



A Critical Appraisal of Realist International Relations Concepts in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf Relations: The state, power, and agency

Uma avaliação crítica dos conceitos realistas de Relações Internacionais nas relações entre o Corno de África e o Golfo Pérsico: Estado, poder e agência

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**A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF REALIST INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS CONCEPTS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA-PERSIAN
GULF RELATIONS: THE STATE, POWER, AND AGENCY**

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A critical appraisal of realist International Relations concepts in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations: The state, power, and agency

International Relations literature (re)produces principally “realist” depictions of relations between the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf. It portrays states as monolithic actors and the Persian Gulf countries as superior according to a state-centric conception of power and fails to recognize the agency of various African state and non-state actors and understand power in their external relations. This article discusses caveats of the key concepts of the realist approach and argues that it provides an inadequate analytical frame when applied to the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations. The article calls for a broader approach that enables a better understanding of multiple actors that engage in international relations, enabling a more accurate analysis that helps to improve both theory and practice.

Keywords: international relations, realism, Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations, state and non-state actors, power, agency

Uma avaliação crítica dos conceitos realistas de Relações Internacionais nas relações entre o Corno de África e o Golfo Pérsico: Estado, poder e agência

A literatura de Relações Internacionais (re)produz principalmente representações “realistas” das relações entre o Corno de África e o Golfo Pérsico. Retrata os Estados como atores monolíticos e os países do Golfo Pérsico como superiores de acordo com uma concepção de poder centrada no Estado que não reconhece a agência de vários atores estatais e não estatais africanos. Este artigo discute ressalvas dos conceitos-chave da abordagem realista e argumenta que ela fornece uma estrutura analítica inadequada quando aplicada às relações entre o Corno de África e o Golfo Pérsico. O artigo clama por uma abordagem mais ampla que possibilite uma melhor compreensão dos múltiplos atores que se envolvem nas relações internacionais, permitindo uma análise mais precisa que ajude a melhorar tanto a teoria como a prática.

Palavras-chave: relações internacionais, realismo, relações Corno de África-Golfo Pérsico, atores estatais e não estatais, poder, agência

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Relations between the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Persian Gulf are millennial and multi-dimensional. Cultural, economic, and political ideas and influences have passed from one territory to the other for thousands of years. As part of this interaction, political, economic, and social entities, groups, and individuals in the Horn of Africa have maintained relations with their counterparts in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. Historically, merchants, pilgrims, and migrants established and maintained interconnections across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which bridged the two territories and allowed empires on both sides to exert their power over the relatively narrow bodies of water. Notably, political entities, such as the Empire of Aksum (Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2012) and the Ottoman Empire (Özbaran, 1994), and Somali city-states active in the maritime space (Alpers, 2009; Lewis, 1999), established expansive trade networks that facilitated the spread of ideas and influences.

Countries in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf, Ethiopia being a notable exception, gained independence relatively recently. Therefore, their contemporary relations were established largely in the second half of the 20th century. In the International Relations literature, which thrived in the context of the Cold War, the interaction of actors between the two areas came to be viewed mainly through the discipline's dominant, realist, lens as monolithic inter-state engagements. From the 1970s onwards, International Relations analysts have systematically deemed states in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf as powerful and dominant in their relations with their Horn of Africa counterparts (Aliboni, 1985; Cannon & Donelli, 2019). Adopting this perspective followed realism's appeal and consideration as the International Relations discipline's most significant theoretical strand.

By greatly contributing to the relatively recent development of International Relations as an academic discipline, realism's "fathers", including Reinhold Niebuhr, E. H. Carr, and Hans Morgenthau, came from the global West and were in most cases based in the United States (US). The scholars' particular interpretations of events and processes in state formation and behavior, international political history, and world politics, from the perspective of the perceived supremacy of the Westphalian nation-state and the Christian religious tradition, were used to buttress the importance of what they considered the "realist" analysis of International Relations. In the context of the consolidation of the US hegemony after World War II, realism's dominance became apparent in subfields of International Relations, especially in security and strategic studies (Buzan, 1983, 1996; Klein, 1994; Walt, 1991). These subfields have been significant in the International Relations analysis of the Middle East and have contributed to the

projection of realist theoretical and analytical frames as most representative of reality. The inquiry of the relations often described as “Arab-African” has been an extension of the already established realist epistemology, as shown by the focus on monolithic inter-state relations and understanding relative power as asymmetric from the perspective of what is deemed as the more powerful, or capable, actor. This Western-centric view of state and power based on the view of the state as a unitary actor fits Middle East-Africa relations uncomfortably. Realists’ insistence on the monolithic conceptualization of the state and relative power in these relations has excluded non-Western perspectives on the theory’s two key concepts and ignored the role of various important state and non-state actors. This significantly diminishes its explanatory power.

The dominance of realism owes to its attractiveness as a preferred theoretical frame for inter-state relations among a large number of scholars within the International Relations discipline. This is particularly the case for those who engage in strategic and security analysis of global great power politics and regional affairs in the Middle East. In addition, its emphasis on states as unitary actors maintains a focus on agglomerated coercive and economic power in inter-state relations. Realism has then become the principal framework for interpreting Arab-African relations from the perspective of what are deemed as more powerful states. The relations between the seemingly rich and powerful countries of the Persian Gulf and their poor and weak counterparts in the Horn of Africa are seen to be dictated by the former mainly through their economic power. However, this state-centric and one-sided view leads to the misrepresentation of interactions between actors from the two territories because it sees them simply as asymmetric and always heavily tilted towards the Persian Gulf actors due to their immense financial resources. Yet, this assessment insists on the idea of states as unitary actors and the conceptualization of power based on a particular view of their relative resources and capabilities. It, however, fails to consider the different types and nature of states and distinct configurations of power as in the case of the Africa-Middle East relations.

This article questions the prevailing realist conceptualization of state and power in the relations between the countries in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf. It shows that simplifying reality by subscribing to the realist assumption of deeming states as unitary actors undermines the understanding of the complexity of these relations. By equating African and Middle Eastern states to their Western counterparts able to systematically monopolize foreign relations and control most important external linkages, the monolithic realist analysis misinterprets these states and is unable to account for the complexity of their foreign

relations, particularly by disregarding the often autonomous agency of significant sub-state and non-state actors. Therefore, such analyses are likely to lead to inaccurate or outright erroneous findings that may affect both strategy and practice. The article further explains that the analysis of the relations between the countries in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf cannot be reduced to blanket assumptions about states and power between them, but requires a nuanced understanding that accounts for the agency of various state, sub-state, and non-state actors.

Western states have the capacity to monopolize their foreign relations, but the realist interpretations assuming that in the conditions of state weakness, fragility, and fragmentation of state power there is a fully centralized monopoly and control of foreign relations is unrealistic. Ignorance of this reality and the significance of multiple actors, including powerful individuals, sub-state administrations and bureaucracies, organizations and businesses, opposition formations and various societal groups, and their agency contributing to the inter-state relations in the conditions of state weakness leads to a flawed basis for the analysis. State-centric realist interpretations exclude important societal actors that engage in foreign affairs and fail to account for the real-life consequences of their actions that may heavily affect relations between states. Critical perspectives in International Relations, such as critical security studies, which argue against state-centric approaches to security analysis, seek to deal with this issue, but they tend to concentrate on the discipline's big questions (as defined in the West) and not on relations between small and middle powers as is the case of the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations.

There has been an increasing amount of International Relations literature emanating from the global South. Most pertinent to the argumentation of this article are relatively recent works emerging from Africa that have sought to remedy the continent's persisting challenge to the International Relations theory (Dunn & Shaw, 2001). However, rather than answering some of the big questions within the discipline and providing altogether new theoretical perspectives, they have mainly focused on issues of regionalism (e.g. pan-Africanism) and actorness (Brown & Harman, 2013; Chipaike & Knowledge, 2018; Coleman & Tieku, 2018; Murithi, 2013). The journal *Africa Spectrum's* Special issue *Exploring Africa's Agency in International Politics* edited by Amanda Coffie and Lembe Tiky is among the most recent efforts to "renew a call for the development of IR theories, concepts, and methods that reflect Global Southern and African experiences, ideas, institutions, actors and processes" (Coffie & Tiky, 2021, p. 1). Yet, notably, none of

these works systematically addresses the shortcomings of the main components of the realist paradigm in their application to African states' international affairs.

This article begins with a brief theoretical discussion engaging crucial concepts in the International Relations discipline, namely the state and power, which are also some of the realist perspective's main tenets in its interpretation of the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations. By focusing on the two concepts, the article shows that the epistemological foundations in International Relations, based on a Western-centric paradigm, have led to insensitivity toward understanding the type and nature of non-Western states and marginalization of distinct views on international and domestic power. Consequently, classical realism, a proto theory in International Relations that emerged as a framework to interpret foreign relations of Western (nation-)states, is unable to fully grasp external linkages of non-Western states and non-state actors. Second, the article debates the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations, which are commonly analyzed from strategic and security studies perspectives. It highlights some of their theoretically relevant aspects that the dominant realist narratives based on a narrow conception of the state and power are not equipped to fathom. The discussion concludes by calling for more consideration of the pluralistic political, economic, and social landscape in the analysis of non-Western states and power in International Relations to overcome simplistic analysis, inaccurate and potentially erroneous findings, and consequent inadequate or inappropriate recommendations for policy and practice. It recognizes that the International Relations literature emerging in the global South is growing and engages some relevant contributions emanating from Africa.

Theoretical considerations: The state and power

The state as a unitary actor

In the International Relations discipline, and particularly in its dominant realist strand, the concepts of state and power are based on a view that emerged in the global West. From their perspective, the "fathers" of realism consider the state as a self-interested Western-type monolithic and unitary actor in the anarchic surroundings of international politics. Seeking to assert their view, these scholars defended their position in the 1930s and 1940s in the so-called "first debate" against the idealist (liberalist) interpretation which had gained currency during the inter-war period. However, rather than a debate, the exchange should be described as a politically charged intellectual competition in which both sides irrevocably defended their view (Ashworth, 2002; Wilson, 1998). Reinhold Niebuhr's

works (1940, 1953), for example, epitomized the Western Christian theological and moral foundations of interpreting politics and power in international affairs from what the authors themselves considered a “realist” perspective. E. H. Carr, one of the leading scholars during the early days of the International Relations discipline, considered that the collapse of the so-called idealist theoretical, political, and diplomatic position at the onset of World War II brought about a crisis in the theory and practice of international politics (Carr, 1939, p. 62). This observation seems to have been accurate in the context of international politics leading to World War II.

Consequently, defenders of the so-called realist view of international politics declared victory. An influential author, Hans J. Morgenthau, who was a dominant figure in the school of classical realism, maintained in his seminal work *Politics among Nations* (1948) that the international system was based on anarchic power competition among nations and emphasized the importance of nations’ struggle for superiority in terms of relative power towards their counterparts. By subscribing to the idea of Western-type (nation-)states as the most advanced polities and dominant units in international politics (Carr, 1939, pp. 226-230), the classical realist position buttresses the understanding of states as unitary actors whose interests and behavior could be determined through an assumed monopoly of decision-making and practice of external affairs. In his influential work *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Kenneth Waltz established a systemic view of international politics known as neorealism, or structural realism, and continued to defend monolithic states as the constituent and most important units of the international system. Another variant, neoclassical realism, further asserts the importance of particularly the powerful states in the international system, although it recognizes the existence of non-state actors as well (Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998).

Classical realism’s state-centric view has continued to feature strongly in security and strategic studies. In the last four decades both strands within the International Relations discipline have attracted significant critical interpretations calling for more nuanced approaches (Booth, 1991a, 1991b; Buzan, 1983; Gray, 2018; Luttwak, 1987), but, although widely criticized (Kapstein, 1995; Lebow, 1994), realism has continued to maintain a strong position in the mainstream literature and various scholars expect it to remain as a major theoretical frame to understand international politics (Buzan, 1996; Mearsheimer, 2019).

Realism, presenting the internally highly authoritative and legitimate (nation-)states as the strongest units of the anarchic international system, is based on an interpretation of the formational experience of the Westphalian state proto-

type in Europe. Drawing on a particular reading of the European experience, the state is seen as a product of coercion, war, and forced homogenization into a nation-state (Tilly, 1990), which then, in the absence of a higher authority, engages in competition for power to secure its survival in the state-based but an anarchic international system (Morgenthau, 1948). War features strongly in this competition for survival and forms therefore a central part of both internal evolution and external affairs of states (Buzan, 1996, p. 60). In this narrative state strength and power become associated with its internal and external coercive capacity and ability to assert authority. When a state enjoys wide legitimacy and authority among its people, the purest form being a nation-state, it is considered strong. Sociologist historians would therefore associate the making of strong, centralized, nation-states with wars that produced nation-based territorial units. In its assumption that states are unitary actors in international affairs, realism draws heavily on historical sociology because as part of centralizing power, governments, at least in the so-called “strong” states, are considered to have developed a capacity to monopolize their foreign affairs. As a result, states would constitute the only unitary and uniform authority conducting significant foreign relations.

Today, the epistemological and theoretical constructions of the understanding of states as the principal monolithic actors in international affairs still carry significant explanatory weight among those subscribing to a realist and states-based systemic view in the International Relations discipline. Relations between states, especially in strategic and security studies that represent the realist current, are often depicted as the most important form of international interaction. This implies that particularly the realists continue to understand mainstream international relations as those based on the conceptualization of the state as strong, powerful, and unitary (nation-state).

However, although this analytical frame persists as one of the dominant perspectives in the discipline, it appears less capable of grasping the complexity of external affairs of other types of states. This is especially the case with the so-called “weak” or “fragile” polities, which are often (post-)colonial multi-ethnic or multi-national creations located in the global South. As a result, although the realist view may claim significant accuracy when observing international relations among the so-called strong (nation-)states where foreign policy is highly centralized and monopolized by the governing forces and institutions, as in the case of great and middle powers in the global West, its explanatory power with-

¹ The term “weak state” emerged in the late 1980s in the West and by early 1990s was joined by the term “fragile state”, which both formed part of an attempt to explain the perceived dysfunctionality of states in the global South and the associated political instability, economic malaise, and armed conflict. See more e.g. Migdal (1988) and Zartman (1995).

ers when applied to the weak (or fragile) non-Western states where governments exercise no such monopoly and various state and societal actors engage in significant foreign relations and connections autonomously. This exposes some of the significant limits of the realist interpretations when observing and analyzing the foreign relations of the latter type of states.

Yet, skeptical approaches, such as various schools of critical security studies (Booth, 1991a, 1991b; Buzan, 1983; Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Jones, 1999), have sought to remedy what they perceive as distorting state centrism in mainstream International Relations. Despite bringing to the fore multiple actors in security affairs, they have tended to focus on the classic Western “big questions” in the discipline and neglected in-depth studies of external relations from the perspective of the weak (or fragile) states in the global South although nuanced empirical observation of these types of states tells a different story from that promoted by classical realism. Undoubtedly some of the tenets of the realist theory, such as the state as an important player, seem plausible in many non-Western cases, but the insistence on the significance of the state as a unitary actor in foreign relations appears inaccurate in light of empirical evidence. While in several cases the state has maintained an authoritative position above sub-state units and societal actors, in other contexts it has been reduced to just one among several domestic actors that maintain foreign relations and engage in competition for power and survival.

Indeed, the empirical record in the Horn of Africa shows that the supremacy of the state over sub-state and non-state actors is often questionable even when it is backed up by legal recognition under international law. For example, some of the strongest states in the Horn of Africa that rank consistently low in the Fund for Peace’s Fragile States Index² experience political competition from sub-state entities, societal groups, and individuals who engage in their own external relations with foreign states and non-state actors. Ethiopia’s recent Tigray crisis shows how the federal government has engaged in formal external relations above all with other states while non-state actors have pursued informal foreign relations with state and non-state actors. Similarly, in the case of Somalia, the federal administration has used its international legal status to maintain official relations with other states, while sub-state actors, such as the federal states of Jubaland and Puntland, as well as non-state actors, including opposition groups and powerful individuals, have maintained informal and semi-formal relationships with foreign governments. Notably, the self-declared and the *de facto* independent Republic of Somaliland has established bilateral relations with other

² Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index (<https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/>).

states which entail various levels of diplomatic acknowledgment and economic cooperation short of full legal recognition of Somaliland's independence by any United Nations member state.

Power

Power is a central concept for the realist theory of international relations. It refers to an actor's (normally a state) ability to survive, exercise influence over other actors, and exert a measure of control to constrain and guide their actions within the international system. For example, the classical realist theory, which has played a central role in the evolution of the International Relations discipline, views power as a defining concept because it enables the state, realism's referent unit of analysis, to pursue its national interest. More power the state has, the more likely it is to achieve the objectives defined by its national interest, most essentially its security and survival.³ Arguably, realism's focus precisely on power as one of its key theoretical groundings and an important attribute in the anarchic world system resulted in International Relations becoming a branch of the wider Political Science discipline.

Power is inherently relational and relative. Morgenthau, an influential classical realist, viewed political power as "a psychological exercise between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised", and in relation to reaching foreign policy objectives entailing "control of the actions of others through influence over their minds" (1948, p. 14). Realists apply this understanding of power to international relations and consider states as the main unitary actors wielding such power over other states in a struggle for survival within international anarchy. While for Morgenthau (1948, pp. 7-8) states seek power as an objective in their national interest and use power in their international relations to gain more of it, influential neorealists such as Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001) see power as means to reach the goal of state survival or gaining hegemony.

While realists emphasize the importance of power, more liberalism-oriented scholars have enriched the understanding of the concept in the discipline. Joseph Nye famously introduced "soft power" as a non-coercive and co-optive form of power "which occurs when one country gets other countries to do *want* what it wants" (Nye, 1990, p. 166) by cultural attraction, ideology, or working through international institutions. State and non-state actors, such as "corporations, institutions, NGOs, and transnational terrorist networks often have soft power of their own" (Nye, 2011, p. 83). Since the end of the Cold War and the following

³ The leading classical realist scholars engaged in extensive discussion on what exactly constitutes "national interest". See e.g. Good (1960).

American unipolar era, soft power has become a popular concept that often accompanies coercive power considerations in debates and strategic thinking of foreign policy and international politics.

Meanwhile, the kind of all-encompassing power realists refer to is often associated with states' resources and capabilities to influence other states' behavior in international politics. In their view, in the international sphere, relational power is manifested in relationships between actors and is often situational and contextual. Its application affects certain but not necessarily all actions of a target state. Structural, or systemic, power refers to a state's ability to influence the environment in which states operate and to exert control over their actions through it. This second type of power is often reserved for hegemonic and regional powers which can influence, for example through multilateral institutions, the international and/or regional political environment. Therefore, realists would argue that the greater and more multifaceted the relational power is, the more extensive the control that the more powerful state can exert over the weaker one.

Similar to political power within states, international (or inter-state) power originates largely from the coercive (military) and economic capacity. However, it also draws on demographic, social, and cultural factors as well as legitimacy and others' perception of status. Material resources are an important source of power in international relations, but reputational and positional resources such as political and social position and hierarchy are equally significant. Between states the perception of power and status is important, but this is also the case in the weak (or fragile) states where foreign relations are less centralized and where various sub-state and non-state actors engage in significant external relations of their own. Due to their local prominence, both material and reputational, such state and societal actors, including various administrations, groups, and individuals, may wield considerable local power and leverage in their relations with external state and non-state actors. This power originates from their local position, status, and control of local social, cultural, political, and economic resources. Some of these resources are material while others are reputational/non-material.⁴

In International Relations, power between two units is often considered to be unequal, or asymmetrical. In a general sense, "asymmetrical power refers to a relationship between two individuals in which one, the powerful person, has control over the outcomes of the other, the subordinate, but not vice versa" (Goodwin, 1993, p. 1). However, according to the realist, or systemic, reading, an asymmetrical power relationship in international politics occurs mainly between individual states, or a state and a non-state actor, based on the differences in in-

⁴ See for example Utas (2012) for more on types of power and how power is exercised locally in Africa.

terests and capabilities. In such a relationship, according to Womack (2016, p. 39), the more powerful actor assumes leadership but both sides are accommodated by the stronger party's recognition of the autonomy of the weaker and the weaker actor's acknowledgment and respect of the superior power of the stronger. The power of the stronger actor over the weaker is therefore not absolute and for an asymmetrical relationship to function both parties need to accept the differential power reality but also recognize and not contest each other's relative position. Pfetsch (2011, p. 41) has further argued that while at the beginning of a negotiation process national capability matters as a source of symmetry or asymmetry, the process itself turns the focus on achieving comparative utility for both actors. This shows that in an asymmetrical relationship, the stronger party may not reach its aspirations to the fullest extent but will be content with a lesser result because it prefers to maintain the beneficial relationship. The weaker actor, on the other hand, may gain more than it expects which is likely to result in its honoring the relationship and accepting the leading position of the stronger party. If one of the parties sees no benefit in the mutual relationship, it may not engage in it.

In the International Relations discipline, the concept of relational asymmetric power is applied to a wide variety of case studies. In terms of political and economic relations, salient topics have involved the management of hegemonic power in the multi-nodal world system (Womack, 2016, pp. 174-201) and a great power's relations with other states, as in the case of China's relations with its neighbors (Womack, 2006, 2010), as well as other subject areas as diverse as the competition among global clothing brands (Tokatli, 2007).

However, during the era of the Global War on Terror, the concept of power in international politics has become most often employed in security matters, such as defense and warfare, due to its ability to provide theoretical and practical perspectives on asymmetric threats. For example, engaging with the case of Taiwan, Sherman (2009, p. 11) has argued that Taipei should unleash the full potential of its defenses against mainland China by maximizing asymmetric technological capacity in its defense strategy while trying to maintain defense capability against the much stronger adversary (Blatt, 2020). In this context, asymmetric armed conflict refers to one in which the presumably weaker party has an edge due to its use of unconventional warfare (Caforio, 2012). According to Kay (2004, p. 15), this was the case in the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993 which led to the US departure from Somalia. Asymmetric threat scenarios have guided defense policy, as has been observed in Washington's approach towards the Islamic State (Antebi & Dekel, 2017; Brüggeman, 2017), Iran (Cordesman, 2020), or in the case of the possible threat scenarios for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Beaulieu &

Salvo, 2018). In 2006, the US Army established the Asymmetric Warfare Group which illustrates the strategic, policy, and practical relevance of the concept.⁵

The state and asymmetrical power in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations

Recently, a growing body of literature on the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations has described them as asymmetric. This is because scholars, adopting mainly a realist perspective of states as unitary actors, have focused on inter-state relations related to the involvement of the regionally powerful Arab states and Turkey in the Horn of Africa. They have observed the interaction through the realist lens, from the viewpoint of what they consider as the more powerful states engaging their weaker counterparts for strategic and security reasons (Cannon & Donelli, 2019; Dahir, 2019; Donelli, 2021; Donelli & Gonzalez-Levaggi, 2021; Huliaras & Kalantzakos, 2017; Vertin, 2019). This has been particularly the case after the Arab Spring and during the Yemeni civil war in the context of heating competition for regional influence among countries of the Persian Gulf and Turkey (Benzekri, 2018; Oluoch, 2019; Todman, 2018).

The use of asymmetric power as a guiding realist concept is related to insufficient information on the often personalized, largely pragmatic, and saliently transactional interactions and decisions guiding foreign relations. As a result, the seemingly dominant party is assumed to dictate the relationship by approaching and offering irresistible or unavoidable conditions to the perceivably weaker party. However, due to the assumption of states being unitary actors, this approach is ill-equipped to interpret the relationship from the perspective of weak (or fragile) states where multiple state and non-state actors with important local leverage may engage significantly and independently in external relations. Therefore, although realist assumptions of state and asymmetric power are in many cases used as a theoretical framework to explain relations between states, they fail to fully account for the importance of the agency of multiple actors and its effect on the overall relationship as in the case of the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations.

Moreover, the realist asymmetric approach bases its assumptions narrowly on bilateral inter-state relations. It depicts the Horn countries as subservient to their Persian Gulf counterparts and having a restricted space for pursuing their foreign relations due to political and economic constraints imposed by them.

⁵ The US Army Asymmetric Warfare Group provides “operational advisory support” and advises tactical and operation commanders on current asymmetric threats and how to defeat them. For more, see <https://www.awg.army.mil/About-Us/Mission-Core-Functions-Priorities/>

The realist approach therefore largely fails to account for the multiple agency of state and non-state actors, the broad and complex networks of external partnerships, and the variety of options for determining and orienting strategies and approaches that the Horn countries maintain to leverage their foreign relations. More specifically, state and non-state actors (such as administrations, officials, popular movements, armed groups, businesses, and prominent individuals) in the Horn of Africa interact with external parties after weighing their options. They often bargain transactional partnerships from a position of strength because they exercise power over local material and non-material resources, but face more constraints when the transaction does not involve such local power. For example, in terms of relations with players from the Persian Gulf during the recent Qatar diplomatic crisis, the federal government of Somalia, a given sub-state administration in the country (e.g. Puntland), or an armed group (e.g. al-Shabaab) may have chosen to partner with state or non-state actors, or both, along the Saudi-Emirati or the Qatar-Turkey axis. Therefore, several domestic actors in Somalia, and elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, are often in a position to bargain and choose external partnerships on a transactional basis. However, the realist framework of International Relations analysis widely used to analyze such relations is not equipped to do so because of being founded on a perception of the state as a unitary actor and power solely as an inter-state concept.

Furthermore, another characteristic of the realist International Relations analysis is that power asymmetry is mainly approached from the perspective of what is considered the more powerful, dominant, or hegemonic actors. Regionally influential states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Turkey, and Iran, have featured in the rather one-sided studies in which the Arab and Middle East actors engage perceivably weaker states in the Horn of Africa. As is also typical for the realist approach, the states have been assumed to have a full monopoly of their external relations. While most studies, which approach these relations from the perspective of Arab and Middle East states, including those listed earlier, adopt this view, they assume that these states fulfill the normative realist assumptions and criteria of a state. However, this assumption is questionable and abides even less by the reality of the states in the Horn of Africa. It constitutes an important caveat in the realist approach and prevents its ability to provide in-depth insights and nuanced analysis of these relations.

Generally, Persian Gulf countries and Turkey are not considered among the internally strongest states in the international system and their Horn of Africa counterparts rank among the weakest in the world. Especially governments of Saudi Arabia and the UAE fear domestic popular political mobilization, but it

is understood that their executives exert an important level of control over foreign relations and largely monopolize them. On the other hand, governments in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia, but also in other states such as Ethiopia, have less control over the overall external relations and may be locally challenged by various sub-state and non-state actors which use such connections to strengthen their domestic position. In Somalia, for example, regional or federal state administrations (e.g. Somaliland, Puntland, and Jubaland), opposition formations and armed groups (e.g. al-Shabaab and clan militias), and business and political leaders, as well as other influential individuals (e.g. traditional and religious leaders), often engage in foreign linkages to increase their domestic power and at times to challenge the central administration. Similarly in Ethiopia, ethnonationalist political formations and armed movements, such as the former governing party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, have maintained their own power bases fed by external linkages distinct from the central government's foreign relations. As shown by a nuanced approach, these actors engage foreign states and non-state actors extensively, but this is not captured in the studies that adopt a realist perspective and center on states as monolithic actors and power solely as inter-state.

Multiple agency and power in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations

Relations between the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Persian Gulf go back thousands of years. The ancient and historical polities in the Horn of Africa also maintained commercial and diplomatic exchanges with kingdoms, sultanates, and empires across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.⁶ Exchange and migration led to a close connection between the Arabian Peninsula and the Somali and Harari city-states as well as to Semitic influences among the local Cushitic cultures (Mordechai, 1980, pp. xvii-xviii). Voluntary and forced (e.g. slave trade) migration and trade from the Horn of Africa to southern Arabia also spread cultural influences to the area.

In the contemporary era, however, this influence has been considered rather one-sided (Mazrui, 1975). This owes largely to the application of the realist systemic frame of analysis based on inter-state relations which came to be seen as salient in explanations of political and economic interaction. Arguably, this view drew heavily on the Western narrative of colonialism which depicts Africa as an

⁶ For example, coastal city states in the Horn of Africa engaged in maritime trade in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean for centuries and polities such as Aksum maintained diplomatic ties with Asian and European courts.

object of intervention by powerful states. Especially in the early Cold War period, and since the independence of the majority of the states in northeast Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, in the relations between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, the latter has been seen as a target of external interventions and influence from what has been considered as more powerful states in the Red Sea neighborhood (Aliboni, 1985; Lefebvre, 1996). For example, from the 1950s onward, regional powers such as Egypt, and later Saudi Arabia, were seen to have sought to exert influence, at times in the name of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, in opposition to their regional rival Israel and great power opponents.

These narratives based on realist inter-state interpretations often fail to account for the agency in the Horn of Africa and the importance of domestic politics and the role of multiple state-related and societal actors engaging in international relations. This inadequacy becomes particularly glaring when seeking to explain events and processes which contain determinants emerging from domestic political realities (Rosecrance & Stein, 1993; Snyder, 1991). In the Horn of Africa, many state, sub-state, and non-state actors have actively engaged Arab and Persian Gulf powers and societal actors. Eritrean opposition activists, for example, maintained a variable presence in several Arab states throughout the liberation struggle and its leaders were able to gain varying levels of external assistance for their cause from various Arab governments (Killion, 1998; Tedla, 2014). Similarly, Islamist leaders in the Horn have drawn support from Persian Gulf countries, especially since the 1970s oil boom which equipped them with financial resources to pursue their political, economic, and religious-cultural interests in the Horn of Africa. Already during independence struggles in the Horn of Africa, migrant workers and diaspora communities began to emerge in the nearby Arab countries, but they grew significantly in number and influence in the economies driven by oil exports. Increasing authoritarianism in Somalia and Ethiopia in the 1970s and labor needs in the Persian Gulf generated the push and pull factors propelling migration. While neither the opposition groups nor migrants formed a visible part of the formal inter-state relations, their interactions with external parties abroad, or with state and societal actors abroad in their respective host countries, affected the overall relations between the states concerned. As the petroleum-rich Persian Gulf countries upped their involvement in the Horn of Africa, Saudi Arabia, in particular, promoted political Islam in Sudan and with its Gulf allies sought to convert the country into a breadbasket for the arid Arabian Peninsula. But again non-state actors exercised important agency in the relations between the countries involved as can be observed in the case of the Sudanese opposition groups and influential diaspora population in

Saudi Arabia. Similarly, during the liberation struggle, southern Sudanese rebels took advantage of the Israeli interest to weaken the Nimeiri regime in Khartoum which was aligned with its regional rivals (Ylönen, 2016, pp. 184, 222).

Superpower competition, rivalry with Israel and on the Red Sea region, an effort to extend pan-Arabic and Islamic influence, and self-perceived vulnerabilities featured in Persian Gulf countries' involvement in the Horn of Africa during the Cold War. This consisted mainly of circulating petrodollars for political influence, supporting both governments and non-state actors, and investing in land. While forming part of the wider Cold War superpower proxy struggle, much of this engagement was motivated by the Persian Gulf countries' self-perceived weaknesses. The competition against Israel and the aspiration to extend political Islam were part of the engagement as well as the concern about securing external food sources and curtailing Marxist revolutionary political influences (Lefebvre, 1996).

Meanwhile, the governments in the Horn of Africa sought to take advantage of the external interest and obtain resources to secure the domestic political *status quo*. Non-state actors, particularly opposition groups, sought to use the increased level of attention to gain strength against their domestic rivals by establishing offices and maintaining representation in the Arab states. They used the financial and material resources obtained from the extra-regional partners to their advantage in the local context. For example, several opposition groups from Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia established representation in the Arab states and often also drew on the diaspora to support their local struggles against governments in the Horn (Adam & Ford, 1997; Tedla, 2014; Warburg, 2003).

The end of the Cold War resulted initially in decreasing superpower interest in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf powers followed suit. After the US played a major role in ensuring the independence of Eritrea it intervened unsuccessfully in Somalia and withdrew. However, by the mid-1990s China had renewed its economic engagement with Africa in Sudan. Yet Arab powers, with a notable exception of Iran and Egypt, turned their attention away from the Horn of Africa. Iran employed a developmental strategy (Lob, 2016) to supplement financial and military aid and cultural diplomacy (Heibach, 2020, p. 70). As Tehran emerged as a regional rival to Riyadh, security aspects in regional relations also grew in importance. At the same time, Sudan promoted political Islam in its neighborhood through non-state actors, such as armed and non-violent opposition groups, with the support of wealthy individuals and several countries of the Persian Gulf (Connell, 1996, p. 34). In the second half of the 1990s, Sudan exporting its Islamist project faced increasing opposition, while Iran's relations

with partner governments in the Horn of Africa, particularly Sudan, deepened. Meanwhile, in Somalia, clan-based warlords and Islamist non-state actors, namely al-Itihaad al-Islamiya, gained strength through their local activities and foreign connections.

Following September 11, 2001, attacks on the US, Washington declared the Global War on Terrorism which has heavily impacted the Horn of Africa. Earlier the same year, Somaliland which had declared independence from Somalia in 1991, passed a new constitution following a referendum that reaffirmed its people's claim for self-determination. Meanwhile, the Bush administration put pressure on the Sudanese government and the various Islamist non-state actors in the sub-region, which eventually led to the secession and independence of South Sudan. In December 2006 after years of insecurity in its eastern borderlands, Ethiopia, out of fear for its stability and territorial integrity, intervened militarily in Somalia with the support of the US. The operation was aimed at rescuing the externally-backed secular Transitional Federal Government which had never held significant territorial control and had recently lost out to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) as the *de facto* government in much of the country. The fall of the ICU led to a breakdown of authority in much of central Somalia where great and regional powers had directly backed various local individuals, clan and religious groups, and factions since the initial state collapse in 1991. These domestic actors took advantage of the interest of external powers, particularly the Gulf states and Iran, in their local competition for power. Islamic elements continued to enjoy the support of external actors despite the rapid collapse and disintegration of the ICU in Somalia.

The 2011 Arab Spring intensified the leading Gulf states' interest in the Horn of Africa. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to maintain the *status quo* of authoritarian rule in Northeastern Africa, Qatar, Turkey, and to some extent Iran, favored revolutionary forces, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic elements, which had strengthened due to grassroots grievances and popular support. Already at odds with Iran, this put Saudi Arabia and its partners on a collision course with Qatar and Turkey (Başkan, 2019; Bilgin, 2018). The upheaval related to the Arab Spring especially across the border in Yemen and Bahrain convinced the Saudi government to intensify its efforts to curb Iranian influence in the Horn of Africa. It stepped up attempts to woo the Horn governments in a transactional manner by offering generous financial contributions in exchange for purging Iranian presence. The governments of Sudan and Eritrea agreed and ended their publicly known linkages with Iran.

Since 2015, Riyadh has led a coalition of allies to intervene in the civil war in Yemen where the Houthis Shia militia took over late in the previous year. Due to Houthis constituting a direct security threat to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, Riyadh sought to curtail the movement of Iranian assistance and together with its junior partner, the UAE, approached governments in the coastal Horn of Africa. Sudan and Eritrea, in particular, joined the coalition and deepened their partnership with the Saudis and the Emiratis. Ethiopia also improved relations with the two regional powerhouses but maintained good relations with their rivals Turkey and Qatar as well as Iran. Ankara and Doha had also developed a strong alliance with the Somali federal government, while the administrations of the Somali states Puntland and Jubaland, as well as self-declared independent Somaliland, preferred to work with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

In the course of the Arab Spring, the Saudi government began perceiving Qatar increasingly as a regional rival. Doha was seen to stir the grassroots against state leaders and manufacture revolutions, as in the case of Egypt, while being close to Iran. In 2017 Riyadh, together with its Gulf Cooperation Council associates, orchestrated an embargo on Doha. Turkey came in to support Qatar, as did Iran, which intensified the regional rivalry. The competition between the two groups of states, in which Egypt participated by siding with Saudi Arabia and the UAE after the resumption of military rule under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, resonated in the Horn of Africa where particularly the coastal states and territories, as well as Ethiopia as the dominant country, came to be seen as strategically important due to their proximity to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Arabian Peninsula (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In the relations between states in the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf, considerations of self-perceived vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the governments themselves play a major role. The leading countries of the Persian Gulf seek to secure themselves in their neighborhood through foreign relations, including with various actors in the Horn of Africa. Their interests include maintaining foreign food supply, accessing markets and investment and business opportunities, and curbing possible destabilizing effects caused by political turbulence in the Red Sea neighborhood. For the incumbent leaders and governments in the Horn of Africa, deeper relations with countries of the Persian Gulf are welcome when these contribute to the strengthening of their domestic position. These governments use the relations primarily for financial and material gain and exercise power through the control of local political and economic resources such as political influence and decision-making and economic and strategic assets including land, labor, and natural resources.

The mutual vulnerability of state actors on both sides of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden owes to their self-perceived weaknesses. While the often cash-strapped governments and non-state actors in the Horn of Africa engage in domestic political and economic competition for survival, the leaders in the proximate Gulf States are preoccupied with the emergence of political instability that could undermine their position, the global phasing out of fossil fuels, the lack of fertile land and other natural resources, and shortage of productive industries and service sector to maintain high standards of living when the oil and natural gas revenues eventually decline. As a result, the Persian Gulf actors use their immense financial assets to mitigate these vulnerabilities, while the state and non-state players in the Horn of Africa often transact their political and economic resources for financial assets that can be used for domestic power rivalries and to ensure political and economic survival. This situation creates a degree of complementarity of interests and endowments, which has contributed to the largely pragmatic and extensive Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations.

The leading Persian Gulf countries' increasing interest in the Horn of Africa in the past decade has given new opportunities to the local state and non-state actors to engage them. Chronically short of financial and material resources required for political survival, states such as Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, and non-state actors within them, have skillfully played "a game of alignments" with countries of the Persian Gulf and given an impression that their loyalties can be bought. However, because they seek to benefit simultaneously from relations with various, and at times contradicting, foreign partnerships, their political allegiances are pragmatic, uncertain, and temporary. This gives them an upper hand concerning local political and economic affairs in their relationship with any given foreign actor. For example, while intensively dealing with the UAE in the late 2000s, the government of Djibouti refused to support its air campaign in Yemen and fell out with Abu Dhabi in 2015. Switching alignment, Djibouti then intensified its alliance with China. Similarly, administrations of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland have switched alignments and exchanged control, management, and development of strategic and economic assets for financial and material gain and diplomatic support. In Somalia, despite the recent change of leadership, sub-state actors in federal states have continued to count on financially and economically lucrative relations with the UAE and other Gulf state and societal actors, while non-state groups and individuals, and many close to, or part of, the federal government, have worked closely with Turkey, and until recently Qatar. Since coming back for his second term in May 2022, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud

has made a conscious effort to work with all interested countries of the Persian Gulf despite their rivalries. In Ethiopia, with the deepening of the Tigray and the surrounding domestic crisis, the federal government's grip on monopolizing foreign relations loosened and various non-state actors pursued external relations as part of contesting local power (Abate, 2021; Deutsche Welle, 2021).

Consequently, the multiple competing local players engaging in foreign relations in the Horn of Africa often reduce the state to only one such actor. Although the state can draw an advantage from its legal recognition, sub-state and non-state actors may be powerful enough to compete with it in their local settings. They may gain sufficient resources through foreign connections to challenge the state's authority and control territory and population groups within their sphere of influence. This shows that significant foreign interactions in such states are fragmented among several actors who exercise agency and can affect the country's overall external relations.

Non-state entities and individuals and sub-state administrations and groups in the Horn of Africa have extensive relationships with state and non-state actors in the Persian Gulf. Individuals and groups engage in social relationships and networks, and economic activity, transactions, and partnerships, which are facilitated by the existence of an extensive diaspora. Similarly, political entrepreneurs, and those who play an important political and economic role in their respective societies, engage in relations with non-state and state actors in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. Economic and political networks established and maintained by these individuals and groups, and the associated accumulated wealth and prestige help elevate their social and political status and power in their local context. Economic and politically relevant interaction includes licit and illicit trade, investment, management of financial flows, and buying and selling political influence through political decisions and economic contracts.

These activities suggest that there is much less power asymmetry in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations than recognized by the conventional International Relations theory. State and non-state actors in the Horn of Africa are active players and wield significant power in their external relations through their control of local political and economic assets and resources. This also affects the insecurities experienced especially by their geographically proximate foreign partners. Therefore, there is significantly more African agency, mutual vulnerability, and interdependency in the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations than what the dominant realist strands of the International Relations theory assume. For example, as the above discussion has shown, Somali federal and state authorities, security agents, warlords, militias, businessmen, and clan and religious leaders, maintain

foreign connections beside the state and many of them draw on financial and material compensation from their Persian Gulf partners. In exchange for financial injections, they may promise political influence or control of strategic assets for a limited time. Yet, they maintain the leverage to keep their end of the bargain or not which puts them in a powerful position relative to their external partners. Realist International Relations narratives assuming asymmetrical power relations between states as unitary actors are unable to account for these crucial aspects of Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations.

Instead, a narrative of these relations that takes into account the state and multiple non-state actors provides a more nuanced account of the nature and role of the state and the structure and manifestations of power. This defies the narrow conceptualizations of state and power, which owe to the predominance of the realist theoretical frame based on Western understanding of the (nation-)state and relative power between them. Realist accounts adopt the viewpoint of what its proponents view as more powerful states and assume that states are unitary actors. This makes their assumptions hardly reflect the reality in much of the global South and especially the Horn of Africa where any in-depth analysis shows that states cannot be considered simply monolithic, and due to their weakness external relations and power are exercised by both state and non-state actors. Realist accounts, which largely ignore the important role of sub-state and non-state actors, are therefore likely to produce inaccurate analysis and potentially erroneous findings on the dynamics of power in the international interactions between the Horn of Africa and the Persian Gulf. This, in turn, may result in misguided policy recommendations and practices.

Concluding remarks

This article has dealt with caveats of the realist paradigm which has dominated the International Relations discipline and the contextualized analysis of inter-state relations for decades. As a foundational proto theory of Western, and particularly American, origin, classical realism considers the concepts of state and power as its fundamental building blocks. The article has pointed out the Western bias and shortcomings in realism's epistemologies of conceptualizing the state as a unitary actor and power as asymmetric between such states, while in most cases the approach adopts the perspective of what it considers as the more powerful, dominant, or hegemonic state. The two interrelated concepts, state and power, are based on the Western understanding of the nation-state as

strong and able to monopolize the most important foreign relations as well as to exert power on weaker states.

However, the article has pointed out that this view of relations between states is highly limited and cannot account for the complexity of relations within and between state and non-state actors in the weak (or fragile) states in the global South. This is due to most states in the global South in general, and in places such as the Horn of Africa in particular, not adhering to the classical Western view of a strong (nation-)state and not having the same capacity to exert control over international affairs of various powerful domestic actors. Instead, such players often pursue their own external connections which they use to strengthen themselves against domestic rivals and which affect the state's overall foreign relationships. In external relations of such states, power should not be simply observed as a state-to-state exercise between two or more monolithic entities because of the importance and influence of various state, sub-state and non-state actors. Similarly, the international interactions and power relations between actors should be contextualized locally so that a nuanced analysis providing a more accurate view of relational power and influence can be undertaken.

In this article, the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations have been discussed as an example of the complexity of international interactions that do not conform to the conceptualization of state and power of the realist theoretical framework. The article has shown how the narrowness of the realist approach fails to fully capture the reality in these relations because it engages in a blanket analysis of states as monolithic actors and adopts the perspective of what it perceives as the stronger countries of the Persian Gulf while depicting the Horn of Africa actors as passive recipients. This not only results in the exclusion of relevant players from the Horn of Africa who have significant influence in these relations but also results in the marginalization of the local agency. Considering the Horn actors and their agency as subservient, the realist approach based on unitary states and asymmetrical power depicts these players as weak and having a narrow space for pursuing their foreign relations. This view erroneously ignores their significant local power which gives them leverage in relations with their Persian Gulf partners who are interested in gaining local influence.

In essence, the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf inter-state relations are based on mutual vulnerability and complementarity of material, non-material, and geo-strategic endowments. The resurgence of relations since the Arab Spring has involved the Gulf states' attempt to address their domestic insecurities, including by maintaining the domestic political *status quo*, ensuring food security, and facing the threat of global phasing out of fossil fuels while securing the strategic Red

Sea and the Gulf of Aden neighborhood. Similar to the Cold War, they have again engaged actors in the Horn of Africa by employing their massive financial assets selectively to acquire political loyalty, control strategic locations, gain resources, and win hearts and minds. The regional strategic, security, and economic competition, in the context of the wider scramble headed by the great powers, has led to the Persian Gulf rivalries becoming manifested in the Horn of Africa.

On the other hand, the state and non-state actors in the Horn have taken the opportunity to exploit the leading Persian Gulf countries' renewed interest in the sub-region. The fragmented nature of political power within states and the contestation of political power nationally and locally have allowed various state and societal actors to engage in and influence the overall relations with Persian Gulf players. Governments and non-state actors alike have forged relations with these external partners to advance their own interests and exchange their local influence and control of material and non-material (reputational) assets for external financial contributions. The transactional local resources in their control have included political access (including local political decision-making and influence), security provision, strategically significant locations (e.g. seaports, airfields, and coastal areas and islands), and economic assets (e.g. local and migrant labor and fertile land for food production), mineral and other natural resources, and local markets. They also provide security for economic activity that mitigates investor risks.

These state and societal actors use the strategic assets in their control to bargain with the interested state and non-state partners. Although exchanging them for financial compensation, they maintain a degree of local power over such strategic assets through coercive, legislative, or territorial control. For example, assets such as ports or land are often leased for external development and management for a limited period and promises of providing political goods in exchange for financial or other material compensation depend on the decision to actually deliver or not. Therefore, due to their local power, the Horn actors maintain various levels of control over the local assets and resources while also influencing external actors. Their actions, including choosing and rejecting external partners, have at times contributed to the cleavages between the Persian Gulf countries as in the case of the Saudi-Iran competition and the Qatar diplomatic crisis. As a result, a nuanced and locally contextualized analysis shows that the conceptualization of inter-state relations as monolithic, accompanied by perceived power asymmetries, as portrayed by the realist International Relations discourse, does not represent the complex reality of multiple actorness, agency, mutual vulnerability, and interdependence in the interaction between the Horn of Africa and the

Persian Gulf. This reveals important challenges in the application of the conventional realist approach to the Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf relations.

Finally, the discussion in this article has shown that a nuanced analysis taking into account the local power and agency of the state and non-state actors from the Horn of Africa is necessary to begin addressing the perpetual marginalization of African agency in the International Relations discipline. Therefore, it is important to steer away from the Western state-centric realist paradigm and move towards a broader approach that not only includes various types of internationally relevant actors but also accounts for their local power and agency. Any such analysis should factor in domestic political dynamics to gain an improved understanding of the role and agency of multiple state and non-state actors and the role of their external connections in the overall relations between countries. This not only challenges conventional state-centric views in International Relations but paves the way for addressing the perpetual marginalization of Africa in the discipline. In the end, such in-depth analysis promotes a nuanced understanding of complex networks of interactions between countries and should generate accurate findings that can improve both theory and practice.

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