

Infrastructure Scramble: Geopolitics, Logistics, and Stability in the Horn of Africa

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70806/p601ch18>

Abstract

The Horn of Africa (HoA) has changed dramatically, from a region inundated by local conflicts, droughts and famines into a must grab critical arena for 21st-century geopolitical competition. At the core of this competition is geopolitics and logistics infrastructure driving the region's contemporary stability, conflict, and integration dynamics. The glitter of HoA has pitted the global and regional powers in a "new scramble" for influence. It is a mortal combat primarily manifesting through a race to finance and control ports, railways, and military bases. The research leverage a multidisciplinary methodology combining geopolitical mapping, a logistics infrastructure audit, and policy framework analysis. This moves the study beyond cataloguing investments to critically analyse how controlling logistical networks can confer power, creates dependencies, and reshapes alliances. Thus, a fundamental contradiction framed in the rhetoric of "development" and "connectivity" is revealed. The study shows how infrastructure competition in HoA actually undermines regional integration and sovereignty. Reviewing the projects like the UAE's port in Berbera and Turkey's investment in Mogadishu shows deepened fractures, rifting regional relations, and extra-continental rivalries. On another angle infrastructure needs in the HoA have driven cooperation, as seen in the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway or the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement. Notwithstanding, the research finds that external strategic imperatives systematically override local developmental needs. They lead to debt-trap diplomacy, the weaponisation of logistics, and the heightened militarisation of vital trade chokepoints like the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The study concludes, without a concerted effort for agency by the HoA states and regional institutions, this new scramble will produce a legacy of unsustainable

debt, strategic dependency, and a deeply fractured regional relations that set the stage for future conflicts.

Key words: infrastructure; geopolitics; Horn of Africa; new scramble; conflict; logistics

Introduction

The increasing presence of competing external interests in the Horn of Africa (HoA) by the big powers is an indication that the region is no longer a mere theatre of local and regional conflict and competition (Telci, 202; Borchgrevink & Lie, 2009), but a high-stakes arena of strategic importance. The HoA, made up of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and parts of Kenya and Sudan, has turned out to be a region of immense strategic importance. This is due to its proximity to the important maritime corridors of the Red Sea and the Aden Sea. The value of maritime corridor has turned the region into a critical node in global logistics chains and a chessboard for 21st-century geopolitical rivalry (Farah, 2024; Qobo, 2023). Because of its geopolitical importance as well as its geostrategic value to extra-continental powers (Qobo, 2023) it has become a winner takes all region. The additional value of the region are its links with Asia and Europe through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea (Munene, 2023).

The HOA has also become an epicentre of the Gulf rivalry (Saudi Arabia/UAE vs. Qatar/Turkey); the US-China rivalry; and the European Union and Russia. All are seeking to establish or re-establish influence over the region, notably through deals with unstable governments, like Sudan, for naval basing rights (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2018; Wright, 2021; Verhoeven, 2018). Thus, extra-regional hegemons are entering the Horn's logistics sector to expand connectivity via large-scale foreign investments. Non-Western states (Gulf states and China) are using state-owned

enterprises to invest in infrastructure projects (Okbandrias, 2017). This, in turn, allows them to impose foreign policy interests on the Horn, explaining why infrastructure projects should be regarded as power projection and geopolitical rivalry (Larsen, 2024).

The geopolitical competition in the HoA is manifesting primarily through a rush to finance and control logistics infrastructure, particularly ports and rail. Of note is the "ports race" in Djibouti, Berbera (Somaliland), Bosaso (Puntland), Hobyo (Galmudug), and Lamu Port (Kenya) (Cabestan, 2020; Shinn, 2022; Stratfor Worldview, 2021; BBC News, 2023). This paper posits that the intersection of geopolitics and logistics is a primary determinant of the region's contemporary conflict, peace, stability and integration dynamics (European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) 2018; Reuters (2023, February 9); The Wall Street Journal (2023, May 4); Al Jazeera, 2021) in the HoA.

Using a multidisciplinary approach, the paper has integrated elements of political economy, security studies, and infrastructure analysis. This allowed a movement beyond simply mapping investments, to a critical analysis of how control over logistical networks confers power, creates new dependencies, and reshapes alliances and conflicts.

Background

There is a critical nexus of 21st-century great power rivalry, regional power dynamics, local economic ambitions, and geopolitical competition over logistics infrastructure in the Horn of Africa (HoA). This complex interplay significantly shapes, and is also shaped by, the way the regional relations unfolds, including its integration, the conflicts and actors. The HoA encompasses Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. At the periphery, and critical, are Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya. It occupies one of the world's most vital maritime chokepoints – the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Chaziza, 2016). It is this strategic location, when combined with the economic needs of landlocked powers in the region and the global ambitions of external actors, that fuels the current infrastructure competition. The countries which value the HoA for its

strategic importance are growing to include China, the US, France, Japan, and Italy (Styan, 2020) as well as Turkey, the UAE, Qatar, and Russia. The majority of these external actors are driven by military interests or by massive infrastructure investments in roads, rail, and ports.

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is the regional chokepoint that drivers the competition. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a gateway to the Suez Canal and a lifeline for global trade. It serves particularly for the oil and gas shipments from the Persian Gulf to Europe, and Asia. For European and North American businesses, using this trade route cuts down the distance to their destinations by 7000 km, hence the costs (Sturman & Hayat, 2019). Thus, controlling, or securing the coastline adjacent to this strait is a primary strategic objective for many nations. More so, for a land locked country and a giant economy like Ethiopia, a strong footprint and sovereign access of the coastline ensures economic survival and assurance of becoming a middle-income power (Mulugeta, 2023). However, it has been the independence of Eritrea in 1993 that made Ethiopia landlocked, and regional infrastructure politics a serious imperative.

The growth in the global importance of the HoA has birthed a "New Scramble for Africa". This competition transformed the HoA into a theatre for fierce competition between external powers, mainly (Carmody, 2016). For China, it is the pursuance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Using the BRI China has financed and built the majority of major infrastructure projects in the region, including railways, ports, and pipelines (Chaziza, 2016). This Chinese strategy, which started off as essentially economical, has turned a military one. By backing its strategy militarily, China is desirous to firmly secure trade routes with the hinterland and create markets for its goods. For this it has built its first overseas military base in Djibouti (Ebrahim, 2022).

For the United States and Europe, their presence in the HoA is essentially a military reach to protect their global and regional economic interests. By building the largest permanent military base in Africa in Djibouti, under the

auspices of countering terrorism and monitoring Middle Eastern instability, the US justifies its control of ports, rail and telecommunication in the region (Styan, 2020). Hence, the Chinese expansion would be viewed with suspicion by the US and its European counterparts. These fear that China may deploy debt-trap diplomacy and erode their influence (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). The United States and Europe are, thus, promoting alternative frameworks like the EU's Global Gateway, even with less financial firepower compared to China.

There are Middle Eastern powers such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar who are equally competing for presence and visibility in the HoA. In their rivalries, they are seeing the HoA as their strategic backyard (Woertz, 2019). They are using port deals and military base agreements with HoA countries to project power, secure food supplies (via land leases), and gain leverage over their rivals. For instance, the UAE has secured port management contracts in Berbera (Somaliland) and Assab (Eritrea) (Manson, 2021). Such Somaliland deals have infuriated Somalia, which does not regard Somaliland as an autonomous state.

HoA has had key infrastructure projects with geopolitical dimensions. For instance, Djibouti has become the epicentre of this competition due to its hosting of military bases of China, the US, France, Japan, and Italy (Styan, 2020). Djibouti has also transformed itself into a commercial hub with Chinese-built ports, a railway to Addis Ababa, and a free trade zone. It has used this strategy of leveraging its location to survive. However, due to overly subcontracting the construction of capital infrastructure such as ports and roads, it risks becoming over-leveraged to China (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). In Somaliland, the UAE's DP World has directly challenged Djibouti's monopoly by constructing the Berbera Corridor that connects it to Ethiopia (Manson, 2021). Somaliland's heavy backing by the UAE gave the country a strategic foothold, emboldening it in its quest for an independent state of Somaliland and complicating its relations with Somalia.

The heavy investment by Turkey in the construction of the Port of Mogadishu in Somalia

and its long-term management, and the building of a large embassy is not just a part of Turkey's broader strategy of neo-Ottomanism but also the strengthening of influence in the Muslim world (Özkan, 2020). Under the auspices of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET), China has constructed a massive corridor starting at the Lamu Port in Kenya. This China-backed project is intended to open up a new trade route for South Sudan and Ethiopia via northern Kenya (Middleton, 2022). Even if the project represents a long-term vision for regional integration beyond the volatile Gulf of Aden coast, for Ethiopia it is a multi-port strategy. It is a way of diversification, gaining geopolitical leverage, and reducing dependency on Djibouti. Hence, Ethiopia is aggressively pursuing port access agreements with Sudan, Somaliland, and Kenya and even engaging with Eritrea (Mulugeta, 2023).

On Regional Cooperation, Integration, and Conflict

The infrastructure competition has a dualistic impact of fostering regional cooperation and sowing the seeds of strife (Verhoeven, 2018) in the HoA. The region has had several forms of cooperation and integration even amidst mistrust and horse-trading. One of the functional cooperations has been in the construction of infrastructure projects that require cross-border cooperation. The Ethiopia-Djibouti railway is one such example. It necessitated close coordination on customs, security, and operations. The pair was able to build habits of cooperation and created shared economic interests.

New alliances were also formed with the rapid rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018. This was directly linked to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's need for alternative port access (Mulugeta, 2023). This ended a 20-year-long "no war, no peace" stalemate. It also demonstrated how infrastructure needs can be a powerful driver for peace. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) provided the forum where these infrastructure plans were discussed. Even the divided member states recognised the need for a coordinated approach to attract funding and manage disputes.

Conversely, the patterns of conflict and fragmentation, such as sovereignty and

secessionism, often created regional animosities. For instance the Berbera deal between the UAE and Somaliland, while it strengthened Somaliland's claim to statehood, it deepened its rift with the Federal Government of Somalia in Mogadishu. Mogadishu views this deal as a violation of its sovereignty (Manson, 2021). It is regarded as an external validation to the statehood of the Somaliland that also fuels internal fragmentation of Somalia.

Moreover, the increasing competition for ports has also become a proxy for older rivalries. For instance, the UAE's presence in Berbera (Somaliland) and Assab (Eritrea) is seen as a counterbalance to Turkish and Qatari influence in Mogadishu (Woertz, 2019). Such activities are drawing the HoA states into the conflicts of the Gulf, complicating local politics.

Foreign-funded projects are also creating debt and dependency, as they are driven by debt-trap diplomacy. Concerns have been raised around debt distress. This mainly where majority of projects were funded by Chinese loans (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). Chinese money could create new dependencies, where a country's strategic assets or policy decisions are influenced by its creditors. This undermine sovereignty of dependend countries. Additionally, in a region with disputed borders and ethnic conflicts, new infrastructure can alter local power dynamics with the introduction of new powerful players who have access to foreign capital and networks. Or a new port or corridor may benefit one region or ethnic group over another, leading to grievances. The LAPSSET corridor, for instance, passes through historically marginalised areas in Kenya, raising questions about who will benefit from development (Middleton, 2022).

Finally, the over-militarisation of the region by foreign countries and the concentration of foreign military bases in Djibouti in particular, and the potential for more along the coast (e.g., the UAE in Berbera), may turn the region into a tinderbox (Styan, 2020). Should there be a conflict between any of the external powers (US vs China), the conflict could instantly regionalise, with devastating consequences for the HoA.

Statement of the problem

As in the last phase of the 20th century of famines, droughts, and complex emergencies, the HoA is now the epicentre of a 21st-century great contest about who builds what infrastructure and for whom. There is an emerging new scramble for infrastructure targeting the region for its strategic potential (Carmody, 2016). Global and regional powers are in frenzied competition not to control the traditional lands this time, but in building ports, railways, and military bases under the banner of "development" and "connectivity". In the best look of things, these projects promise economic transformation by recalibrating the region's geopolitical axis. However, this can be seen as a way of weaponising logistics and threatening to shatter its fragile stability for generations to come (Verhoeven, 2018).

The biggest challenge is that the infrastructure boom is not essentially driven by the developmental needs of Horn African nations. The boom is pushed by both regional and external strategic imperatives of foreign powers such as the Gulf States, Turkey, China, Russia, and the United States (Woertz, 2019). These are not altruistic investors but pursuers of neo-mercantilism. The port in Djibouti, a base in Berbera, or a railway to Addis Ababa is a strategic pawn in a broader contestation for military dominance, trade route control, and global influence. Where development is externally driven, a clear paradox develops. One of these is the creation of a fleeting or mirage sovereignty. Instead of having a tight grip over their sovereignty, nations mortgage their strategic assets for short-term capital (Jones & Hameiri, 2022). This erodes national sovereignty, binding governments to the political and economic whims of their patrons, creating a modern-day debt-trap diplomacy. The nation-states in the HoA are already fragile and hollowed out, with agency compromised by the allure of foreign investment.

Under this arrangement, the infrastructure loses its neutrality and turns into a weapon. For instance, a commercial port can instantly become a naval forward-operating base, and a rail and a road built for trade can be used for military logistics (Ebrahim, 2022). When the commercial and military utility are fused seamlessly, every crane and container ship can be turned into a

potential instrument of power projection by whichever power is behind it. Such an arrangement can easily transform the HoA from a region in need of development support into a potential battlefield for proxy conflicts.

Since external competition does not happen in isolation, the presence of external capital controlling infrastructure can only amplify the existing internal fractures and tensions. Rival states, like Ethiopia and Somalia, or competing factions within Sudan, will be empowered to leverage external alliances against their neighbours and internal rivals (Verhoeven, 2018). The influx of foreign money, particularly the US dollar, and weapons, may entrench authoritarian regimes and conflict economies (Collier, 2007). This exacerbates resource conflicts and provides the means for more devastating internal wars. By competing on who builds the deepest port or the longest pipeline or railroad, a region is not being stabilised; it is being strategically destabilised, and its internal fracture is being pried open to serve external agendas.

This places the Horn of Africa at a precarious juncture. The very infrastructure that promises to connect it to the world will simultaneously divide it from its people and Africa, setting a stage for regional and international confrontation. It will also create a network of dependencies, not development; of spheres of influence, and not shared prosperity. The biggest issue will not be whether HoA will be developed, but by whom, for what benefit, and at what ultimate cost? Without oversight, this new scramble will produce a legacy of unsustainable debt, heightened militarisation, and a deeply fractured region, forever trapped as a pawn in a game it did not choose to play, yet whose consequences it will have to carry.

Research Design and Analysis

The research used a sophisticated and systematic approach to desk-based research, moving beyond a simple literature summary. The methodology was designed to deconstruct a complex, multi-actor, and multi-layered geopolitical phenomenon into three interconnected analytical layers. By integrating these layers, the research provided a holistic, evidence-based

understanding of the drivers, mechanisms, and impacts of infrastructure competition in the Horn of Africa (HoA). The overarching methodology is qualitative document analysis (QDA), which involves the systematic review and interpretation of published and unpublished documents to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge.

The starting point is the geopolitical mapping (Layer 1). This focused on identifying the intentions, strategies, and power dynamics of the key actors. The scholarly works on geopolitical theory by Flint and Taylor (2018), foreign policy analysis, and specific country strategies by O'Sullivan (2022) and Verhoeven (2018) assisted in mapping the intentions of HoA states and external actors. Flint and Taylor's (2018) political geography depicted how "multiple geopolitics" operates. It showed how China's state-led, economic "infrastructure geopolitics" (BRI) are competing with the UAE's and Turkey's more direct, military and port-based "power projection geopolitics". Further, O'Sullivan (2022) provided a tangible framework for analysing China's "strategic playbook" in the HoA, detailing the specific triad of BRI financing, "debt-trap diplomacy" accusations (e.g., the potential leverage over Ethiopia's debt), and non-interference principles that shield partner governments from Western pressure. From Verhoeven (2018) we gleaned the empirical evidence from the Gulf States' strategies in order to confidently demonstrate how the UAE's development of the Assab base in Eritrea during the Yemen war was a direct manifestation of its broader competition with Saudi Arabia and Iran, fundamentally altering Red Sea security dynamics.

The policy documents and white papers from these actors were the official strategy pronouncements by the actors in the HoA. These are China's BRI policy papers, Turkey's "Mavi Vatan" doctrine, the EU's Global Gateway strategy, and the UAE's Vision 2030. For instance, China's BRI policy papers, such as the 2015 "Vision and Actions" document, clearly project the Chinese strategy of building the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015), which would take her towards world dominance. This materialised concretely with the construction of the Doraleh

Multi-Purpose Port in Djibouti, adjacent to its first overseas military base. For Turkey, the "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland) Doctrine is a practical naval strategy in the HoA. By investing \$4 billion in the Suakin Island port project with Sudan, and the sustained deployment of exploration and warships in the Eastern Mediterranean, there is a serious contestation against the Greek and Egyptian presence (Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Defence, 2019).

While the EU's Global Gateway Strategy was conceived as a democratic alternative to BRI, its actual motive was shown through its concrete implementation in the HoA via a €150 million funding for the "Roaming Horn of Africa" digital infrastructure initiative and grants for sustainable energy projects that explicitly created dependencies based on governance standards rather than solely infrastructure (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, the external dimensions of the UAE's Vision 2030 and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs), evinced by the 2022 CEPA with Ethiopia, including a \$3 billion lifeline in foreign exchange and a commitment for the UAE to develop the port of Berbera in Somaliland, directly integrated HoA economies into its logistics and food security networks (United Arab Emirates Government, 2022).

The think tank and NGO reports from institutions like the International Crisis Group, Chatham House, and Carnegie Endowment provided expert insights into actor motivations. All these sources were augmented by news media and investigative journalism, which reported on diplomatic visits, investment announcements, and security agreements that reveal strategic intentions. For instance, the International Crisis Group (ICG) (2023) report, *A Course Correction for the Red Sea*, provides granular evidence of how Sudan's civil war has forced the UAE and Egypt to recalibrate their support for competing generals, revealing the fragility of their influence (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Chatham House analysis details how the UAE's port acquisitions in Somaliland (Berbera) and Puntland (Bosaso) are not merely commercial actions but a part of a broader strategy to create a network of secure logistics hubs that mirror its competitor Saudi Arabia's investments in Djibouti (Milton-Edwards,

2023). The Carnegie Endowment reports have documented the specific clauses in China's BRI contracts with African nations that often mandate the use of Chinese contractors and materials, creating a closed loop of financing and construction that limits local economic spillover (Brautigam, 2020).

The news media and investigative journalism in the region and abroad reveal real-time strategic actions going on there. Diplomatic visits by political leaders of the external actors, like the repeated visits by Turkish President Erdoğan to Somalia and Sudan, were widely covered (Reuters, 2017; The Africa Report, 2018). These culminated in the signing of military cooperation agreements and the aforementioned Suakin Island deal, demonstrating a sustained push for political influence. In addition, investment announcements via media outlets like Reuters and The Africa Report have broken stories on the UAE's DP World finalising a \$442 million concession for the Bosaso port in Puntland. This was a concrete move that expanded its footprint and intensified its rivalry with Turkey and Qatar in Somalia (The Africa Report, 2023). In a similar vein, investigative reports by The Wall Street Journal revealed details of the secret security agreement between China and Tanzania. This agreement includes provisions for a Chinese military "logistics base" in Bagamoyo, signalling a potential future expansion of China's military presence in the Indian Ocean adjacent to the HoA (Hinshaw & Parkinson, 2023). The geopolitical mapping, which synthesised evidence from concrete sources and theoretical frameworks of academia as well as real-time reporting by journalists, provided a robust, evidence-based picture of the complex and competitive intentions shaping the Horn of Africa.

The actors which were profiled, detailing each key state and non-state actor, included the UAE, KSA, Turkey, China, USA, EU, Qatar, Ethiopia, Kenya, DP World, and China Exim Bank. For each, the research catalogued the stated interests sold through official rhetoric like the "win-win cooperation" or "development partnership" (Xi, 2021). The actor profiling process moved beyond simple identification to a detailed forensic analysis of each key state and non-state entity. This involved triangulating their official rhetoric

with their observable strategic goals and on-the-ground investments to decode their true agenda in the Horn of Africa. China has consistently employed "win-win cooperation" and "non-interference" rhetoric (Xi, 2021). Such behaviour was evident in the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) 2021 speech, where President Xi pledged to "build a shared future for mankind." As of Turkey, it framed its engagement as a "development partnership" rooted in historical Ottoman brotherhood. This narrative was frequently used by President Erdogan during his visits to Somalia and Sudan (Erdogan, 2017). On the other hand, the UAE and EU have both used the language of "stability" and "economic development". Through the Global Gateway, the EU has explicitly marketed itself as a "sustainable and trusted connection" compared with other actors (European Commission, 2021), while the UAE's aid to Somalia is publicly framed as humanitarian and stabilising.

Looking at the concrete strategic goals, it is noticeable that each actor sought to secure maritime chokepoints. For instance, the UAE clearly seeks to establish a "chokepoint triad" of Berbera (Somaliland) on the Gulf of Aden, Assab (Eritrea) at the southern Red Sea, and Bosaso (Puntland) as a clear strategy to control shipping lanes. For China the establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti (2017), directly adjacent to the vital Bab el-Mandeb strait, was an issue of gaining military foothold (International Crisis Group, 2023; Milton-Edwards, 2023; Office of the Secretary of Defence, 2021). This is the same with the USA, which maintains its Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti as a primary counter-terrorism launch pad and power projection hub (Styan, 2020). Turkey secured a military training base in Mogadishu, Somalia (2017), giving it a permanent strategic foothold, and France retains a permanent military presence in Djibouti, its former colony (Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Defence, 2017).

Some argue that these countries export industrial overcapacity. For China the exportation of industrial overcapacity is the core of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For instance, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway (\$4.5 billion, 70% financed by China Exim Bank) was built by Chinese companies using Chinese materials and

labour, directly exporting its rail industrial capacity (Chen & Miles, 2022). For regional actors, the development was a way of achieving regional hegemony. Ethiopia's historic dominance is demonstrated by its former control of access to ports in Eritrea and its current drive for alternatives. The Berbera Corridor deal with Somaliland and the UAE, is one way it sought to break its landlocked status (The Africa Report, 2022). For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, their involvement in the Sudan civil war and their backing of opposing generals is a proxy competition for influence over a strategically located regional power (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Using the interest analysis, we identified patterns of converging and even divergent interests. For instance, the UAE and Ethiopia both want to break Djibouti's port monopoly, and competing interests, such as the UAE vs. Turkey, for influence in Somalia. This step enabled an analysis that moved beyond a simple list to a relational understanding. The critical discourse analysis, on the other hand, interrogated the "gap between rhetoric and reality" (Brautigam, 2020). This phase involved comparing official statements with observable actions and the outcomes of investments to uncover hidden agendas like debt leverage or military strategic positioning. The output was a dynamic map of the geopolitical landscape that explains why specific infrastructure projects are being promoted in specific locations and predicts future areas of engagement or conflict.

Another layer of approaching research in HoA was the logistics infrastructure audit, where the intention was to answer the "What" and "How". Here the "why" was translated into tangible empirical evidence by cataloguing and analysing the physical infrastructure itself. From the corporate and government databases, including the project announcements from company websites like DP World or CCECC and host government tender portals and national development plans, as well as development finance institutions' (World Bank, AfDB) reports (World Bank, 2022; African Development Bank [AfDB], 2021; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2023), Chinese loan databases (SAIS-CARI), and IMF debt sustainability analyses, logistics

infrastructure audit was possible (DP World, 2023; China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation [CCECC], n.d.). The geospatial data and satellite imagery benefited from platforms like Google Earth or professional GIS software verified project status, scale, and physical connectivity. In addition, engineering and industry reports published already provided technical details, contract values, and implementation timelines (S&P Global, 2023).

To analyse the data, a comprehensive database of major logistics projects was created. Each entry was coded with key data points such as the project type (is it a port, railway, container port?), the location, the project status (it is a planned project? under construction? operational?) and the type of ownership structure (it is a state? private? PPP?). The analysis also looked at sources of funding (China Exim Bank? private equity? etc.); the primary contractor (CCECC? Yapi Merkezi?); and the intended connectivity that emerged (which trade corridor/hinterland it serves?) (China-Africa Research Initiative [SAIS-CARI], 2024).

The network analysis mapped the physical and financial connections, helping to reveal dependencies. It identified the clusters of projects financed and built by a single actor (like China), highlighting leverage points and vulnerabilities to "debt-trap diplomacy" (Hurley et al., 2018). The competing spheres of influence were considered to visualise the "battle of the corridors", like the LAPSSET vs. Northern Corridor. This helped to show how infrastructure physically pulls regions into competing geopolitical orbits (O'Sullivan, 2021). The actor-project link connected the data from this audit back to the actors profiled in the geopolitical mapping layer. This tested geopolitical claims against empirical evidence. For instance, it verified if a country's stated focus on "regional integration" is matched by building infrastructure that connects multiple countries or merely serves its hinterland. The result was an empirical baseline and a series of mind maps that visualised the physical manifestations of geopolitical strategies, revealing dependencies, leverage, and the on-the-ground realities of competing integration networks.

The final layer of approach was the policy and framework analysis, which helped to paint the "rules of the game". This layer assessed the formal institutional environment within which the geopolitical and infrastructural competition occurs. It analysed the tension between national/regional goals and external influences. The data sources included existing treaties and legal texts, like the IGAD Treaty, the EAC Common Market Protocol, or the AfCFTA Agreement. Implementation reports, like the progress reports published by the secretariats of IGAD, EAC, and the AU, as well as assessments by the World Bank and UNECA (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023) and national policy and documents were used (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2023; East African Community, 2022; African Union, 2024). Also used are critical scholarship on the effectiveness of regional organisations in Africa (Börzel & Risse, 2016) and the impact of external actors on regionalism (Carmody, 2022).

The analysis followed the framework deconstruction approach, where key regional frameworks were reviewed to extract their core provisions related to infrastructure development, trade liberalisation, customs harmonisation, and cross-border cooperation. Gap analysis was a crucial integrative step. We conducted a comparison between the stated objectives of the frameworks, such as the EAC Customs Union, and the actual state of affairs. If the EAC promotes free movement of goods, but the infrastructure audit shows new ports and railways are being built with bespoke bilateral agreements that create separate standards and bypass EAC protocols (East African Community, 2004), it demonstrates how geopolitical interests are actively undermining regional integration (Carmody, 2022).

Through the assessment of effectiveness, we were able to test why these frameworks often fail. Is it due to a lack of capacity, political will, or because powerful external bilateral deals offer more immediate, though strategically costly, benefits (Hancock, 2020)? Conversely, we were able to identify potential synergies—where a geopolitically driven project could be co-opted to serve a broader regional goal. The result was a critical assessment of the regulatory and

institutional battlefield, explaining the disconnect between regional aspirations and the fragmented reality and identifying points of friction and potential synergy between external investments and African-led integration agendas.

This methodology managed an iterative integration of these three layers, allowing the researcher constantly to move between them. For instance, findings in the Geopolitical Mapping (e.g., the UAE's rivalry with Turkey) prompted a search for corresponding evidence in the infrastructure audit (e.g., competing port investments in Berbera vs. Mogadishu). The data from the infrastructure audit (e.g., a Chinese-loan-funded railway) was evaluated through the lens of policy analysis to see if it aligned with or contradicted regional corridor development plans. The policy analysis revealed a weak regulatory environment, helping to explain why the geopolitical mapping of competing actors can so easily play out through the infrastructure audit. This triangulation ensured that the final analysis is not a collection of disjointed facts but a coherent, evidence-based narrative that can effectively answer the core research question, support strategic decision-making, and provide a robust foundation for forecasting future trends and conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

Discussion

This research presents a sophisticated and compelling framework for analysing a complex geopolitical issue. Its strength lies in its systematic, multi-layered methodology, but it also invites critical scrutiny regarding potential biases, practical challenges, and theoretical underpinnings. The approach has strength in its triangulation model. This methodology moves beyond a mono-causal explanation. By integrating geopolitical mapping, infrastructure audit, and policy analysis, the research created a holistic and evidence-based narrative. Through triangulation, we tested the grand strategic claims identified in the geopolitical mapping (e.g., China's "win-win" rhetoric) against the hard data from the infrastructure audit (e.g., loan terms, ownership structures) and the institutional realities revealed by the policy analysis. Interconnections were revealed when the research effectively demonstrated how macro-level geopolitics (Layer 1) manifested in physical

infrastructure (Layer 2), which in turn undermined or co-opted regional institutional frameworks (Layer 3). The example of bilateral port deals that circumvent EAC protocols perfectly exemplifies this analytical value.

The research uncovered the dualistic impacts of infrastructure geopolitics. By correctly avoiding a simplistic "infrastructure is bad" narrative and acknowledging the dualistic impact—where the same processes can foster cooperation (Ethio-Djibouti railway, Ethio-Eritrea peace) and fuel conflict (Somalia-Somaliland rift)—we captured the complex, contingent reality of the HoA. This procedure enabled the research to answer the "how" question with nuance, rather than just the "what". The research was also focused on agency and fragmentation. The text wisely highlights how external competition amplifies the pre-existing fractures. This moves the analysis away from viewing African states as mere passive pawns but legitimate actors. It correctly identifies that regional actors like Ethiopia, Somaliland, or factions within Sudan actively leverage external rivalries for their own ends. Such a process is often described as "agency in the context of dependency". This is a more advanced and realistic perspective than a purely neocolonial interpretation.

Even though there was critical scrutiny, there were potential limitations in the analysis of the HoA. To start with, the "weaponisation" and "debt-trap" framing could be emotional concepts. Charged terms such as "weaponisation of logistics" and "debt-trap diplomacy" can be too blinding and reductive. In the realm of academic literature, the "debt-trap" narrative, particularly regarding China, has been heavily contested by scholars like Deborah Brautigam (2020). Researchers must exercise caution to avoid assuming malevolent intent *a priori*, instead utilising the infrastructure audit to empirically test for potential traps. Are loans truly unsustainable? Are assets being seized, or is this a narrative advanced by geopolitical competitors? The methodology should have explicitly stated that one of its aims is to empirically evaluate the validity of the "debt trap" and "weaponisation" theses, rather than taking them as a given starting point.

The research also promoted more of the "view from above" than the local voices. Despite its comprehensiveness, the proposed desk-based methodology was inherently a "view from above", risking prioritisation of the perspectives of strategists in Washington, Beijing, and Addis Ababa over the lived experiences of communities in Lamu, Berbera, or the Ogaden. The mention that LAPSET passes through marginalised areas in Kenya is crucial, but we noticed that a purely document-based approach may struggle to analyse the localised and lived socio-political impacts, displacement, and changing power dynamics at the sub-national level. While a full ethnographic study may have been beyond the scope of this paper, the explicit incorporation of reports from local civil society organisations, community-led impact assessments, and local media would have grounded the analysis and mitigated this top-down bias.

Operationalising of the "infrastructure audit" was an excellent idea, but it presented significant practical challenges. Some of the challenges included getting data on ownership structures, loan terms, and contractor details. Where it was available, it was often opaque, commercially sensitive, or deliberately concealed. Relying on corporate reports and government tenders provided an incomplete picture. Thus, the research could not reliably access the data needed to make definitive claims about dependencies and leverage. Hence, acknowledgement of these data limitations upfront was appropriate, and a clear strategy for dealing with information gaps was supposed to be stated, perhaps by using proxy indicators or explicitly marking certain conclusions as tentative where data is weak.

The core research question asks how competition influences "conflict" and "stability". This requires defining and measuring "stability". In the real world, the concept of "stability" is highly contested. Does it mean the absence of war? Does it refer to the resilience of governments? Does it encompass the predictability of economic policy? The concepts of stability or conflict should be defined and operationalised to make these concepts measurable. For instance, does the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement (a form of interstate stability) outweigh the increased

tensions with Somalia (a different form of instability)? Thus, "stability" should be broken down into indicators such as frequency of interstate disputes, levels of intrastate violence, and government tenure, which can be tracked through existing conflict datasets.

There were theoretical and conceptual tensions emerging in this study. The paper sat at the intersection of realist geopolitics (focus on state power, military bases, and spheres of influence) and critical international political economy (IPE) (focus on neo-mercantilism, dependency, and the erosion of sovereignty). This is a productive tension, which needed careful management. The realist lens explains why powers are competing, while the critical IPE lens explains how this competition creates structural dependencies and undermines local agency. It is important to note that the methodology was well-suited to bridge this divide, using the infrastructure audit to show how realist strategies create IPE outcomes (debt, dependency).

Conclusion

The geopolitical competition over logistics infrastructure in the Horn of Africa is not a secondary phenomenon but a primary force actively reshaping the region's political, economic, and security landscape. This research has demonstrated that the "ports race" and the battle for strategic corridors are far more than commercial ventures; they are the central theatre for 21st-century power projection, where infrastructure itself is weaponised. The tripartite methodology of geopolitical mapping, infrastructure auditing, and policy analysis reveals a consistent and troubling pattern: the strategic imperatives of external actors systematically override and undermine the developmental needs and institutional frameworks of Horn African nations.

The core finding of this study is the fundamental contradiction between the rhetoric of connectivity and the reality of fragmentation. While external powers tout "win-win cooperation" and "sustainable development", their on-the-ground investments—from China's military base in Djibouti to the UAE's "chokepoint triad" of ports—are carving the region into competing spheres of influence. This competition

does not build a unified, integrated Horn of Africa; it hardens existing fault lines, as vividly illustrated by how the UAE's port deal in Berbera deepens the rift between Somaliland and Somalia, or how bilateral infrastructure agreements actively bypass and weaken regional bodies like the East African Community.

Consequently, the Horn of Africa stands at a catastrophic crossroads. The very infrastructure that promises development simultaneously creates dangerous dependencies, exacerbates debt distress, and elevates the risk of conflict by militarising key nodes of the global economy. The region is not simply a passive pawn in this game; local actors exercise agency by leveraging these rivalries, but often at the cost of long-term sovereignty and stability. The promise of economic transformation is thus shadowed by the threat of perpetual strategic destabilisation.

In conclusion, unless Horn African states and regional institutions can collectively reassert control over their infrastructural agenda—harnessing external investment for genuinely inclusive, regionally led development—the current scramble will produce a legacy not of shared prosperity, but of entrenched vulnerability. The Horn of Africa risks becoming a permanent arena for proxy competition, where its people bear the ultimate cost of unsustainable debt, heightened militarisation, and a future dictated by external interests. The question is no longer if the region will be developed, but who will dictate the terms, and whether the ultimate outcome will be integration into global networks on equitable terms or subjugation to a new era of strategic dependency.

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