2. Exploring the Geopolitical Configurations of Eastern Africa: FOIP and External Geopolitical Theories for Better Harmonization

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Abstract

This chapter examines the geopolitical positioning of Eastern Africa through the lens of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework and classical geopolitical theories that originate outside Africa. It argues that FOIP is rooted in the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitical thought, particularly its emphasis on maritime power, sea-lane security, and strategic access points linking oceans and continents. From this perspective, Eastern Africa—especially the Horn of Africa—emerges as a critical but underexamined boundary region of the Indo-Pacific. The chapter situates FOIP within the broader contrast between the Anglo-American and Continental traditions of geopolitics. While the Continental tradition emphasizes territorially bounded zones dominated by regional hegemons, Eastern Africa lacks the historical unity and hegemonic structure necessary for such a framework. Applying this framework to Africa, the chapter highlights the strategic significance of the Horn of Africa as a "bridgehead" connecting the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the African interior. Drawing on historical analysis, it traces the Somali Peninsula's enduring geopolitical importance from ancient trading empires through colonialism, the Cold War, and contemporary great-power competition. The persistence of external military and economic presence underscores the region's continuing global relevance. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the fundamentally external nature of classical geopolitical theories when applied to Africa. While such theories help explain the behavior of external actors, they have intrinsic limitations in capturing African realities. The author calls for the harmonization of external geopolitical perspectives with African-centered insights, urging both external actors and African societies to engage

collaboratively, with Africans taking greater initiative in shaping this interaction.

Keywords: Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Anglo-American Geopolitical Tradition, Horn of Africa (Somali Peninsula), Maritime Power and Sea-Lane Security, External Geopolitical Perspectives and Harmonization

1.   Introduction

Japan's policy engagement with East Africa is shaped by its broader strategic orientation under the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" framework. From the FOIP perspective, East Africa, situated on the edge of the Indian Ocean, forms a critical geographic boundary of this conceptual region. Despite its strategic relevance, East Africa has received comparatively limited attention in both policy and academic discussions. While Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East command greater economic weight, this does not diminish the importance or potential of East Africa. On the contrary, the region's future prospects for development are strong, and its significance deserves fuller recognition in academic discourse.

This chapter claims that the basic orientation of FOIP is line with the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitical theory. It suggests that by studying the mode of the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitics, we can better understand the patterns of FOIP even in the world of the 21st century. This observation illustrates the contrast between the Anglo-American and the Continental traditions of geopolitical theory. They are competing over many parts in the world including the African continent or Eastern Africa in particular.

This chapter however suggests that such traditional theories of geopolitics are all external in the eyes of Africans. Even if external theories are not necessarily destined to be interventional and may be even convenient in explaining the attitudes of outsiders, it is apparent that such external perspectives must have fundamental limits in grasping the intrinsic nature of African nations and

communities. This chapter thus suggests that while African-oriented discussions of geopolitics are highly welcome, what is imperatively needed now is to harmonize external perspectives based on geopolitical theories and African-oriented deep insights into African societies and communities.

2. What is FOIP?

The concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) has emerged as a cornerstone of regional and global strategy, particularly for countries seeking to uphold international norms, promote connectivity, and maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Originally proposed by Japan, FOIP has since evolved into a shared vision among like-minded countries, including the United States, Australia, India, and African nations.

The roots of FOIP can be traced back to 2007, when then–Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe introduced the idea of the "Confluence of the Two Seas" in a speech to the Indian Parliament, referring to the strategic linkage between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.[1] However, it was not until 2016 that Japan officially articulated FOIP as a coherent diplomatic and strategic framework.[2] The core idea is to ensure that the vast Indo-Pacific region remains a space that is free, open, inclusive, and governed by the rule of law.

FOIP promotes several fundamental principles: the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, economic prosperity through connectivity, and respect for sovereignty. Japan's FOIP vision rests on three main pillars: (1) the promotion and establishment of the rule of law and freedom of navigation; (2) the pursuit of economic prosperity through enhanced

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[1] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "'Confluence of the Two Seas': Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India", August 22, 2007, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[2] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", October 16, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

connectivity and infrastructure development; and (3) the commitment to peace and stability through capacity building and security cooperation with regional partners.

One of the most prominent multilateral platforms aligned with FOIP is the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), comprising Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. The Quad plays a central role in advancing FOIP goals by coordinating efforts on maritime security, infrastructure development, cyber resilience, and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, FOIP maintains a degree of flexibility to accommodate the diverse interests of ASEAN member states and emphasizes alignment with the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), which similarly upholds inclusiveness and non-alignment.

In 2023, Japan updated its FOIP strategy to emphasize "principles for peace and rules for prosperity," placing greater attention on development cooperation, digital transformation, and the promotion of human security. This reflects Japan's effort to make FOIP not merely a geopolitical counterbalance to China's growing influence, but also a constructive vision for inclusive regional development.

However, FOIP faces challenges in gaining widespread consensus across the Indo-Pacific. While some countries see it as a necessary response to assertive behaviors in the South and East China Seas, others are wary of its potential to be interpreted as a containment strategy against China. Striking a balance between strategic deterrence and inclusive cooperation remains a key test for the future of FOIP.

3. The Perspective of Geopolitical Theory

3-1 The "Anglo-American" Geopolitical Theory

In relation to the vision of FOIP, it is instructive to introduce the perspective of the "two traditions of geopolitical theory." [3] One of these is the "Anglo-American Tradition" of geopolitical thought, which is

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[3] Hideaki Shinoda, *Confronting Theories of Geopolitics* (Springer, forthcoming [2026])

characterized by a dichotomous worldview that distinguishes between "sea power" and "land power," with particular emphasis on the concept of the "Heartland." The other is the "Continental Tradition" of geopolitical theory, which emphasizes a multipolar world composed of distinct "zones," each dominated by a regional hegemon. These two traditions present fundamentally different strategic perspectives and often stand in contrast to each other.

At present, it is difficult to identify a clearly defined geopolitical "zone" in East Africa, making the application of the Continental Tradition less applicable to the region. East Africa lacks both a strong historical unity and a dominant regional hegemon. It may be regarded as a sub-regional area within the broader African continent, but such classification stems more from an institutional perspective than from the existence of a substantively coherent geopolitical zone. Sub-regional organizations in East Africa are indeed active in promoting regional cooperation, but they do not necessarily represent a unified geopolitical entity that pre-exists these institutional frameworks.

Halford Mackinder, the most influential figure in the development of geopolitics and the founding theorist of the Anglo-American Tradition, is renowned for his conceptualization of the "Heartland" at the center of the Eurasian continent.[4] In the 19th century, European international politics were largely guided by the idea of a balance of power among sovereign and relatively equal great powers.

Mackinder, however, introduced a novel viewpoint by asserting that geographical conditions imbue political communities with distinct characteristics. The Heartland, in Mackinder's theory, was uniquely protected from northern invasion by the uninhabitable Arctic, yet also disadvantaged by its lack of navigable rivers and year-round ice-free ports. Even its coastal areas faced harsh climates that rendered ports unusable for much of the year. As a result, the Heartland remained landlocked and geographically isolated from maritime trade routes, giving rise to distinct geopolitical dynamics.

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[4] Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, 1904, vol. 23, pp. 421-37, available in Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (Washington, DC: National Defence University Press, 1996), pp. 175-194.

Mackinder argued that political entities in the Heartland would be compelled to overcome these geographical limitations. Should such a land power strengthen its military capabilities, it would likely pursue southward expansion. This inward-to-outward dynamic, he believed, would shape not only the political fate of Eurasia but potentially that of the world. Russia's historical southward expansion served, in Mackinder's view, as a prime example of this geographic imperative—what he famously termed the "Geographical Pivot."

Mackinder further contrasted land power, exemplified by Heartland states, with sea power, embodied by island nations such as the United Kingdom and Japan. While land powers struggle for maritime access, sea powers inherently possess such access and only need to secure continental port points to project influence inland. When expanding land powers threaten these coastal access points, sea powers perceive this as a strategic threat and respond with containment measures.

To articulate this strategic geography, Mackinder introduced the concepts of the Heartland, Land Power, Sea Power, Inner Crescent, Outer Crescent, and Bridgeheads. The Outer Crescent included key maritime nations like the UK, the United States, Japan, Canada, and Australia—states firmly aligned with the logic of sea power. In contrast, the Inner Crescent—encompassing regions such as the Indian subcontinent and the Korean Peninsula—occupied a more ambiguous role. These areas, later termed "amphibious zones," became critical sites of competition between land and sea powers.

It should now be evident that the foundational logic of the FOIP vision aligns closely with Mackinder's geopolitical worldview—what this chapter refers to as the "Anglo-American Tradition" of geopolitical theory. FOIP's foundation lies in a network of maritime powers—both island and coastal states—working together to uphold the freedom of the seas and maintain continental access by surrounding and counterbalancing land power expansion.

In the case of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the expansion is not necessarily southward, as in the classical Heartland model, but it similarly aims to extend influence across both the continental "Silk Roads" and the maritime "Silk Road" routes. The BRI of China spans the periphery of the Eurasian

continent—corresponding to Mackinder's Inner Crescent, or what Nicholas Spykman later conceptualized as the "Rimland."[5]

3-2 The Anglo-American Geopolitical Theory and the African Continent

The perspective of the Anglo-American Tradition of geopolitical theory originally connected itself with the African continent through the lenses of Southern Africa, not East Africa. Mackinder, at the beginning of the 20th century when the British Empire still prevailed in the world, also observed that South Africa is a de-facto sea power. He observed what America, Australia and Trans-Saharan Africa are to "Euro-Asia" is similar to what Britain and Scandinavia were to Europe in the earlier time. He stated in 1904 that "Britain, Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and Japan are now a ring of outer and insular bases for sea-power and commerce, inaccessible to the land-power of Euro-Asia."[6]

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[5] Mackinder's theory was further developed during World War II by American strategist Nicholas Spykman. Spykman inherited the Land Power vs. Sea Power dichotomy while also correcting the Eurocentric bias in Mackinder's theory. He emphasized the strategic importance of what he termed the "Rimland," a zone corresponding to Mackinder's Inner Crescent but stretching across the entire Eurasian periphery. Spykman argued that the fate of the "World Island" (Eurasia) would be determined not by the Heartland but by control over the Rimland. See Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944); and Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942).

[6] Halford Mackinder, "Geographical Pivot of History" (1904) in Mackinder, op. cit., p. 188.
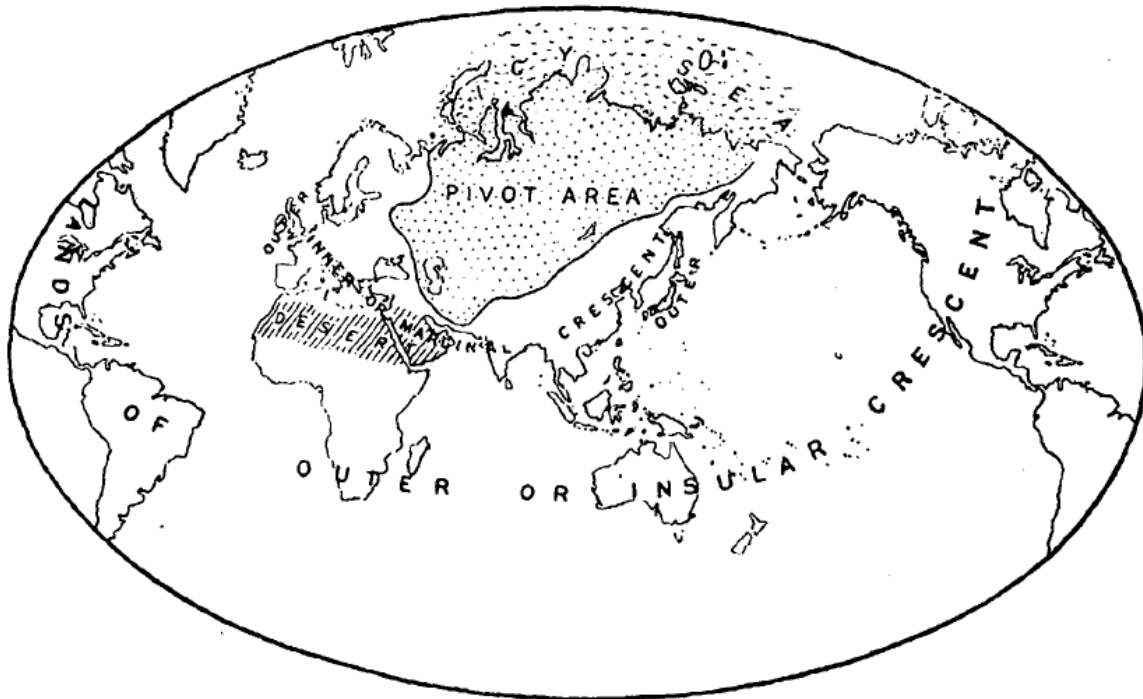
Fig. 5. The Natural Seats of Power. Pivot area: wholly continental; Outer crescent: wholly oceanic; Inner crescent: partly continental, partly oceanic.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of the contemporary world, it is essential to critically examine the applicability of the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitical theory to East Africa. Notably, this tradition forms the theoretical foundation of the FOIP vision, which conceptualizes a strategic network of sea powers—comprising island and coastal states—across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. What distinguishes East Africa geographically from the standpoint of this tradition is the unique shape of the Horn of Africa, which juts sharply into the Indian Ocean. Together with the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa defines the narrow maritime corridor of the Gulf of Aden leading into the Red Sea. In the Anglo-American geopolitical framework, such peninsulas are referred to as "bridgeheads"—strategic access points that allow sea powers to project influence onto continental landmasses.

Mackinder is best known for his conceptualization of the "Heartland" in the center of the Eurasian continent. This region, surrounded by a vast belt of forests and shielded by the uninhabitable Arctic to the north, lacks major rivers leading to the oceans and remains largely cut off from maritime access. Less well known, however, is Mackinder's identification of a "Southern Heartland" in sub-Saharan Africa. He wrote: "We may, therefore, regard the interior of Africa south of the Sahara as a

second Heartland. Let us speak of it as the Southern Heartland, in contra-distinction to the Northern Heartland of Asia and Europe. Notwithstanding their very different latitudes the two Heartlands present other striking similarities."

According to Mackinder: "The Southern Heartland also has its wide open grasslands, which in the Sudan gradually increase in fertility from the edge of the Sahara towards the tropical forest of the Guinea Coast and the Congo. The forests do not spread completely across to the Indian Oceans but leave a belt of grassy upland which connects the grasslands of the Sudan with those of South Africa, and this immense, open ground, thus continuous from the Sudan to the Cape Veldt, is the home of the antelopes, zebras, and other large hoofed game, which correspond to the wild horses and wild asses of the Northern Heartland" [7]

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[7] Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideas and Reality* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1919), p. 58-59.
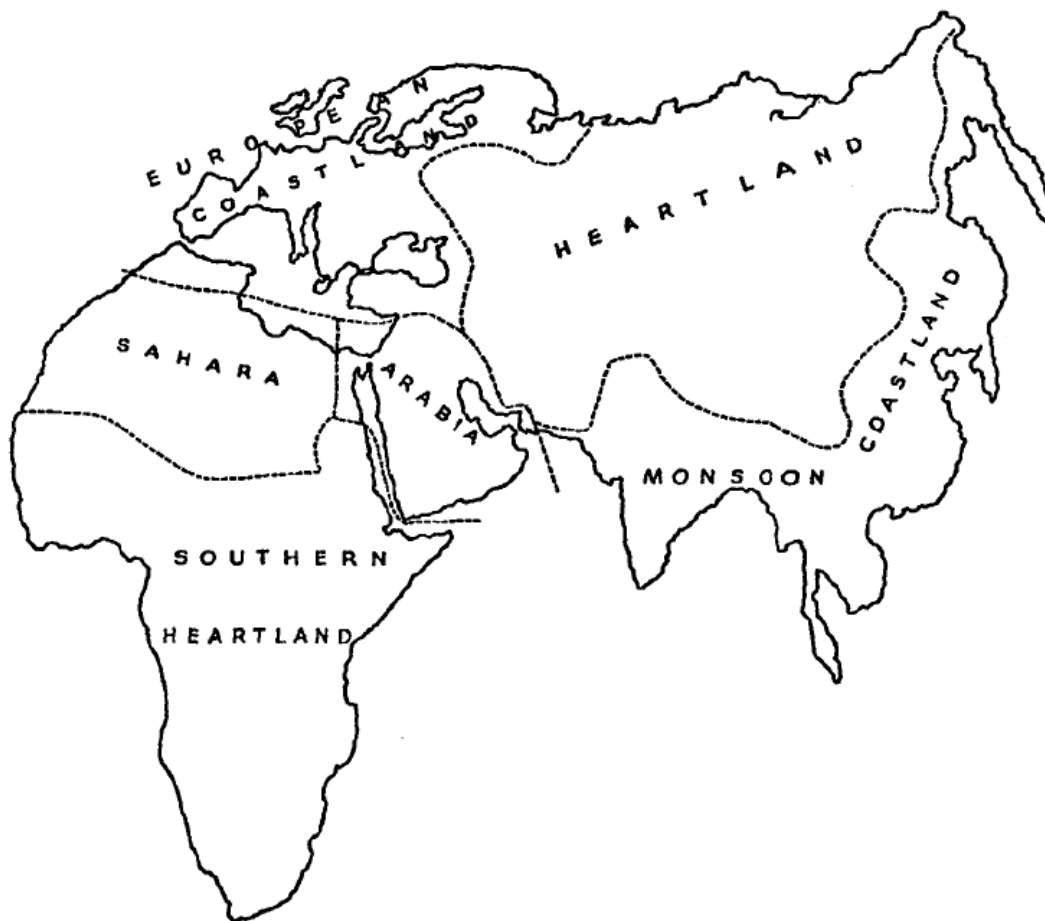
Fig. 16.-The world Island, divided into six natural regions. (Equal areas projection)

This observation relates to the geopolitical functions of the Red Sea. According to Mackinder, what "distinguishes Arabia both from the Heartland and the Sahara is the fact that it is traversed by three great waterways in connection with the ocean---the Nile, the Red Sea, and the Euphrates and Persian Gulf…. It follows from the foregoing description that the Heartland, Arabia, and the Sahara together constitute a broad, curving belt inaccessible to seafaring people, except by the three Arabian waterways. This belt extends completely across the great continent from the Arctic to the Atlantic shores."[8] The Suez Canal radically altered this geographical condition. While Mackinder remained skeptical of the canal's effectiveness in 1904—citing that "persistent north winds of the trade-wind current blow down

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[8] *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.

the northern end of the Red Sea, which is beset with rocks, and sailing ships do not willingly attempt the northward voyage to the Canal, which would therefore have been relatively useless but for steam navigation"—his concerns about the difficulty of navigation in the Red Sea have since become obsolete. Today, the Horn of Africa, as the southern gateway to the Red Sea, has emerged as a strategically important point in geopolitics. Naturally, following Mackinder's observations, we may regard Eastern Africa as a critical gateway on the route that cuts across the center of the "World Island"—comprising the Eurasian and African continents—and connects to the traditionally defined "Southern Heartland" within Africa.

Fig. 17.—The southern Heartland. = River falls. ← Lines of Arab invasion.

3-3 The Dynamism of the Somali Peninsula (Horn of Africa)

Let us now turn more specifically to the countries in Eastern Africa. The outstanding geographical nature of the region is the existence of the Somali Peninsula or the Horn of Africa.[9] The Somali Peninsula has long served as a crossroads of civilizations, empires, and global interests, owing to its proximity to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. Its history stretches back to antiquity, beginning with the Kingdom of D ʿ mt (circa 10th–5th century BCE), followed by the Kingdom of Aksum (circa 1st–7th century CE). Aksum controlled key Red Sea ports, minted its own currency, and was one of the first empires to officially adopt Christianity. The decline of Aksum in the 7th century—partly due to the rise of Islamic powers in Arabia—marked a shift in regional trade routes and geopolitical influence.

From the 13th century onward, the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia claimed descent from the biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Meanwhile, along the Somali coast, Islamic city-states such as Zeila and Mogadishu flourished as commercial and religious centers, integrated into the wider Indian Ocean trading network. Conflicts between Christian highland Ethiopia and Muslim sultanates— such as the Adal Sultanate—defined much of the region's political landscape during this period.

In the late 19th century, the Somali Peninsula became a focal point of European imperialism. Italy colonized Eritrea and parts of Somalia, France claimed Djibouti (then French Somaliland), and Britain established a protectorate over northern Somalia. Ethiopia, under Emperor Menelik II, notably resisted colonization, defeating Italian forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Ethiopia thus remained independent, becoming a powerful symbol of African resistance to imperial rule, although it was briefly occupied by Fascist Italy from 1936 to 1941.

Following World War II, the wave of decolonization swept through the region. Somalia gained independence in 1960, while Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia before launching a 30-year war for

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[9] While the phrase, "the Somali Peninsula," is more widely used, this chapter uses the phrase, "the Somali Peninsula", as "the Somali Peninsula" is linked with the colonial history and "the Somali Peninsula" is more neutral.

independence, ultimately succeeding in 1993. During the Cold War, the Horn emerged as a major geopolitical battleground, with both the United States and the Soviet Union supporting rival regimes. In the early Cold War period, Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie was a close ally of the United States. It received substantial U.S. military and development assistance, including the establishment of key intelligence facilities.

However, this alliance dramatically shifted after the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, which overthrew the monarchy and brought the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, to power. Ethiopia then aligned with the Soviet Union, receiving massive military assistance, advisors, and arms. Conversely, Somalia—initially aligned with the Soviet Union under the military regime of Siad Barre—reversed course after the 1977–78 Ogaden War. Somalia had invaded Ethiopia's Ogaden region in an attempt to unify Somali-inhabited areas, but when the Soviets chose to back Ethiopia, Somalia expelled Soviet advisors and turned to the United States for support. With Soviet and Cuban assistance, Ethiopia repelled the Somali invasion, dramatically reshaping regional power dynamics.

Meanwhile, Eritrea's struggle for independence from Ethiopia—which began prior to the Cold War—persisted throughout the era, with various factions receiving external support. By the late 1980s, Cold War patronage had begun to wane as the Soviet Union weakened. Ethiopia's Marxist regime ultimately collapsed in 1991, ending the Derg era and ushering in a new geopolitical chapter for the Horn.

The Somali Peninsula's geopolitical importance made it a persistent hotspot of conflict and competition before, during, and after the Cold War. The rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union over the region illustrates how both superpowers viewed its strategic significance. That significance remains today—arguably even more so—as global powers such as China, the United States, Turkey, European and Gulf states establish military and economic footholds, particularly in Djibouti, which now hosts multiple foreign military bases.[10]

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[10] On 26 December 2025, Israel recognized Somaliland as an independent state. This bold move ushered in the furious reactions from many countries. The author of this chapter cannot afford to

4. Concluding Remarks: Reflections on External Nature of the Geopolitical Theory

The geopolitical theories discussed in this chapter are all rooted in the intellectual history of Eurocentric international relations. Perspectives derived from such theories are inherently external, and there are clear limitations to these outsider viewpoints. African-oriented geopolitical theories remain underdeveloped and are therefore still very much awaited.

At the same time, it is also true that external powers have long viewed Africa through such external perspectives and have, in practice, exerted significant influence on African politics. Historically, European powers were colonizing Africa at the very moment they were developing and debating their geopolitical theories. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of imperial Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, when Japan invaded parts of Asia while selectively adopting and shifting among geopolitical theories that suited its strategic interests.

What is required today is the harmonization of interests between external actors—who often behave in accordance with particular geopolitical theories—and Africans who live in and actively develop African societies, as well as enhanced collaboration between them. External actors need to recognize and articulate their own interests without imposing them, in order to engage more effectively with African partners. At the same time, Africans should be able to discern the patterns of behavior of external actors so as to take the initiative in pursuing such harmonization.

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analyze the details of this action, it can be said that the move may constitute a penetration of the Somali Peninsula by an external force in line with the logic of the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitical theory.