

The New Geopolitical Formation in the Wider Horn of Africa: Consequences for Europe

Jan Pospisil



Executive Summary

The ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia significantly destabilise the Wider Horn of Africa and impact the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. These conflicts, rooted in fragmented statehood and exacerbated by internal ethnic, regional, and political divisions, threaten regional stability through increased migration and disruptions in the Red Sea. The conflicts are deeply internationalised, involving military engagements from neighbouring countries and attracting global powers due to significant geostrategic stakes. Traditional Western influences are waning. Instead, new actors like China, Russia, and various Gulf States are heavily engaged in the region. For Europe, the instability in the Horn of Africa presents urgent challenges, primarily related to migration, the security of maritime routes, and potential spillover effects in neighbouring regions like Egypt. Addressing these issues requires enhanced political engagement, addressing humanitarian needs, reforming peacekeeping efforts, and strengthening security cooperation. Europe's response should be robust and coordinated, aiming to mitigate immediate threats and contribute to long-term stability in the region, reflecting the complexity of the intertwined interests and ongoing conflicts.

Zusammenfassung

Die anhaltenden Konflikte im Sudan, Somalia und Äthiopien destabilisieren den Großraum Horn von Afrika erheblich und beeinflussen damit die gesamte Region des Nahen Ostens und Nordafrikas (MENA). Diese Konflikte, verwurzelt in fragmentierter Staatlichkeit und durch interne ethnische, regionale und politische Spaltungen verschärft, bedrohen die regionale Stabilität durch zunehmende Migration und Instabilität im Roten Meer. Die Konflikte sind intrinsisch internationalisiert, mit militärischen Engagements von Nachbarländern. Regionale und globale Akteure spielen ihre unterschiedlichen geostrategischen Interessen in der Region aus. Traditionelle westliche Einflüsse schwinden. Stattdessen sind neue Player wie China, Russland und die Golfstaaten stark in der Region engagiert. Für Europa stellt die Instabilität am Horn von Afrika eine substantielle Herausforderung dar, insbesondere in Bezug auf Migration, die Sicherheit von Transportrouten und potenzielle Spill-Over-Effekte in die unmittelbare EU-Nachbarschaft. Die Bewältigung dieser Probleme erfordert verstärktes politisches Engagement, die Adressierung der massiven humanitären Bedürfnisse, Reformbemühungen im regionalen Peacebuilding und Peacekeeping, sowie die Stärkung der Sicherheitskooperation. Europas Antwort sollte robust und koordiniert erfolgen, um unmittelbare Bedrohungen zu mindern und gleichzeitig im Anbetracht der komplexen Konfliktlage zur langfristigen Stabilität in der Region beizutragen.

Keywords:

Wider Horn of Africa, neighbouring countries, fragmented statehood, internationalised conflicts, geostrategic stakes, Europe

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Introduction

The Wider Horn of Africa, which comprises – besides the Horn states Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia – Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda, holds significant strategic importance for the European Union due to its geostrategic location, ongoing security challenges, migration issues, and impact on European economies, predominantly through the Red Sea maritime transport route. The ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia have profound implications, exerting a significant destabilising influence beyond the Wider Horn on the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This destabilisation directly impacts key countries in the immediate European neighbourhood such as Egypt and Libya. The political turmoil in these countries threatens to escalate into broader regional instability, with substantial knock-on effects such as forced displacement that may lead to increased migration flows towards Europe.

The interconnected nature of these conflicts highlights their international dimensions, with each country's internal strife impacting its neighbours through complex socio-political and economic channels. Increasing insecurity in the Red Sea, a critical route for global maritime trade, exacerbates the situation, resulting in lengthened transport times and increased costs for essential shipments to the Mediterranean Sea. Such disruptions have wider economic implications, affecting global supply chains and economic stability far be-

yond the immediate region. The strategic importance of the Red Sea underscores the strategic importance of a stable and secure maritime corridor to facilitate international trade.

The dynamics of external involvement in the region have also shifted dramatically. Traditional actors such as the United States and the United Kingdom, who previously played significant roles in the region's geopolitical landscape, find their influence waning. Conversely, actors such as China, Russia, and various Gulf States (Mabon and Mason, 2022) have ascended. Their involvement is driven by distinct geostrategic and material interests that often diverge from those of their Western counterparts. These new actors are not only reshaping the geopolitical fabric of the region but also redefining the parameters of diplomatic and economic engagement. By looking at the issues of only fragmentarily institutionalised statehood and the regionalisation and internationalisation of conflict and their material underpinnings, the following research brief elaborates on the new environment of conflict and intervention in the region.

Fragmented Statehood

The pervasive armed conflicts within the Wider Horn of Africa and its environs are deeply rooted in the incomplete and fragmented projects of statehood that characterise most countries in the region (Clapham, 2023). These states grapple with the challenges of building cohesive national identities and institutionalised political structures in

the face of deep-seated ethnic, regional, and political divisions, often resulting in complex quests for self-determination (de Waal and Nouwen, 2021).

In Ethiopia, the recent crises, initially in the Tigray region and subsequently spreading to other parts of this large country, can be traced back to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's determined efforts to dismantle the model of ethnic federalism, which had been established by Meles Zenawi's Tigrayan-dominated government in the aftermath of the fall of the Derg regime. This system was designed to maintain a delicate ethno-political balance by granting substantial autonomy to various ethnic groups. Abiy's efforts instead aimed at centralising power and, thus, have disrupted this balance, igniting conflicts that threaten Ethiopia's stability and unity.

The current war in Sudan presents a classic case of a centre-periphery conflict. Tensions between the central government and peripheral regions have persisted in wide parts of the country almost continuously since independence, only often beyond wider recognition given the relative stability in the capital Khartoum. The recent escalation into a civil war, that also turned Khartoum into a war zone for the first time in Sudan's history, involves two huge militia alliances, one of which is led by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the other by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the successors of the notorious Janjaweed militias that were responsible for the worst atrocities in the Darfur civil war in the mid-2000s. The current war signifies a breakdown of an elite pact that previously held the fragile centre in place. This conflict reflects deep-rooted

grievances and power struggles that have long plagued Sudanese politics. An easy and quick solution appears unlikely at present (Pospisil, 2024).

Somalia's challenges stem from its prolonged inability to establish a centralised state authority in the face of strong regional, often clan-based interests. At present, the Islamist group al-Shabab presents a formidable and sustained armed challenge for nearly two decades, combined with the offer of relatively stable governance to substantial parts of the Somali population. For the Somali state, it has perpetuated a state of chronic instability and insecurity across the country.

The regional instability extends to countries bordering the region such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and Chad. These countries also suffer from fragmented state structures and face armed challenges by various groups, often at a subnational and local level, further contributing to the vast area of instability bordering the Wider Horn. Chad has been particularly affected by the war in Sudan through refugee flows, military support and direct operations of armed actors, the RSF in particular. Across the Red Sea, Yemen adds to the regional turmoil, with substantial control wielded by the Houthis militia (de Waal, 2020). The Houthis' recent missile attacks against international cargo ships illustrate how conflicts in the region can have broader geopolitical implications, including threats to international maritime security (Salisbury, 2024).

Internationalised Conflicts

The conflicts in the Wider Horn of Africa are not only internal but are deeply internationalised, featuring an intricate web of military and geopolitical entanglements that span multiple regional and international actors. The military involvement of neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Uganda in Somalia, Eritrea in Ethiopia, and Egypt in Sudan, exemplifies the regional nature of many of these interventions. States seek to protect their own security interests by securing regional stability. However, these actions can also exacerbate the conflicts (Pospisil, 2023, on the example of Sudan).

Due to multiple trade routes and substantial natural resources, geostrategic stakes in the region are significant, attracting the interest of global powers. Historically, the United States and China have been perceived as the most influential external actors in the region. However, the US has seen a reduction in its engagement following its disastrous involvement in Somalia during the 1990s (Clausen and Albrecht, 2021). In addition, US foreign policy interest has meanwhile shifted to the Pacific region. The recent massive challenges in the Eurasian region, from Ukraine over the Wider Horn to Israel/Palestine, however, have renewed US interest. This renewed interest is primarily driven by security concerns and the alleged need for regional stability.

China's interests have remained more consistent, largely driven by economic considerations. Its focus on stabilisation is tied to safeguarding its business interests, including investments in infrastructure and resource extraction throughout Africa.

China's approach is often based on a combination of diplomacy and economic investment, aiming to create a stable environment conducive to its ongoing projects. While characterised as South-South cooperation, economic investment is expected to generate profitable returns, which is a major factor in Chinese investment in regional transport corridors and infrastructure development.

Russia has emerged as a significant security actor in the region, notably through the activities of the Wagner Group. Wagner's involvement in Sudan (Peter and Plichta, 2023), the Central African Republic (CAR), and Chad, along with its efforts to stretch Russian influence into Western Africa, illustrates a clear strategy aimed at securing resources such as gold and enhancing geopolitical clout through potential naval access in Sudan. However, following the chaos surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine that resulted in the dismantling of the Wagner Group (Sabbagh, 2024), there is evidence of a strategic shift, with formal Russian military forces possibly consolidating Wagner's prior engagements. While doing so, they have been actively confronted by a Ukrainian military contingent in Sudan, leading to an, at least, tactical alignment between the Ukraine and the SAF which even resulted in a bilateral meeting between Ukrainian President Zelenskiy and the Sudanese coup leader al-Burhan, to counter the long-standing alliance between Russia and the RSF (Hunder, 2023).

Among the Gulf States, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has notably turned into a key regional player

active in a variety of ongoing armed conflicts, regularly providing substantial arms and logistical support, particularly to the RSF in Sudan. At the same time, they emerge as a mediator in a number of conflict settings (Freer, 2023). The UAE's involvement is motivated not only by strategic interests in the Red Sea but also by its internal transformation. In the light of (intended) global decarbonisation as a consequence of climate change, the UAE diversifies its economy away from oil, with a focus on sustainability and food independence. To achieve this aim, securing influence in the Horn of Africa becomes increasingly crucial for ensuring access to necessary resources and safeguarding strategic maritime routes.

The Material Underpinnings of Geo-strategy

The strategic importance of the Red Sea has been a critical factor in regional geopolitics. This reality has been recently underscored by the Houthi militia's attacks on maritime shipping as a result of the Gaza war (Al Jazeera, 2024). This pivotal maritime corridor has drawn intensified interest from global actors, particularly the UAE, whose involvement in Sudan and Yemen is largely driven by ambitions to shape the dynamics of the Red Sea region. This geopolitical competition is also reflected in the establishment of naval bases by various maritime powers such as the US, the UK, France and China in Djibouti. For China, the Djibouti maritime base is its only official overseas naval base (Vines et al, 2024), which symbolises the global strategic stakes associated with the region.

Ethiopia's recent efforts to develop a naval capability signifies a complex layer added to the regional security matrix (Abate Demissie et al, 2022). Despite the geographic handicap of being landlocked as a consequence of Eritrea's secession in 1993, Ethiopia's strategic imperative to assert influence over the Red Sea is evident (Sarkar, 2023). The ongoing friction with Eritrea, which recently re-erupted after their tactical military alliance against the Tigray Defence Force in the Tigrayan war, prevents Ethiopian access to Eritrean ports. The conflict has led to inflamed bilateral tensions (de Waal, 2023). It has also forced Ethiopia to explore alternative maritime outlets, possibly in Djibouti and Somaliland. This strategic recalibration is illustrated by Ethiopia's contemplation of recognising Somaliland's independence in exchange for critical access to the port of Berbera (Ylönen, 2024), showcasing a profound shift in regional alliances and diplomatic engagements.

The UAE's strategic interests in the Horn of Africa encompass extensive land acquisitions and resource exploitation, activities extending way beyond mere maritime control. These interests, including significant land deals in Somalia, Ethiopia, and potentially South Sudan, align with the UAE's broader objectives of achieving food security and transitioning its economy beyond its traditional oil base (Munshi et al, 2024). The support for Sudan's RSF, as recently highlighted by the UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan (2024) report, is partly motivated by these land interests, essential for the UAE's agricultural and economic diversification strategies. Additionally, the UAE's pivotal role in facilitating the logistics of Wagner-controlled gold

to Russia (McDowall, 2023) highlights the intricate interplay between resource extraction and geopolitical strategy in the region.

Furthermore, the persisting relevance of oil in regional economic strategies is evident in ongoing explorations and productions in Libya, Sudan, South Sudan, and, with more recent discoveries, Uganda. The strategic deployment of oil transport infrastructure, particularly pipelines, is critical and linked to broader transportation networks across the region. For instance, the operational challenges of the existing pipeline from South Sudan to Port Sudan, now compromised by the Sudanese civil war, have necessitated the exploration of alternative routes and strategies for South Sudan. This situation has prompted new exploratory initiatives in the Jonglei region and adjustments in regional infrastructure strategies.

Kenya's ambition to establish itself as a dominant regional hub through the development of the LAPSSET corridor to the port of Lamu exemplifies the scale of infrastructure projects designed to foster regional integration and economic development (Aalders et al, 2021). However, the project's progression has been stymied by its route through territories controlled by Al-Shabab (Kazungu, 2024), illustrating the profound impact of security challenges on derailing economic initiatives. The resultant realignment of strategies, such as Uganda's recent agreement with Tanzania to develop the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) to Dar-es-Salaam, not only generates tensions with Kenya (Cannon and Mogaka, 2022) but also influences the logistical frameworks of neighbouring

South Sudan. In response, South Sudan has engaged with Ethiopia and Djibouti to formulate plans for a new oil transport corridor, illustrating the dynamic nature of strategic infrastructural planning in the region (Tekle, 2022).

The intricate material linkages across the Wider Horn of Africa, while harbouring significant prospects for economic advancement – as demonstrated in Kenya and, to a lesser extent, Ethiopia and Tanzania – precipitate considerable risks of regional instability. The array of international and regional actors, each pursuing divergent interests, frequently intervenes in complex national and subnational conflicts, thereby complicating the landscape and potentially exacerbating the conditions of instability.

Implications for Europe

The situation in the Wider Horn of Africa presents several significant implications for Europe, each intertwined with complex geopolitical and humanitarian dynamics. The most relevant European actor in the region by far, the United Kingdom, is not an EU member state anymore, and even though there are coordinated efforts ongoing, does not necessarily align with EU Foreign Policy interests. The ongoing naval and training missions of the EU in Somalia and the increasing number of European Special Envoys for the Horn are camouflaging the fact that the region is not a focus of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the respective policies of the EU member states. Given the high relevance of the region for European economies, for

migration streams and the stability of the EU Neighbourhood, this neglect may become costly in the mid- to long term.

First, though the direct consequences of regional conflicts have been somewhat contained, the potential for high migration flows to Europe remains a critical concern. Most forcibly displaced individuals remain within the region as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). At the same time, the ongoing Sudanese conflict has rendered traditional migration corridors partly impassable. However, as seen in Libya, once an unsettled conflict situation begins to stabilise, commercialised transit routes can swiftly emerge, likely facilitating increased migration towards Europe.

Secondly, the recent attacks on cargo ships by the Houthi militia demonstrate the direct impact of Red Sea security on European economies. Several naval missions, among them the EU NAVFOR Operation Atalanta, established in 2008, have aimed at increasing maritime security, especially around the Somali coastline. While there was some success in curbing piracy, these missions could not prevent the missiles shot at sea cargo from Yemen. These incidents have prompted military interventions by the United States and the United Kingdom. Yet, for a sustainable resolution, a broader regional strategy is necessary that involves all Red Sea states with larger ports. Otherwise, the escalating competition for control over the Red Sea may lead to further instability, affecting crucial maritime routes that are vital for European trade.

Finally, the potential spillover effects from ongoing conflicts, particularly in Egypt that borders two critical conflict zones – Sudan and Gaza, pose a severe challenge to the European Union, which must contend with another highly fragile situation in its immediate neighbourhood. This situation necessitates a multifaceted response by European actors.

Enhanced Political Engagement. Beyond migration pacts like the Khartoum Process – which has inadvertently supported one of the factions in the Sudanese civil war – there is a need for a deeper, more comprehensive political engagement. This should include efforts to mitigate conflicts and stabilise the region by moderating the competition among international actors and aligning their interests. Initiatives undertaken by the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa and various bilateral efforts, particularly in dialogue with the Gulf countries, exemplify attempts at such diplomatic engagements. Surely, the UAE is the most difficult regional actor whose interests are not entirely clear. A concerted European initiative could support the development of a regionally focused dialogue that integrates the UAE in regional peacebuilding endeavours. The former Quad group (consisting of the US, the UK, the UAE and Saudi Arabia) was one effort in that regard, which has yet ceased. Using the leverage of the EU Special Representative, some comparable efforts could be undertaken.

Humanitarian Aid Delivery. Addressing the substantial humanitarian needs on the ground is imperative. For instance, the humanitarian crisis in Sudan is deemed as the worst globally, with famine looming imminently in parts of the country

(Michael, 2024). France, Germany, and the EU have reacted by organising a Sudan Conference in Paris in April 2024, leading to pledges of more than two billion Euros in humanitarian relief (France24, 2024). However, the effective disbursement of these funds remains a challenge, complicated by both sides of the Sudanese conflict seeking to control aid flows. Similarly, the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia has resulted in massive humanitarian needs, despite Ethiopia's complexities as a partner (Gebrehiwot and de Waal, 2023). In light of these challenges, there is a pressing need to influence UN agencies and major international NGOs to adopt more flexible approaches to humanitarian aid delivery.

Reforming International Peacekeeping. The changing landscape of international peacekeeping – marked by the end of missions like UNAMID in Sudan and MINUSCA in CAR, the failure of the political mission UNITAMS in Sudan, the scaling down of AMISOM in Somalia, and potential transition of UNMISS in South Sudan to a downsized political mission in the aftermath of the South Sudanese elections to be held late 2024 or early 2025 – requires fresh expertise on how to design and better integrate political missions within the regional political framework. How should UN peace support operations look like in a turbulent regionalised conflict arena such as the Wider Horn?

Security Cooperation and Police Training. Finally, targeted and well-tailored security cooperation in the region remains a pressing need. The EU's training mission in Somalia, aimed at enhancing local policing capabilities, has shown limited effectiveness and has not been able to support the institutionalisation of the Somali security apparatus. This, however, highlights the need for improved cooperation and support with local security providers. A renewed focus on peacekeeping and policing, especially post-conflict peacekeeping in regions like Sudan, although this sadly might be only in the distant future, is crucial.

These multifaceted challenges call for a robust and coordinated response from European stakeholders. This response needs to aim at mitigating immediate threats and contributing to long-term stability in the region, taking into account the particular history of political institutionalisation that is at the root of many of the challenges. A meaningful engagement cannot happen as an afterthought. The establishment of a Special Envoy for the region is an important step to make the EU's approach more strategic and link isolated initiatives, such as the security cooperation with Somalia and the humanitarian efforts to mitigate the effects of the Sudan war. However, more attention and practical investment is needed in a region that, given its strong interlinkages with Europe, will have considerable impact on the EU's future.

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