

Counterbalancing Chinese Influence in the Horn of Africa

A Strategy for Security and Stability

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By all appearances, we are in a period of diminishing US engagement in East Africa, extending back to 2017. Perhaps the starkest example was in January 2021, when the United States followed through on the Donald Trump administration's promise to remove all military personnel from Somalia. According to military sources, 600–800 troops have departed Somalia and been transferred to the neighboring East Africa nations of Kenya and Djibouti.¹ Though US forces assert that they “retain the capability to conduct targeted counterterrorism operations in Somalia and collect early warnings and indicators,”² the benefits of a physical presence in the country will be difficult to replace. These concerns are not limited to Somalia, however. Further US disengagement from East Africa would create greater instability in an already unstable and strategically critical region. Moreover, the vacuum left by US disengagement is likely to be filled by great-power rivals such as China and Russia. The ultimate reality is that African issues—especially those endemic to the Horn of Africa—often have global effects. Therefore, I argue that the United States should increase its engagement in East Africa to not only help maintain security and stability in this strategically significant region but also to counterbalance Chinese influence and power.

To be clear, I am not advocating for a dramatic increase in direct military support or more boots on the ground. On the contrary, while a military presence is an important part of the engagement I advocate, the other soft-power elements of statecraft—diplomatic, informational, and economic—are likely to be equally important in the future of US relations with East Africa. The withdrawal of US military forces from countries like Somalia is shortsighted and ill advised, but the failure to apply other soft-power tools, or an overreliance on military power, risks a more severe deterioration of influence in the Horn of Africa, in addition to the alienation of potential allies in a strategically vital region.

The Strategic Importance of the Horn of Africa

For the purposes of this article, the Horn of Africa will be defined as five countries: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya. Some wider contexts may also include Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. As previously mentioned, the Horn of Africa maintains a strategically important place on the global stage geographically, politically, and economically. It is the source of the Nile and the primary entrance to both the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The area attracts international attention due to its major ports, resource potential, and proximity to some of the world's busiest sea lanes.³

Any country looking to establish a presence in the region “will almost certainly engage with actors in China’s Belt and Road Initiative or any competing bloc or country’s strategies to tap African markets and resources.”⁴ The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, Turkey, Russia, Europe, and the United States have all identified the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea as being a hub of geostrategic competition and are actively pursuing interests in the area. On 23 March 2021, the world was given a lesson in the importance of the Suez Canal—and by extension the surrounding region—when a container ship called the *Ever Given* became stuck in the canal, cutting off all trade into and out of the Red Sea. Though the blockage was cleared in less than a week, it ground to a halt a trade route that accounts for over 12 percent of global trade and costs \$9 billion daily when stopped. The incident put immense strain on already burdened supply chains and resulted in a dramatic slowdown in global commerce.⁵

The most notable evidence for the region’s strategic importance is the ever-increasing presence of international military forces. Perhaps the most well-known base is Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which plays a crucial role for US military operations in both US Central Command and US Africa Command. However, Djibouti also hosts a Chinese People’s Liberation Army support base, as well as military personnel from Japan, Italy, Britain, and France.⁶ Similarly, Kenya and Somalia (until recently) have both been home to several US military outposts and bases. The increasing military presence in the Horn, along with its location and economic and political importance, make it one of the most strategically significant regions in the world.

Chinese Influence

Given the significance of this region on a global scale, it should come as no surprise that China has also identified the Horn of Africa as a focal point for significant economic, political, and military growth opportunities, with the obvious objective being to secure a foothold in East Africa, resulting in increased

control and the strategic advantages therein. Of all the countries in China's crosshairs, Ethiopia stands out as a country with immense political and economic potential. It has the second-largest population in Africa, is relatively politically stable, has proven to be a regional leader on the continent, and is poised to have significant economic growth this decade. As a result, China has purchased or supported several high-profile construction projects in Ethiopia, such as a light rail and the new headquarters of the African Union. The Ethiopian government joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018⁷ and sees itself as crucial to Chinese interests in East Africa.⁸ Similarly, Beijing sees Ethiopia as a nucleus for the Belt and Road Initiative and thus has heavily invested in it to earn its goodwill.

Beijing has also sought to ensure its military foothold in Djibouti. On 1 August 2017, China officially opened its support base just a few miles from Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. The base's stated primary mission is to protect Chinese commerce in the Gulf of Aden—along with intelligence collection, logistical support, and counterterrorism operations. Its existence also represents a significant augmentation in China's power projection capabilities. Perhaps more importantly to the Chinese is the influence that accompanies such a base. As a component of improving Sino-Djiboutian relations, China has provided 40 percent of the funding for infrastructure and loaned Djibouti \$1 billion for investment projects.⁹ Such engagement is likely an indication of things to come, with Djibouti serving as only one piece of China's much larger Belt and Road Initiative, much of which is extensively focused on the nations of East Africa.

Where China appears to have a grand strategy of engagement with East Africa, the United States seems to be two steps behind and in a permanent state of reevaluating its place in the region especially vis-à-vis great-power competition. The United States has shown an unwillingness or inability to articulate its strategy for countering Chinese influence in the Horn or across the rest of the continent. As written by retired four-star Admiral James Stavritis, "Unlike China, which has a finely crafted strategy for Africa and is moving swiftly to execute it, US efforts are relatively small and not well aligned between the military, economic and diplomatic."¹⁰ America's strategy for Africa is often inconsistent and, consequently, creates disadvantages compared to other great-power competitors. As the United States focuses more on great-power rivals, its focus shifts away from Africa and the willingness (or the perception of willingness) to engage on the continent decreases. Such inconsistent messaging, coupled with actual physical withdrawal, represents a lost opportunity to challenge China and other great-power rivals indirectly. Perhaps more damaging, as the United States relinquishes its influence, it permits these countries to manipulate the power vacuum to their own ends.¹¹

In the context of Africa, there is an additional consideration that one must assess when considering the present day US-Chinese rivalry. It is highly unlikely that a direct, conventional conflict will take place between the two countries in the near term. On the contrary, the most likely scenario is that the conflict will be a war of ideas and a battle for influence. As Professor Sean McFate says in his book *The New Rules for War*, “weaponizing influence and controlling the narrative of the conflict will help us win future wars. . . . The West needs to update its information warfare game. Until it does it will continue to be outplayed by its enemies that wage war in the information space.”¹² The objectives of such a war will not be military dominance, but influence and indirect power. Economic, diplomatic, and informational tools of statecraft will consistently rise to the top of the priority list for great powers who wish to attain victory by controlling the narrative.

Beijing understands this concept. Its ability and willingness to provide Ethiopia, Djibouti, and even Somalia with economic and political support typifies their strategy of utilizing influence and soft power to bring about political objectives. The goal is not military supremacy or even economic advantage, but rather “the power to exercise predominant influence over the defining ideas, rules, and institutions of world [or, in this case, regional] politics.”¹³ Political and economic expansion is a means to that end. To counter these efforts, the United States must first solidify a strategy in the Horn of Africa and ensure that strategy is directed at augmenting its engagement in the region, thereby countering (or at the very least balancing) efforts from Beijing.

Providing a Soft-Power Counterbalance

As discussed in the beginning, the soft-power tools of statecraft are going to be the most effective means by which to provide the counterbalance to China’s growing influence. This is due to practical concerns like resource constraints as well as more intangible ideas like public perception of the United States. On paper, America has already enumerated a strategy for beginning this counterbalance. The 2021 “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” says that “We will also continue to build partnerships in Africa. . . and support [African countries’] economic and political independence in the face of undue foreign influence.”¹⁴ Again, efforts to fulfill this strategic vision will need to involve a coordinated plan featuring both military and security aspects, as well as soft-power influence through diplomatic, economic, and informational channels.

Diplomatic Counterbalance

This article has already addressed the security aspect of the US presence in the Horn of Africa. From a diplomatic perspective, US policy toward Africa is in dire need of adjustment. To again quote Judd Devermont, “From travel bans and proposed budget cuts to derogatory statements made by senior U.S. officials, many African leaders and publics have deplored what they regard as a neglectful, mean-spirited, and China-obsessed U.S. foreign policy.”¹⁵ To address this issue, the Biden administration should reverse the previous administration’s policy of leaving key state department posts unfilled. A relatively simple first step to signal US commitment in Africa would be filling key diplomatic positions on the continent and in the Horn such as an ambassador to Kenya and an assistant secretary of state for African affairs. Once key officials are in place and prepared to present and support US foreign policy, they can begin the process of finding what programs, policies and investments will benefit both the partner nation and the United States.

In a globalizing world, diplomatic engagement is more than just philanthropy or kindness. Properly executed, such engagement can help in a myriad of ways—from supporting human rights, to increasing standards of living and expanding development, to implementing more effective governance. Further, it can have positive effects beyond that country’s borders, extending to its neighbors, the region around it, and even how that country interacts with great powers. Governments with a free press, independent courts, functional legislatures, and a respect for human rights are more likely to cancel corrupt or unsound deals with countries such as Russia and China.¹⁶ Through constructive, effective diplomatic engagement, the United States can maintain a positive influence in Africa, while simultaneously presenting a counterbalance to great-power rivals.

Despite the perception of decreasing commitment, the United States remains one of the most prominent powers on the continent. As such, the government should use its still-considerable influence to play a pragmatic and neutral role in resolving (or supporting the resolution of) regional disputes. By partnering with European and other international actors to solve issues on the continent, the United States can act as a diplomatic force multiplier and hasten effective resolutions to these issues—such as the dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over Nile water usage and the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. With sufficient diplomatic tact, the United States may even be able to play the role of peacemaker in Ethiopia’s Tigray conflict. Regardless of what issues the United States chooses to address, the reality is that such efforts are only possible with increased diplomatic presence in the Horn.

Economic Counterbalance

Diplomatic efforts as outlined here would also clear a path for economic investment. China has already identified Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti as opportunities for investment, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing sees the Horn as part of a chain of investments spanning the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and across the continent. To be a counterbalance, the United States must also see Africa as a similar source of economic opportunity. To that end, Washington could encourage private sector expansion in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti, while simultaneously incentivizing investment in those economies. Some programs like this are already in the works, such as the International Development Finance Corporation's plan for investing \$5 billion into newly privatized Ethiopian markets. More programs like this will benefit not just the countries and businesses directly involved but will also have positive ripple effects for the rest of East Africa.

Security and Stability in the Horn

Compared to great-power competition, counter violent extremist organization operations have been deemphasized in the security sector—but in East Africa these organizations still represent the most acute threat. Therefore, the most immediate and obvious reason for maintaining US presence and influence in the region is security, especially in Somalia itself. Though increasing direct military support to Somalia is likely not the right answer, neither was the removal of what few US forces were still in the country. The US, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), and Somali security forces had made significant gains against the main regional antagonist, al-Shabaab, but those gains have only been possible through the cooperation between African and US forces. Without the US military, the reality on the ground is that no Somali force is ready to take the fight to al-Shabaab alone. The Somali military is far from ready to take over the counterterrorism mission, and the Somali Danab special forces units continue to rely heavily on American training, equipment, and support.¹⁷ Moreover, AMISOM is increasingly looking as though it will follow America's lead and withdraw its forces by year's end. Without the United States or AMISOM, it is likely that al-Shabaab will experience a violent resurgence and imperil whatever fragile stability has been gained.

It bears repeating that problems in Africa, particularly in East Africa, can have ripple effects on a worldwide scale. As articulated by Judd Devermont, the Africa program director at CSIS, "What happens in Africa does not stop at the water's edge. Africa's setbacks and advances are reshaping how the world works."¹⁸ The

concept is particularly true of Somalia. The US withdrawal endangers not only our ability to maintain security in the country itself, but it dramatically diminishes our intelligence collection capabilities in the region. This is incredibly dangerous with a group like al-Shabaab that has, on several occasions, proven its willingness and ability to strike outside the borders of Somalia. According to Katherine Zimmerman from the American Enterprise Institute, “al Shabaab intends to attack the US homeland and is pursuing the capability to bring down commercial planes. . . . The group copied a laptop bomb from al Qaeda’s Yemeni branch in 2016, and al Shabaab operatives have been arrested trying to take flying lessons, copying the 9/11 hijackers.”¹⁹ Despite Pentagon assurances that the United States can maintain its ability to collect early warnings and indicators regarding threats to the homeland,²⁰ withdrawal will inevitably have a detrimental effect on the quality of US intelligence related to al-Shabaab that thus potentially endanger regional interests or even America itself.

While not as acute as security in Somalia, continued diplomatic, economic, and military involvement by the United States will have a stabilizing effect on the region, especially in Ethiopia. As one of the most important nations on the continent, Ethiopia has a significant effect on regional stability. A strong and stable Ethiopia is likely to engender stability in the surrounding countries. For the United States, the country has consistently proven to be a linchpin in US counterterrorism operations and, with American financial and military support, has been strategically vital. However, over the last four years, the United States has begun to decrease support both fiscally and, as a result, militarily. “The recent decline of financial support brought significant impact. Despite its committed engagement to fight al-Shabaab, the past four years (2014–2017) peace and security budget aid by the US government to Ethiopia had been declined.”²¹ Given its importance in the region and largely productive past relationship with the United States, a recommitment to Ethiopian stability would represent a recommitment to stability in the Horn and greater East Africa.

One cannot discuss partnering with Ethiopia without addressing the current turmoil in the Tigray region, but that, too, serves to illustrate the importance of continued US engagement in Ethiopia. The United States has already condemned the violence, called on the Ethiopian government to hold those responsible for human rights violations to account, and demanded the removal of Eritrean troops in the Tigray region. Moreover, as of 26 May 2021, Secretary of State Blinken announced visa restrictions along with restrictions on economic and security assistance to Ethiopia and Eritrea until such time as both countries change course.²² While these actions are both laudable and understandable, they lack real effectiveness in an environment of decreased engagement. Continued

retreat from its African commitments leaves America less able to effect positive change when conflicts such as this arise.

The opportunity exists, however, to adjust US strategy, especially as the new administration begins. There are a multitude of diplomatic actions which have the potential to help the Tigray crisis, while at the same time demonstrating the United States' willingness to remain partnered with Ethiopia for the benefit of both countries. The Biden administration can and should appoint a special envoy to the Horn of Africa with the explicit objective of revitalizing relations. Additionally, the United States should work with multi-national organizations like the African Union and the UN Security Council to prioritize the cessation of hostilities and stabilization of the Tigray province. Finally, the United States should ensure that an impartial investigation into the conflict is completed and work with Ethiopia and other partners in Africa so that any human rights violations are addressed and efforts toward reconciliation can begin. As Cameron Hudson, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, put it in his article *The Case for U.S. Reengagement in Ethiopia*, "Ethiopia is too important a strategic partner for the U.S. to alienate. But allowing its transgressions to go unchecked is too big a price to pay."²³ The only realistic way for the United States to strike that balance is to remain engaged in Ethiopia and the greater Horn of Africa.

To maintain security and stability in the strategically vital region of the Horn of Africa, the United States must increase its engagement with the nations therein. The same is true for any goals of providing a counterbalance to Chinese influence. While it can be tempting to set the main objective of any Africa strategy as a direct counter to China, it should instead be dedicated to building and strengthening mutually advantageous alliances and partnerships within the continent. Again, from the *National Defense Strategy Summary*: "By working together with allies and partners we amass the greatest possible strength for the long-term advancement of our interests, maintaining favorable balances of power that deter aggression and support the stability that generates economic growth." By focusing on increasing its diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with the countries of the Horn of Africa, and ensuring those relationships remain mutually beneficial, the United States can continue to be both a bulwark of stability and, by extension, counter Chinese influence in the Horn of Africa. 🌟

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Notes

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