

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE HORN OF AFRICA IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER

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The renewed centrality of geopolitics and the gradual emergence of an increasingly complex and asymmetric multipolar world order have profoundly reshaped international politics. The post-Cold War era, often characterized by globalization and the brief “unipolar moment” dominated by the United States (Krauthammer, 1990), has gradually given way to a more fragmented international environment in which multiple global, regional, and middle powers simultaneously shape the international system. Rather than replacing one dominant order with another, contemporary international politics is increasingly characterized by overlapping gravity centers of power, competing normative frameworks, and differentiated forms of influence (Acharya, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018). This evolving order is not simply multipolar; it is asymmetric, since states possess highly uneven political, economic, technological, and military capabilities while nevertheless exercising significant influence within specific geographical or functional domains (Brands, 2022). As recent scholarship on the Global South demonstrates, this transformation has considerably expanded the diplomatic and strategic room for maneuver available to many African states (Brown, 2012; Harman & Brown, 2013; Tarrósy & Marsai, 2024). A symmetrical order is not automatic, and asymmetry will likely persist. Yet the current flux affords smaller states’ room to maneuver – and a possible, if contested, opening to co-author worldmaking (Getachew, 2019).

Few regions illustrate these transformations more vividly than the Horn of Africa. Situated at the intersection of Africa, the Middle East, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean, the Horn has become one of the world’s foremost geopolitical crossroads. Long conceptualized as a regional security complex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), the region today occupies a pivotal position in the geopolitics of maritime trade, energy security, critical infrastructure, and global connectivity (Lefebvre, 1992; Verhoeven, 2018; de Waal, 2015). The proliferation of

military bases, port investments, infrastructure financing, diplomatic initiatives, and security partnerships demonstrates that the Horn has become one of the principal theatres through which both established and emerging powers pursue influence. Yet the region should not be understood merely as an arena upon which external actors project their rivalries. Instead, the Horn itself has evolved into an asymmetric multipolar regional order, where states continuously renegotiate alliances, recalibrate foreign policy priorities, and strategically navigate competing external engagements.

This emphasis on regional agency represents one of the principal contributions of the present thematic issue. Much of the existing literature continues to analyze the Horn primarily through the actions of major external powers, often portraying governments in the region as passive recipients of geopolitical competition. Such perspectives overlook the increasingly sophisticated diplomatic strategies adopted by the states of the Horn. Recent scholarship on African agency has demonstrated that African governments are not merely objects of international politics but active participants that negotiate, shape, and occasionally redefine the terms of external engagement (Brown, 2012; Harman & Brown, 2013; Coffie & Tiky, 2021). Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan increasingly pursue strategies of balancing, hedging, selective alignment, strategic neutrality, and competitive partnership as they navigate the opportunities and constraints created by an increasingly crowded geopolitical landscape. Agency, therefore, is neither absolute nor absent; rather, it is exercised within structural asymmetries that simultaneously constrain and enable political action.

This thematic issue of the *Hungarian Journal of African Studies* seeks to contribute to these debates by placing the agency of Horn states at the center of analysis. Rather than treating the region simply as an arena of great-power rivalry or a chessboard for extra regional powers, the contributions collectively explore how actors of the region interpret, respond to, and shape contemporary geopolitical transformations. Together they demonstrate that the Horn has itself become an asymmetric multipolar regional subsystem, characterized by overlapping security interests, shifting alliances, contested sovereignty, and multiple external partnerships. The issue thus offers an important corrective to conventional analyses that privilege external intervention while underestimating the strategic calculations of regional governments.

Firehiwot Sintayehu opens the thematic issue with an examination of the changing relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea following the celebrated rapprochement of 2018. While the peace agreement initially appeared to end nearly two decades of hostility, subsequent developments – including the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement and Ethiopia's renewed demands for access to the Red Sea – have exposed fundamental divergences in the national interests and foreign policy priorities of the two states. Drawing upon Regional Security Complex Theory, the article demonstrates how bilateral tensions increasingly intersect with wider regional rivalries involving Djibouti, Somalia, and external powers, thereby illustrating the fragility of regional stability.

Yared Debebe then turns to one of the Horn's most enduring geopolitical fault lines: the Ethiopia–Sudan border dispute surrounding al-Fashaga. By combining historical analysis with contemporary developments, the article demonstrates how the return of geopolitics, the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the Sudanese civil war, the Nile waters dispute, and domestic political transformations have collectively reshaped prospects for border demarcation and interstate cooperation. The study illustrates how historical territorial disputes acquire new meanings within an evolving regional and global security environment.

Viktor Marsai analyses contemporary Somalia by focusing on the simultaneous processes of continuity and change that characterize the country's political trajectory. While al-Shabaab remains the principal threat to state stability, the growing international profile of Somaliland, the increasing involvement of external powers, and the emergence of new security dynamics associated with the Islamic State all point to significant transformations in Somalia's geopolitical environment. The article highlights how domestic political developments cannot be understood independently of broader regional competition.

Pamela Chemelil further develops the theme of regional agency by examining how neighboring states strategically exploit domestic conflicts beyond their own borders. Focusing on Eritrea's and Sudan's responses to the Tigray conflict, the article argues that internal conflicts increasingly function as instruments of regional diplomacy and geopolitical leverage. Rather than remaining passive observers, neighboring governments actively utilize instability in pursuit of broader strategic objectives, thereby contributing to the reshaping of regional political dynamics.

The thematic issue concludes with two contributions on Africa–China relations. The first paper by Yared Tesfaye and Yonas Ashine examines China's expanding role in the Horn of Africa through the complementary frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and BRICS. The article argues that China has developed a multidimensional geopolitical strategy combining economic connectivity, infrastructure investment, and institutional cooperation. At the same time, it demonstrates that governments across the Horn adopt diverse strategies in responding to Beijing's growing influence, thereby reinforcing the broader argument that regional agency remains central to understanding contemporary geopolitical transformations. The second paper by Zoltán Vörös and Danilo Lorenzo Delos Santos examines how China's engagement has evolved from infrastructure investment under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into a broader security-development role and assesses its implications for regional integration. Drawing on the frameworks of geoeconomics and regional integration, the analysis focuses on Ethiopia as a case study, particularly the Addis Ababa Light Rail and the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway. While Chinese-financed infrastructure has significantly enhanced regional connectivity, its developmental impact has been constrained by debt, financial sustainability, maintenance challenges, limited technology transfer, and weak institutional integration. Simultaneously, China's expanding security footprint – through its Djibouti base, anti-piracy operations, and UN peacekeeping – reflects growing strategic commitments. The study concludes

that China has emerged as an influential security-development actor, yet its engagement has not generated deeper regional integration or established Beijing as a comprehensive regional security provider.

Taken together, the contributions assembled in this thematic issue advance a broader analytical proposition: the Horn of Africa should be understood not merely as a recipient of great-power competition but as a dynamic geopolitical subsystem whose own actors increasingly contribute to shaping regional and global political outcomes. The collection moves beyond conventional narratives of external intervention and chronic instability by demonstrating how Horn states strategically exploit opportunities generated by the transition towards an increasingly asymmetric multipolar international order. In doing so, the issue contributes to contemporary debates on geopolitics, African agency, regional security, and the transformation of the international system while offering new perspectives on one of Africa's most strategically consequential regions. We hope that the studies presented here will stimulate further comparative research on the Horn of Africa as a region where global structural change and local political agency increasingly intersect to redefine the contours of twenty-first-century international relations.

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