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Continuity or Change?

United States–Africa Relations in Trump 2.0

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INSIDE

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Abstract

Since making a comeback to the White House, President Donald Trump has pursued an "America First" foreign policy that has had far-reaching implications for both allies and adversaries. The use of tariffs, visa restrictions, and deportation of undocumented immigrants have particularly reshaped the way in which Washington relates with several countries. A number of African countries have borne the brunt of the Trump administration's policies on sensitive issues such as race, while others have been elevated owing to the increasing transactional nature of Trump's diplomacy. This article analyses the evolution of United States foreign policy in Africa through the Obama, Trump 1, Biden, and Trump 2 administrations and draws parallels on

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the approaches of these administrations in areas of trade, development, and security. It highlights foreign policy changes during the Trump administration and what they mean for the future of United States–Africa relations. It concludes by recommending that African countries should adopt a multilateral approach to relations with major powers in order to balance diplomatic engagement and guard against exploitation.

Introduction

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 sent ripples across different corners of the world, owing in large part to some of the policies he introduced during his first term that redefined relations between the United States and other countries. On the African continent, accusations that the government of South Africa was instigating genocide against its white population grabbed international media headlines. The United States government's action to establish an emergency refugee programme in response brought to the fore the aggression of the Trump administration in handling differences with African nations. In quick succession, the United States boycotted the G20 summit held in South Africa in November 2024 and President Trump announced that his country would bar South Africa from participating in this year's conference, to be held in the United States in December 2026.

This article investigates the strategic priorities and distinguishing features of the Trump administration's policy toward the continent, while also examining the responses of African governments to these developments. In particular, the article explores how African states are exercising agency by adapting to the evolving United States approach in pursuit of their own national and regional interests. This article is guided by the central research question: What patterns are emerging from Trump 2.0's Africa policy, and what are the implications for African agency?

The Evolution of United States–Africa Relations Before Trump

Since the end of the Second World War, United States policy toward Africa has evolved in response to changing global geopolitical dynamics, yet its fundamental foreign policy orientation towards the continent has remained largely consistent. Although successive administrations differed in their priorities and policy instruments, American engagement with Africa was consistently anchored in a combination of strategic interests, development assistance, security cooperation, and the promotion of liberal international norms. This continuity provides an important backdrop against which the significance of the Trump administration's approach can be understood.

During the Cold War (1947–1991), Washington's engagement with the continent was principally driven by the imperative of containing Soviet influence rather than by Africa's strategic importance to the United States. Newly independent African states became arenas of ideological competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, with both superpowers seeking allies through military assistance, economic aid, and diplomatic support (Taylor, 2018). During this period, Africa was viewed less as an independent strategic actor than as a theatre within the broader East–West rivalry. The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered the international environment within which United States–Africa relations operated. Without the Soviet threat, successive administrations sought to redefine the rationale for American engagement on the continent.

The Clinton administration (1993–2001) shifted emphasis toward democratic governance, market liberalization, conflict resolution, and economic integration. The enactment of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2000 represented a significant milestone by granting eligible African countries preferential access to the United States market, reflecting an emerging recognition that trade, rather than aid alone, could become a cornerstone of United States–Africa relations (Lyman & Morrison, 2006).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, introduced a new strategic dimension to United States engagement with Africa under President George W. Bush (2001–2009). Security cooperation and counterterrorism assumed greater prominence as Washington increasingly viewed weak governance and fragile states as potential breeding grounds for transnational terrorist networks. This shift culminated in the establishment of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 to coordinate American military activities across the continent. Yet Bush's Africa policy cannot be understood solely through the lens of security. His administration simultaneously launched some of the most ambitious development initiatives in United States–Africa relations, most notably the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) (Pham, 2017).

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 generated widespread expectations that United States–Africa relations would undergo a transformative shift owing to his Kenyan heritage and symbolic connection to the continent. While Obama largely retained the strategic priorities inherited from his predecessor, his administration sought to reposition Africa as a long-term economic and political partner rather than merely a recipient of aid. These priorities were operationalized through flagship initiatives such as the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), Power Africa, and the inaugural United States–Africa Leaders Summit in 2014, all of which emphasized entrepreneurship, investment, energy access, and people-to-people partnerships (Carson, 2013).

Trump 1.0 and the Reorientation of United States–Africa Relations

Against this backdrop, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 marked a significant inflection point. Rather than merely recalibrating existing priorities, the first Trump administration questioned many of the assumptions underpinning United States–Africa relations for nearly three decades. The first Trump administration (2017–2021) marked a noticeable departure from the tone and emphasis of previous United States engagement with Africa. Unlike the Obama administration, which sought to frame Africa as a long-term strategic partner, President Trump initially accorded the continent limited diplomatic attention (Carson, 2020). His administration was widely criticized for its perceived neglect of Africa, reflected in the absence of a presidential visit to the continent, repeated proposals to reduce foreign assistance, and rhetoric that strained diplomatic relations with several African governments (Schneidman & Signé, 2018).

President Donald Trump (1.0) speaks to African leaders at a luncheon at the Palace Hotel during the 72nd United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 20, 2017 (Photo Credits: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images)

Whereas Africa has never really featured as a strategic priority for the United States across the Democratic and Republican divide (Nuwair & Nasser, 2025), the first Trump administration treated the continent with mistrust, hostility, and neglect (Singh, 2024). Caomique et al. (2025) argue that while President Bush focused on debt relief and trade and Obama on good governance and development aid, in contrast, Trump implemented "America First" policies, leading to cuts in foreign aid and the promotion of protectionist measures.

Nevertheless, the Trump administration did articulate a more coherent Africa policy in December 2018 when National Security Adviser John Bolton unveiled the Prosper Africa Strategy. The strategy rested on three pillars: advancing United States commercial interests through expanded trade and investment; strengthening security cooperation to counter terrorism and violent extremism; and ensuring that United States development assistance served American strategic interests more effectively (Bolton, 2018). Trump's Africa strategy was explicitly framed within the context of great-power competition, identifying China and Russia as America's principal strategic rivals on the continent. Bolton argued that Chinese and Russian engagement threatened both African sovereignty and United States interests, signaling a shift from a development-centered approach toward one driven by geopolitical competition and commercial diplomacy.

Prosper Africa consequently sought to reposition the United States as Africa's preferred economic partner by mobilizing private investment and reducing reliance on traditional aid. While this represented a significant policy innovation, critics argued that the administration's emphasis on bilateral, transactional relationships and strategic rivalry often overshadowed broader objectives relating to long-term development of the continent (Signé & Olander, 2019). The result was an Africa policy characterized by selective engagement anchored on viewing Africa through the lens of strategic competition with other global powers.

The Biden Interlude: Restoring Conventional United States–Africa Engagement

The election of Joe Biden in 2020 was widely interpreted as signalling a return to more conventional United States foreign policy after four years of Trump's "America First" approach. In Africa, the Biden administration sought to restore diplomatic engagement, reaffirm multilateral cooperation, and rebuild relationships that had been strained during the first Trump presidency. Although Biden did not fundamentally redefine America's strategic interests on the continent, his administration largely revived the partnership-oriented framework that had characterized previous Democratic and Republican administrations, emphasizing development cooperation, democratic governance, investment, and engagement with regional institutions. Consequently, many scholars regard Biden's Africa policy less as a new strategic vision than as a restoration of the pre-Trump policy paradigm (Westcott, 2026; Sseruwagi, 2024).

A defining feature of the Biden administration's Africa policy was the revival of multilateral engagement and institutional partnership. This was most evident during the 2022 United States–Africa Leaders' Summit, where President Biden convened African political and business leaders to deepen cooperation across a range of sectors. The summit resulted in the launch of the Digital Transformation with Africa Initiative to expand digital connectivity and the African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT) initiative to support countries transitioning from military to democratic governance. Biden also pledged $55 billion in investment over three years and announced commitments exceeding $15 billion in two-way trade, reaffirming the administration's emphasis on development, economic partnership, and collaboration through multilateral institutions (Sseruwagi, 2024; Adebajo et al., 2024). This approach contrasted sharply with the first Trump administration, which generally favored bilateral and transactional engagement while displaying skepticism toward multilateral institutions.

Beyond diplomacy, the Biden administration continued to advance strategic American interests in Africa through infrastructure investment and security cooperation. During his 2024 visit to Angola, Biden announced $560 million in additional funding for the Lobito Corridor, a major rail and infrastructure project linking the mineral-rich regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia to the Port of Lobito. While presented as a development initiative, the project also reflected Washington's efforts to strengthen access to critical mineral supply chains and provide an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (OECD, 2025). Similarly, the administration maintained long-standing counterterrorism partnerships, including the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership

(TSCTP) and the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PREACT), underscoring continued United States commitments to regional security (Sseruwagi, 2024). Together, these initiatives suggest that although Biden restored the language of partnership and multilateralism, United States engagement with Africa remained firmly anchored in strategic competition and national interests.

Trump 2.0 and the Consolidation of Transactional Statecraft

Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 marked more than the restoration of his "America First" foreign policy agenda; it signalled the consolidation and expansion of the transactional approach to international relations first introduced during his initial administration. Whereas Trump 1.0 questioned many of the assumptions underpinning traditional United States–Africa engagement, Trump 2.0 has sought to institutionalize a foreign policy in which diplomacy, development assistance, trade, migration, and security cooperation are increasingly deployed as instruments of strategic bargaining in pursuit of narrowly defined American interests. In this respect, the second Trump administration represents not simply a continuation of its predecessor but a significant intensification of the logic of transactional statecraft (Long et al., 2025).

The most far-reaching consequence of Trump's new policies for the African continent in 2025 was the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), headed for a short period by billionaire businessman Elon Musk. Musk summarily abolished the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), putting an end to all its programmes without regard to contractual obligations (Westcott, 2026). At the time of Trump's freeze on foreign assistance, USAID was overseeing programmes in Africa totalling over $12 billion (Kohnert, 2025) across sectors such as health, education, and environmental conservation. The abrupt end to these programmes had severe consequences for many countries, especially in the health sector where HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis programmes had benefited from this funding for years. The cut on foreign assistance by the United States appears to have motivated similar action by other actors, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Canada (OECD, 2025).

The other immediate and consequential Trump policy was the imposition of tariffs on imports from various countries. Although the tariff war was framed as one between the United States and China, several African countries were included in Trump's extensive list. The "reciprocal" tariffs imposed on African countries ranged between 11% for Cameroon to 50% for Lesotho, while revised tariffs range between 10% and 15% (Baloyi, 2025). However, goods from at least four African countries attract higher tariffs: South Africa (30%), Algeria (30%), Tunisia (28%), and Libya (31%) (The White House, 2025). The imposition of these punitive tariffs has effectively prohibited the export of goods from Africa to the United States, running counter to efforts by previous administrations to promote trade through initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). President Trump has also used tariffs as a weapon against those who disagree with him and challenge his policies and actions, as has been the case with South Africa.

In May 2025, Trump made allegations that the Government of South Africa was waging genocide against its white population. When South African President Cyril Ramaphosa visited Washington and met Trump at the White House on May 21, 2025, the host ambushed his guest by showing footage of alleged graves of white farmers (Reuters, 2025). Despite Ramaphosa's protestations, Trump continued the narrative, and his administration moved swiftly to offer refugee status to Afrikaner farmers, with total refugee numbers initially capped at 7,500 per year. This ceiling was adjusted upward by 10,000 in May. Of the more than 6,000 refugees

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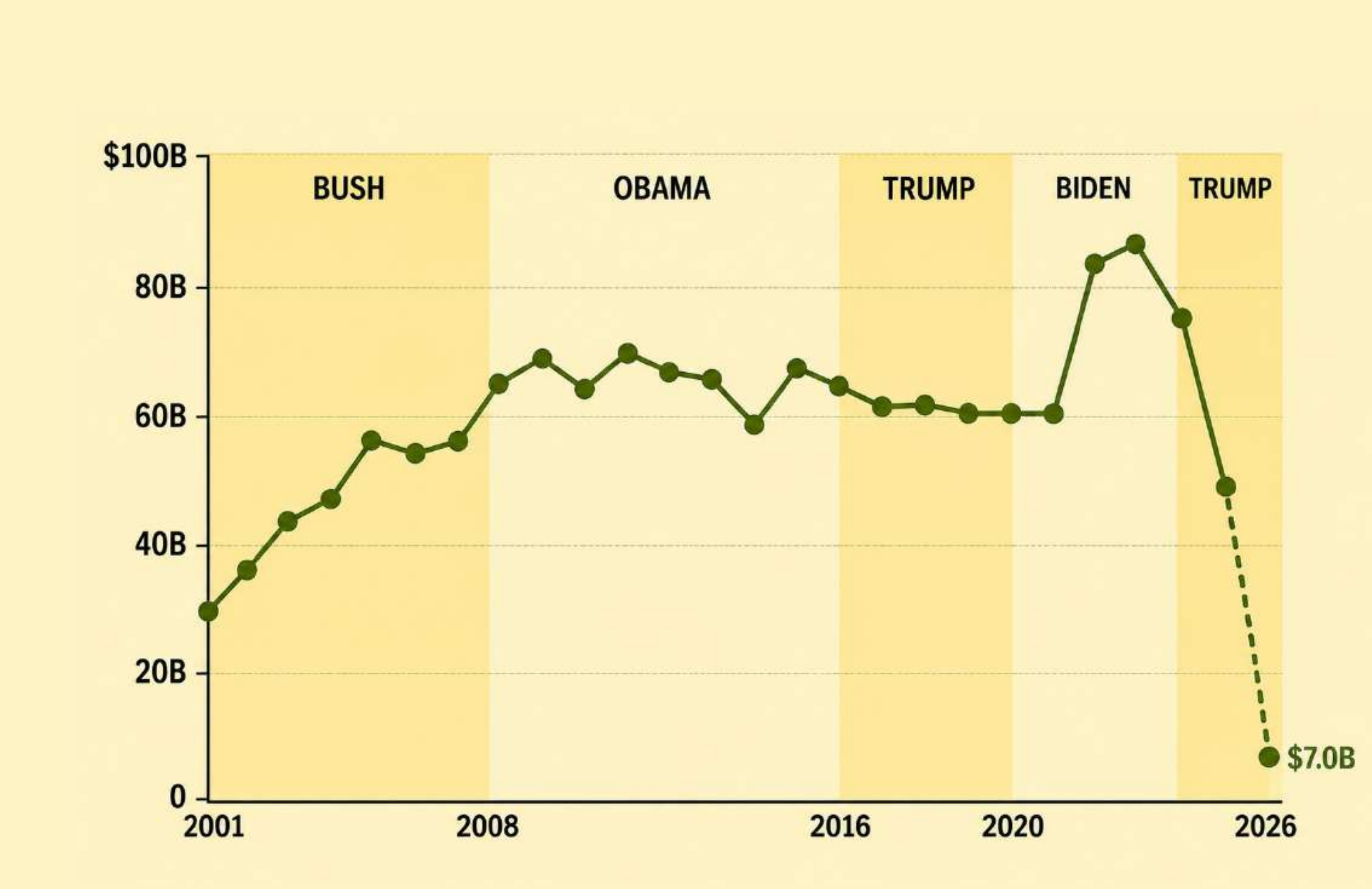

Graph showing the sharp decline in United States assistance to Africa during President Trump's second term, based on total inflation-adjusted disbursements across successive fiscal years. The dotted section represents preliminary data up to July 1, 2026 (Graph source: Pew Research Center)

admitted between October 2025 and May 2026, all but three were white South Africans (AP & Westcott, 2026).

Apart from limiting immigration generally, the administration between June and December 2025 imposed a travel ban on several countries, including an initial seven in Africa: Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Libya, Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Sudan, with another five added later (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, and South Sudan) citing reasons such as terrorism, regular overstaying of visas, and refusal to accept undocumented immigrants deported from the United States (Westcott, 2026).

South Sudan, for example, was involved in a diplomatic spat with Washington following the third-country deportation of a Congolese citizen. Third-country deportation involves the Government of the United States sending someone to a country that is not the country in which they lived prior to arriving in the United States, nor to a country of which they are a citizen or national (American Immigration Council, 2025). In reaction to a visa fraud scandal in the state of Minnesota involving members of the Somali diaspora, Trump referred to Somali immigrants as "garbage" and soon after ordered the withdrawal of temporary protected status for 5,000 Ethiopian and 700 Somali refugees (Westcott, 2026).

Trump's low-value approach towards Africa is also evident in the lack of priority or urgency in the appointment of substantive ambassadors to many African capitals and generally the staffing of the Bureau of African Affairs. As of April 2026, 37 of 51 United States ambassadorial posts in Africa were vacant. One of the few new United States ambassadors to be approved by the Senate is Leo Brent Bozell III, a conservative, anti-abortion campaigner who was sent to South Africa. With little direct African experience but closely allied to Trump, he has deeply antagonised the South African government, especially in light of Trump's rhetoric about the treatment of white South Africans (BBC, 2026). The Bureau of African Affairs, the division of the State Department charged with policy development in Washington's relations with Africa, has also been peripheral in both Trump administrations.

Transactional Diplomacy and Strategic Partners in Africa

Perhaps the clearest indicator of the Trump administration's transactional diplomacy has been its focus on countries that provide leverage for the United States in the global competition for resources (EU, 2026). Whereas Trump has demonstrated little or no interest in the affairs of other countries, his approach has been different when dealing with countries that are rich in mineral resources. The case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the conflict that has rocked the Eastern part of the country best illustrates Trump's interest. On December 4, 2025, a peace deal brokered by the United States was signed by President Felix Tshisekedi and Paul Kagame of Rwanda at the White House. Before the Washington Accords, the United States and the DRC entered into an agreement in which, in exchange for preferential or exclusive access to certain mineral concessions, the United States would extend security assistance, foreign direct investment, and diplomatic support to the DRC (Christien & Tshimbombu, 2025).

On June 17, 2026, on the sidelines of the G7 summit in France, Kenyan President William Ruto told journalists that Kenya and the United States were close to sealing a critical minerals deal (Reuters, 2026). However, not all targeted African countries have acceded to Trump's demands. Zambia rejected a critical minerals partnership with the United States which would have seen American companies receive preferential access to minerals, especially copper, in exchange for a $2 billion health package (S&P Global, 2026). In April, a similar deal between the United States and Ghana collapsed after the latter pulled out citing sovereignty concerns, ostensibly regarding the requirement to share health data with the Americans (DW, 2026). These cases demonstrate a significant shift in American foreign policy towards Africa, with Washington's preference in striking minerals deals representing a clear departure from the broader policy approach of previous administrations.

It is also worth noting that the Trump administration has demonstrated its bias in dealing favourably with countries that grant its wishes while demonising those that do not. With the continuing elaboration of South Africa's place in the BRICS formation and its decision to file a case against Israel, a key United States ally, at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the Trump administration has been particularly vengeful against it. Trump has personally levelled accusations of genocide against South Africa and has taken personal initiative to frustrate the country's role in the G20 and G7.

Trump boycotted the last G20 summit held in South Africa and has threatened to bar South Africa from the next summit to be held in Florida, United States. The African countries that will retain visa processing rights under Trump's new policy are those that have acceded to his transactional diplomacy, those that host American military bases such as Djibouti and Kenya, and those that have agreed to receive third-country deportees from the United States.

African Countries' Responses to Trump 2.0

The emergence of Trump's second-term Africa policy raises an important question: How have African states responded to this increasingly transactional approach? Thus far, the continental response to policies such as punitive tariffs, travel restrictions, aid reductions, and migration measures has been fragmented and largely reactive. Much of this can be attributed to the Trump administration's preference for bilateral rather than multilateral engagement, which has weakened the collective bargaining power that African states might otherwise exercise through institutions such as the African Union. By negotiating with individual countries rather than regional blocs, Washington has effectively compelled many African governments to engage from relatively weaker positions.

Those that have resisted or challenged United States positions, most notably South Africa, have faced diplomatic pressure and public criticism. Even incidents with symbolic continental significance, such as the denial of entry to Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan—Africa's Referee of the Year in 2025 and an official selected to officiate FIFA World Cup matches in the United States—failed to generate a coordinated continental response, illustrating the limited cohesion of African diplomacy in confronting Trump's policies.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to portray African states as passive recipients of United States foreign policy. Rather, many have demonstrated increasing strategic autonomy by diversifying their diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships. Countries such as Kenya and Nigeria have continued to cooperate with the United States on selected security initiatives while simultaneously deepening engagement with regional institutions such as the African Union and external partners including China and Turkey. This reflects a broader strategy of hedging, whereby African states seek to maximize strategic and economic opportunities through multiple partnerships while reducing dependence on any single external power (Oluwadare, 2023). Viewed through this lens, African agency under Trump 2.0 has not been expressed primarily through collective resistance but through pragmatic adaptation, selective cooperation, and the pursuit of greater strategic autonomy within an increasingly competitive and multipolar international order.

Conclusion

Contemporary Africa–United States relations are increasingly shaped by the interplay of cooperation and competition within a rapidly evolving multipolar international system. Unlike earlier periods defined by Cold War ideological rivalry or the liberal partnership paradigm that characterized much of the post-Cold War era, the current phase is marked by diversified partnerships and greater strategic competition among external powers. Although the United States remains an influential actor on the continent, it now operates within an increasingly crowded geopolitical landscape in which African states have access to a broader range of political, economic, and security partners.

The analysis presented in this article suggests that Trump 2.0 is replacing the liberal, values-driven, and development-oriented approach that traditionally underpinned United States–Africa relations with a more transactional and interest-based model of engagement. Rather than diminishing Africa's importance, this shift has redefined the basis upon which the United States engages the continent, privileging strategic value, commercial interests, and geopolitical alignment. At the same time, this evolving environment presents new opportunities for African states to exercise agency by strategically engaging external powers, bargaining more effectively, diversifying partnerships, and leveraging intensifying geopolitical competition to advance their national and regional interests.

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To strengthen their bargaining position under this emerging policy environment, African countries should pursue a more coordinated and collective approach through the African Union and other regional institutions. Whether responding to punitive tariffs, negotiating trade and investment agreements, or addressing migration and security issues, African states are likely to exert greater influence when acting collectively rather than individually. Ultimately, the future of United States–Africa relations under Trump 2.0 will depend not only on the policies pursued by Washington but also on the extent to which African states can transform their growing strategic relevance into collective diplomatic leverage and meaningful policy influence.

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Sudan in Russia's Africa Strategy: The Red Sea, Strategic Interests, and Regional Competition

By Natalia Tsamalashvili

Abstract

Sudan has become one of the most strategically significant states in Russia's contemporary Africa policy. While the proposed naval facility at Port Sudan has attracted considerable attention, Russia's interests in Sudan extend far beyond maritime access to encompass geopolitical influence, military cooperation, economic interests and diplomatic engagement. This article argues that Sudan serves as a strategic gateway through which Moscow seeks to strengthen its presence across the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the wider African continent. Rather than viewing Russia's engagement solely through the proposed naval facility at Port Sudan, this article demonstrates that Sudan's importance to Moscow lies in the combination of maritime access, natural resources and security cooperation that together advance Russia's broader regional strategy. Russia has adapted its engagement to the changing political conditions in Sudan, while the Sudanese political and military actors have continued to pursue pragmatic relationships with multiple external partners in support of their own interests. The Sudan case illustrates the growing strategic importance of the Red Sea as an increasingly contested geopolitical space where regional and global powers compete for long-term military, economic and political influence.

Introduction

Sudan occupies a pivotal position in the geopolitics of Africa and the Middle East. Located on the western shore of the Red Sea, it connects North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, making it a strategic bridge between Africa's interior and one of the world's busiest maritime corridors. Beyond its geostrategic location, Sudan possesses significant natural resources, including gold, fertile agricultural land and valuable export commodities such as gum arabic and sesame, further enhancing its strategic importance (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2005; Hussein & Ali, 2025).

These characteristics have made Sudan one of the principal arenas where domestic conflict, regional rivalries and great-power competition increasingly intersect. Regional and global powers, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Iran, the United States (US), China and Russia, have pursued competing military, economic and geopolitical interests in Sudan (Assefa, 2025). Consequently, developments in Sudan increasingly extend beyond the country's borders, influencing security dynamics across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

Among these external actors, Russia occupies a distinctive position. Unlike many of its competitors, Moscow combines military cooperation, diplomatic engagement, security partnerships, economic interests and ambitions for a long-term maritime presence within a broader strategy aimed at expanding its influence across Africa and the Red Sea region.

This article asks why Sudan has become strategically important to Russia. It argues that Moscow's engagement extends far beyond the proposed naval facility at Port Sudan and reflects a broader strategy of strengthening Russia's political, military and economic influence across the Red Sea and Africa. At the same time, Russia's engagement has unfolded within Sudan's fragmented political landscape, requiring Moscow to adapt its strategy to competing centres of power rather than a unified Sudanese state. This article demonstrates that Sudan's importance to Russia lies not only in its geographic position or natural resources, but in its role as a strategic gateway through which Moscow seeks to project influence across the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the wider African continent.

Russia's weapons of war are seen at the Red Sea naval base, where they are expected to support the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in their war with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (Photo Credits: AFP/Getty Images)

Historical Context

Russia's relationship with Sudan predates current debates over Port Sudan and Russia's renewed engagement in Africa. Diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the newly independent Republic of Sudan were established on 5 January 1956, shortly after Sudan gained independence (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Sudan, 2026). From the outset, however, Sudan's importance to Moscow extended beyond bilateral diplomacy. During the Cold War, Sudan occupied a strategically significant position on the western shore of the Red Sea. For both the Soviet Union and the US, the Red Sea constituted one of the world's most important maritime corridors, making control of, or access to, its coastline a central element of broader geopolitical competition.

Soviet interest in Sudan should therefore be understood within Moscow's wider regional strategy rather than as an isolated bilateral relationship. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union cultivated a network of political and military partnerships across the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean. Soviet naval forces operated from Berbera in Somalia until 1977 (Mohammed, 2026), while South Yemen became Moscow's closest regional ally, with the port of Aden and the island of Socotra serving as key logistical hubs for Soviet naval deployments in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean (Ramani, 2018). Following the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974, Ethiopia also emerged as one of the Soviet Union's principal strategic partners in Africa, receiving extensive military, political and economic assistance (Kingston-Cox, 2022). Although Moscow never secured a permanent military facility in Sudan, the country remained part of the Soviet Union's broader network of political and security partnerships across the Red Sea region.

Sudan, however, approached its foreign policy from a markedly different perspective. As Harry Cross argues, successive Sudanese governments rarely aligned permanently with any external power on ideological grounds. Instead, Sudan consistently adjusted its external partnerships according to domestic political priorities and economic necessity, with foreign policy closely linked to access to military assistance, investment and political support rather than fixed ideological commitments (Cross, 2025). This pragmatic approach would become one of the defining characteristics of Sudan's external relations throughout the Cold War and beyond.

The first sustained period of Soviet-Sudanese strategic cooperation emerged after Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri seized power in 1969. Sudan initially strengthened military and political cooperation with Moscow, receiving arms, military training and technical assistance. However, following the failed communist coup of 1971, Nimeiri gradually reoriented Sudan's foreign policy towards Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United States. This shift reflected political survival and economic necessity rather than ideological transformation. Facing mounting financial pressures and growing dependence on external assistance, Khartoum increasingly sought support from whichever external partners could provide political, military and economic support (Cross, 2025).

The decline of Soviet influence in Sudan coincided with the broader weakening of Soviet engagement across Africa during the final years of the Cold War. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia substantially reduced its diplomatic, military and economic presence on the African continent while concentrating on domestic political and economic transformation. Nevertheless, this represented a temporary interruption rather than the abandonment of Russia's long-term strategic interest in the Red Sea region.

Russia's renewed engagement with Sudan should therefore be understood within the broader context of Moscow's return to Africa under President Vladimir Putin. Beginning in the early 2000s, Russia sought to restore part of the international influence lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union by expanding its diplomatic, military and economic engagement across Africa while seeking greater access to strategic maritime routes and natural resources.

Unlike Soviet engagement, which was largely framed by ideological competition during the Cold War, Russia's contemporary Africa policy has been guided primarily by geopolitical and economic considerations, emphasising sovereignty, non-interference and mutually beneficial cooperation (Kostelyanets, 2019). Within this broader strategy, Sudan emerged as one of Russia's most important partners.

> Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia substantially reduced its diplomatic, military and economic presence on the African continent while concentrating on domestic political and economic transformation

Sudan's growing international isolation also encouraged closer engagement with Russia. Following Sudan's designation as a United States State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1993 and the imposition of comprehensive US sanctions in 1997, Khartoum encountered increasing difficulties accessing Western finance, technology and investment. The central role of the United States within the international financial system meant that these sanctions extended well beyond bilateral relations, discouraging multinational companies and commercial banks from operating in Sudan (Cross, 2025). Consequently, Sudan increasingly diversified its external partnerships towards China, the Gulf states and Russia, whose engagement generally imposed fewer political conditions relating to governance, democratisation and human rights.

Against this background, Russia-Sudan relations gradually evolved beyond conventional diplomacy into a broader partnership. Russia became one of Sudan's principal arms suppliers, expanded cooperation in the mining sector, particularly in gold extraction, strengthened diplomatic coordination in international forums and initiated negotiations over a naval logistics facility at Port Sudan. These developments reflected Moscow's broader objective of securing a long-term strategic presence on the western shore of the Red Sea. Access to Port Sudan would significantly enhance Russia's ability to project naval power between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean while reinforcing its geopolitical position within the Red Sea region (Cafiero, 2021).

Viewed from this longer historical perspective, Russia's contemporary engagement in Sudan represents less a new foreign policy direction than the adaptation of enduring strategic interests to changing international conditions. Likewise, successive Sudanese governments and, more recently, competing political and military authorities have continued a longstanding pattern of pursuing external partnerships according to regime survival, economic necessity and strategic autonomy rather than ideological alignment. These parallel historical trajectories help explain why Sudan continues to occupy a central place in Russia's contemporary Africa strategy.

Port Sudan is strategically important not only because it is Sudan's principal commercial port, but also because it connects the economies of Sudan and landlocked South Sudan to international markets

Why Sudan Matters to Russia

Port Sudan is strategically important not only because it is Sudan's principal commercial port, but also because it connects the economies of Sudan and landlocked South Sudan to international markets. South Sudan's crude oil is transported through pipelines crossing Sudan to export terminals on the Red Sea, making Port Sudan essential to Juba's principal source of state revenue as well as to Khartoum's transit income. Its location on the western shore of the Red Sea also places it along the maritime corridor linking the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal with the Indian Ocean through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which an estimated 12-15 per cent of global seaborne trade passes (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2026).

Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2023, Port Sudan has also become the de facto administrative and diplomatic centre of Sudan. As fighting engulfed Khartoum, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the Sovereignty Council, government ministries, foreign embassies and many international organisations relocated key operations to Port Sudan, further increasing the city's political and strategic importance. Consequently, control of Port Sudan now provides not only access to Sudan's principal maritime gateway but also to the country's wartime political leadership.

For Russia, the proposed naval logistics facility at Port Sudan would fill a significant gap in its maritime network. Moscow currently lacks a permanent military foothold in the Red Sea, while its navy faces limited overseas maintenance, refuelling and replenishment capacity. A facility capable of hosting up to 300 personnel and four vessels, including nuclear-powered vessels (Al Jazeera, 2020), would therefore support longer naval deployments, maritime surveillance and logistical operations between the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the western Indian Ocean. It could also strengthen supply networks supporting Russian security activities elsewhere in Africa, particularly in Libya, the Sahel and the Central African Republic (Battaglini, 2026). Beyond logistics, the facility would strengthen Russia's operational presence in the Red Sea and improve coordination with its military and security activities elsewhere in Africa (Ramani, 2020).

The project has acquired additional importance following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, which created uncertainty over Russia's continued access to its naval facility at Tartus and the Hmeimim air base (Reuters, 2025a). Although Port Sudan could not fully replace Tartus because it remains separated from the Mediterranean by the Suez Canal and would face its own logistical and political constraints, it would diversify Russia's overseas military access and reduce Moscow's reliance on a single regional hub (Battaglini, 2026; Cafiero, 2021).

Russia's interest in Port Sudan becomes clearer when compared with the strategic positions of other external powers. The US, China, France, Japan and Italy already maintain military facilities in Djibouti. Although China maintains substantial economic interests in South Sudan's oil industry and depends on export infrastructure running through Sudan to Port Sudan, its existing military base in Djibouti reduces the strategic necessity of acquiring another permanent military facility on the Red Sea (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2019). Türkiye maintains its largest overseas military base in Somalia and, under Omar al-Bashir, obtained rights to redevelop Suakin Island in Sudan, although the project never evolved into an operational military base (Mashamoun, 2022).

Similarly, the UAE has developed an extensive commercial and logistical network across the Horn of Africa, particularly through Berbera in Somaliland. Recent infrastructure expansion around Berbera Airport has also been linked to a future military facility serving Emirati, US and Israeli strategic interests near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Hochet-Bodin et al., 2026). Saudi Arabia and Egypt, meanwhile, possess their own Red Sea coastlines and established naval capabilities. Russia, by contrast, has repeatedly sought, but failed, to secure a permanent military foothold elsewhere in the Red Sea. Earlier discussions over naval or logistical facilities in Yemen, Djibouti and Eritrea failed to materialise, making Sudan the most viable opportunity to establish a long-term presence in the region (Ramani, 2020). Consequently, Port Sudan represents Moscow's principal opportunity to establish a permanent logistical foothold on the western shore of the Red Sea and strengthen its long-term maritime presence.

On Sudan's side, the SAF-led authorities have also used this Russian interest as leverage. Negotiations initiated under Omar al-Bashir produced a preliminary 25-year framework, but political change and repeated reviews have prevented implementation (Reuters, 2025c). Rather than indicating a simple rejection of Russia, these delays reflect Sudan's broader practice of preserving flexibility among competing external partners. By keeping negotiations over the proposed naval facility open, the SAF-led authorities have preserved room to negotiate military assistance and broader political support from Moscow without immediately committing to a permanent Russian military presence. More broadly, successive Sudanese governments have generally pursued pragmatic relationships with multiple external partners, seeking support according to changing political and security needs rather than exclusive alignment with any single power (Reuters, 2025c).

At the same time, Sudan should not be viewed as a single, unified actor. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2023, political authority has become fragmented between competing military, political and economic actors, each maintaining different external relationships. Consequently, Sudan's engagement with Russia is shaped not only by bilateral diplomacy but also by the internal balance of power, particularly the interests of the SAF-led authorities based in Port Sudan. Despite these constraints, the SAF has continued Sudan's longstanding strategy of pragmatic partnerships, engaging simultaneously with Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, China and other partners to secure military assistance, diplomatic support and economic resources while avoiding excessive dependence on any single external actor.

Russian President Vladimir Putin meets Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in Sochi on November 23, 2017, for talks on strengthening bilateral relations and discussing developments in the Middle East and North Africa (Photo Credits: President of Russia News Events) loss of most of its oil reserves, gold became Sudan's largest export commodity and one of the country's principal sources of state revenue. At the same time, the largely informal nature of Sudan's mining sector created opportunities for external actors to participate in extraction, trade and export networks beyond effective state regulation. According to SWISSAID, Sudan currently produces between 70 and 90 tonnes of gold annually, making it one of Africa's largest gold producers, while between 50 and 70 per cent of production is smuggled abroad through informal channels (SWISSAID, 2025a).

Gold has simultaneously become a central component of Sudan's war economy. Revenues from gold production and trade constitute one of the principal sources of financing for both the SAF and the RSF, linking the conflict to cross-border networks of miners, smugglers, armed groups and foreign governments (Soliman & Baldo, 2025). Gold flows through regional smuggling routes extending across Egypt, Chad, Libya, the Central African Republic and South Sudan before frequently reaching markets in the UAE, demonstrating that Sudan's conflict economy has become embedded within wider regional supply chains (SWISSAID, 2025a).

For Russia, Sudan's gold offers more than commercial profit. It provides access to a strategic commodity that can be monetised through trading networks outside the Western financial system, thereby contributing to Russia's sanctions resilience following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2026). Investigations have linked Russian entities associated with the Wagner Group, including Meroe Gold, to gold extraction, processing facilities and export networks in Sudan (Elbagir et al., 2022). Although the precise volume of Sudanese gold ultimately reaching Russia remains difficult to verify because illicit flows rarely appear in official trade statistics, available evidence indicates that Sudan has formed part of Moscow's broader strategy of securing access to critical mineral resources while mitigating the impact of international financial restrictions (SWISSAID, 2025a).

The outbreak of civil war did not increase Russia's access to Sudanese gold; in the short term, it disrupted it. Official production and exports declined sharply during 2023 as fighting affected mining areas and transport routes. At the same time, international sanctions against Meroe Gold, together with the dismantling of Wagner's formal commercial structures, reduced the visibility of Russian operations. Rather than ending Russian involvement, however, these developments appear to have pushed activity towards less transparent networks operating through neighbouring states and Gulf markets, particularly the UAE, where the origin of Sudanese gold is increasingly difficult to trace (SWISSAID, 2025a).

Taken together, Port Sudan and Sudan's gold sector illustrate the multidimensional nature of Russia's engagement with Sudan. While Port Sudan serves Moscow's geopolitical and maritime ambitions by providing a potential long-term military foothold on the Red Sea, Sudan's gold sector offers important economic opportunities and contributes to Russia's sanctions resilience.

Military cooperation has also remained a central pillar of the bilateral relationship. Russia has been one of Sudan's principal suppliers of military equipment for decades, providing combat aircraft, helicopters, armoured vehicles and air-defence systems. Beyond their commercial value, these defence exports have strengthened institutional ties between Russian and Sudanese military elites while reinforcing Moscow's long-term political influence within Sudan's security sector (Kostelyanets, 2019). Since the outbreak of the civil war, reports indicate that Russia has continued supplying military equipment and fuel to the SAF, while linking expanded military assistance to negotiations over a naval facility at Port Sudan (African Defense Forum, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024).

Russia's military engagement has not relied solely on official state-to-state cooperation. During Omar al-Bashir's presidency, the Wagner Group became an important instrument of Russian influence, combining security assistance with commercial interests, particularly in the gold sector. Wagner personnel reportedly trained security forces, protected mining operations and facilitated Russian access to Sudan's natural resources. Following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023, many of these activities were gradually absorbed into the Russian Ministry of Defence's Africa Corps, illustrating institutional continuity rather than a fundamental change in Russia's objectives.

The outbreak of Sudan's civil war in 2023 prompted an adjustment in Russia's approach rather than a fundamental change in its objectives. Prior to the conflict, Russia maintained relations with both the Sudanese

Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), enabling it to safeguard both its official state interests and its commercial networks. As the war progressed, however, Russia increasingly aligned itself with the SAF. This shift reflected pragmatic strategic considerations rather than ideological preference. The SAF retained international recognition, controlled Port Sudan and possessed the legal authority to negotiate the proposed Russian naval logistics facility. At the same time, the restructuring of the Wagner Group under the Africa Corps brought Russia's security activities in Sudan more directly under state control.

Nevertheless, Moscow avoided severing ties with the RSF, which continued to control important gold-producing areas in western Sudan. Russia's closer alignment with the SAF also coincided with reports of Ukrainian military assistance to Burhan's forces, including drone capabilities and training support, reinforcing Moscow's interest in limiting Kyiv's influence in Sudan's security sector (McGregor, 2024). Rather than representing a policy reversal, Russia's approach illustrates its continued preference for strategic flexibility while prioritising the actor best positioned to advance its long-term political, economic and maritime interests.

Sudan also carries diplomatic value for Moscow as part of Russia's broader engagement with African states. Russia has consistently framed its relationship with Khartoum around the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, presenting itself as an alternative to Western partnerships that often attach political conditions to security and economic cooperation (Kostelyanets, 2019; Cafiero, 2021). Although Sudan represents only one vote in the United Nations, maintaining close relations with Khartoum contributes to Russia's wider effort to build diplomatic support across Africa and counter Western initiatives in multilateral institutions. This was illustrated when Sudan voted alongside Russia against the 2026 UN General Assembly resolution reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity (Farge, 2026).

Future Trajectories

The future of Russia's engagement in Sudan will depend on two interconnected factors: the outcome of Sudan's civil war and the evolving geopolitical competition in the Red Sea. While Moscow's long-term strategic objectives have remained relatively consistent, the instruments through which they are pursued are likely to continue adapting to changing political and security conditions.

Russia's closer alignment with the SAF also coincided with reports of Ukrainian military assistance to Burhan's forces, including drone capabilities and training support, reinforcing Moscow's interest in limiting Kyiv's influence in Sudan's security sector

Rather than pointing towards a single outcome, current developments suggest several plausible trajectories.

One possibility is that Russia ultimately secures a permanent logistics facility at Port Sudan. Such an outcome would represent the culmination of a strategic objective pursued for more than a decade and would establish Russia as a permanent military actor on the western shore of the Red Sea. Beyond supporting naval deployments, the facility would strengthen Moscow's ability to connect its activities across North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel while reducing its dependence on other overseas facilities. It would also reinforce Russia's position as an increasingly important participant in regional security affairs, particularly as competition over the Red Sea continues to intensify.

An alternative development, however, is that the agreement remains delayed or is never fully implemented. Sudan's fragmented political landscape, the absence of stable state institutions and the uncertain outcome of the civil war continue to create significant obstacles to long-term strategic agreements. Since negotiations over the Russian facility have already been postponed several times under different governments, further delays would not necessarily represent a failure of Russian policy (Chapman et al., 2025). Moscow has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity to adapt its approach, maintaining influence through diplomatic engagement, military cooperation, economic networks and security partnerships even without a permanent naval presence.

On the other hand, Russia's ability to sustain its expanding engagement also remains uncertain. The war in Ukraine, international sanctions and growing military commitments across multiple theatres place increasing

Map showing the location of Russia's proposed naval base at Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast, a strategic gateway that could significantly expand Moscow's military and geopolitical influence across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa (Map Credit: eOmbisa)

pressure on Russian financial and logistical resources (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2026).

Regardless of whether the proposed naval facility is ultimately established, competition in the Red Sea is unlikely to diminish. Instead, the region is expected to become increasingly characterised by overlapping military partnerships, strategic infrastructure projects and political competition among global and regional powers. Rather than seeking exclusive influence, external actors are likely to continue pursuing flexible partnerships that allow them to secure access to ports, maritime routes, natural resources and political allies.

For Sudan, these developments present both opportunities and challenges. Continued interest from multiple external powers may provide greater diplomatic leverage and access to economic and military assistance. At the same time, maintaining strategic autonomy will become increasingly difficult if external competition deepens. The country's long-term foreign policy is therefore likely to depend on its ability to balance relationships with competing partners while avoiding excessive dependence on any single external actor. Whether future governments continue to pursue this pragmatic balancing strategy may ultimately prove as important as Russia's own regional ambitions.

Ultimately, Russia's future role in Sudan should not be assessed solely through the question of whether a naval base is constructed. More significant is whether Moscow succeeds in consolidating a durable political, economic and security partnership capable of surviving changes in Sudan's domestic politics. Likewise, the future of the Red Sea will not be determined by any single external actor, but by the interaction of multiple powers competing within an increasingly interconnected geopolitical environment. In this sense, Sudan is likely to remain not merely a site of conflict, but one of the principal arenas through which the future regional order of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa will be negotiated.

Conclusion

Sudan's importance to Russia extends well beyond the country's ongoing civil war or the proposed naval facility at Port Sudan. Rather, Sudan occupies a strategic position at the intersection of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the wider African continent, allowing Russia to pursue multiple geopolitical, military, economic and diplomatic objectives through a single regional partnership. The case of Sudan therefore illustrates how Moscow's contemporary Africa policy is driven less by ideological alignment than by long-term strategic positioning and the pursuit of flexible partnerships capable of advancing broader regional ambitions.

The article has also shown that the Russia-Sudan relationship is neither static nor one-sided. Rather than relying on a single instrument of influence, Russia has combined official diplomacy, military cooperation, security partnerships and economic engagement while adapting its approach to changing political circumstances. At the same time, Sudan has not simply been an object of external competition. Despite the fragmentation of political authority since 2023, Sudanese actors have continued a longstanding tradition of balancing competing external partners in pursuit of military assistance, diplomatic support and economic opportunities, demonstrating that smaller states retain agency even amid intense geopolitical rivalry.

More broadly, developments in Sudan reflect a wider transformation of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa into an increasingly contested geopolitical space. Competition in the region is no longer defined solely by territorial control or ideological rivalry, but increasingly by access to strategic infrastructure, maritime routes, critical resources and political partnerships. Russia's engagement in Sudan is therefore not an isolated case, but part of a broader reconfiguration of regional power dynamics in which global and regional actors seek to expand their influence through long-term strategic presence rather than direct territorial control.

Ultimately, Sudan matters to Russia not simply because of what it possesses, but because of what it enables. Whether or not Moscow ultimately secures a permanent naval facility at Port Sudan, Sudan has already become a strategic gateway through which Russia seeks to project influence across the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and Africa more broadly. As geopolitical competition in these interconnected regions continues to intensify, Sudan is likely to remain one of the principal arenas through which the future regional balance of power will be negotiated.

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Hybrid Power Projection by Foreign Powers in Somalia: The Case of External Influence, Structural Entrenchment and Indirect Competition

By Laurence Jost

Abstract

The Horn of Africa has emerged as a key arena of contemporary geopolitical competition, where external actors increasingly pursue influence through indirect and multidimensional strategies rather than overt military intervention. This article examines Somalia as a paradigmatic case of hybrid power projection and investigates how external actors utilize political, security, economic, and symbolic instruments to establish long-term strategic influence in a fragile state environment. Drawing on the literature on hybrid warfare, proxy warfare, and small-state foreign policy, the study develops a four-dimensional analytical framework consisting of political patronage and elite sponsorship, security sector embedding and proxy alignment, geo-economic entrenchment, and narrative and symbolic power projection.

Applying this framework to the Somali case, the article demonstrates how actors including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and neighbouring regional powers have embedded themselves within domestic political, economic, and security structures. Rather than relying on direct coercion, these actors exploit existing institutional weaknesses, elite rivalries, and fragmented authority structures to secure durable strategic footholds. The findings suggest that hybrid power projection is most effective in politically fragmented environments, where external influence can be institutionalized through a combination of security cooperation, infrastructure investment, political partnerships, and legitimacy-building initiatives. Beyond the Somali case, the analysis highlights broader implications for regional order in the Horn of Africa. Hybrid competition contributes to the reconfiguration of sovereignty, the emergence of overlapping governance arrangements, and the growing entanglement of domestic political processes with external strategic interests. The article concludes that strengthening institutional resilience and regional coordination is essential to mitigating the long-term fragmentation effects associated with sustained hybrid power projection.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa has re-emerged as one of the most strategically contested regions in contemporary international politics. Located at the crossroads of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean, it constitutes a critical maritime nexus linking Europe, Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Asia. Over the past decade, the region has attracted an unprecedented level of external engagement, as Gulf States, Turkey, China, and Western actors seek to secure influence over vital maritime routes, energy corridors, and political alignments (Donelli & Cannon, 2021). This development reflects not only a regional shift, but also a broader transformation in the nature of geopolitical competition. Increasingly, rivalry unfolds below the threshold of direct military confrontation, taking the form of hybrid strategies that combine political, economic, security, and informational instruments to achieve strategic objectives indirectly. As such, the Horn of Africa provides a particularly salient setting through which to analyse the evolving modalities of power projection in a changing global order.

Within this regional context, Somalia occupies a uniquely revealing yet underexplored position. Despite its geostrategic relevance, the country remains insufficiently integrated into scholarly debates on hybrid warfare and subregional power projection. At the same time, Somalia represents one of the most illustrative cases of fragile statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa and the wider Middle Eastern–African interface: a political system characterized by fragmented authority, competing elite networks, and multiple entry points for external influence (Menkhaus, 2014). These structural conditions not only heighten Somalia's vulnerability to external intervention but also render it particularly susceptible to indirect and network-based forms of influence. Foreign hybrid engagement in Somalia,conducted by actors such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and China,demonstrates how external powers capitalize on structural fragility to entrench long-term strategic positions (Vertin, 2019). Yet, despite the growing relevance of these dynamics, a systematic analytical interpretation within the framework of hybrid warfare remains insufficiently developed. This gap is particularly striking given the increasing policy attention devoted to the Horn of Africa as a theatre of geopolitical competition.

Addressing this lacuna requires an integrative theoretical perspective. This article therefore builds on the conceptual foundations of hybrid and proxy warfare, as well as insights from small-state foreign policy and power projection theory. Drawing on the literature on proxy warfare and hybrid strategies, it conceptualizes indirect influence as a process mediated through local actors, institutional fragmentation, and informal governance structures (Bartosh, 2018; Mumford, 2013). At the same time, scholarship on small-state influence strategies highlights how non-great powers combine conventional and non-conventional instruments to maximize strategic leverage (Long, 2016).

By synthesizing these approaches, the article develops a framework that captures the strategic logic underlying multi-domain, predominantly non-kinetic forms of power projection, particularly as employed by regional middle powers in fragile political environments. By analysing Somalia as a case of hybrid regional power entrenchment, this article contributes to ongoing debates on the reconfiguration of geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa and beyond. It not only elucidates the mechanisms of indirect influence but also highlights their broader implications for sovereignty, governance, and regional order. In doing so, it speaks to both academic debates and pressing policy concerns regarding the future of fragile states in an increasingly competitive international environment.

The 6th Plenary Session of the House of the People of the Federal Parliament of Somalia amid growing competition among foreign powers for influence in the country (Photo Credit: Gole-Kaab)

> Politically fragmented settings, marked by elite competition, contested legitimacy, and weak institutional consolidation, and limited territorial control, offer particularly conducive conditions for multi-layered external engagement

What Makes Warfare Hybrid? A Multi-Dimensional Perspective

Hybrid warfare can be conceptualized as a mode of indirect power projection that systematically integrates military and non-military instruments in order to reshape political environments below the threshold of open warfare. Rather than constituting a fundamentally novel form of conflict, hybrid warfare reflects a strategic logic of integration: the deliberate synchronization of conventional force, proxy relationships, economic leverage, and informational influence into a coherent campaign architecture (Hoffman, 2007). Its analytical distinctiveness lies not in the individual instruments employed, but in their coordinated and mutually reinforcing deployment, designed to generate cumulative and often non-linear effects across multiple domains of political order.

At its core, hybrid warfare builds upon the logic of proxy warfare, yet extends it in both scope and function. As Mumford (2013) demonstrates, proxy relationships enable states to pursue strategic objectives indirectly while reducing the risks of escalation and preserving plausible deniability. However, contemporary hybrid strategies transcend the classical military dimension of proxy engagement. They embed proxy relations within a broader ecosystem of influence that includes economic interdependencies, political sponsorship, and institutional linkages. In this expanded form, proxies do not merely serve as instruments of coercion, but as nodes within a wider network of influence through which external actors can shape governance structures, redistribute power among domestic actors, and anchor their presence within local political economies. The strategic objective thereby shifts from short-term battlefield gains to long-term positional advantage within the target state.

To explain why such strategies are particularly attractive to non-great powers, this article integrates insights from small-state foreign policy literature. Long (2017) demonstrates that small and medium-sized states can exercise disproportionate geopolitical leverage through forms of transactional "niche diplomacy," especially by exploiting strategic geography, infrastructure control, and access to critical nodes of connectivity. These strategies are typically not embedded in formalized multilateral frameworks, but rather operate through flexible, often personalized arrangements with key domestic actors. In parallel, Nye's (2009) concept of "smart power" provides the theoretical underpinning for understanding the fusion of coercive and attractive instruments. Hybrid strategies operationalize this fusion by combining security-related tools, such as training missions, military assistance, or proxy alignment, with instruments traditionally associated with soft power, including development aid, education initiatives, and symbolic diplomacy. The resulting form of influence is neither purely coercive nor purely persuasive, but structurally embedded and relationally sustained.

The effectiveness of hybrid power projection is closely linked to the structural characteristics of the target environment. Politically fragmented settings, ,marked by elite competition, contested legitimacy, and weak institutional consolidation, and limited territorial control, offer particularly conducive conditions for multi-layered external engagement (United Nations & World Bank, 2017). In such contexts, hybrid strategies do not primarily generate instability; rather, they selectively engage with and reconfigure pre-existing patterns of fragmentation. External actors can align with specific elite factions, insert themselves into institutional vacuums, and exploit governance gaps in ways that incrementally reshape domestic power equilibria. Hybrid warfare, in this sense, operates less as a disruptive force and more as a mechanism of adaptive insertion into fluid political orders.

Building on these considerations, hybrid warfare is conceptualized in this study as a four-dimensional strategy of indirect influence, encompassing distinct but interrelated spheres of action. The first dimension, political patronage and elite sponsorship, refers to the cultivation of privileged relationships with key decision-makers, political factions, or informal power brokers (Menkhaus, 2014). Through financial support, diplomatic backing, or personalized networks, external actors gain access to domestic decision-making processes and can influence political alignments from within (Cooley, 2012; Chandler, 2007).

The second dimension, security sector embedding and proxy alignment captures the integration of external actors into the coercive apparatus of the target state. This includes the provision of training, equipment, and operational support to selected security forces, as well as the establishment of partnerships with non-state armed actors. Such engagement enables external actors to shape the distribution of coercive capacity while maintaining indirect control and deniability (Mumford, 2013). The third dimension, geo-economic entrenchment, refers to the strategic use of infrastructure investments, trade relations, and financial flows to create long-term dependencies. By securing control over critical assets,such as ports, logistics hubs, or energy infrastructure, ,external actors embed themselves within the economic foundations of the target state, thereby translating economic presence into political leverage (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). The fourth dimension, narrative and symbolic power projection, encompasses the construction and dissemination of legitimizing narratives, as well as the use of cultural, educational, and diplomatic instruments to shape perceptions of legitimacy and partnership.

Through media engagement, humanitarian initiatives, and symbolic acts of recognition, external actors seek to normalize their presence and frame their involvement as beneficial, necessary, or even indispensable (Nye, 2009; Miskimmon & Loughlin, 2015).

These dimensions do not operate in isolation. Their strategic effectiveness derives from their cumulative interaction, as influence generated in one domain reinforces and stabilizes engagement in others. The overarching aim is not territorial control or immediate domination, but the gradual normalization of the external actor as an embedded and structurally relevant participant within the target state's political, economic, and security architecture. Hybrid warfare, as conceptualized here, thus represents a form of strategic entrenchment rather than overt confrontation.

Somalia as a Laboratory of Hybrid Warfare

Somalia occupies a geo-strategically pivotal position along one of the world's most important maritime corridors, linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and, indirectly, to European and Asian trade routes (Notteboom et al., 2024). At the same time, the country exhibits structural features commonly associated with fragile statehood, including limited institutional consolidation, fragmented authority structures, and contested political legitimacy. From the perspective developed in the previous section, this constellation is analytically significant not as background context, but as a structural configuration that enables and shapes the operation of hybrid power projection. The coexistence of strategic value and political fragmentation renders Somalia a particularly suitable case for examining how external actors deploy multi-dimensional influence strategies in practice.

Building on the theoretical framework, Somalia can thus be conceptualized as an "entry-point arena" in which hybrid strategies are operationalized through the selective engagement with existing political fault lines. These fault lines, such as tensions between federal and regional authorities, clan-based patronage structures, ideological divisions, and asymmetric security constellations, do not merely constitute constraints, but function as strategic access points. Hybrid power projection, in this sense, operates through a logic of adaptive insertion: external actors identify, align with, and recalibrate these internal divisions in ways that allow for indirect yet durable influence.

This dynamic becomes visible when disaggregating external engagement along the four analytical dimensions outlined above. First, political patronage and elite sponsorship constitute a central mechanism through

> The United Arab Emirates' support for the Puntland Maritime Police Force exemplifies how external actors can strengthen specific security actors outside the central chain of command, thereby influencing local security architectures

	Security	Finance	Infrastructure	Agriculture	Mining	Energy	Ports
United Arab Emirates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turkey	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Qatar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kuwait and Others	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Foreign actors and sectoral investments in Somalia and Somaliland map, showing the extent of engagement by Gulf states and Turkey across strategic economic and security sectors (Map is for illustration purposes only)

which influence is established. External actors cultivate relationships with key political elites at both federal and regional levels, often through financial support, diplomatic backing, or preferential access to resources. Qatar's engagement at the federal level, for instance, has been characterized by close alignment with central government actors, while the United Arab Emirates has historically maintained strong ties with regional authorities, particularly in Puntland and Somaliland. These differentiated patronage strategies enable external actors to embed themselves within competing centres of authority, thereby hedging political risk while maximizing leverage (Vertin, 2019). Second, security sector embedding, and proxy alignment play a crucial role in shaping the distribution of coercive capacity.

The United Arab Emirates' support for the Puntland Maritime Police Force exemplifies how external actors can strengthen specific security actors outside the central chain of command, thereby influencing local security architectures (Mohamud, 2025). Similarly, Turkey's military training mission in Mogadishu reflects a more centralized approach, aimed at building the capacity of federal security institutions while simultaneously securing long-term strategic access (Thiessen & Özerdem, 2019). Ethiopia and Kenya have historically pursued their security interests through cross-border interventions, security partnerships, and support for local allied actors, particularly in Somalia's border regions (Menkhaus, 2014; Clapham, 2017).

Across the above cases, security engagement does not merely enhance stability, but redistributes coercive capabilities in ways that align with external strategic interests. Third, geo-economic entrenchment constitutes a key pillar of hybrid power projection. Investments in port infrastructure, logistics corridors, and urban development projects create material dependencies that extend beyond immediate political cycles. The involvement of the United Arab Emirates in port development and management illustrates how control over critical infrastructure can be translated into long-term geopolitical leverage (Jost, 2025). Such investments are not neutral economic activities; they embed external actors within the economic foundations of the state and create enduring channels of influence.

At a broader level, China's infrastructure diplomacy in the wider Indian Ocean region reinforces this pattern by linking local economic projects to transregional networks of trade and connectivity (Gebru, 2020). Through these mechanisms, geo-economic engagement becomes a structural component of influence rather than a supplementary instrument. Fourth, narrative and symbolic power projection complements material and institutional forms of engagement. External actors actively shape perceptions of legitimacy and partnership through diplomatic visibility, humanitarian initiatives, and public diplomacy. Turkey's emphasis on humanitarian assistance and state-building narratives, for example, has contributed to framing its presence as supportive and partnership-oriented, thereby enhancing its acceptance among local populations and political elites. Similarly, Gulf actors utilize media networks, religious diplomacy, and symbolic gestures to reinforce their political alignments and legitimize their involvement. These narrative strategies are critical insofar as they normalize external presence and reduce resistance to deeper forms of institutional and economic embedding.

Crucially, these four dimensions do not operate independently. Their strategic effectiveness lies in their cumulative interaction. Political patronage facilitates access to decision-making processes, which in turn enables security cooperation and economic agreements. Geo-economic investments reinforce political alliances, while narrative strategies legitimize and stabilize these relationships over time. Hybrid power projection in Somalia thus unfolds as a multi-layered process of strategic entrenchment, in which influence is gradually institutionalized across interconnected domains. Importantly, this process should not be reduced to a unidirectional model of external imposition. Rather, it reflects a pattern of competitive entrenchment in which multiple actors pursue overlapping and sometimes conflicting strategies (Ylönen, 2021). Somalia's political landscape becomes embedded within a wider network of geopolitical interactions spanning the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Western Indian Ocean. In this emerging configuration, characterized by ports, bases, logistics corridors, and political partnerships, the country functions as a nodal point through which regional and extra-regional rivalries are mediated and materialized.

The cumulative outcome of these dynamics is not necessarily state collapse, but a reconfiguration of governance and security structures. Formal institutions increasingly coexist with externally supported patronage networks and parallel security arrangements, producing a layered and hybridized political order. Multilateral stabilization efforts, such as those led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU), operate alongside bilateral engagements that often bypass or undermine collective frameworks. The result is a fragmented security environment characterized by overlapping spheres of influence rather than coherent regional governance (Jost, 2025). At the systemic level, these patterns reflect broader transformations in the Horn of Africa.

As global and regional power constellations shift, external actors expand their engagement through indirect and multi-domain strategies. China's growing economic presence, Gulf rivalries, and the security interests of neighbouring states intersect within local political arenas, transforming domestic alignments into extensions of wider geopolitical competition (Telci, 2021). Somalia thereby emerges not merely as a case of fragility, but as a microcosm of contemporary multipolar contestation.

Conceptualizing Somalia through the lens of hybrid power projection thus provides insight into how fragile states become embedded in broader architectures of indirect competition. Influence is not imposed through singular interventions, but accumulated incrementally through the interaction of political, security, economic, and symbolic instruments. This perspective also suggests that hybrid rivalry is unlikely to remain episodic; rather, it constitutes a persistent feature of the regional order, as external actors continue to seek strategic depth through indirect engagement (Vertin, 2019).

Regional and strategic implications

This section translates the Somali case into regional-level insights. Its purpose is not to introduce additional theory, but to derive broader strategic consequences from the observations above. Somalia should not be understood as an isolated anomaly, but as an illustrative case whose dynamics reveal structural transformations in security governance, sovereignty, and geopolitical competition across the Horn of Africa and its adjacent maritime spaces.

A closer examination of hybrid power projection in Somalia reveals a broader transformation in regional competition. What was historically characterized by relatively overt geopolitical rivalry has increasingly evolved into a subtler form of influence projection. Rather than direct confrontation or formal military intervention, contemporary regional power politics relies on political patronage, security cooperation, infrastructure investment, economic leverage, and strategic narrative-building.

This shift reflects the logic of hybrid power projection outlined in the theoretical framework. Influence is exercised below the threshold of open conflict, minimizing escalation risks and political costs while allowing for sustained regional presence. In this sense, hybrid strategies enable foreign actors to secure long-term footholds without formal occupation or visible intervention. The Somali case demonstrates how such indirect engagement gradually reshapes the understanding of geopolitical influence in the Horn of Africa. Somalia's geostrategic significance explains why it has become a focal point of this competition. Positioned between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and connected to major Indian Ocean shipping lanes, Somalia constitutes a strategic hub within global maritime trade networks. Port concessions, logistical hubs, military training facilities, and security partnerships create durable entry points for external actors. Through these mechanisms, Somalia becomes integrated into a wider geopolitical "archipelago" composed of bases, trade corridors, stabilization missions, and infrastructure projects stretching across the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean. These developments correspond with broader international trends often described as the re-emergence of geopolitics and the securitization of aid and trade. Development assistance, infrastructure investment, and capacity-building initiatives increasingly intersect with strategic agendas (Leonard, 2021). In Somalia, hybrid engagement transforms the country into a multiplier of regional power projection, where rivalries among Gulf states, neighbouring African powers, and global actors intersect within a fragile political environment.

Importantly, foreign power projection in the Horn of Africa is not historically unprecedented. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union were deeply involved in regional conflicts, underscoring the long-standing strategic relevance of the region (Schwab, 1978). What distinguishes the current phase, however, is the systematic reliance on hybrid instruments rather than overt military confrontation. External competition is exported into domestic political arenas, reinforcing patronage networks and elite fragmentation while embedding long-term dependencies.

The cumulative effect of sustained hybrid engagement has significant implications for state sovereignty and regional governance. Formal sovereignty may remain intact, yet functional autonomy becomes increasingly

Somalia Armed Forces participate in a military parade in Mogadishu during celebrations of Somalia's 66th Anniversary of Independence and Union (Photo Credit: Horseed Media) constrained. When external actors provide essential security assistance, financial resources, or infrastructure investment, the recipient state may gradually become structurally dependent on these partnerships. Such dependency does not necessarily imply direct foreign control. Instead, it reflects a more subtle transformation: decision-making processes, economic priorities, and security arrangements become intertwined with external strategic interests. Particularly in fragile states that are still consolidating institutions and legitimacy, this dynamic may complicate efforts toward autonomous governance and coherent state-building (Chandler, 2007).

At the regional level, hybrid competition challenges the effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union face difficulties when bilateral and elite-centered arrangements operate parallel to, or bypass, formal frameworks. This contributes to a layered security order characterized by overlapping patronage networks rather than unified regional governance structures.

From the perspective of external actors, hybrid strategies can be strategically efficient in the short term. They provide access, leverage, and influence without the costs of open intervention. Infrastructure investments, security cooperation, and diplomatic engagement may generate visible stabilization gains and economic opportunities. However, over the longer term, structural risks emerge. If elite patronage, external dependency, and institutional bypassing become entrenched, domestic fragmentation may deepen. Regional resilience mechanisms are often insufficiently prepared to address such indirect forms of influence. As a result, hybrid competition may unintentionally contribute to prolonged instability, even when framed as stabilization or capacity-building (Jost, 2025). These dynamics highlight the necessity of strengthening both national and regional resilience. Limiting structural vulnerabilities, such as weak institutions, fragmented security sectors, and opaque governance arrangements, reduces entry points for external manipulation.

Hybrid rivalry in the Horn of Africa should therefore be understood as a structural feature of contemporary geopolitics rather than a temporary deviation. Somalia exemplifies how incremental hybrid influence-building can gradually transform regional order. The country illustrates how fragile states become embedded in wider architectures of geopolitical competition and how indirect power projection reshapes security governance beyond national borders.

> Importantly, foreign power projection in the Horn of Africa is not historically unprecedented. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union were deeply involved in regional conflicts, underscoring the long-standing strategic relevance of the region

While Somalia remains a distinct case shaped by its specific historical and political trajectory, the structural patterns observed here extend far beyond its borders. Hybrid power projection systematically alters regional alignments, redistributes influence among external actors, and contributes to a fragmented security environment across the Horn of Africa.

The strategic implications are therefore regional rather than purely domestic. Somalia functions as a warning case: where structural fragility intersects with high geostrategic value, hybrid competition is likely to intensify. Understanding these dynamics is essential for anticipating future patterns of rivalry and for designing governance frameworks capable of mitigating fragmentation effects.

Conclusion

Somalia is not an outlier but a paradigmatic case of contemporary hybrid power projection, as external actors systematically combine political patronage, security embedding, geo-economic leverage, and symbolic instruments to achieve durable influence below the threshold of open conflict in the country. Hybrid strategies, as evidenced here, are not episodic interventions but mechanisms of structural entrenchment that gradually reshape governance, redistribute power, and anchor external presence within domestic systems.

Theoretically, Somalia's case confirms that hybrid power projection is most effective in fragmented political environments, where institutional weakness and elite competition provide multiple access points for indirect influence. Rather than seeking territorial control, external actors pursue positional advantage through long-term embedding across political, economic, and security domains. This shifts the locus of competition from the battlefield to the structure of governance itself. The implications are consequential. While hybrid engagement can generate short-term gains, such as enhanced security capacities or infrastructure development, it simultaneously risks deepening dependency, reinforcing elite fragmentation, and constraining functional sovereignty. Statehood is not dismantled but reconfigured, as domestic decision-making becomes increasingly intertwined with external strategic interests. Scaled regionally, these dynamics contribute to a fragmented order characterized by overlapping spheres of influence and weakened multilateral coordination.

Addressing these challenges requires a recalibration of policy approaches. First, strengthening institutional resilience must take precedence over transactional engagement. This includes reinforcing state capacities, increasing transparency in security and infrastructure agreements, and prioritizing rule-based governance over elite-centered arrangements. Second, external investments should be embedded in accountable and, where possible, multilateral frameworks to reduce the risks of dependency and institutional bypassing. Third, regional coordination needs to be enhanced. Strengthening organizations such as IGAD and improving mechanisms for monitoring indirect forms of influence, such as elite co-optation or parallel security structures, are critical for mitigating fragmentation effects.

Ultimately, hybrid power projection reflects a broader transformation in contemporary geopolitics. Competition increasingly unfolds through indirect, cumulative, and embedded strategies rather than overt confrontation. Ensuring long-term stability in the Horn of Africa therefore depends less on deterring visible conflict and more on addressing the structural conditions that enable external actors to convert fragility into strategic advantage.

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Women-Led Households in Refugee Camps: A Comparative Analysis of Kakuma and Dadaab Camps

By Rahab Mwangi

Abstract

Women head roughly half of all households across Kenya's Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps, yet only six percent of refugee women are empowered across basic indicators of health decision-making, labour market access, contraceptive use, and freedom from domestic violence. This article argues that humanitarian programming treats female household headship as a demographic fact rather than a protection status requiring targeted response, and that Kakuma and Dadaab, though routinely discussed as one context, are structurally distinct enough that uniform programming fails women in both. It examines four areas in turn. Household restructuring produces an empowerment paradox: independent headship is itself associated with higher empowerment, yet women who are divorced, separated, or widowed have a 23-percentage-point lower probability of empowerment than women in monogamous marriages, and no study has yet disaggregated these outcomes by camp. On protection, Dadaab's Somali, multi-generational population relies on the Maslaha customary mediation system, which is accessible but rarely delivers justice for survivors; Kakuma's more formal referral infrastructure is stronger but strained by a growing, diverse caseload, and the most recent camp-level gender-based-violence data for Dadaab is now several years old. Economically, women-led households are concentrated in petty trade on margins that barely cover subsistence, are drawn into formal credit by desperation rather than opportunity, and are trained repeatedly for trades their camp markets have already saturated.

Most critically, the article traces a direct causal chain from the 2025 food ration cuts to transactional sex and the early marriage of daughters as household coping strategies, and onward to girls being withdrawn from school, showing that food security functions as gender-based-violence and child-protection policy, not a separate logistical stream. Recommendations include camp-disaggregated data collection, a negotiated rather than imposed reform of Dadaab's Maslaha referral pathway, market-saturation assessments before further vocational training, evaluation of financial-inclusion programmes against debt sustainability rather than loan uptake, and immediate restoration of rations for female-headed households to at least 70 percent of minimum standards.

Introduction

In July 2025, refugees in Kakuma rioted after the World Food Programme cut rations to 28 percent of the minimum food basket (ACAPS, 2025). The burden of that crisis, like most crises in these camps, falls unevenly: across Kakuma and Dadaab, the two camps that host the large majority of Kenya's refugee and asylum-seeker population, only six percent of refugee women are empowered across the basic indicators of health decision-making, labour market access, contraceptive use, and freedom from domestic violence (Kaaria and Murithi, 2025). These are not abstract statistics. They describe the daily reality of the women who head roughly half of the households in Kenya's refugee camps, most of them because a husband has died, left, or been separated from the family during displacement (Refugee Consortium of Kenya, 2024).

This article argues that humanitarian programming in Kakuma and Dadaab systematically underserves women-led households by treating female household headship as a demographic characteristic rather than a protection status that requires targeted intervention. It further argues that the two camps present importantly different contexts for this failure. Dadaab is a largely Somali, multi-generational settlement in Garissa County shaped by clan structures and customary dispute-resolution mechanisms. Kakuma is a multi-ethnic camp in Turkana County, now majority South Sudanese, with a more diverse and more recently arrived population and a distinct livelihood environment linked to the Kalobeyei

Women at the Kakuma Women Power Center showcase their baking skills and products, building livelihoods, strengthening entrepreneurship, and supporting one another in their homes (Photo Credit: liftinghandsinternational)

Integrated Settlement, a deliberate government and UNHCR policy zone adjacent to Kakuma that combines refugee and host-community economic activity within a single planned market and service area. Programming that treats the two camps as interchangeable will continue to fail women in both. The solutions must be camp-specific.

The analysis draws on gender-sensitive livelihoods frameworks, examining how structural inequalities in asset access and institutional power compound the specific vulnerabilities of women heading households in protracted displacement. It is organised around four areas where the failure is most acute and most fixable: household restructuring and the empowerment paradox; gender-based violence and protection; economic participation; and access to essential services. Each section sets out what the evidence shows separately for Kakuma and for Dadaab, and the article closes with a consolidated set of recommendations addressed to the Kenyan government, UNHCR, and implementing partners.

Two Camps, Two Realities

Kakuma and Dadaab are routinely discussed together because both are protracted, large-scale refugee settlements in Kenya established within a year of each other, Dadaab in 1991 and Kakuma in 1992 (UNHCR, n.d.). Beyond that, the two camps diverge in ways that matter directly for women-led households.

Dadaab, in Garissa County, hosts approximately 432,000 registered refugees across its three camps and the Ifo 2 settlement, and the population is more than 96 percent Somali (Department of Refugee Services, 2025). This relative homogeneity means that protection and dispute resolution in Dadaab operate substantially through Somali clan structures and customary law, including the Maslaha mediation system discussed in Section 4. Dadaab is also the older of the two camps in terms of continuous settlement: it holds a multi-generational population, with some residents born and raised entirely within the camp, producing social stratification and entrenched gendered hierarchies that a newer arrival population would not yet have developed.

Kakuma, in Turkana County, hosts approximately 306,000 registered refugees, with a further 79,000 in the adjacent Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement (Department of Refugee Services, 2025). Unlike Dadaab, Kakuma is multi-ethnic: the largest single group is South Sudanese, now estimated at well over half the camp population and growing as the South Sudan conflict continues, alongside significant Congolese, Somali, Ethiopian, and

Burundian communities (ACAPS, 2025). This diversity creates a fundamentally different protection environment from Dadaab's: there is no single customary system that can mediate disputes across the camp, community governance is more fragmented, and newly arrived South Sudanese women often lack the established social networks that longer-settled Somali women in Dadaab, for better or worse, can draw on.

Unless otherwise noted, the camp population figures used throughout this article are drawn from the Department of Refugee Services' Kenya Statistics Package as of 31 May 2025 (Department of Refugee Services, 2025), so that Kakuma and Dadaab are compared on a consistent reporting date. UNHCR's national operational updates for later months in 2025 (UNHCR Kenya, 2025a; 2025b) report modestly higher totals consistent with ongoing registration and new arrivals; they do not indicate a change in the relative proportions between the two camps that would affect the comparative analysis below. The commonly cited national figure of Kenya's refugee and asylum-seeker population (upwards of 850,000) is higher than the sum of the two camps' registered populations because it also includes urban refugees and other settlements outside Kakuma and Dadaab; it describes the scale of Kenya's overall refugee response and is not a camp-level figure.

The policy environment also diverges. Kenya's Shirika Plan, launched in March 2025, aims to shift both camps from a humanitarian-aid model toward integrated socioeconomic development (UNHCR Kenya, 2025a; Department of Refugee Services, n.d.). In Kakuma, this builds on an existing programme, the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan, which has already created market linkages and livelihood opportunities not available in Dadaab (UNHCR, 2023). In Dadaab, the equivalent initiative, the Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Programme, is newer and is layered onto a more isolated local economy in a poorer, more sparsely serviced county (UNHCR, n.d.). The same national policy will therefore land very differently on women-led households in the two camps, and programming that assumes a single Kenyan refugee-camp context will misjudge both.

Dadaab Refugee Camp is regarded as one of the world's largest refugee complexes, reflecting the scale of displacement and the harsh realities faced by refugees living in Kenya's arid northeastern landscape (Photo Credits: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images)

The sections that follow return to this comparison for each of the article's four thematic areas.

Household Restructuring and the Empowerment Paradox

Displacement forces a basic reorganisation of household structure and gender roles. In the countries most Kenyan refugees have fled, pre-displacement households typically positioned men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. Conflict and forced migration destabilise that arrangement and frequently leave women as de facto heads of household. This shift simultaneously opens space for women's decision-making and exposes them to acute economic and protection risks (Kaaria and Murithi, 2025).

The 2021 Refugee and Host Household Survey, conducted in Nairobi, found that only six percent of refugee women were empowered across indicators of health-decision agency, labour-market integration, contraceptive use, and freedom from domestic violence (Kaaria and Murithi, 2025). Independent household headship was associated with a higher chance of empowerment on these measures, suggesting that autonomous leadership can itself be a source of power even in a restrictive setting. But the World Bank Group (2023) complicates this picture: women who were divorced, separated, or widowed had a 23-percentage-point lower probability of empowerment than women in monogamous marriages. Household headship and vulnerability run together, a paradox at the heart of current programming gaps: the same status that can expand a woman's authority over her own household also strips her of the economic protection that a partner's income and social standing would otherwise provide.

Household composition compounds the effect. Women heading larger households, with multiple dependents such as young children or older relatives, face acute resource shortages as humanitarian aid contracts. Dependency ratios in female-headed households are consistently higher than in male-headed households, increasing the economic burden and forcing women into coping strategies that can damage their long-term wellbeing (ACAPS, 2025).

Neither of these findings has yet been disaggregated by camp. The 2021 survey and the World Bank study were conducted in Nairobi, and while their findings are widely treated as indicative of the broader Kenyan refugee population, no equivalent study has separately

> "Dadaab, in Garissa County, hosts approximately 432,000 registered refugees across its three camps and the Ifo 2 settlement, and the population is more than 96 percent Somali

measured empowerment outcomes for women heading households in Kakuma against those in Dadaab. Given how differently the two camps are structured, this is a significant blind spot: a Somali widow embedded in a multi-generational clan network in Dadaab and a recently arrived South Sudanese widow in Kakuma are likely to be navigating very different pathways to, or away from, empowerment, and current data cannot say how.

Gender-Based Violence: Two Protection Systems

Structural conditions common to both camps (overcrowding, inadequate lighting, poor sanitation infrastructure, and economic desperation) create an environment in which sexual and gender-based violence thrives (Mugo, Owaka and Mutisya, 2025). Women heading households without a male partner are especially exposed: the absence of a man in patriarchal social structures, combined with economic survival pressure, can push women toward transactional sex or exploitative relationships. Refugee women overall face gender-based violence at rates roughly 20 percent higher than host-community populations, with physical abuse and forced marriage the most common forms (Obara et al., 2025).

The two camps' response infrastructure, however, is not equivalent. In Kakuma, GBV Support Centres handle an estimated 15 to 20 cases per day, with adolescent girls markedly overrepresented among survivors (Abdi, 2023). No comparable per-day figure is published for Dadaab. The most detailed camp-level data available comes from a case-management evaluation conducted by the International Rescue Committee and CARE International with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine: among women accessing GBV case-management services in Dadaab, 47 percent reported intimate partner violence and 39 percent reported non-partner violence in the preceding year (International Rescue Committee, 2018). That data is now several years old, and its age is itself a policy problem: Dadaab is being managed, in effect, without current camp-wide GBV surveillance comparable to what exists in Kakuma.

In Kakuma today, women heading households face a formal referral system organised around age-graded, 24-hour Support Centres. In Dadaab today, women rely far more heavily on the Maslaha, a Somali community mediation mechanism in which clan elders settle disputes, including GBV cases, through negotiated agreements between families. The Maslaha is both a critical first-response mechanism, because formal GBV services in Dadaab are less accessible and less trusted, and a significant protection risk, because its settlements typically prioritise restoring social harmony between families over securing justice for the survivor and rarely result in criminal accountability for the perpetrator (Karimi, 2024). This tension between community accessibility and individual rights protection is one of Dadaab's central, camp-specific protection challenges, and it has no direct equivalent in Kakuma's more formalised, though still overstretched, referral system.

Any reform to this arrangement has to reckon with why the Maslaha functions at all: its authority in the community rests substantially on its independence from external mandate. Elders who experience a formal referral requirement as an imposition from UNHCR or the Kenyan state may simply decline to comply or, more damaging still, may route fewer GBV cases through the Maslaha in the first place, pushing disputes further from any form of oversight rather than closer to it. A durable reform therefore depends on treating Maslaha elders as co-designers of any referral pathway rather than as a customary mechanism to be redirected by directive, and is considerably more likely to succeed as a negotiated pilot in one or two Dadaab sub-camps, tested and adjusted before wider rollout, than as a single complex-wide requirement imposed from the outset.

Intimate partner violence is a significant and cross-cutting part of this picture. Prevalence among refugee women reaches 30 to 50 percent in some camp settings, aggravated by the stress of displacement, poverty, loss of social status, and unresolved trauma (Koigi, 2022). Women who leave an abusive partner to head an independent household may escape physical harm but continue to face social stigma and economic marginalisation tied to their marital status. How institutional responses, cultural norms, and women's own agency interact to shape protection outcomes is poorly understood at camp level and urgently needs examination, most pressingly for Dadaab, where the last rigorous data predates the current caseload.

Economic Participation and Livelihood Strategies

Refugee women's economic marginalisation is well documented. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only 20 percent of refugees in Kenya held formal employment, including self-employment, against 63 percent of Kenyan nationals, despite the 2021 Refugees Act's provisions expanding refugees' right to work (International Labour Organization, 2025). Regulatory barriers to movement and employment, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, and discrimination in local labour markets all constrain refugees generally; gendered analysis shows that women participate less in agricultural work and have less access to formal financial services than their male counterparts.

Livelihood strategies for women-led households are concentrated in the informal economy, above all in petty trade: small-scale buying and selling of vegetables, charcoal, firewood, and household goods. Women traders are structurally disadvantaged relative to male traders by limited capital to buy wholesale, restricted movement to reach markets outside the camp, and a lack of storage facilities (Ahmed, 2025). The result is thin profit margins that barely cover daily subsistence, leaving women-led households acutely exposed to shocks such as illness, theft, or a bad trading week.

A genuinely counterintuitive finding deserves more attention than it has received. Studies in Kakuma have found female-headed households to have a higher financial inclusion index than male-headed households (Ahmed, 2025). This is unlikely to reflect financial empowerment in any positive sense. The more plausible explanation is that economic desperation, not confidence or opportunity, drives women to take up formal financial products such as small loans, in order to finance agribusiness or income-generating activity that a male-headed household under less acute pressure would not need. That distinction matters for programme design: financial-inclusion metrics that treat higher uptake as a success indicator risk rewarding programmes that are, in practice, responding to and normalising deprivation rather than relieving it. Financial inclusion programmes for women-led households need to be evaluated against outcomes such as debt sustainability and asset accumulation, not uptake alone. Consistent with this, households that prioritised spending on children's education were less likely to use formal financial services at all, indicating a direct trade-off between short-term survival and long-term investment in human capital that current financial-inclusion programming does not address.

Vocational training illustrates the same problem from a different angle. Tailoring, hairdressing, and baking are the standard skills offered to women in both camps, and training in them has produced mixed results because the camp economies are already saturated with providers of exactly these services (International Labour Organization, 2025). A woman who completes a hairdressing course in a camp market that already has more hairdressers than customers gains a certificate, not an income. This is one of the most practically important and most overlooked findings available: vocational programming needs to be designed against each camp's actual labour market, not a generic refugee-livelihoods template. Here the two camps again diverge sharply. Kakuma's proximity to the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, a deliberate policy innovation combining refugee and host-community economic zones, has generated livelihood and market linkages that simply do not exist in Dadaab's more isolated setting in Garissa County. Vocational and enterprise programming transplanted from Kakuma to Dadaab without adjustment will fail for reasons specific to Dadaab's more constrained local market, and the reverse transplant carries the same risk.

Access to Services: Food Insecurity as the Structural Driver

Food security is the most urgent access issue facing refugee households in both camps, and it should be understood as the structural driver of several of the other harms described in this article, not as a separate, contained problem. The World Food Programme's cut of rations to 28 percent of minimum standards has produced widespread hunger and malnutrition, and triggered protests in Kakuma in July 2025 (ACAPS, 2025; World Food Programme, 2025). Average household income, at roughly KES 6,982 a month, sits far below the minimum expenditure basket of KES 16,424, forcing 74 percent of households into negative coping strategies (ACAPS, 2025).

Women heading households absorb the largest share of this shortfall. They routinely forgo their own food to feed their children, skip meals, eat less nutritious food, and borrow from neighbours. The causal chain from there is direct and well evidenced, and it is the article's most important empirical point: insufficient food aid drives some women toward transactional sex and toward the early marriage of daughters, both used as household-level strategies to cut spending and secure resources. Food security policy is therefore also GBV policy and child-protection policy, and should be resourced and evaluated as such rather than treated as a separate, purely logistical stream.

Healthcare access compounds the problem. Both camps offer primary healthcare, but chronic shortages of medicines, equipment, and personnel affect service quality throughout. Reproductive health services, including antenatal care, safe delivery, and family planning, remain inadequate relative to demand (CARE International, 2023), and mental health services are scarce despite high rates of trauma, depression, and anxiety among displaced women. Water and sanitation systems place a disproportionate burden on women as the household's primary water carriers and hygiene caretakers: long walks to water sources, inadequate latrines, lack of privacy, and poor lighting around sanitation facilities all carry security risks that fall almost entirely on women and girls.

Education is where the food-security causal chain closes. Women heading households consistently prioritise their children's education, but school fees, uniforms, and meal costs force many into a choice between sending a son or a daughter to school, and gender bias means that choice frequently falls against girls (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2024). A girl pulled from school to cut costs, and a girl married early to reduce the number

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of mouths a household must feed, are two versions of the same underlying failure: a food and cash-assistance system that is no longer meeting minimum needs.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are organised by the article's four thematic areas and marked by time horizon: immediate (within six months), medium-term (within two years), and structural (policy-reform horizon).

Household restructuring and empowerment

Immediate: UNHCR and the Refugee Consortium of Kenya should commission a camp-disaggregated extension of the Refugee and Host Household Survey, covering Kakuma and Dadaab separately, so that empowerment outcomes for women-led households can be measured and compared rather than inferred from Nairobi-based data.

Medium-term: The Department of Refugee Services and UNHCR should establish a joint registry that flags female-headed households at registration and tracks their access to assistance, so that camp management can identify and correct gaps in real time rather than through periodic surveys.

Structural: Camp governance structures in both Kakuma and Dadaab should include guaranteed representation for women heading households, not only for women generally, since the two groups face materially different constraints.

Gender-based violence and protection

Immediate: UNHCR and CARE International should commission an updated GBV case-management data collection exercise for Dadaab equivalent in scope to Kakuma's Support Centre reporting, since current Dadaab figures predate the present caseload by several years.

Immediate: UNHCR and CARE International should expand GBV Support Centre capacity in Dadaab toward the 24-hour staffing model already operating in Kakuma, with a dedicated fast-track referral pathway for women-led households.

Medium-term: In Dadaab, UNHCR and the Refugee Consortium of Kenya should convene Maslaha elders as co-designers of a phased referral pathway that routes GBV cases, after mediation, through the formal justice and case-management system. Given that the Maslaha's legitimacy rests on its independence from external direction, this should begin as a negotiated pilot in one or two sub-camps, evaluated for elder compliance and survivor outcomes before any complex-wide requirement is considered, preserving the Maslaha's role as first responder while closing its accountability gap.

Camp governance structures in both Kakuma and Dadaab should include guaranteed representation for women heading households, not only for women generally, since the two groups face materially different constraints

Economic participation

Immediate: The International Labour Organization and NGO livelihoods partners should conduct a market-saturation assessment in each camp before enrolling further cohorts in tailoring, hairdressing, or baking training, and redirect vocational programming toward trades identified as under-supplied in that camp's specific market.

Medium-term: Microfinance and financial-inclusion partners operating in Kakuma should shift programme evaluation from loan uptake to debt sustainability and asset accumulation among women-led households, to avoid rewarding programmes that are absorbing desperation rather than building resilience.

Structural: The Kenyan government should extend Kalobeyei-style integrated market access to Dadaab through the Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Programme, with specific provisions for women traders' capital access and freedom of movement to markets outside the camp.

Access to services

Immediate: WFP and donor governments should restore food rations for female-headed households

Women display fresh produce, highlighting how women's economic empowerment can strengthen household food security and resilience among refugee communities (Photo Credits: Peter Irungu/Oxfam International)

to at least 70 percent of minimum standards as a protection-critical priority, given the documented link between ration cuts and transactional sex and early marriage.

Medium-term: CARE International and health-sector partners should expand reproductive and mental health service capacity in both camps, with services co-located so that women do not need separate visits, separate travel, and separate exposure to risk to access each.

Structural: The Department of Refugee Services and donor governments should fund school-fee and uniform subsidies specifically targeted at girls in female-headed households, recognising that the education gender-gap in these households is a direct downstream effect of food and cash-assistance shortfalls rather than a standalone problem to be solved by education-sector programming alone.

Conclusion

Kakuma and Dadaab are not interchangeable settings for a single refugee-camp policy. Dadaab's Somali, multi-generational population and its reliance on the Maslaha demand a strategy built around formalising accountability within an existing, trusted community system, negotiated with, not imposed on, the elders who run it. Kakuma's multi-ethnic, more recently arrived population and its proximity to the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement demand a strategy built around extending an already-functioning referral and livelihoods infrastructure to keep pace with a growing and more diverse caseload. In both camps, the underlying failure is the same: humanitarian programming continues to treat female household headship as a demographic fact rather than the protection status it is.

The evidence in this article is specific and actionable. The Kenyan government, UNHCR, WFP, and their implementing partners now have what they need to act: restore food assistance for the households absorbing the sharpest edge of the ration cuts, close the data gap that leaves Dadaab's GBV response effectively unmeasured, redesign vocational programming around each camp's real labour market, and give women heading households a guaranteed seat in the governance structures that decide how all of this is implemented. These failures demand urgent policy attention. The cost of continued inaction is measured in the food a mother does not eat, the daughter pulled from school, and the survivor who is offered a family settlement instead of justice.

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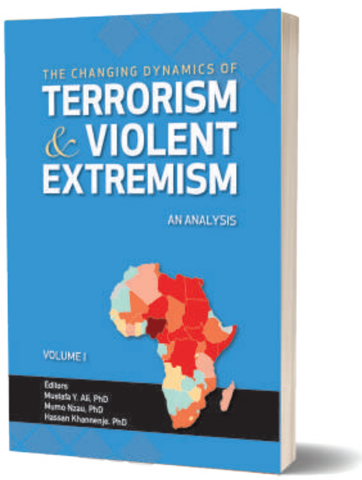
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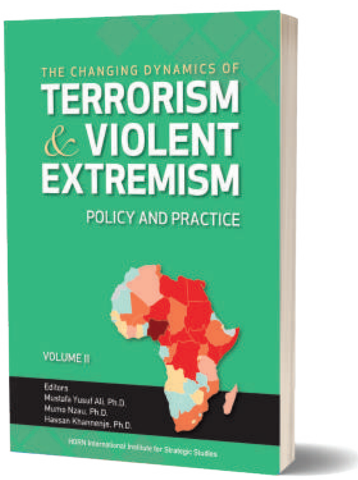
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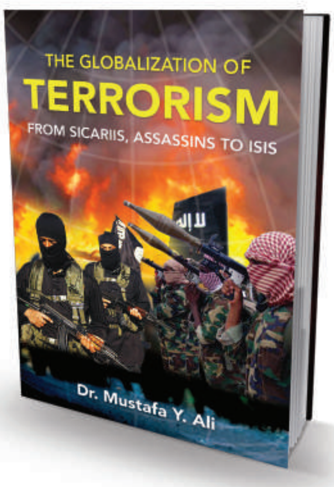
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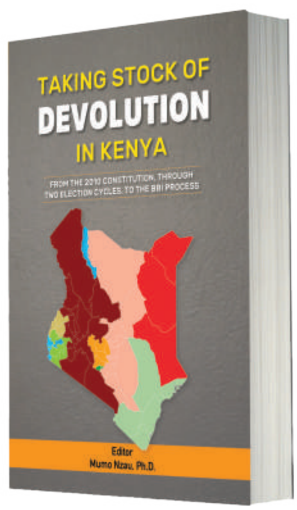
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