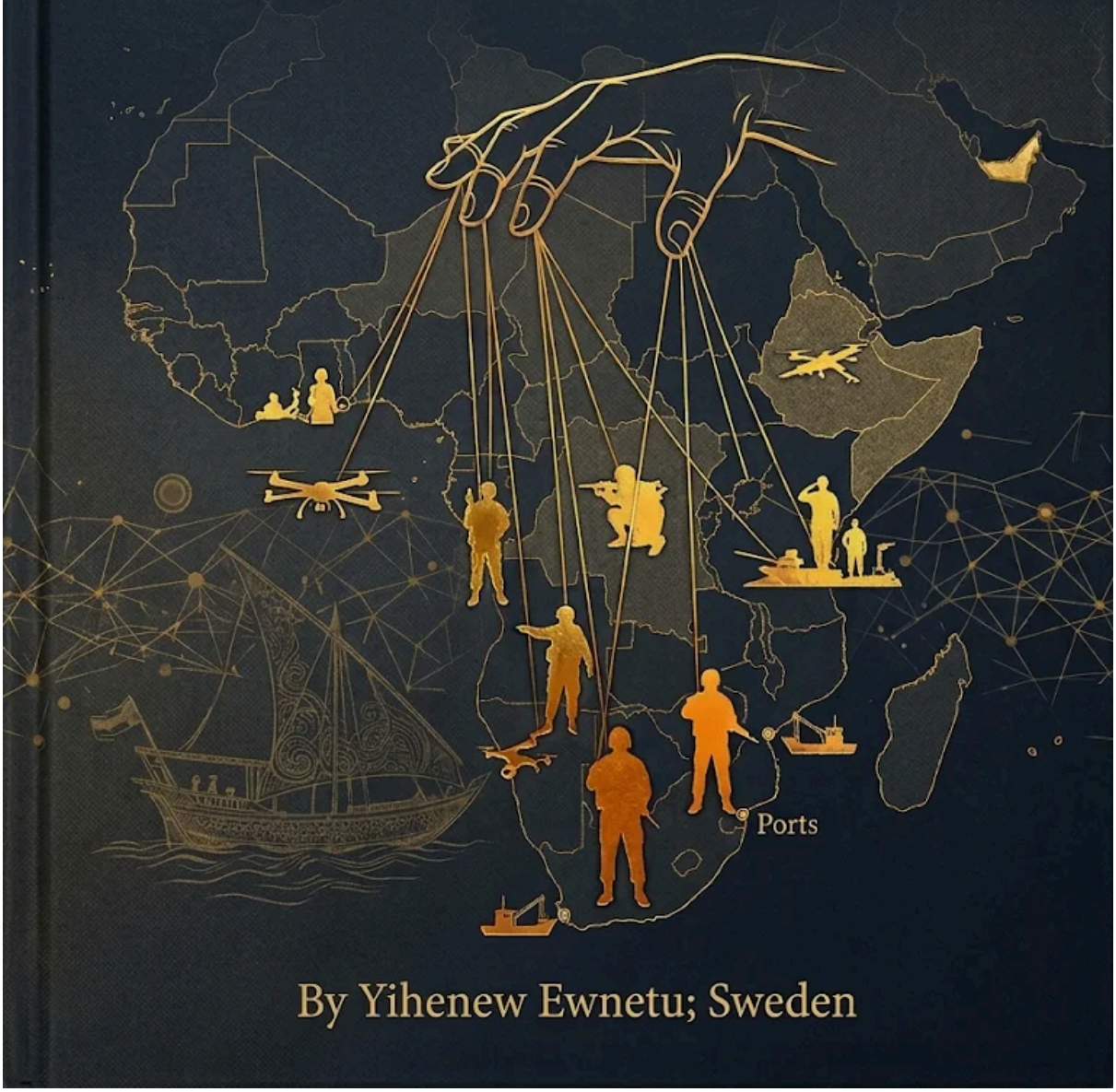
THE ART OF COMPENSATING DOMESTIC ILLEGITIMACY THROUGH EXTERNAL PATRONAGE

A Case Study of Abiy - bin Zayed Relation



By Yihenew Ewnetu; Sweden

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as one of the most consequential external actors in Africa, deploying more than $118 billion in investments and commitments through a network-centered model of **neo-mercantilist colonialism** (Transnational Institute, 2025). Rather than pursuing formal territorial annexation, Abu Dhabi and Dubai fuse sovereign wealth capital, state-owned logistics conglomerates (DP World and AD Ports Group), and critical-mineral vehicles (ADQ and International Resources Holding) with targeted military and financial patronage for domestically illegitimate rulers and centrifugal armed factions across Northern, Eastern, Central, and Southeastern Africa. Whether bolstering besieged federal leaders such as Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed or arming non-state warlords such as Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), Emirati power projection systematically **exploits domestic legitimacy deficits and state fragility as a strategic and commercial opportunity**—converting political crises and armed chaos into low-cost entry points for maritime chokepoints, fertile agricultural land, and extractive supply chains (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 5–6; Transnational Institute, 2025; Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243).

The centerpiece of this study—the personal and strategic relationship between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ)—illustrates how leaders facing deepening internal political crises seek foreign patronage to secure regime survival. Operating through the twin logics of **extraversion** and the **political marketplace**, Addis Ababa has compensated for the erosion of domestic political consensus, protracted civil wars in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia, and severe macroeconomic distress by turning to Emirati emergency bailouts (including an initial $1 billion central bank deposit within a $3 billion rescue package), currency swaps, decisive armed drone air-bridges, Republican Guard training, and high-profile prestige projects (Bayart, 2000, pp. 217–219; de Waal, 2026, p. 48; Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2; Sarkar, 2023, pp. 5, 23; Walsh, 2025, p. 253). In return, Ethiopia's sovereign policy choices, strategic airfields, and regional alignment have become increasingly subordinated to Abu Dhabi's Red Sea ambitions and regional proxy wars—culminating in severe regional isolation, including Sudan's May 2026 recall of its ambassador from Addis Ababa (Gebru, 2025, pp. 4–8).

A central finding of this work is that the **African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN)** have failed vividly and consequentially to curb the UAE's military interference, its profiteering from conflict-induced chaos, and its institutionalization of illicit trade:

United Nations Paralysis: Binding UN arms embargoes in Libya and Darfur are violated with near-total impunity while Security Council resolutions remain blunted by geopolitical vetoes and a refusal to sanction state sponsors operating regional air-bridge supply lines (United Nations Security Council, 2024, p. 3; International Rescue Committee, 2025, pp. 7–8).

African Union Enforcement Deficit: Despite robust legal prohibitions in the AU Constitutive Act and repeated Peace and Security Council (PSC) communiqués condemning external interference in Sudan and Somalia, continental bodies have failed to operationalize sanctions against external financiers or enforce airspace and port-sovereignty rules (African Union, 2000, Art. 4; African Union Peace and Security Council [AU PSC], 2025, p. 4; AU PSC, 2026a).

IGAD's Structural Impasse: Paralyzed by internal divisions, competing mediation tracks, and member states' own financial dependence on Emirati loans and port concessions, IGAD has proven unable to restrain external spoilers or prevent belligerents from "forum shopping" (Kameir, 2025, p. 3; Clingendael Institute, 2025, p. 3).

European Union Half-Measures and Market Complicity: While the EU enacted targeted sanctions and a July 2026 ban on direct Sudanese gold imports (Council Regulation (EU) 2023/2147, 2026, Arts. 1a–1b), European governments have avoided direct costs against Emirati state enablers and left open origin-laundering loopholes through which Dubai-refined bullion continues entering European and Swiss markets (Clingendael Institute, 2025, p. 3; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 2).

The international community and the multilateral organizations entrusted with maintaining international peace and human rights cannot simply ignore this crisis, react as though powerless, or assume a passive bystander-onlooker posture while hundreds of millions of people across the Horn of Africa and the wider continent suffer mass displacement, economic ruin, and warfare driven by an insatiable appetite for wealth that is insensible to human suffering. The inhuman exploitation of hundreds of millions of Africans by a small state like the UAE should never have been condoned or tolerated. Without binding continental port-sovereignty rules, coordinated airspace monitoring, enforceable secondary sanctions on illicit bullion hubs, and the restoration of domestic constitutional legitimacy, African states will remain trapped in a twenty-first-century architecture of indirect extraction.

Compensating Domestic Illegitimacy Through External Patronage

The relationship between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and United Arab Emirates (UAE) President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ) illustrates a

defining pathology of contemporary African politics: **how rulers facing acute internal political crises seek foreign patronage to purchase regime survival, trading national sovereignty, diplomatic alignment, and strategic assets for external capital and military hardware.** Political scientists conceptualize this bargain through the twin lenses of **extraversion**—wherein embattled ruling elites actively mobilize asymmetrical external relationships to compensate for domestic weakness (Bayart, 2000, pp. 217–219)—and the **political marketplace**, where political loyalty, coercive capacity, and territorial control are monetized and transacted through external rents rather than constitutional institutions (de Waal, 2015, Ch. 2; de Waal, 2026, p. 48).

Classical theories of state formation hold that governments build durable legitimacy through a domestic fiscal and social contract—negotiating taxation, representation, and public goods with their own citizens. However, when embattled leaders or insurgent commanders gain access to unconditional external liquidity, sophisticated weaponry, and diplomatic cover, that domestic social contract is severed (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243, 253). External patronage allows rulers to govern *against* rather than *with* their populations: instead of building inclusive constitutional coalitions, regimes deploy foreign-supplied drones, praetorian guards, and surveillance systems to suppress internal dissent. **For the external patron, domestically illegitimate clients are ideal partners** precisely because their internal isolation leaves them with few alternatives, compelling them to mortgage strategic ports, airfields, fertile land, monetary autonomy, and foreign policy alignment at steep discounts (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–5; Sarkar, 2023, pp. 5, 23).

Nowhere is this dynamic more consequential than in the expanding footprint of the UAE across the Horn of Africa and its adjacent Red Sea, Saharan, and Central African corridors (Transnational Institute, 2025). While Abu Dhabi's interventions in Sudan and Libya demonstrate how Emirati networks empower non-state paramilitary proxies to capture conflict gold and maritime corridors, Ethiopia exemplifies the state-level manifestation of the same logic: the cultivation of deep, personalized regime dependency within a centralized federal state (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243).

Neo-Mercantilist Colonialism

The concept of neo-mercantilist colonialism sits at the intersection of classical mercantilism, nineteenth- and twentieth-century neomercantilism, postcolonial theories of neo-colonialism, state capitalism, extraversion, and the political marketplace. Together, these frameworks explain how capital-rich states project asymmetric economic and military power across sovereign borders—and sustain compliant, domestically weak clients—without reviving formal territorial empires.

A. Historical Roots: Classical Mercantilism and Neomercantilism

Classical mercantilism (1500–1750) treated global wealth as a zero-sum competition in which national power depended on accumulating bullion, maintaining trade surpluses, and monopolizing overseas markets (History of International Political Economy, n.d., pp. 3–4). Epitomized by Jean-Baptiste Colbert in France and James Steuart's *Principles of Political Economy* (1767), it drove early European colonial expansion across Latin America, Africa, and Asia (History of International Political Economy, n.d., pp. 3–4). In the nineteenth century, neomercantilism—synthesized by Friedrich List in 1841—shifted focus from hoarding bullion to building state-directed "productive powers" through protectionism, subsidies, and state-sponsored enterprises (Helleiner, 2021, pp. 11, 52–79). While defensive neomercantilists sought to protect national sovereignty, aggressive factions pursued offensive power projection and resource capture (Helleiner, 2021, p. 14; Helleiner, 2023).

B. Theoretical Synthesis: Neo-Colonialism, State Capitalism, Extraversion, and the Political Marketplace

Following post-World War II decolonization, Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, defined neo-colonialism in *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965): a state is "in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty," yet "in reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from the outside" through monetary dependence, debt, infrastructure leverage, or international financial consortia such as Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (Nkrumah, 1965, pp. 317–318).

In the twenty-first century, neo-mercantilist colonialism fuses Nkrumah's mechanisms with "the new state capitalism"—sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that reshape host-country governance while serving home-state strategic priorities (Alami & Dixon, 2024; State Capitalism, Capitalist Statism, 2023, pp. 2–3). Crucially, this external capital does not enter a political vacuum; it intersects with **extraversion**, in which African political elites intentionally leverage external diplomatic, financial, and military rents to reinforce their domestic dominance over internal rivals (Bayart, 2000, pp. 217–219, 222). Within the Horn of Africa's **political marketplace**, where political budgets determine regime survival, unconditional external bailouts, currency swaps, and arms transfers insulate rulers from domestic fiscal and electoral accountability—locking host states into asymmetric clientelism while hollowing out public institutions (de Waal, 2015, Ch. 2; de Waal, 2026, p. 48; Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243, 253).

Table 1: Comparative Investment Scale and Political-Economy Footprint in Africa

Indicator / Dimension	People's Republic of China	United Arab Emirates (UAE)
Cumulative / Multi-Year Capital Footprint	$180.87 billion in loan commitments (2000–2024); $73.9 billion in announced greenfield FDI and $38.1 billion in M&A deals (2004–2024) (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2026, p. 34)	Over $110 billion committed (2019–2023), accounting for ~60% of all Gulf inflows into East Africa; historically nearly $60 billion invested plus $97 billion newly pledged—Africa's 4th-largest FDI source (CARPO, 2025; The Africa Debate, 2026, p. 11; Transnational Institute, 2025)
Recent Annual / Post-2023 Trajectory	Sovereign lending contracted sharply to $4.61 billion (2023) and $2.1 billion (2024), while BRI investment/construction in Africa surged to $33.5 billion in H1 2026 (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2026, pp. 37–38; Nedopil, 2026, p. 7)	Anchors GCC's $53+ billion in announced African greenfield FDI (2023); rapidly expanding sovereign equity in ports, renewable energy, critical minerals, and AI data centers (e.g., $1B G42/Microsoft Kenya hub) (Afreximbank, 2024, pp. 10, 12)
Global Outward Investment Intensity (% of GDP)	0.8% of GDP globally—massive in absolute volume but modest relative to China's domestic economy (Nedopil, 2026)	10.1% of GDP globally—an extraordinarily high capital-projection ratio for a small state (Nedopil, 2026)
Trade & Extractive Flows	Record $275 billion bilateral trade in 2024 ($182B African imports vs. $93B exports); 39 African states ran trade deficits with China (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2026, p. 10)	Primary global hub for African gold: imported 591 tonnes of illicit gold ($74B) in 2024, including 413–453 tonnes smuggled from Africa (~70% of Africa's gold) (Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 2)
Major Country Concentrations & Leverage Mode	Angola (~$49B loans, >25% of total), Ethiopia (~$14B loans; $16.9B total investment/aid 2010–2020), Sudan ($5.2B, 2010–2020), Kenya ($3.5B SGR debt converted to yuan in Oct. 2025) via formal state-to-state contracts (Yue et al., 2026, pp. 6, 12, 15; Meester & Lanfranchi, 2021)	Ethiopia ($3B aid/investment in 2018; $817M currency swap in 2024), Sudan (RSF gold-for-arms network), Somalia (Berbera & Bosaso ports), Angola ($6.5B announced), DRC/Zambia (IRH critical minerals) via personalized and proxy patronage (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2; The Africa Debate, 2026, p. 11; Transnational Institute, 2025)

C. Comparing and Contrasting China and the UAE in Africa's Political Economy

While both China and the UAE exemplify twenty-first-century neo-mercantilist state capitalism in Africa, their capital models and political-economy leverage differ

sharply. China operates primarily as a **state-centric, debt-financed industrial creditor** that ties African governments to long-term sovereign loans, formal ministry-to-ministry infrastructure contracts, and raw commodity off-take agreements (Ziegler, 2014, pp. 29, 35; Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2026, pp. 10, 34). By contrast, the UAE operates as an agile, **networked sub-imperialist investor**—deploying disproportionate capital relative to its GDP (10.1% globally vs. China's 0.8%) through equity concessions, central-bank bailouts, illicit bullion hubs, and direct military/proxy patronage that penetrates both embattled federal regimes and sub-national armed factions (Nedopil, 2026; Transnational Institute, 2025; Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243).

This divergence is sharpest across three regional theaters:

Ethiopia (Institutional Infrastructure vs. Personalized Regime Patronage): China's ~$14 billion in sovereign loans (2000–2024) financed state-led railways, industrial parks, and power grids anchored in formal public institutions, whereas the UAE's 2018 emergency rescue package, 2024 currency swap, Republican Guard training, and armed drones cultivated highly personalized regime dependency under Abiy Ahmed—enabling Addis Ababa to govern through coercion despite declining domestic consent (Yue et al., 2026, p. 6; Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2; Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243, 253).

Djibouti and the Horn (Sovereign Counterweight vs. Sub-National Circumvention): After Djibouti's dispute with Dubai's DP World over the Doraleh Container Terminal led to China Merchants Port replacing DP World, Abu Dhabi pivoted aggressively toward rival sub-national authorities in Somaliland (Berbera) and Puntland (Bosaso), bypassing Somalia's federal government to secure maritime chokepoints (Meester & Lanfranchi, 2021, p. 4).

Sudan and Angola (Debt Retrenchment vs. Opportunist Expansion): As China pulled back from sovereign lending after 2020—shifting toward selective yuan-denominated refinancing in major borrowers like Angola and Kenya—the UAE stepped into the resulting capital vacuum, pairing formal commercial pledges in stable states like Angola ($6.5 billion announced) with illicit conflict-gold extraction and proxy warfare in Sudan (Yue et al., 2026, pp. 12, 15; The Africa Debate, 2026, p. 11; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 2).

The Architecture of Emirati Power Projection: Legitimacy-Deficient Clients

At the core of the UAE's African footprint is the fusion of maritime logistics, sovereign wealth capital, and security patronage. Two state-linked logistics giants—**DP World** (owned by the Dubai government) and **AD Ports Group** (majority-owned by Abu

Dhabi's sovereign wealth fund, ADQ)—have pursued 30-to-50-year port concessions encircling Africa's coastlines, from the Mediterranean and Red Sea to the Indian Ocean and Atlantic (Transnational Institute, 2025).

These facilities serve dual functions:

- **Commercial and Resource Security:** Anchoring global trade routes connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, securing agricultural land and food supply chains under the UAE's National Food Security Strategy 2051, and channeling African gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt, lithium, and bauxite to Emirati markets (Transnational Institute, 2025).
- **Geopolitical and Military Utility:** Converting port concessions, adjacent free zones, and airstrips into dual-use logistical platforms for military training, arms transfers, drone operations, and diplomatic leverage (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 5–6).

Crucially, across fragile or contested states, this strategy systematically targets **clients with acute domestic legitimacy deficits**—unrecognized militias, breakaway regional administrations, or besieged federal leaders—who trade long-term sovereign assets and territorial access for immediate weapons, cash, and political survival.

Table 2: Regional Matrix of Emirati Economic Interests, Client Patronage, and Geopolitical Impact

Country / Sub-Region	Primary Emirati Economic & Infrastructure Interests	Security & Client Patronage Mechanisms	Geopolitical & Legitimacy Impact
Libya *(Northern Africa)*	Energy infrastructure, Mediterranean maritime access, and reconstruction leverage (Transnational Institute, 2025)	Military, financial, drone, and air-defense backing for Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA); logistics overlapping with Wagner Group networks (Organization of African Unity, 1977/2002, pp. 25–40; Transnational Institute, 2025)	Entrenched east-west territorial fragmentation and bypassed UN-recognized authorities
Sudan *(Northern / Eastern Africa)*	Primary global hub for Sudanese gold, fertile agricultural land, and Red Sea port ambitions (Transnational Institute, 2025)	Financial, weapons, and air-bridge logistical support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and foreign contractor networks (AU PSC, 2025, p. 4; AU PSC, 2026a)	Enabled an unrecognized paramilitary force to wage a devastating civil war, triggering the world's largest displacement crisis (United Nations Security Council, 2026)

Country / Sub-Region	Primary Emirati Economic & Infrastructure Interests	Security & Client Patronage Mechanisms	Geopolitical & Legitimacy Impact
Chad *(Central Africa)*	Transit corridors linking Libya, Sudan, and the Sahel; bilateral financial aid	Military bases, security training, and airfield corridors used to route supplies toward Darfur (AU PSC, 2025, p. 8)	Heightened divisions within Chad's military elite and escalated cross-border instability (AU PSC, 2025, p. 8)
South Sudan *(Eastern / Central Africa)*	Oil transit corridors, border trade, and regional logistics	Spillover from Sudanese armed networks and Emirati-supported supply routes	Destabilized borderlands and disrupted vital oil export lifelines running through Sudan (AU PSC, 2025, p. 8; Apuuli, 2023, pp. 9, 30)
Democratic Republic of Congo *(Central Africa)*	Critical mineral off-take agreements (copper, cobalt, tin, tantalum) via IRH/ ADQ and gold hubs (Transnational Institute, 2025)	Indirect exposure via regional mineral smuggling routes and commercial-security linkages in eastern DRC	Replicates extractive mine-to-port dynamics while fueling illicit armed financing networks (Nkrumah, 1965, pp. 317–318; Transnational Institute, 2025)
Somalia *(Eastern Africa / Horn)*	Port concessions in Berbera (Somaliland) and Bosaso (Puntland) via DP World (Transnational Institute, 2025)	Funding and training for the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF), Somaliland security forces, and counterterrorism airstrikes	Empowered sub-national authorities at the expense of Somalia's federal sovereignty (AU PSC, 2026b; African Union, 2000, Art. 4)
Ethiopia *(Eastern Africa / Horn)*	Financial bailouts, currency swaps, arable land, urban prestige real estate (e.g., Eagle Hills, Chaka Project), and the Berbera Port corridor (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2; Transnational Institute, 2025)	Wing Loong II drone air-bridges, Republican Guard and police training, and alleged UAE use of airfields such as Harar Meda and Asosa (Gebru, 2025, p. 2; American Enterprise Institute, 2026)	Substituted external regime protection for domestic legitimacy while triggering regional isolation, including Sudan's May 2026 recall of its ambassador (Walsh, 2025, p. 253; Apuuli, 2023, p. 30)
Kenya & Southeastern Africa *(Eastern / Southeastern Africa)*	Indian Ocean port terminals (Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique), inland dry ports, and mineral corridors (Transnational Institute, 2025)	Transit and diplomatic positioning within East and Southern African trade corridors	Positioned the UAE as a dominant maritime gatekeeper linking Africa's interior to Gulf markets (State Capitalism, Capitalist Statism, 2023, pp. 2–3)

A. Sub-State Proxy Patronage Across Northern, Central, and Coastal Africa

In **Libya**, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's 2019–2020 assault on Tripoli established the modern blueprint for Emirati proxy warfare: supplying armed drones, air-defense systems, intelligence, and financing to a rival military commander against an internationally recognized government, entrenching national partition and turning eastern Libya into a forward logistics base (Transnational Institute, 2025).

That logistical base directly enabled the UAE's deeper intervention in **Sudan**, where Abu Dhabi cultivated the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) after Omar al-Bashir's 2019 ouster. Following the outbreak of full-scale war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF in April 2023, international monitors documented extensive Emirati cargo air-bridges operating through airfields in **Chad** and eastern Libya to sustain RSF combat operations—generating severe downstream spillover across **South Sudan's** borderlands and oil pipelines (AU PSC, 2025, pp. 4, 8; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 5–6). By late 2026, this externally fueled conflict had produced the world's largest displacement crisis (United Nations Security Council, 2026).

Meanwhile, in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, sovereign vehicles such as ADQ and International Resources Holding (IRH) have targeted copper, cobalt, and lithium off-take chains linked to East and Southeastern African ports in **Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique** (Transnational Institute, 2025). In **Somalia**, DP World's concessions in Berbera (Somaliland) and Bosaso (Puntland), paired with Emirati financing and training for the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF), deliberately bypassed Mogadishu's federal authority to lock in Red Sea and Gulf of Aden chokepoints (AU PSC, 2026b; Transnational Institute, 2025).

B. The Gold-for-Arms Pipeline: How Conflict Extraction Finances Proxy Warfare

Gold serves as the financial lifeblood enabling non-state proxies like the RSF to wage prolonged warfare without domestic tax legitimacy or international recognition:

Extraction at the Source: RSF gold operations in Darfur and Kordofan were consolidated under Al-Junaid Multi Activities Co. Ltd., controlled by the family of RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") and sanctioned by the United States in June 2023 and the European Union in January 2024 (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, p. 6; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 5). To evade SAF airspace control, the RSF built dozens of makeshift airstrips adjacent to mining zones (AU PSC, 2025, p. 8).

Regional Smuggling Corridors: Bullion is smuggled out of western Sudan through Chad, Libya, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic (CAR), obscuring its origin through layered intermediaries (AU PSC, 2025, p. 8). Following the UAE's August 2025 suspension of commercial flights and

maritime traffic with Port Sudan, formal exports collapsed; by November 2025, the state-owned Sudanese Mineral Resources Co. (SMRC) estimated that 80% of Sudan's gold output was being smuggled abroad (Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 5).

Dubai Bullion Integration and Partial Sanctions: More than 95% of gold declared as imports from Sudan ended up in the UAE, which absorbed 174.5 tonnes of conflict gold from Sudan, Russia, and Yemen in 2024 alone (Ummel & Schulz, 2026, pp. 2, 5). Investigations by *The Sentry* and Western sanctions authorities exposed UAE-registered front companies—including Capital Tap Holding (managed by Abu Dharr) and Al-Zumoroud and Al-Yaqoot Gold & Jewellers—converting smuggled gold into hard currency, fuel, and weapons (European Foundation for Democracy, 2026, p. 6; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 5). In July 2026, the EU banned Sudanese gold imports and mining chemicals, while the UK sanctioned Abu Dharr alongside Sudanese mining entities (Council Regulation (EU) 2023/2147, 2026, Arts. 1a–1b; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 5).

Table 3: Operational Stages of the Sudan–UAE Gold-for-Arms Pipeline

Stage	Key Actors & Mechanisms	Strategic Function
1. Extraction	Dagalo family; Al-Junaid Multi Activities Co. Ltd.; Darfur & Kordofan mines	Generates raw bullion outside formal state taxation or sovereign oversight (AU PSC, 2025, p. 4; Transnational Institute, 2025)
2. Transit & Smuggling	Makeshift airstrips; overland and air corridors via Chad, Libya, South Sudan, and CAR	Evades SAF airspace control and launders the bullion's Sudanese origin (AU PSC, 2025, p. 8)
3. Laundering & Sale	UAE-based precious metal trading fronts (e.g., Capital Tap Holding, Al-Zumoroud)	Converts conflict gold into hard currency and fungible bullion in Dubai (Transnational Institute, 2025; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 5)
4. Reinvestment	Procurement facilitators (e.g., Abu Dharr); airfields and cargo routes via Chad	Finances fuel, ammunition, and armed drones to sustain RSF combat capacity (AU PSC, 2025, pp. 4, 8; AU PSC, 2026a; Organization of African Unity, 1977/2002, pp. 25–40)

The Abiy–Bin Zayed Relationship — Compensating Domestic Illegitimacy by Seeking External Patronage

While Sudan illustrates how the UAE empowers non-state paramilitary forces to capture war economies, Ethiopia represents the state-level archetype of Abu Dhabi's strategy: **cultivating deep, personalized regime dependency within a centralized**

federal government so that an embattled leader can compensate for eroding domestic legitimacy by seeking external patronage. Since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed office in April 2018, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ) has embedded Emirati leverage across the financial, coercive, urban-symbolic, diplomatic, and geopolitical pillars of the Ethiopian state (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2; Walsh, 2025, p. 253).

A. The Domestic Legitimacy Deficit (2018–2026)

When Abiy Ahmed took office in April 2018, he initially enjoyed high domestic popularity anchored in promised democratic reforms and a historic peace deal with Eritrea (Sarkar, 2023, pp. 22–23). However, his domestic standing eroded rapidly under three compounding crises:

- **Erosion of Political Consensus:** The creation of the centralized Prosperity Party in 2019, the fracture in the alliance of Oromo and Tigray ethnonationalist forces that once coalesced under the EPRDF, the absence of any transition roadmap from the EPRDF era to a better future, and the ever worsening atrocities and genocidal war committed on the Amhara people (Walsh, 2025, p. 253; Sarkar, 2023, p. 23).
- **Protracted Civil Conflicts:** Full-scale war in Tigray then (2022-2023) and now, followed by entrenched armed Amhara force, Fano that severely weakened the central state's authority, territorial reach, and moral legitimacy (American Enterprise Institute, 2026; Martín Martín, 2026, pp. 6–7).
- **Macroeconomic Distress:** Severe foreign-currency shortages, soaring inflation, and sovereign debt defaults eroded Addis Ababa's fiscal capacity, undermining the government's ability to buy domestic loyalty through traditional state patronage and public investment (Sarkar, 2023, p. 23; Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2).

B. Mechanisms of Emirati Patronage: The Four Pillars of the Abiy–MbZ Axis

To compensate for his shrinking domestic base and depleted state coffers, Abiy turned to Abu Dhabi, which was simultaneously seeking to expand its strategic footprint across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Regional analysts—including researchers at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) as well as commentators at outlets such as *Horn Review* and *Noonpost*—highlight four interlocking pillars of Emirati support:

Emergency Financial Bailouts and Monetary Leverage: Shortly after Abiy took power in 2018, the UAE pledged $3 billion in aid and investments—including a critical $1 billion central bank deposit that prevented immediate economic collapse, eased acute foreign-exchange shortages, and kept the state apparatus functioning (Gebru, 2025, p. 1; Sarkar, 2023, p. 23). Commercial dependence steadily deepened: by 2023, the UAE had become Ethiopia's fourth-largest export destination, and on July 16, 2024, both governments signed an $817 million bilateral

currency swap agreement to supply local liquidity for cross-border settlements (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2).

Decisive Military Intervention, Drone Warfare, and Praetorian Protection: During the Tigray war, when traditional Western partners imposed sanctions and suspended aid, Abu Dhabi established an air bridge to supply Addis Ababa with armed drones (including Wing Loong II UAVs) and ammunition—assets that proved decisive in reversing TPLF advances toward the capital in late 2021 (Gebru, 2025, p. 2). Abu Dhabi further entrenched Abiy's coercive survival by training Ethiopia's elite **Republican Guard** (a praetorian unit loyal directly to the Prime Minister) and dispatching Dubai Police and UAE Ministry of Interior specialists in January 2025 to train Ethiopian internal security personnel (Gebru, 2025, p. 2). Externally supplied drones have remained central to federal counterinsurgency campaigns in Amhara and renewed clashes in Tigray through early 2026 (American Enterprise Institute, 2026).

Prestige Projects, Soft Power, and Personalized Diplomatic Sponsorship: Emirati capital has backed high-profile urban development and real estate ventures in Addis Ababa—notably the Chaka Project and luxury developments by Eagle Hills—enabling Abiy to project an image of sleek modernization despite widespread rural instability and economic hardship (Gebru, 2025, p. 2). Simultaneously, MbZ cultivated Abiy's international stature from the outset by hosting secretive follow-up summits in Abu Dhabi and Jeddah after the July 2018 Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement that helped earn Abiy the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize (de Waal, 2026, p. 48; Sarkar, 2023, pp. 22–23). Unlike China's institutionalized state-to-state engagement, UAE involvement in Ethiopia is overtly political and **intensely personalized around the Abiy–MbZ bond** (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243)—vividly demonstrated on March 13, 2026, when Abiy became the very first foreign head of state to travel to Abu Dhabi while the Emirates were under active Iranian attack (Med-Or Foundation, 2026a).

Red Sea Geopolitics and Maritime Corridors: Emirati financial and diplomatic backing—led by Abu Dhabi and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development—underpins Abiy's framing of Ethiopia's landlocked status as a "historic mistake" and enabled Addis Ababa's controversial January 2024 port and naval-base Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland (Gebru, 2025, pp. 4–5; Martín Martín, 2026, p. 5).

C. The Cost of Patronage: Strategic Asymmetry and Authoritarian Conflict Management

External patronage is rarely unconditional. Critics and regional analysts—including those at SWP (Gebru, 2025, pp. 4–8) and writing for *The Geopolitics*—demonstrate

that Ethiopia has increasingly subordinated its sovereign foreign and security policy to Emirati strategic priorities in an acutely asymmetric exchange:

Table 4: Strategic Asymmetry in the Abiy–Bin Zayed Exchange

Dimension	What Abiy Gains	What the UAE Gains
Security & Military	Armed drones (e.g., Wing Loong II UAVs), weapons, Republican Guard training, and intelligence to suppress domestic insurgencies (Gebru, 2025, p. 2; American Enterprise Institute, 2026)	Access to Ethiopian airfields (such as Harar Meda and Asosa) as forward logistical hubs for regional military and supply operations
Regional Alignment	Diplomatic sponsorship, international legitimacy boosts, and mediation (e.g., the 2018 Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement) (de Waal, 2026, p. 48; Sarkar, 2023, pp. 22–23)	Strategic alignment in the Sudan civil war, including alleged transit routes through Ethiopian territory for supplies to the UAE-backed Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and subordination to Emirati Red Sea rivalries (Gebru, 2025, pp. 5, 7)
Maritime, Finance & Trade	Emergency bailouts ($1B central bank deposit, $817M currency swap), prestige real estate ventures, and backing for Ethiopia's Red Sea access push (Somaliland MoU) (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2, 4–5)	Strategic dominance over Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ports (via DP World), **preferential access to Ethiopia's arable land and water resources,** and leverage over flagship state assets (Gebru, 2025, pp. 2, 4; Transnational Institute, 2025)

The underlying political mechanism driving this exchange is **Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM)**—where illiberal regimes rely on non-Western external patrons to centralize coercion, control public discourse, and suppress domestic contestation rather than negotiate constitutional settlements (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243, 253). Through this classic act of **extraversion** (Bayart, 2000, pp. 218–219), external bailouts remove the domestic fiscal accountability that would otherwise force compromise, while drone warfare and praetorian policing incentivize Addis Ababa to treat political grievances strictly as military targets—deploying aerial strikes, emergency decrees, and bank freezes against Fano militias, Oromo insurgents, and Tigrayan factions (American Enterprise Institute, 2026; Martín Martín, 2026, pp. 6–7). Yet empirical fieldwork in Ethiopia reveals a sharp **legitimacy paradox**: while MbZ's patronage ensures tactical survival for the executive, it actively deepens long-term public alienation as citizens experience foreign-enabled warfare, displacement, and economic hardship rather than inclusive development (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243, 253).

D. Long-Term Structural Vulnerabilities

Relying on an external patron to offset internal illegitimacy exposes Ethiopia to three severe structural vulnerabilities:

Hollowed Sovereignty and De-Institutionalization: Since 2018, Ethiopian foreign and security policymaking has been progressively de-institutionalized, bypassing parliamentary oversight and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in favor of closed personal channels in Abu Dhabi (Sarkar, 2023, pp. 5, 23). When regime survival depends on foreign liquidity and weapons rather than a domestic social contract, national policy—and strategic national endowments ranging from arable land and water to proposed equity stakes in crown-jewel enterprises such as Ethiopian Airlines—becomes tailored to external benefactors rather than Ethiopian constituencies (Gebru, 2025, pp. 2, 4–7; de Waal, 2026, p. 48).

Regional Diplomatic Isolation and Counter-Encirclement: Aligning closely with Abu Dhabi's regional agenda has severely damaged Ethiopia's standing across the Horn of Africa. Accusations that Ethiopian territory has been used to funnel Emirati weapons to the RSF led Sudan to formally recall its ambassador from Addis Ababa in May 2026, deepening hostility along Ethiopia's western flank. Simultaneously, Ethiopia's UAE-backed port ambitions in Somaliland catalyzed the August 2024 Somalia–Egypt defense pact designed to block Ethiopian coastal access, alienated Djibouti (which handles over 90% of Ethiopia's maritime trade), and turned Eritrea from a 2018 peace partner into an adversary alarmed by a UAE-backed Ethiopian naval footprint (Gebru, 2025, pp. 5, 7–8; Martín Martín, 2026, p. 7; Med-Or Foundation, 2026b, p. 14).

Fragile Dependency and Patron Volatility: As noted in analyses by *Eurasia Review* and European strategic institutes, external patrons act strictly on their own shifting geopolitical calculations (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243). Because Emirati emergency liquidity provides short-term breathing room without resolving Ethiopia's underlying debt, inflation, or political fractures, any Middle Eastern crisis—such as regional escalation involving Iran—or strategic pivot that diverts Emirati attention or capital leaves Addis Ababa abruptly exposed to the unresolved domestic grievances it bypassed (Sarkar, 2023, p. 23; Med-Or Foundation, 2026a; Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2026, p. 10).

E. Strategic Scenarios for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa (2026–2030)

Sustaining domestic domination through external dependency places Ethiopia on a volatile trajectory across four primary pathways:

Table 5: Strategic Scenarios for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa (2026–2030)

Scenario	Core Trigger & Mechanism	Impact on Ethiopia & Its People	Regional & Geopolitical Fallout
1. Regionalized Interstate War (Ethiopia–Eritrea & Red Sea Escalation)	Addis Ababa attempts to externalize domestic insurgencies by striking Eritrean positions accused of backing anti-Abiy rebel coalitions, or forcefully pursues Red Sea port access (Med-Or Foundation, 2026b, pp. 14, 18; Gebru, 2025, pp. 7–8)	Mass conscription, economic collapse, severe civilian casualties, and complete breakdown of northern and eastern trade lifelines	Draws in Egypt, Sudan, Houthi actors across the Bab-el-Mandeb, and rival Gulf powers; risks leaving a coastal power vacuum along Eritrea's 350 islands (Med-Or Foundation, 2026b, p. 14)
2. Protracted "Garrison-State" Authoritarianism	Continued UAE financial swaps, drone supplies, and security training enable the Prosperity Party center to hold Addis Ababa while failing to pacify peripheral regions (Gebru, 2025, pp. 1–2; Walsh, 2025, p. 253)	Chronic multi-front insurgencies (Amhara, Oromia, Tigray), permanent militarization, brain drain, hyperinflation, and deepening state-society alienation (American Enterprise Institute, 2026)	Ethiopia loses its historic diplomatic leadership role in the AU and IGAD, becoming a permanent arena for proxy competition
3. Patron Withdrawal and Disorderly Regime Implosion	Because Emirati patronage is transactional and personalized (Walsh, 2025, pp. 240–243), a Gulf geopolitical shock (e.g., Middle East escalation involving Iran) or a UAE pivot toward alternative Red Sea proxies abruptly cuts off funding and arms (Med-Or Foundation, 2026a; PISM, 2026, p. 10)	Sudden fiscal insolvency, elite defections within the military and Prosperity Party, and high risk of violent state fragmentation along ethno-regional lines	Massive cross-border refugee flows into Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti; destabilization of the entire Horn of Africa security architecture
4. Sovereign Rebalancing and Constitutional Reset *(Low-Probability Positive Path)*	Sustained domestic civil pressure, economic exhaustion, and coordinated AU/IGAD diplomatic leverage compel Addis Ababa to abandon personalized foreign dependency (Sarkar, 2023, pp. 5, 23)	Inclusive national dialogue, restoration of federal checks and balances, demilitarization of internal politics, and recovery of institutional legitimacy (Walsh, 2025, p. 253)	De-escalation with Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, and Egypt; negotiated commercial port access replacing unilateral security deals

UAE : A Small State with Insatiable Appetite for Power and Resources

The UAE's Networked Neo-Mercantilist Colonialism

The UAE does not hoist its flag over African capitals or administer formal colonial bureaucracies. Instead, it has updated Dutch chartered-company monopolies and Belgian private-sovereign extraction for a postcolonial legal order:

- **Sovereign-Corporate Fusion:** State-owned conglomerates (DP World, AD Ports Group, ADQ, IRH) operate as modern equivalents of the Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and WIC)—locking in 30-to-50-year port concessions, free zones, and mineral off-take rights without formal territorial annexation (Transnational Institute, 2025).
- **Outsourced Coercion via Legitimacy-Deficient Clients:** Rather than deploying a formal colonial army like Leopold's *Force Publique*, Abu Dhabi finances, arms, and trains domestically illegitimate leaders and centrifugal militias (from Abiy Ahmed's Republican Guard to Hemedti's RSF and Haftar's LNA), securing compliant local enforcers while preserving plausible deniability (Gebru, 2025, p. 2; Transnational Institute, 2025).
- **Humanitarian Rhetoric vs. Extractive Devastation:** Just as Leopold II wrapped the Congo Free State in anti-slavery philanthropy (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), modern Emirati interventions are routinely packaged as humanitarian relief, port modernization, and counterterrorism—even as conflict-gold laundering and drone transfers prolong wars that displace and impoverish tens of millions of Africans (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 5–6; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 2).

Multiple Paralysis Despite the presence of Applicable Continental and International Legal Frameworks

The UAE's arming of non-state factions, circumvention of federal governments, and integration into illicit resource pipelines directly violate the foundational legal architecture of both the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

A. Foundational Continental and Regional Treaties

Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000):

- **Article 4(a) & 4(b):** Enshrines the sovereign equality and interdependence of Member States and strict respect for borders existing upon independence (African Union, 2000, Art. 4). Sub-national port deals bypassing federal governments (as in Somalia) and support for de facto territorial partitions (as in Libya and Sudan) directly contravene these norms.

- **Article 4(f) & 4(g):** Prohibits the use or threat of force and establishes strict non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States (African Union, 2000, Art. 4).
- **Article 4(h) & 4(j):** Establishes the AU's shift from passive non-interference to "non-indifference"—granting the Union the right to intervene in grave circumstances involving war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity, and empowering Member States to request AU intervention to restore peace and security (African Union, 2000, Art. 4; Kioko, 2003, p. 817).

OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa (1977):

- Adopted in Libreville on July 3, 1977 (entered into force April 22, 1985), this binding treaty defines mercenarism as a crime against peace and security in Africa (Articles 1–2) and obligates states (Articles 5–6) to prohibit the recruitment, financing, training, equipping, and transit of foreign fighters or private military contractors operating against recognized governments or territorial integrity (Organization of African Unity, 1977/2002, pp. 25–40). Foreign drone operators, private contractors, and overlapping proxy logistics in Libya and Sudan directly violate this continental norm.

Agreement Establishing IGAD (1996):

- **Article 6A (Principles):** Binds Horn of Africa Member States—and establishes the regional standard for external partners—to four core principles: (a) sovereign equality of all Member States; (b) non-interference in internal affairs; (c) peaceful settlement of inter- and intra-State conflicts through dialogue; and (d) maintenance of regional peace, stability, and security (Intergovernmental Authority on Development [IGAD], 1996, Art. 6A; Apuuli, 2023, pp. 9, 30).

B. Specific AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) Resolutions

- **Sudan — Condemning External Interference and Parallel Governments:** Across **Communiqué PSC/AHG/COMM.1218 (2024)**, **Communiqué PSC/AHG/COMM.1261 (2025)**, and **Communiqué PSC/PR/COMM.2.1308 (2025)** (1308th Emergency Session, October 28, 2025), the AU PSC condemned RSF atrocities in El Fasher, rejected the RSF's declaration of a "parallel government," and tasked the **PSC Sanctions Subcommittee, CISSA (Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa), and AFRIPOL** with identifying external actors fueling the war (AU PSC, 2025, p. 4). At its **1330th Ministerial Meeting (February 12, 2026)**, the PSC reiterated its total rejection of the RSF-led Sudan Founding Alliance ("Tasis") parallel government and instructed the Sanctions Subcommittee to expedite implementation of Communiqué 1218 (AU PSC, 2026a).
- **Somalia and the Horn — Defending Federal Sovereignty:** Across **Communiqués PSC/PR/COMM.1205 (2024)**, **PSC/PR/COMM.1217 (2024)**,

PSC/PR/COMM.1225 (2024), and **PSC/PR/COMM.1342 (2026)** (April 28, 2026), alongside **UN Security Council Resolution 2809 (2025)** authorizing AUSSOM, the PSC reaffirmed its unequivocal commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity of the Federal Republic of Somalia—centering the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) as the sole legitimate authority for port and security partnerships (AU PSC, 2026b).

- **Continental Rejection of Foreign Proxies:** In the **May 2022 Malabo Declaration**, the **October 2024 PSC Communiqué**, and its **1319th Meeting (late 2025)**, the AU demanded that all external actors cease backing armed proxies across Africa and called for coordinated cross-border intelligence sharing in the Lake Chad Basin and Sudanese borderlands (Botha & Graham, 2026; AU PSC, 2025, p. 8). Yet research on Horn regionalism demonstrates a persistent **structural enforcement gap**: Member States practice "guarded participation," invoking sovereignty to resist collective discipline while cutting bilateral financial and security deals with Abu Dhabi (Apuuli, 2023, p. 30; Negotiating Sovereignty in the Horn of Africa, 2026).

C. Institutional Failure: Why the AU, IGAD, EU, and UN Have Enabled Impunity and Bystander Complicity

Despite overwhelming evidentiary documentation, the response of the **AU, IGAD, EU, and UN** has been marked by institutional paralysis, selective enforcement, and diplomatic timidity—allowing the UAE to treat human catastrophe as an investment opportunity:

- **Profiteering from Armed Chaos:** In Sudan, Libya, and northern Somalia, state collapse lowers the political and financial cost of acquiring strategic assets. External arms and drone supplies incentivize armed proxies to choose battlefield escalation over peace negotiations (European Foundation for Democracy, 2026, p. 7), giving Emirati networks privileged access to Darfur's gold, fertile land, and Red Sea/Mediterranean corridors without accountable national oversight (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 5–6; Transnational Institute, 2025).
- **Institutionalizing Illicit Bullion Laundering:** Rather than enforcing anti-money-laundering standards, the UAE's lax regulatory regime actively rewards smuggling across Africa. SWISSAID's November 2026 investigation revealed that at least **591 tonnes of illicit gold—worth $74 billion and representing 42% of total UAE gold imports—entered the Emirates in 2024**, including 413 tonnes smuggled directly from Africa and at least 453 tonnes including transit smuggling (Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 2). Roughly 70% of all gold extracted in Africa flowed to the UAE in 2024, linking 41 of 54 African states to Dubai's market, while most UAE refineries audited between 2023 and 2025 were found "not compliant" with the UAE Ministry of Economy's own Due Diligence Regulations (Ummel & Schulz, 2026, pp. 2, 7).

- **UN Security Council Paralysis:** In Libya, the UN Panel of Experts concluded that the arms embargo "remained ineffective where Member States controlled the logistical flow and supply chains to armed actors" (United Nations Security Council, 2024, p. 3). In Sudan, UNSC Resolution 2791 (2025) merely renewed the geographically restricted Darfur arms embargo rather than expanding it nationwide, while Security Council action has been repeatedly weakened by vetoes and a refusal to penalize state sponsors routing weapons through Chad, Libya, CAR, and South Sudan (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, pp. 5–8; International Rescue Committee, 2025, pp. 7–8).
- **EU Half-Measures and Market Complicity:** Although the European Parliament urged the EU Council to sanction arms-embargo violators and expand the Sudan embargo (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025, p. 9), EU member states avoided direct diplomatic or economic penalties against the UAE to protect bilateral energy, arms, and trade deals (Clingendael Institute, 2025, p. 3). Even after the EU's July 2026 ban on Sudanese gold imports and mining chemicals (Council Regulation (EU) 2023/2147, 2026, Arts. 1a–1b), European and Swiss markets continued absorbing vast quantities of Emirati-refined gold of undisclosed origin—with Switzerland alone importing 36% of UAE gold exports (roughly 420 tonnes via refiner Valcambi in 2025), leaving conflict-gold laundering channels intact (Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 2).
- **IGAD's Structural Impasse:** Disjointed mediation tracks (IGAD, Jeddah, and the Quintet involving the UN, EU, and Arab League) enabled warring factions to "forum shop," while IGAD member states—compromised by their own reliance on Emirati loans, currency swaps, port deals, or transit fees—lacked the political cohesion to confront Abu Dhabi (International Rescue Committee, 2025, p. 7; Kameir, 2025, p. 3; Clingendael Institute, 2025, p. 3).

Policy Recommendations for African Regional Bodies and the International Community

Enforce Constitutional Ratification and Sovereignty Standards on Port Concessions (AU & AfCFTA): Adopt binding AU maritime governance protocols requiring all foreign port, free-zone, and airstrip concessions to undergo transparent parliamentary and federal ratification, incorporating strict non-militarization and regional inspection clauses.

Operationalize Targeted Sanctions Against External Spoilers and Illicit Bullion Networks (AU PSC, EU, UK, US & UNSC): Fully empower the AU PSC Sanctions Subcommittee, CISSA, and AFRIPOL—as mandated in Communiqué 1308 (2025) and Communiqué 1330 (2026)—to designate front companies, aviation operators, and bullion refineries laundering conflict gold

from Sudan and the DRC, paired with mandatory mine-of-origin disclosure rules in European and Swiss gold markets (United Nations Security Council, 2026; Ummel & Schulz, 2026, p. 7).

Institute Coordinated Airspace and Border Monitoring Across Conflict Corridors (AU PSC & IGAD): Deploy joint satellite and radar surveillance across the Libya–Chad–Darfur, Ethiopian borderland, and Red Sea air corridors to interdict unauthorized cargo flights operating from military or makeshift airstrips and enforce UN/AU arms embargoes.

Condition Financial Assistance on Democratic Accountability and Anti-Praetorian Safeguards (International Financial Institutions & Development Partners): Prevent external emergency bailouts and bilateral security assistance from being weaponized for Authoritarian Conflict Management by conditioning international macroeconomic support on parliamentary transparency, cessation of drone warfare against civilian populations, and inclusive national dialogue (Walsh, 2025, p. 253).

Build Collective Bargaining Consortia for Critical Minerals and Sovereign Assets (AfCFTA, SADC & EAC): Replace opaque, regime-to-patron bilateral asset sales with bloc-level mineral and infrastructure frameworks requiring foreign sovereign wealth funds to invest in domestic value addition and audited public revenue streams.

Conclusion

The relationship between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan—embedded within Abu Dhabi's wider continental network of proxy warfare and resource extraction—epitomizes a defining pathology of twenty-first-century African geopolitics: **compensating for domestic illegitimacy by seeking external patronage at the expense of national sovereignty and human life.** Operating through extraversion and the political marketplace, rulers and armed factions that lose domestic consent invite capital-rich external patrons to sustain their hold on power with emergency bailouts, armed drones, and praetorian training, converting internal political crises into foreign military logistics hubs, maritime chokepoints, and illicit bullion flows.

While the UAE's neo-mercantilist model avoids the formal colonial flags of King Leopold II's Congo Free State or the Dutch chartered companies, its human toll—tens of millions displaced, economies hollowed out, and entire regions locked into perpetual war—mirrors those historical tragedies. Above all, the international community and the multilateral institutions entrusted with upholding peace, sovereignty, and human dignity—the AU, IGAD, the EU, and the UN—cannot continue to look away, plead institutional helplessness, or hide behind hollow

communiqués while hundreds of millions of people suffer from the unbridled greed and predatory exploitation of small states with an insatiable appetite for wealth and power. Closing the chasm between international legal norms and their enforcement, while restoring genuine constitutional legitimacy at home, is the indispensable condition for African sovereignty and lasting peace.

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