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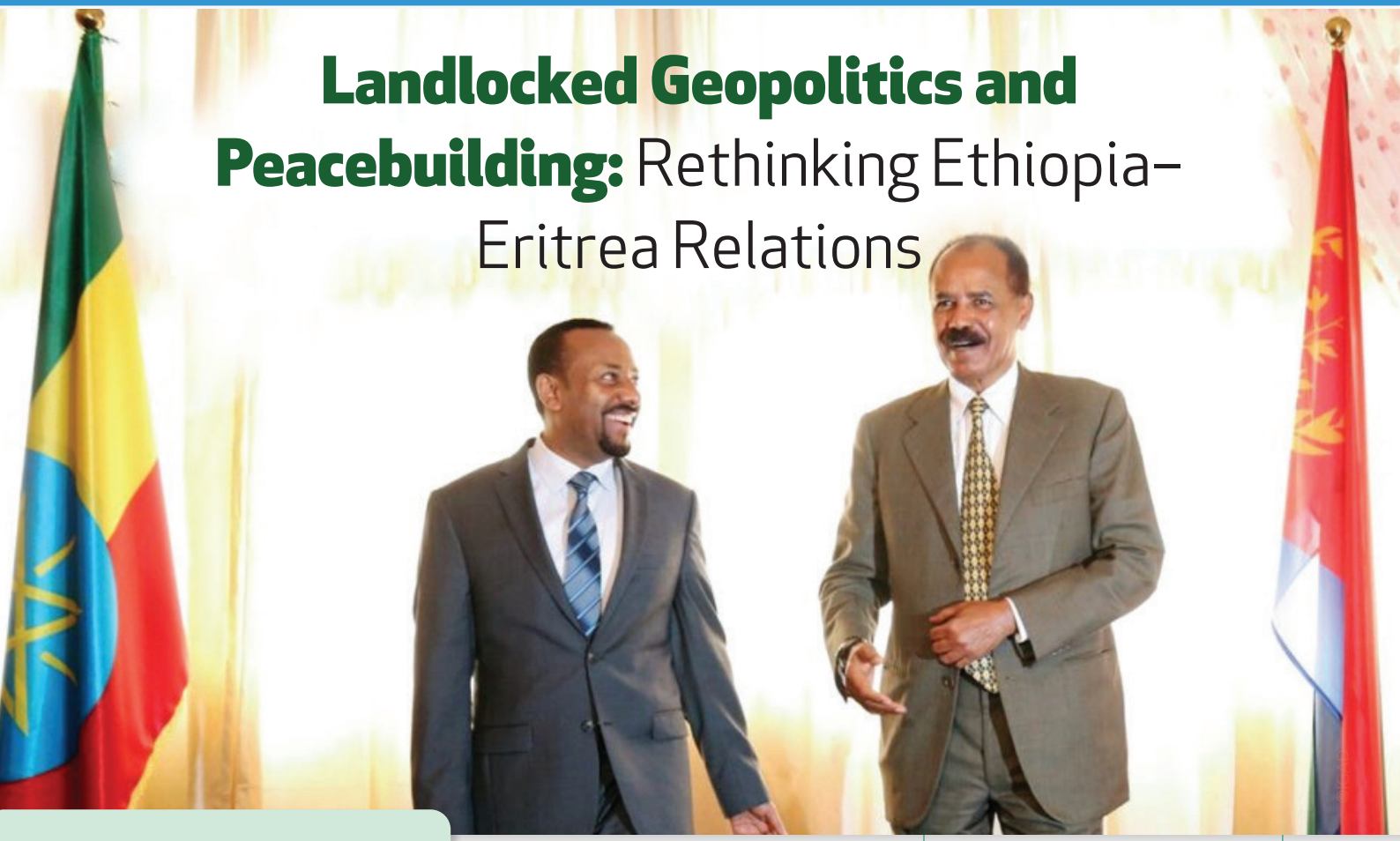
Landlocked Geopolitics and Peacebuilding: Rethinking Ethiopia–Eritrea Relations



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Abstract

This article assesses the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship through the theoretical lens of the security and foreign policy of landlocked States. It argues that Ethiopia's landlockedness and Eritrea's coastal leverage have produced a structural asymmetry that perpetuates cycles of mistrust, strategic misperception, and fragile cooperation. By integrating historical and political analysis with the landlocked-state framework, the article reveals that Ethiopia's economic and security imperatives are inherently linked to Eritrea's geopolitical position. Comparative insights from Afghanistan, Botswana, Armenia, and Switzerland demonstrate that durable peace depends on institutionalized interdependence and multilateral guarantees

for transit and access. The article concludes that Ethiopia and Eritrea can transform their zero-sum rivalry into a win–win partnership through joint corridor diplomacy and cooperative sovereignty mechanisms anchored in international law and regional integration frameworks.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa remains one of the most complex and strategically contested regions in the world, shaped by overlapping historical grievances, ethno-political fragmentation, and regional rivalries. Within this volatile environment, the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship occupies a pivotal role in determining regional peace and stability. The political transition in Ethiopia in 2018 created unprecedented opportunities for regional stability and renewed dialogue between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's diplomatic outreach quickly engaged Eritrean leadership and signaled a departure from the entrenched hostility that had dominated bilateral relations for decades. For President Isaias Afwerki, the change in Ethiopia represented the decline of TPLF influence and the emergence of a new leadership in Addis Ababa that Eritrea could trust. This political shift was perceived as a validation of Eritrea's long-standing position that the TPLF had dominated Ethiopian politics to its detriment, and it opened the door for constructive engagement (Bereketeab, 2019).

Eritrea, which shares a 1,030-kilometer border with Ethiopia, had gained independence in 1993 after decades of struggle against Ethiopian rule. Between 1998 and 2000, the two countries fought a brutal border war that left tens of thousands dead and many more displaced. Following the cessation of hostilities, relations were defined by a "no war, no peace" status quo, characterized by deep mistrust and minimal cooperation.

The 2018 rapprochement marked a historic change in this dynamic. Ethiopia, focused on consolidating domestic political transitions and preventing further unrest, offered an opportunity for Eritrea to emerge from relative isolation. The strategic importance of Eritrea's Red Sea ports, particularly during regional conflicts such as the war in Yemen, further enhanced the incentive for engagement (Vertin, 2019). Symbolic gestures during this period reinforced Ethiopia's recognition of Eritrean sovereignty. President Afwerki's visits to Addis Ababa and other Ethiopian regions, including Sidama (Hawasa city) and Amhara (Bahir Dare city), along with the presentation of a camel and commemoration of Nakfa, underscored the acknowledgment of Eritrea's independence and territorial integrity. Ethiopia's acceptance of the 2002 boundary decision by an independent commission further strengthened optimism for the resolution of a historically intractable border dispute (Stigant & Phelan, 2019; Keane, 2018). The Jeddah Agreement formalized the cessation of hostilities, establishing a framework for cooperation in trade, security, investment, and cultural exchange, and granting Ethiopia access to the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa (Otieno, 2018).

However, sustaining this peace required effective institutionalization, which proved challenging given the structural and administrative asymmetries between the two states. Ethiopia's well-established bureaucratic structures contrasted sharply with Eritrea's highly centralized governance, in which decision-making remained largely at the discretion of President Afwerki. These structural differences posed significant hurdles in translating agreements into practical, long-term cooperation. This article analysis is guided by two central research questions and it adopts Mahdi's (2021) Security and Foreign Policy of Landlocked States framework to interpret Ethiopia–Eritrea dynamics not merely as a bilateral political issue but as a manifestation of the broader strategic dilemmas of landlocked states.

- What historical, political, and structural factors have shaped the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship from conflict to recent rapprochement? This question directs attention to the interplay of domestic political conditions, leadership decisions, and the legacy of past conflicts in determining the bilateral dynamic.
- What challenges and opportunities exist for institutionalizing sustainable peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the current geopolitical context of the Horn of Africa?

Theoretical Framework: Security and Foreign Policy of Landlocked States

Mahdi's (2021) framework on the security and foreign policy of landlocked States provides an analytical foundation for understanding Ethiopia's foreign policy dilemmas after losing its coastline. The theory posits that landlocked states are characterized by three structural conditions: (1) geographical vulnerability due to dependence on transit neighbors; (2) strategic adaptation through multi-vector diplomacy and economic diversification; and (3)

the pursuit of regional interdependence as a pathway to mitigate insecurity. Case studies such as Switzerland, Botswana, Armenia, and Afghanistan illustrate diverse strategies in balancing these constraints. Switzerland's neutrality and strong institutions enabled it to transcend geographical limitations, whereas Botswana leveraged high-value, low-volume exports to avoid overdependence on transit routes. In contrast, Afghanistan and Armenia demonstrate how domestic instability and nationalist narratives can exacerbate vulnerability and isolation.

Historical Roots of the Ethiopia–Eritrea Conflict

Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1993 ended decades of armed struggle but created a new geopolitical reality for Addis Ababa. The 1998–2000 border war, rooted in disputes over sovereignty and identity, left deep scars and entrenched a 'no war, no peace' status quo for nearly two decades. Domestically, diversionary politics in both states fueled escalation: Ethiopia's fragile ethnic federal system under the TPLF-dominated EPRDF created legitimacy deficits, while Eritrea's leadership used the conflict to consolidate power (Butcher & Maru, 2018). Structurally, Ethiopia's sudden loss of coastline transformed maritime access into a securitized national concern which left the country to structural vulnerability.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea border war is one of the deadliest inter-state conflicts in modern African history. Its escalation can be traced to structural opportunities and constraints arising from partial democratization in both countries following the overthrow of the Derg regime. In

Figure 1: Map of Eritrea and Ethiopia showing the border between the two countries in the northern Tigray region (Sources: ACCORD/Berita Musau)

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Ethiopia, domestic political instability, weak legitimacy of the TPLF-led EPRDF, and ethnic federalism created vulnerabilities that Eritrea could exploit. This political environment provided incentives for Eritrea to pursue territorial claims and assert regional influence (Butcher & Maru, 2018).

Eritrea maintained a highly disciplined military force, bolstered by continuous compulsory conscription, enabling rapid mobilization in the event of conflict. President Afwerki and his leadership perceived the Ethiopian government as weak, particularly regarding its capacity to defend Tigrayan interests, which created a strategic window for Eritrean assertiveness (Dias, 2011; Bigg, 1998c). Economic pressures, domestic opposition, and the desire to consolidate national identity further motivated Eritrea's leadership to escalate tensions. Scholars have argued that the outbreak of conflict reflected both leaders' ambitions and personalities, as well as their calculations regarding domestic political advantages. Afwerki's vision of Eritrea as a dominant regional actor utilized the border dispute as a pretext for asserting regional influence, while Ethiopia's internal divisions constrained its capacity to respond effectively (Olika, 2008; Lata, 2006).

The conflict can also be interpreted through the lens of diversionary foreign policy strategies. Eritrea faced internal challenges, including opposition movements such as the Afar Liberation Democratic Movement and socio-economic pressures, which created incentives to project strength externally. Conversely, Ethiopia's transitional political environment and ethnic federalist tensions limited the government's flexibility, making escalation of the conflict a politically viable option for both sides (Butcher & Maru, 2018). The war thus reflected not only territorial and security considerations but also the domestic political calculations and leadership ambitions that shaped the policies of both states. This agency based narrative and ambitions is not a closed file when it comes to Eritrea.

Rapprochement and Structural Constraints

The 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, formalized through the Jeddah Agreement, marked a rare moment of optimism. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's diplomatic outreach and President Isaias Afwerki's reciprocal engagement ended years of frozen hostility. However, as Mahdi's framework suggests, peace agreements among asymmetrical neighbors require institutionalization to endure. Eritrea's centralized governance and Ethiopia's bureaucratic pluralism created implementation gaps. The absence of joint commissions, transparent follow-up mechanisms, and legal guarantees meant that the symbolic peace lacked structural reinforcement (Aweke & Seid, 2022). The 2018 peace agreement represented a decisive departure from decades of hostility, facilitated by personal diplomacy between the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea. High-profile visits and public gestures of goodwill signaled a readiness to engage in cooperative frameworks. The Jeddah Agreement formalized a comprehensive framework for ending hostilities, strengthening bilateral cooperation across trade, security, investment, and cultural domains, and establishing mechanisms to combat terrorism and illicit trafficking (Otieno, 2018). This accord was widely celebrated as a historic milestone that ended the "no war, no peace" status quo (Stigant & Phelan, 2019; Woldemariam, 2018).

Despite initial optimism, the institutionalization of peace faced significant structural and political challenges. Ethiopia's administrative systems were well-established, whereas Eritrea's governance remained highly centralized under President Afwerki. This asymmetry limited the ability of both states to implement agreed-upon measures effectively. Furthermore, the lack of regular ministerial meetings, formal communication channels, and systematic follow-up inhibited the translation of agreements into sustainable outcomes.

The 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea marked a dramatic departure from decades of hostility, offering hope for lasting peace in the Horn of Africa. However, sustaining this cooperation has proven to be an extraordinarily complex endeavor, shaped by a combination of domestic political dynamics, structural

asymmetries, historical grievances, and regional strategic calculations. At the domestic level, Ethiopia's internal political landscape has exerted a profound influence on its bilateral relations with Eritrea. The 2022 Pretoria Agreement, which sought to resolve the Tigray conflict, notably excluded Eritrean participation, a decision that the Eritrean government interpreted as a threat to its national security and regional standing. The exclusion raised concerns in Asmara about the potential resurgence of Tigrayan forces, particularly the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), whose military capabilities and historical enmity towards Eritrea remain deeply entrenched. From Eritrea's perspective, the inability to influence outcomes directly in Mekelle, coupled with the interim federal arrangements in Tigray, represented a setback to the strategic objectives that had motivated Eritrean involvement in the conflict from the outset (Council on Foreign Relations; Plaut, 2023). At the same time, Ethiopia's internal factional disputes—manifested in disagreements over interim leadership appointments and recurrent infighting between political and regional actors—have hampered the effective implementation of peace measures, delaying normalization and feeding mutual suspicion (The New Humanitarian, 2025). The resulting political uncertainty in Ethiopia complicates bilateral planning and creates a perception in Asmara that Addis Ababa may be unable to guarantee the durability of agreements or prevent the reemergence of adversarial actors.

Structural asymmetries between the two states further complicate efforts to sustain cooperation. Ethiopia possesses relatively well-established bureaucratic and institutional systems that allow for formalized policy coordination, while Eritrea operates under a highly centralized governance model dominated by the personal authority of President Isaias Afwerki. This structural divergence limits Eritrea's capacity to institutionalize foreign policy commitments and challenges Ethiopia's ability to engage with Asmara through conventional state-to-state mechanisms. As a result, even when agreements are reached at the leadership level, translating these accords into actionable policies requires navigating distinct administrative logics and varying capacities for policy implementation. Moreover, the difference in governance models impacts domestic accountability, transparency, and public buy-in, which are crucial for sustaining long-term cooperation and ensuring that bilateral initiatives endure beyond individual leadership tenures (Bereketeab, 2019; Woldemariam, 2018).

Regional dynamics add an additional layer of complexity. The Horn of Africa remains one of the most geopolitically sensitive regions in the world, where the interests of neighboring states and external powers intersect in ways that can undermine bilateral cooperation. Ethiopia's efforts to secure port access through agreements with Eritrea and Somaliland have been interpreted by Somalia and other regional actors as provocations, raising tensions and creating opportunities for third-party interference in Ethiopia–Eritrea relations (House of Lords Library, 2025). Simultaneously, Eritrea's strategic alignments with Egypt and certain Middle Eastern states—including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran—provide it with external support that bolsters Asmara's bargaining position but can also exacerbate regional competition. The presence of competing regional actors creates overlapping pressure points: Ethiopia seeks to pursue a multipolar foreign policy focused on regional integration and trade diversification, whereas Eritrea continues to pursue a securitized and zero-sum approach to the region, prioritizing national defense and strategic leverage (Vertin, 2019; Plaut, 2023). These divergent strategies not only complicate the implementation of bilateral agreements but also heighten the risk of misperception and unintended escalation, as third-party actors may interpret routine defensive measures as aggressive posturing.

Historical grievances continue to inform current interactions. Eritrea's memory of past Ethiopian dominance, including the conflicts during the Derg regime and the TPLF era, underpins Asmara's strategic caution and skepticism toward Addis Ababa's intentions. The historical perception that Ethiopia's political transitions often ignore Eritrean security concerns amplifies Eritrea's reluctance to fully institutionalize cooperative frameworks, while Ethiopia's concern over Eritrea's potential interference in its internal affairs fuels mutual mistrust. This historical context is critical in understanding why gestures of goodwill, such as port access agreements and peace declarations, do not automatically translate into stable cooperation; they must be accompanied by sustained, reciprocal commitments that address structural imbalances and historical anxieties (Bereketeab, 2019; Otieno, 2018).

The economic dimension also shapes bilateral cooperation. Ethiopia's landlocked status makes access to Red Sea ports essential for its trade and national development strategy. The operationalization of access

Massawa, Eritrea's main port, located along the sea lane connecting Europe to the Persian Gulf and countries bordering the Indian Ocean. (Photo Credit: Erihistory)

to Assab and Massawa ports, along with logistical cooperation, requires detailed negotiation over customs, security, and revenue-sharing arrangements. Any ambiguity or lack of clarity in these arrangements risks creating friction, as Eritrea can leverage its control of port infrastructure as a bargaining tool. The interplay between economic imperatives and security concerns exemplifies the multi-dimensional nature of the challenges confronting the bilateral relationship (Stigant & Phelan, 2019).

The Political Economy of Landlockedness and Port Diplomacy in the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia's landlocked status constitutes not only a strategic and security dilemma but also a profound politico–economic constraint that shapes its development trajectory and foreign policy behaviour. Since Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia has relied overwhelmingly on the Port of Djibouti, through which over 90 per cent of its external trade transits. While this arrangement has provided relative stability, it has also generated structural vulnerabilities, including elevated logistics costs, exposure to single-corridor disruption, and limited bargaining leverage over transit fees and infrastructure governance (World Bank, 2024; UNCTAD, 2023). These constraints have transformed port access from a technical trade issue into a core national security concern, reinforcing Ethiopia's incentive to diversify maritime outlets.

Within this context, Eritrea's ports of Assab and Massawa represent latent economic and strategic assets whose significance extends beyond bilateral relations. From Ethiopia's perspective, access to Eritrean ports offers the prospect of reduced transit costs, enhanced supply-chain resilience, and strategic redundancy in an increasingly volatile Red Sea environment. For Eritrea, however, port access is not merely an economic opportunity but a source of geopolitical leverage that can be mobilized to offset asymmetries in population size, economic capacity, and regional influence. This asymmetry has historically encouraged a securitized, zero-sum approach to port diplomacy, whereby access is treated as a concession rather than a mutually beneficial economic arrangement.

The failure to operationalize Assab and Massawa following the 2018 rapprochement illustrates the limitations of personalized diplomacy absent institutional frameworks. Effective port cooperation requires detailed agreements on customs administration, revenue-sharing, infrastructure investment, security coordination, and dispute resolution mechanisms. In the absence of such arrangements, Eritrea retains the ability to instrumentalize port access as a bargaining tool, while

Ethiopia remains exposed to strategic uncertainty. Comparative experiences from other landlocked states suggest that durable solutions emerge not from ad hoc political goodwill but from legally codified transit regimes embedded in regional and multilateral institutions (Mahdi, 2021; UNCTAD, 2023).

Moreover, Eritrea's domestic political economy complicates port cooperation. Decades of militarization, limited private-sector development, and the legacy of international sanctions have constrained Asmara's capacity to modernize port infrastructure and absorb large-scale commercial traffic. While port access could generate revenue and employment, it also carries political risks for the Eritrean leadership, including increased external exposure, demands for regulatory transparency, and pressures for economic liberalization. These internal considerations help explain Eritrea's cautious and selective engagement with port diplomacy, reinforcing the need for confidence-building mechanisms that align economic incentives with regime security concerns.

From a peacebuilding perspective, reframing port access as a shared development project rather than a zero-sum strategic asset is critical. Joint corridor authorities, co-managed logistics zones, and third-party guarantees potentially involving IGAD, the African Union, or multilateral development banks could help depoliticize transit arrangements and reduce the scope for coercive leverage. Such institutionalized interdependence would not eliminate political tensions, but it could raise the costs of conflict and embed cooperation within durable economic structures.

Misperception, Proxy Politics, and Regional Pressures

Misperception between Ethiopia and Eritrea remains a major source of instability. Eritrea perceives the persistence of TPLF elements as an existential threat, while Ethiopia views Eritrea's regional militarism as revisionist (Plaut, 2023). Mahdi's comparative lens on Afghanistan's insecurity and Armenia's border politics illuminates this dynamic: when strategic communication collapses, domestic actors exploit ambiguity to justify militarization. Proxy engagements—such as alleged Eritrean support for militias in northern Ethiopia (Reuters, 2023)—further erode trust. Regional rivalries involving Egypt, Sudan, and Gulf states exacerbate this environment, aligning with Mahdi's finding that landlocked insecurity is magnified in unstable regional systems.

A critical challenge in Ethiopia–Eritrea relations is the persistent divergence in perceptions between the two states and their respective domestic and proxy actors, which creates fertile ground for miscalculations and potential escalation. The intricacy of this issue originates from historical rivalries, conflicting strategic aims, and the complex dynamics of Ethiopia's internal political environment. Eritrea's perception of threats is strongly influenced by its historical experience of Ethiopian dominance and the persistent presence of Tigrayan political and military actors, particularly factions of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). From Asmara's perspective, the TPLF is not merely a domestic Ethiopian political adversary but an existential security threat whose resurgence could jeopardise Eritrea's sovereignty and strategic interests. This perception has motivated Eritrea to maintain a posture of vigilance and, at times, covert intervention to preempt any perceived threat from northern Ethiopian actors (Plaut, 2023; ICG, 2022).

In contrast, certain TPLF factions and other Ethiopian opposition groups may misinterpret Eritrea's strategic aversion to overt warfare as tacit support for their military initiatives or proxy actions. This misreading can embolden opposition actors to engage in hostilities that they cannot sustain independently, expecting Eritrean intervention to tip the balance in their favour. Such actions carry the inherent risk of triggering a broader conflict, potentially drawing Eritrea into confrontation, even when its strategic preference is limited engagement or deterrence rather than full-scale war (ICG, 2022). This dynamic highlights the

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Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Part X explicitly recognizes the right of landlocked states to access and transit through the territory of coastal states to reach the sea. Article 125 affirms that such access should be exercised "by mutual agreement" and in a manner that respects the sovereignty of transit states while preventing arbitrary obstruction

asymmetry between Eritrea's cautious strategic posture, focused on safeguarding national security, and the more opportunistic calculations of domestic Ethiopian factions, who may act on misperceptions of alliance or support.

The misalignment of expectations is further complicated by Ethiopia's federal structure and ongoing domestic political fragmentation. The multiplicity of actors, including regional forces such as Fano and the OLF-Shenie, creates a scenario where localised conflicts can escalate beyond their initial scale, particularly if one party interprets Eritrean engagement as legitimising their operations. In such circumstances, the risk of inadvertent escalation becomes significant, as actions undertaken by subnational actors may provoke disproportionate responses at the state level, both from Ethiopia's federal government and from Eritrea (Plaut, 2023).

Regional dynamics exacerbate these risks. Eritrea's strategic partnerships with Egypt and certain Gulf states, coupled with Ethiopia's diplomatic engagements in the Red Sea corridor and Horn of Africa integration initiatives, create overlapping spheres of influence in which misperception can easily take root. For example, Eritrea may interpret Ethiopian moves to diversify port access or deepen regional integration as potential encirclement or economic marginalization, prompting precautionary measures that are misread in Addis Ababa as aggressive posturing. Similarly, external actors may amplify tensions by providing selective intelligence or political signals, further increasing the likelihood of miscalculation.

Historical memory plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions. Both Eritrean and Ethiopian actors operate within narratives constructed over decades of conflict, including the 1998–2000 border war and earlier struggles for national consolidation. These narratives reinforce zero-sum thinking and heighten sensitivity to perceived slights or strategic maneuvers by the other party. Even seemingly minor incidents such as troop movements near disputed boundaries, public rhetoric, or unilateral economic initiatives can trigger a disproportionate reaction if they resonate with historical fears or grievances (Dias, 2011; Steves, 2003).

International Law, Cooperative Sovereignty, and Corridor-Based Peacebuilding

The sustainability of Ethiopia–Eritrea cooperation ultimately depends on anchoring bilateral arrangements within established international and regional legal frameworks. While political declarations and peace accords can signal intent, they lack durability unless translated into legally binding mechanisms that constrain unilateral action and provide predictable rules of engagement (Stigant & Phelan, 2019; UNCTAD, 2023). For landlocked states, international law offers a critical though often underutilized foundation for mitigating structural vulnerability and promoting cooperative sovereignty.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Part X explicitly recognizes the right of landlocked states to access and transit through the territory of coastal states to reach the sea. Article 125 affirms that such access should be exercised "by mutual agreement" and in a manner that respects the sovereignty of transit states while preventing arbitrary obstruction (United Nations, 1982). Although Eritrea is not a party to UNCLOS, the principles enshrined in Part X reflect broader customary norms that inform international expectations regarding transit rights and obligations (UNCTAD, 2023; UN-OHRLLS, 2022). Anchoring Ethiopia–Eritrea port arrangements in these norms could help depersonalize negotiations and reduce the scope for strategic misperception.

At the regional level, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides an emerging legal framework for transit facilitation, customs harmonization, and corridor development. The Protocol on Trade in Goods

emphasizes the reduction of non-tariff barriers and the promotion of seamless cross-border trade objectives directly relevant to Ethiopia's landlocked condition (AfCFTA Secretariat, 2021). Similarly, IGAD's regional infrastructure and connectivity initiatives offer platforms through which Ethiopia and Eritrea could multilateralize port cooperation, thereby reducing bilateral asymmetry and embedding their relationship within a wider web of regional interdependence (IGAD, 2022).

The concept of cooperative sovereignty is particularly salient in this context. Rather than viewing sovereignty as absolute control over territory and infrastructure, cooperative sovereignty emphasizes shared management, joint oversight, and mutually agreed limitations on unilateral action in pursuit of collective gains (Keohane, 2002; African Union Commission, 2023). Applied to Ethiopia–Eritrea relations, this approach would entail the establishment of joint port and corridor authorities, standardized legal regimes for transit, and third-party monitoring or arbitration mechanisms to manage disputes. Such arrangements do not erode sovereignty; rather, they enhance it by increasing predictability, reducing conflict risk, and enabling both states to extract long-term benefits from cooperation (World Bank, 2024; UNCTAD, 2023).

Importantly, corridor-based cooperation also carries peacebuilding dividends beyond the economic sphere. Institutionalized transit regimes create constituencies traders, transport workers, local communities, and investors whose livelihoods depend on stability and open borders (International Crisis Group, 2024). Over time, these constituencies can generate bottom-up pressure against renewed militarization and contribute to the normalization of relations. In the Horn of Africa, where historical grievances and securitized narratives remain potent, embedding peace within legal and economic institutions offers a pathway to transform symbolic reconciliation into durable coexistence.

Conclusion

The Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship illustrates the dilemmas of landlocked geopolitics. Structural asymmetry, mistrust, and regional instability sustain fragility, yet they also offer opportunities for transformative cooperation. Applying the Security and Foreign Policy of Landlocked States framework reveals that peacebuilding in the Horn requires not only leadership diplomacy but also institutionalized interdependence. If Ethiopia and Eritrea operationalize corridor diplomacy and cooperative sovereignty, they can redefine their futures from adversarial neighbors to strategic partners, anchoring regional stability and prosperity.

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Corporations, Governments and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Race: Towards a People-Centered AI

By Edmund Pamba, Jeremy Oronje, Bravin Onditi and Husna Maalim

Abstract

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has sparked a global competition among corporations and governments, but this "AI race" is leaving the interests of people behind. The current model of AI development is primarily driven by the pursuit of profit and market dominance by tech companies and the geopolitical ambitions of power and national security by leading states such as the US and China. This article argues that a people-centered approach is essential to steer AI toward a more equitable and sustainable future. Corporations, led by a handful of tech giants, are focused on maximizing cost-efficiency and building foundational platforms, often sidestepping societal concerns about job displacement, algorithmic bias, and data privacy. Their "responsible AI" frameworks are frequently used as a tool to manage public image and preempt meaningful regulation, rather than as a genuine commitment to the public good. Similarly, governments are competing for AI dominance as a strategic resource, leading to a concentration of power and the adoption of security-focused AI systems that can erode individual freedoms and democratic norms. To counter these trends, the article advocates for a middle ground that prioritizes human rights, fairness, and the well-being of communities. This involves a collaborative effort between governments and the private sector to establish an "AI transition" plan, which includes reskilling programs to help populations adapt to job automation. It also calls for greater global cooperation and multilateral partnerships to liberalize AI development, ensure equitable access, and create ethical frameworks that protect human rights, promote transparency, and restore the balance between security and individual freedoms.

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI), refers to the ability of computer systems to perform tasks that require human intelligence like learning, problem-solving and decision-making; it involves building machines which operate on limited intelligence as opposed to the general-purpose intelligence humans possess. AI operates using narrow or specialized intelligence designed to perform specific functions with remarkable speed and accuracy. It adapts human algorithms and can recognize patterns in large datasets, predict outcomes and even engage conversationally through natural language processing as seen in virtual assistants and chatbots (Russell & Norvig, 2022).

AI was initially conceptualized in the mid-20th century and evolved from simple rule-based systems to advanced machine learning algorithms and neural networks that power everything from digital assistants to autonomous vehicles (Russell & Norvig, 2021). Over time, AI has witnessed transformative changes driven by intelligent automation and data analytics. AI technologies are active across a wide array of sectors, including healthcare, finance, agriculture, transportation, education, and defense systems, boosting economic productivity, scientific advancement, and growth in military power. Given the impact of AI on societies, the technology has attracted strategic competition from global powers seeking AI dominance, especially the United States of America (US) and China, and by extension the European Union (EU) and Russia, among others. Governments and private sector players – particularly tech companies and corporate firms are increasingly competing to shape AI development and governance.

This article makes the central argument that in the wake of the scramble for AI development and governance, the people have been left behind. AI development models are currently exclusive to the interests of tech companies and governments, but the net effects of AI on populations are likely to be harmful even as governments

An illustration depicting the evolving balance of collaboration and competition shaping the future of AI governance (Photo Credit: Maxwell Scott)

and companies are focused on maximizing strategic and operational goals. The article thus argues for a middle ground based on a people-centered approach for AI development and governance to transform the current "AI race", which is majorly dominated by government and corporate interests.

Corporations, Profits and AI

The current era of AI is defined by a frantic and high-stakes corporate scramble. This race, fueled by unprecedented levels of private investment, is not primarily a scientific pursuit of knowledge but a strategic competition for market dominance. It is driven by two core objectives: the maximization of profit and the construction of dominant technology platforms. In this frenetic pursuit, this section argues, broader societal interests and the well-being of people are not merely secondary considerations; they are systematically sidestepped. Corporate actors treat public concerns less as a moral compass and more as operational hurdles to be managed, mitigated, or circumvented in the relentless drive for competitive advantage (Naisho, 2025).

The foundational driver of the corporate AI scramble is the pursuit of cost-efficiency and profit. AI is viewed as a revolutionary tool for achieving core business objectives, increasing operational efficiency and securing market-beating returns. The assignment of tasks to AI through automation of jobs, optimization of supply chains, or personalization of marketing is evaluated on a single primary metric, its contribution to the bottom-line (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). This relentless focus on profit inherently necessitates sidestepping complex societal questions. Concerns about technological unemployment, the ethics of algorithmic decision-making, or the quality of AI-mediated work are often framed as an externality cost to be borne by society rather than the corporation. As argued by Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014), while the technologies may create immense wealth, there is no inherent economic law ensuring this wealth is distributed equitably. The logic of profit maximization, therefore, puts corporate interests on a direct collision course with a people-centered agenda, prioritizing speed and shareholder value over deliberation and social welfare.

According to the World Economic Forum, around 85 million jobs are expected to be displaced by AI by 2025, particularly those involving repetitive and routine tasks. McKinsey estimates that 45% of current tasks could already be automated using existing AI technologies, placing jobs with predictable workflows at higher risk. However, this shift is also creating new avenues for employment, with 97 million new roles projected to emerge in areas such as AI development, data analysis, and technology management. As companies seek

greater efficiency and profitability, 35% have adopted AI specifically to reduce labor costs. Reflecting this momentum, global spending on AI technologies soared to $300 billion in 2025, underscoring a continued rise in investment and integration of automation across the global economy.

The strategic battlefield for the AI scramble is the creation of foundational platforms. Corporations such as Google, Baidu, Zhipu AI, Microsoft, and OpenAI among many others, are not just building products; they are constructing the essential infrastructure upon which future innovation will depend. By developing massive foundation models and controlling access through APIs and cloud services, these firms aim to win the scramble not just for one application but for the entire ecosystem. This strategy of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017) is designed to create powerful network effects and technological lock-in, ensuring long-term market control.

The battle for platform dominance is perhaps the most significant way in which the people are sidestepped. The architecture of these platforms, their inherent biases, their data privacy policies, and their very capabilities are determined by a small, homogenous group of engineers and executives within a handful of corporations. Once built and widely adopted, these foundational systems become deeply embedded in the fabric of society, yet there is no formal mechanism for public input or democratic governance in their design or deployment (Autor, 2015). The platform model centralizes power and decision-making, effectively sidestepping the principles of public accountability and co-creation from the outset.

Faced with growing criticism, corporate actors in the AI scramble have developed a sophisticated apparatus for managing their public image: the corporate "Responsible AI" framework. These frameworks, with their published principles of fairness, accountability, and transparency, present a facade of ethical diligence. However, they function less as a genuine commitment to the public good and more as a strategic tool for sidestepping meaningful accountability.

These initiatives are a form of "ethics washing" (Metcalf, Moss & Boyd, 2019), designed to placate public concern and pre-empt binding government regulation, thereby allowing the profit- and platform-driven scramble to continue unabated. They allow corporations to control the narrative around AI ethics while avoiding substantive changes to their core business models. For example, a company might promote a principle of "fairness" while continuing to profit from data-gathering practices that perpetuate societal inequality (Zuboff, 2019). Critical issues such as the planetary costs of computation or exploitative labor in the AI supply chain are neatly sidestepped in these polished corporate pronouncements (Crawford, 2021). Large technology companies such as Google, Amazon, Meta and Microsoft dominate AI. They have immense access to data and computational power that has allowed them to advance. AI tools are often optimized to promote user engagement and advertising rather than social well-being. Such developments are primarily driven by the pursuit of profit and market share (Zuboff, 2019).

Governments, Power and AI

AI has joined the category of strategic resources. The effects of AI on economic growth, national security capabilities and military power have transformed the strategic relevance of AI from an output of scientific progress, to an input of national power. The development and governance of AI has thus become a sphere for scramble and geopolitical competition among the leading global powers—the US and China, and by extension EU and Russia with each power keen on becoming the global leader in AI, as a pathway to geopolitical dominance. The Russian President Vladimir Putin has described AI as "... the future not only for Russia, but for all humankind. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world" (Lindsay, 2023). Putin's words accurately capture the global powers' AI ambitions, especially dominance and control, but gloss over the inadvertent effects of the AI race on global populations. This concentration of power undermines democracy and increases the risk of social manipulation through AI-driven misinformation and political interference.

> The current era of AI is defined by a frantic and high-stakes corporate scramble. This race, fueled by unprecedented levels of private investment, is not primarily a scientific pursuit of knowledge but a strategic competition for market dominance

The foundational driver of the corporate AI scramble is the pursuit of cost-efficiency and profit. AI is viewed as a revolutionary tool for achieving core business objectives, increasing operational efficiency and securing market-beating returns

The AI race has exposed the leading powers as focused on blocking each other's ascension to AI dominance, while blind to the harmful gatekeeping and protectionist policies and measures they adopt for AI development and governance. Primarily, such policies are limiting the spread of AI across the world for the benefit of all of humanity. As AI technologies increasingly continue to shape critical aspects of the economy, governance and also daily life, there is a dire need to liberalize AI to ensure that it is inclusive, ethical and globally beneficial. Currently, the trajectory of AI advancement is mostly dependent on a few dominant corporations and powerful states like the United States and China. These countries possess the required capital and technological infrastructure and the vast datasets to lead the field. This centralization brings about many risks, especially the monopolization of innovation, unequal access to AI's benefits and the reinforcement of geopolitical tensions (Floridi, 2020). A liberalized AI ecosystem ensures a diversity of thought and encourages the development of AI systems that reflect a broader range of cultural, economic and social contexts. It also alleviates the dangers of technological dependency.

The AI race is also changing the nature of democracies and transforming governance systems across the world by blurring the lines between security on the one hand, and freedoms, rights and the sovereignty of the individual on the other (Csernatoni, 2024). The current AI models seem mostly built to achieve security goals as opposed to expanding freedoms, rights and the sovereignty of the individual. As democracies increasingly deploy AI-enabled facial, voice and gait recognition tools and inter-operationalize them with geolocation data, they achieve significantly enhanced surveillance and security outcomes, but undemocratically breach individual spaces and de-personify and disempower their populations. An overbearing state emerges, and previously people-focused power relations into a "state versus the people" relationship, which is now replacing democratic policing models.

The integration of AI particularly into social media platforms, has increasingly been exploited to disseminate misinformation, disinformation and propaganda, which is spiralling beyond governmental oversight and societal ability to manage the consequences on social cohesion and political stability (Csernationi, 2024). While such use of AI is destabilizing, the lack of a middle ground is a constant risk to the long-term stability of affected countries. This is because governments are responding by increasingly adopting laws and norms which limit freedoms online and promote suppression in local jurisdictions (Shahbaz & Vesteinsson, 2022). The United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany and the European Union (EU) are among the leading democracies which have adopted stricter regulations and laws to govern speech online (Accardo, 2025).

Algorithms at the core of AI technology have been programmed in these jurisdictions in cooperation with tech companies, to identify "harmful" speech—mostly considered "hate speech"—and the "perpetrators". Digital censorship has increased, with democratic governments heavily deploying AI technologies to limit public access to certain information and public debate around certain issues of national importance (Shahbaz & Vesteinsson, 2022). Unlike the control of speech, the effect of digital censorship can be at the global scale, given the global reach of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok.

The Middle Ground: A People-Centered AI Development

Currently, tech corporations are the leading actors in AI development, with a keen focus on developing technologies that maximize their revenue, often at the expense of developing technologies that are people-centered. In principle, a people-centered approach in the development of AI should prioritize human rights, fairness, inclusivity and the well-being of communities (Frank et al., 2019). At its core, a people-centered approach puts people before profits and power, ensuring

that developed technologies serve human needs; this is especially important in a contemporary world that is increasingly embracing the use of AI across multiple sectors, with job automation increasingly becoming the trend across sectors. There is thus the need for the world, or at least the leading AI economies, to adopt an "AI transition" plan which allows for populations to acquire "future resilient" skills, in a manner which is sustainably paced with the automation of jobs, as a middle ground.

Without prioritizing human values, AI would risk harming the very society it is meant to help. It may reinforce existing inequalities by embedding racial, gender, and economic biases into decision-making processes and may lead to widespread surveillance, data exploitation, and loss of individual autonomy especially when controlled by powerful corporations or authoritarian governments. A recent assessment of AI development, precisely by technological corporations, reveals a trend of leveraging on global consumer trends to maximize profits. Technological corporations have especially leveraged on the rising internet and social media penetration rates. According to Davenport (2025), the global social media penetration rate stood at 5.24 billion, accounting for 63.9 per cent of the world's population. As of July 2025, the leading platforms that recorded active social media usage were Facebook (3.07 billion), YouTube (2.50 billion), Instagram and WhatsApp (2.0 billion). Recognizing the potential of AI in growing their user base, the aforementioned have been keen to set up their private AI research labs, primarily with the intention of enhancing user engagement. The latter has further contributed to an "AI race" among the various social media platforms.

Social media corporations such as Meta for instance, deploy AI-algorithms across its Facebook and Instagram platforms to recommend users and groups, personalize content feeds, moderate harmful content and target users with advertisements. According to the Meta Annual report (2022), the firm generated over USD 113 billion from advertisements alone, which were largely driven by AI-algorithms. According to the same report, the revenue generated from advertisements accounted for 97 per cent of Meta's total revenue. TikTok, which has its own AI research Lab as well ("the Seed team"), runs a "For You"

AI reshaping social media marketing through automation, precision audience targeting, personalized content, and real-time analytics. (Photo Credit: EvinceDev/Kulin Dave)

Emerging economies across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia are increasingly shaping AI development, adoption, governance, and geopolitics beyond the US–China rivalry. (Photo Credit: Aspen Institute)

feed, which heavily relies on machine learning to monitor users' real-time engagement and curate customized feeds. As a result, TikTok with 1.6 billion users globally records one of the highest average global social media usage per person per day, recording an average of 52 minutes. YouTube on the other hand, which is operated by Google, attributed 70 per cent of its watch time to algorithm-recommended content (Google, 2021). These separate incidents of different technology corporations highlight the role of corporate-led AI development in enhancing social media user interaction. The latter is often done at the expense of fostering addictive user behavior and deepening information echo chambers, a sharp contrast to what a people-centered AI-development model should look like.

Equally, there is a need for governments to partner with the private sector players, particularly the tech corporations and other industry players, to establish mechanisms to transition their populations into the AI era, for instance, through re-modelling the job training systems to mainstream "future resilient skills" (Jyotishi, 2020). Such a step would mitigate the immediate effects of AI on employment and livelihoods across various sectors, particularly manufacturing, agriculture and healthcare. In 2016, having spearheaded automation of the American industry, for example, to allay anxiety among American workers, the US President Barack Obama's AI transition vision, whereby he urged for the "retraining of populations for the jobs of the future" (Jyotishi, 2020). President Obama's vision for future resilient jobs accurately captures the urgency with which global AI development should be "peopled" to balance between the interests of the corporations and the societies. Essentially, the people-centered AI development approach provides a transition ramp for populations in the most vulnerable sectors and allows for re-skilling, which expands the human role in future economies and societies.

The geopolitical competition for AI dominance, particularly between the US and China, is limiting the global spread of AI for global development through protectionist measures and intellectual property regimes at the national level. This is creating two centers or capitals of AI (the US and China), which the rest of the world is virtually cut off from perhaps until one AI pole gains dominance over the other, to be able to determine the future development and spread of AI. Global and multilateral partnerships and cooperation for AI development and governance are necessary for global AI diffusion. Such efforts will provide a formidable people-centered AI development approach, being inclusive and allowing global participation and equitable access to AI technologies. Global cooperation and multilateral

partnerships are also critical for establishing global models for AI governance, co-created between AI powerhouses and the rest of the world.

Conclusion

The current model of AI development which is dominated by the leading tech corporations such as Google, Meta, Microsoft, OpenAI, Baidu, and Zhipu AI among others, has marginalized the interests of the people from the design stage to operationalization. In consequence, AI innovations are mostly serving the interests of the capitalistic corporate world, mainly productivity, profit and cost-efficiency, while undercutting the livelihood and income outcomes for populations being rendered redundant by AI. Aggressive AI-enabled personalized marketing, mostly deployed through social media and popular search engines, is also trampling over societal values by driving up consumerism and commodifying human networks.

Global powers, especially the US and China should provide global leadership in the space of AI development to enable globalized participation and spread of AI technologies across the world for global development. Similarly, in charting AI governance through global and multilateral partnerships, reviewing the use of extreme versions of intrusive security-focused AI which have personified populations and adversely changed the nature of democracies and power relations in the affected countries is necessary to restore individual freedoms and democratic policing.

The current model of AI development which is dominated by the leading tech corporations such as Google, Meta, Microsoft, OpenAI, Baidu, and Zhipu AI among others, has marginalized the interests of the people from the design stage to operationalization

Given the current gap in governance of AI globally, there is an urgent need for leading actors in AI, corporates and governments, to partner and include the people in AI development, to liberalize and humanize AI innovations. Global partnerships should steer the development of ethical frameworks for the development and deployment of AI to protect human rights, protect livelihoods and incomes, ensure transparency, and promote accountability. Embracing the middle ground will create a future of technology where humans are not isolated targets of scientific advancement and their livelihoods are not vulnerable to the ever-changing technologies.

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Conflict by Proxy: Gulf Rivalries and Strategic Influence in the Horn of Africa

By Solomon N. Kimaita

Abstract

Over the past two decades, the Horn of Africa has emerged as a strategic arena for Gulf states seeking to extend their power and influence beyond the Arabian Peninsula. While Gulf states defend their continued infiltration in the Horn of Africa on grounds of conflict intervention, a more critical analysis reveals the extension of their regional supremacy rivalries and economic and security imperatives as the main motivating factors. Endowed with mineral-rich countries, proximity to strategic maritime routes, extensive arable land, and opportunities for military expansion, the Horn of Africa has been opportune ground for Gulf states' pursuits. This strategic penetration has produced a complex intersection of external rivalries with local conflicts. Rivalry among dominant Gulf countries has shaped conflict dynamics by influencing local actors, deepening internal divisions and complicating chances of amicable resolution of conflicts in the fragile states in the Horn of Africa. By interrogating the hidden agendas underlying Gulf interventions, this article examines how Gulf supremacy rivalries shape conflict dynamics in the Horn of Africa and assesses the subsequent impacts of such interventions. To achieve sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa, the article recommends transparent and inclusive interventions that transcend elite interests and prioritise community-level benefits.

Introduction

In a narrow sense, the Horn of Africa (HoA) comprises four countries – Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea – while in a broader sense, it includes Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda and Kenya (Long, 2024). The region is troubled by deep-rooted inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Somalia, for instance, has endured political instability since the collapse of its central government in the early 1990s. Despite concerted stabilisation efforts in the recent past, the country continues to struggle with persistent separatist movements, most notably the self-declared Republic of Somaliland and the semi-autonomous Puntland. Ethiopia, on the other hand, contends with domestic instability in the Tigray region, which has had significant spill-over effects on the security and politics of the neighbouring countries. Additionally, Ethiopia is also engaged in numerous territorial disputes with her neighbours, with allegations of infringing on Somalia's sovereignty; contestations over transboundary resources with Sudan; and cross-border ethnic rivalries and military supremacy battles with Eritrea. Sudan continues to live through a protracted transition characterised by attempts of the military to reassert its power in a contested political space following the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir. Both Sudan and South Sudan have experienced deep factionalisms, which are part of the causes of domestic and regional instabilities (Wilson, 2025; Dubale, 2024). The Gulf countries have increasingly viewed these developments as threats to their security and economic interests, necessitating their interventions.

Notwithstanding the numerous conflicts, the region carries significant geopolitical and economic advantages. Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the HoA is strategically located at the crossroads of critical global trade routes that link the African, Asian and European markets. Moreover, it is richly endowed with natural resources, vast arable land, a huge consumer market and enormous industrial potential. According to Wilson (2025), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that 15% of global trade passes through this route, bolstering the region's strategic relevance in global geopolitics. These factors make the HoA attractive to external actors, both regional and international, seeking to enhance their influence and power. To the Gulf countries, in particular, the HoA remains a geostrategic hotspot for their economic and security pursuits.

Map of the Persian Gulf and part of the Gulf of Oman (with bathymetry), including the Strait of Hormuz (Photo Credit: Nations Online Project)

The Gulf comprises the seven countries – Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – bordering the Persian Gulf in the Arabian Peninsula. Of the seven, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar stand out, not only as the political and economic heavyweights, but also as the most ambitious in expanding their sphere of influence outside the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This quest to expand their influence is largely linked to the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings in MENA between 2010 and 2012, and the subsequent fall of authoritarian regimes in North Africa.

The United States (US), their major ally, was in full support of the uprisings, for instance, in Egypt and Tunisia, and welcomed the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the two countries (Shiferaw, 2016). It was, therefore, clear to the Gulf monarchs that their national interests and that of their major ally were no longer synchronised. Henceforth, Gulf countries have embarked on diversifying their political and economic allies and assumed a more proactive role in regional affairs, all in a bid to improve their international relevance. Given the geographical proximity and cultural similitude with the HoA, the latter became a prime site for Gulf's strategic alliances and an arena to pursue its interests.

It is on this basis that, in the last two decades, the Gulf countries have stepped up their involvement in the HoA, notably in conflict intervention. Gulf countries consider their stability to be inextricably linked to that of the HoA, making it one of their strategic priorities. Lyammouri (2018) attributes the rise of the Gulf's prominence in the HoA to the conspicuous absence of traditional Western peace brokers, who have shown little or no interest in the protracted conflicts in the region. The challenge is compounded by the fact that the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have exhibited limited conflict response capacity, partly due to their operational and structural challenges. As such, the Gulf countries have seized the opportunity to fill in the vacuum, as underscored by their willingness to host some of the important peace summits regarding the HoA. According to Laako & Hatab (2024), the Gulf states have leveraged their financial resources and deep historical and cultural ties with the HoA to outpace other international actors as they position themselves as key mediators in the HoA.

Both regions recognise that peace and security are imperative for their political and economic well-being. They face shared security concerns emanating from armed conflicts, transnational terrorist networks and

the consequent humanitarian crises. Also, the Gulf is constantly concerned with the influx of forced migrants from the HoA due to the persistent conflicts (Kinkoh, 2024). It is also worth noting, as argued by Marangio (2024), that most countries engaging the HoA are mostly keen on safeguarding their economic interests, including access to natural resources. The Gulf is no exception to this. Over and above these shared interests, Gulf states have leveraged their shared history, culture, and Islamic values to advance their agenda and outwit their competitors in the HoA (Gaid, 2022). They have capitalised on the Islamic soft power approach to cut a niche in cultural cooperation and humanitarian and developmental assistance in the HoA. To a large extent, albeit controversially, this engagement has been mutually beneficial to the two regions.

On the one hand, the HoA is eager to collaborate with the Gulf, not only to address the contemporary security threats it contends with, but also to fill in their infrastructural deficits from the massive investments from the Gulf. On the other hand, apart from guaranteeing their domestic security through mitigating security threats in the HoA, the Gulf has benefited immensely through establishing new allies, diversifying their economies and positioning itself as an emerging regional and international stakeholder.

Gulf's Strategic Interests in the Horn of Africa

Gulf countries have played a significant role in promoting peace and stability in the HoA. This is evident through their initiatives in mediation and peace talks, supporting regional security programmes, training and equipping security personnel and enhancing security through diverse investments across various sectors. In 2023, Saudi Arabia played a significant role in clinching the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan. This was in an attempt to quell the conflict between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (ASF), the two warring factions in Sudan. Qatar, while mediating various inter-state conflicts in the HoA, has dared to venture where traditional power brokers have struggled. In 1999, she brokered an agreement between Sudan and Eritrea, restoring relations that had stalled since 1994. In the 2000s, Qatar was an intermediary between the warring factions in Somalia, between Djibouti and Eritrea (2008) and between Kenya and Somalia (2021). Saudi Arabia and the UAE were in the limelight for brokering the Jeddah Peace Agreement, restoring relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea (2018), two major rivals in the HoA (Kinkoh, 2024; Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2024). Although most of the initiatives have not been successful, they have contributed to enhancing the role of these states as important actors in international mediation.

Gulf countries have contributed to a more stable and secure environment in the HoA by supporting regional security frameworks. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have stepped up their efforts to secure strategic maritime routes, especially in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This is through the establishment of military outposts in Eritrea and Somaliland with the aim of containing piracy and terrorism. This increased military foothold not only enhances the Gulf's geopolitical influence but also responds to shared threats in the HoA and the Gulf. Gulf states have also been involved in training and equipping local security forces in the HoA. For example, the UAE has provided extensive support to the Puntland Maritime Police Force and Somaliland's military. Qatar has invested in training and equipping security forces in Somalia to enhance their capacity to combat piracy and terrorism. These efforts have been crucial in reinforcing regional security.

Moreover, Gulf countries have also invested significantly in developmental peace. This is by investing in projects aimed at improving infrastructure, healthcare and education in the HoA. Saudi Arabia, through the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), supports sectors in agribusiness, energy, mining, transport and tourism. Qatar has been involved in the construction of Hobyo Port in Somalia and funding the expansion of the Port of Mombasa in Kenya (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Kinkoh, 2024). These investments are important to the Gulf countries, as they help in diversifying their economies, and to the HoA, promoting sustainable peace

"On the one hand, the HoA is eager to collaborate with the Gulf, not only to address the contemporary security threats it contends with, but also to fill in their infrastructural deficits from the massive investments from the Gulf

by addressing some of the root causes of conflict, such as poverty and inadequate access to basic necessities.

However, the interventions have resulted in a mix of successes and failures. Gulf countries have a preference for bilateral over multilateral engagements. This has continually sidestepped important peace and conflict stakeholders in the region, hence minimising chances of successful and constructive conflict resolution. The Jeddah Peace Agreement, for instance, was negotiated in the absence of both the AU and IGAD. Unfortunately, it is on the verge of collapse (Gaid, 2022). Secondly, the interventions have not been immune to the longstanding rivalries between the Gulf countries, which has only served to exacerbate conflicts in the HoA. In Sudan, SAF enjoys support from Saudi Arabia, while the UAE sides with RSF. The conflicting agendas and hidden interests of the two Gulf countries have significantly stalled efforts to find a lasting solution (Chome, 2025; Mosley, 2021). In addition, Somalia has expressed strong reservations against Qatar's working relationship with Somaliland, the unrecognised breakaway republic in Somalia. Just like in Sudan, this has dimmed chances of positive peace in the already delicate Somalia.

Conflict intervention is not the primary goal of the Gulf countries' presence in the Horn of Africa; rather, it serves as a strategic façade for advancing their economic interests, which appear to be the central priority. Driven by their economic interests, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are emerging as generous development partners and the leading sources of capital and private sector engagement for the HoA. The UAE, for instance, has an estimated investment of $22 billion in non-security sectors in Sudan. South Sudan is the second largest recipient of UAE investments, primarily on an oil agreement valued at $13 billion. Saudi Arabia's investments in the HoA are approximated at $15.6 billion, mostly in energy, infrastructural and agricultural sectors. These investments are channelled through the SDF, with most of them concentrated in Djibouti. Although Qatar does not have significant investments in the HoA, it has a pending 40,000-hectare agricultural project in Kenya and is a major financier of the SAF in Sudan's conflict (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Donelli, 2020; Ayman, 2019). These Gulf states have gained relatively easy access to the region due to the non-conditional nature of their financial assistance, which, as Laako &

Map of the Horn of Africa states and the countries bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. (Photo Credit: GISGeography)

Hatab (2024) and Shiferaw (2016) note, does not require economic or political reforms, unlike Western aid, nor is it primarily resource-extractive like China's. This approach aligns well with the preferences of many Horn of Africa governments, which are in dire need of funding but often unable or unwilling to meet Western donor requirements.

Despite the preceding observations, Chome (2025) underscores the transactional, interest-driven, and personalised nature of relationships between key conflict actors in the Horn of Africa (HoA) and Gulf commercial elites—often operating under the guise of powerbrokers. Gulf states have secured and sustained loyalty from warring factions in the HoA using petrodollar diplomacy, while these factions, in turn, have perpetuated violence using the same financial support. This dynamic casts the HoA as a political marketplace where Gulf commercial interests consistently overshadow the pursuit of sustainable peace. Such transactional engagement has marginalised formal diplomatic efforts and undermined peace initiatives led by regional bodies like the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Wilson (2025) and Mosley (2021) contend that this approach extends beyond traditional conflict intervention. Gulf states are also focused on securing maritime trade routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, thereby creating favourable commercial conditions for their investments in the HoA. By expanding into sectors such as logistics, agriculture, and infrastructure, Gulf countries seek to diversify their economies and reduce dependence on oil revenues, which have steadily declined since 2014 (Ayman, 2019).

Gulf Supremacy Rivalries and Conflict Dynamics in the Horn of Africa

The contemporary rivalry among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar traces its roots to the political upheavals of the 2011 Arab Spring, which revealed divergent visions for regional order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Central to this rivalry is a contest for leadership within the Sunni Arab world, compounded by stark differences in positions on political Islam. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are firmly opposed to Islamist movements, viewing the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar groups as existential threats to both domestic and regional stability. Their response to the Arab Spring reflected a coordinated effort to suppress Islamist political influence (Hilde, 2019). Notably, the UAE has spearheaded an international campaign framing political Islam as a driver of instability and a security risk to the Gulf region (Long, 2024). In contrast, Qatar has openly supported Islamist movements and cultivated close ties with Turkey, positioning itself as a patron of political Islam. Its hosting of Islamist leaders contributed to a diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, culminating in the 2017 Gulf diplomatic rift (Larsen & Stepputat, 2019). Economically, the three states are locked in a parallel competition over diversification strategies focused on logistics, aviation, and maritime infrastructure. For example, Qatar's expanding global presence in aviation and shipping has challenged the UAE's long-standing dominance in those sectors. These overlapping ideological and economic rivalries have evolved into a multidimensional contest for regional influence, one that directly shapes conflict trajectories and political outcomes in the Horn of Africa.

Somalia is perhaps the most visible arena of Gulf rivalry. During the GCC crisis (2017), Somalia's political system split along Gulf-aligned lines. Qatar and Turkey invested heavily in Somalia's central government in Mogadishu, providing political finance, military aid, and institutional support (Mishra, 2019; Long, 2024). In contrast, the UAE established relations with breakaway federal states – Somaliland, Puntland, and Jubaland – thereby undermining the central government's efforts at building national unity. The 2018 seizure of UAE funds in Mogadishu and the subsequent withdrawal of their trainers further heightened tensions (International Crisis Group, 2018). As Mwangi (2024) submits, such alignments deepen factionalism and erode the prospects for sustainable peace, only exposing Somalia to further external manipulation. On the same note, Sudan offers another important arena where Gulf states' presence has been experienced heavily. Prior to the ouster of Omar al-Bashir, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were key supporters of his regime. Following his fall, they extended support to the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to deter the rise of a civilian government with perceived Islamist linkages (Freer, 2022). Despite subsequent Western pressure moderating their influence, their involvement strengthened military dominance and complicated Sudan's transition.

Further, Qatar's role as mediator in the Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute illustrates how Gulf rivalries directly impact local conflict dynamics. The sudden withdrawal of Qatar's peacekeepers in 2017, which was triggered by the GCC crisis, created a security vacuum that increased the risk of military escalation between the two neighbouring

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countries (Lyammouri, 2018; Kinkoh, 2024). The 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement, brokered in Jeddah by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, marked a notable moment of Gulf diplomatic activism (Mishra, 2019). The UAE's pledge of $3 billion to Ethiopia and its military presence in Eritrea brought to the fore its broader maritime strategy. Qatar's earlier influence in Djibouti and mediation roles declined significantly after the diplomatic fallout with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Moreover, the Yemen conflict expanded Gulf rivalries into the HoA through military recruitment, port access deals, and political alignments. Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti became entangled in the Saudi-UAE coalition (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2024; Shiferaw, 2016), linking domestic politics in the HoA to external geopolitical agendas.

The HoA increasingly mirrors the ideological and political divisions of the Gulf itself. The region has become an arena for Gulf rivalries and proxy wars. This has led to prolonged political instabilities by introducing external dynamics that favour conflict persistence. The HoA's vulnerability to Gulf infiltration owes to its fragile political systems. Notably, the resulting alignments in Somalia worsened internal divisions, empowering breakaway federal states to defy the central government, thereby undermining national unity goals. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar has become a defining feature of the HoA's conflict and security landscape. While Gulf states have occasionally contributed to diplomatic breakthroughs, such as the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement, their competitive interventions more often fragment domestic politics, weaken regional governance mechanisms, militarise strategic maritime routes, and embolden authoritarian actors. As Freer (2022) asks whether Gulf states are cooperating or competing in the Horn, the evidence strongly suggests the dominance of competitive dynamics. These conditions collectively undermine the prospects for sustainable peace and regional stability.

Impact of the Gulf's Conflict Intervention in the Horn of Africa

Gulf rivalries have repeatedly contributed to the prolongation and complexity of conflicts across the Horn of Africa. The 2017 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis polarised the region along the Saudi Arabia–UAE versus Qatar–Turkey axis, further destabilising already fragile political landscapes in Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Sudan. Eritrea and Djibouti's alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE led to Qatar's abrupt withdrawal of peacekeepers, creating a security vacuum that reignited tensions between the two countries. Although the Gulf-brokered 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was hailed as a diplomatic breakthrough, Gaid (2022) notes that it reshaped Ethiopia's internal political dynamics in ways that indirectly contributed to the eruption of the Tigray conflict. The UAE's provision of drones and military equipment to the Ethiopian government further intensified the conflict, shifting battlefield dynamics and prolonging hostilities. In Somalia, competing Gulf alliances deepened political fragmentation: the UAE supported federal member states while Qatar backed the central government, fostering rival power centres that undermined national reconciliation efforts (Donelli, 2020; Hilde, 2019). In each of these contexts, Gulf involvement has seldom addressed root causes of conflict; rather, it has entrenched factional divisions and sustained cycles of violence across the region.

Gulf states often engage in the HoA through elite-driven, personalised bilateral diplomacy that bypasses established regional institutional frameworks. This approach undermines governance by empowering rebel groups and authoritarian leaders, encouraging patronage politics, and weakening formal state institutions. In Somalia, the UAE's direct engagement with Somaliland, Puntland, and other breakaway federal states ignited constitutional disputes and weakened the country's fragile federal structure. Qatar's political and financial

support for particular Somali leaders further reinforced elite competition, consolidating power in narrow networks rather than strengthening state institutions. Similar patterns emerged in Sudan, where Gulf support for competing military factions eroded chances for a smooth transition and reduced prospects for democratic consolidation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Lyammouri, 2018). Ultimately, these interventions dilute sovereign governance, fragment national authority, and distort political incentives, often pushing leaders toward short-term survival strategies rather than institutional development.

Gulf geopolitical rivalry has reshaped alliances and produced new regional arrangements that destabilise the HoA. For instance, Saudi Arabia's Red Sea security strategy involves Djibouti and Eritrea, while the UAE has expanded economic and security partnerships with Ethiopia, as seen in recent disputes surrounding Ethiopia's Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. The region has thus become a theatre for Gulf competition, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE seeking to counter Qatar's influence while Qatar capitalises on mediation and its financial capabilities to expand its footprint. Somalia's attempt to remain neutral during the GCC crisis provoked retaliatory measures from the UAE, disrupting security cooperation and aggravating internal political tensions (Mahmood, 2020; Carbone, 2020). These evolving external alignments contribute to a volatile peace and security environment where domestic disputes easily escalate into regional crises. As Gulf states reshape alliances based on shifting geopolitical priorities, the HoA remains vulnerable to external shocks that undermine long-term regional stability.

One of the most consequential outcomes of Gulf involvement is the rapid militarisation of the HoA and the Red Sea corridor. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have pursued military installations in Eritrea, Somaliland, Puntland, Djibouti, and on the Red Sea (Donelli, 2020; Mwangi, 2024). The UAE's strategy, described as *the geopolitics of ports*, integrates commercial port management with military operations to secure maritime chokepoints from Aden to Berbera and onwards to the

Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a key mediator in the Eritrea–Ethiopia conflict (Photo Credit: Crisis Group)

Although Gulf states have occasionally facilitated diplomatic progress, their broader involvement has contributed to prolonging conflicts, weakening local and regional governance structures, increasing regional instability, worsening humanitarian conditions, and accelerating militarisation of the HoA

Suez Canal. These developments have prompted an arms race in the region, with HoA states increasingly reliant on Gulf-supplied drones, armoured vehicles, and surveillance technology. For example, Ethiopia's reported use of drones supplied by the UAE during the Tigray conflict demonstrates how Gulf militarisation reshapes conflict dynamics in the HoA (Gaid, 2022). Such militarisation raises the risk of interstate conflict, strengthens coercive state apparatuses, and transforms the HoA into a contested security space where external actors drive regional security agendas at the expense of peace.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Gulf conflict intervention in the HoA has generated outcomes that overwhelmingly undermine regional stability. Although Gulf states have occasionally facilitated diplomatic progress, their broader involvement has contributed to prolonging conflicts, weakening local and regional governance structures, increasing regional instability, worsening humanitarian conditions, and accelerating militarisation of the HoA. These interventions reflect strategic calculations informed by Gulf regional rivalries rather than the long-term peace and security needs of the HoA. Stability in the HoA requires the strengthening of regional agency. HoA, therefore, must adopt coherent, sovereignty-centred engagement strategies that prioritise institutional resilience, transparency, and accountable governance. Rather than competing for Gulf support, states should coordinate their diplomatic positions to enhance collective bargaining power. Equally important is enhancing conflict responsiveness among regional multilateral organisations such as the AU and IGAD. The regional bodies should reclaim leadership in peace processes and insist on structured inclusion in Gulf-backed interventions. On their part, the Gulf states should endeavour to pursue more transparent, development-orientated and inclusive partnerships that move beyond elite interests and prioritise benefits to the community.

Addressing militarisation in the region will require collective security frameworks capable of monitoring arms flows, regulating foreign military bases, and enhancing maritime cooperation. Sustainable development partnerships must replace transactional investment models that deepen vulnerability. Ultimately, long-term peace in the HoA demands a balanced approach that recognises the strategic interests of Gulf states while upholding the peace and stability of HoA states. Without such changes, Gulf involvement is likely to continue exacerbating rather than resolving the region's complex conflict dynamics.

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An Appraisal of the Dynamics of Darfur Conflicts: Impacts on the Livelihood of Affected Populations

By Umar Abdullahi, Ph.D

Abstract

The 2003 Darfur conflict marked the onset of one of Sudan's most protracted and devastating humanitarian crises. Triggered by historical grievances over land, identity, and political exclusion, the conflict escalated into mass violence, with devastating consequences for civilian populations. Between 2003 and 2005 alone, an estimated 500,000 people were killed, over 2,000 villages destroyed, and millions displaced. The humanitarian toll worsened in subsequent years, with intensified fighting in 2012–2013 linked to economic deterioration, resource competition, and unresolved ethnic tensions. Despite multiple conflict resolution initiatives, most national-level approaches have failed to address the structural root causes—particularly the marginalization of non-Arab communities in resource distribution and governance. This article analyzes the Darfur conflict through a structural conflict lens, examining its evolution, key actors, and long-term impacts on human security and livelihoods. It concludes that enduring peace remains unlikely without equitable political inclusion and land reform that addresses the grievances of historically marginalized groups.

Introduction

The spate of killings and destruction of properties of the people of Darfur assumed disastrous levels from 2003 to 2004, as the conflict resulted in the displacement of many people in the conflict areas. The major strategy of the conflict was deliberate displacement of the people. Starting from 2003, nearly half of the population in the distressed areas have been compulsorily displaced, with many of them moving from neighbouring states to Darfur. In 2006 and 2011, peace agreements were entered into, but the conflicts continued unabated (Oguone & Ezeibe, 2014).

In 2014, the character as well as the strategy of the violence in Darfur changed when the Sudanese government carried out a major offensive attack against the JEM and a splinter group of SLM/A led by Minni Minawi. This attack brought about an increase in the intensity of fighting in Darfur, leading to the loss of more lives and properties among the civilian population that was not witnessed from 2003 to 2004 (Joshua & Olerenwaju, 2017). Essentially, the conflict in Darfur has resulted in the death of over 300,000 people, while about 3,000,000 were displaced, with 2,600,000 of them internally displaced and 350,000 fleeing to the neighbouring state of Chad (International Refugee Rights Initiative, 2016).

A number of measures were adopted at the national level to resolve and manage the Darfur conflict, but such measures focused on tackling the "behaviour" of actors manifested as communications, actions and physical violence without theoretically discerning and solving the root causes of the conflict relating to injustice in the distribution of resources in Darfur, which was skewed against the non-Arab tribes. In view of the foregoing, this article is geared towards analysis of the Darfur conflicts with a view to understanding their security implications on the wellbeing of the Darfurians.

This article explores the dynamics and consequences of the Darfur conflict through a structured analysis. It begins with a review of literature on security and conflict, followed by an outline of structural conflict theory as the guiding framework. It then provides a brief history of the Darfur conflict, examines the key actors and their perspectives, and analyzes both the structural and proximate causes of the violence. The article further investigates how these causes interact to sustain conflict, assesses the implications for the wellbeing of Darfur's population, and evaluates the effectiveness of past and present conflict resolution efforts. It concludes with policy recommendations focused on addressing marginalization, promoting

Internally displaced people from the Zamzam camp in Darfur queue for food in an open field near the town of Tawila in western Darfur, Sudan. (Photo Credit: AFP)

equitable resource distribution, and supporting inclusive peacebuilding.

History of Darfur Conflicts

The name "Darfur" is derived from "dafur", which is an Arabic word for "land of the Fur". Traditionally, Darfur was an Islamic sultanate which was located in the western parts of Sudan. Before 1916, the Fur were the ruling ethnic nationality in Sudan, and they started converting to Islam as far back as the 1300s. Islam was declared a state religion with the establishment of the Darfur Sultanate in 1956. Even with many conflicts in Sudan, including the Anglo-Egyptian occupation of Sudan in 1898, and before being totally subjugated by the British in 1916, the Darfur Sultanate remained independent. Darfur is comprised of about 80 diverse tribes as well as ethnic nationalities divided between sedentary communities and nomads. The rebels appear to be drawn largely from 3 communities of the Fur, the Zaghawa and the Massalit tribes. However, the indigenous peoples of Darfur, comprising of the Fur and many other ethnic nationalities as well as the Arabs, have comparatively distinct identities; they largely related well until resources became scarce, and then ethnicity and race became a factor in the conflict (Reliefweb, 2005).

Essentially, the people of Darfur suffered largely from the famine of 1984-1985, which brought about a major loss of cropland as well as overall resources. The foregoing prepared the grounds for conflicts often between diverse racial groups. While the conflicts took place throughout the 1990s, physical violence swiftly escalated after two rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equity Movement (JEM), carried out attacks on military bases as well as police stations in Darfur. Since the membership of the SLM/A and JEM largely consisted of non-Arab tribes such as the Zanghawa, the Fur, and the Massalit in the west, while the state is mainly governed by Arab Muslims, the conflict soon took ethnic as well as racial overtones (Evans, 2009).

Actors Involved in Darfur Conflicts

Some of the actors in the conflict were pastoralists and sedentary farmers. Pastoralist nomadism is the major means of livelihood for many Darfurians. One of the major cattle-herding groups in Darfur is the Arabic-speaking Baqqara, who are scattered between the Korodofa and Darfur Provinces (Sikainga, 2009). The pastoralists needed more land for rearing their animals in the areas originally occupied by the sedentary farmers. On the other hand, the sedentary farmers needed more land for crop production due to threats posed by climate change.

Other actors in the Darfur conflict were the government of Omar al-Bashir, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), and the Justice and Equity Movement (JEM). Also, the Janjaweed is another actor in the Darfur conflict.

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The membership of the SLM/A and JEM largely consisted of non-Arab tribes such as the Zanghawa, the Fur, and the Massalit in the west who wanted regime change, while the membership of the Janjaweed is comprised of mainly Arab-Muslims who wanted perpetuation of the existing order so as to have more grazing land for their animals as well as maintenance of the existing power configuration in the country. The Janjaweed was armed and backed by the government against the SLM/A and JEM (Evans, 2009). The government wanted to suppress the resistance by the non-Arabs and maintain the existing order as against the regime change clamoured for by the non-Arabs.

Proximate and Structural Causes of the Darfur Conflicts

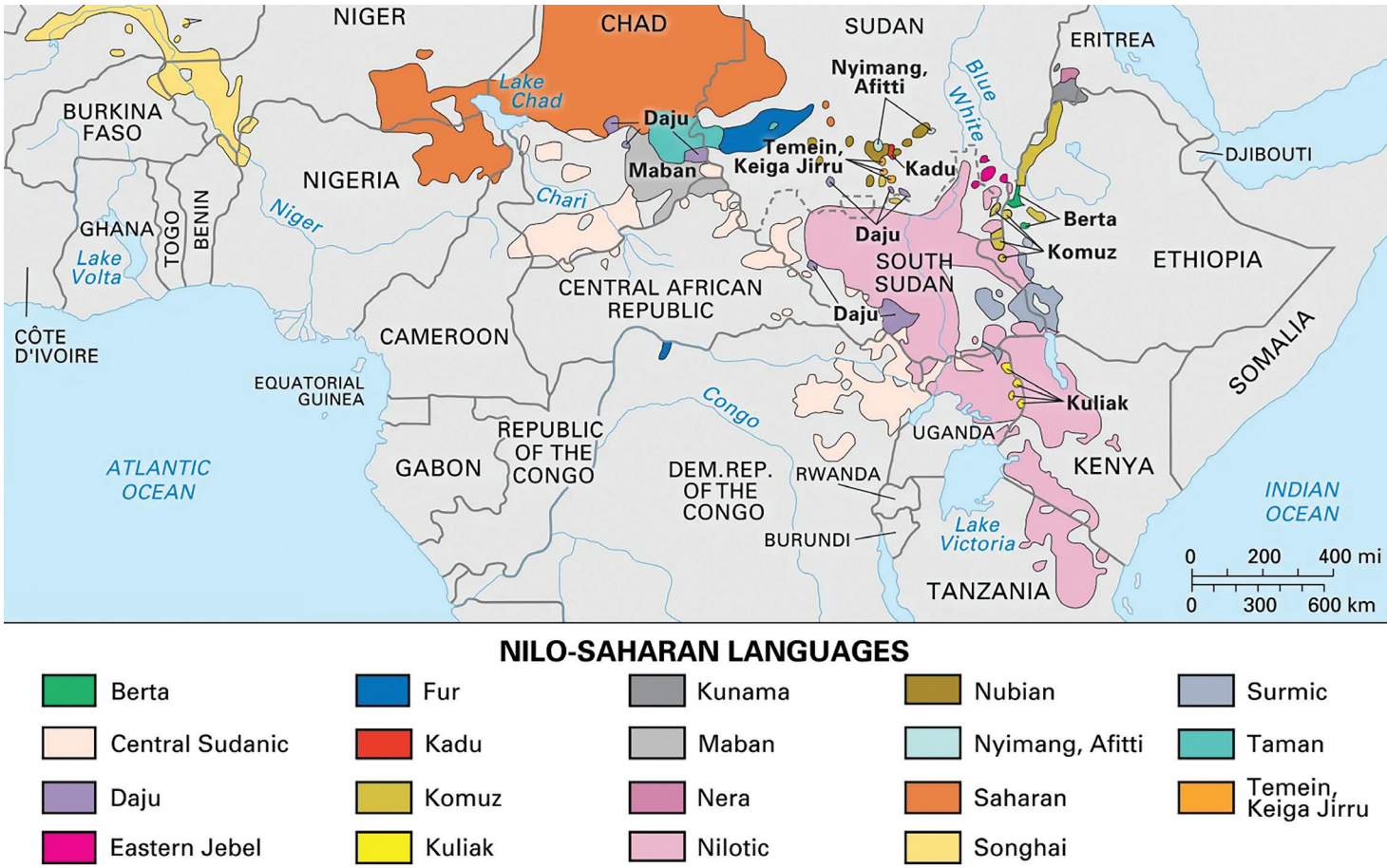
One of the structural causes of the Darfur conflict is the diversity of the people of Darfur. The western part of Darfur is populated by many ethnic nationalities, such as Zaghawas, Furs, Baggaras, Tunjurs, Fallatas, and Massalits, among others. The naming of Darfur after Fur, which is connected with the Arabic word "dar", meaning home, and "Fur", the name of the major ethnic group that has lived in the area since pre-modern epochs, contributed to preparing an enabling atmosphere for the conflict. Therefore, Darfur means the home of the Furs, even though the country is comprised of a heterogeneous population or many other ethnic nationalities. The Arabs in Darfur are not natives because they settled there later. The prominent cultural difference between Arabs and native Africans is nomadism. Africans are known as settled farmers, while the Arabs are known as nomadic shepherds of goats and camels. The Furs belong to the Nilo-Saharan language family, and they are Muslims. The majority of them are farmers. The people that comprise the Masalit ethnic nationality are farmers too, but the two groups were largely influenced by the conflict because many of their villages were destroyed, making them join the rebels. The Tunjures are also like the Furs and Masalits because they are also settled farmers. Also, many of them were killed or had their properties destroyed in the conflict. On the other hand, Baggaras are nomads who settled down in Darfur because of good natural conditions consistent with the type of life they live. They originally formed part of the Arab population that migrated from the north, but they got married to the native Africans and became assimilated. Moreover, Zaghawaras are known as semi-nomads because of their long travel through the desert towards the border with Libya. The tribe sells herds of camels as well as salt. They live on the border with Chad, where many of them sought refuge after ground attacks on them during the war (Danielova, 2014).

In addition, the SLM/A and the JEM started a major offensive targeted against the government of Sudan, resulting in the capture of a number of government installations, including the El Fasher Airport. The two rebel groups had the support of the SLM/A, which is another major rebel group fighting in the western part of the country during the Second Sudanese Civil War. The rebels scored high points against the government during the early days of the attack because the government forces were already overstretched between fighting the SPLA in the south as well as fighting the Eritrean-sponsored rebels in the east. In response to the foregoing, the government forces began aerial bombardment of Darfur while, at the same time, enlisting the support of a nomadic militia group, the Janjaweed, which the government began arming in 1985. Another structural cause of the conflict is that instead of the government of Sudan directly attacking the rebel forces, it launched blanket attacks at the non-Arabs (settled farmers) by draining the sea regardless of whether they were rebel forces or civilians (International Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2016).

The government used the Janjaweed militias to attack the villages largely populated by African Masalit, Fur and Zaghawa people, where the SLM/A and JEM largely draw their support from. Although the foregoing Africans are largely Muslims, they also practise a form of religion that is infused with sefism and animism and that was held in contempt by the Arab Islamic government in Khartoum. Therefore, the conflict in Darfur could equally be perceived as a combination of efforts aimed at converting Muslims who are perceived as going astray by driving them off the land (Zissis, 2006).

The conflict in Darfur is a combination of political, environmental and economic factors. The environmental degradation as well as competition over dwindling natural resources played and continues to play a pivotal role in Darfur. The Darfur region is comprised of many climatic zones. While the southern part of the country lies within the rich Savannah, which receives an adequate amount of rainfall, the central part of the region is a plateau where the mountain of Jabel Marra dominates the landscape. The northern part of Sudan is a desert, which extends all the way to the Libyan and Egyptian borders. Crop farming is the major economic activity of the majority of the population, but cultivation of land largely depends on rainfall as well as on soil fertility, making the population vulnerable to climatic changes and natural disasters. In the 1980s and 1990s, drought and desertification, as well as population growth, combined to produce a dangerous decline in food production and widespread famine. Also, at the heart of the competition over resources is the question of land ownership. Over the years, the land tenure system has changed, leading to an increase in intercommunal tensions. In the Fur kingdom, local ownership of land was based on the Hakura system, which came from the Arabic 'Hikr', which means 'ownership'.

The system allows each group to be given a Hakura or Dar, which was regarded as the property of the entire community. The local chief was the sole custodian of the Dar and allocated the same to the people for the purpose of cultivation, and belonging to a Dar was an integral part of a person's identity. At the same time, successive chiefs allocated lands to influential members of the community for private owners. Under the British colonial rule, the land tenure system was modified to suit the indirect rule system known as native administration. During this epoch, each chief was allocated different territories to administer for administrative convenience. The local chiefs were equally given the authority to allocate land to the residents. During the post-colonial epoch, the system of land tenure as well as native administration underwent major changes. The post-independence Sudanese rulers perceived native administration as an archaic system that was part of the colonial legacy and slowly dismantled it. The policy, most importantly, brought about erosion of



Nilo-Saharan languages, one of the four major language families of Africa, spoken by communities including the Fur people of Darfur, Sudan. (Photo Credit: Britannica)

the local chief's authority. The changes to the land tenure system drastically reduced the ability of local chiefs to settle inter-communal conflicts (Sikainga, 2009).

The nomads were not part of the Hakura system; hence, the nomads had to rely on customary rights to wander and pasture their animals in areas largely dominated by farmers. The movement of the nomads between northern and southern parts of the region was facilitated through specific arrangements for animal routes by the leaders of both the nomads and the farmers, but such arrangements were scrutinised by the government. The system worked for decades but was dismantled by the drought of the 1980s. With the deterioration of climate change, the maturity date of crop harvests became uncertain, and this made many farmers gradually embrace animal husbandry and needed grazing land. At the same time, the pastoralists were equally feeling the effects of the drought, as grazing land in the northern part of Darfur had largely shrunk. Confronted with the foregoing, camel nomads insisted on maintaining the traditional arrangement, which became one of the major factors that drove the clashes (Sikainga, 2009).

With respect to the proximate causes of the conflict, in some parts of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, armed rebel groups were fighting for more autonomy for their religion and tribe as well as for regime change. Starting from 2003, former President Al-Bashir as well as Sudanese forces carried out genocide against several non-Arab, rebel tribes in Darfur. Therefore, the conflict in Darfur started in 2003 when non-Arabs rebelled against the Arab-led government. Nevertheless, Darfur had traditionally experienced conflicts between nomadic herdsmen and sedentary farmers. Also, after the secession of South Sudan in 2011, some pro-southern rebel groups remained in Sudan and continued to clash with the Sudanese army, leading to the displacement of about 900,000 people in the South Kordofan border region (Project Ploughshares, 2017).

Dynamics of Interactions among Different Causes of Darfur Conflicts

The conflict begun between African farmers and Arabic nomads over limited resources in the Darfur region following a prolonged drought in 1983. With the Muslim government in the north fighting a civil war with rebels

Al-Fashir in flames. The historic capital of the Sultanate of Darfur in the 18th century, it was once an economic hub linked by caravan routes to Libya, the River Nile, Egypt, Chad, and the wider Sahel region (Photo Credit: Just Security)

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in the Christian/animist south, there was a perception of attacks by the government on the non-Arabs. Also, the funding of Janjaweeds by the government of Sudan to fight rebels inflamed Arab-African tensions in Darfur. In other words, Omar al-Bashir transformed a competition for scarce resources into large-scale violent confrontations which were fuelled by extreme ethnic and racial overtones. This triggered the February 2003 Darfur conflicts which came almost immediately after the government started peace negotiations to resolve the civil war with South Sudan. The conflict made a loosely aligned SLM/A and JEM rebels attack government targets in central Darfur, demanding autonomy (Zissis, 2006).

The conflict in Sudan occurred on at least three fronts. In the Darfur area of Western Sudan, rebels fought to overthrow former President Omar al-Bashir. Tribal clashes were equally commonplace. In the border areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, rebel groups fought for regime change and sometimes engaged in ethnic killings. The capital of Sudan, Khartoum, did not experience much physical violence starting from 2003, but the area was replete with patches of protests and police brutality over the government's cut on fuel subsidy. The public as well as opposition groups in Khartoum were equally frustrated with the regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2017) over serious financial indiscipline (Project Ploughshares, 2017).

Unlike the Second Sudanese Civil War in the South, the conflict in Darfur was not characterised by religious dimensions because grievances emanated from a mixture of ethnic and economic tensions rather than from religious acrimony. Also, the regime of al-Bashir used Arab networks to extend its control over the country through the use of identity politics in the mobilisation of support, hence causing more schism among diverse ethnic nationalities in the country. The feelings that came from the foregoing were worsened by the policies of government, which appeared to discriminate against non-Arabs as well as divide Darfur into three different regions in order to break the unity existing amongst Darfur tribes. Members of marginalised Fur and Zaghawa tribes formed rebel groups to challenge the contradictions occasioned by structural violence by the al-Bashir administration against the Darfur tribes (International Center for Responsibility to Protect, 2016).

Over the years, the dynamics of the Darfur conflicts have changed. A dwindling economy in 2012 and 2013 brought about increased fighting between diverse Arab tribes over land and resources in Central, North and South Darfur. About 300,000 people were displaced within the first five months of 2013 alone, a number that outweighs the figure recorded from 2010 to 2012. Following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, Sudan lost the majority of its oil revenues. With the dwindling of the country's economy exemplified by rising inflation and massive unemployment, there emerges an increase in discontent within Sudan's paramilitary forces, the Central Reserve Police (CRP), Border Guards (BG), and Popular Defence Forces (PDF) (Tran, 2014).

Darfur Conflicts and Its Implications for the Wellbeing of Darfurians

Since the commencement of the conflict in Darfur, nearly 2 million Darfurians, representing one-third of the region's population, have been internally displaced as a consequence of the systematic destruction of their villages. Also, about 200,000 refugees have fled the region to neighbouring Chad, hence impinging on their fundamental human rights. About 350,000 people in the region have died as a result of violence, starvation and diseases, which largely affected their health security and food security. Sexual violence was commonplace, as rape was systematically used as a weapon of warfare (Zissis, 2006). Between 2003 and 2005, more than 2,000 villages were destroyed, while about 500,000 people were killed (Evans, 2009).

In 2013, the Sudanese government launched the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), many of whom were members of the Janjaweed, who actively carried out genocide against the people of Darfur. This further led to massive

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displacement of the people from their homes. A major ground and aerial offensive by the government of Sudan led to an increase in the number of casualties and displaced people (Jewish World Watch, 2019).

The conflict in Darfur had serious security implications for the Darfurians. Apart from the number of people killed and displaced in the conflict, the means of livelihood of the people were equally destroyed. Since the main occupation in Darfur is pastoralism and sedentary agriculture, the farmers were disconnected from their means of livelihood, leading to hunger and malnutrition. Disease arising from rape is likely to have negative implications on the reproductive health of the victims in Darfur. Since security means freedom from fear and want, the Darfur conflict brought poverty and fear to the Darfurians, hence affecting their security.

Injustice arising from the distribution of limited resources that had the approval of al-Bashir's government further posed a threat to the security of the people. The exploitation and violence meted out on the non-Arabs, who are largely sedentary farmers, by pastoralists, who are largely Arabs backed by Bashir's regime, is a serious security concern since it is rooted in structural violence. Therefore, the Darfur conflict has negative security implications for the people of Darfur.

Management and Resolution of Darfur Conflicts

The management of the Darfur conflict did not address the root causes of the conflict, which are contradictions arising from injustice in the distribution of land resources in Darfur. The government, instead of addressing the issue of injustice in the distribution of land between the pastoralists and sedentary farmers, supported the pastoralists against the sedentary farmers on the basis of ethnicity. Also at the national level, al-Bashir was charged with corruption and money laundering, which were not adequate in solving the root causes of the conflict (Jewish World Watch, 2019).

The foregoing conflict management and conflict resolution strategies adopted in Darfur conflicts did not touch on the root causes of the conflict which were injustice in the distribution of land resources and demand for regime change by non-Arabs (largely sedentary farmers). The conflict resolution strategies adopted in resolving the Darfur conflicts focused on neutralising physical violence and actions (behaviour), but that was made more ineffective by structural violence perpetuated against the non-Arabs by the al-Bashir regime.

Conclusion

The article has been an attempt to analyse the Darfur conflict that started in 2003 with a view to determining and analysing the implications of the conflict on the wellbeing of Darfurians. Focusing on state-level analysis, it was discovered that the 2003 Darfur conflicts, contrary to the views of some scholars, emanated from a contest or struggle over limited land resources brought about by prolonged drought. The conflict was dynamic in nature because it started as a struggle between pastoralists and sedentary farmers over land resources but was given ethnic colouration when al-Bashir supported and backed the Arab militia group, Janjaweed, against the non-Arab SLM/A and JEM.

The conflict resulted in wanton destruction of lives and properties of the people of Darfur, hence posing a huge security threat to their wellbeing. The conflict resolution and management techniques adopted at the national level did not address the fundamental issues in the conflict, which are injustice in resource distribution, desire for regime change arising from exclusion of non-Arabs from assuming the office of president (turn/order), and the position of non-Arab tribes in the country. In view of the foregoing, it is concluded that unless the fundamental issues in the conflict are addressed, the security or wellbeing of Darfurians will continue to be under threat.

Recommendations

1. Recruitment into the military in Sudan should be based on merit and balance to ensure that power is evenly distributed between Arabs and non-Arab tribes in the country in order to avoid intimidation of one group by another group.
2. Members of rebel groups that participated in the conflict should be de-radicalised and reintegrated into the society to avoid resurgence of the conflict in the near future.
3. The government of Sudan should urgently address the issue of marginalisation of non-Arabs in resource distribution in the country.
4. The government should ensure through constitutional provisions that all ethnic nationalities in Sudan are given equal opportunities to carry out economic production.

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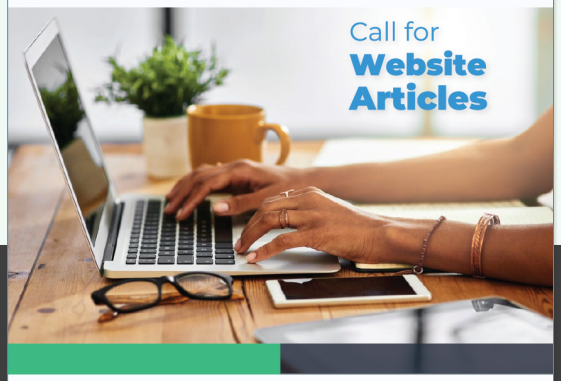

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