

Review Article

The Geopolitics of the Horn of Africa: Navigating Regional Conflicts and Global Interests

Aschale Abie Dubale* 

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Kebri Dehar University, Kebri Dehar, Ethiopia

Abstract

The Horn of Africa, comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Eritrea, Sudan, and Djibouti, is one of the most geopolitically significant yet unstable regions in the world. This paper explores the complex interplay of internal conflicts, regional power struggles, and the influence of global actors in shaping the region's security and political landscape. Internal divisions, particularly ethnic tensions and contested political systems, have led to protracted conflicts, such as the Somali civil war, the Ethiopian-Tigray conflict, and ongoing instability in Sudan. These conflicts are further compounded by external interventions, with global powers like the United States, China, and the Gulf States seeking strategic and economic footholds in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative and military investments, along with the Gulf States' engagement in regional proxy wars, illustrate the heightened geopolitical competition. The African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have played critical roles in mediating conflicts and providing peacekeeping forces, but their efforts have often been undermined by internal political divisions and external pressures. The findings suggest that long-term stability will require more effective regional cooperation, stronger governance, and a balanced approach to external engagement that prioritizes peace over geopolitical rivalry.

Keywords

Horn of Africa, Geopolitics, Regional Conflicts, External Interventions, Global Interest

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a region marked by both historical complexity and contemporary strategic importance. Comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti, the Horn sits at the crossroads of critical global trade routes, linking the Middle East to Sub-Saharan Africa. It is home to some of the world's most volatile and long-standing conflicts, including the civil war in Somalia, the border disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and the internal strife in Sudan and South Sudan. These conflicts have not only contributed to the region's instability but have also drawn in

global powers, each with its own strategic interests, further complicating efforts to establish lasting peace and security.

The geopolitics of the Horn of Africa is shaped by both regional dynamics and external interventions. For example, the rivalry between the Gulf States, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has significantly influenced political alliances, particularly through military bases and economic investments in countries like Somalia and Eritrea [3]. Meanwhile, China and the United States have increasingly sought to secure economic and strategic footholds in the re-

*Corresponding author: aschaleabie27@gmail.com (Aschale Abie Dubale)

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gion, with China's Belt and Road Initiative further embedding it as a key player in the region's infrastructure development [12]. The role of international organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations, has also been crucial in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, though their effectiveness has often been limited by geopolitical rivalries and inadequate resources.

The region's complex web of internal and external interests has made it a focal point for both cooperation and conflict. For instance, Ethiopia's rise as a regional power and its role in peacekeeping missions across East Africa contrasts with the challenges it faces, including the Tigray conflict and internal ethnic tensions [7]. Additionally, the ongoing war in Yemen, with its proximity to the Horn, has had significant spillover effects on the security and political landscapes of neighboring countries, especially Somalia and Djibouti. These factors illustrate the precarious balance the Horn of Africa must maintain as it navigates regional disputes, external interventions, and the pursuit of political and economic stability.

This paper analyzes the geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa, focusing on the regional conflicts, foreign interests, and international engagements that shape the security, political, and economic landscape of the region.

2. Literature Review

The geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa is complex, shaped by a mix of historical legacies, regional dynamics, and global interests. A significant body of literature has explored the interaction of these factors, examining the region's internal conflicts, external interventions, and strategic importance in the international system.

2.1. Internal Conflicts and Regional Instability

Scholars have long examined the role of internal conflicts in the Horn of Africa and their implications for regional stability. According to [9], the Horn of Africa's vulnerability to conflict can be traced back to colonial-era boundaries that created artificial states without regard for ethnic, cultural, or political realities. These colonial legacies continue to fuel tensions, particularly in Ethiopia and Somalia, where ethnic divisions and territorial disputes remain significant sources of instability.

In Somalia, the civil war and subsequent state collapse in the early 1990s have been central to the region's geopolitical challenges. [10] argues that the persistent instability in Somalia, compounded by terrorist groups like al-Shabaab, not only destabilizes the country but also affects neighboring states, particularly Kenya and Ethiopia, through refugee flows, terrorism, and regional proxy battles. The Somali diaspora and its role in both contributing to and alleviating conflict, highlighting how external Somali communities influence local politics through remittances and activism.

The Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, which began in 2020, has drawn significant attention from scholars seeking to understand the complexities of ethnic federalism and governance in Africa. Kebede [8] posits that the Ethiopian state's internal contradictions particularly the system of ethnic federalism have exacerbated regional conflicts, with the Tigray War serving as a stark reminder of the risks of ethnic-based political systems. Getachew [6] emphasizes that Ethiopia's struggle with ethnic divisions is compounded by its pursuit of regional dominance, particularly in relation to Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia.

2.2. Geopolitical Rivalries and External Influences

External actors have been increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa, driven by both economic and strategic interests. The United States, China, and the Gulf States have all established a presence in the region, with varying degrees of involvement in the region's political and security affairs.

Friedman [4] argues that the U.S. has historically seen the Horn of Africa primarily through the lens of counterterrorism, particularly with regard to the Somali-based terrorist group al-Shabaab. In addition to security concerns, the U.S. has also been involved in supporting peace building initiatives and humanitarian aid, with mixed results. However, U.S. policy has often been criticized for its failure to address the region's deeper political and economic issues, and its reliance on military interventions has at times contributed to the perpetuation of conflict rather than its resolution.

China's growing influence in the Horn of Africa, particularly through investments linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been the subject of several studies. Smith [12] examines how China has strategically positioned itself as a key economic partner for countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. Through infrastructure projects, loans, and military installations, China has become a major geopolitical player in the region. This economic diplomacy has allowed China to exert significant influence, as seen in its establishment of a military base in Djibouti, a move that has raised concerns among Western powers about China's expanding military footprint on the African continent.

The Gulf States particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have also intensified their involvement in the Horn of Africa in recent years, primarily through military engagements, humanitarian aid, and economic investments. According to Bennett [3] the Gulf States have played a dual role in the region: they are engaged in proxy wars, such as their involvement in the Yemen conflict, which directly affects Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti, while also attempting to secure critical ports along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for strategic reasons. These states have sought to influence local politics, with the UAE, for example, developing close ties with the Somali federal government and providing financial support to Ethiopia's military operations.

in Somalia.

2.3. Regional Organizations and Conflict Resolution

The role of regional organizations, particularly the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), has been another key area of scholarly focus. [5] Evaluates the African Union's peacekeeping efforts in Somalia, where the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has played a critical role in stabilizing key areas and facilitating dialogue between the Somali government and various factions. However, [2] critiques the AU's ability to address internal African conflicts effectively, citing issues related to funding, political will, and the organization's dependence on external actors for support.

Similarly, IGAD, a regional economic organization established to promote peace and development in the Horn of Africa, has been pivotal in mediating conflicts in the region. [1] Discusses IGAD's involvement in peace talks, especially the 2005 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea and its role in mediating the Sudanese peace process. Despite these efforts, IGAD has faced significant challenges in curbing conflicts, as its political and economic cohesion has often been undermined by the varying interests of its member states, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, whose rivalry over regional influence complicates the organization's decision-making.

2.4. Strategic Importance of the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa's location, bordering critical maritime routes like the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, enhances its strategic significance in global geopolitics. [11] highlights the region's role as a nexus for global trade, especially for oil shipments from the Middle East to Europe and Asia. The region's importance as a chokepoint for international shipping traffic has drawn the interest of global powers, particularly as they seek to secure energy routes and enhance military positioning.

Global powers have, therefore, increasingly viewed the Horn as a "geostrategic hotspot," with its proximity to the Middle East and the Suez Canal amplifying its significance for both economic and military interests. As [4] discuss, the region's access to vital trade routes has made it a focal point in the competition for global influence, particularly in the context of the rising Sino-U.S. rivalry.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This paper employed the qualitative research approach.

3.2. Data Collection

Conduct a comprehensive review of academic articles, books, and research reports related to geopolitics in the Horn of Africa.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Identify recurring themes in the collected data.

4. Discussion

The Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape remains complex and fluid, shaped by a combination of historical, regional, and global dynamics. This section discusses the key findings from the literature, focusing on the region's internal conflicts, the role of external actors, and the implications of global strategic interests. It also analyzes the outcomes of regional efforts to address these challenges.

4.1. Internal Conflicts and Regional Instability

Internal conflicts have been the primary drivers of instability in the Horn of Africa, and despite significant efforts at peacebuilding, they continue to undermine regional development. As discussed by [10] and [8], the region's internal conflicts, such as the Somali civil war, Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, and the Sudanese crises, have not only destabilized individual countries but also created regional security challenges, with neighboring states often drawn into these disputes.

The root causes of these conflicts are deeply tied to political systems and ethnic divisions. Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, for example, has often been cited as a contributing factor to the Tigray conflict. [8] Argues that ethnic-based political structures in Ethiopia have exacerbated political competition and ignited tensions between ethnic groups, resulting in violent confrontations. Similarly, in Somalia, the collapse of the central state in the 1990s led to the fragmentation of political authority, leaving the country vulnerable to war-lordism, terrorism, and external interference [10].

However, despite these internal divisions, there have been instances of resilience. [11] highlights the importance of Somali diaspora communities in peace building efforts, which have provided resources and leadership in pushing for political solutions. Similarly, Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia and the establishment of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) are examples of regional attempts to stabilize conflict zones, even if the outcomes have been mixed.

4.2. External Influences and Global Geopolitical Interests

A significant finding from the literature is the growing role

of external actors in shaping the Horn of Africa's political and security dynamics. [4] and [12] argue that the region's strategic location at the crossroads of international maritime routes and proximity to the Middle East has made it a target for foreign powers seeking to secure economic and military interests.

The presence of China, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is particularly notable. [12] notes that China's investments in infrastructure and strategic military outposts, such as its base in Djibouti, have enabled it to exert significant influence over the region. This economic engagement, while beneficial in terms of infrastructure development, has also led to concerns among Western powers, particularly the United States, about China's growing military footprint in the region. The strategic rivalry between China and the U.S. in the Horn of Africa underscores the global significance of the region.

The influence of the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has also been substantial, as explored by [3]. These countries have provided financial support and military backing to various actors in the region, often pursuing their own interests, such as securing strategic ports and influencing political outcomes. For example, the UAE's role in the Yemeni conflict, with its involvement in Somalia and support for Ethiopia's military operations in the Horn, exemplifies the complex geopolitical maneuvering in the region. These actions have deepened political divisions and have occasionally sparked tension between regional powers.

However, the external interventions have been double-edged. While foreign involvement has brought economic investment and military assistance, it has often exacerbated local conflicts and led to the entrenchment of unstable power structures. The competition between global and regional powers, rather than promoting stability, has sometimes resulted in proxy conflicts, as seen in the ongoing competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE for influence over Somalia.

4.3. Role of Regional Organizations in Conflict Resolution

The involvement of regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and IGAD in addressing conflicts in the Horn of Africa has been both critical and challenging. [5] and [2] underscore the importance of AU-led peacekeeping missions, such as AMISOM, which have played a crucial role in Somalia and other areas. However, these efforts have been marred by funding shortages, political disagreements among member states, and the challenge of coordinating peace operations across a region marked by diverse and sometimes opposing interests.

IGAD has played a mediating role in conflicts, including in Sudan and South Sudan, but its success has been uneven. [1] Points out that while IGAD was instrumental in broker-

ing peace in Sudan, it has struggled to maintain cohesion among its members and has failed to effectively address the recent crises in Ethiopia and Somalia. The conflicting interests of member states such as the rivalry between Ethiopia and Kenya over regional leadership have often impeded IGAD's ability to act decisively.

While regional organizations are essential to conflict resolution, their capacity to prevent or resolve crises is often undermined by political fragmentation and external pressures. The effectiveness of peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts is highly dependent on the willingness of member states to prioritize regional peace over national interests, a factor that remains elusive in the Horn of Africa [2].

4.4. Strategic Importance and Future Trends

The geopolitical importance of the Horn of Africa, especially its control over vital maritime routes and proximity to the Middle East, continues to attract the attention of global powers. [11] and [4] highlight that as global competition intensifies, particularly between China and the United States, the Horn of Africa will continue to be a strategic focal point for power projection. This geopolitical significance will lead to continued external involvement, further complicating local efforts to address conflicts.

In terms of future trends, the Horn of Africa will increasingly experience more competition for influence, especially from regional powers like Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as external actors such as China and the Gulf States. [4] argues that the region will need to navigate this external interference carefully to ensure that foreign investments do not exacerbate local conflicts but instead contribute to long-term stability and development.

5. Conclusion

The findings highlight that the Horn of Africa's geopolitical challenges are deeply intertwined with internal conflicts, external interventions, and regional rivalries. While external actors have brought investment and support for peacekeeping, their involvement often complicates efforts to resolve conflicts. Regional organizations like the African Union and IGAD play a critical role but face significant hurdles in maintaining unity and effectiveness. Ultimately, the path to stability in the Horn of Africa will require greater regional cooperation, the strengthening of local governance, and a more balanced approach to external engagement, where foreign powers prioritize the long-term peace and development of the region rather than their own strategic interests.

Abbreviations

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AU	Africa Union

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
UAE	United Arab Emirates

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Author Contributions

Aschale Abie Dubale is the single author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of Interest.

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