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AFRICA IN FOCUS: OPTIONS FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

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In the first year of the Trump-Vance Administration, U.S. engagement in Africa has made headway in the fight against terrorism and on the path towards increased partnerships on the continent. Amongst these wins were strikes to eliminate the threats from Houthis in the Red Sea, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorists in Nigeria, and al-Shabaab militants in Somalia. The Administration has also opened a new chapter of peace and prosperity on the continent, including the signing of an initial ceasefire between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, and the return of economic investments into transnational commercial initiatives. In line with the National Security Strategy's (NSS) priority of maintaining focus on economic opportunities and preempting terrorist threats, the Administration can continue its focus on thwarting adversaries' aims of expanding their influence on the continent while exploring economic opportunities, including the Lobito Corridor and the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline. These efforts can block the influence of malign actors while delivering tangible economic benefits to the American people.

The following series takes these efforts as a baseline for presenting the Trump Administration with a longer view regarding the dynamics and factors at play in the continent's top flashpoints. The series avoids offering policy recommendations and instead presents the President and his team with practical options based on how circumstances appear at the time of publication.



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EAST AFRICA: CURBING THE ASCENT OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Where We Are: Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan are currently experiencing civil wars. In Somalia, these conditions have enabled terror groups to create an opportunity to launch external operations. Sudan and South Sudan risk going down a similar path. The Iranian regime is capitalizing on this instability by shifting its focus to East Africa vis-à-vis the Houthis and the Somalia-based group Al-Shabaab ([al-Jabarni & Jalal, 2025](#)). This shift has, in large part, been catalyzed by Iran’s territorial losses across the Middle East over the last two years due to Israel’s military pressure. Iran may increasingly look to the Horn of Africa in the wake of the U.S. and Israeli strikes on its military and nuclear facilities in June 2025 ([Wehner, 2025](#)).

U.S. Interests at Stake: As Iran pivots towards the Horn, it is likely to focus on the surrounding geography, particularly the waterways paramount to international trade; the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. These routes are key to the movement of goods and resources to and from Europe and Asia. Moreover, this region contains swaths of untapped oil, gas, and critical mineral reserves, all of which are in the American supply chain. If left undefended, these resources risk falling into the hands of Russia, Iran, and China ([Meservey, 2025](#)). Al-Shabaab’s growing presence in the region furthermore makes this region uniquely vulnerable to cooptation and threats.

Analysis: The emergence of a Houthi alliance with al-Shabaab is not the start of a new military campaign in the Horn of Africa but rather the next move in Iran’s global chess game ([Africa Center for](#)



[Strategic Studies, 2025](#)). This alliance comes on the heels of former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi’s visits to Uganda and Kenya in 2023—the first visits to Africa by an Iranian president in over a decade ([Arab News, 2023](#)). Today, security concerns in the Horn of Africa are no longer synonymous with terrorist networks—the region is also the scene of intense competition over untapped mineral resources by state actors. This competition is elevating the region’s geopolitical importance. Furthermore, recent failures to adequately defend shipping lanes from Houthi attacks not only raise global shipping costs but also jeopardize the submarine cables in the Red Sea, which transmit data and critical information across the globe.

THE SAHEL: CONTAINING TERRORISM AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Where We Are: The Sahel region spans the countries located below the Saharan Desert and has been dubbed the “epicenter of terrorism.” The region has recently witnessed a stark rise in jihadist activity. From 2008-2023, there was a 2,000% rise in terrorism-related deaths, with the region accounting for over 40% of the world’s deaths caused by terrorism during this period ([Arslan, 2023](#)). Prominent terrorist groups in the region include Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Over the last five years, the expansion of terrorist presence has been juxtaposed by Western withdrawal. A breakdown of relations between new Sahelian governments and the West resulted in the departure of French forces from Mali (2022), Burkina Faso (2023), Niger (2023), and Chad (2025), and U.S. forces departed from Niger (2024) and Chad (2024). The resulting power vacuums are being filled by our adversaries: China, Russia, and Iran.

Amid these foreign threats, new local non-aligned power arrangements have emerged, including the Alliance of Sahel States, an alliance of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The member nations of the Alliance of Sahel States are committed to anti-Western narratives—e.g., blaming the European “neo-colonialism” for regional economic woes. In light of these views, this organization’s rise further diminishes Western influence in the region ([Stevens, 2025](#)). Niger provides the most glaring example. Following a coup in July 2023, Russian planes arrived in the capital, Niamey, delivering the new government military trainers and equipment. This delivery was then followed by



demonstrations calling for a full severance of ties with the U.S. ([Olumba & Ojo, 2024](#); [Al Jazeera, 2024](#)).

More recently, President Trump has refocused his attention on the Sahel towards the conflict in Nigeria. Initially designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in December 2020 by the first Trump Administration, because of the attacks against Nigeria Christian Community by jihadists, the designation was removed by the Biden Administration in November of 2021 ([Gilbert, 2022](#)). However, since the removal of the designation, the environment has not improved. Nigeria was redesignated as a CPC on October 31, 2025, and barring significant changes from the Nigerian government to protect its Christian population, the Trump Administration has threatened to withhold foreign aid and if things should continue to trend south and involve the U.S. military ([Shalal & Eboh, 2025](#)). In December of 2025, the United States launched strikes targeting key ISIS terrorists and training camps as a response to the mass-targeting of Nigeria's Christian community by the terrorist group.

U.S. Interests at Stake: Beyond boxing out adversarial influence in the Sahel, the rest of the continent is ripe with resources and potential partnerships that not only promote prosperity in the region but will also directly benefit the American people. Although abundant in resources, the region often lacks the proper infrastructure needed for exploration and preparation for use in the production of different goods. Projects such as the proposed Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline—a pipeline in which the United States has expressed significant interest—could be endangered should more of the Sahel fall victim to coups and terrorism. Construction on the pipeline is slated to begin in early 2026 and, when completed, will connect 13 countries. It is poised to be the largest offshore pipeline in the world and will boost gas supply to Africa and the West. As Europe actively seeks to divest from Russian gas, the pipeline, once completed, would serve as a suitable alternative ([Onyango, 2024](#)). European utilization of the pipeline would further American interests by giving European nations greater margins to disperse burden sharing for defense. However, the United States is not the only international power keen to get in on the pipeline. China, for example, has already staked out investments in the pipeline, with the Jingye Group agreeing to supply steel products for the pipeline's construction ([Coco, 2025](#)).

Analysis: Over the past five years, out of all of Africa's regions, the Sahel has seen the most growth in activity from malign actors. Islamist terror activity increased sharply in 2021—in contrast to other regions, such as the Lake Chad Basin and Northern Africa, which experienced a roughly 30% decline over this same period ([The African Center for Strategic Studies, 2022](#)). As Western countries withdraw from the region in response to cooperation challenges (particularly stemming from



corruption and ineffective governance), China, Russia, and Iran have moved quickly to fill the resulting power gaps. As these countries fall further into the orbit of our adversaries, issues of concern to the American people— e.g., drug trade, human trafficking—could become more common and more difficult to stop.

Nonetheless, and following on U.S. Africa Command’s (USAFRICOM) call for increased burden sharing amongst U.S. partners in Africa, there are non-military reasons for a continued interest in the Sahel. Projects such as the Nigeria-Morocco pipeline benefit more than just the African continent. Should the pipeline be completed, it would be a win for U.S. partners in Europe seeking alternatives to Russian gas. Potential for investment in the region could also work together with U.S. counterterrorism goals, which would work to increase stability and thereby pave the way for future investments from the private sector. Dissipation of a stable security apparatus has also led to the strengthening of ties between local jihadist groups and Western hemisphere-based cartels. Cartels have worked with jihadist groups in the region to move illicit drugs from South America into Europe by using the Sahel as a transit point. From 2015-2020, the average amount of cocaine seized each year in the Sahel sat around 13 kgs. In 2022, this number shot up to 1,466 kgs seized, and in 2023, 2,300 kgs had been seized in Mauritania alone ([United Nations, 2024](#)).

SOMALILAND: A POTENTIAL NEW PARTNER

Where We Are: Although Somaliland’s independence is not recognized by the wider international community, it has successfully governed itself since it declared independence from Somalia in 1991. Moreover, even amid the considerable regional instability in the Horn of Africa, Somaliland has managed to avoid any major coups or government infiltration by non-state actors. Presidential elections in November of 2024 saw the election of Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, who is presently interfacing with the Trump Administration in the hopes of finally receiving recognition as a sovereign nation. Movement in the direction of a deal has already been foreshadowed on the Somaliland side with their Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, H.E. Abdirahaman Dahir Adan, visiting the U.S. in late May—a visit in which he met with different U.S. agencies as well as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and members of Congress.

U.S. Interests at Stake: The movement to formalize Somaliland’s national independence is an attainable long-term goal that stands to benefit the United States ([Tan, 2025](#)). As most of the



African continent grapples with constant pursuits from our adversaries, Somaliland has previously rejected these advances in hopes that it will lead to deals with the United States and Europe ([Le Grange, 2025](#)). This is noteworthy as Somaliland's location on the Gulf of Aden, namely the Port of Berbera, holds the potential of being a bastion for counterterrorism and a hub for the facilitation of trade. Furthermore, the territory has proven its ability to be a stalwart against terrorism, having kept al-Shabaab at bay even as the terror group expands its reach in neighboring Somalia. With the Trump Administration placing a high priority on striking al-Shabaab targets—the total number of strikes since 2024 has doubled within the first five months of 2025—a potential partnership with Somaliland on the counterterrorism front could prove fruitful ([Slayton, 2025](#)).

Analysis: While the Trump Administration has yet to take a position on Somaliland's international standing, the prospects for formal recognition of Somaliland appear greater than during the Biden Administration. These prospects may be amplified with Israel's December 2025 announcement of its recognition of Somaliland's statehood. In the past year, Rep. Scott Perry (PA-10) introduced “the Republic of Somaliland Independence Act” ([H.R. 3992, 2025](#)), which calls for Congress to revisit the potential of official recognition, and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) was quoted as calling for the official U.S. recognition of Somaliland as an independent nation ([Cruz, 2025](#)). Following Israel's recognition of Somaliland's statehood, Cruz sent a letter to the White House encouraging the administration to do so as well. Having showcased the ability of a region in a neighborhood of conflict to both host a thriving democracy and a robust security arrangement, Somaliland's newly elected government will likely seek to quickly establish a rapport with the Trump Administration in its pursuit of formalized statehood.

Engagements within the first year of the administration featured a delegation from Somaliland led by H.E. Abdirahman Dahir Adan, the Republic's Minister of Foreign Affairs. The group met with members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Representatives Tim Burchett, Tom Tiffany, Pat Harrigan, Scott Perry, Ronny Jackson, and John Moolenaar, all of whom are in favor of increasing engagement with Somaliland. While current engagements are focused on increasing collaboration between the U.S. and Somaliland, subsequent meetings will most likely involve the leverage of the Port of Berbera, a port that made international headlines when a letter revealing a Russian inquiry about the port was shot down by the Somaliland government ([Le Grange, 2025](#)).

SOUTHERN AFRICA: EXPANDING ECONOMIES, BROADENING PARTNERSHIPS



Where We Are: The southern part of the continent is an epicenter for maritime and land-based trade, but also faces some of the heaviest pushes from the Iranian and Chinese governments. South Africa, the continent's leading economy by GDP, has slowly seen the expansion of a rift with the United States and its allies. This rift would seem to belie claims of “non-alignment”—South Africa looks increasingly aligned with U.S. adversaries. This reality was made manifest following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when it took Russia's side and, following Hamas's barbaric attack on October 7, 2023, the closing of the Israeli embassy in Pretoria the following month ([Lidor, 2023](#)). In the latter case, South Africa cited an assessment by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that Israel invaded a “sovereign and peaceful country”—an ironic assertion, given South Africa's concurrent defense of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the government in South Africa—rumored to have been assisted by the Iranian government—has further pursued action against Israel in the IJC ([Edelson, 2024](#)). The outcome of the case has not been decided, and a verdict is not expected for another three to four years.

Furthermore, the relationship between the United States and South Africa has seen a rift form over the South African government's treatment of a minority group, the Afrikaner Farmers. Proposed changes to South Africa's property rights laws could see the usurpation of “idle land,” land that has historically been owned by white Afrikaners, move into the hands of the government ([Friedman, 2025](#)). These movements have led to an increase in the highlighting of violence against Afrikaners, leading to President Trump announcing that the United States would begin to accept Afrikaner farmers fleeing political persecution or racial discrimination ([Carter, 2025](#)).

While the U.S. grapples with the challenge of reevaluating its posture towards South Africa—a country once considered “developed” if not “First World, but now mired in government corruption, economic dysfunction, and a slow moving ostracism against, Afrikaner farmers—the U.S. continues to make investments to the region, largely in projects to the north (e.g., the Lobito Corridor). Designed to further enhance U.S.-Africa economic cooperation in the region, the trade route will connect Angola's Atlantic seaboard to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zambia, and Tanzania. U.S. investments into the area surrounding South Africa aim to bolster the economies of the mineral-rich DRC and Zambia, which have the resources to be competitive in the global markets, but, due to their landlocked nature, lack of infrastructure, and historical trends of poor governance and corruption, have struggled.



Alongside its economic investments, the United States has pursued partnerships with countries willing to assist in the President’s plan for mass deportations through usage as diplomatic “safe third countries”—most notably with the country of Eswatini. On May 14, 2025, the Trump Administration struck a deal with the nation that saw \$5.1 million move to the small nation in exchange for the intaking of 160 deportees. A similar deal was also struck with Rwanda on June 7, 2025, a deal that saw up to \$7.5 million go to the country in exchange for the acceptance of 250 deportees ([Gibson, 2025](#)).

U.S. Interests at Stake: Although southern Africa still contains risks to U.S. interests, the region is important to U.S. grand strategy for the continent because of its wealth of resources and partnerships. The U.S. previously saw partial success in helping bolster economic prosperity in Angola following the end of the Angolan Civil War, when it shifted its approach from a humanitarian one to one of economic development and long-term growth. While it is important to caveat that Angola today still is not in a place where it alone can be a competitor on the global market, the difference in approach marks the possibility of there being other suitable solutions for developing countries in the region. Increased engagement from then-Secretary of State Collin Powell and then President George W. Bush designated Angola eligible for tariff exceptions under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), helping Angola more easily enter U.S. markets ([Mai et al., 2007](#)). Angola continues to face developmental challenges, but these relationships are symbolic of countries being willing to partner with the United States instead of being reliant on China. While success in the country cannot necessarily be transposed automatically onto the rest of the continent, the U.S. experience with Angola does demonstrate that a prosperity-backed approach can be used to counter adversarial influence while directly bolstering American supply chains.

Analysis: With the continued investment in economic projects in southern Africa, the U.S. is hoping to not only supplant Chinese influence but also to bolster American supply chains. As seen with President Trump’s visit to the Middle East, trade deals and investments will play a key role in the administration’s foreign policy playbook. The President has also shown a continued willingness to engage with governments that may not necessarily be aligned with the U.S.—with one prominent example being President Trump’s engagement with Syria’s Ahmad al-Sharaa—if there is a path towards a more hopeful future in a part of the world of geopolitical significance. This is an important note, as even with the differences that the U.S. and the country of South Africa have, they are still one of the U.S.’s biggest trading partners on the continent. South Africa alone accounts for 80% of the world’s platinum group metal reserves—minerals that are primarily used in the automotive industry as well as to build the electrical components that are found in most devices. Deals that connect these sources to



ongoing projects such as the Lobito Corridor create opportunities for better production within U.S. markets. Continued importation of these metals not only bolsters the U.S. industrial supply chain but also keeps China from dominating that part of the market.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC): POTENTIAL PATHWAYS TO PEACE AND PROSPERITY

Where We Are: Armed conflict has been present along the DRC's eastern front since the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, a conflict that saw, militias comprised of the Hutu tribe target those of the Tutsi population, sending many fleeing across the border into the neighboring DRC. Complicating matters further, the Congolese Tutsi community was divided over the question of integrating the fleeing Rwandan Tutsis. Additionally, several Hutu extremists—the same group targeting Tutsis in Rwanda—likewise fled to the DRC and proceeded to continue their campaign to exterminate the fleeing Rwandan Tutsis.

Following a peace agreement in the early 2000s, there was hope that the conflict would end. That hope was short-lived. In 2012, members of the Hutu majority National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP) formed the M23 group, a Hutu militia operating in the eastern regions of the DRC, in response to concerns that the Congolese government had not properly integrated them into the new government. In an effort to achieve integration into the government, the group restarted violent attacks and, despite initial setbacks in 2013 ([Africa Research Bulletin, 2013](#)), the group made a resurgence in the early 2020s. A report from the UN alleged Rwandan funding of M23, but the state has denied its involvement in the group's activities ([Pecquet, 2023](#)). Most recently, the Trump Administration brokered a peace agreement between the DRC and Rwanda. While the agreement itself did not fully end the fighting, it set up the foundation for future negotiations. Moreover, the agreement was noteworthy as it was the first time that anyone was able to make a breakthrough in conflict mediation. Through this peace agreement, the U.S. will be able to conduct oversight on the agreed-upon peace terms without having to commit boots on the ground for the cause. In exchange for helping broker the deal, the U.S. also received access to mineral deposits in the DRC, allowing for American companies to directly invest in the harvesting of rare earth minerals. While there have been setbacks in the rollout of the ceasefire, December 4, 2025, saw the presidents of both countries officially sign the deal, now known as the Washington Accords, with President Trump reaffirming commitment from not only the United States but the DRC and Rwanda in ending the conflict ([Livingstone, 2025](#)).



U.S. Interests at Stake: Controlling 70% of the world’s reserves, the DRC is the largest producer of cobalt. The country also contains roughly 10% of the world’s copper reserves and over 30% of the world’s diamond reserves ([Zadeh, 2025](#)). However, the export market is dominated by China. In 2020, the People’s Republic of China imported \$3,026,427.932 ([World Bank, n.d.](#)) of DRC-produced refined copper, while the U.S. only imported \$797.781—a near 200% difference. (trade value in 1000 USD) Part of this is due to the increase in illicit Chinese mining activity. As of July 2024, in the South Kivu province alone, there were over 450 illegal Chinese mining operations ([Tom, 2025](#)). These mines often engage in illegal practices, relying on child labor, and neglecting environmental and tax-related laws. Increased U.S. economic presence in the DRC would serve not only as another outlet for the diversification of the U.S. supply chain but would also directly counteract a major supply stream out of our greatest economic competitor.

Analysis: The DRC peace agreement provides a potential framework for other peace agreements across the continent. While the success of the deal is yet to be measured or fully realized, it shows the administration’s ability to broker peace agreements that have a positive impact on U.S. citizens without having to deploy the U.S. military. During the signing of the agreement, Secretary Rubio and Special Advisor Massad Boulos remarked on how the U.S.’s next task would be helping to draft a similar agreement for the conflict in Sudan, noting that such efforts were already underway ([U.S. Department of State, 2025](#)). In what appears to be the first of many peace agreements on the continent brokered by the U.S., this deal showcases the Trump Administration’s commitment to not only pursuing peace but protecting and furthering U.S. economic interests.

SUDAN: A PATH TOWARDS ENDING CIVIL WAR

Where We Are: Following the 2019 coup that forced out former President Omar al-Bashir, Sudan has been engulfed in a series of conflicts ranging from civil wars, growing threats of terrorism, and the presence of other non-state actors such as the Russian-affiliated private military contractors (PMC), the Wagner Group. These conflicts have involved disagreements over governance between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) commanded by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (better known as Hemedti). The SAF are part of Sudan’s armed forces, while the RSF is a former militia that, under al-Bashir, purged non-Arabs and in return was awarded with access to resources and land. The two groups originally worked together to overthrow al-Bashir in 2019, but since then have been engaged in on-going conflict.



Tensions reached a peak in 2023 when the RSF redeployed in various parts of Sudan, and negotiations between the two groups on this deployment fell through. Fighting has continued, and international powers such as the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have at various times attempted to negotiate ceasefires. As of May 31, 2023, SAF has suspended all ceasefire negotiations, citing the unwillingness of the RSF to uphold the previous agreements ([Al Jazeera, 2023](#)). However, due to the scale of the atrocities, international attempts at negotiations have since occurred but have lacked involvement from either of the Sudanese parties ([Mehta et al., 2024](#); [International Crisis Group, 2025](#)).

Under the Trump Administration, the formation of the Sudan Quartet, (comprised of the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt), was the forefront of diplomatic negotiations, but progress has been slow. A proposed July meeting was being cancelled following disagreements on the wording of a proposed solution and was not made up until October 25, when the group reconvened to establish a joint operational committee on the transition to civilian governance ([Sudan Tribune, 2025](#)).

While the President himself has remained removed from direct mediation in the conflict, his attention was shifted following the visit and appeal of Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) to the White House on November 18, 2025. At the urging of the Crown Prince, the President has taken a personal interest in overseeing the end of the conflict, and has begun working with other Middle Eastern partners, namely the UAE and Egypt, to find a solution ([Haltiwanger & Iyengar, 2025](#)).

U.S. Interests at Stake: Unlike many of Sudan's neighbors, the U.S. interest in Sudan does not primarily lie on the economic side. While there is economic gain to be had in Sudan vis-à-vis its access to the Red Sea and its gold mines, Sudan is most strategically important for the United States because it tends to be a central factor in the plans of our adversaries in Africa, particularly those of Russia. Russia has funded both sides of the conflict to bolster both the Kremlin's presence as well as that of its proxies: the Wagner Group and the Africa Corps ([Brundage, 2025](#)). A Kremlin alliance with the SAF eventually yielded an agreement that will allow them to set up a naval base in the Red Sea in the Port of Sudan ([The Maritime Executive, 2023](#)), while the Wagner Group and the Africa Corps have worked closely with the RSF, smuggling gold out of Sudan both in an effort to skirt Western sanctions and in exchange for military assistance ([ADF, 2024](#)). With the reports of Sergei Surovikin—who at one point oversaw Russia's war efforts in Ukraine—resurfacing in Algeria ([Cole, 2025](#)), there is a growing concern that Russia's Africa Corps is attempting to connect its resources with Sudan at the center. The structure of a Sudanese government is also essential for U.S. initiatives in the Middle East. As a signatory of



the original Abraham Accords, Sudan—particularly once it achieves internal stability—would be looked to as a supporter of a renewed accord on the African continent. With the caveat that Sudan has a long way to go before it renews its commitments from the first Abraham Accords, the first step towards this would be ending the fighting and having a government that is able to be present at a negotiating table.

Analysis: Even amid the lack of stability and war, Sudan has the potential to play a pivotal role in the future of the African continent. Its location in the center of Africa and along the Red Sea makes it an attractive transportation route for Russia’s Africa Corps. Its Red Sea access—also exploited by the Iranian regime to arm Hamas—could be thwarted, should the conflict between Israel and Hamas end and the country agree to re-enter into a renewed version of the Abraham Accords. However, navigating to the end of this conflict will be challenging as neither leader has demonstrated the ability to be fully trusted. General Burhan (SAF) was once a loyalist to former president Omar al-Bashir while Hemedti came from the Janjaweed, a former militia responsible for the ethnic cleansing of many non-Arabs in the western region of Darfur. ([Michael & McNeill, 2023](#)). While a lot remains up in the air, continued focus on this area (as the Trump Administration demonstrates) is key to preventing circumstances from deteriorating.

ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA: A CONTINUING CRISIS AND THE UNFINISHED WAR

Where We Are: The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea has long been fragile. Under then-Emperor Haile Selassie, Ethiopia attempted to annex Eritrea in 1961, sparking a 30-year war ([History Rise, 2024](#)). The war ended with Eritrean independence in 1991 (officially formalized in 1993), and the subsequent redrawing of borders, leading to the loss of Ethiopia’s Red Sea access. Consequently, its navy has effectively lost its relevance. Ethiopia has instead relied on ports in Djibouti and Somaliland to import products ([Mengesha, 2022](#)). Tensions between the two countries quelled from 2020 to 2022, following a civil war in Ethiopia between Ahmed’s government and the Tigrayan ethnic group—a group that until Abiy’s election in 2018 maintained control over the Ethiopian government. Yet even with Eritrea also having qualms with the Tigrayan people, the relationship between the two countries has continued to deteriorate. Recent calls by the Ethiopian president to reverse what he deemed a “historic mistake” in the redrawing of the borders have reignited conflict between the two nations ([Hiraan, 2025](#)).

Conflict between the two countries could escalate into a larger regional issue, and while observers should keep a close eye on its evolution, it is not the most glaring issue in the region.



The current targeting of civilians by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) and mass atrocities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia have led to over 600,000 Tigrayan lives being lost, and there is fear that the lack of international coverage on the issue could lead to a deepening of the crisis. Following Abiy's election, Tigrayan political dominance has waned. As a result, Tigrayans are increasingly targeted by several groups, including the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and the allied Eritrean Defense Forces.

U.S. Interests at Stake: While the U.S. does not and should not play the role of peacemaker in this conflict, reasons remain for the Trump Administration to keep a close eye on Ethiopia and Eritrea. An intensification in conflict would be detrimental for what looks to be a new page in the U.S. foreign policy plan for Africa. Should tensions rise to the point of a war, commercial traffic in the Red Sea would be greatly impacted, driving up global oil prices and impeding the Administration's ability to strike bi-lateral trade deals with African and Middle Eastern regional partners.

Ethiopia remains one of the United States' strongest trading partners, with the country having imported \$1.01 billion of U.S. goods in 2024—the 5th most on the continent ([Ekanem, 2025](#)). With over 30% of global trade running through the Red Sea ([El-Fekki, 2025](#)), flashpoints in Eritrea, compounded with the lingering threat of the Houthis in the southern part of the Red Sea, would also be detrimental for trade between European and Asian partners. Furthermore, porous borders and Iranian and Chinese interests could also lead to the region being the source of the world's next proxy war. The Eritrean government has held in custody for over a decade a U.S. citizen, Ciham Ali Ahmed, the daughter of a former Eritrean minister who defected. Ali Ahmed was arrested as a teenager in December 2012 and has been detained without trial and without any communication with the outside world. Any change in relations between the United States and Eritrea cannot commence until Ali Ahmed is released ([Busari, 2019](#)).

Analysis: American investments hinge on the maintenance of relative stability in the Horn of Africa, while global trade requires preventing the spread of conflict and Jihadism throughout the region. With a rapidly expanding jihadist threat in the Sahel and continued conflicts through the continent's north-south nexus, should the Horn fall, jihadist groups would have widespread control of the continent. Terrorism thrives on instability. Should a wider Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict develop, Al-Shabaab would likely expand its foothold in Somalia, Ethiopia's southern neighbor, thereby reversing the Trump Administration's progress in containing the terrorist group. On a diplomatic level, with Secretary Rubio and Mr. Massad Boulos actively working to secure a peace agreement in



neighboring Sudan, shockwaves from a potential conflict would greatly complicate the progress towards peace in Sudan, including with neighboring Egypt. This point was recently emphasized in the recent publication of the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy, where the Administration highlighted the brewing conflict as an engagement that it wishes to prevent ([Trump, 2025](#)).

Additionally, a new conflict would exacerbate the current humanitarian crisis with the Tigray people, further displacing thousands and potentially pushing them towards Western allies, compounding the current migrant crises faced by countries such as Great Britain, Italy, and France. Finally, should the Red Sea become a domain of conflict over oil resources, rising gas prices could complicate America's European partners' ability to divest from Russian oil.



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