

The

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## The Impact of President **TRUMP DECISIONS** on **Developing Countries**

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### Abstract

Donald Trump's return to office in 2025 has ushered in a wave of executive orders that have rippled across the globe, with particularly acute effects in the developing world. This article explores how the recalibration of U.S. foreign policy under his administration marked by funding freezes, multilateral withdrawals, and trade protectionism has disrupted healthcare, climate initiatives, foreign aid, trade relations, and migration flows in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Through a detailed review of policy reversals and their on-the-ground consequences, the authors illustrate how vulnerable populations now face heightened insecurity, from the collapse of HIV/AIDS programs to stalled climate finance and strained global health systems. Moreover, the

article highlights how Trump's preference for bilateralism over multilateral engagement risks weakening collective bargaining power among developing nations. While some leaders view this realignment as a call for self-reliance and reform, the broader sentiment captured here is one of urgency: developing countries must adapt swiftly, diversify alliances, and build resilience to navigate an increasingly uncertain global order.

## Introduction

On 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025, Donald Trump became the 47<sup>th</sup> president of Untired States of America and as expected he started his second term with far reaching forty-four executive orders and memos that had immediate effect across the world. The executive orders are on a variety of issue including development aid, healthcare, environmental protection, immigration, and trade. The orders have created geopolitical realignment and tensions with long-term friend of US such as Western Europe getting in the crossfires. America being a leader in almost all sectors such as trade, security, and technology, these decisions were felt globally. Developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America

have been greatly impacted due to their reliance on aid, the need to immigrate to the land of opportunity and belonging to multilateral organizations that rely on US funding.

In his first term, Trump made similar moves especially on environment, trade, refugees and towards the end, he took a swab at WHO. America is a major provider of development assistance, trade partner and source of investments and technologies to low and middle income countries. Following the executive orders, Usman (2025) identifies six areas of concern for the global South. They include tax deals, foreign direct investment (FDI), trade relations, foreign aid and the effect of geopolitical tensions with China. Horsfield (2025) in his article *A World Left Behind: Consequences of Trump's Policy Reversals On Africa's Climate Agenda* points out that the withdrawal of funds will affect development projects in Africa which include healthcare, climate change mitigation efforts, and also job security. Since the freezing of the funds, many NGOs have sent home thousands of employees home and shut down operations. USAID employs thousands across the world and its staff has been reduced to a skeleton at its head office in Washington



*Hundreds of thousands living with HIV in Africa will be affected by the US executive order following the slash on HIV prevention medicines, largely funded by the USAID-PEPFAR (Photo Credit: PEPFAR)*

## Impact on Health care

The executive orders include the withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO), pulling the U.S. out of ongoing negotiations on the Pandemic Preparedness and Response Agreement, and recalling U.S. government personnel seconded to the organization. Between 2022 and 2023, the U.S. contributed \$1.3 billion to the WHO, making it the organization's largest donor.

Former President Trump's dissatisfaction with the multilateral organization began during his first term, when he accused the WHO of mishandling the COVID-19 crisis and acting as a puppet of China. According to Gichuki (2025), Trump demanded that the WHO hold China responsible for the virus, and when his demands were not met, he threatened to cut U.S. funding to the organization. Withdrawal from the WHO requires a one-year notice period. Trump's initial attempt to withdraw the U.S. was halted after his defeat in the 2020 elections, when President Joe Biden reversed the process. However, now in his first year of a new term, the withdrawal is likely to proceed, thereby actualizing the earlier threats.

This decision will have significant implications for global health and security. According to Judd Walson (2025), the WHO plays a vital role in providing goods and services that enhance global health, monitoring and responding to health risks, delivering humanitarian aid, and offering technical assistance, among other functions. The U.S. withdrawal means that the WHO and its member states will need to seek alternative sources of funding to replace the 12%–15% share previously contributed by the U.S.

According to Caritas Internationalis, an aid and development agency, the closure of USAID funded programs across the globe condemn millions to 'dehumanizing poverty and even death'. USAID has been funding access to HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, Malaria drugs and research in developing countries. In Africa, through the US Presidents' Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) provided humanitarian aid to combat HIV. For instance, between 2003 and January 2025, PEPfAR has spent eight billion dollars on 1.3 million HIV/AIDS patients in Kenya. In South Africa, PEPfAR caters for 8 million HIV patients by providing 400 million dollars to HIV Programs such as the Desmond Tutu HIV Centre in Cape Town (Jotzo et al. 2018).

Since the funding freeze was announced, millions of HIV/AIDS patients are at risk of losing access to lifesaving antiretroviral drugs. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, the distribution of essential medications—including the HIV prevention drug pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)—is already becoming increasingly difficult. Perhaps the most concerning consequence of the funding shortfall is the heightened risk of mother-to-child transmission, which had previously seen significant reductions. According to UNICEF, there was a 62% decrease in mother-to-child transmission between 2010 and 2023 (Levitt, 2025). Without continued financial support, this hard-won progress is in danger of being reversed.

## Environmental Protection

The US also withdrew for the second time from the Paris Agreement and ceasing or revoking all contributions to UNFCCC, this withdrawal encompasses stopping all climate related financial support, encouraging the use of fossil fuels and using regulations to suppress renewable energy.

President Trump, who has expressed skepticism about climate change, previously withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement during his first term in 2017. He argued that the Agreement posed challenges to the American economy, particularly the energy sector (CPI, 2024). The current U.S. stance contrasts with ongoing global efforts under the Paris Agreement to transition away from fossil fuel dependence. It is expected that just as it was in 2017, the US will not propose an alternative to the Paris Agreement nor renegotiate the Agreement. The withdrawal of the world biggest economy and second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases poses a significant setback to the implementation of the Paris Agreement, which relies on widespread economic and social transformation.

Developing countries depend on climate funding to implement climate change mitigation projects. In Africa, climate financing has been increasing steadily before plateauing in 2021-2022, the plateau may be attributed to the economic impact of Covid -19. According to Climate Policy Initiative (CPI) climate funding for developing countries is aimed at 'unlocking vast economic opportunities, avoiding severe economic losses, and minimizing catastrophic social and development

consequences. The funds come from both public and private sources.

## Development assistance

The administration announced a 90-day pause on U.S. development assistance—excluding military aid to Israel and Egypt, essential healthcare services unrelated to family planning, life-saving medicines, food, shelter, and administrative costs required to deliver such assistance. This pause is intended to allow for an audit to assess alignment with American strategic interests.

In 2023, the United States disbursed \$72 billion in foreign aid to nearly 180 countries, the majority of which are in the developing world (Oumalkhaire Yacin, 2025). While the withdrawal itself has garnered attention, it is the abrupt nature of the pause that has raised concern among practitioners and partner governments. Many recipient countries are now required to reallocate resources from already constrained budgets to fill the gap.

Beyond Ukraine and Israel, leading recipients of U.S. foreign assistance include Ethiopia, Jordan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Kenya, Yemen, South Sudan, Colombia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Lebanon, Iraq, and Bangladesh.

As the world's largest aid donor, the United States delivers assistance through agencies such as the Department of State, USAID, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and multilateral platforms including various UN agencies. In 2023, African nations received \$14.9 billion out of the total \$64.7 billion in aid disbursed. By January 2025, Kenya had received \$359.2 million in U.S. aid to support health programs (including HIV/AIDS, TB, and malaria), agriculture, and capacity building. According to the U.S. Foreign Assistance Department, these funds have helped finance a range of critical services, including healthcare, humanitarian relief, and population support through multilateral partnerships.

**Table 1: US foreign assistance to Kenya between 2001 to 2024**

Category	Sector	Amount in \$
Healthcare and population	HIV/AIDS	270m
	Basic Health	58m
	Maternal health and child health and family planning.	54m
	Water supply and sanitation	18m
	Health general (TB, malaria,	16m
Humanitarian Assistance	Emergency response (emergency food assistance, maternal relief assistance and services, relief coordination, support and protection	280m
Agriculture	Agricultural policy and administrative management	57m
Governance	Governance and civil society	32m
	Conflict, peace and security	21m
Administrative cost	Operating Expenses	45m

Source US Foreign Assistance website <https://foreignassistance.gov/cd/kenya/>

Over the same period, developing countries in South and Central Asia such as Bangladesh and Afghanistan received \$488 million and \$890 million respectively. In South America, Colombia received \$740 million and Ecuador \$230 million. These funds supported critical sectors such as agriculture, humanitarian assistance, governance, education, health and population, and infrastructure.

While the decision to pause development aid and the closure of USAID has sparked concern, it has also received support from those who argue that U.S. aid has at times been misused, has promoted programs that conflict with local cultural values, and has been used as a tool to influence political outcomes or facilitate regime change in developing countries.

## Refugee and migrant crisis

The United States continues to be a key destination for migrants, particularly from Latin America. During his first term, President Trump constructed a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and suspended entry through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). His administration faced serious criticism over human rights violations, especially the forced separation of children from their parents many of whom remain un reunited to this day.

In 2025, the administration again suspended both entry through USRAP and applications for refugee status (Pedraza et al., 2024). As a result, thousands of refugees have been deported to countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, and Guatemala. These deportations have triggered geopolitical tensions, with some governments like Colombia refusing to accept flights carrying deported migrants.

Experts warn that beyond the humanitarian implications, these mass deportations could also lead to economic disruption within the U.S. However, the more pressing concern is the return of these individuals to the same poverty and insecurity that originally forced them to flee.

## Trade Policies

During President Donald Trump's tenure (2017-2021), America's trade policy shifted and emphasized on "America First" approach. The president encouraged Americans to focus on domestic industries and economy instead of international economy integration. Donald Trump's time in office from 2017 to 2021 brought about a notable change in U.S. trade policy, with a strong focus on an "America First" strategy that put domestic industries ahead of global economic ties. His administration took steps like imposing tariffs, reworking trade agreements, and pulling out of multilateral economic deals. While these actions mainly targeted major economic players like China and the European Union, they also had significant impacts on developing nations. Many emerging economies found themselves in the middle of these trade conflicts, dealing with disrupted supply chains, fewer export opportunities, and economic uncertainty.

## Trade Wars and Their Ripple Effects

One of the defining aspects of President Trump's trade policy was the trade war with China, which began in 2018.

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The U.S. imposed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods, prompting retaliatory measures from China. While the conflict was centered around the world's two largest economies, its ripple effects were felt across the globe—especially in developing nations.

## Supply Chain Disruptions:

Many developing countries in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa are deeply integrated into global supply chains linking the U.S. and China. As U.S. tariffs made Chinese goods more expensive, American companies began sourcing from alternative markets, providing short-term opportunities for countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh. However, the broader disruptions to the flow of raw materials and intermediate goods had a destabilizing effect on businesses dependent on predictable trade networks.

## Commodity Market Volatility:

Developing nations that rely heavily on the export of raw materials—such as metals, oil, and agricultural products—were particularly vulnerable to market fluctuations triggered by the trade war. The policy uncertainty led to sharp swings in commodity prices, with countries like Brazil (soybeans), Indonesia (palm oil), and Zambia (copper) facing disruptions in demand and unstable earnings.

## Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Uncertainty:

The unpredictability of the Trump administration's trade policies created widespread hesitation in global investment circles. Developing countries that depend on foreign direct investment for infrastructure and industrial development encountered setbacks, as investors grew cautious about entering markets affected by shifting trade dynamics and geopolitical tensions.

## Impact on Specific Regions

### Latin America

Trump's trade policies had a mixed impact on Latin American economies. A key shift came with the renegotiation of NAFTA, which led to the creation of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). While the new agreement preserved Mexico's access to the U.S. market, it introduced stricter labor standards and rules of origin that posed challenges for several industries operating across the region.

Additionally, tariffs on steel and aluminum significantly affected major exporters like Brazil and Argentina. Although the Trump administration later issued some exemptions, the initial measures disrupted trade flows and undermined investor confidence in the region. Compounding these economic pressures, the administration also scaled back aid to Central American countries in an effort to curb migration. This move intensified financial strain in already vulnerable economies, further complicating regional stability and development efforts.

### Africa

Many African economies benefited from preferential trade agreements such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which provided access to the U.S. market. However, the Trump administration showed less enthusiasm for multilateral trade partnerships, casting uncertainty over the future of such agreements. In addition, the global economic slowdown triggered by escalating U.S.-China trade tensions led to decreased demand for African exports particularly raw materials like minerals and agricultural products further straining the continent's trade-dependent economies.

### Asia

Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) had significant repercussions for

developing economies in Asia. The TPP was designed to enhance trade among Pacific Rim countries including Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines by offering greater access to key markets, including the United States. By stepping away from the agreement, the U.S. limited opportunities for these nations to expand their exports under preferential trade terms. However, there was a silver lining for some. Countries like Vietnam benefited from shifts in U.S. supply chains, as American companies sought to relocate production away from China to avoid tariffs imposed during the U.S.-China trade war.

## Tariffs and the Erosion of Market Access

For many developing countries, the tariffs set by the Trump administration made it tougher for them to compete in the U.S. market. Some industries felt the impact more than others:

**Textiles and Apparel:** Nations like Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Pakistan, which depend heavily on textile exports, found themselves under increasing strain as global supply chains shifted (Horsfield, 2025). While the main target of these tariffs was China, the ripple effects on manufacturing and trade routes had unintended consequences for these economies.

**Agriculture:** Developing countries that sent agricultural products to the U.S. faced a mix of challenges and opportunities. Trump's tariffs on Chinese goods opened doors for alternative suppliers—like Brazil, which saw a boost in soybean exports—but the overall market instability made it hard for farmers in developing nations to plan for the long haul.

**Manufacturing:** The tariffs on steel and aluminum hit exporters from countries such as India, Brazil, and Turkey hard. These tariffs not only cut down direct exports to the U.S. but also impacted industries that relied on affordable raw materials, resulting in job losses and economic slowdowns.

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*President Donald Trump proposed 10 per cent duty on most goods from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) countries will significantly affect their economies. (Photo credits: Business Insider Africa)*

## Reduced Multilateral Trade Engagement

Trump's focus on bilateral trade deals instead of multilateral cooperation weakened global trade institutions, including the World Trade Organization (WTO). Many developing countries depend on the WTO's dispute resolution mechanisms to challenge unfair trade practices and secure their access to global markets. By undermining the WTO and blocking new judge appointments to its appellate body, the Trump administration made it harder for smaller economies to defend their trade interests (Horsfield, 2025).

Historically, the United States has interacted with Africa through various multilateral frameworks, like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which allowed eligible African countries to access the U.S. market without tariffs. According to Usman (2025) during President Trump's administration, there was a clear shift towards focusing on bilateral trade agreements. This new strategy aimed to create direct trade relationships with individual African nations, exemplified by the start of free trade agreement talks with Kenya. While this approach intended to customize agreements based on the unique circumstances of each country, it sparked worries about potentially diminishing Africa's collective bargaining power and jeopardizing regional integration efforts.

The administration's shift towards bilateralism has thrown some uncertainty into the future of AGOA. In 2023, trade between the U.S. and Africa reached a hefty \$67.5 billion, but that figure pales in comparison to China's impressive \$282.1 billion trade with the continent (Levitt, 2025). This gap really brings to light the challenges the U.S. faces in being competitive in African trade. Additionally, the administration's focus on re-balancing trade agreements and sticking to existing commitments sparked conversations about possible reforms within the World Trade Organization (WTO), all in an effort to create a global trading landscape that better serves U.S. interests.

The administration also took some economic steps, like cutting aid and implementing targeted sanctions. In early 2025, President Trump announced a \$440 million reduction in aid to South Africa, pointing to worries over land expropriation policies. In response, South African officials, including Minister Gwede Mantashe, hinted at the possibility of withholding mineral exports to the U.S., emphasizing how crucial African resources are. Moreover, the U.S. was contemplating sanctions against South African politicians tied to corruption or policies that could harm U.S. interests, marking a notable change in diplomatic relations. Even with less multilateral engagement, the U.S. remained keen on Africa's critical minerals. Talks with the Democratic Republic of Congo

Trumps executive orders have been received with mixed reaction in developing countries. Some like former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta seeing it as an opportunity for Africa and other developing countries to end aid dependence and come up with solutions for internal issues

(DRC) were underway to secure access to essential minerals like cobalt and copper, which are vital for various industries. These discussions highlighted just how important African resources are in global supply chains and the U.S.'s determination to counter the influence of other global powers in the region.

## Recommendations

The influence of Trump's trade and foreign policies on developing nations has been quite profound, impacting their economic growth, trade relationships, and diplomatic ties. Here are some important suggestions for minimizing negative impacts while seizing new opportunities:

### 1. Strengthen Regional Trade Agreements

Developing countries should focus on regional economic integration to lessen their reliance on individual deals with the U.S. By bolstering partnerships within regional groups (like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), ASEAN, and Mercosur), they can boost their collective bargaining power.

### 2. Diversify Trade Partners

Relying too heavily on U.S. markets can be a gamble; developing nations should look to expand their trade with the EU, China, and other regional partners. Promoting local industrialization and value-added production can help reduce their vulnerability to trade disruptions.

### 3. Enhance Domestic Economic Policies

Countries ought to adopt strategies that build economic resilience, such as investing in infrastructure, technology, and education. Strengthening local supply chains will help cushion the impact of tariffs and trade restrictions.

### 4. Leverage Alternative Funding Sources

With cuts to U.S. aid in some areas, developing nations need to explore alternative financing options from global institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and private investors. Encouraging foreign direct investment (FDI) from a wider array of countries can help fill funding gaps.

### 5. Engage in Strategic Diplomacy

When engaging with the U.S., diplomatic efforts should focus on mutual benefits rather than one-sided agreements. Developing countries should align their positions in global institutions (like the WTO and UN) to advocate for fairer trade policies.

### 6. Build Technological and Industrial Capacity

Investing in technology, manufacturing, and research & development will help reduce dependence on foreign goods. Governments should create incentives for local entrepreneurs to develop industries that can compete on a global scale.

### 7. Address Debt and Fiscal Sustainability

Addressing debt and ensuring fiscal sustainability is crucial, especially with the ever-changing trade policies we see today. Developing nations need to keep their debt levels in check and avoid becoming too dependent on any one country. Promoting public-private partnerships (PPPs) can open up new avenues for funding infrastructure and development projects, which is essential for growth and stability.

## Conclusion

Trumps executive orders have been received with mixed reaction in developing countries. Some like former Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta seeing it as an opportunity for Africa and other developing countries to end aid dependence and come up with solutions for internal issues. For government, it has to rearrange its budget to cover the short fall. Kenya's Ministry of Health has moved with speed to make plans to cover the \$58b shortfall, plans are also underway to integrate HIV treatment into the Social Health Insurance Fund (SHIF). Africa has resources and proper use of these resources can get the continent out of the dependency bandwagon. Mali has demonstrated this by paying off its domestic debt of \$332m becoming debt free in 2024.

The trade policies and tariffs from the Trump administration really shook things up for developing

countries. While some nations found ways to take advantage of the changing trade landscape, many others faced challenges like supply chain disruptions, fluctuating commodity prices, and limited access to markets. The emphasis on protectionism and unilateral actions weakened multilateral trade institutions, making it tougher for developing economies to find their footing in the global trading arena.

As we move past Trump's presidency, these countries are still dealing with the lasting impacts of those policies. The Biden administration is working to bring back multilateral trade cooperation, but the protectionist trends that took root during Trump's time in office are still very much in play. For developing nations, adjusting to these evolving trade policies is essential for building economic resilience and achieving sustainable growth in a global market that feels increasingly unpredictable.

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# Foreign Influence in Somalia: The Strategic Role of Turkey and the Gulf States

By Natalia Tsamalashvili

## Abstract

Somalia has become a key battleground for Gulf state influence, with Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia each pursuing strategic interests in the country. This bulletin examines how these states have shaped Somalia's political landscape through economic investments, security engagements, and diplomatic maneuvering. Turkey has focused on development and military cooperation, while the UAE has leveraged economic influence and political alliances. Qatar's involvement has centered on political patronage, often in competition with Emirati interests, whereas Saudi Arabia has taken a more cautious, trade-focused approach. As geopolitical dynamics evolve—particularly in the wake of shifting Gulf alliances and broader global conflicts—Somalia's future will continue to be shaped by these external actors.

## Introduction

Somalia's strategic location at the crossroads of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean has long positioned it as a focal point of geopolitical competition. Over the past two decades, external actors—including Turkey, the Gulf states, the United States, and China—have intensified their involvement in Somalia, shaping its political landscape, security dynamics, and economic development. Turkey's growing presence in Somalia, particularly through humanitarian aid, military cooperation, and infrastructure investments, has made it a key actor in the region, challenging the influence of Gulf states like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.

The recent escalation of the Israel-Gaza conflict in October 2023 has had ripple effects beyond the Middle East, significantly impacting the Horn of Africa. The conflict has diverted international diplomatic attention from ongoing disputes in the region, particularly the Somaliland-Somalia standoff. With global focus on Gaza, regional actors—including the UAE and Turkey—have recalibrated their strategic priorities, leading to a temporary de-escalation of hostilities in Oman, where tensions between the UAE and Iran had been rising over maritime security and trade routes. This shift has affected the Horn of Africa, as both Gulf and Turkish investments in Somalia and Somaliland are closely linked to broader Red Sea security concerns.

The Gaza war has also influenced intra-Somali politics, exacerbating existing divisions between Mogadishu and the self-declared Republic of Somaliland. In response to the conflict, Turkey and Qatar—both supporters of Hamas—have sought to reinforce their influence in Somalia's federal government, while the UAE has bolstered its ties with Somaliland, seeking to deepen economic and security partnerships. This has further complicated negotiations between Somaliland and Somalia, as Gulf states continue to leverage their influence to secure strategic ports and military access in the region. The Berbera Port, managed by DP World UAE, has become a key asset in this geopolitical struggle, positioning Somaliland as an increasingly significant player despite its lack of international recognition.

Meanwhile, Turkey's military and economic footprint in Somalia continues to expand, particularly with the February 2024 Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. The agreement, which establishes a joint naval force and strengthens counterterrorism cooperation, underscores Ankara's commitment to securing its interests in the Red Sea and beyond. With Gulf states, Turkey, and Western actors all competing for influence, Somalia remains at the center of a complex geopolitical chessboard, where external interventions both sustain and complicate its fragile state-building process.



*Saudi Arabia power Somali Health Centers with solar energy to combat child mortality in Somalia (Photo Credit: Mogadishu 24)*

As Somalia navigates these shifting geopolitical currents, the interplay between global crises and regional rivalries will continue to shape its future. This article will explore the historical role of foreign powers in Somalia, analyze the impact of recent port and military deals, and examine how shifting alliances among Gulf states, Turkey, and other external actors are shaping Somalia's political landscape. The evolving dynamics of the Israel-Gaza conflict, Gulf rivalries, and Turkey's expanding presence will determine the country's path toward stability—or further fragmentation—in the years ahead.

### **Gulf Influence in Somalia: Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia has historically maintained ties with Somalia through religious, economic, and diplomatic engagements. As the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, it has exerted religious influence, funding mosques and religious institutions in Somalia. Additionally, trade between the two countries has been significant, particularly in livestock exports from Somalia. However, Saudi involvement fluctuated, with major shifts occurring during the Cold War and after 2017 due to geopolitical rivalries (U.S. Department of State, 1978).

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia, has been driven by geopolitical, security, and economic priorities. To

counter Iran's growing influence, Riyadh has expanded its presence in Sudan, Djibouti, and Eritrea, working since 2014 to weaken Tehran's regional ties (Gebru, Zeru, & Tekalign, 2023). Security concerns remain central, as Saudi Arabia seeks to curb extremist Sunni movements and counter Houthi rebels, seen as Iranian proxies. Given Somalia's strategic position near the Gulf of Aden, Riyadh has strengthened alliances to secure vital shipping routes and prevent further Iranian-backed destabilization (Gebru, Zeru, & Tekalign, 2023).

Recently, the security dynamics have been further complicated as Houthis have begun targeting Israel following the events of October 7 in Palestine and recent US bombings in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2025). This development is significant because it strengthens Iran's influence and further complicates Saudi Arabia's efforts to counterbalance Tehran in the Horn, while also impacting maritime security and local political stability in Somalia.

Economic ties are key to Saudi-Somalia relations, with Riyadh making Somalia a key trade partner. In 2023, Saudi exports to Somalia totaled \$38.6 million, led by tropical fruits (\$8.46M) and concentrated milk (\$4.31M). Though exports have declined by 8.8% annually since 2018, Somalia's exports to Saudi Arabia surged by 31% annually, reaching \$283 million in 2018, mainly driven by livestock

“The UAE has provided military training and financial support to security forces in Puntland and Jubaland, often bypassing Somalia’s federal government. This has fueled tensions between Mogadishu and its regional states

sales (\$205M for sheep and goats) (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023).

Moreover, the security of the Red Sea—a critical passage for global trade and oil exports—remains a top priority for Saudi Arabia. By strengthening relationships with Horn countries, including Somalia, Riyadh aims to safeguard maritime routes and preempt potential threats to its economic and security interests.

## The UAE

Historically, Somalia maintained ties with Gulf states, including the UAE, through trade, labor migration, and remittances. Since the 2010s, the UAE has shifted from providing humanitarian aid (Gulf News, 2018) to active political and military engagement. Its strategy aimed to counter Islamist movements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, secure control over key maritime routes, and expand its military influence—particularly by training regional security forces in Puntland and Jubaland (Levy, 2024).

The UAE has strategically used religious and economic influence in Somalia to advance its geopolitical interests. It has supported Islamic charities and clerical networks to reinforce conservative interpretations of Islam, aligning them with its broader regional strategy to shape Somalia’s governance and legal structures (Tactics Institute, 2021). This religious influence has also served as a counterbalance to Turkey’s growing engagement, which introduced a different model of Islamic governance and economic partnership (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Beyond ideology, the UAE has prioritized security, trade, and military interests. It bypassed Mogadishu’s authority to establish security partnerships with Puntland and Somaliland, investing in key maritime infrastructure like Berbera and Bosaso ports. These investments bolstered regional economies but heightened tensions with

Somalia’s federal government. Through its state-owned company, DP World, the UAE has secured agreements to manage and develop strategic ports, bypassing the Somali federal government. Berbera Port Agreement (2018): DP World signed an agreement with Somaliland to develop and manage the Berbera Port without Mogadishu’s approval. This deal heightened tensions between the UAE and Somalia’s central government, which declared the agreement illegal (ReliefWeb, 2018). Bosaso Port Investment: The UAE has also expanded its economic presence in Puntland, particularly through investments in the Bosaso port (Horn Observer, 2024), further strengthening its influence in Somalia’s semi-autonomous regions.

In addition to economic investments, the UAE has been involved in training and funding regional security forces. Puntland and Jubaland Security Training: The UAE has provided military training and financial support to security forces in Puntland and Jubaland, often bypassing Somalia’s federal government. This has fueled tensions between Mogadishu and its regional states, as the central government sees this as foreign interference (Mohamed, 2025). Furthermore, The UAE has played a role in counter-piracy operations off the Somali coast, particularly in Puntland. It has funded local militias to combat piracy and protect maritime trade routes vital to its economic interests (Garowe Online, 2025).

Despite periods of cooperation, Somalia-UAE relations have been fraught with tensions. Diplomatic Strains Over Port Agreements – The Somali federal government has consistently opposed the UAE’s unilateral agreements with Puntland and Somaliland, viewing them as violations of Somalia’s sovereignty. Suspension of UAE Military Training Programs – In 2018, Somalia ended a military training program run by the UAE after diplomatic tensions escalated over the seizure of \$9.6 million in cash from a UAE aircraft in Mogadishu. The UAE had claimed the funds were intended to pay Somali security forces, but the Somali government suspected it was being used to support opposition groups (Al Jazeera, 2018).

While relations between Somalia and the UAE have improved under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, recent events have reignited tensions. The killing of UAE military officials in Mogadishu (Al Jazeera, 2024) and Somalia’s expanding naval cooperation with Turkey have further complicated bilateral ties (Abouyoussef, 2024). Furthermore, Somaliland’s President Muse Bihi

Abdi's visit to Dubai escalated diplomatic strains (Horn Observer Contributor, 2025), while reports suggest the UAE is brokering a U.S. recognition of Somaliland in exchange for an Israeli military base. Israel, which has maintained unofficial ties with Somaliland since 2010 (Al Sayed, 2025), sees strategic value in the region amid rising Houthi threats. Already collaborating with the UAE on Socotra, Israel seeks a Somaliland base for direct regional operations (LEAKSNEWS, 2024). If the deal proceeds, it could destabilize Somalia's territorial integrity and reshape regional geopolitics.

## Qatar

Qatar has taken a different approach in Somalia by relying on financial aid and direct political engagement with Mogadishu's federal government. While tensions between Gulf states intensified, Qatar positioned itself as Somalia's main Gulf ally, providing direct financial assistance and security cooperation to counter UAE and Saudi influence. The 2017 Gulf crisis marked a turning point, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed a blockade on Qatar, accusing it of funding Islamist groups. When Somalia refused to align with the UAE-Saudi bloc, Qatar

increased its support for Mogadishu, thereby reinforcing the federal government's position. This shift deepened political rivalries in Somalia, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia intensified their backing of regional states, while Qatar strengthened its influence over the central government.

In addition to its direct support, Qatar has played a mediator role both within Somalia and across regional borders. It has hosted meetings among rival Somali political and clan groups to reconcile differences over resource allocation and representation (International Crisis Group, 2018). Furthermore, Qatar has also facilitated dialogue between Mogadishu and Nairobi, aiming to ease cross-border tensions and promote regional stability (Africa Intelligence, 2019).

Somalia's trade with Qatar remains highly asymmetrical. In 2023, Somalia exported \$13.2M in livestock to Qatar, growing at 23.1% annually since 2018, while Qatar's exports to Somalia totaled just \$143K, despite a higher growth rate of 45.7%. This suggests Somalia benefits more from the trade relationship (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023).



Qatar donated 68 armored vehicles to Somalia in 2019, cementing Doha's presence and influence in the country (Photo Credit: Alwaght)

## Turkey's military and economic footprint in Somalia continues to expand, particularly with the February 2024 Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. The agreement, which establishes a joint naval force and strengthens counterterrorism cooperation ...

### Turkey's Expanding Footprint in Somalia

Turkey's engagement in Somalia is shaped by a combination of strategic, economic, and security interests. Somalia's geographical position along key maritime routes, including the Gulf of Aden and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, makes it a crucial player in Turkey's trade and military ambitions. By securing access to ports and shipping lanes, Ankara strengthens its influence in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region (Africanews, 2024). At the same time, Turkey's presence in Somalia serves as a counterweight to the influence of Gulf powers such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have supported regional administrations like Somaliland and Puntland. Aligning itself with Mogadishu's federal government allows Turkey to reinforce its role in Somalia's state-building process while expanding its leverage in the broader Gulf rivalry (Hamit, 2024).

Security cooperation has been another pillar of Turkey's involvement. In 2017, it established its largest overseas military training facility in Mogadishu, contributing to the training of Somali security forces. This engagement deepened in February 2024 with the signing of the Defense and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, which includes counterterrorism, anti-piracy efforts, and joint naval security operations (Kasapoglu, 2020; Kadioglu, 2023).

Alongside security, economic interests play a central role in Turkey's engagement. The country has expressed interest in offshore energy exploration, particularly in Somalia's oil and gas reserves, aligning with Ankara's long-term energy security strategy (Africanews, 2024). Trade relations have also grown significantly, with Turkish exports to Somalia reaching \$424 million in 2023, dominated by food products and raw materials. However, the trade balance remains largely in Turkey's favor, as Somali exports to Turkey remain limited (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023).

Beyond economic ties, Turkey has invested in education and social services, offering scholarships to Somali students and funding hospitals and schools. Between 2011 and 2017, it provided nearly \$1 billion in aid, reinforcing its image as a development partner (Osman, 2018). More broadly, Somalia serves as Turkey's gateway to Africa, allowing it to expand its diplomatic and economic footprint across the continent and compete with both Western and Gulf actors. Turkish companies, NGOs, and diplomatic missions continue to spread throughout Africa, supporting Ankara's long-term geopolitical ambitions (van den Berg & Meester, 2019). Since the 2011 famine, Turkey has further cemented its presence by reopening its embassy in Mogadishu and launching direct Turkish Airlines flights to the Somali capital. Turkish NGOs, such as the Red Crescent and the Diyanet Foundation, have played a key role in humanitarian relief, while major Turkish firms have secured infrastructure contracts. The Albayrak Group now manages Mogadishu's seaport, and Favori LLC operates the international airport, further embedding Turkey's economic presence in the country (van den Berg & Meester, 2019).

### The 2017 Gulf Crisis: How Somalia Became a Battleground

The 2017 blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt forced Somalia into a high-stakes geopolitical contest. This crisis stemmed from accusations that Qatar supported Islamist movements and maintained close ties with Iran, spilling over into Somalia—a country strategically positioned along the Gulf of Aden and reliant on foreign aid (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Qatar and Turkey backed Somalia's federal government, providing financial aid and military training, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia supported autonomous regional states like Puntland and Somaliland to counter Qatar's influence (Mahmood, 2017). The UAE formalized its support through a 2014 memorandum of understanding,

training Somali security personnel and developing military infrastructure. Initially focused on counter-piracy, this engagement expanded into counterterrorism operations against Al-Shabaab (Hiiraan, 2014). The UAE operated a training camp in Mogadishu, paid salaries to Somali trainees (Garowe Online, 2018), and supported the Puntland Marine Police Force for maritime security. However, UAE-backed units have also been implicated in illicit trade; reports suggest Al-Shabaab-linked charcoal traders in Kismayo received tax breaks for exports to the UAE, with some revenues allegedly benefiting the militant group (Meester et al., 2018).

While Turkey concentrated its efforts in Mogadishu—notably by opening a \$50 million military academy in 2017 to train Somali soldiers—the UAE invested in Somaliland and Puntland. DP World secured a 30-year concession to manage Berbera port, backed by a \$442 million investment, reflecting Abu Dhabi's strategic ambitions (Gerding, 2022). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pressured Somalia's federal government to cut ties with Qatar, even threatening to withhold financial aid (Akwei, 2024). Despite this, Mogadishu remained neutral, receiving \$385 million in Qatari assistance in 2018 (Fick, 2018).

Foreign rivalries have also shaped Somalia's domestic politics. The UAE supported former President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed in the 2017 elections, while Qatar backed Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. However, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (Farmaajo) won, rejecting a Saudi offer of \$80 million to sever ties with Qatar (Meester et al., 2018). This decision escalated tensions, prompting the UAE to withdraw its military training mission and shift investments to regional administrations. The African Union and European Union have urged an end to non-African interference in Somalia's internal affairs (Al Jazeera, 2018).

Somalia's internal security remains fragile. The Somali National Army, composed largely of former clan militias, lacks a unified command structure and has been further divided by competing foreign-trained units. These divisions hinder effective counterinsurgency efforts against Al-Shabaab, which exploits them to carry out attacks (International Crisis Group, 2018).

The Gulf crisis has also deepened tensions between Mogadishu and Somalia's breakaway regions. In 2018,

Somaliland sided with the Saudi-Emirati bloc, banning Qatar Airways from its airspace (Somaliland Sun, 2017) and signing a deal with DP World to develop Berbera Port—moves that Mogadishu condemned as violations of national sovereignty.

Beyond Somalia, the crisis has influenced regional dynamics. Turkey's involvement in Sudan—marked by investments, the acquisition of Suakin Island, and cooperation with Qatar—has heightened tensions with Egypt over regional influence (van den Berg & Meester, 2019). These developments underscore how Gulf rivalries have reshaped the Horn of Africa's political and security landscape.

### What's next for Somalia?

Somalia stands at a crossroads as foreign powers deepen their involvement, not only shaping its economic and security landscape but also influencing its territorial integrity. The UAE and the U.S. have escalated their engagement in Somaliland, offering implicit and explicit support for its independence—a move that threatens to further destabilize Somalia's already fragile sovereignty. Ethiopia's economic expansion in Somaliland, including its controversial bid for access to Berbera, could force Mogadishu into a tougher stance (International Crisis Group, 2024). Meanwhile, Turkey and Qatar—both key players in Somalia—must navigate this shifting power balance as the UAE and U.S. strengthen their foothold in the region.

With these dynamics in play, a crucial question emerges: Can Somalia use these rivalries to secure better deals and safeguard its sovereignty, or will it be sidelined in decisions that determine its own future?

Qatar and Turkey backed Somalia's federal government, providing financial aid and military training, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia supported autonomous regional states like Puntland and Somaliland to counter Qatar's influence



*Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara, Turkey, hold talks to accelerate joint initiatives in infrastructure, trade, security, and humanitarian aid on March 28, 2025 (Photo Credit: GOOBJOOG NEWS)*

Foreign actors—whether the Gulf countries or Turkey—have all begun their engagement in Somalia through soft power, capitalizing on historical and religious ties to gain influence. Over time, however, their roles have evolved, and their involvement is no longer purely economic or humanitarian. The Gulf crisis underscored just how powerful these actors have become in Somalia, revealing their ability not only to invest in infrastructure and security but also to shape political allegiances and deepen divisions within the country. The UAE, for instance, leveraged its economic influence to back rival factions in Somali politics, while Turkey positioned itself as one of Mogadishu's strongest allies, securing military agreements and major infrastructure projects.

While these foreign powers profit from Somalia's strategic location and resources, their actions do not always align with Somalia's national interests. Rather than strengthening Somalia's sovereignty, their growing influence often limits Mogadishu's ability to make independent decisions. The battle for Berbera is not just about trade—it reflects a larger contest over who truly controls Somalia's future. If Mogadishu does not assert itself in these negotiations, it risks becoming a spectator in its own development, with external forces dictating its path forward. The challenge for Somalia now is to navigate these competing interests strategically, ensuring that foreign involvement serves national stability rather than undermining it.

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# Eritrea and Ethiopia at a Crossroads: Rethinking Eritrea's Foreign Policy

By: Merhawi Woldemichael

## Abstract

Eritrea has historically supported the principle of Ethiopia's territorial integrity, often at significant political and military cost. However, Ethiopia's evolving internal dynamics marked by persistent governance challenges, inter-regional tensions, and shifting foreign policy postures present new strategic considerations for Eritrea. This paper explores three scenarios for Ethiopia's future: centralized rule, federalism with autonomous regions, or a gradual and managed decentralization that may include the emergence of independent entities. Drawing on comparative experiences such as the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, the study examines the importance of early diplomatic engagement with emergent regional actors to safeguard stability. While the paper does not advocate a predetermined outcome, it assesses how Eritrea's evolving foreign policy might adapt to these scenarios to enhance its own security and promote regional peace. It concludes by encouraging international actors particularly the United States to consider more flexible approaches that emphasize stability and inclusive dialogue over rigid support for a unitary Ethiopian state.

## Introduction

In recent years, Eritrea's foreign policy has experienced a notable evolution, particularly in its engagement with Ethiopia, the broader Horn of Africa region, and influential international actors such as the United States. Historically, Eritrea has maintained a policy of supporting Ethiopia's territorial integrity, even at times when doing so involved considerable political and security-related costs. However, recurrent tensions between the two countries including unresolved border issues and intermittent hostile rhetoric highlight the need for Eritrea to periodically reassess its regional diplomatic posture. These challenges, some of which are rooted in longstanding historical grievances and predate recent administrations, underscore the complexity of bilateral relations and the importance of developing a strategic, forward-looking foreign policy that anticipates future risks and opportunities.

This article seeks to reassess Eritrea's foreign policy in light of recent developments, notably the Tigray War (2020–2022), shifting U.S. involvement, and evolving relations with Ethiopia. It argues that Eritrea's foreign policy is undergoing a critical transformation driven by both internal and external factors. This shift indicates a broader reorientation in Eritrea's strategy, which will have significant implications for regional stability.

The Tigray War marked a pivotal moment in the Horn of Africa, shifting the dynamics between Eritrea and Ethiopia and influencing Eritrea's relations with regional and international powers. Against this backdrop, Eritrea faces a range of potential regional scenarios (1) the consolidation of a centralized Ethiopian state under a dominant political authority, (2) the strengthening of a federal system with genuine regional autonomy, or (3) a gradual disintegration of the Ethiopian state into independent entities. These scenarios are shaped by Ethiopia's persistent governance challenges, internal conflicts, and contested regional roles. Understanding and preparing for these trajectories grounded in comparative political analysis and historical precedent may prove essential for Eritrea's strategic planning and regional engagement.

## The Case for Managed Disintegration: Strategic Lessons and Regional Implications

State disintegration is often associated with instability, including significant social, political, and economic disruptions (Caspersen, 2010). However, in contexts where national unity is maintained primarily through coercion, lacks a cohesive national identity, and perpetuates recurrent conflict, the sustainability and legitimacy of such a structure merit critical re-evaluation (Hale, 2004;

Cederman et al., 2013). Ethiopia's current trajectory—with deepening internal divisions and persistent unrest—appears increasingly susceptible to such a tipping point.

Historical precedents offer contrasting lessons. The peaceful breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993—the “Velvet Divorce”—shows how negotiated secession can avert violence and lead to long-term stability. Post-separation, the Czech Republic and Slovakia developed governance and economic systems suited to their contexts, with gains in responsiveness and performance (Smith, 2005; Turner, 1993). While this outcome depended on elite consensus and low interethnic hostility (Bunce, 1999), it highlights the viability of non-violent disintegration.

Yugoslavia, by contrast, exemplifies the danger of insisting on artificial unity. The international community's failure to support a structured breakup contributed to a violent collapse and widespread atrocities. A similar pattern may be unfolding in Ethiopia. Continued insistence on unity risks escalating internal conflicts, with consequences for regional stability (Kaplan, 1996).

For the U.S. and other international actors, the key lesson is that rigid support for unity can enable violence. A more realistic approach would acknowledge Ethiopia's fragmentation and support early, negotiated disintegration where warranted. This does not mean promoting secession indiscriminately, but recognizing when unity perpetuates marginalization and conflict.

This shift holds particular significance for Eritrea. While Eritrea has historically supported Ethiopian unity even during periods of bilateral conflict such as the 1998–2000 border war its long-term strategic interests may no longer be best served by that position.

Evidence from the Horn of Africa illustrates how civil wars in neighboring states can generate considerable spillover effects, including refugee movements, cross-border violence, and economic disruption. For example, the 1990s Somali civil war led to protracted instability across the region, resulting in refugee flows into Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, and contributing to maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Aden. Similarly, the Tigray War (2020–2022) has already displaced hundreds of thousands,



*The infrequent wars in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, displaced thousands, and left many wounded (Photo Credits: Yasuyoshi Chiba / AFP)*

with some seeking refuge in Sudan, straining bilateral relations and humanitarian capacities. These patterns suggest that continued support for a fragmented and conflict-prone Ethiopia may increase Eritrea's exposure to regional instability. Conversely, early engagement in promoting a peaceful, internationally mediated transition should fragmentation become inevitable could enhance Eritrea's security and contribute to broader regional stability.

These cases challenge assumptions that equate unity with peace. In Ethiopia's case, enforced integration may be more destabilizing than a well-managed separation. A reassessment of Eritrea's policy grounded not in ideology, but in strategic and empirical reasoning may be both timely and necessary.

### Recent Developments and Shifts

The Tigray War represented a significant turning point in the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape, with Eritrea emerging as a consequential actor through its involvement in Ethiopian military operations against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This engagement elevated Eritrea's regional profile and altered its diplomatic relations, compelling a re-evaluation of its foreign policy priorities. The post-war environment introduced new dynamics, shaped by historical rivalries, shifting regional alignments, and the involvement of global powers such as the United States (Smith, 2024; Jones, 2025).

While some of Eritrea's strategic interests converge with those of Ethiopia, challenges persist—particularly unresolved border disputes and contested Red Sea access (Smith, 2024). Eritrea's foreign policy response reflects both continuity and adaptation, balancing long-standing security concerns with evolving strategic opportunities.

Eritrea's recent re-engagement with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in June 2023, after a 16-year absence, signals a recalibration of its regional diplomatic strategy (Africanews, 2023). This development indicates a selective approach to regional integration, shaped by specific national interests. Eritrea's cautious participation in peacebuilding and collective security frameworks further illustrates its pragmatic posture, even as it resumes engagement with regional institutions (The Guardian, 2023). Overall, these shifts suggest a strategic, interest-driven recalibration rather than a fundamental transformation in Eritrea's diplomatic orientation.

“The Tigray War represented a significant turning point in the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape, with Eritrea emerging as a consequential actor through its involvement in Ethiopian military operations against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

### The US–Eritrea Dynamics

The relationship between Eritrea and the United States has been marked by sustained tension since Eritrea's independence in 1993, largely due to concerns over its governance and regional interventions. This dynamic has varied in intensity across U.S. administrations. Recent signals from Washington may reflect a shift toward pragmatic engagement, driven more by regional developments than ideological change. The United States has prioritized stability in the Horn of Africa, particularly in relation to the Tigray conflict and broader security issues across Ethiopia and neighbouring states (Goh, 2024).

Under the Biden administration, sanctions were imposed on Eritrean officials over their role in the Tigray War, reflecting ongoing concerns about human rights and regional instability (Harrison & Peters, 2025). Yet Eritrea's evolving diplomacy—evidenced by its return to the IGAD—has prompted a reassessment in Washington. Scholars such as Goh (2024) argue that shifting geopolitical dynamics are pushing U.S. policymakers toward a more flexible engagement strategy.

Rather than choosing between isolation or alliance, scholars highlight the value of blending pressure with diplomacy to influence Eritrean behaviour and uphold regional stability (Lynch, 2023). This evolving posture indicates growing recognition that Eritrea's role in the region may require more differentiated responses within a broader strategic framework.

### The Forced Annexation of Eritrea – A Historical Example of Failed Unity

The forced annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia resulted in thirty years of war, substantial human and infrastructure



*Tigray leaders are torn between Addis Ababa and Asmara. TIA president Getachew Reda (l.) and TPLF president Debretsion Gebremichael (r.) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, February 16, 2025 ((Photo Credits: Amanuel Sileshi/AFP)*

losses, and considerable opportunity costs for both nations. Eritrea was initially confederated with Ethiopia, but its unilateral incorporation triggered widespread resistance among Eritreans. King Haile Selassie revoked Eritrea's right to self-determination, which had been guaranteed under the 1952 Federation Agreement (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 390(V), 1952). After three decades of armed struggle, Eritrea held a UN-supervised referendum in 1993, in which the population overwhelmingly supported independence (United Nations Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia, 1993).

While independence did not immediately resolve regional tensions, scholars contend that it was not secession itself that prolonged instability, but the years of forced unity and violent suppression that preceded it (Clapham, 2018). Tareke (2009) provides evidence that Ethiopia's forced annexation of Eritrea contributed to long-term conflict, illustrating the high costs of suppressing demands for self-determination. This historical case is often cited to argue that delaying or denying legitimate aspirations for separation can result in protracted violence rather than stability. Similarly, Ayoo (1995) argues that attempts to forcibly preserve state unity in deeply divided societies often exacerbate instability, making managed disintegration a less catastrophic alternative to prolonged internal conflict.

## Shifting Perspectives – External Influences and the US Role in Ethiopian Unity

As Ethiopia's internal instability intensifies, external actors—particularly the United States—have continued to shape the region's geopolitical landscape. However, scholarly analyses increasingly question whether ongoing Western support for Ethiopian unity aligns with long-term regional stability, as efforts to maintain complex state structures have, in some cases, exacerbated conflict (Ayoo, 1995; Young, 2021). The United States has historically prioritized Ethiopian territorial integrity as a cornerstone of its Horn of Africa strategy, influenced by Cold War alliances, counterterrorism objectives, and concerns over state collapse (Marcus, 2002).

Despite this strategic focus, preserving Ethiopia's unity has entailed significant costs. The U.S. has allocated billions in military and humanitarian aid, yet the country continues to experience recurrent internal conflicts, including the recent Tigray War (2020–2022) (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This war, which resulted in widespread displacement and loss of life, has been cited by analysts as evidence of the limitations of external stabilization efforts grounded in territorial unity (de Waal, 2021).

## Eritrea's Strategic Interest in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar Secession

Eritrea has a strategic interest in the evolving political trajectories of Tigray, Amhara, and Afar—Ethiopian regions experiencing growing centrifugal pressures. While these dynamics are shaped by internal Ethiopian factors, their implications for regional stability necessitate Eritrea's attention.

- Tigray has long resisted centralized Ethiopian rule. Its historical support for Eritrean independence, role in establishing ethnic federalism, and contributions to the 1995 constitution demonstrate its longstanding autonomy-oriented stance. Following the devastating Tigray War (2020–2022), which resulted in massive loss of life and displacement, secessionist rhetoric has intensified (Plaut, 2022; Abbink, 2022).
- Amhara, traditionally a champion of Ethiopian unity, supported central regimes from Menelik II to Abiy Ahmed. However, recent disillusionment—especially after the Tigray conflict—has prompted a shift from Ethiopian nationalism to regional Amhara nationalism (de Waal, 2023; Berhe, 2023). While not uniformly secessionist, this ideological turn may alter Amhara's role in the federation.
- Afar holds geopolitical importance due to its location along the Eritrean border and the Red Sea coast. Ethnic ties between Eritrean and Ethiopian Afars, combined with disputes over Assab and growing local grievances, have introduced secessionist undertones (Ylönen, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2022).

From a regional policy standpoint, Eritrea could benefit from proactively engaging with these developments. Scholars argue that carefully managing relations with these regions—without promoting fragmentation per se—may reduce future instability and foster constructive

post-conflict alignments (Young, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2022). Such engagement would require nuanced diplomacy and sensitivity to the evolving federal dynamics within Ethiopia.

## The Role of the TPLF and Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopian Disunity

The TPLF played a central role in establishing Ethiopia's ethnic federal system, which has significantly shaped the country's political trajectory. Enshrined in the 1995 constitution, this system grants regional states the right to self-determination, including secession (Young, 1997). While originally framed as a mechanism to accommodate Ethiopia's ethnic diversity and historical grievances, ethnic federalism has also institutionalized identity-based politics and contributed to inter-regional tensions (Aalen, 2006; Abbink, 2011).

The TPLF itself has oscillated between advocating Ethiopian unity under its rule and supporting ethnic self-determination. In the aftermath of the Tigray War (2020–2022), TPLF leaders and segments of the Tigrayan population have increasingly expressed support for secession, illustrating the enduring tensions embedded in the federal structure (Plaut, 2022; Abbink, 2022). This development underscores how ethnic federalism, while offering a legal framework for self-rule, has also created pathways for fragmentation.

## Ethiopian Rhetoric on Annexing Assab: A Threat to Eritrean Sovereignty

Recent political discourse in Ethiopia has revived irredentist claims over Eritrea's Red Sea access, particularly the port of Assab. Statements by Ethiopian leaders, including Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, have emphasized Ethiopia's historical access to the sea and implied a strategic need to restore it (Reuters, 2023). Such rhetoric has raised concerns among scholars and policymakers about renewed regional tensions and the erosion of post-independence norms of sovereignty in

Amhara, traditionally a champion of Ethiopian unity, supported central regimes from Menelik II to Abiy Ahmed. However, recent disillusionment—especially after the Tigray conflict—has prompted a shift from Ethiopian nationalism to regional Amhara nationalism

Ethiopia's ongoing governance failures and ethnic divisions—most notably in regions like Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Afar—complicate the future of the Horn of Africa and call for a strategic reassessment of Eritrea's role and response

the Horn of Africa (Clapham, 2023; Woldemariam, 2023). This evolving discourse underscores the need for careful diplomatic engagement to prevent escalation.

### Reassessing Eritrea's approach regarding three potential scenarios for Ethiopia's future

Eritrea's foreign policy has long been shaped by its complex relationship with Ethiopia, rooted in their shared history of conflict and shifting power dynamics. Given Ethiopia's entrenched internal conflicts and evolving governance models, Eritrea may need to reassess its approach to three potential futures for Ethiopia: (1) the consolidation of a centralized Ethiopian state under a dominant political authority, (2) the strengthening of a federal system with genuine regional autonomy, or (3) a gradual disintegration of the Ethiopian state into independent entities. Each scenario presents unique risks and opportunities for Eritrea to navigate (Pankhurst, 2003; Young, 2006).

Eritrea's experience, from its forced annexation by Ethiopia to its hard-won independence in 1991, underscores the dangers of maintaining artificial unity. The thirty-year struggle for independence, coupled with Ethiopia's persistent internal instability, suggests that Eritrea should now critically evaluate whether supporting Ethiopian unity serves its long-term security and regional stability. Ethiopia's ongoing governance failures and ethnic divisions—most notably in regions like Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Afar—complicate the future of the Horn of Africa and call for a strategic reassessment of Eritrea's role and response (Kibreab, 2009; Friedman, 2016; Markakis, 2011).

### Scenario One: A Centralized Ethiopia Under a Single Political Force

A strong, centralized Ethiopia under a single political entity whether the ruling Prosperity Party or a future iteration—poses serious risks to Eritrea. Historically, centralized Ethiopian regimes have pursued expansionist policies, often at Eritrea's expense (Baker, 2008). This model, reminiscent of imperial Ethiopia and the Derg era, stifles ethnic and regional autonomy, fostering deep resentment and inevitable uprisings (Clapham, 1999).

#### Implications for Eritrea:

- **Security Risks:** A powerful Ethiopian central government could revive hegemonic ambitions, threatening Eritrea's sovereignty (Markakis, 2011).
- **Economic Pressures:** A unified Ethiopia controlling trade routes and economic policies could marginalize Eritrea's economic independence (Kibreab, 2009).
- **Diplomatic Challenges:** Eritrea may face regional isolation if a centralized Ethiopia aligns with hostile global actors (Friedman, 2016).

#### Strategic Considerations:

- Eritrea must enhance its defense posture and border security.
- Diplomatic engagement with regional powers and international organizations should counterbalance Ethiopian dominance.
- Economic diversification and regional partnerships should be prioritized to reduce reliance on Ethiopia's trade networks.

### Scenario Two: A Federated Ethiopia with Significant Regional Autonomy

A genuinely federal Ethiopia, with significant devolution of power to regional states, aligns with its existing constitutional framework but demands genuine political commitment. This model allows ethnic groups to exercise self-governance while maintaining a unified Ethiopian state. However, Ethiopia's history of undermining federalism raises questions about its viability (Abbink, 2011).

### Implications for Eritrea:

- **Reduced Threats:** A decentralized Ethiopia would have limited central authority, reducing its ability to pose a unified threat to Eritrea (Kassahun, 2014).
- **Regional Alliances:** Eritrea could cultivate bilateral relations with autonomous regions like Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Afar (Young, 2006).
- **Economic Prospects:** Trade and infrastructure agreements with regional governments could enhance Eritrea's economic position (Tadesse, 2015).

### Strategic Considerations:

- Eritrea should engage proactively with Ethiopian regional governments to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties.
- Advocating for genuine federalism through regional institutions could stabilize Ethiopia while serving Eritrean interests.

- Infrastructure development should focus on Eritrea's connectivity with emerging regional economies.

### Scenario Three: The gradual disintegration of the Ethiopian state into independent entities

The most radical scenario Ethiopia's fragmentation into independent states—presents both opportunities and significant risks. Secessionist tendencies in regions such as Tigray and Oromia highlight Ethiopia's deep internal divisions (Markakis, 2011). The success of independent states would depend on economic viability, governance structures, and international recognition (Abbink, 2011).

### Implications for Eritrea:

- **Geopolitical Shifts:** Ethiopia's disintegration would reshape the Horn of Africa's political landscape, providing Eritrea with opportunities to form strategic alliances with emerging states (Kibreab, 2009).



Ethiopia-Eritrea-Tigray map not-to-scale illustration of areas of control and influence (Photo Credit: ACSS)



The thirty-year struggle for independence, coupled with Ethiopia's persistent internal instability, suggests that Eritrea should now critically evaluate whether supporting Ethiopian unity serves its long-term security and regional stability

- **Security Challenges:** A violent breakup could result in prolonged conflicts and border instability (Clapham, 1999).
- **Economic Reorientation:** Eritrea could establish direct trade agreements with new states, bypassing centralized Ethiopian control (Tadesse, 2015).

#### Strategic Considerations:

- Eritrea should advocate for structured, peaceful transitions and support diplomatic efforts to facilitate stable state formations.
- Military readiness is critical to prevent spillover conflicts along Eritrea's borders.
- Strengthening regional institutions could enable cooperative frameworks among newly independent states and Eritrea.

### Eritrea's Strategic Response to Ethiopia's Potential Disintegration

Eritrea has historically supported Ethiopian unity due to its legacy of struggle against Ethiopian imperialism. However, ongoing internal strife—including the Tigray conflict and ethnic fragmentation—necessitates a re-evaluation of Eritrea's foreign policy in light of regional security concerns (Abbink, 2011). While a chaotic disintegration may destabilize the region, a negotiated transformation of the Ethiopian state could present avenues for cooperative security arrangements.

Eritrea's stability may benefit from engaging in multilateral diplomacy and strategic partnerships that prioritize conflict mitigation over unilateral influence. The broader regional response—including that of Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, and the African Union—will likely shape outcomes, requiring Eritrea to adopt a pragmatic,

research-informed approach to evolving dynamics (de Waal, 2021).

### Regional Actors' Responses to Ethiopia's Potential Disintegration

The potential disintegration of Ethiopia could significantly reshape regional dynamics, prompting varied responses from neighboring states and multilateral organizations. The African Union would likely prioritize conflict resolution frameworks (Williams, 2007), while Somalia—given its fragility—may adopt a cautious stance. Egypt, concerned with Nile geopolitics, may view fragmentation as a strategic opening (Verhoeven, 2013). Sudan, entangled in border disputes, would likely weigh security risks and opportunities. Kenya may emphasize economic stability and regional trade. Eritrea's policy, when contextualized within these regional shifts, requires a calibrated and evidence-based approach to maintain influence and security.

### The Need for an International Shift in Approach

Given Ethiopia's escalating internal fragmentation, international actors—including the United States—may need to reconsider long-standing assumptions about the inevitability of Ethiopian unity. As comparative cases like Yugoslavia illustrate, state disintegration can occur despite extensive efforts to maintain cohesion (Baker, 2008). Academic assessments indicate that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, designed to manage diversity, has in practice intensified regional and ethnic competition (Abbink, 2011). Thus, a proactive, research-informed approach that emphasizes conflict prevention and peacebuilding is warranted.

Instead of solely advocating for unity, global actors could explore mechanisms for a peaceful and internationally monitored transition, including self-determination referendums where constitutionally permissible (Tronvoll, 2009). International organizations such as the African Union and United Nations would be instrumental in supporting governance transitions and safeguarding rights during such a process (Markakis, 2011). A multilateral peacekeeping framework could help prevent violence, drawing on past interventions in divided societies (Young, 2006).

Eritrea's strategic positioning within the Horn of Africa underscores its interest in regional stability; however, its policy choices must account for broader geopolitical

tensions. The United States' historic support for Ethiopian territorial integrity, as well as the economic and diplomatic stakes of powers such as Egypt and China, may influence the feasibility of supporting structural change in Ethiopia. Eritrea's response, therefore, requires careful calibration within the broader international and regional landscape.

## Implications for Eritrea's Foreign Policy Post-Tigray War

The Tigray conflict and its aftermath necessitate a reassessment of Eritrea's foreign policy, particularly in light of shifting regional dynamics. Scholars argue that Eritrea must adapt its foreign policy to a more complex geopolitical environment, balancing relations with neighbouring states like Sudan and Somalia, while engaging with external powers such as the U.S. and China (Jones, 2025).

Given the significant influence of internal political stability on foreign policy, Eritrea's management of ethnic diversity and economic challenges will be pivotal in shaping its diplomatic posture. Research indicates that domestic cohesion is crucial for maintaining regional credibility, especially in the Horn of Africa, where volatile alliances and rivalries complicate regional dynamics (Tronvoll, 2009).

In this context, Eritrea's foreign policy will need to strike a balance between regional engagement and internal stability to maintain its strategic role in the Horn of Africa.

## Potential Risks of a Managed Disintegration

Advocating for a structured dissolution of Ethiopia carries significant risks that require careful consideration. Resistance from powerful Ethiopian factions, particularly the Amhara and the central government, could destabilize the region. Historical examples, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia, demonstrate how political fragmentation can fuel ethnic tensions and violence (Clapham, 1999). Similarly, the secession of South Sudan from Sudan resulted in widespread violence, highlighting the dangers of disintegration (Markakis, 2011).

In Ethiopia, disintegration may exacerbate tensions in regions like Tigray, Oromia, and the Somali region, potentially leading to further conflicts. Research suggests that Eritrea must balance its security concerns with efforts to ensure regional stability by engaging diplomatically

and promoting international support for peacebuilding (Pankhurst, 2003).

The role of international actors in mitigating these risks through peacekeeping and diplomatic initiatives will be vital to prevent further escalation in the region.

## Conclusion: A Pragmatic Path Forward for Eritrea

Eritrea's foreign policy is at a critical juncture following the Tigray War, as it contends with shifting dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the increased involvement of global actors, particularly the United States. While relations with Ethiopia remain central, the persistence of internal conflicts and emerging self-determination movements—alongside evolving geopolitical alliances—indicates a reassessment of Eritrea's longstanding support for Ethiopian unity may be warranted from a strategic standpoint.

To safeguard its national security and promote long-term regional stability, Eritrea could evaluate whether continued allegiance to a unified Ethiopia remains viable. A more nuanced approach may involve selective engagement with self-determination movements in regions such as Tigray, Amhara, and Afar, provided this is rooted in international legal norms and guided by conflict prevention and regional dialogue. This does not imply immediate endorsement of fragmentation, but rather a flexible foreign policy that anticipates multiple trajectories and prepares Eritrea to respond effectively. Strategic calculation must weigh the risks and opportunities of a centralized, federated, or potentially fragmented Ethiopia.

The international community, particularly the United States, may also need to re-evaluate the limits of its traditional emphasis on Ethiopian unity as the cornerstone of regional stability. Continued adherence to this paradigm risks unintentionally prolonging fragility and conflict. A more pragmatic framework would include structured dialogue around self-determination, coupled with robust multilateral mechanisms to ensure peaceful transitions. While the recognition and viability of emerging states pose challenges, pre-emptive diplomatic engagement may reduce the likelihood of violent collapse and humanitarian crises.

In this context, Eritrea may have a role to play in managing transitions, should Ethiopia's internal divisions

deepen—a negotiated Czechoslovakia rather than a catastrophic Yugoslavia. Historical cases such as Czechoslovakia's peaceful separation and Yugoslavia's violent disintegration underscore the importance of timing, mediation, and coordination in shaping outcomes. Although Ethiopia presents a distinct and complex case, early efforts to support de-escalation, inclusive political dialogue, and regional cooperation could mitigate the risk of a broader collapse.

In the near term, Eritrea would benefit from building strategic partnerships with neighbouring states like Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti, while preparing diplomatically and militarily for transformations in Ethiopia. By advocating for a conflict-sensitive, flexible approach among global partners, Eritrea positions itself as a potential stabilizing actor. With calibrated diplomacy, strategic foresight, and regional engagement, Eritrea has the opportunity to shape the Horn's future amid a period of profound geopolitical transition.

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# Paradigm Shifts in the Western World and Their Implications for the Horn of Africa: Navigating a Fragmented Global Order

By Simon Mulongo

## Abstract

The contemporary global geopolitical landscape is undergoing profound changes marked by declining Western power dominance, declining effectiveness of multilateral organizations, and increasing competition between major global players. The World War II-bred liberal order based on American security guarantees, economic interdependence, and diverse institutional arrangements is now collapsing. The weakening of the transatlantic alliance and the U.S.'s strategic disengagement have precipitated a fragmented global system, with significant consequences for regions like the Horn of Africa that have long depended on Western political, military, and economic support. This transition is reshaping the region's geopolitical positioning and strategic alliances. The Horn of Africa (HoA) is a geopolitically pivotal region, controlling key maritime corridors such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which facilitates global trade, and holding abundant natural resources, making it a focal point in contemporary geopolitical competition. In particular, the IGAD area is facing an uncertain future as a result of changing global power relations that are reforming strategic alliances, economic structures, and security policies. This research critically examines Western geopolitical changes' impact on the HoA and explores possible approaches through which the area might utilize multipolarity to enhance its independence and reduce overdependence on emerging powers like China, Russia, and the Gulf States. By integrating historical analysis, geopolitical theories, and contemporary economic and security data, this paper argues that the HoA must pursue a strategic posture that safeguards its long-term stability, sovereignty, and economic resilience. The region's ability to navigate this transition effectively will determine whether it emerges as an autonomous geopolitical force or remains susceptible to external manipulation.

## Introduction

The world stands on a hinge moment, precipitated by early March 2025 events involving the U.S., E.U., and Ukraine, that portend a reorganization of the past. The post-Second World War liberal order, built on multilateralism, economic interdependence, and security alliances, is disintegrating. The US, erstwhile hegemonic balancer, is repositioning its global presence, as suggested by aid debates to Ukraine and a rising emphasis on economic nationalism (Zakaria, 2025). Such a change, combined with geopolitical competition with China and Russia – as embodied by their positions on the conflict in Ukraine – undermines Western security guarantees, with allies having to seek alternative alignments (Mearsheimer, 2021).

The consequences of such dynamics are most hurt for regions like the Horn of Africa. For the Greater Horn

of Africa (HoA)—a place long characterized by the presence of Western aid, security intervention, and trade agreements—the collapse of the U.S.-led liberal order is a crisis and an opportunity. The HoA is geopolitically significant as a transit corridor for global maritime trade through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a counterterrorism hotbed, and a richly endowed region coveted by multiple global actors. Yet the HoA is also a politically fragmented, conflict-prone, and economically vulnerable space open to external influence (ICG, 2024).

This paper critically explores the implications of the Western paradigm shift for the greater Horn region, specifically analyzing how Horn of Africa states can strategically reposition themselves within the emerging multipolar global order, mitigating external dependencies while enhancing regional sovereignty and resilience.



*Ethio-Djibouti Railway built by China BRI, launched in Addis Ababa, August 25, 2022 (Photo Credits: ENA/ Ethio-Djibouti Railway [EDR])*

## Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a multi-theory framework to analyze the shifting geopolitics of the Horn of Africa (HoA) in the background of a declining Western hegemony and the rise of multipolarity. In line with realist and geoeconomic theories, the study tries to balance the dynamics of regional sovereignty and foreign intervention, with an emphasis on the pursuit of national sovereignty in the face of contending great powers.

Drawing from realist perspectives (Morgenthau, 1948; Mearsheimer, 2021), international politics is a power struggle where survival hinges on strategic alliances. The decline of U.S. dominance signals a new, anarchic global system. The Horn of Africa (HoA), a vital maritime and resource zone, becomes a key arena for great power competition. HoA states must navigate this geopolitical landscape, balancing China, Russia, and the Gulf States to safeguard their sovereignty.

Geoeconomic theory (Baldwin, 1985; Keohane & Nye, 2012) highlights the economic foundations of statecraft. The HoA's increasing reliance on external finance and trade exposes its economic vulnerabilities. Regional actors seek strategic autonomy through regional integration and debt diversification, aiming to

escape the constraints imposed by external powers and challenge extractive economic systems (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

These theoretical approaches, taken together, allow for a rich study of the HoA's shifting strategic options in an increasingly fragmented international order.

## Literature Review: Theoretical Perspectives, Historical Analogies, and Contemporary Implications for the HoA

The dynamics of global power remain a central concern of IR scholarship as contending paradigms shape how states, particularly in Africa, adapt to changing geopolitics. With the retreat of Western hegemony, theories from realism, liberal institutionalism, and geoeconomics offer essential frameworks for understanding the strategic options available to the Horn of Africa (HoA), helping contextualize the region's responses to evolving global power dynamics. This section explores these theoretical perspectives, contextualizing within historical precedents and contemporary global developments, with particular emphasis on great-power rivalry, regional agency, and economic reorientation.

## Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and the Limits of Multilateralism

From a realist perspective, global affairs are defined by power politics rather than institutional or ideational commitments. Classical realists such as Morgenthau (1948) and contemporary scholars such as Mearsheimer (2021) believe that states prioritize survival and the pursuit of power, aligning with other states strategically out of necessity rather than a shared ideology. The decline of U.S. global hegemony, as well as the apparent disintegration of NATO and the active withdrawal of Washington from Africa, marks a return to an international order of anarchy, with transactional relations dictating diplomatic and security policy. In this system, the HoA is increasingly subject to foreign intervention motivated by pragmatic calculation. As Chin & Bartos (2024) argue in their study of U.S. Africa policy, Washington's policy toward the continent remains inconsistent, reactive, and subject to great-power competition rather than long-term commitment. This means that the HoA must balance in an era of unstable alliances, in which dependence on any one power—whether the U.S., China, or Russia—risks great danger.

Liberal institutionalists such as Keohane & Nye (2012), however, believe that international institutions have the potential to damp the volatility introduced by great-power change, inducing cooperation and common stewardship even in the face of geopolitical change. International institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) provide regional forums for conflict resolution, economic integration, and policy coordination, potentially providing a platform for action. Yet authors such as Adar (2023) and Bendiek (2017) present skeptical counterarguments, lamenting the weakness of such institutions, stating that regional blocs tend to lack the mechanisms of coercion, fiscal autonomy, and internal cohesion to effectively function in an era of dwindling support from the West. Their efficacy is undermined by the dependence on external funding and the presence of competing national interests.

The ongoing governance crises in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Somalia underscore the limitations of IGAD in effectively managing regional conflicts. The region's vulnerability highlights the need for stronger, internally driven conflict-resolution mechanisms and the creation of more robust regional institutions capable

of acting independently of external interventions. Such weakness opens the vulnerability of regional institutions to long-term political cleavages and the demands of dwindling resources. While Africa aims for strategic independence (Bamidele, 2025), its engagement within multilateral institutions is significantly limited. This constraint stems from persistent dependencies on external actors for critical resources like security, infrastructure development, and technological advancements, ultimately hindering full strategic autonomy.

## Historical Parallels: From Colonial Retreat to Cold War Rivalry

Historical hegemonic withdrawals leave behind geopolitical vacuums. British decolonization of Africa yielded Cold War competition, with the U.S. and Soviet Union competing for influence (Göpel, 2016). The current power transition, with the disengagement of the West and the rise of China and Russia, follows the same patterns, potentially making the HoA a conflict focal point once more.

China's BRI expansion mimics hegemonic patterns. Investments like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway and port development in Djibouti have placed China as a hegemonic economic power (Brautigam, 2020; Magara & Kinkoh, 2020). Engagement comes with the threats of debt entrapment and loss of sovereignty, with China's loans being attached to strategic concessions, including mineral rights.

Russia has also ramped up its military presence in the HoA with arms sales and defense pacts in Sudan and Eritrea (IISS, 2025). This broader geopolitical rivalry positions the HoA as a focal point for counterbalancing Western and Chinese power (El Baz, 2024). The region's strategic importance makes it vulnerable to these external forces.

“The region's vulnerability highlights the need for stronger, internally driven conflict-resolution mechanisms and the creation of more robust regional institutions capable of acting independently of external interventions”

## The United States and France maintain significant military presences in Djibouti. Camp Lemonnier, the largest U.S. base in Africa, and France's largest overseas military installation enable power projection in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

### Economic and Security Implications of Multipolar Competition

The Horn of Africa (HoA), strategically located along the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, is at the center of intensifying global rivalries. With China, Russia, the United States, and France vying for influence, HoA nations face both economic opportunities and strategic risks. To navigate this landscape, they must balance development with sovereignty amid growing multipolarity and a resurgence of classical realism. As Kaplan (2009) notes in *The Geography of Power*, control over strategic locations remains a key determinant of geopolitical influence.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is tracking toward transforming the HoA's infrastructure, particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. The Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), and Djibouti's Doraleh Port have improved connectivity but also deepened financial dependence. Ethiopia's debt to China accounts for 32% of its external debt (IMF, 2024), and Kenya's debt-to-GDP ratio, exceeding 70% (Central Bank of Kenya, 2024), raises sustainability concerns.

The declining internal rate of return (IRR) of the SGR (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024) highlights the risks of overreliance on Chinese financing. Advanced debt sustainability models, including dynamic stochastic general equilibrium (DSGE) analysis (Ghosh et al., 2013), are crucial to assessing economic resilience. To mitigate the risks of economic entrapment, HoA nations must adopt robust macroprudential policies, diversify their financial sources beyond China and the West, and pursue more inclusive growth strategies. As Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue in *Why Nations Fail*, true development hinges on overcoming extractive economic structures that limit opportunities for widespread prosperity.

Unlike China's economic engagement, Russia's strategy in the HoA is security-driven. By exploiting instability in Sudan, Russia has secured a Red Sea naval base

(Reuters, 2023) and expanded its influence through military pacts in Sudan and Eritrea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). However, while this grants Russia a foothold, it also worsens instability, discouraging foreign investment and trade (EBRD, 2024). Game-theoretic assessments indicate that such security alignments could provoke countermeasures from rival powers, escalating tensions (Allison, 1971). As Huntington (1996) warns in *The Clash of Civilizations*, these alliances can deepen regional divides, triggering wider instability. HoA states must therefore carefully balance security interests while avoiding entanglement in broader geopolitical conflicts (Walt, 1987).

The United States and France maintain significant military presences in Djibouti. Camp Lemonnier, the largest U.S. base in Africa (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), and France's largest overseas military installation (French Ministry of Armed Forces, 2023) enable power projection in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. However, Djibouti's hosting of multiple foreign militaries increases strategic risks. Bayesian network modeling (Pearl, 1988) suggests a high likelihood of rising tensions due to competing military operations, shifting US-EU relations, and the resurgence of nationalist policies in the West (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The implications of these foreign engagements are profound. While they provide economic and security benefits, they also foster dependencies and vulnerabilities, increasing the risk of internal fragmentation. South Sudan's continued instability (Small Arms Survey, 2023) exemplifies how external power struggles can weaken state cohesion. Without decisive action, HoA nations risk becoming battlegrounds for proxy conflicts, leading to state failure (Rotberg, 2004). A rigorous SWOT analysis (Mintzberg, 1994) is essential to developing resilient national strategies. As dependency theory (Prebisch, 1950) suggests, unchecked foreign entanglements can erode policy autonomy, turning the HoA into a theater for great power rivalry.

To safeguard their interests, HoA states must adopt a strategic approach to foreign partnerships. Diversifying economic and security relationships, strengthening regional integration, and enhancing collective bargaining power will be crucial. Robust strategic planning, incorporating scenario analysis and contingency planning (Schwartz, 1991), is essential to navigating this uncertain geopolitical environment. The ultimate challenge is to leverage external engagement while resisting domination and internal fragmentation, particularly in a world where shifting power balances and realist ideologies (Gilpin, 1981) continue to shape global affairs.

### The Need for Strategic Realignment in the HoA

The Horn of Africa stands at a defining juncture—navigating the shifting tides of multipolarity while striving to preserve its regional agency. This critical moment demands strategic foresight and cohesive policy frameworks to safeguard autonomy and mitigate vulnerabilities from external powers. As Western aid wanes and protectionist trade policies reshape global alliances, HoA nations must transition from dependency to strategic self-reliance. This shift demands evidence-based policymaking, leveraging economic integration,

defense coordination, and indigenous innovation to counterbalance geopolitical entanglements.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers a pathway for economic realignment, with projections of a 33% rise in intra-African trade and a \$450 billion boost to regional GDP by 2035, contingent on infrastructure expansion and the removal of non-tariff barriers (UNECA, 2020). However, realizing this vision requires robust investment in logistics, harmonized trade policies, and financial deepening. Ethiopia and Kenya's LAPSSET corridor exemplifies the transformative power of strategic infrastructure investment.

Simultaneously, reinforcing regional security through IGAD is crucial to reducing reliance on foreign military forces. This is long overdue. With Djibouti hosting U.S., Chinese, and French bases, the HoA remains vulnerable to external military competition and manipulation. A unified security framework, akin to the ECOWAS Standby Force, or a revised and strengthened Eastern Africa Standby Force (EASF) could enhance sovereignty without escalating regional tensions.



African heads of state and government at the African Union Summit that saw the signing of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement in Kigali, Rwanda, on March 21, 2018. (Photo Credits: STR / AFP)

Climate finance represents another frontier of strategic leverage. Ethiopia's Great Green Wall initiative, if scaled effectively, could sequester 250 million tons of carbon annually and yield \$67 billion in economic benefits by 2030 (UNCCD, 2021). Harnessing carbon markets, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy investments could transform environmental sustainability into an economic asset, reducing reliance on concessional financing.

Beyond economics and security, Africa's agency in global affairs hinges on controlling its own development narrative. Ribeiro & Pereira (2025) argue that narrative sovereignty is as vital as economic sovereignty. Resisting Western agricultural subsidies that undercut African farmers, participating actively in trade negotiations, and fostering indigenous technological advancements are crucial for dismantling structural dependencies. Empirical data show a strong correlation ( $r = 0.7$ ) between R&D investment and export diversification in East Africa, underscoring the need to cultivate innovation ecosystems (UNESCO, 2022). Rwanda's tech-driven economic model offers a replicable blueprint for HoA nations.

Ultimately, the HoA's future depends on forging alliances that advance its interests rather than perpetuating dependence. The next decade will determine whether the region emerges as an autonomous geopolitical force or remains subject to great-power maneuvering. Success requires forward-thinking policymaking, strategic investment, and regional cohesion to ensure that external engagements reinforce—rather than erode—sovereignty.

## The Shifting Geopolitical Landscape and Its Implications for the HoA

The current world paradigm shift, with the relative decline of the West and the rise of multi-polar power relations, is fundamentally repositioning Africa's geopolitical standing, particularly in the strategically vital Horn of Africa (HoA). Several key developments highlight the cascading effects of Western decline: increasing engagement by non-traditional actors like China and Turkey, offering alternative development and security models; the weakening of Western-led conditional aid programs, allowing African states greater policy autonomy; the resurgence of regional power dynamics, as Ethiopia and Kenya assert stronger influence within their spheres; and the intensified exploitation of natural resources by foreign powers, often with little regard for governance or environmental impact. These interconnected shifts

present both opportunities and risks for the HoA, necessitating a sophisticated re-evaluation of its ties with the West and a strategic realignment to the evolving global order.

## The Security Implications of NATO's Fragmentation

The potential strategic reorientation of U.S. and NATO commitments in a hypothetical second Trump term signals a seismic shift in global security with immediate implications for Africa, particularly the Horn of Africa (HoA). Trump's threats to undermine NATO and prioritize economic nationalism (Hindustan Times, 2025) pose a direct risk to Western military engagement in Africa, which has been vital for counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and maritime security. As security aid becomes conditional or withdrawn, African states face an uncertain new reality.

A potential withdrawal of AFRICOM forces from Djibouti, home to Camp Lemonnier—a key counterterrorism hub coordinating operations against Al-Shabaab and piracy (SIPRI, 2025)—could create a security vacuum, exacerbating instability in Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, all of which are already grappling with internal conflicts. Without reliable NATO-led operations and U.S. military support, HoA states will be compelled to reassess their security alignments and seek alternative defense alliances.

This geopolitical shift opens strategic openings for both Russia and China, which have aggressively expanded their military presence across Africa, including significant investments in the Horn of Africa, where they seek to establish long-term influence through military bases and security partnerships. Russia has strengthened its influence through arms sales and PMCs like the Wagner Group in Sudan and the Central African Republic, while China has heavily invested in Djibouti, establishing its first overseas naval base in 2017 (IISS, 2025).

A broader strategic reorientation away from Western security engagement could see African states diversifying their defense partnerships beyond traditional allies. While this presents opportunities for military modernization, it also raises concerns about dependence on authoritarian powers, security fragmentation, and the erosion of Western-backed governance frameworks. Should Western disengagement continue, the HoA risks becoming a battleground for great-power proxy conflicts, further destabilizing an already fragile region.

The key challenge is navigating this transition without over-reliance on any single global actor—balancing immediate security needs with the pursuit of long-term strategic autonomy, a precarious tightrope walk in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

### Economic Consequences: A Decline in Western Aid and Trade

The HoA faces a critical juncture, its stability challenged by the far-reaching consequences of a fundamental transformation in the global economic order. This shift presents significant uncertainties for the region's future. For decades, its economic model rested on a Western-led framework—aid, concessional finance, and preferential trade—a form of developmental Keynesianism on an international scale. While this system provided critical infrastructure, public services, and humanitarian relief, it also fostered a dependency that now appears increasingly unsustainable.

The world is shifting toward a multipolar order marked by deglobalization, strategic protectionism, and resurgent economic nationalism—a gradual dismantling of the Bretton Woods consensus. The United States and the European Union, once champions of open markets and primary benefactors of African development, are now prioritizing domestic economic recalibration. This shift, reflected in aid reductions, trade barriers, and restructured financial engagements, signals the erosion of the Washington Consensus (World Bank, 2025).

This geoeconomic transformation is already rippling across the HoA, unsettling traditional economic orthodoxies. The contraction of Official Development Assistance (ODA) is not just a budgetary adjustment—it represents a philosophical pivot away from interventionist development models. Countries like Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, where aid constitutes a significant share of government revenue, now face the vulnerabilities of an externally driven development strategy. In 2023, Africa received \$35.6 billion in ODA, with the U.S. contributing 26%. However, projections suggest a 20% reduction in U.S. aid by 2025, reflecting a shift from post-colonial obligations to a more transactional approach (ISS African Futures, 2025).

This retreat coincides with a global liquidity squeeze driven by rising interest rates in advanced economies, signaling the end of cheap capital. Ethiopia and Kenya, having aggressively pursued Eurobonds and syndicated

The current world paradigm shift, with the relative decline of the West and the rise of multi-polar power relations, is fundamentally repositioning Africa's geopolitical standing, particularly in the strategically vital Horn of Africa (HoA)

loans for infrastructure, now face surging debt-service burdens, with sovereign bond yields exceeding 15%. This challenges the long-held assumption that debt-fueled infrastructure development guarantees prosperity, pushing debt sustainability into uncharted waters (IMF, 2024).

Adding to these pressures is the rise of trade protectionism, driven by the second Trump administration, which undermines the theoretical benefits of comparative advantage. New U.S. and EU tariffs, regulatory restrictions under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), and domestic industry subsidies sideline African exports, exposing the fragility of export-driven growth models (Firstpost, 2025). Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya—where Western trade constitutes over 60% of exports—are particularly affected. Ethiopia's trade deficit widened by 8.4% in Q1 2025, while Djibouti's foreign direct investment (FDI) shrank by 5.7%, reflecting investor uncertainty as the ideal of free trade fractures into fragmented blocs.

The HoA now faces an urgent recalibration of its alliances in a transactional world, challenging long-held assumptions about global economic integration (Hindustan Times, 2025). The era of unbridled free-market capitalism has faded, giving way to a realignment of economic incentives and a restructuring of the global order.

### The Rise of China and Russia as Alternative Patrons

The strategically positioned Horn has become a crucible where global powers—China, Russia, the United States, and France—compete for influence. These rivalries, expressed through economic investment, security alliances, and strategic positioning, offer



Camp Lemonnier a U.S. Navy installation and the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa (Photo Credit: Camp\_Lemonnier)

both opportunities and risks, reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape. HoA states must carefully navigate this shifting world order, balancing the promise of development with the imperative of preserving sovereignty. As Robert Kaplan observes in *The Geography of Power*, enduring influence is rooted in control over key geographical nodes, a reality that underscores the HoA's intrinsic importance (Kaplan, 2009).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has profoundly reshaped the region's infrastructure, particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. While projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), and Djibouti's Doraleh Port enhance regional connectivity, they also generate economic dependencies that require careful management. Ethiopia's debt to China now constitutes 32% of its external debt, while Kenya's debt-to-GDP ratio exceeded 70% in 2024, largely due to BRI-related loans (World Bank, 2025). Prudent debt governance is essential to avoid strategic entrapment and the erosion of economic sovereignty, as Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson highlight in *Why Nations Fail*, which warns against extractive economic structures that stifle true development (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Unlike China's economic foothold, Russia's strategy in the HoA revolves around security, exploiting Sudan's instability

to establish a Red Sea naval base and deploying private military contractors in Sudan and Eritrea in exchange for strategic partnerships. While this strengthens Russia's influence, it also risks further militarizing the region and entrenching authoritarianism. As Samuel Huntington argues in *The Clash of Civilizations*, such alignments can deepen existing regional fractures (Huntington, 1996). HoA states thus face the difficult task of securing defense partnerships while avoiding entanglement in broader geopolitical conflicts.

The United States and France maintain a strong military presence in Djibouti, with Camp Lemonnier—the largest U.S. base in Africa—and France's largest overseas military installation serving as key power-projection hubs into the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. However, Djibouti's role as a host for multiple foreign militaries underscores its strategic vulnerability, heightening the risk of external tensions spilling over into the region.

These external engagements carry profound implications for the HoA. While they offer economic benefits and security assistance, they also introduce dependencies, leverage, and strategic fragility. As dependency theory suggests, such entanglements risk reducing the HoA to a mere battleground for great-power competition, weakening domestic policy autonomy. To safeguard their interests, HoA states must adopt a strategic foreign

policy that prioritizes national sovereignty. Strengthening regional collaboration through the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) can create a united front for equitable negotiations, economic diversification, responsible debt management, and regional security cooperation to counterbalance external influence. The ultimate challenge is to skillfully manage global engagements while resisting external domination in an evolving and volatile international landscape.

## Conclusion: Navigating the New Multipolar Reality

The decline of Western hegemony is not merely a power shift—it is the unraveling of an era, casting deep shadows over the Greater Horn of Africa (HoA). The withdrawal of the United States and the fragmentation of transatlantic alliances mark the collapse of familiar geopolitical anchors. For the HoA, this moment presents both peril and opportunity. The erosion of Western economic aid and security guarantees exposes IGAD states to internal fragility and external pressures. In an age of economic restraint, the region must walk a tightrope between resilience and vulnerability.

History, however, does not favor the passive. The rise of a multipolar world—driven by China, Russia, and the Gulf States—offers alternative alliances and investments.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expands infrastructure, Russia forges defense partnerships, and Gulf monarchies extend economic influence. Yet these are not mere windfalls but precarious bargains. The specter of colonial exploitation looms, cautioning that unchecked dependence may lead to new forms of subjugation. IGAD states must act with strategic foresight—leveraging partnerships without surrendering autonomy, extracting benefits without becoming expendable.

The true challenge for the Horn of Africa lies not in external competition but in its ability to shape its future. The region now stands at a crossroads: will it seize the opportunity to assert itself as a unified geopolitical force, or will it remain a battleground for the competing interests of global powers? Economic self-reliance, military modernization, and diplomatic agility are essential. Strengthening intra-African trade, reducing debt vulnerabilities, and developing indigenous security frameworks are the foundations of policy independence.

As the old order collapses, the region must confront a defining question: will the HoA be the architect of its own destiny or the theater of external powers? The answer lies in the strategic choices of today, choices that will determine its path in a fragmented and contested global future.

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The HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies is a non-profit, applied research, and policy think-do tank based in Nairobi, Kenya. Its vision is a progressive Horn of Africa and the African continent, served by informed, evidence-based and problem-solving policy research and analysis. Its mission is to contribute to informed, objective, definitive research and analytical inquiry that positively informs policies of governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and spaces.

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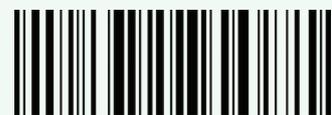
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