



International Journal of Peace, Governance and Social Change

Beyond State Fragility: Commodified Sovereignty, Hybrid Order and the Geopolitics of the Horn of Africa

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Article History:

Published on: 21/07/2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21457307>

How to cite: Abdiweli, M. H., Akoth, S. O., & Nyanchoga, S. A. (2026). Beyond State Fragility: Commodified Sovereignty, Hybrid Order and the Geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. *International Journal of Peace, Governance and Social Change*, 3(2), 1–22.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21457307>

Abstract:

Purpose of the Study: This study critiques the dominant state fragility paradigm used to explain insecurity in the Horn of Africa and proposes an alternative analytical framework. It examines how hybrid political orders, commodified sovereignty, regional security dynamics, and African agency provide a more comprehensive explanation of contemporary geopolitical developments between 2024 and 2026.

Methodology: The study employs an interpretive qualitative methodology based on structured theoretical synthesis and documentary analysis. It draws upon peer-reviewed literature, official government statements, United Nations records,

policy reports, and reputable international media to analyse major regional developments through regional security complex theory, negotiated statehood, hybrid political orders, and political marketplace perspectives.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that the state fragility paradigm inadequately explains the evolving security landscape of the Horn of Africa because it overemphasises institutional weakness while overlooking regional geopolitical interactions. Evidence shows that sovereignty has become a strategic commodity exchanged through recognition, port access, military basing, and diplomatic alliances. The Horn increasingly functions as a regionalised security complex closely integrated with Gulf politics, where local political orders are negotiated, hybrid, and shaped by both domestic and external actors. Furthermore, African governments and sub-state entities exercise significant agency, strategically influencing regional alignments rather than merely responding to external interventions.

Conclusion: The study concludes that replacing the state fragility paradigm with a regionalised hybrid security framework provides a more accurate explanation of the Horn of Africa's evolving security landscape. Sustainable peace requires recognising African agency, negotiated political order, and regionally driven governance approaches instead of externally imposed state-building models.

Keywords: *Horn of Africa; state fragility; regional security complex; Red Sea; sovereignty; Somaliland; hybrid political order; political marketplace; Gulf states; Sudan; Ethiopia; Somalia; African agency*

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1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa has long been analysed through the lens of state fragility, which portrays insecurity as the consequence of weak institutions, limited state capacity, and ineffective governance. However, recent geopolitical developments challenge the explanatory power of this framework. The recognition of Somaliland by Israel in December 2025, Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access, the continuing war in Sudan, growing competition over the Red Sea, and Somalia's persistent governance challenges reveal a regional security environment shaped less by institutional weakness than by strategic rivalry, contested sovereignty, and external intervention. These developments demonstrate that the Horn is increasingly embedded within the wider security dynamics of the Gulf and Middle East, where regional and global powers actively influence political outcomes.

This article argues that the state fragility paradigm has become analytically inadequate for understanding contemporary security dynamics in the Horn of Africa. Rather than viewing the region as a collection of weak states requiring external stabilisation, it proposes that insecurity emerges from interactions between hybrid political orders, negotiated authority, commodified sovereignty, and the competing interests of regional and international actors. Political authority is frequently exercised through formal and informal institutions, while sovereignty has become a strategic resource exchanged through diplomacy, military cooperation, and economic partnerships. Consequently, the region functions as an interconnected security complex rather than a series of isolated national crises.

The article develops an alternative analytical framework grounded in regional security complex theory, hybrid political orders, negotiated statehood, the political marketplace, and African agency. By applying this framework to major developments between 2024 and 2026, it demonstrates that the Horn's evolving geopolitical landscape is better understood through regional interdependence and strategic interaction than through conventional assumptions of state failure and institutional deficiency.

The State-Fragility Paradigm and Its Limits

The state fragility concept became popular after the Cold War and was widely used to describe countries with weak governments, especially after the 11 September 2001 attacks, when fragile states were seen as sources of terrorism and insecurity (Ficek, 2022). Somalia became the main example of this approach. However, the framework has important limitations because it focuses mainly on weak state institutions while overlooking how authority actually works in the Horn of Africa. For example, Somaliland has maintained peace and effective governance despite lacking international recognition, while the recognised government of Somalia has struggled to control much of its territory (Ferragamo & Klobucista, 2025). This shows that insecurity in the Horn is influenced not only by state weakness but also by local governance, history and regional political dynamics.

Four failures of the fragility lens

The state fragility framework has four major weaknesses when applied to the Horn of Africa. First, it assumes that the Western state model is the ideal form of governance and labels alternative systems as failures, ignoring hybrid arrangements that combine formal institutions with traditional authorities, such as Somaliland's governance model (Schoeman, 2021). Second, it focuses on individual states rather than regional connections, overlooking how conflicts are shaped by cross-border ethnic ties, migration, trade, and foreign involvement. Third, it presents insecurity as a technical problem of weak institutions while ignoring how political elites and external actors may benefit from instability (Edmunds & Juncos, 2020). Fourth, it underestimates African actors' agency by portraying them as dependent on external solutions and misidentifies areas as "ungoverned spaces" despite the presence of local governance systems. It also fails to fully consider the historical impacts of colonialism, Cold War politics, and external interventions on contemporary conflicts in the region.

Why the critique matters now

These criticisms have existed in academic debates since the mid-2000s, but they have become more urgent due to the Horn of Africa's growing strategic importance. The region is no longer viewed only as a peripheral area of humanitarian concern and counterterrorism management; it has become a major geopolitical corridor influenced by actors such as the Gulf states, Türkiye, Israel, Egypt, the United States, China, and Russia (Mariam & O'Hara, 2026). As a result, analysing the Horn through a fragility lens that overlooks regional dynamics, hybrid governance, political economies of conflict, and African agency creates significant strategic limitations. Furthermore, the fragility paradigm is not merely a neutral analytical tool; it supports an institutional system of rankings, assessments, funding mechanisms, and stabilisation programmes that often reproduce the very categories it seeks to address (Saeed, 2020). Moving beyond this framework therefore requires not only a new analytical approach but also a broader understanding of the region that recognises its complexity, local agency, and changing geopolitical significance.

Rethinking the Horn: An Alternative Framework

If the state is the wrong unit and absent the wrong metric, what should replace them? This section builds an alternative framework from four propositions, each drawn from an established body of theory but rarely combined, and integrates them into a single reading of the Horn as a *regionalised hybrid security complex*.

The Horn as a regional security complex, now fused with the Gulf

Regional Security Complex Theory argues that the security of neighbouring countries is closely connected, meaning that events in one country can quickly affect others (Sridharan, 2020). This idea is highly relevant to the Horn of Africa, where conflicts in Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, and Somaliland are linked through shared borders, migration, trade, and political alliances. In recent years, the Horn has become increasingly connected to the Gulf and the wider Middle East through investments, military bases, port agreements, and diplomatic partnerships. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Egypt, Qatar, and Israel now play an

important role in shaping the region's security and political developments ((Priya & Quamar, 2025). As a result, the Red Sea has become a strategic bridge rather than a boundary between the two regions. Understanding the Horn of Africa therefore requires looking beyond individual states and recognising that its security is influenced by both regional and external actors operating within a single interconnected geopolitical system.

Hybrid political orders and negotiated statehood

The concept of hybrid political orders argues that governance in the Horn of Africa is not carried out by the state alone. Instead, formal government institutions work alongside traditional leaders, clan elders, religious authorities, and local community structures to maintain peace, resolve conflicts, and provide public services (Boas & Strazzari, 2020). This means that political authority is shared rather than controlled by a single government. The idea of negotiated statehood also explains that state authority is not fixed but is constantly shaped through negotiations between governments and non-state actors over power, resources, and legitimacy. In Somalia and Somaliland, for example, clan elders and customary institutions play an important role in governance alongside formal state institutions (Richards, 2020). Rather than seeing these arrangements as signs of state weakness, this perspective views them as practical and legitimate forms of political order that reflect the region's unique historical, cultural, and social context.

The political marketplace and the commodification of sovereignty

The political marketplace explains that politics in the Horn of Africa is often driven by the exchange of power, money, and political support rather than by formal institutions alone (Jaspars et al., 2023). Political leaders, armed groups, and other influential actors compete for resources that help them gain and maintain loyalty. External support, including foreign aid, military assistance, investment, and port revenues, plays an important role in this process. As a result, sovereignty itself has become a valuable political and economic resource. Governments and regional authorities negotiate over access to ports, military bases, trade routes, and diplomatic recognition in exchange for economic or political benefits. Examples include Ethiopia's efforts to secure sea access, Somaliland's search for international recognition, and Gulf countries' investments in ports across the Horn. This reflects a broader strategy known as extraversion, where African leaders use relationships with external powers to strengthen their domestic position (Khan & Idle, 2024). Rather than being passive recipients of foreign influence, governments in the Horn actively negotiate with regional and international partners to advance their own interests. This perspective shows that conflict and cooperation in the region are closely linked to political and economic competition over strategic resources and sovereignty, rather than simply resulting from weak state institutions (Bayramov, 2020).

African agency

The final part of this framework is the recognition of African agency. Unlike the state fragility approach, which often portrays African countries as passive recipients of foreign intervention, this perspective argues that governments and local actors in the Horn of Africa actively shape regional and international politics (Lacher et al., 2025). Countries in the region make strategic decisions to protect their interests, build alliances, and negotiate with external powers. For example, Somalia has worked with Arab and Islamic countries to strengthen its diplomatic position, Somaliland has

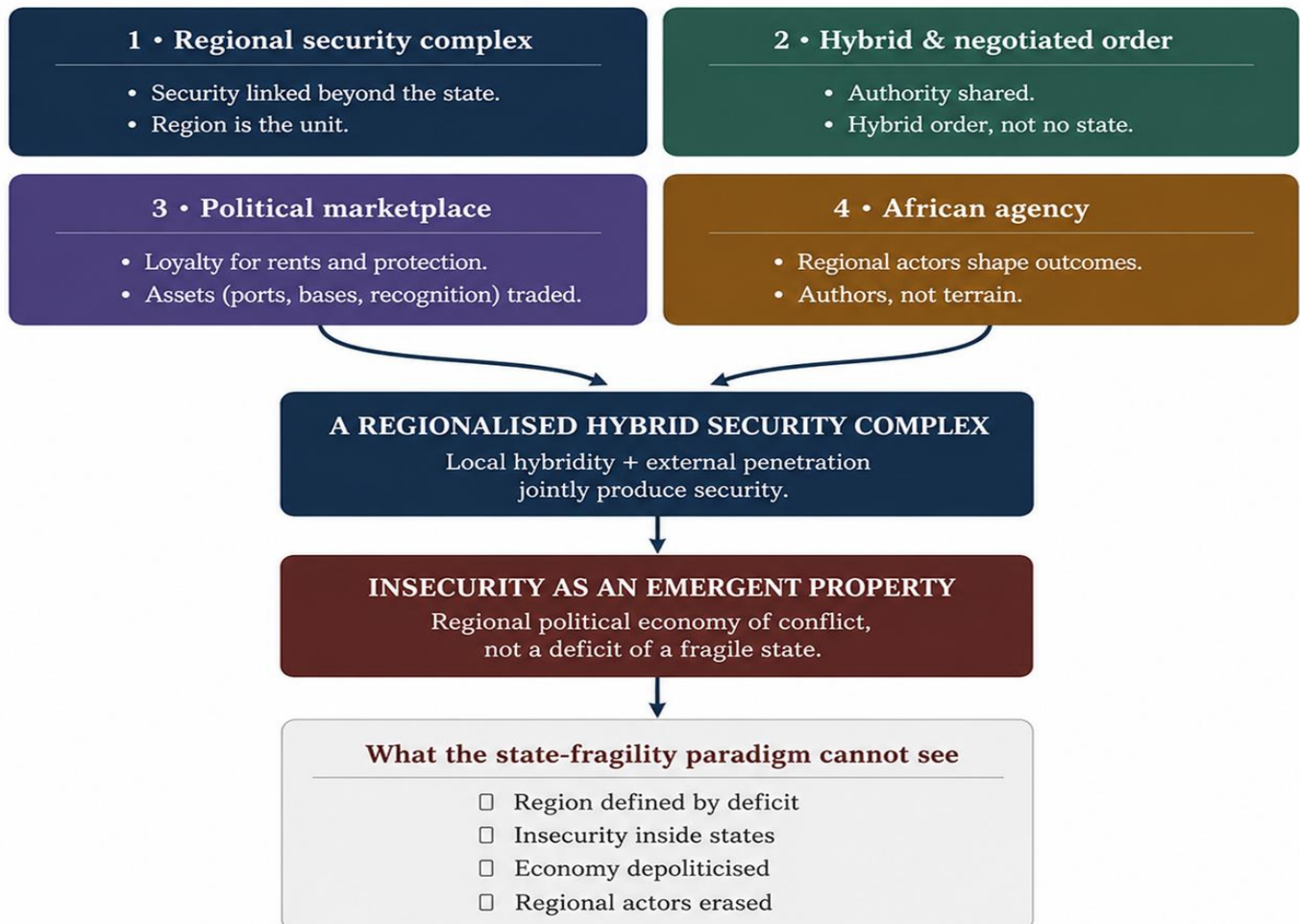
continued its campaign for international recognition, Ethiopia has actively pursued access to the sea, and Eritrea has used its strategic location along the Red Sea to increase its regional influence (Negash, 2023). These examples show that political developments in the Horn are not simply imposed by foreign actors but are also influenced by the choices and strategies of local governments and communities. Together with regional security dynamics, hybrid political orders, and the political marketplace, African agency provides a more complete understanding of how peace, conflict, and cooperation develop in the Horn of Africa. Rather than viewing the region as a collection of fragile states, this framework sees it as an interconnected political system where both local and international actors shape outcomes.

An integrated reading

Combined, these four propositions yield a reading of the Horn as a *regionalised hybrid security complex*: a fused Horn–Gulf arena (proposition one) composed of hybrid, negotiated political orders (proposition two), integrated by a political marketplace in which sovereignty itself is commodified (proposition three), and animated by agentive actors who co-produce regional outcomes (proposition four). In this reading, insecurity is not a deficit internal to fragile states but an *emergent property of the system*: it arises from the interaction of local hybridity and external penetration, each reinforcing the other. External powers exploit and deepen local hybridity and marketplace dynamics to secure access and advantage; local actors exploit external rivalry to secure resources and leverage; and the result is a self-sustaining regional political economy of conflict that no amount of state-level capacity-building can resolve, because the problem was never located at the state level to begin with. The sections that follow trace this dynamic across five arenas. The framework is represented schematically in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Beyond state fragility: The Horn as a regionalized hybrid security complex.*

Beyond State Fragility: The Horn as a Regionalised Hybrid Security Complex



Source: Author's conceptualisation.

The diagram argues that insecurity in the Horn of Africa is best understood as a regionalised hybrid security complex rather than as the product of individual fragile states. It integrates four complementary perspectives: the regional security complex, which views security as shaped by regional interdependence; hybrid and negotiated order, where state and non-state actors jointly exercise authority; the political marketplace, in which political loyalty and strategic assets are exchanged through transactional relationships; and African agency, which recognises that regional actors actively shape political and security outcomes rather than merely responding to external powers. Together, these dynamics produce a regional system in which local hybrid governance and external intervention are mutually reinforcing, making insecurity an emergent property of the wider regional political economy rather than a failure of any single state. Consequently, the figure challenges the conventional state-fragility paradigm by showing that it overlooks regional dynamics, depoliticises conflict, and underestimates the agency of African actors.

2. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach to examine the changing security dynamics in the Horn of Africa. Rather than testing specific hypotheses, the study aims to explain recent regional developments using the alternative analytical framework developed in this article. The analysis is based on a review and synthesis of secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, United Nations reports, official government statements, policy papers, and reports from established international news organisations and research institutions. The study focuses on five major security issues between 2024 and 2026, including Somaliland's recognition, Red Sea geopolitics, Ethiopia's maritime ambitions, the conflict in Sudan, and state-building efforts in Somalia. These cases were selected because they represent the most significant security developments affecting the Horn of Africa during the study period.

The theoretical framework is informed by Regional Security Complex Theory, Hybrid Political Orders, Negotiated Statehood, the Political Marketplace, and African Agency. These theories provide the basis for interpreting how regional and international actors interact to shape security outcomes. Because many of the events examined are recent, some evidence comes from official statements, United Nations documents, and reputable news organisations where peer-reviewed research is not yet available. To improve reliability, information is cross-checked using multiple sources, and contested claims are presented cautiously without drawing conclusions that cannot be supported by evidence. The purpose of the methodology is not to establish direct causal relationships but to demonstrate that the proposed framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of contemporary security dynamics in the Horn of Africa than the traditional state fragility paradigm.

Table 2. *Key flashpoints in the Horn of Africa, 2024–2026.*

Date	Event	Significance
1 Jan 2024	Ethiopia–Somaliland memorandum of understanding (coastline for possible recognition)	Sovereignty commodified; triggered a regional crisis
Mar 2024	Puntland withdraws recognition of the federal government	Federal disaggregation begins, two years before the recognition crisis
Aug 2024	Egypt–Somalia defence pact	Began Egyptian encirclement of Ethiopia
Nov 2024	Jubaland suspends cooperation with Mogadishu; Somaliland elects Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi	Second member state exits; peaceful opposition turnover in Hargeisa
12 Dec 2024	Ankara Declaration (Türkiye-brokered)	De-escalated Ethiopia–Somalia; implicitly shelved the memorandum
Jan 2025	AUSSOM launched; Egyptian troops join	New AU mission amid United States retrenchment
Feb–May 2025	Al-Shabaab Shabelle offensive	Reversed most of the government's 2022–2023 territorial gains

Date	Event	Significance
Mar–May 2025	SAF retakes the presidential palace, then declares Khartoum cleared	Turning point in Sudan’s war
26 Oct 2025	RSF seizes El Fasher after an 18-month siege; mass atrocities	Functional partition of Sudan; famine; later found genocidal by the UN Fact-Finding Mission
Dec 2025	Jubaland abandons the vocabulary of federalism	Federation reduced to a contested core
26 Dec 2025	Israel recognises Somaliland	First UN member state to do so since the five-day independence of 1960; Abraham Accords framing
11 Jan 2026	Sudanese government returns to Khartoum on the war’s 1,000th day	Symbolic consolidation amid continuing stalemate
12 Jan 2026	Somalia annuls all agreements with the United Arab Emirates	Saudi–Emirati schism transmitted directly into Somali politics
Feb 2026	UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission finds genocide at El Fasher	Juridical characterisation of the RSF campaign
1 Jun 2026	Ethiopian general election; Prosperity Party supermajority	Consolidation on a partial franchise; maritime project retained
8 Jun 2026	Houthis renew targeting of Israeli-linked shipping	Red Sea equilibrium of early 2026 breaks
Jul 2026	United States to block UN logistical support to AUSSOM beyond 31 Dec 2026	Somali stabilisation financially imperiled

Source: Author’s compilation from Al Jazeera (2025, 2026), Amnesty International (2026), CFR (2026a, 2026b), ICG (2026), Karr and DeAngelo (2026), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye (2024), Nogueira Pinto (2026), Reuters (2026a, 2026b, 2026c), Times of Israel (2025), United Nations (2025) and United Nations Human Rights Council (2026).

Read as a sequence, the table makes an argument the individual entries do not. The events fall into no single national column: a memorandum signed in Addis Ababa produces a crisis in Mogadishu, a recognition announced in Jerusalem realigns the Somali federation, a quarrel between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi surfaces weeks later as a rupture in Somalia’s external relations, and a war in Sudan is financed from the Gulf. The chronology is also dense: what it records is not a region in slow decline but one in which the terms of sovereignty were renegotiated repeatedly within thirty months. Neither feature is legible to an analytical frame that takes the individual state as its unit and institutional weakness as its explanation.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Contested Sovereignty: Somaliland and the Politics of Recognition

Sovereignty as currency: The Ethiopia–Somaliland memorandum

The Ethiopia–Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on 1 January 2024 demonstrates how sovereignty has become a strategic resource in the Horn of Africa. Under the agreement, Somaliland offered Ethiopia long-term access to part of its coastline in exchange for economic cooperation and Ethiopia's consideration of recognising Somaliland as an independent state (Terrefe, 2025). This agreement illustrates the concept of the commodification of sovereignty, where political recognition, territorial access, and strategic assets are negotiated to achieve national interests rather than being viewed as fixed legal principles. The agreement also triggered strong regional reactions. Somalia rejected the MoU as a violation of its territorial integrity and strengthened diplomatic and security partnerships with Egypt and Türkiye, while tensions between Ethiopia and its neighbours increased (Hailu et al., 2025). These developments show that the issue was not simply about the internal governance of either Ethiopia or Somaliland but about shifting regional alliances, strategic competition, and geopolitical interests. The case therefore supports the argument that security in the Horn of Africa is shaped by interconnected regional dynamics rather than by state fragility alone.

The Ankara Declaration and the limits of mediation

The crisis was contained, though not resolved, by Turkish mediation. On 12 December 2024 Ethiopia and Somalia signed the Ankara Declaration, brokered by President Erdoğan, in which both reaffirmed Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity while acknowledging the potential benefits of commercial sea access for Ethiopia, and agreed to technical talks (Aydın & Kavak, 2026). The declaration implicitly shelved the Somaliland memorandum and de-escalated the confrontation, and it is worth pausing on who accomplished this: not a Western state-building mission or a UN mediation, but a rising middle power with its own military base in Mogadishu, its own energy and defence interests in Somalia, and its own rivalry with the Gulf and Israel. Regional order in the Horn is increasingly made by regional and middle powers pursuing their own designs, a fact the fragility paradigm, fixated on the internal deficits of the states being ordered, is poorly equipped to register.

Israel's recognition and sovereignty as a geopolitical instrument

Israel's recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 illustrates how sovereignty can be used as a geopolitical tool rather than simply a legal or diplomatic process. Israel became the first United Nations member state to recognise Somaliland's independence since its declaration in 1991, presenting the decision as part of the expansion of the Abraham Accords (Badawi, 2026). The recognition was driven largely by strategic interests, including strengthening Israel's position in the Red Sea and expanding its diplomatic influence in the region. For Somaliland, the recognition represented an important step toward achieving the international legitimacy it had pursued for more than three decades. The decision also triggered strong regional and international reactions. Somalia rejected the recognition, while the African Union, the Arab League, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation reaffirmed their support for Somalia's territorial integrity (United Nations, 2025). The recognition further reshaped regional alliances, contributing to diplomatic tensions between Somalia and the United Arab Emirates and strengthening cooperation between Somalia,

Egypt, and Türkiye. These developments demonstrate that sovereignty and international recognition are closely linked to regional and global strategic interests rather than to the strength of domestic institutions alone. The case therefore supports this article's argument that the security and political dynamics of the Horn of Africa are better explained through regional geopolitics, contested sovereignty, and external strategic competition than through the traditional state fragility paradigm.

Fragmentation and the wider crisis of the Somali federation

The political tensions surrounding Somaliland's recognition occurred during a period of increasing fragmentation within Somalia itself. In recent years, disagreements between the Federal Government and several federal member states have weakened national unity. Puntland announced in 2024 that it would govern independently until a new national constitution was agreed upon, while Jubaland suspended cooperation with the federal government following political disputes over leadership (Abdi et al., 2026). At the same time, the SSC-Khaatumo areas around Las Anod challenged Somaliland's authority and declared their support for remaining within the Federal Republic of Somalia. These developments show that political authority in Somalia is continuously negotiated among the federal government, regional administrations, clan leaders, and local communities. Rather than representing simple state failure, these events reflect a complex system of negotiated statehood, where power is shared and constantly renegotiated at different levels. The case demonstrates that Somalia's political challenges cannot be fully understood through the state fragility paradigm alone but are better explained by hybrid political orders, contested sovereignty, and the interaction between domestic and regional political dynamics.

Recognition, international law and the precedent problem

The case of Somaliland also raises important questions about international law and the recognition of states. According to the Montevideo Convention (1933), a state should have a permanent population, a defined territory, an effective government, and the ability to establish relations with other countries. Somaliland meets these requirements by maintaining functioning institutions, territorial control, and a stable government. However, international recognition depends not only on these legal criteria but also on political decisions made by other states. This explains why Somaliland has remained largely unrecognised despite its effective governance. Many African countries continue to support Somalia's territorial integrity because they fear that recognising Somaliland could encourage other separatist movements across the continent (Bayeh, 2024). The African Union has therefore maintained its long-standing commitment to preserving colonial borders. Israel's recognition of Somaliland in 2025 demonstrated that recognition is often influenced by geopolitical interests rather than legal principles alone. This case highlights that sovereignty in the Horn of Africa is shaped by international politics, regional security, and strategic interests, reinforcing this article's argument that the region's political dynamics cannot be fully understood through the traditional state fragility framework.

3.2. The Red Sea Arena: Ports, Bases and the Horn–Gulf Confluence

The militarisation of a chokepoint

The Red Sea has become one of the world's most important and heavily militarised strategic corridors. After the outbreak of the Gaza conflict in October 2023, the Houthi movement in Yemen launched attacks on commercial ships and Israeli-linked vessels passing through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. These attacks disrupted global trade, increased shipping costs, and prompted military responses from the United States, the United Kingdom, and their allies (CFR, 2026a). As a result, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait became a key area of international security competition, with naval forces deployed to protect shipping routes. The continuing tensions between Iran, Israel, and the United States have further increased instability in the region, showing that security in the Red Sea is now strongly influenced by wider Middle Eastern conflicts rather than by events within the Horn of Africa alone (Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023). Unlike earlier security concerns such as Somali piracy, which were largely linked to weak coastal governance, today's maritime insecurity is driven by regional geopolitical rivalries. This demonstrates that the Red Sea has become part of a wider interconnected security system linking the Horn of Africa, the Gulf, and the Middle East, supporting the argument that regional security dynamics provide a better explanation than the traditional state fragility framework.

The real estate of geopolitics

The strategic importance of the Red Sea has led to growing competition among regional and global powers for ports, military bases, and coastal infrastructure in the Horn of Africa. Countries such as Djibouti, Somalia, Somaliland, Eritrea, and Puntland have become key locations for foreign military and commercial investments (Ding, 2024). Djibouti hosts military bases from the United States, China, France, Japan, and Italy because of its location near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. The United Arab Emirates has invested in ports at Berbera and Bosaso and previously operated a military base in Eritrea, while Türkiye has expanded its military and economic partnership with Somalia through its large military base in Mogadishu and cooperation on maritime security. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel have also increased their strategic engagement in the region. These developments show that ports and coastal infrastructure are not only economic assets but also important geopolitical tools used to project power and influence. As a result, the Horn of Africa has become a central arena where international and regional powers compete for strategic advantage, reinforcing the article's argument that regional geopolitics, rather than state fragility alone, shapes the region's security environment.

Table 1. *External and regional powers in the Horn of Africa, 2024–2026.*

Actor	Principal footprint (bases / ports)	Main partners	Core interest
United Arab Emirates	Berbera (Somaliland), Bosaso (Puntland), Assab (Eritrea), Socotra	Ethiopia, Somaliland, RSF (Sudan)	Maritime-logistics network; Red Sea access; revisionist advantage
Saudi Arabia	Red Sea coast; financing networks	Egypt, Türkiye, SAF (Sudan)	Status-quo order; central-state primacy; countering the UAE

Actor	Principal footprint (bases / ports)	Main partners	Core interest
Türkiye	TURKSOM base, Mogadishu	Somalia	Defence, energy and maritime partnership; rivalry with Israel and the Gulf
Egypt	Troop commitment to Somalia; port cooperation (Eritrea, Djibouti)	Somalia, Eritrea, SAF (Sudan)	Nile / GERD security; containing Ethiopia; littoral-only Red Sea
Israel	Diplomatic ties with Somaliland (from Dec 2025)	Somaliland, UAE	Securing its Red Sea flank; expanding an African footprint
United States	Camp Lemonnier (Djibouti); UNSOS support (withdrawing)	FGS Somalia; Gulf states	Counterterrorism; freedom of navigation; managing China
China	First overseas base (Djibouti)	Djibouti; broad	Trade routes; Belt and Road; strategic presence
Ethiopia	Berbera equity stake; port diplomacy	UAE (contested with neighbours)	Sovereign sea access; regional primacy

Source: Author's compilation from Chome (2026), CFR (2026a, 2026c), Karr and DeAngelo (2026), Nogueira Pinto (2026), Solomon (2026) and The National (2026). Alignments are fluid and partly contested; several actors support opposing parties in different theatres, and the table records a configuration as at July 2026 rather than a settled structure.

Two coalitions and a Gulf schism

The growing involvement of external powers has created two broad political and security alignments in the Horn of Africa. One group includes the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and more recently Israel, which share interests in expanding port access, supporting Ethiopia's maritime ambitions, and strengthening strategic partnerships with regional actors such as Somaliland. The other group includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Türkiye, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and the Sudanese Armed Forces, which generally support existing international borders and the authority of recognised central governments (Abdi et al., 2026). Although these alliances are not permanent, they have significantly influenced regional security and diplomacy. Rivalries between Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have also affected conflicts in Sudan, Yemen, and Somalia, demonstrating how disputes in the Gulf quickly spread to the Horn of Africa. These developments show that the region's security is increasingly shaped by external geopolitical competition rather than by domestic institutional weakness alone. This supports the article's argument that the Horn of Africa has become part of a broader regional security complex closely connected to the Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Figure 1. *Two coalitions across a fused Horn–Gulf arena.*

Two Coalitions Across a Fused Horn-Gulf Arena



Alignments are loose, shifting and internally contradictory; the diagram simplifies a fluid field.

Source: Author’s conceptualisation, drawing on Karr and DeAngelo (2026) and Chome (2026).

Great-power competition and the return of the base

The Horn of Africa has also become an important arena for competition among major world powers. Djibouti, because of its strategic location near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, hosts military bases from the United States, China, France, Japan, and Italy, making it one of the world's most heavily militarised locations (Alexandre, 2021). The United States operates Camp Lemonnier, its only permanent military base in Africa, while China established its first overseas military base there in 2017. Russia has also sought access to the Red Sea by negotiating for a naval facility at Port Sudan, although these plans have been affected by the ongoing conflict in Sudan (Dent, 2026). These developments show that the Horn of Africa is no longer only a region affected by local conflicts but has become a key area of global strategic competition. Countries in the region use their geographic position, ports, and coastlines to attract investment, military partnerships, and political support from major powers. This demonstrates that sovereignty has become an important strategic asset, while the security of the Horn is increasingly shaped by global geopolitical interests rather than by domestic state fragility alone.

3.3. Ethiopia's Maritime Question and the Regional Order

The routes to the sea and the security dilemma they create

Ethiopia's search for access to the sea has become both a regional security challenge and a domestic political issue. Since becoming landlocked, Ethiopia has explored different routes through Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea to reduce its dependence on Djibouti for trade (Bayeh, 2024). However, neighbouring countries often view Ethiopia's maritime ambitions as a threat to their sovereignty, creating a regional security dilemma, particularly with Eritrea, where relations have deteriorated despite the 2018 peace agreement. At the same time, Ethiopia continues to face internal political tensions, including conflicts in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia, making access to the sea an important national goal that promotes unity, economic development, and political legitimacy (Bayramov, 2020). Consequently, Ethiopia's maritime strategy is shaped by both domestic and regional pressures, demonstrating that the country's internal politics and external security interests are closely connected. This supports the article's argument that the Horn of Africa's security challenges are better understood through regional interdependence and geopolitical competition than through the state fragility paradigm alone.

Egypt, the Nile and the anti-access ring

Ethiopia's efforts to gain access to the sea are closely connected to its long-running dispute with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Egypt views both the dam and Ethiopia's growing regional influence as threats to its national security and has strengthened partnerships with Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan to limit Ethiopia's strategic expansion (Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023). Egypt has also opposed any Ethiopian military presence on the Red Sea while supporting the position that only coastal states should influence Red Sea governance. At the same time, Ethiopia has continued to defend both the GERD and its maritime ambitions as essential for its economic development and national interests. These developments show that Ethiopia's maritime challenge is not simply the result of weak state institutions but is rooted in regional geography, competing national interests, and geopolitical rivalry. The case demonstrates that security in the Horn of Africa is shaped by interconnected regional relationships, supporting the argument that a regional security framework provides a better explanation than the traditional state fragility paradigm.

Landlockedness as a structural condition

Ethiopia's maritime challenge is primarily a result of its geography rather than weak state institutions. As the world's most populous landlocked country, Ethiopia depends on neighbouring states, especially Djibouti, for most of its international trade, making access to the sea a vital national priority (Boas & Strazzari, 2020). This geographical reality encourages Ethiopia to seek alternative routes through Somaliland, Somalia, and Eritrea, while neighbouring countries view these efforts as both economic opportunities and potential security threats (Cannon & Donelli, 2019). Consequently, Ethiopia's search for maritime access creates a regional security dilemma that affects the entire Horn of Africa. The issue cannot be solved by strengthening one state's institutions alone because it is rooted in geography, regional politics, and competing national interests. This demonstrates that many of the Horn's major security challenges arise from regional

interdependence rather than from state fragility, supporting the need for a broader regional security approach.

3.4. Sudan: The Externalised War and the Political Marketplace

A war made and sustained from outside

The conflict in Sudan demonstrates that insecurity in the Horn of Africa is driven not only by internal political struggles but also by strong external involvement. Both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have received support from regional powers, turning the conflict into a wider geopolitical competition. The United Arab Emirates has been widely linked to support for the RSF, while Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar have generally supported the SAF in different ways (Edmunds & Juncos, 2020). As rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has grown, the Sudan conflict has increasingly reflected their competing regional interests (Farah, 2024). This situation illustrates the political marketplace, where armed groups and political leaders compete for power using financial resources, foreign support, and access to strategic assets rather than relying solely on state institutions (Ferragamo & Klobucista, 2025). The continuation of the war therefore reflects both domestic political competition and external geopolitical interests. This supports the article's argument that the conflict in Sudan cannot be understood simply as the failure of a fragile state but as part of a broader regional political and security system shaped by external actors and strategic competition.

The war economy and the marketplace of destruction

The Sudan conflict has continued because it has developed into a war economy in which both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) finance their operations through control of gold mines, border crossings, natural resources, and external support (de Waal, 2015). The RSF, in particular, has benefited from control of gold-producing areas and regional smuggling networks, while both sides have received financial and military assistance from external actors, making the conflict profitable for both domestic and foreign interests (Ficek, 2022). The war has also spread beyond Sudan by increasing refugee movements, disrupting trade, and affecting neighbouring countries such as Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. These regional effects demonstrate that the Sudan conflict cannot be understood as an isolated case of state fragility but as part of a wider regional political and economic system shaped by external interests, cross-border networks, and geopolitical competition.

3.5. Somalia and the Limits of Stabilisation

Somalia has been the main example of a "failed state" in the fragility literature and has received almost two decades of international stabilisation support through African Union peace missions backed by the United Nations and major donors. However, despite billions of dollars in assistance, the results have been limited. Al-Shabaab has continued to regain territory, while the long-term funding of the latest African Union mission remains uncertain as international support declines

(Mariam & O'Hara, 2026). This suggests that Somalia's challenges cannot be solved simply by building stronger state institutions through external intervention.

A better explanation is that Somalia is governed through a hybrid political system where the central government, regional administrations, clan elders and other local authorities all share influence. International stabilisation efforts often focused on strengthening the central state while overlooking these local systems of governance and the wider regional rivalries shaping Somalia's security. At the same time, disputes between the federal government, Puntland, Jubaland and Somaliland show that authority in Somalia is constantly negotiated rather than fixed (Hailu et al., 2025). The Somali experience therefore demonstrates that lasting peace requires working with existing local political structures instead of relying only on externally driven state-building.

3.6. Regional Institutions and the Governance Deficit

The Horn of Africa needs strong regional cooperation, but its institutions have struggled to respond to today's security challenges. IGAD, which was created to promote peace and cooperation, is often unable to act because its member states are involved in disputes with one another. The African Union continues to defend the principle of respecting existing borders and has appointed special envoys for the Horn and the Red Sea, but it has had limited success in reducing external interference or managing conflicts such as the war in Sudan. As a result, countries outside Africa, including Türkiye and the Gulf states, have taken a larger role in regional diplomacy and conflict resolution.

This governance problem has become more serious because the Horn and the Gulf are now closely connected politically, economically and militarily. However, regional organisations were designed when these two regions were treated separately, making them less effective in dealing with today's interconnected challenges. At the same time, increasing competition among global powers such as the United States, China and BRICS members has created more opportunities for Horn countries to build new partnerships, but it has also increased rivalry and competition (Hailu et al., 2025). This shows that the region's main challenge is not only weak states, but also the lack of strong regional institutions that can manage shared security problems effectively.

3.7. The Limits of the Framework: Scope Conditions and Hard Cases

Three hard cases

Some important events in the Horn of Africa cannot be explained only by regional politics. The Tigray War (2020–2022), for example, was mainly driven by internal Ethiopian politics, including disagreements between the federal government and the Tigray regional leadership over power, elections and the country's federal system (Jaspars et al., 2023). Although Eritrea joined the war and foreign support influenced the conflict, its main causes were domestic. Similarly, the strength of al-Shabaab is linked not only to regional networks but also to problems inside Somalia, such as weak government institutions, clan disputes and the group's ability to provide security and local justice where the state has failed.

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea also shows the importance of domestic leadership. Their peace agreement in 2018 was made possible by political reforms and decisions taken by national leaders, while the later breakdown in relations resulted from changing political interests within both countries (Khan & Idle, 2024). These examples show that regional dynamics are important, but they do not explain everything. Internal politics, leadership decisions and local social conditions also play a major role in shaping conflict and security in the Horn of Africa.

Scope conditions

These cases do not refute the framework, but they bound it, and the boundary is instructive. The regionalised hybrid security complex is at its most powerful for phenomena that live at the interface of the domestic and the external (the trading of recognition, the leasing of coastline and bases, the externalisation of civil wars, the cross-border constitution of insurgency and alignment), which is precisely where the fragility paradigm, with its methodological nationalism, is at its weakest. It is at its least powerful, conversely, for conflicts whose drivers are predominantly internal to a single polity's institutional and social order, and for shifts driven by individual leadership, where state- and agent-level analysis retains its purchase (Lacher et al., 2025). The proper conclusion is not that one lens is right and the other wrong, but that they operate at different levels and are strongest in different domains.

Even in these hard cases, moreover, the regional dimension is rarely wholly absent: Eritrean and Emirati involvement in Tigray, the cross-border and external enablement of al-Shabaab, and the regional stakes of the Eritrean rapprochement all mark the reach of the fused arena into ostensibly domestic events. The framework thus retains partial purchase throughout, while claiming exclusive purchase nowhere. That is the appropriate ambition for an argument offered as a corrective to a paradigm that erred by claiming too much for a single level of analysis. The remedy for methodological nationalism is not an equal and opposite methodological regionalism, but an analysis that moves between levels and locates each phenomenon where its drivers actually reside. The argument of this article is not that the internal configuration of states never matters, but that it has been made to bear an explanatory burden it cannot carry, and that the regional level, systematically neglected by the fragility paradigm, must be restored to its proper place.

3.8. Rethinking Peace and Security: Toward a Post-Fragility Agenda

From the state to the region as the unit of action

The first reorientation is analytical before it is practical: to stop treating the Horn's crises as a series of national fragilities to be diagnosed and treated in isolation, and to begin treating them as expressions of a single regional system. This implies that the pursuit of peace must be regional in scope: that Somalia cannot be stabilised while its conflict is fed from Asmara, Cairo and the Gulf; that Sudan cannot be pacified while its war is capitalised from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh; that Ethiopia's maritime question cannot be resolved bilaterally without destabilising the whole (Priya & Quamar, 2025). The corollary is that the relevant architecture is a regional security architecture, however difficult to build, rather than a sequence of country-level stabilisation missions.

African agency and ownership

The second reorientation is to place African agency at the centre of the response, as the framework places it at the centre of the analysis. The peoples and polities of the Horn are not passive terrain awaiting external stabilisation; they are the authors of their own political orders, and durable peace will be one they negotiate, not one imposed upon them. This argues for genuinely African-led processes (an empowered IGAD, a Red Sea agenda driven by the African Union's own envoys, mediation by regional actors of the kind Türkiye demonstrated at Ankara but lodged in African institutions) rather than externally designed settlements (Richards, 2020). It also cautions against the reflexive outsourcing of security to external patrons, whose interests, as the Gulf's conduct in Sudan and the Red Sea has shown, diverge sharply from those of the region and whose guarantees evaporate when their priorities shift.

Building on hybrid legitimacy

A more effective approach to peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa is to work with the region's existing systems of authority instead of trying to replace them with a fully centralised state. Customary leaders, clan elders, religious institutions and local agreements already play a major role in resolving conflicts and maintaining order, as seen in Somaliland, where peace was built through dialogue among clan elders rather than external intervention. Although these traditional systems have weaknesses and should become more inclusive, they remain trusted by local communities and provide a strong foundation for lasting peace. Building on these local institutions, while supporting reforms where needed, is likely to produce more stable and sustainable governance than relying only on externally driven state-building efforts.

Legitimacy and its counterfeits: al-Shabaab, the RSF and the problem of malign hybridity

The concepts of hybrid governance and local legitimacy should not be confused with accepting every group that exercises power. There is an important difference between authorities that gain legitimacy through community consent and those that rely on violence and fear. In Somaliland, traditional elders helped build peace through dialogue, customary law and agreements accepted by local communities. In contrast, groups such as al-Shabaab and Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) use coercion, intimidation and violence to control territory (Saeed, 2020). Although they provide some form of administration, their authority is not based on public consent or accountability. Understanding this distinction helps explain why peacebuilding should strengthen legitimate local institutions while isolating and weakening armed groups that maintain power through violence and external support.

Confronting the political marketplace

A post-fragility approach should focus on the political and economic factors that keep conflicts alive rather than only strengthening state institutions. Many conflicts in the Horn of Africa continue because they are supported by external funding, weapons and political backing. Lasting peace therefore requires stronger enforcement of arms embargoes, greater accountability for countries that finance armed groups, and measures that reduce the financial benefits of war. At the same time, the Horn needs a stronger regional security system that reflects its close links with the Gulf (Schoeman, 2021). This includes greater cooperation between Horn and Gulf countries,

transparent agreements on ports and military bases, negotiated solutions to Ethiopia's need for sea access, and regional dialogue that manages shared security challenges instead of relying on external powers to shape the region's future.

The limits of the agenda

None of this is easy, and honesty requires acknowledging the obstacles. A regional security architecture presupposes a minimum of trust among states currently locked in rivalry; African agency is often exercised by elites whose interests diverge from their populations'; hybrid orders can entrench conservative or exclusionary hierarchies; and confronting the political marketplace runs against the interests of powerful states whose partnership the region and its external interlocutors are reluctant to jeopardise. The framework advanced here does not dissolve these difficulties (Sridharan, 2020). What it does is locate them correctly, as features of a regional political economy rather than deficits of national institutions, and thereby direct effort toward the level at which the problems actually reside. That is a precondition for progress, not a guarantee of it.

4. Conclusion

The Horn of Africa should not be viewed as a region of weak states waiting for outside powers to create order. Instead, it is a highly strategic region where local politics, regional rivalries and international interests are closely connected. Recent events, including the recognition of Somaliland, Ethiopia's search for sea access, the war in Sudan, the militarisation of the Red Sea and the challenges facing Somalia, show that these issues are linked and are better understood as part of one regional security system rather than as separate national crises. This article argues that the state fragility approach does not fully explain the realities of the Horn because it focuses too much on weak institutions within individual states while overlooking regional politics, local systems of governance and the role of external actors. A more effective approach is to see the Horn as a region with its own political structures, hybrid forms of governance and active local actors who shape events. Lasting peace will depend not only on stronger states but also on stronger regional cooperation, locally legitimate institutions and solutions that address the wider political and economic forces driving conflict across the region.

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