

## Tigray Crisis

### A Case Study of Geopolitical Competition in the Horn of Africa<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract:

Promoting economic and political interests, maintaining balance of power at the global level, and influencing others to protect state and regime security are some of the reasons why global powers contend with each other internationally. By using the Tigray crisis in northern Ethiopia as a case study and analysing it based on neo-realism principles, this article explores the competition between global and regional powers and their political, economic and security ramifications for the Horn of Africa. The article argues that by framing the Tigray crisis in a contradictory way and responding to it differently, global powers are competing each other to project their power by embracing either a defensive or offensive realistic strategy. The findings also demonstrate that the contradictory strategy adopted by the major global powers and their conflicting behaviour are driven by their competing geostrategic interests in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, the article explores the consequences of these geostrategic political rivalries and power competition on matters of sovereignty, security, and power dynamics in the region and beyond.

#### Keywords:

Ethiopia, geo-political competition, geo-strategic interests, Horn of Africa, international order.

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## *Introduction*

Post-cold war era has been marked by a diverse array of diplomatic relations, democratic diffusion in many contexts, rise of regional blocs, as well as access to free markets across international borders. Globalization has, however, also brought not only transnational relations, but also geopolitical rivalries between states and non-state actors around the world. With the intent of advancing economic and political benefits, maintaining balance of power at the international order, and influencing others to maximize state and regime security, states contest each other on the global stage even though they have differences in power capability. Despite rising nationalist and populist tendencies, especially in the western world in recent years (e.g., Trump's protectionist policy and Britain's separation from the EU), the world is still experiencing unprecedented geopolitical and economic rivalries in varying forms and in different geographical settings. The rise of vaccination nationalism against COVID-19, the emergence of new centres of power in the global south, and untapped opportunities in emerging economies have become hotspots for global superpowers to engage in proxy wars or to compete for resources towards securing their geostrategic interests.

Ethiopia, as one of the oldest civilizations, also has a long history of diplomatic ties with other countries around the world and has long been a point of competition among major world powers for millennia. The history of modern diplomacy in Ethiopia is generally linked with the rise of Emperor Tewodros in the 1850s, however, historical records show that European explorers and missionaries were in close contact with ancient Ethiopian rulers even before the 14th century. Even though Ethiopia's diplomatic relationship has been changing over the years due to internal and external factors like regime behaviours, political ideologies, and ever-changing regional and global patterns, it has always been an important partner of both the Western and Eastern civilizations. In part, this is due to its geographical location in the volatile Horn of Africa region and its proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, where the major trade routes of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden converge. The contemporary relation between Ethiopia and the major global powers is also a continuation of this age-old Red Sea geostrategic perspective. As the seat of the African Union and a variety of multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, a strong ally in the fight against Islamic terrorism in Somalia, being the largest contributor to peacekeeping forces in Sudan and South Sudan conflicts and as one of the relatively stable states in the Horn of Africa with an enormous economic potential, Ethiopia is viewed as a key strategic partner of the major world powers.

This 'key strategic partnership' with the West and East has, however, turned into a well-spring of geopolitical competition among the major superpowers, particularly following the flare-up of the Tigray crisis in northern Ethiopia a year prior. The conflict erupted in November 2020 after the federal government accused the Tigray People Liberation Front, an ethno-nationalist party that oversaw the autonomous region of Tigray, of assaulting Ethiopian National Defence Forces stationed in the region. As the escalation extended to adjoining Eritrea in the north, Sudan in the west and to other regions within Ethiopia explicitly to the

Afar in the east and Amhara in the south, the global community had repeatedly called for tranquillity and cessation of hostilities as there had been a growing trepidation that the conflict might be transformed into a full-blown regional war that would destabilize the entire Horn of Africa.

This unanticipated security crisis has pitted western global powers like the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union against emerging powers like China, Russia, India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates for political clout, economic gains, and security assurances in the Horn of Africa. It has also compelled these powers to pay close attention to their foreign policies in the region and make daring decisions according to their geo-strategic interests in the area. A press articulation by Antony J. Blinken upon his appointment of Jeffery Heltman as the U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa shows how seriously the US approached the matter. According to the foreign secretary, the main priority of the emissary is to address “the volatile situation in Ethiopia including the conflict in Tigray” (US Department of State, 2021). In the assertion, Blinken portrayed the Horn of Africa as a ‘strategic region’ in which the US must engage at a higher level to ‘mitigate the risks posed by escalating conflict’ in the region. (Ibid). Similarly, before departing for the Horn of Africa, Feltman himself described the region as “a complex part of the world with a lot of overlapping crises happening at the same time” (Gramer, 2021, p. 8). He also mentioned that the region “is extremely important strategically for the U.S., for our allies, for the region” (Ibid). The envoy, on the other hand, stated that the deadly conflict is threatening US’s interests in the region by wreaking havoc on both Ethiopia and neighbouring countries. The major concern of the Biden administration is not only the humanitarian and security crisis in the region but also the increasing competition from other emerging powers such as China and Russia that could take advantage of the crisis to expand their political and economic clout in the region.

Global security researchers Ann FitzGerald and Hugh Segal wrote in their recent piece *'Ethiopia: A New Proxy Battle'* that the Tigray conflict has become "a proxy battleground for external powers" and a way of influencing the Ethiopian government towards their strategic aims. They also claimed that while "the geopolitical interests of various major powers in the Horn of Africa, such as the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and France, remain largely hidden," their security diplomacy toward Ethiopia, and the decisions they make, will determine the region's political, economic, and security dynamics (FitzGerald & Segal, 2021). They further noted that as the US-China rivalry grows at a worldwide level, particularly since the Biden administration assumed office, the US is attempting to 'catch up' to China's leadership role in the economic relationship with African countries. And it demonstrates that the Tigray situation in northern Ethiopia has served as a springboard for the new US administration's efforts to contain China's and other emerging powers' influence in the Horn of Africa.

The great superpowers' reactions and measurements to the Tigray crisis, however, are staggeringly varied due to their competing interests. As the crisis in the region worsened, diplomatic tensions between Ethiopia and western superpowers such as the US, UK, and EU



have grown, and there is an increasing perception among Ethiopian elites and the general public that the country is becoming a diplomatic pariah in the eyes of the West. The western major powers have voiced their concerns and harsh critiques of Ethiopia's administration since the crisis began. They've also taken harsh measures, including political and economic sanctions, in order to bring the hostilities to a halt. Economic sanctions have been implemented by the US with the intention of faltering Ethiopia's security sector. It has also imposed visa restrictions on the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who are suspected of being responsible for the crisis. The European Union also halted a €90 million fiscal aid package and threatened to take further forceful measures until the crisis is resolved. Likewise, a rising number of legislative members and lobbying groups in the United Kingdom have been urging Boris' administration to take similar steps.

In contrast, emerging global powers such as Russia and China, as well as developing regional economic actors including India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates are strengthening diplomatic connections with Ethiopia. While western powers unanimously condemn the humanitarian and security crisis in Tigray and agree that diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia to end the conflict is necessary, emerging economies and political powers have resisted any punitive measures, viewing the conflict as an "internal matter" that should be addressed by Ethiopia itself. At a series of meetings among UN Security Council members on the humanitarian situation in the region, this divergent view of the conflict and the manner the two contending factions are dealing with it was clearly demonstrated. For instance, there was a UNSC meeting which was conducted on March 4, 2021. The meeting was summoned by Ireland with the support of permanent members such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as non-permanent members such as Estonia and Norway. Despite the fact that many parties, including the Ethiopian government, had sought for a strong statement from the Security Council, there was no consensus among the member states, and the outcome was zero. Associated Press later reported, citing diplomats close to the session, that the council had scrapped its plan to issue a statement "following concerns from India, Russia, and especially China." (Lederer, p. 1, 2021)

Indeed, the UN Security Council had indicated prior to the meeting that "members have had divergent views on the crisis," making it difficult for the session to reach a consensus on the measures to be undertaken (Security Council Report, p. 7). Some council members have been challenging the UN's position on Ethiopia's sovereignty, as per the council. According to the report, when dealing with internal issues, Russia (one of the permanent members) stressed the need of upholding the UN charter's principle of "sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity of States." As a result, the major global powers have so far been unable to reach an agreement on how to respond to the crisis and have been compelled to act on their own. While the western superpowers have imposed maximum diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia's government, including a series of urgent calls to end the conflict, requesting the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from the conflict region, withholding budgetary support, imposing visa restrictions, and rescinding the deployment of observers for the previous June

national election, Russia and China, as well as other rising regional powers, are bolstering their diplomatic ties through various bilateral agreements such as forming intra-party political alliances, signing nuclear power installation pacts, selling armaments, and supporting budgetary deficits.

Why different perspectives and reactions to the Tigray crisis emerged is an issue that has sparked heated debate among academics, policymakers, and commentators. There is a hypothesis here that the divergent views and responses given by the western great powers and emerging powers regarding the Tigray conflict stemmed from their competing geo-strategic interests in the Horn of Africa and the desire to dominate the global order. As a result, it is the objective of this article to explore these geo-strategic interests in the Horn of Africa and to demonstrate the African continent's position in the global system. To attain this objective, the article will begin by defining geo-political competition as a conceptual framework and neorealism theory as an analytical tool. Second, it will place the Tigray crisis in context by highlighting the historical and contemporary political factors that have contributed to the ongoing conflict. Thirdly, the major superpowers' differing responses and actions in response to the conflict will be examined in light of their geostrategic goals. Finally, a summary of the significant findings will be reviewed, along with their ramifications.

## *Theoretical Foundations*

### ***Geo-political competition – A conceptual briefing***

We reside in an unpredictable world. We can examine how COVID-19 has destabilized human life, how it has caused millions of deaths, brought economic crisis, conflict, and instability, and how it has drawn global powers to compete against each other for political and economic gains and a shift in the global power balance. In this chaotic international order, great power struggles along geopolitical lines are adding to the risks and unpredictability of the disordered world. Scholars agree that geopolitics as a conceptual discourse arose at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly after Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen coined the word "geopolitik" in 1899 to characterize the effects of geographic features on state politics, using Sweden as an example. Since then, numerous scholars have described the term in a multitude of ways, all of which have interconnected contextual boundaries. Zbigniew Brzezinski is one of the experts who provided us with a classical conception of geopolitics. He defined the terminology as "the combination of geographic and political factors determining the condition of a state or region and emphasizing the impact of geography on politics" (Brzezinski, 1986, p. IV). Karl Haushofer, on the other hand, stressed the importance of geography in deciding cross-border political decisions. He described the concept as "a doctrine on the spatial determinism of all political processes," (Cohen, 2003, p.11). Geographic patterns, on the other hand, were linked to world politics by Geoffrey Parker and John Agnew. Parker defines geopolitics as "the study of international relations from a spatial or geographic perspective," while Agnew defines it as "the examination of the geographical assumptions, designations,



and understanding that enter into the making of world politics." (Cohen, 2003, pp. 11-12). These definitions incorporate two key aspects of geopolitical analysis: the existence of political processes and the spatial contexts in which they occur.

Sahul, B. Cohen, an emeritus professor of human geography who has written numerous books and articles on the subject and its associated notions, provides a robust definition of the term geopolitics. Cohen, in his book 'Geopolitics of the World System', defines the term in the following way:

*"Geopolitics is.... the analysis of the interaction between, on one hand, geographical settings, and perspectives and, on the other, political processes. The settings are composed of geographical features and patterns and the multi-layered regions that they form. The political processes include forces that operate at the international level and those on the domestic scene that influence international behaviour. Both geographical settings and political processes are dynamic, and each influences and is influenced by the other. Geopolitics addresses the consequences of this interaction". (Cohen, 2003, p.12)*

Cohen's comprehensive explanation has provided a broader understanding of the term geopolitics and its fundamental characteristics. The first distinguishing feature is the presence of 'geographical settings' and 'political processes,' which are essential in defining the concept. While geographical settings include a variety of regions, political processes contain the power and influence of states. The second feature is the interaction and situational friction of these two elements, as well as their outcomes in determining global order, as we are seeing rivalries rise in various geographical contexts at the present time. Evidently, Fint and Taylor (2018) described this situational hostility in more precise terms, claiming that "geopolitics has become a popular term for describing global rivalries in world politics" (p.76). They also noted that geopolitics is a crucial facet in great power competition analysis since governments conceptualize the distribution of political power beyond their geographic boundaries as a prerequisite for formulating foreign policy.

Geopolitical competition is a global rivalry for political influence, economic gains, or military dominance between two or more protagonist states. Though the classical explanation of geopolitical competition revolved primarily around military might, contemporary definitions of the term extend beyond that boundary to include a variety of issues such as economics, innovation and technology, security issues, and public policy. Scholars define geopolitical competition in a variety of formats, but with similar conceptual constituents. Bortsov et al. (2017), for example, defined geopolitical competition as "the result of interests' collision of several states (the state blocs, supranational organizations, etc.) due to the unwillingness or inability to resolve contradictions based on cooperation and partnership" (p, 507). This definition encapsulates some of the fundamental characteristics of geopolitical competition, such as the existence of diverse interests among several actors in a given competitive environment, the possibility of collision among them, and the lack of peaceful

means of resolving their differences. Empirical research done by Fariss and Markowitz (2018), on the other hand, emphasized the role of power projection in geopolitical competition. The authors defined the term as "the potential for coercive bargaining interactions between each state and the other states in its geopolitical environment" (p.79). By coercive bargaining, they mean that competing nations exert diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, or military force to pursue their strategic interests, economic sanctions, or military force.

Flint (2006)'s seminal book provides a comprehensive understanding of what geopolitical competition in the modern world entails by outlining its various characteristics. The first is that states compete for control of territories and/or resources, which is one of the factors that drives global powers to become involved in global politics. Second, states compete not only for territories and resources, but also with a sense of knowing everything about the competitive environment and acting accordingly. Thus, according to classical geopolitical theorists, the entire world is a "transparent space" that is "seeable" and "knowable" (p.16). Flint, on the other hand, contends that such unsubstantiated imagination of the competitive environment leads policymakers to "rely on the assumption and arrogance of being able to see and know the entire world and the essence of its historical development" (Ibid). In practice, this is one of the fundamental characteristics of great power competition as it has manifested in the modern world. The most egregious example would be the United States' dubious rationale for invading Iraq and its catastrophic consequences. The invasion has remained a contentious issue in American politics, with critics pointing to US policymakers' unsubstantiated assumption that weapons of mass destruction were present in Iraq.

The existence of various state and non-state actors in a diverse competitive environment is the third feature of geopolitical competition. Flint contends that geopolitics is more than just a battle between states for resources and territories. It is the interaction of "multiple practices and multiple representations of a wide variety of territories" (Ibid). This could include racial tensions, gender issues, and environmental concerns, which could lead to interactions between state and non-state actors (individuals, indigenous peoples, lobbyists, NGOs, associations, private institutes, or companies). The final feature of a geopolitical environment is the power dynamics between competitors. Though classical geopolitical theorists argue that states are the primary actors, contemporary theorists on the subject emphasize the role of powerful non-state actors and structural issues in determining the balance of power during competition. Flint suggests that researchers engaged in geopolitical study broaden their understanding of the "complexity of the world, and the particular situations of people across the world, as opposed to the simplistic models of classic geopolitics and their simple explanations" by quoting feminist geopolitical theorists such as Mary and Eleonore (p.17). This is especially crucial for scholars and policymakers focused on conducting a comprehensive theoretical and epistemological analysis of geopolitical rivalries in underprivileged societies and geographical regions such as Africa.



### ***Understanding geo-political competition in the realm of international relations***

For the past three or four decades, international relations theorists have devised a variety of conceptual explanations to understand great powers' competition on a global stage. Realists described geopolitical competition in terms of states' desire to increase their political and military power on a global scale. Liberals emphasized the role of free market and democratic expansionism as a means of projecting power through vigorous competition and cooperation among sovereign states. Constructivists on the other hand departed from material interests and focused on social, cultural, and historical factors that determine state's behaviour and action at the global stage. Functionalists on their part attributed the role of shared interests among states in forming alliances or integrating and challenging the global system. Marxists and feminists emphasize on the role of social classes and gender differences in explaining global politics. Despite conceptual differences, the majority of IR theories regard power as a defining factor of the global system because it creates structural settings in which decisions are made and aspirations are defined. There is also scholarly agreement that human and state desires are infinite. Desire, on the other hand, breeds competition and conflict by definition. As a result, states always strive to maximize their capabilities in order to meet competing national interests (both material and normative powers).

Another common scholarly tendency in international relations studies is to associate power with a realistic approach. Scholars used a variety of classical and neo-realistic sub paradigms to explain state behaviour in the international system and the motivations that drive them to act, such as security dilemmas, power balances, hegemonic stability, subversion, and so on. This article utilizes neo-realism theory as an analytical tool to understand global powers' competition in the Horn of Africa in relation to the Tigray crisis. Neorealism was chosen for its multifaceted ability to comprehend global politics in the post-Cold War era. Over the last four decades, neorealism and its subunits of analysis (defensive and offensive realism) have been among the most influential IR theories used by scholars to analyse the behaviours and motivations that drive states to engage in global affairs. Big props to Kenneth Waltz [the prominent apologist of defensive realism] and John Mearsheimer [the leading advocate of offensive realism] for firmly establishing neo-influential realism's power in explaining great power competition on the global stage.

Why neo-realism is more relevant than other theories such as classical realism, in explaining global powers' competition in a certain environment is an issue that needs to be thoroughly discussed. While classical realism emphasizes leaders' egoism and desire for power (human nature) to describe state behaviour on the global stage, neorealist scholars such as Kenneth Waltz (defensive realism) and John Mearsheimer (offensive realism) argue that states' behaviours in international politics are determined by their survival motives and the structure of the system. Kenneth Waltz, one of the founding fathers of neo-realism, for example, developed a tripartite model with three basic features: ordering principles, the character of the units, and the distribution of capabilities in the international system. Even though, like all IR theories, Waltz's neorealism and its conceptual foundations have been

criticized from theoretical and epistemological perspectives, it has remained an influential analytical tool in the study of international politics.

### ***Ordering Principles – anarchic nature of the global system***

Waltz used a binary distinction between domestic and international political systems to describe the behaviour of states from a structural standpoint. He noted that, in contrast to domestic politics, which has a centralist and hierarchical structure, international politics is anarchic and chaotic:

*“parts of domestic political systems stand in relations of super- and subordination. Some are entitled to command; others are required to obey. Domestic systems are centralized and hierarchic. The parts of international-political systems stand in relations of coordination. Formally, each is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey. International systems are decentralized and anarchic.”* (Waltz, 1979, p.88).

And, as previously stated, the first core principle of neo-realism is the existence of a decentralized and anarchic system in which states act independently to ensure their survival in the absence of a command of central authority. Waltz added that international-political systems are the by-product of ‘self-regarding units’, which are “individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended...Whether those units live, prosper, or die depends on their own efforts” (Waltz, 1979, p. p.91). According to him, the main realm of the global system that drives states to act independently or in coordination with their kin is the 'survival motive' in search of security assurance. Despite their agreement on the anarchic nature of the global system, however, defensive and offensive realists take different approaches to dictate state behavioural motives in international politics. In defensive realism, states pursue power in order to maintain their position in the global system, whereas in offensive realism states pursue power in order to maximize their position. Because survivalism is the driving force of international politics in defensive realism, "the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system," according to Waltz (p.126). As a result, hegemonic states strive to maintain the status quo in order to prevent their adversaries from gaining power at their expense. According to John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, the ultimate goal of states in the global system is to maximize their relative power, seize opportunities, and claim hegemony at the expense of others. According to him, “great powers are primed for offense. But not only does a great power seek to gain power at the expense of other states, it also tries to thwart rivals bent on gaining power at its expense” (2003, p.3). Thus, the anarchic behaviour of the global system and states' pursuit of power are the common denominators of the two realistic approaches.

### ***The Character of the Units – Sameness of functionality***



The functionalism similarity of each independent state in the international system is the second feature of defensive realism. Waltz observed that “states that are the units of international- political systems are not formally differentiated by the functions they perform. Anarchy entails relations of coordination among a system's units, and that implies their sameness...so long as anarchy endures, states remain like units” (Waltz, 1979, p. 94). This principle asserts that, in the face of decentralized order, states behave similarly, with variations depending on their power capability. That is, states, regardless of their power, carry out the same activities as other states, and there is no difference in terms of functionalism. This principle, however, does not apply in national politics. Domestically, various institutions and government units perform pre-defined functions through their hierarchical duties, but in international politics, “units duplicate one another's activities. and distinctions among them arise principally from their varied capabilities” (Waltz, 1979, p.97). The same analogy holds true in offensive realism. In the anarchic world order, the presence of insecurity, fear, suspicion, war, and resource competition drives states to maximize their power and engage in a self-help cycle.

### ***The distribution of capabilities – power variation***

The power distribution among system units is the final feature of neo-realism. Kenneth Waltz pointed out in his three-part neorealism model that, while the global order's anarchic character and the functionality of its units remain independent, the distribution of political and economic capabilities among units is a dependent variable that can be affected when systems oscillate due to units' behavioural changes and actions. He said that “the structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system's units. And changes in structure change expectations about how the units of the system will behave and about the outcomes their interactions will produce.”. (p.97). This theoretical explanation is quite pertinent because it adds a new dimension to the relationship between power and stability in an anarchic global system. Waltz contends that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity due to the uneven distribution of power capabilities in multipolar systems. In multipolar polities, stability would be jeopardized, and conflict would be unavoidable in the absence of a legitimate coercive power at the central level. He goes on to say that the interdependence of units, risk diffusion, and intermixed responses to a specific security threat are all peculiar characteristics of great power politics in a multipolar system that could lead to a crisis. Similarly, Mearsheimer contends that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity for three reasons: superpowers have balanced power, bipolarity eliminates the incentive for war, and power miscalculation between them is reduced.

### ***Rationality vs. Critics for choosing neorealism as an analytical tool***

Despite its popularity in describing the global system, as a Western-centric discourse, neorealism was not without scholarly critics. The theory's critics focus on its inability to provide an overarching understanding of the political structures of the global South, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America. To address the issue, global south scholars have developed various theories to make IR theories more inclusive and pragmatic. In the 1990s, for example, 'peripheral realism' emerged in Argentina, claiming that existing major IR theories are Eurocentric by default and cannot adequately represent Latin America. Similarly, Pan-African IR theorists such as Assis Malaquias have been critical of such shortcomings, arguing that major IR theories, including neo-realism, lack the conceptual capability to explain the role of non-state actors in defining domestic orders in the global south. In his book, 'Reformulating International Relations Theory: African Insights and Challenges,' Professor Malaquias exposes the flaws of classical IR theories by demonstrating the role of non-state actors such as insurgency groups and national movements in determining the structure of African domestic politics. He notes that

*“in the African context, nations and armed nationalist movements are important units of analysis. By ignoring such important analytical unites while concentrating mainly on the state, traditional IR theory has not been able to explain, let alone predict, the behaviour of African political actors on the world stage”.* (Malaquias, 2001, p. 11).

This appears plausible, especially when we consider the various nationalist movements that sought to establish their own independent states while also significantly challenging power hierarchies in various African nations. Examples include Nigeria (the Biafra movement), Cameroon (Ambazonians' struggle for statehood), Somalia (the autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland), Mali (the Tuareg independence movement), and others.

Though realistic theories, including neorealism, have been challenged by emerging scholars for their neglect of the peculiar state structures in the global South, including Africa, they have undeniably provided a great understanding of states' behaviours and how interstate politics works on a global scale. Thus, the rationale for using neo-realism as a conceptual discourse to analyse the competition of the great powers in the Horn of Africa rests on three fundamental premises. Firstly, neorealism generates a new dimension of conceptual understanding of the contemporary decentralized, segmented, and anarchic world order much better than the other classical theories in explaining and predicting the likelihood of conflict and war among great powers. And the Horn of Africa, as one of the world's volatile regions with a chaotic environment, ideally fits into this category. Secondly, it sees powerful states as the primary actors in global politics, owing to their dominance and influence over the international system. This is a significant departure from classical realist paradigms that are human-centric. The state and structural-centric arguments of neorealism enable us to understand the broad picture of states' behaviour in the international system by emphasizing power as an important factor. When it comes to the Tigray crisis, both traditional global powers and emerging powers are key players in shaping the region's political, economic, and security landscape, in addition



to the domestic politics of Horn of Africa member states. Third, neo-realism contends that great states compete for power and resources in order to survive or maximize utility. The desire for political influence, security assurance, economic exploitation, and international prestige is a driving force behind the global power competition in the Horn of Africa.

## *Discussion*

### ***Global Power Competition in the Horn of Africa in the realm of neo-realism***

#### ***Contextualizing the Tigray crisis***

Tigray regional state is located in northern Ethiopia, bordering Sudan to the west, Eritrea to the north, Afar to the east, and Amhara to the south. The region, which has a population of about 6 million people, is one of the ten autonomous regional states and two self-administrative cities that comprise the current Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. While Tigrigna is the regional state's official language, Amharic, the federal government's working language, and a few indigenous languages are also rarely spoken in the region. Tigray is dominated by Orthodox Christianity, which accounts for approximately 96 percent of the population, with Muslims accounting for the remaining one (Central Statistical Agency, 2007). Tigray also has many historical sites, including the Axumite obelisks, Emperor Yohannes IV's Palace, Al Nejashi mosque, the Arch of the Covenant in Axum Saint Mary church, and numerous ancient monasteries. Being the birthplace of the ancient Aksumite kingdom, the region has been a centre of civilization and political gravity in Ethiopian political history. Though Amharic-speaking rulers from the Amhara, Oromo, and Gurage ethnic groups dominated the Ethiopian political space, particularly after the reign of King Minilik II in 1899, Tigrayan rulers also played an important role in forming and shaping ancient Ethiopia. As notable examples, Ezana of Aksum (320s – c. 360), King Yohannes IV (who ruled Ethiopia between 1871-1889), and Ras Alula Engida (an influential military general and politician who lived between 1827 – 1897) can be mentioned.

In modern times, the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) has played an unrivalled role in shaping contemporary Ethiopia. The former ruling party of the Tigray regional state, which is currently leading an insurgency war against the federal government, dominated Ethiopian political, economic, and military spaces for nearly 30 years after it played a majority role in deposing the former socialist Derg regime in 1991. Between 1991 and 2018, the TPLF was the architect of Ethiopia's remarkable economic growth while also being the mastermind behind the major pitfalls in the political arena, as the regime used to rule the country with an iron fist. However, the authoritarian rule and dominance of ethnic Tigrayans (6 percent of the total population) over other ethnic groups in major political and economic sectors created a sense of inequality and injustice. As a result, nationwide discontent and discriminatory sentiments among other ethnic groups began to rise, and the first major public protest against the TPLF-dominated regime erupted in the Oromia region in October 2015. Since then, both violent and

nonviolent public protests have wreaked havoc on the country, claiming thousands of lives and causing a severe economic downturn. And, after three years of concerted public opposition, particularly in the Oromia and Amhara regions (the two largest regional states with a combined population of 70 million people), the ethno-nationalist front TPLF was driven from federal political power and confined to the Tigray region. As a result, political tensions between the federal government, led by reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, and the leaders of the TPLF began almost immediately after the latter's removal in March 2018.

In defiance of the central government, the TPLF began objecting to all administrative orders issued by federal institutions, claiming that the federal government lacks the authority to impose its rule on autonomous regional states. In response, the federal government decided to suspend budgetary support that was supposed to be distributed to the Tigray regional state, claiming that the region's ruling party was hijacking the democratic transition process by coordinating ethnic-based conflicts across the country. In the midst of the two parties' hostile relationship, the TPLF decided to hold a regional election on September 9, 2020. This was in objection to the federal government's decision to postpone the 6th national election due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the regional electoral commission declared the TPLF as the winner of the election, the federal government and the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia rejected the result, claiming that the election had no legal basis and should be considered 'null and void.' To make matters worse, the TPLF launched an unexpected but well-coordinated attack on the Northern Command army of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) stationed in the Tigray region in early November 2020. The attack's goal was to seize control of the ENDF's weapons and depose PM Abiy from power.

In response, Prime Minister Abiy declared extensive counter-offensive measures by mobilizing the majority of the ENDF's army units dispersed across the country. After three weeks of heavy fighting between federal troops (backed up by other regional armies) and Tigray forces, the ENDF was able to capture Mekelle, the Tigray region's capital city. Later, the federal government declared the end of the war because the majority of the region was under the control of ENDF troops, but an insurgency movement reversed the result, and the federal army was finally ordered to leave Tigray region after a significant victory by Tigrian forces, particularly after June 2020. The TPLF has also managed to extend the war to neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions, and the conflict is still ongoing which brought enormous security crises and humanitarian calamities in the Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions. Official figures have not been released, but various reports indicate thousands of civilians and military personnel have been killed or severely injured. More than 63,000 people have fled to Sudan for safety, and 7 million people need humanitarian aid. There are also reports of mass atrocities, sexual violence, internal communal displacement, and food scarcity in all three regions.

In addition to the humanitarian crisis, the conflict has exacerbated regional insecurity in the Horn of Africa. The involvement of Eritrean forces in the conflict, the border clash between Sudan and Ethiopia that erupted following the conflict, and the conflict's spill over into neighbouring Amhara and Afar regions, combined with the emergence of Gulf rivalries in the



Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula, as well as the geopolitical competition of the region's major global powers, are profoundly changing the Horn of Africa's political, economic, and security dynamics.

### ***Geo-political competition in the Horn of Africa: An in-depth analysis***

There are two major groups of global powers competing in the Horn of Africa. The first group consists of Western superpowers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. The second group consists of emerging global and regional powers such as Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Gulf countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates. As the Horn of Africa undergoes major political, economic, and security transformations, geostrategic rivalry among these powers is intensifying, particularly in light of the Tigray crisis. Since then, Western powers have been unequivocally calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities between the federal government and the TPLF, the withdrawal of 'alien' forces such as the Eritrean army and neighbouring Amhara regional forces, the launch of an independent investigation into human rights violations, and the opening of unrestricted access for humanitarian organizations to provide lifesaving aid to people in need due to the conflict. The emerging powers, on the other hand, did not oppose the federal government's military actions, claiming that the Tigray conflict is an internal matter that should be resolved by the Ethiopian government without outside interference. While the western powers' main geostrategic interests are primarily political and security issues, the emerging powers' main priorities are primarily economic and, to a lesser extent, security issues.

### ***The Western Powers and their geo-strategic interests in the Horn of Africa***

#### ***United States***

During his first speech as US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken hinted at the resumption of great power competitions among global powers in the current anarchic order. His speech also asserts a return of the United States' foreign policy to a globalist approach after experiencing protectionism during Trump's administration, which primarily focused on domestic affairs with its "American First" premise. Blinken emphasized the importance of globalization in maintaining America's geostrategic interests on the global stage in his speech. "Not a single global challenge that affects your lives can be met by any single nation acting alone – not even one as powerful as the United States," he said. (Department of State, 2021). This is in stark contrast to Trump's administration's foreign policy approach, which has categorically rejected the essence of globalization in favour of a nationalistic protectionist viewpoint. In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, Trump stated unequivocally that "the future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots" (Shehadi, 2020, p. 2) The withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accords, the trade war with China and the closure of its consulate in Houston, the intention

to withdraw US troops from Somalia, Iraq, and Germany, as well as its restrictive immigration policies against Muslim-majority countries, could all be cited as evidence of Trump's administration's proclivity for a protective foreign policy approach.

The current US administration is attempting to reverse this trend and restore the US's leadership role in global affairs. While discussing "the eight top foreign policy priorities of the Biden administration," Blinken stated that the fight against China would be the "biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century" (US Department of State, 2021). He has also identified Russia, Iran, and North Korea as nations that pose "serious challenges" to US geostrategic interests around the world. The 2017 US National Security Strategy also reinforces the secretary's statement that China and Russia are challenging "American power, influence, and interests" and "attempting to erode American security and prosperity" (The White House, 2017, p. 2). The document also mentioned North Korea and Iran as countries that "are determined to destabilize regions, threaten Americans and our allies, and brutalize their own people" (Ibid). Given the region's history of Islamic terrorism, maritime piracy, intra- and interstate conflicts, and frequent border disputes, it is obvious that the United States' geostrategic interests on the global stage and in the Horn of Africa are derived from these fundamental security concerns. Prior to his first trip to Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea, the new US envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Heltman, described the region as "a complex part of the world with a lot of overlapping crises happening at the same time." He also emphasized that the region is "extremely important strategically" not only for the US but also for its "allies" (Gramer, 2021, p. 8).

The West, including the United States, considers the Horn of Africa an important strategic location due to its economic and geographical significance, as it is located along one of the major global trade routes of the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula. Of course, the region is riddled with contradictions: on the one hand, it is an extremely important strategic location, but on the other, it is known for recurring conflicts and instability. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States has formed diplomatic alliances with strategic partners all over the world, calling for coordinated action against global terrorism. Since Ethiopia had already deployed thousands of troops in Somalia to fight Al-Shabaab and other Islamic jihadists in 2006, the New York attack provided an incentive for the US to support the then TPLF-dominated regime in order to maintain its security interests in the region. During his 2015 visit to Ethiopia, Barack Obama praised Ethiopia as an important partner in the fight against terrorism in the African continent. He said that "*part of the reasons we've seen this shrinkage of Shabab in East Africa is that we've had our regional teams... We don't need to send our own Marines in to do the fighting: the Ethiopians are tough fighters,*" (France 24, 2015, p. 2-3). Not only has Ethiopia been praised for its role in regional stability in the Horn of Africa by contributing large numbers of peacekeepers in Sudan and South Sudan, but it has also been praised for its role in the fight against terrorism in Somalia under the leadership of the TPLF. Prior to 2018, Addis Ababa had also played an important role in isolating the Eritrean regime, which is perceived to be hostile to the West, from the international community.



However, the regime praised by Obama and his successors was deposed in 2018 and replaced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's current government. And, once in power, Abiy broke the Ethio-Eritrean deadlock, which helped him win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. He has also formed an alliance with Isayas and Framajo, prompting accusations that Abiy Ahmed has deliberately weakened IGAD, the regional bloc that has played a significant role in regional stability, contributing to the rise of authoritarianism in the region. All of these political and security factors, combined with China's, Russia's, Turkey's, India's, the UAE's, and other Gulf states' involvement in regional security and economic maximization, have caused the US to lose faith in the current administration, prompting it to act aggressively against it.

Since the Tigray conflict began, the US has advocated for a ceasefire, political dialogue, the cessation of hostilities, an investigation into human rights violations, unrestricted access to humanitarian aid, and the withdrawal of Eritrean and Amhara forces from the Tigray region. Though the Ethiopian government has attempted to address some of these concerns, such as establishing an independent body to investigate alleged human rights violations, it has also categorically denied many of the Biden administration's requests, claiming that the Tigray conflict is an internal matter. As a result, diplomatic tensions between Washington and Addis Ababa are soaring. The Ethiopian government was enraged in February 2021 when President Biden called Uhuru Kenyatta instead of directly calling Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to discuss the Tigray conflict and its regional implications in the Horn of Africa. In addition to diplomatic pressure, the US has halted millions of dollars that were supposed to be given to the regime in Addis Ababa to strengthen the security sector as a coercive measure. State Department spokesperson Ned Price stated in a March 2021 news briefing that "given the current environment in Ethiopia, we have decided not to lift the assistance pause for other programs, including most programs in the security sector" (Psaledakis, 2021, p. 2). In addition to diplomatic pressures, the Biden administration has barred Ethiopia from participating in the United States' tariff-free African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a lucrative trade agreement designed to benefit African exporters to the US market. As Ethiopia's security situation has deteriorated in recent months, the United States has urged its citizens to leave the country.

In addition to the economic and financial sanctions, the White House announced that the Biden administration has imposed visa restrictions on Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders deemed "responsible for, or complicit in, undermining Tigray's resolution" (White House, 2021, p. 2). In response to the sanctions, the Ethiopian government accuses the US of interfering in its internal affairs, claiming that "the attempt by the US administration to meddle in its internal affairs is not only inappropriate, but also completely unacceptable" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021, p. 7). It has also threatened diplomatic retaliation if the US continues to interfere. The statement said that Ethiopia "*will be forced to reassess its relations with the United States, which might have implications beyond our bilateral relationship*" (p. 11). Several nationwide pro-government rallies have also taken place in various parts of Ethiopia, as well as in other western major cities, to protest the US's continued interference in Ethiopia's

internal affairs. The United States' aggressive responses to the Tigray crisis can be interpreted in terms of both defensive and offensive realism. Great powers typically use punitive measures such as military interventions, economic sanctions, and diplomatic pressures on weaker states to comply with their geostrategic interests in order to maintain and maximize their influence. The United States' punitive measures against the Ethiopian government indicate that it is determined to maintain and expand its political and security hegemony in the Horn of Africa, including Ethiopia. France is doing exactly this in West Africa, and the US is attempting to replicate that experience in the Horn of Africa.

### ***The European Union***

Among global powers, the European Union, as a unified polity, has been the most vocal critic of the federal government's military action against the TPLF. The Union's mood swings from expressing "grave concerns" about the humanitarian crisis in Tigray to calling for a cease-fire, political dialogue, and the withdrawal of Eritrean forces. Other measures taken by the union include the postponement of development aid, the cancellation of election observers, and the call for sanctions against the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders. One of the Union's coercive measures is the budgetary deferment of more than €90 million that was supposed to be disbursed at the end of 2020. The European Union made this audacious decision, claiming an "absence of full humanitarian access" in Tigray. For a country that is heavily reliant on foreign aid, particularly from the Western world, the news of the European Union suspending budgetary support continues to have enormous ramifications for shaping Ethiopian domestic politics as well as regional dynamics in the region. Following the decision, European Commission Vice President Joseph Borrell stated, "we are ready to help, but unless there is access for humanitarian aid operators, the EU cannot disburse the planned budget support to the Ethiopian government" (EU External Action Service, 2021, p. 1). In addition to the budgetary deferment and diplomatic pressures, the EU has also threatened to impose additional economic sanctions and visa restrictions. The Ethiopian government, for its part, accused the European Union of making such decisions based on unfounded allegations. After the EU decided to cancel the deployment of its election observers in June 2021, Dina Mufti, spokesperson for Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accused the union of attempting to undermine Ethiopia's sovereignty by interfering in the election process.

The European Union has stated unequivocally that "Ethiopia is a strategic partner for the EU in the Horn of Africa and the wider region, as well as an important multilateral actor." (Council of the European Union, 2021, p.1). But, if the union claims Ethiopia is an important strategic partner in the Horn, why is it embroiled in a diplomatic spat and enacting coercive measures against it? The answer appears to be uncontentious: the union's motives and actions are heavily influenced by the overall political and security dynamics of the Horn of Africa. The EU Council recently announced the establishment of a new geostrategic policy toward the Horn of Africa, as well as its desire to expand its strategic relationship with member



states. The Union declares that “with this new strategy, the EU’s intention is to further strengthen and deepen its strategic relationship and partnership with the Horn of Africa and its countries, notably with a view to reduce instability, promote democracy and sustainable growth” (EU Council, 2021, p. 3). The union also asserts that the new strategy “aims at strengthening the partnership with the broader region, notably the Red Sea, the Western Indian Ocean, and the Nile.” (Ibid). However, in order to achieve these objectives, the union needs a stable and peaceful Horn of Africa, and the Tigray crisis poses a security threat to this ambition. And the council has clearly underlined that the “regional implications of the situation in the Ethiopian region of Tigray, as well as the risk of further spill over in an already fragile region, are of great concern. Further military escalation and long-term instability in Ethiopia and in the wider region must be avoided” (Council of the European Union, 2021, p. p.4).

It should be noted that Djibouti is home to military bases for two of the European Union's most powerful members, France and Germany. The primary function of these bases is to oversee the EU's security concerns in the Horn of Africa. The security crises in Somalia as a result of Islamic jihadists, the Darfur crisis and Sudan's fragile transition, the ongoing armed conflict in South Sudan, and now the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia all indicate that the Horn of Africa is in a precarious position that could jeopardize global security. Other security concerns for the European Union, which imports petroleum from the Gulf States, include maritime piracy and armed robbery along Red Sea trade routes. In addition to its extensive geostrategic interests in the region, the European Union is also concerned about a potential migration crisis. The European Union and the United Kingdom are vulnerable to refugee crises because of their proximity to North-eastern Africa. Ethiopia is already the world's largest refugee recipient country, hosting over 900,000 refugees, the majority of whom are from Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan. If political insecurity and conflict persist in the region, thousands, if not millions, of refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan are likely to cross the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Europe. As a result, in order to avoid the economic and security risks that refugees may pose to Europe, the EU needed to take a proactive approach to addressing any security issues in the region.

### ***The United Kingdom***

The United Kingdom has similar geostrategic interests to the EU in the Horn of Africa. Some of the UK's major interests in the region include fighting terrorism in Somalia, protecting its military bases in Kenya and Djibouti, managing a potential refugee crisis, and ensuring the smooth flow of trade with Kenya and other neighbouring states. Britain regards Ethiopia as a strategic partner in the region, and it is one of the largest aid donors, having provided billions of pounds in development and humanitarian aid over the last decades. For example, Ethiopia received £800 million in aid between 2018 and 2021, making it the largest recipient, followed by Pakistan and Nigeria (DFID, 2021). The Department for International Development (DFID)

stated in its budgetary support for 2019/2020 that "Ethiopia is a strategically important partner for the UK in tackling poverty, regional instability, and irregular migration" (DFID, 2021, p.2). It has also emphasized the following:

*“The UK relies on a stable Ethiopia that is supportive of our foreign policy priorities in the Horn of Africa, particularly in relation to Somalia and South Sudan. Ethiopia is the largest contributor of peacekeeping forces in the world and particularly in its neighbourhood. Ethiopia hosts the second largest refugee population in Africa (890,000 refugees) from South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea. It is also a transit country for Eritrean and Somali refugees migrating to Europe: 40,000-50,000 take the “central Mediterranean” route each year. Ethiopia therefore has a critical role to play in deterring irregular migration.” (Ibid)*

Thus, with a population of 120 million and nearly one million refugees, instability in Ethiopia spells disaster for the rest of the Horn of Africa and beyond. The UK's economic and security concerns in the region have also been influenced by this quandary. Prior to his visit to Ethiopia in January 2021, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab told the Financial Times that the Tigray crisis is causing Ethiopia to lose its reputation as a model of stability and an economic powerhouse. He said that “until this conflagration, [Ethiopia] has had, if you like, a reputation as a beacon, and of course it is being tarnished. There is no doubt, there is no escaping it” (Schipani, A.2021). However, unlike the United States and the European Union, the United Kingdom has yet to impose coercive measures on the Ethiopian government, despite mounting pressure from members of its parliament, lobbying groups, and analysts. Dominic Raab tweeted after meeting with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed during his tour of Ethiopia and Sudan that he had "constructive discussions on the situation in Tigray, humanitarian access to the region, and the need for political dialogue to bring about a lasting peace." (Raab, 2021) Despite the fact that the UK has repeatedly expressed grave concerns and the need for diplomatic pressure during G7 summits and UN Security Council meetings, it has yet to take unilateral coercive measures against the Ethiopian government. The US has repeatedly urged its international partners, including the United Kingdom, to impose the same economic sanctions and visa restrictions on Addis Ababa. It remains to be seen whether the United Kingdom will follow suit.

In general, the Western powers' geostrategic interests and the measures they have taken in response to the Tigray crisis indicate that these powers prefer a submissive Ethiopia and are determined to maintain the status quo. Their actions also demonstrated that they are struggling to align their foreign policies in the Horn of Africa with the new global order, which is heavily influenced by China, Russia, Turkey, and the oil-rich Gulf States. The Western global powers are attempting to maintain their hegemonic status in the region, but the Ethiopian government, backed by emerging global and regional powers, is defying their pressure. As a result, it would be reasonable to label Western powers' behaviour and response to the Tigray crisis as defensive realism.

### ***Emerging powers and their geo-strategic interests in the Horn of Africa***

The image below depicts the emerging global order in the Horn of Africa following the eruption of the Tigray crisis. The picture was taken from the capital Addis Ababa, during an anti-US rally in which thousands of demonstrators denounced the Biden administration for its economic sanctions and unnecessary meddling in Ethiopian internal affairs. Demonstrators have also waved images of Putin, Xi and Erdogan in an attempt to show respect for Russia, China, and Turkey for their solidarity with Ethiopia and the role they have played in challenging the western great powers at the global stage.



*A picture taken by the Ethiopian Press Agency at the anti-US rally in Addis Ababa, May 30, 2021.*

When discussing global rifts in the Horn of Africa, it is critical to note that Western diplomatic pressure and punitive measures are forcing Ethiopia to seek out reliable global partners such as China and Russia. This may not be in Ethiopia's best interests, but the hostile relationship with the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom that emerged following the Tigray crisis left Ethiopia with no choice but to forge diplomatic relationships with these global and regional powers that have no political conditions. In this context, emerging powers refer to rising political and economic powers that, through their economic and political capabilities, are significantly shaping the international order. Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Indian, and Gulf states are among these powers. The section that follows will explain the role of these key players in shaping the regional dynamics of the Horn of Africa.

#### ***Russia***

Despite the fact that the former Soviet Union was one of the most powerful powers with significant political clout in Africa, its diplomatic engagement was severely curtailed after the collapse of the USSR. However, Russia's presence in Africa has grown significantly in the last

few decades, particularly in the economic and security sectors. The first Russia-Africa summit, held in Sochi in 2019, was one of the most important milestones that allowed Russia to re-establish its influence in Africa.

During the summit's closing remarks, President Vladimir Putin applauded African leaders claiming that the summit opened “a new page in the history of Russia’s relations with African countries” (Presidential Press Office, 2019, p. 1). He also vowed that “expanding and simplifying mutually beneficial ties with African states are among Russia’s foreign policy priorities” (Para,8). Since the 2000s, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has steadily expanded its African influence through expanding its arms sales and growing its trade volume that reaches around US\$ 20 billion in 2020. In addition, since 2015, Russia has signed military cooperation agreements with 21 African countries, including six for the construction of military bases. Other approaches Russia is taking to increase its influence in Africa include forging regional and global political alliances, as well as exchanging interparliamentary delegates. On May 5, 2021, the Russian leading news agency, TASS, published a story with the headline: "African Union prioritizes Russia's role in ensuring African stability." Dr. Levi Uche Madueke, the head of the African Union Strategic Partnerships, was interviewed for the report, and he stated that "the issue of peace and security is where Russia can play a key role." (p. 2). He has also mentioned industrialization, energy, and cyber security as areas in which Russia could play an important role in African economic development. Russia's foreign policy toward Africa also demonstrates that its geostrategic interests in the African continent are primarily focused on four major areas: projecting power and challenging the western great powers on the global stage through alliances with African states, accessing raw materials and natural resources, expanding arms exports, and investing in energy infrastructure through its multinational corporations.

According to Samuel Ramani, a Russian foreign policy expert, "the Russian Federation's geopolitical presence in the Horn of Africa is experiencing a resurgence" in recent years (Ramani, 2020, p.1). However, Ramani claims that Moscow's influence in the Horn of Africa is based on 'engaged opportunism,' referring to its neutrality on polarized conflicts and inconsistent stance on major pressing issues that shape the continent's political and economic dynamics. One of the fundamental factors allowing Russia to strengthen its presence on the continent is its non-interference policy in the internal affairs of African states. At the international inter-party conference organized by the United Russian Party and held in Moscow between March 24-25, 2021, under the theme 'Russia-Africa: Reviving Traditions,' Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that the agendas of the conference include "such important issues as ensuring peace and regional security as well as countering interference in the sovereign states' domestic affairs." (Russian News Agency, 2021). Similarly, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stated during the conference that "the Russian Federation and African countries have a rich tradition of resisting counterproductive interference." The Russian Federation was a key ally in the continental independence movement against oppression, colonialism, and slavery, both domestic and foreign." (Russian Embassy Addis Ababa, 2021, min. 01:03-01:27).



Maintaining regime security is the most important factor for an African leader, and it is a matter of survival.

Russia's non-interference foreign policy, as well as its enormous role on the global stage in challenging the western-centric international system, are increasing its influence on the African continent. Russia has publicly supported the federal government's military action in Ethiopia, stating that it is an internal matter and an important measure to maintain Ethiopia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Following a phone conversation between the foreign ministers of the two countries in December 2020, the Russian Federation's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that:

*“Demeke Mekonnen informed Sergey Lavrov about the developments in Ethiopia and the government's measures to restore constitutional order in the Tigray Region. Sergey Lavrov reaffirmed Russia's unwavering commitment to the principles of respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the FDRE.” (p. 3)*

Similarly, during his diplomatic visit to Addis Ababa, Russian Federation Senator Andrey A. Klimov reaffirmed Russia's non-interference principle, stating that "Russia recognizes that the situation in northern Ethiopia in Tigray state a purely internal matter. Therefore, the interference of third parties is unacceptable, whatever pretexts they may use. In accordance with the UN Charter, Russia has advocated and still advocates the territorial integrity of States and respect for each country's national sovereignty" (Ethiopian Press Agency, 2021, p.11). Aside from maintaining a non-interference policy in the Tigray crisis, Russia has sent several diplomatic delegations to Addis Ababa over the last several months to strengthen economic and security cooperation with Ethiopia. The diplomatic delegations include parliamentary members, representatives of the United Russia Party [the Russian Federation's ruling party], and business groups specializing in the energy and automotive industries. In addition, on April 14, 2021, Russia and Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding to develop nuclear energy and improve public perception of the sector in Moscow. Representatives of Russian civil society were also among the international observers for Ethiopia's national election on June 21, 2021. Taking those patterns and developments into account, one can undoubtedly conclude that the Tigray crisis has become a source of 'diplomatic boom' between Russia and Ethiopia.

Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, is determined to increase its economic, political, and security influence on the global stage, including in the Horn of Africa, by challenging the US and other great powers. Russia's economic interests in the Horn of Africa revolve primarily around the arms industry. Russia is the world's second largest arms exporter, trailing only the United States, and the continent's largest arms supplier. Ethiopia, as a trustworthy partner, has benefited from Russia's massive defence trade by importing small and large military weapons. Prior to the Tigray crisis, Ethiopia had already received four Pantsir-S1s worth more than \$70 million to modernize its air defence system. In addition to the Tigray crisis, Ethiopia is currently

dealing with other security issues, such as a border conflict with Sudan and a Nile dam dispute with Egypt and Sudan. As a result, Ethiopia is likely to continue spending millions, if not billions, of dollars on Russian arms imports in order to strengthen its defence system. Aside from arms sales, Moscow is expanding its security presence in the Horn of Africa to assert its influence. Various unconfirmed reports indicate that Russia intends to build military bases in Eritrea, Sudan (Port Sudan), and Somaliland (Berbera). And Russia sees Ethiopia [a rising regional power in the Horn of Africa] as a critical partner in achieving its goals.

Mearsheimer argues that *“great powers are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal”* (Mearsheimer, 2003, p.16). Russia’s revisionist and aggressive behaviour in the current global order can be examined in terms of this offensive realistic yardstick. While the US imposed economic and financial sanctions on Ethiopia, Russia has chosen Addis Ababa to host the upcoming Russia-African summit in 2022. Similarly, while the Biden administration imposes visa restrictions on Abiy Ahmed leadership, Putin sent a congratulatory message to the PM on the annual anniversary commemorating the downfall of the Derg regime. By manipulating the diplomatic row between the US and Ethiopia, one can conclude that Russia is maximizing its influence and asserting its presence significantly in the Horn of Africa because in this anarchic global order *“great powers seek to maximize their share of world power”*. (Ibid).

## **China**

China is the largest investor and finance creditor in the Africa continent. Despite the fact that its presence in Africa is a contentious issue, China has firmly established massive economic and political influence in the continent over the last two decades. According to data from the China-Africa Research Initiative (2021), China provided US\$ 153 billion in loans for various development projects across the African continent through its Belt and Road Initiative project between 2000 and 2009. Ethiopia is the largest recipient of this massive economic figure, receiving US\$ 13.7 billion, followed by Zambia and Kenya, which received US\$ 9.9 and US\$ 9.2 billion, respectively. According to the report, this credit commitment is given to African governments and their state-owned institutions, excluding private foreign direct investments. China has also built a US\$ 200 million African headquarters in Addis Ababa and handed it over 'for free' to cement its ties with the continent. Aside from loans, China is Africa's largest trading partner. It is also Ethiopia's largest import and export partner. The Chinese government has fully or partially funded the majority of megaprojects in Ethiopia, which has resulted in one of the fastest growing economies in the Sub-Saharan region. Some of China's mega projects include the US\$ 3.4 billion Sub-Saharan electrified railway that connects Ethiopia and Djibouti, the US\$ 1.8 billion electric grid expansion, the US\$ 350 million Addis Ababa-Adama expressway, the US\$ 475 million Addis Ababa Light Railway, the US\$ 345 million Bole airport expansion project, the US\$ 116 million new Addis Ababa Stadium Construction, and the US\$ 300 million Adama industrial park and others



Economic and financial assistance from Western nations are frequently accompanied by stringent political and legal conditions, making them unpopular among African leaders. On the other hand, in addition to the substantial economic incentives that China has provided to Africa, the East Asian nation's non-interference principle and neutrality in dealing with various forms of political regimes have made it a trustworthy partner. Its response to the Tigray crisis exemplifies this. China, like Russia and other emerging powers, has backed the federal government's military campaign against the TPLF. During a United Nations Security Council meeting in March 2021, China, Russia, and India expressed their support for the Abiy administration by rejecting a proposal made by the council's western members to condemn the federal government's military action. According to AFP, who cited council diplomats who attended the meeting, *"China wanted the statement to focus only on the humanitarian situation, with no reference to the violence in Tigray. India only wanted a minor change, and Russia reportedly supported its ally China at the last minute"* (Lederer, 2021, p. 7). Surprisingly, China's objection to the proposed UNSC statement came despite the fact that its 600 nationals, who were working at Chinese funded mega projects in the Tigray region, were forced to be evacuated as the conflict escalated. In a rare statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China has also recently demonstrated its non-interference policy towards other sovereign states' internal affairs. The ministry's spokesperson, Wang Wenbin told Beijing Media Network that China recognizes the Ethiopian government's efforts in rebuilding the Tigray region and has urged the international community to support those efforts. He said that *"as a good friend to Ethiopia, China hopes that all Ethiopian people including those in Tigray enjoy peace, stability, and prosperity. We support the Ethiopian government's effort in providing help and assistance to people in Tigray and restoring local life and production."* (Olander, 2021,p. 4).

To demonstrate its support and cooperation with its Ethiopian counterpart, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese government's regular armed forces, also donated Covid-19 vaccines and provided financial support to the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF). China has also vehemently opposed the United States' unilateral sanctions against Ethiopia. In a press conference in September 2021, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian stated that "we oppose the wanton exertion of pressure through sanctions or the threat of imposing sanctions to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries," adding that "the US should handle relevant issues prudently and play a constructive role in restoring peace and stability in the country." (Gebre, S, 2021, p. 2). Given the fact that China regards Ethiopia as a reliable partner and a major gateway for its expansionist policy in Africa, it should come as no surprise that the Chinese government would support the current regime in order to maximize its economic and security interests in the country.

China's behaviour in the Horn of Africa, like Russia's, can be analysed through the lens of offensive realism. Beijing has recently completed the construction of a pier near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea. According to reports, the pier will serve as a gateway to the Red Sea for China, and it can accommodate aircraft carriers from

the country's military base in Djibouti. However, China's growing maritime assertiveness in the Horn of Africa has created uncertainty and insecurity for the United States. The assumption that great powers are usually suspicious of each other because their intentions are unpredictable is one of the fundamental principles of offensive realism. According to Mearsheimer *"great powers fear each other. They regard each other with suspicion, and they worry that war might be in the offing. They anticipate danger"* (2003, p. 17). That is exactly what is happening in the Horn of Africa between the United States and China. Gen. Stephen Townsend, head of US Africa Command, told the House Armed Services Committee that *"China is of great concern. They are literally everywhere on the continent"* adding that Beijing has plans to use the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait pier as a *"platform to project power across the continent and its waters...and this is the most significant threat from China"* (Pickrell, 2021, p. 3). In this context, the US's behaviour can be explained primarily through a defensive realism approach as it seeks to maintain the status quo, whereas China exhibits aggressive and revisionist behaviour in order to maximize its power, which can be interpreted through offensive realism principles.

### ***Turkey, India, the United Arab Emirates***

Turkey, India, the United Arab Emirates, and other emerging Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have primarily economic and security interests in the Horn of Africa due to their proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a vital trade route connecting the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. These emerging regional powers are not acting aggressively and do not compete directly with the region's other global powers. However, by supporting the Abiy administration's short- and long-term economic goals, they are implicitly challenging the region's geo-political dynamics, alongside China and Russia.

### ***Turkey***

Over the last two decades, Turkey's influence in Ethiopia has steadily grown. According to Yaprak Alp, the Turkish ambassador to Ethiopia, Ankara regards Addis Ababa as the "door to the continent," referring to Ethiopia's political influence and vibrant economic growth in the Horn of Africa. A report from the Ethiopian Investment Commission indicates that Turkey has invested approximately US\$ 2.5 billion in Ethiopia so far, primarily in the textile, construction, and manufacturing sectors. According to the newspaper, Ankara is the "third biggest investor of operational capital in the African country after China and Saudi Arabia" (Schipani & Pitel, 2021, para, 11). The two countries' trade exchange is also worth US\$ 650 million, with the goal of increasing it to US\$ 1 billion. Turk Exim Bank has also financed the 390km Awash-Kombolcha-Hara Gebeya modern railway project, which aims to connect the economic zones of north-eastern Ethiopia with central Ethiopia and the Djibouti corridor. The project is expected to cost \$1.7 billion. Aside from trade and economic sectors, there is also a growing relationship between the two states in terms of tourism, educational, and cultural exchanges. Turkish films are also playing an important role



in boosting public diplomacy between the two countries. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's picture was displayed alongside his Russian and Chinese counterparts during an anti-US rally in Addis Ababa, which speaks volumes about Turkey's growing influence in Ethiopia and the wider African continent.

However, Turkey, like the other emerging powers, favours the federal government in the Tigray crisis. Back in November 2020, Ethiopian Foreign Minister Demeke Mekonnen spoke with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu about the federal government's 'legal measures' in Tigray region, and the Turkish foreign minister had no reservations about the military campaign, according to Anadolu Agency. "The government of Turkey understands the federal government of Ethiopia's decision to take action to maintain law and order in the region," the minister said. According to the report, the minister also "expressed his confidence that the operation would end soon and not compromise the safety of civilians," (Geatchew, 2020, p. 8-9). Demeke Mekonnen paid a two-day official visit to Turkey's capital Ankara after the federal government announced the end of the 'law enforcement' operation in Tigray region. In addition to discussing current issues, the two foreign ministries also inaugurated a newly built embassy in the capital, demonstrating the two countries' growing diplomatic cooperation. Following the official visit, social media rumours circulated about the Ethiopian government's intention to purchase Turkish drones, which played a significant role in shifting the balance of power during the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict. A one-day visit to Ankara by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on August 18, 2021, was warmly welcomed by President Erdoğan. Following the reception there was a signing of Memorandum of Understanding on various economic and security sectors. Given the Western powers' opposition to the federal government's military offensive, it is not surprising that the federal government would seek military assistance from other partners, including Turkey.

**India.** India is one of Ethiopia's most important trading partners, and its primary interests in the Horn of Africa are primarily in trade and investment. According to the Indian embassy in Addis Ababa, approximately 600 Indian companies have received investment licenses totalling US\$ 6 billion, mostly in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. In 2020, the two countries' trade exchange was also US\$ 1.17 billion. Medical tourism, higher education exchange programs, ICT, and health care are some of the other major areas in which India and Ethiopia have collaborated. (Indian Embassy in Addis Ababa, 2021). Because of its economic and commercial interests in Ethiopia, India has remained largely silent on the Tigray crisis. However, when the United Nations Security Council met in March 2021, it showed its support for the federal government by categorically rejecting a proposal made by western members aimed at condemning the humanitarian and security crisis in the Tigray region. Prior to the meeting, Ethiopian Foreign Minister Demeke Mekonnen paid an official diplomatic visit to India, where he inaugurated the newly constructed chancery building and residence of the Ethiopian Embassy in New Delhi. During the visit, officials from both states declared that their relationship to be "mutual and sisterly."

According to the Indian embassy in Addis Ababa, *“India Ethiopia relations have been traditionally close and friendly. Ethiopia has been appreciative of the fact that India has never been hostile to Ethiopian interests. Ethiopia has been consistent in their support for India in the international fora on various issues.”* (Ibid)

**The United Arab Emirates and other Gulf States** – The presence of the Gulf states in the Horn of Africa is rapidly expanding. These rising Middle Eastern powers are vying for a foothold in the region due to their geographical proximity. Qatar and Turkey back the Somali federal government, while the United Arab Emirates back Somaliland and other autonomous regions. Saudi Arabia recently dispatched military and intelligence officers to Eritrea in order to form an alliance in its involvement in the Yemeni civil war. In exchange, the kingdom promised to financially support the Eritrean government. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia played a significant role in resolving the long-standing security stalemate between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The UAE is also attempting to mediate the Nile dam dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. Its ongoing efforts to resolve the Ethiop-Sudanese border conflict have also highlighted the region's growing influence.

Since the Abiy administration took power, the UAE has been one of Ethiopia's most reliable partners. Its huge financial support to the regime, amounting to US\$ 3 billion, has played a significant role in stabilizing the foreign exchange shortage Ethiopia faced during the three-year political crisis. Aside from financial assistance, the UAE is expanding its influence in Ethiopia through political alliances and massive investment in agriculture, construction, and transportation sectors. It also intends to sign an agreement with Ethiopia and Eritrea to build an oil pipeline connecting the two countries. The Tigray crisis exemplifies the UAE's growing influence in Ethiopia. One of the allegations levelled by TPLF supporters against the UAE is that it is involved in the conflict by providing drones and other area artillery from its Assab military base in Eritrea, though the Ethiopian government denies this. In February, the Ethiopian National Intelligence Security claimed to have foiled a terrorist plot against the UAE embassy in Addis Ababa. According to the report, a second group of suspects was planning to carry out the same attack on the UAE embassy in Khartoum, Sudan. Regardless of their credibility, these reports demonstrate the UAE's growing influence in the region.

One important point to note here is that the behaviour of Turkey, India, the UAE, and other Gulf states in the Horn of Africa can be explained in terms of offensive realism, as they strive to maximize their economic and security presence in the region. However, their behaviour differs from that of Russia and China due to differences in power capability. These rising regional powers meet at least four of the five principles of offensive realism. To begin, because there is no authoritative power that governs the competitive actors in the Horn of Africa, they are attempting to maximize their power in an anarchic system. Second, because states can never be certain of other states' intentions, they act independently. They can be aggressive at times and soft at others. Third, because survivalism is the ultimate goal of each state, these regional powers seeking to expand their influence in the Horn of Africa seek to maximize their power in order to secure their territorial integrity and domestic political autonomy through



economic and security incentives. Finally, because states are rational actors, Turkey, India, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states in the Horn of Africa make decisions and behave in accordance with the current dynamics in the region. The only basic principle of offensive realism that these rising regional powers may fail to fulfil is the second: “great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other” (Mearsheimer, 2003, p.16). Despite spending billions of dollars to develop and modernize their military forces, Turkey, India, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states are not yet capable of challenging the military might of the United States, Russia, and China. Indeed, regional rising powers import their weapons from global powers.

### **Conclusion**

The primary goal of this article is to demonstrate Africa's position in the global system using the Tigray crisis as an example. While the theoretical part of the article discusses the two fundamental concepts of neo-realism, namely the anarchical behaviour of the global system and states' desire to survive, the evidence-based analysis shows how competing strategic interests of global powers in the Horn of Africa brought geopolitical competition in the region. The analysis also shows that the overarching goal of the global and emerging powers competing in the Horn of Africa is to maximize and maintain their political, economic, and security clout in the region. However, because there is no authoritative power that dictates and controls the anarchic global system, western states and emerging powers make independent decisions and act in accordance with their geostrategic interests in the region. The objections of Russia, China, and India to the proposed UN Security Council statement on the Tigray crisis, as well as the US decision to impose economic sanctions and visa restrictions on Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders, demonstrate that when there is no central power at the global system, states act independently, either to maintain their existing hegemonic status quo or to maximize their influence. There is also one noteworthy point to mention here. Waltz emphasized that as long as the great powers are the main actors, the structure of global politics is determined by them. That is exactly what is going on in the Horn of Africa right now. The desire of western global powers to maintain their hegemonic political influence, combined with the desire of emerging powers to maximize their economic and security gains, is transforming the Horn of Africa into a new geopolitical landscape.

What is more interesting to note here is the issue of polarity and system stability, which is one of the core conceptual components of neorealism theory. Both Waltz and Mearsheimer contend that as the number of global actors grows, so does uncertainty, suspicion, and conflict. Waltz contends that in multipolar systems, there is greater uncertainty, allowing competitors to make erroneous decisions based on their adversaries' intentions and actions. During the cold war, the Horn of Africa was one of the focal points of an ideological proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the Ethiopia-Somalia war, the Soviet

Union supported the socialist Derg regime, while the United States supported the Somali government. As a result of the balance of power between the two superpowers, it is unavoidable to state that the global system's structure at the time was bipolar. However, the region is currently a place where multiple global and regional actors are competing with each other not on ideological grounds, but on the desire to maximize their political-economic gains. As a result, the Horn of Africa has become a multipolar battlefield. Furthermore, the dominant US-led Western powers' political influence in the region is currently under threat due to the rapidly expanding presence of emerging powers such as China and Russia. Because the anarchical nature of the multipolar world system does not allow states to maintain power for long, great powers are always suspicious of one another. Suspicion causes friction, which leads to increased instability, fragility, and an increase in violence in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere. Thus, in order to mitigate the looming global security crisis that could arise from the Horn of Africa, the article recommends that scholars and policymakers work to raise awareness about the disastrous consequences of destructive competition among the region's great powers. There is a classic proverb that could sum up my point here: 'No one will be safe until everyone is safe.' That principle applies everywhere in the world.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

### ***Notes on Contributor***

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