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Dragon Rising? Evaluating Chinese Power in the Horn of Africa

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Tension is rising between China and the United States and the rivalry has reached Africa, with the two countries trading accusations over both espionage and the alleged use of Chinese lasers against two U.S. pilots in Djibouti as early as 2018. (1) Yet the primary nature of the two countries' growing competition in the Horn of Africa is non-military and American-Chinese competition in the region will not mirror the old Soviet-U.S. rivalry during the Cold War. There are several reasons for this, which this article explores.

Firstly, China is integrated and committed to the global economic system and market mechanisms, unlike the old Soviet Union, and can and is using these mechanisms to gain influence rather than relying on naked military force. In the Horn this means that China can use both Chinese state and private actor investments, floating potential access to the Chinese market, and debt through development loans as tools to wield power and influence in the Horn and Africa more broadly. Many African states have a strong interest in gaining access to the large Chinese market and/or are dependent on Chinese goods, enhancing Chinese power on the continent. Outside the Horn, we have seen a Chinese will to use trade embargos and blockades to punish countries that do something China does not like, as when Australia angered their Chinese counterparts by publicly calling for an investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. (2) In the Horn so far, China has not used economic pressure overly much vis-à-vis regional countries, save in cases of little importance for local powers. Rather, China has reserved the economic pressure option as a potential tool for power, a tool which can – but has not yet – been wielded to achieve state goals.

Secondly, China does not have the alliance system that the U.S. today has. China, while being generous with loans and economic assistance, lacks the extensive security cooperation that the U.S. has invested in establishing around the world, including in Africa broadly and in the Horn specifically. Chinese military assistance and weapons exports, with some notable exceptions in Ethiopia and Sudan, have little strategic importance and the numbers are relatively limited compared to weapons systems from other states. While Chinese military exports to the Horn have increased over the past ten years, most of the region's major weapons systems and equipment – such as fighter planes, tanks, artillery, and small arms – are still mostly of non-Chinese origin. China does supply niche capabilities such as transport planes (for example, all eight of Eritrea's transport planes and half of Djibouti's six transport planes are Chinese-made), armored personnel carriers (APCs) and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) (20% of Ethiopia's IFVs and 15% of Kenya's are Chinese-made), and multiple rocket launchers (77% of all Sudanese multiple rocket launchers are Chinese-made). (3) More important weapons systems – including fighter and strike aircraft and main battle tanks (MBTs) – are almost solely non-Chinese-made, with Sudan being the exception with 20% of its MBTs being Chinese-made. (4)

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This month's featured article is the first in a two-part series by Dr. Hansen analyzing great power competition in Africa and especially East Africa and the Red Sea zone. The second article, in the October issue, will examine Russia's operations and influence in Africa.

Moreover, China does not offer direct military support programs, taking the attitude that ‘if you, African countries, are in security trouble,’ the U.S. is the actor to ‘call’ and they will give support via drone strikes and air attacks against jihadi organizations, support training programs for local militaries and police, and provide subsidies for hiring American military contractors (to a smaller extent, France also plays these roles in parts of Africa). China is simply not in the business of backing or supporting the security of African governments and states, this despite its activities in protecting the merchant fleet from the continuing threat of piracy in the Horn and the adjacent Indian Ocean and Red Sea.

The Chinese foreign policy agenda is, so far, limited, seeming to prioritize a defensive posture rather than seeking to actively create global change in alliance systems. The Chinese agenda has so far been to protect China and what is seen as Chinese “internal affairs” (including human-rights related issues) and interests. Such efforts include pressuring East African states to distance themselves from Taiwan, secure Chinese business interests, secure the Chinese supply chain of vital raw materials such as oil and gas, and, to a certain extent, target countries that China sees as interventionist in internal Chinese politics, particularly in regard to pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and China’s repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. (6)

Paradoxically this more limited foreign policy agenda gives China certain advantages over the U.S. and other competitors because it demands less of potential supporters and allies as no military sacrifices are necessary, which makes it more tempting for older traditional U.S. allies to side with China on issues important for China but which are less important for the U.S, for example, expressing the “One China policy” publicly or avoiding criticism of Chinese human rights violations. However it is not a foregone conclusion that this type of Chinese power will work if there is a military confrontation between China and the U.S., even when tensions are mounting. This is because the U.S. can offer something that China, thus far with a few exceptions, is not offering: direct military support programs to East African militaries and even the coordination and carrying out of direct kinetic strikes. Today, Chinese military influence in the Horn is limited but its economic influence in the region is substantial. In order for Chinese influence in the region to pose a real threat to the U.S. and existing networks of alliance, China will have to transform or expand its current strategy to pursue an expansion of hard power.

As the following sections show, Chinese influence and potential power is limited across much of the Horn including in South Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, and Eritrea while in Ethiopia and Sudan (China’s older strategic allies in the region), Chinese power and influence is facing major challenges and older strategic relationships have come under increasing strain. In Djibouti, the extent of Chinese influence may be overestimated.

Somalia and Somaliland: Limited Goals & Limited Effect

The growing rivalry between the U.S. and China in the Horn involves many actors, including local actors who are either indifferent to the rivalry or who are actively trying to manipulate it to their advantage. Somaliland, a region of Somalia that seceded from Somalia in 1991 and declared itself an independent republic, has tried to secure international recognition of its independence ever since, securing Taiwanese foreign aid and gaining Taiwan’s support for infrastructure projects and for the COVID-19 crisis. (7) The move led to China dispatching diplomats to persuade Somaliland officials to abandon their state’s engagement with Taiwan, but in vain. (8) However, it should be noted that Somaliland might have intended to provoke heavy Chinese reaction in order to elicit U.S. counter-reactions in its favor, though, so far, neither the U.S. nor China have taken the bait. Increased rivalry between the U.S. and China, though, might make a more direct and, for Somaliland, internationally legitimizing, engagement between the U.S. and Somaliland more tempting.

As it stands, Taiwanese-Somaliland cooperation is a diplomatic loss for China and Chinese prestige in the Horn, in particular because China, despite its substantial economic and other resources of influence, failed to hinder or end Taiwanese-Somaliland cooperation.

Somalia is a slightly more successful story for China. China has secured some of its national goals by gaining fishing licenses from the Somali Federal Government (SFG), support for Chinese policies in Hong Kong and vis-à-vis Taiwan and against the large Muslim Uyghur population in Xinjiang, the latter being a relatively notable achievement by China since Muslim solidarity has figured strongly in Somali political and national rhetoric. Chinese relative successes in Somalia with the sitting SFG under President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmajo” mirrored the usual Chinese goals of securing access to natural resources and raw materials, market access, and promoting what the Chinese government sees as ‘noninterference’ in ‘internal’ Chinese politics. (9) This was perhaps a product of relatively early Chinese diplomatic efforts in Somalia, which included putting ‘boots on the ground’ by reestablishing a Chinese embassy in 2014, remaining in spite of the continuing major security threats (for example, a 2015 Al-Shabaab attack on the Jazeera Palace Hotel, which hosted the Chinese delegation; China chose to keep its embassy open in Mogadishu). (10) The COVID-19 pandemic also boosted Chinese credentials as China supplied Somalia with Sinopharm vaccines. (11)

The Chinese strategy in Somalia has seemingly created an image of China as neutral and not taking sides in ongoing internal Somali power struggles with two notable exceptions. These exceptions were, to a certain extent, forced upon the Chinese, the first being on the previously discussed Somaliland issue where Somaliland chose to cooperate with Taiwan and the second being the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Shabaab organization, which is probably the most ardent Somali critic of China’s Uyghur policies and which has targeted Chinese interests in the past. However, despite the hostility from Al-Shabaab, China is largely absent from the internationally-backed efforts to curtail the insurgent organization. China does not engage on any large scale with the Somali security sector and other international actors such as the European Union (EU), Qatar, Turkey, Ethiopia, and Kenya are far ahead of China in providing support for forces and programs seeking to undermine Al-Shabaab. China is thus not an alternative for Somali politicians who want (and still need) substantial support in fighting Al-Shabaab and reconstructing and professionalizing Somali security forces. This means that the U.S. holds advantages in the event of a power struggle with China in Somalia, especially if it manages to align American allies, such as the EU and Turkey, behind it and against China.

Kenya and Eritrea: Potential Consequences of a Debt Crisis in the Making

Kenyan-Chinese and Eritrean-Chinese relations have some of the same characteristics as Somali-Chinese relations. China is not focused on security related support but has invested in and loaned money to the Kenyan and Eritrean governments. The Chinese quest to gain support against what it sees as foreign interference in internal Chinese issues has been relatively successful, though Kenya stopped short of publicly supporting China’s Uyghur policies. The low cost of Kenyan and Eritrean action may be one explanation for Chinese success. China seems disinterested in providing military assistance and having a military presence in either country, but holds a form of power through the increasing debt and payment problems these countries have with regard to their foreign debt, including the large debt they owe to China. It has been speculated that this may lead to a Chinese takeover of critical infrastructure that has been offered as collateral, which may have military importance, but so far this has not happened and China has been flexible when it comes to restructuring loans. (12)

One of the most prominent Chinese-financed projects in Kenya is the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, a project financed by a Chinese loan of \$5 billion and contracted to be built by the China Road and Bridge Corporation.

The Kenyan government offered its strategically most important port, the Mombasa port, as collateral for the sum, creating fears in the maritime sector. (13) The Mombasa port also has potential military uses for the Chinese. However, Kenyan National Treasury Cabinet Secretary Ukur Yatani maintained that so called provisions in the agreement give multiple lenders equal claim to the assets used to secure the loan, which will prevent Chinese seizure of the port even upon loan default. (14) This project, and others in Kenya, illustrate a general trend where China or Chinese actors have invested in large-scale infrastructure projects that have a high risk of default, the most recent of these being roads for the Lamu Port and South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) project. China is also heavily involved in port construction in Lamu city, located relatively close to the U.S. military deployment at the Manda Bay naval and air base, which could present some surveillance risks to the U.S.

Yet, there are major limitations to Chinese influence projection in Kenya. In general, the use of Chinese contractors in Chinese-funded projects have created animosities domestically, with Kenyan parliamentarians accusing these projects of crowding out Kenyan workers, and there have been cases where Chinese-owned businesses have practiced segregation, denying African workers service in restaurants. (15) Secondly, China holds a smaller percentage (21%) of Kenyan foreign debt than it holds for Ethiopia and Djibouti, giving it less influence and Kenya more potential to restructure its debt away from China if needed, for example through the World Bank. (16) Kenya also has acted less supportive diplomatically for China compared to Djibouti and Somalia and did not sign the 2019 letter supporting the Chinese government's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, although Kenyan state media has a tendency to reflect the issue from the Chinese side. (17)

Eritrea has a somewhat similar relationship with China as Kenya's. China has invested in Eritrea, especially in Eritrean mines, infrastructure, the power grid, as well as free trade zones and ports, and China has had a long-term, albeit limited, relationship with the country in the medical and educational sectors. (18) Eritrea was scheduled to receive COVID-19 aid from Chinese investors, but the aid was diverted in Ethiopia and the exact circumstances as to why remain unclear. (19) By

2020, China was Eritrea's largest investor, creditor, and trade partner, yet the Eritrean dictatorship keeps the exact figures secret. (20) The Eritrean debt is seemingly more diverse and smaller than Ethiopia's and Djibouti's debt, partly as a result of a general skepticism on the part of the Eritrean regime towards foreign investment in general. Chinese debt, despite China being the largest lender, is assessed to be as low as 4% of the total debt, indicating Eritrea's will to diversify its loans. (21) Eritrea's debt to China is thus the lowest percentage relative to total debt in the Horn, save for Somalia, and gives Eritrea ample room to restructure it if its relationship with China grows tense. (22) However, Chinese involvement and investment has gained Eritrean support for China on the issues of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Uyghurs as well as Eritrea providing China access to raw materials.

Strategic Relationships? Chinese Relations with Ethiopia, the Sudans, and Djibouti

Ethiopia has, in the past, been a more strategic ally of China, with relatively close cooperation between its ruling party between 1991 and 2019, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the Chinese Communist Party. This was partly because of the EPRDF's Maoist background and the Chinese historically had observer status at the larger EPRDF conferences. China helped bolster Ethiopia's military and war-making capabilities at several key points in the latter's modern history. For example, China violated the arms embargo against Ethiopia during the Eritrean-Ethiopian War (1998-2000) by exporting an estimated \$1 billion worth of arms. (23) Today, Ethiopia fields Chinese-made APCs and IFVs, artillery systems, and surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, with Chinese-made vehicles making up 20% of the total number of APCs and IFVs used by the Ethiopian military and Chinese-made artillery making up 6% of Ethiopian artillery (the rest is Russian-made). (24)

China also follows the same pattern of relations with Ethiopia as it has with Kenya and Eritrea, investing heavily in Ethiopian infrastructure and raw material production, including in the development of oil resources in the Ogaden region. Chinese investments are and have often been conditioned on the use of Chinese firms and entrepreneurs in Ethiopia to carry out these development projects, crowding out Ethiopian businesses and workers, but offering relatively cheap services.

Chinese investment enabled Ethiopia to finance controversial projects that have been shunned by the West, for example, the construction of the Gibe III Dam that displaced 200,000 locals. (25) China profited from Ethiopia's mobile phone 'explosions' when mobile phones became common for the average Ethiopian citizen from 2003 onwards and it also invested in Ethiopia's industrial parks. China became the largest foreign direct investment source in Ethiopia in 2019, accounting for about 60% of new investment in the country and, by 2017, China held 50% of Ethiopia's national debt. (26) China is today the most important exporter to Ethiopia and the second most important importer of Ethiopian goods, thus giving China considerable economic influence over Ethiopia. Yet, Chinese strategies toward Ethiopia face trouble. The China-Ethiopia strategic partnership was, in many ways, distorted by the rise to power of the current Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, in 2018, and his subsequent dissolution of the EPRDF in 2019, untying his country's strategic relationship with China.

Today, China has reduced its investment in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian military and its Chinese-made weapons systems seem to have become less important as Abiy increasingly has relied on ethnic militias in his recent military campaigns and has expelled experienced, and probably also sometimes Chinese-trained, Tigrayan officers. (27) Moreover, Chinese investments have been directly influenced by the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, which began in 2020, as the EPRDF channeled much of the Chinese investment to the region and the investment now seems lost due to the dissolution of the ruling party and the ongoing war in Tigray. Furthermore, as in Kenya, Ethiopia's largest projects, including the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, were delayed and suffered severe financial losses. The combination of increasing foreign debt and less willingness on the part of China to provide new loans means that Western lenders have gained a larger part of Ethiopian investments, spurred by the still impressive growth of the Ethiopian economy. Prime Minister Abiy is probably wary of Chinese dominance and the Chinese, for their part, are wary of increasing instability and ethnic violence in Ethiopia. Yet, because Ethiopia is increasingly being sanctioned by Western powers due to the poor and declining human rights situation in the country, China has a new opportunity to increase its influence there if and when Abiy seeks other backers and financiers to offset Western sanctions.

China has also been challenged by the Sudan and South Sudan cases. At the start, China distanced itself from the South Sudanese campaign for independence and more directly supported Khartoum, shielding Sudan from negative diplomatic consequences of the Sudanese-sponsored Darfur genocide, receiving access to Sudanese oil in return. However, after South Sudanese independence in 2011 and the subsequent South Sudan civil war, China became more engaged with South Sudan.

This was in part because Chinese oil investments were considerable in the new state, making up as much as 2-5% of all Chinese oil imports and China chose to have a more direct engagement with South Sudan while also maintaining contact with (North) Sudan. China actively discouraged Sudanese support for factions involved in the civil war in South Sudan and arranged negotiations and regional meetings between the warring parties and other regional actors seeking a resolution to the conflict. (28)

China's approach was soft, cautioning against international or regional actions against parties involved in the South Sudan civil war, yet also achieving some security for South Sudanese oil infrastructure. Later, during the COVID-19 crisis, China also supported South Sudan with 100,000 Sinopharm vaccine doses as well as funding the rehabilitation of Juba International Airport. (29) Chinese engagement secured South Sudanese support at the UN for China's Hong Kong security plan, but South Sudan is also today poised to take over the operating responsibility for several oil wells. (30) Moreover, the China-South Sudan relationship has been strained by poor standards in Chinese infrastructure projects and oil spills from Chinese operated wells. (31)

China, as mentioned previously, had a strategic relationship with Sudan during the time of Omar al-Bashir's regime (June 1989 - April 2019), something perhaps reflected clearest in the fact that Sudan has the largest amount of Chinese-made and provided arms in their military of all the Horn countries with more than 140 Chinese-made tanks and light tanks, fifty Type-92 APCs, and a large number of multiple rocket launchers, though the mainstay of the Sudanese military's equipment remains Russian in origin. Sudan also has considerable debt to China, an estimated \$6.4 billion, but this is still a low percentage of Sudanese debt compared to the more than \$50 billion overall debt the country has. (32)

Sudan's debt is now being restructured and Sudan's Arab Gulf allies seem to be willing to plug Sudan's budgetary gaps, offsetting the Chinese potential for wielding control and influence through debt.

In 2019, China also lost its key Sudanese ally, President Omar al-Bashir, in a military coup, though Chinese rapprochement with the new regime was fast, indicating a considerable amount of pragmatism on both the Chinese side and among the new interim Sudanese political leadership. (33)

China continued its support for strategic infrastructure projects, including the Port Sudan–N'Djamena railway project, the strategic Port Sudan development plans, the construction of a special economic zone on the Red Sea, development of Nile shipping and tourism resources, and the important Sudanese livestock sector. (34) China also constructed the Haidob port located to the south of Port Sudan in 2020. (35) However, despite all of this investment, Chinese support for the al-Bashir regime has not been forgotten by the Sudanese population and Sudanese researchers, including Dr. Salma Abdalla, maintain that Chinese influence in the government has declined drastically compared to the West's influence after the fall of al-Bashir. (36) There is no doubt that al-Bashir's fall was a major blow to China, as was the new interim Sudanese regime's overtures to the West generally and the U.S. specifically. The restructuring of the Sudanese oil sector will also challenge Chinese interests. It is important to note, however, that despite the decline of Chinese influence, Sudan still chose to back the Chinese Hong Kong national security law at the UN in 2020. China still has influence in Sudan, but this influence has declined. It is an open question as to how this will affect China's influence in the Horn, as Sudan matters less to China today because of the North's losses of many of its oil wells to South Sudan after the latter's independence.

The most intensively discussed case in the Horn regarding China-U.S. competition is that of Djibouti. China opened, in 2017, a military base in the country following the deployment of a considerable Chinese naval contingent to combat piracy via Djibouti between 2008 and 2015 as well as a naval evacuation operation of mostly Chinese citizens conducted in the wake of the Yemeni Civil War in 2015. The Chinese base houses a 400-strong garrison and has a two pier support base facility that seems to be an installation meant to support Chinese ad hoc operations in the regional theater rather than give China a large-scale strike capacity beyond East Africa, although it is important to note that the base seems to be able to serve a Chinese aircraft carrier. (37) It should not be inferred that Djibouti has necessarily developed a strategic relationship with China. Djibouti has in the past seen it as advantageous to host foreign bases because doing so brings in income and foreign investment and also serves as a check on possible Eritrean military aggression against Djibouti, the two countries having a long-running border dispute. The Djiboutian attitude to hosting foreign bases seems to have been 'the more, the merrier' with the U.S., France, Italy, and Japan maintaining bases in the country.

The presence of so many U.S. and other friendly allied forces in Djibouti will seriously inhibit the value of China's Djiboutian base in a situation of the outbreak of severe tension between the U.S. and China, as today U.S., Japanese, and Italian military forces in the country outnumber the Chinese by at least twenty to one, and even more so in terms of direct fighting power, as the Chinese troops stationed in country are for support and are by-and-large not frontline combat units. (38) The most important strategic military relationship Djibouti has is with France, which guarantees the defense of Djiboutian airspace and was crucial in the 2008 Eritrean-Djiboutian border war with France supplying Djibouti with intelligence. (39) Nevertheless, we have seen tensions between the Chinese and the American forces in Djibouti over alleged Chinese use of lasers to blind American pilots and U.S. flight vectors over the Chinese base that led to Chinese accusations of American espionage. (40) While the Djiboutian base allows China to 'show the flag,' combat piracy, and provides it the capability to evacuate and protect its own citizens and ships, the base is of still limited value with regard to providing major military support to China and its strategic allies. Furthermore, China today does not have key strategic allies in the region any more.

It is the economic power that China holds over Djibouti that should be watched more carefully in the short term. This economic power is substantial, with China holding more than 57% percent of Djibouti's debt, the largest percentage in the Horn. (41) Chinese investment in Djibouti has been plagued with many of the same problems as in Kenya and Ethiopia, with low profitability of the resulting infrastructure and there have been the same speculations of a coming Chinese takeover of critical infrastructure in Djibouti as there were in Kenya, yet this has not come to pass nor has China indicated a desire to do this. The Chinese investment in the Djiboutian telecommunications infrastructure, especially in the Pakistan-Djibouti telecommunications cable, may, however, allow China to surveil American, French, Italian, and Japanese communications related to the military bases of these countries in Djibouti. (42) Chinese influence, however, was too little to force Djibouti to ban American overflights of the Chinese base, despite Chinese diplomatic pressure, and France and the U.S. have entered into a security alliance with Djibouti, something China has not done.

Conclusion: Chinese Potential in the Horn of Africa

Chinese military power remains limited in the Horn of Africa, as is China's ability and strategic will to provide extensive security support to regional countries. Chinese engagement with the region's governments remains primarily economic rather than security and defense related. Moreover, China has experienced setbacks in Somaliland and Ethiopia and the country's accumulation of debt targeting regional East African countries is making it unpopular.

Speculations of Chinese takeovers of critical infrastructure, some of which has military value, have so far not become a reality and in three cases – those of Kenya, Eritrea and Somalia – the debt amount is limited and can be addressed by the local powers themselves and/or international actors such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, World Bank, EU, and the U.S. In the case of Ethiopia and Djibouti, the debt burden to China is larger, but China has shown flexibility in addressing it and Ethiopia and Djibouti have both shown the will to disregard Chinese interests if needed. Chinese power is thus limited, but the case of Ethiopia shows that Chinese influence has the potential to grow despite recent hurdles and setbacks. Prime Minister Abiy's policies and human rights repression in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia threaten to further alienate the West, cutting him off from much-needed foreign aid and investment to the extent of pushing him closer to China, whose government is unconcerned with human rights. It should be noted that this might come at a price for China as this might alienate it from Sudan, the current Somali political opposition, and, to a lesser extent, Kenya. Ethiopia's and Sudan's recent history also indicate that China is capable of having strategic relationships, although it also seems to have lost them due to ongoing political changes in East Africa. Despite the limits of Chinese power in the Horn, China's engagement and potential recalibration of its relationships with regional governments needs to be watched because of their potential to develop and deepen.

The U.S.'s strengths – its allies and its unique will and capacity to support security sector development – gives it advantages. However, while it remains more advantageous to go "Team USA" over "Team China," if a regional state has security-related problems, this in turn poses challenges regarding the nature of U.S. relations and alliances with regional East African governments, some of which have dubious human rights practices and strategic interests potentially at odds to those of the U.S. and its allies.

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