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Thinking state viability through stabilization and integrationism.

The greater Eastern Africa geography is gripped in a convergence of a contemporary Mahan–Mackinder [moment](#). This moment reflects stark competition to construct vertically oriented rails, roads, and pipeline infrastructure with ports on the African seaboard¹. This dynamic underpins an apparent trifurcated power struggle pitting status quo and revisionist states against each other over landlocked states seeking access to the sea. Spawning this competition are material resources, available capital for extraction and building infrastructure alongside strategic and often idiosyncratic imperatives of leaders.

The earlier war between Ethiopia and Eritrea inclined the former to shift its entire export–import traffic to the Djibouti port of [Doralleh](#). Subsequently, Djibouti began to visualize an expansive hinterland it could service across the Central African latitude stretching to the Atlantic seaboard of Senegal. Such imaginary thought is visible in Ethiopia’s [green society transformation strategy](#). This strategy seeks state consolidation through hydro energy driven rural transformation, pharmaceutical production, distance reducing rail networks and energy supply to neighbouring states set within a vision of a regional security coupling strategy. In a parallel development, South Sudan’s decision to seek infrastructure independence from Sudan’s Chinese-owned and built oil pipelines reinforced Kenya’s visualization of the [LAPSSET curving belt](#).² Kenya sought to maximize on LAPSSET and its Standard Gauge Rail (SGR) to ‘capture’ Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, DR Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi down to the [Atlantic port of Duala](#) in Cameroon.

Uganda’s decision to opt for the Hoima–Tanga pipeline–port option in Tanzania raised tensions within the East African community. The same goes for SGR viability questions relative to decisions taken by Rwanda to opt for both the Tanzanian and Kenyan SGR, and Uganda completing either the [Kampala-Malaba or Kampala-Rwanda border sections](#) or both.

¹ Arrival of technology driven distance decay reducing rail infrastructure as postulated by Sir Alford Mackinder, in his 1904 paper “The geographical Pivot of History”. These are converging with control over Sea lines of Communications as advanced by Alfred Thayer Mahan. The cumulative effect is the closing of space in the Horn of Africa.

² See <https://afritek.wordpress.com/2017/07/12/visioning-the-modern-the-challenges-and-risks-surrounding-kenyas-proposed-lamu-port-south-sudan-ethiopia-transport-corridor/> for map of Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopian Transport Corridor (LAPSSET).

Thawing relations between [Ethiopia and Eritrea](#) and the decision by the former to buy shares in the Dubai Ports (DP) World's Berbera Port project saw Djibouti terminate the DP World contract to run the Doraleh port. The latter points to external or foreign interest dynamics that are also visualizing geopolitical thoughts about strategic spaces. Core here are regional Arab states and global powers such as China that are competing for control of or influence over East African ports, their construction or extension. While China seeks distance decay reduction within the broad logic of the *String of Pearls* and now *One Belt One Road* vision (OBOR), Arab states such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia seek to counter [threats from Iran](#) in the region and in Yemen to the east of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

Turning offshore, security and insecurity on land feature alongside swathes of disorder on the [African Indian Ocean](#) board. Responses to contain or restore order at sea affirms the salience of enhanced and even new forms of maritime governance as entry points to state viability discussions. This presupposes leadership's ability to generate new practices for states that conceive of maritime and landward domains as mutually reinforcing for state, community and regional security. To the extent that new practices flounder, sites of resource extraction and vertical infrastructure corridors might well converge into spaces for resistance promoting state and regional viability crisis. Where the same aspects of resource extraction and export corridors serve as platforms for regional and state viability construction, states have to agree to understand their interest in broader terms. They must recognize community and regional interests and subsequently build cooperative structures for distance decay reduction i.e. that distance becomes less of an obstacle for development and its underlying elements. In this vein insecurity reducing and economically driven micro and macro infrastructures complemented by shared management hold the potential to converge and shape shared corridors of growth and security cooperation for communities, states and the wider East African region. This developmental dynamic has the potential for state viability, consolidation, and evolution of new forms of governance that recognises how well-governed sea and landward spaces enhance developmental initiatives.

Critical geopolitical dynamics in the East Africa region are deeply rooted in a constrained state consolidation process. Resistance efforts towards vertical infrastructure and resource extraction tie in with elite corruption, marginalization and exclusion. Elitist exploitation underpins networked organized crime, internally and regionally enabled resistance networks, and communities' contestation of state legitimacy. Competition for control and dominance of ports (by inference vertical infrastructure) stimulate power struggles rooted in a desire to gain control over landlocked and external actors seeking access to resources while denying entry by others. The underlying 'winner takes it all' logic continues to incline actors to pursue limited as opposed to absolute gains.

Looking towards the future, states of East Africa are obliged to evolve policy mechanisms that transcend limited gains, encourage mutual development of shared economic corridors that connect to stable maritime outlets – ports as well as ocean landscapes. The operationalization of these frameworks and the securitization dividend of growing and integrated infrastructure within development corridors could be regional in kind and housed by economic architectures such as the East Africa Community and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development.

Suggested further reading:

Katumanga M. Security Concerns and lateral pressures as a basis for enhanced Integration: The case for North Western Kenya. In A. Mohiddin (Ed). 2005. Deepening Regional Integration of the East African Community. DPMF Book Series, Addis Ababa.

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