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EXPERTS TAKE

The New External Politics of the Horn of Africa: Competition and Cooperation

An Interview with

DR. NEIL J. MELVIN

In light of increasing global tensions exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war and the return of great power strategic competition, ISDP's Asia Program intern Lwanga Egbewatt Arrey sat down with international security expert Dr. Neil Melvin to discuss how the current security dynamics have led to an amalgamation of the Indo-Pacific and the Horn of Africa as a contiguous geopolitical space with possibilities for both cooperation and competition.

Dr. Neil John Melvin *is the Director of International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Prior to that he was the Director of the Armed Conflict and Conflict Management Programme and later the Director of Research at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). His current research is focused on emerging international security dynamics in key regions around the world, notably Europe and Eurasia, the Gulf and Middle East, East Africa and the Horn, and the Indo-Pacific. He has also held senior adviser positions in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Energy Charter, the European Union, and has been a consultant for the United Nations on African security. Dr. Melvin holds a DPhil from Oxford University. He has been a visiting fellow at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University and the Department of Government of the London School of Economics.*

Egbewatt Arrey: *What particular event(s) or development(s) sparked your interest in initiating research on this topic?*
Melvin: I think probably the primary event was the growing attention to China's military base in Djibouti, and the conversation that was taking place around that. It was very China-centric in my opinion, so I started to look into that. And then I began to understand that, in fact, it was part of a much broader and more complex set of security developments that were interlocking. But I think the China base was probably the catalyst of my interest.

Egbewatt Arrey: *Can you tell us why the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean is important as a geostrategic space?*
Melvin: What I found interesting was that at least in recent history, those regions had not been considered as a single geostrategic space. There was a continental security agenda, which was very much about addressing instability and violence in the Horn of Africa, which was seen as sort of primarily an internal land-based issue. There was also a set of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, which again were largely seen as land-based issues. Like for instance, the civil war in Yemen. There was an idea of the maritime domain as one in which there was a set of security challenges, often on the non-traditional side, such as piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, and related activities. But these non-traditional security issues are increasingly becoming linked to a wider geopolitical struggle around control of sea lanes and access to the Red Sea in particular. And what was interesting was that the continental and maritime security issues, which had often been separate, were coming together because the external struggles were sort of spilling onto the land, mostly revolving around the competition for bases in Djibouti. So, the land and sea domains were coming together to create a new strategic space.

Egbewatt Arrey: *Why did you choose to engage in this project given the existence of other maritime security chokepoints in the world?*
Melvin: I would like to say there was a very strong intellectual and strategic reason. But the main reason was that my wife was a Swedish diplomat, and she got posted to Kenya. So, I started to look around to find what was interesting in the region. And I came across this issue, which was a local one in a way. That was why I started to focus on it. I can't say that I looked at the whole globe and then

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> [Today] there exist trust issues between some actors in the region. But in most circumstances, they all want to see the free flow of goods. That is a common interest at the moment. But also, there is a concern that if relations deteriorate, none of the stakeholders want these choke points to be used against them.

said, "Aha! The Red Sea is the most important one". Nevertheless, there are good reasons to focus on the region, which are strategic, and that is because there is an almost unprecedented set of countries who come together in that space, to some degree by chance, because the catalyst was anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. If we hadn't had the Somali piracy issue at the end of the 2000s, then we may not have had exactly this situation. Perhaps China would have been a bit slower, and a bit more cautious in developing its interest in this region. They might have had more of a focus on the Malacca Straits, because it's closer to home. So, the decision to engage in this project stemmed from a combination of serendipity and personal interests, as well as the current strategic agenda.

Egbewatt Arrey: *Can you tell us how the non-traditional and traditional security aspects of the Western Indian Ocean and Horn of Africa converge?*

Melvin: The current security issues in the region really began around the piracy question, because up until then, the region was seen primarily as a transit route. And if you speak particularly with naval officials, it was more like a region that you transited to get to other key areas. So then, with the Somali piracy issue, it became a focus itself. And the Somali piracy issue was a land issue in a way. But the response was initially on the maritime and the air policing domains. And what you got was an international response, which was seen at the time as very positive, because we saw cooperation between some countries which are not particularly friendly towards each other. So, we had Russia, China, the U.S., NATO, EU, and Middle Eastern countries all sending missions there. But then that gradually, sort of morphed, because the presence, of course, included stepped up presence on land, in terms of trying to address the situation in Somalia. This began to actually reduce much of the other maritime softer security aspects. But the big military missions continued in the region. And of course, they continue to be called "anti-piracy missions", even though the pirates had long disappeared. And China has continued to send nonstop anti-piracy missions, and they have gotten bigger and bigger. And then we have had other layers of issues being added to this, which do have a softer side. One, of course, was the smuggling around the Yemen war, and it was often about weapons. But it was about other things too, intersected with the smuggling of drugs with people and arms. Often, it is essentially the same. The same people, the same networks, even the same boat. Sometimes you have all three present – weapons, drugs, and people – on the same boat being moved around. And then the third aspect that came in was that Iran tried to sort of build up its own presence in the region, which again, they categorized as

anti-piracy. But this was viewed by many other countries, particularly in the Gulf, but also Israel and the U.S., as an effort to try to have an impact on the land-based security domain.
What we have seen is that the softer maritime security issue continues to be a real challenge. There are still intercepts fairly regularly, mostly of drugs, since it is a major drug smuggling route. But that often seems to be the basis for legitimating a wider, much bigger security presence. Because if you are really interested in addressing those smuggling and piracy issues, you do not need frigates. You need a lot of small policing vessels. Arguably, you probably do need airplanes to some degree, like those of EU NAVFOR Atalanta, for maritime domain awareness. But not the frigates, destroyers, submarines, and aircraft carriers, which are not ideal for dealing with soft security issues.

Egbewatt Arrey: *Is cooperation between various security actors in the region more likely on some issues in comparison to others? If so, in what areas do you think cooperation is possible and why is cooperation more difficult on other issues?*
Melvin: There's obviously a whole spectrum of security questions in the region. And you can see that there would certainly be areas that are perhaps less controversial, or even where there are common interests, and those are on the softer side. So, for example, environmental security would be something that you could make a case for. Though there are sometimes difficulties with this too, as it turns out. Even a country like China has been busy blowing up reefs offshore to build its port, while talking about environmental issues. But maybe you could say that around environmental issues like pollution, most countries, I think, would argue that in most circumstances, they share an interest.
Of course, there exist trust issues between some actors in the region. But in most circumstances, they all want to see the free flow of goods. That is a common interest at the moment. But also, there is a concern that if relations deteriorate, none of the stakeholders want these choke points to be used against them. Another area of possible cooperation is around the softer securities of combating smuggling, piracy, and illegal fishing. Though again, it is often more complicated because lots of the illegal fishing has been done by Chinese ships, some by European fleets too. And it is not by accident, perhaps that the Spanish have a naval force there, because often their fleets have been the ones doing some of the illegal fishing. But again, broadly speaking, that could be an area of cooperation.
And the last area I would highlight is humanitarian and disaster relief. Even during the evacuation of internationals from Yemen, the Chinese took a lead there and actually took out people from Western countries, which was a bit of a new development. On the humanitarian side, there has been cooperation around helping the World Food Program bring supplies into Yemen. India, and other countries have helped to escort supplies there. So, those are roughly the four broad areas where you could build cooperation.
There was an effort to build a discussion on cooperation between the Gulf countries and the countries of the Horn of Africa. And the biggest difficulty was a kind of asymmetry in resources and ability to engage on it, because the Saudis just have so much money, and the countries in the Horn of Africa don't really have the capacity to be able to match that. It was therefore quite difficult in terms of having a balanced political discussion. It did seem to be quite one-sided.
And so that's why it has not fully taken off. The international community tried to support some

of the Horn of Africa countries and multilateral formats to engage in that. But then COVID-19 pandemic came along. So, I am not actually sure where it stands now. But that was one of the difficulties, I would say.

Egbewatt Arrey: *Do you think this topic has received its due attention within policy and diplomatic circles?*

Melvin: The challenges in the region began to receive quite a bit of attention when I was working on it. And then it seems to have dropped off for some reason. And partly, that was because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, it is because events like the war in Ukraine have taken attention to other places, you know, maintaining focus on these questions is not terribly easy. It may be that some of the worst assumptions, particularly about China, have not yet played out. Because at the time, the string of pearls concept was very much in vogue, and you began to see that the presence in the Horn of Africa looked like part of a much bigger strategy to build dual-use infrastructure all across the region. As for instance the port in Sri Lanka, the ports in Bangladesh – sort of the Belt and Road Initiative going ahead. There's a lot of talk about China trying to get access to other ports in the region, like Mombasa and in Tanzania further south. That has not played out in the way that some people thought.

The string of pearls has been partly proven though. Djibouti is obviously continuing to develop, and I mean, China now has a facility that can potentially even take aircraft carriers. The Chinese have not yet deployed an aircraft carrier to the Indian Ocean, but they created the facility to do that. I mean, they are talking to the Djiboutian government about working with them on space issues. And that has continued to develop. Sri Lanka basically collapsed with large debts. China has a port there, but it is not really a functional port they can use. There was a trajectory in their buildup of military forces, but that seems to have plateaued for the moment. They have kept the naval missions in the region going. They built them up in terms of capacity. But they are essentially largely the same. They have added a few ships each time, but they have not really done that in a big way recently. And alongside the deployment of the anti-piracy mission, there was evidence that they were starting to send submarines into the Indian Ocean. That activity seems to have been reduced. It appears the threat aspect of China in the region has become less intense. And so, we have seen perhaps, governments less focused on it. There are many actors in that region, and the actors vary. So, the attention has perhaps shifted a bit more to the MENA region.

Ethiopia, which has obviously been a key player,

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historically in the Horn of Africa, descended into civil war in 2020, and did not take an African lead on these issues. The Horn of Africa agenda turned inwards in terms of civil wars and instability, rather than turning outwards, to engage on the maritime side. The Horn of Africa continues to be largely kind of a maritime-blind area. They have very insufficient ambitions, abilities, and attention to the maritime side. Because when I was there, there were even discussions about Ethiopia trying to reconstitute its navy. It had a navy until Eritrea broke away, then it lost its navy because it did not have access to the sea. And what was left eventually ended up in Yemen. There was a discussion about trying to reconstitute it and then perhaps even have it based in Eritrea, or possibly Djibouti. But once the Civil War happened, of course, that all evaporated, all of that talk – and the moment was lost.

Egbewatt Arrey: *Earlier, you mentioned a concept called the "string of pearls". How does it manifest in the Horn and Western Indian Ocean?*
Melvin: The idea is based on the premise that China was building a set of port facilities primarily, but more broadly, infrastructure, particularly transport infrastructure that was allowing it to extend not just its trade influence, but potentially its military influence. This network of ports and infrastructure was going to enable China to break out, since it was largely contained in a sense by U.S. military strength around the South China Sea and the first island chain in the Pacific. And the key ports that grabbed a lot of attention were Hambantota in Sri Lanka and the port in Bangladesh. And then Djibouti, which really sort of sparked interest in the string of pearls concept. Also, the Chinese-run port of Gwadar in Pakistan has attracted lots of attention and speculation.
The string of pearls was also linked to Beijing's bilateral security relationships. And not only was it creating ports, but it was seen to be offering material security assistance to countries so that the countries would become pro-China. Pakistan and China have a whole partnership around developing submarines and new frigates and missiles. China has given submarines to Bangladesh, and some ships to Sri Lanka. So, there was a feeling that they were starting to not only create ports, but actually create allies that were favorable to Beijing. Then sort of overlaying that with Belt and Road money – investment money. The western Indian Ocean thus became a focus of that strategy. But actually, it's much broader than that. I think while the pace of this strategy has slowed down, there is some evidence that it continues to go forward. For instance, the U.S. Pentagon has reported that China has got some kind of port facility on the West African coast. They are also in discussions with Argentina

to have access to a port there. So, in a maximalist version, the string of pearls would not only see China be able to move its navy from China to the Indian Ocean and up to the Red Sea, but actually be able to transit military forces around the globe. You would have a series of bases through which you could move Chinese forces east or west. And very few countries can do that. The U.S. can do it, and to some degree, the British and the French. But up until now, those are really the only countries that have had a set of military facilities in different places to do that. And so, I think, at heart, the string of pearls was viewed as a Chinese effort to build that sort of network.

Egbewatt Arrey: *The Horn of Africa and Western Indian Ocean feature several maritime chokepoints, some of which sit at the intersection between the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean and the wider Euro-Atlantic area. How important are the security dynamics and challenges in the region to the emerging issue of global supply chain security?*
Melvin: There's a number of ways. Of course, the reason that all these forces are there is because of their concern to ensure their supply chains continue to operate. The Red Sea, Suez Canal, and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait have become key arteries in globalization. Globalization is only possible because supply chains function to bring goods from China and other Asian countries to European markets and to some North American markets. If we start to have decoupling, of course, this region may lose some of its significance. Most of the decoupling is probably going to shift to other Asian countries. So, the region is going to continue to be central. Secondly, because of that growth, what you have also seen is that the Middle Eastern countries who invested heavily in ports as part of their development policy, have shifted outwards. They have recognized that the future lies elsewhere. Therefore, alongside all this external security stuff is actually the creation of a lot of ports along the East African coast. Actually, there are plans to upgrade the port of Mombasa and ports in Tanzania as well. So, all of that trade is driving interest in the region. It is becoming an enhanced area of interest because of that global supply chain and thus a very vital node in the global economy.

Egbewatt Arrey: *There is clearly a plurality of stakeholders to this project. Can you tell us who funded the project?*
Melvin: It was sort of a mixture of funding really. I got some funding from the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SIPRI supported a bit. And I worked a bit for the EU as an advisor, and they were interested in these issues. As part of that job, they supported my travel to Japan, South Korea, China, and India to do interviews on what was driving their interest in the region. So, it was a mixed set of sources.