

CHINA IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: BRICS, BRI, AND SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa, a region marked by a complex history of global power struggles, is now central to the emerging multipolar world order. This paper examines China's strategic role in the Horn, arguing that it is crafting a new geopolitical narrative through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the BRICS bloc as interrelated foreign policy tools. Employing a multi-theoretical framework in International Relations that synthesizes Neorealism and Liberal Institutionalism, the analysis shows that the BRI facilitates economic integration and connectivity. At the same time, the BRICS provides a platform to challenge Western-dominated norms. The paper asserts that Horn of Africa states are active agents, employing various strategies to navigate this competition. The study concludes that China's dual strategy is contributing to the emergence of a more multipolar regional order while intensifying great-power rivalries, underscoring the importance of strengthening African agency and coordinated regional diplomacy.

Keywords

Foreign Policy, China–Africa relations; Horn of Africa; Belt and Road Initiative; BRICS; multipolarity; great-power competition; pan-African diplomacy

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1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa has hitherto served as a significant historical stage for important global events (Schwab, 1978). The post-colonial and post-cold war era also later continued this pattern. Making the history of the region both rich and complex (Woodward, 1996; Wais and Dogan, 2025).

In contemporary times, the historical dynamics of the Horn of Africa have evolved within the context of locally-driven state-making rooted in anti-colonial movements (Clapham, 2017). These political dynamics – both between states and within states – have influenced proxy battles during the Cold War and continue to shape frameworks for the Global War on Terror and efforts against piracy.

We are entering a new era of historical dynamics, marked by the resurgence of great-power politics, particularly amid China's rise as a disruptive force against the Western-led order. This article examines the current geopolitical landscape in the Horn of Africa, shaped by local and global events and the strategies of various actors. Through an analysis of foreign policy trends, including policy documents, media reports, and academic works, the paper reveals how historical precedents, the presence of external actors – especially Chinese strategies – and African agency are transforming the region into a hub of 21st-century multipolarity.

Against this background, this study asks: How have China's expanding economic, political, and strategic engagements shaped its role and interests in the evolving geopolitical order of the Horn of Africa? More specifically, the study interrogates how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's engagement through BRICS function as interconnected instruments through which China navigates, and potentially reshapes, the changing geopolitical and security environment of the region. It further explores how states in the Horn respond to these expanding engagements and exercise agency amid intensifying competition among global and regional powers.

The central argument of this article is that China's growing presence in the Horn should not be understood simply as an expansion of bilateral economic relations or as a direct replacement of Western influence. Rather, China increasingly combines infrastructure-based engagement through the BRI with multilateral and institutional engagement through BRICS. Together, these instruments expand China's economic and political presence while simultaneously reshaping the strategic choices available to states in the Horn. The resulting regional order is therefore characterized not only by intensified external competition but also by the continuing agency of Horn states, which selectively and pragmatically engage, balance, and diversify their external partnerships. Our humble recommendation is for Horn states to move beyond pragmatic tactics toward a dynamic strategic vision.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design and regional process tracing to examine changes in the Horn's geopolitical order over the past two decades. Methodologically, the paper is diachronic in scope, taking history seriously and tracking regional political trends, dramatic alignments and realignments, and the evolving engagements of external powers in the Horn of Africa over the past two decades. However, history is not employed for exhaustive narration; rather, it

is mobilized to illuminate the synchronic entanglement, multiplicity, and structural multipolarity as well as agency that define the region's contemporary geopolitical landscape.

Empirically the analysis draws on official policy documents, diplomatic agreements, regional and international media reports, and insights from policy and academic engagements. The study is not only historically informed but theoretically engaged and situated with the international relations scholarship debate. It hence employs an integrated analytical framework drawing primarily on Neorealism and Liberal Institutionalism, while treating regional agency as an important empirical and analytical dimension. Neorealism provides the first lens through which the study examines the Horn as a strategic arena characterized by power competition, security concerns, shifting alliances, and the growing presence of external powers. It is particularly useful for explaining why China's expanding presence, and the responses it generates from the United States, European powers, Gulf states, and other actors, contributes to the intensification of geopolitical competition.

Liberal Institutionalism provides a complementary lens for examining the role of institutions and economic interdependence in shaping this competition. The BRI and BRICS are therefore examined not merely as instruments of material power but also as mechanisms that facilitate connectivity, institutional cooperation, and the construction of alternative frameworks of global and regional engagement.

The study combines these perspectives with an emphasis on regional agency. Horn states are not treated as passive arenas in which external powers compete. Rather, they are understood as strategic actors that selectively engage external partners, diversify alliances, and seek to extract political, economic, and security benefits from a crowded geopolitical environment. However, the framework's limitation is its consideration of states as black box relegating complex domestic fragmentation as intervening factors for parsimony.

2. The Global in the Regional: The Horn in History and Theory

The Horn of Africa is a region forged by historical linkages, encounters, external interventions, and local agency (Woldemariam, 1999). It has long been a transnational and transcontinental meeting point, serving as what historians describe as a "world historical stage" (Manning, 2015) and an "international arena" of major geopolitical spotlight (Schwab, 1978). Throughout its history, the Horn has been a theater of global dramas, with changing actors but the region's strategic importance remaining constant.

The colonial scramble and the partition of Africa replaced the premodern projects of empire-building and religious expansion. Colonial competitions, exemplified by incidents like the Fashoda Crisis, were subsequently replaced by Cold War rivalries in the post-colonial era. More recently, the Cold War framework gave way to the Global War on Terror and against piracy (Bereketeab, 2013).

Various historical and geopolitical factors have shaped the multiple encounters that define the Horn of Africa as a region. Historical, geopolitical, and geostrategic

structural factors have allowed for the continuity of interactions between local actors and external regional forces (Woldemariam, 1999). There is a colonial linkage with Western powers, mainly Britain and France, leaving its own legacy in remaking the Horn as an international arena where former colonial powers maintain their legacy as a major extra-regional actor (Woldemariam, 1999). The geo-strategic location of the Horn, which is primarily characterized by its “proximity to the Middle East - oil and the Arab - Israeli conflict - interface” (Bereketeab, 2013: 3) and adjacency to global shipping routes that transport petroleum and other critical commodities made the region a global arena. The historical connection with the Arab world, making four states (Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia) members of the Arab League, also made the region an extension but peculiar part of the Middle East as an Afro-Arab region. As Ali Mazrui (1992) articulated well, the horn is truly a region of Afrabia.

A recent book by Christopher Clapham (2017) refers to the Horn as a non-colonial region of Africa, highlighting the anti-colonial struggle, particularly Ethiopia’s victory over Italian colonial aggression, and the persistent agency of actors in the region despite external intervention. Clapham (2017: 2) argues that “external powers both spiritual and military have been absorbed into the existing structures of the region and have contributed to conflict (and in some cases also to peace) in ways that owe more to their configuration to local circumstances than to anything inherent in those powers themselves.” While Clapham underlines the non-coloniality of the Horn, subscribing to the autonomy and bargaining mode of foreign policy making, many others define the region as a geopolitical and geostrategic chessboard where external actors dominate, overlooking local agency and dynamics (Lefebvre, 1996; Melvin, 2019), subscribing to the dependency model of foreign policy making.

The dependence of regimes and their opposition in the Horn of Africa on Western and other extra-regional support for their survival has made the region a fertile ground for intervention and projection of power. The interactions between regional and extra-regional actors reveal a complex entanglement characterized by global structural inequalities and center-periphery dynamics. Rather than viewing the Horn either through the lens of autonomy or as a dependent geopolitical chessboard, this study conceptualizes the region as a history of encounters in which external intervention and local agency interact under conditions of structural asymmetry.

The internationalization of the Horn through multiple interventions, as well as the permanent interaction and entanglement between the Horn and the Middle East, should also be understood in this context. While it is undeniable that Middle Eastern politics have expanded into the Horn, it is crucial to consider how actors - states, regimes, and their oppositions - in general, inter-state and intra-state politics (Bereketeab 2013 and Berhanu 2013) within the Horn navigate this expansion and the internationalization of the political dynamics at play. Ultimately, this interplay lends empirical weight to Mazrui’s “Afrabia” – a concept that requires fuller attention elsewhere – yet with a critical caveat: while Horn actors actively navigate this expansion, they do so from a position of profound material and geopolitical asymmetry. The re-emergence of Afrabia, therefore, is not a reciprocal merger of equals, but a

contested arena where local agency is exercised primarily as a survival strategy amid intensifying external rivalries

Today, in addition to Afro-Arab entanglement, we are also witnessing a new chapter in this enduring pattern: the return of great power politics. A new Cold War-like rivalry between the West and China is unfolding, while multiple actors from an increasingly multipolar world further internationalize the regional geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. The players and ideologies have shifted once again, but the Horn remains a central space on the world historical stage.

Considering this complex historical trend, this article explores China's emergence as a global actor in the Horn of Africa. It specifically investigates the new geopolitical 'script' that China is authoring through its distinct economic and strategic practices. The analysis then examines how both traditional and regional actors are adapting their behavior in reaction to this disruptive presence, thereby reshaping the region's strategic landscape and signaling trends of global relevance. What this growing Chinese presence does to the historical internationalization of the Horn is the major question of this study.

This historical continuity, disrupted by new actors and foreign policy strategies, can best be understood through a multi-theoretical framework of International Relations (Waltz, 1979). This paper emphasizes the importance of regional actors, particularly states, and their competition (Waltz, 1979), as well as their positions within an anarchic and asymmetrically distributed global power structure, which includes both material and military capabilities (Waltz, 1979). It also acknowledges soft power and other capabilities that create interdependence and foster cooperation (Nye, Axelrod, and Keohane, 1985). The conditions of dependency and the fragmentation of regional strategy, coupled with the divergent interests among the states in the Horn of Africa, can be understood through a neorealist lens. This reality necessitates a reevaluation of cooperation within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) framework, which can be explained through a neoliberal paradigm. More critically, this perspective points toward the possibility of a pan-African foreign policy for the Horn, understood as an aspirational and potentially liberatory response to patterns of external dependency (Mazrui, 1977).

For example, Neorealism emphasizes the anarchic structure of international relations, the competition among great powers, and the security dilemma, highlighting the anxieties caused by China's emergence as a global actor in the Horn of Africa and beyond. China's expanding geopolitical activism can in this sense be understood not simply as an increase in material capabilities, but as part of Beijing's broader attempt

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to navigate – and increasingly shape – a transforming international order, with the BRI serving simultaneously economic and geopolitical objectives (Vörös, 2022). Meanwhile, Liberal Institutionalism (as noted by Keohane in 1984 and Keohane and Martin in 1995) helps explain the processes involved in the institutionalization of geopolitics and the convergence of actors that produce regimes and international organizations like BRICS. BRICS exemplifies a realistic competitive approach by disrupting Western-centric international norms, values, and order, primarily through soft power strategies that effect soft balancing, disruption, and counterweighting. At the same time, the internal politics among its members reveal the significance of institutions and the non-military aspects of cooperation in the spirit of Liberal Internationalism. Therefore, through an interdisciplinary convergence of neorealism and neoliberalism, we can effectively demonstrate how China is authoring a ‘new script’ by promoting an alternative set of norms and identities to navigate the international anarchic system, competing against U.S.-led unilateralism and fostering cooperation with various states in the Horn of Africa and beyond.



▲ Figure 1. The Horn of Africa: Geographic Location and Regional Context. Source: UN Geospatial (2012).

This development challenges the ideological foundations of the Western-led order by providing an alternative platform for states in the Horn as sites of cooperation in a multipolar world, which is characterized by increased anarchy and instability (Banks, 1985; Nye, 1988; Baldwin, 1993). Such an engagement illustrates how China instrumentalizes multilateral platforms or institutions not only as vehicles of economic expansion but also as arenas for shaping governance norms in one of the world's most contested regions.

3. China's Multilateral Leverage: BRICS as A Foreign Policy Platform

China's engagement in the Horn of Africa cannot be understood solely through bilateral relations China has with individual Horn of Africa countries. Rather, it has become an exercise increasingly shaped by multilateral frameworks such as BRICS and the BRI, which China uses as instruments of economic expansion and geopolitical influence.

A framework meant to expand infrastructure connectivity and deepen trade linkages, the BRI has enabled China to perform as a development partner, embedding its strategic interests in the Horn of Africa region (Bharti, 2022). Likewise, by offering China greater leverage in shaping multilateral norms and fostering South-South cooperation, BRICS emerges not only as an institutional alternative and a counterweight to Western-dominated institutions (Laïdi, 2011) but also as a foreign policy vehicle China could use to project its influence. These two initiatives further carry significant geopolitical implications, as they not only enhance China's visibility but also reshape the security and political alignments of states in the Horn of Africa (Abdilahi, 2020). Hence, the competitive aspect, the soft balancing and revision against the West, and the possibility of cooperation that the Chinese presence can create can be best explained through the inter-paradigmatic synthesis and convergence between Neo-realism and Neo-liberalism.

3.1. BRICS

The formation of BRICS emerged from both economic prediction and geopolitical alignment. Originally coined as "BRIC" (Brazil, Russia, India, China) by economist Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs in 2001 to capture fast-growing economies (Sachs, 2001; O'Neill, 2001), the term was later adopted by the countries themselves as they began informal cooperation as BRIC and later changed to BRICS after the admission of South Africa to the block in 2010 (Patrick, 2012).

3.1.1. A Counterweight?

BRICS has since developed into what Laïdi (2011:3) calls a "counterpoint to Western dominance" in international institutions. Over its first fifteen years, BRICS evolved into a structured forum, consolidating cooperation in finance, development, and global governance. BRICS has consolidated an agenda of cooperation in the international political economy and security, expressed in initiatives such as the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, which reflect its insti-

tutional densification” (Ramos et al 2018:2). According to Kirton and Larionova (2022), these years reflected a gradual but consistent shift of BRICS from a dialogue forum to a governance actor.

Since its inception, BRICS has attempted to position itself as a strategic balance and alternative to Western-led institutions by advancing parallel mechanisms of global governance, South–South cooperation, and alternative narratives. As Wso and Mahmood (2025) observe, BRICS challenges the Western monopoly over international financial institutions not by dismantling the existing order, but by promoting multipolarity and creating competing institutions. This aligns with Laïdi’s (2011) position that BRICS represents a collective strategy against the unilateralism of the West, with enduring political significance. Similarly, Streltsov et al. (2021) argue that the group’s economic potential constitutes a direct challenge to the Western-centered model of global governance.

Concrete institutional innovations reinforce this position. BRICS initiatives such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) demonstrate the group’s practical steps to establish parallel financial architectures meant to challenge the existing financial arrangements. Since its establishment in 2015, the NDB has approved more than \$32 billion in projects in renewable energy, transport, and urban development (NDB, 2022, 2023). Complementing this, the CRA, launched in 2014 with \$100 billion in committed capital, was designed to provide a liquidity buffer against currency shocks, reducing dependence on IMF emergency lending and its conditionalities (BRICS, 2014; Stuenkel, 2016).

3.1.2. Power in Expansion

Besides the institutional meaning, the demographic and economic size it commands underscores BRICS’ counter-hegemonic potential. For instance, following the 2024 expansion, which brought in four new members, BRICS collectively recorded 4% GDP growth, while global growth stood at 3.3% (Souto, 2024). IMF data also reveal that BRICS accounted for 40% of the global economy (measured by Purchasing Power Parity, PPP) in 2024, with projections rising to 41% in 2025 (IMF, 2024). This expansion augmented BRICS’s status as a representative of the Global South. It reinforced its ability to present itself as a counterweight to Western dominance, informing the neorealist move toward revisionism. Lipton (2017) notes that BRICS does so, not as a revolutionary challenger, but as a pragmatic alternative, with members seeking to bend rules in their favor rather than dismantle them outright, informing more soft power and soft balancing of neoliberalism.

Similarly, Özekin and Sune (2023) argue that BRICS is contesting U.S.-led hegemony in strategic regions not by dismantling existing institutions but by providing competing platforms and diplomatic avenues, making it a soft challenger and influencer. In this sense, BRICS reflects the core institutionalist insight that rules, norms, and organizations can reshape state behavior and create alternative pathways for cooperation outside the dominant Western-led order (Keohane, 1984; Nye, 1988; Keohane & Martin, 1995).

3.2. BRI

In Ethiopia, the significance of the BRI goes beyond its broad global ambitions. China's engagement has been particularly visible in large-scale infrastructure, manufacturing, and transport projects, making Ethiopia what Sautman & Hairong (2024) describe as Africa's "model" BRI country, owing to China's extensive infrastructure financing and construction as well as the growing presence of Chinese manufacturing enterprises. Importantly, their analysis also cautions against viewing the relationship simply as a one-sided Chinese project, arguing that Ethiopia has exercised considerable agency in "leveraging the BRI for its development agenda" (Hairong & Sautman, 2024: 222). This perspective is particularly relevant to understanding the Ethiopia–China relationship, as the expansion of Chinese-financed infrastructure has simultaneously created new opportunities for connectivity and development while raising questions about debt sustainability.

Tarrósy (2020), examining projects such as the Addis Ababa Light Railway and the Ethiopia–Djibouti Railway, draws attention to the difficulty of loan repayment and asks what the costs and benefits of Chinese financing are for both sides. He further argues that Ethiopia's growing indebtedness to China may contribute to "new dependencies in the making" (Tarrósy, 2020). Similarly, Carmody, Taylor, and Zajontz (2022), focusing specifically on Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya, argue that BRI-related loan financing exposes important contradictions in China's infrastructure-driven engagement in Africa. Rather than treating these projects simply as instruments of Chinese expansion, they situate them within what they call a broader "spatial fix" and highlight concerns about debt and the economic sustainability of some BRI projects. This suggests that the BRI has deepened China–Ethiopia economic interdependence while also creating a more complex relationship in which infrastructure, investment, financing, and debt have become closely intertwined. The Ethiopia case therefore provides an important setting for examining how China's economic engagement can generate both developmental opportunities and new forms of vulnerability, while also giving the Ethiopian government room to negotiate and pursue its own interests.

In practice, the BRI has evolved into a vital instrument of China's foreign policy and economic engagement, leveraging multilateral partnerships and strategic collaborations meant to advance its interests (Calabrese, 2025). Johnston (2019) underscores that the BRI is an outward-facing development strategy designed to advance China's long-term economic and political objectives.

In the wider Horn of Africa, the BRI serves as China's primary instrument for embedding itself in the region's economy and strategic geography. Since its inception, the BRI has supported significant infrastructure projects that have reshaped the Horn's strategic landscape and highlighted its centrality within China's broader economic vision (Bharti, 2022; Ylönen, 2020).

3.2.1. Corridors of Influence: BRI in the Horn of Africa

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has influenced the infrastructure landscape in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya, as pivotal nodes in China's expansive connectivity strategy, facilitating enhanced regional integration and access to global markets that inform a new liberal trend. These infrastructure initiatives not only facilitate regional connectivity but also reflect China's broader objectives of fostering its geopolitical influence in Africa, depicting a neorealist intention (Lynch, 2023; Nesibu, 2025). This complex foreign policy praxis makes the neo-neo synthesis a plausible theoretical framework.

Among the Horn of Africa countries, Djibouti sits at the crucial chokepoint Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Owing to this geostrategic significance, China, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has invested approximately 9.8 billion USD in large-scale infrastructure projects in Djibouti (Edens, 2015).

A signature investment under the BRI, Djibouti's Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port, co-financed by China State Construction Engineering Corporation, was commissioned in 2017. The multipurpose port situated next to China's military base was designed to handle 7.08 million tons of cargo annually, positioning Djibouti as a strategic maritime hub for China (Xinhua, 2017; Zhou, 2017). Its significance, however, is better understood in relation to the wider Ethiopia–Djibouti transport corridor rather than as an isolated Chinese investment. The Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, which connects landlocked Ethiopia to Djibouti's ports, has become what Tarrósy, Vörös, and Miganeh Hadi (2026) describe as a “lifeline” for Ethiopia's access to global maritime transportation. The railway and the port therefore function as interconnected components of a broader logistics system linking Ethiopia's economy to international markets.

The significance of this infrastructure consequently extends beyond China's commercial presence. It also reflects Ethiopia's continuing reliance on Djibouti as its principal maritime outlet, while providing Djibouti with an opportunity to derive strategic and economic value from its geographical position. As Larsen (2024) argues, the geopolitics surrounding Djibouti's infrastructure should not be understood simply in terms of foreign powers exercising control over a passive host state. Rather, she states that the Djiboutian government has employed “discursive, legal and political” strategies to exercise agency over its logistics sector and concludes that infrastructure-led geopolitics is a “reciprocal effort” rather than merely a process of external imposition (Ibid: 515).

In this sense, Doraleh represents more than a Chinese-funded port or a node in China's expanding maritime presence. This port is part of a wider regional configuration in which Chinese infrastructure investment, Ethiopia's search for reliable access to the sea, and Djibouti's efforts to capitalize on its strategic location have become mutually reinforcing. It therefore illustrates the multidimensional character of China's infrastructure engagement in the Horn of Africa, where Chinese economic and strategic interests intersect with the interests and agency of Horn of Africa states.

Owing to its strategic location and centrality to infrastructure-driven growth and industrializing investment strategies, Ethiopia has emerged as a flagship showcase for China's BRI in Africa (Sautman & Hairong, 2024), underscoring its significance within China's broader effort to expand its economic and geopolitical footprint through the BRI.

Ethiopia's landlocked position makes infrastructure connectivity particularly vital, and the BRI is providing rail, road, and energy projects that link Ethiopia to global markets via Djibouti (Yalew & Changgang, 2020). As Sautman & Hairong (2024) noted, Ethiopia's prominence within the BRI underscores its dual role as both a recipient of large-scale Chinese financing and a model for how infrastructure-led development can anchor China's influence on the continent. Between 2006 and 2018 alone, Ethiopia secured almost 15 billion USD from China, primarily channeled to transport, energy, and large-scale industrial projects (Sautman & Hairong, 2024).

Kenya also stands among the primary examples of the BRI's strategic footprint in Africa. It hosts significant infrastructure projects, most notably the Nairobi–Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), which has facilitated passenger mobility and freight transport (Yegon, 2022). The development of Lamu Port, another BRI-related project, expanded maritime trade capacity and positioned Kenya as a critical gateway for regional commerce (Al Arabiya English, 2019).

3.3. Horn's Foreign Policy Responses

Horn of Africa states are not passive recipients of China's engagements but are active players who strategically act to shape external partnerships and advance their interests, depicting continuity of agency in an anarchic, internationalized Horn of Africa (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). This underscores that Horn states are exercising agency in negotiating between a retreating West and an assertive China. China's emergence through soft power and multilateral institutionalism has also created conditions for Horn states to embrace cooperation without necessarily antagonizing their historic relations with the West and other traditional partners, either from the Middle East including towards the imagined Afrabia (Mazrui, 1992) or beyond.

Kenya – “Invite both”

Among the Horn of Africa countries, Kenya perceives its growing engagement with China as a strategic opportunity to accelerate infrastructure development, economic growth, and regional connectivity, but is cautious about the geopolitical implications of its engagement with China (Alden & Otele, 2022; Shilaho, 2025; Hamasi & Amutabi, 2023).

Kenya's approach emphasizes the need to pursue a cooperative, business-oriented approach with China, which contrasts with the West's more prescriptive focus on politics of governance, accountability, and human rights (Shilaho, 2018; Nakola, 2025). This depicts the liberal tenets and institutionalism that China is presenting, creating easy possibilities for Kenya to engage through its neutral foreign policy orientation.

As Makinda (2020) notes, such a strategic balancing of Kenya is meant to ensure that it does not become overly dependent on a single external actor. According to Nakola (2025) and Shilaho (2025), this approach exemplifies Kenya's balancing strategy, whereby Chinese involvement is leveraged for rapid development, while Western donors are courted for governance and security programs. This dual-track approach reflects that Kenya pursues a "both/and" approach seeking to maximize benefits without alienating either side.

Djibouti – "Invite everybody"

In broad terms, leveraging its strategic location, Djibouti's foreign policy is highly accommodative and pragmatic, positioning the country as a neutral hub for diverse international partners.¹ Djibouti positions itself as an open-access hub, inviting all powers, including China, the U.S., and Gulf states, creating an environment where multiple interests coexist while maximizing Djibouti's economic, security, and diplomatic gains.²

At the moment, Djibouti hosts Chinese, American, French, and Japanese military facilities while also cultivating Gulf partners such as the UAE. An all-inclusive approach has resulted in a uniquely multipolar environment (Okewoye, 2025). Djibouti's approach is a "more open-ended," "all doors open" strategy, characterized by inviting multiple powers to establish military bases and economic enclaves.

As far as its engagement with China is concerned, Djibouti uses it as a strategic opportunity to advance economic development and become a regional hub for logistics, finance, tourism, and information and communications technology (ICT).³ As Cabestan (2020) and Manek (2019) alluded, Djibouti has actively leveraged Chinese financing and expertise, gaining both economic returns and enhanced international relevance.

Besides the major infrastructure investments such as the Doraleh Port and International Free Trade Zone, China's strategic footprint in Djibouti is exemplified through the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti (Dutton et al, 2020; Vertin, 2020).

Djibouti maintains strong relations with Western powers as well, hosting U.S., French, Japanese, and European military bases that provide security cooperation, technical assistance, and diplomatic leverage (Masuda, 2023; Ali et al., 2025). Regardless of the strong interests of multiple partners, Djibouti actively balances Chinese investments with Western military and political presence, reflecting a strategic calculus targeted at maximizing external benefits and minimizing dependence on any single actor.⁴

Eritrea – "Engage China, Distance from the West"

In practical terms, among Horn of Africa nations, Eritrea has a circumscribed and cautious relationship with the West, shaped by critiques of governance and human rights (van Dijk, 2025). As its normative and political posture led to sanctions that restrict Western financial engagement, Eritrea arguably regards China as a strategic

partner that may simultaneously facilitate economic growth and the consolidation of regional influence.

As a result, Chinese-supported investments in infrastructure, ports, and industrial initiatives have endowed Eritrea with critical resources and capacities, particularly in sectors where Western involvement has often been constrained by political considerations (Amahazion, 2025; van Dijk, 2025). China's apparent willingness to provide support without imposing stringent governance or human rights requirements could be understood as a factor that enhances its appeal for Eritrea, enabling the country to pursue modernization while, arguably, reinforcing its strategic position (Mesfun, 2024; Bodetti, 2020).

Eritrea has often perceived Western engagement as coming with conditions that limit its sovereignty. This perception has influenced the country's foreign policy, leading it to favor Chinese engagement as a counterbalance to Western pressure. This pattern could be interpreted as an "engage China, distance from the West" strategy, which possibly allows Eritrea to derive benefits from Chinese investment and diplomatic support while mitigating external pressures on domestic and foreign policy decision-making.

Sudan – Leaning toward China?

As a source of economic, political, and diplomatic support without the typical conditions imposed by Western partners, Sudan has historically treated China as a key strategic ally (Vörös, 2011; Large, 2023). China's engagement in Sudan, particularly in the oil and infrastructure sectors, has been characterized by a pragmatic developmental approach prioritizing economic growth and stability over political reform (Large, 2023; Large, 2009).

Particularly during the Darfur conflict, China appeared to be neutral or non-interventionist, providing both investment and military support and distancing itself from reputational and economic pressures applied by Western governments (Shinn, 2009; Kristof, 2006). Furthermore, China's engagement in mediation and peace-keeping during South Sudan's secession further reinforced its reputation as a neutral actor willing to work constructively with both Khartoum and Juba (Back, 2025).

On the contrary, Sudan's relationship with Western actors has often been characterized by caution, primarily because such interactions are frequently linked to sanctions, external conditions for democratization, and broader normative pressures. Sudan has viewed such pressures as constraints on its political autonomy (Large, 2023; Kristof, 2006).

This positioning, however, was not a wholesale rejection of the West by Sudan; rather, it reflects a balanced move, seeking the tangible benefits of Chinese coopera-

At the moment, Djibouti hosts Chinese, American, French, and Japanese military facilities while also cultivating Gulf partners such as the UAE.

tion while approaching Western partners more selectively and with caution. In this sense, Sudan's foreign policy trajectory, towards China and the West, might be read as leaning toward China without entirely closing the door to Western engagements.

South Sudan – Turn to China

Because China offers investment, infrastructure development, and political support without the governance or human rights conditions that often accompany Western engagement, South Sudan has increasingly come to see China as a pragmatic and stabilizing partner (de Simone, 2023; Brosig, 2021).

During the post-independence era and amid prolonged internal conflicts, China has followed what Hodzi (2017) called a strategy of “parallels,” signified by engaging with multiple conflicting factions while protecting its economic and security interests, particularly in the oil sector (Anthony & Hengkun, 2014). This strategy combines conflict prevention, economic partnership, and adaptive diplomacy, enabling South Sudan to obtain development assistance without being constrained by the political conditions that frequently frame Western involvement (Chun & Kemple-Hardy, 2015; Barber, 2014).

Western engagement in South Sudan, by contrast, is often perceived as conditional and politically intrusive, closely tied to democratization, accountability, and human rights expectations (de Simone, 2023). This factor clearly influenced South Sudan's foreign policy orientation, producing a pragmatic alignment where China acts as a reliable anchor for development and security, and the West functions as a counterbalance whose conditions must be carefully navigated. The approach to South Sudan, as seen from relevant literature, can be dubbed as a “China anchor, Western check” or “Partner East, balance West” framework, highlighting South Sudan's effort to maximize economic and security gains while preserving political autonomy.

Seen together, the foreign policy orientations of Horn of Africa states toward China reveal that agency remains firmly with Horn states, whose engagement with China is instrumental, contingent, and adaptable. What emerges is not a monolithic “turn to China,” but a set of hybrid alignments that reflect both the structural pressures in light of realist explanation and pragmatic calculus of maximizing economic and political returns in a crowded field of external competition.

3.4. Ethiopia: Pragmatism and diversifying alliances

Ethiopia sees its relationship with China as more than transactional; it views China as a partner aligned with its development model and less burdensome in terms of political conditionality. Esteban and Olivié (2022) contend that Ethiopia values the “no-strings-attached” approach China often offers, especially when compared to Western donors who tend to emphasize norms like transparency, political liberalization, and governance reforms.

China's infrastructure projects, technology transfer, and industrial investments are thus seen not only as instruments for economic growth but also as reinforcing a development path that preserves Ethiopia's domestic policy autonomy. As Tesfaye

(2020) notes, many Ethiopian elites regard the Chinese model – centered on rapid infrastructure, centralized planning, and state-led industrialization – as well suited to Ethiopia’s aspirations for modernization, particularly in transport, manufacturing, and energy sectors.

However, Ethiopia’s engagement with the West continues to be important and is not supplanted by its Chinese links. Debisa and Borah (2025) emphasize that the United States and European partners remain critical in areas such as education, health, human rights, and financial regulation, where Western aid norms continue to exert influence. Although the Chinese model is attractive for its speed and scale, the normative expectations of Western aid provision – on accountability, civil society participation, and environmental protection – still shape Ethiopia’s diplomatic behavior and policy choices in many forums (Esteban & Olivie, 2022).

Thus, Ethiopia appears to adopt a calibrated engagement strategy, leveraging China’s infrastructure-focused support to advance its economic objectives while simultaneously maintaining ties with Western partners to navigate normative expectations and avoid overdependence, ensuring a measured and strategic approach to its foreign policy. Owing to its central geopolitical position in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is frequently cited as a regional power in the making. Its large population, the second largest in Africa, and its status as a hub for continental diplomacy, being the seat of the African Union and numerous regional organizations, underscore its strategic weight (Maru, 2017).

There is a near-consensus view that Ethiopia functions as a “security provider” in the Horn, deploying troops in peacekeeping missions and exerting influence over regional security architectures (Kłosowicz, 2015). Though constrained by recurrent internal conflicts and economic vulnerabilities, Ethiopia has also leveraged its diplomatic activism and military strength to project authority in the Horn of Africa region (Mesfin, 2012). Besides, its efforts to shape regional order have often been met with suspicion, particularly by neighboring states (Le Gouriellec, 2018).

Although Ethiopia’s regional leadership is contested, often described as an ‘imperfect hegemony’ (Le Gouriellec, 2018), its role remains decisive enough to shape outcomes in the Horn of Africa, as it increasingly serves as a fulcrum where the strategic interests of external powers converge (Debisa & Borah, 2025). Maru (2017) notes that “global powers from West to East have always competed to win Ethiopia as their sole trophy in the geopolitically significant Horn of Africa.” Sautman & Hairong (2024) illustrate Ethiopia as a “bridge between the BRI and Africa’s development,” a “model of South – South cooperation,” and “a pilot country for China – Africa production capacity cooperation,” underlining how Addis Ababa functions both as a hub of infrastructure and investment and as a platform for broader political/public diplomatic influence.

This centrality is particularly evident in the BRI and BRICS, two major frameworks that illustrate the economic, political, and multilateral dimensions of China’s engagement in the region. The following sections explore how these frameworks – BRI and BRICS – operationalize China’s economic and political objectives in Ethiopia.

3.4.1. Ethiopia at the Heart of BRI

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) engagement in Ethiopia has become a central component of China's African strategy, with Ethiopia emerging as a flagship partner due to its early and extensive participation in key BRI projects (Hackenesch, 2013; Sautman & Hairong, 2024). The project illustrates China's broader strategy of aligning infrastructure investment with regional economic development objectives, positioning Ethiopia as a potential "model" country within the BRI framework (Sautman & Hairong, 2024). While offering Ethiopia critical avenues for economic modernization, technology transfer, and integration into global supply chains, these projects provide China with a platform to expand operations in the wider Horn of Africa (Tesfaye, 2020).

Transport and Connectivity

With flagship projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Standard Gauge Railway and the Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit, transport and connectivity constitute a cornerstone of China's BRI engagement in Ethiopia. The Addis Ababa - Djibouti Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) arguably represents one of the most significant transport infrastructure projects associated with China's BRI in Ethiopia. Since becoming operational in 2018, with a reported cost of approximately 3.4 billion USD, primarily financed by China Exim Bank and other Chinese institutions, the railway considerably reduced freight transit times between Ethiopia and the Djibouti port - from several days to roughly 12 hours (Calabrese et al., 2021; Sautman & Hairong, 2024; Bharti, 2023: 182).

Its significance, however, extends beyond the reduction in transit time. Tarrósy and Vörös (2018), drawing on fieldwork conducted in Ethiopia, describe the railway as connecting the landlocked country to the "maritime trade routes of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea," highlighting its importance for Ethiopia's integration into regional and global trade.

The Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit similarly illustrates both the opportunities and limitations associated with Chinese-financed transport infrastructure. Tarrósy and Vörös (2018) describe the project as the "first modern light railway (tram) system of sub-Saharan Africa" and note that its construction was financed largely through an 85 percent concessional loan from China's Export-Import Bank. Costing around 475 million USD, with approximately 85% funded by China Exim Bank (Calabrese et al., 2021), the system has been operational since 2015 and serves an estimated 60,000 passengers daily. Taken together, these transport and connectivity initiatives reflect the BRI's dual ambitions of improving national and urban connectivity while facilitating developmental benefits across multiple scales. Taken together, these transport and connectivity initiatives reflect the BRI's dual ambitions of improving national and urban connectivity while facilitating developmental benefits across multiple scales.

Industrial and Economic Zones

BRI-supported industrial and economic zones developed in Ethiopia draw on Chinese investment and technical expertise to diversify the national industrial base, facilitate integration into global value chains, and support Ethiopia's ambition to position itself as a regional manufacturing hub. Ethiopia's Hawassa Industrial Park is the other flagship industrial project under the BRI, with a focus on textile and garment manufacturing. The park benefits from Chinese investment and technical support, including managerial expertise and industrial technologies (Larçon & Vadcar, 2021). Employing approximately 35,000 direct workers by 2022, Hawassa Industrial Park has contributed to Ethiopia's development as an apparel supplier and to its integration into global apparel value chains, while supporting the development of the country's manufacturing base (Larçon & Vadcar, 2021; U.S. International Trade Commission, 2023). Similarly, the Eastern Industrial Zones, located in Kombolcha and around Addis Ababa city, appear to rely heavily on Chinese state-owned enterprises and local partnerships, offering incentives for industrial investment (Bharti, 2023) as part of a wider strategy to consolidate Ethiopia's role as a hub for industrial development under the BRI.

Energy Infrastructure

Another critical dimension of Ethiopia's BRI engagement is the expansion of energy infrastructure. For instance, the Genale-Dawa III Hydropower Station, launched at a reported cost of 451 million USD and approximately 72% Chinese funding (Calabrese et al., 2021), is fully operational and feeds both industrial zones and the national grid. Another notable energy investment under the BRI is the Aysha Wind Power Project, which was commissioned in 2018 under Chinese financing and equipment contracts. With an installed capacity of 120 MW and an annual energy output of about 467 GWh, it is intended not only to bolster Ethiopia's grid but also to support industrial zones along the Ethiopia-Djibouti corridor (NDRC, 2021).

These projects are meant to contribute to energy security and support ongoing industrial development (Bharti, 2023) as part of the BRI initiative. In sum, BRI energy projects showcase a synchronized approach to how China is extending BRI energy investment to have strategic leverage in the energy sector. Taken together, BRI-linked projects position Ethiopia as a showcase for China's BRI model and reveal how China uses them as strategic levers to entrench its influence in the Horn of Africa, reinforcing Beijing's long-term geopolitical and economic presence in a region of high strategic importance.

3.5. Anchoring BRICS in the Horn

China, as a key actor of the initiative, strategically leverages BRICS to advance its global objectives. BRICS is "a vehicle for global ascent and systemic reform," enabling China to challenge Western dominance while collaborating with other major non-Western powers (Lukin and Xuesong, 2019: 620). Emphasizing BRICS' role in supporting China's geopolitical goals (Cheng, 2015: 358) implies that China's

engagement is not passive, but a deliberate effort meant to reshape the international system to better align with its interests.

In the Horn of Africa, BRICS provides China with a collective identity as part of a non-Western coalition, offering political legitimacy and institutional depth that extends beyond unilateral influence. China's leadership within BRICS+ "fosters a multipolar world that integrates diverse political and economic systems," allowing it to promote an alternative, inclusive pathway to global governance (Lee and Sims, 2024). Such a framework enables China a wider opportunity to advance its strategic interests in the region while projecting a collaborative, rather than purely unilateral, presence.

3.5.1. BRICS: A Foreign Policy Instrument?

BRICS' latest expansion, launched on January 1, 2024, marked a pivotal moment featuring the bloc's strategic intent to reshape international economic and political dynamics. Admitting Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as new members, BRICS+ now carries significant demographic and economic weight, accounting for nearly half the world's population (46%, up from 41% for BRICS) compared with just under 10% for the Group of Seven (G7) (Afota et al., 2024). According to forecasts by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), BRICS+ will account for 37.6% of world GDP in 2027, compared with 28.2% for the G7 (Ibid). This expansion reflects BRICS's commitment to advancing a multipolar world order rooted in inclusivity and solidarity across the Global South, as Lissovolik (2023) conceded. BRICS' expansion, which Gavrilenko and Shenshin (2024) labeled a "geopolitical triumph," signals a counterbalance to US-led alliances.

For China, BRICS functions as a multidimensional foreign policy instrument that extends far beyond its economic agenda. Cheng (2015) underscores a dual logic at play: China uses BRICS to legitimize its policies through multilateral cooperation and to reshape rules and institutions in ways more favorable to its wider geopolitical ambitions. BRICS provides a platform to enhance China's global legitimacy, particularly in the Global South, while enabling the pursuit of systemic reforms and the reshaping of international rules in ways favorable to its development model and geopolitical ambitions (Lukin & Xuesong, 2019; Cheng, 2015; Dehshiri & Bahrami, 2016).

In this light, China's engagement in BRICS is not passive but rather a deliberate effort to reshape the international system to align with its interests and geopolitical goals (Cheng, 2015).

Glosny (2010) emphasizes that BRICS provides China with a tangible, though limited, partnership in a unipolar world, enabling it to hedge against U.S. dominance without directly confronting the liberal order. Complementing this, Srinivas (2022) argues that China regards BRICS as an "instrument of strategic alignment," particularly through its partnership with Russia, to amplify non-Western perspectives in shaping the global order.

3.5.2. BRICS' Expansion: A Bridge to the Global South

The 2024 BRICS expansion was explicitly designed to widen political and economic reach by including new regional powers from the Global South. Lissovolik (2023:2) describes this as “including new regional powers from the Global South” to strengthen BRICS’s influence, highlighting that BRICS+ states represent “key strategic geographies” through which the bloc can project power. The Kazan summit underscored this trajectory by reaffirming BRICS as a primary channel for the Global South, emphasizing multilateralism and equitable development (CFR, 2024).

Among the BRICS members, China stands out as the central driving force behind the initiative. As the initiative’s key architect, China has strategically leveraged BRICS as a platform to advance its global objectives and reform the international system (Wang & Xi, 2021; Afota et al.,2024).China’s advocacy for BRICS cooperation and its expansion is justified by the notion that BRICS represents the Global South and functions as a vehicle for fairness and justice in global governance, especially in response to what is described as Western hegemonism, protectionism, and unilateralism.⁵

Building on the recognition of BRICS as a strategic foreign policy instrument, China employs the platform to amplify its global presence, deepen alliances, and consolidate influence across the Global South, framing it as a South-South cooperation mechanism with global reach aligned to its foreign policy priorities (Patrick & Hogan, 2025; Sarpong & Sibiri,2024). BRICS has become China’s strategic bridge to harness and potentially shape non-Western countries’ transformative power to reform the international order, while Beijing views BRICS as a platform to institutionalize cooperation and maintain a leadership role within the Global South community (Patrick& Hogan, 2025).

3.5.3. Ethiopia in BRICS: China’s Horn Gateway

At a basic level, the expanded BRICS furnishes China with political cover: activities that might otherwise be perceived as unilateral Chinese influence can be reframed as part of a South–South multilateral partnership. In the Horn of Africa, where donor competition and sovereignty sensitivities are acute, BRICS provides China with a way to deepen engagement while deflecting critiques of hegemonic intent (Patrick & Hogan, 2025). BRICS expansion alters China’s strategic package in the Horn by transforming bilateral ties into multilateral leverage. Fundamentally, BRICS provides China with political cover to promote its interests, reframing them under more collective, less overtly bilateral frameworks (Patrick & Hogan, 2025). This identity reduces reputational friction and normalizes Chinese engagement in policymaking spaces. China’s push to expand BRICS is also closely linked to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As Singh (2022) noted, China seeks to align BRICS with BRI, integrating economic infrastructure and diplomatic outreach into a cohesive strategy of global influence. By using BRICS to diversify sources of investment and harmonize policy norms among emerging economies, China leverages the grouping to amplify BRI’s reach (Patrick & Hogan, 2025).

The 2024 expansion of BRICS, which included Ethiopia's formal accession, represents more than a compositional shift. Ethiopia's membership has significant implications for the Horn of Africa, aligning the region more closely with BRICS. Ethiopia's political and demographic weight amplifies BRICS's African dimension, while Grishenkin and Zamesina (2024) note Ethiopia's strategic location, AU headquarters status, and demographic potential as key drivers of its selection.

For China, Ethiopia's membership offers strategic depth in the Horn, amplifying its influence in a geopolitically sensitive region. BRICS provides Beijing with a formal multilateral channel to integrate its bilateral projects into broader institutional frameworks, enhancing their legitimacy (Patrick & Hogan, 2025). This can be seen in Ethiopia's growing relationship with China, which was upgraded to what Beijing calls an "all-weather strategic cooperation partnership" during the Ninth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in September 2024 (Ibid).

Ethiopia's accession to BRICS, as framed by Chinese officials, can be seen as more than symbolic diplomacy; it appears to function as a mechanism for advancing BRI-linked cooperation, while also signaling China's broader ambition to expand multilateral platforms and gradually institutionalize its strategic engagement in the Horn of Africa. President Xi Jinping of China called Ethiopia an important participant in the development of the BRI and further emphasized that Ethiopia's accession to BRICS provides an avenue for advancing broader multilateral cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023). Chinese Ambassador to Ethiopia Zhao also described Ethiopia's accession to BRICS as "one of the biggest diplomatic victories of the country recorded in the last few decades" and stressed that "China always stands ready to expand cooperation with Ethiopia under the BRICS framework and bring more dynamics to BRICS cooperation" (Zhao, 2023).

By bringing Ethiopia into BRICS, China gains a political ally and interlocutor capable of raising Horn issues within the bloc and framing Chinese initiatives as multilateral rather than bilateral. This reduces diplomatic friction, situates Chinese projects under the banner of South-South cooperation, and strengthens China's position within Africa's diplomatic infrastructure.

3.5.4. Horn Awaits: Mapping Potential BRICS Members

While Ethiopia's accession to BRICS already marked a defining moment for the Horn of Africa's engagement with the bloc, there remains a strong possibility that more countries from the region will follow suit, providing wider avenues for China to project influence, consolidate partnerships, and institutionalize its role in shaping the region's multilateral alignments. Some of the Horn of Africa countries have recently expressed interest in joining BRICS, a trend that highlights the grouping's growing appeal as an alternative multilateral platform and creates new openings for China's regional outreach. Eritrea formally applied for BRICS membership in 2024 (News Addis, 2024), while South Sudan repeatedly signaled its intention to join the grouping (TASS, 2023; TV BRICS, 2023). Likewise, Sudan has articulated its aspiration to become a BRICS member (Sudan Events, 2024; Sputnik International,

2017). Kenya, too, has sought China's support for accession, framing BRICS as a mechanism to diversify partnerships beyond traditional Western alignments (Africanews, 2024; Shilova, 2024).

4. Countering China: Competing Strategies in the Horn

China's expanding presence in the Horn of Africa has prompted recalibrated responses from established and emerging external actors. While some emphasize security, counterterrorism, and migration management over infrastructure development, others advance alternative investment and development models, including strategic bases and regional cooperation initiatives, intensifying the region's multipolar dynamics.

4.1. American Pushback

Serving as a pivotal node for military, economic, and geopolitical engagement in Africa and the broader Indian Ocean–Red Sea corridor, the Horn of Africa has long been recognized as a region of critical strategic importance for the United States (Woodward, 2016; Sun & Zoubir, 2016).

U.S.'s presence, exemplified by military deployments and regional partnerships, is primarily aimed at counterterrorism, securing maritime routes, and maintaining regional stability (Burgess, 2015). Nonetheless, this strategic positioning by the U.S. is increasingly contested by China, whose expanding economic, diplomatic, and infrastructural influence through initiatives such as the BRI has challenged the former's traditional leverage in the region (Devecioglu, 2024; Ahmed & Hough, 2025).

The U.S. has responded by pursuing a multifaceted strategy that combines security and diplomacy. Complemented by the new American First transactional strategy its approach includes reinforcing its presence through strategic deployments and partnerships focused on counterterrorism and securing maritime routes near the Horn of Africa region (White House 2025; Sun & Zoubir, 2016).

A practical illustration of the United States' multifaceted strategy is its military base in Djibouti, Camp Lemonnier, serving as a U.S. Navy expeditionary base in Africa. Located adjacent to Djibouti–Ambouli International Airport in Djibouti City, it functions as a key operational hub and a U.S. Navy-led installation supporting U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and fostering security and stability in the Horn of Africa.⁶

Hosting approximately 4,000 personnel as of 2022, Camp Lemonnier supports surveillance, rapid response, and joint exercises with regional partners, including Ethiopia and Kenya, to secure key maritime corridors and counter extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab (Sun & Zoubir, 2016; Woodward, 2016). Beyond military operations, Camp Lemonnier serves as a platform for humanitarian and stabilization initiatives, demonstrating how security measures are integrated with broader diplomatic and development objectives to maintain US influence amid expanding Chinese investment and presence in the Horn of Africa.⁷

Diplomatically, the US seeks to strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties with regional states to provide alternatives to Chinese-led infrastructure and investment initiatives, while promoting governance, accountability, and regional stability (Woodward, 2016; Burgess, 2015). Additionally, policy analysts emphasize efforts to leverage development aid and trade initiatives to maintain influence amid China's expanding Belt and Road footprint (Negatu, 2022; Devocioğlu, 2024).

A concrete example of the United States' diplomatic and development-oriented approach is its support for regional infrastructure and governance initiatives through programs such as the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative and USAID development aid. In 2022 alone, the US allocated over \$1.2 billion in foreign assistance to offer alternatives to Chinese-led infrastructure investments in the Horn of Africa countries (Negatu, 2022; Devocioğlu, 2024).

4.2. Japan's Influence Contest

Japan views the Horn of Africa as western frontier of the Indo-Pacific region, strategically situated both for safeguarding critical maritime routes and for countering China's growing influence. Its military base in Djibouti, established in 2011, represents Japan's first overseas permanent facility since World War II and underscores the importance Tokyo attaches to the region's security architecture (Sun & Zoubir, 2025).

The facility subsequently acquired broader information-gathering and maritime-security functions. Japan's military presence also forms part of the wider concentration of foreign military forces in the Horn, where external powers have established bases that increasingly intersect with strategic competition. Sun and Zoubir (2025) conceptualize this pattern as "disrupting rivalry," arguing that military deployments in the Horn can serve to constrain or disrupt rival powers' presence and prevent unchallenged strategic gains.

Initially staffed with approximately 180 personnel and occupying a 12-hectare site near Djibouti's international airport, the Japanese facility supports anti-piracy operations through maritime patrol aircraft and other security-related activities (Kubo, 2016). Japan's continued military presence in Djibouti should therefore be understood within the wider strategic competition among external powers in the Horn. In this broader context, Sun and Zoubir's (2025) concept of "disrupting rivalry" is useful for interpreting how foreign military deployments may serve not only immediate security purposes but also the strategic objective of preventing rival powers from acquiring unchallenged influence.

In addition to security considerations, Japan employs the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) initiative to promote its presence in the Horn of Africa and across the African continent. In doing so, Japan positions itself as a potential counterweight, particularly to China's infrastructure-oriented Belt and Road Initiative (Askar, 2021). As such, Japan pursues a dual strategy: safeguarding strategic sea lanes while simultaneously projecting soft power, thereby adding yet another dimension to the competition it wages with China in the Horn of Africa.

4.3. Türkiye's Strategic Outreach

Similar to the great powers, the Horn of Africa holds a pivotal place in Türkiye's broader geopolitical strategy, functioning as both a gateway to the Red Sea and as an arena of strategic competition with regional and global actors. Telci and Yimer (2024) argue that Türkiye's engagement in the region should be viewed through the lens of its middle-power foreign policy, in which the Horn is not merely an aid recipient but a stage for active geopolitical maneuvering.

As Sıradağ (2024: 9) alluded, Türkiye has positioned itself as a new security actor in the Horn, using military bases, training programs, and security cooperation to consolidate influence and counter rival presences. This strategic engagement has placed Türkiye in competition with China and other powers seeking leverage over the region's critical maritime routes.

One concrete illustration of Türkiye's geopolitical activism in the Horn of Africa is its deployment of military trainers and establishment of security cooperation agreements in strategic coastal states. For example, Türkiye has conducted dozens of joint exercises and training programs with regional militaries over the past five years, involving upwards of 500 personnel in some instances, aimed at enhancing maritime security and countering illicit trafficking in the Red Sea corridor (Sıradağ, 2024). Türkiye's engagement, particularly in Somalia, has combined humanitarian, economic, and security dimensions, reflecting what Donelli (2017) describes as Ankara's hybrid role, merging development aid with hard power projection. Under its middle-power foreign policy framework, these activities-characterized by Telci and Yimer (2024)-are not mere aid or symbolic gestures but deliberate efforts to secure strategic footholds that mirror rival powers' presence, such as China's.

These dynamics illustrate how Ankara views the Horn of Africa not only as a development partner but also as a contested arena in which Turkey asserts its strategic ambitions amid intensifying external rivalries.

4.4. Middle Eastern and Gulf States' Competitive Engagement

Beyond the great and middle powers, the Horn of Africa has also become a critical arena for Middle Eastern and Gulf states, with an engagement shaped by entangled security, economic, and geopolitical imperatives. Among these Middle Eastern and Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, in particular, pursue strategies aimed at securing vital maritime routes along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and extending their influence across Africa (Mabon & Mason, 2022). The Gulf's systematic absorption of Horn labor constitutes an economic lifeline for the region and a critical, often overlooked pillar of Afrabian entanglement (Mazrui, 1992; Mabon & Mason, 2022). This trend renders plausible the historical 'Afrabia' perspective (Mazrui, 1992), which underlined the deep entanglement and close relations between Africa and Arabia – an entanglement now unprecedentedly facilitated by the emerging multipolar world order.

Beyond intra-Gulf rivalries, signified through competition over military installations, investment projects, and political alignments, their engagement introduces

further layers of contestation, making the Horn a crossroads of global power competition. Recent studies underscore that Gulf states increasingly treat the region not only as a security buffer but also as a laboratory for projecting soft power and economic influence, reflecting a “new era of engagement” that intertwines domestic security concerns with broader regional ambitions (Bereketeab, 2024). Taken together, the growing activism of Middle Eastern and Gulf states in the Horn of Africa not only intensifies multipolarism and intra-regional rivalries but also situates them in direct competition with external powers such as China, as each seeks to secure influence over the region’s strategic corridors and developmental trajectories.

4.5. *Russia’s Comeback*

The Horn of Africa is taking on increasing strategic importance for Russia, as is for other countries, near and afar, due to its strategic location along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which are vital maritime corridors, central to global trade and security flows (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022; Generoso, 2022). Russia’s involvement in the Horn region has never followed a single pattern. Its engagement followed a varied pattern, encompassing military cooperation, port access, and more discreet diplomatic initiatives, as well. Russia’s activities in Djibouti and Somaliland, for instance, seem to be part of a broader attempt to secure a lasting foothold in the region to counterbalance the influence of Western powers and regional competitors (Rodrigues, 2025; Klyszcz, 2024).

At the same time, they may be read as pragmatic responses to opportunities arising from political instability in the Horn and the competing ambitions of external actors, including China, the United States, and Gulf states. While it remains to be seen how durable these initiatives will prove, Russia’s efforts suggest a desire to carve out both military and economic space in the Horn of Africa, positioning itself as a relevant – if still secondary – player within an increasingly crowded field of strategic competition (Generoso, 2022; Klyszcz, 2024).

Russia’s re-entry into the Horn of Africa comes into focus through its push for security pacts, arms sales, and trade corridors. Over the past few years, Russia has explored port access and military cooperation with Djibouti and Somaliland, moves that point to its ambition to anchor a lasting naval presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (Rodrigues, 2025; Klyszcz, 2024). This can be read as a calculated response to shifting openings in the Horn region, a way of shoring up its own leverage while cutting across the influence already exercised by Western states, China, and Gulf actors (Oğultürk, 2017; Duursma & Masuhr, 2022).

Russia’s return to the Horn of Africa has taken shape through a blend of security and economic maneuvers. In Djibouti and Somaliland, it has probed for port access and military cooperation, while in Sudan and Ethiopia, it has deepened ties through arms transfers and training agreements (Mathew & Moolakkattu, 2022; Rodrigues, 2025). Taken together, these initiatives strengthen Russia’s foothold and enable it to push back against the established presence of Western, Chinese, and Gulf powers in the Horn (Oğultürk, 2017). To conclude the above detail trend and

historical trajectory depict the multiple entanglement in global multipolarity. The evolving geopolitics of the Horn of Africa epitomizes a distinct form of multipolarity manifesting simultaneously at both global and regional levels. Globally, the United States, China, and Russia vie for strategic footholds, while regionally, middle powers such as Türkiye and rival Gulf states actively pursue their own security and economic influence along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This layered competition transcends any binary great-power rivalry, embedding the Horn within a broader macro-regional framework where maritime chokepoints, trade corridors, and military installations converge. The resulting configuration does not constitute a single security complex, but rather a densely interconnected arena characterized by intensifying security interdependence across neighboring regional spaces. Crucially, this external multipolarity interacts reciprocally with internal regional dynamics; domestic instability invites foreign intervention, even as local states strategically diversify partnerships to mitigate excessive reliance on any single actor. Ultimately, the Horn's security trajectory is shaped by this continuous interplay between layered global-regional competition and local agency, solidifying its role as a pivotal node in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical order.

Conclusion

This paper explored the China factor in the Horn of Africa within the context of the global multipolar order. In doing so it examines how BRICS and the BRI shape geopolitical competition, institutional engagement, and regional order and agency - while assessing the prospects for a reimagined Pan-African strategic response. To this effect it employs an integrated analytical framework drawing primarily on Neorealism and Liberal Institutionalism.

The study reaffirms how the Horn of Africa has long stood as a turbulent yet strategic frontier, where a multitude of regional and global interests intersect. A pivotal actor in this geostrategic contest, China employs BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as foreign policy vehicles to deepen its economic footprint and project influence across political and security domains. Ethiopia's recent admission to BRICS – framed as a counterweight to Western pressures – enhances China's political legitimacy and adds leverage to expand its influence in the Horn, a dynamic likely to deepen should additional Horn states join the grouping. Complementing this, the BRI functions as a foreign policy instrument anchoring China's presence through connectivity and infrastructure projects, thereby weaving Beijing's long-term strategic interests into the region's developmental trajectory. For Horn states, China's twin strategies present both promise and peril: the possibility of leveraging rivalries for development gains, but also the danger of deeper entanglement in volatile geopolitical contests.

The theoretical architecture proved conceptually robust, capturing both the structural pressures of great-power rivalry and the functional dynamics of institutional cooperation. Neorealism illuminated the Horn as a strategic theater characterized by security dilemma and competition, shifting alliances, and the growing presence of

external powers – particularly China, and the United States. Liberal Institutionalism, in turn, provided a complementary lens for examining the role of institutions and economic interdependence, framing the BRI and BRICS not merely as instruments of material power but as mechanisms of soft power facilitating connectivity, institutional cooperation, and the construction of alternative frameworks of global and regional engagement.

Substantively, the analysis revealed that the Horn of Africa is not merely a passive arena for external powers but an active space where regional actors exercise agency – though largely limited to pragmatic maneuvering within structural constraints. Beyond the great and middle powers, Middle Eastern and Gulf states – particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar – have emerged as critical actors, their engagement shaped by entangled security, economic, and geopolitical imperatives aimed at securing vital maritime routes and extending influence across Africa (Mabon & Mason, 2022).

This contemporary re-engagement resonates with the historical Afrabia thesis (Mazrui, 1992), highlighting the enduring entanglement between Africa and Arabia – now intensified under a multipolar world order that permits unprecedented regional agency. The systematic absorption of labor from the Horn into the Gulf economies, governed by the kafala sponsorship system, constitutes an additional yet often overlooked pillar of this entanglement, serving as an economic lifeline for the region while perpetuating systemic vulnerability.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design anchored in process-tracing. Diachronic in scope, it tracked regional political trends, dramatic alignments and realignments, foreign policy statements, and media reports over the past two decades. History was mobilized not for exhaustive narration but to illuminate the synchronic entanglement, multiplicity, and structural multipolarity defining the contemporary landscape. Empirical data drew on three primary streams: (i) official foreign policy statements and bilateral/multilateral agreements; (ii) regional and international media reporting; and (iii) insights derived from sustained research engagements and conversations within policy and academic circles. Data was subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, coded according to the study's dual theoretical pillars.

A foundational methodological limitation, acknowledged upfront, is the treatment of the state as a unitary, rational actor – a convention inherited from both Neorealism and Liberal Institutionalism. While domestic fragmentation, ethnic federalism, and elite patronage are empirically significant in the Horn, they were deliberately bracketed as intervening factors for the sake of theoretical parsimony. This allowed the study to isolate the structural effects of external great-power competition and institutional engagement, though it necessarily sacrifices granularity regarding the domestic political economy of foreign-policy implementation.

China's expanding influence underscores the Horn's salience in the emerging multipolar global order. This order incorporates African agency alongside great-power competition – particularly through China's involvement in BRICS and the

BRI – which will shape the evolving landscape of international politics. In this context, foreign policy fragmentation, despite the survival of IGAD and other pan-African platforms, interacts with competition among regional actors and external rivalries, reflecting the complexities of global multipolarity in the Horn. Historical precedents, structural anarchy, and China’s revisionist yet soft-power approach contribute to the potential for African agency, even amid structural dependency and peripheral status.

Given that regional agency is largely limited to pragmatic maneuvering, a dynamic foreign policy strategy necessitates that institutional Pan-Africanism be fundamentally rethought. Pan-Africanism must be reimagined as a dynamic instrument of strategic agency, not a frozen monument ideology ossified by nostalgia. It must be reconstituted as a practical instrument of collective strategic agency- operationalizing IGAD and the AU as gatekeeping mechanisms for all major infrastructure, security, and labor agreements. Horn states must reject permanent military alignment, utilizing competitive leasing to extract concessions from external powers while maintaining strategic ambiguity. Simultaneously, they must pivot from bilateral dependency to collective institutional agency, transforming pragmatic survival into coordinated bargaining power. For Horn states to thrive in this anarchical multipolar environment, cooperation is essential. Ideally grounded in a reimagined institutional Pan-Africanism that moves beyond rhetoric to operational collective bargaining. This would transform the Horn from an exhausting pragmatic constant realignment into a sustaining dynamics policy that enhances the active arbiter of its own geopolitical destiny. Failure to pursue this will result in a race to the bottom, where regional states are systematically outmaneuvered by external powers with deeper pockets and longer strategic horizons. ✨

Notes

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