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## Power Practice And Geopolitics Of Horn Of Africa

Deep Narayan Pandey

Special Centre for Disaster Research, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

### Introduction

The paper assess the geopolitical significance of the Horn of Africa (HoA) stems from its strategic location, natural resources, socio-economic complexities, political instability, international influence, and humanitarian concerns. Understanding these factors is crucial for comprehending the region's dynamics and the complex interactions that shape its geopolitical landscape. Addressing the region's challenges requires concerted efforts from both regional actors and the international community to promote stability, economic development, and security. As a critical nexus for global trade routes and security, developments in the Horn of Africa have far-reaching implications beyond its borders. The Horn of Africa sits at a critical juncture between the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. This geographic position gives it control over major maritime routes, including the Aden-Suez Canal route, which is crucial for global trade, particularly oil transportation. The Horn of Africa is rich in natural resources such as potash, diamonds, and increasingly significant discoveries of oil and gas reserves. These resources attract international interest but also contribute to local economic disparities and conflicts over resource control.

### Peace and Security Challenges

The Horn of Africa's challenges are deeply interconnected, spanning governance deficits, economic hardships, security threats, and complex regional dynamics. Addressing these issues requires sustained efforts in conflict resolution, economic development, governance reforms, and international cooperation to mitigate the impacts on local populations and ensure long-term stability in the region. Disputes over water resources, such as those involving the Nile River, have been longstanding issues between countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, and downstream nations like Egypt and Sudan. The pastoral communities across the region, including in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Kenya, face conflicts over access to grazing lands, exacerbating tensions and sometimes leading to violence. Widespread poverty persists in the Horn of Africa, driven by factors including drought, inadequate infrastructure, and limited economic opportunities. Poverty fuels vulnerabilities to

recruitment by extremist groups. Groups like Al-Shabaab in Somalia pose significant security threats, fueled by extreme religious ideologies, unemployment, and marginalization. These groups not only destabilize local communities but also attract international attention due to their links with global terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda. The Bab al Mandab strait, a crucial maritime chokepoint between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, faces threats from piracy and the movement of terrorist networks, affecting global shipping and security interests (NSDS, 2019).

The Horn of Africa (HoA) faces significant challenges related to internal displacement, primarily driven by ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises. The region consistently ranks among the highest in terms of displacement worldwide, reflecting the scale of internal displacement within its borders. As of 2016, East Africa alone accounted for a substantial portion of Africa's internal displaced persons (IDPs), with 8.6 million out of 12.6 million IDPs across the continent. This statistic underscores the severity of displacement within the region, highlighting the profound impact of conflicts and instability on local populations. South Sudan, which gained independence from Sudan in 2011, quickly descended into civil war in late 2013. By the end of 2016, the country was grappling with a dire humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by internal conflicts and violence. More than a quarter of South Sudan's population was internally displaced, resulting in immense suffering and humanitarian challenges. The displacement crisis in South Sudan has persisted beyond 2016, continuing to pose significant obstacles to stability and development in the country. It has strained resources, hindered economic progress, and exacerbated food insecurity and health crises. The displacement of such a large segment of the population has also disrupted social cohesion and strained host communities and neighboring countries.

Efforts to address the displacement crisis in the Horn of Africa require comprehensive and sustained interventions. This includes humanitarian assistance to meet immediate needs, support for peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives, and long-term development strategies to promote stability and rebuild communities. The international community plays a crucial role in providing support and resources to alleviate the suffering of displaced populations and facilitate durable solutions to displacement in the region. The displacement crisis in the Horn of Africa is primarily driven by intra-state conflicts, political instability, ethnic tensions, and violence perpetrated by armed groups. Factors such as competition over resources, weak governance structures, and historical grievances exacerbate these conflicts, leading to prolonged displacement of populations. The international community, alongside regional organizations and neighboring countries, plays a crucial role in providing humanitarian aid, mediating peace processes, and supporting efforts to address the root causes of conflict and displacement in the Horn of Africa. However, challenges persist due to complex geopolitical dynamics, limited resources, and ongoing security threats (Bharti, 2022).

The Horn of Africa's strategic location, resource wealth, and importance for global trade make it a magnet for international interests and investments. Understanding the dynamics of competition and involvement by various actors, including Dubai World and other Middle Eastern entities, is crucial for navigating the complex geopolitical landscape of the region. The Horn of Africa has indeed become a focal

point for global powers and regional actors due to its strategic location and valuable resources, especially in relation to trade routes and economic interests. The Bab al Mandab Strait is a critical chokepoint for maritime trade, linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. It is a crucial passage for international shipping, particularly for oil tankers heading towards Europe and Asia. The Horn of Africa is not only strategically located but also rich in resources such as oil, gas, and minerals. Countries like South Sudan, with its significant oil reserves, attract attention from global powers and regional actors seeking to secure access to these resources (Bharti and Bharti, 2024).

China's involvement in Africa, particularly through infrastructure development and strategic investments, has significantly increased its influence across the continent. Djibouti, due to its strategic location at the entrance to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, has emerged as a focal point of Chinese interests in Africa. China has been a major player in Africa's infrastructure development, funding and constructing roads, railways, ports, and other key projects. These investments are aimed at enhancing connectivity and facilitating trade, which is crucial for China's economic interests. China has accumulated significant debt holdings in Africa, totaling around \$60 billion USD. This debt is often tied to infrastructure projects financed by Chinese loans, raising concerns about debt sustainability and economic dependency among African countries. Djibouti's location at the southern entrance to the Red Sea and the Bab el Mandab strait makes it a vital hub for international maritime trade. The majority of Europe-bound shipping from Asia passes through this route, including oil tankers and container ships. Djibouti hosts China's first overseas military base, established in 2017. This facility serves multiple purposes, including safeguarding Chinese economic interests by ensuring stability along critical trade routes and protecting Chinese nationals and assets in the region (Bharti, 2023).

China's increasing presence in Djibouti has prompted strategic responses from the United States, Europe, and others, shaping geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa. Efforts to balance interests, foster peace, and promote development are critical in navigating the complex landscape of this strategically important region. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, citing reasons such as protecting its economic interests and contributing to regional stability. This move has raised concerns among other global powers about China's expanding influence in the region. Concerned about China's dominance in Djibouti, the United States and its allies have explored alternative strategic locations. Eritrea has emerged as a potential alternative due to its proximity and strategic importance along the Red Sea coast. The United States has shown interest in fostering peace and stability between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Resolving their long-standing conflict not only contributes to regional stability but also potentially opens up Eritrea as a strategic partner for Western interests in the Horn of Africa. The competition for influence in the Horn of Africa reflects broader geopolitical strategies aimed at securing trade routes, resources, and military footholds. This competition can lead to strategic collaborations or tensions among global powers and regional actors. African states are essential to address challenges and capitalize on opportunities in the region (Ibid).

## Geopolitical Realignment and Challenges

Despite its rich natural resources including oil, gas, and minerals, the Horn of Africa has struggled to fully exploit these resources due to various factors such as governance issues, conflicts, and lack of infrastructure. This limitation leaves the region vulnerable to external influence and exploitation by global powers seeking to control resources and trade routes. Global powers often use proxies and engage in proxy conflicts in the Horn of Africa to advance their own strategic interests. This exacerbates internal conflicts and perpetuates instability, hindering the region's development and perpetuating dependency on external actors. The cycle of dependency on external aid and influence can reinforce economic and political vulnerabilities in the region. This dependency makes it challenging for local governments to assert sovereignty and pursue independent development agendas. The competence and effectiveness of leadership in the region are tested by the complex geopolitical environment and internal socio-economic pressures. Leaders must navigate competing interests while addressing the aspirations and grievances of diverse populations (Horn, 2023).

## Sincere Engagement and Conflict Resolution

External actors should prioritize genuine efforts to resolve conflicts in the Horn of Africa rather than exploiting them for strategic interests. This involves supporting mediation efforts, peacebuilding initiatives, and diplomatic dialogue aimed at addressing root causes of conflicts such as governance issues, resource disputes, and historical grievances. Healthy and positive competition among external actors can be encouraged through transparent engagement and alignment of objectives with regional stability and development. This approach helps mitigate the negative impacts of external polarization and competition, which often exacerbate existing conflicts. Enhanced coordination among external actors, regional organizations (such as IGAD and AU), and local governments is crucial. This coordination should focus on aligning strategies, pooling resources, and sharing expertise to effectively address regional challenges and promote sustainable development. Establishing reliable and diversified pathways for long-term cooperation involves investing in infrastructure, trade agreements, and development projects that benefit all stakeholders in the Horn of Africa. This approach promotes economic integration and stability while reducing dependency on external aid (Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, 2024).

The establishment of the Horn of Africa as a distinct region in the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was indeed influenced heavily by both European colonial ambitions and the strategies of African powers. One critical factor was the expansionist agenda pursued by Muhammad Ali Pasha's dynasty in Egypt, alongside the territorial ambitions of Ethiopian leaders in the highlands. Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Ottoman-appointed ruler of Egypt, sought to expand his domain beyond Egypt itself. His dynasty's campaigns included invasions into Sudan and along the Red Sea coast. These efforts were driven by strategic interests in controlling trade routes, accessing resources, and expanding influence in the region. The Egyptian expansion into Sudan and the Red Sea littoral

had significant implications for the geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa, as it brought new powers into the equation and altered existing political dynamics. At the same time, Ethiopian rulers, particularly during the reign of Emperor Menelik II, pursued their own expansionist policies. The highland Abyssinians embarked on campaigns that incorporated numerous kingdoms, chiefdoms, and sultanates inhabited by diverse ethnic groups such as the Nuer, Anuak, Somalis, Omotic, and Surmic speakers. These conquests helped define contemporary Ethiopia's boundaries and solidified its status as a major regional power.

However, the incorporation of such diverse territories into Ethiopia posed significant challenges. The newly acquired regions brought together different ethnic communities with distinct cultures, languages, and traditions. Managing this diversity within a unified Ethiopian state required careful navigation and adaptation of governance strategies. Issues of integration, cultural assimilation, and administrative coherence were crucial in shaping Ethiopia's internal dynamics and external relations within the Horn of Africa. To consolidate control and manage these complexities amidst external pressures, Ethiopian rulers implemented assimilation policies and invested in infrastructure. This infrastructure included the establishment of a telephone network, construction of palaces, ministries, and airports, as detailed by Levin (2016). These efforts were crucial in asserting territorial boundaries and restructuring the political and economic dynamics of the region (Terrefe and Verhoeven, 2024).

Despite facing significant fiscal constraints and encountering alternative models of territorial organization pursued by adversaries, Ethiopian leaders opted for infrastructural development and assimilation strategies. This choice, often termed as "roads not taken," highlighted Ethiopia's unique approach to managing its territorial acquisitions and ensuring its sovereignty amidst competing powers in the region. The article provides a comprehensive perspective on the intricate interplay between infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa. It underscores how leaders and state-builders in the region have historically viewed infrastructure as crucial for asserting and maintaining both internal cohesion and external legitimacy amidst multifaceted challenges. Infrastructure projects, such as railways, roads, and communication networks, have been instrumental in consolidating state power and connecting disparate regions within the Horn. They have facilitated economic integration, enhanced administrative control, and projected state authority over vast and diverse territories. However, the relationship between infrastructure and sovereignty is far from straightforward (Verhoeven, 2018).

The Horn of Africa has been characterized by frequent border changes, political realignments, and competing claims to authority. Infrastructure projects, despite their intended role in solidifying state authority, have often encountered challenges in neutralizing rival visions of sovereignty. Moreover, competing articulations of belonging and legitimate governance have at times led to the abandonment or redirection of infrastructure priorities. The article explores the intricate interplay between infrastructure development and state sovereignty in the Horn of Africa, highlighting how leaders in the region have navigated a complex landscape where infrastructure projects serve as both tools for state-building and arenas for contestation.

Infrastructure development, such as roads, railways, ports, and other essential facilities, plays a crucial role in shaping state sovereignty. These projects are not merely physical constructions but also symbolic representations of state authority and capabilities. They facilitate economic integration, enhance connectivity, and extend state presence into remote areas, thereby consolidating territorial control and reinforcing national identity. However, in the Horn of Africa, infrastructure initiatives also reflect a series of choices and deferred sovereignties. The region's history is marked by shifts in political power and aspirations, where infrastructure projects mirror these changes. Leaders have used infrastructure to assert authority, secure alliances, and project influence both domestically and internationally. At the same time, the implementation of infrastructure projects has often been contested, reflecting competing visions of development, resource allocation, and governance.

Moreover, infrastructure development in the Horn of Africa is deeply intertwined with geopolitical dynamics and societal complexities. The region's diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural landscapes present challenges in achieving inclusive development and equitable distribution of resources. Infrastructure projects can exacerbate existing tensions or serve as platforms for reconciliation and cooperation among different communities. In essence, the article provides a nuanced understanding of how infrastructure has shaped and been shaped by sovereignty in the Horn of Africa. It underscores the region's historical complexities and the pivotal role of infrastructure in negotiating authority amidst persistent geopolitical changes. By examining the intersection of infrastructure development, state-building efforts, and societal dynamics, the article illuminates the evolving nature of sovereignty in a region where infrastructure serves as a critical determinant of political, economic, and social stability (Chome, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This research indicates the Horn of Africa remains a region deeply affected by conflict and displacement, with South Sudan's situation serving as a stark example. Addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting inclusive governance, and enhancing regional cooperation are essential steps toward mitigating the humanitarian impact and fostering sustainable peace and development in the region. China's strategic investments in Djibouti and other African countries underscore its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and broader economic strategy to secure resources, enhance trade routes, and expand its geopolitical influence in the region and beyond. However, these developments also pose challenges and considerations for both African nations and the international community in terms of economic sustainability and geopolitical stability. The Horn of Africa's strategic importance and security challenges necessitate coordinated efforts from global powers, regional actors, and local communities to promote stability, economic development, and regional integration. Strengthening institutions like IGAD and fostering cultural diplomacy can pave the way for sustainable peace and prosperity in this critical region. The Horn of Africa's complex political, ethnic, and socio-economic dynamics require nuanced approaches to peacebuilding and integration. Addressing historical grievances, economic disparities, and governance challenges is essential for sustainable peace.

The Horn of Africa faces complex challenges stemming from global geopolitical dynamics, internal conflicts, and economic vulnerabilities. There are need to addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that promotes regional cooperation, strengthens governance, and empowers local institutions to mitigate external pressures and foster sustainable development. Promoting sincere engagement, minimizing external polarization, and enhancing coordination among stakeholders, the Horn of Africa can move towards sustainable peace and development. It is imperative for external actors to align their strategies with regional priorities, support conflict resolution efforts, and invest in long-term cooperation to ensure the region's stability and prosperity. This approach not only addresses current challenges but also builds a foundation for inclusive growth and resilience in the face of future uncertainties.

The discussion on Djibouti's ports, the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline, and the Addis Ababa-Red Sea railway underscores how regional infrastructures have intricately woven together specific economic interests, political alliances, and notions of identity and belonging over the past century in the Horn of Africa. Rather than straightforward victories for aspiring nation-states, these infrastructures have been tools through which some polities have strengthened their sovereignty by creating dependencies for others. Djibouti's strategic location and its ports, for example, have facilitated international trade and positioned it as a critical hub for global maritime activities. The Greater Nile Oil Pipeline has enabled Sudan to export its oil resources, influencing its economic and political relationships with neighboring countries. Similarly, the railway from Addis Ababa to the Red Sea has enhanced Ethiopia's access to ports for imports and exports, thereby shaping its economic strategies and geopolitical positioning. However, these infrastructures have not only enabled prosperity but also reinforced inequalities and power dynamics within the region. They have sometimes marginalized or assimilated certain communities or states that do not directly benefit from these infrastructural developments.

Moreover, the choices made in developing these infrastructures have not definitively closed off alternative futures. Aspirations for a reinvigorated Islamic East Africa or closer ties with Gulf states illustrate ongoing debates and aspirations that draw from the vulnerabilities and opportunities presented by existing political and economic orders. Looking ahead, future infrastructural developments in the Horn of Africa hold the potential to reshape the region once again. The prospect of new infrastructures could inspire new generations to reimagine spatial patterns and regional orders beyond the confines of competing nation-states. These infrastructures connect the region to multiple historical trajectories and contingent futures, fostering diverse visions of what the Horn of Africa was, could have been, and might still become.

By and large, the interplay between infrastructures and regional dynamics in the Horn of Africa highlights both the complexities and possibilities inherent in shaping political economies, identities, and futures in a region marked by diverse histories and aspirations.

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