

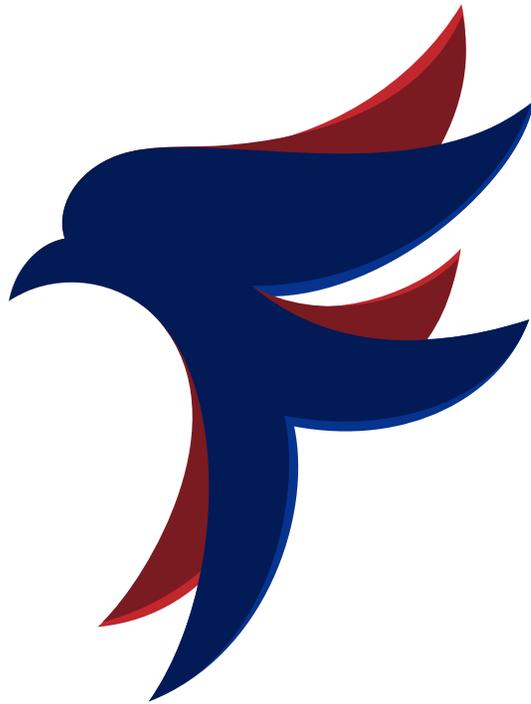
# “ENGAGED OPPORTUNISM”

## RUSSIA’S ROLE IN THE

## HORN OF AFRICA

SAMUEL RAMANI





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# “ENGAGED OPPORTUNISM” RUSSIA’S ROLE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Samuel Ramani** is a DPhil candidate at the Department of Politics and International Relations at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, specializing in post-1991 Russian foreign policy and the dynamics of protracted conflicts in the Middle East. He is a regular contributor to leading publications, such as *Foreign Policy*, the *Washington Post* and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and has briefed the U.S. Department of State, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, NATO Intelligence Fusion Center and France’s Ministry of Defense on Russian security policy. He can be followed on Twitter @samramani2.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After spending nearly three decades as a marginal player in the Horn of Africa, the Russian Federation has made significant progress towards recapturing its great power status in the region. Russia has engaged with all countries in the Horn of Africa and refused to take sides in the region’s most polarizing conflicts, so Moscow can be best described as an “engaged opportunist” on the Horn of Africa. Russia is principally focused on establishing itself as the region’s leading arms vendor, but prospectively, has one eye on constructing a Red Sea base. Russia’s resurgence in the Horn of Africa has generally dovetailed with the People’s Republic of China’s regional aspirations, but has placed it increasingly at odds with France and the United States. Looking ahead, Russia’s ability to link its Horn of Africa strategy to its aspirations in the Middle East will shape the future trajectory of its involvement in the region.

## BACK TO THE HORN

More than three decades after the Soviet-aligned Derg dictatorship in Ethiopia collapsed in 1987, the Russian Federation's geopolitical presence in the Horn of Africa is experiencing a resurgence. In September 2019, Somali Ambassador to Russia Abdullahi Mohamud Warsame stated that the Somali people “would like to see the Russians come back” to Somalia, and Somalia's president, foreign minister, and defense minister traveled to Sochi for the Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019.<sup>1</sup> Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has also established strong ties with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. Ethiopia formally requested Russia's assistance in fighting COVID-19 on April 16,<sup>2</sup> which followed its prior receipt of medical aid from the People's Republic of China on March 22.<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia's Ambassador to Russia Alemayehu Tegenu Aargau reaffirmed this request on June 18, and cited the need for “friendly countries,” like Russia, to supply material assistance to Addis Ababa's pandemic response.<sup>4</sup> Russia has also assumed the role of a dialogue facilitator in one of the region's most important disputes, the Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan competition over Nile River access, and Somalia and Ethiopia are actively courting Russia as a security partner.

Although Russia's resurgence in Sub-Saharan Africa has gained widespread attention in recent years, Moscow's rising profile in the Horn of Africa often has been ignored. Russia's growing influence in the Horn of Africa is important for Western policymakers

## AFRICA IS IMPORTANT FOR WESTERN POLICYMAKERS TO CONSIDER, AS IT ALLOWS MOSCOW TO BOLSTER ITS PRESENCE ON THE RED SEA.

to consider, as it allows Moscow to bolster its presence on the Red Sea. The United States designated Ethiopia as a strategic partner in the Global War on Terrorism, operates the Camp Lemonnier naval base near Djibouti City, and regularly carries out counterterrorism operations in Somalia, so Russia's expanded security footprint in the Horn of Africa could clash with U.S. interests in the region. As France operates a naval base in Djibouti and is seeking to strengthen its partnership with Ethiopia, it shares similar concerns with the United States about Russian power projection on the Horn of Africa.

This report will outline the history of Russia's relationship with the Horn of Africa. It will argue that Russia's involvement in the region has been inconsistent, but Moscow can be best described as an “engaged opportunist” in regional affairs. It will then assess the drivers of Russia's “engaged opportunist” security strategy in the Horn of Africa, including Russia's desire to establish itself

1 “Somalia eyes ‘Strengthened Relationship’ with Russia,” *Garowe Online*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-eyes-strengthened-relationship-with-russia>.

2 “Ambassador says Ethiopia Requests Russia's Assistance in Combatting Coronavirus,” *TASS*, April 16, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1145731>.

3 Samuel Gebre, “China Expands Medical Aid to Africa with First Ethiopia Shipment,” *Bloomberg*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-22/china-expands-medical-aid-to-africa-with-first-ethiopia-shipment>.

4 “Ethiopia Looks Forward to Aid from Russia to Battle Pandemic, says Ambassador,” *TASS*, June 18, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1169257>.



Tiglachin memorial in Addis Ababa, commemorating the Ethiopian and Cuban soldiers involved in the Ogaden War. (Francisco Anzola/Wikimedia Commons)



Worker's Party of Ethiopia monument extolling the virtues of communism. (Wikimedia Commons)



Cuban artillery crew during the Ogaden War, 1982. (Wikimedia Commons)



Mengistu Haile Mariam with Derg members. (Wikimedia Commons)



Ethiopian troops in Somalia, 2014. (AMISOM/Mahamud Hassan)

as a reliable provider of arms and defense infrastructure to regional powers and its aspirations to construct a military base on the Red Sea. The report will then discuss patterns of cooperation and contestation between the Russia and China in the Horn of Africa. It will conclude by assessing the potential for future strategic competition between Russia, France, and the United States in the region and underscore how Russia's resurgence in the Middle East both augments its presence and restricts its freedom of action in the Horn of Africa.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

Although Moscow has viewed the Horn of Africa as a valuable theater for power projection since 1930s, the Soviet Union only emerged as a major player in the region during the early 1960s when it established close relations with Somalia. This partnership was strengthened by the Marxist-Leninist ideological orientation of Somalia's President Siad Barre, who assumed power in a 1969 coup d'état. The Soviet Union supported

Djibouti's independence in June 1977 and forged close relations with President Hassan Gouled Aptidan. The Soviet Union's relationship with Somalia collapsed during the 1977-78 Ogaden War, as the USSR and its ally, Cuba, openly supported the Ethiopian army. These tensions also affected the USSR's relationship with Djibouti, which provided military intelligence to Somalia, and caused Moscow to support the Afar clan against the governing Issa as a means of undermining Aptidan's authority.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Soviet Union's opposition to Somalia's destabilization of the Horn of Africa by annexing Ogaden precipitated this foreign policy shift, the USSR saw the war as an opportunity to establish closer relations with Ethiopia. As one might extrapolate from this abrupt strategic shift, Radoslav Yordanov's archival research reveals that the Soviet Union sought to promote socialism on an ad hoc basis in the Horn of Africa and lacked a cohesive regional strategy.<sup>6</sup> However, U.S. policymakers viewed the USSR's resurgence in the Horn of Africa with alarm and enabled the transformation of the region into a zone of Cold War confrontation throughout the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa began to wane in the mid-1980s, as the USSR's new General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, tried unsuccessfully to encourage Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam to embrace his brand of reformism.<sup>8</sup> The aftershocks of the 1983-85 famine, the military successes of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and the strained personal relationship between Gorbachev and Mengistu culminated in the USSR's cancellation of military aid to

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5 Aryeh Yodfat, "The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa: Part Two of Three Parts," *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, Spring 1980, p. 36-37.

6 Radoslav Yordanov, "The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa," Wilson Center, February 15, 2017, <https://www.wilson-center.org/blog-post/the-soviet-union-the-horn-africa>.

7 Yordanov, "The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa," 2017.

8 Getachew Metaferia, *Ethiopia and the United States: History, Diplomacy and Analysis*, (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), p. 70.

## RUSSIA REMAINED A PERIPHERAL PLAYER IN THE HORN OF AFRICA UNTIL THE 2008 PIRACY CRISIS.

the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in September 1989. Mengistu's alarm at the prospect of a complete collapse of USSR-Ethiopia relations and concerns about the potential diffusion of the 1989 anti-communist revolutions in Eastern Europe encouraged him to appease Gorbachev by considering economic liberalization. The USSR was unmoved by these gestures, however, and ceded leadership on the Ethiopia-EPLF diplomatic process to the United States in early 1990.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Union's departure from Ethiopia coincided with the collapse of its Marxist-Leninist client state of South Yemen and left Moscow without a reliable partner on the Red Sea for the first time since the early 1960s. Aside from the use of Russian aircraft and rockets by both Ethiopian and Eritrean military forces during the 1998-2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war,<sup>10</sup> Russia remained a peripheral player in the Horn of Africa until the 2008 piracy crisis.

Due to the threat posed by Somali pirates to Russian nationals involved in commercial shipping, Russia supported United Nations-sponsored interventions against Somali pirates in 2008. China, Vietnam, Libya, and Indonesia challenged the legality of anti-piracy patrols that spanned the entire region of East Africa in UN debates,<sup>11</sup> but Russia did not join these countries in opposing France's vision for an expansive UN mandate to combat piracy in the Horn of Africa.

In October 2008, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Russia aimed to stop "the outrageous actions" of Somali pirates and called for a UN resolution to combat the crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Russia's contributions to anti-piracy efforts in Somalia, which included the deployment of the Neustrashimy warship to guard the Gulf of Aden and coordination with Britain's HMS Cumberland against pirates on November 12, 2008,<sup>13</sup> created a rare avenue of cooperation with the United States and Europe after Russia-West relations deteriorated following the August 2008 Georgian War. Yet, Russia's efforts to combat piracy in Somalia did not significantly expand its geopolitical presence in the Horn of Africa, as the Kremlin has emphasized symbolism and opportunistic gains in its engagement with the region. In October 2012, Russia tried to highlight its role in anti-piracy missions by requesting permission from France to station two Il-38 reconnaissance planes in its base of Heron in

9 Mark Webber, "Soviet Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Final Phase," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1-30.

10 Mehmet Cem Ogulturk, "Russia's Renewed Interests in the Horn of Africa as a Traditional and Rising Power," *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 127, <https://risingpowersproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/vol2.1-Mehmet-Cem-Ogulturk.pdf>.

11 "Litsenziya Na Unichtozheniye Piratov OON Razreshila Borotsya s Somaliyskimi Piratimi Samostoyatelno [Pirate Destruction License: UN Allowed to Fight Somali Pirates on Their Own]," *Gazeta.ru*, June 3, 2008, [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/06/03\\_a\\_2742804.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/06/03_a_2742804.shtml).

12 "Russia Call to Halt Somali Piracy," *BBC*, October 3, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7651329.stm>.

13 Peter Walker, "British and Russian Ships Fight Off Somali Pirates," *Guardian*, November 12, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/12/somalia-russia>.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Somali Prime Minister Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke meet in April 2016. (Russian Foreign Ministry/Flickr)

Djibouti.<sup>14</sup> In April 2016, Lavrov met with Somali Prime Minister Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmake and vowed to establish areas of cooperation with Somalia in the counterterrorism sphere.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these promises and the widespread coverage of Lavrov's meeting with Sharmake in Kremlin-aligned media outlets, Russia has not provided material assistance in Somalia's conflict with al-Shabaab or aided in mediating Somalia's long-standing dispute with Somaliland. This policy has not changed, even though Russia's profile has risen in Sub-Saharan Africa. Russian Ambassador to Somalia and Djibouti Mikhail Golovanov stated in February 2020 that "the issue of holding joint military exercises with Somalia to combat terrorism has not been considered."<sup>16</sup> Russia's partnership with Djibouti similarly

remains peripheral, as France's unwillingness to grant Moscow's Il-38 request convinced policymakers in the Kremlin that Djibouti is beholden to Western pressure.<sup>17</sup> These self-imposed limits and external constraints on Russia's ability to establish genuine alliances in the Horn of Africa support the author's contention that Moscow is an "engaged opportunist" in the region.

<sup>14</sup> Greg Kennedy and Harsh V Pant, *Assessing Maritime Power in the Asia-Pacific: The Impact of American Strategic Re-Balance*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> "Somalia Would Like Russia to Help Develop Economy, Support Army- PM," *Sputnik*, April 19, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201604191038248777-cooperation-pm-army-economy/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Mikhail Golovanov: Dzhibuti i Somali Zhduť Rossiyskikh Investirov [Mikhail Golovanov: Djibouti and Somalia are Waiting for Russian Investors]," *RIA Novosti*, February 7, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200207/1564348844.html>.

<sup>17</sup> David Brennan, "Russia-Africa Summit: How Putin is Challenging the U.S. and China in New Continental Race," *Newsweek*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-africa-summit-vladimir-putin-challenging-u-s-china-new-continental-race-sochi-1466966>.

# RUSSIA'S "ENGAGED OPPORTUNIST" ROLE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Russia's "engaged opportunist" approach to the Horn of Africa has often led Moscow to seek out opportunities in the region on an ad hoc, rather than a strategic, basis, but two objectives have recurred frequently enough to warrant special attention. In the Horn of Africa, Russia's immediate security policy objective is to secure arms contracts and to establish itself as a vital investor in the development of defense infrastructure. Once Moscow's presence as a great power in the Horn of Africa is further ensconced, Russia may want to construct a naval base there, which would give the Russian navy a permanent presence on the Red Sea.

## *RUSSIA'S ARMS CONTRACTS AND DEFENSE COORDINATION IN THE HORN OF AFRICA*

Due to Soviet-era legacies and Russia's increasingly assertive posturing in Africa, Moscow is the leading arms vendor to Sub-Saharan Africa. Aggregated data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) from 2015-2019 reveals that Sub-Saharan African countries purchased 36% of their arms from Russia, compared to 19% from China and 7.6% from France.<sup>18</sup> In tandem

with this continent-wide trend, Moscow has increased its arms sales to countries in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia imported \$71 million worth of arms in 2019—more than any of its East African counterparts—and seeks to upgrade its air defense systems, making it Russia's principal arms client in the Horn of Africa.<sup>19</sup>

**IN THE HORN OF AFRICA, RUSSIA'S IMMEDIATE SECURITY POLICY OBJECTIVE IS TO SECURE ARMS CONTRACTS AND TO ESTABLISH ITSELF AS A VITAL INVESTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEFENSE INFRASTRUCTURE.**

Russia's history of arms transfers to Ethiopia, which included \$245 million in equipment during the 1998-99 war and \$407 million in arms transfers in 2003-04, laid the foundation for their current security partnership.<sup>20</sup> Russia's strategic use of debt forgiveness has resulted in an expansion of its arms sales to Ethiopia; for example, Moscow's decision

<sup>18</sup> Pieter D Weizman et al, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs\\_2003\\_at\\_2019\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019_0.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> "Ethiopia, Kenya Raise Military Spend as East Africa Arms Budget Hits \$104 Million," *The East African*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/ea/East-African-countries-splurge-usd-104m-on-new-arms/4552908-5513938-wofs23/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Evgeny Korendyasov, "Rossiya Prodvigayetsya Na Rynakh Vooruzhneniy I Voyennoy Tekhniki v Afrike [Russia Advances on Arms and Military Equipment Markets in Africa]," Russian International Affairs Council, May 11, 2017, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiya-nastupaet-na-rynki-vooruzheniy-i-voennoy-tekhniki-v-afrike/>.



Russia's strategic use of debt forgiveness has resulted in an expansion of its arms sales to Ethiopia; for example, Moscow's decision to cancel \$163.6 million in Ethiopian debt ahead of the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi helped facilitate arms deals with Addis Ababa.

Picture: Meeting with Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed, Sochi Summit, October 2019. (kremlin.ru)



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed. Sochi Summit, October 2019. (kremlin.ru)

to cancel \$163.6 million in Ethiopian debt ahead of the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi<sup>21</sup> helped facilitate arms deals with Addis Ababa. In November 2019, Russia delivered Pantsir-S1 air defense systems to Ethiopia, a deal which occurred with a “fruitful defense cooperation meeting.”<sup>22</sup> Due to Ethiopia’s “ethno-confessional conflicts, active Islamist and pirate activities,” Addis Ababa was listed in a May 2017 Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) report as one of Russia’s five most important African arms markets,<sup>23</sup> and Ethiopia is likely to purchase more Russian arms in the years to come.

Russia’s swift entry into Eritrea’s arms markets after UN sanctions on the Eritrean defense industry were lifted in November 2018 is

a product of historical legacies. Citing the failure of sanctions to achieve regime change in Iraq and Libya, Russia strongly opposed the implementation of arms embargoes against Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000. However, Russia ultimately acquiesced to sanctions and pivoted towards supporting a diplomatic solution to the Ethiopia-Eritrea War in order to deflect from criticisms of its arms deals with both countries.<sup>24</sup> Even though these sanctions disproportionately impacted Eritrea, Russia continued to supply Asmara with military equipment. In April 2005, Russia reportedly sold Eritrea anti-tank missiles to counter the Ethiopian army’s use of Russian-made military technology.<sup>25</sup>

21 “Russia Vows to Forgive Ethiopia’s Debts Amid Growing Push for Influence in Africa,” *Moscow Times*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/22/russia-vows-to-forgive-ethiopias-debts-amid-growing-push-for-influence-in-africa-a67851>.

22 “Russia Delivered Pantsir S1 Air Defense Missile Gun Systems to Ethiopia,” *Borkena*, January 27, 2020, <https://borkena.com/2020/01/27/russia-delivered-pantsir-s1-air-defense-missile-gun-systems-to-ethiopia/>.

23 Korendyasov, “Rossiya Prodvigayetsya Na Rynakh Vooruzhneniy I Voyennoy Tekhniki v Afrike [Russia Advances on Arms and Military Equipment Markets in Africa],” Russian International Affairs Council, 2017.

24 Leonid Gankin, “Pobeda Russkogo Oruzhiya Na Efiopsko-Eritreyskom Front [The Victory of Russian Weapons on the Ethiopian-Eritrean Front],” *Kommersant*, May 19, 2000, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/148295>.

25 Stephen Blank, “Russia Will Sell Eritrea Anti-Tank Missiles to Use Against Ethiopia’s Russian-Made Weapons,” Jamestown Foundation, April 20, 2005, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-will-sell-eritrea-anti-tank-missiles-to-use-against-ethiopias-russian-made-weapons/>.

## WHILE SOMALIA'S ISOLATION HAS CURTAILED RUSSIAN ARMS CONTRACTS, DJIBOUTI'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY HAS HAD A SIMILAR CURBING EFFECT ON MOSCOW'S LEVERAGE.

Given this track record, it is unsurprising that Russia was the first major power to enter Eritrea's arms market in the post-sanctions period. In January 2020, Russia announced that it would deliver two Ansat helicopters to Eritrea by the end of the year.<sup>26</sup> Deputy Director of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Anatoly Punchuk revealed Eritrea's interest in purchasing Russian "missile boats, helicopters and small arms" in October 2019, which suggests that more sales to Eritrea are in the offing.<sup>27</sup> Russian arms sales to Somalia, however, have been stymied. The stringent international arms embargo against Somalia has restricted Russia's ability to revive Soviet-era weapons contracts with Mogadishu, even though the Somali army had previously expressed interest in Russian MiG-class planes, tanks, and armored personnel carriers.<sup>28</sup> While Somalia's isolation has curtailed Russian arms contracts, Djibouti's multi-vector foreign policy has had a similar curbing effect on Moscow's leverage. Djibouti's purchases of Russian aircraft, such as Mi-24 and Mi-35 helicopters, ensure that Russia is an important supplier of Djibouti's Air Force, but French, Chinese, United Kingdom, and U.S. arms sales to Djibouti prevent it from achieving the position of primacy that it enjoys in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Beyond the growth in transactional facets of Russia's relationship with the Horn of Africa, such as arms contracts, Moscow's "engaged opportunist" approach to the region has deepened its defense cooperation with Ethiopia. In April 2018, Russia signed a

defense cooperation accord with Ethiopia, which included provisions for peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and anti-piracy training, but the expansion of these training programs has been admittedly slower than anticipated.<sup>29</sup> Although official statements do not explicitly monitor progress towards implementing this accord, military-level cooperation between Russia and Ethiopia has increased in recent months. In early December 2019, the Ethiopian military sent 1,000 naval officers to Russia for training, with the goal of strengthening its naval capabilities off the coast of Djibouti.<sup>30</sup> After the confirmation of Russia's delivery of Pantsir S-1s to Ethiopia in January, Ambassador Tegenu claimed that Ethiopia wanted to work with international stakeholders like Russia on peacekeeping, in addition to contributing to

26 Fahad Shabbir, "Russia to Deliver 2 Ansat Helicopters to Eritrea in 2020," *Urdu Point*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.urdupoint.com/en/world/russia-to-deliver-2-ansat-helicopters-to-erit-814332.html>.

27 Fahad Shabbir, "Eritrea Interested in Buying Weapons from Russia," *Tesfa News*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.tesfanews.net/eritrea-interested-buying-russia-military-equipment-weapons/>.

28 Peter Akopov, "Afrikanskiy SSSR [African USSR]," *Izvestiya*, July 4, 2001, <https://iz.ru/news/248772>.

29 "Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries," *Reuters*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-africa-russia-factbox/factbox-russian-military-cooperation-deals-with-african-countries-idUSKCN1MR0KH>.

30 "Ethiopia: Army Sends 1,000 Officers to Russia for Naval Training, Report Says," *Stratfor*, December 11, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/situation-report/ethiopia-army-sends-1000-officers-russia-naval-training-report-says>.



Port of Berbera, Somalia. (Wikimedia Commons)

international peacekeeping missions.<sup>31</sup> This rhetoric suggests that Russia is taking steps towards consolidating a defense partnership with Ethiopia, in spite of prior delays.

#### *RUSSIA'S POTENTIAL AMBITIONS FOR A NAVAL BASE ON THE HORN OF AFRICA*

Due to Russia's rising profile in Sub-Saharan Africa, which was revealed by the Sochi summit and growth of Russian arms sales to the region, speculation has grown about Russia's desire to establish a naval base on the Red Sea. On January 28, 2020, the *New York Times* quoted anonymous Pentagon officials who claimed that Russia was interested in constructing a military base in Somaliland's port of Berbera. The base would allow Russia to establish a sphere of influence near Chinese and U.S. bases in

Djibouti.<sup>32</sup> However, this speculation was swiftly quashed by the Kremlin. On February 7, Ambassador Golovanov stated, "Russia does not consider the port of Berbera to deploy a military base. Negotiations on this issue are not conducted."<sup>33</sup>

Even though the Kremlin denies its interest in building a base, the prospects of Russia constructing a military installation on the Horn of Africa should not be completely discounted. During former President Omar al-Bashir's last months in power, Sudan engaged in negotiations with Russia on establishing a base on its Red Sea coast,<sup>34</sup> and Moscow's cordial relationship with Sudan's post-transition government has resulted in the advancement of these talks. Djibouti reportedly denied Russia's offer to construct a military base, in response to intense countervailing pressure from

31 "Ethiopia Wants to Modernize Army in Cooperation with Russia-Amb," *Fana Broadcasting*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-wants-to-modernise-army-in-cooperation-with-russia-amb/>.

32 Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Russia Exerts Growing Influence in Africa, Worrying Many in the West," *New York Times*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/world/africa/russia-africa-troops.html>.

33 "Mikhail Golovanov: Dzhibuti I Somali Zhdut Rossiyskikh Ivestorov [Mikhail Golovanov: Djibouti and Somalia are Waiting for Russian Investors]," *RIA Novosti*, 2020.

34 "Sudan May Show Interest in Hosting Russian Naval Base, Expert Says," *TASS*, April 22, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1054964>.

## EVEN THOUGH THE KREMLIN DENIES ITS INTEREST IN BUILDING A BASE, THE PROSPECTS OF RUSSIA CONSTRUCTING A MILITARY INSTALLATION ON THE HORN OF AFRICA SHOULD NOT BE COMPLETELY DISCOUNTED.

the United States.<sup>35</sup> Establishing a base in Berbera could potentially have negative implications for Russia's bilateral relationship with Somalia, as Mogadishu views Somaliland as an illegitimate breakaway republic. Due to the dearth of other viable options for a Red Sea facility, Eritrea is the most likely venue for a base or major military installation in the Horn of Africa.

In August 2018, Lavrov announced Russia's intention to construct a logistics center in Eritrea, which would give Moscow a foothold on the Red Sea.<sup>36</sup> The Soviet Union had a history of stationing ships and naval equipment on the Ethiopian island of Nokra, which is now part of Eritrea, and Russian defense

analysts like Viktor Murakhovsky have noted that proximity to the bridge between the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean is useful for a naval base.<sup>37</sup> Lavrov has also admitted that the construction of a logistics center in Eritrea would benefit Russia-Eritrea trade relations, which could result in mineral extraction, agricultural machinery transfer, and infrastructure development deals in a post-sanctions environment.<sup>38</sup>

Skeptics of the sincerity of Lavrov's statements contend that potential opposition from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as the financial cost of a Red Sea facility, might prevent a logistics center from being built in Eritrea.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, pressure from influential figures within the Russian military establishment and Moscow's desire to avoid being excluded from the international competition for influence in the Horn of Africa could cause Russia to eventually construct a base on the Red Sea.

## RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Since early 2018, U.S. policymakers have viewed Russia and China as major challengers to U.S. influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Due to U.S. counterterrorism operations in Somalia and the U.S. base presence in Djibouti, the Horn of Africa has become an

35 Marcel Plichta, "Why Russia is Standing by Sudan's Bashir," *World Politics Review*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27714/with-russian-activity-in-sudan-growing-moscow-stands-by-bashir>.

36 "Vedet Peregovory o Sozhdanii Logisticheskogo Tsentra v Portu Eritrei [Russia is in Talks to Establish a Logistics Center in a Port off Eritrea]," *RIA Novosti*, August 31, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180831/1527595506.html>.

37 Amalia Zadari, "Rossiyskaya Baza v Sudane: 'Eto Chudovishchnyye Raskhody' [Russian Base in Sudan: These Are 'Monstrous Expenses']," *Gazeta*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/12/01/11024036.shtml>

38 "Vedet Peregovory o Sozhdanii Logisticheskogo Tsentra v Portu Eritrei [Russia is in Talks to Establish a Logistics Center in a Port off Eritrea]," *RIA Novosti*, 2018.

39 Vasily Dianov, "Rossiyskaya Voyennaya Baza v Eritreya: Plyusy I Minusy [Russian Military Base in Eritrea: Pros and Cons]," *Oborona*, October 25, 2019, <https://oborona.ru/includes/periodics/navy/2019/1025/093527956/detail.shtml>.

important theater of great power competition. In order to avoid creating tensions with China or causing local officials to view Russia's assertiveness as an extension of Chinese primacy, Russian officials generally refrain from making normative assessments of Beijing's strategy in the Horn of Africa. Notwithstanding the Kremlin's reticence, the Russian analytical community typically views Beijing's presence as benign or beneficial. Alexei Maslov, an expert on China at the Higher School of Economics, has dismissed the prospect of Russia-China competition in the Horn of Africa, even if a Russian base were established in Sudan, and he argued that Moscow was much more concerned about Chinese humanitarian initiatives in Syria and Beijing's resurgence in the Persian Gulf.<sup>40</sup> Igor Yanavrev, a Russian analyst, opined that hawks within the U.S. Department of Defense could invoke the threat of China's presence in the Horn of Africa to prevent cuts to U.S. forces involved in counterterrorism operations in Somalia.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to the lack of direct competition between Moscow and Beijing in the Horn of Africa, China's military base in Djibouti could also have strategic benefits for Russia. The potential contribution of China's base in Djibouti to the security of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait ensures that Moscow does not need to invest limited economic resources in protecting that trade route.<sup>42</sup> Although Russia does not rely on the Bab el-Mandeb

## THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF CHINA'S BASE IN DJIBOUTI TO THE SECURITY OF THE BAB EL-MANDEB STRAIT ENSURES THAT MOSCOW DOES NOT NEED TO INVEST LIMITED ECONOMIC RESOURCES IN PROTECTING THAT TRADE ROUTE.

Strait for commercial shipping, Russia's status alongside Saudi Arabia as a de facto guarantor of the price of oil means that it is naturally concerned about disruptions to supply on a trade route where 500,000 to 700,000 barrels of Saudi oil transit per day. Russia's ability to land ships on a regular basis in Djibouti's main port, which is protected by the Chinese security umbrella, is also an important benefit from Moscow's perspective.<sup>43</sup>

While the short-to-medium term outlook

40 Zadari, "Rossiyskaya Baza v Sudane: 'Eto Chudovishchnyye Raskhody' [Russian Base in Sudan: These Are 'Monstrous Expenses'];" *Gazeta*, 2017.

41 Igor Yanavrev, "Rossiyu Podozrevayut v Sozdanii bazy v Somali SSHA: Obespokoyeny Interesom Moskvyy k Afrike [Russia Suspected of Creating a Base in Somalia: US Worries about Moscow's Interest in Africa]," *News.ru*, February 3, 2020, <https://news.ru/africa/rossiyu-podozrevayut-v-sozdanii-bazy-v-somali/>.

42 Maxim Yusin, "Pyat Bazovykh Stran [Five Base Country]," *Kommersant*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3217935>.

43 Yusin, "Pyat Bazovykh Stran [Five Base Country]," *Kommersant*, 2017.



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Picture: China's naval base in Djibouti. (mod.gov.ca)

## BEYOND THE EXTRA-REGIONAL CONTEXT, A DJIBOUTI-INSPIRED MILITARIZATION OF THE BRI COULD POSE A SERIOUS CHALLENGE TO RUSSIA'S ASPIRATIONS IN AFRICA.

for Russia-China relations in the Horn of Africa is positive, potential storm clouds could emerge as Moscow's influence in the region increases. As the continued growth of China's Belt and Road Initiative depends on the preservation of political stability, Chinese policymakers believe that Russia's willingness to sell arms to rival states and factions within civil wars is destabilizing.<sup>44</sup> China's concerns about Russian arms transfers first surfaced in the Central African Republic (CAR), as Russia has sold weapons to both the CAR government and Selaka alliance of rebel groups that threaten oil deposits held by Chinese companies in the northern part of the country.<sup>45</sup> China views the repetition of indiscriminate Russian arms sales in the Horn of Africa as a similarly unwelcome development. Lingering tensions between Eritrea and Djibouti could result in frictions between Russia and China, as Moscow has supplied Djibouti's Air Force with Mi-35 attack helicopters and has sold arms to Eritrea. China's offer to mediate during the July 2017 Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute<sup>46</sup> suggests that it would benefit from a swift diplomatic resolution to this potential conflict, which could be jeopardized by Russian arms sales.

In addition, some Russian analysts are concerned that China's naval base presence in Djibouti and hegemonic aspirations in the Horn of Africa signify an interventionist turn in Chinese foreign policy. If China's interventionist policies in the Horn of Africa

were to serve as a model for Beijing's actions in other regions, then China could crowd Russia out of its emerging theaters of power projection and challenge Russia's vital interests. Vasily Kashin, an expert on Chinese foreign policy at the Valdai Discussion Club, views China's base construction in Djibouti as a springboard for greater assertiveness in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea.<sup>47</sup> Mikhail Sergeev, the chief economics correspondent for Moscow's *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, noted that China's base presence in Djibouti created a precedent for a more militarized Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>48</sup>

Beyond the extra-regional context, a Djibouti-inspired militarization of the BRI could pose a serious challenge to Russia's aspirations in Africa. The expansion of

44 Vita Spivak, "Russia and China in Africa: Allies or Rivals?" Carnegie Moscow Center, October 25, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80181>.

45 Spivak, "Russia and China in Africa: Allies or Rivals?" Carnegie Moscow Center, 2019.

46 Liu Zhen, "China offers to Mediate Djibouti-Eritrea Border Row as it Expands Military Presence in Africa," *South China Morning Post*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2103947/china-offers-mediate-djibouti-eritrea-border-row-it>.

47 Vasily Kashin quoted in Mikhail Sergeev, "Kitai Mozhet Postroit Voyennyye Bazy Na Svoyem Shelkovom Puti [China Can Build Military Bases on the Silk Road]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 3, 2019, [http://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-05-03/100\\_silkway0305.html](http://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-05-03/100_silkway0305.html).

48 Sergeev, "Kitai Mozhet Postroit Voyennyye Bazy Na Svoyem Shelkovom Puti [China Can Build Military Bases on the Silk Road]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2019.



## 'Glimmer of Transparency': AFRICOM Admits to Killing 2 Somali Civilians in New Casualties Report

Sputnik News headline, April 27, 2020.

Chinese involvement in African security could infringe on the foundations of Russia's power projection strategies in Africa, which rely on providing security assistance in theatres like Sudan and Mozambique and converting this military presence into diplomatic influence in protracted conflicts, like the Central African Republic civil war. Chinese private security companies (PSCs), which have remained a fixture of Beijing's policy in Africa since they arrived in Zambia in 2010 and South Sudan in 2012,<sup>49</sup> could compete directly with Russian military training initiatives in the Horn of Africa. This prospect was widely debated after China's establishment of a base in Djibouti, as Russian media outlets noted the presence of Chinese PSCs in Ethiopia and Eritrea and highlighted informal links between Chinese security personnel and Blackwater.<sup>50</sup> Although Russia and China's overall relationship in the Horn of Africa is cooperative, periods of inter-state conflict

or greater Chinese assertiveness in other theaters could adversely impact Moscow-Beijing relations in this unstable region.

## FUTURE TRENDS IN RUSSIA'S INVOLVEMENT ON THE HORN OF AFRICA

As Russia wishes to regulate its involvement in the resolution of the Horn of Africa's numerous security challenges, Moscow is likely to remain in the "engaged opportunist" role, which has defined its post-2008 presence in the region. Despite the unlikelihood of a radical overhaul

49 Sergey Sukhanin, "Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects," *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, vol. 20, no. 9, May 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-private-security-contractors-new-trends-and-future-prospects/>.

50 "Krasnyy i Opasnyy" (Red and Dangerous), *Lenta*, January 9, 2018, [https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/01/09/chinese\\_warriors/](https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/01/09/chinese_warriors/).

in Russian policy towards the Horn of Africa, Moscow's strategy towards the region could be impacted by an intensification of tensions between Russia and Western powers (principally France and the United States), as well as reverberations from the expansion of Russia's influence in the Middle East.

## RUSSIA VIEWS FRANCE AS A POTENTIAL COMPETITOR IN THE SECURITY SPHERE, AS BOTH COUNTRIES WISH TO BENEFIT FROM CONCERNS AMONG THE COUNTRIES IN THE HORN OF AFRICA ABOUT AN OVERRELIANCE ON CHINA.

Although Russia is broadly suspicious of Western involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa, Moscow directly competes with France in the Horn of Africa and tries to act as a spoiler for U.S. ambitions in the region. Russia views France as a potential competitor in the security sphere, as both countries wish to benefit from concerns among the countries

in the Horn of Africa about an overreliance on China. The December 2019 announcement of Russia's expanded naval cooperation with Ethiopia closely followed France's negotiation of a similar agreement with Addis Ababa in March 2019. This coincidence in timing illustrates the competitive dynamic in France-Russia relations in the Horn of Africa.<sup>51</sup> Alexander Karpov, a Russian political analyst, argued that France's deal with Addis Ababa aimed to link Ethiopia with Djibouti, a former French colony, and mirrored France's efforts to strengthen its relationships with countries that it did not previously occupy, such as Nigeria and Ghana.<sup>52</sup> As Russia has established closer relations with Mali and the Central African Republic, which are theaters where France is involved, and condemned France's conduct in both countries, Moscow could leverage its burgeoning security partnership with Ethiopia in order to detach Addis Ababa from Paris.

As Russia does not wish to militarily intervene in the Horn of Africa, its ability to challenge U.S. influence in the region is limited. Instead, Russia could try to undermine the credibility of the United States in the Horn of Africa by launching a concerted information war against U.S. military activities. After U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's African tour in February 2020, an article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* noted Ethiopian public animosity towards the United States by stating that many Ethiopians were "used as cannon fodder in hot spots in Africa by American commanders."<sup>53</sup> *RT* and *Sputnik* have extensively highlighted casualties resulting from U.S. counterterrorism strikes in Somalia and have expressed doubt about the credibility of U.S. government

51 John Irish, "Ethiopia, France Sign Military, Navy Deal, Turn 'New Page' in Ties," *Reuters*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-france/ethiopia-france-sign-military-navy-deal-turn-new-page-in-ties-idUSKBN1QT2W3>.

52 Alexander Karpov, "Kak Postroit Flot Bez Vykhoda k Moryu? Efiopiya [How to Build a Fleet Without Access to the Sea? Ethiopia]," *Regnum*, May 6, 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2624390.html>.

53 Danila Moiseev, "Amerika Obeshchayet Pomoshch Afrikanskomu Gorbachevu [America Promises Assistance to African Gorbachev]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 19, 2020, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2020-02-19/1\\_7798\\_africa.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2020-02-19/1_7798_africa.html).

reports on death tolls in Somalia.<sup>54</sup>

Negative Russian media coverage could impact local opinions of U.S. military conduct, due to *RT Arabic's* rising popularity in Africa. Due to its extensive social media footprint and youth outreach efforts, *RT Arabic's* viewership surpasses *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* in Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Sudan.<sup>55</sup> While quantitative data on the reach of Russian state media outlets in the Horn of Africa is limited, *RT* and *Sputnik's* emphasis on positive news stories from Africa<sup>56</sup> ensures that its stories are regularly reprinted and circulated in local media outlets, which magnifies the impact of Russia's information war against the U.S.

In addition to potential frictions between Russia, France, and the United States, the trajectory of Russian influence in the Horn of Africa could be impacted by Moscow's actions in the Middle East. Since March 2019, Russia has established close ties with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a United Arab Emirates-aligned south Yemeni separatist group, and the STC's recent declaration of self-rule in southern Yemen could give Moscow a geopolitical foothold in Aden.<sup>57</sup> Closer ties between Russia and an autonomous southern Yemen would allow Moscow to project influence on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden,<sup>58</sup> and reciprocally strengthen its links with the Horn of Africa. On a contrasting note, Russia's engagement with Ethiopia could become more circumspect if tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over

the Grand Renaissance Dam persist, as Cairo is an increasingly important partner for Russia in Libya and Syria and a significant purchaser of Russian weaponry. The Horn of Africa continues to be a secondary priority for Russia's relationships with Egypt, Turkey, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and Moscow will likely reduce its involvement in the Horn of Africa if its actions infringe on the objectives of any of these partners.

Although Russia's influence in the Horn of Africa has grown considerably since 2008, Moscow's role in the region remains that of an "engaged opportunist," as it eschews binding alliances or security commitments in the region. Russia's chief short-term priorities are to expand its array of arms exports in the region and deepen its military cooperation with Ethiopia. In the long term, Russia views Eritrea's Red Sea coast as a potential location for a military base or logistics center. With respect to foreign powers, Russia largely views China as a constructive force, sees France as a competitor, and wishes to act as a spoiler to U.S. ambitions in the region, but modalities exist in Moscow's perspectives on these three great powers. Ultimately, the trajectory of Russian influence in the Horn of Africa will be significantly impacted by its ability to devote resources towards establishing a foothold on the Red Sea and to navigate constraints laid out by its Middle Eastern partners. 

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54 "US Says No Civilians Have Died in Somali Airstrikes, Contrary to Probe Findings," *Sputnik*, March 20, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/africa/201903201073410200-US-Says-Zero-Civilian-Death-Somali-Airstrikes-Contrary-Probe/>.

55 Anna Borschevskaya and Catherine Cleveland, "Russia's Arabic Propaganda: What it is, Why it Matters?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2018, p. 5, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/Policy-Note57-BorshchevskayaCleveland.pdf>.

56 Evan Gershkovich, "At Russia's Inaugural Summit, Moscow Sells Sovereignty," *Moscow Times*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/26/russias-inaugural-africa-summit-moscow-sells-sovereignty-a67916>.

57 Kirill Semenov, "Does Russia Seek Return of Independent South Yemen?," *Al Monitor*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/russia-south-yemen-uae-prospects.html>.

58 Giorgio Cafiero, "Self-Rule" in Aden and the Implications for Russia," *Middle East Institute*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/self-rule-aden-and-implications-russia>.

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