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"East Africa & the Horn: A Tinderbox or a Turning Point?"

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, and members of the committee, thank you for the honor of testifying today, and for your attention to an important region of the world.

My name is Joshua Meserve, and I am a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute. My views are my own and should not be construed as representing the official position of Hudson Institute.

The importance of East Africa¹ to the United States

East Africa is important to the prosperity and safety of Americans. The region has significant reserves of oil, gas, and critical minerals, the latter of which could lessen the U.S.'s serious minerals supply chain problem. Its economy is fast-expanding—the World Bank estimates nearly 6 percent growth this year and next²—and it has 6 of Africa's 10 most populous countries if including the DRC. Kenya is also one of Africa's emerging tech hubs. The region is rich with possibilities as a potential market for American goods, for U.S. investment, and for potential technological breakthroughs in key industries like biotechnology.

The region's extensive coastline spans key shipping routes in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean. The Houthi attacks on these sensitive sea lanes have raised shipping costs globally, including for America.³ Djibouti has more foreign military bases per square mile than any other country, and hosts the U.S.'s and China's only permanent African bases. The Red Sea is dense with submarine cables that carry vital information around the globe.

¹ For the purposes of this testimony, the author considers East Africa to comprise Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.

² "The World Bank in Eastern and Southern Africa," The World Bank, October 21, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/eastern-and-southern-africa> [accessed May 10, 2025].

³ "President Trump Is Standing Up to Terrorism and Protecting International Commerce," The White House, March 15, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/03/president-trump-is-standing-up-to-terrorism-and-protecting-international-commerce/> [accessed May 10, 2025].



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The region is also experiencing serious instability with the potential for far worse. If some of the grimmer scenarios materialize, there will be mass displacement throughout the region and potentially into Europe, the Middle East, and beyond, along with a severe human toll.

The world's worst humanitarian crisis already rages in Sudan where the genocidal Rapid Support Forces (RSF) battles the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The recent UAV attacks by the RSF on Port Sudan have escalated the conflict even higher. Buoyed by external actors, both sides appear to believe that they can still achieve their goals on the battlefield, suggesting there is no end in sight.

Renewed political violence in South Sudan threatens a return to full-scale civil war. To its east, tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia remain high and could trigger a disastrous conflict. None of the primary underlying tensions have been resolved. Until they are, the situation will remain on a hair trigger.

In a piece of welcome news, the U.S. recently facilitated a détente between DRC and Rwanda on the conflict in eastern DRC. However, the progress is incomplete and reversible.

In Somalia, the Islamist terrorist group al-Shabaab has retaken territory as the government in Mogadishu remains mired in corruption and dysfunction. Al-Shabaab killed Americans in the region previously and maintains the desire and capability to do so again.

Additionally, the U.S.'s primary geopolitical competitors, as well friendlier but at times still challenging countries, are prioritizing the region. The following is a sample of the activities of some of the outside players active in East Africa:

- In Djibouti, **China** built its first overseas military base, a hardened enclave with a pier sufficient to host a Chinese aircraft carrier or nuclear submarine. Since 2008, its vessels have participated in anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. After their deployments, the taskforces make port calls to countries up and down both coasts of the continent. The capabilities the PLA Navy is building will likely be useful in any future invasion of Taiwan or for enforcing Beijing's expansionist territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Chinese companies built and/or operate terminals within Djibouti port and are involved in 17 ports total in East Africa, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.⁴ Some of the largest Chinese-involved infrastructure projects in all of Africa are in this region,

⁴ Paul Nantulya, "Mapping China's Strategic Port Development in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 10, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-port-development-africa/> [accessed May 10, 2025].

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and Chinese companies have built sensitive African government buildings in the area.⁵ Between 1963 and 2023, Chinese officials holding four of the most senior Chinese government and Communist Party positions involved in foreign affairs visited East Africa 101 times.⁶ All but two East African countries have signed letters circulated at the United Nations supporting China's ethnic cleansing policies in Xinjiang.⁷

- **Russia** secured an agreement to build a “logistical support point”⁸ in Port Sudan after years of trying to secure a base in the region. Wagner mercenaries supported the Rapid Support Forces for a time in Sudan and were involved in gold mining in the country.

In the space of two months in 2023, Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki visited Moscow twice, and less than a year later a Russian Pacific fleet frigate made a five-day port call in Massawa. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Eritrea in 2023, the first ever such visit by a Russian foreign minister.

In March this year, the Russian deputy navy commander visited Ethiopia and signed with his counterpart a cooperation agreement on capacity building and training.

- **Iran** in the last several years has focused on East Africa to regain some of the influence it lost due primarily to the efforts of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Ebrahim Raisi became the first Iranian president to visit Africa in over a decade when he toured Uganda and Kenya in 2023. Despite the Iranian-backed terror plots his country has suffered, Kenyan President William Ruto dubbed Iran a “critical strategic partner.”⁹

Somalia and Iran began normalizing diplomatic relations last year, and Sudan completed its own rapprochement with Iran in 2023. Iranian weapons, especially drones, appear to have helped the SAF to reclaim territory and assisted the Ethiopian government to prevail

⁵ Joshua Meservey, “Government Buildings in Africa Are a Likely Vector for Chinese Spying,” The Heritage Foundation, May 20, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/government-buildings-africa-are-likely-vector-chinese-spying> [accessed May 10, 2025].

⁶ The four ranks are President, Premier, Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, and Foreign Minister. Data compiled by author from various sources.

⁷ The two are Rwanda and Seychelles. Burundi, Comoros, Eritrea, and South Sudan have signed all 10 of the letters. Data compiled by author.

⁸ “Sudanese diplomat confirms commitment to Russian naval base on Red Sea,” *Sudan Tribune*, June 1, 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article286475/> [accessed May 10, 2025].

⁹ “Iran's president in Kenya and Uganda to deepen ties,” *The Citizen*, July 12, 2023, <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/east-africa-news/iran-s-president-in-kenya-and-uganda-to-deepen-ties-4301232> [accessed May 10, 2025].

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in the recent Tigray war. Earlier this year, Ethiopia's and Iran's police services agreed to cooperate on intelligence sharing and other issues, notwithstanding the 2021 disruption of an Iranian terror plot in Addis Ababa.

Other outside powers are important players as well. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and the UAE have invested heavily in East African sectors ranging from agriculture to mining to renewable energy. In addition to its economic activities, Qatar mediated disputes including between Djibouti and Eritrea, in Sudan, and, currently, between DRC and Rwanda. It also bankrolled Somali politicians and distributed aid in the country through Islamist organizations.

Saudi Arabia is backing the SAF in Sudan and was once interested in building a base in Djibouti.

Turkiye built a military base and its largest embassy in the world in Mogadishu and recently sent advanced UAVs and hundreds of troops to fight al-Shabaab's advances. Turkish companies run Mogadishu seaport and airport, and Ankara recently struck a favorable deal for developing Somalia's oil reserves.

The UAE, meanwhile, has trained troops in Somalia's Puntland region, operated a base in Eritrea during its military operations in Yemen, and expanded Somaliland's Berbera port via a state-owned company. It is also the RSF's primary backer in the Sudanese civil war and has made large loans throughout the region.

This partial survey of outside powers' activities in East Africa demonstrates their understanding of the region's importance. Chinese, Iranian, and Russian actions in particular underscore the risks for the U.S. of not being energetically and wisely engaged.

Recommendations

There are many ways for Washington to ensure Americans benefit from the opportunities in East Africa while protecting against the threats emanating from the region, including the following:

- Create an East Africa strategy that is integrated into a broader Africa and global strategy. The Trump administration should urgently develop a pragmatic, reality-based strategy for the region. What happens there has too many implications for the U.S. to allow American policy to drift. Such a strategy can only be effective if it is plugged into a larger continental strategy, which in turn must be part of a global strategy. It also requires quickly filling the senior Africa-focused positions at the State Department and National Security Council.

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At the heart of a properly formulated East Africa strategy would be commercial engagement. Increased American investment and equitable trade would add to the U.S. economy, draw countries closer to Washington, and help address American critical minerals supply chain problems. Washington should upgrade its abilities to facilitate U.S. business operations in the region, including by streamlining the work of the Development Finance Corporation, the U.S. EXIM Bank, and related organizations.

- Conduct sober assessments of Washington's ability to positively influence issues of democracy and proceed accordingly. For instance, state-building in Somalia is a failed experiment. Clan remains the fundamental ordering principle of Somalia's society, making a strong central government unworkable. Yet Washington has spent over a decade trying to make just such a system work in Mogadishu. Instead, Washington should work directly with those federal member states and other sources of authority that are friendly and have enough legitimacy and competence to degrade al-Shabaab. The U.S. should coordinate with neighboring states that have strong national security interests in Somalia as well.
- Upgrade Washington's abilities to support African government and civic institutions and avoid overreliance on personalities. Institutions are generally stabilizing forces and will often outlast even the longest-serving rulers. Washington should maintain working ties with regional leaders, but overreliance makes the U.S. vulnerable.

Kenya, for instance, is an important country and there are opportunities to work with President Ruto. Yet he was also recently in Beijing proclaiming his commitment to refashioning the global order, a project that is core to the Chinese government's efforts to supplant the U.S. globally.

Uganda is another such case. Its troops are helpfully fighting al-Shabaab, yet President Museveni's son, his heir apparent, is erratic and intemperate, and may have recently participated in the torture of an opposition leader's bodyguard.¹⁰ Washington should balance the risks inherent in working with especially long-term leaders and promote durable state-to-state relations by, for instance, offering more technical trainings for African judiciaries and commercial ministries.

¹⁰ Bobi Wine (@HEBobiwine), "THE STATE OF EDDIE MUTWE. We just returned from Masaka Main Prison, where we checked on our comrades Eddie Mutwe, Achileo Kivumbi, Mugumya Gaddafi, and Wakabi Grace. Eddie Mutwe is alive - that's the only good news...", X, May 7, 2025, 8:04 a.m., <https://x.com/HEBobiwine/status/1920087242871112128> [accessed May 10, 2025].

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- Develop a focus country framework. Given that Washington perennially allocates relatively few resources to its Africa efforts, it should concentrate those resources in countries that have a baseline level of competence, strategic importance, and willingness to work with the U.S. Such countries should receive a full suite of U.S. engagements including high-level diplomatic visits, business delegations with access to U.S. government support, and commercial officers stationed in the embassy.

Tinderbox and Turning Point

Africa seems to forever be at a turning point, yet the current situation in East Africa is undeniably as tense and delicate as it has been for decades. In addition to Sudan, it is plausible that there could soon be two other full-fledged wars in the region, either of which would likely be among the worst in the world.

Yet despite these and other dangers, the region is also one of opportunity and importance for Americans. Seizing opportunity while minimizing risk demands vigorous and sustained U.S. diplomacy. Washington is still perfectly capable of mustering such an effort, but urgency is required.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.