

## ON GEOPOLITICS

# The UAE's Long Game in East Africa

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Shipping containers are offloaded from a vessel at Berbera Port in Somaliland on Aug. 31, 2021. (ED RAM/AFP via Getty Images)

Over the past two decades, Emirati companies have steadily expanded their footprint across East Africa, with a focus on logistics, farmland and critical minerals. Amid East African countries' rapid economic growth, this trend will likely continue as Dubai-based entities look to capitalize on the region's economic potential and to position Dubai as its leading trade interface with the rest of the world. However, the United Arab Emirates' outreach to East Africa has become increasingly driven by geostrategic considerations since the start of the 2010s, with the goal of pushing back against political Islam and shoring up Emirati influence in the Red Sea region. With a rising prospect of resurging UAE-Turkey competition in the medium-term amid Iran's repeated setbacks, Abu Dhabi will likely keep deepening its security and trade partnership with East Africa as it seeks to keep Ankara and other

regional competitors' influence at bay – with Ethiopia and Uganda emerging as key local partners. Although the United Arab Emirates' outreach will help East African countries secure much-needed investments to support their infrastructure buildup, it will also threaten to entangle the region once more in external geopolitical rivalries and raise the risk of proxy competition, if not conflict.

## **A Blueprint for Emirati Strategy in East Africa**

The United Arab Emirates' push into East Africa was first motivated by the commercial interests of Dubai-based entities. Since the mid-2000s, Emirati companies have plowed billions of dollars into East African countries' agricultural and logistics sectors. These investments have helped shore up the United Arab Emirates' food security by giving Abu Dhabi control over food production systems, while also enabling Emirati logistics giant DP World to secure long-term port concession deals in the region, such as at Tanzania's Dar es Salaam. Investments in logistics portend significant returns in the coming decades, as East Africa stands as one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. These investments also help position the United Arab Emirates as the region's main interface with global markets, owing to DP World's expansion of transhipment routes through Dubai, which supports the city's status as a global business hub and by extension the United Arab Emirates' push to diversify its economy away from the oil and gas sector.

However, political and geostrategic drivers have become increasingly important in shaping the United Arab Emirates' outreach to East Africa. This tilt was first spurred by the 2010-2012 Arab Spring and accelerated after the eruption of the Yemeni civil war in 2014, as Abu Dhabi sought to proactively counter Islamist influence, including that of Iran around the strategic Bab el-Mandeb strait. In turn, the United Arab Emirates began developing an influence network of its own that included

Sudan's Rapid Support Forces – a paramilitary organization that regrouped mostly Arab militias from Darfur and sent thousands of fighters to Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthis in the second half of the 2010s. In addition to tackling Tehran's regional influence, the United Arab Emirates' efforts to counter political Islam also saw it enter a heightened phase of competition with Qatar and Turkey across the broader Middle East, including in the Red Sea region – a vital trade corridor between Europe and Asia. Together with Yemen's civil war and the Horn of Africa's perennial security challenges, this prompted Middle Eastern powers to increasingly militarize their approach to the region, including through the provision of military training and equipment, such as attack drones.

## **Sudan's Plight: A Catalyst for Emirati Outreach**

The United Arab Emirates' rapprochement with the RSF in the mid-2010s saw Emirati companies gradually expand their stake in the Sudanese economy. However, Abu Dhabi's counter-revolutionary agenda increasingly geared the United Arab Emirates' involvement in Sudan toward preventing the success of pro-democracy forces following the ousting of President Omar al Bashir in April 2019. While Abu Dhabi's backing of the RSF helped stall Sudan's transition to civilian rule, the eruption of clashes between the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces in April 2023 shifted the United Arab Emirates' political priorities. In response to the SAF's backing by Sudanese Islamists, Abu Dhabi has provided large-scale military support to the RSF through Chad and Libya as part of its efforts to counter the rise of political Islam across the broader Middle East region – although it insists that it is not backing any side in the conflict. The United Arab Emirates' military support has emboldened the RSF and discouraged it from making concessions to the SAF, thereby prolonging Sudan's civil war and the risk of violent spillovers into neighboring countries.

In addition to providing military support to the RSF, Abu Dhabi also appears to be leveraging its financial resources to sway East African countries toward benevolent neutrality vis-a-vis the paramilitary group, if not outright support. As a case in point, Kenya secured a \$1.5 billion concessional loan in the United Arab Emirates after hosting a conference of the RSF and its allies in Nairobi, where the paramilitary group unveiled plans to form a parallel government in February. There is also emerging evidence that Nairobi has provided at least indirect military support to the RSF. Sudan's ongoing civil war thus acts as an additional driver to the United Arab Emirates' outreach to East Africa, which will provide fresh economic opportunities for states in the region. Despite reputational risks due to the RSF's widespread human rights abuses, most East African states will likely agree to adopt a stance of benevolent neutrality toward the RSF in exchange for access to Emirati financing, especially given declining development aid from the United States and European countries. In turn, a large number of states in the region are likely to face spats with Sudan's SAF-led government, further stalling African-led peace initiatives for Sudan.

## **Ethiopia: A Strategic Anchor**

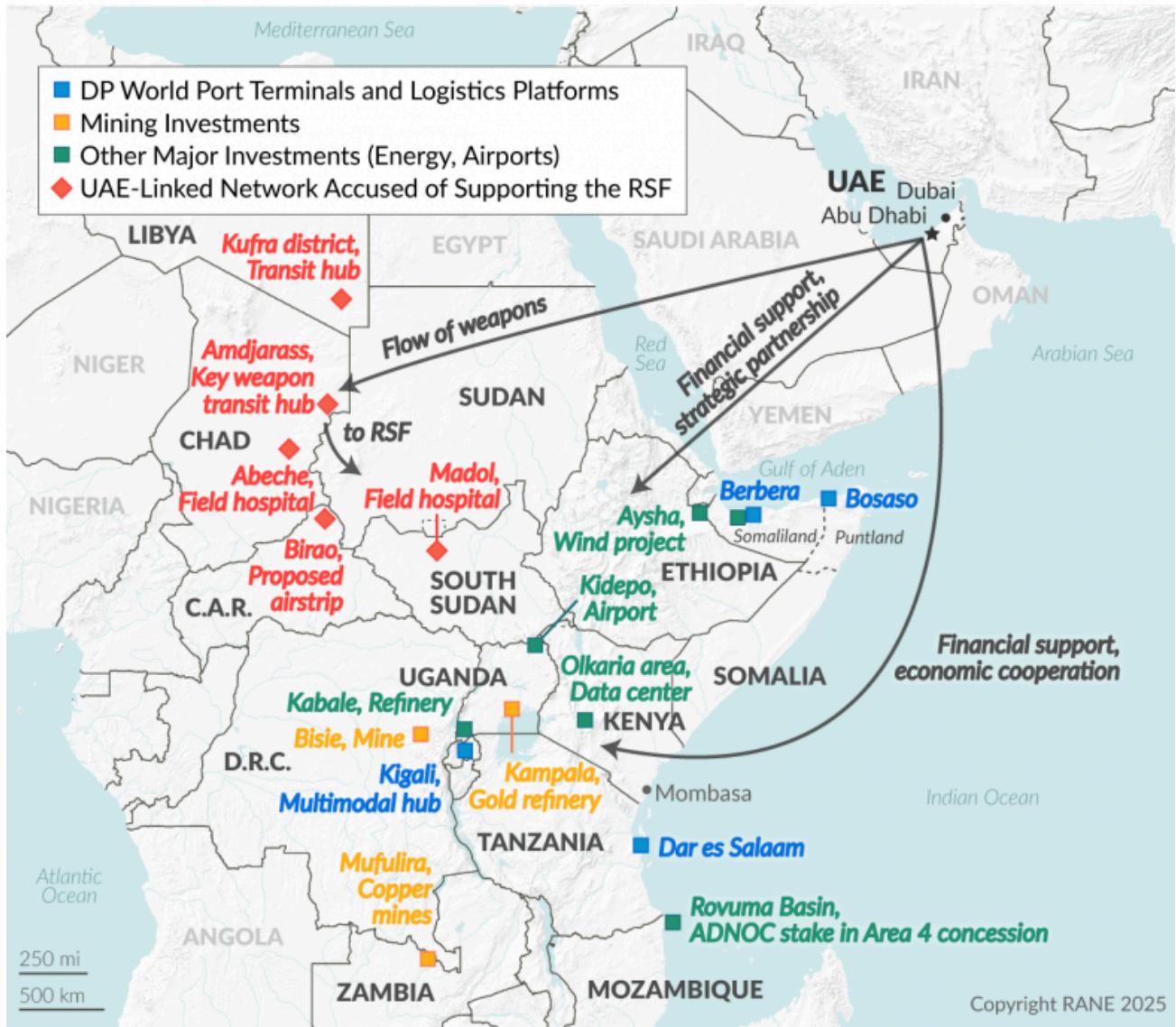
Despite its internal fragilities, Ethiopia's large population, economic size and political heft grant it many of the attributes needed to emerge as the Horn of Africa's regional hegemon. For the United Arab Emirates, this makes a partnership with Addis Ababa particularly appealing, as Ethiopia could act as a sub-regional anchor within its sphere of influence to which it can delegate the management of local security issues. Given these strategic drivers, the United Arab Emirates has rapidly increased cooperation with Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in 2018, including through an expansion of aid and investments, currency swaps, and the provision of military equipment. Moreover, DP World and Abu Dhabi have sought to

establish a new trade corridor between Somaliland's Berbera port and Ethiopia as an alternative to Djibouti since Djiboutian authorities seized DP World's Doraleh container terminal in 2018, which aligns with Abiy's push to diversify Ethiopia's port access. Against this backdrop, cooperation between the two sides appears set to remain strong in the years ahead.

Somaliland is another key UAE partner in the Horn of Africa. While it does not currently recognize Somaliland's independence, Abu Dhabi has positioned itself as the breakaway region's leading strategic partner, including through infrastructural development and the provision of military training and equipment. In exchange, the United Arab Emirates has secured access to military facilities in the territory, which first supported its military efforts against the Houthis in Yemen but now help it consolidate its strategic position in the Gulf of Aden. The United Arab Emirates currently appears to be a key facilitator in U.S.-Somaliland relations, as the Trump administration grows increasingly likely to recognize the territory's independence, which would provide Abu Dhabi with fresh international backing to strengthen its economic and defence ties with Somaliland. But while the United Arab Emirates may decide to follow in the United States' steps and recognize Somaliland's independence, this would almost certainly severely strain its relations with Somalia's federal government, which are already hindered by Abu Dhabi's close ties with Somaliland and Puntland state. While the United Arab Emirates currently provides Somalia with military support to counter Turkish and Qatari influence in the country, Mogadishu would likely strongly pivot toward Ankara and Doha if Abu Dhabi joined Washington in recognizing Somaliland's sovereignty.

# The UAE's Economic and Logistical Footprint in East Africa

Driven by commercial and strategic interests, the United Arab Emirates has developed an extensive economic network in East Africa, with Emirati companies pursuing large investments in logistics, agriculture, energy and mining. This network makes the United Arab Emirates a pivotal economic partner for East African countries while simultaneously positioning Dubai as the region's leading trade interface with global markets.



## Divide To Rule

Competition among Middle Eastern powers in the Horn of Africa has varied in intensity over the past decade, with a peak in tensions during the Qatar blockade. With Iran now on the back foot following U.S. and Israeli airstrikes in June 2025, Sunni powers in the Middle East are growing more likely to enter a new phase of heightened competition against one another. But with concerns of ever-growing Israeli

assertiveness and shared interests by Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in stabilizing Syria – at least for the next few years – this competition currently appears more likely to materialize in the Middle East's periphery. Abu Dhabi's growing footprint across Northeast Africa and its perceived destabilization of Sudan, and to a lesser extent Somalia, raises the prospect of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia coordinating their approach to the region in a way that undermines Abu Dhabi's strategic interests. In practice, this could see Cairo and Ankara endorse a resumption of the Saudi-led Jeddah talks while simultaneously expanding their military support to the SAF with Riyadh's backing, in a bid to force the RSF into meeting SAF demands to resume peace negotiations. However, this trilateral coordination could also extend to Somalia, such as through expanded support to its federal government in asserting influence over Puntland and/or Somaliland.

But while Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia's interest in Northeast Africa may align in the short to medium term, the longevity of such a

partnership is questionable given Cairo and Riyadh's concerns about Turkey's long-term ambitions in the broader Middle East region.

Indeed, growing Turkish influence in Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean or Libya could prompt Cairo and/or Riyadh to rapidly shift their priorities back to countering Turkish influence. To prevent greater Turkey-Egypt-Saudi Arabia alignment, Abu Dhabi will thus likely continue to seek to drive a diplomatic wedge between Cairo and Riyadh, and between Cairo and Ankara. In practice, this could see the United Arab Emirates leverage existing investment pledges in Egypt – and potentially future ones – to dissuade Cairo from joining such a coalition. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates will likely publicly encourage Ethiopia to adopt a more compromising stance on regional matters, as Addis Ababa's perceived assertiveness would likely act as a

catalyst for cooperation between Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. However, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will likely still urge the United Arab Emirates to press the RSF into meeting certain SAF demands, which could temporarily de-escalate Sudan's civil war – if not pave the way for a political settlement to the conflict.

## The Great Lakes: A New El Dorado?

The Great Lakes region's geographical location is not as strategically significant as the Horn of Africa, but its bountiful mineral resources are a major source of interest for the United Arab Emirates. Emirati companies have rapidly expanded their stake in the region's critical mineral assets over the last few years, with International Resources Holding – a company linked to UAE National Security Advisor Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan – acquiring majority stakes in Zambia's Mopani Copper Mines and the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Bisie coltan mine in 2024 and 2025, respectively. These investments in critical minerals position the United Arab Emirates in a high-growth and increasingly strategic sector, which aligns with its economic diversification efforts. Moreover, a comparatively greater control over mineral supply chains could help the United Arab Emirates reduce its reliance on third parties to secure critical minerals for its emerging tech and industrial base, though key dependencies are set to persist over the coming decade, such as on China's mineral processing capabilities. However, Emirati companies' push to grow their footprint in the Great Lakes' critical mineral sector will likely lock them in growing commercial competition with their Saudi and Qatari counterparts, which, for similar reasons, are looking to expand their stake in the sector.

Although competition between Middle Eastern powers in the Great Lakes region is now largely driven by economic considerations, the

region's volatile security environment means that this rivalry could become increasingly militarized in the medium term. As Emirati companies expand their footprint in the region, Abu Dhabi will likely seek to support regional states in improving their defense capabilities to ensure the security of its economic interests. The United Arab Emirates is already expanding security cooperation with Uganda, whose recent military intervention in South Sudan played a pivotal role in stabilizing South Sudanese President Salva Kiir, a key UAE ally. Uganda is also a key player in the African Union's peacekeeping mission in Somalia. This suggests that Abu Dhabi may now perceive Uganda as its leading security partner in the Great Lakes, even though the Emirati government has also expanded security and defense cooperation with Rwanda. While the United Arab Emirates will likely seek to expand bilateral cooperation with both countries in the coming years, this would prove challenging if tensions resurge between Uganda and Rwanda, which have faced several phases of heightened competition over the past decades. In this scenario, Rwanda may tilt closer to Turkey and Qatar due to the United Arab Emirates' close ties to Uganda, which could in turn prompt Abu Dhabi to double down on cooperation with Kampala – and thereby threaten a spillover of Turkey-UAE military competition in the Great Lakes region.

## **Navigating Between Giants: America, China and India**

The United Arab Emirates' willingness to invest at scale in East Africa creates a clear opportunity for alignment with the Trump administration, which is seeking to counter Chinese influence in Africa while simultaneously minimizing costs. Although Abu Dhabi already commercially competes with Beijing, the United Arab Emirates is unlikely to adopt an anti-Chinese stance in East Africa anytime soon, as it would risk disrupting its economic ties with Beijing, an increasingly important economic partner. This suggests that the Emirati

government or members of the royal families are unlikely to condition their investments in the region on East African countries curbing their ties to China in any significant way. However, Abu Dhabi could – as part of a quid pro quo with Trump – agree to finance the construction of telecommunications and technology infrastructure in coordination with U.S. companies that limit the use of Chinese technologies. This would provide space for countries in the region to diversify the sourcing of their telecommunications equipment, thereby enabling them to reduce their reliance on Chinese technology and financing. However, countries in East Africa, and elsewhere on the continent, are unlikely to fully abandon Chinese telecommunications technologies given Chinese companies' already critical importance in their telecommunications networks.

While China-UAE competition in East Africa has the potential to grow beyond the commercial realm, the Emirati government is actively advancing joint initiatives with India, with the two countries striking a memorandum of understanding on development cooperation across Africa as early as 2018. In April, DP World and the Indian government announced the launch of the Bharat Africa Setu initiative, which aims to double India-Africa trade through 2030 by improving the connectivity between DP World's African and Indian ports. Moreover, Indian and Emirati companies are already co-investing. For example, India's Adani Group secured a 30-year concession deal at Dar es Salaam's Container Terminal 2 that builds upon a 2022 MoU with the Abu Dhabi Ports Group and paves the way for joint investments in infrastructure along trade routes linking the Tanzanian port to East Africa's hinterland. Moreover, India's growing role in counter-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia also portends increased bilateral cooperation in maritime security, which would help the United Arab

Emirates secure trade routes in the western Indian Ocean. For New Delhi, partnering with Abu Dhabi enables it to leverage Emirati logistics companies' integrated trade ecosystem to facilitate Indian companies' entry in East Africa markets at a time when many are looking for new partners amid uncertainty over U.S. tariffs. As for the United Arab Emirates, playing this pivotal role in India's outreach to East Africa will reinforce Dubai and Abu Dhabi's position as critical nodes for trade between the two regions, which appear set to rapidly grow in the coming decades given their strong economic growth, favorable demographics and geographical proximity.

## What it Means for East Africa

The United Arab Emirates's outreach to East Africa is rapidly reshaping the region by improving trade connectivity and supporting the rise of regional players like Ethiopia and Uganda. For East African countries, Emirati investments are a major opportunity to build much-needed infrastructure while mitigating their reliance on Chinese financing. In turn, this helps them advance their economic development while simultaneously diversifying their foreign partnerships. Despite this upside potential, Abu Dhabi will also seek to leverage its growing economic influence for political and strategic ends that could run counter to those of local states – most notably when it comes to outmaneuvering other Middle Eastern powers. Growing Emirati – but also Turkish – influence in East Africa could escalate regional tensions in the medium to long term, as Ankara and Abu Dhabi may seek to exploit local rivalries to advance their competing interests. While this risk of proxy competition is highest in the Horn of Africa, it could also affect countries in the Great Lakes region – especially if tensions between Uganda and Rwanda resurge. For East African countries, the challenge will thus be to harness the benefits of this newfound interest while avoiding a militarization of foreign competition in the region.

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