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Hybrid Power Projection by Authoritarian Small States:

The UAE´s Strategic Engagement in East Africa from 2011 Onwards

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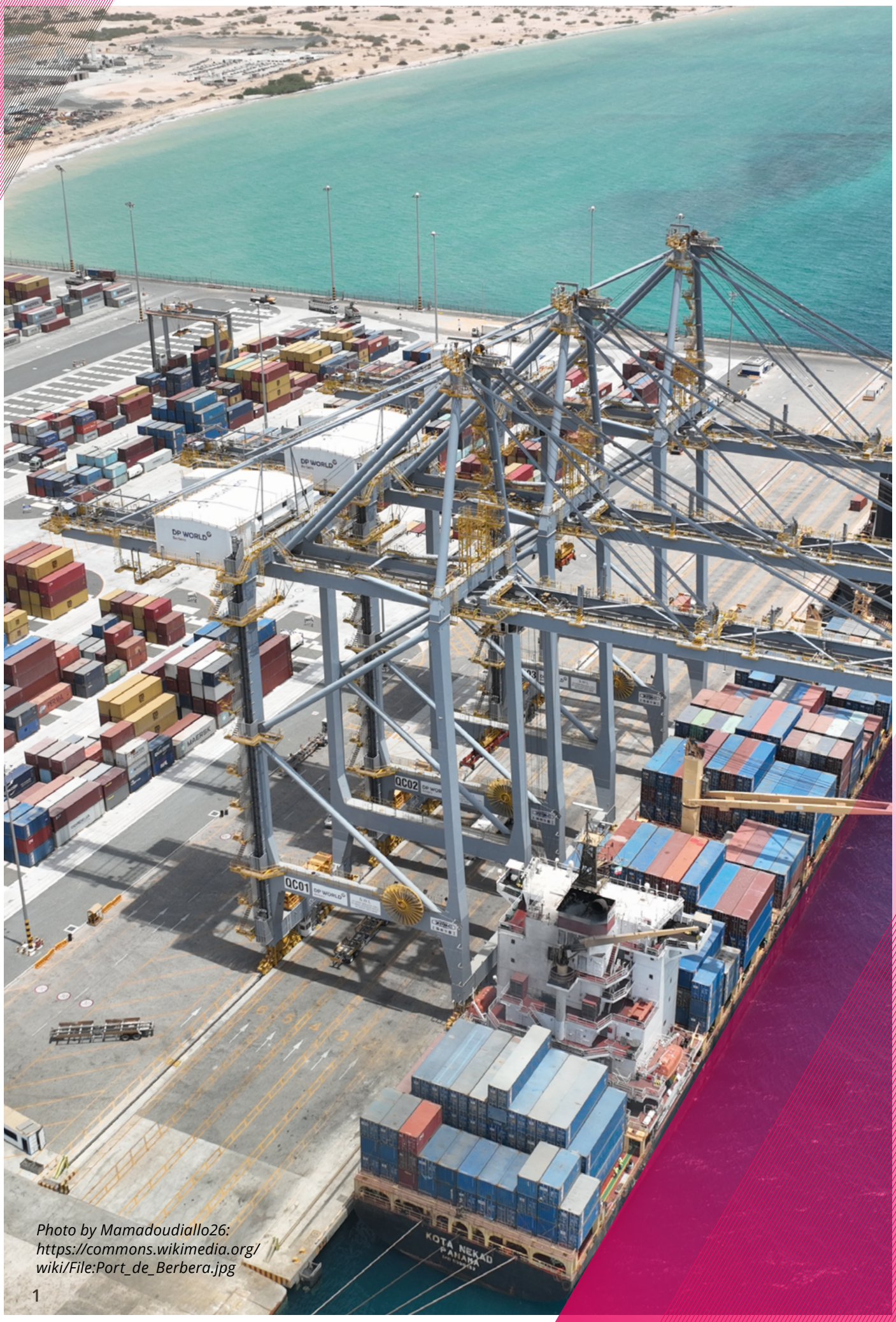

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has extended its foreign political footprint beyond the Arabian Gulf region, leaving a visible mark in neighbouring regions, in particular in East Africa.[1] Through a combination of investments, security partnerships, and political engagements, the UAE is emerging as a key partner for East African countries—particularly in fragile, post-war contexts.[2] This growing presence raises important questions about the strategic rationale behind the UAE's involvement in a region characterized by instability, external intervention, and geopolitical contestation. Understanding the nature and impact of these engagements is not only academically relevant but also politically significant, as they shape patterns of governance, economic dependency, and regional power dynamics in one of the world's most fragile conflict regions.

While the UAE's growing visibility in East Africa has attracted attention in policy circles and media coverage, academic research remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of systematic analysis that interrogates the strategic motivations, tools of influence, and regional implications of the UAE's activities. Existing scholarship on external engagement in East Africa tends to focus on historical actors such as colonial powers, or on contemporary great powers and multilateral institutions.[3] The role of emerging and smaller states—especially authoritarian ones—has been largely overlooked. Moreover, the UAE's foreign policy conduct in East Africa defies traditional categories: its engagement spans humanitarian aid, religious diplomacy, military support, and large-scale infrastructure investment, often without formal diplomatic recognition or institutional transparency.[4]

This paper addresses a research gap by examining the UAE's strategic engagement in East Africa through three empirical cases: Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland, between 2011 and the present. These cases were selected for their strategic variation in statehood, conflict status, and UAE presence, offering a comparative basis for understanding the broader logic of Emirati foreign policy in the region. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What strategic objectives can be inferred from the UAE's actions in Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland?
2. What forms of influence—ranging from soft to hard power—has the UAE deployed across these cases?
3. How can the UAE's engagement be situated within broader theoretical debates about small authoritarian states and regional order-making?

Methodologically, this paper combines a qualitative case study design with a theory-driven coding approach, drawing primarily on semi-structured expert interviews and contextualized empirical observations. The analytical framework is informed by theories of hybrid power projection, small state foreign policy, and authoritarian internationalism. Importantly, the majority of interviewees are based in the three case study countries—Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland—or in the broader East African region. Empirical observations likewise stem from field-related experiences and extensive conversations conducted during extended stays in East Africa. Accordingly, the analysis does not rely on direct access to Emirati actors or institutions, but rather interprets the UAE's strategic objectives and influence patterns through their observable behaviour and local effects on the ground. This indirect, locally embedded perspective ensures a grounded and context-sensitive reading of the Emirates' engagement, while also aligning with the research ethics and regional scope of the author's fieldwork.

This approach makes several contributions: first, it expands the literature on foreign policy behaviour by small authoritarian states, a category often neglected in International Relations theory. Second, it sheds light on how external actors engage in order-making in zones of limited statehood, not through normative or institutional diffusion, but through informal elite networks, infrastructure control, and strategic denial of rival influence. Finally, it offers a new perspective on the Horn of Africa—still understudied in the context of hybrid influence—as a critical frontier where strategic ambitions, economic diversification, and fragile governance converge.

2. Literature Review

When looking at the strategic engagements of Gulf states in the East African region, a broader pattern of interest becomes evident, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. Among the key actors—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—the UAE has emerged as the most strategically consistent and institutionally embedded. Its engagements span across investments, security partnerships, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic initiatives. These efforts are not merely transactional but reflect a broader foreign policy doctrine aimed at securing economic interests, projecting influence, and countering regional rivals. The UAE's strategic behaviour suggests a deliberate attempt to embed itself within fragile political environments and to create a sustainable presence through infrastructure and economic control.[5]

A defining characteristic of the UAE's engagement is its emphasis on geo-economic strategy: acquiring and managing critical infrastructure, controlling access corridors, and building logistical hubs across East Africa. In Eritrea, following its expulsion from Djibouti in 2015, the UAE established a major base at Assab port, deploying helicopters, drones, and naval vessels to support its Yemen operations—thereby creating a Red Sea logistical corridor under Emirati control.[6]

Similar engagement is observable in Kenya, where the UAE has emerged as a key investor in infrastructure. Trade between Kenya and the UAE has more than doubled in the past decade, with the Emirates becoming Kenya's sixth-largest export market and second-largest source of imports.[7] Bilateral cooperation includes fuel supply agreements, investments in port infrastructure, and UAE financing for the extension of Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, designed to link Mombasa with Uganda and South Sudan.[8]

In Uganda, the UAE has become the leading external investor, committing over $6.6 billion, including a $4.5 billion stake in the country's first oil refinery.[9] Emirati firms are also active in solar energy, agro-processing, and airport development. These engagements reflect a pattern of targeting resource-rich, institutionally weak environments with high strategic value.

Tanzania presents another critical case, where DP World secured a 30-year, $250 million lease to operate two-thirds of Dar es Salaam Port in 2023.[10] This expands UAE influence into the southern corridor of East Africa, complementing its investments in Sudan, Eritrea, Kenya, and Somaliland. These moves point to a clear geostrategic vision: the UAE aims to consolidate control over nearly all major access points along East Africa's coastline, creating a continuous maritime corridor of influence. This chain enables the efficient extraction and export of natural resources from the continent's interior

and serves the UAE's broader ambition of becoming a global logistics and trade hub in the post-oil era.

Beyond East Africa, the UAE's activities in North and West Africa reinforce this pattern. In Libya, the UAE backed up General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army with over 850 drone strikes and extensive military support between 2019 and 2020, seeking long-term political influence and access to Sahelian transit routes.[11] In West Africa, Emirati investments in mining and energy projects further highlight its interest in securing primary commodities.[12] However, due to the lack of reliable port infrastructure along much of West Africa's Atlantic coast, East Africa becomes indispensable for shipping extracted goods to the Gulf. In this logic, the ports and corridors of East Africa form the logistical backbone for wider pan-African engagement.

The UAE's strategic behaviour thus challenges conventional understandings of small state foreign policy. Despite its limited size, the Emirates project is influenced through a hybrid approach that blends soft and hard power tools. These include foreign direct investment, humanitarian aid, military cooperation, symbolic diplomacy, and religious affinity. Importantly, the UAE's foreign policy is largely bilateral and elite-driven, allowing it to operate in opaque environments with minimal oversight. Its focus on informal partnerships and institutional bypassing aligns with broader patterns of authoritarian foreign policy, as described in the literature on hybrid power and authoritarian internationalism.

Despite the growing empirical footprint of the UAE across East Africa, systematic academic inquiry into its engagement remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on great power competition, Chinese infrastructure diplomacy, or Western humanitarian frameworks. The UAE's distinct model—combining authoritarian governance, strategic economic investment, and informal diplomacy—remains under-theorized. Especially lacking is research that systematically analyses how the UAE identifies access points, adapts its strategy to different institutional environments, and uses hybrid tools to establish long-term influence.

To operationalize the research framework, the study applies a qualitative case study design comprising three embedded sub-cases. Building on the theoretical and conceptual rationale outlined in the introduction, the cases of Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland serve as empirical entry points for tracing the UAE's hybrid power projection in diverse political settings. These cases were deliberately selected to reflect both the strategic relevance of the Horn of Africa and the variation in regime type, institutional robustness, and recognition status. Empirical findings are derived from semi-structured expert interviews and analyzed using Philipp Mayring's qualitative content analysis. The temporal focus spans from 2011—marking a turning point in UAE foreign policy after the Arab Spring and the independence of South Sudan—up to mid-2025, thereby capturing both long-term trends and recent dynamics of Emirati engagement.

By focusing on the UAE's actions in these three countries, this research contributes to bridging a conceptual and empirical gap in scholarship on authoritarian foreign policy, regional order-making, and Gulf-African relations.

The paper is structured as follows. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework, drawing on the literature of small state foreign policy, authoritarian influence, hybrid power, and regional order-making. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach. Chapter 5 provides the empirical analysis of the three sub-cases based on the qualitative content analysis of the semi-structured expert interviews and presents the core analysis of UAE strategies and instruments across the cases. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, and concludes with a summary of results and directions for future research.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework guiding this study. It systematically outlines the relevant bodies of literature and conceptual foundations used to interpret the UAE's engagement in Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland. Rather than testing a single grand theory, this framework draws from multiple scholarly traditions to construct an analytical lens capable of explaining the strategic behaviour of the UAE as an authoritarian small state practicing hybrid power projection. The approach is guided by the heuristic question: *"What is my case a case of?"*

3.1 Small State Foreign Policy

The UAE, despite its limited geographic and demographic size, has emerged as a global actor with an expanding foreign policy footprint. Small state foreign policy literature provides a foundational lens by emphasizing how structurally weak states may compensate through flexible, niche-based strategies.[13] These include bilateralism, conflict mediation, strategic investment, and adaptive diplomacy. The UAE exemplifies this model: it leverages its wealth, sovereign funds, and reputation as a pragmatic actor to engage in regions where major powers hesitate, particularly in fragile and post-conflict environments.

Strategic behaviours associated with small states—hedging, band wagoning, and niche diplomacy—are clearly observable in the Emirati case. These behaviours challenge traditional assumptions about the limits of small-state agency in global affairs and open analytical space for understanding the UAE's foreign policy as both assertive and unconventional.[14]

3.2 Authoritarian Internationalism

A second pillar of the framework addresses the role of authoritarian regimes in international politics. Literature on authoritarian diffusion and regime-compatible external engagement highlights how autocratic states often export elite-centred, non-democratic governance practices. Rather than promoting democratic norms or institutional development, these actors focus on stabilizing friendly regimes, suppressing political Islam, and cultivating personalized elite relationships.[15]

The UAE exemplifies this pattern: its engagements frequently favour military or authoritarian actors (e.g., RSF in Sudan), involve opaque bilateral deals, and reflect a strong preference for informal channels of influence. Such behaviour aligns with the logic of authoritarian internationalism, whereby external engagements reinforce domestic regime priorities.[16]

3.3 Smart and Hybrid Power

Joseph Nye's framework of *smart power* provides a useful conceptual foundation to distinguish between the forms and functions of power. Nye defines hard power as coercive tools—military force, sanctions, or economic pressure—while soft power refers to attraction-based influence rooted in cultural appeal, legitimacy, or norms. Smart power, then, is the calibrated, context-sensitive combination of both.[17]

While originally conceptualized for liberal democracies, recent scholarship has extended smart power to authoritarian regimes, including the UAE. In practice, UAE employs a mix of:

- **Hard power:** Military support to actors like the RSF, security infrastructure in strategic ports (e.g., Berbera).
- **Soft power:** Humanitarian aid, cultural diplomacy, Islamic identity politics, symbolic recognition.
- **Smart power:** Flexible combinations adapted to local contexts.

In fragile environments like East Africa, the boundaries between hard and soft power often blur. For example, infrastructure projects serve commercial, strategic, and symbolic purposes simultaneously. Humanitarian aid often fosters elite loyalty. These dynamics necessitate a broader concept of power: hybrid power.

3.4 Hybrid Power Projection

Hybrid power refers to the strategic integration of economic, military, and symbolic tools of influence, tailored to specific local contexts. Building on Nye (2004), Cooley (2015), and Von Soest (2015), this study defines hybrid power projection as a flexible and non-linear foreign policy approach characteristic of authoritarian actors operating in zones of limited statehood.

Core components of hybrid power in the UAE's case include:

- Foreign direct investment in logistics and infrastructure (e.g., ports, airports).
- Security cooperation with paramilitary or state actors (e.g., RSF, elite units).
- Military logistics through bases (e.g., Berbera, formerly Assab in Eritrea).

- Humanitarian aid as diplomatic capital.
- Symbolic diplomacy and informal recognition (e.g., high-level visits to Somaliland without formal recognition).

This strategy is not aimed at assuming formal governance responsibilities but at shaping functional dependencies and elite allegiances. It creates pathways for indirect regional order-making.

3.5 Regional Order-Making and Limited Statehood

The Horn of Africa represents a fragmented political environment where state capacity is often weak or contested. Drawing on Börzel and Risse's (2011) concept of *limited statehood*, this study conceptualizes the UAE's engagement as a form of informal external governance. Rather than building institutions, the Emirates shape outcomes through selective partnerships, infrastructure control, and economic integration.[18]

This informal order-making is particularly visible in settings like Somaliland, where the UAE plays a state-like role in infrastructure, trade, and regional connectivity without engaging in formal diplomacy. The same applies, to varying degrees, in Sudan and South Sudan, where Emirati actors navigate through elite networks, security actors, and informal channels to project power.

3.6 Synthesis and Analytical Utility

By combining small state theory, authoritarian internationalism, hybrid power projection, and regional order-making, this framework allows a layered understanding of the UAE's engagement. Each theoretical strand contributes analytical categories later operationalized in the empirical chapters:

Theoretical Lens	Analytical Focus	Application in Case Analysis
Small State Theory	Strategic flexibility, bilateralism	Niche diplomacy, soft entry points
Authoritarian Internationalism	Elite focus, regime-friendly partnerships	RSF in Sudan, Somaliland elites
Smart/Hybrid Power	Mixed tools of influence	Investment, aid, military cooperation
Limited Statehood	Informal order-making	Institutional bypassing, symbolic diplomacy

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Given the complexity of the UAE's engagement in East Africa and the multidimensional nature of its instruments and interests, this study adopts a qualitative case study design with three embedded sub-cases: Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland. The case study design is particularly well suited for capturing the context-dependent nature of hybrid power projection strategies, especially in post-conflict or fragile settings. Rather than testing a hypothesis in the classical sense, the study follows a theory-guided exploratory logic, drawing from the literature to construct an analytical lens through which empirical patterns are interpreted.[19]

The three sub-cases were selected through purposeful variation: each represents a distinct constellation of regime type, institutional fragility, and geostrategic relevance. All three cases share characteristics of limited statehood and are marked by a high degree of external engagement. At the same time, they differ in their political and institutional setups, allowing for cross-case comparison. The time frame spans from 2011 to the present, covering a period of increased UAE activity in the wake of the Arab Spring and the independence of South Sudan.

In addition to these three cases, supplementary references are made to the UAE's activity in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Eritrea, which help contextualize the broader regional strategy. These states, while not analyzed in-depth, offer insight into the UAE's access strategies and logistical footprint across the wider Horn of Africa and Red Sea corridor.

The empirical basis of the study consists of eight semi-structured expert interviews, conducted online in English during June 16th and June 25th 2025. Interview durations ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. Participants were selected via purposive sampling, guided by expertise on regional dynamics, and supplemented through snowball sampling. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. While verbal informed consent was obtained, no written declarations were collected. Respondents include scholars, regional analysts, and policy practitioners familiar with UAE engagement in the respective contexts. The material reflects both supportive and critical perspectives on the UAE, and must be interpreted in light of potential interest-driven bias by respondents who are themselves embedded in national or institutional networks influenced by UAE activity.

Although the empirical focus of this study does not involve immediate personal threats to participants, the research touches upon politically sensitive topics—such as foreign military presence, elite networks, and external influence in fragile and contested political environments.[20] These issues can elicit strong views, strategic silences, or biased responses, especially in contexts

marked by authoritarian governance or conflict legacies. To ensure the integrity of the data and the protection of participants, all interviews were conducted online and anonymized throughout the research process. Respondents were informed in advance about the nature and scope of the interview and gave verbal consent. No personal identifiers, institutional affiliations, or precise locations are disclosed in this paper. Each interview was assigned a random number for internal reference. In cases where interview content overlaps with public domain information or relates to widely known events, references to location or function are made only in general terms. The author is available to provide further methodological background upon request and at their discretion.

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis - The Philipp Mayring Approach

To analyze the semi-structured interview data collected for this study, qualitative content analysis (QCA) as developed by Philipp Mayring (2014) was employed. This approach is particularly well-suited for the systematic yet interpretive analysis of textual material within its communicative and socio-political context. Given that the research interest lies in uncovering patterns of influence, strategy, and adaptation in UAE foreign engagement—often expressed implicitly rather than explicitly—Mayring's method allows for a robust and flexible analysis of latent meanings in expert narratives.

The core objective of qualitative content analysis is to develop a rule-guided, replicable process of textual interpretation that reduces material systematically while retaining the richness of qualitative meaning. As Mayring (2014) emphasizes, the method seeks to bridge methodological rigor with contextual sensitivity, enabling verifiability through clearly defined analytical steps and traceable category application.[21]

4.2.1 Justification and Fit of the Method

The method is particularly appropriate for analyzing semi-structured interviews, where the flexibility of responses produces diverse but thematically interconnected material. Rather than aiming to test a hypothesis, the study applies a theory-informed approach to generate insights into the hybrid strategies of an authoritarian small state acting in complex and institutionally fragile environments. This makes qualitative content analysis an ideal instrument, as it allows for both deductive category application and inductive nuance recognition.

In contrast to purely quantitative approaches, QCA retains the interpretive depth needed to understand strategic intent, normative positioning, and elite interaction. The method is particularly advantageous in examining how actors interpret and justify foreign engagement patterns, including implicit dimensions of legitimation, symbolic projection, and normative diffusion.

4.2.2 Structuring as the Core Analytical Technique

Among the three core strategies of QCA—summarizing, explicating, and structuring—the study adopts the structuring variant. This means that a category system was developed deductively from the theoretical framework (Chapter 2), including five main analytical categories with associated sub-

codes. The categories allow for both cross-case comparison and contextual variation, enabling a nuanced understanding of the UAE's engagement in Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland.

4.2.3 Analytical Procedure

The coding and analytical process followed several steps, as suggested by Mayring (2014)[22]:

1. Definition of categories and sub-categories: The codes were derived from the theoretical framework on hybrid power projection, authoritarian small state foreign policy, and regional order-making. Each category reflects a specific dimension of Emirati strategy (see section 4.3).
2. Establishing coding rules: Rules were defined for each sub-category to ensure internal coherence and intersubjective transparency. Each rule specifies the condition under which a statement or textual element is to be assigned to a category.
3. Identification of anchor examples: Representative segments from the interviews were identified as prototypes for each category, ensuring practical applicability and aiding reliability.
4. Application to material: The full corpus of interview transcripts was coded using MAXQDA. Codes were assigned manually by the researcher to maintain interpretive control and contextual sensitivity.
5. Iterative revision: During the coding process, categories were periodically reviewed for fit. In case of ambiguity, category definitions and rules were adjusted to improve clarity without compromising comparability.
6. Paraphrasing and reduction: Relevant segments were paraphrased and abstracted before being assigned to categories, as per Mayring's summarizing principles embedded within the structuring approach.

This structured yet adaptable procedure ensured that both surface content and latent strategic logic were captured. The method thereby enabled the identification of patterns such as elite capture, geoeconomic anchoring, and symbolic projection across the cases.

4.2.4 Structuring and Validity

According to Mayring (2014), structuring can be content-oriented, formal, typifying, or scaling. This study primarily employs content structuring, as the goal is to extract thematic dimensions from the material, particularly those related to UAE's strategic objectives, instruments, and regional ambitions. Typifying structuring was applied secondarily to discern context-specific modes of engagement, especially in distinguishing patterns across the three case studies.[23]

To ensure analytical transparency and replicability, all coding decisions were documented in a codebook that includes definitions, anchor examples, and assignment rules. The coding was performed by the primary researcher, ensuring conceptual alignment with the theoretical framework. Given the high context-dependence of the material, intersubjective validity was enhanced through iterative triangulation with secondary literature and field context

knowledge. By integrating Mayring's systematic framework with the contextual demands of the research topic, this study delivers a methodologically rigorous and empirically grounded interpretation of Emirati foreign engagement in fragile East African environments. The resulting findings reflect not only observable behaviour but also deeper layers of strategic logic and normative orientation.

4.3 Analytical Categories

To systematically analyze the interview data, a deductively developed coding framework was applied, derived from the study's theoretical design. The objective of this categorization is to make observable patterns in the foreign policy behaviour of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) analytically tangible across the three case studies—Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland. The coding system consists of five main categories, each representing a key dimension of hybrid power projection as practiced by authoritarian small states. Each category is subdivided into four to five subcodes, each of which captures precisely defined manifestations of strategic behaviour. These categories informed both the coding of the empirical material and the theoretically grounded structure of the empirical analysis.

The empirical analysis in this study is guided by a deductively developed system of analytical categories that operationalizes the core dimensions of hybrid power projection by authoritarian small states. Drawing on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3, five main categories were constructed to systematically capture observable patterns in the UAE's foreign policy behaviour across the embedded case studies of Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland. Each category reflects a distinct but interrelated dimension of Emirati influence and strategic engagement, allowing for both within-case and cross-case comparison.

The first category, Strategic Objectives, focuses on the overarching goals pursued by the UAE, including geopolitical positioning, regime consolidation, geoeconomic expansion, and the externalization of security interests. The second category, Instruments of Influence, captures the diverse means through which these objectives are pursued—ranging from economic investments and humanitarian diplomacy to military presence and ideological tools. The third category, Local Adaptation and Strategic Variation, reflects the UAE's context-sensitive approach, including its ability to tailor engagements to varying institutional environments, regime types, and political opportunities. The fourth category, Target Group Interaction, examines how the UAE engages with specific actors—such as elites, informal authorities, or local populations—and the modes of cooperation, co-optation, or bypassing that structure these relationships. Finally, the category of Regional Order-Making addresses the UAE's broader impact on regional political configurations, including its role in shaping informal governance structures, securing spheres of influence, diffusing preferred norms, and constraining rival actors.

Each of these categories is further disaggregated into clearly defined subcodes and dimensions, which serve as the basis for the coding and interpretation of the empirical interview material. A complete list of all subcategories, coding rules, and illustrative examples is provided in the Appendix 1.

5. Discussion

This chapter presents the empirical analysis of UAE engagement in Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland, based on a theory-guided qualitative content analysis. The analytical categories were derived deductively from the theoretical framework, covering five dimensions that were covered in the Methodology chapter. The coding was applied to eight expert interview transcripts using a deductive codebook. This chapter is thereby organized thematically, following the five major code families. Each section begins with a brief summary of sub-code frequency and continues with a cross-case interpretation of patterns and variations.

5.1 First Case - Sudan

The UAE's engagement in Sudan exemplifies the logic of hybrid power projection as theorized in this study. As a small authoritarian state, the UAE deploys a context-sensitive blend of coercive, economic, and symbolic instruments to maximize influence in fragile environments.[24] The Sudan case reflects this strategy in its clearest form: the empirical data demonstrates that geo-economic access is the primary strategic objective, aligning with the concept of resource-oriented regional positioning. With 62.07% of strategic objective codes referring to geo-economic aims, the UAE's focus on critical minerals and natural resources—especially gold—dominates its Sudan policy.[25]

From a theoretical perspective, this suggests that the UAE is engaging in "regime-contingent power projection"[26], leveraging authoritarian compatibility by partnering with hybrid actors such as the RSF. The support of General Hemedti's paramilitary network—despite its internationally condemned human rights record—highlights the instrumental and non-normative logic of Emirati foreign policy in fragile states. This form of power projection is not aimed at normative diffusion, but rather at extraction, access, and strategic leverage.[27]

The use of military assistance as a tool of influence—reflected in 30.30% of instrument codes—underscores the hybrid character of Emirati power. The UAE provides drones, arms, uniforms, and logistical backing to the RSF, allegedly in exchange for unregulated access to gold-rich territories in Darfur and southern Sudan[28]. These practices blur the lines between diplomacy, covert intervention, and illicit economic activity. They also exemplify the UAE's flexible instrumentality, a hallmark of hybrid power projection. However, the informal and opaque nature of this engagement—combined with a lack of official acknowledgment by Emirati authorities—raises critical questions about the legality and long-term sustainability of this approach.[29]

From the lens of small state foreign policy theory, Sudan also illustrates how the UAE compensates for structural constraints through elite-centric, case-specific

partnerships (C1.2). The RSF serves as a surrogate governance structure, through which the UAE is able to bypass formal institutions and avoid engagement with the internationally recognized government in Khartoum. The coding results (e.g., 39.13% for case-specific partnerships and 33.33% for institutional bypassing) confirm that this approach is highly personalized, transactional, and interest-driven, matching patterns found in other authoritarian engagements abroad as described by Cooly.[30]

Moreover, the shared Sunni identity functions as a form of symbolic soft power, building cultural affinity and trust with RSF commanders.[31] However, as the data and expert insights suggest, this religious commonality operates as a pragmatic entry point rather than an expression of ideological export. This aligns with Nye's (2004) idea that soft power can be used in selective, context-dependent ways, especially when embedded within broader hard and economic power structures.[32]

The UAE's Sudan strategy also demonstrates the sequencing logic of hybrid power: informal, low-visibility networks precede formalized state-to-state relations. The coding results related to the degree of formality (8.70%) and timing (17.39%) reveal a deliberate opportunistic entry into Sudan during its conflict phase, consistent with Börzel and Risse's (2011) argument that external actors exploit zones of limited statehood to establish informal orders.

In terms of regional order-making, the empirical findings support the conclusion that the UAE seeks to build an informal sphere of influence, rather than promote a coherent regional governance vision. The emphasis on informal governance structures (42.86%) and sphere creation (35.71%), coupled with the marginal coding for norm export (14.29%) and strategic denial (7.14%), suggests that the UAE is not attempting to reshape Sudan ideologically but rather to embed itself economically and logistically within the post-conflict order. Critically, this raises concerns about the destabilizing effects of such strategies. By supporting the RSF and enabling extractive dynamics in conflict zones, the UAE may be prolonging violence for economic gain. This casts doubt on the normative claims often made about Emirati statecraft and illustrates the dark side of authoritarian small state behaviour in fragile regions.

In sum, Sudan is a paradigmatic case of hybrid power projection: the UAE acts as a strategic broker in a war economy, using informal elites, military tools, economic investments, and symbolic cues to entrench itself in a structurally weak environment. These results reflect the fact that Emirati influence is already established in the energy, mining, and security sectors, and that the UAE is in an advanced stage of establishing infrastructure, port, and agricultural arrangements in Sudan, with total investments amounting to USD 21.9 million. This makes Sudan the second-largest recipient of UAE investments among the three cases examined.[33] The result is a multilayered, opaque form of influence that operates below the radar of international governance but is nonetheless highly consequential for Sudan's political and economic trajectory.

5.2 Second Case - South Sudan

The empirical results on the UAE's activities in South Sudan provide further support for the notion that Abu Dhabi's foreign policy reflects a broader strategy of hybrid power projection by a small authoritarian state. At the heart of this approach is a flexible mix of tools—predominantly economic and humanitarian—that are adapted to local conditions and deployed in contexts where traditional state-to-state diplomacy may be limited. This is particularly visible in South Sudan, where the UAE appears to pursue influence primarily through soft power instruments, but not in isolation.[34]

The dominance of *geoeconomic access* (71.43%) confirms that the Emirates' engagement is strongly motivated by access to oil fields, agricultural potential, and livestock markets. This reflects Joseph Nye's (2004, 2015) notion of "soft power" in its economic form—emphasizing attraction and incentivization over coercion—but applied in a highly strategic and interest-driven fashion. What is striking, however, is how this soft power is embedded in elite networks and informal arrangements, consistent with Von Soest's (2015) model of authoritarian external governance, where foreign influence is secured not through public institutions, but via opaque, elite-driven pathways.[35]

These elite-based "case-specific partnerships" (40.91%) and patterns of "institutional bypassing" (45.71%) serve as key mechanisms of UAE strategy in South Sudan. Rather than working through formal bilateral channels, the Emirates have invested in personal networks and business alliances, thereby ensuring flexibility and minimizing external scrutiny. This mirrors what Börzel & Risse (2011) describe as a "selective engagement with institutional environments," especially in fragile or failing states. The fact that South Sudan ranks among the top five states on the Fragile States Index (FSI) underscores why such a strategy finds fertile ground: governments are weak, regulation is limited, and foreign actors can operate with relative impunity.[36]

The limited formalization of the UAE's involvement—evident in the low percentages of formal regime adjustment or official agreements—supports the idea that Abu Dhabi is in a phase of strategic experimentation. Lacking a strong ideological or security-based foothold like in Sudan (where the RSF provides a militarized partner), the UAE employs a softer approach in South Sudan, while simultaneously testing potential entry points. This sequencing and timing reflect the "opportunistic flexibility" of hybrid power projection: the ability to calibrate the balance between soft, hard, and smart power depending on the host environment and the availability of reliable local partners.

Humanitarian diplomacy, for example, has become a useful legitimizing tool for the UAE's ambitions. Nye (2004) would characterize such activities as image-building, but in this case they serve as both entry strategies and moral cover. The UAE's investment in hospitals, food security, and civil infrastructure under the Red Crescent umbrella serves to project benevolence while simultaneously building material and symbolic capital. In some cases, this also acts as a gateway to more direct influence, such as the alleged treatment of

RSF fighters in the Aweil Civil Hospital.[37] This connection, although humanitarian on the surface, reveals an embedded security and political calculus.[38] It strengthens the view that the UAE seeks to keep its networked approach flexible, informal, and adaptable to evolving circumstances. In that regard, a potential spillover of the Sudan conflict into South Sudan—particularly into the oil- and resource-rich northern regions—could serve the UAE's strategic interests.[39] Such a development would enable the Emirates to reproduce the access dynamics they have already established through the RSF in Sudan, thereby expanding their extractive reach into South Sudanese territory under the cover of conflict and humanitarian necessity.

The UAE's desire to create a sphere of influence (coded 54.55%) in South Sudan is a continuation of a broader regional pattern that reflects post-hegemonic regional ordering. This approach resonates with Cooley's concept of illiberal regionalism, where rising middle or small powers project order not through institutional embedding, but by building networks of patronage, logistics, and strategic denial. While norm export or ideological alignment remains marginal (4.55%), the strategic aim appears to be one of economic territorialization: embedding UAE-linked actors in strategic points of South Sudan's resource and trade networks.

Critically, this also raises questions about governance and transparency. As Nye (2004) noted, soft power depends on legitimacy. In this case, however, the opacity of the UAE's engagements, the private nature of elite partnerships, and the lack of formal oversight challenge the liberal reading of soft power. Instead, the South Sudan case illustrates a smart power hybrid, where soft instruments are used to serve strategic hard interests—without the traditional visibility and accountability associated with liberal statecraft.[40]

In conclusion, the UAE's South Sudan strategy, while lacking the direct military leverage present in Sudan, illustrates a calibrated attempt to embed influence through economic and humanitarian tools, supported by informal governance structures and elite co-optation. These findings indicate that Emirati influence in South Sudan is firmly anchored in the fields of infrastructure and energy, while a foothold is being established in the security and agricultural sectors. Investments in the port sector remain comparatively limited due to South Sudan's landlocked geographic position. With a total investment volume of USD 13 million, South Sudan ranks lowest in terms of the overall intensity of UAE engagement across the three cases examined in this study.[41] This hybrid model of influence suggests that the Emirates are positioning themselves not only as external investors, but as architects of new regional hierarchies—operating through informal networks in spaces where traditional multilateral governance has failed to deliver.

5.3 Third Case - Somaliland

The UAE's activities in Somaliland represent a particularly sophisticated case of hybrid power projection by an authoritarian small state. As the empirical results show, geo-economic access is the key strategic objective of the Emirati approach, most visibly through port investments, livestock trade,

and infrastructure projects like the Berbera corridor. These align closely with Nye's (2004) broader understanding of "smart power", which refers to the combination of soft and hard power instruments to achieve strategic goals. In the case of Somaliland, the Emirates utilize soft and economic power with minimal coercion, showing a clear preference for non-military means of influence. The result is a deeply embedded form of control that operates through logistics, trade, and connectivity.[42]

In addition to the Berbera port modernization, the UAE has invested in road and airport infrastructure, particularly the corridor connecting Hargeisa to Berbera and the upgrade of Berbera's international airport. These investments significantly enhance Emirati logistical reach and contribute to the UAE's ability to project influence deep into the Horn and toward landlocked Ethiopia.[43]

From a hybrid power perspective, Somaliland showcases the UAE's ability to use state-like tools without establishing overt state control. The leasing of the Berbera port zone for 30 years, combined with the near monopoly over livestock exports and the construction of vital infrastructure, indicates not only economic integration but also a form of territorial and functional sovereignty-lite exercised by a non-African state actor.[44] This reflects a form of geo-economic statecraft typical for rentier economies diversifying their global reach in a post-oil world.[45] As the results demonstrate, regional influence-building and security externalization play secondary—but still relevant—roles. The UAE has no large-scale military presence but uses Somaliland as a potential security hub to monitor the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea corridor.[46] This is evidenced by the establishment of a UAE military facility in Berbera, which was initially linked to operations in Yemen and now contributes to maritime surveillance and power projection in the Bab al-Mandab and Gulf of Aden. The base, although politically sensitive, remains functional and strategically valuable to Emirati regional posture.[47]

This corresponds with Börzel and Risse's (2011) argument that small authoritarian states may project power by embedding themselves strategically into fragile zones where traditional institutions are absent or weak.

Regarding instruments of power, the UAE's preference for economic tools (50%) reinforces its identity as a geo-economic actor whose influence relies on logistics corridors, infrastructure control, and business partnerships. This is hybrid power in practice: while no formal political sovereignty is claimed, the Emirates gain effective leverage over flows of goods and people. This includes securing long-term livestock supply chains, as Somaliland reportedly sends up to 90% of its livestock exports to the UAE, highlighting a deeper agro-economic interdependence that aligns with Emirati food security strategies.[48]

The significant use of symbolic tools—including visa regimes and diplomatic gestures—furthers this agenda, particularly by elevating the Somaliland government as a de facto partner, while simultaneously avoiding official recognition that could harm UAE-Somalia relations. A striking example is the unilateral decision by the UAE to grant visa-free access to Somaliland citizens, reinforcing de facto recognition without diplomatic entanglement.[49] Moreover, the

opening of a UAE consular mission in Hargeisa institutionalizes bilateral engagement while sidestepping the political risks of full recognition.[50] Humanitarian diplomacy adds a layer of legitimacy and moral cover, enhancing soft power while facilitating informal networks of control. UAE-affiliated organizations such as the Zayed Charity Foundation and Emirates Red Crescent have established medical clinics, schools, water infrastructure, and public housing projects throughout Somaliland, further entrenching the UAE's soft power presence.[51]

Somaliland also exemplifies what Börzel and Risse term the "externalization of governance": the UAE strengthens local elites not to promote democratic governance, but to stabilize their own investment environment. The coding results show a significant presence of elite-focused, informal case-specific partnerships, which bypass formal institutions and are often run through business networks or personally aligned political figures. This approach reduces visibility and political accountability, fitting Von Soest's (2015) argument that authoritarian external actors often pursue opaque, elite-based ties to maximize flexibility and minimize international scrutiny.

In this case, informality is not a transitional phase—it is a strategic constant. The dominance of "institutional bypassing" in the coding (61.54%) proves that Somaliland, like Sudan and South Sudan, is approached by the UAE through an "access politics" logic that avoids the constraints of formal diplomacy. Instead, the UAE builds dense networks with local elites and economic actors to create functional dependencies. The UAE's support for Somaliland as an autonomous region within Somalia once again illustrates its strategy of circumventing formal intergovernmental relations by engaging with subnational entities. Somaliland, which seeks international recognition and sovereignty, benefits from a powerful partner like the UAE in its quest for statehood. In return, the UAE gains privileged and less regulated access to Somalia through its ties with Somaliland.[52] The minor attention to population perception and norm exportation confirms Nye's distinction: the Emirates are not exporting values, but outcomes. Soft power is instrumentalized, not idealized.

Finally, from a regional order-making perspective, Somaliland plays a pivotal role in the UAE's grand strategy. The strong empirical support for "sphere of influence" creation (57.14%) and "strategic denial to rivals" (28.57%) supports the interpretation that the Emirates use Somaliland as a hub to counterbalance Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi ambitions in the Horn of Africa.[53] The failure to consolidate control via Djibouti makes Somaliland even more valuable. The breakdown in UAE-Djibouti relations, including the termination of port agreements, directly contributed to the Emirati pivot toward Somaliland. Experts suggest that the UAE now uses informal connections via Djibouti to reinforce its footprint in Somaliland, circumventing regional diplomatic bottlenecks. This links to Cooley's (2015) view of competitive connectivity, where rival powers contest access corridors and logistics chains rather than conventional territory. These results underscore that Emirati influence in Sudan is strongly embedded across all key political and economic sectors,

including infrastructure, energy, mining, port development, agriculture, and security. In terms of overall investment intensity, Somaliland stands out clearly as the most significant case, with a total volume of USD 539 million invested to date—by far the most extensive and established Emirati engagement among the three countries examined.[54] The UAE's hybrid projection from Somaliland into East Africa—enabled by DP World, livestock trade, visa liberalization, and security infrastructure—is a prime example of this logic. In this context, Somaliland becomes not only a client but a platform from which broader regional strategies are launched.

5.4 General Analysis

The empirical findings from expert interviews indicate that the primary strategic objective pursued by the UAE in East Africa is geo-economic access. With 60% of all coded segments aligning with this objective, it is by far the most dominant strategic rationale across all three cases—Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland. This demonstrates that the UAE's engagement is fundamentally driven by economic rationality rather than normative ambition or traditional regional hegemony. This economic priority is deeply tied to the UAE's long-term strategy of diversifying its economic sectors in preparation for a post-oil era, with particular emphasis on securing access to natural resources (especially gold and oil), agricultural goods, and livestock markets. The Emirati leadership views these African markets not only as zones of economic extraction but also as nodes in a wider logistical and trade infrastructure aimed at sustaining national development beyond oil dependency.[55]

Indeed, the UAE's interest in the region predates the Arab Spring. Early engagement, particularly with Sudan, can be traced back to labor migration, remittance flows, and land acquisition, especially in fertile zones of eastern Sudan. These early connections were not heavily publicized but form the institutional memory upon which recent assertive policies build.[56] In this context, the UAE's leasing of agricultural land in Sudan and the 30-year lease of the Berbera port in Somaliland are emblematic of a strategy that combines long-term economic positioning with infrastructural control.

The instrument most frequently deployed in the UAE's East African strategy is economic engagement, specifically in the form of investment in ports, airports, and strategic infrastructure—facilitated primarily through state-linked companies such as DP World. With 37.08% of all instrument-related codings falling into this category, the data confirms this preference. Particularly in Somaliland, the UAE's economic activities stand out as the most sophisticated and comprehensive, surpassing both Sudan and South Sudan in scope and institutional entrenchment. This makes Somaliland a focal case where the broader global ambitions of the UAE come into sharper view: here, the Emirati agenda seems oriented toward establishing a logistics hub that connects Middle Eastern capital to East African resources and global supply chains. Ports are not just trade assets—they are essential exit points for resources extracted from unstable areas, facilitating direct shipment to the Gulf.[57]

The choice of entry points reflects a highly strategic calculus. The UAE systematically engages with countries ranked among the most fragile states in the world—Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland consistently placed in the top tier of the Fragile States Index, according to the 2024 Fragile States Index (FSI), they occupied the top three positions among the world's most fragile states.[58] This fragility grants the UAE significant leverage: such states cannot afford to refuse foreign investments, and their institutional weaknesses allow for informal, elite-driven arrangements. The UAE's entry typically bypasses formal state institutions and is routed through case-specific partnerships, which account for 40.35% of all codings within the "access strategy" category. In Sudan, this manifests as support for the RSF, whose control over gold-rich territories provides a direct return on Emirati military and logistical aid. Security cooperation (20.22%) and military logistics (16.85%) are thus substantial in this case, underlining the UAE's use of coercive instruments where conflict dynamics permit strategic leverage.

The UAE's approach to target group interaction further reveals a systematic pattern: formal diplomacy is often secondary to elite co-optation, institutional bypassing, and network-building with localized actors. Empirically, institutional bypassing was coded in 47.62% of all related segments, and elite cooperation in 31.75%, underscoring the extent to which Emirati strategies are informal and opaque. These informal networks enable Emirati agents to operate discreetly, shielding activities from international scrutiny. While popular legitimacy appears largely irrelevant (coded only 8.57%), Islamic commonality—especially Sunni identity—functions as a symbolic entry point that facilitates trust-based negotiation, reflected in 16.85% of coded interactions.[59] Religious affinity plays a soft-power role, particularly in regions like Sudan and Somaliland, where Emirati agents build rapport through Sunni Islamic solidarity, even if religious doctrine is not overtly politicized.[60]

Humanitarian diplomacy (15.73%) adds another dimension to Emirati strategy: by offering food aid, medical infrastructure, and development assistance, the UAE bolsters its legitimacy while deepening dependencies—especially in Somaliland and South Sudan. This combination of economic and symbolic tools supports what Nye (2004) termed "smart power", i.e., the calibrated mix of soft and hard power to pursue strategic interests without incurring reputational costs. A comparative glance at regional competition—particularly Turkey's engagement in Mogadishu or Qatar's influence in Eritrea and the broader Horn—shows that the UAE is not acting in a vacuum. The empirical results support this with 14.04% of statements referring to strategic denial efforts. In Somaliland, UAE-backed infrastructure projects stand in direct contrast to Turkish investments elsewhere in Somalia. These dynamics suggest that regional rivalry shapes the UAE's geographic focus and timing, reinforcing its preference for semi-recognized, diplomatically flexible environments where great power rivalry is intense and international oversight is minimal.[61]

Finally, the UAE's behaviour across all three cases contributes to a distinct form of regional order-making—not through formal institution-building or norm export (which

were only 7.02% of total codings), but via the creation of informal governance structures (28.07%), logistics corridors, and resource-linked dependencies. While norm export plays only a marginal role, the emergence of a soft, yet durable Emirati sphere of influence is undeniable. This sphere is marked not by ideology, but by logistical control, elite loyalty, and selective economic integration, allowing the UAE to function as a strategic broker between instability and extraction. The overall emphasis on sphere-of-influence creation, which accounts for 50.88% of all regional order-related codings, reinforces this interpretation and underlines the UAE's ambition to structure influence without overt state-building.[62]

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the strategic engagement of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in East Africa through the lens of hybrid power projection by an authoritarian small state. Drawing on a theory-informed, qualitative analysis of three embedded case studies—Sudan, South Sudan, and Somaliland—it has demonstrated that the UAE's foreign policy in the region is characterized by a flexible, adaptive, and interest-driven logic that blends economic, symbolic, and coercive instruments of influence. Rather than following traditional models of institution-building or norm diffusion, the UAE operates through elite-based partnerships, informal networks, and infrastructural entrenchment—mechanisms that allow it to project power and secure strategic access in zones of limited statehood.

The empirical findings show that geo-economic access constitutes the UAE's primary strategic objective across all three cases, with a clear emphasis on natural resource extraction, trade corridor control, and logistical integration. Instruments of influence vary by context but consistently reflect a hybrid logic: economic investments dominate in Somaliland, humanitarian soft power is prominent in South Sudan, and military and security cooperation are most visible in Sudan. Across all three contexts, the UAE systematically avoids formal state-to-state channels in favor of institutional bypassing and case-specific elite partnerships, underscoring the regime-compatible and opportunistic nature of its engagement.

These findings contribute to broader theoretical debates on small state foreign policy, authoritarian internationalism,

and informal regional order-making. The UAE exemplifies how small authoritarian states can act as agile and effective actors in contested geopolitical spaces, not by scaling up traditional diplomatic tools, but by deploying flexible mixes of hard, soft, and smart power tailored to fragile environments. In doing so, the Emirates not only circumvent institutional constraints but also reshape regional dynamics through informal governance, functional dependencies, and selective denial of rival influence.

Theoretically, this paper expands the conceptual vocabulary for understanding the foreign policy behaviour of authoritarian small states beyond the dichotomy of soft and hard power. It introduces hybrid power projection as a useful analytical lens for capturing the complex, layered, and often opaque practices of influence exercised by non-democratic actors in the Global South. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative content analysis based on expert interviews to uncover strategic rationales that are not always made explicit in official discourse.

At the regional level, the UAE's activities in East Africa reflect a form of illiberal regionalism: a mode of order-making that eschews liberal norms and formal institutions in favor of informal networks, logistical control, and transactional alliances. While this strategy allows the UAE to operate effectively in fragile and institutionally weak environments, it also raises critical concerns regarding transparency, accountability, and long-term stability. The reliance on opaque elite networks and the instrumentalization of humanitarian and development aid risk undermining efforts toward inclusive governance and sustainable development in host countries.

Future research should further investigate the comparative dimensions of hybrid power projection among other authoritarian small and middle powers, especially in similarly fragile regions such as the Sahel, Central Asia, or the South Pacific. In addition, greater attention should be paid to the local perceptions and societal impacts of such engagements, which remain underexplored in elite-centered analyses.

In sum, the UAE's strategic engagement in East Africa is neither an anomaly nor a marginal development. It signals a broader shift in the global landscape of influence, where small authoritarian states increasingly shape regional orders through hybrid strategies that defy conventional diplomatic categories. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for scholars of international relations, but also for policymakers seeking to navigate an era of multipolarity, informal governance, and strategic fragmentation.

Appendix 1.:

Coding Scheme Overview

This appendix provides a complete overview of the coding scheme used in the qualitative content analysis. It includes all main categories, subcategories (codes), coding rules, and exemplary anchor citations from the interview material. The structure is aligned with the theoretical framework on hybrid power projection by authoritarian small states.

1. Strategic Objectives

Subcategory (Code)	Definition / Coding Rule	Anchor Example
Regional Influence Building	Activities countering regional rivals or enhancing UAE visibility	E.g., takeover of ports, elite visits, support to factions
Regime-Compatible Order	Support for authoritarian regimes and suppression of political Islam	E.g., backing military rulers, sidelining opposition
Geoeconomic Access	Securing access to resources and trade corridors	E.g., investment in gold, oil, livestock, logistics
Security Externalization	Stabilizing regional threats via power projection	E.g., base building, training proxies, military deals

2. Instruments of Influence

Subcategory (Code)	Definition / Coding Rule	Anchor Example
Economic Instruments	Strategic economic engagement and concessions	E.g., DP World contracts, Berbera port concession
Humanitarian Diplomacy	Aid activities with geopolitical intent	E.g., UAE Red Crescent food and health programs
Security Cooperation	Direct military/security support	E.g., RSF equipment/training, joint operations
Military-Logistical Presence	Permanent or semi-permanent UAE military infrastructure	E.g., airstrips, ports, logistics hubs
Ideological/Symbolic Tools	Symbolic and ideological influence instruments	E.g., official visits, Islamic soft power

3. Local Adaptation and Strategic Variation

Subcategory (Code)	Definition / Coding Rule	Anchor Example
Case-Specific Partnerships	Tailored coalitions with local actors	E.g., alignment with clans, governors, traditional leaders
Adjustment to Regime Type	Tactics adapted to state fragility or recognition	E.g., unilateral ties to Somaliland
Timing and Sequencing	Opportunistic engagement strategies	E.g., investments post-conflict or post-coup
Degree of Formality	Balance between formal/ informal channels	E.g., direct elite ties vs. formal MoUs

4. Target Group Interaction

Subcategory (Code)	Definition / Coding Rule	Anchor Example
Elite Capture/Cooperation	Selective empowerment of political/military elites	E.g., elite contracts, patronage ties
Institutional Bypassing	Operating outside or against state institutions	E.g., working with RSF or traditional councils
Population Perception/ Legitimacy	Perceived legitimacy of UAE by local population	E.g., ambivalence in public narratives
Network-Building	Establishing enduring personal and strategic networks	E.g., repeat visits, embedded brokers

5. Regional Order-Making

Subcategory (Code)	Definition / Coding Rule	Anchor Example
Informal Governance Structures	UAE-backed non-state power arrangements	E.g., parallel logistics or governance frameworks
Creation of Spheres of Influence	Securing areas for long-term control	E.g., strategic ports or airbases
Norm Export/Regime Diffusion	Diffusion of UAE-style governance	E.g., technocratic authoritarianism
Strategic Denial to Rivals	Blocking geopolitical competitors	E.g., excluding Turkey or Qatar

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