THE CRISIS IN THE DRC
Can Diplomacy Work or is War Inevitable?

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INSIDE

Abstract

The ongoing conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has reached a critical juncture following the flawed December 2023 elections, escalating violence between the Congolese military and insurgent groups such as the March 23 Movement (M23) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). M23, with alleged ties to Rwanda and Uganda, and the ISIS-affiliated ADF are among the over 100 armed groups operating in the region, exacerbating a decades-long humanitarian crisis. As of March 2024, the UN reported that 7.2 million people had been internally displaced, making DRC one of the worst humanitarian disasters globally. The roots of this conflict date back to the First and Second Congo Wars (1996–2003), with

ethnic tensions, foreign interventions, and competition for the DRC's vast mineral resources fueling ongoing instability. While past diplomatic efforts, including peace agreements and international interventions, have sought to curb the violence, they have often failed due to weak governance, regional power struggles, and economic interests. In 2022, M23 resurged, seizing parts of North Kivu, further straining relations between Kinshasa and Kigali. Despite a U.S.-brokered agreement in late 2023 to reduce military presence near the DRC-Rwanda border, violence has persisted to date. This article examines whether diplomacy can bring lasting peace to eastern DRC or if military action is inevitable. It explores the challenges of diplomatic negotiations, the effectiveness of past peacekeeping missions, and the potential consequences of military escalation. A sustainable resolution will require a balanced approach integrating diplomatic engagement, security sector reform, and regional cooperation to break the cycle of violence.

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) remains one of the most complex and deadly crises in Africa. As of January 29, 2025, the situation has worsened, with violent clashes continuing between the Congolese military and various insurgent groups, most notably the M23 and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) (United Nations, 2024). The M23, primarily composed of ethnic Tutsis, is backed by Rwanda, while the ADF, an ISIS-affiliated militia, poses a significant threat to the region's stability. The violence has escalated dramatically, with over seven million people displaced internally and the humanitarian toll growing worse. The roots of the conflict can be traced back to the legacy of the Rwandan Genocide, the First and Second Congo Wars, and the complicated interplay of ethnic, political, and economic factors (Crisp, 2024).

The stakes are immense, the humanitarian crisis is dire, with millions facing food insecurity, violence, and displacement. Additionally, the conflict has far-reaching implications for regional stability, particularly involving neighboring countries like Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi, who have vested interests in the region's resources and security (Carter, 2024). Beyond the immediate human cost, the conflict also touches on global economic interests.

DRC President Félix Tshisekedi (left) and his counterpart President Paul Kagame of Rwanda in Kigali, 2021. (Photo Credits: Habimana Thierry | Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

The DRC is home to some of the world's most valuable mineral resources, including cobalt and copper, which are crucial to global technology and energy industries (Bauer, 2024).

The central question guiding this discussion is whether diplomatic efforts can offer a sustainable solution to the conflict or whether military intervention, including both international peacekeeping forces and regional military engagements, is an inevitable course of action. This article explores both avenues, evaluating the feasibility of diplomatic solutions amid ongoing violence, entrenched political instability, and competing regional interests. Given the complexity and longevity of the conflict, the answer is far from clear.

Background

The root of the Conflict

The ongoing turmoil in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is deeply rooted in a complex history shaped by years of regional unrest, ethnic disputes, and the exploitation of natural resources. The region remains mired in violence, made worse by the resurgence of armed groups, political instability, and the involvement of neighboring nations. Understanding the current state of the conflict requires an examination of its historical causes, the role of regional actors like Rwanda and Uganda, the rise of non-state militant groups, and the influence of resource exploitation.

Historical Context

The First and Second Congo Wars

The origins of the violence in eastern DRC can be traced back to the First and Second Congo Wars, two catastrophic conflicts that destabilized the region and continue to fuel the present-day turmoil. The First Congo War (1996-1997) was set in motion by the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, during which Hutu extremists massacred Tutsi civilians in neighboring Rwanda. After the genocide, millions of Hutu refugees fled to eastern DRC, where many formed militias. These Hutu factions, including the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR), became a major destabilizing force in the region (Reyntjens, 2009).

In response, Rwanda, under President Paul Kagame, intervened in eastern DRC to neutralize the Hutu militias and protect the Tutsi population. This intervention led to the ousting of Mobutu Sese Seko, the long-time leader of

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Zaire, and the installation of Laurent Kabila as president of the DRC (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). However, tensions soon erupted between Kabila and his Rwandan allies, leading to the Second Congo War (1998-2003), a conflict that involved multiple African countries and became one of the deadliest wars in modern history (Prunier, 2009). The war left millions dead, caused massive displacement, and entrenched armed groups in the eastern DRC, many of which continue to operate in the region today.

The Role of Rwanda, Uganda, and Other Regional Actors

The involvement of neighboring nations, particularly Rwanda and Uganda, has been a crucial factor in the continuation of conflict in eastern DRC. Both countries have significant interests in the region, driven by both security concerns and economic motivations. Rwanda, for instance, sees the presence of Hutu militias in DRC as a direct threat to its national security, as these groups have launched attacks on Rwanda from Congolese soil (Autesserre, 2012). Consequently, Rwanda has provided support to various armed groups in eastern DRC, including the M23, a rebel faction that has played a prominent role in recent years.

Likewise, Uganda's involvement is motivated by its historical connections to the region and its desire to exert influence over the political and military dynamics of eastern DRC. Uganda has supported several militias, including the ADF, a group responsible for a significant amount of violence in the Beni region (Hovil, 2016). Uganda's goals include securing its borders, gaining access to the region's mineral wealth, and preserving its influence over the political developments in DRC.

The rivalry between Rwanda and Uganda further complicates the situation. At times, these two nations have found themselves backing opposing factions,

with Uganda supporting groups that oppose Rwandan-backed militias. This competition, fueled by historical grievances and the presence of numerous armed factions, has deepened the instability in eastern DRC (Buur, 2011). In addition, other regional players such as Burundi, Angola, and Tanzania have been involved in varying capacities, either contributing to peacekeeping operations or pursuing their own security interests.

The Rise of Armed Groups

M23, ADF, FDLR, and Their Motivations

The proliferation of armed factions in eastern DRC is one of the primary factors driving the continuing violence. The region is home to over 100 non-state armed groups (NAGs), each with distinct goals and reasons for participating in the conflict. Among the most significant are the M23, ADF, and FDLR, whose actions have led to widespread destruction and suffering in the region.

The M23, primarily composed of Tutsi fighters, emerged in 2012 following the breakdown of a peace agreement between the DRC government and an earlier Tutsi-led rebel group, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP). The M23's primary objective is to secure greater autonomy for the Tutsi community in eastern DRC, which they claim is being targeted by the Congolese government (Ndaywel, 2020). The group has received support from Rwanda, though the Rwandan government denies these allegations. The M23's recent resurgence in 2022 has increased tensions between the DRC and Rwanda. The group's violent attacks, which have targeted both military and civilian populations, have intensified the displacement crisis (UNHCR, 2024).

The ADF, an Islamist extremist group with links to the Islamic State, has also become a major force in the ongoing violence. Originating in Uganda, the ADF has expanded its operations into DRC, where it has been responsible for a large number of attacks on civilians and military personnel. The group's ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state in the region, and it has carried out numerous massacres and brutal acts of violence, particularly in the Beni area (Hovil, 2016). The ADF's presence in DRC has not only contributed to the instability in the region but has also aggravated ethnic and religious tensions.

The FDLR, a Hutu-led militia, is one of the longest-operating armed groups in the DRC. Formed after the Rwandan Genocide, the FDLR has been active in eastern DRC, where its aim is to overthrow the Rwandan government and establish a Hutu-led regime. The FDLR has continued to engage in violent actions, including attacks on Rwandan and Congolese targets, leading to widespread human rights violations and further complicating efforts for peace (Reyntjens, 2009).

The Impact of Natural Resource Exploitation on Conflict Dynamics

The extraction of natural resources in the DRC has been a significant factor in perpetuating the violence in eastern regions. The DRC is rich in mineral resources, including cobalt, copper, gold, and diamonds, which have drawn both international and local actors eager to profit from these valuable materials (Vlassenroot & Huggins, 2005). Armed groups, such as M23, ADF, and FDLR, have seized control of mining areas, using the revenues generated to fund their violent activities. These groups often employ violence and coercion to control mining operations and extort resources from local populations (De Vries, 2019).

The Congolese government, in partnership with multinational corporations, has struggled to manage the mining sector, with widespread reports of illegal mining and smuggling undermining the efforts to regulate the industry (Haufler, 2019). The presence of armed groups in mining areas has led to significant human rights abuses, including forced labor, child labor, and violence against local communities. Additionally, the global demand for minerals like cobalt, crucial for the production of electric

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Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF) in song at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport before departing to eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to join a new regional force vowing to enforce peace (Photo Credits: Thomas Mukoya | REUTERS)

vehicle batteries and electronics, has intensified the conflict. International powers, including China, the United States, and European nations, have vested interests in the DRC's mining industry, adding a layer of geopolitical competition to the conflict (Heath, 2021).

Thus, the exploitation of natural resources has become a key driver of violence, creating a vicious cycle where armed groups use mineral wealth to fuel conflict, while the conflict itself impedes efforts to create a stable and peaceful society. The government's inability to regulate the mining sector effectively, along with the involvement of foreign entities seeking to profit from the resources, has prolonged the violence and hindered any significant resolution to the crisis.

The ongoing conflict in eastern DRC, is deeply intertwined with a complex history shaped by political, economic, and social factors. The First and Second Congo Wars, the involvement of neighboring states like Rwanda and Uganda, the rise of armed groups such as M23, ADF, and FDLR, and the exploitation of the region's rich natural resources have all contributed to the prolonged instability and violence. As armed groups continue to vie for control of territory and resources, and as neighboring states pursue their own interests, the path to peace remains elusive. Addressing the root causes of the conflict—historical grievances, regional rivalries, and resource exploitation—will be essential for achieving a lasting resolution to the crisis in eastern DRC.

Diplomatic Efforts and Their Effectiveness in the Ongoing Conflict in Eastern DRC

Previous Peace Agreements and Their Limitations

Over the years, several peace accords have been introduced in an attempt to end the conflict in DRC. These include the Lusaka Agreement (1999), the Sun City Accord (2002), and the Nairobi Agreement (2007), all of which sought to establish peace but ultimately failed to bring lasting stability.

The Lusaka Agreement aimed to halt the Second Congo War by creating a ceasefire and facilitating political negotiations. However, despite its initial promise, the agreement quickly deteriorated due to the lack of genuine commitment from the involved factions and the absence of reliable enforcement mechanisms (Clark, 2002). One critical flaw in Lusaka was its failure to address fundamental issues such as foreign armed group interventions and the exploitation of DRC's vast natural resources (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). Additionally, the exclusion of key regional players like Rwanda and Uganda from the talks rendered the agreement ineffective, as these nations continued to support rebel factions within DRC.

Similarly, the Sun City Accord signed in 2002, was focused on political resolution through the establishment of a transitional government. Although the deal seemed like a significant step toward peace, it faltered due to delays and disagreements among the factions within the transitional government. The accord failed to bring lasting stability to the eastern provinces, which remained under the influence of armed groups (Reyntjens, 2009). Much like the Lusaka Agreement, the Sun City Accord did not sufficiently engage with the region's underlying issues, such as political and ethnic tensions, making it ineffective in quelling the violence.

In 2007, the Nairobi Agreement was introduced, which primarily concentrated on the disarmament and reintegration of combatants. However, this initiative also faced challenges in implementation and was ultimately insufficient in addressing the root causes of the conflict (Buur, 2011). The continued support of rebel groups by regional powers and the absence of a comprehensive plan to address political and social grievances contributed to the failure of the agreement to end the violence.

The Role of Regional Organizations

Regional bodies have played pivotal roles in attempting to resolve the DRC crisis, but their efforts have often been thwarted by internal divisions, limited resources, and competing national interests. The African Union (AU), for instance, has made several attempts to intervene in the DRC conflict, but its impact has been limited due to a lack of a unified strategy and weak influence over key regional powers like Rwanda and Uganda (Autesserre, 2012). While the AU has contributed to peacebuilding efforts, its ability to implement effective solutions has been hindered by the complex political dynamics within the region.

The East African Community (EAC), which includes countries such as Uganda and Kenya, has also been involved in peace initiatives in the DRC. However, its influence has been constrained by the diverging interests of its member states, particularly Uganda and Rwanda, who have historically supported different rebel groups (Buur, 2011). The EAC's peace efforts have often failed to adequately address the multifaceted nature of the conflict, especially the local ethnic tensions and military alliances that perpetuate violence in the eastern provinces.

Similarly, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), tasked with promoting peace and security, has been less involved due to the DRC's limited membership in the organization. As a result, SADC's influence has been somewhat restricted, and its ability to foster lasting peace in the region has been limited by a lack of direct involvement (Vines, 2011).

The Impact of International Mediation

International diplomatic efforts, particularly through the United Nations (UN), United States (U.S.), European Union (EU), and China, have also shaped the DRC peace process. The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), one of the largest peacekeeping operations globally, was tasked with maintaining security, aiding in disarmament efforts, and supporting the DRC government. Despite MONUSCO's considerable resources, it has faced significant criticism for its inability to curtail the ongoing violence, especially in the eastern regions. Critics contend that MONUSCO's mandate has been too limited and that it's operational challenges—such as lack of resources, political constraints, and poor coordination with the DRC government—have weakened its impact (Hovil, 2016).

The United States has played a central role in diplomatic efforts, particularly through U.S.-brokered agreements between Rwanda and the DRC. These diplomatic initiatives have focused on fostering dialogue and reducing hostilities between the two nations, especially with regard to Rwanda's alleged support for armed groups like the M23. While the U.S. has made strides in facilitating ceasefires, these initiatives have been undermined by entrenched political positions and a failure to address the fundamental drivers of the conflict, such as the control of resources and regional power dynamics (Heath, 2021). Despite occasional successes in halting military action, U.S.-brokered agreements have been largely ineffective in producing long-term solutions.

The European Union has similarly engaged in peace efforts, primarily through its support of MONUSCO and its provision of humanitarian aid. However, the EU's ability to influence political negotiations has been limited, and its focus on aid rather than conflict resolution has led to criticisms of its approach (Haufler, 2019). The EU's involvement, while commendable, has been overshadowed by the more significant roles played by

regional powers and other international actors like the U.S. and China.

China has also become involved in the region, though its primary interest has been securing access to the DRC's rich mineral resources rather than engaging in peacebuilding efforts. While China has contributed to peacekeeping operations, its approach has been focused more on ensuring stability for its economic investments rather than addressing the underlying political issues driving the conflict (Vlassenroot & Huggins, 2005). China's growing influence has, however, complicated the diplomatic landscape, making it difficult for Western powers to effectively mediate the conflict.

U.S.-Brokered Agreements Between Rwanda and DRC—Progress or Setback?

The U.S.-facilitated agreements between Rwanda and the DRC have been one of the most notable efforts to bring peace to the region. These negotiations have primarily focused on reducing tensions between the two nations, especially following the resurgence of the M23 rebel group, which has been accused of receiving support from Rwanda. While these efforts have achieved temporary ceasefires, they have not addressed the deeper, systemic causes of the conflict, such as the competition for natural resources and the involvement of neighboring states in supporting insurgencies. Despite some short-term progress, the diplomatic agreements have been insufficient in producing lasting peace, as the underlying issues—such as ethnic tensions, regional rivalries, and resource control—remain unresolved (Prunier, 2009). The failure of these agreements highlights the complexity of the conflict and the limitations of diplomatic initiatives that fail to address the broader socio-political and economic dynamics.

Diplomatic initiatives in the DRC have been numerous but largely ineffective in achieving lasting peace. The Lusaka Agreement, Sun City Accord, and Nairobi Agreement, while well-intentioned, failed to end the violence due to their inability to address the core causes of the conflict, such as regional interference, political tensions, and resource exploitation. Regional organizations like the AU, EAC, and SADC have contributed to peace efforts but have been limited by internal divisions and a lack of influence over key regional players. Similarly, international mediation efforts by the UN, U.S., EU, and China have made little progress in addressing the fundamental causes of the conflict. While the U.S.-brokered

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agreements between Rwanda and DRC have yielded temporary peace, they have not provided a long-term solution to the crisis. To achieve lasting peace in eastern DRC, a more comprehensive and inclusive approach is required, one that addresses both the political and socio-economic factors fueling the violence.

The Role of Military Action in the Conflict

The military operations remain a crucial aspect of the ongoing strife in eastern DRC, particularly in North Kivu and Ituri provinces. The armed forces of the DRC (FARDC) have been consistently engaged in conflicts with several rebel factions, including M23, Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and other insurgent groups (Boisselet, 2021). However, the FARDC's ability to effectively combat these groups has been hindered by logistical difficulties, limited resources, and coordination challenges, which have prevented the forces from achieving decisive victories (United Nations, 2023).

The United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has been heavily involved in peacekeeping efforts but has faced substantial criticism. Despite deploying specialized peacekeeping units and military personnel, MONUSCO's operations have often been deemed ineffective in quelling the violence. The mission's failure to provide adequate protection to civilians and prevent insurgent advances has led to growing dissatisfaction among both the local population and international actors (Sarkissian, 2024). Protests against the mission's inability to stabilize the region have been frequent, with many calling for the withdrawal of MONUSCO, thus complicating the ongoing peacebuilding process (Kukunda, 2023).

Military involvement from neighboring countries, such as Rwanda and Uganda, has further intensified the situation. Rwanda's armed forces are suspected of supporting the M23 rebels, with allegations of providing vital resources and strategic assistance (African Union, 2023). Uganda, in contrast, justifies its military presence in the region as an effort to secure its borders from the threat of groups like the ADF. However, Uganda's actions have often worsened the instability, bringing the region closer to the risk of a large-scale, cross-border war (Kikong, 2024).

The potential for the conflict to escalate into a full-blown regional war remains a significant concern. The already fragile security of neighboring countries could easily collapse under the pressure of continuing violence, potentially drawing in multiple regional actors with interests tied to the DRC's politics and resource wealth (Smith & Turner, 2024). This danger is aggravated by the competition for control over the region's rich mineral resources, which not only fuel rebel activities but also attract external powers with a stake in exploiting these assets.

Challenges to Peace and Security

The road to lasting peace in the eastern DRC is obstructed by a variety of challenges, many of which have become more entrenched over time. A fundamental issue is the cyclical nature of the violence, which has cultivated deep mistrust between the conflicting parties and exacerbated tensions between various ethnic and political groups (Tshisekedi, 2023). The growing influence of non-state armed groups like M23, ADF, and CODECO has only worsened the conflict, as their actions are often driven by territorial and ethnic disputes, amplifying existing divisions within the region (African Union, 2023).

Another key impediment to peace is the persistently weak governance in the DRC. The central government continues to grapple with rampant corruption, an insufficient state presence in rural areas, and a lack of effective administrative capacity, all of which undermine efforts to foster national unity and stability (Kukunda, 2024). The political instability following the contested 2023 elections has only deepened these challenges, as the government struggles to assert control over

General Sultani Makenga, military leader of the March 23 Movement (French: Mouvement du 23 mars), also known as the Congolese Revolutionary Army (Armée révolutionnaire du Congo), a Congolese Tutsi-led rebel military group (Photo Credit: VOA News)

the country and implement meaningful reforms (Boisselet, 2023).

The humanitarian situation in eastern DRC is dire and continues to deteriorate. By early 2024, more than 7 million people had been displaced within the region, and millions more faced extreme food insecurity, with approximately 23 million individuals experiencing hunger (United Nations, 2024). The violent conflict has resulted in severe human rights abuses, including targeted killings and widespread attacks on civilians, particularly women and children, further compounding the suffering of the local population (Sarkissian, 2024).

A significant driver of the ongoing violence is the exploitation of DRC's vast natural resources. The country is home to a wealth of minerals such as cobalt, copper, and gold, which are critical to global industries, especially in technology and renewable energy sectors. While these resources provide economic benefits, they have also fueled conflict, as armed groups vie for control over mining areas. The involvement of foreign countries, particularly China, in the mining sector has further complicated the situation, as both state and non-state actors seek to profit from the exploitation of DRC's resources, which has worsened the conflict (Smith & Turner, 2024).

Possible Paths Forward

Addressing the entrenched violence in eastern DRC requires a renewed focus on diplomatic negotiations. Previous agreements, such as the Lusaka Agreement and Sun City Accord, offer important lessons, though their failures highlight the need for more inclusive and sustained peace processes. A successful diplomatic approach will require the resolution of ethnic tensions, political grievances, and the implementation of robust mechanisms for enforcing peace agreements (African Union, 2023).

Reforming the DRC's security sector is another critical step in reducing the country's vulnerability to insurgency. A professional, well-equipped military is essential not only to combat existing rebel groups but also to ensure long-term security and stability. Strengthening the FARDC's capacity and reducing corruption within the armed forces would help foster greater internal security (Tshisekedi, 2023). Regional cooperation is another vital component of any successful peace strategy. Cooperation among

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the East African Community (EAC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the African Union (AU) would promote coordinated peacekeeping efforts and ensure that peace agreements are honored. Engaging neighboring states in discussions about shared security concerns will be crucial to preventing the conflict from spreading beyond DRC's borders (Boisselet, 2023).

Lastly, a balanced approach that combines military action with long-term peacebuilding strategies is essential. While military operations may be necessary to address immediate security threats, a focus on rebuilding trust among local communities, improving governance, and addressing the root causes of the conflict will be key to ensuring lasting peace. Long-term strategies must prioritize development, human rights, and inclusive political participation (Sarkissian, 2024).

Conclusion

The prospects for peace in eastern DRC remain uncertain. While diplomatic efforts can offer a potential path forward, they must be accompanied by reforms, strong international support, and regional cooperation. A comprehensive approach that blends military action with development and peacebuilding is essential for securing lasting peace. The risk of military escalation continues to loom, making it clear that any military intervention must be carefully balanced with efforts to address the underlying causes of the conflict to avoid a cycle of instability. Achieving peace requires a comprehensive strategy that balances military actions with long-term development and reconciliation efforts. Without addressing the core causes of the conflict, military interventions may provide only temporary solutions, while a more holistic, long-term approach is essential for peace.

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Somaliland and the Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean: Navigating Sovereignty and Strategic Influence

By Simon Mulongo

Abstract

Somaliland's location at the confluence of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden gives it a pivotal role in the geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean. Since declaring itself independent from Somalia in 1991, Somaliland has remained unrecognized internationally, facing the dual challenge of leveraging its strategic location while operating under the limitations of its political status. The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which is critical for global trade and energy security, emphasizes Somaliland's significance, with more than 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports passing through this route annually (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2024, p. 3). This analysis delves into the changing geopolitical dynamics surrounding Somaliland and the external factors influencing its trajectory. For instance, the UAE's investments in Berbera Port and Ethiopia's moves on recognition of Somaliland in exchange for strategic access to the Gulf of Aden highlight the region's shifting alliances. However, increased militarization and the involvement of global powers like the UAE, Israel, Turkey, and China introduce potential threats to Somaliland's autonomy. The study also raises key questions about the role of unrecognized states in today's multipolar world: Does engagement with international players enhance sovereignty, or does it undermine local governance? With a GDP growth rate of 7.2% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023, p. 15), Somaliland demonstrates significant economic potential, yet remains heavily reliant on external partnerships to sustain itself. Through statistical analysis, strategic evaluation, and philosophical inquiry, this paper sheds light on Somaliland's prospects for becoming a stabilizing force in both regional and global contexts.

Introduction

Positioned at the crossroads of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Somaliland has established itself as a significant geopolitical player in the Western Indian Ocean. Since its unilateral declaration of independence in 1991, Somaliland has remained internationally unrecognized, placing it at the heart of both global trade routes and regional political dynamics. Its proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait—a crucial passageway for over 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports each year—highlights its vital role in maritime security and global economic connectivity (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2024, p. 5).

In contrast to its unstable neighbor Somalia, Somaliland enjoys relative stability and functional governance, drawing international attention. The UAE, for example, has made significant investments in modernizing Berbera Port, transforming it into a critical hub for Ethiopia's trade and reducing Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti (Bradbury, 2018, p. 47). However, Somaliland's lack of formal recognition has left it vulnerable to external dependencies, as global powers such as China, Israel, and Turkey vie for influence in this strategically important region (Rio Times, 2024).

This study examines how Somaliland manages its quest for sovereignty while playing a crucial role in regional security. The memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland serves as a case study of Somaliland's ability to harness strategic partnerships in pursuit of international recognition. However, it has also heightened tensions with Somalia, underscoring broader issues of sovereignty and territorial disputes (Somaliland Reporter, 2024). By analyzing these complex dynamics, the paper contributes to broader discussions about the future of unrecognized states, the securitization of key maritime chokepoints, and the impact of great-power rivalries on regional stability.
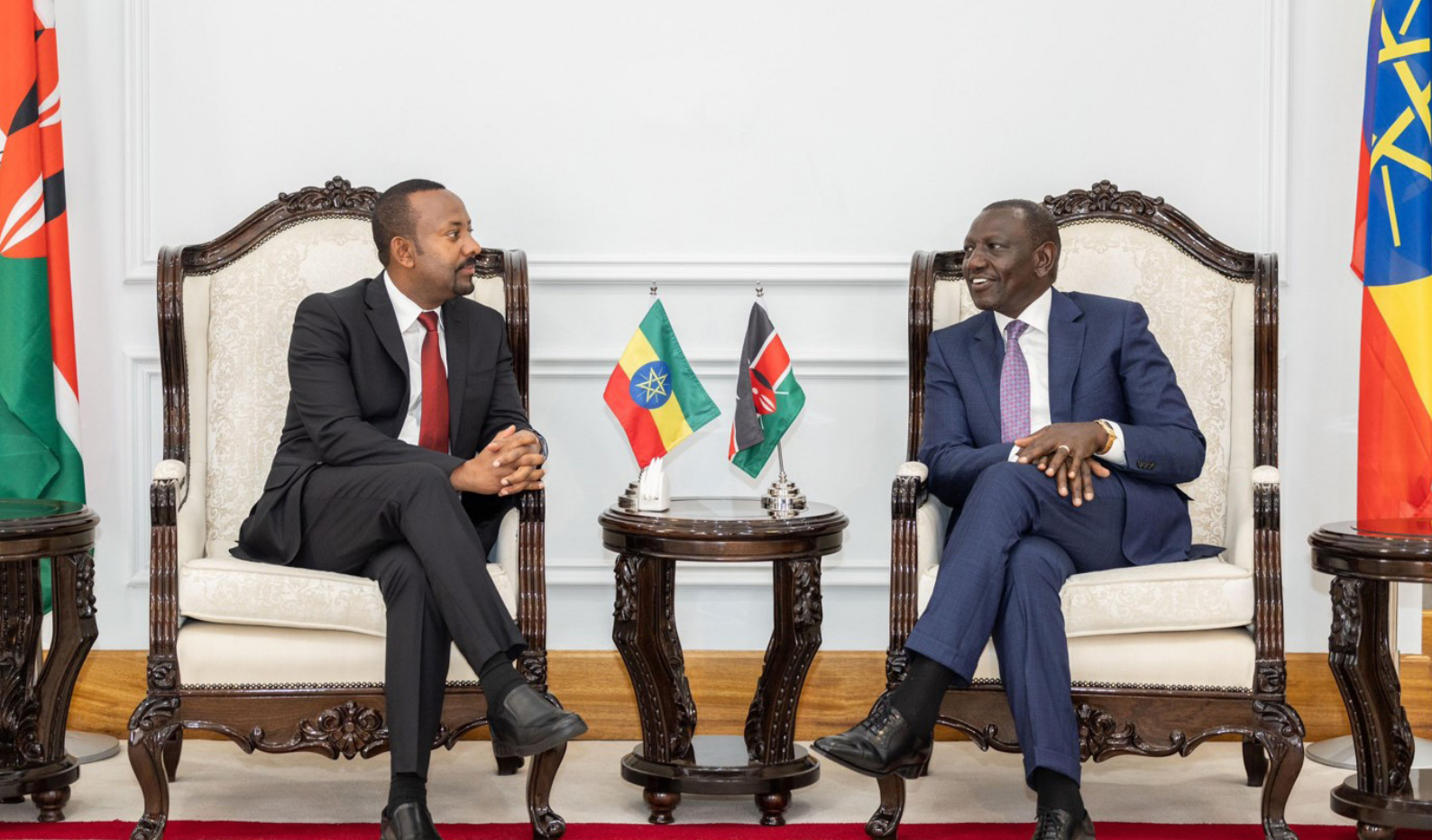
Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed chats with President William Ruto of Kenya, following his state visit to Nairobi on February 27, 2024. (Photo Credit: International Peace Support Training Centre)

2. Background

Somaliland's pursuit of sovereignty is intricately tied to its distinct colonial legacy. As a former British protectorate, Somaliland briefly attained independence in 1960 before uniting with Italian Somaliland to establish the Somali Republic. The collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991 prompted Somaliland to declare independence, aiming to reclaim its pre-unification autonomy. Nonetheless, Somaliland remains unrecognized, as Somalia and the African Union prioritize the principle of territorial integrity over its claims (Vivekananda International Foundation [VIF], 2025).

Geographically, Somaliland's proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait positions it as a linchpin in global trade networks. The UAE's investment in the Berbera Port, executed through DP World, has transformed the port into a critical transit hub, driving a 35% increase in trade volumes since 2020 and offering Ethiopia a vital alternative to Djibouti (Africa Confidential, 2017). Yet, this strategic positioning has attracted the competing interests of global powers such as the UAE, Israel, and China, raising concerns over the potential militarization of the region.

Concurrently, Somaliland's lack of formal recognition constrains its access to international financial systems and diplomatic channels, compelling reliance on external actors for economic and security support. The Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed in 2024, epitomizes this reality, as Ethiopia acknowledged Somaliland in exchange for access to the Gulf of Aden and military base rights. While this agreement amplifies Somaliland's geopolitical leverage, it has provoked sharp opposition from Somalia, which interprets it as an affront to its sovereignty (Somaliland Reporter, 2024; Horn Diplomat, 2025).

This context positions Somaliland as both a symbol of stability within a turbulent region and a pawn within the broader machinations of great-power competition. It provokes profound questions regarding Somaliland's sovereignty, its capacity for self-determination, and its enduring viability in the evolving global order.

Strategic Importance and Sovereignty Dilemma

Somaliland's geostrategic significance in the Western Indian Ocean underscores its critical role in securing maritime trade routes and fostering regional commerce. Positioned near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait—through which over 20,000 vessels transit annually, carrying 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports—Somaliland has become central to discussions on maritime security

> "The U.S. has considered establishing a diplomatic office in Somaliland to counterbalance China's growing influence in Djibouti, where Beijing operates its first overseas military base

and trade (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2024, p. 5).

The modernization of Berbera Port, initiated in partnership with the UAE's DP World in 2016, is key to Somaliland's economic ambitions. The port has become a vital transit hub for Ethiopia, providing an alternative to Djibouti, a relationship solidified through the 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal. This agreement granted Ethiopia access to the Gulf of Aden in exchange for recognition and military base rights, illustrating Somaliland's ability to use its assets to advance regional diplomacy (Bradbury, 2018, p. 47).

However, Somaliland's bid for recognition remains contentious. Somalia, with African Union backing, opposes Somaliland's independence, arguing it would threaten Somalia's territorial integrity and inspire other secessionist movements, including Puntland and Jubaland (Vivekananda International Foundation [VIF], 2025). Internationally, recognition could embolden separatist regions such as Catalonia or Biafra, destabilizing norms of sovereignty and statehood (Kurtz, Roll, & Lossow, 2024).

Reliance on external powers further complicates Somaliland's sovereignty. Partnerships with the UAE and Israel have boosted economic growth and security but tied Somaliland to foreign agendas. For instance, the UAE's military base in Berbera serves its regional strategy, potentially overshadowing Somaliland's domestic priorities (Rio Times, 2024).

Somaliland's quest for recognition presents a complex dilemma. While legitimizing its de facto statehood could redraw the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape, it also risks unsettling global norms on sovereignty, requiring policymakers to balance the benefits of recognition against its far-reaching implications.

Problem Statement

Somaliland's strategic position at the junction of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, a critical maritime chokepoint that facilitates over 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports, underscores its geopolitical importance (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2024, p. 5). Despite this, Somaliland remains an unrecognized state since its 1991 secession from Somalia, embodying the paradox of strategic indispensability paired with political marginalization. This dynamic demands a closer examination of Somaliland's evolving role within an increasingly polarized global order.

The 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) exemplifies the geopolitical recalibration in the Horn of Africa, granting Ethiopia access to the Gulf of Aden in exchange for diplomatic recognition. While bolstering Somaliland's aspirations, this agreement has fueled tensions with Somalia, which views it as a threat to its territorial integrity (Vivekananda International Foundation [VIF], 2025). Meanwhile, external actors like Turkey, mediating between Ethiopia and Somalia, continue to reshape regional power dynamics for strategic gains (faf.ae, 2025).

Somaliland has also become a flashpoint in global great-power rivalries. The U.S. has considered establishing a diplomatic office in Somaliland to counterbalance China's growing influence in Djibouti, where Beijing operates its first overseas military base (Semafor, 2025). Advocates in Washington argue that recognizing Somaliland would strengthen it as a democratic ally, curbing Chinese ambitions and reinforcing U.S.-UAE-Israel partnerships in the Red Sea region (Foreign Policy, 2025). However, such recognition risks destabilizing Somalia and inspiring secessionist movements in regions like Catalonia and Biafra (The Cradle, 2024).

Externally driven militarization further complicates Somaliland's sovereignty. The UAE's military base in Berbera, ostensibly established to counter Iranian influence, highlights Somaliland's growing dependence on foreign powers. While bolstering its economic ambitions, such alignments risk subordinating Somaliland's autonomy to external agendas (Somaliland Chronicle, 2024).

This study explores whether Somaliland's strategic value can coexist with its aspirations for recognition and sovereignty, while assessing the broader implications of

recognition on regional and global stability. As Somaliland navigates its status within a multipolar world, it offers a critical case study for understanding the challenges faced by unrecognized states in balancing strategic relevance with political autonomy

Research Questions

This study seeks to critically explore Somaliland's geopolitical significance, its sovereignty challenges, and the broader implications of its strategic interactions with regional and global actors. Framed within the context of escalating great-power rivalries and the evolving dynamics of the Horn of Africa, the research is guided by the following key questions:

1. How does Somaliland's geostrategic location near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a critical maritime chokepoint, shape its influence in regional security and global trade networks?

2. What are the political, economic, and security implications of the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), and how does this agreement affect stability and power dynamics within the Horn of Africa?

3. To what extent does the absence of formal international recognition constrain Somaliland's capacity to assert its sovereignty, negotiate international partnerships, and maximize its strategic potential?

4. How do great-power rivalries, involving actors such as the UAE, Israel, Turkey, and China, influence Somaliland's geopolitical trajectory and regional integration?

5. What actionable policy recommendations can address the risks associated with militarization, external dependency, and regional fragmentation, while advancing Somaliland's aspirations for recognition and stability?

Objectives

This study aims to critically examine Somaliland's evolving role as a key geopolitical actor in the Western Indian Ocean, focusing on its strategic importance, sovereignty challenges, and interactions with regional and global stakeholders. The specific objectives of the study are:

A vessel docks at the port of Berbera in Somaliland. (Photo Credit: DP Wo)

Somaliland's geostrategic significance in the Western Indian Ocean underscores its critical role in securing maritime trade routes and fostering regional commerce. Positioned near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait—through which over 20,000 vessels transit annually, carrying 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports

1. To analyze the geopolitical significance of Somaliland within global maritime trade and energy security networks, with a particular emphasis on its strategic position near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

2. To assess the political, economic, and security impacts of the 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on regional dynamics, including its implications for Somalia's territorial claims and Ethiopia's economic diversification efforts.

3. To explore how external engagements, such as foreign investments and military base agreements with actors like the UAE and Israel, influence Somaliland's sovereignty, governance, and long-term autonomy.

4. To evaluate the role of great-power competition, including rivalries involving the UAE, China, Turkey, and the United States, in shaping the Horn of Africa's security and political architecture.

5. To develop practical, evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at mitigating the risks of militarization and external dependency, while advancing Somaliland's aspirations for formal recognition and ensuring regional and global stability.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study employs Realism and Geopolitical Theory, combined with Sovereignty and Recognition Theory, to examine Somaliland's geopolitical importance, its external engagements, and the challenges to its sovereignty. Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive lens to evaluate Somaliland's strategic role within an increasingly multipolar and competitive international system.

Realism and Geopolitical Theory

Rooted in the foundational works of Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979), Realism asserts that states operate within

an anarchic international system where survival, security, and power are paramount. Somaliland exemplifies these realist principles by strategically leveraging its location near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a critical chokepoint facilitating over 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports annually (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2024, p. 5). Through its partnership with the UAE on the Berbera Port modernization project and its 2024 agreement with Ethiopia—securing diplomatic recognition in exchange for access to the Gulf of Aden—Somaliland demonstrates how geographic and economic assets can be aligned with external partnerships to advance political and economic objectives.

Geopolitical theory further illuminates Somaliland's significance as a focal point in great-power competition. The presence of China's military base in neighboring Djibouti, Turkey's active mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia, and Israel's reported interest in Somaliland's maritime zones underscore how its strategic location has attracted rivalries among global and regional powers (Foreign Policy, 2025; Somaliland Chronicle, 2024). These interactions reveal how Somaliland operates simultaneously as a key actor and a contested space within the broader struggle for influence in the Horn of Africa.

This analysis highlights the duality of unrecognized states like Somaliland: while leveraging their strategic assets for survival and influence, they often find themselves entangled in the geopolitical ambitions of larger powers. This duality reflects the enduring relevance of realism and geopolitics in explaining the interplay of agency and dependency in an evolving international order.

Sovereignty and Recognition Theory

Sovereignty and Recognition Theory challenges the traditional Westphalian understanding of statehood, emphasizing the contested and fluid nature of sovereignty in contemporary international relations. Krasner's (1999) notion of "organized hypocrisy" illustrates how sovereignty is selectively applied,

enabling external actors to engage strategically with Somaliland without conferring formal recognition. Despite demonstrating functional governance, political stability, and democratic practices, Somaliland remains excluded from international institutions, exemplifying the sidelining of unrecognized states by global norms that prioritize territorial integrity over self-determination (Bull, 1977). This tension is compounded by Somalia's staunch opposition, as it perceives Somaliland's recognition as a dangerous precedent that could inspire other secessionist movements, such as those in Catalonia and South Ossetia (Vivekananda International Foundation [VIF], 2025).

Recognition Theory further exposes the vulnerabilities faced by unrecognized states in the international system. Somaliland's reliance on partnerships with external powers such as the UAE and Israel reflects a strategic alignment that, while bolstering economic and security prospects, risks subordinating its long-term aspirations for sovereignty and development to foreign agendas. This dependency underscores critical questions about the capacity of unrecognized states to assert autonomy and navigate a global order that systematically denies them formal legitimacy.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates four interconnected variables to comprehensively analyze Somaliland's geopolitical role:

1. Somaliland's proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and its control over Berbera Port emphasize its role as a critical node in global trade and energy security.

2. Partnerships with actors like the UAE, Israel, and Ethiopia reflect Somaliland's efforts to attract investments and political recognition, while highlighting the risks of dependency.

3. The challenges posed by Somaliland's lack of international recognition underscore its constrained capacity to formalize agreements and access financial systems.

4. The Horn of Africa's transformation into a theater for great-power competition, involving actors such as China, the U.S., and Turkey, further complicates Somaliland's strategic calculus.

Synthesis and Analytical Perspective

This integrated framework provides a holistic lens for analyzing Somaliland's multifaceted geopolitical trajectory. Realism emphasizes Somaliland's capacity to leverage its strategic assets for political and economic gains, while Sovereignty and Recognition Theory highlights the systemic obstacles it faces within the international order. Together, these perspectives reveal the paradox of Somaliland's critical role in global trade and security contrasted with its persistent marginalization. This duality positions Somaliland as a compelling case study of how unrecognized states maneuver within the shifting power dynamics of an increasingly multipolar and interconnected world.

By grounding the analysis in these theoretical frameworks, this study deepens the understanding of Somaliland's evolving geopolitical role and its broader implications for regional stability, sovereignty debates, and the global contest for influence.

Literature Review

This literature review critically evaluates existing scholarship on Somaliland's strategic significance, sovereignty challenges, and its positioning within the broader geopolitical landscape. It synthesizes current knowledge, identifies gaps in the research, and assesses the quality and relevance of existing studies. By framing Somaliland's role within the context of the Western Indian Ocean, the review underscores the intricate interplay between its strategic importance, external partnerships, and struggles for sovereignty in an increasingly multipolar global order. This analysis also shapes the research questions driving the study.

Strategic Importance of the Bab-el-Mandeb and Geopolitics

The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, is pivotal to global trade and energy security, facilitating over 12% of global trade and 30% of Europe's oil imports annually (IMO, 2024, p. 5). Somaliland's proximity to this chokepoint underscores its geostrategic significance, especially as the UAE's investment in Berbera Port transforms it into a key regional trade and military hub. Lefebvre (2018) emphasizes that chokepoints like Bab-el-Mandeb function as arenas for power projection, with Somaliland emerging as a nexus for external actors such as the UAE, Israel, and China. However, while existing literature highlights Somaliland's strategic value as a partner, it insufficiently explores how its unrecognized status limits its ability to fully capitalize on these opportunities, revealing a significant gap in current research.

Theoretical Insights on Sovereignty and Recognition

The concept of sovereignty lies at the heart of Somaliland's challenges. Krasner (1999) characterizes sovereignty as "organized hypocrisy," highlighting how international engagement is often dictated by strategic interests rather than adherence to legal norms. Despite Somaliland's stability and effective governance, which starkly contrast with Somalia's ongoing fragility, it remains excluded from formal international systems due to concerns over preserving regional unity. Bull (1977) and Jackson (1990) underscore the selective nature of recognition, framing it as a geopolitical instrument wielded by powerful states. While existing literature examines the theoretical dimensions of Somaliland's de facto sovereignty, it inadequately addresses the practical impact of external engagements, such as the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), on Somaliland's governance structures and its pursuit of autonomy

Great-Power Rivalries in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa region is a stage for competition between major powers, with Somaliland at its center stage. The UAE's development of a Berbera Port, China's founding a base in Djibouti, and Israeli alleged development of a base in Somaliland capture the geostrategic worthiness of the region (Rio Times, 2024; Somaliland Reporter, 2024). As significant as such actions elevate the position of Somaliland, such actions have a chance to extend militarization in the region, undermining governance and independence locally. Lefebvre's (2018) contention that militarization in high-strategic regions destabilizes governance in such regions holds specific relevance, but literature is not replete with in-depth analysis of how Somaliland navigates such competition in a quest for independence.

Case Studies on Unrecognized States

Comparative studies with Northern Cyprus and Palestine reveal significant observations about unrecognized state challenges. According to Krasner (1999, p. 45), Taiwan's alliances with principal countries bestow de facto independence in a state of international unrecognition, a modus vivendi adopted by Somaliland. In contrast to Taiwan, nevertheless, Somaliland's application of powers such as the UAE subjects it to manipulation. Governance in unrecognized states is a theme in most studies but seldom addresses specific vulnerabilities occasioned

by alliances in Somaliland, providing a future research opportunity.

Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU and Regional Implications

The 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU granting access for Ethiopia to the Gulf of Aden via Berbera Port is a geo-political development of paramount importance. For Vivekananda International Foundation (2025), the agreement can encourage unrecognized nations to use strategic assets for state recognition. Nevertheless, the vigorous protests in Somalia betray a future of intensifying territorial contests. Insofar as the MoU is a political triumph for Somaliland, existing literature doesn't appropriately investigate its long-term ramifications for regional security, with particular consideration for Somalia's fragile state and Ethiopian diversification of economy.

Militarization and Regional Stability

Militarization along Somaliland's borders reflects broader trends in Western Indian Ocean and Red Sea securitization. The UAE-Israel and Turkey-Qatar axes have positioned Somaliland in a proxy battleground, with Yemen-inspired dynamics (Haaretz, 2024). Regional tensions become even more heightened with competition between China and America, the great powers. Lefebvre's (2018) argument that militarization erodes neighboring stability is particularly relevant but one not yet considered in detail in the literature about how Somaliland accommodates its security concerns with its sovereignty, particularly with increasing competition between great powers.

Synthesis and Research Gaps

While extant scholarship has produced insightful interpretations of the geostrategic value and sovereign complications of Somaliland, gaps in studies dominate its scholarship. Inadequacies in analysis of its unacknowledged statehood as a deep constraint in its geostrategic aspirations demand deeper analysis.

As a concurring concern, its external alliances, most particularly with its governance and long-term development, demand less than satisfactory analysis. In addition, a lack of careful analysis regarding its long-term implications of the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) betrays an imperative for critical analysis. With an objective to bridge such gaps in thinking through critical analysis, its geostrategic position in a scenario of transforming powers, its sovereign complications of its unacknowledged state, and its overall

implications of its engagements towards both regional security and overall security trends in a new geographical configuration demand investigation.

Analysis and Discussion

The Analysis and Discussion section explains and informs the key findings and utilizes theory and conceptual frameworks to analyze Somaliland's position in geopolitics, its sovereignty issues, and its relations with the outside world. What follows is the structure for this section

Strategic Importance and Economic Potential

The geographical location of Somaliland near Bab-el-Mandeb Strait renders it a key player in international sea-based oceanic trade and security in terms of energy. As a chokepoint, it deals with 12% of international trade and 30% of European-imported oil per annum, and its value and geostrategic worth cannot be overestimated (International Maritime Organization [IMO], 2024, p. 5). The geostrategic investment in Berbera Port by the UAE through DP World located Somaliland at a key position in terms of regional logistics and trade. As of 2023, Berbera Port received over 35% of Ethiopian trade, offering a key alternative to Ethiopian overreliance in its sea trade, with over 95% of its sea-bound trade handled in Djibouti (Bradbury, 2018, p. 47; Somaliland Reporter, 2024).

The agreement is in consonance with realist geoeconomic and political calculation, in which countries use geo-strategic location to gain political alignments and geo-economic investments. By positioning Berbera Port at a regional level, Somaliland not only diversified Ethiopian sea options but increased its own geo-strategic portfolio and politics. The agreement is an expression of a geo-strategic calculation for projecting its assets for exercising political clout in view of its lack of international acknowledgement.

However, Somaliland's excessive dependence upon external powers, such as the UAE, is reason for utmost concern about independence and sovereignty. The UAE's Berbera base is partly to counter Iran's Red Sea presence, a strategic necessity that will not necessarily coincide with Somaliland's security and economic ends (Rio Times, 2024). This sets in sharp contrast the two-edged sword of value for strategy: while alliances with powers drive development and international profile, these drive concomitant trade-offs out of a loss of sovereignty.

> Placing Somaliland in a realist and theory of state context sets in sharp contrast the paradox of political marginalization and one of strategic necessity, and raises questions about whether unrecognized states can generate a durable opportunity for value-added through geographical positioning at a loss of sovereignty.

Furthermore, Somaliland's unilateral lack of access to international financial institutions and full free trade agreements heightens its excessive dependence on direct foreign investments. This excessive dependence even identifies the constraint of unrecognized statehood, in that value added through positioning is balanced through an inability to have full discretion over, or shape, engagements with the exterior. Somaliland therefore has to navigate a narrow tightrope between leveraging its value through positioning and safeguarding its independence, with excessive dependence undermining its long-term governance and stability.

Placing Somaliland in a realist and theory of state context sets in sharp contrast the paradox of political marginalization and one of strategic necessity, and raises questions about whether unrecognized states can generate a durable opportunity for value-added through geographical positioning at a loss of sovereignty.

Sovereignty Challenges in a Fragmented System

Somaliland's unrecognized state continues to limit its ability to sign international agreements, access international financial platforms, and enjoy full state sovereignty. One such example is the 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), under which Ethiopia gained access to access to the Gulf of Aden through Berbera Port in exchange for diplomatic acceptance of Somaliland. Dubbed a diplomatic success, the agreement elicited a sharp reaction in Somalia, supported by the African Union, depicting it as an encroachment of Somalia's territorial integrity. This reflects regionally experienced tension over the legitimacy of Somaliland (Somaliland Reporter, 2024; Vivekananda International Foundation, 2025).

A map showing the geographical borders of Somaliland. It borders Djibouti to the northwest, Ethiopia to the South and Somalia to the East. The capital and largest city is Hargeisa (Photo Credit: Boundless Ocean of Politics)

The "organized hypocrisy" theory proposed by Krasner (1999) best explains such a reality, in that international politics towards unrecognized states circumvent legal conventions in a move to preserve non-recognition conventions. Ethiopian acceptance consolidated political momentum for Somaliland but, at the same time, showed the weakness in its position in a disintegrated international system.

From an economic viewpoint, Somaliland's unrecognized state keeps it out of development funding through channels such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, and it must then depend on bilateral agreements often contingent to extraterritorial consideration. For instance, the UAE's investment in Berbera Port, in its transformational value, is focused towards Emirati region-first approaches, such as countering Iran's access in the Red Sea region. This reflects a scenario in which unrecognized states have asymmetrical alliances whose ends are often determined through outside consideration over national necessity (Rio Times, 2024; Haaretz, 2024).

Domestically, the absence of international recognition weakens Somaliland's capacity for dealing with internal crises, such as Las Anod fighting. This territorial dispute, fueled by competition and claims over resources, has

taken an ethnic and political form. In its lack of institution clout earned through recognition, Somaliland finds it difficult to mediate effectively and implement long-term governance (Majid & Abdirahman, 2024).

Somaliland's location at the confluence of critical routes opens its vulnerability to external strain, with nations such as Ethiopia, Somalia, the African Union, the UAE, and global powers muddling its path. Turkey, in its role in brokering between Ethiopia and Somalia in 2024, appealed for balancing territorial integrity and pragmatic minds towards resolving the Somaliland issue (FAF, 2025). Nevertheless, a recognition consensus is elusive.

Somaliland's sovereignty paradoxes, in conclusion, reveal the tension between value of a location and deep-rooted customs of territorial cohesion. Overcoming governance and recognition deficits in unrecognized nations requires new thinking in a changing environment of transformation in competition at a geopotential level.

External Engagements and Militarization

Somaliland's strategic location at the mouth of Bab-el-Mandeb Strait puts it at the heart of international and regional rivalry. The UAE-Israel axis in Somaliland, for securing sea routes and counterbalancing Houthi and Iranian presence, puts its role in Red Sea security at

its epicenter, with its Berbera base creating a critical hub (Haaretz, 2024). Similarly, its 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Ethiopia with its unrecognized government illustrates the role played by unrecognized governments in advancing regional powers and its geopolitical and economic motives (Somaliland Reporter, 2024). Despite this, Somaliland's alliances increasingly form a larger role in and about larger competition between and between the United States, China, and Somalia.

The United States, in its concern about Beijing's expansion in Djibouti and in the Red Sea, mooted opening a U.S. liaison office in Somaliland countervailing Beijing's expansion in its region (Semafor, 2025). This comes alongside U.S. moves to consolidate its presence in key strategic regions, with its China's Belt and Road Initiative and its base in Djibouti tightening its presence and access in key shipping corridors and over critical trading corridors. These present Somaliland's role in the region's politics increasingly in shades of complexity, raising competition in the Horn of Africa.

Somalia resisted firmly Somaliland's external alliances, perceiving them to erode its territorial integrity. With its backing by Turkey and Qatar, Somalia amplified its claim over Somaliland, describing its alliances as destabilizing. With its drive towards its own regional aims, Turkey brokered between Somalia and Ethiopia in 2024 talks, a reflection of its move for balancing out UAE-Israel presence in Somaliland (FAF, 2025). All these have placed Somaliland in the firing range of U.S.-Chinese rivalry, claims of Somali territory, and larger competition in regions.

Somaliland's coastline is thus a microcosm for international competition. Lefebvre (2018) is of the view that militarization in critical regions tends to destroy governance locally, a fact attested to in Somaliland. As its economic portfolio is boosted through such engagements such as that of the presence of the UAE-Israeli army in Berbera, such engagements prioritize security abroad at the expense of governance and independence for Somaliland.

Somaliland's external relations boost its strategic worth but expose both its unacknowledged independence and vulnerability. U.S.-Chinese competition and rivalry, Somali rebellion, and regional competition serve to remind Somaliland of a thin tightrope its leaders have to navigate to exercise independence in an escalating bipolar international environment and maintain security in its region.

Regional Implications and Risks

The 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is a striking example of an unrecognized state leveraging strategic assets to secure diplomatic recognition. By opening doors for Ethiopia's access into the Gulf of Aden via Berbera Port in exchange for recognition, Somaliland showed pragmatic strategies adopted by de facto states in exercising political salience. Yet, tension rose with Somalia, perceiving the MoU as a direct encroachment on its sovereignty. That reaction identifies vulnerability in territorial integrity in the Horn of Africa, with disputed borders and governance conflicts sparking instability (Vivekananda International Foundation [VIF], 2025).

The implications of the MoU extend beyond bilateral relations, perturbing regional power dynamics. Eritrea, with its alignment with Ethiopia, gained a voice in region politics, contributing to complications in balancing powers. On a concomitant track, competition between great powers intensifies in the Horn of Africa region. To rebuff China's growing security and commercial footprint in Djibouti, America boosted its presence in Somaliland, and with it, in a move endorsed in the U.S. Congress, a planned establishment of a diplomatic compound (Semafor, 2025). In contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative continues to build Beijing's presence, leveraging Djibouti's infrastructure and military capabilities to secure access routes and expand its navy's range.

Adding yet more complexity, the Turkey-Qatar axis underlies Somalia's claim to territoriality over Somaliland, in direct contrast to counterbalancing with the UAE-Israel axis in the region. These competing rivalry axes have placed the Horn of Africa region at a hotspot for proxy conflict, putting Somaliland in increased vulnerability. As Krasner (1999) avers, unrecognized states become pawns in grander geostrategic battles, and Somaliland's strategic location extends such vulnerability.

From a theoretical viewpoint, Somaliland's journey reflects the confluence of trans-regional competition, external interventions, and strategic value. As in its boost towards its diplomacy, Somaliland's MoU also brings with it risks of militarization, external dependency, and increased territorial clashes. All these represent a fragile balancing act between leveraging alliances and securing stability in a broken geo-political setting.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Somaliland occupies a unique position, leveraging its geographical position at Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and its effective administration to claim salience in Western Indian Ocean politics. Berbera Port development, specifically through UAE partnerships, has amplified Somaliland's role as a region-wide trading hub, with important dividends for neighboring Ethiopia. In a reflection of its ability to capitalize in its geographical advantage, its state of not being formally recognized continues to afflict it with a substantive challenge, its access to international frameworks truncated and its search for statehood complicated.

The Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU is an illustration of a model for unrecognized states to utilize pragmatic alignments in securing incremental acceptance in diplomacy. Nonetheless, such achievement has increased tensions with Somalia, deepening regionwide instability and drawing attention to the fragile territorial integrity of the Horn of Africa region. Besides, militarization of Somaliland's coastlines by such powers as the UAE, Israel, and China is a reflection of its contradiction of importance and vulnerability to colonization from abroad.

The analysis utilizes realism and theory of sovereignty to apply to Somaliland's role in an anarchical international environment. Realism can account for its search for alignments and investments, and theory of sovereignty discloses systemic restraints that accompany its lack of acknowledgement. Together, these frameworks lay out Somaliland's balancing act between projecting independence and weathering external pressure.

Somaliland's challenge calls for new, multilateral approaches to bridge its desire for acceptance and its need to maintain regionwide stability. In a fragile Horn of Africa, with its congeries of big-power competition and territorial claims, Somaliland's journey holds important lessons about unrecognized statehood's complications. In conclusion, Somaliland's survival under constraint holds larger lessons about unrecognized states' survival at power's and identity's intersection with international governance.

Recommendations

For Somaliland

1) **Enhance Institutional Governance.** Somaliland should first focus on creating strong institutions of governance to enhance sovereignty and reduce external dependence. This includes solid legal frameworks for controlling international collaborations, foreign military interventions, and domestic interests. Stronger institutions will enable Somaliland to better negotiate in international and regional spaces.

2) **Diversify International Engagements.** Increasing diplomatic and economic ties with neutral actors, such as Japan, South Korea, and the Nordic countries, will reduce dependency on militarized alliances with other nations like the UAE and Israel. Engagement with global institutions and emerging markets will provide equitable assistance without compromising Somaliland's sovereignty.

For Regional Stability

1) **Facilitate Tripartite Dialogues.** Neutral, formal negotiations between Somalia, Somaliland, and Ethiopia, mediated by IGAD or the African Union, are necessary to settle border conflicts related to the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU. Highlighting common economic interests can de-escalate tensions and pave the way for long-term settlements.

2) **Create Shared Economic Corridors.** Common infrastructure projects and shared trade zones can encourage cooperation between Somaliland and its neighbors. These projects would create economic interdependence, rendering resource-based conflicts unsustainable.

3) **Improve Counterterrorism Cooperation.** Local counter-terrorism activities against groups like Al-Shabaab are vital in stabilizing the Horn of Africa. Multilateral strategies can increase safety and lower threat levels to institutions of governance.

To Global Powers

1) **Prioritize Development Over Militarization.** Outside powers such as the U.S., China, and UAE should prioritize investment in infrastructure growth, education, and capacity improvement over

establishing bases. Sustainable growth offers more long-term dividends in stability in the region.

2) **Promote De-escalation Strategies.** Great powers must cooperate to tone down tensions in Somaliland waters, particularly among rival blocs like the UAE-Israel and Turkey-Qatar alliances. Collective diplomacy will be required to de-risk militarization.

For the International Community

1) **Embrace Incremental Recognition Paths**. Step by step integrate Somaliland into international institutions and development agencies, starting with observer status in organizations like the African Union. This path allows Somaliland to fill governance gaps without destabilizing the geopolitical order.

2) **Support Conflict Resolution Mechanisms**. The UN and multilateral agencies should fund neutral mediators to resolve sovereignty issues between

> " Increasing diplomatic and economic ties with neutral actors, such as Japan, South Korea, and the Nordic countries, will reduce dependency on militarized alliances with other nations like the UAE and Israel

Somaliland and Somalia, balancing territorial integrity against de facto Somaliland statehood.

Encourage Regional Integration

Integrate Somaliland into regional security, trade, and economic organizations to lessen isolation and encourage interdependence in the interest of stability within the Horn of Africa.

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Balancing Global Power Dynamics: How East African States Navigate Western and Non-Western Engagements

By: Laurence Jost

Abstract

East Africa occupies a pivotal role in the evolving geopolitical landscape, where states balance engagements with Western and non-Western actors to advance their strategic and developmental goals. This article examines how states like Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Djibouti navigate the interplay between Western powers (e.g., the United States of America, United Kingdom, and European Union and non-Western players such as China, Turkey, and the Gulf States. While Western partnerships often provide aid tied to governance reforms, non-Western engagements prioritize infrastructure and trade investments, exemplified by China's Belt and Road Initiative. These dual alignments offer East African states opportunities for development but also pose risks, including debt dependency and political pressures. Case studies illustrate varied approaches: Kenya balances Western military aid with Chinese loans, Ethiopia fosters ties with Turkey and China while maintaining links to the West, Uganda capitalizes on both governance aid and non-Western infrastructure investments, and Djibouti leverages its strategic location to host multiple military bases. The analysis highlights the challenges of dependency and the complexities of non-alignment, alongside opportunities for economic diversification and regional integration. This bulletin underscores the importance of robust governance to harness global competition for sustainable development and geopolitical stability in East Africa.

Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of East Africa has been a focal point of global interest due to its strategic location and rich resources. European imperial rule has thereby influenced the existing economic and political frameworks of East African countries. Countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania became vital nodes for the export of raw materials and the establishment of governance structures reflecting their colonizers' systems (Rashid & Department of History, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2014). The remnants of this era persist, with infrastructure, legal systems, and governance models still bearing the imprint of colonial frameworks. In recent years, however, the region has witnessed a significant shift with the reemergence of non-Western actors. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become a dominant player, financing transformative infrastructure projects such as railways and ports (Tekdal, 2017). Similarly, countries like Turkey and members of BRICS (BRICS: Acronym for **Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)** have strengthened their presence through trade, investment, and military cooperation. These developments signal a transition from a Western-centric paradigm to a more multipolar engagement model, offering East African states new opportunities while presenting unique challenges (Thiessen & Özerdem, 2019).

One of the most present developments underlining the tendencies described is the acceptance of Ethiopia as one of the newest BRICS member states located in East Africa (Rubina, 2024). East African nations have increasingly sought to balance these diverse engagements. While Western alliance's offer critical aid and institutional support, they often come with governance conditionalities that can strain sovereignty. For instance, Uganda's relationship with the European Union demonstrates this tension. The EU's Democratic Governance Facility (DGF) has provided substantial funding to promote democratic governance and human rights. However, allegations of interference in domestic politics led Uganda to suspend the facility temporarily, highlighting the delicate balance between accepting aid and maintaining sovereign control over governance (Vandeputte, 2023). Conversely, non-Western partnerships, particularly those driven by China and Gulf states, emphasize infrastructure and economic development but carry risks of debt dependency and strategic overreach. For example, Kenya's engagement

with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has resulted in transformative projects like the Standard Gauge Railway. However, these projects have significantly increased Kenya's debt burden, with loans from China comprising a substantial portion of its external debt. This dependency raises concerns about China's potential leverage over strategic assets, such as the Port of Mombasa, which was reportedly listed as collateral in case of default (Han & Webber, 2019; Onjala, 2017). This balancing act highlights the strategic acumen required by East African states to navigate a complex web of global interests while maintaining autonomy and fostering sustainable growth (Edor & Illinois State University, 2024). This paper explores the dynamics of this balancing act, focusing on how East African states strategically manage Western and non-Western engagements. It examines the historical context of Western influence, the rise of non-Western actors, and the implications of these shifts on regional development, security, and governance. By delving into specific case studies of countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Djibouti, the analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and risks inherent in these engagements. Ultimately,

the paper seeks to contribute to the discourse on how East Africa can leverage its position within a shifting global order to achieve sustainable development and geopolitical stability.

Background

To understand East African international relations, a contextualization of East Africa's colonial history is essential. The historical influence of European powers significantly shaped the region's economic and political systems. During the colonial era, these powers established political and economic connections between themselves and the colonized territories, many of which persist today (Alemazung & Hochschule Bremen (University of Applied Sciences), 2010). Colonialism facilitated European dominance over governance, land distribution, trade, and strategic influence, serving both economic and military goals. Soldiers from East Africa were even conscripted to fight in the First and Second World Wars (Koller, 2008). Beyond this, colonial powers exploited resources and created extractive economies, leaving long-term socio-economic legacies. Post-independence, many former colonies retained systems that reflected their colonial

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) heads of state and government at the 2014 G20 summit at Centro de Eventos do Ceará - Brazil on July 14-16, 2014 (Photo Credit: BRICS Alliance)

Aerial view of the Madaraka Express at Mazeras Bridge of the Mombasa-Nairobi standard gauge railway in Kenya (Photo Credit: Xinhua Photo)

pasts, maintaining strong political and economic ties with European powers. Infrastructure, legal frameworks, and bureaucracies in these nations still exhibit these colonial influences (Shohat, 1992). For example, Britain's control over Kenya, Uganda, and later Tanzania after World War I introduced agricultural export systems (e.g., tea, coffee, cotton) and governance structures still in use today (Lange & Brown University, 2004). Similarly, France concentrated its influence on trade and military bases in Djibouti, which remain critical points of engagement. France maintained strategic interest in former colonial regions and thereby also provides development aid and military support across the wider Francophone region to retain relations (Chee et al., n.d.). Italy's colonial involvement in Somalia

"In Somalia, Turkey manages key infrastructure projects like Mogadishu's airport and port, while operating a military training base to support local forces. Turkey also supplies arms and fosters trade relations, emphasizing its increasing role as a military and economic partner in the region

and Ethiopia left enduring marks on urban planning and infrastructure in Somalia, although its influence diminished after World War II. Today, Italy focuses on post-conflict reconstruction and economic cooperation (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2015). Germany, the colonial ruler of modern-day Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi until 1920, introduced cash-crop plantations and railways, shaping the region's economy in the course of their exploitation. Although Germany's direct control ended after World War I, it remains an influential development partner through aid and technical assistance, securing their influence in the region (Tautz, Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, & Zantop, 2000).

While its colonial legacy continues to influence certain structures, East Africa has actively diversified its partnerships, engaging with non-Western actors like China and Turkey. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Turkey's strategic investments illustrate the region's evolving efforts to balance traditional Western partnerships with emerging alternatives (Anthony, 2013; Habiyaremye et al., 2014). This growing diversification in international relations reflects East Africa's pursuit of autonomy and better terms in global partnerships (Lissovolik, 2024).

Global Power Shifts and Their Impact on East Africa

The rise of the BRICS countries signifies a potential shift in global power dynamics toward a multipolar global order. Many nations in the Global South, including East African countries, view BRICS as a platform to achieve greater autonomy and reduce dependence on Western-dominated structures (Carpintero, Murray, & Bellver, 2016). Dissatisfaction with U.S.-led economic models and the expanding influence of China, India, and Russia offer East African states alternative economic and geopolitical options. BRICS' initiatives, including discussions of a common currency, provide avenues to mitigate U.S. influence and foster trade and economic autonomy (Hassan, 2024). Specifically, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has played a significant role in East Africa, funding transformative infrastructure projects such as railways and ports, which some critics argue mirror Western influence in their vested interests (Tekdal, 2017). Russia's involvement in East Africa, while growing, remains limited and primarily economic. Sudan is Russia's most notable foothold, tied to arms sales and conflict-driven security cooperation (Kulkova, 2021). Outside Sudan, Russian influence is sparse compared to other non-Western actors, marking it as a secondary player in East African geopolitics (Nikulin, 2020). These limited engagements highlight a rather peripheral Russian role in East Africa while China successfully challenges Western dominance in the region.

Alongside BRICS, the Gulf States are expanding their presence in East Africa. The United Arab Emirated (UAE), a leading player, focuses on port development in Djibouti, Somaliland (Berbera), and other key locations, reinforcing trade routes and global connectivity (Telci, 2018). Additionally, UAE-based ADNOC has invested in oil and gas infrastructure in Tanzania, while agricultural projects in Sudan and Ethiopia enhance food security amid domestic vulnerabilities (Young & Khan, 2022). The UAE also maintains military bases in Eritrea and Somaliland, ensuring strategic oversight of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and Red Sea (Al Attas, 2018). Saudi Arabia complements these efforts with investments in agriculture, energy, and critical minerals, with potential expansion into renewable energy projects (Griffiths, 2017). Qatar, meanwhile, has focused on mediating regional conflicts, avoiding significant military involvement (Alqashouti, 2021). Turkey's growing engagement in East Africa illustrates another example of non-Western influence.

In Somalia, Turkey manages key infrastructure projects like Mogadishu's airport and port, while operating a military training base to support local forces (SucuoGlu et al., 2016). Turkey also supplies arms and fosters trade relations, emphasizing its increasing role as a military and economic partner in the region (Orakçi & Reuters, 2022).

These developments underscore a potential shifting balance of power. While Western influence remains significant, non-Western actors such as China, Turkey, and the Gulf States are increasingly prominent, challenging traditional dominance and reshaping East Africa's geopolitical landscape.

Case Studies of East African States

Different approaches can be witnessed regarding the way different East African states are dealing with western and non-western economical and military engagements. A tendency of rather dealing with Western or non-Western countries can be witnessed in that regard. How those tendency can affect the power dynamics on the African continent and specifically in East Africa is strongly depended on the specific approach that those countries are undertaking.

Kenya strategically balances its long-standing ties with Western powers and growing engagements with non-Western actors. Historically, the United States and the United Kingdom have been central to Kenya's security and economic frameworks. The U.S. provides military aid and training, including its "Prosperity Guardian" maritime security mandate operating from Kenya's Manda Bay naval base. These initiatives underscore Kenya's importance in U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa (FA.gov, n.d.; U.S. Department of Defense & Austin, 2024). Similarly, the UK's British Army Training Unit in Kenya (BATUK) facilitates joint military exercises and counterterrorism training, with a focus on combatting Al-Shabaab (Odhiambo, 2021). The UK-Kenya Security Compact further supports law enforcement and cybersecurity, highlighting the enduring significance of UK-Kenya relations (Ateya et al., 2019).

Economically, the UK is a key partner, investing in infrastructure, renewable energy, and agriculture. Agreements like the 2020 UK-Kenya Economic Partnership Agreement grant tariff-free access to UK markets, fostering trade and development while attracting British investment (Waihenya, 2021). Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has made Kenya a focal point

for infrastructure development. Projects like the Standard Gauge Railway have modernized trade and transport but created economic dependencies through Chinese loans (Han & Webber, 2019). Kenya's dual alignment illustrates its ability to leverage competition between global powers. Western partners provide stability and governance aid, while China's investments address infrastructure needs. This strategy enables Kenya to diversify funding sources and mitigate dependency risks, though managing external debts and strengthening local capacity remain critical challenges.

Ethiopia employs a multifaceted strategy to balance Western and non-Western engagements, leveraging these relationships to address its economic and security challenges while maintaining autonomy. Unlike many of its East African neighbors, Ethiopia was never colonized, a fact that shapes its strong sense of sovereignty and influences its cautious yet strategic approach to foreign partnerships (Molla, 2020). Ethiopia, despite its unique history of resisting colonization, was pulled into the dynamics of global dependency and influence through strategic alignments with Western powers during the Cold War, substantial development aid tied to governance reforms, and its integration into non-Western initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's economic and military partnerships, which collectively shaped its modern geopolitical and economic landscape (Broich, 2017). Historically, Ethiopia relied on Western allies for development aid and military support. The United States and European Union have played significant roles in providing funding and fostering economic reforms. However, recent tensions, particularly during the Tigray conflict, have strained these relationships due to Western demands for humanitarian access and conflict resolution (Zhao, 2020).

In contrast, non-Western actors like Turkey and China have become increasingly important. Turkey's engagement with Ethiopia has expanded through military cooperation, including a 2021 agreement providing arms supplies, training programs, and technical support (Kyirewiah & Bilate, 2022). These ties have raised regional sensitivities, especially with Egypt, due to tensions over the Nile. Economically, Turkey has emerged as one of Ethiopia's largest foreign investors, heavily involved in industrial parks that create jobs and promote manufacturing growth. Turkey's development aid and infrastructure investments further solidify its presence, demonstrating a long-term commitment to economic collaboration (Seid,

2019). China, another critical partner, has significantly shaped Ethiopia's infrastructure and industrialization through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway highlight China's role in transforming Ethiopia's connectivity and trade potential (Tarrosy & Vörös, 2018). Beyond infrastructure, China's investments extend into telecommunications and manufacturing, central to Ethiopia's industrialization agenda (Bharti, 2023). However, the growing debt dependency associated with Chinese loans has sparked concerns about the sustainability of these engagements. Ethiopia's ability to balance these partnerships reflects a strategic effort to maximize benefits while minimizing over-reliance. By maintaining ties with Western powers, Ethiopia secures aid and institutional support, while non-Western partners like Turkey and China address infrastructure and security needs.

Uganda's foreign policy reflects a strategic dual alignment, balancing Western aid with non-Western partnerships to achieve its development and diplomatic goals. While Uganda receives substantial Western support, particularly from the EU, for democratic governance and human rights, its relations with Western powers are marked by ambivalence. The EU's Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a central source of aid, has faced criticism from Uganda's government for alleged interference, leading to periodic suspensions (Vandeputte, 2023). Despite this, Uganda's significant refugee hosting capabilities, supported by Western nations, enhance its regional importance and ensure continued financial assistance (Betts, 2021). Western nations, while pressuring Uganda on human rights issues, balance their criticisms with recognition of Uganda's role in counterterrorism and regional stability (Walsh, 2020). Conversely, Uganda's engagement with non-Western actors has intensified, particularly with Russia and China. President Museveni and his son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba, have expressed strong pro-Russia sentiments, aligning Uganda with non-Western powers in international matters. Muhoozi's declarations of support for Russia, especially during the Ukraine conflict, underscore Uganda's occasional divergence from Western positions (AfricaNews, 2023; The East African, 2023). China's influence in Uganda is most evident in large-scale infrastructure projects, including roads, telecommunications, and power. Unlike Western aid, Chinese investments come without governance conditions, allowing Uganda to pursue its development goals without external political pressures (Ndzendze et al., 2023). Projects funded by China's

Export-Import Bank often focus on short-term contracts, enabling rapid development while leaving Uganda's political structures untouched (Obwona et al., 2007). This alignment of Chinese investments with Uganda's priorities offers significant flexibility in managing external relations.

By capitalizing on Western governance aid and non-Western infrastructure investments, Uganda mitigates dependency risks and leverages global competition for better terms. This approach reflects a deliberate strategy to balance competing influences, maximizing both economic and diplomatic benefits while preserving political autonomy. Uganda's ability to manage these dynamics highlights its agency in navigating shifting global power structures.

Djibouti exemplifies a strategic balancing act between Western and non-Western engagements, leveraging its geographic location to attract competing global powers. Its primary focus lies in military engagements, with major Western actors including the United States, France, Japan, Italy, and Spain. The U.S. operates Camp Lemonnier, its largest military base in Africa, which serves as a hub for counterterrorism and regional operations in the Horn of Africa and beyond (Blanchard & Collins, 2022; Ezeh & Ezirim, 2023). France, maintaining its military presence since colonial times, continues to provide security guarantees under a defense agreement established after Djibouti's independence in 1977 (Kostelyanets, 2023). European states such as Italy and Spain contribute to maritime security through EU mandates like ATALANTA and ASPIDES, countering piracy and Houthi insurgencies (Barlucchi, 2024).

On the non-Western front, China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, aligning with its Belt and Road Initiative to secure Red Sea trade routes. This base complements significant Chinese investments in Djibouti's port infrastructure, solidifying its role as a critical economic partner (Chaziza, 2018). Meanwhile, Japan's presence counterbalances China's influence, focusing on anti-piracy operations and regional security (Mason, 2018). By hosting competing powers, Djibouti positions itself as an indispensable strategic partner. This dynamic allows the Djiboutian government to negotiate favorable terms, including increased leasing

Turkiye President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in a joint news conference in Ankara, Turkiye, August. 18, 2021 (Photo Credits: Turkish Presidency via AP | Pool)

Djibouti exemplifies a strategic balancing act between Western and non-Western engagements, leveraging its geographic location to attract competing global powers. Its primary focus lies in military engagements, with major Western actors including the United States, France, Japan, Italy, and Spain

fees and infrastructure investments. Balancing these engagements enables Djibouti to maintain sovereignty while capitalizing on the West–non-West rivalry. Long-term, Djibouti must carefully manage these relationships to avoid over-reliance on any single actor. Strengthening governance and diversifying its economic base, beyond port revenues and military rents, will be critical for sustainable development and geopolitical resilience.

Challenges and Opportunities

Balancing relationships with Western and non-Western powers presents East African countries with economic and strategic opportunities but also significant risks. Establishing ties with multiple foreign powers allows nations to secure aid, funding, and investments, but overreliance on a few dominant actors creates vulnerabilities. Heavy dependence on Chinese loans for infrastructure projects, for instance, has raised concerns about sovereignty and sustainability, with countries like Kenya and Djibouti carrying significant debt burdens (Brautigam & Hwang, 2016). This dependency can enable China to exert pressure on debtor nations, potentially demanding substitutes like land or infrastructure control if debts are not repaid (Tarrósy, 2020). Western nations, while offering aid tied to governance reforms, also create challenges for East African states that resist external conditions. Leadership also plays a pivotal role in shaping how nations navigate these engagements. For example, Kenya's shifting political priorities under different administrations have influenced its foreign relations.

Former President Mwai Kibaki emphasized diversification through increased Chinese investments, while President Uhuru Kenyatta advanced this approach under the Belt and Road Initiative (Onjala, 2017). Despite these shifts, long-standing relationships, such as Kenya's ties with the United States and the UK, have endured, highlighting the interplay between leadership ambitions and the enduring nature of certain partnerships. Leaders often prefer

non-Western investments to avoid external conditions tied to governance reforms, even as balancing such engagements remains complex. Debt-trap diplomacy risks associated with initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate how strategic assets, such as ports, could be leveraged if debts are defaulted. For example, the increasing reliance on Chinese funding raises concerns about potential political or economic coercion, further complicating foreign policy strategies. Cases such as Kenya's deployment of troops to Haiti under U.S. influence highlight how external dependencies can impact national decision-making (Pierre, 2023).

To counter these risks, East African nations strive to diversify funding sources and adopt non-alignment strategies. By engaging with competing powers such as the U.S., China, Turkey, and Gulf states, they can negotiate better terms for investments and aid. Djibouti's hosting of multiple military bases exemplifies how leveraging strategic locations can attract diverse investments while maintaining sovereignty (Mills, 2020). Regional initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and multi-nation projects like the LAPSSET Corridor further enhance collective bargaining power, reducing reliance on external actors (Apiko et al., 2020). Ultimately, robust governance and transparency are essential for East African states to balance these engagements effectively, ensuring long-term economic stability and autonomy.

Conclusion

East African nations navigate a complex geopolitical landscape, balancing Western powers like the U.S., UK, and EU with non-Western actors such as China, Turkey, and the Gulf States. This strategic positioning allows East African countries to leverage global competition, securing better deals and diversifying partnerships. The rise of non-Western players, particularly China, has shifted the balance, offering alternatives to traditional Western aid and investment. Non-Western initiatives,

such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have driven critical infrastructure development, including railways and ports. However, these projects often carry risks of debt dependency and reduced economic sovereignty. Excessive reliance on single partners can lead to imbalances, enabling external powers to exert political or economic pressure. Western aid, while vital for institutional development, frequently comes with conditions tied to governance reforms, creating tension for nations prioritizing autonomy. Examples like Djibouti illustrate the benefits of strategic neutrality. By hosting multiple military bases from competing global powers, Djibouti strengthens its economy while safeguarding its sovereignty. Similarly, regional projects like the LAPSSET Corridor and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) enhance collective trade and infrastructure, reducing dependence on external actors. To optimize these engagements, East African nations must prioritize robust governance frameworks. This approach minimizes risks, aligns partnerships with national goals, and fosters sustainable development through diversified international collaborations.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

One of the key risks that was identified during the research was the tremendous dependency connected to foreign investments in the East African region. Diversifying the funding sources away from single actors who then manage to accumulate more and more influence and interest within the area is critical in that regard. Proactively seeking investments from multiple actors (e.g., Western institutions, BRICS countries, Gulf States) to mitigate dependency on any single bloc is a very necessary step that needs to be conducted by East African states to minimize the current growing dependency. Secondly a solid boundary against the rising dept risk would be an enhancement of government and transparency. Strengthen institutional frameworks to manage external engagements effectively and avoid debt traps or undue political influence is a recommended point on the agenda of East African states in that regard. Very underestimated in that regard is an increased support towards reginal integration and collaboration.

Uganda's foreign policy reflects a strategic dual alignment, balancing Western aid with non-Western partnerships to achieve its development and diplomatic goals. While Uganda receives substantial Western support, particularly from the EU, for democratic governance and human rights, its relations with Western powers are marked by ambivalence

Focusing more on regional collaboration can create a counterbalancing economic potential creating a more independent platform for East African countries. Focusing on collaborative projects like the LAPSSET Corridor and AfCFTA to reduce individual vulnerabilities and increase regional bargaining power will loosen the grip of foreign investors in the region. When dealing with foreign parties that already managed to successfully base themselves in the region it is important to navigate carefully through the engagements of those different parties. Maintaining a strategic neutrality can be recommended in this scenario. Avoiding over-commitment to any one global actor, balancing relationships to attract diverse investments and maintain sovereignty is a key factor looking at this strategy. Lastly it is important to point out that fostering innovation and local capacity in general is necessary to loosen the grip of foreign investors and thereby also weakening foreign dependence and influence in the East African region creating a more independent economic and political environment for East African states. Using foreign investments to build local capacity in infrastructure, technology, and human capital, ensuring long-term sustainability beyond external aid is crucial to achieve the independency for East African states in that regard.

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Expertise Matters: The Impact of Social Power Variations in National Inter-Religious Councils on Reducing Severe Electoral Violence

By Joanna Nakabiito

Abstract

This article explores how power dynamics within National Inter-Religious Councils (NIRCs) affect their ability to reduce severe electoral violence in Africa. Using data from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) project and an original dataset on NIRC interventions and social power, the study examines how variations in NIRCs' social power influence electoral violence outcomes between 1992 and 2019. The central hypothesis posits that interventions by more powerful NIRCs during electoral rounds are more effective in reducing severe violence than those implemented by weaker councils. Additionally, the analysis highlights that the mitigating effect of NIRC interventions diminishes when expertise is not a core component of their influence. The findings reveal that when powerful NIRCs intervene, the probability of severe electoral violence decreases by 42%, while less powerful NIRCs' interventions are associated with a 20% increase in electoral violence. Moreover, the exclusion of expert power significantly shifts the dynamics between NIRCs' interventions and electoral violence outcomes, resulting in comparatively higher levels of violence when technical expertise is when technical expertise is not integrated into their power structure. These findings underscore the indispensable role of expert authority in amplifying the effectiveness of NIRCs' peacebuilding efforts in mitigating electoral violence.

Introduction

The Role of Faith Based Organizations in Electoral Violence Prevention

Faith-based organizations (FBOs), and in particular National Interreligious Councils, are increasingly recognized for their role in lowering incidences of electoral violence, leveraging their social capital and moral authority. Acting as neutral mediators, FBOs have been shown to bridge divides between rival factions, encourage peaceful competition, and help reduce tensions that might otherwise lead to conflict. For instance, scholars have underscored the role of the inter-religious council of Liberia in managing electoral crises, where religious leaders have advocated for cessation of hostilities between conflicting political factions during the 1997 elections (Adebayo, 2015; Nilsson, Svensson, Teixeira, Lorenzo, & Ruus, 2020).

One key contribution of local FBOs has been engaging in international diplomacy, as international efforts alone may fall short without strong local partnerships. Empirical insights suggest that international mediation, especially when initiated early and combined with robust electoral frameworks, can help mitigate electoral violence (Pokharel, 2019). Moreover, research highlights the crucial role of FBOs in international mediation, emphasizing that strong local partnerships are vital for success. For instance, the Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL) played a pivotal role in mediating political turbulence from 2007 to 2012. By collaborating with the United Nations Development Programme, the CCL leveraged local trust and external resources to facilitate dialogue and address electoral issues. Ahead of the 2012 elections, the CCL invited Archbishop Desmond Tutu to appeal for nonviolence and democratic integrity, reinforcing its role in promoting stability (Cogan, 2022, p. 296).

NIRCs also play a crucial role in naming and shaming electoral misconduct, leveraging their authority to expose voter fraud and human rights abuses. In November 2020, the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda demonstrated this by appearing on national television to

Fourth (4th) General Assembly of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) delegates group photo (Photo Credit: Mathias Mazinga)

urge security forces to enforce the law fairly and refrain from using excessive force against opposition candidates (Daily Monitor, 2020). Donno (2013, pp. 14-30) highlights that such public condemnation can harm a regime's reputation, showing how global media and human rights organizations amplify these criticisms.

Critiques of Faith Based Organizations' Effectiveness

Though positioned as mediators in conflict resolution, NIRCs globally, including those in Russia, Uganda, and Nigeria, have been shown to struggle in fulfilling their role as peace agents (Omona, 2022; Ezegbobelu, 2009; Karpenko, 2016, pp. 132-136). In the context of the Balkans, for example, initiatives led by NIRCs were frequently hampered by political entanglements. Rather than fostering neutral spaces for dialogue, religious leaders sometimes prioritized nationalist agendas, ultimately undermining the councils' efforts toward genuine reconciliation. Additionally, external support for religious leaders as peace advocates had ambiguous results, as some individuals involved in earlier conflicts managed to avoid accountability by adopting roles as mediators without significant impact on lasting peace (Vjekoslav, 2004).

A Critical Gap in Research on the Power Dynamics of Faith-Based Electoral Interventions

While electoral violence mitigation encompasses various approaches—such as public engagement, diplomacy, and accountability measures—there has been limited quantitative research on the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs). Specifically, the effects of their interventions on electoral violence outcomes, as well as how their social power influences their effectiveness, remain insufficiently examined. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the role of expertise as a critical power source in shaping these interventions.

It is unclear how NIRCs' intervention outcomes behave when expertise is considered a central element in their strategies versus when it is absent or underdeveloped. This raises questions about whether expertise amplifies the effectiveness of other power bases or acts independently to enhance their impact. The interactions between these power dynamics, and their combined potential to stabilize volatile electoral environments, remain largely unexplored. By investigating these dimensions, future research could illuminate how FBOs, leveraging their intricate power structures and contextual knowledge, might contribute to sustainable solutions

to electoral violence. This article examines how power dynamics within National Inter-Religious Councils (NIRCs) influence their effectiveness in reducing severe electoral violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on the impact of variations in social power and the role of expert power in peacebuilding interventions.

Arguments and Causal Processes

Hypothesis 1: *Electoral rounds in which powerful NIRCs intervene are more likely to experience lower levels of severe electoral violence compared to those in which less powerful NIRCs intervene.*

Drawing on French and Raven's (1959) typology of power, I argue that powerful NIRCs—those capable of leveraging multiple forms of power—are better positioned to reduce electoral violence. Specifically, expert power, referent power, legitimacy power, reward power, and informational power work synergistically to enable NIRCs to influence electoral outcomes in ways that promote peace.

Expert power refers to the ability to influence others based on specialized knowledge and competence (French & Raven, 1959). While religious figures may not traditionally be seen as electoral experts, many NIRCs in Africa, such as the Nigerian Inter-religious Council (NIREC), continuously develop practical skills in peace and confidence building through training and workshops (Religions for Peace, 2024; Ezegbobelu, 2009, p. 156). These skills enhance NIRCs' credibility as mediators, allowing them to intervene effectively in electoral disputes. I propose that the provision of credible guidance, grounded in expert knowledge, may allow NIRCs to navigate complex electoral tensions and foster nonviolence.

I also propose that NIRCs can leverage referent power to embed nonviolent behavior within the social fabric,

> Electoral rounds in which powerful NIRCs intervene are more likely to experience lower levels of severe electoral violence compared to those in which less powerful NIRCs intervene

fostering peaceful engagement among electoral stakeholders. Referent power, defined as the ability to influence based on admiration or identification (French & Raven, 1959), allows individuals or organizations to shape behavior by fostering a sense of connection or respect. In contexts where religious identity is central to social life, NIRCs embody the moral and cultural values of the community. Furthermore, referent power relies on social trust, which has been identified as a potent factor in influencing behavioral change (Fiske, 2011, p. 505).

Legitimacy power is key, positioning NIRCs as neutral and authoritative figures in peacebuilding. It stems from their roles as ethical representatives of religious communities and, in some cases, state-sanctioned authority, granting them credibility with both political actors and the public. This legitimacy enhances their ability to influence behavior by aligning electoral conduct with societal expectations of nonviolence and ethical standards (Reychler, 2020; Houser & Ham, 2004, p. 66).

Additionally, informational power may enable NIRCs to shape public narratives and foster accountability through strategic communication. In his framework for religion in democracy, Hertzberg (2018, p. 125) suggests that the distribution of informational power affects the reliability of actors in the public sphere. Reward power, though less overt, complements these influences by creating incentives for political actors to conform to nonviolent standards. Unlike coercive measures such as sanctions, reward power allows NIRCs to foster compliance by offering symbolic benefits, such as increased visibility or community engagement, to those aligning with peaceful norms (Reychler, 2020, p. 193).

In summary, I argue that the combined influence of various power bases supports the hypothesis that powerful NIRCs—those able to leverage multiple sources of power—are more effective in reducing severe electoral violence compared to their less powerful counterparts. These causal arguments, based on French & Raven's typology, provide a framework for my hypothesis that electoral rounds in which powerful NIRCs intervene are more likely to experience lower levels of severe electoral violence than those where less powerful NIRCs intervene.

Hypothesis 2: *Excluding expert power from the NIRC power index diminishes its moderating effect on electoral violence, resulting in comparatively higher levels of severe electoral violence in electoral rounds where NIRCs*

intervene without expertise as a component of their power base.

As defined earlier, expert power, according to French and Raven (1959), refers to the ability to influence others based on specialized knowledge and competence. This form of power allows individuals or groups to impact decision-making and behaviors due to their recognized expertise in a particular area. The role of expert power is critical in ensuring effective conflict resolution initiatives (Khaled, 2021). Expertise may enable NIRCs to navigate the complexities of electoral processes, including advising on strategies to de-escalate tensions, promoting peaceful competition, and offering ethical justifications for non-violence. Thus, in evaluating the effectiveness of NIRCs in mitigating electoral violence, expert power should be accounted for.

The absence of expertise as a power base could disrupt the effectiveness of their influence, as Lines (2007) suggests that change agents with high levels of expert power are more successful in gaining acceptance and reducing resistance among communities. NIRCs may struggle to

engage in effective influence tactics such as participation and sense-giving, which are crucial for fostering trust and cooperation during electoral processes (Lines, 2007, pp. 166-167).

Thus, I argue that NIRCs' interventions in electoral rounds are most effective when they can leverage their "technical know-how" in electoral violence management. However, without expert power, their interventions may be perceived as lower in quality, and their ability to lower electoral violence could diminish substantially.

Description of the Data

Dependent Variable: Severe Electoral Violence

This variable was operationalized using the **NELDA 33** variable labeled "Significant Electoral Violence" from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) V.6 dataset (Hyde & Marinov, 2021, p. 21). It captures instances where electoral violence results in at least 50 civilian deaths, marking it as a significant measure of severity. To ensure that only election-related incidents were captured, I excluded any deaths resulting

Election observers pose for a group photo with mission leaders during a press conference on the status of elections in Kigali on July 17, 2024 (Photo Credit: National Electoral Commission)

Excluding expert power from the NIRC power index diminishes its moderating effect on electoral violence, resulting in comparatively higher levels of severe electoral violence in electoral rounds where NIRCs intervene without expertise as a component of their power base

from unrelated forms of violence, such as ongoing civil conflicts. The final data frame consisted of 171 electoral observations; the unit of analysis.

Independent Variable: NIRCs' Peacebuilding Interventions

While inter-religious councils do not have a single, universally accepted definition, they share a common goal: to reduce conflict, support national development, and promote peace and justice (Wundah, 2011, p. 109; Axelson & Stier, 2020, p. 235). This study focuses on National Inter-religious Councils (NIRCs) in Africa, which operate under Religions for Peace, a United Nations-accredited international organization. Religions for Peace has established 90 NIRCs globally, with 30 of them based in the African region (Religions for Peace, 2018)

Peacebuilding is defined as the activities performed by religious actors and institutions to resolve and transform conflict, aiming to build social relations and political institutions based on tolerance and nonviolence (Little & Appleby, 2004, p. 5). For NIRCs, this includes electoral-related interventions such as democracy promotion, electoral monitoring, leadership accountability, early warning, peace messaging, interfaith dialogue, and disarmament (Religions for Peace, 2018). The variable is operationalized as the presence or absence of these interventions during an electoral round. I reviewed NIRCs' publications, media, and reports from 1990-2019 to identify such interventions, coding them as 0 (absence) or 1 (presence).

Moderator Variable: Social Power

NIRCs' power bases were coded using secondary sources, primarily the *Global Interreligious Council Directory* (Religions for Peace, 2018), which compiles data from Pew-Templeton, the U.S. Department of State, and other global databases, supplemented by NIRCs' websites and other sources. To assess their influence on electoral violence, I developed a composite index based on French & Raven (1959) power typology.

Legitimate power was captured through operational status, distinguishing fully functional councils from those in development. Expert power was assessed via electoral-related mandates, with NIRCs focused explicitly on preventing electoral violence rated higher. Informational power was measured by social media presence, with councils having over 1,000 followers deemed more effective in shaping public discourse. Referent power reflected the extent of religious affiliation, with councils commanding over 95% adherence seen as highly capable of mobilizing community support. Lastly, reward power was gauged by the number of affiliated subsidiary organizations, with councils linked to more than five subsidiaries viewed as better equipped to mobilize resources for peacebuilding.

In this study, I utilized a scoring system to quantify the power of National Inter-Religious Councils (NIRCs) across different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. This scoring system comprised of a composite index reflecting several dimensions of power, including legitimate power, expert power, referent power, informational power, and reward power. The index was calculated based on various proxy variables, with scores assigned from 0 to 1, indicating low to high power levels, respectively.

Figure 1 illustrates the geographical distribution of NIRCs' social power. As depicted, the Inter-Religious Councils of **Kenya and Uganda** achieved a perfect score of **1.0** on the Power Index, demonstrating strong operational status, an electoral-related mandate, a significant social media following, a high level of religious affiliation, and multiple subsidiary organizations. In contrast, the **Inter-Religious Council of Botswana** scored **0**, reflecting its lack of operational functionality and engagement in electoral violence mitigation efforts.

Control Variables

To ensure robustness, I incorporated several control variables to account for external factors that could influence electoral violence. Economic growth data from the NELDA V.6 dataset helped isolate the effect

of NIRC power, as declining GDP has been linked to increased unrest, with a 1% drop in growth raising the risk of violence by approximately 2% (Brennan, 2018). The presence of international observers, also drawn from the NELDA V.6, was included due to their documented role in reducing electoral violence by enhancing transparency, with studies showing a reduction of incidents by up to 30% in elections they monitor (Hafner-Burton, Hyde, & Jablonski, 2014). I further accounted for peacekeeping operations using the Geo PKO 2.1 dataset, as countries with active UN missions experience approximately 40% fewer election-related fatalities (Fjelde & Höglund, 2014). Additional controls included founding multiparty elections, opposition harassment, and low electoral competitiveness, particularly in cases where an incumbent wins.

Figure 1: Scoring of NIRCs' Power

Map: Joanna Grace Nakabiito • Source: Joanna Grace Nakabiito •
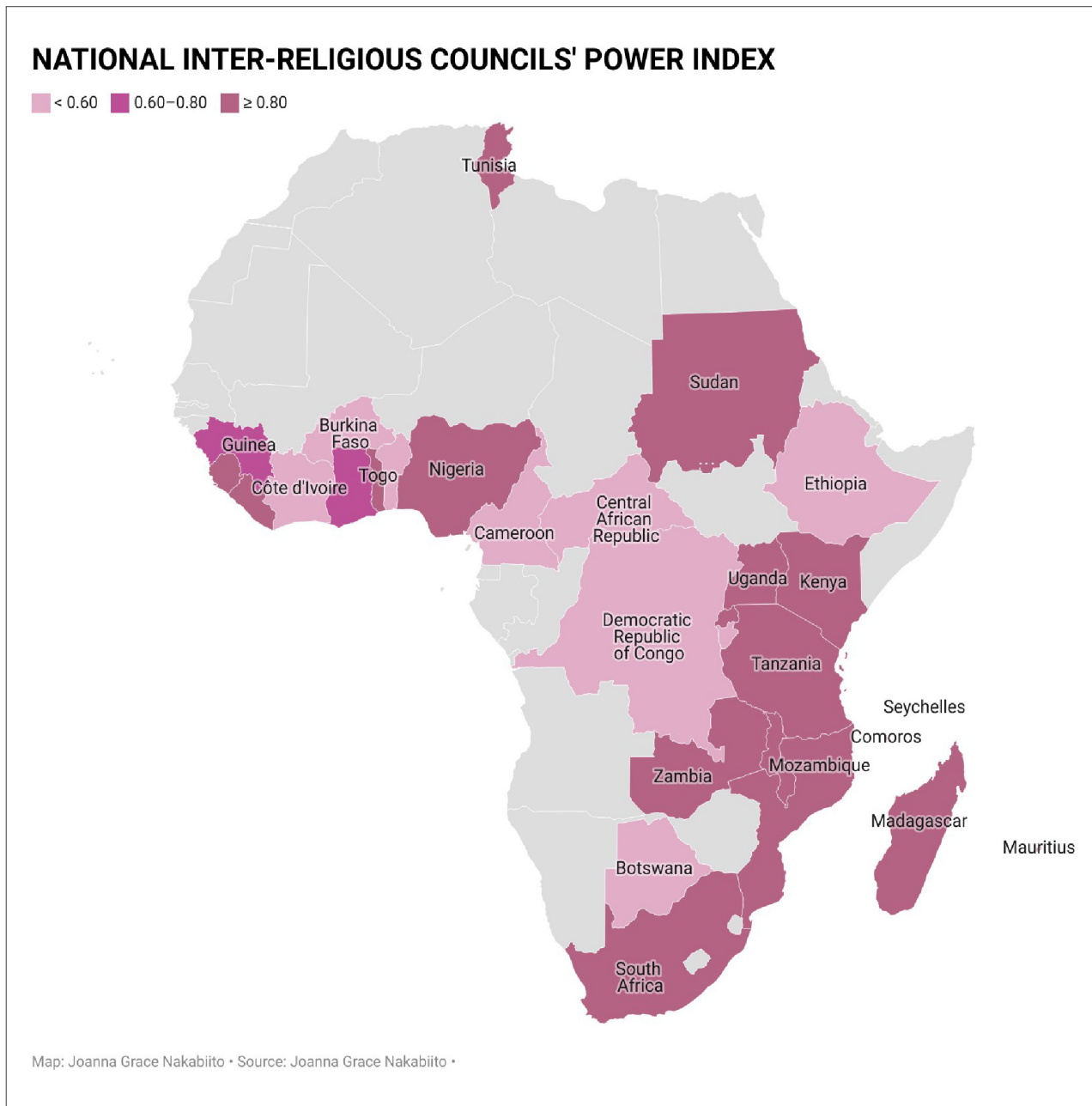
Methodology

In this study, I employed a quasi-experimental observational approach to assess the influence of National Inter-Religious Councils (NIRCs) on electoral violence. I used **propensity Score Matching** to reduce selection bias and ensure comparability between cases by matching on key covariates. I was able to create a balanced dataset that allowed for a more accurate estimation of the effect of NIRC power on severe electoral violence. I conducted

the regression analyses using **R Version 4.2.1**, ensuring the validity of my findings by testing for multicollinearity and including relevant control variables.

It is important to note that this study employs a statistical modeling approach to analyze the likelihood of electoral violence in relation to the power of National Inter-Religious Councils (NIRCs), utilizing data from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) project. As such, while the results indicate significant trends, they should be interpreted with caution, as they do not account for the complexities of real-world electoral dynamics.

Findings and Discussion

Hypothesis 1: *Electoral rounds in which powerful NIRCs intervene are more likely to experience lower levels of severe electoral violence compared to those in which less powerful NIRCs intervene.*

To test this hypothesis, I employed a **binary logistic regression model** to analyze the relationship between power—and the incidence of severe electoral violence.

The logistic regression results provide a detailed account of how overall NIRCs' power interacts with peace building interventions to influence the severity of electoral violence. This regression included three models: (1) the direct effect of NIRC interventions on electoral violence, (2) the influence of NIRC power alongside these interventions, and (3) an interaction model examining how the combination of interventions and NIRCs' power influences electoral violence outcomes.

The coefficient for NIRCs' interventions is -1.219, statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, indicating that, on average, NIRCs' interventions reduce the likelihood of severe electoral violence. However, when these interventions are supported by social power, their effect strengthens, with a statistically significant increase in the coefficient (Interventions1:Powerful_NIRCs = -2.583, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that interventions are more impactful when NIRCs possess greater legitimacy, referent power, expertise, reward and informational power. These findings underscore the critical role of power in enhancing the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts in electoral contexts.

TABLE 1: HYPOTHESIS 1 LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS

	DV: Severe Electoral Violence in Africa, 1992-2019		
	Interventions Direct	Power (Control)	Interaction
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Interventions	-1.219***	-1.432***	0.783
	(0.383)	(0.419)	(1.117)
PowerB		0.685	1.103**
		(0.504)	(0.553)
Opposition Harassment	1.013***	1.063***	0.964**
	(0.391)	(0.395)	(0.400)
Economic Growth	-0.725	0.662	0.745
	(0.442)	(0.447)	(0.458)
Electoral Competitiveness	1.235***	1.346***	1.597***
	(0.438)	(0.443)	(0.470)
Riots and Protests	1.347***	1.236***	1.398***
	(0.404)	(0.414)	(0.433)
International Monitors	-1.387	-1.222	-1.478
	(0.898)	(0.942)	(0.946)

In contrast, the coefficient for interventions by less powerful NIRCs is positive and statistically significant (2.583, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that interventions by powerful NIRCs significantly reduce electoral violence, whereas those by less powerful NIRCs are associated with an increase in violence, revealing a disordinal interaction effect.

PKO	-0.235	-0.291	-0.194
	(0.415)	(0.420)	(0.431)
FME	0.444	0.459	0.643
	(1.010)	(0.999)	(1.032)
Interventions1: Powerful_NIRCs			-2.583**
			(1.264)
Constant	-0.488	-0.939*	-1.254**
	(0.398)	(0.520)	(0.558)
Observations	171	171	171
Log Likelihood	-79.187	-78.580	-76.345
Akaike Inf. Crit.	176.374	177.159	174.690
Significance levels			*p**p***p<0.01

Nonetheless, these results suggest that the effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions is contingent upon the power of the NIRCs, supporting the hypothesis that NIRCs' power moderates the impact of their interventions.

The Dichotomy of Power: A Critical Examination of Effect Sizes

NIRC Power Level	Effect of Interventions on Electoral Violence	Change in Probability of Severe Electoral Violence
Powerful NIRCs	Significant reduction	-42%
Less Powerful NIRCs	Significant increase	+20%

An analysis of estimated marginal means revealed that in contexts where powerful National Interreligious Councils intervene, the predicted probability of severe electoral violence drops to 42%. This finding is particularly relevant in the case of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) in Malawi, which I have scored over .80 as a strong interreligious council. The PAC's widespread respect and its alignment with religious and cultural values likely enabled it to unite political leaders behind a peace declaration, framing peaceful electoral conduct as a collective moral responsibility (Taylor, 2018, p. 52). This suggests that the PAC's influence, through its referent power and other power bases, played a critical role in reducing electoral violence, supporting the broader argument for the effectiveness of powerful interreligious councils in conflict mediation. In contrast, the interventions of less powerful NIRCs are associated with a troubling 20% increase in the likelihood of severe electoral violence, suggesting that their efforts may inadvertently exacerbate tensions rather than alleviate them. This dichotomy raises critical questions about the role of NIRCs in electoral contexts. It is not merely the presence of these councils that matters, but rather their capacity to influence and mediate conflicts effectively. Boulding (1990, pp. 197-198) highlights that the power of integrative organizations, like FBOs, depends on their alignment with societal values and their ability to balance serving existing members while expanding their reach. Organizations that fail to meet member needs or lack outreach focus often struggle to maintain influence. In electoral contexts, this explains why weaker NIRCs may falter; without strong legitimacy or effective outreach, their interventions lack the credibility and impact necessary to mediate conflicts and reduce violence.

Hypothesis 2: *Excluding expert power from the NIRC power index diminishes its moderating effect on electoral violence, resulting in comparatively higher levels of severe electoral violence in electoral rounds where NIRCs intervene without expertise as a component of their power base.*

Following my investigation of NIRC power, I incorporated a variable for NIRCs' power without expertise to assess

how the absence of expert authority influenced NIRC interventions on electoral violence. The results show that while the impact of NIRCs' interventions without expert power has a negative coefficient (-0.860), it lacks statistical significance. This supports the hypothesis that expert power is a critical component of NIRCs' influence, aligning with research on epistemic authority, which emphasizes that technical expertise is essential for resolving complex disputes (Haas, 1992)

Without expert power, other forms of influence—such as referent, legitimacy, and informational power—are insufficient to reduce electoral violence effectively. Expert power likely enhances NIRCs' legitimacy and neutrality, positioning them as trusted mediators in high-stakes electoral conflicts. In these contexts, political leaders and the electorate are more inclined to engage with organizations they view as knowledgeable and capable of offering informed solutions. This aligns with Mutahi's (2018) assertion that during Kenya's 2017 elections, the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya used its understanding of conflict resolution to mediate between political factions, promoting a more peaceful electoral environment.

From a methodological perspective, expert power should not be dismissed as an additive or peripheral factor in understanding NIRC interventions. The loss of statistical significance without expert power suggests that it is a core component influencing the efficacy of interventions. This highlights the importance of assigning weights to capture the relative significance of each power base, thereby improving the model's predictive accuracy.

From a practical standpoint, NIRCs should place greater emphasis on **building and maintaining expertise** within their leadership structures and initiatives. This may involve strengthening the councils' capacity for electoral monitoring, conflict analysis, and diplomatic negotiation, thereby ensuring that they remain credible and effective in their peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

This study provides a quantitative exploration of how National Interreligious Councils (NIRCs) influence electoral violence, highlighting the critical role of power in moderating their effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that powerful NIRCs significantly reduce the likelihood

Bernard Wakoli, a candidate in March 4 Matungu parliamentary by-election checks the rear windscreen of his vehicle that was allegedly smashed by rivals in Matungu, Kakamega County, Kenya on March 1, 2021 (Photo Credits: Isaac Wale | Nation Media Group)

of severe electoral violence. Specifically, interventions led by powerful NIRCs were associated with a 42% decrease in violence, affirming the hypothesis that their comprehensive power base enhances peacebuilding outcomes. Conversely, less powerful NIRCs, lacking key elements such as expert power, were linked to a troubling increase in violence by 20%, suggesting that inadequate capacity may inadvertently heighten tensions.

The results further emphasize the indispensable role of expert power in electoral conflict resolution. When this component was excluded, the effectiveness of NIRC interventions declined, underscoring that legitimacy and referent power alone may be insufficient in high-risk electoral environments.

These findings not only reveal the importance of NIRCs' multidimensional power but also highlight the need for future research should aim to complement this analysis by investigating the causal pathways through process tracing and in-depth interviews, to validate the statistical trends identified. This would enable a deeper exploration of the mechanisms underlying these relationships, enhancing our understanding of how NIRC interventions operate in real-world electoral environments and the factors that influence their effectiveness.

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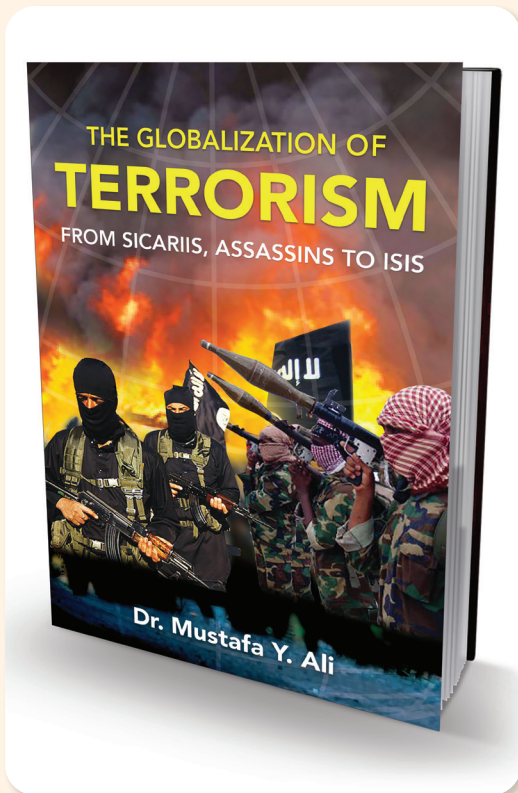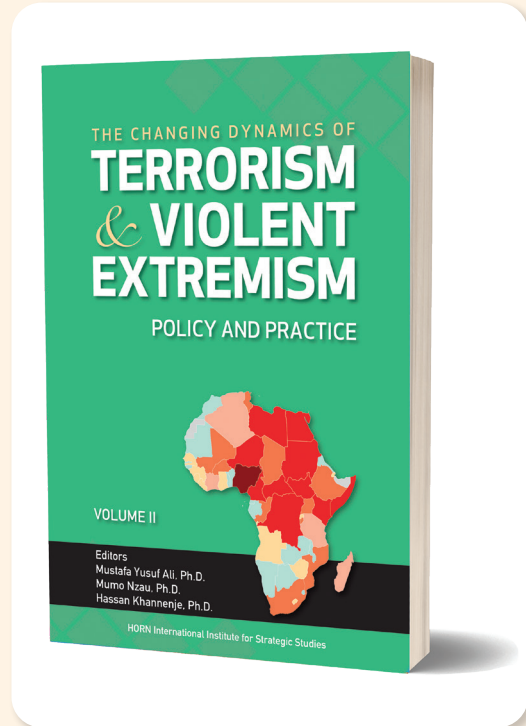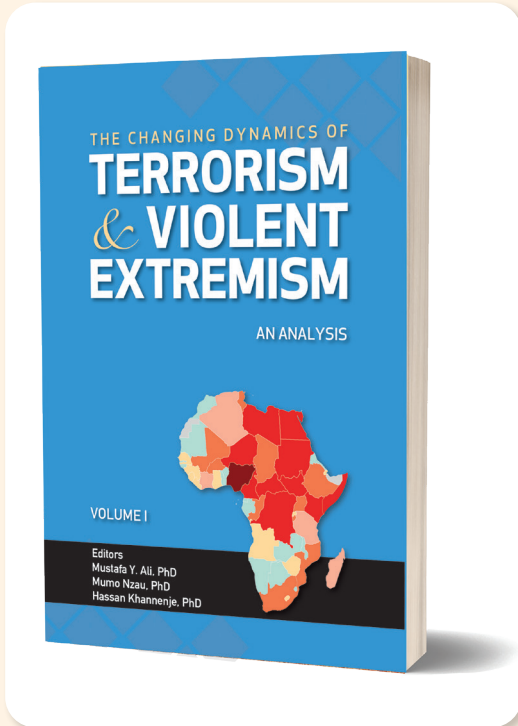A modest compensation for successful articles will be disbursed

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