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BIEA INNOVATIVE RESEARCH IN AFRICA

THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF EASTERN AFRICA

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On 20 May, the British Institute of Eastern Africa (BIEA), Chatham House, and the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) convened a group of experts to discuss the 'The New Geopolitics of Eastern Africa'.[1] The closed-door roundtable considered the ongoing transformation of regional order, including: the extent of change and continuity; the implications for domestic political and conflict systems; the relative agency of different actors; potential opportunities for greater alignment within the region and increased cooperation across the Red Sea; and a research agenda going forward. The event was followed by a public discussion on 21 May exploring regional responses to current changes. This brief highlights analytical insights and points of debate arising from both events. Individual participants are not referenced as the roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule.

A REGION IN FLUX

Eastern Africa is experiencing a profound multi-decade shift in its relationship with the wider world. The role of "the West" in promoting regional peace and security, always contested and flawed, is decreasing in significance and coherence. In the Red Sea, where the West was previously able to guarantee the security of vital shipping lanes, Houthi attacks have significantly impeded traffic. The resurgence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden reinforces a trend towards maritime instability. In tandem, geopolitical competition has surged in the Red Sea littoral, as great powers and Middle Eastern players vie for political influence, expansion of security and commercial interests, control of strategic resources and infrastructure, and the promotion of various divergent ideologies. The fallout from the US and Israeli attack on Iran, including the latter's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, is set to accentuate competition for control of this alternative maritime chokepoint. The Israeli regime's pursuit of genocide in Gaza with impunity, following Hamas's horrendous attack on 7 October 2023, hangs over this new geopolitical flux, signalling the irrelevance of multilateral norms and international law in containing new dynamics of contestation.

These shifts in international and regional order have interfaced with existing political and economic systems in Eastern African states. This is especially the case in contexts shaped by violent conflict, such as Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, where the agendas of warring parties, and Middle Eastern and global actors intersect. This represents

1 This report was authored by Partha Moman (LSE/BIEA), while Geoffrey Lugano (RVI) compiled a full record of the events. The events were a joint initiative by the BIEA, Chatham House and RVI. They were funded by BIEA with the support of the British Academy and the Folke Bernadotte Academy of the Swedish Government and were part of the wider 'Eastern Africa in the World' seminar series held by BIEA. We are grateful to all the participants and speakers for sharing their insights, though they cannot be named specifically to protect anonymity.

the constitution of a new regional security complex in which geopolitical flux and domestic trends enmesh to reshape the possibilities for both Eastern African societies and the trajectory of change for regional and international order.

Historical trajectories and parallels were used to shed light on the nature of this shift, though the relevance of history was also hotly debated. Parallels were drawn with the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the region was defined by competition between imperial powers—the British, French, Ottoman, Ethiopian and others—over control of ports and trade routes. This analogy suggested that such transitions of order can last several decades, feature continuous reconfigurations of alignments between different actors, and be marked by contestation over fundamental concepts of sovereignty and international law. Contemporary players also deploy historical narratives to frame engagement in the region, further warranting examination of the past to interrogate these attempts at legitimation. At the same time, some participants cautioned that current changes were marked by very different dynamics, for example the emergence of oil-rich Gulf states as influential players, or widespread technological change. Moreover, it was noted that an over-emphasis on history can reinforce notions—often negative—of path-dependency, rather than help reveal potential opportunities.

Geopolitical change is triggering new debates on the boundaries of the region. Analysis, and by extension policy, is no longer easily contained inside geographical concepts, such as "East Africa" or the "Horn of Africa". Indeed, several observers argued that there are now deep interdependencies between Eastern Africa and the Middle East and that these must be viewed as one region centred on the Red Sea. At the same time, the exact scope of this new region threatens to encompass so many players and geographies that insightful and accurate analysis becomes increasingly challenging. Moreover, some argued that existing economic and political connections had always blurred distinctions between conceptualizations of the region imposed by colonial powers and Cold War-influenced knowledge communities.

"New" powers from the Middle East are much more consequential, but their actions are not easily reducible to clear and coherent agendas. The foreign policies of states such as Türkiye, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are, like most other countries, the product of internal domestic contestation, multiple modes of self-identification, and trade-offs between different interests. As such, any one actor's intervention in Eastern Africa could be shaped by a complex mix of grand strategy, pressing national security interests, economic and commercial adventurism, ideological precepts, contingent reactions to the actions of other players, or historical and religious ties. This has led to diverse, changing, and sometimes contradictory and counter-productive policies in the region.

Moreover, despite the media focus on regional powers operating in neat and coherent blocs, participants highlighted how relationships between Middle Eastern powers are often fraught and have regularly fluctuated during the past decade. Relations may well continue to do so in the coming period, especially as several of these countries face their own domestic economic and political challenges that could trigger new pivots in foreign policy. However, concerns were also raised that Israel's more proactive role in the region, including its recent recognition of Somaliland and growing cooperation with the UAE's own expansive agenda, could disrupt this fluctuating status quo, as more actors coordinate to contain a perceived threat from this consolidating alliance.

There was considerable debate over where agency lies in the relationship between Middle Eastern powers and East African players. Participants highlighted the massive asymmetry in resources between the Middle East, especially hydrocarbon-rich Gulf Arab countries, and East African states. Yet others cautioned against viewing Gulf countries as all-powerful in their engagement in the region, arguing that their interests were partly driven by existential threats, such as food security and control of vital trade routes, and they remained reliant on the United States and other security partnerships. The US and Israeli attack on Iran and commensurate instability in the Gulf has also shown the limits of Gulf power and wealth. At the same time, participants noted that political actors in Eastern Africa were also shaping the agendas of extra-regional players, constraining their room for manoeuvre, and embroiling external actors in conflicts to meet their own goals. More widely, the highly unstable multipolar context provides opportunities for African elites to negotiate alignments that meet their domestic agendas. Ethiopia in particular was held up as an example of an actor that was seeking to bend external patronage to meet its own ends of expanding maritime access.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

Contemporary conflict in Eastern Africa is highly internationalized, but some participants expressed a concern that the role of external players was over-privileged in analysis. All agreed that current geopolitical shifts were having a profound impact on conflict, and that there were real concerning trends in the role of extra-regional players. But it was also observed that analytical focus on Middle Eastern actors and their action may reflect a lack of access to conflict zones, rather than realities on the ground. While geopolitical re-alignments feature across international headlines and are legible across global capitals, the complexity and significance of local dynamics in driving conflict can often be misunderstood or underplayed altogether. This is critical to framing and developing solutions to regional challenges. For example, it suggests that focus on 'the Quad'—comprised of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and the United States—as the primary peace-making vehicle to address the war in Sudan, is insufficient to address structural and domestic drivers of conflict in the country.

Geopolitical shifts are playing out differently across contexts. In Sudan, it was noted that, although conflict was motivated and driven by domestic and historical trends, its intensity was greatly accentuated by the willingness of external actors to back different sides in the war. In Ethiopia, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has attempted to leverage geopolitical flux as an opportunity to assert regional dominance and establish more preferential access to the sea, even though internal conflict dynamics are increasingly hindering Ethiopia's ability to achieve these goals. In Somalia, which has long had its political and security dynamics shaped by external players, a deeper shift was noted. Over the last decade, a political elite which emerged in part through its ability to interface with Western intervention complexes in the region, is gradually being replaced by a class of brokers who have the social capital to engage and work with Middle Eastern powers.

There was also speculation that geopolitical flux could create openings for conflict resolution. For example, the US-led "War on Terror" was observed as being a driver of conflict in the region, often privileging kinetic interventions and US national security interests over more political solutions to conflict. The potential retreat of such an approach in an era of great power competition, could open new opportunities for peace-making, for example, by presenting new avenues for dialogue between the Federal Government of Somalia and al-Shabaab. Moreover, it

was observed that regional elites can now deposit capital, often accumulated through control of the state, in Middle Eastern financial hubs. The impact of this is yet to be determined, potentially provoking local grievances against the enrichment of elite cliques, but also possibly reducing the personal stakes of leaders to maintain state control.

Geopolitical shifts are coinciding with the closure of political space and the reduced accountability of elites. Most participants were clear-eyed that Eastern Africa has faced repeated challenges of authoritarian and repressive rule since independence, reflecting some of the legacies of colonial states. Yet, there was general agreement that current geopolitical shifts were accentuating a negative trend in democratic or more representative governance. Elections, once a supposed hallmark of democratization, are increasingly tools to legitimate authoritarian regimes, and triggers of repression and conflict. Protests are often the only available avenue for citizens to challenge governments, and they increasingly lead to brutal crackdowns, rather than changes in policy.

Western liberal actors had previously played a role, albeit problematic and inconsistent, in enabling civil society and pressuring regimes to limit abuses of power. As Western actors pivot away from the region—as well as away from multilateralism and liberal global governance, and towards far-right ideologies and protecting national interests—their sometimes-positive influence has declined. By contrast, new powers, many of which are autocracies or monarchies themselves, provide Eastern African elites with new access to resources and military support with fewer conditions, enabling them to consolidate power. Indeed, it was observed that these actors likely see the commercial aspects of their foreign policies better served by partnerships with authoritarian and militarized regimes, rather than democratic players. The growing lack of accountability of elites was also seen as a conflict driver, as warring parties are increasingly able to deploy violence to pursue political goals with impunity.

Shifts in regional order also appear to be disrupting the primacy of the state and sovereignty as organizing political concepts. Participants highlighted that non-state and de facto autonomous actors were becoming increasingly entrenched in political landscapes, whether it be the Rapid Support Forces, the Tigray Interim Administration or al-Shabaab. This in part reflects a trend of consolidated fragmentation, where different political fragments, regardless of their level of formal statehood, are able to leverage external support from across the increasingly multipolar global political landscape. This trend is coinciding with an acceleration of challenges to the norms of sovereignty in the region and other aspects of a rules-based order, from the assertion of Ethiopian claims beyond its current borders, to the Israeli recognition of Somaliland. Concerns that engagements by Middle Eastern powers, even when centred on formal states, parallel previous colonial relationships are adding to the sense that sovereignty, long fragile in a region subject to imperial rule and intrusive Western military intervention, is increasingly open to contestation.

Global convulsions are also posing major new challenges to already fragile economies. The shuttering of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and massive decline in international aid is leading to shocks and stresses, such as deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Somalia. During the past decade capital inflows from China have also gradually reduced as the commodity supercycle has ebbed. This is exacerbated by the increasing constraints warring parties have placed on the humanitarian system. In tandem, Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, in response to US and Israeli attacks, has led to increases in food, fertilizer and fuel prices in Eastern African countries, most of which are net energy importers and have few

strategic hydrocarbon reserves. Its impact is likely to last for months, if not years. Economic challenges are placing further pressure on indebted treasuries in the region, even as states fail to harness the widening tax base resulting from demographic growth. Instead the fiscal capacity of the state risks declining further compared with the needs and expectations of a growing population. Paradoxically, it remains clear that Eastern African states need capital to survive and thrive, meaning that partnerships with Gulf players will necessarily continue to be explored in the near-term, even as new connectivities bring additional challenges.

EMERGING RESPONSES

Existing multilateral organizations are struggling to respond effectively to these shifts. The UN is failing to hold political space amid increasing great power competition and funding challenges, reinforced by its bureaucracy's growing aversion to deploying its traditional good offices and peacekeeping roles in conflict settings, as well as outdated state-centric approaches. This was most clear in the UN's reluctance to engage in mediation during the war in Tigray in 2020. The AU too has struggled to maintain a coherent and effective peace and security role, as non-African powers gain greater prominence. It has been unable to broker negotiations in Sudan, its mission in Ethiopia has achieved little in ensuring the implementation of the 2022 Pretoria Agreement, and its sole surviving peace operation in Somalia faces financial collapse. Participants argued that the AU was hamstrung by a lack of political will among its member states to support collective action or fund its budget, making it susceptible to external agendas. The East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), were seen as valuable in principle, but hindered by internal divisions and their overlapping mandates. The Red Sea Council, an initiative led by Saudi Arabia, was seen as also being ineffectual due to its exclusion of major non-littoral states (particularly the UAE and Ethiopia), and competition between Cairo and Riyadh.

Participants pointed to several ways in which collective action by states could be revitalized. For example, it was mooted that the EAC and IGAD could be merged to better reflect regional connectivity and ensure that all the major influential players on the East African side are included in one framework. In parallel, IGAD has previously launched initiatives to engage the Red Sea region and these could be revitalized. With regard to the Red Sea Council, it was suggested that expanding its membership could increase its effectiveness. The AU could be greatly strengthened if member states took on responsibility for its budget—at just over USD 600 million per year, this was considered within continental means. Effective AU-led coordination in response to the Covid-19 pandemic also provided a powerful example of the body's crisis response capacity. Multilateral frameworks aside, a case was also made for the proactive use of "minilateralism"—small, flexible groups of states organized around specific issues—to increase state–state cooperation. The potential mediation capacities of states such as Oman and Qatar were also highlighted as relevant to de-escalating Eastern African peace and security challenges, though the current war with Iran was minimizing the scope for these actors to play such a role.

Eastern African states must also weigh challenging foreign policy choices to respond to this geopolitical turmoil. Although it was made clear that the current crop of leaders is mostly acting against the wider public interest, it is evident that Eastern African states face genuine dilemmas in articulating a foreign policy that can respond to national concerns. This reflects the fact that external players are increasing in number, more divided, and the alliances between them increasingly fragile. Developing foreign policy that can leverage external resources, while

avoiding being subsumed into great power competition is therefore extremely challenging. A potential response to this could be "strategic non-alignment", whereby states avoid explicitly siding with blocs at the global and regional level, while simultaneously forging a select number of mutually beneficial, long-term bilateral partnerships on specific issue areas. Domestic reform to mitigate fragmentation can also allow Eastern African states to act more assertively on the world stage, as can defining and leveraging their comparative advantage. Collective engagement from the region through multilateral bodies could also avoid divisions between Eastern African actors being accentuated by the competing geopolitical agendas.

Emphasis was placed on the role of people-to-people, bottom-up or "Track II" dialogue initiatives as a key infrastructure for promoting peace and stability in the region. It was noted that networks between intellectuals, researchers and experts that span both sides of the Red Sea are thin, constraining space for independent thought in response to regional challenges. Strengthening these linkages in the long-term could increase mutual understanding, as well provide informal channels for anticipating and problem-solving emerging issues. Stronger regional networks could also help transcend ways of framing conflict—from "Ethiopian imperialism" to "Somali irredentism"—that have so far limited cooperation. In tandem, transnational civil society mobilization in borderlands was mentioned as a potentially valuable approach to addressing regional security issues. More widely, it was noted that local-level ceasefires and peace agreements could be more feasible and effective pathways to mitigating conflict dynamics, while informal youth-led networks may be most significant for advancing democratic change. Participants also noted that community-led infrastructures were increasingly best positioned to deliver humanitarian aid.

A research agenda that could support such a movement must rapidly adapt its focus, audience and business model. Knowledge production in Eastern Africa continues to be shaped by the legacies of colonialism, prioritizing Western ways of knowing. Western donors have continued to be central to funding and supporting research on peace and security challenges in the region. Yet now these same actors are deprioritizing research as a whole, while remaining areas of focus are increasingly linked to their national interests such as migration, shipping and superficial questions of regional macro-stability. At the same time, this may provide openings for researchers and institutions from within the region to shape research agendas. A greater focus could also be placed on influencing domestic publics, empowering citizens to advocate for change and increase the accountability of elites. This would require rethinking the formats and language of research outputs to connect with a broader group of people outside elites. Others raised the need to conduct research to influence middle powers or China, and informal spaces where many Eastern African elites convene. In terms of topics, participants highlighted the need to advance research that explores: human security and the securitization of everyday life; civil society and bottom-up connectivities across the Red Sea; labour migration and rights across the region; the evolution of state decay; tracing new financial flows into the region; and assessing the risks posed by Israeli engagement in the Horn. Research must also be attentive to challenges emerging from new technologies, such as disinformation through social media, state control over the Internet, and growing digital violence against women and girls. Finally, the development of a future research agenda faces a number critical challenges, such as the mobilization of resources and the maintenance of independence amid an increasingly polarized global landscape. Nonetheless, participants agreed on the urgency of tackling these issues and connecting researchers across disciplinary and national divides to examine the changing geopolitics of the region in-depth and spark new ideas on how to respond.