

## Trajectories and Geopolitical Implications of the Gulf-Horn Interaction

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### Abstract

*The concept of the "Gulf-Horn Region" is a new framework in geopolitical studies. This emerging concept underscores the growing strategic, economic and political interactions between the two regions. Indeed, the Gulf-Horn interaction spans centuries of close engagement. Seeing from a geopolitical lens, both regions are complex and conflict-prone – often described as 'conflict-oriented'. Theoretically speaking, therefore, any interaction between the two regions needs critical scrutiny. In recent years, Gulf States' assertiveness in the Horn of Africa has intensified competition over port militarization, securitization, and commercialization. Accordingly, these evolving dynamic developments demand closer investigation to unpack the strategic implications of Gulf-Horn entanglements in an increasingly volatile regional context. For this reason, a study that relied on a combination of both primary and secondary source of data was conducted. Methodologically, the study involved a comprehensive review of both published and unpublished materials, as well as conducting key informant interviews with selected participants. The findings indicated a significant increase in competition among Gulf States for geopolitical, geo-economic, strategic, and ideological interests in the Horn of Africa. This ongoing dynamic has profound implications for regional security, driven by recurring hegemonic cycles of confrontation.*

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### Introduction

The concept of the "Gulf-Horn Region" is a new framework in geopolitical studies. This emerging concept underscores the growing strategic, economic and political interactions between the two regions. The Horn of Africa (HoA) represents one of the most geopolitically significant regions in the world, serving as a theatrical stage for strategic power struggles in the past 150 years (SSRC, 2007). Its geographic proximity with the Red Sea region– where close to 12% of global sea trade passes through – and Red Sea ports is one of the factors that made the horn of Africa a strategic landscape. In recent years, the geopolitics of ports in the region has drawn attention of Gulf regional powers, affecting the global political economy. With approximately 80 percent of global trade takes through maritime transport, ports has played a tremendous role (UNCTAD, 2018). Consequently, analysts argue that ports are shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century as much as railways defined the 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomena (Cafiero & Čok, 2020).

Seeing from a geopolitical lens, both the Horn and the Gulf regions are complex and conflict-prone, traditionally described as 'conflict-oriented'. Theoretically speaking, therefore, any interaction between the two regions needs critical scrutiny. Their union can be counterproductive – a surge in conflict may dominate

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the interaction, instead of their cooperation. As a matter of fact, hitherto Gulf-Horn interaction has tended to fulfill the commercial and strategic interests of the Gulf States rather than addressing the concerns of the Horn countries (Horton, 2019). Furthermore, the regional Gulf rivalries are affecting the politics of the Horn. For example, the assertiveness of the Gulf States has led to a new Cold War-style dynamic in the Horn of Africa. As a result, key ports in the region are now under intense competition, highlighting the need for in-depth study of these developments.

In sum, the geopolitical interaction between the Gulf States and the Horn of Africa has become a focal point in contemporary geopolitical analysis. This relationship is characterized by a complex interplay of economic, strategic, and cultural factors that shape the dynamics of the region. While it is difficult to conclude that the involvement of the Gulf States in the Horn region necessarily invites others to follow suit, the region undeniably witnesses the simultaneous participation of both superpowers and regional powers. Thus, the Gulf-Horn interaction attracts multiple actors, highlights the importance of studying these dynamics to understand the geopolitical and security implications of this strategically significant region.

## **Materials and Methods**

The study relied on qualitative approach to grasp a detailed understanding of the issues at hand including actors and implications of geopolitical interaction in the Horn of Africa. To this end, a mix of primary and secondary sources of data was employed. Relevant qualitative data was collected through Key Informant Interviews. The method helped to explore the perspectives of the participants on the implications of geopolitical interaction while paying a particular attention to key geopolitical actors in the HoA. The participants were approached purposely based on their knowledge of the matter. Accordingly, representatives from Ethiopian Navy force and Maritime Institute of Ethiopia were consulted. On the other hand, to supplement the primary data, a review of secondary sources was conducted. Books, scholarly articles, journals, media reports, archival materials, policy documents, published and unpublished materials were consulted.

## **The Trajectory of Gulf – Horn Interaction**

Regional cooperation has been in the spotlight of research for several decades. Existent literature offers a wide range of justifications for explaining why states seek to interact at a regional level. To name a few, states want to maintain security, prove legitimacy and reputation, ensure economic interests, and form alliances (Henneberg & Stapel, 2020). The following discussion covers a brief chronological description of Gulf-Horn interaction in the ancient, postcolonial, Cold War, and contemporary period's vis-à-vis the shifting geopolitical landscape of the HoA initiated by different factors. Among others, the factors include trade, political, economic and geopolitical dimensions.

### **Ancient Gulf–Horn Interaction: Trade Factor**

The interaction between the HoA and the Gulf states dates to the early days of Islam. For instance, an Ethiopian King hosted Prophet Muhammad's companions who escaped persecution (Fakude, 2017). Such interaction has survived several centuries, characterized by a complex relationship (Feierstein, 2020). Archeological evidence and Greco-Roman documents proved their classical interaction. Based on this evidence, Chami (2002) constructed five ancient historical periods. These periods are the Pre Greco-Roman

era; the Greco-Roman era; the Sasanian era of 300–700 AD; the era between 700 and 1200 AD when East Africa was being integrated into the Islamic world; and lastly, the interval between 1200 and 1500 AD when East Africa is identified as Swahili.

The relationship between the Arabs and East Africa was healthy during most of the historical periods and trade was the glue that connected the two regions. The book *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* written by an anonymous Greek-speaking Egyptian, highlighted the ancient Gulf-Horn relationship. The book provided a detailed account of the trade relations between Arabs and Africans, the items of import and export, and the conditions of ports in the ancient period (Hoyle, 1967).

### **Post-Colonial Gulf–Horn Interaction: Political Factor**

After the end of the Second World War, European power in the Middle East crumbled and resulted in the emergence of several post-colonial states. These post-colonial states inherited the colonial institutions that were put in place. Unfortunately, the colonizers designed these institutions to control the colonized people from above. A problem happened when the newly emerged post-colonial states including many Gulf States used these colonial installments. These institutions were wrongly used to protect states from its own people rather than from outside militaries. Strikingly, states that were never formally colonized, such as Iran and Turkey, developed institutions similar to those of the post-colonial states in the Middle East (Helfont, 2015). Consequently, the then Gulf-Horn engagement could not escape the post-colonial reality of the Gulf States.

In the postcolonial era of the 1950s and 1960s, geopolitical interaction between the Horn and Gulf countries was principally centered on political objectives. At times, the Gulf countries influenced the Horn's political landscape with their spillover effect. Therefore, on many occasions, the conflict that broke out in the Gulf countries affected the Horn's politics as well. For example, the prolonged conflict in Sudan (1983-2005), the civil war in Ethiopia (1974-1991), and the Ethio-Somalia war (1978-79) all had a factor of Middle East rivalries spilling over into the Horn region (Khan, 2018).

### **Gulf – Horn Engagement in the Cold War period: US Policy Factor**

The Gulf-Horn cooperation took on a new dimension in the 1970s and 1980s. The oil boom transformed the Gulf countries and radically altered their relations with the Horn of Africa (Waal, 2017). They spent millions of dollars in the Horn to secure their national interests while siding with the United States of America (USA). Presumably, they gauged their cooperation with the HoA States by taking the foreign policy of US as a litmus test (Hadzikadunic, n.d). The provision of support by Saudi Arabia to Eritrean rebels against the Marxist government of Ethiopia demonstrated this fact (Khan, 2018). During that time Saudi Arabia and the Greater Arab world were not interested in the Ethio-Soviet Union relationships. Hoynes (1993) described the then time anti Ethio-Soviet and pro-USA Arabs' view as follows:

*The Arab world viewed the presence of Soviet influence in Ethiopia as a threat to the stability of the Red Sea region, particularly to their absolute monarchies that oppress the poor working class in the Middle East. Most countries maintained good relations with the United States during the Cold War. Besides, most of these regimes were monarchies that would not find the heart to allow any revolutionary challenges that might put the working class in power in the region.*

Following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the Gulf–Horn interaction declined as Gulf countries’ influence on the HoA dramatically ebbed. Waal (2017) pointed out three important cases depicting a slim representation of Gulf States’ politics in the HOA and a resultant decline of Gulf-Horn cooperation at the time. First, in the 1990s, the Sudanese government supported the invasion of Iraq. As a result, prominent figures such as Hassan al-Turabi opposed the government's move and disregarded the longstanding principle of Sudanese foreign policy - “be friendly with Egypt and Saudi Arabia”. Turabi’s comment gave rise to the emergence of an isolated Sudan. Second, the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 and the failure of the UN intervention in 1993 left the Arabs bewildered about how to deal with Somalia. The Arabs struggled to adapt the *modus operandi* of a stateless political system, and they could not manage their cooperation with the new dynamics that flourished in the Horn region. Third, the Eritrea-Yemen war over the Hanish Islands in 1995–96 severed Eritrea’s cooperation with the Gulf States. All these factors indicated the presence of weak, if not damaged, interactions between the Gulf and Horn countries toward the end of the 20th century.

### **Gulf – Horn Cooperation in the Contemporary Period: The port factor**

The current engagement between the Gulf States and Horn countries reframes politics, economy, and the security terrain of the two regions. From Gulf’s side, the need for income diversification, the 2011 Arab Spring and the subsequent rise of Muslim Brotherhood, and the need to countering Iran’s presence in the HoA are the three major driving forces behind the Gulf-Horn interaction. The Gulf countries have attempted to cement their cooperation while competing with each other for the militarization and commercialization of ports in the Horn region.

More specifically, owing to the intensive militarization and commercialization of ports, the HOA has seen major changes in its security domain. International actors from Europe, North America, and Asia are operating in the region and playing with their competing interests. Consequently, the region has experienced a proliferation of foreign military bases and commercial centers around ports (Bergenwall, 2019).

### **Geopolitical Actors and Competition in the HOA**

In the past 10 years, the geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea, by extension the HoA region, has been fundamentally reshaped and witnessed new developments. This new development further enhanced the relevance of the HoA more than ever. The region now links the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean security systems all having their vested interests. These interests are sometimes overlapping and other times contradictory. In broader sense, more than 100 countries have shown interest in the Horn and the Red Sea regions. Empirical evidences suggest three distinct categories of geopolitical interactions defining the Horn region. These include the “competition” between Superpowers, the ‘interaction’ between Super and Regional powers, and the struggle among Regional Powers. Despite receiving little attention, competition between the Middle Powers in the region, such as Kenya and Ethiopia, is also noticeable.

Actors from each category interact in various environments. These settings often include areas of compromise, potential interaction, and likely conflict among the actors. Evidences suggest that conflictual relations outweigh cooperational relations in the Horn of Africa. Key informants added that the probability of direct hostility between actors is rare even though conflictual relations overwhelmingly define the HoA. The chance of direct confrontation between the various actors is limited in the Horn region. This is perhaps

due to the US-China bilateral relationship. It is in the interests of both US and China to stabilize the Horn of Africa (UPEACE, 2020).

### **The Geopolitical Competition between Global Powers**

After the completion of Cold War and brief international disengagements, geopolitical, strategic, and economic realities of the world led to a new global superpower competition in the HoA. The unilateralism of the USA as the sole global superpower in the Post-Cold War period did not last long despite US's huge security investment. For example, the 1975 US allocations showed that 65% of security expenditure was directed at the Soviet Union and its commitments to NATO, 25% on Asia, most of it against China, Seven percent on the Arab Israel confrontation in the Middle East, Seven percent on Latin America, and the remaining One percent at the rest of the world including the Horn of Africa (Herman, 1993).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has unleashed strategic competition among superpowers on the international stage. The new active global and regional power contestations are evident in the strategically important HoA involving China, the USA and Russia. Traditionally, the USA and some European Superpowers have had a presence in the HoA and competed with each other. More importantly, USA, after 2001, has increased its involvement. Some of its objectives are: fighting against terrorism, ensuring military hegemony in the West Indian Ocean, isolating Iran and weakening the Houthi rebels in Yemen, ensuring energy security in the Arabian Peninsula sea lane and gaining a military edge on China and Russia at the top end of the conflict spectrum. Recently, however, Asian Superpowers, such as China and Japan, have assertively demonstrated their interest in the region. For the first time, they established a military base in Djibouti.

China's growing engagement in the Horn region signals the emergence of a new strategic paradigm – one that emphasizes not only economic diplomacy but also an assertive military presence. This shift reflects Beijing's broader ambitions to project influence and ensure security. The objective of China's geopolitical interaction in the region targets, among other things: facilitating energy import, protecting the belt and road initiative, gaining reputation as a major power in a strategic region, ensuring tactical advantage in a potential conflict, consolidation the transition from a continental power to a maritime power, and acting as a counter-balance for the traditional US influence in the region.

Russia is also another key Superpower with renewed interest in the HoA, primarily for security reasons. It launched an independent anti-piracy operation off the region in September 2008, and it has maintained a regular but non-permanent regional presence ever since (Melvin, 2019). Like its contenders, Russia came up with refined objectives in the HoA. Some of its main goals in the HoA include regaining its status, expanding its economic interests, influencing the resolution of the Yemeni conflict, linking the HoA to Arabian Peninsula, changing the region's negative perception of Russia and bridging key actors in Yemen. The geopolitical interaction of the USA, China and Russia reflected that they have more differences than common terms. As a result, one could expect more conflictual engagements than healthy relationships.

### **The Geopolitical Interaction between Regional Powers**

Middle East regional powers have shown a revived interest in the HoA. More specifically, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, Egypt, Israel and Qatar have increased their engagement in the region for economic, political, and geostrategic reasons. Feierstein pointed out five types of competition among/between/ Gulf



countries in the HoA (Feierstein, 2020). These comprise: Saudi competition with Iran, Saudi/Emirati competition with Turkey/Qatar, Egypt's struggle to preserve regional dominance and water rights, Egypt's competition with Ethiopia's rising regional role and Saudi competition with the UAE.

In the same vein, best rival and arch-foe rival competition exist in the HoA. The former rivalry is epitomized by Saudi Arabia's competition with the UAE, while the latter can be demonstrated by the Saudi-Iran tension. For the most part, Saudi and UAE have prescribed identical political goals. They coordinated efforts to push back Iranians from the HoA. They have also worked together on responses to the growing Turkish and Qatari presence in the region. Nevertheless, they could not conceal their differences on important regional occasions. This is evident in Saudi's worry about the UAE's expansion into the Red Sea region. The later arch-foe rivalry mirrored the aggressive competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example. The military presence of UAE and Saudi Arabia in Eritrea reveals their ambition to project power against Iranian influence in the Horn of Africa (ICG, 2017).

Ample sources indicate that Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt have approached the HoA with the following objectives: Preventing Qatar from gaining access to bases and ports in the HoA, Supporting Hadi government in Yemen, containing Iran's presence in the HoA and ensuring maritime security in the Red Sea region. To implement all these, for instance, the Saudis have used their considerable financial and political influence and compelled HoA countries to minimize political, commercial and military links to Iran. Saudi Arabia seemed successful in this regard as Eritrea and Sudan reduced their engagement with Iran.

Iran, in its turn, has tried to influence the HoA in various ways. It has attempted to support the Houthi militias in Yemen, and damage the reputation of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim World. In so doing, Iran has maintained regional hegemony. Furthermore, on the opposite side of Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis which recently took a new momentum along the Qatar blockade (2017-2021), there is a Turkey-Qatar alliance which is primarily in charge of defending the vision set in motion during the Arab Spring, increasing regional influence in the HoA, encouraging an independent foreign policy that opposes the Saudi interest, and building good relations with Sudan and Somalia. Most of these goals are seen as evils from the Saudi-Emirati perspective, thereby yielding fierce geopolitical competition in the HoA region.

The Horn region is also an arena of competition between Israel and other Gulf regional powers. Israel has strived to defend its national security, prevent Iran from having a standing naval presence in the HoA, ensure the security of its merchant ships traveling through the Red Sea, and prevent Hizbollah and other Iran proxies from using combat experience it gained in Yemen to attack Israel.

After years of fierce competition in the HoA, Gulf ambitions in the region are facing increasing challenges and new political realities. Lons explained that Gulf countries reconsider their involvement due to different factors. The COVID-19 crisis, for instance has put significant strain on their financial resources. The drawdown in Yemen is downgrading the immediate need for a military foothold in the Horn, and the UAE has already started reducing its presence on its Assab base in Eritrea (Lons, 2021). GCC countries have also been careful to appear as constructive and reliable partners to the new US administration, adopting a more pragmatic approach on regional issues, with notable signs of *détente* with Qatar and Turkey. Above all, Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a rapprochement deal on 10 March 2023 brokered by China. All these developments shed light on the future of Gulf-Horn interaction.

## Geopolitical Interaction between Regional and Global Powers

The geopolitical interaction between regional and global powers is more complicated given the involvement and interaction of a multitude of actors. Strikingly, their interaction seemed to “relatively healthy” as compared to the previous geopolitical interactions: the interaction between super powers and the struggle between regional powers. This is mainly because the necessity of cooperation rather than competition deriving their geopolitical interaction. Thus, both Super powers and Regional powers seem to have committed to a “win-win” approach, instead of magnifying one’s side. In global politics, states often rationally calculate their loss and gains out of their interaction. The Djibouti–Russia’s engagement proved this reality. Empirical evidences show that Djibouti refused Russia’s plan of building a military base as Djibouti did not want to become the terrain of proxy war for super powers (Melvin, 2019). Generally, cooperation seems to outweigh conflict in the geopolitical interaction of global and regional powers. Most frequently, the interaction of regional and global powers is vitally important to the security terrain of the Red Sea and the HoA region.

### The Implications of Geopolitical Interaction in the HOA

The Gulf-Horn region is an arc of instability that has Gulf States on one side and Horn countries on the other. Therefore, it would be narrow-minded to consider the impact of the Gulf States’ fierce competition as limited to either the Gulf or the HoA region alone. By becoming an ideal place for competition among external powers—super and regional—the regional stability of the HoA is becoming riskier. Meanwhile, the international community has failed to take this issue seriously. Hence, one of the likely scenarios is that the Gulf States competition will persist to expand political, economic, and security interests in the HoA (Feierstein, 2020). To make things worse, the amplified proliferation of military bases has transformed the Horn region into a military zone. As a result, the region has become a battleground for a hegemonic cycle of confrontation.

The Gulf States have strived to broaden their presence beyond their territory including the HoA. Their acquisition of power through the pursuit of alliances and putting pressure on the “weak state” matched with the realist theory linchpin. Indeed, both the Gulf and the HoA have been involved in different spheres of competition. Apparently, “a double-fold race is taking place in the HoA region”. For example, while Djibouti and Somalia have competed with each other to provide better port services for the Gulf States, on the other end of the competition spectrum, the arch-foe rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrated their fight for alliance in Eritrea. All these multitudes of fierce competition may have regional security implications unless a careful oversight is crafted.

The Gulf States’ activities could catalyze geopolitical tensions across the HoA, threatening the balance of military and naval power. This is particularly worrisome as the region has been passing through the process of ‘Middle Easternization’ in recent years (Donnelly, 2004). The increased involvement of the Gulf States in the HoA have had significant impacts on the region. Political cleavages in the HoA, such as Somaliland’s support of the Saudi-UAE side in the Qatar diplomatic crisis; Djibouti’s support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and its downgrading of diplomatic relations with Qatar; and Mogadishu’s refusal to side against Qatar, are worth mentioning. These cleavages signaled that the Gulf States have seemingly used the HoA States as a proxy for internal Gulf rivalries. This, in turn, sparks a serious question about the regional

security of the HoA. The pattern creates a very difficult security dilemma where regional stability and individual state survival are both at stake.

The Gulf-Horn cooperation has catalyzed the emergence of a new, geopolitically significant bloc—referred to here as the Gulf-Horn region. With a shared strategic vision, this region holds the potential to become an influential voting bloc within the United Nations system. Countries in the Horn of Africa (HoA) have traditionally demonstrated a strong commitment to multilateralism. By forging a collective identity under the Gulf-Horn framework, member states can amplify their influence on the global stage, particularly in relation to major powers such as the United States and China.

This interregional partnership may thus revitalize multilateral diplomacy, shifting the emphasis away from bilateral engagements toward broader, cooperative global governance (UPEACE, 2020). In essence, Gulf-Horn cooperation contributes to rebalancing the international order by promoting multilateralism over unilateralism. Ethiopia, in particular, stands to benefit from this shift, given its longstanding advocacy for multilateral platforms such as Pan-Africanism and the Non-Aligned Movement.

## Conclusion

The Gulf-Horn cooperation spans centuries of close interaction. Geopolitical, geo-economics, strategic, and ideological reasons are the motives behind their assertive engagement. For this reason, the emerging Gulf-Horn interaction has become more complex and dynamic. However, there are signs suggesting that a decisive turn in the Gulf States' competition is taking place. The end of the Gulf Crisis, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal, the relative stability of Yemen, and the UAE's decision to reduce its military presence in Eritrea can be cited as causes for initiating a gradual decline in the fierce competition. Presumably, the Gulf-Horn interaction has targeted more long-term objectives than short-term goals. Saudi Arabia and UAE have all taken part in conflict resolution in various ways, indicating a broader interest in the Horn of Africa than just narrow commercial ties and security interests. Nonetheless, the proliferation of military bases and the spillover effect of Gulf rivalries would be alarming.

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