

Policy BRIEF

SYMPOSIUM EDITION

HORN OF AFRICA AND GREAT LAKES SECURITY

Addressing Key Security Challenges

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By The HORN Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Security Symposium, a high-level strategic forum organized by the HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) – Regional Programme Security Dialogue for East Africa, was convened on December 8, 2025, at the Serena Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya. This symposium served as a critical platform for a multi-sectoral assembly of stakeholders, including senior policymakers, regional security practitioners, renowned scholars, and high-ranking representatives from the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the East African Community (EAC). Amidst a global climate of shifting alliances and regional volatility, the primary objective of the gathering was to dissect the rapidly mutating security landscape of the Horn and Great Lakes regions home to over 250 million people and to formulate actionable, evidence-based strategies to arrest the cycle of state fragility and conflict that currently threatens to undo decades of developmental progress.

The deliberations were anchored on four critical pillars that define the contemporary regional crisis: the persistent and deepening nature of state fragility; the evolution of violent extremism into technologically sophisticated and decentralized networks; the operational and political hurdles facing regional intergovernmental institutions; and the intensifying impact of external geopolitical interventions from both Global and Gulf powers. A primary conclusion of the symposium is that the region is currently trapped in a “governance-security paradox.” While the Horn of Africa possesses unparalleled economic potential evidenced by its strategic maritime corridors and vast mineral reserves critical for the global energy transition, it remains categorized as one of the most fragile zones globally. According to the 2022 Fragile States Index, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan continue to rank among the most unstable nations, suffering from what the symposium identified as “mutually reinforcing cycles” of weak institutional legitimacy, resource-driven localized violence, and systemic corruption.

In terms of specific dynamics, the symposium highlighted a worrying trend in the “professionalization” of non-state actors. Groups like Al-Shabaab and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have transitioned from traditional guerrilla tactics to a model of “shadow governance,” providing alternative justice and taxation systems that often outpace the reach of central governments. Furthermore, the conflict in Sudan has evolved into a catastrophic case of state fragmentation, with the emergence of parallel government structures in Port Sudan and Nyala creating a mediation vacuum that existing regional frameworks have struggled to fill.

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The symposium also critically evaluated the effectiveness of the EAC-led Nairobi Process and IGAD's engagement in Sudan, noting that while tactical successes like the deployment of the EAC Regional Force (EACRF) were achieved, they were ultimately hampered by a lack of sustainable funding, restrictive mandates, and a "trust deficit" between member states.

Ultimately, this Policy Brief asserts that the region's security challenges cannot be solved through kinetic, military-first approaches alone. The key finding of the symposium is that stability requires a "whole-of-society" shift toward inclusive governance, the harmonization of competing peace tracks to prevent "forum shopping" by belligerents, and the establishment of a unified regional strategy to manage the strategic interests of external actors such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, China, and the United States. Without these structural reforms, the region risks remaining a theater for proxy competition and a breeding ground for transnational threats that extend far beyond the continent's borders.

BACKGROUND

The Horn of Africa, home to over 250 million people, currently stands at a transformative yet volatile juncture where its

strategic position for global trade and natural resource wealth is frequently overshadowed by protracted conflict and state fragility. The rationale for the 2025 Security Symposium stems from the urgent need to address this "mutually reinforcing cycle" of insecurity, where internal governance voids in one state inevitably spill over into regional crises. According to the 2022 Fragile States Index, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan consistently rank among the most fragile nations globally, a status that has only been exacerbated by recent civil wars and the failure of political transitions.

The conference sought to move beyond reactive security measures by evaluating the structural drivers of conflict, such as climate-induced resource scarcity and the predatory nature of state-citizen relations. Furthermore, the symposium addressed the subject matter of regional cooperation, questioning the efficacy of the AU, IGAD, and EAC in an era where overlapping mandates and geopolitical competition often stall diplomatic progress. By providing a platform for stakeholder consensus, the event aimed at harmonizing regional responses to existential threats, ranging from Al-Shabaab's "shadow governance" to the economic collapse of the region's oil-dependent economies.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Finding 1: State Fragility and the Anatomy of Economic Collapse

State fragility in the region is increasingly defined by a toxic nexus of institutional voids and extreme economic vulnerability. In South Sudan, the fragility is rooted in a legacy of incomplete political transition and a "rentier-state" model that has led to a catastrophic contraction of the economy. For instance, following the damage to key pipelines in conflict-torn Sudan in early 2024, South Sudan's oil production plummeted from approximately 160,000 barrels per day to just 60,000 barrels per day, triggering a projected GDP contraction of nearly 24% for FY2025. This has fueled hyperinflation, which peaked at 112.6% in late 2024, and caused the local currency to depreciate by over 400% on the unofficial market. Similarly, in Sudan, the 2023 conflict has decimated state revenues by over 80%, leading to the world's largest displacement crisis with 13.6 million people forced from their homes. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), fragility is manifested through the

proliferation of over 120 armed groups in the Kivu region, where violence is often triggered by the exclusion of local communities and the arbitrary appointment of local chiefs, such as the incident where ten chiefs were killed during the M23 escalation. These cases demonstrate that without robust public financial management and local governance, fragile states remain "risk multipliers" that attract external interference and transnational crime.

Key Finding 2: The Technological Evolution and Shadow Governance of Terrorism

Terrorism and violent extremism have evolved from localized insurgencies into sophisticated, tech-enabled regional threats. Groups such as Al-Shabaab and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have demonstrated remarkable resilience by exploiting governance vacuums and adopting advanced technologies. Most notably, Islamic State (IS) affiliates in Somalia and Central Africa have begun utilizing Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for surveillance and reconnaissance,

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significantly enhancing their operational lethality. Al-Shabaab continues to operate a highly efficient “shadow government” that generates between \$100 million and \$150 million annually often surpassing the official revenue collection of the Somali Federal Government in key sectors. Their revenue model is deeply diversified, involving “zakat” (coerced taxation) on real estate, port imports, and agricultural produce. Furthermore, extremist groups are increasingly forming transactional cross-border alliances, such as the reported weapons-for-piracy support deal between Al-Shabaab and Houthi rebels in 2024. This operational sophistication, combined with multilingual propaganda in Somali, Swahili, and Afaan Oromo, allows these groups to recruit across borders and frame regional governments as illegitimate occupiers.

Key Finding 3: Institutional Structural Barriers and Geopolitical Competition

The effectiveness of regional institutions like IGAD and the EAC is frequently hindered by structural limitations and the competing interests of external powers. While IGAD has successfully utilized multi-track diplomacy in Sudan, its efforts are often undermined by “forum shopping,” where belligerents exploit parallel peace processes like the Jeddah Declaration or the Quad mechanism. In the DRC, the EAC-led Nairobi Process achieved tactical gains through the deployment of the EAC Regional Force (EACRF), but the mission was ultimately constrained by a time-bound mandate and a lack of sustainable funding from member states. These institutional gaps are widened by the intense competition for influence among global powers (U.S., China, Russia) and Gulf states (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar). This geopolitical struggle often prioritizes external strategic interests such as securing Red Sea trade routes or access to the DRC’s vast cobalt and lithium reserves over local stability. Excluding these consequential geopolitical players from peace processes, however, risks perpetuating a cycle of destabilizing competition where external military and financial support for local factions deepens existing divides and renders conflicts nearly intractable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For National Governments:

- ❑ **Institutionalize Local Governance:** Establish functioning local administration and land management systems immediately following the liberation of territories from extremist groups to reinforce state legitimacy and prevent insurgent return.
- ❑ **Fiscal Reform and Diversification:** Implement rigorous public financial management to mitigate the shocks of oil dependency; governments like South Sudan must prioritize non-oil revenue mobilization to sustain essential services.
- ❑ **Inclusive National Dialogues:** Mandate the inclusion of women, youth, and civil society in all peace processes to move beyond “elite power-sharing” and address the underlying “trust deficits” between citizens and the state.

For Regional Bodies (IGAD, EAC, AU):

- ❑ **Harmonize Mediation Tracks:** Create a unified framework for conflict resolution to eliminate the proliferation of parallel peace tracks and prevent belligerents from evading accountability.
- ❑ **Enhance Enforcement Capacities:** Transition from mere facilitation to developing robust accountability mechanisms, including regional sanctions and enforceable compliance standards for peace agreements.

- ❑ **Operational Autonomy:** Develop predictable funding models for regional peace operations to reduce dependency on external donors and ensure mandates are driven by regional security priorities rather than external agendas.

For International Partners:

- ❑ **Support Community Resilience:** Rebalance assistance from purely kinetic military support toward community-centered prevention programs (P/CVE) that address the root causes of recruitment, such as unemployment and marginalization.
- ❑ **Transparency in Resource Governance:** Support regional certification mechanisms for minerals and oil to ensure that revenues benefit local populations and do not fund conflict.
- ❑ **Technological Cooperation:** Assist regional states in developing counter-UAV capabilities and cybersecurity infrastructure to match the evolving technological sophistication of extremist groups.

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