

THE RISING INFLUENCE OF GULF AND MIDDLE EASTERN POWERS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: CONSIDERATIONS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

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January, 2025

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SUMMARY

- **Middle powers in the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East have been gradually building strategic partnerships in the Horn of Africa region during the past decade, often through agricultural and mining deals, defence pacts and public infrastructure projects. Preferring personalised relations with the region's power brokers, these transactional, interest-driven partnerships have crystallised into new networks for regional influence and power.**
- **The rivalry and competition among the Horn's rulers over these new sources of money and power, leveraged to secure loyalty and fund violence for survival, have created a potent catalyst for regional instability.**
- **This geopolitical development has grown out of a wider multipolar world, where multiple middle powers have emerged to challenge the unfettered influence of a global hegemon (the U.S and the West), putting, as a result, the limits of a rules-based, international order to test. In the wake of shifting geopolitical realities in the Horn, this article proposes hybrid and pragmatic approaches to peace diplomacy, that must anchor normative principles in the realities of power politics.**

For the Horn of Africa (HoA), 2024 began with a surprise fractious Memorandum of Understanding between Addis Ababa and Hargeisa that bore wider regional implications.¹ Ethiopia's maritime deal with the self-proclaimed independent republic of Somaliland would have allowed Ethiopia access to 20 km of Somaliland's coastline. In exchange for Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland's sovereignty, Somaliland offered the landlocked Ethiopia a gateway to the Gulf of Aden for commercial and naval military use for 50 years.² The MoU was vehemently rejected by Somalia, which considers Somaliland part of its territory. In a rare flash of Somali nationalistic fervour, its Federal Government rallied allies across the region to oppose Ethiopia.³ Regional alliances formed in fear and anticipation of the eventuality of open hostilities.⁴ But by year's end, regional tensions had calmed,

- 1 Kalkidan Yibeltal, "Ethiopia signs agreement with Somaliland paving way to sea access." 2 January 2024, BBC News <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67858566>> 17 January 2025.
- 2 Aleksii Yonen "Somaliland Has Been Pursuing Independence for 33 Years: Expert Explains the Impact of the Latest Deal with Ethiopia," 24 January 2024, The Conversation <<https://theconversation.com/somaliland-has-been-pursuing-independence-for-33-years-expert-explains-the-impact-of-the-latest-deal-with-ethiopia-221502>> 17 January 2025.
- 3 Mohamud Abdulaziz Abdisamad and Kalkidan Yibeltal, "Somalia calls Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement act of aggression," 2 January 2024, BBC News <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67861390>> 17 January 2025.
- 4 Kalkidan Yibeltal and Damien Zane, "Ethiopia-Somaliland deal: Can the Horn of Africa rift be healed?" 3 July 2024, BBC News <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67911057>> 17 January 2025; Staff Writer, "Africa File: Islamic State Suicide Attack in Somalia; AUSSOM Dysfunction; M23 Captures District Capital in Eastern DRC," ISW Press, 9 January 2025 <<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-january-9-2025-islamic-state-suicide-attack-somalia-aussom-dysfunction-m23>> 17 January 2025.

when Somalia and Ethiopia agreed to end their feud. The 12 December 2024 Ankara Declaration had been brokered by Turkiye, an emerging regional power-broker in the Horn of Africa.⁵

Next door in Sudan, where according to the United Nations the world's worst hunger crisis is underway, and where tens of thousands of people have died, including up to 12 million displaced from their homes, Turkiye has also been invited as mediator.⁶ As of January 2025, both sides of the war in Sudan – the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) on one side, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on the other – had welcomed Turkish mediation.⁷ The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has long been accused of supporting the RSF, but has consistently denied the claims, has also accepted Turkish mediation.⁸ While Turkiye's role in the crisis in Sudan is yet to be seen, it is noteworthy that American-Saudi led initiatives since the war began on 15 April 2023 have failed to stop the guns from firing.⁹ The U.S, which committed junior-level diplomats to resolve the Sudanese crisis, has now imposed sanctions on the feuding generals, that is, SAF's General, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and RSF's leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti.¹⁰ The impact of the newly-

imposed American sanctions is yet to be felt. Saudi Arabia (the other lead mediator alongside the U.S) has itself been accused of supporting one side of the conflict, dimming its effectiveness in finding a resolution.¹¹

The easing of tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia (through Turkish diplomacy), and the welcoming of Turkish mediation in Sudan, after Saudi-American mediation failed to find a resolution to the crisis, signals the rising influence of Gulf and Middle Eastern countries over rulers in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, countries such as China, Japan and Russia have also established a footprint in the Horn region during the past decade, but it is the influence of Gulf states and other powers in the Middle East that has had a more direct impact in shaping the region's conflict map.

These geopolitical shifts are taking place in an era of global multipolarity.¹² In particular, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, after it lost World War I, did not only usher in a long struggle to revive Islam's political legacy; it also left the region under Western tutelage and hegemony. Filling the void now left by an America and Europe whose influence is waning across the world, the resulting rivalry amongst Gulf and Middle Eastern powers, notably Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Qatar, Turkiye and Iran, has come to create new cartographies of power and influence in the region that have spilled over onto the Horn of Africa. This is posing significant consequences for regional peace and stability.

This article contends that these new networks of power and influence (driven by the interests of powerful Gulf and Middle Eastern countries) have come to privilege particular forms of politics over others, necessitating new approaches to peace diplomacy. In other words, normative principles may have to be anchored onto the realities of power politics, as personalised forms of rule, where money, war and the accumulation of power, have been reemphasised as the real (if perhaps, the only) politics of the Horn of Africa region.¹³

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- 5 Kalkidan Yibeltal and Basillioh Rukanga, "Ethiopia and Somalia agree to end bitter Somaliland port feud" *BBC News*, 12 December 2024 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgr7v1evvgo>> 17 January 2025; Paulo Aguiar, "Ethiopia-Somalia Agreement: Turkiye's Rising Influence in the Horn of Africa," *Geopolitical Monitor* < <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/ethiopia-somalia-agreement-turkeys-rising-influence-in-the-horn-of-africa/>> 17 January 2025.
 - 6 Staff writer, "11 months into Sudan war, 'world's worst hunger crisis' looms" *UN News*, 6 March 2024 < <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147287>> 20 January 2025; Reuters, "U.S issues sanctions on Sudanese army chief Burhan" *NBC News*, 17 January 2025 < <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/us-issues-sanctions-sudanese-army-chief-burhan-rcna188111>> 20 January 2025.
 - 7 Staffwriters. "Sudan Army Chief Backs Turkish Peace Effort." *Africanews and AP*, 6 January 2025 < <https://www.africanews.com/2025/01/06/sudan-army-chief-backs-turkish-peace-effort/>> 17 January 2025.
 - 8 Staffwriters. "Sudan Army Chief Backs Turkish Peace Effort." *Africanews and AP*, 6 January 2025 < <https://www.africanews.com/2025/01/06/sudan-army-chief-backs-turkish-peace-effort/>> 17 January 2025; Yasir Zaidan, "To end Sudan's War, Pressure the UAE" *Foreign Policy*, 29 August 2024 < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/29/sudan-war-rsf-saf-uae-arms-hemedti-burhan/>> 17 January 2025.
 - 9 Bureau of African Affairs "Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan." *U.S. Department of State website*, 11 May 2023 < <https://www.state.gov/jeddah-declaration-of-commitment-to-protect-the-civilians-of-sudan/>> 17 January 2025; Mawahib Abdilatif, "Sudan army snubs Geneva ceasefire talks" *The East African*, 15 August 2024 < <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/north-africa/sudan-army-snubs-geneva-ceasefire-talks-4726392>> 17 January 2025.
 - 10 Anita Powell, "US Sanctions Sudan army leader, citing atrocities" *Voice of Africa*, 16 January 2025 < <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-sanctions-sudan-army-leader-citing-atrocities/7939740.html>> 20 January 2025; Aggrey Mutambo, "US imposes sanctions on Sudan's RSF leader Hemedti" *The East African*, 8 January 2025 < <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/north-africa/us-imposes-sanctions-on-sudan-rsf-leader-hemedti-4882058>> 20 January 2025.

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- 11 Talal Mohammad, "How Sudan became a Saudi-UAE Proxy War," *Foreign Policy*, 12 July 2023 < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/12/sudan-conflict-saudi-arabia-uae-gulf-burhan-hemedti-rsf/>> 20 January 2025.
 - 12 Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper, "Yes, the world is Multipolar," *Foreign Policy*, 5 October 2023 < <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/>> 20 January 2025
 - 13 See for example Alex De Waal, *The real politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power* (Polity Press, Cambridge, U.K), 2015; Review by Nicolas Van De Waal, "The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and the Business of Power," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2016 < <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/real-politics-horn-africa-money-war-and-business-power>> 17 January 2025.

1. KEY ATTRIBUTES OF THE EMERGING HORN – MIDDLE EASTERN RELATIONSHIP

A clear attribute in the emerging relationship between HoA rulers and political and commercial elites in the Gulf and the Middle East is transactionalism. And the Horn region has proved a fertile zone for the planting of transactional deals; where politics - that is, the organisation of public interest and life – is being transformed by supply and demand principles commonly associated with markets.¹⁴ Lacking “social contract” principles such as constitutionalism and generally the rule of law, in this world, leaders simply secure loyalty; and loyalty is bought and maintained by cash and the use of violence.

The current propensity towards bilateral defence pacts, merged with often murky commercial agreements, highlights the importance of the relationship in the HoA between money, power and violence. As has been described by Alex De Waal, a veteran HoA researcher, this reinforces the character of regional politics simply as a political marketplace.¹⁵ In this way, war in the Horn region seems to have fully taken on the expression that was offered by German philosopher, Clausewitz, as the extension of politics by other means.¹⁶

This arrangement of power has not only marginalised the role in peace diplomacy of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU), it has also complicated the operation of broad-based, normative principles of multilateralism or the achievement of “liberal peace”.¹⁷ The notion of liberal peace relies on ending civil wars by agreements to draft a democratic constitution, disarm and demobilise rival armies, and mechanisms for transitional justice and reconciliation. Lastly, liberal peace usually encompasses aid-funded programmes to deliver a peace dividend for the afflicted population. However, where personalised forms of rule and bare-knuckle politics of survival are prominent features of governance, multilateral principles - such as those enshrined in the UN Charter and

the AU Constitutive Act - come under threat. The alternative is “illiberal peace”, where belligerents cut deals, or a private bargain, over the counter.

2. TRACING THE GULF IN THE HORN

While analysts and foreign missions working along the HoA would often think about the region as one portfolio and the Gulf and Middle East as another, these two regions are now creating a geopolitical confluence. Separated from the Gulf and Middle East by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden by as little as 60 km, the Horn region has long shared colonial, cultural, religious and kinship ties with the old Ottoman Empire – ties often overlooked or obscured in favour of the colonial cartographies of Europe. Now, areas that were formerly under the Ottoman Empire, especially the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian periphery, are under the influence of one or more of the principal powers in the Gulf and the wider Middle Eastern region.

In addition to the natural resources found in the Horn region – marine life, rich agricultural land, gold, oil and gas reserves – access to the Red Sea coastline has attracted Gulf and Middle Eastern commercial interests, and the region has conversely been featured in their geostrategic calculations.¹⁸ While this recent focus on the HoA region by Gulf and Middle Eastern countries could be traced back to the aftermath of the Arab Spring of 2011, where the UAE more directly moved against the rise of Islamist offshoots of the Muslim brotherhood in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Sudan, it bears more direct lineage from the war in Yemen.¹⁹ Notably, amid the Yemeni conflict since 2015, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have aimed to diminish the influence of Iranian-backed Houthis and counter Iranian presence in the southern Red Sea region.²⁰

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have maintained a relationship with the feuding generals in Sudan principally because both generals contributed troops – an estimated 14,000 that allegedly included child soldiers – to the Saudi-UAE led

14 De Waal, *The real politics of the Horn*, pp. 18-20.

15 *ibid.*

16 See Robert Callum. 2010. 'War as a Continuation of Policy by Other Means: Clausewitzian Theory in the Persian Gulf War,' *Defense and Security Analysis*, 17(1): 59-72.

17 Ngala Chome, "Sudan: The Quiet Scramble to Broker the Peace." *African Arguments*, 17 May 2023 < <https://africanarguments.org/2023/05/sudan-the-quiet-scramble-to-broker-the-peace/>> 17 January 2025.

18 Staff Writer, "Importance of Red Sea for Global Trade and Geopolitics," *Global Strategic Defense Network*, GSDN, 15 February 2024 < <https://gsdn.live/importance-of-red-sea-for-global-trade-and-geopolitics/>> 17 January 2025.

19 See for example, Randeep Ramesh, "UAE Told UK: Crack Down on Muslim Brotherhood or Lose Arms Deals," *The Guardian*, 6 November 2015 < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/06/uae-told-uk-crack-down-on-muslim-brotherhood-or-lose-arms-deals>> 17 January 2025.

20 Staff Writer. "Conflict in Yemen and the Red Sea," *Centre for Preventive Action*, 8 October 2024 < <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>> 17 January 2025.

coalition against the Houthis.²¹ To help prosecute the war in Yemen, the Emiratis poured millions of dollars into improving the Eritrean Red Sea port of Assab, located only 70 km away from Yemen.²² As they pulled out of Assab, the UAE was crafting partnerships through Dubai-based DP-World to develop Doraleh Port in Djibouti, including Berbera Port on the coast of Somaliland, and Bosaso Port on the coast of Somalia's autonomous federal region of Puntland.²³ While Saudi Arabia laid plans to develop Sudan's port (Port Sudan) located on the Red Sea coast,²⁴ the UAE, on the other hand, invested USD 6 Billion to develop another Sudanese port on the Red Sea known as Abu Amama.²⁵ In Sudan, the UAE maintained a relationship with RSF's leader, Hemeti, whose family ran gold supply syndicates from Sudan to the UAE, while the UAE controlled several land and farming operations spanning over 200,000 hectares of cultivated land.²⁶ During Ethiopia's two-year civil war between 2020-22, it was drones supplied to the Ethiopian government by the UAE, Turkiye

and Iran that strafed an overstretched Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) column that was advancing towards Addis Ababa that forced the TPLF back into the northern region of Tigray.²⁷ Lacking the support of backers from the Gulf and the Middle East, a year-long siege in Tigray, where a genocide is suspected to have taken place, forced the TPLF to the negotiating table in Pretoria.²⁸ In addition to the sale of drones and a host of other commercial interests, Turkiye, in particular, boosted its regional influence in the Horn region through a maritime defence pact with Somalia signed in early 2024, and another agreement to potentially drill Somalia's offshore oil reserves.²⁹ Turkiye continues to hold its largest overseas military base in Somalia.³⁰

Tensions in the Horn of Africa during 2024 were also fuelled by the demonstrated significance of the Red Sea (and the adjoining Gulf of Aden), owing to Israel's response to the Hamas-led attack on its soil on 7th October 2023. The importance of the Red Sea as a global trade transit route cannot be overstated.³¹ Each year, over 10 % of international trade flows through it, promising significant revenue for Red Sea coastline states, especially Egypt.³² But as the escalation

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- 21 Quentin Muller, "Libya, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Saudi Arabia: Former Sudanese Mercenaries Testify," *The Africa Report*, 18 February 2022 <<https://www.theafricareport.com/177622/libya-united-arab-emirates-yemen-saudi-arabia-former-sudanese-mercenaries-testify/>> 17 January 2025; Yuri Neves, "Saudi Arabia's Sudanese Mercenaries in Yemen," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 24 February 2019 <<https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2019/02/24/saudi-arabias-sudanese-mercenaries-in-yemen/>> 17 January 2025; Staff Writer, "Huge Sudanese Losses in Yemen Highlight fighters' Role in the Conflict," *Middle East Eye*, 10 November 2019 <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/thousands-saudi-paid-sudanese-mercenaries-die-frontline-yemen>> 17 January 2025.
- 22 Associated Press, "UAE Dismantles Eritrea Base as It Pulls Back After Yemen War," *Voice of Africa*, 18 February 2018 <<https://www.voanews.com/a/africa-uae-dismantles-eritrea-base-it-pulls-back-after-yemen-war/6202212.html>> 17 January 2025.
- 23 Antony Kitimo, "Inside UAE's Plan to Control African Ports Business Through DP World" *The East African*, 3 July 2022 <<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/business-tech/inside-uae-plan-to-control-african-ports-business-dp-world-3866552>> 22 January 2025; Staff Writer, "UAE Investment in Berbera and Bosaso Ports: A Catalyst for Economic Growth and Job Creation in Somalia," *Horn Observer*, 2 May 2024 <<https://hornobserver.com/articles/2735/UAE-Investment-in-Berbera-and-Bosaso-Ports-A-Catalyst-for-Economic-Growth-and-Job-Creation-in-Somalia>> 22 January 2025.
- 24 Staff Writer, "Saudi investors plan to build new port in Sudan: minister," *Sudan Tribune*, 20 January 2025 <<https://sudantribune.com/article67921/>> 17 January 2025; Giorgio Cafiero, "Analysis: Saudi Arabia's diplomatic energy, soft power in Sudan" *Al-Jazeera*, 15 May 2023 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/15/analysis-saudi-arabias-diplomatic-energy-soft-power-in-sudan>> 17 January 2025; Khalil Al-Anani, "The Sudan Crisis: How Regional Actors' Competing Interests Fuel the Conflict," Arab Centre in Washington DC., 11 May 2023 <<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-sudan-crisis-how-regional-actors-competing-interests-fuel-the-conflict/>> 17 January 2025.
- 25 Alma Selvaggia Rinaldi, "How Sudan's RSF Became a Key Ally for the UAE's Logistical and Corporate Interests", *Middle East Eye*, 1 September 2024 <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-rsf-key-ally-uae-logistical-and-corporate-interests>> 22 January 2025.
- 26 Khaled Abdelaziz, Michael Gorgy and Maha El Dahan, "Exclusive: Sudan Militia Leader Grew Rich by Selling Gold" *Reuters*, 26 November 2019 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusivesudan-militia-leader-grew-rich-by-selling-gold-idUSKBN1Y01DQ/>> 22 January 2025.

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- 27 Declan Walsh, "Foreign Drones Tip the Balance in Ethiopia's Civil War" *New York Times*, 20 December 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/africa/drones-ethiopia-war-turkey-emirates.html>> 22 January 2025; Alex De Waal, "How Foreign Drone Intervention and More Turned Tide for Abiy in Ethiopia" *Responsible Statecraft* <<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/23/how-foreign-drone-intervention-and-more-turned-tide-for-abiy-in-ethiopia/>> 22 January 2025.
- 28 Staff Writers, "Genocide in Tigray: Serious Breaches of International Law in the Tigray Conflict: Ethiopia, and the Paths to Accountability," *New Lines Institute*, 3 June 2024 <<https://newlinesinstitute.org/rules-based-international-order/genocide-in-tigray-serious-breaches-of-international-law-in-the-tigray-conflict-ethiopia-and-paths-to-accountability-2/>> 17 January 2025.
- 29 Federico Donelli, "Red Sea Politics: Why Turkey Is Helping Somalia Defend Its Waters," *The Conversation*, 28 February 2024 <<https://theconversation.com/red-sea-politics-why-turkey-is-helping-somalia-defend-its-waters-224377>> 17 January 2025; Staff Writer, "Turkey to Provide Maritime Security Support to Somalia – Official," *Reuters*, 22 February 2024 <<https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-provide-maritime-security-support-somalia-official-2024-02-22/#:~:text=The%20agreement%20aims%20to%20enhance,against%20terrorism,%22%20he%20said>> 17 January 2025; Dilara Hamit, "Türkiye, Somalia Sign Agreement on Defense, Economic Cooperation," *Anadolu Agency* <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkiye-somalia-sign-agreement-on-defense-economic-cooperation/3132095>> 17 January 2025.
- 30 Staff Writer, "Turkey sets up largest overseas army base in Somalia," *Al-Jazeera News*, 1 October 2017 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/1/turkey-sets-up-largest-overseas-army-base-in-somalia>> 20 January 2025.
- 31 Kagure Gacheche, "Red Sea Tensions: Four Scholars Explain What's At Stake For Global Trade and Security," *The Conversation*, 11 December 2024 <<https://theconversation.com/red-sea-tensions-4-scholars-explain-whats-at-stake-for-global-trade-and-security-245048>> 22 January 2025.
- 32 Marc Espanol, "The Suez Canal Crisis: How Houthi Attacks Are Crippling Egypt's Revenue", *El Pais*, 13 January 2025 <<https://english.elpais.com/economy-and-business/2025-01-13/the-suez-canal-crisis-how-houthi-attacks-are-crippling-egypts-revenue.html>> 22 January 2025.

of the conflict in Gaza enveloped a much wider region of the Gulf and the Middle East, the Houthis in Yemen, in solidarity with Hamas in their Palestinian cause against Israel, began attacking ships that were passing through the Red Sea that they claimed were affiliated to Israeli interests.³³ Taking advantage of the resulting chaos, groups of Somali pirates began launching attacks on vessels passing across the adjoining Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean, breaking an almost decade-long lull in Somali piracy activity.³⁴ Throughout 2024, the EU's Naval Force, Operation-Atalanta, documented reports of 20 attacks on Somali waters, including those that were unsuccessful in seizing vessels.³⁵ In all, disturbances along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden had disastrous consequences for international oil and merchant shipping throughout the year.³⁶

Competition for influence over the Red Sea and the countries relying on it for trade and transit has now integrated the Horn of Africa region in the security and conflict systems of the Gulf region and the wider Middle East, the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean. In consequence, in most sites of conflict and tension in the Horn region in recent years, one sees the influence of a Gulf and/or Middle Eastern state. These observations largely forestall outdated analyses that remain preoccupied with China's, and until recently, Russia's growing influence in the region, typically presented as a problematic counterweight to the West.³⁷

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

The characterisation of the HoA region as a political marketplace has achieved prominence in recent years given the confluence of naked self-interest by regional

autocrats and the influence-peddling tendencies of Gulf and Middle East powers. Preferring personalised contact with the region's power brokers, these transactional, interest-driven partnerships have crystallised into new networks for regional influence and power. Devoid of durable institutions or mobilising ideologies to back them, rulers in the region survive only if they can secure material resources and receive funding from external patrons, which they then use to purchase political support. In such a desperately poor area with awful infrastructure and vast expanses of desert, this presents a recipe for instability. It also precludes democratic transitions. Most countries in the Horn, and their allies in the Gulf and the Middle East, are not liberal democracies. In fact, the majority do not aspire such ambitions.

Neither is a dependable, regional guarantor of peace in sight, especially given Ethiopia's internal struggles to build a unified federation, and Kenya's domestic economic challenges.³⁸ Furthermore, Western donor fatigue and disunity at the U.N Security Council are threatening the continued possibility of multilateral peace support missions with broad "Christmas tree mandates," especially those that lack clear exit strategies. Donald Trump, the current American President, known for his unpredictable nature and adherence to an "America First" doctrine, is unlikely to reverse America's recent trend of disengaging from global sites of tension and conflict.³⁹ Despite expectations that Trump might recognise Somaliland's sovereignty – a move that could plunge the Horn region further into turmoil – in the event the U.S. seeks to re-establish its foothold in the Red Sea, the HoA is likely to feature less in Trump's list of priorities.⁴⁰

In a plan, dubbed "Project 2025", compiled in April 2023 by the prominent American right-wing Heritage Foundation, and widely believed to influence Trump's policies during his second term, sub-Saharan Africa takes up less than two pages in the 900-plus page plan. Trump's administration, during his first term as president (2016–2020), also ignored the efforts of his predecessor, Barack Obama, to reform United Nations (UN) rules on funding peacekeepers, which

33 Frank Gardner, "Hard choices for the West in Red Sea Standoff," BBC News, 11 January 2025 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67938290> > 17 January 2025.

34 Antony Kitimo, "Rising Piracy Revives Old Headache, Could Hike Prices," *The East African*, 28 December 2024 < <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/rising-piracy-revives-old-headache-could-hike-prices-4872058> > 17 January 2025.

35 Antony Kitimo, "Somali Pirates Release Chinese Fishing Ship," *The East African*, 14 January 2025 < <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/business-tech/somali-pirates-release-chinese-fishing-ship-4888872> > 17 January 2025.

36 Burak Sakir Seker, "Red Sea Crisis: Expert Unpacks Houthi Attacks and Other Security Threats," *The Conversation*, 13 January 2024 < <https://theconversation.com/red-sea-crisis-expert-unpacks-houthi-attacks-and-other-security-threats-220951> > 17 January 2025.

37 See for example, Nimi Princewill, "Across Africa, Russia is growing in influence. What might Moscow want?" *CNN*, 18 January 2025 < <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/18/africa/russia-expanding-influence-in-africa-intl-cmd/index.html> > 20 January 2025

38 See for example, Meron Elias, "What's at Stake in Kenyan President William Ruto's State Visit to the U.S.?" *International Crisis Group*, 15 May 2024 < <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/east-and-southern-africa/kenya-united-states/whats-stake-kenyan-president-william-rutos> > 17 January 2025.

39 Alex de Waal, "Unconventional Trump brings Openings and Perils for Africa" *BBC News*, 13 November 2024 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj0jelzpngzo> > 17 January 2025.

40 Mary Harper, "The Would-Be African Nation in Love with Donald Trump," *BBC News*, 16 January 2025 < <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp3j1qn0499o> > 20 January 2025

would have provided African peace support missions with a stable financial foundation.⁴¹

Since 2016, no new UN or AU peacekeeping missions were authorised in Africa until last December. And during the UN Security Council vote on 27 December 2024, the US abstained from voting to authorise the successor mission to the AU force in Somalia.⁴² The abstention was attributed to concerns over funding shortfalls.

The reliability of the region's preeminent former colonial power, the United Kingdom, as a regional peace broker also seems to have been dented. Recent reports, which the UK denies, hold that its Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, or FCDO, tried to head off African diplomats' condemnation of the UAE over its alleged support of the RSF.⁴³ The UAE has previously issued threats to the UK, that it could lose arms deals, over taking certain foreign policy positions in the region.⁴⁴

Global multipolarity, where Gulf states and Middle East countries are competing for influence and power in a wider region of the Gulf and the Middle-East, including the HoA, has served to increase the influence of these Middle Powers amongst rulers of the Horn. In conflict sites throughout the Horn region, it seems, Gulf heavyweights and Middle East powers have emerged as the preeminent power brokers. This presents challenges as well as new vistas for peace diplomacy.

4. NEW FRONTIERS FOR DIPLOMACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

41 Alex de Waal, "Unconventional Trump brings Openings and Perils for Africa" *BBC News*, 13 November 2024 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj0jelzpngzo>> 17 January 2025.

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43 Mark Townsend, "UK 'Tried to Suppress Criticism' of alleged UAE role in Arming Sudan's RSF Militia," *The Guardian*, 24 June 24, 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/jun/24/uk-allegedly-suppressing-criticism-uae-arming-sudan-rsf-militia-genocide-darfur>> 17 January 2025.

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Emerging networks of power and influence centring around powerful Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, and shifting geopolitical realities influenced by a multipolar world do pose tough questions for peace and stability in the HoA region. However, the world of self-interest, rivalry and realpolitik has been with us since time immemorial. Conversely, a rules-based international order is relatively new, and its liberal principles even newer in many countries in the Horn, as well as in the Gulf and the wider Middle-East. But the fact that relations between rulers in the HoA region and political and commercial elites in Gulf and Middle Eastern countries continue to exist in a state of flux presents opportunities for new ways to advance peace. This article proposes paths for peace diplomacy in the HoA region as follows:

- Firstly, diplomats and the international community need to **adopt a more pragmatic approach** to peace when it comes to the Horn region, while finding a way to ground normative principles in the realities of power politics. This may call for hybrid, peace mediation and conflict management approaches that simultaneously persuade belligerents to lower the guns while ensure some form of peace dividend for the victims of conflict.
- Secondly, the international community needs to consider and accept that the priority of Gulf and Middle Eastern countries in the Horn region is first and foremost to grow richer and more powerful. Political and commercial elites in the Gulf with interests in the Horn region **may need to be convinced of the long-term wealth creation benefits of prevailing peace**. Consequently, they may see the need to integrate their transactional deals into broader (and democratic) stabilization efforts. This is especially pertinent for leaders of countries that seek a diversification of their economies away from reliance on hydrocarbons.
- Thirdly, and if diplomacy fails, the international community should find **new and innovative ways to promote accountability mechanisms**. This could be done by working with human rights organisations, investigative journalists, researchers and academics so as to expose and publicize the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity in active war zones. As multiple examples in the past have shown, such work is often useful in pushing powerful, democratic nations to spring into action, leading to indictments, international sanctions and concerted action at the level of the UN Security Council.

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ISBN 978-2-490093-49-6

Layout by: Michael Lusaba

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