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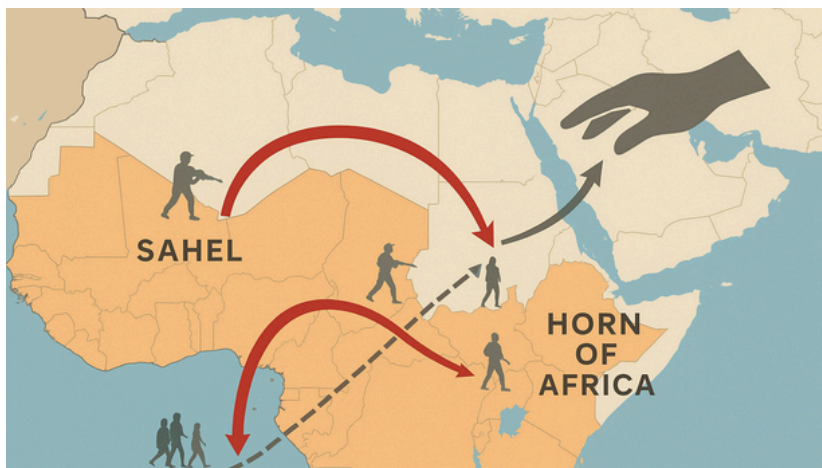
Digest

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Contents

Page **1**

The Horn and the Sahel in a Period of Geopolitical Upheaval: Interconnectedness, Global Shifts, and Implications for Building Lasting Peace



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CDRC is a non-profit, independent Ethiopia-based policy institute engaged in research and analysis. The Centre looks at opportunities and key challenges in the Horn of Africa, and focuses on policy ideas on development, sustainable peace and security.

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The Horn and the Sahel in a Period of Geopolitical Upheaval: Interconnectedness, Global Shifts, and Implications for Building Lasting Peace

Introduction

The African continent is experiencing a new and volatile phase of political and security transformations. Long-standing challenges such as inter-state rivalries, contested sovereignty, militarized governance, and internal insurgencies are resurfacing with renewed intensity. At the same time, new dynamics driven by shifting global alliances, economic competition, climate shocks, and the expanding role of non-state actors are reshaping state–society relations. Nowhere is this confluence of pressures more evident than in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. In the Horn, sovereignty disputes, political transitions, violent conflicts, and regional power rivalries intersect with the strategic interests of regional and global actors seeking influence along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The effects of the devastating war in Sudan, the fragility of the political transition in South Sudan, Somalia’s ongoing battle against violent extremism, and Ethiopia’s challenging transition illustrate how insecurity in one state reverberates across the region.

In parallel, the Sahel has become a critical geopolitical flashpoint where fragile governance, identity-based tensions, and deep socio-economic marginalization converge with expanding networks of armed groups and transnational criminal economies. The region has witnessed a rapid succession of military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, where new ruling authorities have capitalized on popular discontent with former governments and rejected the influence of traditional Western partners in favor of alternative, “sovereign” security and diplomatic alignments. Today, the Sahel stands as one of the world’s most active epicenters of violent extremism, where groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS exploit local grievances, weak institutions, and porous

borders to entrench their influence. As governance structures erode and political legitimacy becomes increasingly contested, states lose their capacity to act as stabilizing forces, leaving societies fragmented and communities trapped in cycles of violence and displacement. Meanwhile, shifting global rivalries and the growing assertiveness of non-Western powers are reshaping the strategic landscape—blurring the boundaries between state and non-state actors and redefining how power, protection, and influence are pursued across the region.

Although the Horn of Africa and the Sahel are geographically distinct, the recent surge in conflicts and political upheavals reveals an expanding belt of interconnected instability stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. This turbulence evokes echoes of the early 1990s, yet the present moment is defined by far more complex dynamics—heightened geopolitical competition, layered crises, and rapidly shifting alliances. Conflict in one region increasingly produces spillover effects in the other, creating a shared arc of fragility. The spread of violent extremism, the circulation of arms from conflict zones, the expansion of illicit financial networks, and the intensification of human trafficking and migration flows have bound the Sahel and the Horn into a single, interlinked security ecosystem. Both regions now function as major corridors for smuggling and trafficking networks that move people, weapons, and goods from source to destination—often funneling refugees and migrants toward North Africa and Europe. As a result, developments in either region have direct and immediate implications for neighboring states and the wider international community.

The erosion of state authority in parts of the Sahel has opened new logistical, ideological, and

operational linkages for extremist networks extending eastward toward the Horn of Africa. Conversely, instability in the Horn—particularly along the Sudan–Chad–Central African Republic borderlands and in Somalia—has created fresh operational spaces and supply chains that connect armed networks back into the Sahelian conflicts as well as Southern Africa, Mozambique in particular. The outcome is a self-reinforcing cycle in which insecurity in one region amplifies instability in the other. Yet, alongside this shared vulnerability lies a latent potential: with the right vision, the regions could be restructured as zones of economic connectivity and growth. Emerging developments in Sudan and Somaliland, coupled with new infrastructure initiatives that could establish transport and trade corridors linking the Gulf of Aden to the hinterland and Darfur to the Mediterranean Sea, hold transformative potential for the coming decades.

This interdependence underscores the inadequacy of fragmented, country-specific peacebuilding approaches. Addressing the crises in isolation only perpetuates instability. What is required is a more integrated, regional, and transregional strategy—one that recognizes the interconnected nature of the threats and opportunities spanning the Sahel and the Horn. Such a framework must align security cooperation, governance reform, economic development, and diplomatic engagement, transforming shared vulnerabilities into platforms for resilience, stability, and collective renewal across both regions.

Compounding these regional dynamics is a rapidly changing global environment. The post-Cold War period of relative geopolitical predictability is giving way to a renewed era of strategic competition among major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, alongside increasingly assertive middle powers from the Gulf, the Mediterranean, and beyond. The Horn and the Sahel have become critical arenas where these external actors seek influence through security partnerships, infrastructure investments, energy access, port control, and political patronage. This external engagement reshapes domestic political calculations and regional alliances, influencing

both the trajectory of conflicts and the prospects for durable peace.

Given these realities, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive analytical and policy framework that can map the complex interplay among domestic governance challenges, regional security dynamics, and global geopolitical shifts. Understanding how local grievances intersect with national political settlements, regional rivalries, and external power strategies is essential for identifying priorities for intervention and for designing peacebuilding strategies that are contextually grounded and regionally coherent. Lasting peace in both the Horn and the Sahel will depend on building legitimate governance, inclusive political settlements, regional cooperation mechanisms, and strategies that look beyond short-term stabilization toward addressing the structural drivers of fragility.

The Horn: An Unstable Landscape Marked by Shifting Alliances

The Horn of Africa has re-emerged as one of the world's most contested geopolitical arenas—a crossroads where African political projects, Middle Eastern rivalries, and broader global strategic agendas converge. It is a region of striking paradoxes: endowed with vast natural resources, rich cultural heritage, and critical maritime routes, yet persistently destabilized by internal fragmentation, inter-elite rivalries, and recurrent cycles of violent conflict. Over the past decade, the crisis of regional order has deepened as long-suppressed fault lines have reopened and new ones have emerged. Powers once deterred through coordinated regional or international efforts have resurfaced with renewed vigor, seeking to entrench divisions and exploit instability for strategic gain. Meanwhile, new actors with transformative capacities have entered the scene pursuing their interests, and cultivating local partners whose roles are often contested domestically and regionally. Traditional partners who once viewed the Horn primarily as a recipient of aid now find themselves sidelined by those who see it as a zone of opportunity and strategic competition. This shift has dramatically altered the

region's political economy and intensified the struggle for influence.

Domestic political turbulence across several states has converged with shifting regional alliances and escalating external competition, producing an increasingly volatile and unpredictable landscape. The dual erosion of regional institutional mechanisms and the fragmentation of diplomatic and mediation processes have left states without a coherent framework for managing crises or fostering trust. The weakening of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—once the cornerstone of regional cooperation—illustrates both institutional deficiencies and the unexpected disengagement of key member states. Perceptions that IGAD was captured or instrumentalized by particular actors have further undermined its credibility and legitimacy.

Rebuilding that legitimacy remains a formidable challenge. It comes at a time when multilateralism itself is under strain globally, and when several governments in the region question whether regional institutions can adequately represent or protect their interests. This growing skepticism has led some states to deprioritize multilateral engagement, preferring instead *ad hoc* bilateral arrangements or alignment with external powers. In the vacuum left by weakened regional frameworks, external actors have deepened their penetration through security partnerships, bilateral defense pacts, and transactional relationships with local elites for regional, proxy contestations. These dynamics have further constrained collective action and reduced the prospects for coherent, homegrown problem-solving, leaving the Horn of Africa vulnerable to both internal fragmentation and external manipulation.

The diffuse political gravity in the region has made coordination among the major states with tensions—Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia—significantly more difficult than in previous decades. Ethiopia, long regarded as the anchor state of the Horn, is currently navigating multiple internal fault lines, a polarizing political

environment, and a fractured governing elite. This internal challenge not only constrains its diplomatic capacity but also reshapes regional perceptions about power balance and influence. Meanwhile, tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea have resurged. What had once appeared as a post-2018 rapprochement is now overshadowed by deep mistrust rooted in unresolved issues, diverging interpretations of regional security, and Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access—which Asmara perceives as a potential threat to its sovereignty and regional position. The risk of a renewed interstate confrontation, though not inevitable, has become a non-trivial concern with far-reaching implications for the wider Horn.

Sudan's ongoing war has become the single most destabilizing conflict in the Horn of Africa. The confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has not only crippled state institutions but also unleashed one of the world's most severe humanitarian catastrophes. The RSF's eastward push, following its consolidation of control over much of Darfur, raises the alarming prospect of renewed mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and additional waves of mass displacement across central and northern Sudan. Unless Sudan's political elites confront the country's profound social, cultural, and regional diversity—and commit to a realistic framework for governing it—the state risks further fragmentation and the emergence of new political and territorial configurations. These warnings are no longer theoretical; they are already visible in the erosion of national authority and the rise of localized power centers. Compounding the crisis is the increasingly destabilizing role of several Gulf countries, whose competing interests and patronage networks have deepened the conflict and hardened divisions among Sudanese actors. Their involvement has shifted the balance of power on the ground and diminished prospects for a negotiated settlement. Taken together, these dynamics leave Sudanese actors dangerously constrained. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, at present, Sudan's domestic political and military forces may not be capable of resolving the crisis on their own—whether due to internal

fragmentation, external interference, or the sheer scale of the state's collapse.

The international community's response to the Sudanese crisis has been fragmented, reactive, and largely ineffective. Calls for the warring parties to simply sign a cessation of hostilities and relinquish control have proven unrealistic and detached from the complex political and military realities on the ground. Such an approach, which ignores the entrenched power structures and deep-rooted grievances driving the conflict, as well as the role of non-Sudanese, has only served to deepen the crisis. The African Union, meanwhile, has struggled to craft a viable proposal to resolve the conflict. Its institutional rules—rigidly applied without sufficient consideration of Sudan's objective realities—have constrained its ability to engage pragmatically with the key actors who hold real influence on the ground. As a result, the AU's long-cherished principle of "African solutions to African problems" risks being undermined by procedural limitations and a disconnect between norms and realities.

Compounding this challenge, as already referred to, competing external powers have taken sides, each pursuing divergent interests and irreconcilable geopolitical ambitions. Instead of fostering a coherent peace process, these interventions have deepened polarization and hardened the conflict's fault lines. Sudan has consequently become a theatre for proxy rivalries, where regional and global actors provide arms, financing, and political backing to opposing factions—fueling the war's persistence and further eroding prospects for a sustainable peace.

South Sudan, meanwhile, stands on the brink of renewed instability. The peace agreement that once offered a tenuous political framework has effectively unraveled. Rival factions remain heavily armed, state institutions are hollowed out by corruption and factionalism, and the social fabric is strained by growing insecurity and economic hardship. The likelihood of a return to large-scale violence looms large. Worryingly, South Sudan's political trajectory now appears shaped less by domestic consensus-building and more by the

competing calculations of external guarantors—leaving the country's fragile sovereignty increasingly vulnerable to external manipulation and regional spillover from Sudan's war.

In Somalia, the struggle over the distribution of power between the federal government and regional states has reasserted itself as the central question of state-building. Despite notable progress in institution-building and counterterrorism, al-Shabaab's insurgency continues to undermine security, governance, and economic stability. Efforts by the federal government to centralize authority and push forward a direct electoral model have reignited tensions with federal member states, many of which seek to protect their autonomous power bases. Added to this, Somaliland's long-running quest for international recognition has gained renewed external interest, particularly in light of global strategic competition in the Red Sea corridor. This evolving diplomatic landscape has reshaped regional alignments, opening new opportunities but also introducing fresh tensions between Hargeisa and Mogadishu, and between external powers positioning themselves in the region.

Overall, instability in the Horn of Africa is being driven by a volatile combination of geopolitical competition, internal state fragility, resource-based disputes, and rapidly shifting strategic realignments. Contests over water sharing, maritime access, and the governance of borderlands have become deeply entangled with questions of national identity and regional power. Emerging alignments—such as the increasing strategic coordination between Eritrea and Egypt in response to Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access—illustrate how quickly alliances in the region can shift and how reactive states have become to one another's moves. These evolving relationships are not anchored in durable institutions, mutual trust, or shared regional frameworks. Instead, they are shaped by short-term strategic calculations closely tied to regime survival, making the regional order fluid, fragmented, and highly susceptible to sudden shocks. Compounding this volatility is the role of

external actors that exploit divisions among local players who, in turn, willingly align with outside powers when it appears advantageous to their own political interests. This mutual instrumentalization reinforces instability, blurs lines of accountability, and leaves the Horn's political landscape even more combustible.

What emerges is a landscape in which cooperation is consistently overshadowed by competition, and where the capacity for collective security is weakened by mistrust. Without the restoration of credible regional mechanisms, the reestablishment of structured diplomatic channels, and the pursuit of political settlements rooted in local realities rather than external power calculations, the Horn of Africa will remain locked in a cycle of instability that undermines both domestic transformation and regional development.

The Sahel: A Break with France — and a Pivot Toward Russia?

The Sahel stretches as a vast ecological and cultural corridor from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, bridging North and Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, it has undergone profound political transformation, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. These states, long anchored within France's postcolonial sphere of influence, have initiated a decisive rupture with Paris. For decades after independence, France maintained a pervasive political, military, and economic presence in the region: its military bases provided security guarantees to allied regimes; French-backed leaders preserved internal control; and Paris retained privileged access to uranium, gold, rare minerals, and other vital resources. The CFA franc—pegged to the French Treasury—symbolized and sustained this enduring economic dependency.

For many in the Sahel, colonial hierarchies never truly disappeared; they merely evolved into subtler forms of dependence and control. Popular resentment toward this unequal arrangement

simmered beneath the surface for years, eventually erupting into open rejection of France's dominance. The new military leaders in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have skillfully harnessed this anti-colonial sentiment, invoking nationalist rhetoric and exposing exploitative past contracts and relationships to discredit their predecessors and consolidate popular support. A shared sense of defiance and renewed confidence has been vividly expressed through social media narratives and mass mobilization across the region.

Yet, this new political moment remains fragile and uncertain. The Sahel is still navigating a turbulent transition, as emerging alliances with non-traditional partners—ranging from Russia to the Gulf states—reshape its geopolitical landscape. These shifts are likely to provoke reactions from departing powers and further complicate the regional balance. In this evolving environment, both state and non-state actors are set to play increasingly decisive roles in defining the next phase of the Sahel's transformation—one that could either reinforce sovereignty and resilience or deepen fragmentation and instability.

The political ruptures of the past four years must be understood in this context. The central Sahel has become a frontline in a new era of geopolitical competition, where global and regional powers are repositioning themselves to fill the vacuum created by the erosion of French influence. The shift is not merely diplomatic; it represents a reordering of political identity, strategic alignment, and narratives of sovereignty. Russia has emerged as the most consequential external beneficiary of this realignment. Moscow has positioned itself as a partner that does not lecture on democracy or human rights, aligning with governing elites who view Western conditionality as a threat to regime survival. Russian state media and diplomatic messaging have successfully tapped into anti-French grievances, framing Russia as a defender of African sovereignty against Western domination. This has resonated strongly among youth populations disillusioned with decades of failed development promises and persistent insecurity.

The absence of a stable and coherent Western

policy response accelerated this geopolitical reversal. France's military withdrawal, compounded by wavering U.S. engagement and Europe's fragmented strategy, generated a strategic void that Russia quickly moved to fill. Through the Wagner Group—now reorganized under the label *African Corps*—Russia has provided advisory support, weapons deliveries, intelligence assistance, and elite protection forces. This approach allows Russia to exert influence without the political liabilities of overt state intervention. Moscow also revives historical narratives to legitimize its presence, invoking the Soviet Union's support for African liberation movements and the education of African elites during the Cold War. This historical memory has become central to Russia's soft power appeal: it presents itself not as a new patron, but as the return of an old ally, now re-engaged on more reciprocal terms.

Yet despite these new political and military alignments, security in the Sahel has continued to deteriorate. The region has become the world's most lethal epicenter of violent extremism. Groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (IS-Sahel) exploit weak governance, social fragmentation, and territorial vacuums to expand their influence. Their violence targets civilians, local leaders, and state institutions, and increasingly shapes patterns of community allegiance and displacement. More than half of global terrorism deaths now occur in the Sahel, indicating that the shift in strategic alliances has yet to translate into meaningful security gains. At the same time, climate change exacerbates vulnerability: prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and shrinking pastoral and agricultural livelihoods generate new pressures that feed recruitment networks, displacement patterns, and local conflict dynamics.

The political break with France and the pivot toward Russia thus represent not the resolution of the crisis, but the opening of a new phase of geopolitical contestation layered atop longstanding structural fragilities. The emerging order in the Sahel is characterized by militarized

governance, securitized political authority, and the deep entrenchment of external actors whose interests do not always align with long-term stability. While the new ruling elites frame their foreign policy shift as a reclaiming of sovereignty, the challenge remains whether this renewed commitment to fostering sovereignty can be translated into durable institutions, functional governance, and improved security for the region's populations.

What is unfolding in the Sahel is therefore more than a shift in alliances—it is a renegotiation of political authority and geopolitical identity. Whether this transformation produces renewed autonomy and stability or deepens fragmentation and militarization will depend on how these states rebuild state capacity, manage social cohesion, and engage with regional and international partners in the years ahead.

Entrenched Power Dynamics in the Horn and the Sahel: Failed Political Transitions?

The political and security developments in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel should not be viewed as isolated national crises, but rather as interconnected regional phenomena shaped by shared structural vulnerabilities and reinforcing spillover effects. Both regions face converging governance challenges, including state fragility, contested national identity, and weak institutional capacity, which have undermined efforts to build durable political settlements. These conditions have allowed cycles of unconstitutional changes of government to take root and, in some cases, to become normalized. In both regions, historical patterns of centralized power, exclusionary politics, and marginalization of peripheral communities have weakened the legitimacy of state institutions and eroded public trust. The failure to meaningfully address these structural issues has produced political orders that appear stable only on the surface, but remain deeply fragile and prone to sudden rupture.

The relationship between power, institutions, and governance in both regions has overwhelmingly favored the personalization of authority rather than the strengthening of institutional checks and

balances. Institutions designed to manage conflict, deliver services, and uphold the rule of law have instead been politicized, captured, or hollowed out to serve narrow elite interests. In such contexts, institutions do not act as neutral arbiters between different social groups or as agents of public interest; instead, they become instruments of political contestation. Corruption becomes not only a symptom but a core organizing principle of political life. This entrenched pattern sustains systems in which access to power determines access to resources, opportunity, and protection. The unresolved political question of “who gets what, when, and how” remains a central source of tension, grievance, and violent contestation.

Developments in the Sahel illustrate how the erosion of state legitimacy and dysfunction within governance systems can lead to dramatic shifts in political authority. Military takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger were enabled by discredited civilian leadership, widespread public frustration with insecurity, and the collapse of trust between citizens and state institutions. Weak governance structures failed to accommodate social and political pluralism, while frustrated security forces, overwhelmed by insurgencies and feeling abandoned by external partners, positioned themselves as alternative custodians of national interest. This dynamic unfolded in a geopolitical environment marked by external competition, creating opportunities for foreign actors—especially Russia—to support new military regimes seeking to consolidate power. In this context, political transitions have been less about democratization or reform than about reconfiguring alliances and securing regime survival.

The African Union (AU), in line with its founding principles, has maintained a firm stance against unconstitutional changes of government. Consequently, the recent military takeovers in parts of the Sahel did not receive its endorsement. However, this rigid application of norms has exposed a serious gap in the AU’s governance framework. Many member states invoke the same principle—not out of genuine commitment to constitutionalism, but as a shield to entrench their

own power. Leaders who manipulate constitutions, extend term limits, or suppress dissent continue to enjoy AU recognition so long as their actions are cloaked in procedural legality.

The AU’s normative framework offers no clear provision for situations where popular uprisings or widespread public discontent drive changes in government. This omission reflects a deeper tension between legality and legitimacy—between the letter of the law and the will of the people. By treating all extra-constitutional transitions as illegitimate, regardless of context, the AU risks alienating African populations who perceive its stance as protecting regimes rather than principles.

To remain relevant and credible, the AU must review and recalibrate its rules to ensure that they protect not only incumbents from coups, but also citizens from authoritarian manipulation. A more balanced approach—one that distinguishes between power grabs and genuine popular movements—would strengthen the Union’s legitimacy and moral authority. The challenge is not confined to the Sahel; similar patterns of constitutional manipulation and political stagnation are evident in other regions, including the Horn and Southern Africa. Unless the AU evolves to address these realities, its vision of “African solutions to African problems” will remain an aspiration rather than a practice.

Similarly, political transitions in the Horn of Africa have been unmanaged, contested, and, in some cases, violently reversed. In the Horn, popular mobilization opened historical windows for transformation, but the institutional mechanisms required to guide transitions toward inclusive governance were weak or absent, particularly in Sudan. Instead of political settlements, countries in the region experienced fragmentation of ruling coalitions, elite rivalries, and the resurgence of militarized politics. Elections and transitional frameworks proved insufficient in the absence of independent judiciaries, functioning security sectors, and political actors willing to commit to negotiated compromise. The failure to reconcile state-building with the accommodation of diverse political identities and regional interests

contributed to renewed conflict and uncertainty.

These vulnerabilities have created fertile ground for external actors to intervene, often pursuing strategic, economic, or ideological interests rather than local stability. The Horn and the Sahel have thus become increasingly arenas of geopolitical competition, where rival global and regional powers support proxies, negotiate military basing rights, or provide security assistance to ruling elites. The result is not the restoration of state capacity, but the further militarization of political life, where armed actors gain leverage over civilian institutions. Proxy warfare has proven to be a cost-effective tool for states seeking influence, further weakening national sovereignty and complicating regional diplomacy.

Meanwhile, many governments in both regions respond to political opposition and social discontent with coercive practices: securitized governance, arbitrary arrests, violent crackdowns, and ethnic mobilization. These strategies exacerbate rather than resolve grievances. The militarization of politics encourages communities to seek protection through armed groups rather than formal institutions, deepening fragmentation and weakening the state's monopoly on violence. As state authority erodes, both insurgent movements and transnational criminal networks expand into the vacuum, further blurring the lines between political, ideological, and economic violence.

Global crises, including the Russia-Ukraine war and escalating conflict in Gaza, have also worsened the situation by driving up food prices, diverting international attention and funding, and reducing the capacity of international partners to support conflict resolution. Economic shocks have intensified resource competition, deepened poverty, and contributed to humanitarian emergencies that destabilize already fragile societies.

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate that power transitions in both the Horn and the Sahel have not resulted in durable political reform. Rather than opening paths toward more inclusive

governance, many transitions have reinforced authoritarian tendencies, militarized political life, and entrenched elite competition. Without institutional renewal, credible political dialogue, and a rethinking of state-society relations, both regions risk remaining trapped in cycles of crisis and re-intervention.

Interconnected Insurgencies in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel

The proliferation and entrenchment of insurgent movements capable of influencing political processes have become defining features of the current security landscape across both the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. These regions are witnessing an unprecedented erosion of state authority, as insurgent groups expand territorial control, disrupt governance, and command large swaths of land and populations. The result is a patchwork of de facto authorities—ranging from jihadist organizations and rebel movements to local militias and self-defense forces—each pursuing distinct agendas but sharing a common effect: the fragmentation of political and territorial sovereignty. In many countries, entire regions are governed not by constitutional governments but by armed non-state actors, whose influence extends into economic, social, and political life.

The insurgent landscape in both the Horn and the Sahel is complex, fluid, and adaptive. These groups are driven by diverse motivations, from ideological and religious extremism to ethnic grievances, territorial autonomy, and control over lucrative resources. What unites them is the exploitation of state fragility, local grievances, and governance vacuums. State institutions in many of these countries—already weakened by corruption, patronage politics, and limited capacity—are now unable to maintain the monopoly on violence or deliver essential services. This has created a permissive environment in which insurgent groups flourish, using both coercion and co-option to gain legitimacy. In some areas, they administer justice, collect taxes, regulate trade, and even provide rudimentary social services, thereby embedding themselves in the daily lives of citizens.

Geography and demography amplify these challenges. The Horn and the Sahel are linked by a vast, semi-arid corridor stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea—an environment characterized by porous borders, weak governance, and high mobility. These physical and political conditions have created a transregional belt of instability, facilitating the flow of weapons, fighters, and illicit goods. In the Sahel, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) commands an estimated 6,000 fighters, while the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (IS-Sahel)—formerly Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)—exploits ungoverned spaces in the tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Similarly, in the Horn, groups such as al-Shabaab, the Al-Bara' ibn Malik Battalion also known as El-Baraa Ibn Malik or Abaraa Iban Malik, a Sudanese Islamist militia that emerged within the complex Sudan crisis, as well as some allies of the Sudan Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and various insurgent movements in the region control and govern significant territories, often running parallel administrations that rival the state's authority.

These insurgent actors have also become more sophisticated in their tactics, financing, and intelligence operations. They have developed transnational linkages, acquired advanced weaponry, and, in some cases, infiltrated state security and political structures. For instance, al-Shabaab maintains an elaborate intelligence and internal security apparatus capable of conducting targeted assassinations and espionage operations. In the Sahel, jihadist groups exploit the weakness of state forces and the corruption within security sectors, allowing them to infiltrate local administrations and coerce communities. Adding to this complexity is the growing interconnectedness between local insurgencies and transnational networks. Alleged intelligence and logistical cooperation between Sudan's RSF and foreign powers and the transactional link between al-Shabaab and Yemen's Houthi rebels, illustrate the regionalization of insurgent activity. These relationships demonstrate how instability in one region can reverberate across borders, linking the security of the Sahel and the Horn in a shared crisis of governance.

The social base of these insurgencies also warrants attention. Many of these groups draw legitimacy from their local constituencies, capitalizing on grievances rooted in marginalization, identity politics, and exclusion. In rural and peripheral areas where state presence is minimal or predatory, local populations often see insurgent groups as the lesser of two evils—entities that, at the very least, provide order and protection. The erosion of state legitimacy, compounded by climate shocks, poverty, and conflict over scarce resources, has driven communities to rely on traditional or ethnic militias for survival. In the absence of credible state protection, allegiance to clan, tribe, or ethnicity becomes a rational security and survival strategy. The trust deficit between citizens and the state fuels cycles of rebellion and counter-rebellion, perpetuating a political economy of violence.

In both regions, insurgencies have become deeply entangled with local conflicts over natural resources. The struggle for control over gold mines in Mali and Burkina Faso, uranium in Niger, oil in South Sudan, gold and precious metals fields in Sudan and fertile agricultural or grazing lands in the Horn underscores the material foundations of these conflicts. Insurgent groups increasingly use resource extraction, taxation of trade routes, and smuggling as key sources of revenue. These networks often overlap with state officials, criminal syndicates, and external actors, blurring the line between rebellion and profiteering. Arms, money, and influence circulate through a shadow economy that sustains conflict and undermines efforts at stabilization.

The opportunistic involvement of regional and international powers further entrenches these dynamics. Rather than focusing on resolving insurgencies, some states and external actors use armed groups as instruments of influence and proxy warfare. Competing interests—whether to secure trade routes, access strategic ports, or maintain leverage against rivals—have led to covert alliances and transactional arrangements with non-state actors. This has transformed insurgencies into tools of geopolitical competition, mirroring the global shift toward fragmented and

hybrid warfare. The great power rivalries playing out in these regions—between Russia, the West, China, and Middle Eastern powers—have fractured the international consensus on counterinsurgency and peacebuilding. Groups considered terrorist threats by one power are often tolerated or even supported by another.

The commodification of insecurity—where instability itself becomes a source of profit and political leverage—has made insurgencies a permanent feature of the Horn and the Sahel's political landscape. As states weaken and the lines between war and governance blur, insurgent groups have evolved from mere spoilers to critical power brokers. The erosion of centralized authority, the fluidity of alliances, and the external manipulation of local conflicts suggest that these insurgencies are not temporary disruptions but symptoms of deeper structural decay. The challenge for governments and regional institutions is not only to defeat these groups militarily but to restore legitimacy, governance, and accountability—elements that have long been eroded.

Looking ahead, the prospects for reversing these trends are bleak in the short to medium term. The insurgent groups in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel have proven resilient, adaptive, and deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of their respective regions. Their pragmatic nature allows them to negotiate, co-opt, and survive under changing political circumstances. Unless there is a coordinated regional and transregional strategy—coupled with a rethinking of governance models, equitable resource distribution, and genuine citizen engagement—the twin crises of insurgency in the Horn and the Sahel will continue to reinforce each other, shaping the future of Africa's security architecture for years to come.

Impacts of a Declining Multilateralism and a Dysfunctional Global Order on the Horn and the Sahel

The Horn of Africa and the Sahel are confronting a confluence of crises—ranging from protracted internal armed conflicts and violent extremism to

fragile political transitions and deepening socio-economic fault lines. These regional challenges are unfolding against the backdrop of a deteriorating global order in which multilateralism is losing its coherence, credibility, and normative power. As global disorder intensifies and the international system becomes increasingly fragmented, regional cooperation frameworks such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are distressed. Their ability to manage complex political and security crises has been severely compromised, and in some cases, their very survival is being questioned. The erosion of collective action mechanisms reflects not only regional political dynamics but also the ripple effects of a dysfunctional global order in which once-stable institutions are now beset by paralysis, politicization, and power asymmetries.

The decline of global multilateralism has created a permissive environment for transactional politics and the resurgence of power-based diplomacy. The weakening of principles and rules-based engagement at the international level has allowed informal, non-diplomatic, and often coercive forms of interstate relations to dominate. States increasingly pursue narrow national interests through unilateral or minilateral arrangements, bypassing established international norms and institutions. This shift undermines the cooperative spirit that multilateralism was designed to foster and erodes the institutional capacity to promote collective security, economic growth, and development. Consequently, the global order is drifting toward a fragile equilibrium characterized by mistrust, volatility, and weakened institutional legitimacy—conditions that are particularly detrimental to vulnerable regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel.

There is ample evidence suggesting a strong correlation between the health of global multilateralism and the effectiveness of regional mechanisms. When collective action is paralyzed at the global level, regional cooperation also stagnates. Today, the multilateral system appears shaken both in its normative foundations and its

operational effectiveness. The United Nations (UN), traditionally the cornerstone of global peace and security, increasingly plays a marginal role in conflict prevention and resolution. The deepening geopolitical rivalry between the United States, China, and Russia has not only eroded trust in global institutions but also gridlocked decision-making in critical organs such as the UN Security Council. At the same time, the rise of populism, protectionism, and the politicization of aid and development assistance have undermined faith in the fairness and utility of multilateralism. Many states—particularly in the Global South—view these institutions as structurally biased, inefficient, and unresponsive to their security and development priorities.

At the continental and regional levels, the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and IGAD have struggled to deliver meaningful and timely responses to emerging and protracted crises. These institutions face significant internal constraints—ranging from financial dependence on external actors and political divisions among member states to the challenge of navigating the competing influences of global powers. The weakening of global multilateralism has further exposed these regional organizations to fragmentation, marginalization, and loss of legitimacy. In West Africa, the wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has dramatically reshaped the political landscape. The withdrawal of these countries from ECOWAS and the creation of the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) reflect the disintegration of regional cohesion and the growing turn toward minilateralism. The AES represents a new model of pragmatic, interest-based cooperation—but one that risks entrenching divisions and weakening broader regional and continental integration efforts.

A similar pattern is emerging in the Horn of Africa. IGAD's inability to act decisively in the face of overlapping political and security crises—from the conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia to the fragility of Ethiopia's post-war transition—highlights the depth of its institutional paralysis. Internal rivalries, conflicting national interests, and external interference have hollowed out its capacity to function as an effective multilateral

platform. As countries in the region increasingly resort to bilateral or ad hoc coalitions to address immediate security threats, regional governance becomes fragmented. The rise of minilateralism in the Horn underscores the limits of existing multilateral frameworks and the appeal of flexible, goal-specific alignments in an era of hybrid warfare, drone diplomacy—though its formulation is contested, and asymmetric threats. Yet these arrangements, while expedient, lack the inclusivity, accountability, and legitimacy required for sustainable peace and development.

The consequences of global fragmentation are profound. As great powers deepen their bilateral engagements through military basing, infrastructure financing, and security partnerships, African states risk being drawn into zero-sum rivalries that undermine continental solidarity. Without a coherent and united continental posture, Africa's ability to shape global norms, negotiate equitable trade and investment frameworks, protect strategic resources, and prevent destabilizing external interventions will remain constrained. Fragmented regional multilateralism not only weakens Africa's collective bargaining power but also increases the likelihood that external competition will exacerbate instability rather than foster development.

Despite the African Union's limited success in preventing or resolving recent conflicts—from the Sahel to the Horn—the normative necessity of the AU remains incontestable. The transnational nature of Africa's challenges demands a multilateral framework; in the AU's absence, such a structure would have to be reinvented. The AU's weakness, however, does not stem from the irrelevance of its mission but rather from structural and political constraints that limit its effectiveness. Chronic underfunding, overreliance on external donors, and the reluctance of member states to cede sovereignty or enforce collective decisions have eroded its authority. Moreover, the increasingly complex nature of contemporary conflicts—marked by the entanglement of local grievances, regional rivalries, and global competition—further complicates its mandate. To remain relevant, the AU must reconfigure its

governance, financing, and operational architecture to reflect 21st-century realities. Strengthening its institutional autonomy, ensuring predictable financing, and enhancing its ability to act independently of external agendas are essential for restoring credibility and effectiveness in managing Africa's peace and security challenges—for which its members have to make a choice—long-term interests to short-term survivalist ones.

The Horn, the Sahel, and the Role of External Powers

The geopolitical landscapes of the Horn of Africa and the Sahel have become increasingly complex and contested, shaped by overlapping crises and intensified external engagement. These two regions now constitute critical arenas in the broader competition among great and middle powers, where influence is pursued through a mix of economic, security, and ideological means. At a time when the global order is characterized by fragmentation and rivalry, the Horn and the Sahel serve as strategic gateways linking the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Sahara to global maritime and resource routes. Their significance lies not only in their geography but also in their political fluidity, which external powers—ranging from global superpowers to Gulf monarchies—have learned to navigate and exploit. The entry of new actors such as Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, alongside traditional Western powers, has turned these regions into laboratories of influence projection and arenas of proxy competition.

External involvement in both regions has taken multiple and often contradictory forms—trade, foreign direct investment, arms transfers, infrastructure financing, military basing, and ideological engagement through soft power. The convergence of these instruments has effectively transformed the Horn and the Sahel into a single geopolitical theatre where local fragilities intersect with global ambitions. The result is a crowded strategic space in which the agendas of external powers overlap, collide, and, in many cases, exacerbate existing insecurities. Rather than

fostering stability and development, these engagements often deepen fragmentation by empowering competing elites, militarizing economies, and reinforcing patterns of dependency. In essence, external powers are not merely responding to instability—they are also shaping and sustaining it, sometimes as a deliberate strategy of influence.

China's expanding footprint across both regions illustrates how economic ambition and geopolitical aspiration have become inseparable. In the Horn of Africa, Beijing's engagement has evolved from infrastructure financing and trade into a comprehensive strategy of connectivity and presence. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have provided the institutional and financial scaffolding for this strategy, combining investment, diplomacy, and political outreach. China's establishment of a "logistics" base in Djibouti—the first of its kind overseas—underscores its intent to anchor its influence militarily as well as economically. The appointment of a Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa further reflects Beijing's recognition that political instability threatens its economic interests, compelling it to adopt a more hands-on approach to mediation and conflict management. In the Sahel, China's engagement is more recent and primarily resource-driven, but it has begun to encounter the same dilemmas: instability threatens assets and exposes the limits of its long-cherished principle of non-interference.

The crisis in the Sahel, in particular, has forced China into an unaccustomed role. Its signature infrastructure projects, such as the 2,000-kilometer Niger-Benin oil pipeline, have come under direct threat from insurgent attacks, forcing Beijing to intervene diplomatically to safeguard its investments. This marks a strategic inflection point in China's Africa policy—from a posture of economic detachment to one that increasingly integrates security and political considerations. The imperative to protect Chinese citizens, companies, and infrastructure abroad is gradually transforming Beijing into a reluctant but active participant in Africa's conflict management landscape. This evolution, while pragmatic, also

reveals the contradictions of China's rise as a global power: it must now balance the rhetoric of South–South solidarity with the realities of interventionism.

Parallel to China's advance, the Gulf States—especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia—have emerged as hyperactive actors in both the Horn and the Sahel. Their involvement is driven by a combination of economic interests, supply chains, and security imperatives linked to their broader contest for regional role. The UAE, in particular, has developed a model that blends commerce, logistics, and security, often financing infrastructure projects such as ports, airports, and mining ventures in exchange for strategic concessions. Payments in gold, mineral rights, or long-term leases have become common instruments of engagement. In both regions, the Gulf's growing presence has blurred the lines between investment and intervention. Rivalries among Gulf monarchies—particularly between Abu Dhabi and Doha—have been exported into fragile political systems, aggravating local divisions and sometimes shaping the outcomes of conflicts and transitions. Somalia was the first victim in this regard.

At the same time, external involvement has increasingly fueled the rise of what might be termed “war economies,” where conflict itself becomes an avenue for profit and influence. Arms transfers, private security contracts, and mining concessions are now deeply intertwined with ongoing violence. This has created a dangerous convergence between economic and military interests, incentivizing instability rather than resolution. Defense expenditures in several Horn and Sahel states have surged dramatically over the past five years, often underwritten by opaque arrangements with foreign partners. In this context, both Turkey and Egypt have asserted themselves as significant regional players, using proxies and political networks to shape outcomes in Somalia, Sudan, and beyond.

Turkey's engagement represents one of the most ambitious transformations of a middle power's role in Africa. What began as a humanitarian outreach

in Somalia has mutated into a multidimensional presence combining trade, diplomacy, and military power. Ankara's base in Mogadishu—the largest Turkish military facility overseas—symbolizes this long-term commitment. From Turkey's perspective, the security threats linking the Sahel and the Horn are continuous: jihadist networks such as al-Shabaab, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and other affiliates form an arc of instability that extends from the Atlantic coast to the Bab-el-Mandeb. Turkey's deployment of drones, intelligence cooperation, and training programs in Somalia reflects its conviction that combating terrorism requires sustained forward presence. Its approach blends ideology, pragmatism, and strategic foresight, positioning Turkey as both a security provider and an economic partner.

Qatar's engagement contrasts in tone and method, relying primarily on mediation, investment, and humanitarian diplomacy. Its approach emphasizes soft power—trust-building, contextual knowledge, and facilitation of dialogue among adversaries. Doha's credibility rests on its nuanced understanding of local dynamics and its willingness to engage with non-state actors on the basis of behavioral change rather than regime type—without forgetting the religiously inclined actors. By contrast, Turkey's mediation style is avowedly non-neutral but claims impartiality—a distinction that underscores Ankara's belief that influence and fairness can coexist. Together, these Gulf and Turkish models illustrate the diversification of external engagement in Africa, where influence is no longer monopolized by Western powers but distributed among a mosaic of assertive middle powers.

The United States, for its part, appears to be reorienting its engagement toward a more transactional, investment-driven approach. Recent signals suggest a focus on leveraging private capital and strategic infrastructure investments as instruments of influence, echoing aspects of China's model. Reports of senior U.S. advisors spearheading initiatives in Ethiopia's mining, aviation, and infrastructure sectors, and mediating in regional disputes, suggest that Washington's

renewed interest in the Horn is both economic and geopolitical. This shift reflects an acknowledgment that traditional aid and security assistance models no longer suffice in an environment dominated by flexible, commercially driven competitors.

Europe's influence, by contrast, is in visible retreat. The European Union and its member states, once central to peacebuilding and governance promotion in Africa, now struggle to maintain relevance amid internal divisions, financial fatigue, and competing global priorities. The shift of attention toward Eastern Europe and migration management has diluted Europe's long-standing normative agenda in Africa. What remains is a more transactional engagement focused on security containment and border control, which has eroded Europe's moral authority and credibility as a partner for democratic governance. The decline of Europe's influence has created a vacuum that Russia, among others, has eagerly sought to fill.

Russia's rebranded "Africa Corps"—successor to the Wagner Group—has expanded its reach across both the Sahel and the Horn, combining military partnerships with access to lucrative resource concessions. Its strategy hinges on building alliances with military regimes, providing security assistance, and securing mining rights in exchange. This model, which fuses security support with economic extraction, has proven attractive to regimes seeking regime survival and autonomy from Western conditionalities. For the European Union, this presents a profound dilemma: whether to persist with principled engagement anchored in democratic norms and human rights or to adapt to the realpolitik logic of its rivals.

As the scramble for influence intensifies, the question of sovereignty in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel becomes increasingly fraught. External economic and security engagements have redefined the boundaries of state authority, often subordinating national decision-making to foreign interests. Predatory contracts—signed under conditions of fiscal desperation—grant disproportionate control to foreign corporations and governments over vital resources and

infrastructure. These agreements, shielded by secrecy and backed by powerful patrons, have transformed natural wealth into instruments of dependency. In West Africa, several recent coups exposed how resource contracts had compromised sovereignty: military leaders justified their seizures of power by revealing exploitative deals that awarded multinational corporations up to 80 percent of resource revenues.

This pattern is not confined to West Africa. In the Horn, similar allegations have emerged regarding newly signed resource exploration agreements, such as Turkey's deal with Somalia, which critics argue heavily favors Ankara at the expense of Somali sovereignty. Across both regions, the erosion of sovereignty manifests not only in economic terms but also in political and security dependency—where foreign patrons, rather than domestic institutions, shape the trajectory of national development and conflict management. The paradox of contemporary external engagement in Africa is thus laid bare: while cloaked in the language of partnership and development, it often deepens structural dependency, undermines governance, and perpetuates cycles of fragility that external powers then use to justify their continued presence.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The Sahel and the Horn of Africa are bound together by complex, multidimensional linkages—shared security dynamics, overlapping geopolitical rivalries, climate vulnerabilities, and evolving regional alliances. These interconnections mean that crises in one region inevitably reverberate in the other. Both regions have become incubators of hybrid governance systems where informal economies, patronage networks, and illicit trade often replace formal state authority. The growth of these shadow economies—driven by trafficking in arms, people, drugs, wildlife, and minerals—has eroded state institutions and sustained cycles of conflict. In this environment, extremist groups such as *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) in the Sahel and *al-Shabaab* in the Horn have learned to operate seamlessly across porous borders, exploiting governance vacuums and

fragile states. As these transnational actors evolve, states have turned to a patchwork of military solutions—ranging from bilateral defense pacts and private security deployments to the arming of local militias. These security experiments are not isolated; they are reshaping the geopolitical balance in both the Horn and the Sahel and redefining the nature of warfare and sovereignty in Africa.

The growing involvement of external powers has further complicated the regional landscape. Strategic competition among Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Russia (through Wagner and its successors), and Western countries reflects a widening perception that the Horn of Africa and the Sahel now form a single strategic continuum—a corridor of influence stretching from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. While such engagement brings investment, technology, and military training, it often prioritizes short-term geopolitical or economic gains over long-term stability and peacebuilding. This transactional logic deepens internal divisions, fuels rivalries, and weakens local ownership of security and governance initiatives. Rather than stabilizing the regions, foreign involvement has, in many cases, entrenched insecurity and eroded sovereignty. If unchecked, this pattern risks reviving the logic of coups and counter-coups reminiscent of the Cold War era—where the imperative of regime survival outweighs developmental priorities, and national decision-making becomes subordinated to the interests of external patrons.

The path forward, therefore, requires African states to recalibrate their strategies to both harness and manage external engagement. Countries in the Horn and Sahel must balance the benefits of foreign investment and security assistance with measures that reinforce national resilience, economic self-reliance, and inclusive governance. Central to this is the revival of regionalism—anchoring peace and development within African-led frameworks that prioritize cooperation over competition. A deliberate shift toward collective security and economic integration will not only help address common threats such as extremism, climate shocks, and

migration but also unlock the regions' vast developmental potential.

Yet, without a unified continental strategy that synchronizes security, economic, and diplomatic efforts, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel will remain vectors of instability. Bridging the institutional divide between the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is thus imperative. The African Union's Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) should spearhead a mechanism for structured collaboration between these blocs—facilitating joint analysis, intelligence sharing, and coordinated responses to transregional threats. Terrorism, migration, and climate-induced conflicts do not respect geographic or institutional boundaries; African responses should not either.

The interconnection between the two regions is symptomatic of a broader continental governance and security deficit. The growing security-commercial nexus—where mercenaries, arms dealers, and informal networks move fluidly between the Sahel and the Horn—demands a Pan-African security compact rather than fragmented interventions. Stabilizing one region while neglecting the other risks perpetuating cycles of instability. A holistic approach that situates both regions within a shared strategic vision is thus essential for sustainable peace.

An integrated lens is indispensable for several reasons.

1. **Transnational armed groups** such as al-Shabaab, ISIS affiliates, and JNIM operate across vast and porous borders, exploiting weak state institutions. Only coordinated, African-led strategies can dismantle these networks and prevent their adaptation.
2. **Illicit economic flows**—including arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and human migration—connect conflict economies from Somalia to Mali. Addressing these networks demands synchronized regulatory and enforcement frameworks.
3. **Climate change** is an accelerant of conflict across both regions. Resource competition over

grazing land, water, and farmland drives intercommunal violence. A shared AU-led early warning and resilience mechanism spanning both regions would enable faster, more informed interventions.

4. **External actors** increasingly view the Red Sea–Sahel corridor as a single strategic arc. African institutions must adopt a comparable integrative outlook to safeguard agency and prevent external actors from setting the regional agenda. The AU should complement existing frameworks with flexible coalitions of willing states that can operationalize joint patrols, shared training centers, and pooled strategic assets.

5. **Geostrategic importance** of both regions—serving as gateways to global trade and migration routes—makes their stability a continental and global priority.

6. **Institutional fragmentation** remains a major obstacle. IGAD and ECOWAS often operate in silos despite overlapping mandates in border zones such as Sudan, Chad, and Niger. The AU

must facilitate political dialogue to bridge these divides, harmonize priorities, and align the continental integration agenda with security imperatives.

Ultimately, the future of both the Horn and the Sahel depends on a new developmental and security paradigm that centers on the people rather than external actors. Sustainable stability can only emerge when local populations are engaged as partners, not as passive beneficiaries of externally designed programs. Africa cannot outsource its security, governance, or political future. These must remain African responsibilities—anchored in continental institutions, supported by regional cooperation, and complemented by international partnerships grounded in mutual respect. A secure and prosperous future for the Horn and the Sahel will depend on recognizing their interconnected destinies and committing to a unified, African-led path toward peace and renewal.