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## **RELIGION, ELITES AND SANCTIONS IN NORTHEAST AFRICA: REGIONAL IMPACTS OF SUPERPOWER MESSIANISM<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The article exposes the regional context of geostrategic rivalry between the United States and China in Northeast Africa (NEA) against the backdrop of the emerging formation of a new bipolar world order and the messianic ambitions of the superpowers. The author predicts a significant increase in NEA's geo-economic and strategic importance, due to the dominant vectors of global development and aspects of national interests of each of their superpowers. The article offers a detailed analysis of the evolution of NEA's confessional space through the last 50 years and of the role of religious factors in the superpower rivalry in the region. The author arrives to the conclusion that the ruling, business and religious elites of the region have taken a wait-and-see attitude in the battle unfolding between the superpowers and do not want to unambiguously associate themselves with either side.

**Keywords:** bipolar rivalry, confessional landscape, elites, sanctions

The perception that the African continent, with its abundant natural resources, rapidly growing economic potential, positive demographic and social dynamics is likely to become one of the locomotives of global development during the second half of this century, is now widely accepted not only by individual analysts and researchers, but by influential think-tanks, global business, political consultancies and international organizations.<sup>3</sup> In a world of shrinking resource opportunities, aging population, social stagnation and uncertainty, these wealth have become the subject of intense competition between the global centers of power, such as the United States, China, EU, as well as Russia, India, Brazil, etc. The growing international influence of African countries makes the continent still

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3 *African Futures 2050*, Institute for Security Studies, Johannesburg, 2011.

more attractive in the eyes of the world' heavy-weights – besides other benefits close engagement with African nations indirectly means broader support for great powers' agenda in the key international fora, like UN or other institutions of global governance, in which usually about a quarter of votes belongs to African member countries.

### **The African context of global megatrends**

Objective factors, such as the shifts in the global balance of power, also lent impetus to increased engagement of many state and non-state actors with Africa. Two concurrent megatrends, which are shaping the world power structure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, underlie their strategies. The first one is *the global power diffusion* after the United States failed to sustain a monopolar world-system under their sole leadership. The other is the shift of power from the West to the East, a relatively long-evolving process, manifest in the West's shrinking share in the world production and trade, erosion of its military and technological superiority, vulnerability of its social and health care capacities, and failure to keep to the role of the ultimate decision-maker for the rest of the world. Both megatrends essentially imply a drastic change from the situation of the first post-Cold War decades, which were characterized by nearly absolute dominance of the united Euro-Atlantic West.

The coronavirus pandemic made those trends particularly evident, only adding to the already existing anticipation of the West's impending power decline and of China's inevitable rise to the role of the full-fledged "alternative" superpower. The renowned UK-based Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) stated in its 2021 annual report: "while virtually all countries have been affected by the pandemic, one of its impacts has been to redistribute economic momentum between countries with Asia doing best and Europe worst. As a result, the Chinese economy is now forecast to overtake the US economy in 2028, five years earlier than in 2033 as we previously forecast".<sup>4</sup>

This warning did not come as a surprise. As a matter of fact, the last two years of the Trump administration in the White House have been marked by a battle against China's growing power and the search for non-military means (like sanctions, tariffs and propaganda) to combat Beijing's global influence, not least in Africa. In the end of 2018, the White House adopted a new African strategy, whose main thrust turned out to be not so much Africa *per se*, but the need and determination to contain China and Russia in this strategically important part of the world. Broadening of economic, diplomatic, cultural relations with Washington's perceived rivals was formally qualified a threat to America's national interests. Introducing the new strategy, the then U.S. President's National Security Advisor J.

4 CEBR, World Economic League Table 2021, December 2020, 12th edition. Available at: <https://cebr.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/WELT-2021-final-29.12.pdf>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020)

Bolton postulated: "Great power competitors, namely China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their financial and political influence across Africa. They are deliberately and aggressively targeting their investments in the region to gain a competitive advantage over the United States" and stigmatized both countries as "predatory".<sup>5</sup>

Abstracting from the emotional and propaganda overtones of the *New African Strategy's* presentation, we can say that both the content load and the delivery of the document amounted to a reluctant recognition and a situational response to the reality of the shift of global power to the East. Though quite prominent and broadly recognized this process from the point of view of social history is only nascent and it is practically impossible to predict its exact outcomes now, especially taking into consideration possible variance in relations between Beijing and Washington under different American administrations.

The rise of China, and with it the ensuing power shift to the East, was largely generated by the strategic (mis-)calculations of the United States in their bi-polar confrontation with the Soviet Union during the Cold War between the Capitalist and Communist Blocks. Back in the early 1970s, Washington made a dramatic and ultimately successful bid to win Beijing over to its side in the fight against the rival superpower of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite USA and PRC remained within their respective socio-political niches (Capitalist and Socialist/Communist), the ensuing economic, cultural and technological relations between them evolved into a form of ecological mutualism with each *species* getting a net benefit from their interaction. With globalization reaching its mature forms the level of the de facto economic integration between Chinese and American economic actors reached a qualitatively new level. The transborder chains of production created a deeply integrated and interdependent economic organism dubbed *Chimerica*<sup>6</sup> by Niall Ferguson. America gained a lot from that symbiosis, its main prize being the demise of the Soviet Union and the ensuing devourment of the resources of former superpower's global zone of influence. Some authors believe that the booty delayed the US decline by over three decades.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Russia, Communist China, free from US hostile containment and benefitting from globalization and the widened access to American, European and Third world markets, managed to rise to the superpower status itself. Its share of the world economy increased from just 3.6% in 2000 to 17.8% in 2020, the second largest portion after USA's 25%. By 2023 the country is expected to become a "high-income economy", overtaking US by 2028 or even earlier.<sup>8</sup>

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5 John R. Bolton, "Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy", The White House, 2018. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>, (date accessed: 25.11.2020).

6 Niall Ferguson, "Team 'Chimerica'", *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2008.

7 David Brooks, "America Is Having a Moral Convulsion", *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2020; Tom Engelhardt, "The End of the American Century", *The Nation*, June 19, 2020; George Packer, *The Unwinding: Thirty Years of American Decline*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2013.

8 CEBR, World Economic League Table 2021 . . .

With relation to Africa, the functioning of *Chimerica* mechanism is well illustrated by the following example. Africa's share in China's gross import of raw commodities according to open sources statistics is at least 15%<sup>9</sup>. Alternative calculations by the Center for Strategic and Global Studies of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, (based on cross-checks on the "reverse" export statistics of African countries and the results of mathematical modeling), suggest that the actual value is probably closer to 23%.<sup>10</sup> The same indicator for US is about 10-12%. At first glance, the US figure may look unimpressive. But the picture changes, if the qualitative aspect is considered. Some of raw materials of African origin either have no substitutes at all, or the technologies of substitute production are too expensive or otherwise unviable. Africa is America's leading supplier of strategically important minerals, without which some key requirements of US economy in general and of its military-industrial complex in particular, would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to satisfy. Thus, according to open sources, about 70% of US imports of raw cobalt originate from Africa. Around 46% of the cobalt consumed in the United States is used in superalloys, mainly in aircraft gas turbine engines, 9% in cemented carbides for cutting and wear-resistant applications; 14% in various other metallic applications; and 31% in a variety of chemical applications.<sup>11</sup> Without cobalt the production of neither the strategic bomber aircraft, nor rechargeable batteries for vital kinds of electronics is possible, just to mention a couple of indispensable uses of the element.

Extraction and processing of Africa's raw materials is an element in *Chimerica's* food chain. While DRC, Zambia, South Africa, Madagascar, Morocco jointly account for over 80% of the world annual extraction of the mineral, the major proportion of African cobalt is not sold directly to the United States. Instead, China as the world's leading producer of refined cobalt, buys cobalt ores, concentrates, and partially refined materials from African countries and completes the environmentally hazardous refining process on its own territory. Beijing then exports the finished refined metal to US. At the same time PRC is itself the world's leading consumer of cobalt, with more than 80% of its consumption being used by the rechargeable battery industry.<sup>12</sup>

Similar triangle economic and subsequently social (jobs, incomes, etc.) interdependencies between American, Chinese, and African state and non-state actors exists also in many other sectors of economy, including rare earth metals production, agribusiness, infrastructure, construction, electronics, etc. The

9 China Statistical Yearbook 2018, National Bureau of Statistics. Available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2018/indexeh.htm>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

10 The discrepancies can be explained both by the existing practices of publishing statistics on strategic raw materials and by the peculiarities of reflecting in African statistics exports to Chinese jurisdictions (including Hong Kong and Macao special administrative areas through which re-exports are carried out, etc.).

11 John F. Slack, Bryn E. Kimball, Kim B. Shedd, "Critical Mineral Resources of the United States – Economic and Environmental Geology and Prospects for Future Supply", U.S. Geological Survey Professional Paper No. 1802-F, 2017.

12 *Mineral Commodity Summaries*, January 2020, p. 50, available at: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2020/mcs2020-cobalt.pdf>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

well-developed and well-established mechanism of *Chimerica* continues to work despite the deterioration of Sino-American relations under the Trump administration. At the same time, as the Chinese economy develops and strengthens, both parties to the interaction have more and more points of divergence of interests since in the long run they cherish the same goal of global leadership (read domination). This quality can not be shared since its basic idea is *messianic* in its essence and there can not be two messiahs, even in mundane aspirations. Given peace and the necessary time, China would foster a block under its own devices and slogans, very much in the same way as the US formed the Western Block under the banners of Capitalism, Liberalism, and Democracy after the Second World War. Thus, the clash is inevitable. US New Strategy for Africa confirms that it had already started.

Revealingly, having coined the term *Chimerica* to denote the well functioning global monster of combined Chinese and American economic power, Niall Ferguson also predicted the imminent divorce and conflict between the superpowers, which he linked with the impending emergence of Beijing's own zones of influence and the resulting formation of China's "own informal nascent empire in commodity-rich Africa."<sup>13</sup>

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Beijing has not only eclipsed the former superpower's influence on the continent, but became number 1 exporter, investor and creditor to many African countries. For some of the latter the successful realization of key development projects and in certain cases even normal economic functioning is hardly possible without China's assistance. For Africa, the growing rift between Washington and Beijing, which became particularly acute in 2020 against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemics and the ensuing global recession, is of fateful importance.

The competition between the old and new superpowers in Africa is not limited to the economic sphere. From the point of view of long-term strategies of global leadership, it is much more important for them to fight for the minds, ideals and values of Africans. And if the unsevered internal ties and bonds of *Chimerica* to some extent still restrain mutual confrontation, it is sharply aggravated in the sphere of ideas and ideological influence. For decades, America's criticism of communist ideology or the position of religion in the People's Republic of China looked like mandatory rituals of little practical meaning. By 2020, the religious factor has become an important line of American criticism of Chinese domestic policies, but it also turned into an important tool of containing Chinese influence on the African continent.

In the context of the emerging global bipolarity, the strategies of the USA and China represent antagonistic programs based on fundamentally different initial messages. In the case of the US strategy, this is to deter by denial the spread of the competitor's influence using tough policies, including forceful (while not

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13 Niall Ferguson, "What 'Chimerica' Hath Wrought", *The American Interest*, January-February, 2009.

necessarily military) confrontational actions, like sanctions, quotas, pressure and stigmatization of the indigenous elites, etc. While China seeks to neutralize the opposition of the United States and its allies to Beijing's expansion on the continent and to win the freedom of interaction with any partners in Africa causing minimal direct confrontation possible.

### **Northeast Africa in the Emerging Neo-Bipolar Competition**

In various parts of Africa emerging bi-polar trends of confrontation manifest themselves with different intensity and propensity. As a peripheral region strategically important for the prospects of ongoing superpower competition, the continent as a whole has become an important testing ground for relatively "safe" elaboration of methods and tactics of geo-economic rivalry and a mutual exchange of systemic attacks. Still, not all of Africa's sub-regions are equally important in the superpower rivalry at all times.

**Strategic importance of NEA.** According to the forecasts of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the importance of the continent's sub-regions will grow asynchronously. Until recently the greatest attention has been drawn to the large area to the South of the Mediterranean (North Africa and the Sahel). But in the 2020s, strategic attention will sharply increase to the zone of "Greater Red Sea", i.e. the countries of Africa and Asia with access to the Red Sea (including Israel, the Arabian Peninsula, the Socotra archipelago, Seychelles and up to the Chagos archipelago), plus the landlocked African hinterland, including Ethiopia, South Sudan, eastern Chad, northern Kenya. From the end of the 2020s, apparently, a rapid growth in the importance of the south-eastern and southern sub-regions (Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa and related territories), known as the Southern Cone of Africa, is likely to accelerate.<sup>14</sup>

In this context a special place belongs to Northeast Africa (NEA), whose geopolitical significance has been fundamentally reshaped during the last decade. These transformations are inalienably linked and, in fact stem from, the process of world power transit from West to East. Consequently the previously peripheral eastern coast of Africa is gaining more and more importance every year. The Indo-Pacific zone is viewed by the Pentagon as a likely arena for US military confrontation with China, and unilateral control over it is a sure way to prevent the rise of the adversary. The strategic concerns of the United States and the long-term mega-projects of the PRC make both countries place the greatest importance on the northern part of this coast and its hinterland. Northeast Africa is the main southern gateway of the Maritime part of the Belt and Road project the entry point to the Mediterranean and Europe, one of the main destinations and Chinese goods and services in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

14 Irina Abramova, Leonid Fituni, The African Segment of Multipolar World: Dynamics of Geostrategic Significance, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, Vol. 62, No. 12, 2018, pp. 5-14.

However, in order to guarantee a strong long-term position in NEA, in addition to the above mentioned geopolitical considerations each country must ensure sympathy and support for its presence on the part of the population of the region. In real world there is rarely any other way to achieve this goal than through influencing local elites, though total neglect to the sentiment of popular masses is detrimental. Throughout history skillful consideration and occasional manipulations of ethnic, confessional, cultural and other specific local characteristics have been an integral part of achieving and maintaining of regional dominance.

**Geographic and demographic contexts.** From this point of view NEA is a very difficult region for both competing superpowers – it is too diverse and the vectors of development of its many countries and abundant and mixed population are hard to predict. There is not even agreement on the country composition of the region and its exact borders.

On the map, NEA is recognized as the “upper-right quarter” of Africa’s land-mass, while in stricter geographic categories, it should be defined as the part of the African continent, lying roughly to the east of 22°E towards the Indian Ocean, between the Equator and the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. This means that countrywise NEA incorporates in full the lands of both Sudans, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Egypt, nearly all the territories of both Somalia and Uganda (their southernmost extremities, however, lie below the Equator and, strictly speaking, do not qualify for NEA) as well as some portions of Libya, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As to Kenya and Central African Republic, each of them contributes to NEA roughly a half of their respective territories, while the other half or slightly less is situated beyond its limits. Thus, nominally, the region comprises either partially or in full 13 sovereign internationally recognized UN member states with a total population of around 410 million persons.

However, there also exists a narrow definition of NEA. For practical purposes and especially from the geopolitical perspective Northeast Africa as a region usually includes the Horn of Africa countries (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia), Egypt, Sudan and South Sudan. In conflict studies the adjacent territories of three neighboring countries (Kenya, Chad and Libya) are considered as part of the region (or rather of the problem). The latest US geopolitical concepts of 2020 regard NEA as “an integral part of and in fact the link among the security systems of the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean by virtue of the strategic importance of and competition for influence over the Red Sea and the states that border and depend upon it for trade and transit.”<sup>15</sup>

The overall population of NEA in its narrow understanding is over 300 million people, who belong to various ethnicities and different confessions. Ethiopia (102

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15 “Final Report and Recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena”, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/final-report-and-recommendations-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

mIn people) and Egypt (101 mln) are the second and the third most populous countries in Africa (after Nigeria with its 202 mln inhabitants). The population of Ethiopia and, as a matter of fact, of the whole Horn of Africa is growing at one of the fastest rates in the world and is expected to double by 2050. Egypt's population is also growing quickly, though at a lower rate, an anticipated increase of nearly 60 percent, to 158 million, by 2050. The age structure of the population is characterized by a large share of younger age cohorts. All African societies in the region are youthful, with about a third of inhabitants being under the age of fifteen.

On the whole the major part of the population of the region lives in rural areas, but the actual situation differs not only from nation to nation, but also from one province to another within one country. Twenty percent of the world's severely food insecure people live in the Horn of Africa. Natural factors and emergencies like hunger, drought, locust infestations and epidemics have a much larger impact social processes and in fact on life expectancy here than in most regions of the world.

**Transformation of confessional landscape.** NEA is believed to be one of the birthplaces of the modern homo sapiens, who are thought to have diverged from other *hominin* in these parts of Africa around 300,000 years ago<sup>16</sup>, while the earliest evidence of *protoreligious* ideas (strictly speaking - symbolic behavior, beliefs and rituals) in this part of the world includes symbolic artifacts from Middle Stone Age sites (i.e. between 280,000 and around 50–25,000 years ago).<sup>17</sup> Fossil discoveries from sites in the Ethiopian rift, namely Omo Kibish and Herto, provide strong indications of ritual practice of 154,000 years ago<sup>18</sup>. The millennia of the ensuing evolution of human development and belief turned the region into a borderland between Christianity, Islam, Judaism and a multitude of local African traditional creeds, inlaid with occasional intrusions of expatriate religions brought in by numerically significant immigrant communities, modern syncretic constructs and ultra-modern cults.

For the last three and a half thousand years, NEA has been the natural western gateway for the spread of the Abrahamic religions beyond the initial eucumene of their nativity in Palestine and the Arabic Peninsula: first of Judaism, then Christianity and later Islam. NEA has also been a battlefield for the clashes between the followers of all three, the phenomena often used by many external players to their own ends.

The contemporary NEA countries, despite their spatial proximity, belong to

16 Eleanor M. L. Scerri, Mark G. Thomas, Andrea Manica, Philipp Gunz, Jay T. Stock, Chris Stringer, Matt Grove, Huw S. Groucutt, Axel Timmermann, Philip G. Rightmire, Francesco d'Errico, Did Our Species Evolve in Subdivided Populations across Africa, and Why Does It Matter?, *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, Vol. 33, No. 8, 2018, pp. 582–594.

17 Sally McBrearty, Alison A. Brooks, The revolution that wasn't: A new interpretation of the origin of modern human behavior, *Journal of Human Evolution*, Vol. 39, No. 5, 2000, pp. 453–563.

18 Yonatan Sahle, W. Karl Huchings, David R. Braun, Judith C. Sealy, Leah E. Morgan, Agazi Negash, Balemwal Atnafu, Earliest Stone-Tipped Projectiles from the Ethiopian Rift Date to >279,000 Years Ago, *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 8, No. 11, 2013, pp. 1–9.

very heterogeneous and quite often historically antagonistic racial, ethnic, confessional, cultural and civilizational backgrounds. With reference to the latter, through history, an outstanding system-forming role belonged here to Egypt and Ethiopia, the two paramount civilizational nuclei for the evolution of confessional space in Northeast Africa. The balance between major religions, though different during various phases of human history, was relatively stable and, except for a few precedents of relatively rapid transitions, usually changed gradually through prolonged periods of time.

But in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the current millennium the transformations of the confessional space in NEA became more accelerated and pronounced. The structure of the confessional space of this region has undergone especially serious changes since the last third of the 20th century. (See Table 1).

**Table 1. The Percentage of adherents of major religions in NEA countries**

	Christians		Muslims		Indigenous	
	1965	2015	1965	2015	1965	2015
Djibouti	7.7	1.8	92.0	96.9	0	0
Egypt	9.7	10.9	90.0	88.4	0	0
Ethiopia*	49.8	63.5	31.2	34.6	18.6	1.4
Eritrea**	41.0	46.3	48.7	51.6	9.7	0.6
Kenya	53.9	81.3	7.8	14.7	34.9	1.0
Somalia	0.3	n.a.	99.5	99.8	0	n.a.
South Sudan	n.a.	57.9	n.a.	4.4	n.a.	22.1
Sudan*	7.4	5.1	67.3	90.5	24.2	2.8
Uganda	61.2	84.6	5.9	11.9	29.0	2.2

Source: compiled by the author using the data of Brown Davis & James Patrick, Religious Characteristics of States Dataset Project - Demographics v. 2.0 (RCS-Dem 2.0), COUNTRIES ONLY, February 10, 2019.

\* - within the official state borders that existed in the respective year

\*\* - estimated share of adherents within the today's borders for the respective year

0 - means "less than 0.1%"

n.a. - stands for "data non available"

The most visible trend in the region is the rapidly decreasing share of adherents of traditional ethnic (indigenous/animist) religions. The roots of this change lay not so much in the successful activity of Christian missionaries or Muslim preachers, but in the wide-spread modernization processes within African societies. The modernity became the main stimulating factor for adoption by an in-

dividual of one or another major religion, since such conversion opened broader possibilities of finding work, receiving education and easier socialization in the rapidly expanding urban environment. The most impressive reductions in the proportion of the adherents of indigenous religions took place in the periphery of NEA, in Kenya and Uganda. On the other hand, the similarly dramatic reduction figure for Sudan may prove to be misleading. The data for year 1965 present in our table referred to the undivided country and included the then Animists/Shamanists of what later became independent South Sudan. The real figure of reduction calculated within the area of the present borders, might have been closer (but probably somewhat higher) to that of Ethiopia or Eritrea.

Due to the significant reduction of the numbers and percent of adherents of indigenous religions the proportion of Christians drastically increased in Kenya and Uganda, to a lesser extent in Ethiopia, Eritrea and slightly in Egypt. Due to the post-secession shrinking of the national territories the figures for Ethiopia and Sudan may also be misleading about the true nature of the transformations. The absolute numbers of Christians might have increased to a much lower degree.

The changes in the percent of Muslim population in the countries of the region were not so dramatic. Attention is drawn to the change to the opposite ratio of the proportion of the Muslim and Christian population in Eritrea since 1965. Several factors contributed to this transformation. The most important of them are the natural decrease in numbers of former European settlers and their African households (mainly Catholics),<sup>19</sup> ethnic migrations connected with the separation from Ethiopia and somewhat higher birth-rates among the Muslim families. Similar processes (including trans-border ethnic migrations) can be observed in Djibouti with similar impact upon the (further) increase of the share of Muslim population.

Summarizing the above described transformations of the confessional space of NEA we can assert that within Northeast Africa 4 regions can be distinguished, which include countries with similar models of the development of the confessional structure of the population. The first area of the confessional space includes Somalia and Djibouti. It is distinguished by the near absolute prevalence of adherents of Islam in the population. In Somalia, The Provisional constitution while providing for the right of individuals to practice their religion, proclaims Islam the state religion, prohibits the propagation of any religion other than the Muslim one, and stipulates that all laws must comply with the general principles of sharia. The processes of state-formation are unfinished, the ideas of ethnic consolidation of Somalis within and beyond the borders of the country (Djibouti, parts of Ethiopia, Kenya, Eritrea) are very strong. Similarly strong is societal pressure to adhere to Sunni Islamic traditions and external funding of Salafist teach-

19 Ruslan Dmitriev and Stanislav Gorokhov, *Geostrategic Competition of Non-State Actors in Africa: The Roman Catholic Church in the Fight for the 'Continent of Hope'*, *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2019, pp. 70-81.

ings and ideology. Extremist and terrorist religion based organizations, of which “al-Shabaab” is the most influential, control vast areas of the country, virtually functioning as a state within a state. They also carry out terrorist acts on the territory of neighboring countries.

The second area and model of confessional space include Eritrea and Ethiopia. Their confessional structure is dominated by Eastern Christianity and Islam and is also characterized by a sharp fall of the followers of traditional ethnic religions and cults. Today the majority of Christians belong respectively to the local Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church or to the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Protestant missionaries are increasingly active in both countries. Since the fall of the Marxist regime a number of *P'ent'ay* (Protestant) churches have gained ground, and according to some estimates now Protestants account for about a fifth of all believers. In Eritrea, about 3.5% of the population belongs to Christian creeds other than Eastern Orthodoxy, mainly to Catholicism. The share of Protestants in the population is below 1 percent. The Islamization of this area also began quite early, but in the course of long interaction between the two world religions, none proved to achieve absolute dominance, the fact reflected in the confessional structure of the population of this region today. Within the present day borders the Sunnis form the majority of Muslims with non-denominational Muslims being the second largest group of Muslims, and the Shia and Ahmadiyyas are a minority. Sunnis are largely Shafi'is or Salafis, and there are also many Sufi Muslims there.

Egypt alone represents a separate third model of confessional space in the region, which is unique in a number of ways. On the one hand, it is the country with the second largest Muslim population in Africa and one of the most revered cultural centers of the global Islam. On the other hand, Egypt also has the largest Christian population in the Middle East and North Africa. The ratio between Christians and Muslims remains relatively stable during the last quarter of a century, though the percentage of adherents of various religions is a controversial topic in Egypt. Of the Christian population over 90% belong to the native Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, an Oriental Orthodox Christian Church. The remaining 10% of Christians are represented by other autochthonous Churches, and churches of local ethnic minorities (Greek, Armenian, etc) as well as various Catholic Churches. Thus, besides the relative stability of the shares of individual denominations, the other specific characteristic of this confessional space is a unique multiplicity of various historically important religions and churches, which continue to coexist on a relatively limited territory of the overpopulated Nile valley.

The fourth specific confessional space and model in NEA is represented by South Sudan and by Kenya and Uganda, the countries adjacent to NEA in its narrow sense. Today this is a confessional space of overwhelming dominance of the Christian population. In fact, looking beyond the national borderline this con-

fessional space forms one large crescent extending further into the territory of Ethiopia. From the point of view of confessional dynamics the forth confessional model is characterized by a sharp shift in a relatively short (by historical standards) period of time of the religious structure, manifest in the rapid increase of the share of Christians and an even more accelerated decline in the proportion of animists and other ethnoreligions.<sup>20</sup> South Sudan still preserves its uniqueness, being the only country of Northeast Africa with a two digit percentage of followers of ethnoreligions in its population.

**The religious component in the superpower outreach for NEA.** External players recognize that within every of the confessional spaces described above, the prevailing model of model its transformation leaves for religion the role of a powerful factor in social life impacting political discourse, public attitudes, institutions, and policy outcomes. The superpower foreign policy makers, development professionals and implementers face these dynamics in their global work.

In 2013 the U.S. Government adopted the framework of the U.S. National Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement, which encourages U.S. diplomats and development professionals to engage and deepen relationships with religious leaders and faith communities as they carry out their foreign policy responsibilities. Since then, the U.S. Government has included religious actors in its civil society engagement around the world, a priority again underscored in the 2020 Presidential Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom.<sup>21</sup>

The religious component in latent and open forms is increasingly being used to project American interests, both at the level of interaction with indigenous elites and in working with the poorest and most vulnerable segments of the African population. Specialized administrative units and programs of *Strategic Religious Engagement* (SRE) function within the framework of US Department of State (DOS), USAID, National Democratic Institute, etc.<sup>22</sup> Within the DOS, unless under special assignments and provisions, the personnel in charge of strategic religious engagement with foreign countries belong the Office of International Religious Freedom (J/IRF), whose workers then specialize on either topical (thematic) issues or geographic areas. SRE being an important and specific line of activity constitutes a separate unit within J/IRF. Conspicuously, unlike the Middle East, East Asia & Pacific, South and Central Asia or Europe, the African region does not have a separate dedicated unit. Within J/IRF, it is falls under the mandate of a joint construct called “Africa & Western Hemisphere” manned by about half a dozen officers. The undermanned unit, however, chaperones a hefty amount of

20 Ivan Zakharov, The Role of Christian Churches in Geo-Economical and Geopolitical Rivalry of European Nations in Africa: 20th – 21st Centuries, *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2019, pp. 82-92.

21 “2020 Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement”, USAID, available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives/2020-evidence-summit-strategic-religious-engagement>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

22 “Organizational Directory”, U.S. Department of State, Global Information Services A/GIS, 2/5/2021. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Org-Directory.pdf>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

grass-root work of a number of organizations and institutions in Africa, of which the wider Northeast part constitutes a significant share.

Due to the secular nature of the state, only those contacts with religious associations in Northeast Africa are implemented through government programs and initiatives, which relate to issues of humanitarian assistance in the field of medicine, the fight against hunger and, to a lesser extent, to education. In the health sector of NEA countries, faith-based organizations are frequently on the front lines of service delivery. In Ethiopia, USAID's flagship Maternal and Child Survival Program works closely with faith-based leaders to improve maternal, newborn and child health. The main burden of interaction along the religious lines falls on American non-governmental organizations, some of which, however, receive grants from government sources.

The limitations of the Communist ideology do not allow PRC to reciprocate its superpower rival with same instruments. However, Beijing has elaborated and successfully implements an alternative system of "soft-power" engagement with African elites and common people. Though not raised directly, the religious factor is usually not out of sight when the circumstances or interests of the case so require. Judging from the current course of Sino-American competition in Africa, it does not stand in the way of Beijing's achievements in protecting its interests on the continent.

### **Entangled in Superpower Messianism**

By the middle of US President Trump's term in office the competition between Beijing and Washington for Africa acquired the fundamental features characteristic to bi-polar rivalry of the Cold War times. Though the fundamental reasons for the rivalry lay in the economic matters related mainly to mobilization and command of resources necessary for sustainable domination in the global economic system and, as a logical consequence thereof, in the balance of power in the world, the repetition of the old patterns of Cold War confrontation is already evident - the economic competition has acquired the shell of ideological confrontation. In full accordance with the lines of previous bi-polar confrontation, the White House proclaimed the Chinese communist regime not just an economic rival or ideological opponent, but an existential threat to the United States, the values of the Western world and democracy.

**New Cold War Declaration.** In June 2020, National Security Advisor to US President Robert C. O'Brien delivered a seminal speech, which amounted to a formal declaration of a new Cold war, this time on China. He acknowledged that the challenge the Chinese Communist Party posed to the United States and its allies was of critical importance and announced that "America, under President Trump's leadership, has finally awoken to the threat the Chinese Communist Par-

ty's actions and the threat they pose to our very way of life"<sup>23</sup>. This position is not a one-party one, but reflects a bipartisan consensus. A change of the Washington administration may bring some new nuances to operational political line, but the fundamental stand it is unlikely to change.

Many characteristic features of the previous Cold war have been applied by the US to contain the newly born Chinese Superpower. Washington is trying to starve Beijing of components and technologies for the advanced sectors and branches of Chinese economy. Academic exchanges have been reduced to minimum and virtually curtailed in various "sensitive" spheres. The decoupling from China comes at a cost to US, too. Analysts allege that "a wholesale relocation of fabs and the rest of the supply chain is entirely impractical. The costs would be prohibitive for both the initial move and the subsequent operations".

Perhaps the most convincing confirmation of the transition of the competition between the two superpowers into a phase of ruthless bipolar rivalry and confrontation is declaration by USA and China of holistic programs, that are essentially Messianic in nature, solemnly addressed to the whole world, to *Urbi et Orbi*. Though, of course not bluntly and religiously, but subtly and in modern categories. Confronting each other both Washington and Beijing strive to show the "true way of salvation" for the rest of the world, while also invariably positioning themselves as both the leader and the redeemer of the humanity, including the developing world.

**Messianic ambitions of superpowers.** The concepts of the national identity of the superpowers, as a rule, contain a pivotal fulcrum of indisputable justification for their natural leadership alleging that the very existence of that power, its values, strategic goals and actions are salutary, not only for that country, but for the mankind as a whole. This phenomenon is known as messianism. In parallel to the religious concept of the Messiah-The Savior, the global superpower claims to offer humanity the only correct path of development, following which supposedly will lead to the solution of all global problems, the resolution of all ethnic socio-economic, environmental and other problems, the pinnacle of social development, the "end of history".

In international relations the bipolar system of the world presupposes the concurrent existence of two competing messianic ideas belonging to competitive actors. The bipolar system of international relations that emerged after the Second World War was a struggle not only between two systems, capitalist and the socialist, but also a clash between two versions of messianic national identities. Both the USA and the USSR substantiated their moral claims to leadership in their blocs with a declaration of salvation emanating from them. The clash of their messianic identities encompassed the whole planet, including the region of Northeast Africa.

23 "The Chinese Communist Party's Ideology and Global Ambitions", remarks delivered by National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien on June 24, 2020 in Phoenix, Arizona. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/chinese-communist-partys-ideology-global-ambitions/>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

As any Messiah, a superpower has to offer its flock a distinct path to salvation, different from their previous experience. The US messianism was formed simultaneously with the emergence of the American state, but its foreign policy manifestations were not too visible for a long time due to the cloak of American isolationism. Its only visible self-realization took the form of the spatial expansion of the United States through the annexations of the territories of indigenous peoples and weaker neighbors.

After World War 2, the US, virtually the only major power whose economy remained intact but in fact even became stronger through the war time. The United States finally revealed its messianic mission to the rest of the world by positioning itself as both exceptional and indispensable. It claimed to be exceptional because it was allegedly the most liberal and democratic state in world, and indispensable because it had sufficient size and power to protect and expand the community of free states against the threat of Communism and against the rival Messiah – the Soviet Union. The ideas of the American messianism rotate around the triad of “capitalism-liberalism-democracy” and the exceptional role of the US in imposing of all three on the humankind irrespective of the level of readiness to embrace them by the better part thereof.

In contrast, the USSR saw its messianic mission in the building of a society, in which there would be “no exploitation of man by man”. Building socialism was meant to be the first stage of fulfillment of that goal. Third world countries, where the level of development of the productive forces, according to Marxist theory, was still insufficient for the construction of socialism, were offered a path of progressive democratic and collectivist reforms, which would create the pre-conditions for building scientific socialism in the future. This option was called “the path of non-capitalist development”, but the name was later changed to “socialist orientation”. It is characteristic that during the Cold War *all* key NEA countries - Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia (which included then Eritrea) at some point opted for this path and followed it for rather a long period of their history.

By all measures, China is preparing to shape the twenty-first century, much as the U.S. shaped the twentieth. Beijing’s messianic message for the 21st century took the form of a concept and a vision of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind (often also rendered in English as Community of Common Destiny for Mankind, or CCD). Since its launch, the concept has been positioned as a “major innovation in the theory of major-country diplomacy with Chinese features”.

<sup>24</sup> In concentrated form the concept envisages a human development which is based on equitable international partnerships, engaging in mutual consultation and showing mutual understanding. It seeks to “create a security architecture featuring fairness, justice, joint contribution and shared benefits, promote open, innovative and inclusive development that benefits all, increase inter-civilization

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24 Wang Yi, Work Together to Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgjb/eng/xwdt/zgyw/t1369269.htm>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020)

exchanges to enhance harmony, inclusiveness and respect for differences, and build an eco-system that puts mother nature and green development first. These five aspects, taken together, constitute the overall approach to create a community of shared future for mankind, depict a bright future for progress of international relations".<sup>25</sup>

According to Chinese academics, CCD represents a new paradigm for promoting regional collaboration in socio-economic development, and plays a crucial role in reshaping the international geopolitical landscape. Central to the concept is the belief that common development and common security transcend differences in cultural tradition and pre-existing level of development.<sup>26</sup>

**Working with local elites.** Nurturing national elites in their messianic ideology was an important priority for the superpowers. China in principle shared the Marxist concept but never accepted the Soviet terminology. It found what seemed to be a better line of radiating socialist ideas to Africa. It positioned itself inside the community of developing nations as one of them, thus overcoming the invisible division line between socialism and underdevelopment.

The United States offered the countries of Africa a competing model of development, which they called simply "pro-western", while Moscow named it "capitalist orientation". Some countries, like Kenya in East Africa, Nigeria in the West or Zaire in Central Africa, were staunch supporters of that line. But many NEA countries experimented with both paths with basically similar end-results. The failure of Soviet pro-socialist experiments in Northeast Africa has many explanations, among which unwillingness and inability to harness or at least to give due attention to religious factors figure prominently.

The messianic call of superpowers though addressed to the whole of the nations is inevitably relayed and transferred via the local elites, among whom the political and religious elites are especially influential throughout Africa. The skirmishes of the new Cold War have not as yet affected Washington's and Beijing's relations with various groups of NEA elites. But the shortcomings and failures of the previous superpower rivalry for hearts and minds of the elites in Northeast Africa seem to have been taken into account by China and USA.

It should be remembered that NEA elites have never been totally westernized. Even in the field of education and professional training, traditionalist approaches and norms retain great influence. The rigid dichotomy of "modern vs. traditional" is not suitable for analyzing Northeast African elites. In real life, their legitimacy, whatever it may be, basically stems from their ability to feed the base / clientele (clan, tribal, ethnic, religious, class, etc.) on which their power is based. And this is another reason why it is extremely difficult for political elites in NEA to achieve a universal nationwide electoral base and legitimacy.

25 Ibidem.

26 *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Building the Community of Common Destiny*, Wang L. & Zhao J. (eds.), Social Sciences Academic Press, Beijing, 2019.

This same trait makes NEA political systems vulnerable to external impacts or manipulative influences. The latter can be carried out both through undermining the positions of the ruling elite and creating threats to the well-being of political elites, and through “constructive cooperation” with them by ensuring the stability of their position in precarious and threatened situations.

In many cases, external influence is realized through the imposition of sanctions by external players either against individuals, or broad strata of the elites, or against the country as a whole. For sanctions or other repressive measures against national elites to have the desired effect, the repressor country must ensure that two prerequisites are met. First, it is necessary to correctly determine the focal group or strata within the elite, which would be able to become the leading force for change and, if this task cannot be solved, to mobilize the “popular masses” against the current government. This means that the focus group must, on the one hand, be strong enough to collectively influence the government, and on the other, easy enough to be manipulated into risky actions. For example, the targeted sanctions that are being introduced should infringe on the vital interests of this part of the elite to such an extent as to push it into taking the risk of going against the existing government and seeking to change the political line of the country or its top leadership.

National elites are vulnerable to external political manipulations. The degree of vulnerability is determined by the specific environment of their formation and special features of socioeconomic development of their states. That is why nurturing of local elites is one of the important strategic activity into which the superpowers are involved in Northeast Africa. This is performed through numerous programs, which target various levels and groups within NEA elites – youth, professionals, cultural figures, business people, politicians, etc.

Still they most effective and direct way of establishing necessary influence and achieving the needed goals is in fostering direct ties and dependences with top political leadership. Through them a superpower’s messianic message is guaranteed to receive the nation-wide attention and, given necessary efforts and media are used, the popular acclaim.

Being the winners in the previous Cold War in broad sense, but in Northeast Africa as well, the United States had no reason to change its messianic message, but only had to step up the charm offensive within NEA elites. This move proved to be equally successful and resulted in the ultimate change of nearly all regimes in the region that were unfriendly to USA.

**Religion related aspects of superpower rivalry in the region.** At some point Washington tried to bring the religion issues into superpower competition and use the religious sentiments in order to undermine PRC’s positions the region. Some efforts were made to mobilize in NEA a ‘civil society outcry’ against “Beijing’s continued repressive policies in the Xingjian autonomous region” and “atrocities against Yuigurs”. The efforts produced a lukewarm response on the

part of some western-leaning NGO's, but according to a US GOP publication "the officials of Muslim-majority countries in the region have assiduously avoided criticizing China. Many of these countries have in fact openly supported China's policies in the Xinjiang region."<sup>27</sup>

Although both China and the United States, being secular states, do not directly proclaim any religious goals in the region, many aspects of their policies and strategies in NEA inevitable tackle the existing confessional problems. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, both countries have long been involved in the efforts of this organization to eliminate the threat of international terrorism and, in particular, the challenges from organizations like "al-Shabaab" in the Horn of Africa. They also participate in the international efforts to maintain peace in the region.

The superpowers' military build-up in the region is to a large extent justified by the necessity and their obligations as global powers to fight Islamist terrorists and pirates or quell interethnic and interconfessional conflicts in the region. The US Inter-Service African Command (AFRICOM) now officially has 7,000 troops. France has its permanent bases in some of her former colonies and a naval base in Djibouti. The latter is now overshadowed by the neighboring US Naval Expeditionary Base *Camp Lemonnier*, which dominates the southern passage to and from the Red Sea. According to official data, about 4,000 U.S. servicemen are stationed on it on a permanent basis.<sup>28</sup> In 2017, China also announced the establishment of a military base in Djibouti.<sup>29</sup> Although the U.S. and China's military involvement in Africa is difficult to compare, Beijing has gained considerable experience in participating in peacekeeping operations. By mid-2019, Chinese military personnel took part in 16 peacekeeping missions in Africa. A total of 32,000 Chinese troops have served on the continent at various times. In the second half of the 2010s, 2,000 Chinese military were present as part of those missions in the DRC, Sudan and South Sudan. Military cooperation with Ethiopia is actively developing.<sup>30</sup>

The United States government had launched a whole gamut of programs to counter the terrorist threat in East Africa after Al Qaeda's bombing of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. These programs include regional and bilateral efforts, both military and civilian. The programs seek to build regional intelligence, military, law enforcement, and judicial capacities; strengthen aviation, port, and border security; stem the flow of terrorist financing; and counter

27 "Final Report and Recommendations of the Senior Study Group on Peace and Security in the Red Sea Arena", available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/final-report-and-recommendations-senior-study-group-peace-and-security-red-sea>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020)

28 "Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army Commander United States Africa Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee", AFRICOM, 30 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.africom.mil/document/32925/2020-posture-statement-to-congress>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

29 "Xinhua. China sets up base in Djibouti", 2017. Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c\\_136435716.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/11/c_136435716.htm), (date accessed: 31.12.2020)

30 See more at: [https://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx\\_4/hpaq/t1684033.htm](https://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx_4/hpaq/t1684033.htm), (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

the spread of extremist ideologies. U.S.-led regional counterterrorism efforts include the State Department's East Africa Regional Strategic Initiative (EARSi) and the U.S. military's Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), part of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). The United States has also provided significant assistance in support of the African Union's (AU) peace operations in Somalia.<sup>31</sup>

Today, it is difficult to reliably assess the extent to which the scale of military involvement of the two superpowers in the region corresponds to the real level of military threat posed by international terrorism and ethnic and religious conflicts in NEA

The analysis performed above leaves little doubt about the fact that the global competition between the two superpowers, the United States and China, has reached a qualitatively new level and entered an acute phase. Both powers will continue the all-around struggle for decisive reinforcement of their positions in comparison with the rival.

Given the fact that a broad direct military confrontation will threaten each of the parties with the prospect of unacceptable damage (which even if the enemy is defeated can be detrimental to the domestic political situation), it would be logical to expect increased bilateral competition in non-military forms and in the peripheral regions of the world.

The region of Northeast Africa is one of those, whose importance and the struggle for which will begin to grow strongly already in the short term. By the start of the pandemic and the ensuing crisis, both superpowers had already completed the necessary initial stages to strengthen mutual rivalry in the region. The region is fundamentally important for the success of the global mega-projects of each of the powers, the implementation of which will allocate the first and second places in the global balance of power for many decades into the future.

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31 Lauren Ploch, *Countering Terrorism in East Africa: The U.S. Response*, *CRS Report for Congress*, 2010. Available at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=14130>, (date accessed: 31.12.2020).

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## РЕЛИГИЈА, ЕЛИТЕ И САНКЦИЈЕ У СЕВЕРО-ИСТОЧНОЈ АФРИЦИ: РЕГИОНАЛНИ УТИЦАЈ МЕСИЈАНИЗМА СУПЕРСИЛА

### Сажетак

Чланак се бави геостратешким ривалством између САД и Кине у региону Северно-источне Африке, у складу са нестанком биполарног света и месијанских амбиција суперсила. Аутор предвиђа значајан раст региона у гео-економском и стратешком смислу, услед процеса глобалног развоја и националних интереса суперсила. Чланак нуди детаљну анализу еволуције верског простора у региону и улогу верских фактора у ривалству суперсила. Аутор закључује да су главне елите у региону, бизнис и верске елите, заузеле став „седи и чекај“ док се одвија борба суперсила и да оне не желе да се сврставају на једну од страна.

**Кључне речи:** биполарно ривалство, конфесионална слика, елите, санкције

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