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**The Strategy of the UAE's Chain Ports in the Horn of Africa and Its Implications  
for the Security of the Israel**




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Amirreza Moghavemi<sup>3</sup>**Extended Abstract****1. Introduction**

Since its independence in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has pursued a foreign policy emphasizing peaceful coexistence with neighbors, economic integration with the West, and opposition to political Islam. The Arab Spring, however, shifted this approach toward a threat-perception strategy. The uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen prompted the UAE to counter perceived threats proactively. The overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, along with uprisings in Bahrain and Yemen, prompted the UAE to adopt measures aimed at countering perceived threats.

Transitioning from a positive-sum to a zero-sum strategy, the UAE influenced revolutionary developments in Egypt and Tunisia, helped suppress protests in Bahrain through the Peninsula Shield Forces, and joined the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in 2015. This engagement expanded its presence in the Horn of Africa, strengthened regional partnerships, and increased its strategic depth through control over ports and islands, serving geo-economic and geopolitical objectives.

The 2020 normalization of relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords further deepened UAE-Israeli ties. Shared security and political interests, coupled with Israel's proximity to the Horn of Africa, have made the region central to both states' strategic agendas. Given Israel's substantial trade with the region and the UAE's control over strategic ports, the Horn of

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Africa serves as a critical corridor for global trade (12–15% of global shipments) and a platform for supporting both Israeli security and the UAE's regional ambitions. The UAE's post-2011 regional activism has earned it the label “Sparta of the Gulf.” Its proactive strategy reflects a departure from cautious diplomacy toward consolidating influence and securing strategic depth to overcome geopolitical constraints.

## **2. Methodology and Conceptual Framework**

The chain-port strategy involves building strategic partnerships with coastal states to secure both defensive and offensive capabilities for protecting energy, trade, and broader security interests. Under this approach, an actor enters medium- and long-term agreements with weaker coastal states to control ports and coastlines, linking them into a chain-like network.

This strategy has historical precedent. Portugal, possessing the world's largest navy, applied it over 500 years ago to assert dominance over the Indian Ocean and compete with China. More recently, China has implemented the “String of Pearls” strategy in the Indian Ocean, effectively adopting a chain-port approach.

The UAE, drawing lessons from Portugal and China, has invested in port infrastructure to establish a comprehensive geostrategic presence in Africa. Each port in the Horn of Africa acts as a node connecting the Gulf to Africa, reflecting the broader growth of Gulf–Africa relations. This strategy facilitates access to African economies and markets, with Dubai's Jebel Ali port serving as a central hub.

## **3. Discussion**

Within the framework of its chain-port strategy, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is drawing on the historical experiences of former maritime powers such as Portugal and China. Through large-scale investments in port infrastructure, the UAE has established a layered geostrategic presence across Africa. Ports in the Horn of Africa now function as key nodes linking the Persian Gulf to African markets, while Dubai's Jebel Ali Port operates as the central super-hub. This approach reflects not only the UAE's ambition to expand economic and logistical influence, but also its role in deepening Gulf–Africa relations.

- **Geopolitical Significance**

The Horn of Africa occupies a critical position along the Indian Ocean and at the gateway to the Persian Gulf, making it a focal point for global energy flows and trade routes. For the Gulf states, and particularly the UAE, a strong presence in this region is essential for securing strategic interests.

The Horn also enables the UAE to reduce dependence on the Strait of Hormuz, thereby mitigating its geopolitical vulnerability (Salahaldin, 2021: 5). Beyond this, the region serves as a vital corridor for oil exports to Europe—supplying roughly 60% of Europe's energy needs—as well as part of U.S. demand, while functioning as a global East–West trade passage (Mohamd, 2019). Against this backdrop, the UAE employs maritime diplomacy and chain-port expansion to consolidate its role as a regional and extra-regional stakeholder, positioning itself alongside major global powers.

- **Geoeconomic Significance**

The Horn of Africa's economic importance extends beyond hydrocarbons to include substantial mineral wealth, such as gold, iron, nickel, phosphates, and uranium. Commercial oil exports began in 1999, though reserves remain concentrated in South Sudan, estimated at 4 billion barrels (Abas, 2019). However, the region's persistent political instability—ranging from fragile governance to civil wars—has enabled the UAE to combine investment with influence. Emirati firms, particularly DP World, dominate port operations, creating financial dependencies that strengthen the UAE's leverage. Moreover, Abu Dhabi's strategy is shaped by a threat-oriented perspective: modernization of ports in countries like Djibouti or Somalia could erode its exclusive advantages, challenging both its economic and geostrategic dominance.

- **Military and Intelligence Significance**

Among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, the UAE has pursued the most assertive military posture in the Horn of Africa. Since the mid-2010s, it has established or expanded facilities in at least eight strategic locations, including Yemen, Eritrea, Somaliland, Puntland, Somalia, Chad, Libya, and Egypt (Motavali, 2023). These bases are developed through a flexible model: either purpose-built, adapted from existing infrastructure, or operated through allied facilities. Such adaptability reduces costs while providing operational advantages in volatile environments dominated by non-state armed actors (Ardemagni, 2024). Military infrastructure therefore complements economic initiatives, reinforcing the UAE's chain-port strategy as an integrated tool of power projection.

#### **4. Conclusion and Suggestions**

The UAE's chain-port strategy enhances both economic and military influence in the Horn of Africa, a region linking the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Mediterranean. Military bases and security partnerships strengthen the UAE's regional presence and strategic depth.

The UAE's chain-port strategy delivers economic and trade advantages while reinforcing its geopolitical and military influence. Establishing military bases and engaging in defense-security cooperation with Horn of Africa states strengthens its regional presence and impact.

This strategy reflects the UAE's evolving foreign policy and efforts to expand its influence. By establishing military bases on Horn of Africa islands, the UAE aims to control strategic maritime routes, secure trade and intelligence flows, and enhance its regional and international clout. This presence also facilitates Israel's pursuit of strategic interests, enabling countermeasures against threats such as the Houthis and Iranian influence.

In essence, the UAE's presence in the Horn of Africa creates conditions for Israel to consolidate influence, establish military and intelligence infrastructure, and coordinate with the UAE on security management. Experiences such as the occupation of Socotra Island and the construction of military bases on Perim and Mayun islands in Yemen underscore the strategic importance of this cooperation.

## 5. Keywords

United Arab Emirates, Horn of Africa, chain ports, Israel

## 6. References

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