

The U.S. Approach to East Africa and the Horn

Prepared statement by

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Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the complex and challenging set of issues that U.S. policy confronts in the Horn of Africa and East Africa more broadly. I also want to thank the staff that work for the committee and its members; I know from personal experience how much work and thought goes into these hearings at the staff level.

This hearing is certainly timely, as the forces pulling the Horn of Africa apart are gaining strength, and there are very real, imminent threats to stability in several other east African countries. Sudan’s shockingly destructive war shows no signs of ending, and the recent wave of drone attacks on Port Sudan, along with the RSF’s sustained pressure on El Fasher, confirm that it is indeed possible for this terrible situation—the worst humanitarian crisis in the world—to get even worse. Famine on a scale the world has not seen in decades remains not just a possibility, but a likelihood. In at least ten parts of Sudan, famine is happening now. South Sudan is teetering on the brink of a return to all out war, multiple civil conflicts persist in Ethiopia, and Prime Minister’s Abiy’s ambition to regain a presence on the Red Sea has raised tensions with Ethiopia’s neighbors. Somalia continues to struggle with the presence, and in much of the

country, the dominance, of al-Qaeda's largest global affiliate, al-Shabaab.

China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and Iran—all of these states are active in the region, and many are clearly thinking about their relationships in the Horn of Africa through a long-term, strategic lens. They are investing in influence—and because their interests do not always align, sometimes engaging in proxy conflict. There is no better illustration of this dynamic than the crowded field of actors fueling Sudan's conflict. Russia is courting the Sudanese Armed Forces coalition in the hopes of securing a Red Sea Port. The UAE funds and arms the genocidal Rapid Support Forces—presumably partly because of its concerns about the Islamist influences in the SAF coalition, which also gets support from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran.

It's less clear that the United States has a strategic vision for its relationship with the region. Today, the longstanding problems of understaffed embassies and insufficient prioritization of African issues have joined the immediate shock of abrupt changes in foreign assistance and international humanitarian aid delivery to make it very easy for adversaries to paint the United States as uninterested and unreliable. Other anti-American messages capitalize on the fact that the U.S. has been the most powerful country in the world throughout the post-Cold War era, and paint Washington as the enforcer of a painful, unjust status quo—one reason why there is real enthusiasm for the BRICS in the region.

This widespread perception of U.S. disengagement exists despite the fact that it is clear that the United States has vital interests in this part of the world—not least the importance of the free flow of commerce through the Red Sea, including vital energy resources and food supplies. Terrorist organizations with the intent to harm Americans—and a track record of doing so—continue to operate in the region.

Part of the problem is the uncertainty around what the U.S. wants in the region. So what kind of east African region is in U.S. interests? The U.S. would benefit from a region at peace, with capable governments that can be partners in addressing existing and emerging threats. The U.S. would benefit from a region with growing economies that can become trading partners, attractive investment destinations, and potential collaborators in new enterprises—and, crucially, give young people dignified work at home rather than pushing them into mass migration. The U.S. would benefit from a region that is not beholden to U.S. adversaries, or mortgaged to deep-pocketed external actors whose interests do not always align with ours.

To pursue this vision, first, the United States needs to prioritize conflict resolution and conflict prevention. In addition to the truly horrifying human cost, the Horn of Africa's conflicts create opportunities for terrorist organizations and international criminal groups, and we have ample evidence that these conflicts do not stay contained within national borders, but spill over to destabilize neighbors and exacerbate their own fragility. Sudan's conflict has worsened instability in South Sudan and Chad. Somalia's longstanding fragility has profoundly affected the security postures and priorities of its neighbors.

Peacemaking and conflict prevention requires senior attention, diplomatic resources, and strategies that give actors on the ground a stake in maintaining peace, which is why job creation and governance matter so much. It requires awareness of the way that migratory flows and resource competition can ignite precarious situations, and timely, professional efforts to mitigate those types of crises. If all of that sounds costly and labor intensive, the truth is that letting these problems fester is even more expensive. Elsewhere in the Red Sea, we are seeing the cost of failing to address militancy and insecurity. Reports indicate that the current administration's military campaign targeting the Houthis has cost taxpayers over a billion dollars, and there is no reason to believe that the problem is definitively resolved.

Conflict prevention also requires looking over the horizon, and I would be remiss if I did not flag for this committee the extremely troubling uptick in political violence in Uganda and Tanzania as those countries approach elections. Avoiding worst-case scenarios requires attention and deft engagement now.

Second, the United States should avoid an overreliance on personal relationships with any specific regional leaders, both because this entire region is in the midst of a major geopolitical realignment, and because this young, urbanizing part of the world is politically volatile. Deals that benefit only small circle of leaders will cease to advance U.S. interests when that circle is no longer in power. It's absolutely the case that the United States cannot impose its will on other states, and that working closely with regional actors and institutions is necessary. But there can be no delegating responsibility for pursuing U.S. interests to any partner.

This is also why it's important to keep a close eye on internal dynamics in the region's diverse countries, and for the United States to develop strong contacts and relationships with actors outside of government. Leadership changes don't have to upend U.S. strategy if we understand the aspirations and concerns that drive them. If getting things done and protecting our interests requires cooperative action, then it makes sense that we need to understand the priorities and interests of potential partners in full. U.S. relations with Kenya, our closest partner in the region, illustrate the point. The United States has worked closely with President Ruto to deepen commercial and security relations with Kenya, but missed opportunities to align with the Kenyan people, who have made it very clear since that fighting corruption is top priority of theirs. The result of the misalignment is a less appealing investment climate for the U.S., and a weakened Kenyan President assiduously seeking support from China and the Gulf.

Finally, the United States must develop and pursue a Red Sea regional strategy—not a set of a la carte deals—that transcends bureaucratic divisions between the parts of our government that work on Africa and those that work on the Middle East. For several years, I have served with other former U.S. officials on the U.S. Institute of Peace's Red Sea Study Group, which has advocated for this kind of more comprehensive approach to the region. There can be no lasting peace in the Horn without addressing the security concerns and economic incentives that have prompted Gulf actors to fan the flames of conflict. Equally, no peace will be sustainable if it is perceived as a set of deals cooked up in Western and Middle Eastern capitals and imposed on Africans. A successful new security architecture for the region must take all relevant equities into account.