

China in the Horn of Africa: Neo-Colonialism or Strategic Manoeuvrers in the Era of Great Power Rivalry?

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Abstract

With the end of the unipolar world, China's rise has seen it challenge Washington's hegemony in not only Asia-Pacific, but also Latin America and Africa. Nowhere stronger in Africa is this Great Power Rivalry than in the Horn of Africa. With energy interests, shipping lanes, business ventures and security concerns, the Horn of Africa has become polarised on the global stage because of China's economic penetration. This penetration has called to question whether Beijing is engaged in neo-colonialism in the region or making partnerships and strategic manoeuvres to outpace Washington in winning favour with Horn of African states. It appears that Beijing has outmanoeuvred Washington as states in the Horn of Africa respond to partnership initiatives by China rather than establishing a culture of aid dependency like the US has created. This model of engaging with developing states has won favour in the Horn of Africa.

Keywords: Horn of Africa, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, China, USA, Power Rivalry, Neo-colonialism.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa, for its strategic location, has traditionally always been a major point of contention and importance. Trade routes linking China and India with Egypt and Europe pass through the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea and onto the Suez Canal before finally reaching the Mediterranean Sea. The Horn of Africa refers to the peninsula strutting out in Northeast Africa and containing Somalia which lays on the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, Djibouti on the strategic maritime chokepoint known as Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Eritrea on the Red Sea, and Ethiopia which is entirely landlocked and reliant on its neighbours for sea access.

Following the Berlin conference of 1884-1885, Colonial Powers (Britain, Italy and France) divided up the Horn of Africa among themselves; France occupying French Somaliland now known as Djibouti; Britain taking the big portion of Somali Peninsula; and Italy took possession of Eritrea as well as Italian Somaliland which is now part of the Somali Republic, with the Italians making strong efforts to also fully subjugate Ethiopia (Yared, 2012). The major colonial powers were content with this division of the Horn of Africa as they all had access to the strategic maritime location. With the so-called end of colonialism in the post-World War Two period and the changing global order dominated by two great Super Powers, the Soviet Union and the United States (US), the Horn of Africa was a contested region between those great Super Powers (Yordanov, 2017). This global rivalry between the Soviet Union and the US ultimately spilled over into local rivalries and conflicts, and in the case of the Horn of Africa, this was primarily between Ethiopia and Somalia, but also involving Eritrea, where Washington and Moscow supported one state over another depending on the current situation.

The implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 signalled what was meant to be an era of the New World Order as George Bush Senior termed it, where the US would dominate intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations and neoliberal institutions like the International Monetary Fund, and be the sole military and economic power of the world. This however has been challenged in the last decade by the rise of China. Coupled with a resurgent Russia, Washington's complete domination over the globe has been challenged.

Although continuously affected by conflict, drought and poverty, the strategic location of the volatile region of the Horn of Africa and its far reaching economic potential has made it a major point of Great Power projection and rivalry between the United States and China.

Academic publications have focused on the challenges and rivalry between Washington and Moscow in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Syria, and between Washington and Beijing in Asia-Pacific, however little scholarly attention has been placed on the immense power projections being made in the Horn of Africa between the US and China. China's newfound economic engagement with Africa has meant it is now challenging the United States on a new front outside of the Asia-Pacific region, as well as challenging the United Kingdom and France, former colonial masters of much of Africa.

A Chinese penetration into resource-rich Africa only means that Western hegemony and exploitation will be challenged. The Chinese model of engaging with the continent has meant that Africa is beginning to prefer to conduct business and receive investment opportunities from China, and shunning the neo-colonial demands made by the West (Quartey, 2013). However, for China to continue conducting business and invest in the continent, it needs to secure a

nexus of transportation in the Horn of Africa, as well as exploit the resources of the region.

The congested military bases of Djibouti, Somalia's decades long instability and untapped oil potential, Eritrea's self-imposed isolation but self-reliance, Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti for sea access, and never ending internal and external conflicts within or between these states has further polarised the Horn of Africa at a microlevel in addition to the macrolevel between the Great Powers.

Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century: Beijing's Challenge on Washington

The end of unipolarity was evident in 2008 when Russia defied the threat of war with US-led NATO when it met Georgia's aggression against South Ossetia and engaged in a successful conflict to defend its citizens (Bruno, 2008). This signalled that the dominance of the US and the set of enforced international rules and order that it imposed was being directly challenged. In this context, we can assign that this was the beginning of 21st Century Great Power Rivalry. This signals that an age of great-power competition and a changing global system has arrived where Russia and China are actively challenging Washington's primacy across the world and advancing a vision for a multipolar order that has a more balanced global economic and security system. However, Great Power Rivalry is not just reduced to the trilateral relations between Washington-Moscow-Beijing but also includes aspiring middle powers such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan among others.

All these states are engaged in a significant drive to dominate regional and/or global influence and primacy. On July 11, 2017, China officially began the first steps to establish its first overseas military

base in Djibouti (Woody, 2017). This would prove to be a peculiar choice when considering the vast distances between the Horn of Africa and China, but must be understood in the context of Great Power rivalry in the region.

Although referred to as a “military” base by international commentators, Xinhua, China’s state-owned news agency, described the new settlement as a “*support base*” which “*will ensure China’s performance of missions, such as escorting, peace-keeping, and humanitarian aid in Africa and west Asia*” (Xinhua, 2017).

In the early morning of July 11, 2017, China held an official ceremony in the port of Zhanjiang, south China’s Guangdong province. The commander of China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Shen Jinlong, “*read an order on constructing the base in Djibouti, and conferred military flag on the fleets,*” according to Xinhua (Ibid).

At the 12th Annual National People’s Congress held in 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained that:

“Like any growing powers, China’s interests are constantly expanding overseas. At present, there are 30,000 Chinese enterprises all over the world... An urgent task for China’s diplomacy is to maintain the growing overseas interests. How to maintain? I would like to tell you clearly that China will never go through the expansion path of the traditional powers, nor will China pursue hegemony. We want to explore a path with Chinese characteristics that both follows the trend of the times and is welcomed by all parties” (Gao, 2017).

It is this pursuit of ideological conviction with Chinese characteristics that has driven Beijing’s domestic and foreign policy since the

establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The statement by Yi inexplicitly states that "*China will never go through the expansion path of the traditional powers, nor will China pursue hegemony.*" Effectively China is emphasising to its international partners that it will not pursue a policy of military and economic domination as seen by Washington's pursuit for global hegemony. Whereas the United States has militarily intervened and destroyed Haiti, Yugoslavia and Iraq to name but a very few, or economically dominate the globe because of the US Dollar hegemony, China has engaged in its Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, or better known as the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) that seeks to economically develop all states involved in the initiative (Hancock, 2017).

The One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) aims to improve the connectivity of states to establish a China-centred trading network, thus improving China's standing in the world. This is a significantly different model of international trade to Washington's approach that has seen the deposition of non-compliant leaders who commit gross human rights violations without criticism because of their obedience to US demands.

The OBOR initiative is divided by two routes; a land overpass called the Silk Road Economic Belt that connects China to Europe through Central Asia; and the Maritime Silk Road connecting China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and onwards to Europe.



(Cai, 2017)

China is using OBOR to assert its new-found confidence into global leadership through significant economic integration. Its aim is to encourage development in China through better integration with international economies; upgrading Chinese industry while exporting Chinese standards; and addressing the problem of excess capacity. It is because of this ambitious effort to streamline China's economy to the global community that the Horn of Africa has been identified as a key region towards Beijing's business ventures into Africa and Europe with its maritime route. This however directly challenges hegemony on the continent as it is almost completely dominated by Western influence, particularly from the former colonial masters, the United Kingdom and France, as well as the US. Whereas the US has directly intervened in Somalia with its military and indirectly involved itself in the Ethiopian Civil War, China has not embroiled itself in any civil or foreign strife in the Horn of Africa (Crossley, Lees and Servos, 2013: 384).

The One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) exerts Beijing's influence across the globe through trade deals, infrastructure developments and business ventures. This is in stark contrast to Washington who still behaves in a unipolar manner by exerting its influence through military pressure, as seen with its backing of militant groups in Syria in the attempt to depose President Bashar al-Assad, threats of war with North Korea, and threats of using a military option to resolve the domestic crisis in Venezuela. The continuous military aggression by Washington has meant that much of the developing world is gravitating towards China as Beijing has proven in not only rhetoric, but also with action, that it is not intervening in a state's domestic affairs (Kuo, 2016). It is for this reason that much of Africa is increasing its economic and diplomatic relations with China.

The states constituting the Horn of Africa are no exception to these increasing relations between the continent and China, and therefore polarising the Great Power rivalry in this region is inevitable. Whereas the US has intervened in the Horn of African countries, particularly Somalia through military means since at least 1992; China has been engaged or shown interesting in the Horn of African countries through economic means. It is in this manner that China will surpass the US for global influence at some point in the 21st Century. As seen in the above map, Djibouti is highlighted as a key tenet to China's OBOR initiative, and it is in Djibouti that the Great Power rivalry between Washington and Beijing in the Horn of Africa may be played out.

An October 2016 Quartz publication presented data from Afrobarometer which revealed that 63% of the 56,000-people surveyed across 36 African countries responded that China's influence was positive (Wike, Stokes, Poushter, Fetterolf, 2017). This was mostly credited because of the Chinese investments in infrastructure, development and business. Meanwhile, although most Africans viewed the US favourably, there has

been a decline with each new poll conducted (Ibid). No research has been conducted yet to find whether this is a result of China's increasing favourable outlook on the continent.

China Enters the Horn of Africa

Most pivotal to influencing the Horn of Africa is the most stable state in the region, Djibouti. Although China has begun to significantly invest in Ethiopia, the full potential cannot be realised except with the security of a Chinese operated port in the region. The tiny Somali-majority state of Djibouti straddles at a strategic juncture in the Horn of Africa. It is for this reason that the US hosts its largest African military base in Djibouti, along with its key allies, France and Japan, and Saudi Arabia also having plans to do so (Antonopoulos, Villar, Cottle and Ahmed, 2017: 10). It is therefore not peculiar that China has decided to establish its first overseas military base in the tiny and congested state.

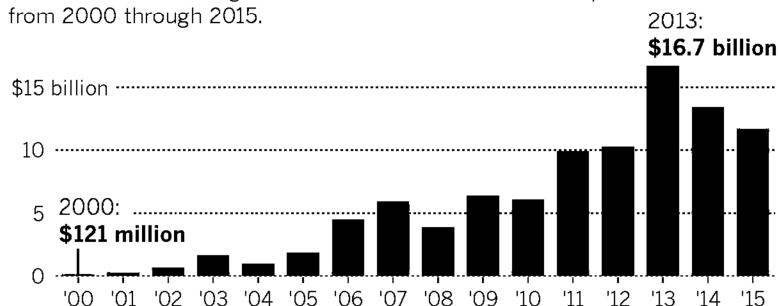
Xinhua reported that *“the base will ensure China's performance of missions, such as escorting, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid in Africa and West Asia”* (Xinhua, 2017). Effectively it is a means for China to project its influence into Africa and across the Indian Ocean. However, although Beijing justifies its first overseas military to *“ensure China's performance of missions, such as escorting, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid in Africa and West Asia,”* it does not acknowledge the direct economic impacts it will have for China's significant investments in the region. Although the claim for the base is to help logistically support China's peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts are valid, the true intentions for the establishment of such a base is to help project and protect China's investments and business ventures in the region.

This is especially crucial as it is projected that by 2050 over 25% of the world's anticipated nine billion people will be African and mostly under

the age of 30, meaning that there will be an abundance of human capital and exploitation available on the continent (United Nations, 2015). China has recognised this eventuality and has committed \$60 billion in new investment in major capital projects that will drive the local economic capacity (Jadesimi, 2017). The growing exchange between China and Africa will see the rapid improvement of the continent’s industrialisation, agricultural modernisation, infrastructure, trade and investment facilitation.

Chinese lend billions to African nations

The Chinese government, banks and contractors lent more than \$94 billion to African governments and state-owned enterprises from 2000 through 2015.



Source: Johns Hopkins SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative

@latimesgraphics

The above infographic demonstrates China’s \$94 billion in a 15-year time period in Africa. Therefore, the recent \$60 billion pledge is an important indicator of China’s new resolve to become the dominant foreign economic force on the continent. Although China would often give easy repayable loans allowing African states to build bridges and stadiums in return for Chinese access to Africa’s vast natural resources, Beijing has now become more ambitious with hordes of Chinese tourists, peacekeepers, soldiers and merchants making their way to the continent.

Mekonnen Getachew, a project manager at the Ethiopian Railways Corp., stated that “*China doesn’t give simple aid, they do give loans.*”

You work, and you return back. That is a good policy. Aid is just making slavery” (Kaiman, 2017). This was a direct statement against Western policies, including US policies, to simply just throw conditional aid money at the continent. Promises of aid money to poverty-stricken African states allow the US to keep them within their orbit of influence. In support, Reuben Brigety, dean at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs and a former U.S. ambassador to the African Union, stated that *“Americans still see Africa as a place where there are a lot of presidents for life, wars and famines. They don’t understand what’s happening on the continent economically and demographically”* (Ibid). This is in stark contrast to Chinese investment which is seen favourably.

In the case of Ethiopia, China’s infrastructural developments are pivotal to lifting the country out of its reputation of being crippled by drought, poverty, famine and war. Most significant is the development of a railway line to connect the country that has been landlocked since Eritrea’s breakaway in 1991. Because of its landlocked position, Ethiopia currently relies on Djibouti for 90% of its foreign trade with billions of dollars of imports and exports traversing the two countries by a three-to-four-day truck journey (Djibouti Embassy U.S., 2017).

However, Chinese firms have built Africa’s first electrified cross-border rail system in Africa between Ethiopia and Djibouti. The 750-kilometre long railway line came at the price of \$4 billion, however, as Getachew stated: *“The rail will make every economic activity easier. Our economy will boom.... This railway is making Ethiopia great again!”* (Kaiman, 2017). He then went onto express his hope and vision that *“by 2020, Ethiopia’s economy will be among the world’s mid-level economies”* (Ibid).



According to the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC), there have been 279 Chinese companies with more than \$571 million worth of investment in the country (Xinhua, 2017). Such projects have stimulated Ethiopia's economy and have created more than 28,300 jobs in Ethiopia between January 2012 and January 2017 (Ibid). Trade between Ethiopia and China grew by 22.2% annually over the last several years with the Asian country becoming Ethiopia's largest trading partner (All Africa, 2017).

Chinese penetration into the Horn of Africa has not been limited to just its port development in Djibouti and railway construction in Ethiopia, but China has also shown interest in Somalia, where the pivotal and strategic state envisages that it can have a rapid post-war development with China playing a key role. Somali State Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdulkadir Ahmedkheyr Abdi said in an interview with Xinhua that China has historically assisted in the development of Benadir Hospital (1977), the National Theatre (1967) and the Mogadishu Stadium (1978), and highlighted that Somalia was the first country in East Africa to establish diplomatic ties with China

(Xinhua, 2017). In the same interview, Abdi praised China's past projects in Somalia and expressed his hope that ties can be further strengthened once the conditions in the war-ravaged state becomes further stabilised. On his part, Qin Jian, Chinese Ambassador to Somalia, stated that China was committed to helping Somalia reconstruct its economic and political pillars destroyed during the civil war (Ibid).

It is evident that the states in the Horn of Africa view China as being a necessary and productive partner for the development of the region. A strong corridor between Djibouti port and Addis Ababa will rapidly increase trade and development, as will China's post-war development of Somalia.

Although China is not as heavily involved in Eritrea as it is in Djibouti or Ethiopia, China has presented itself as a mediator in the ongoing border friction between Djibouti and Eritrea (Sputnik, 2017). With Qatar's withdrawal, as a peacekeeping force over the contentious Doumeira Mountain and Doumeira Island because of its diplomatic row with fellow Gulf States, China has offered itself to maintain peace in the contended areas (South China Morning Post, 2017).

Zhang Hongming, an African studies expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that China's peacekeeping initiative in the contested region is only a means to protect its own interests, stating that "*Wherever Chinese interests go, means and tools to protect them should follow*" (Asia Maritime Review, 2017). This is however contradicted by a former Chinese ambassador to Eritrea, who claimed that China's intentions to mediate the border issue between Djibouti and Eritrea was in no way connected to its Djibouti military base. "*The disputes over Doumeira Mountain have been recurring, and China has been mediating in it for long time, mostly through the mechanism of the*

African Union. I don't see much difference this time." Shu Zhan, former ambassador to Eritrea, said (South China Morning Post, 2017).

Chinese Interests are a Case of Neo-Colonialism?

Western critics have questioned whether China's expansive investments, developments and peacekeeping initiatives in the Horn of Africa are a case of neo-Colonialism. Shu however stated that "*China would not do anything that is like a colonialist*" (Ibid). The entirety of Africa experienced decades of harsh imperialist and colonial rule by Western major powers that set the continent back in terms of development despite being an extremely resource rich continent. The Horn of Africa experienced brutal colonialism from the British, French and Italians for huge portions of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In this manner, China too has experienced the horrors of colonialism and imperialism in the same period that the Horn of Africa did. Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and to a lesser extent the US, forced China into trade and territorial concessions that would have lasting impacts on the development of the country. Ingrained in the Chinese memory is the horrors of the Opium Wars that could not prevent Britain flooding China with the highly addictive drug, as well as Japanese atrocities in northeast China, known as the Rape of Nanking, where Imperial Japanese Army killed over 300,000 Chinese people and engaged in a program of mass rape and looting at the prelude of World War Two (Perkins, 1999: 339). The Chinese experience of colonialism and imperialism has influenced its foreign policy since the establishment of the People's Republic of China and has meant that China has always been wary not to become a coloniser or imperialist themselves as they begin to rise as a major world power in the era of multipolarity. To emphasise this point, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, insisted in a 2015 tour of Kenya, that "[China] absolutely will not

take the old path of Western colonists, and we absolutely will not sacrifice Africa's ecological environment and long-term interests" (Manero, 2017).

Although Western powers claim to assist Africa in humanitarian and development efforts, which have totalled to over \$300 billion since 1970, the assistance is often conditional and renders African states to become dependent on aid (Moyo, 2009). Therefore, China's "*no-strings attached*" policy in investment and development with African states has become highly desirable. Dirk Willem de Vilde, a Senior Research Fellow and head of International Economic Development at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), said that "*on all the infrastructure indicators, African countries are way behind compared to other countries. There is a huge infrastructure gap that is holding back development in many African countries at the moment*" (Harvard Political Review, 2017). Whereas Western powers have failed to develop the Horn of Africa, especially Somalia, China has been rapidly building ports, railway lines, schools and hospitals, shortening the gap that de Vilde highlights. He believes that China is not engaging in neo-colonialism and states that "*There is mutual interest... If there are good policies and institutions in place, [African countries] can use the investment well to grow their economies*" (Ibid).

Critics highlight that many of the infrastructure programs funded by China are usually done by Chinese labour, which limits opportunity for local companies and workers to gain experience and capital (China Africa Research, 2017). Although a fair criticism, it overlooks the brain drain that often occurs in the Horn of Africa as many of the brightest people leave to work in European, North American or the Arab Gulf countries, and therefore, to have the development projects completed in a timely manner, Chinese workers are needed to fill the gap in local knowledge (Raviv, 2014). This does not negate, however, that there are

local concerns of bringing low or unskilled Chinese workers to Africa instead of hiring local African workers.

Although China is undoubtedly reaping the benefits of investing in the Horn of Africa, unlike with Western investment, the relationship between Beijing and the region is a duality. Whereas Western ambitions are to protect capitalist corporate interests in extracting African resources and exploit cheap labour, China's interests are to implement the Chinese economic and development model that saw the country that was once as underdeveloped and poor as the Horn of Africa, to become a major world player that has reduced poverty. China in 1990 had an extreme poverty level of 40% that was reduced to 7% in 2012 (Phelps and Crabtree, 2013). Whereas the West exacerbated poverty in the Horn of Africa because of colonialism and the implementation of aid dependency, China has experienced the full effects of poverty and colonialism, but has in a short period of time lifted the majority of its people out of the cycle of poverty.

Beijing therefore has genuine interests in the Horn of Africa with developing the region out of poverty and to become partner states, rather than subordinate states, that could have aid money from the West dropped at any given moment. With Western aid money often going through bureaucratic hands and only trickles of the money reaching development and infrastructural projects, Chinese aid is often real with the evidence seen in the rapid construction of projects like schools, hospitals and stadiums. This is part of Beijing's foreign policy as it continues to grow in the age of multipolarity. In 2014, South Africa denied entry to the Dalai Lama knowing that it could enrage China, whilst in early 2016 Kenya deported 50 Taiwanese nationals to China (Oneko and Sandner, 2016). What these examples suggest is that with continued Chinese investment in the region, it will likely gain international allies in Addis Ababa, Djibouti City and Mogadishu.

Yong Deng, an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, stated that, “*China feels that it is entitled to a Great Power status, so maintaining that in a global world order is always a long-term foreign policy goal. In terms of great power rise... Africa carries an enormous amount of diplomatic weight in [shifting] China’s diplomatic and political influence away from U.S., Western dominated world order*” (Harvard Political Review, 2017). With China demonstrating real and honest development, it is inevitable that states in the Horn of Africa will continue to gravitate towards China, looking at its success in poverty reduction and maintaining its ‘*no-strings attached*’ policy.

Why is the Horn of Africa Strategically Pivotal?

The strategic maritime route connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean comes to a chokehold at Bab el-Mandeb Strait, in-between Djibouti and Yemen. In 2012, over 20,000 ships accounting for 20% of global yearly exports passes through Bab el-Mandeb Strait, with this figure set to rapidly increase as China’s rise means its further economic engagement with Africa and Europe (Antonopoulos, Villar, Cottle and Ahmed, 2017: 10). In 2012, China engaged with \$1 billion worth of daily trade with the European Union, demonstrating the importance of this strait and offers a reason as to why China built its first overseas military base in Djibouti (Ibid). Although Yemen can offer a base on this strategic chokehold, it has been ravaged by a war since March 2015.

Meanwhile, for the US, its 4000-military personnel strong Camp Lemonnier base in Djibouti serves as Washington’s main point of operations for its ‘*War on Terror*’ in the Horn of Africa and Yemen (Wyscaver, 2017). Djibouti’s stable conditions is in far contrast to conflict-prone Somalia where US concerns are mostly in stemming

terrorism in the region. Somalia as a hub for Al-Shabaab and ISIS is the primary focus for Washington's 'War on Terror' in the region. Whereas China is mostly motivated by economic opportunity in the region, the US is supposedly mostly motivated by so-called security concerns, which could then allow it to exploit natural resources in the region.

Therefore, the primary Great Power concerns in the region revolves around investment opportunity in the case of China, security concerns for the US, and natural resource exploitation for both. It is believed that Somalia has untapped reserves of oil and numerous natural resources, including uranium, iron ore, tin, gypsum, bauxite, copper, salt and natural gas (The World Fact Book, 2017). Because of this vast amount of unexploited natural resources in Somalia, the Central Bank of Somalia believes that as the country undergoes reconstruction, not only will Somalia's economy reach pre-civil war levels, but accelerate and grow beyond those highs (Central Bank of Somalia, 2017). With China making a serious developmental effort in Somalia, it is only expected that they will be favoured for energy contracts over their US rivals. Whether tankers would leave from Djibouti city or China will develop a port in Somalia remains to be seen.

Ethiopia, dubbed as Africa's China, hosts the seat of the African Union and is the source of the Blue Nile, one of the two major tributaries of the Nile River that provides water to Egypt. Rather, what Ethiopia provides is a stringboard for China to continue projecting its influence across Africa. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa when completed, is one such example. The massive hydropower station at the headwaters of the Blue Nile River was difficult to get off the ground as the World Bank and other international financial organisations had no interest in funding the project because of Egyptian threats of using military action if any diversion of Nile water occurred. Chinese companies were more than

happy to take on the project that will ultimately be a source of energy in not only Ethiopia, but also neighbouring countries including Eritrea, Djibouti and South Sudan. Ultimately, by creating a source of energy for South Sudan, it is expected that Chinese firms will have priority to tap into the country's vast oil reserves. Such is the level of influence Beijing has in Ethiopia, that Girma Biru, Ethiopia's Minister of Trade, stated that "*China has become our most reliable partner and there is a lot we can learn from Beijing, not just in economics but politics as well*" (Zhu. 2010: 33).

However, with China's strong relations with Ethiopia, how does it affect its engagement with Eritrea? Eritrea achieved its independence from Ethiopia in 1993 and has never had healthy relations with its neighbour, especially since the independence of Eritrea marked Ethiopia's descent into becoming a landlocked state. Qiu Xuejun, China's Ambassador to Eritrea, revealed that "*China is Eritrea's largest trading partner and the two countries have fruitful cooperation in the areas of agriculture, mining, infrastructure construction, culture, education, health and people to people exchanges*" (Xuejun, 2015) This demonstrates that despite China's strong relations with Ethiopia, it has not hampered its engagement with Eritrea at all.

The Eritrea National Mining Corporation reported that the country is rich with gold, copper, potash, zinc, oil, natural gas, cement, gypsum, granite, marble, ceramics, limestone and iron ore, demonstrating why this state is pivotal to the Great Powers (Anderson, 2015). However, as China embarks on projects to exploit the vast natural resources of Eritrea, the US is lagging behind in comparison to Beijing's efforts and still has sanctions imposed on the country (Bureau of African Affairs, 2016).

US-Eritrean relations are not strong, especially since the UN imposed sanctions in 2009 and again in 2013 on the impoverished country (United Nations Security Council Subsidiary Organs, 2013). Given that Washington's main priority in the Horn of Africa is to supposedly curb terrorism, it is peculiar that the US refuses to engage with Asmara on issues of security given Eritrea's strategic location bordering Sudan and opposite Yemen. Rather, the mostly isolationist policy by decisionmakers in Asmara has meant that the country does not fall into the orbit of the American Empire, making Eritrea a target of US-imposed sanctions. This explains Eritrea's gravitation towards China given that Beijing is willing to engage with any country in Africa without interfering in their domestic issues.

Deputy Director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, Bronwyn Bruton, wrote in a report that:

“the United States could find itself facing instability and perhaps a terror threat on both sides of the [Bab el-]Mandeb Strait, which is a critical chokepoint for the \$700 billion ... of trade passing annually between the European Union (EU) and Asia. Threats to this trade route have in recent years led the United States to pour millions of dollars into combating Somali piracy – an indication of the Strait's importance to U.S. interests” (Birku, 2016).

He then also highlights the potential ally that Eritrea could be as the country has *“repelled jihadists and proven immune to radical ideologies”* (Ibid). The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia has identified the strategic location of Eritrea and has made it the centre to its operations in the Red Sea Basin (Fitzgerald, 2015). In addition, Australian, Canadian and Chinese firms have made inroads to exploit the natural resources of the country (Jamasmie, 2013). With the

imposition of US-led UN sanctions on Eritrea, any opening of the country will mean that Washington will have little to no access.

Kaplan, a lecturer in African Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, states that if Washington's "*primary goal in that part of the world is simply to reduce the threat from terrorism and to defang as much as possible terrorist groups and possibly, to the extent that it's possible, to end the conflict in Yemen, certainly we would want better relations with Eritrea*" (Lavinder, 2017).

However, policymakers in Washington are yet to fully accept that the era of unipolarity has ended, and that states who do not fall into the orbit of US influence can still have impressive economic development and fruitful relations with other Great Powers, such as China and Russia. Although US-imposed sanctions can affect an economy, it can no longer fully cripple a state if strong relations are had with Beijing and/or Moscow.

Kaplan goes onto question that: "*the fact that fighting terrorism, fighting Islamic terrorist groups, might turn out to be by far the most important goal for the new [US] administration, you would think that Eritrea would be not a highly prioritised but still important partner, given its geopolitical location...*" (Ibid). Effectively, China is proving victorious in the Great Power rivalry in Eritrea as it has substantive relations with Asmara while Washington is failing to subdue the country with sanctions.

Conclusion

The main advantage China has with its relationship with the Horn of Africa compared to the West is that the leadership in Beijing views

their relationship as a North-South prism while emphasising that developing states need to coordinate against the industrialised West. An excerpt from the New Republic said “*China is ready to coordinate its positions with African countries... with a view to safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries*”, while Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said during a 2003 speech in Ethiopia that “*China is ready to coordinate its positions with African countries... with a view to safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries*” (Navarro, 2007: 96).

It is through this approach by China that it is outweighing the US in this region. As former US Ambassador to Ethiopia, David Shinn, noted in April 2015:

“Chinese influence in Ethiopia today is equal to or rivals that of any other country, including the United States. The leadership of the ruling EPRDF (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front) certainly gives the impression that it is more comfortable with the style and leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) than with the leadership and ruling parties of Western countries, including the US. [...] Ethiopia has joined other African countries in stopping resolutions in the UN Human Rights Commission that censor China’s human rights practices. Former prime minister [sic] Meles Zenawi stated emphatically that Tibet is internal affair and outsiders have no right to interfere” (Draitser, 2016).

Rather, what this demonstrates is that elements in the US recognise that Beijing is making far greater inroads in the Horn of Africa. Whereas the US created a culture of aid dependency in the Horn of Africa, establishing a relationship of paternalism rather than partnership,

China's approach has been significantly different with Beijing preferring to develop states rather than trap them into submission.

This model implemented by China has seen it edge out the US in Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and with the same model being applied across the continent, in the medium term we will see economic and development change in Africa. The Chinese experience of colonialism and imperialism gives it an advantage over Western Powers who were the colonisers and imperialists in Africa. This Chinese approach will see its influence begin to penetrate other 'traditional' spheres for the West, such as Latin America, where it already is building strong relations with states such as Venezuela and Bolivia. However, in the Horn of Africa, we will see the restive region begin to rapidly develop and stabilise because of China's economic help.

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