



The ISIR Digest

**TRUMP'S SECOND TERM: IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE HORN OF AFRICA**

April 2025

COPYRIGHT © 2025 by ISIR Institute

All rights reserved.

No part of this digest may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, without permission in writing from the publishers.

ISIR INSTITUTE

Off Airport Road, Masallaha, Hargeisa, SOMALILAND

Phone: +252 63 6226667

www.isirinstitute.com | info@isirinsitute.org |

 @ISIRInstitute  @ISIRinsitute  @ISIRinsitute  @isirinsitute

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR)

ISIR INSTITUTE

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) is an independent, nonpartisan organization that uses research to inform its policy advocacy work. It undertakes impartial policy research, training and analysis to organizations and decision-makers in the Horn of African region who are working toward innovative thinking to stimulate formulation of sound public policies leading to positive outcomes in the fields of peace & security, good governance, safeguarding human rights and democracy.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 1

The Strategic Importance of the Horn of Africa..... 1

Shifts in the U.S. Policy Toward Somalia: Uncertainty and Action..... 2

Re-evaluating U.S. Foreign Policy 2

Towards Africa in the Trump Era: 2

U.S-China Rivalry: The Battle for Influence 3

Reevaluating U.S. Alliances: A Strategic Shift Away from Europe and Asia 3

Navigating Conflict and Cooperation: Russia’s Role in Sudan Amid
U.S.- Russia Dialogue 4

Middle Eastern Influence: Gulf States in the Horn 4

Security and Counterterrorism: Balancing Light Footprints
and Lasting Stability 5

Economic Policies and Trade: America First vs. Regional Growth..... 5

Humanitarian and Development Aid: A Precarious Future 6

Conflict and Fragile States: The Road Ahead..... 6

U.S. Engagement with Horn of Africa
(Somalia/Somaliland and the Trump “Gaza Relocation Plan” 6

The High Stakes of “Transactional Diplomacy” 7

Conclusion 8

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Horn of Africa remains a critical geopolitical hotspot, influencing global trade, security, and power dynamics. In his second term, the U.S. president Donald Trump has introduced a wave of Executive Orders, reshaping the U.S. policy on economic deregulation, military strategy, and immigration, including a potential travel ban affecting countries in the Horn of Africa region.

His administration's approach, guided by Project 2025, '[Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise.](#)' outlines a conservative policy agenda to reshape the U.S. government and

shifts focus from aid to private-sector investment while deprioritizing Africa in favour of strategic interests elsewhere. Meanwhile, China, Russia, and Gulf states are expanding their influence, heightening competition in the Horn of Africa region. Trump's "transactional" diplomacy risks weakening the U.S.'s influence in the long term, creating security gaps that rival powers could exploit. For the U.S. administration, the challenge remains balancing short-term strategic interests with sustainable engagement to maintain stability in the Horn of Africa region.

The Strategic Importance of the Horn of Africa

Positioned at the crossroads of major maritime routes like the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the Horn plays a crucial role in global trade and security. Its wealth of natural resources, control over key ports, and status as the source of the Nile, further elevate its geopolitical significance. As international powers compete for influence, the region's stability remains essential for both economic growth and security across Africa and beyond.

Meanwhile, President Donald J. Trump's return to office has triggered a swift wave of Executive Orders (EOs), rapidly reshaping the United States' governance. These directives, many of which roll back key policies from the Obama and Biden administrations, have targeted economic deregulation, military policy, and healthcare, with more withdrawals/reductions expected in the coming months.

Among the most controversial actions is the fact that the Trump administration is reviewing a prospective travel ban that would restrict entry for citizens from multiple countries, including Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Eritrea from the Horn of Africa, along with others from Asia and the Middle East. The

Trump Administration's sweeping use of [Executive Orders](#) highlights both impatience with legislative gridlock and determination to leave a lasting mark on U.S. policy, reinforcing his reputation as one of the most assertive presidents.

Shifts in the U.S. Policy Toward Somalia: Uncertainty and Action

In Trump's second term, the United States' engagement with Somalia remains unpredictable. After the U.S. withdrew its troops from Somalia in 2021, Trump's administration launched decisive military action against ISIS strongholds in the Golis Mountains, Puntland/Somalia, in a move that was contradictory to the 2021 withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia. [The airstrikes led to significant militant casualties](#) and the capture of a high-ranking ISIS

commander.

This juxtaposition between strategic withdrawal and tactical engagement raises questions about long-term U.S. commitment and influence in the Horn. The fluctuating approach risks undermining U.S. credibility among local governments and security partners while creating opportunities for extremist groups to exploit the security and governance gaps.

Re-evaluating U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Africa in the Trump Era:

The Project 2025 policy guidance paper is now President Trump's road-map; the U.S.'s aid approach in Africa recently shifted towards private-sector investment, job creation, and "holding

China accountable for exploitative practices", according to the Project 2025 document.

President Trump's push for global energy dominance reflects his

narrow geopolitical focus, prioritizing Europe, Ukraine, and the Middle East while sidelining Africa. Project 2025 criticizes U.S. aid to Africa for fostering dependency, while advocating

private-sector investment instead — a strategy that exposes Trump's myopia towards Africa's strategic importance; this leaves African leaders dismayed by this neglect.

U.S-China Rivalry: The Battle for Influence

China's growing influence in the Horn, particularly in Djibouti, has been a key concern. With investments funding nearly 40% of Djibouti's infrastructure and establishing China's first overseas military base, Beijing's expanding footprint challenges the U.S.'s strategic interests.

The [Belt and Road Initiative's](#) emphasis on large-scale infrastructure projects has increased China's economic leverage, with long-term implications for regional autonomy. Trump's second term is expected to prioritize countering China's Belt and Road Initiative and securing the United

State's access to critical infrastructure, potentially through increased investment and military collaboration with local partners. However, the Trump administration's cost-cutting measures may undermine the scope and consistency of this counterstrategy.

The Trump Administration's use of [legislative measures](#), such as the **Belt and Road Oversight Act**, **Countering the PRC Malign Influence Fund**, and **the Strategic Competition Act**, aims to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and limit its global infrastructure expansion.

Reevaluating U.S. Alliances: A Strategic Shift Away from Europe and Asia

The U.S. is currently engaged in a heated debate about its future relations with European and Asian allies, framed in emotional, moral terms. Proponents of the "America First" agenda argue that

allies have failed to show sufficient gratitude or contribute enough to their defence, questioning whether they deserve the U.S.' protection.

In contrast, defenders of the current alliance system emphasize the importance of standing by commitments, particularly in the face of the Ukraine war. [The global military strategy established after WWII](#), which was shaped by the U.S.'s economic

interests, may no longer reflect current global dynamics. The debate should shift from "morality" to assessing whether the strategic assumptions made 75 years ago are still valid today in a vastly different geopolitical context.

Navigating Conflict and Cooperation: Russia's Role in Sudan Amid U.S.-Russia Dialogue

Against the backdrop of turbulence in the Middle East, [Russia has strategically hedged its bets in Sudan's brutal conflict](#), initially arming both the SAF and RSF before shifting support to the SAF by mid-2024 to secure a Red Sea naval base. Meanwhile, the Wagner Group's covert backing of the RSF, despite official denials, highlights

Moscow's broader aim to expand its military influence in Africa and the region. Since the Red Sea is a strategic waterway, there is no imminent threat to the U.S.' interests, and given the U.S.-Russia cooperation on a Ukraine ceasefire, there are no tensions over Sudan or the Red Sea at the moment between the two.

Middle Eastern Influence: Gulf States in the Horn

The Gulf States—particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar — have deepened their engagement in the Horn through infrastructure investments and diplomatic initiatives. The UAE's development of the Port of Berbera in Somaliland exemplify its strategic ambitions. Saudi Arabia's interest in establishing a military

base in Djibouti and the [Eritrean port development reflects broader regional competition for influence](#).

Trump's "transactional approach" could amplify these rivalries, prioritizing the U.S.' strategic deals over diplomatic balance, which may exacerbate existing regional tensions. The increasing competition between [Gulf States led](#)

[to fuelling conflicts](#) (as in Sudan now) that further destabilized the Horn.

Security and Counterterrorism: Balancing Light Footprints and Lasting Stability

The U.S.' military policy in Somalia remains a focal point in counterterrorism efforts. The Trump administration's reliance on drone strikes and a "light footprint" strategy raises concerns about longer-term stability in Somalia.

A reduction in U.S. engagement risks creating security vacuums which may be exploited by extremist groups like ISIS. In contrast, strategic partnerships with local forces could enhance counterterrorism effectiveness, provided they are paired with efforts to strengthen institutions and promote

political reconciliation.

The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait's strategic significance underscores the need for stability in the Horn. Houthi activity and regional conflicts risk complicating U.S. engagement, necessitating a balance between protecting global trade routes and avoiding deeper military entanglements. The presence of multiple foreign military bases in Djibouti highlights the strategic competition for maritime control, with implications for regional security and international commerce.

Economic Policies and Trade: America First vs. Regional Growth

Trump's "America First" approach could deprioritize initiatives like the [African Growth and Opportunity Act \(AGOA\)](#), impacting Ethiopia's and Kenya's economic growth. A pivot toward bilateral trade agreements focused on immediate benefits to the U.S. may undermine regional integration efforts.

African nations reliant on AGOA's preferential trade terms may face economic disruptions, and the reduced U.S. support for multilateral economic initiatives could diminish long-term development prospects.

Humanitarian and Development Aid: A Precarious Future

A shift toward reduced foreign aid threatens ongoing development programs and humanitarian efforts. Cuts to USAID funding could exacerbate food insecurity, weaken health systems, and disrupt educational initiatives in fragile states like South

Sudan and Somalia. The withdrawal of support from multilateral institutions like the United Nations may further strain regional capacities to address humanitarian crises, increasing the likelihood of prolonged instability and displacement.

Conflict and Fragile States: The Road Ahead

[South Sudan's tensions point towards resurgence of conflict](#) and Sudan remains vulnerable to external interference and internal divisions. The U.S. policy under Trump may prioritize strategic interests over long-term state-

building efforts, potentially reducing support for democratic transitions and conflict resolution initiatives. The absence of sustained engagement risks reversing gains in peace and stability, exacerbating humanitarian crises.

U.S. Engagement with Horn of Africa (Somalia/Somaliland) and the Trump "Gaza Relocation Plan"

Somaliland's strategic location presents opportunities for direct U.S. engagement, including the possibility of recognising it as a sovereign state. but this potential is overshadowed by the controversial Trump-Netanyahu plan to [forcibly displace Palestinians from Gaza to African countries](#). As reported in the *Financial Times*, the U.S. and Israel have approached the Horn

of Africa nations about hosting the Gazan population, raising significant humanitarian, legal and moral concerns.

The idea of transforming Gaza into a "tourist hub," as proposed by President Trump to the Jordanian King Hussein, seems to have the potential to evolve into "a plan", absurd as it may seem.

The notion that Palestinians could be relocated to places like Sudan, Somalia, or Somaliland disregards the severe political, economic, and humanitarian challenges these nations already face. Moreover, this plan has been met with fierce global resistance—from Arab nations to human rights organizations—who view

it as a violation of international law and Palestinian sovereignty.

The U.S.' sources are reported to have made contacts as "the beginnings of a conversation", noting that Washington raised the possibility of relocating refugees from the U.S. and Gaza to Somaliland, although Somaliland has rejected such conversation.

The High Stakes of "Transactional Diplomacy"

Trump's second term promises a transactional and unilateral approach that could reshape U.S. engagement in the Horn of Africa. While commercial investments and strategic partnerships may grow, reduced support for multilateralism and development aid risks destabilizing the region and undermining long-term U.S. influence. Balancing immediate strategic interests with sustainable development remains critical for maintaining regional stability and advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives. As far as the U.S.-Africa relations are concerned, Africa is likely to remain a low priority for the Trump administration.

Trump's indifference could perpetuate the status quo, where U.S. engagement

is largely defined by counterterrorism efforts and military presence, particularly through AFRICOM.

While some African leaders might appreciate Trump's transactional approach, his neglect of key issues like public health programs, and his support of authoritarian regimes, could further erode the U.S.' influence on the continent. In the long term, Africa may continue to see reduced U.S. diplomatic and economic engagement with African countries and diminished global standing.

The Horn of Africa's stability is crucial to global security; it stands at a crossroads, shaped by global competition, and regional conflicts, yet Trump's "transactional approach"

Conclusion

prioritizes short-term U.S. gains over long-term mutually beneficial regional engagement. Reduced aid, shifting military policies, and waning diplomatic focus may weaken the U.S.' influence, allowing rivals like China and Russia to expand their foothold.

To maintain stability in the Horn of Africa, the U.S. must balance strategic interests with sustainable partnerships.

This requires a mix of military presence, economic investment, diplomatic engagement, and regional security support. The stakes are high- 12% of global trade passes through the Red Sea, and any disruption impacts the world economy. Overall, the Trump Administration will continue to negatively impact the Horn of Africa and Africa as a whole.

The ISIR Digest

TRUMP'S SECOND TERM: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HORN OF AFRICA

April 2025

COPYRIGHT © 2025 by ISIR Institute

ISIR INSTITUTE:

Off Airport Road, Masallaha,
Hargeisa, Somaliland