



## Assessing the Implications of Great Power Competition in The Horn of Africa on Kenya's National Security Interests, 2010 to 2022

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**Abstract:** *This article assesses the implication of great powers competition in the Horn of Africa (HoA) region on Kenya's national security interests in the period between 2010 to 2022. The article further proffers strategies that the country may adopt to address the challenges and opportunities arising from the rivalry in the region. The essay moreover adopted realism theory of international relations as the theoretical lens to explain great power competition in the HoA region and the impact it had on Kenya's national security interest. In regard to the methodology, this article employed a qualitative research design to collect and analyse data. The data which was collected from key informant interviews and focus discussion groups was analyzed thematically. The research determined that relationships existed between great power competition in the HoA region and Kenya's national security interests. Further, the study showed that there were multiple dimensions to comprehending Kenya's national security interests within the context of great power rivalry in the region. The article concluded that the hegemonic rivalry in the region impacted on Kenya's national security interests, and thereby recommended the need for Kenya to continually develop strategies to mitigate against the aforesaid in addition to maximizing on the resultant opportunities.*

**Key Words:** *Great Power Competition, Horn of Africa, National Security Interests*

## 1.1 Introduction

For centuries, states have intensively competed globally with a view to advancing their national strategic and security interests abroad. Scholars such as Mearsheimer (2001), view superior military and economic capability as central to states' survival and identification as a power in geopolitics. On his part, Schmidt (2023) argues that advanced technology is also a critical determinant for incisive victory in power competition.

In Africa, Vertin (2019) argues that the United States of America (USA), China, Japan, Russia, Gulf and Western European states have competed for; minerals, hydrocarbons, seaports for shipping and logistics, building infrastructures, and military and naval bases. It is against this backdrop, which think tanks such as The Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019) loosely refer to the deepened and intensified competition for the resource as a “twenty-first-century scramble for Africa”. In the HoA region, competition for military and naval bases, economic opportunities, minerals, and hydrocarbon have intensified as exemplified by Russia’s agreement with Sudan to put up a military facility in Port Sudan in 2020 (Hicks et al., 2021). Besides power politics, the naval base is aimed at protecting Russia’s commercial and security interests along the waters of the Red Sea. China on its part had established its own base within the region in Djibouti in 2017. It is suggested that this military base plays a critical role in, inter alia, resupplying her naval ships along the coasts of Yemen and Somalia (Reuters, 2017). Overall, Hicks argues that the increased Russia and China activities in Africa make the region an epicentre for power competition and proxy wars-thereby almost repeating the Cold War period where Africa was engulfed in such wars.

This article hence assesses how this great powers’ competition in the HoA region impacted Kenya’s national security interests from 2010 to 2022. During this period, the HoA region witnessed a surge in economic, political, protracted conflicts and strategic engagement like never before from both great powers, as well as gulf powers (Vertin, 2019). The article for purposes of limiting the scope and scale of focus, is restricted to the analysis and extent of involvement of China, USA and Russia. Further the research broadly considered the HoA region to include Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti. Moreover, the study conceptualizes Kenya’s national security interests to include the state’s security, territorial integrity, and economic stability and well-being of her citizens for operational clarity.

## **1.2 Statement of the Research Problem**

The HoA region has witnessed geopolitical rivalry pitting various regional and global powers. The rivalry as noted by various scholars has contributed to the instability of the HoA region as well as undermining the national security interests of various states in the region. For example, Ero & Atwood (2023) argue that global powers from the West have played a part in the protracted Sudan conflict. In particular, the USA has been in Sudan on the grounds that they are promoting democratic transition since the outbreak of the 2010-2011 Arab Spring (Anderson, 2023).

From the foregoing it was evident that there is a burgeoning array of literature focusing on the implication of the competing great powers on various states within the HoA region. Nonetheless, studies assessing how the global competing powers impacted on Kenya’s national security interests in the period 2010 to 2022 are few compared to the other states in the region. Additionally, the strategies to address the resultant impact of the competition on her national security interests were limited. It is against the above backdrop that this study sought to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the implication of great power competition in the HoA region on Kenya’s national security interests from the period 2010 to 2022. Moreover, the study also aimed to proffer strategies and measures that Kenya can adopt to address the influence of great power competition in the HoA region to her national security interests.

### **1.3 Research Objective**

To assess the implications of great power competition in the Horn of Africa on Kenya's national security interests from 2010 to 2022.

### **1.4 Justification of the Study**

The justification for undertaking the study was two-fold: first, the study aimed at addressing the existing gap in the literature. Secondly, this article strides to inform policies and strategies that will bolster effectiveness in protecting Kenya's national security interests in the HoA region and beyond.

### **1.5 Theoretical review: Realism**

The philosophical grounding underpinning realism is mainly attributed to the writings of scholars, inter alia, Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Hans Morgenthau, Edward Carr and Kenneth Waltz, Realism upholds that the state is the main actor in the international system. Within the study context, the state is considered the soul and the heart of the international system. Pointing out what decision-makers should do to ensure the survival of the state in the international system, Morgenthau (1948) argues the need to conduct the affairs of the state in a prudent manner.

The article utilizes this theory to investigate the impact of great power competition in the HoA region on Kenya's national security interests for the period 2010 to 2022 due to realism argument concerning the uniqueness and preponderant position the state occupies within power politics scholarship. Moreover, the centrality of the state as explained within realism aids the article to investigate measures Kenya undertook to protect its national security interests from the competing powers within the study timeframe. The theory is philosophically organized around four broad assumptions that include: first, the state as a central and unifying actor in international politics. Second, state survival in an anarchical system is critical. Third, states are rational actors. Fourth, the international system is dominated by power competition amongst states.

### **1.6 Methodology**

The study employed qualitative research design as it allowed for thorough and detailed analysis of the causal and coherent linkages between the variables under focus over an extended period of time (Bryman, 2016). Primary data gathering took the form of in-depth interviews with key informants and discussions within focus groups. At the secondary level, library research was conducted by exploring and investigating various literature, including books, journal articles and relevant reports.

The target population for this research consisted of various ministries, departments and agencies within the Republic of Kenya dealing with issues relevant to the study. Additionally, representatives of embassies of relevant states based in Nairobi, officials of relevant Inter-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), researchers and scholars also formed part of this population. These aforementioned individuals and institutions were identified line with Kothari & Garg (2004) who elucidates that target populations is considered to be individuals of objects having characteristics of interest to the study. The sample population was selected through purposive and snow-balling techniques. The participants chosen were those who possessed the desired qualities of expertise, experience, and affiliation to the above-named institutions. Personal judgement was critical in selection of respondents who met the criterion set out in the study.

The determination of the total number of respondents was guided by the principles of inclusivity, as well as attainment of the saturation point regarding the quantity and quality of the information collected. In other words, as Vasileiou et.al, (2018) puts it, the sample adequacy should be dictated by both the size and composition. These two variables should consequently aid the study in achieving saturation point in data collection. Morse (2015) argues that saturation is the most guiding principle for assessing the adequacy of sample size in qualitative studies. In the context of this study, the respondents chosen for the research met the following requirements; demonstrated expertise on the topic, and experience dealing with the issues around the topic. As such, the study stressed on quality over quantity in data collection in striving to attain saturation point in data collection. According to Hennink & Kaiser (2022), qualitative studies reach saturation with a sample size of between 9 to 17 key informants, and 4 to 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Further, Vasileiou et al., (2018) posits that saturation in qualitative case study projects can be attained with a sample size of 15 to 30. Arising from the aforesaid, the study adopted a sample size of 30 key informants' interviews and 4 focus group discussion with 86.6% and 50% response rate, respectively. A qualitative approach was used to process and analyse the data gathered. First, content analysis was used to analyse secondary data. The process entailed identifying themes guided by the study objectives, as well as selecting areas and issues related to the study topic and focusing reading and analysis of secondary literature around them. For the primary data, the outcome of the interviews was written down as per the various sub-themes determined by the objectives of the study and used to generate qualitative information.

### 1.7 Study findings

#### *Manifestation of Great Power Competition in The HoA Region*

Shown in Table 1 below, are the views of the respondents on the manifestation of great powers influence in the HoA region, including through economic engagement, infrastructural development and construction of military and naval bases. Further, the great powers are thought to be involved in ongoing conflicts within the region with the grounds of offering solutions whereas they may be responsible for escalation.

**Table 1: Manifestation of Great Powers Influence in The HoA Region**

S/No.	Influence Manifestation	Frequency (No. of Informants)	Percentage
1.	Economic Engagement	23	92%
2.	Infrastructure Development	22	88%
3.	Military and Naval Bases	20	80%
4.	Proxy Conflicts	15	60%
5.	Diplomatic Alliances & Partnerships	8	32%
6.	Resources Competition	5	20%
7.	Debt Trap	4	16%
8.	Ideology	3	12%
9.	Climate Change	1	4%
10.	Religion	1	4%

**Source:** Researcher (2024)

The current analysis of the rivalry between and among the great powers in the region between 2010 and 2022 demonstrates an intricate interplay influenced by geopolitical interests. This view finds affirmation in the realism theory that stresses on the pursuit of power and national security interest as a fundamental determinant of state behaviour and therefore foreign policy conduct. Morgenthau (1948) notes that man, and thus state is primarily driven by selfish (national) interest considerations. As such, national security interest is a key determinant of state conduct, among other factors. The key informants provided insights as to why the HoA region seemed to attract the interest of great powers into its vicinity. For example, key informant 5 noted that,

*“The strategic location of the HoA at the entrance to the Red Sea and near to Suez Canal was essential to global trade and maritime security. Controlling such strategic location offers accessing to resources, vital shipping lanes and trade routes.” (KI05, 2024)*

Both the USA and China were the main contenders in the struggle for influence in the HoA region, as they strived to safeguard their respective interests in the area. This is a Realist view that emphasizes on self-help and maximization of national security interests. The above may be traced to the USA’s long-standing recognition of the strategic significance of the HoA region due to its close proximity to important maritime routes and its potential as a strategic location for terrorist operations.

Further and as shown in Table 1 above, majority of the informants interviewed perceived that the motives and behaviors of the great powers in the HoA region had been influenced by numerous factors. For instance, China and the United States were competing for influence by making substantial investments in ports, railway, and other infrastructure. China in particular progressively prioritized Africa as a crucial element of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to expand its economic sway worldwide. Further, China sought to obtain natural resources which, is a significant catalyst for economic rivalry, trade agreements and partnerships as other crucial instruments to ensure economic dominance in the HoA region. This argument was for example advanced by key informant (KI02, 2024) who indicated that;

*“China has been exerting increasing influence over the region through infrastructure investments, trade partnerships and military cooperation. China has invested significantly in port facilities in Djibouti under its Belt and Road Initiative. China's presence in the Horn of Africa region is driven by economic interests, resource access and geopolitical considerations.” (KI02, 2024)*

From 2010 to 2022, major nations aggressively also sought to establish military presence and exert influence in the HoA region, a view supported by Abebe (2010). This manifestation was exhibited by the building of numerous military bases and naval presence, along with the supply of weapons and military assistance to local participants. The military efforts had substantial ramifications on regional politics, resulting in changes in alliances and power relations. Furthermore, the augmentation of military forces resulted in socio-economic consequences and security obstacles, exacerbating the already intricate dynamics in the region.

During the study period, military bases and naval presence in the HoA region emerged as pivotal elements in the battle between major powers in the region. This view is espoused by Woldemariam & Yohannes (1998) who argued that several influential actors strategically create military bases and increase their naval presence in order to express their influence and safeguard their interests. These

military bases function as strategic locations for projecting power and allow nations to oversee and regulate crucial maritime commerce routes and sea passages in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The pursuit of military supremacy in the area not only heightened regional tensions, but also resulted in an increase in the sale of weapons and provision of military assistance to local participants.

The existence of military bases and naval presence has significantly contributed to the intricate network of alliances, rivalries, and proxy wars, hence exacerbating regional instability. Many of the respondents did allude to this fact, including key informant 16 who said that,

*“The United States of America maintains military presence through Camp Lemonnier military base in Djibouti; the focus primarily being counterterrorism efforts, maritime security and drone operations aimed at extremist groups in the region as well as supporting peacekeeping initiatives and providing development aid.” (KI016, 2024)*

### ***Implications of Great Powers Competition on Kenya’s National Security***

As portrayed in Table 2 below, key informants in the research opined that great power competition in the HoA region affected Kenya’s security both in a positive and negative manner. Economic prosperity and infrastructure development was cited as a key positive implication of great power competition in the region. It was also contended that counterterrorism efforts were impacted by great powers competition in the region hence affecting Kenya’s security through instability and escalation regional conflicts.

**Table 2: Impact of Great Powers Competition on Kenya’s National Security**

<b>S/No.</b>	<b>Impact of Great Power Competition</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>1.</b>	Economy And Infrastructure Development	17	68%
<b>2.</b>	Counterterrorism Efforts	16	64%
<b>3.</b>	Regional Stability & Conflict Spill Over	15	60%
<b>4.</b>	Sovereignty And Territorial Integrity	14	56%
<b>5.</b>	Military And Security Cooperation	10	40%
<b>6.</b>	Geopolitical Alliances	10	40%
<b>7.</b>	Resource Competition	8	32%
<b>8.</b>	Peace Keeping Missions	5	20%

**Source:** Researcher (2024)

In the period 2010 to 2022, the great power rivalry generated varied consequences, in the process affecting Kenya’s overall national security interests. Kenya’s national security interests are documented variously, including the Constitution of Kenya (CoK) 2010, Sessional Papers, among other sources. Specifically, Article 238 of the CoK 2010 defines national security as follows:

*“National security is the protection against internal and external threats to Kenya’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, its people, their rights, freedoms, property, peace, stability and prosperity, and other national security interests.”*

In general, the breadth and complexity of Kenya's national security interests have several dimensions, including political, economic, social, and security domains. The major aim of the government is to safeguard the welfare and prosperity of its population, while concurrently engaging in regional and

global issues. The aforesaid national security interests are buttressed from the primary data gathered from respondents who opined that those interests had been impacted by the great power competition in the following ways.

### ***Socio-Economic Impact***

From 2010 to 2022, the competition among the great powers in the HoA region had substantial socioeconomic repercussions. The region saw a surge in investment and infrastructure initiatives by foreign powers, with the aim of attaining strategic benefits and securing access to crucial resources. The acquisition of natural resources, such as oil, gas, and minerals emerged as a significant catalyst for rivalry, resulting in conflicts and rivalries. In fact, Poulshock (2022) considers trade agreements and partnerships as being established to safeguard economic interests and enhance influence of the involved states. Furthermore, economic aid and assistance have been used as strategic instruments to acquire influence and bolster alliances.

The fierce economic rivalry did not only influence the regional dynamics but also affected the socio-economic growth and stability of the region, as well regional economic alliances. For Kenya, the economic involvement of the China in the HoA region, particularly proved poignant. The economic engagement between China and Kenya increased during the latter's third president tenure (President Kibaki's 'Look East Policy')

The Chinese were involved in in the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway, Nairobi Expressway, Thika Superhighway, Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor regional project, among others. From the foregoing, while Sino (China)-Kenya relations transcended various fields, including trade, information technology, military cooperation, and cultural programmes, most public attention was on China-sponsored mega projects, including roads, bridges, seaports, and railways. For Kenya thus, the Chinese involvement in the country, especially in the infrastructure and trade spheres have generated controversies in the public debate, especially on the balance between external investment and public debt. A respondent captured the public debate around Chinese involvement in Kenya in the following way:

*“Chinese mega projects in Kenya should be looked at as either embodiment of modernity or manifestations of intrusion of Kenya’s sovereignty, or enormous losing deals. Thus, the Chinese should be seen not only as harbingers of development and hope, but also as latter-day neo-imperialists who have their own hidden agenda. While dealing with any of the great power great caution should be exercised as there is no free lunch when it comes to discussing matters development.”*

### **Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity Impact**

Sovereignty and territorial integrity are core tenets of the 1933 Montevideo Conference that defines the rights and duties of states. Moreover, Kenya has codified (in key documents such the CoK, 2010, Kenya's Foreign Policy document, among others) sovereignty and territorial integrity as constituting its national security interest. However, the involvement of foreign powers in the HoA region during the study period rendered preservation of absolute sovereignty a challenge to Kenya. This situation was attributable to the relative weak position of Kenya in the international system – Kenya is an appendage

state to the core states. This position is captured by Immanuel Wallerstein who talked about the limitations in the exercise of absolute sovereignty in the international system arising from the organization of states according to classes (Wallerstein, 1984). In reference to Kenya, Munene (2011) captures the dilemma in the following way:

*“The threat from big powers is partly over interpretation of who should determine what Kenya’s interests are and how to advance and protect them. North America and the European Union are threats to Kenya’s national security interests because their officials purport to tell Kenyans what they have to do, and that is not always in Kenya’s security or national security interest.”*

Further, the continued meddling in the region by the great powers has and appears will likely be extended due to factors related to economy, political stability, geography, as well as colonial legacy.

### ***Defence and Security Cooperation Impact***

For the period between 2010 and 2022, security challenges and conflicts in the HoA region constituted a significant facet of the rivalry among the great powers. Diverse players participated in military operations, proxy battles, and regional power struggles, resulting in increased tensions and instability. The security situation in the region was further heightened by the establishment of military bases and naval forces, as the powers competed for control and influence. The provision of weaponry and military assistance to various sides worsened hostilities. A respondent in the study opined that,

*“Foreign militaries engaging in anti-terrorism operations, training exercises or establishing military bases can enhance Kenya’s defensive capabilities by sharing intelligence, providing logistical support and deterring hostile acts by opponents. However, such deployments may also cause disapproval among local communities, escalate tensions with neighboring states and provoke arms races within the region.”*

For Kenya, the overall security situation of the HoA region may be seen to have revived the Cold War political rivalries that saw western governments seeking closer security partnership with Kenya as a way of creating a buffer zone to socialism ideology that had permeated most of the region. In line with this view Jureńczyk (2021) argued that both the USA and the Soviet Union were interested in the HoA region, principally due to the strategic location in the Middle East neighbourhood and the possibility of affecting oil supplies. Kenya kept on changing sides during this period depending on the party in power. During the study period the USA and Kenya continued to cooperate to implement measures that address common security interests.

Moreover, Kenya’s involvement with the Global War on Terror (GWOT) was tied to its historical experience. Over the years, Kenya has been targeted for attack due to its perceived close relationship with the USA and Western allies. For most of the history, USA did not consider Kenya as a critical partner in the war on terrorism until it was hit by terrorist assault, namely the embassy bombing in Nairobi in 1998. Consequently, the 1998 attack on the USA Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania changed how the USA viewed Kenya.



### ***Geopolitical Alliances Impact***

Upon analyzing the changes in alliances and power dynamics in the HoA region between 2010 and 2022, it becomes evident that the area was a significant arena for geopolitical rivalry among the great powers. These powers were competing for influence and strategically formed alliances with various governments and entities in the region, resulting in notable changes in alliances and power dynamics.

Between 2010 and 2022, Kenya maintained an ambiguous posture in its relations with the various great powers in a bid not to jeopardize its bilateral relationships with any of the great powers in the context of the shifting alliances and power balance. Specifically, the administration of President Mwai Kibaki maintained cordial relations with both the West, East, and even Middle Eastern countries like Iran. This view was captured by respondent 18 as follows:

*“Kibaki gave instructions to all diplomats that their primary role was to maintain cordial social and economic relations with the respective nations of their posting for the benefit of Kenyans. This ensured that the bilateral relations Kenya had whether with the USA, Britain, Iran, among others was maintained.”*

President Uhuru Kenyatta administration largely mirrored Kibaki administration in terms of how it handled bilateral relations. Kenyatta administration deepened economic ties with the East, especially China, and at the same time maintained cordial relations with Kenya’s traditional allies – the West. Thus, it can be argued that Kenya like it was during the Cold War international system, pursued an ambivalent foreign policy in order to survive the jostling by the great powers in the region.

### ***Strategies to Address Resultant Great Powers Competition Challenges***

To address the resultant impact of great powers competition to her national security interests, Kenya needs to institute various strategies. Kenya has and must continue to deploy instruments of national power including the military, informational, diplomatic, law enforcement, intelligence gathering and usage, financial, and using the human capital to enhance economic power. As stated by Morgenthau et al., (1985) when he characterized these instruments as elements of national power, that they need to be harnessed properly should enhance the capability of a state. This in essence reflects the concept of orchestration of instruments of national power in order to achieve the stated objectives. Successfully orchestrating these instruments would require effective coordination among national institutions particularly those related to national security. The main strategies that Kenya may consider could include;

#### ***Deployment of Tools and Instruments of National Power***

In response to the actual and potential threats posed by the great power competition to Kenya’s national security interests, Kenya must deploy its instruments of national power including the military, informational, diplomatic, law enforcement, intelligence gathering and usage, financial, and using the human capital to enhance economic power. As characterized by Morgenthau et al., (1985) these tools of national power that when harnessed properly should enhance the capability of a state. Thus far, Kenya has enhanced the deployment of the aforesaid tools, for instance, Kenya’s military finesse has been employed significantly and has played a crucial role in minimizing the threat posed by Al Shabaab to the country and her interests. This mission has been made possible due to involvement of other national

security agencies in a multi-agency set up. The unequivocal role of various policies and strategies should also be highlighted.

For instance, Kenya has a raft of policies and strategies to handle foreign policy matters, including the Kenya Foreign Policy document, a fully-fledged Ministry of Foreign Affairs, among others. The existence of comprehensive security laws, policies and strategies is another high point that has enabled Kenya to promote and protect her national security interests both against internal and external threats. Moreover, owing to its status as a developing country, Kenya has an expansive diplomatic footprint around the world – with 65 Missions abroad, 2 Missions in Nairobi, 31 Honorary Consuls, and 109 Foreign Resident Missions in Nairobi.

### ***Enhancing Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperation***

The study found that cooperation in the form of bilateral and multilateral engagements is key for Kenya to effectively secure her national security interests in the region. This is due to the reciprocity, pooling of resources, and increased bargaining power that comes with increased cooperation. Consequently, the study found that Kenya should continue to cooperate with other states through intensifying multilateral diplomacy, strengthening regional integration and building coalitions and alliances based on mutual interests such as addressing climate change, fostering economic growth, and achieving peaceful conflict resolution. Moreover, Kenya stands to benefit immensely by implementing treaties and conventions that speak to collective issues faced by Kenya and other states.

In addition, it is crucial for Kenya to continue collaborating with other African countries in peace-keeping efforts such as African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) (now African Transition Mission in Somalia, ATMIS).

### **1.8 Conclusion**

The article established a connection between great power rivalry in the HoA region and Kenya's national security interests. This is manifested in a strong positive correlation between the geopolitical jostling over access to the region and the subsequent impacts generated at the national level whose dynamics subsequently shape Kenya's national security interests. This study hence opines that there are multiple dimensions to comprehending Kenya's national security interests within the context of great power rivalry in the region. Accordingly, it is the conclusion of this study that the geopolitical rivalry in the region has significantly impacted on Kenya's national security interests, in the process necessitating the need for Kenya to continually come up with strategies to mitigate against the aforesaid.

### **1.9 Recommendations**

The article recommends that in order to address the impact of great power rivalry on Kenya's national security interests, there is need to continually redesign her national security policies and strategies in view of the evolving interests and dynamics that shape great power competition. This will allow Kenya to have in place an active and pragmatic strategy to safeguard against interference to her national security interests. For instance, Kenya may consider exploiting the geostrategic position of the Port of Lamu to maximize the opportunities accorded by the great power competition in the HoA region. This may be done by expanding the role of the Port of Lamu to compete with the Port of Djibouti in hosting the great powers' appetite for military and naval bases. This policy recommendation is informed by the fact that the Lamu Port is essentially underutilised due to delays in actualizing the LAPPSET project. The

activation of the Port would stir up economic development of the region, increase youth employment in addition to serving as a base to counter Al Shabab terrorism and piracy in the Indian ocean which could be on the rise following the Middle East conflict specifically Yemen and the Gulf of Eden.

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