

Gulf States Scramble for the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa, so named for its hornlike shape when viewed on a map or from outer space, is a geostrategic region on the African continent owing to its proximity to the shipping lane sea-borne goods and oil, worth millions of dollars from the Persian Gulf, pass through on a daily basis from the Gulf of Aden, through the chokepoint Bab el-Mandeb, to the Red Sea, and then the Suez Canal which leads to the Mediterranean Sea. Made up of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, the Horn of Africa has become attractive to a number of foreign powers that are jockeying to have a foothold in it. Among these external powers with competing diplomatic, economic and security interests are the Gulf States in the Arabian Peninsula – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which are investing huge capital, and building seaports and military bases in the geostrategic region. This paper examines Gulf States scramble for the Horn of Africa with a focus on the protagonist, the UAE. For the study, data were garnered from secondary sources. Theoretically, the Game Theory was adopted for the study. The paper concludes that the UAE has done remarkably well over the years by investing billions of dollars in development projects in the region. However, its investment will be at stake, if a divided Somalia distabilises the region in the nearest future.

Keywords: *Horn of Africa, Gulf States, UAE, Military Base, Port.*

Introduction

History has it that Africa has experienced two ‘Scrambles’ by foreign powers with economic, political and security interests in the region. The first occurred in the 19th century, when the representatives of European imperial powers – Great Britain, France, Belgium and others, dashed to Africa mainly to secure raw materials supply (e.g. palm oil and rubber) for their industrialising country, and acquire territories via treaties which not only led to the partitioning of Africa’s land in the 1884/1885 Berlin Conference, but the commencement of colonial rule on the continent (except in Ethiopia and Liberia). The second was during the Cold War in the 20th century, where the two superpowers – capitalist United States and communist Soviet Union, vied for the allegiance of post-colonial African states’ despotic leaders, thus carving out for themselves a sphere of influence on the continent (Al Jazeera, 2014; The Economist, 2019; as cited in Zambakari, 2020, p. 6).

Today, in the 21st century, Africa for the third time is a theatre of competition, this time around, between established and (re-)emerging powers from Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North/South America – Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Iran, Japan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (hereafter UAE), the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (hereafter U.S.) which over the years are jockeying to bolster diplomatic, trade and military ties with chiefly sovereign African states. These growing interests, scuttle and contest between the above-mentioned external powers on the continent, have been labelled by scholars the ‘New Scramble for Africa’.

“The Horn of Africa (hereafter HoA) is one of the most geo-strategically important regions of the world.” (Magara and Kinkoh, 2020, p. 58) The region, comprised of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, is located next to one of the world’s busiest Sea Lanes of Communication (hereafter SLOCs), with access to both the Red Sea and Indian Ocean (Kleinfeld, 2018). Most exporters of petroleum

and natural gas from the Persian Gulf that transit either the Suez Canal or the SUMED Pipeline, go through the Strait of Hormuz, and then the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (also spelt as Bab al-Mandab or Bab al-Mandeb) (Offshore Energy. 2019). In 2018, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), around 6.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil, condensate, and refined petroleum products flowed through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a chokepoint bordered by Eritrea and Djibouti in the HoA, and Yemen in the adjacent Arabian Peninsula (Horton, 2019; Offshore Energy. 2019).

Against this backdrop, this paper with a focus on the UAE as one of the Gulf States with competing national interests in the HoA, has been compartmentalised into the following subheadings: theoretical framework, an overview of Gulf States scramble for the Horn of Africa, the UAE scramble for the Horn of Africa: A discourse, conclusion, and lastly recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

To explain ‘Gulf States Scramble for the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)’, this paper employs the Game Theory. The Game Theory is “a body of thought dealing with rational decision strategies in situations of conflict and competition, when each participant or player seeks to maximize gains and minimize losses” (Plano and Riggs, 1973, p. 33 as cited in Varma, 1975, p. 286). Simply put, it is a tool for analysing actors or players decision-making in competitive and cooperative situations (Smith, 2003).

The Game Theory was expounded by the Mathematician, John von Neumann and the Economist, Oskar Morgenstern, in their co-authored book: *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944). Other notable scholars to have contributed to the development of the theory include: T. C. Schelling (1960, 1967), J. C. Plano and R. E. Riggs (1973), and A. Rapoport (1974).

The Game Theory, drawing from the games played at leisure time e.g. Chess and Tic-Tac-Toe (popularly known as X and O), states that there are two or more players (states or group of states in the context

of international relations) in a situation of competition or conflict. Each of the players or group of players, make rational decisions in order to win the game against the opponent. The decision taken by one of the players in the game is dependent on the other. In other words, the decisions of the players are interdependent (Varma, 1975, p. 287; see Akinboye and Ottoh, 2005, pp. 76-77).

According to Rapoport (1974, p. 1), games used to simulate real-life situations typically include five elements:

1. *players*, or decision makers;
2. *strategies* available to each player;
3. *rules* governing players' behaviour;
4. *outcomes*, each of which is a result of particular choices made by players at a given point in the game; and
5. *payoffs* accrued by each player as a result of each possible outcome (Smith, 2003).

In the Game Theory lies the *Prisoner's Dilemma*, a hypothetical scenario of two criminals interrogated separately by security officers. This dilemma succinctly shows how players in a game can cooperate. That said, there are three known types of games: i) *Two-Person Zero Sum Game* – in this game of two players, one of the players wins what the other loses. In other words, there must be a clear winner and loser. Mathematically, this is written as $(+1) + (-1) = 0$ (Akinboye and Ottoh, 2005, p. 78; Onah, 2010, p. 59), ii) *Two-Person Non-Zero Sum Game* – the 'winner-takes-all' is not the case in the two-person non-zero sum game. Simply put, a player's win in the game is not equal to the loss of the other player, iii) *Nth-Person Sum Game* – This type of game unlike the previous two, has more than two players that come together to form groups i.e. alliances.

Evidently, Gulf States scramble for the HoA is an *Nth-Person Sum Game* between Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Among these countries competing to have a foothold in the region, the UAE over the years gained, only to lose tremendously, its enviable influence

over Djibouti and Somalia. In Somalia for example, Qatar and its ally, Turkey's sway over Mogadishu is growing stronger compared to that of the UAE. In mid-2017, the intra-Gulf rivalry led to a Saudi Arabia-UAE coalition against Qatar accused of backing Islamist groups. While Djibouti, Eritrea, and the self-declared Somaliland supported the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance, Ethiopia and Somalia stayed neutral.

An Overview of Gulf States Scramble for the Horn of Africa

Decades ago, the HoA was a fragile region plagued by poverty, intermittent armed conflicts and droughts. But in recent years, the oil-rich Gulf States – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which initially had little interest in the hornlike region, have been racing each other for influence in the strategic region. The UAE to start with, has built a military base in Eritrea, and a Dubai-based company has built, operates, manages, and invests in seaports in Djibouti and the self-declared Somaliland and Puntland (Berbera and Bosaso respectively), while Qatar plans to construct a new seaport in Hobyo, Somalia. Saudi Arabia on its part has in Ethiopia, focused its investments on agriculture for its food security following 2008 food prices hike (Kleinfeld, 2018; Horton, 2019; Reuters Staff, 2019). Still on Ethiopia, the UAE has promised the largest economy and most populous country in the HoA, billions of dollars in aid and investments (see International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 7).

Since 2010, Gulf States have carried out peace-keeping and counter-terrorism operations in the HoA. In the year 2010, Qatar deployed a small contingent of peacekeepers to the Eritrea-Djibouti border after clashes broke out between the HoA neighbours over disputed territory in the June of 2008 (Reuters Staff, 2017). From 2014 to 2018, the UAE trained hundreds of Somali troops as part of an effort to defeat Islamist insurgency and secure Somalia for the government backed by Western nations, Turkey, and the United Nations (Reuters Staff, 2018a).

Worth mentioning straightaway is that in Gulf States today (e.g. Saudi Arabia and the UAE) are some migrant workers from e.g. Eritrea and Ethiopia who offer their relatively cheap and unskilled labour through the controversial sponsorship system called the 'kafala system'. Though Africans are not the largest migrant communities in Gulf States, their remittance flows are a critical source of income for countries in the HoA, meaning they represent an important source of Gulf States economic influence in Africa. Also, Gulf States Islamic cum charitable organisations over the years have played a significant role in winning the hearts and minds of the people in the HoA through generous humanitarian donations (Todman, 2018).

Presently, Gulf States are not the only foreign powers competing to have a foothold in the HoA. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. by al-Qaeda, America, in pursuit of its security interest and that of its allies, carries out from time to time, counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region from military outposts across Africa. In the Lilliputian State, Djibouti, it has its own military base called Camp Lemonnier. Aside the U.S., France, Italy, Japan all have a military base in the diminutive state (The Economist, 2018; Neethling, 2020).

On the 1st of August, 2017, the People's Republic of China (PRC) officially opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in line with President Xi Jinping's ambitious military modernisation programme which includes developing China's forces capabilities to operate far from home (Al Jazeera, 2017). Over a month after the launch of the Chinese military base, the transcontinental country, Turkey, formally opened its biggest overseas military base in the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu, on September 30, 2017. More than 10,000 Somali soldiers will be trained at the base that cost Ankara \$50 million to build (Hussein and Coskun, 2017). Still in Somalia, Turkey plans to build a launchpad in the country for its first moonshot in the year 2023 (see Fabricius, 2021).

The UAE Scramble for the Horn of Africa: A Discourse

Of all the Gulf States with a footprint in the HoA, the UAE is arguably the most active in the ongoing competition in the region (Horton, 2019). In the last two decades, the UAE has increasingly made its presence felt in the HoA by building and managing ports in the region through DP World, a global port operator based in Dubai. In the year 2006, DP World won a 30-year concession contract to build and operate the Doraleh Container Terminal (hereafter DCT) in Djibouti which opened in 2009. The Doraleh port is Djibouti's biggest employer and source of revenue. Also, the port alone accounts for 95% of imports for its landlocked neighbour, Ethiopia (Al Jazeera, 2018a; Kleinfeld, 2018; AP 2020; Paduano, 2020). Subsequently, in the May of 2016, DP World signed a \$442 million agreement with Somalia's self-proclaimed Somaliland, to invest and manage the deep-sea port of Berbera for 30 years. In the said port, Ethiopia has a 19% stake that will reduce its dependency on Djibouti's Doraleh port (Stavis and Fitch, 2016; Kleinfeld, 2018).

The UAE's involvement in the HoA entered a new phase when Abu Dhabi pledged on the 15th of June, 2018, a whopping sum of \$3 billion in aid and investments to Ethiopia. \$1 billion out of the promised \$3 billion will be deposited in its central bank (the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE)) to ease the country's foreign currency shortage according to an Ethiopian official (Maasho, 2018). In August 2018, Ethiopia announced that Abu Dhabi plans to invest in an oil pipeline connecting Eritrea and Ethiopia. The pipeline will run from Eritrea's port city of Assab to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, an Ethiopian official said (Obulutsa and Fick, 2018; Oneko, 2018).

Aside its economic interests in the HoA, the region is of great interest to the UAE for security reasons. In 2015, the UAE started the construction of its first naval base in Assab, Eritrea (The Economist, 2018). Thereafter, the parliament of breakaway Republic of Somaliland approved on February 12, 2017, a deal which permits the UAE to build a naval and air base in the port city of Berbera (Osman, 2017).

Obviously, Abu Dhabi needs these bases to defend key commercial ports and SLOCs in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as well as to conduct its military operations in Yemen. In 2014, the UAE and Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen to defeat the Iran-backed Houthi rebels that had taken control over Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and large parts of the country along the Red Sea and near Bab el-Mandeb (Bergenwell, 2019).



Figure 1: *A Magnified Map of the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula*

Source: Oneko, S. (2018). Arab Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: What Role do they Play? *DW*.

Regarding diplomacy, some observers feared that the intra-Gulf rivalry between the UAE/Saudi Arabia and Qatar, may spill over to the HoA. Their fear came true during the Gulf diplomatic crisis in 2017. The UAE and Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of supporting Iran and Islamist groups e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) that are destabilising the Middle Eastern region. Thus, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar on the 5th of June, 2017. Excluding Egypt, the three Gulf States gave Qataris two weeks to leave their country. All four Arab countries imposed air, sea, and land blockade of Qatar which exposed its vulnerability, as some of Qatar's food supply come from Saudi Arabia via land. Qatar Airways was not spared. The national carrier had to shoulder more cost going through a detour (Wintour, 2017; Kleinfeld, 2018; Todman, 2018; see Iyayi et al., 2020, pp. 19-20; Salihu et al., 2020, pp. 100-101).

In the HoA region, the governments of Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia's breakaway region of Somaliland sided with the UAE and Saudi Arabia while the government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed a.k.a 'Farmaajo' in Mogadishu, which is closer to Qatar and Turkey, stayed neutral despite Emirati and Saudi pressure to cut ties with Qatar (Al Jazeera, 2018b; Kleinfeld, 2018, Maruf, 2018; Feierstein, 2020, p. 3). Purportedly as a consequence of Eritrea and Djibouti taking the side of the UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance, Qatar announced on June 14, 2017, that it had withdrawn its peacekeeping troops from the disputed Eritrea-Djibouti border (Reuters Staff, 2017).

Still on diplomacy, the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement was a big win for the UAE. For years, the two foes have had a border dispute. As a statement of fact, both countries were at war from 1998 to 2000. But on July 09, 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali (who was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize) and his Eritrean counterpart, President Isaias Afwerki, signed the landmark "joint declaration of peace and friendship" which normalised ties between both countries.

On the part of the UAE and its ally, Saudi Arabia, they brokered the second historic peace accord – the Jeddah Peace Agreement which the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea signed in the Saudi city, Jeddah, on the 16th of September, 2018. Present at the signing ceremony were Saudi Arabia's King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres (Mitchell, 2018; Oneko, 2018; Reuters Staff, 2018b; see Todman, 2018).

The UAE, no doubt, is leading in the geopolitical and geoeconomics competition in the HoA. Nevertheless, it has suffered setbacks *vis-à-vis* its ambitions in the region (Fenton-Harvey, 2019). On the 22nd of February, 2018, the Government of Djibouti seized control of the DP World-run DCT. In response to Djibouti's nationalisation of DCT, DP World filed a case at the London Court of International Arbitration (LCIA) which ruled in its favour on January 14, 2020. Needless to say at this juncture is that the current ruling is the sixth legal victory of DP World over the government of Djibouti's president, Ismail Omar Guelleh (Al Jazeera, 2018a; Kleinfeld, 2018; AP 2020).

In Somalia, the UAE is fast losing its influence, as the country draws closer to the Gulf State, Qatar, and its ally, Turkey. The UAE-Somalia relations gradually turned sour owing to Mogadishu's failure to back the UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance against Qatar in the 2017 Gulf crisis, and the UAE's investments and operations in Somaliland that broke away from Somalia in 1991, and Puntland, that became semi-autonomous in the year 1998, after Somali dictator, Mohamed Siad Barre, was toppled in 1991. Mogadishu sees Abu Dhabi's actions as undermining its efforts at reunifying Somalia with Somaliland and Puntland (Fenton-Harvey, 2019; Feierstein, 2020, p. 6). To have compounded their frosty relations was the \$9.6 million, seized by Somali security officials on a Royal Jet plane that flew into Mogadishu airport from Abu Dhabi on the 8th of April, 2018. The UAE made it known that the money was to pay for the salaries of Somali soldiers as part of an agreement between the two countries. Displeased by the

action of Somalia, the UAE as reported by its news agency, WAM, disbanded its 4-year-old military training programme (2014-2018) in Somalia (Al Jazeera, 2018b; Maruf, 2018; Reuters Staff, 2018a; Horton, 2019; Paduano, 2020).

Conclusion

In the light of the findings of this paper, the Gulf States scramble for the HoA has been good and bad for the strategic region. In its national interests and that of HoA countries, the UAE has done remarkably well over the years by investing billions of dollars in development projects in the region. Many thanks to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the neighbours – Eritrea and Ethiopia inked a peace agreement in 2018. However, as was seen in 2017, the UAE scramble for the HoA left some countries in the region with no choice but to take sides with it and Saudi Arabia during the Gulf diplomatic crisis. Also, the UAE relations with the governments of breakaway Somaliland and semi-autonomous Puntland have made the reunification of the territories of Somalia an arduous task for Mogadishu. Should the UAE continue relating with them, its billion-dollar investment in the HoA will be at stake, if a divided Somalia destabilises the region in the nearest future.

Recommendations

The following are strongly recommended to the governments of HoA countries, and Gulf States, in particular the UAE:

- i) The government of the four HoA countries are to ensure that their multifaceted relations with Gulf States are mutually beneficial and not exploitative;
- ii) At the moment, the HoA is still a fragile region. A seed of discord sown in the volatile region is enough to heighten existing tensions and cause instability. Thus, Gulf States should desist from pressurising the HoA countries to take sides in intra-Gulf rivalry;
- iii) Gulf States in the HoA should as much as possible, pursue a

- healthy competition in their national interests and that of the countries in the geostrategic region;
- iv) If an 'African solution' is not forthcoming *vis-à-vis* a dispute between HoA countries or a dispute involving one of them e.g. the protracted Egypt-Ethiopia Nile River dispute, Gulf States should once again play the role of a mediator, if requested by the disputants;
 - v) The UAE should bear in mind at all times that it is not the only foreign power in the game of infrastructural development in the HoA. China also has a presence in the region in pursuit of its 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which simply put is about infrastructure connectivity between China and different parts of the world, including the HoA. Losing ground in the region as it did in Djibouti and Somalia only creates opportunity for China, Qatar, and Turkey;
 - vi) The UAE should assist the government in Mogadishu in reunifying Somalia with the self-declared Somaliland and semi-autonomous Puntland by persuading the government of the two regions to rejoin the federation. This way, it will regain its influence over the federal government in Mogadishu.

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