The challenges of transnational civic engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Vikramendra Kumar, "Emerging trends in sociology of tourism," *Sociology International Journal* 2, no. 3 (2018): 225-237.

²⁸ Kennedy Chi-Pan Wong, "Sowing hate, cultivating loyalists"; Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893–1982* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); Dana M. Moss, "The ties that bind."

²⁹ Philip M. Ayoub and Lauren Bauman, "Migration and queer mobilisations: how migration facilitates cross-border LGBTQ activism," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 15 (2019): 2758-2778; Dana M. Moss, "Transnational repression, diaspora mobilization, and the case of the Arab Spring."

³⁰ Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn A. Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*.

³¹ Tamara Kay, "Labor transnationalism and global governance: The impact of NAFTA on transnational labor relationships in North America," *American journal of sociology* 111, no. 3 (2005): 715-756.

³² Gary Adler, *Empathy beyond US borders: The challenges of transnational civic engagement*.

dependencies, and shifting geopolitical alliances. These processes intersect with globalized racism,³³ persistent mismatches between nations and the states that house them,³⁴ increased global migration,³⁵ and recurring cycles of violence. Well-intended non-state institutions work hard to redress global inequality; however, they are not immune from its effects, as international institutions designed to promote peace, stability, and development must grapple with their colonial origins.³⁶ Furthermore, efforts to understand the consequences of global inequality are also complicated because academic institutions must grapple with their often-complicated pasts,³⁷ and much of the scholarship on these issues must contend with methodological nationalism and Western biases in research and publishing.³⁸ Ultimately, to empirically address these complexities, scholarship must resist the temptation to assume state power is confined to borders, opting instead for relational

³³ Michelle Christian, *The Global Journey of Racism* (Stanford University Press, 2025).

³⁴ Benedict Anderson, “Imagined communities”; Nina Caspersen, “Making peace with de facto states,” in *Unrecognized states and secession in the 21st century*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017); Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized states: The struggle for sovereignty in the modern international system* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013); Scott Pegg, *De facto states in the international system* (Vancouver: Institute of International Relations, University of British Columbia, 1998).

³⁵ Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky, “Transnational migration studies.”

³⁶ Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire*, 1893–1982.

³⁷ Sarah Federman and Clare Bath, “The University of San Diego: Curated histories and forgotten stories,” *The Journal of San Diego History* 70, no. 1 (2025): 133-176.

³⁸ Raewyn Connell, “Decolonizing Sociology,” *Contemporary Sociology* 47, no. 4 (2018): 399-407; Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, eds., *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield publishers, 2008). Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation–state building, migration and the social sciences,” *Global networks* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301-334.

and transnational frameworks to capture how borders, power, and inequality are reproduced and negotiated.³⁹

This special issue does just this, as it explores the causes and consequences of the aforementioned conditions, bringing together five contributions that illuminate how borders are made, contested, and lived in different contexts. The contributions are organized thematically. The opening article situates borders within broader historical and political-economic processes, examining how colonial legacies and state-building projects continue to shape sovereignty and territoriality. The middle contribution, along with the book review, turn to social and affective dimensions, highlighting how borders are lived and contested by local economies, migrants, and activists. The final two articles look outward, considering contemporary geopolitical and transnational projections of military and ideological power that reshape sovereignty and belonging in a globalized world.

In the first article, “Understanding the Malawi and Tanzania border dispute on Lake Malawi (*Lake Nyasa*),” Raege Omar explores a post-independence border dispute, where two recognized states use well-established, yet contradictory, legal rationales to negotiate a border first drawn during the colonial era. On the one hand, Malawi bases its claim to the entire lake on the 1890 Heligoland treaty and the African Union’s affirmation of the *uti possidetis juris* principle, which affirms colonial-era boundaries. On the other hand, Tanzania advocates for splitting the lake at the meridian line, citing international legal precedent. The discovery of valuable hydrocarbon resources has aggravated the conflict, demonstrating how enduring and unresolved colonial legacies—manifested in both physical borders and contradictory international legal precedents—can complicate each state’s role, access, and power within the global economy. This article demonstrates that international law is not always a resource for resolving disputes, but at times reproduces the very ambiguities it purports to settle.

³⁹ Navid Hassanzadeh, “Africa in Du Bois’s Internationalist Thinking; Michelle Christian, *The Global Journey of Racism*; Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*.

The next two contributions investigate how borders and citizenship are lived and experienced by local actors, both as sites of exclusion and transcendence. Aimee Watkin's article, "A Mirage of Protection: Statelessness and Legal Failures in Côte d'Ivoire," examines a case in which state borders are legally recognized, yet the boundaries of the corresponding national community remain contested. A combination of legal contradictions, post-conflict mass migration, inter-ethnic tensions, and a lack of political will has left nearly 700,000 people in Côte d'Ivoire without legal citizenship, despite the country's legal commitments to protect them. Watkins conducted a comprehensive review of international, regional, and national laws, conventions, and reports published between 1960 and 2018 to illustrate how these legal instruments have created what she calls a *mirage* of protection for stateless individuals, rendering legally guaranteed rights inaccessible in practice. More broadly, this article exposes the critical gap between formal human rights commitments and the exercise of sovereign power. The very pathways intended to resolve marginalization can instead serve to normalize exclusion as a permanent condition in both society and law.

Théa Klement reviewed Daniel K. Thompson's 2025 book *Smugglers, Speculators, and the City in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands*.⁴⁰ Drawing on years of ethnographic fieldwork, Thompson describes the historical and contemporary economy surrounding Jigjiga, an Ethiopian city situated near the border with Somaliland. Klement outlines Thompson's argument, as he offers a striking critique of liberal and capitalist theories that bolster narratives about the merit of securitization and law enforcement in borderlands. The book depicts the local economy as a dynamic site of cultural reproduction where goods, both legal and illicit, travel between diverse communities and across borders— a process that both emancipates and constrains these spaces and actors. Klement's review balances modest critique with high praise and highlights implications for researchers and practitioners engaging with peacebuilding, postcolonialism, borderlands, and human security studies.

⁴⁰ Daniel K. Thompson, *Smugglers, speculators, and the city in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands* (Cambridge University Press, 1945).

The final two articles investigate macro phenomena, including geopolitics and soft power. Nasir Ali's article "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in the Horn of Africa and Implications for Regional Security" draws on interviews with regional policy experts and a comprehensive review of policy reports, academic literature, and geopolitical analyses to explore the power dynamics between core, semi-periphery, and periphery states in the Horn of Africa. The region is strategically vital, contested by the U.S., China, and several Middle Eastern powers due to its role in global supply chains and digital infrastructure. Ali details how this multi-layered geopolitical competition exacerbates existing regional security dilemmas, creating a fragile environment susceptible to proxy war that local states are ill-equipped to manage. The article emphasizes the need for revised national policies and stronger regional institutions that prioritize self-determination and dispute resolution, shielding peripheral states from the zero-sum calculations of competing core powers. This article offers implications for scholars of geopolitics, maritime security, African studies, and international peace and conflict studies, highlighting how global connectivity infrastructure increasingly catalyzes external intervention and proxy conflict in a multi-polar world.

Finally, this issue features "Citizenship as a Contested Global Caste Order: How Political Rhetoric Creates Symbolic Boundaries in World-System Hierarchies," by Farrah Bennett and Ana Velitchkova. The authors analyze speeches, press releases, and diplomatic communications from 2025 using qualitative discourse analysis and world-systems theory to examine how political rhetoric both reproduces and contests global citizenship hierarchies. They argue that leaders of core states deploy symbolic language to construct boundaries that rank the perceived value of national citizenships. Paternalistic and stigmatizing discourse institutionalizes a global caste system, ranking human value by national origin, primarily when such claims resonate with domestic audiences and international peers. Conversely, when this rhetoric fails to gain legitimacy, it can spark counter-hegemonic alliances that challenge a state's strategic interests. Bennet and Velitchkova demonstrate that

symbolic boundaries and violence, when successful, perpetuate global stratification and, when unsuccessful, delegitimize perpetrators and offer pathways for resistance.

The five pieces in this issue collectively reveal the paradoxes of borders: they are legally drawn yet frequently contested, selectively include and exclude populations, and are transcended in practice. These dynamics serve as a prudent reminder that borders are not natural or inevitable features of human society but rather social and political constructs that are continually fortified and reshaped.

These paradoxes underscore the importance of critical border studies. Watkins, Omar, Ali, Bennett, Velitchkova, Klement and Thompson not only expose the flaws of the current global system but also highlight the agency and capacity for resistance that persist within it. Their analyses demonstrate that borders are not only sites of control and exclusion but also of negotiation, adaptation, and possibility. This conceptualization of boundary-making, rooted in the empirical findings of this issue, highlights the need for new empirical work that utilizes postcolonial thought to transcend state-centric approaches to understanding nationhood, law, and borders. Learning from the cases in this issue opens pathways for future research and points toward alternative models of belonging and governance in a world where borders remain consequential, contested, and transcended.

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Understanding Malawi and Tanzania Border Dispute on Lake Malawi (also known as *Lake Nyasa*)

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Abstract

This article examines the enduring legal complexities of colonial boundary-making in international law: the Malawi-Tanzania border dispute over Lake Malawi (Nyasa). Malawi's claim to the entire lake is firmly grounded in the 1890 Heligoland Treaty, a formal legal instrument explicitly placing the entire lake within the British sphere. Malawi invokes the principle of *uti possidetis juris* which mandates inherited colonial geo-bodies. The African Union affirmed *uti possidetis juris* as a cornerstone of post-colonial African boundary law. Tanzania contests this, advocating for a median line boundary based on principles of customary international law for shared water bodies. Tanzania also cites inconsistent British mandate-era maps. However, International Court of Justice (ICJ) jurisprudence generally subordinates maps to primary textual instruments such as treaties. Although the dispute remained dormant for decades, Malawi's 2011 unilateral awarding of hydrocarbon exploration licenses in the contested lake aggravated the dispute. Although the lake dispute demonstrates that modern African sovereignty draws on *uti possidetis juris*, this article's conclusion recommends ways African states might move beyond inherited colonial legal frameworks and adopt pragmatic approaches to conflict resolution.

Keywords: Malawi, Tanzania, *uti possidetis juris*. Colonial boundary-making, Lake Nyasa, Heligoland Treaty, postcolonial Africa, territorial dispute, natural resources, SADC mediation, landlocked states, African Union, median line boundary.

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Introduction

Background: Colonial Historical Roots

Border disputes in Africa are inextricably linked to the era of European colonialism, as the arbitrary partitioning of the continent laid the foundation for many of the territorial disagreements that persist today (Loisimaye, 2024; Yoon, 2014; Abramson & Carter, 2016). Colonial powers delimited national boundaries in law and on maps, often surveying and marking borders according to the physical landscape or for political advantage. These processes were largely driven by imperial interests with limited or no regard for pre-existing social, ethnic, or geographical realities (Donaldson, 2008). The enduring consequences of these colonial tactics is exemplified by numerous border issues across the African continent, including the enduring dispute between Malawi and Tanzania over Lake Malawi (also known as Lake Nyasa).

The root of the contemporary Malawi-Tanzania border dispute can be directly traced to a legal agreement between colonial powers: the Heligoland Treaty of 1890, between Great Britain and Germany (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973). Intended to define the respective spheres of influence of these European powers in East Africa, the treaty stipulated that the boundary between Nyasaland (British Malawi) and Tanganyika (German Tanzania) would follow the eastern, western, and northern shores of Lake Nyasa. The agreement effectively placed the entire lake within the British sphere (Mahony et al., 2014; Loisimaye, 2024; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973; Okumu, 2010; Yoon, 2014). One unilateral decision, made in European capitals without the involvement or consent of the African populations, determined the boundaries of countries' sovereignty (Donaldson, 2008; Maluwa, 2016). Furthermore, the allocation of a significant water resource to one territory deviated from more traditional African practices of shared access (Okumu 2010).

In the aftermath of World War I, Tanganyika came under British mandate rule in 1919. As a result, Britain administered both sides of the lake for several decades (Mahony et al., 2014). However, British documents and maps contained contradictions regarding where the boundary between Malawi and Tanzania lay.

On the one hand, the Heligoland treaty placed the entirety of Lake Malawi under Malawi's domain. On the other hand, the 'Annual Reports on Tanganyika' from 1924 to 1932 refer to a boundary down the center-line of the lake that distinguishes between the two territories (Mahony et al. 2014). Furthermore, a 1924 British State Department report with a map showing a median line. Such inconsistencies, produced by the same colonial administration, would later be used by Tanzania to argue for a median line boundary. However, by 1959 (that is, 3 years before Tanzania gained independence) the British Government told Tanganyika that the entire lake was within Nyasaland's borders (Mayall, 1973).

Contemporary Tanzanian perspectives argue that the British contradiction is evidence that the British administration effectively redrew the border (Mahony et al., 2014); Malawi maintains that the British colonial edict is correct, granting their territory the entire Lake Malawi upon independence in 1964, citing *uti possidetis juris*. African states have largely adopted the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, which meant respecting the colonial borders that existed at the time of independence (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Malawi's claim to the entire lake is firmly based on the Heligoland Treaty of 1890 and the principle of *uti possidetis*. This means that the eastern shoreline was the recognized boundary when it became independent in 1964 (Loisimaye, 2024; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Tanzania challenged this boundary in 1967, advocating for a median line (see Figure 1), which directly contested the colonial-era decision and the subsequent principle of inherited borders (Loisimaye, 2024; Yoon, 2014).

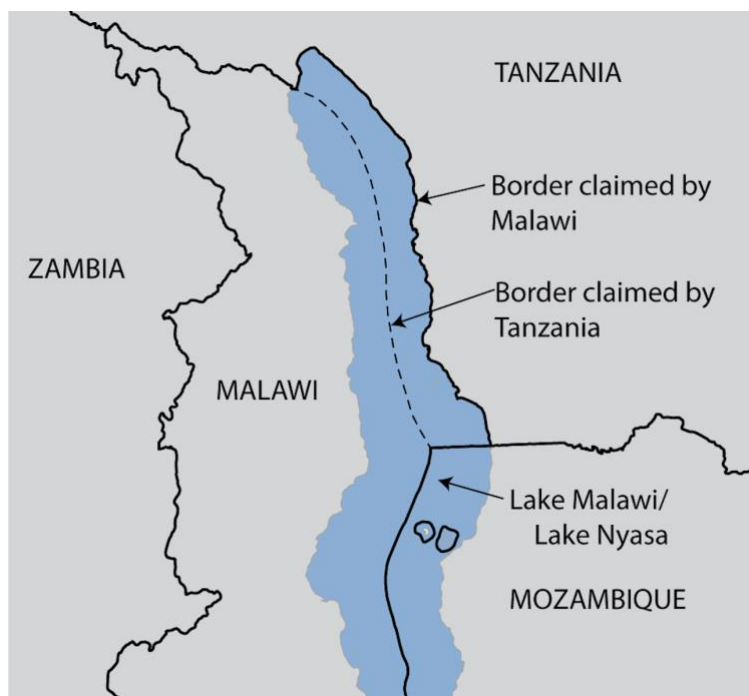


Figure 1: Map of Lake Malawi (*Nyasa*) identifying the competing border claims

Legacies of colonial boundary-making extend beyond the Malawi-Tanzania dispute, as the debate results from the artificial boundaries drawn by European powers during the scramble for Africa (Loisimaye, 2024). These boundaries frequently partitioned communities across newly formed state lines (Goemans and Schultz, 2017; Okumu, 2010). Similarly, Togo and Ghana, following a pre-World War I German-controlled Togo boundary (Scott and Carter, 2016), have experienced border conflict resulting from colonial precedents. However, it is not only the case that colonial borders are frequently contested, but it is also often the case that the incomplete or poorly executed demarcation of colonial borders (Donaldson, 2008; Okumu, 2010; Maluwa, 2016) adds another level of ambiguities which newly independent states have to grapple with. As I will later discuss regarding Tanzania's claims to Lake Malawi, such

territorial disputes are sometimes exacerbated when resources are explored or discovered in these border regions.

Africa and 'uti possidetis juris'

The principle of *uti possidetis juris*, often translated as 'as you possess, so you shall possess under law,' is important in shaping the territorial landscape of post-colonial Africa. The principle also helps to explain why newly independent states largely upheld the boundaries inherited from the colonial era (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014), as the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now known as the African Union (AU), relied heavily on this principle. On the one hand, such reliance endorsed the legacy of European colonialism; on the other, it became a cornerstone of the pragmatic approach to identifying and legitimizing postcolonial borders. Thus, *uti possidetis juris* gave African leaders a script to help navigate the complex realities of independence (Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014).

Like Latin America and South and Southeast Asia, Africa's modern state borders are rooted in treaties made by European colonial powers in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Loisimaye, 2024; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). International Law views these borders as unequivocally legal and binding, contending that the fact that they were often drawn arbitrarily is a non-issue (Donaldson, 2008; Okumu, 2010; Yoon, 2014). The Malawi-Tanzania border dispute over Lake Malawi (Nyasa) serves as a clear example of this colonial legacy. One of the key sources of International Law are 'treaties' such as the Heligoland Treaty of 1890 between Great Britain and Germany to delineate their spheres of influence while placing the entire Lake Nyasa within the British sphere (Nyasaland) (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973; Yoon, 2014). This bilateral agreement laid the foundation for Malawi's post-independence claim (Loisimaye, 2024; Mahony et al., 2014).

As many African states saw independence in the early 1960s their grappling with questions of inherited borders became a significant point of deliberation. While Maluwa (2016) notes that, initially, there were some movements advocating for the alteration of these boundaries to better reflect local demographics, a consensus emerged among the majority of African leaders to

uphold the existing colonial borders using *uti possidetis juris* (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014).

The principle was also widely applied in Latin America to demarcate boundaries of newly independent states from former Spanish and Portuguese colonies (Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). However, African leaders reluctantly or willingly accepted administrative boundaries existing at the time of independence as their countries' internationally recognized borders (Maluwa, 2016) for three reasons. First, the inherited colonial borders, no matter how artificial they might be, constituted a 'tangible reality' at the moment of independence (Maluwa, 2016). Redrawing these borders was viewed as an immensely daunting, complex, and potentially inviting destabilization, particularly in the early days of independent statehood (Yoon, 2014). Given the vast number of diverse ethnic and cultural groups dispersed across the continent, attempting to create new borders based on these lines could have led to the fragmentation of existing states into numerous smaller and weaker entities (Yoon, 2014). Second, newly independent African states faced numerous pressing challenges resulting from colonialism, including building national unity, developing weak economies, and developing government institutions' administrative capacity (Yoon, 2014). In this context, the potential for conflict arising from widespread border revisions was deemed a significant threat to the fragile stability of the nascent nation-states. Some leaders, like the President of the Malagasy Republic (in Madagascar), were explicit in their reckoning with the moral and historical arguments for readjusting boundaries vis-à-vis the practical attempts to reshape them (Maluwa 2016).

Third, the principle of territorial integrity was considered essential for the survival of newly sovereign but often weak states (Yoon, 2014). Article III of the OAU Charter, adopted in 1963, already affirmed respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state (Maluwa, 2016). However, the OAU's adoption of the Resolution on Border Disputes Among African States in Cairo in 1964, which solemnly declared that all member states would respect the borders existing at their independence, was a further commitment to *uti possidetis juris* (Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). This resolution, proposed by President Nyerere of

Tanzania (Maluwa, 2016), effectively enshrined *uti possidetis juris* as a guiding principle for interstate relations in Africa (Yoon, 2014). This commitment was further reiterated in the Constitutive Act of the African Union in 2001 (Maluwa, 2016).

This legal reality, however, does not preclude border conflict, as the Malawi-Tanzania dispute demonstrates. Malawi relies on the Heligoland Treaty of 1890 and the principle of *uti possidetis*, asserting that the eastern shoreline was the established boundary at independence (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Tanzania, while initially accepting this boundary, later contested it, arguing for a median line based on international law principles for shared water bodies (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Despite Tanzania's arguments, the legal weight, supported by the principle of *uti possidetis*, generally favors the colonial-era boundary inherited by Malawi (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016). While some scholars like Mutua (1995) have critiqued the legitimacy of these imposed borders and the OAU's decision (Maluwa, 2016), the practical challenges of redrawing the map of Africa and the desire for stability led African leaders to prioritize the upholding of colonial-era boundaries through the principle of *uti possidetis juris*. This decision, born out of the specific historical context of decolonization, continues to shape the political geography of the continent and influences the dynamics of ongoing border disputes (Loisimaye, 2024; Yoon, 2014).

Lake Nyasa (Malawi): Territorial Dispute

There are several factors which drive territorial disputes in post-independence Africa. Ethnic political consideration appears to be a significant factor. All border segments that divided ethnic groups became particularly susceptible to claims when those groups held political power in ethnically homogeneous societies (Goemans and Schultz, 2017). Physical and geographical features near the border also play a role, albeit a secondary one. For instance, border segments which followed clear focal geographical features such as rivers and watersheds were less likely to be disputed, even when colonial-era border changes created opportunities for later disputes (Goemans and Schultz, 2017). Furthermore, historical precedents matter for territorial

claims. These often follow earlier boundary configurations, potentially offering leaders greater political opportunity (Scott and Carter, 2016). Indeed, resource competition is often an underlying factor, yet power considerations in tandem with resources played only a minor role in explaining the location of territorial claims in Goemans and Schultz' analysis of the Malawi-Tanzania dispute (2017). However, in Eastern Africa, it has been proven that the likelihood of inter-state disputes increases when natural resources (e.g. oil and valuable minerals) are discovered in borderlands (Okumu 2010). This was also the case with the Tanzania-Malawi: after remaining dormant for the decades 1970s till 1990s, the lake dispute resurfaced with the discovery of potential oil and gas deposits (Loisimaye, 2024; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014).

Malawi's Case for the Lake

As previously discussed, the legal claims of Malawi and Tanzania over the border on Lake Nyasa (Lake Malawi) are deeply rooted in the history of European colonialism in East Africa, specifically the interactions between Great Britain and Germany (Loisimaye, 2024; Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973; Yoon, 2014). Malawi's legal claim rests primarily on the Heligoland Treaty of 1890 between Great Britain and Germany. From the Malawian legal point of view, the famous treaty demarcated the British and German respective spheres of influence (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). The treaty explicitly stated that the boundary between Nyasaland (the predecessor of Malawi) and Tanganyika (the predecessor of Tanzania) ran along the eastern, western, and northern shores of Lake Nyasa. In particular, the explicit language of the treaty identifying a physical geographical feature (i.e., 'shores') unequivocally placed the entire lake within the British sphere of influence (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973; Yoon, 2014). When Malawi gained independence in 1964, Nyasaland possessed the entirety of the lake.

In sum, Malawi cites a British colonial-era treaty that promises them sovereignty over the whole of lake Nyasa (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Malawi maintains that such agreements should be upheld, citing the

principle of *uti possidetis juris*. The Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) 1964 resolution supports this claim, as it pledged member states to respect the frontiers existing upon their achievement of national independence. It is of great importance to note that both Malawi and Tanzania assented to the Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) 1964 resolution. While the OAU's 1964 resolution bolsters Malawi's claim (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016), some legal scholars argue that the Heligoland Treaty carries more weight as the primary instrument for determining the boundary (Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014).

Tanzania's Case for the Lake

Tanzania asserts that the boundary should run through the median line of the lake. This would effectively grant Tanzania sovereignty over the eastern half of the northern part of the lake (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973; Yoon, 2014). Tanzania's claim for the disputed lake rests on several grounds. First, Tanzania points to various maps and reports produced under British mandate rule such as 'Annual Reports on Tanganyika' (1924-2932), which referred to a center line as the lake boundary (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016). Such inconsistencies serve as evidence, they claim, that the precedent that the British set was inconsistent. Central to this claim is the British acknowledge their later modification of the 1890 treaty (Mahony et al. 2014). In short, Tanzania has found maps that indicate that the treaty initially reflected the median border line; later, they claim, the British amended this document and afforded Malawi control of the entire lake. However, the legal significance of these maps and reports is contested. As the International Court of Justice (ICJ) established in the Frontier Dispute Case (Burkina Faso vs. Mali), treaties are the primary source for determining boundaries; maps, such as the one Tanzania uses to dispute the validity of the Heligoland Treaty, should generally serve only as corroborative evidence unless formally annexed to a legal text (Maluwa 2016). The absence of explicit (legal) textual evidence demonstrating a deliberate agreement between the colonial powers to alter the boundary weakens Tanzania's reliance on these cartographic representations (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016).

Second, Tanzania invokes customary international law regarding the delimitation of boundaries in contiguous lakes, in particular when suggesting a presumption for a median line (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Article 15 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides for a median line in the absence of agreement or special circumstances (Mahony et al., 2014). There are two major hurdles for Tanzania for invoking customary international law: (a) UNCLOS is meant to help settle maritime disputes, but the dispute about the *lake* is a 'territorial' border dispute; and (b) the existence of the 1890 treaty, predating UNCLOS, could be considered a specific agreement that overrides this presumption. Furthermore, both Malawi and Tanzania ratified UNCLOS *after* their independence, suggesting the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, based on the *earlier* colonial agreement, takes precedence in determining the inherited boundary (Maluwa, 2016).

Third, Tanzania's President Kikwete argued that the 1890 agreement could not deny communities living along the lake their natural rights (Mahony et al., 2014). However, this argument, while addressing the human dimension, does not necessarily displace the legally established colonial boundary (Maluwa, 2016). Tanzania may also attempt to argue historical consolidation of title based on its presence and activities on the lake. However, as the ICJ held in the Cameroon vs. Nigeria case, mere presence and administrative activities in a territory do not automatically negate established conventional title or imply acquiescence from the other party (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016).

Historical reckoning: The Berlin Conference through the 1890 Heligoland Treaty

The root cause of the Lake Malawi conflict lies in the arbitrary partitioning of Africa for colonial exploitation at the 1884 Berlin Conference, when European powers formalized the scramble for Africa (Mayall 1973). Of particular importance, this partitioning was primarily intended to define European spheres of influence on the continent and borders were drawn without proper and adequate consideration of the pre-existing socio-cultural structures and geographic realities of African societies. Instead,

these treaties often reflected geopolitical considerations in European capitals and prioritized the marking of boundaries on *maps*, often neglecting to identify clear physical demarcations on the *ground* (Donaldson, 2008). Furthermore, many colonial-era border decrees and inter-state treaties were contradictory. Despite these foundational territorial arrangements which shape the new states in sub-Saharan Africa, both Tanzania and Malawi acknowledge the legitimacy and binding nature of colonial agreements such as the 1890 Heligoland Treaty, which established clear spheres of influence between Germany and Britain and consequently influenced the contemporary border delineations (Mayall 1973).

The Heligoland Treaty was a product of the ‘diplomatic scramble for African territory’ among European powers (Donaldson, 2008). Heligoland defined spheres of interest between Britain and Germany in East Africa and beyond, also referencing new borders on Heligoland Island in the northern sea (on the European continent). Though the African countries’ geographic landscapes were considered when drawing boundaries established by the treaty (i.e. the lake and the Nyasa-Tanganyika plateau), this border was predominantly drawn with Colonizers’ interests in mind. The treaty negotiations were, for example, heavily influenced by Britain’s desire to control the entire Lake Nyasa to protect missionary and commercial interests and abolish the slave trade (Loisimaye, 2024; Tillotson 2020; Mayall, 1973). Ultimately, the treaty was meant to address and resolve tensions between Britain and Germany, it was a practice of diplomacy.

The treaty explicitly stated that the boundary ran along the eastern, western, and northern shores of Lake Nyasa. The treaty’s reference to an immutable geographical feature such as the lake shore effectively situated the entire lake within the British sphere of influence; and this is the status quo which Malawi inherited upon independence (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Mayall, 1973; Yoon, 2014). However, following Germany’s loss of World War I, Germany lost its colonial territories and Britain controlled both sides of the lake and Tanganyika came under British mandate (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016). Though Malawi and Tanzania are now each independent nation-states, the

1890 Heligoland Treaty continues to paramount significance in the Malawi-Tanzania lake dispute. It sets such an important legal foundation which can hardly be overlooked when engaged in defining the colonial boundary.

Even though it is widely known that some subsequent inconsistencies emerged during the colonial period, the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, the 1964 resolution of the OAU, and the jurisprudence of the ICJ, all underscore the enduring legal weight of this treaty to determine delimiting the inherited post-colonial boundary (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014). Therefore, legal commentators largely agree that this treaty represents the foundational legal basis for determining the boundary (Maluwa 2016; Yoon 2014). Ultimately, the Malawi-Tanzania lake dispute reflects a broader pattern in post-independence Africa and beyond. Colonial treaties, despite their origins and occasional ambiguities, remain the primary legal basis for determining international boundaries.

Unpacking the Dispute in Post-Independence

The Malawi-Tanzania border dispute over Lake Nyasa significantly unfolded after Malawi gained independence on July 6, 1964. There is no official and formal record of Tanzania approaching the Government of Malawi in the immediate aftermath of its independence. However, tensions began to surface around the delimitation of the boundary along Lake Malawi (Nyasa). Although symbolic and may not hold any legal sway, Malawi unilaterally changed the lake's name to 'Lake Malawi' without consulting neighboring states (Loisimaye, 2024). Of particular importance, Tanzania was not consulted which marked the starting point of political and territorial contestation post-independence.

The Exchange of First Letters

Tanzania-Malawi relations were strained immediately following independence (Mayall 1973). In 1967, the Lake Nyasa border dispute between Malawi and Tanzania saw a crucial exchange of letters and notifications that solidified their differing positions. This period marked overt 'border anxiety,' starting with a formal

escalation from Tanzania's challenge to the inherited and established colonial boundary (Simmons & Shaffer 2024). The exchange began with a Note Verbale dated January 3, 1967. This note, sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania to the Ministry of External Affairs of the Republic of Malawi, explicitly laid out Tanzania's stance: the lake should be divided at the median line (Maluwa 2016). Malawi responded to this initial notification on January 21, 1967 (Maluwa, 2016). However, Malawi's reply was limited to an acknowledgment of Tanzania's Note Verbale and indicating willingness to send a response following the brief note. Of particular importance, Malawi did not issue a further reply (Maluwa 2016).

The exchange continued later in the year. On May 31, 1967, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania wrote directly to his Malawian counterpart, President Kamuzu Banda (Loisimaye 2024; Maluwa 2016). In this letter, President Nyerere advised President Banda that Tanzania rejected the eastern shoreline boundary. President Nyerere's message communicated that Tanzania rejected the shoreline boundary (Loisimaye 2024). On the same day, President Nyerere publicly announced Tanzania's new position for the first time in a speech given at a school in Iringa, southwestern Tanzania (Maluwa 2016). In this public address, he declared that Tanzania could no longer accept the shoreline as the boundary and instead recognized the median line as more equitable.

In a note dated January 3, 1967, the Tanzanian Government informed Malawi that it considered the median line to be the legal border and rejected the shoreline boundary (Mayall 1973). There was no written response from President Banda to President Nyerere's letter of May 31st (Maluwa 2016). But Malawi's President Banda addressed the issue publicly on June 27, 1967, in an address to the Malawi Parliament (Maluwa 2016; Mayall, 1973). In this speech, he rejected Tanzania's claim, arguing that it had no justification and reaffirmed that the lake had always belonged to Malawi. Later that year, President Banda publicly rejected Tanzania's claim (Loisimaye 2024).

Overt Tension and Political Contention

The initial exchanges between Tanzanian and Malawian officials marked the beginning of a protracted dispute (Maluwa 2016). For the next year and a half, Presidents Nyerere and Banda engaged in escalated political conflict, both in rhetoric and action. Presidents Banda and Nyerere attacked one another in the media in 1968. Malawi's President Banda ordered the deployment of patrol boats and threatened to deploy armed boats on the lake, and Tanzania fortified communications technology and small arms reserves (Loisimaye 2024; Maluwa 2016). In response, the Tanzanian government launched a military and education program in villages surrounding the lake. Towards the end of 1968, Tanzania indicated it would no longer discuss the border issue until Malawi had a 'sensible and sane leader' (Loisimaye 2024). Tensions died down and relations improved slightly towards the end of the year, as the states entered a 'passive phase' of paused negotiations (Loisimaye 2024; Maluwa 2016; Yoon 2014). Relations regarding the Lake remained generally cool until 1985 (Yoon 2014).

Though tensions regarding the lake subdued, diplomatic relations between the two countries did not fully recover. These tensions arose from several factors, including contrasting viewpoints on white minority regimes in Southern Africa and the liberation struggles in those regions. Additionally, President Banda harbored suspicions that Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere was supporting exiled Malawian politicians who opposed his rule. Through all of this was the undercurrent of the dispute over the delimitation of the lake boundary, contributing to the strained relationship. Though there were sizable efforts to re-establish formal diplomacy in 1985, an effort that signified some improvement of the relationship, tensions persisted until 1994, when Malawi's President Kamuzu Banda left power (Maluwa 2016). The improvement in relations continued and was strengthened further in the immediate post-1994 period with the appointment of resident ambassadors to each other's capital. This further step of establishing resident diplomatic missions stabilized a commitment to a more normalized and cooperative relationship.

Dispute Resurgence

The exploration of oil and gas deposits in Lake Nyasa in 2011 escalated the dispute and spurred renewed attempts at resolution (Loisimaye, 2024; Mahony et al., 2014). Malawi unilaterally awarded legal exploration licenses to private companies to begin drilling for oil in the lake (Mahony et al., 2014). Tanzania condemned the move, and the two states together submitted the dispute to third-party mediation under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Mahony et al., 2014; Loisimaye, 2024). SADC appointed former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano, who was chair of the Forum of Former African Heads of State and Government, to lead the mediation process (Loisimaye, 2024; Mahony et al., 2014).

SADC mediation process, though hopeful in its initiation, was mired in delays and controversy. Specifically, Malawi often expressed skepticism and a preference for referring the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), especially following a former president's suggestion to do so during her term (Maluwa, 2016; Mahony et al., 2014). In April 2013, Malawi temporarily withdrew from the SADC mediation process citing bias, only to return to the mediation table a month later (Lautier, 2013; Mahony et al., 2014).

While the SADC mediation efforts were a major development toward settling the dispute, the core positions of both countries have remained largely unchanged. Malawi continues to insist on ownership of the entire lake based on the Heligoland Treaty (1890) (i.e., Anglo-German Treaty, 1890) and the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, which was affirmed by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1964. Both Malawi and Tanzania were signatories of the relevant Organisation of African Unity (OAU) resolution. Tanzania also maintains its claim for a median line boundary, making an argument based on contradictory colonial maps and customary international law regarding maritime boundaries. The protracted nature of this dispute, initially characterized by an exchange of letters, and later hampered by an extended-period without formal high-level negotiation, exemplifies one of many African border disputes rooted in colonial boundary-making.

The Lake Dispute Today, and Broader Implications for Landlocked States

The Malawi-Tanzania dispute exemplified the enduring legal structure established by colonial agreements which contribute a critical challenge for modern state development. However, sources of international law such as treaties must not preclude cooperation towards development between states. While Malawi's foundational claim to the entirety of Lake Malawi/Nyasa rests firmly on the 1890 Heligoland Treaty, reinforced by the principle of *uti possidetis juris* (Mahony et al., 2014; Maluwa, 2016; Yoon, 2014), the enduring legal weight of such colonial treaties must be balanced against the pragmatic imperative for stability and mutual prosperity (Powell & Wiegand, 2023; Maluwa, 2016).

This tension is rooted in inherited colonial legal structures which had no regard or neglected to foresee both short and long-term effects on the burgeoning post-colonial international order. This is especially relevant for landlocked states such as Malawi, whose economic development depends heavily on access agreements with coastal neighboring countries. Malawi does not have any direct maritime access, and the country has historically relied on neighboring nations for transit. Beyond the lake dispute, Malawi heavily depends on Tanzania's major port of Dar es Salaam for both exports and essential imports. This interdependence incentivizes regional cooperation. Malawi evidently values mutual benefits from interdependence considering Malawi's decision to officially join the Central Corridor Transport Facilitation Agency (CCTFA) in 2023 (Kisamfu, 2023). The decision is also a strategic move towards maritime access to regional markets, promoting trade and economic growth via the Tanzanian Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam (Kisamfu, 2023).

However, Malawi challenged recent Tanzanian port development on Lake Malawi (Nyasa) signaling that the spillover of the territorial sovereignty concerns renders commitment to cooperation vulnerable. In 2024, Tanzania decided to upgrade the Mbamba Bay Port located on Malawi's shoreline. Tanzania's port development goals aimed to increase cargo efficiency at Mtwara's port (Lansing Institute, 2024). Malawi immediately

protested the move. The Government of Malawi asserted that proceeding with the project on what it considers Malawian territory without consent was ‘irregular and illegal’ (Lansing Institute, 2024) and the country demanded the project be halted until proper consultations were conducted. This challenge emphasizes that even development-focused cooperation can be derailed when it intersects with unresolved colonial boundaries and the assertion of inherited colonial legal claims.

The complexity of this dynamic mirrors relevant implications in the quest for maritime access by other major landlocked nations, such as Ethiopia. The Eritrean independence in 1993 resulted in a loss of Ethiopian maritime sovereignty, and Ethiopia has been actively working to diversify its trade corridors and secure access to the sea (Mulugeta, 2024). Ethiopia engaged in high-level diplomatic discussions, culminating in the January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), with the Republic of Somaliland. The Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali and President Muse Bihi Abdi (MoFA Somaliland, 2024) signed the bilateral MoU: (a) Somaliland would lease a 20km strip of sea access for 50 years for commercial and naval use; (b) and Ethiopia would undertake ‘in-depth assessment’ toward formal recognition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The case is a powerful example of African statecraft in a context in which the *uti possidetis juris* doctrine did not reward the Republic with *de jure* sovereignty, and the underlying colonial determinants of international law did not dissuade Ethiopia’s peaceful pursuit for maritime access.

Though colonial-era treaties complicate the case of Malawi-Tanzania, Ethiopia and Somaliland represent countries engaging pragmatic negotiation maritime access rights outside traditional frameworks. Such cooperation is especially significant in a global system marked by persistent inequalities, where reliance on colonial-era legal precedents, while convenient and well-established, carry legacies that are at times contradictory and/or ill-suited to address contemporary political and economic realities.

Conclusion

The protracted dispute over the boundary on Lake Malawi/Nyasa has witnessed various attempts at peaceful resolution, reflecting the complexities inherent in post-colonial border disagreements. Ultimately, diplomatic relations between Malawi and Tanzania were almost permanently strained soon after Malawi's independence in 1964 (Mayal 1973). The heightened tensions were initially marked by personal accusations between leaders in 1967, and 1968 gave way to a period where direct, high-level formal negotiations were largely absent for several decades. It was not until 1985 that significant steps towards improving relations occurred with the establishment of diplomatic ties between Malawi and Tanzania (Maluwa, 2016). This normalization was further solidified in the post-1994 era through the appointment of resident ambassadors, indicating a commitment to a more cooperative relationship (Maluwa, 2016).

The dispute is no longer dormant, however, and there are renewed attempts towards peaceful resolution. The border dispute is currently active as a result of oil and gas deposits exploration in Lake Nyasa in 2011. Malawi's unilateral awarding of oil exploration licenses in the contested area further aggravated the situation (Maluwa, 2016). Unlike the period when the diplomatic relations were frozen, the contemporary governments of the two states are recognizing the potential for conflict considering the rich natural resources of the lake. Thus, both states agreed to submit the dispute to third-party mediation under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Maluwa, 2016), and the former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano, to lead the mediation efforts in 2012.

Despite this commitment to peaceful means, the SADC mediation process faced significant challenges in delays and instances of controversy (Maluwa, 2016, Mahony et al., 2014). While actively participating in the process, Malawi questioned the integrity of the process. The country has repeatedly voiced its preference for referring the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Malawi's inclination towards adjudication reflects the country's confidence in its legal standing, based primarily on the Heligoland Treaty of 1890 (Maluwa, 2016, Yoon, 2014) and principle of *uti possidetis juris*, which generally upholds colonial-

era boundaries upon independence (Yoon, 2014). On the other hand, Tanzania has strategically favored continued mediation and bilateral negotiations with Malawi. Tanzania's claims primarily rely on post-1890 colonial maps indicating a median line and the historical usage of the lake by its citizens. Tanzania's inclination towards mediation and bilateral negotiations shows that the state is indeed aware of the legal complexities of challenging the established treaty.

Powell and Wiegand (2023) succinctly observe that “since political, economic, and strategic considerations, as well as particulars of legal claims associated with each territorial and maritime dispute, are unique, no single PR [peaceful resolution] method is always most appropriate on each occasion” (p. 7). The future for the disputed lake is uncertain, however, one potential avenue for peaceful resolution which has been considered involves shared management and utilization of the lake's resources (Maluwa, 2016). This approach could potentially satisfy both country's interests to ensure Malawi's territorial integrity while allowing Tanzania to benefit from the vast economic opportunities the lake offers including oil and gas natural resources (Maluwa, 2016, Yoon, 2014, Okumu, 2010). Such a solution would align with SADC's principles of cooperation emphasized as a regional body with a priority for prosperity (Maluwa, 2016). Whichever venue the two states choose, either continued mediation or eventual adjudication, the success of any peaceful resolution will ultimately depend on the political will of both nations to compromise and prioritize the long-term stability and mutual benefit of the region.

The implications from the Malawi-Tanzania border dispute go beyond post-colonial rivalry. Considering the diverse contexts for applying international law while drawing on *uti possidetis juris* doctrine, the case provides an in-depth analysis for international law scholarship on territoriality, inherited sovereignty, and particularly concerning the application of international law in resource-rich regions. This paper's findings underscore the enduring legal weight of existing international principles and their intricate relationship with challenging historical legacies which gave rise to contemporary modern states. This research reinforces the hierarchy of legal sources and

the pragmatic political utility of *uti possidetis juris*. The doctrine was first applied in Latin America, where theorists and practitioners developed legal strategies for contemporary maritime delimitation disputes. The Malawi-Tanzania case highlights the continued, often immutable colonial-era treaties in defining modern international boundaries. This is not an isolated phenomenon. Others, for example the dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsula and ultimately settled by the ICJ, were also based on colonial treaties (Yoon, 2014; Maluwa, 2016). Such cases reflect the enduring legal significance of colonial-era treaties such as the Anglo-German (Heligoland) Treaty of 1890. Similarly, improperly delimited, contradictorily referenced, and poorly demarcated colonially inherited borders are among the sources of current border disputes in Eastern Africa. Kamazima (2017, 2018), for example note “the Tanzania-Uganda border stems from the Anglo-Germany delimitations of spheres of influence of November 1st, 1886, 1890 and 1893, with modifications by an Agreement of May 14, 1910” (p.41). In the dispute on Lake Nyasa, the resurfacing of claims due to the exploration and potential discovery of natural resources further adds to African border disputes.

For scholars and policymakers interested in the dynamics of post-colonial statecraft globally, this research illuminates that *uti possidetis juris* doctrine is not just as a legal rule, but a political cornerstone endorsed by the African Union to ensure stability and territorial integrity in a continent grappling with arbitrarily drawn boundaries. The African adoption of *uti possidetis juris* was arguably a pragmatic necessity, accepted to prevent the fragmentation of nascent post-colonial states. The AU could not imagine feasible policies to manage the daunting complexity of redrawing maps based on ethnic or cultural lines. The dispute thus serves as a powerful case study demonstrating the trade-off between the moral arguments for boundary readjustment and the practical imperative for stability. The resource dimension underlying territorial disputes adds another layer of conflict underpinning international law. The Lake Malawi/Nyasa conflict stands as an enduring testament that even decades after independence, the legacy of colonial geopolitical decisions continues to impose its legal structure upon modern sovereignty,

and the need for political commitment to devise approaches prioritizing cooperation and compromise between states to navigate the complexities of inherited boundaries.

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A Mirage of Protection: Statelessness and Legal Failures in Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract

This paper focuses on individual statelessness, a phenomenon experienced by an estimated 10 million people globally. International law and conventions, such as the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, interact with national and regional instruments to address the phenomenon around the world. Despite Côte d'Ivoire's ratification of these conventions in 2013, approximately 700,000 individuals in the country remain without legal citizenship. Limited resources and political will significantly hamper the effective implementation of protective measures for stateless individuals. This study therefore seeks to address the question: How do legal frameworks at the national, regional, and international levels construct or undermine the protection of stateless individuals in Côte d'Ivoire, and what might this reveal about the contested nature of borders, citizenship, and identity in postcolonial Africa? An extensive review of international, regional, national legal documents and reports published between 1960 and 2018. I argue that the multiplicity of regulatory frameworks creates what I call a *mirage* of protection for stateless individuals, where rights are proclaimed but remain largely inaccessible. Ultimately, the findings suggest that a multidisciplinary, inclusive approach (bridging legal reform, regional cooperation, and socio-political advocacy) is essential for addressing statelessness and fostering genuine belonging in Côte d'Ivoire and beyond.

Keywords: Statelessness, Côte d'Ivoire, citizenship, nationality law, postcolonial Africa, civil registration, ECOWAS, imagined community, colonial legacies, jus soli, jus sanguinis, UNHCR, human rights, Ivoirité, migrant populations, legal exclusion.

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“In Africa, human rights are abundantly proclaimed,
insufficiently protected and constantly violated”.

-Dégni-Ségui René

Statelessness remains one of the most profound legal and existential crises facing individuals globally (UNHCR, 2014). Despite the widespread proclamation of human rights, particularly in Africa, protections often remain elusive, with stateless individuals experiencing the most severe exclusions from legal, political, and social recognition (Belton, K. A., 2011; Kingston, L. N., 2017). While international and regional frameworks formally address statelessness, scholars have noted that these protections are often undermined by weak enforcement mechanisms and entrenched exclusionary practices (Blitz & Lynch, 2011; Manby, 2016). Existing literature has largely focused on state-level obligations or legal reforms, often overlooking the structural and cultural conditions under which statelessness becomes durable. The lack of provisions for stateless individuals affects the broader citizenry through civil registration systems, where ambiguity around identity and nationality criteria obstructs access to basic documents such as birth certificates. A telling instance documented in Adjami's report involved civil registrars refusing to register births without parental identity documents, despite legal provision allowing for oral testimony, thus barring even eligible children from legal recognition (Adjami, 2016). The 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons formally defines a stateless person as “an individual whom no State considers as its national by operation of its law.” Beyond its legal definition, I contend that statelessness represents the erosion of identity, belonging, and protection that citizenship ideally confers. Globally, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that approximately ten million individuals are stateless (UNHCR, n.d.). However, the true number remains uncertain due to states' reluctance or inability to document, invest sufficient time and resources, or acknowledge the phenomenon. In West Africa, and particularly in Côte d'Ivoire, statelessness has reached a critical magnitude (Atuguba, R.A., Tuokuu, F.X.D., and Gbang, V., 2020, pp.14-31; Muteerwa, E.B., 2020). With approximately

700,000 individuals lacking recognized citizenship, Côte d'Ivoire bears the highest burden of statelessness in the region (Manby, B., 2015; Ajami, 2016). Historical patterns of migration, colonial borders legacies, and postcolonial struggles over national identity have compounded the problem. (Mamdani, M., 2007; Hawthorne, W., 2013, pp. 77-93; Manby, B., 2015; Babo, A., 2022).

Despite Côte d'Ivoire historically robust legal tradition and its formal commitment to human rights instruments (Viljoen, F. 2012; Bassey, J.R. 2014., pp. 151; Piccolino, G. 2014., pp. 45-68), the country's nationality laws, rooted in frameworks established at independence, have often failed to adapt to changing demographic realities (Mitchell, M. I. 2012., pp. 267-287; Babo, A. 2013., pp. 100-119; Yéré, H. M. 2007., pp. 50-65). Instead of clarifying national belonging, these frameworks have often entrenched exclusion, especially among migrant-descended populations and minority groups (Aning, K. 2021, pp. 336-366; Langer, A., Mustapha, A., & Stewart, F. 2007; Hudson, H. 2009, pp. 287-318). The persistence of statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire underscores the interplay between sovereignty, identity, and legal recognition. Conflicts of law, where different legal orders fail to reconcile nationality rights, contribute significantly to the production and perpetuation of statelessness (Van Waas-Hayward, L. E. 2008; Siegelberg, M. L. 2020; Jain, N. 2022, pp. 237-288). Nationality, recognized by the International Court of Justice as a "legal bond having its basis a social fact of attachment," becomes an elusive status when states prioritize rigid legalistic definitions over social realities (Nottebohm, 1955). Statelessness, therefore, emerges not merely as a legal anomaly but as an outcome of contested boundary-making practices in postcolonial African States. Efforts to protect stateless individuals face tremendous obstacles (Weissbrodt, D.S., & Collins, C., 2006, pp. 245-276; Blitz, B.K., 2009). Traditional mechanisms of diplomatic protection are unavailable, as stateless persons lack direct legal access to any state. Access to justice, whether national or international, is similarly fraught (Weissbrodt, D. S., & Collins, C., 2006, pp. 245-276); legal remedies often require exhaustion of domestic procedures, a hurdle nearly insurmountable for those without recognized legal existence. Furthermore, international mechanisms struggle to

address statelessness effectively, constrained by the sovereignty of states and the fragmentation of legal norms (Batchelor, C. A. 1998, pp. 156-182; Hayden, P. 2008, pp. 248-269).

This article contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting the gaps between national, regional, international legal frameworks, their implementation in practice, and literature around the contested nature of borders, citizenship, and identity in postcolonial Africa. In that regard, this paper analyzes documents spanning from 1960 to 2018, including international conventions, regional agreements, and national legal instruments. It also engages with African studies literature to frame statelessness as a reflection of broader political and symbolic boundary-making processes. The multiplicity of regulatory frameworks creates what I call a *mirage* of protection for stateless individuals, where rights are proclaimed but remain largely inaccessible. Ultimately, my findings suggest that a multidisciplinary, inclusive approach – bridging legal reform, regional cooperation, and socio-political advocacy – is essential for addressing statelessness and fostering genuine belonging in Côte d’Ivoire and beyond.

Exoskeleton of Statelessness: Historical Legacies

Confronting the roots of Statelessness in Côte d’Ivoire implies taking a deep dive into the complex interaction of colonial inheritance, inconsistent national legislation, and under-implemented international commitments. At the heart of the issue lies the dissonance between globally articulated rights and their weak or fragmented execution within the national legal system.

International Norms

Article 1 of the 1930 Hague Convention on Certain Questions Relating to the Conflict of Nationality Laws stipulates that “it is for each State to determine under its own law who are its nationals,” conditioned by the respect for internal custom and human rights law (1930: page number). Building on the foundation laid by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 15) ratified in 1948, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954) reinforce the right to legal identity and

frame statelessness as an urgent international concern, officially defining for the first time what it means to be stateless: a “stateless person” is “a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.” More broadly, this convention establishes “a framework for the international protection of stateless persons and is the most comprehensive codification of the rights of stateless persons yet attempted at the international level.” In the coming decade, the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Article 5) enshrines the right to nationality as fundamental and protects against its arbitrary denial. Article 2, paragraph 3 of the 1965 Convention stipulates that “each state party shall take effective measures to review governmental, national and local policies, and to amend, rescind or nullify any laws and regulations which have the effect of creating or perpetuating racial discrimination wherever it exists.”

Regional level

At the regional level, Côte d’Ivoire has committed to key frameworks such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). For instance, Article 6 of the Charter stipulates:

States Parties to the present Charter shall undertake to ensure that their Constitutional legislation recognizes the principles according to which a child shall acquire the nationality of the State in the territory of which he has been born if, at the time of the child’s birth, he is not granted nationality by any other State under its laws (African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990., p9).

This provision reflects a foundational principle in the fight against statelessness: that every child should acquire nationality if they would otherwise be stateless. It reinforces state responsibility in ensuring that no child born within its borders is left without legal identity, especially in cases of abandonment or where parentage cannot be established.

It is important to note that the ECOWAS also aimed to bring some clarity to notions of citizenship and nationality, both usually

used as synonyms. The protocol on the community's citizenship code, adopted in 1982, clarifies the concept of citizenship within the ECOWAS region. The first article of this protocol outlines the process for becoming a citizen of the community through four pathways, by way of: (1) descent, (2) by place of birth, provided that at least one parent is a national, (3) adoption, or (4) naturalization. However, despite this comprehensive definition, its practical application among member states remains inconsistent. The implementation of these criteria requires clear mechanisms and careful oversight, which are often lacking, leading to further confusion alongside existing internal regulations. In contrast, the protocol to the treaty on the free movement of persons offers a more straightforward interpretation. It defines a community citizen as "any national of a member state" (Treaty Protocol, 1982, p. 3). Chapter IV of this treaty emphasizes that citizens of member states should be recognized as citizens of the community (Enabuele, A. O. 2010, pp. 111-137), obligating the member states to eliminate any barriers to their freedom of movement and residence within the region. This provision, at the same time, highlights the commitment of member states to facilitate and protect these rights. Yet the gap between ECOWAS aspirations and the on-the-ground realities remains inconsistently implemented. This disjunction is not unique to statelessness; many international conventions in Africa and globally face similar challenges, where legal ratification is not directly followed by implementation (Hoekstra, J. 2021, pp. 43-66; Maluwa, T. 2020, p. 237). The regional inconsistencies underscore the precarious legal and social positioning of stateless individuals as they are unable to benefit from broader rights associated with regional citizenship. The promise of ECOWAS as a space of mobility and legal inclusion collapses for those not claimed by any state. When progressive on paper, the said promise frequently functions as a mirage, protecting integration while masking the legal and logistical hurdles faced by stateless people. This further illustrates how statelessness erodes both national and regional identities, leaving individuals without effective recourse or recognition.

Given the significant number of stateless persons in Côte d'Ivoire, the country took the initiative to host the ministerial

conference on statelessness for ECOWAS member states (Citaristi, I., 2022). This pivotal conference resulted in the adoption of the first declaration on statelessness in West Africa, building upon two key resolutions that preceded it: the 2013 and 2014 resolutions by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). Resolution No. 234 (LIII), adopted on April 22, 2013, in Banjul, Gambia, specifically aimed to conduct an in-depth study on the right to nationality, reaffirming that "the right to a nationality for every person is a fundamental human right," as inferred by Article 5, paragraph 1 of the African Charter on Human Rights (ACHR). This resolution brought renewed attention to the necessity for States to refrain from adopting discriminatory measures regarding nationality, urged them to ratify international conventions on human rights and statelessness, and advised comprehensive legal reforms to significantly mitigate the prevalence of statelessness. Furthermore, the article poignantly emphasizes two critical points: (1) the failure of African nations to ensure that all children are registered at birth, which can lead to statelessness, and (2) the strong conviction that it is in the best interest of African States to recognize, guarantee, and facilitate the right to nationality for every individual, ensuring that no one faces the risk of statelessness (ACHPR/Res.234(LIII). Apr. 22, 2013). The ACHPR followed up with Resolution No. 277 in May 2014, which focused on developing a protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights regarding the right to nationality in Africa. This resolution not only reinforced the earlier measures outlined in the 2013 resolution but also emphasized the necessity of taking substantial steps to identify, prevent, and reduce statelessness while protecting the right to nationality. This renewed commitment from African States, particularly from Côte d'Ivoire, was further solidified in February 2015 with the Abidjan Declaration.

The Abidjan Declaration is organized around four main axes, each emphasizing the reaffirmation of commitments made through international conventions (Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database, 2024). The first axis, titled "On the Prevention of Statelessness," highlights the commitment of States to prevent and reduce statelessness. This includes revising legal

frameworks to incorporate effective safeguards against statelessness and conducting comprehensive awareness campaigns on the risks associated with statelessness, as well as providing information on the processes for acquiring and confirming nationality. The second axis focuses on the identification and protection of stateless persons. States are committed to implementing appropriate measures that align with the 1954 Convention, ensuring that stateless individuals can attain a legal status. The third axis addresses the resolution of existing statelessness. Here, member states reaffirm their commitment to providing stateless individuals with access to clearly defined procedures for acquiring nationality. Finally, the fourth axis emphasizes the establishment of strategies and partnerships to combat statelessness. This involves a commitment from States to implement national action plans aligned with the UNHCR Global Action Plan, further reinforcing their dedication to comprehensively addressing statelessness.

National Level

The law of November 3, 1960, establishing the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, notably lacks provisions addressing the status of stateless persons or the mechanisms for granting Ivorian nationality to individuals who currently possess none (Constitution, Nov. 3, 1960). This absence is particularly striking given that the preamble affirms the nation's commitment to the rights outlined in the Declaration of Human Rights and of the Citizen. Article 123 of the Ivorian Constitution of 2016 further emphasizes the importance of international treaties by stating that "Treaties or agreements regularly ratified have, upon their publication, an authority superior to that of laws, subject to the application of each treaty or agreement by the other party" (Constitution, Nov. 8, 2016). This provision highlights the proclaimed authority of international treaties following their ratification by states. Ratification serves as the formal expression of a state's consent to be legally bound by the provisions of a treaty or agreement, as explained by Cornu, G. (2014). Consequently, the head of state is tasked with ensuring that the state fulfills its obligations under such treaties. However, the thesis of non-compliance with international commitments emerges because many international

instruments call for a revision of national frameworks by the states parties. The Abidjan Declaration, for instance, states that nations should undertake legislative revisions to integrate appropriate guarantees against statelessness (Refworld - UNHCR's Global Law and Policy Database, 2024, pp. 3-4). Unfortunately, at the national level, there remains a glaring absence of legal frameworks aimed at protecting the rights of stateless persons in alignment with these international agreements. Conversely, Article 3 of the Ivorian nationality law asserts that "the provisions relating to nationality contained in duly ratified and published international treaties or agreements apply, even if they are contrary to the provisions of Ivorian domestic legislation" (Law No. 61-415, December 14, 1961, p. 1). This provision suggests a theoretical willingness on the part of the Ivorian state to implement its international commitments regarding nationality and statelessness. Nonetheless, the lack of subsequent legislative action raises significant concerns about the practical realization of these theoretical commitments. Here, the framework of protection of stateless individuals reveals itself as a legal mirage, a surface-level adherence to norms that lacks the structural depth or political will necessary for substantive change. It furthermore sometimes encompasses the creation of a national legal system that endorses the said measures without actual mechanisms to enforce them. This "mirage" of protection masks the persistent legal void and distances in this case, the Ivorian state from the transformative potential of the treaties it purports to uphold.

Shortcomings of the National Civil Registration System

Article 6 of the Nationality Code of Côte d'Ivoire establishes that a person born on Ivorian soil is considered Ivorian unless both parents are foreigners or the relationship with the foreign parent has been legally established (Law No. 61-415, December 14, 1961, p. 2). At first glance, this provision appears to endorse the principle of nationality by birthright, articulated in Latin as "*jus soli*." This principle asserts that anyone born within the territory of a state is entitled to nationality or citizenship, irrespective of their parents' citizenship (Scott, J. B. 1930, pp. 58-54). However, the implementation of Article 6 presents a paradox. While it

ostensibly champions nationality based on *jus soli*, it concurrently necessitates a biological connection to Ivorian parents, thereby invoking the principles of “*jus sanguinis*” or “right of blood” (Scott, J. B. 1930, pp. 58-54).

Furthermore, Article 7 of the same code stipulates that “the legitimate or legitimized child, born abroad to an Ivorian parent” is considered Ivorian (Law No. 61-415, December 14, 1961, p. 2). This provision extends to children born outside of marriage, thereby effectively establishing nationality by *jus sanguinis* for the progeny of Ivorian parents. From an analysis of these two articles, two significant conclusions emerge. First, mere birth on Ivorian territory does not confer any legal entitlement to nationality. Second, there exists a requirement for an individual to establish a connection with the Ivorian state through *jus sanguinis* to secure Ivorian nationality by origin. Thus, despite the legislators' attempts to balance the principles of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*, the resultant legal framework reveals weaknesses that contribute to the risk of statelessness. Moreover, Article 6 lacks a clear definition of who qualifies as a “foreigner,” categorically defining individuals as “Ivorians” without specifying criteria for distinguishing them from foreigners. This omission complicates the equitable application of nationality laws but also poses challenges for the civil registration system as a whole. Crucially, these flaws not only marginalize stateless populations but also compromise the administrative integrity of citizenship procedures for nationals. Ambiguities in classification and registration make it more difficult even for eligible citizens to obtain birth certificates and prove legal identity, thereby affecting public service delivery and undermining trust in state institutions (Batchelor, C. A. 1998; Hunter, W. 2019). For example, during the 2002-2011 conflict, civil registration records were destroyed in many areas, making it harder for both stateless individuals and recognized citizens to prove identity or access to basic rights (Adjami, 2016).

In addition to the previously discussed challenges, it is essential to address the difficulties surrounding birth registration in Côte d'Ivoire to highlight the inadequacies of the national framework in safeguarding the rights of stateless persons (Piccolino, G. 2016; Atick, J. J., Palacios, R. J., & Ouerghi, A.

2015). A birth certificate serves as the first official document to establish a child's legal identity and existence, providing vital information regarding the place of birth and parental lineage (Pais, M.S. 2002, pp. 1-32; Vandenabeele, C. 2011, pp. 307-330). Notably, within the Ivorian legal system, the birth certificate itself does not confer any legal recognition of Ivorian nationality; it merely certifies the occurrence of birth (Adjami, 2016; Lawrance, B. N., & Stevens, J., 2017). The civil status law mandates that all births in Côte d'Ivoire be declared and registered with the appropriate civil status authorities within three months, as stipulated in Article 72 of Law No. 99-691 of December 14, 1999, which amends Law No. 64-374 of October 7.

However, this legislation does not require that parents or relatives declare the birth to present identity documents at the time of registration. Instead, the law permits the verification of the child's origins through oral testimony. In practice, however, civil registry officers in certain regions have been known to refuse birth registrations if the parents lack proper identity documentation which has consequently contributed to the emergence of new cases of statelessness (Pais, M.S. 2002; Piccolino, G. 2016; Muteerwa, E.B., 2020). Furthermore, the issue of birth registration in the context of statelessness is exacerbated by the crises that have afflicted the country. Instances of civil registry records being destroyed, along with the inaccessibility of certain remote areas, have significantly hindered the availability of these essential services. Thus, without effective measures to ensure comprehensive birth registration, the risk of statelessness is likely to persist, underscoring the urgent need for reform in the national framework.

Fixing the Frame: Theories of Exclusion and the Realities of Stateless Assistance

Understanding and addressing statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire requires not only legal reform and administrative clarity but also a deeper reckoning with the theoretical and institutional forces that perpetuate exclusion. As previously articulated, statelessness is embedded in the structural contradictions of postcolonial state-building, where the mechanisms of inclusion – nationality,

citizenship, legal recognition – are systematically undermined by both cultural and material borders.

Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" offers critical insights into the construction of national identity in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly in how it systematically excludes long-settled migrant communities. At the heart of Anderson's argument lies the notion that a nation is 'imagined' because its members generally do not have personal connections with the majority of their fellow citizens, yet they still perceive themselves as part of a cohesive group. He posits that every nation is inherently limited by its boundaries, which brings forth an implicit understanding of who belongs and who does not. This boundary-setting is crucial when we consider the predicament of stateless individuals, who find themselves marginalized and excluded from citizenship. Scholars such as Paul Nugent (2004) have applied Anderson's framework to West African nationalism, demonstrating how postcolonial states like Ghana and Nigeria, similarly to Côte d'Ivoire, constructed national identities that systematically excluded rural and migrant populations, even when those groups legally qualified as citizens. The (symbolic) boundaries of the Ivorian nation have shifted historically, from an inclusive post-independence framework under Houphouët-Boigny to a more ethnonationalist vision during the rise of Ivoirité in the 1990s and 2000s (Akindès, F. A. 2004; Campbell, C. K. 2010; Mitchell, M. I. 2012). In this context, national identity is imagined not merely through legal frameworks but through narratives of belonging that determine perceptions of who is authentically Ivorian. For Anderson, the modern nation-state serves as a replicable model, inherited and adapted by postcolonial states like Côte d'Ivoire. He emphasizes that national identity is performed and narrated, rather than being a biologically or culturally inherent trait. Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) have adapted Anderson's model, moving beyond his Eurocentrism to detail how non-Western nations developed their own symbolic frameworks of belonging beyond this replicable Andersonian model; feminist critiques, including McDowell (1999), also argue that Anderson's theory at times overlooks the gendered hierarchies embedded in national identity. These conversations continue today, notably in digital nationalism studies (e.g.,

Anderson, B. 2019), which emphasize how state narratives exclude mobile, migratory populations. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, as well as many other modern cases, the country's adaptation of the nation-state often does not address the exclusionary foundations that were embedded in the original colonial structures. This highlights a significant paradox: every imagined community necessarily creates an exclusionary dynamic. We know from Simmel (1955) that in the act of formulating a collective "us" – often by way of solidarity, conflict, and cultural negotiation – the construct of a collective "them" also arises (Mummendey, Klink, and Brown 2001; Calhoun 1993; Simmel 1955). However, there are people– in this case, stateless persons– who exist in a liminal space between "us" and "them" categories by way of cultural, political, legal, or ethnic classification and exclusion (Robert Ezra Park 1950; Simmel 1950). Together, these theorists provide foundational tools for dissecting the complexities of statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire.

The construction of national identity and social othering is accompanied by development legal and administrative frameworks. Mahmood Mamdani's "Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism" (1996) stands as a seminal text in African political thought, critically examining the colonial roots of contemporary postcolonial state structures. Mamdani reveals the enduring patterns of exclusion, inequality, and political identity within African societies, highlighting a central concept: the bifurcated state. This concept describes a division between urban citizens and rural subjects, a duality that has persisted into the postcolonial era and continues to influence who receives full rights and who remains marginalized. In the context of Côte d'Ivoire, Mamdani's framework provides a compelling explanation for the effective denial of citizenship faced by descendants of migrants, despite their formal eligibility. The Ivorian government relies heavily on decentralization as its primary governance system, a strategy that has drawn both acclaim and scrutiny (Crook, R. C. 1989, pp. 205-228; Boone, C. 2003, pp. 355-380). Mamdani critically analyzes decentralization through the lens of "custom." He contends that "custom" functions as a tool of control, conceptualized and

codified during colonial rule not to preserve tradition, but to exert domination. Postcolonial states have often retained these “customary” frameworks to more effectively govern rural populations. Nyamnjoh (2007), in the same vein has extended Mamdani’s analysis, showing that decentralized, customary authority also often functions as elite power networks, not egalitarian tradition. In Côte d’Ivoire, these frameworks could justify selective administrative inclusion, a modern reenactment of bifurcation.

Mamdani asserts, “The creation of customary law was an act of state, not a product of native consensus,” which is particularly relevant in contexts where ethnic identities inform notions of belonging. In Côte d’Ivoire, characterized by approximately 60 distinct ethnicities, this dynamic exacerbates historical grievances. Furthermore, Mamdani emphasizes the concept of indirect rule, a colonial policy that has tragically lingered in the governance practices of postcolonial states. The continued existence of the urban/rural and citizen/subject divide fosters institutionalized exclusion, reinforcing systemic disparities. He critiques the colonial legacy as not merely a matter of inequality, but as an institutional dualism that transforms cultural differences into political discrimination. This legacy is evident in Côte d’Ivoire, where the marginalization of migrant-descended communities demonstrates how these populations are systematically excluded from the category of “citizen” (Boswell, K. V. 2010; Riester, A. 2011, pp. 185-206). Therefore, Mamdani introduces the notion of rights without inclusion. He argues that while postcolonial African states may formally extend legal rights to all, the underlying structures of governance often render certain groups as outsiders within the political community. He posits, “The issue is not whether people have rights, but whether they have the power to claim and enjoy them.” This distinction is critical in understanding statelessness: possessing a legal right to nationality does not guarantee the ability to claim it in practice, as evidenced by the complex and often impenetrable legislation in Côte d’Ivoire. Although Mamdani’s work faces critiques regarding its limited use of local archival sources, it undeniably illuminates the historical dynamics between rulers and the oppressed, offering valuable insights into the ongoing challenges

faced by marginalized communities in contemporary African states.

Social and administrative cohesion and exclusion also impact, and are impacted by, the bureaucratic order. Achille Mbembe's concept of the "Postcolony" provides a nuanced framework for understanding how arbitrary power, bureaucratic opacity, and selective enforcement shape the lived experiences of stateless individuals. He defines the Postcolony not merely as a historical period following colonialism, but as a complex system of power, knowledge, and subjectivity intricately linked to both colonial legacies and local adaptations. Mbembe argues that "the Postcolony is characterized by a distinctive relationship between power, violence, and subjectivity," highlighting how states in postcolonial Africa often emulate colonial forms of control. This results in a troubling fusion of authoritarianism and informality, as well as law and arbitrariness. Mbembe explores the intimate relationship between the State and its Subjects, emphasizing that subjects are not simply repressed; they are also interpellated by the state. They engage in the rituals of power, often despite the exclusion or humiliation they experience. He posits that "the postcolonial subject is both a victim and an accomplice of the state's commandment." In the context of statelessness, individuals may seek assistance and documentation from the very systems that exclude them, complicating their relationship with the state. Mbembe critiques linear, Western notions of historical time, asserting that in the Postcolony, time is not experienced as a straightforward progression. Instead, it is shaped by cycles of violence, collective amnesia, and the repetition of colonial logics. He contends that "in the Postcolony, the past continues to haunt the present, and the state's legitimacy is caught in a crisis of memory." This concept is particularly relevant in the context of Côte d'Ivoire, which has endured a decade of civil war rooted in these colonial legacies. The nation grapples with the haunting memories of conflict and the unlearned lessons that threaten the possibility of another civil war. In later chapters, especially in "Out of the World," Mbembe anticipates his subsequent work on *necropolitics*, which examines how states determine who may live and who must die. He asserts that "the power to decide who may live and who must die is the ultimate expression of

sovereignty.” Statelessness, in this light, can be understood as a form of social death, representing an exclusion from the right to rights.

Mbeme’s Postcolony framework has been applied and adapted across global contexts. Lauren Berlant (2007) contributes the notion of “slow death,” describing how precarious and stalled social conditions erode lives over time without overt violence. For instance, Fabio Santos (2025) examines how necropolitical structures shape citizenship and exclusion in African stateless populations. His study, *The Necropolitics of Statelessness: Coloniality, Citizenship, and Disposable Lives*, demonstrates how stateless individuals can be systematically rendered legally and socially disposable. These contributions reinforce Mbembe’s insight that sovereignty in the Postcolony is often exercised through practices that render certain lives *ungrievable* and socially withdrawn.

Discussion: Borders Unbound

The condition of statelessness in Côte d’Ivoire sheds light on the fragility and permeability of borders in the postcolonial African context. Within this theoretical framing, the role of assistance initiatives—both international and national—must be critically examined. International organizations such as UNHCR have played an important role in advocating for reform, supporting registration campaigns, and helping draft action plans such as the Abidjan Declaration. Yet their influence is limited: they lack cooperation from national political actors and are constrained by the government’s limited institutional capacity. While these institutions articulate a broad and rights-centered vision of nationality access, national legal, bureaucratic systems and their personnel often remain sites of inertia or resistance (Clapham, C. 1996; Sannerholm, R. 2007, pp. 64-94; Cole, W. M. 2016, pp. 69-97). These frameworks often operate as normative *mirages*, appearing to guarantee protection while failing to dislodge the deeper social and bureaucratic structure that creates individual statelessness.

National efforts, including the Special Acquisition of Nationality by Declaration Program (2014–2016), have likewise fallen short of addressing the systemic roots of statelessness.

While these programs have benefited some, they have not transformed the legal and social systems that perpetuate exclusion. The heavy reliance on documentation that many cannot procure, the inconsistent application of procedures, and the persistence of discretionary barriers within the civil registry reveal the limits of technical or bureaucratic solutions. Moreover, such assistance often approaches statelessness as a legal anomaly to be corrected, rather than a political condition deeply rooted in contested notions of belonging. The findings of this paper underscore that individuals who secure nationality documentation may still face stigma, discrimination, and restricted access to opportunity. This disconnect between legal status and social recognition points to the need for a broader redefinition of citizenship—one that acknowledges historical injustice, embraces plural identities, and dismantles systemic hierarchies. In this light, the condition of statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire exposes the fragility of the nation-state's promise of universal inclusion.

Far from being merely geographical demarcations, borders in the country operate as socio-political constructs that continually redefine who belongs and who remains excluded. The historical processes of colonialism, migration, and state formation have left behind contested terrains of identity, where citizenship is not simply a legal status but a marker of access to rights, protection, and recognition. I find that statelessness, therefore, represents the ultimate form of exclusion: a denial not only of nationality but of the right to have rights. In this sense, the very notion of the nation-state as the guarantor of rights becomes unstable. The Ivorian state, through restrictive nationality laws and inconsistent administrative practices, even though engaged in paying closer attention to statelessness, perpetuates in some capacities symbolic and material borders that fracture communities and individual identities. International conventions articulate expansive rights and protections, yet their implementation remains hostage to the sovereign prerogatives of the state. National legal systems, rather than serving as neutral arbiters of belonging, often become instruments for maintaining socio-political hierarchies (Barzilai, G., 2010; Menski, W., 2018). The theoretical lenses of Anderson, Mamdani, and Mbembe

deepen this understanding by exposing how the postcolonial state constructs and manipulates the boundaries of citizenship. The “imagined community” of the nation, while invoking cohesion and unity, simultaneously necessitates the drawing of exclusionary lines. This, at the same time, raises questions about what a nation should be and what should be taken into consideration when there is a potential will for progressive and inclusive ideas. The colonial legacy of bifurcated citizenship persists, creating a stratified social order where some are fully recognized members of the polity while others are relegated to a liminal, invisible existence.

Legal efforts to redress statelessness from both national and international actors, while requisite, often fail to address these deeper structural and symbolic dimensions of exclusion (Kingston, L. N. 2017). Programs aimed at providing documentation or facilitating naturalization risk reinforcing a technocratic understanding of statelessness that overlooks the entrenched social and political dynamics at play. Without confronting the underlying narratives of identity, belonging, and historical grievance, such initiatives offer only partial remedies. In Côte d’Ivoire, the unbound borders are not only those of territorial sovereignty but of identity, legality, and recognition. Statelessness thus emerges as a symptom of broader failures to create inclusive, equitable political communities in the wake of colonialism. Addressing statelessness meaningfully requires a reimagining of the nation itself – one that embraces historical pluralism under the core values of what it means to be Ivorian, dismantles exclusionary practices, and affirms the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals, irrespective of origin, setting an example as a hospitable country. The case of Côte d’Ivoire compels a broader reflection on the nature of statehood, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary Africa. Scholars, policymakers, and advocates must move beyond formal legalistic approaches and engage with the deeper historical and socio-political forces that continue to shape the lived realities of millions rendered invisible by current configurations of power and identity.

Implications and Conclusion

In this article, I argue that the conditions of statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire reveal the disjuncture between international legal commitment and national realities, where the promise of inclusion and legal protection often materializes as what I call a *mirage*, a formal legal framework that proclaims protection but fails to deliver it. This mirage has deep historical roots in colonial governance and continues to manifest in postcolonial policies that selectively confer nationality and recognition.

The phenomenon of statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire serves as a profound testament to the engagement of colonial legacies, contested national identities, and the fragility of postcolonial state formation. Stateless individuals, rendered invisible within an imagined national community, endure systematic exclusions that expose the contradictions inherent to the modern nation-state project. It is evident that while international legal frameworks articulate a comprehensive vision for the protection and inclusion of stateless persons, national systems often fall short.

The disconnect between international norms and domestic implementation reflects not only technical and administrative failures but also deliberate political choices. National reforms, when attempted, have been limited in scope, and the structural barriers to the acquisition of nationality remain formidable. However, a government's disregard of its international legal obligations is widespread and often hidden behind bureaucratic inertia and rhetorical commitments.

The assistance provided by international and national actors, though necessary, illustrates the limits of interventions that do not confront the socio-political roots of exclusion. Efforts document legal status, as previously highlighted, risk overlooking the enduring cultural, social, and economic causes of legal and cultural marginalization. Without addressing the symbolic borders that define belonging, legal solutions alone cannot eradicate statelessness. The systemic barriers to late birth registration, especially among rural populations, due to costs, lack of information, and procedural delays (Adjami, 2016), hinder both stateless individuals and citizens from securing legal identity, demonstrating the pervasive nature of exclusion born from fragile systems. As Adjami's analysis underscores, durable solutions require more than legal reform; they necessitate the

strengthening of civil registration systems, the political commitment to inclusive nationality laws, and broader societal shifts toward recognizing and valuing the diversity of national identities. Ultimately, confronting statelessness demands reimagining citizenship as an inclusive, dynamic, and historically conscious construct.

This work is especially relevant to legal practitioners and policymakers seeking to bridge the gap between rights on paper and in practice. It offers a conceptual lens for scholars to interrogate the persistence of exclusionary legal regimes that function as protective *mirages*. Cases such as Kuwait's Bedoon, formally eligible for nationality yet systematically denied recognition, and the Dominican Republic's revocation of citizenship from Haitian descendants, despite international obligations (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Open Society Foundation, 2015), exemplify how other states create legal *mirages*. By bringing these dynamics into focus, this paper aims to catalyze more inclusive, pragmatic, and historically grounded approaches to nationality reform and the protection of stateless persons.

The case of Côte d'Ivoire offers critical lessons for the broader African context. It reveals that unbinding the borders of identity and belonging is essential for building equitable and cohesive societies. Addressing statelessness, therefore, is not merely a technical legal task but a fundamental political and moral imperative, necessitating compassionate decision-making, deep transformations in how nations imagine themselves, and embracing all those who call their territories home.

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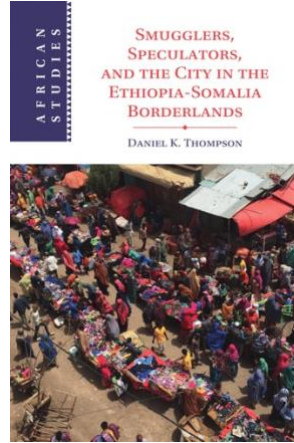
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**Review of “Smugglers, Speculators, and the City in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands,” by Daniel K Thompson,
Cambridge University Press, 2025**

Théa Klementⁱ

Daniel K. Thompson’s book *Smugglers, Speculators, and the City in the Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands* offers a timely and empirically rich analysis of the intersection between border securitization and urban development. Thompson argues that this relationship is co-produced through the social and cultural logics of those residing along one of the Horn of Africa’s busiest and increasingly restrictive borders. Drawing on years of ethnographic and geographical study in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State (SRS), he shows how Jigjiga’s transactional, everyday networks and cultural economies generate both opportunities and risks in relation to state-led, geopolitical efforts to control movement and border economy.



Woven among his ethnographic depictions of the everyday lives of traders, smugglers, diaspora investors, and officials, Thompson situates Jigjiga’s urban and economic development within a long history of cross-border trade and identity-making among Somalis, tracing its evolution from colonial interventions through contemporary secularization efforts. For those unfamiliar with the SRS and the surrounding geography, Thompson’s balanced historical and topographical accounts detail how Somali people have moved, worked, and made lives amidst unstable and often conflict-ridden periods. This approach and the clarity with which he writes offers a unique opportunity to understand the

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region’s history through the socio-spatial practices of survival and resilience.

One of Thompson’s primary contributions is his analysis of “ordinary” people which explicitly complicates mainstream global, neoliberal and capitalist explanations of Ethiopian-Somali borderwork. While he acknowledges the influence of these forces (particularly on Horn regimes during the “War on Terror”), he argues that the top-down practices of border externalization cannot fully explain the layered economic and social dynamics that have shaped, sustained, and resisted state control in Jigjiga and along its borders. Therefore, he insists that ‘urban borderwork’ is a necessary framework, as borders are spacial, social, and cultural constructions that any state-based or economic analysis alone cannot adequately describe. Throughout the book, Thompson argues that built space and social exchange are essential locus of analysis for urban border study. Drawing on the seminal work of Philippe Frowd (West African ‘border work’) and Henri Lefebvre (social “production of space”), this multi-disciplinary urban borderwork approach is central to his argument that Somali egalitarian and nonhegemonic norms practiced in dense urban environments behave in paradoxical ways, creating both opportunities and inequalities for different social groups. Thompson’s research highlights how these cultural logics, which include dimensions of mobility, reciprocity, and entrepreneurial aspiration, challenge simplified readings of Somali economies as either marginalized or subsumed by global capitalism.

Structurally, this book provides a helpful model for examining how local processes of social reproduction occur through securitization. Each chapter examines a different sociospatial practice, including how *kontarabaan* traders navigate the moral posturing of non-Somali border guards, how Ogaden-dominated DDSI elites and transnational networks entrepreneurially appropriate government subsidies and land, and the business deals and euphoria of Jigjiga’s chat dens. Thompson uses ethnographic detail to vividly explain how actors in these spaces mobilize connections such as clan affiliation and transnational family ties to secure economic opportunities or serve as informal credentials to ease border crossings. His exploration of the moral claims and reputational economies that

come with such practices reveal the mechanisms at play in developing a group's agency amidst strict securitization. For example, he compellingly depicts *kontarabaan* as both a means of livelihood and political commentary, placing it within broader debates on fairness and the right to economic participation.

Thompson's attention to *kontarabaan* raises broader questions about who defines these practices. The book's main limitation emerges in Thompson's limited engagement with his own positionality and the ways his presence, identity, and gender may have shaped his access, interpretation, or emphasis. While there are various asides in the book commenting on, for example, his ease of passage in contrast to his Somali counterparts, his careful critique of mainstream "Euro-Western" interpretations is weakened by his limited reflexivity. For example, although Thompson notes that women are central to certain smuggling economies, they appear mainly at the margins of his extended analysis. This is not a call for broad coverage, but rather an acknowledgment intended to invite other scholars to deepen these areas of study.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not overshadow Thompson's substantive contribution to urban and border studies and their applications in practice. He consistently engages with possible interpretations, justifying his focus on egalitarianism, local agency, and networked transactional relationships. His approach yields timely insights for urban development, border management, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution practitioners working in tense borderland settings, showing how Somalis navigate overlapping systems of authority, power, and kinship in ways that state-level analysis cannot. Fundamentally, Thompson illustrates how actors resist or repurpose state structures without engaging in political mobilization, underscoring the relational logics of the Ethiopian-Somali borderland and Somali transnational networks. This analysis has implications for anti-colonial approaches to peacebuilding. By showing how failing to recognize these local and transnational social infrastructures can entrench power norms or cause harm, this book helps academics and practitioners anticipate the unintended consequences of external interventions and design approaches better aligned with local logics. Ultimately, Thompson's work challenges siloed

research approaches and successfully identifies several avenues for continued research outside the dominant neoliberal framings of African border studies. Those working in social movements, peace studies, social geography, migration, global urban studies, and systems thinking will find this book especially valuable for extending lessons from Jigjiga's borderland to other contested spaces worldwide.

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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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Citizenship as a Contested Global Caste Order: How Political Rhetoric Creates Symbolic Boundaries in World-System Hierarchies

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Abstract

This study examines how political rhetoric can reproduce and contest global citizenship hierarchies. We draw on Ana Velitchkova's framework of the global citizenship order as a caste-like system and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory to analyze the symbolic language world leaders, particularly from the United States, use to rank nations and reinforce global inequalities among citizens of different nations. Based on qualitative discourse analysis of speeches, press statements, and diplomatic exchanges during the first year of the second Trump administration, the study reveals three recurring rhetorical processes: paternalistic interventionist framing, where the U.S. casts itself as a benevolent guardian superior to lower status states; hierarchical devaluation, where nations, especially in the global periphery and their citizens are symbolically stigmatized as inferior; and discursive contestation, where people in targeted countries reclaim sovereignty and dignity. The findings show that speech acts serve as instruments of symbolic boundary-making, shaping who is deemed a "first-class" versus "second-class" global citizen. Nonetheless, the responses of people in less powerful nations challenge the legitimacy of these hierarchies and expose the contestability of symbolic power. This study demonstrates how the political language of world leaders can reflect and shape the caste-like stratification of the global citizenship order. The study offers insight into how symbolic boundaries are drawn, enforced, and resisted in the evolving world-system.

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Introduction

A year after Donald Trump's second inauguration as President of the United States, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney gave a historic speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos announcing "a rupture in the world order, the end of a pleasant fiction" (2026 "Davos..."). The "pleasant fiction" Carney mourns is the liberal international order the U.S. established and led after World War II (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). At the core of this liberal international order is the United Nations Charter promising "the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small" (UN Charter). According to Carney, the beginning of President Trump's second term marked "the beginning of a harsh reality, where geopolitics, where the large, main power, geopolitics, is submitted to no limits, no constraints" (Davos 2026). In a year, President Trump's administration dismantled the liberal international order not only in practice but also rhetorically, openly asserting "American hegemony" and demanding "subordination" by any means possible (Davos 2026). This new U.S. presidential rhetoric further "traumatized" the foreign policy establishment domestically and internationally and undermined the legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy, already damaged during President Trump's first administration (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). At the same time, President Trump's international rhetoric in 2025 laid bare the reality of global inequalities. Examining this rhetoric, therefore, can shed light on the processes by which world hierarchies are created and symbolically maintained.

The most prominent sociological understanding of global inequalities is grounded in world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974). Global inequalities, according to world-systems theory, emerge as a result of the dynamics in a unified capitalist world-system where economic exploitation and imperialism produce a tripartite global hierarchy. Capital accumulation and unequal exchange concentrate power and wealth in a global core. Resource extraction and exploitation produce a global periphery of weak and economically dependent regions. A semi-periphery

with features of both the core and the periphery serves as a buffer in the world-system (Wallerstein 1974). This tripartite global hierarchy results in between-country economic inequality, which in turn affects people through the national citizenship they are assigned by birth (Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009; Velitchkova 2023).

The existence of global economic inequalities has been obvious. Following World War II and decolonialization, the United Nations and its Charter, however, have maintained the symbolic equality of different countries and their people, at least nominally. The liberal international order established by the United States through the United Nations and other international organizations, rules, and norms has provided legitimacy and helped maintain the unequal global economic hierarchy. This legitimacy was achieved as much through peace and order as through nominal symbolic equality. Hence, the foreign policy establishment was shocked when the US dismantled much of the liberal international order (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). How else can the United States (as well as other core countries) justify global inequalities and its primacy in the global core?

Racialization serves as another possible explanatory framework. President Trump has used racially charged statements about Mexican immigrants being “rapists” and bringing “drugs” and “crime” (Washington Post 2017) and referenced “shithole countries,” including majority non-white and Muslim countries, such as Afghanistan, Haiti, and Somalia (Wang 2025). The production of “racial” distinctions, according to the racialization approach, has been used to “justify” global inequalities. Du Bois (1947) argues, for example, that European imperial domination was built upon and justified through a global racial hierarchy in which “the doctrine of the Superior Race” cast white Europeans as “heaven-sent rulers of yellow, brown, and black people” worldwide; the black race was constructed as “dirty, stupid, and inevitably inferior” whereas “everything great, everything fine, everything really successful in human culture, was white” (Du Bois 1947:11, 13). The United States could imagine itself as a contemporary carrier of white European civilization, according to the racialization framework. However, while Du Bois highlights important symbolic boundary dynamics, the racialization

approach alone cannot explain President Trump's dismissive treatment of Canada and of U.S. European allies.

Velitchkova's (2023) theory of citizenship as a global caste marker offers an alternative, yet complimentary account of how global inequalities can be justified. This approach includes but is not limited to racialization. Velitchkova proposes the global institution of citizenship and the caste-like system it creates as a mechanism providing a symbolic foundation for global inequalities. According to Velitchkova's theory, nation-states exercise symbolic and physical violence to create and maintain caste-like distinctions between nation-states and their citizens. Racialized distinctions are used to produce the lowest castes in the global citizenship order (cf. Du Bois 1947). Recipients of symbolic and physical violence, in Velitchkova's theory, can contest it, as peripheral and semi-peripheral regions in the world-system can challenge their position in the global hierarchy. Following Velitchkova's (2023) theory, we expect that the U.S. administration can justify global inequalities by asserting caste-like distinctions between core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral nations and their citizens. We also expect, however, that this justification would be contested.

The political rhetoric employed by the U.S. administration and its challengers to justify or oppose global inequalities represents "boundary work" (Hofius and Kranke 2025; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013). International relations scholars have adopted the sociological concept of "boundary work" (Lamont and Molnár 2002) to examine the symbolic practices involved in creating and justifying both distinctions and cooperation internationally (Hofius and Kranke 2025). We take on this approach as well and propose that the political rhetoric employed by President Trump and his administration at the beginning of his second term in office represents a case of "boundary work" justifying U.S. hegemony in the contemporary world-system.

The first year of President Trump's second administration was a critical juncture for the dismantling of the liberal international order, as Carney's Davos speech indicates (Davos 2026). The same period, therefore, would be a crucial case for examining the U.S. administration's international "boundary work" and justification of global inequalities. This article examines publicly

circulated statements by President Trump in 2025 referencing foreign countries in relation to the United States. The goal of this discursive analysis is to understand how his administration's political rhetoric reflects and reinforces global hierarchies symbolically. The case is sociologically important because it illustrates how political rhetoric becomes a vehicle of symbolic power globally: it can normalize unequal global valuation of countries and their citizens, justify domination, and define who belongs to the core versus the periphery of the current world-system.

Guided by these frameworks, the study addresses three interrelated research questions:

1. How do President Trump's statements portray the United States's role in relation to other countries, and what do they reveal about the country's assumed global power?
2. In what ways, if at all, do President Trump's characterizations of foreign nations explicitly or implicitly rank them as inferior or subordinate, reinforcing a global symbolic hierarchy?
3. If so, how do leaders and publics in other countries respond to President Trump's remarks, and to what extent do these reactions challenge or renegotiate the symbolic hierarchies the U.S. President asserts?

We find Velitchkova's (2023) theory of the global citizenship order as a caste order, combined with world-systems theory (Wallerstein 1974; Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009), to be a useful framework to understand the international "boundary work" (Hofius and Kranke 2025; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013) of the second Trump administration. We argue that President Trump's 2025 statements about countries around the world function as exercises of symbolic power that project a hierarchical global order of "first-class"/core and "second-class"/peripheral countries, and, by extension, citizens. We show that President Trump's rhetoric frequently combines paternalistic claims of U.S. authority with symbolic devaluation of countries portrayed as lesser, irrelevant, or threatening. Majority non-white and Muslim countries appear to be subjected to the worst treatment, as suggested by the racialization approach (Du Bois

1947). At the same time, international responses to these remarks, whether from state leaders or official representatives, demonstrate resistance and contestation, revealing both the reach and the limits of symbolic power in the global arena. In tracing these interactions, we highlight how global inequalities are reproduced through discourse and how they are challenged by those positioned as targets of unfavorable classification.

This inquiry is a timely intervention in a period of turmoil in the world-system. The United States finds its hegemony challenged by rising semi-peripheral powers, most notably China, but also Iran. The United States' current administration is responding by anchoring itself in nationalist political rhetoric. President Trump's ideological anchor "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) operates not only as domestic political branding and strategy (McVeigh and Estep 2019) but also as a source of international symbolic boundary-making (Hofius and Kranke 2025; cf. Wimmer 2002). Internationally, MAGA functions as a globally intelligible claim about rank and worth, one that privileges U.S. interests while casting other nations as deficient, threatening, or undeserving. Such rhetoric can legitimate policy agendas and simultaneously project a moral imagination of a world order, where "greatness" is defined through contrast and hierarchical classification. The centrality of this political rhetoric in the U.S. administration's approach to international relations in 2025 highlights the importance of symbolic power in global affairs. In what follows, we further elaborate on our ideas and present the theoretical framework, methodology, and empirical findings supporting these ideas.

Citizenship-based Caste Distinctions in the World-System

This study is situated at the intersection of two complementary sociological frameworks dealing with global stratification: Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory and Ana Velitchkova's (2023) conceptualization of citizenship as the foundation of a global caste-like system. By synthesizing these paradigms, we develop a robust lens to examine how political rhetoric reinforces or intermittently destabilizes global hierarchies.

Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory posits a macro-sociological framework for understanding the structural persistence of global inequality. He theorizes the modern world-system as a tripartite hierarchy—comprising core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones—wherein power is concentrated through material extraction and sustained through ideological reification. Core nations dominate economically, militarily, and ideologically, while peripheral countries are structurally subordinated and economically dependent. Importantly, Wallerstein stresses that this hierarchy is not merely material, it is justified and perpetuated through cultural and ideological means. The hierarchical structure of the world-system is sustained by means of cultural and ideological integration through the state machinery and national cultures.

Political rhetoric, in this approach, plays a central role in legitimating the dominant position of core powers and rationalizing the marginalization of other countries. It functions as a mechanism for hegemonic naturalization, framing the marginalization of peripheral states as an inevitable byproduct of civilizational or stability-oriented imperatives. By casting core powers as architects and models of civilization, such narratives sanitize systemic exploitation. Global dominance is recast as the protection of a desirable global order. This was the case with the international liberal order.

While Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory provides a macro-structural approach to global stratification, Velitchkova's (2023) global citizenship caste order theory highlights the personal dimensions and individual experiences in the context of a global hierarchy. In Velitchkova's (2023) formulation, citizenship functions as a caste marker determining one's structural position within the international order. Citizenship is an ascriptive, largely immutable status that dictates a person's differential access to mobility, rights, security, and recognition. The "first-class" citizenship enjoyed by core-nation subjects is maintained through state-sanctioned closure mechanisms, including passports, borders, and exclusionary immigration policies. The resulting regime of legalized discrimination produces durable distinctions between "valuable" and "devalued" lives and related national identities.

In Velitchkova's framework, political rhetoric is involved in the process of creating caste-like distinctions among citizens of different nation-states. Political rhetoric is used to ascribe symbolic value or deficiency to entire populations based on national origin. The caste-like distinctions of the global citizenship order, in a sense, become the very justification for global inequalities. Racialized devaluation, according to this approach, can support the production of the lowest castes in the global citizenship order (cf. Du Bois 1947).

By synthesizing Velitchkova's and Wallerstein's frameworks, this study conceptualizes political rhetoric as a medium through which global hierarchies are constructed, reinforced, or resisted. Political rhetoric does not merely reflect geopolitical relationships; it helps constitute them by defining the moral worth and global standing of nations and their citizens. The next section elaborates on the role of political rhetoric in constructing global symbolic boundaries and hierarchies.

Political Rhetoric and Global Boundary Making

In a globalized world, the words of political leaders travel rapidly across borders and shape how nations and the people associated with them are imagined, evaluated, and ranked on the world stage. Political rhetoric does not merely describe international relations; it can actively produce symbolic boundaries and symbolic hierarchies that influence who is treated as legitimate, valuable, or expendable in global social life.

Symbolic boundary scholarship offers insights into how political rhetoric is involved in the production and reproduction of symbolic hierarchies, a crucial dimension of the (re)production of global inequality. Discursive practices can help construct social boundaries on both the national and the international scale. Wimmer, for example, suggests that cultural closure, in the form of adopting a national language and developing historical narratives can be used to include some in the national citizenry and exclude others (2002). Institutionalization of such practices, in Wimmer's view, can lead to social hierarchies within nation-states (2002). Wimmer's later work highlights the dynamism of social boundary development and identifies mechanisms by which social boundaries can be transformed, namely by

expanding or contracting who belongs to the in-group, and by blurring, shifting, or re-evaluating boundaries between groups (2013).

Hofius and Kranke (2025) examine the notion of “boundary work” (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013) at the global level, specifically in international relations. They argue that boundary work is an organizing principle of global politics that involves continuous practices of making, maintaining, and unmaking symbolic and territorial boundaries. A crucial aspect of Hofius and Kranke’s (2025) argument is that boundary work is not unidirectional, as in creating more boundaries, but can also involve cooperation that stretches national sovereignty. This argument implies that national leaders have a choice in the kind of boundary work they can engage in. The symbolic equality between nation-states established by the UN Charter represents a blurring of the symbolic boundaries between nation-states, in Wimmer’s terms (2013). This is why the reintroduction of symbolic boundaries between nation-states that U.S. President Trump initiated is so significant.

Starting with the first Trump administration, U.S. foreign policy took a dramatic turn (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024), which only accelerated in the second Trump administration. Instead of global cooperation, the Trump administration has advanced an “America First” rhetoric. The foreign policy establishment questioned the legitimacy of such populist rhetoric in international relations and sought to restore U.S. global leadership in promoting global symbolic equality by framing Trump’s “America First” agenda as a deviation from internationalist norms (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024). With the second Trump administration, the “America First” rhetoric has returned with a vengeance. Barely recovered from the trauma of the first Trump administration (Biegon and Hamdaoui 2024), the U.S. foreign policy establishment was dismantled during the first year of President Trump’s second administration. With it went the liberal international order discussed at the beginning of this piece. The U.S. President’s rhetoric regarding foreign nations during this period thus represents an unadulterated form of his and his administration’s views of the world, namely as a symbolic hierarchy.

President Trump's foreign policy stance has a domestic origin. President Trump's rhetoric in the international arena is a populist tool aiming at creating a sense of crisis to maintain domestic support (Hall 2021). President Trump's radical foreign policy discourse consists of constructing international "enemies" rhetorically to produce a sense of perpetual crisis domestically (Hall 2021). This discourse, rooted in MAGA ideology, establishes symbolic boundaries between a righteous "America" and threatening outsiders, reinforcing national sovereignty while diminishing global interdependence.

Accounts of the MAGA movement emphasize its grievances, expressed in rhetoric of loss of honor and status (McVeigh and Estep 2019; Koenig and Mendelberd 2025). In an ethnographic study of the MAGA movement, Koenig and Mendelberd (2025), for example, find that President Trump's supporters seek to reclaim dignity and honor by drawing sharp moral boundaries between "real Americans" and elites and foreign others. MAGA activists are hostile to others because they feel symbolically excluded and seek to reify symbolic boundaries that preserve the status of white, "real Americans."

A hostile and exclusionary foreign policy rhetoric is a logical extension of populist domestic politics rooted in a sense of permanent crisis and threat to status, domestically and internationally. As a reaction to perceived symbolic exclusion and devaluation, the MAGA movement and its leadership reassert a desire to return to "previous" greatness. The symbolic classification asserted by President Trump in his foreign policy pronouncements during the first year of his second administration represent a distilled version of contested global hierarchies of worthiness. His foreign policy discourse is an effort to reinforce these hierarchies of worthiness by drawing symbolic boundaries in the interest of the MAGA movement, on behalf of the U.S. as a global hegemon in crisis.

The empirical portion of this study, to which we turn next, examines the features of the symbolic hierarchies constructed and contested through international political rhetoric initiated by U.S. President Trump in 2025. Based on world-systems theory, we expect President Trump's rhetoric to reflect the tripartite structure of the world-system, with the U.S. at the center of the core. Based

on the theory of citizenship as a global caste marker, we further expect that people's symbolic position in the President's symbolic classification would be based on their national citizenship. Racialized devaluation would be reserved for the lowest citizenship castes globally. To reiterate, rhetorical practices particularly from core powers like the U.S. do not merely describe global relationships; they actively construct them by assigning value, status, and legitimacy to different nations and their citizens.

Methodology

Research design

This study uses a qualitative, theory-informed thematic analysis of political rhetoric to examine how U.S. presidential speech produces symbolic hierarchies of belonging and exclusion based on citizenship in global discourse. The empirical focus is President Trump's publicly reported statements made in 2025 regarding multiple countries and geopolitical issues, analyzed alongside documented responses from foreign governments and publics. Rather than treating political speech as merely descriptive, we analyze it as performative: rhetoric is approached as a form of symbolic power that can legitimate intervention, devalue targets, and provoke contestation across borders.

Data sources and corpus construction

We constructed a corpus of widely reported cases of rhetorical engagement by President Trump regarding different countries and reactions by governments and the public in these countries in 2025. For each case, we compiled: (1) direct, attributable quotations from President Trump, excerpted from publicly available political statements made in 2025, and (2) responses directly addressing those statements, where available (e.g., foreign government statements, official spokesperson remarks, or widely reported public backlash). Materials were drawn from publicly accessible sources such as official remarks, social media posts, and reputable news reporting that reproduces direct quotations and contextual details (date, venue, and immediate political context). Each case was assembled into a standalone

document file to maintain traceability between quotes, context, and attribution.

To support comparative analysis, each document was organized around the same internal structure: a brief contextual note, a set of dated quotations attributed to President Trump, and any corresponding reactions or rebuttals reported in relation to those quotations. This standardized formatting allowed us to compare rhetorical patterns across cases while preserving the specificities of each case (e.g., border security, sanctions, war, trade, migration).

Cases were organized by country/topic file (e.g., Mexico, Venezuela, China, Iran, Ukraine, Somalia, Lesotho) and by broader slogan-based discourse (e.g., “Make America Great Again”). The primary unit of analysis was the meaningful rhetorical segment, defined as a discrete statement (or short cluster of sentences) that expressed a coherent claim, justification, evaluation, or demand. In practice, this usually corresponded to one direct quotation or one paragraph-length segment in which a position was articulated. When a longer passage contained multiple rhetorical moves (e.g., both devaluation and intervention justification), the text was segmented into separate excerpts to ensure analytic precision.

Analytical framework

The analysis operationalized a three-theme framework designed to capture how political rhetoric constructs global hierarchy and citizenship boundaries. These themes were theoretically informed and applied consistently across cases:

1. **Paternalistic Interventionism:** rhetorical moves that frame the United States as protector, disciplinarian, manager, or moral guardian of other nations, often presenting control or intervention as responsibility, security, or “help.”
2. **Hierarchical Devaluation:** rhetorical moves that symbolically lower the status of nations or populations through ridicule, stigmatization, criminalization, delegitimation of sovereignty, or claims of inferiority/irrelevance.
3. **Global Resistance and Contestation:** rhetorical moves in which targeted states, publics, or international actors reject,

rebut, retaliate, or otherwise contest the hierarchy implied by U.S. political speech, often through sovereignty claims, moral counter-framing, or policy responses.

This framework was used to analyze not only what was said, but what the speech act accomplished socially—especially how it reproduced or challenged symbolic boundaries between “deserving” and “undeserving” nations, “legitimate” and “illegitimate” political subjects, and “core” and “peripheral” positions in global status order.

Project organization, coding procedure, and analysis in ATLAS.ti
We organized our data and conducted the qualitative analysis using the software ATLAS.ti. ATLAS.ti provides a transparent environment for organizing documents, creating coded excerpts, and retrieving evidence systematically across cases.

All case files were imported into a single ATLAS.ti project. Documents were grouped by case (country/topic) to enable cross-case comparisons. This step ensured that later outputs (e.g., tables and excerpt reports) could be filtered by case and used to support comparative claims. Coding was conducted in three iterative steps.

Coding began with segmentation and quotation creation. We first identified analytically meaningful segments and created quotations in ATLAS.ti for each segment. Segmentation prioritized rhetorical coherence rather than length; most quotations consisted of one statement or one short paragraph.

Second, thematic coding was conducted. Each quotation was coded with one primary theme from the three-theme framework (Paternalistic Interventionism, Hierarchical Devaluation, or Global Resistance/Contestation). To preserve interpretive clarity and avoid code inflation, we applied a one-quotation/one-theme rule. When a passage contained multiple themes, it was split into separate quotations and coded accordingly.

Finally, we refined codes and categories and checked for consistency. After initial coding, we revisited coded excerpts to check for internal consistency, especially in borderline cases where devaluation and intervention framing overlapped. Code definitions were refined in code comments to document

inclusion/exclusion rules and improve stability of interpretation across the dataset.

Throughout coding, analytic memos were used to record emerging patterns (e.g., recurring logics of “protection,” common devaluation strategies, or typical forms of rebuttal). These memos functioned as a running record of interpretive decisions and helped connect empirical excerpts to the paper’s theoretical argument.

Analytic outputs

ATLAS.ti tools were used to generate and verify cross-case patterns in two primary ways. First, for theme-by-case comparisons. Document-based comparisons were used to examine how frequently and in what contexts each theme appeared across cases. This supported claims about variation (e.g., which contexts most often produced devaluation versus paternalism, and where resistance emerged most explicitly). Second, for excerpt retrieval for writing. We produced theme-based quotation reports (all excerpts coded under each theme) to build the Findings section transparently. This ensured that interpretive claims were grounded in traceable textual evidence and that quotations could be selected systematically rather than opportunistically.

Analytic rigor and ethical considerations

Several strategies were used to strengthen analytical rigor. First, the corpus construction process prioritized verifiable public statements and clear attribution (date, venue, and source context). Second, coding followed a documented codebook with stable definitions and memo-based justifications for key interpretive choices. Third, we conducted iterative recoding and consistency checks on earlier segments after later insights emerged, reducing drift in code application. Together, these practices created an audit trail linking raw statements to themes and ultimately to analytic claims.

All analyzed materials are publicly available statements and public reactions reported in the public record; the study does not involve human subject recruitment, private data, or interventions. Ethical emphasis therefore centered on accurate attribution,

careful contextualization, and avoiding decontextualized quotation.

Limitations

This study analyzes a curated corpus of public statements and reported reactions rather than the full universe of political speech. As such, the analysis emphasizes interpretive depth and theoretical contribution over exhaustiveness. Additionally, reliance on publicly reported quotations means the dataset reflects both the speaker's rhetoric and the media/official documentation through which that rhetoric is circulated. These limitations are addressed by transparent sourcing and by treating the corpus as evidence of globally circulating political discourse rather than a complete record of all utterances.

Findings

Using qualitative discourse analysis, we examined President Donald Trump's 2025 public statements referencing foreign countries, as reported in official transcripts, press interviews, and widely circulated news media, alongside official reactions from foreign state leaders and international organizations. Employing the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti for analyzing our data, we revealed three central rhetorical themes across the political discourse: (1) paternalistic interventionism, (2) hierarchical devaluation, and (3) discursive contestation. This analysis applies Velitchkova's (2023) model of citizenship as a global caste-like marker and Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems framework to understand how President Trump's rhetoric performs classification work that reinforces global stratification.

Paternalistic Interventionism

A first dominant theme in President Trump's 2025 rhetoric is paternalistic framing: the United States appears as the deciding authority, moral guardian, or "manager" of other nations' futures. In this framing, U.S. action is presented as inherently rational, necessary, and beneficial even when coercive and while the agency of other countries is minimized. This is not merely a policy stance; it is a classificatory stance. By speaking as if U.S. preferences are synonymous with security, order, and freedom,

President Trump asserts a global symbolic hierarchy in which American standards and actions define legitimacy. In world-systems terms, it is a discursive mechanism through which a core actor normalizes domination as responsibility (Wallerstein 1974). In global caste terms, it is a symbolic status claim: high-status citizenship (core citizenship) is portrayed as naturally entitled to supervise lower-status polities (Velitchkova 2023).

A paternalistic posture is visible in Trump's recurring treatment of Canada as an entity that should be absorbed under U.S. authority. In a nationally televised interview aired during the Super Bowl preshow, Trump stated that he was serious about wanting Canada to become the 51st state, explicitly justifying annexation through U.S. economic "loss" narratives and claims that Canada benefits disproportionately from American protection and trade (Associated Press 2025). The rhetorical move is paternalistic because it frames absorption not as domination but as rational "fixing" of an imbalanced relationship: the United States appears as the adult correcting an arrangement that allegedly enables Canadian dependency. This logic works through symbolic boundary-making: Canada is not treated as a peer sovereign with equal standing, but as a near-domestic subordinate whose existence is acceptable only insofar as it aligns with U.S. interests (Associated Press 2025).

Paternalism becomes even clearer when President Trump's talk of annexation is paired with coercive economic tools. On March 4, 2025, President Trump's tariffs against Canada took effect and triggered immediate retaliation, with Canada's prime minister calling the policy "a very dumb thing to do" and describing the U.S. justification as false (Reuters 2025b). Trump's narrative surrounding tariffs repeatedly casts the U.S. as correcting others' failure especially around border security and fentanyl thereby presenting punitive measures as parental discipline rather than interstate dysfunction or conflict (Reuters 2025a; Reuters 2025b). The United States appears as the only legitimate judge of compliance, and other states appear as actors who must "do better" under U.S. supervision. This is paternalistic interventionism in symbolic, and the right to discipline becomes a marker of rank in the global order.

A second strong illustration of paternalistic interventionism is President Trump's discourse on Greenland. In 2025 reporting, Trump is quoted telling Greenland that the United States would "make you rich," and insisting the U.S. would acquire it "one way or another" (Reuters 2025c). The logic is overtly hierarchical: the U.S. frames itself as the benefactor offering wealth and security, while Greenland is positioned as an object to be acquired rather than a polity with its own self-determination. Even when couched as an "offer," the rhetorical structure is paternalistic because it assumes U.S. decision-making authority over another territory's future. Domination is framed as generosity, and coercion is framed as inevitability justified by higher purposes, an ideological move consistent with core power behavior in the world-system (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025c).

Paternalistic framing also appears in President Trump's approach to war and diplomacy, where he positions the United States as the principal architect of "solutions" that others must accept. For example, Reuters reporting on March 11, 2025, describes Trump expressing hope Russia would accept a ceasefire plan developed by American and Ukrainian officials and indicating Zelensky would be invited back to the White House (Reuters 2025d). This is not simply a peace initiative; it is a staged narrative of U.S. managerial authority. The story is told in a way that places the U.S. at the center designing the plan, inviting leaders, and shaping acceptable outcomes while the sovereignty and priorities of the directly affected country (Ukraine) become secondary to the U.S. performance of brokerage. In symbolic terms, the U.S. speaks as the actor with the power to convene legitimacy. In world-systems terms, it is the core presenting itself as the indispensable political center (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025d).

Finally, paternalistic framing appears in Trump's rhetoric regarding Venezuela, where coercive measures are justified through claims of global security and moral policing. In December 2025, Trump announced what Reuters describes as a "total and complete blockade" of sanctioned oil tankers entering or leaving Venezuela, justifying escalation through allegations of terrorism, trafficking, and criminality linked to the Maduro government (Reuters 2025e). Here, paternalism operates through

the language of protection: the U.S. frames itself as safeguarding international order and moral security, implying that Venezuela's sovereignty is conditional and can be overridden by U.S. definitions of threat. Even when the policy is materially coercive, the rhetoric asserts legitimacy by positioning the U.S. as the guardian enforcing proper global conduct. Within the caste-like global citizenship system, higher-status states can more easily present coercion as "responsibility," while lower-status states are framed as objects of discipline (Velitchkova 2023).

Hierarchical Devaluation

A second major theme is hierarchical devaluation, where President Trump's rhetoric ranks countries as irrelevant, dirty, criminal, or beneath respect thus producing a symbolic hierarchy of national worth. If paternalistic framing is "we know what's best," hierarchical devaluation is "you do not matter / you are inferior." These statements do not merely insult individual leaders; they attach stigma to entire national populations and treat some nations and their citizens as naturally disposable. In a caste-like global order, stigma "sticks" to citizenship status, shaping how entire groups are imagined and treated as "impure" (Velitchkova 2023). These rhetorical moves also create symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002) by defining who belongs to the category of "serious" nations and who is cast outside it.

A widely reported example occurred in President Trump's address to Congress, where he mocked foreign aid by referring to funding for the African nation of Lesotho and adding that it was a place "which nobody has ever heard of," prompting laughter (Reuters 2025f). The sociological significance is not simply that the line is dismissive; it performs global ranking. Lesotho is positioned as so low in world importance that it becomes a punchline. This is a core leader treating a peripheral state as inherently insignificant, an ideological gesture that mirrors material inequality and contributes to symbolic marginalization (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025f).

Hierarchical devaluation also appears through racialized and impurity-coded language that frames some nations as contaminated sources of disorder. Reuters reporting from

December 11, 2025, describes President Trump calling Somalia “filthy, dirty, disgusting, ridden with crime,” and adding that “the only thing they’re good at is going after ships,” invoking piracy (Reuters 2025g). This is not a neutral description; it is symbolic boundary-making through moral contamination. By describing an entire national origin group in terms of dirt and disgust, Trump invokes rhetorical impurity, a mechanism that casts populations outside the moral community of legitimate, “clean,” or “civilized” membership. In citizenship politics, such metaphors historically justify exclusion, punishment, and social closure (Wimmer 2002; Velitchkova 2023). Within the caste-like global order, impurity discourses help stabilize rank by making inequality appear like common sense (“of course they are inferior; look how they are described”) (Velitchkova 2023).

Another major site of hierarchical devaluation in 2025 is President Trump’s rhetoric about trade partners and transnational crises, especially fentanyl. Reuters reporting on March 4, 2025, describes tariffs on Canada and Mexico alongside increased duties on China, framed as pressure to address fentanyl flows into the U.S. (Reuters 2025a). Even when the policy debate is technical, the rhetorical structure implies moral ranking: other states are blamed as negligent or complicit actors whose failures justify U.S. punishment. In this framework, the U.S. is portrayed as a victim of others’ wrongdoing, while targeted countries become morally downgraded as irresponsible suppliers of danger. This moral narrative reinforces global stratification by associating legitimacy with the core and instability or threat as distance from the core increases (Wallerstein 1974; Reuters 2025a).

Hierarchical devaluation is also visible in the language of illegitimacy directed at the Venezuelan state. Reuters reporting on the seizure of a sanctioned oil tanker describes Trump confirming the seizure and the episode escalating tensions with Caracas (Reuters 2025h). This public confirmation of seizure followed by rhetorical escalation helps transform material coercion into a moral story in which Venezuela is framed as an illegitimate actor outside normal rules. The country becomes symbolically classified as criminal and thus as a legitimate target for exceptional treatment. This classification stigmatizes Venezuelan citizenship itself, marking it as unworthy of

protection and thereby justifying a global caste distinction in rights and recognition (Velitchkova 2023; Reuters 2025h).

Overall, these forms of hierarchical devaluation do not merely reflect existing inequalities, they (re)produce them. They create a global common sense in which some countries are laughable, some are contaminating, and some are disposable. These rhetorical hierarchies normalize global stratification and consolidate the core-periphery distinction central to the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974; Velitchkova 2023). Racialized impurity rhetoric is reserved for those ranked lowest in the global symbolic hierarchy (cf. Du Bois 1947).

Discursive Contestation

The third theme is discursive contestation: public resistance by foreign leaders, ministries, and international organizations that reject President Trump's classificatory hierarchy. Contestation matters because global symbolic stratification is not merely imposed; it is also interpreted, negotiated, and at times challenged by the very actors it aims to subordinate. In a world-system marked by uneven power, discursive pushback offers a window into how the ideological dimensions of core-periphery dominance can be confronted (Wallerstein 1974). At the same time, Velitchkova's (2023) framework helps reveal how actors positioned as holders of "lower-caste" citizenship can reject the stigma attached to them and assert dignity, autonomy, and equal standing.

Canada's reaction to the March 2025 tariffs illustrates contestation as both discourse and countermeasure. Reuters reporting documents Trudeau calling the tariffs "a very dumb thing to do," announcing retaliatory tariffs, and describing Trump's fentanyl justification as untrue (Reuters 2025b). Canada also pursued institutional contestation through global trade mechanisms, including WTO consultation requests (Reuters 2025i). These acts reasserted equal standing through the language of international law, reciprocity, and the rules-based order. Rather than accepting the legitimacy of U.S. paternalism, Canadian leaders classified the move as irrational and unjustified, effectively rejecting the United States' attempt to act as global disciplinarian.

A parallel form of contestation appears in the European Union's response to U.S. tariffs. Reuters reports EU leadership vowing "firm and proportionate countermeasures," explicitly rejecting unilateral U.S. authority to impose hierarchical trade discipline (Reuters 2025j). The European Commission also issued a formal statement emphasizing that unjustified tariffs would not go unanswered (European Commission 2025). Here, contestation affirms the EU's status as a co-equal actor in global economic governance and challenges the implied paternalistic and devaluating stance of U.S. dominant rhetoric in global trade. These statements do not simply express grievance; they offer a counter-claim to legitimacy within the world-system.

Discursive contestation is also evident in responses to insult-based devaluation. Reuters reporting on Lesotho notes officials expressing offense and defending the country's legitimacy after Trump's remark that "nobody has ever heard of" the country (Reuters 2025f). The insult operates as an attempt to symbolically erase a peripheral nation from the imagined community of global actors. The response thus becomes a struggle over visibility and worth, an insistence that Lesotho's sovereignty and recognition are not contingent upon U.S. acknowledgment.

Somalia's response provides an even clearer illustration of how contestation targets the moral logic behind stigmatizing language. After Trump's remarks describing Somalis as "filthy" and "disgusting," Reuters reports Somalia's defense minister rejecting the characterization and urging Trump to focus on U.S. responsibilities instead (Reuters 2025g). Rather than internalizing symbolic impurity, the Somali response reclaims moral standing and re-narrates national identity in terms of resilience and dignity. Within Velitchkova's (2023) framework, this act directly challenges the caste-like stigma imposed on Somali citizenship by asserting equal human worth and national pride.

Venezuela's reactions show contestation framed in the language of sovereignty and international law. After the U.S. seized a sanctioned oil tanker, Reuters reports Venezuelan officials calling the action "blatant theft" and pledging to denounce it before international organizations (Reuters 2025k). In response to the announced blockade, Reuters similarly reports Venezuela condemning the move in anti-imperial terms and

highlighting its illegality (Reuters 2025e). These statements invert the moral classification embedded in U.S. discourse: instead of Venezuela being the deviant, the United States is recast as violating international norms. Legal scholars noted that the use of the term “blockade” raised serious questions under international law, further reinforcing the legitimacy of Venezuelan contestation (Just Security 2025; Reuters 2025e).

Across cases, discursive contestation does not dissolve the structures of global inequality, but it does expose the fragility of hierarchical narratives. States like Canada, Somalia, and Venezuela refused to passively accept devaluation and instead mobilized law, sovereignty claims, and dignity narratives to push back against symbolic demotion. Within a world-system marked by entrenched core-periphery inequalities, such acts of symbolic resistance remind us that global hierarchy is not a static structure; it is a site of ideological struggle and symbolic negotiation.

Conclusion

Our empirical analysis shows that, in 2025, the first year of President Trump’s second term in office, the President used political rhetoric aimed at reinforcing U.S. dominance on the world stage. This was a fundamental departure from the “pleasant fiction” (Davos 2026) of sovereign equality among nations and their citizens advanced by the UN Charter. However, this domineering rhetoric created backlash revealing the fragility of the country’s dominance. Through what we call paternalistic interventionism, President Trump presented the United States as a stern global caretaker, suggesting that other countries or territories, like Canada or Greenland, would be better off under U.S. control. Also, the President’s comments often involved hierarchical devaluation of other nations, praising those who fell in line and insulting or belittling others, like Lesotho or Somalia. Such international boundary work (Hofius and Kranke 2025; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2002, 2013) supports a vision of the world, according to which the U.S. sits at the top. This discursive effort is consistent with Velitchkova’s (2023) theory of the global citizenship order as a caste-like system and with Wallerstein’s (1974) model of an unequal world-system. President Trump’s rhetoric serves to normalize a global caste

order where opportunities and recognition align with U.S. interests and where racialized devaluating discourse is reserved for the lowest global citizenship castes (Du Bois 1947; Velitchkova 2023).

President Trump's rhetorical strategy did not go unchallenged, however. His openly domineering rhetoric provoked strong responses, not only from other core countries, but also from less powerful countries in the global periphery. Recurring instances of discursive contestation from both traditional allies like Canada and the European Union and adversarial nations like Somalia and Venezuela demonstrate that global symbolic hierarchies are not static structures but sites of continuous symbolic struggle. Countries pushed back against their symbolic devaluation, defending their sovereignty and demanding equal treatment and respect. Canada rejected the idea of becoming a U.S. state. Leaders across Europe and Asia promised countermeasures against U.S. tariffs. Even small nations like Lesotho spoke out to defend their national dignity. In doing so, they all questioned President Trump's rhetorical claim to global superiority. Such reactions highlight the inherent volatility of symbolic power.

The evolving world-system appears to be a space of both profound inequality and persistent resistance. While the "America First" motto of President Trump's administration may have appealed to its domestic supporters, it backfired internationally. Paired with a broad dismantling of U.S. contributions to global, liberal infrastructures, it produced a counter-narrative of U.S. arrogance, weakening U.S. influence abroad. Ultimately, the symbolic struggles of 2025 illustrate how powerful world leaders can deploy political rhetoric to enforce a caste-like symbolic hierarchy globally, while targets of such classificatory efforts have agency to challenge the symbolic attacks on their legitimacy. The second year of the second Trump administration, 2026, the time of this writing, has seen escalation of global conflict and its expansion from the symbolic arena to the arena of interstate violence. President Trump appears to have realized that U.S. dominance cannot be maintained through belligerent rhetoric alone. What comes next is likely to be more conflict and more uncertainty.

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