Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

An Analytical Study of China's Multifaceted Role in the Horn of Africa

Prerna Kapoor

kapoor.prerna256@gmail.com

Indira Gandhi National Open University

Perspective

Keywords: China, The Horn of Africa, Multifaceted role of China, Mutual benefits

Posted Date: November 26th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11611289/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

By the early 2000s, China had actively taken part in global governance and had increasingly engaged with the international community on multilateral terms as indicated by its growing diplomatic relations with 183 of 195 countries. China's increasing role in international affairs and global markets has generated a large body of academic scholarship. This is probably because many aspects of its strategic goals are purposely shrouded in mystery, which has contributed to extensive discussion of the motivations, implications and consequences of China's foreign policy and diplomatic activities. This paper has attempted to conduct a comprehensive analysis of various dimensions of China's engagement with The Horn of Africa, focusing on its relations with Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, to determine whether its presence in the region tends to facilitate development and stability or is mostly motivated by strategic, economic and geopolitical interests.

Introduction

China's journey from a passive member of international affairs to a global influencer through military involvement, economic aid, advanced technology, and diplomatic relations has been extensively debated and scrutinised from academic and comparative politics perspectives. While its growing global presence is widely acknowledged, the strategic objective underlying its foreign policy often remains ambiguous, fuelling debate about its true intentions. The story of China's engagement in Africa is not a new phenomenon. We have historical documents indicating that as early as the 2nd century BC, ports that are now located in areas in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia were connected to the Maritime Silk Road that enabled trade and cultural exchange. However, the nature of its interaction today with the continent is different from what they existed centuries ago. The current role of China in the Horn of Africa consists of economic investment, infrastructure development, security cooperation, military presence and diplomatic mediation.

Horn of China offers us an excellent perspective for examining how these different forms of engagement operate together. This study therefore analyses China's multifaceted role in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia by its economic, developmental, diplomatic and security dimensions collectively.

1) Outlining China's diplomatic behaviour with the world.

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China's focus has shifted from regional development to a more proactive role in global affairs. China aims to advance its own ideas, standards and narratives of global governance rather than functioning within the Western frameworks of international relations. In contrast to many Western countries, it frequently avoids clearly stating its commitments and interests. Instead, Chinese diplomacy frequently relies on broad and open-ended concepts that provides interpretive flexibility [11].

According to Semenov and Tsvyk (2021) this diplomatic ambiguity is an expression of strategic flexibility rather than intentional ambiguity. With this strategy, China can maintain space for future strategic

expansion, modify its policy when needed in response to changing geopolitical factors without being restricted by strict commitments. This strategic adaptability has also exacerbated uncertainty over China's long-term goals. China's growing influence is frequently viewed with caution as an emerging global power pursuing an independent foreign policy outside of the conventional West-led international order, raising concerns about whether its engagement is motivated by mutual development or more general strategic interests.

2) China and The Horn of Africa.

China's foreign policy continues to place greater emphasis on The Horn of Africa. Understanding China's role in The Horn of Africa requires examining the primary factors that could have made the region central to Beijing's interaction.

The following can be the primary factors affecting China's interest:

i) Geographical advantage: As Leake (2020) and Muss'id (2023) emphasised on the geographical advantage of The Horn of Africa stems from its strategic location overlooking the Bab El-Mandeb Strait- a vital maritime bottleneck connecting the Red Sea the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean to international market corridors [9].

Besides connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait provides access to the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal, which connects China's market to Europe. For China, this maritime route is one of the shortest and most efficient sea passages to European markets, thereby strengthening its maritime connectivity and strategic presence [9, 10]

ii) Mineral Portfolio of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia contain diverse mineral assets. The following is a mineral portfolio of these countries according to the World Bank report on Mineral Resources of Africa (2025):

Table 1: Mineral Portfolio of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia

Country	Major minerals/resources
DJIBOUTI	No significant mineral deposits
Eritrea	Gold, Copper, Zinc, Silver, Potash
ETHIOPIA	Gold, Potash, Soda ash, Iron ore, Copper, Nickel
KENYA	Gold, Titanium, Zircon Rutile, Niobium
SOMALIA	Iron ore, Uranium

Note. Source: World Bank (2025), Mineral Resources of Africa.

According to the data presented above, China's increasing engagement with these countries may be related to their strategic mineral resources, which are critical for the development of renewable energy technology and advanced industry. The presence of critical and speciality minerals, such as potash in Ethiopia and Eritrea are rare earth elements and niobium in Kenya, is particularly significant for emerging technologies. In addition, these countries possess commercially valuable mineral resources, including copper, zinc, iron ore and gold all of which remain in high global demand for industrial production, renewable energy infrastructure, and technological manufacturing.

iii) Demographic potential: One of the reasons that has drawn China's attention towards Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia could be the abundance of human factors of production and the economic conditions of these countries.

According to the report The Horn of Africa Economic Memorandum of the World Bank (2021) the working-age population is expected to grow rapidly in this area from 107 million in 2020 to 143 million in 2030, income levels might stay low and poverty may also be widespread. Thus, it is expected to create a lag in formal job creation and unemployment. As Kyirewaih and Attah (2024) noted, The Horn of Africa's young dynamic population and growing consumer markets present significant demographic potential for industrial transformation and trade. The high population growth and rapidly expanding working-age population create a large pool of cheap labour, alongside growing consumer demand [8, 2]. This serves as an attractive low-cost destination for China's manufacturing firms looking to offload excess industrial capacity and relocate lower-end manufacturing. This region will also serve as a growing consumer market for Chinese finished manufactures, electronics and capital goods.

iv) Presence of oil/gas resources: According to the World Bank's Mineral Resources of Africa (2025) report, oil and gas reserves vary considerably across The Horn of Africa, influencing the nature and extent of engagement by global state-owned enterprises. As noted by the Muss'id (2023), Somalia's offshore reserves of crude oil and natural gas have attracted Chinese interest with the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) securing a production-sharing agreement for the exploration of offshore blocks. Kenya has also entered into a similar agreement. In Ethiopia, Chinese firms such as the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau (ZPEB) have conducted seismic surveys, geological mapping and exploratory drilling in the Ogaden Basin and the Gambella region near the Sudanese border .

3) China's most significant initiatives in The Horn of Africa

i) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative was put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 as a global connectivity strategy aiming at developing new physical and digital infrastructure networks linking China with Asia, Africa, and Europe. The plan consists of two principal components: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) [4, 10]. The SREB focuses on overland connectivity along routes that broadly trace historical continental trade networks with an emphasis on

railways, energy infrastructure, industrial parks, and educational and cultural exchanges. In contrast, the Maritime Silk Road extends through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea to the Mediterranean with particular emphasis on shipping routes, port development, and maritime infrastructure [10].

ii) Forum On China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a multilateral forum that facilitates dialogue and practical cooperation between China and African countries. Since its establishment, FOCAC has served as an overarching institutional mechanism driving Chinese foreign direct investment, commercial loans, concessional financing and infrastructure development across Africa [9, 10]. Guided by the principles of mutual respect, equality, noninterference in internal affairs, and South-South cooperation, FOCAC positions itself as a development partner rather than an external actor prescribing policy to African states [9]. In recent years its scope has expanded beyond economic cooperation, reflecting the growing security dimension of China's engagement with Africa [4].

4) China's multifaceted role in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia

China's role in these countries can be traced using China's different initiatives and roles as follows:

i) China as an investor: China is the largest economic and trading partner in The Horn of Africa, accounting for approximately 25% of total Chinese investment across the African continent [6; 10]. China has also invested over 58 billion dollars between 2005 and 2017 in mining and mineral-related industries across Africa, with annual investments averaging over 10 billion dollars according to the World Bank report on Mineral Resources of Africa (2025). The following are investments made by China:

Djibouti: Chinese entities have invested directly in major port and commercial facilities, including the Doraleh container terminal, the Doraleh multipurpose port, and the Djibouti international free trade zone. [6, 10]

Ethiopia: Ethiopia is the fifth largest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa Chinese FDI flows rose from 0.98 million dollars in 2003 to 310.8 million in 2020. Investment heavily covers manufacturing, industrial parks, real estate and power transmission. [6, 12]

Kenya: Kenya ranks among the top 10 African destinations for Chinese investment with over 30 new Chinese companies investing in 2004 across construction, communications and green energy. [6; 12]

Eritrea: Chinese firms hold direct investment stakes in primary mining assets, including the Bisha mine (copper, zinc and gold) and potash exploration in the Danakil basin. [4, 5]

Somalia: commercial interests including the insurance of fishing licenses to 30 Chinese companies operating off the Somali coastline. [9]

ii) China as a lender: Between 2000 and 2017, China extended $35.77 billion in loans to The Horn of Africa through institutions like China Exim Bank and China Development Bank representing 25% of all Chinese loans to Africa [6].

Country breakdown of loan volume from 2000 to 2017 according to Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI) 2020:

Djibouti: received $2.08 billion from China Exim Bank for railway construction, water pipelines and ports.

Eritrea: borrowed $504 million. Ethiopia: received $13.74 billion for projects including the Ethio-Djibouti railway, Addis Ababa transit railway, and power lines.

Kenya: received $9.80 billion, including $4billion for the Mombasa-Nairobi standard gauge railway (SGR), plus funding for roads, dam, and telecom.

Somalia: no such record of any formal Chinese loan.

iii) China as a builder: As Abdilahi (2020) and the Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (2020) highlighted, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) serve as the primary engineering contractors for transport, urban mobility, energy, and civic infrastructure under The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Djibouti: Chinese firm built the 752 Addis Ababa- Djibouti railway (Djiboutian segment), Doraleh multipurpose port, and a cross-border water pipeline from Ethiopia [1, 10]

Eritrea: Chinese engagement expanded the Red Sea ports of Massawa and Assab, constructed a major hospital in Asmara, and developed regional roads [1, 12].

Ethiopia: Chinese contractors constructed the 752km electrified Addis Ababa Djibouti railway, Addis Ababa light railway, Addis Ababa ring road, African Union headquarters, industrial parks and Tekeze hydroelectric dam [8, 12].

Kenya Chinese enterprises built the 670 km Mombasa Nairobi standard gauge railway, Garissa solar power station, Lamu port deep-water berths and Nairobi expressway [4].

Somalia: prior to 1991, Chinese contractors built over 80major civil projects like Mogadishu national stadium, national theatre, Banadir hospital and Mogadishu-Hargeisa highway) Recent works focus on civil reconstruction and port exploration [9, 12].

iv) China as peace mediator: Eickhoff and Godehardt (2022) note that China has departed from a purely passive non-interference stance and has adopted an active facilitative mediation role to stabilise regions where its economic interests and citizens are located. In 2022, China appointed its first special envoy to The Horn of Africa, Ambassador Xue Bing, to mediate regional disputes, build consensus and lead peace initiatives. In the same year it also hosted the inaugural regional peace conference in Addis Ababa,

bringing together senior officials from Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda [4]

v) China as security actor: Under the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and integrated foreign policy mandates, China treats security as a prerequisite for protecting its trade corridors, infrastructure and expatriate workers. Since 2008, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy has conducted over 26 naval escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and the off-coast of Somalia [9]. China has also donated military equipment to Somalia to support anti-terrorism operations against Al-Shabaab. In March 2021, China signed a memorandum of understanding with Ethiopia on security safeguarding mechanisms to protect the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway.

vi) China as military support: on august 1st 2017, China officially opened its first overseas military installation- the Chinese People's Liberation Army support base in Djibouti-built for $590 million [9]. It accommodates thousands of troops with logistical capacity for up to 10,000 personnel, serving as a "preventive" facility to defend multi-billion-dollar investments in Ethiopia and the wider Horn, secure the Bab-el-Mandeb energy checkpoint, assist in military logistics/joint training and enable force projection across the Indian Ocean and Red Sea.

5) Mutual benefits

China's relationship with Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia is based on complementary interests. China has capital, technology, infrastructure capacity and global markets, whereas these countries have development needs, investment opportunities, resources, markets and strategic partnerships. The following can be studied as reciprocal benefits for China and Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia:

i) Political support: The African countries collectively count for 54 votes in the United Nations General Assembly, making the continent one of the largest voting blocs in the organisation. As each member state holds one equal vote regardless of its size or economic power, maintaining strong diplomatic relations with African countries is of considerable importance to China being one of the permanent members of the United Nations. China's initiatives in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia have strengthened its diplomatic ties with these states, therefore expanding its support within the United Nations. Shinn (2005) and Leake (2020) notes that all these countries officially recognise the People's Republic of China and support the One China policy regarding Taiwan. Their diplomatic backing has reinforced China's position while limiting Taiwan's claim to gain diplomatic recognition among sovereign African states.

Nations of The Horn of Africa often face Western criticism and constant fear of intervention. China uses its United Nations Security Council position or veto power whatever the situation may require to block or dilute Western-backed UN sanctions and interventions against host countries in return to these countries routinely vote and issue joint statements in support of China on sensitive human rights debates at the UN Human Rights Council.

ii) **Economic and development benefits**: The economic partnership between China and The Horn of Africa operates as a mutually beneficial exchange, converting Chinese state capital and technical expertise into physical infrastructure while providing Beijing with secure trade routes, expanded markets and raw materials. Driven by frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative and FOCAC, Chinese institutions provided loans to bridge East Africa's infrastructure gap, while simultaneously opening outlets for Chinese construction firms and enterprises [6]. This investment flow was used to build projects like the Addis Ababa Djibouti Railway, Mombasa Nairobi standard gauge railway, Doraleh multipurpose port, and Kenya's Garissa Solar Power Station [6]. With access to the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a vital maritime route for China's foreign trade and energy imports[9]. These initiatives have improved China's strategic and economic ties in these areas.

Chinese private companies and Stated Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have created a commercial anchor throughout these nations by entering a new consumer market. China's involvement has also given it access to important mineral resources needed for its domestic supply of clean energy and industrial processing [12]. In return, these countries have gained access to Chinese technology, capital and technical expertise that would otherwise require substantial domestic financial and technological capacity [6].

iii) **Strategic and security benefits:** China's engagement with The Horn of Africa has increasingly extended beyond economic cooperation to include maritime security, protection of overseas interests, peacebuilding and security cooperation [4]. The region's location along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden makes stability important for both China and Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, particularly in relation to maritime trade and regional security. China's participation in anti-piracy operations and its naval presence in Djibouti reflects its growing involvement in the region's maritime security, while Horn countries benefit from additional support for securing important sea routes [4, 9]. Similarly, as Chinese companies, infrastructure projects and citizens have expanded across the region, security cooperation has become relevant in protecting both Chinese interests and major development projects [4]. China's involvement in peacekeeping, conflict mediation, military training and security capacity-building also provides Horn countries with an additional partner in addressing regional security challenges, while strengthening China's diplomatic and institutional engagement with the region. Thus, security has become an important dimension of the China-Horn relationship.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary sources. It examines China's multifaceted role in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia using academic studies and institutional reports and other relevant documents. The analysis focuses on China's economic, diplomatic, developmental and security engagement and the mutual benefits arising from these relations.

Countries under study
The study examines China’s engagement in the Horn of Africa focusing on Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Conclusion

This analysis of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia shows China’s engagement in the region covers investment, lending, infrastructure development, diplomatic dialogue, peace mediation, security cooperation and a military presence. These multifaceted approaches indicate that China’s increasing focus on the Horn is driven by a complex combination of economic, political, diplomatic, geographic and strategic considerations rather than a single policy objective. China's increasing strategic engagement with The Horn of Africa’s strategic geography, including the proximity to the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, increases the importance of the region to China’s Maritime Silk Road plans and its role in international trade.

In addition, the region possesses ample natural resources, a growing population that will offer markets for Chinese goods and services, a burgeoning working-age population and opportunities for development projects, which could all boost China’s economy.

China has invested, lent and constructed to capitalise on such opportunities through projects, major initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. At the same time China’s engagement in the Horn has evolved beyond its economic interests. The expansion into peace-mediating, security and military roles represents an increasing priority of ensuring the protection of Chinese economic interests, property, and citizens. This is embodied in China’s establishment of a military support base in Djibouti and its contribution to counter-piracy efforts in the region.

The benefits for Horn countries engaging with China provide Horn countries access to much-needed capital, technology, infrastructure projects, technical knowledge, investment and development resources.

It can prove particularly advantageous to countries struggling with funding to build critical infrastructure and with limited internal financial capacity and expertise. Meanwhile, it also facilitates market access for their products and sources of abundant resources, trade and security support from China and strengthen diplomatic ties between the countries of the Horn and the East African nation. Therefore, there exists a degree of shared interests between the Horn of Africa and China which benefit both parties.

Overall, this study reveals that China’s engagement in the Horn of Africa can’t be solely described as aid provision or strategy building. Its policies in the region intertwine economic and political, commercial and strategic purposes, all of which coexist. China’s involvement through business has laid the foundation for its increasing influence in the region while diplomacy, trade and security interests further support its engagement with region where development, trade, the security are mutually relevant.

Finally, the implications from the nature of the interaction show that engagement should be understood not only as a mutual benefaction, but also as an important element of China's strategy.

Horn of African countries can get from Chinese funds, capability and development capacity while China can consolidate its power, finance, diplomacy and influence within the region by cooperating at the regional level and developing interests related to commercial development and strategy. However, the future of that can assure long-term development and stability depends on how the countries of the Horn and China can carefully address and balance their own interests.

Declarations

Funding

No funding was received for conducting this research or for the preparation of this manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics approval

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or the collection of personal data.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Data availability

This study is based on publicly available secondary sources. No original datasets were generated or collected during the study.

Author contributions

The author was responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, analysis, interpretation, and writing of the manuscript, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Use of artificial intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language editing, grammatical improvement, and refinement of academic expression. The author reviewed and revised all

AI-assisted text and takes full responsibility for the content, arguments, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the manuscript.

References

1. Abdilahi Ismail Abdilahi, IMPACTS OF CHINA'S ONE, BELT, ONE ROAD INITIATIVES IN THE HORN OF AFRICA. Eur J Political Sci Stud. 2020;3(2). https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3836887. THE GEOPOLITICS AND.
2. Bundervoet T, Brenton P, Edjigu H, Masaki T, Sienaert A. Horn of Africa regional economic memorandum: Overview. World Bank; 2021. https://hdl.handle.net/10986/36460.
3. Burcu O, Boni F. (2022). China's public diplomacy and its foreign policy towards Central and South Asia. In China's international communication and relationship building (pp. 79–95). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003254157-7
4. Eickhoff K, Godehardt N. (2022). China's Horn of Africa initiative: Fostering or fragmenting peace? (Megatrends Afrika Working Paper 2022 01). Megatrends Afrika. https://doi.org/10.18449/2022MTA-WP01
5. Guj P, Schodde R, Bocoum B, Cust J. Mineral resources of Africa. World Bank; 2025. https://hdl.handle.net/10986/43848.
6. Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute. (2020, December 23). Cooperation between China and the Horn of Africa: In the context of FOCAC and Belt & Road Initiative. https://hespi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/China-Horn-of-Africa-relations-under-FOCAC-and-BRI-.pdf
7. Krukowska MM. China's security relations with Africa in the 21st century. Secur Def Q. 2024;46(2):4–23. https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/190066.
8. Kyirewiah FK, Attah EY. China's contemporary strategies for the promotion of security, development, and governance in the Horn of Africa. Mediterranean J Social Sci. 2024;15(2):68–79. https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2024-0014.
9. Leake GA. China's engagement in the promotion of peace and security in the Horn of Africa: An interplay of big power responsibility and geopolitical interest. Afr J Political Sci Int Relations. 2020;14(4):150–8. https://doi.org/10.5897/AJPSIR2019.1173.
10. Muss'id F. (2023, December 3). From launching economic projects to building military bases: Chinese influence in the Horn of Africa. Abaad Studies & Research Center. https://abaadstudies.org/en/strategies/topic/60078
11. Semenov A, Tsvyk A. The Approach to the Chinese Diplomatic Discourse. Fudan J Hum Soc Sci. 2021;14:565–86. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-021-00321-x.
12. Shinn DH. (2005). China's approach to East, North and the Horn of Africa. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/7.21-22.05shinn_david_wrts.pdf
13. Tewodros Kassie Mabadi, Crossref. https://doi.org/10.14445/23942703/IJHSS-V7I4P120.

Figures



Figure 1

UN Geospatial. (2012). Horn of Africa [MAP]. United Nations.



Figure 2

Source: National Administration of Surveying, Mapping and Geoinformation of China (2016)