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DECONSTRUCTING THE (IM)BALANCE: ASYMMETRY IN EMIRATI-AFRICAN RELATIONS

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Abstract: The United Arab Emirates has become a leader in economic development and sectoral diversification, mostly due to its unique ability to trade with everyone at any time. As such, it has been present in various parts of Africa for the better half of their existence. Developing relations with states on the continent, albeit not a priority, has certainly constituted a significant aspect of Emirati power-building, though not without a significant imprint on its partners.

The aim of this article is to examine the implications of the United Arab Emirates' current presence in Africa for African nation-states, local communities, and the environment. As this study aspires to situate the UAE's foreign policies within broader debates on international relations theory, it is argued that its current activity in the analysed regions is an exemplary case of highly asymmetrical partnership: providing contracting states with the capital needed for development and direct assistance in the short-term perspective, but also encroaching on their sovereignty.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates; Africa; Asymmetrical Partnership; International Relations.

Resumo: Os Emirados Árabes Unidos tornaram-se líderes em desenvolvimento económico e diversificação setorial, principalmente devido à sua capacidade única de negociar com qualquer um, a qualquer momento. Como tal, têm estado presentes em várias partes de África durante a maior parte da sua existência. O desenvolvimento de relações com os Estados do continente, embora não seja uma prioridade, constituiu certamente um aspeto significativo da construção do poder dos Emirados, embora não sem uma marca significativa nos seus parceiros.

O objetivo deste artigo é examinar as implicações da atual presença dos Emirados Árabes Unidos em África para os Estados-nação africanos, as comunidades locais e o ambiente. Como este estudo pretende situar as políticas externas dos EAU no âmbito de debates mais amplos sobre a teoria das relações internacionais, argumenta-se que a sua atividade atual nas

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regiões analisadas é um caso exemplar de parceria altamente assimétrica: fornece aos Estados contratantes o capital necessário para o desenvolvimento e assistência direta numa perspetiva de curto prazo, mas também invade a sua soberania.

Palavras-chave: Emirados Árabes Unidos; África; Parceria Assimétrica; Relações Internacionais.

1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates[1] is a state whose ambitions have outgrown the expectations set for it even 20 years ago. It has become a leader in economic development and sectoral diversification, mostly due to its unique ability to trade with everyone at any time. As such, it has been present in various parts of Africa for the better half of its existence. Developing relations with newly established, post-colonial states on the continent, albeit not a priority (giving way to securing military alliances with the United States and inviting the capital-exporting West to invest in the Emirates), has certainly constituted a significant aspect of Emirati power-building.

Due to a set of favourable cultural features, the UAE was never in a position similar to that of a Western colonial metropolis. Unlike traditional Global North powers, the Emirates entered Africa without the burden of a colonial past, allowing them to shape partnerships with a relatively clean slate. Their involvement in Africa's affairs is often viewed with "cautious optimism" (Thomas, 2025). They share faith with almost 50% of the African population[2] and a language with over 11% of the continent (Shafeek, n.d.), which has enabled them to create a distinct bond of multidimensional cooperation, focused not only on economic gains but also religious and cultural exchange. Similar to other important stakeholders in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Islam provides an important context for an easy "way in" to establish Emirati-

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1. The transliteration of Arabic names and geographic locations follows the most widely accepted conventions used in contemporary English language (e.g., *Abu Dhabi*, *Djibouti*, *Khartoum*) and generally aligns with the simplified ALA-LC (American Library Association – Library of Congress) system, usually adopted in academic contexts. Diacritical marks have been omitted for clarity and accessibility. The transliteration of other Arabic sources follows the ISO 233-2 standard.

2. According to various sources, the Muslim population in the 2020s in Africa varies from 41% to 50%. cf. (Statista, n.d.; Kettani, 2010: 136)

African relations and increase influence through the operations of, for example, Emirati charity organisations (Nada, n.d.). This "cultural solidarity" is described as an important factor in sculpting the overall strategy of relationship development in Africa. Religion is also an important driving force in extending soft power on the continent, especially in terms of nation branding targeted at the population.)

The aim of this article is to examine the implications of the United Arab Emirates' current presence in Africa for African nation-states, local communities, and the environment. Throughout this analysis, it is argued that the current activities of the United Arab Emirates in Somalia, Somaliland, Tanzania, Liberia, Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea, and Djibouti are based on predominantly asymmetrical partnerships, on the one hand providing contracting states with the capital needed for development and direct assistance in short-term perspective, while on the other, partially encroaching on the sovereignty of these partners.

The study aspires to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the UAE's growing influence on the African continent and to situate this involvement within broader debates on international relations theory. Ultimately, this assessment boils down to two questions: to what extent is an unequal distribution of benefits acceptable within a partnership, and at what point does foreign involvement transition from strategic cooperation to excessive intervention?

2. The research framework for asymmetrical relations between states

Both the terms "partnership" and "exploitation" are frequently used to describe interactions between states, and indeed, the nature of relations between international stakeholders can resemble both. Albeit these alternatives seem to be at opposite ends, a deeper insight provides a more nuanced outlook on the dynamics of partnership, complicating the final diagnosis. As a result of natural imbalances between states, determined by wealth indices, geographical location, controlled territory, or political influence, international cooperation is increasingly becoming asymmetrical. An acknowledgement of differences in negotiating leverage, influence over one another, and discrepancies in benefits reaped leads to the dilution of the sharp line between fair partnership and abuse, which ultimately results in the adoption of the category of asymmetrical relations.

The concept of asymmetry in international relations is linked to the notion of small states, and the analysis of their foreign policy (Long, 2017: 14). Throughout the course of studies devoted to power imbalances, the need arose to implement new categories that could adequately describe the nature of relations between powerful, wealthy states and their weaker counterparts. The study of state behaviour through the lens of asymmetry presumes the analysis of state interests, their prioritisation, and the overall (im)balance in terms of whose issues and ambitions dominate mutual (or multilateral) relations, and consequently, which party enjoys more freedom of action. The baseline assumption of asymmetry theory, as presented by Womack, is that although profits may not be equal, both parties preserve their autonomy and ultimately cannot be forced to act in line with the other party's wishes. As he further explains, the maintenance of the partnership is more important to the weaker side, since it consumes more of its attention, as is more prone to the adverse consequences of deterioration of the mutual exchange. Since asymmetrical relations occupy less space in the stronger side's foreign policy, the risk of their degradation is also proportionally less threatening. Changes initiated by the stronger state will easily influence the weaker state, but not the other way around – less powerful states do not possess the ability to affect the overall standing of the dominant partner (Landau and Pfetsch, 2000: 25).

If executed correctly – i.e., with a realistic assessment of the power imbalance by both parties – an asymmetrical partnership might be stable and peaceful. As Kupiecki (2016: 31–33) notes, the assessment of such a relationship cannot be straightforwardly denounced as negative, opposed to a "normal" state of symmetry, since it does not automatically ascribe full power to the stronger party or put the weaker state in the position of a subsidiary; rather, it creates a sphere of mutual engagements in which the power player has to responsibly manage common interests, while the smaller actor attentively observes and adjusts to the direction put forward by the hegemon. In practice, the asymmetrical character of a relationship is best observed during negotiations, since it is at this moment that the differences in power are most apparent, as they directly influence the bargaining power of each party. Despite the imbalance, however, it is possible to reach a satisfactory outcome even in an asymmetrical negotiation setting (Landau and Pfetsch, 2000: 24) – otherwise, even the less powerful party would not engage in the process.

In the scenario relevant to this paper – i.e., the relationship between the United Arab Emirates and one of the analysed African states: Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, Liberia, Chad, or Kenya – asymmetry means that one of the partners has more leverage to shape the relationship, be it in the sphere of security, politics, or the economy, while the other adjusts its interests and priorities to keep up with the shared vision.

The UAE's approach to forging partnerships with African nations is driven largely by its strategic interests and the pursuit of tangible benefits for the state. However, it is important to recognize that African countries would not engage in such relationships unless they also perceived opportunities to advance their own goals. These nations are sovereign entities, fully capable of independently shaping their foreign policies and leveraging their partnerships to foster either closer ties with, or increased distance from, any international actor, based on their strategic priorities. This is not to suggest that the scrutinized governments act with total autonomy – they are, of course, limited by the overall political situation, security concerns, and economic challenges; societal expectations must also be taken into account. Political stakeholders on the continent recognize the power struggle over the resources they oversee and use it to advance their own agendas (Obadare, 2023).

The pivotal characteristic attributed to the asymmetrical partnership between the UAE and African states is the mutual benefit for both parties. The scale and relevance of benefits may be multidimensional and disproportionate, but that discrepancy does not necessarily equate to exploitation.

The asymmetry narrative is already evident in the literature on the subject: since the Emirati "African doctrine" is analysed both in critical academic writing and domestic press op-eds, there is ample evidence of how certain stakeholders wish to portray the UAE's activity on the continent. For example, the state-owned newspaper *Al-Ittiḥād* (Markaz al-Ittiḥād li-al-Akhbār, 2024) summarises the rationale behind strengthening relations as working in line with five main principles: building reliable long-term partnerships, strengthening intra-African relations, deepening supply chains within Africa, helping the continent gradually become more self-reliant, shifting from re-export trade to direct investment, ensuring economic sustainability, and enhancing mutually beneficial activities for both the UAE and Africa. This description focuses on bilateral gains, emphasising the developmental assistance the Emirates offer their African partners, while also clearly affirming their dominant role. Similarly, in an article (Barqāwī, 2024) published in *Al-Khaleej*, a Sharja-based daily Arabic language newspaper, the nature of the investment relationship between the UAE and Emirates is described as "non-traditional, developmental". The strong focus on the asymmetrical benefits of intense economic partnership is visible also in non-Emirati (but also non-African) opinions and briefs: for example, in a press release by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2024) growing cooperation between the continent (through the African Continental Free Trade Area) and the Gulf is highlighted, with emphasis placed on the amount of foreign direct investment flowing from the Arab states into Africa, as it is expected to enhance "food security, the energy transition, and infrastructure development".

The Emirates' proactive stance on facilitating Arab-African economic exchange is also embodied by soft power initiatives: hosting conferences ('Diplomacy Lab Announces UAE Africa Connect' 2022) and debates ('UAE to Host "The Africa Debate" on October 31 to Boost Trade, Investment' 2024), digital products to assist businesses ('Ministry of Economy Launches "UAE – Africa Gateway" to Enhance Economic and Investment Partnerships with African Markets' 2024), participating in international semi-official events bringing together Arab and African stakeholders, (and strengthening diplomatic ties (Markaz al-Ittiḥād li-al-Akhbār, 2024). Both international and Emirati media outlets tend to highlight those initiatives as contributing to the development of various African regions, openly suggesting that the Emirates are positioning themselves as a more advanced international actor. The UAE is clearly trying to shape the narrative around its African strategy, portraying it as an agenda for development and progress.

While appearances undeniably play a significant role in diplomacy and international relations, they do not always provide an accurate representation of the true nature of these interactions. The growing influence of the UAE in Africa is increasingly viewed by critical commentators as a modern form of neocolonialism. Despite the enthusiastic appraisals from Emirati media outlets (as described above), there is also an abundance of critical voices. On a similar note, in an article for the Paris-based organisation Noria Research, Hamza Hamouchene, an Algerian researcher and activist, describes the UAE's (and other Gulf states) endeavours towards the energy transition as "Arab Green colonialism".

Meanwhile, a Washington-based non-governmental organisation, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, published in July 2024 a short commentary on the Emirati policies towards Africa, suggesting that "controversies [of the UAE's presence on the continent] challenge [its] legitimacy and ethical foundations". Environmental NGOs – both from the region and beyond – have also used the term "colonialism" to describe the UAE's relations in Africa, focusing in particular on recent carbon credit deals and land conservation projects.[3] A campaigner at the Dutch foundation Fern, in an article from November 2023, urged the global community not to "give a green light to fossil fuel states' – and other rich countries' – exploitation of often impoverished countries who have forests which need protecting".

3. Effects of Emirati policies – a bottom-up and top-down perspectives

3.1. Nation states

When assessing the consequences of the UAE's policies in Africa for nation states, it should be noted that although the matters discussed concern the sphere of international relations between public actors, it is the private companies that remain the most upfront stakeholders. Overall, the UAE conducts much of its business not directly through symmetrical state-to-state deals, but rather chooses to deploy publicly-backed investors to provide capital to the other party under a private-sector veneer.

Having noted the above, it follows naturally that the global expansion of port infrastructure has been conducted by entering into agreements between the Emirati port management company, DP World, and the states hosting its investments. Dubai Ports World (DP World) – originated in 1972 as a local operator of Port Rashid and later Jebel Ali. In 1999, it was incorporated under the name Dubai Ports International, at which point it already operated the Jeddah port (Saudi Arabia), Visakhapatnam (India), Doraleh (Djibouti), and Constanta (Romania). The company took its current form in 2005 through a merger with the Dubai Ports Authority. The state is said to own approximately 1,8% of the world's deadweight tonnage (Miller and

3. See, for example, a commentary prepared by the American organization Democracy Now! on the occasion of COP28, hosted by the United Arab Emirates. (DEMOCRACY NOW!, n.d.)

Verhoeven, 2020), making it the 13th largest state fleet owner globally (UNCTAD, 2023).

DP World came to Africa as early as 2000, when it started operating a terminal in Djibouti (Kostelyanets, 2022: 116). Almost quarter of a century later, the company claims to operate over 60 ports and terminals, 9 of which are located on the continent ('Our Locations', n.d.): in Egypt, Djibouti, Somaliland, Somalia, Mozambique (two locations), Angola, Senegal, and Algeria (two locations). Thus, the enterprise controls maritime logistics hubs all around the continent, including the prominent ports of Sokhna on the western coast of the Gulf of Suez, the terminal in Doraleh (control over which is currently disputed between the company and Djibouti) and the port of Berbera (Somaliland). Furthermore, it is finalizing the upgrade of port in Bosaso (Somalia), located at the entrance to the Red Sea, just a few hundred kilometres from the Bab al-Mandab Strait.

As exemplified by the arrangement with Somaliland,[4] the company can be granted rather extensive powers at the local level. In the case mentioned above, it received the power to collect tariffs (and even set their value, although in cooperation with the government). Transferring such extensive power to a company should be perceived – even regardless of the regional context – as risky and disadvantageous to the public authority on whose territory the port is located. Business enterprises are, by nature, designed to generate profit, and it is financial incentive that constitutes the marker of success. The ultimate power in the company is wielded by its shareholders, who hold the board accountable, and who are thus not responsible politically before the local community. In other words, as long as the company remains in good standing with the central public authorities, it can implement its policies largely unchecked, without taking into consideration the interests of the population. Adjusting tariff rates to suit the financial goals of an international company may ignite resistance from local communities and port users. Such an incident did, in fact, happen in 2019 at Berbera port, when, in response to increased tariffs, local businesses went on strike, causing delays in port traffic and leaving goods stranded in the harbour.

Additionally, such an arrangement divests the state of a significant portion of its sovereignty, as it is no longer equipped to implement its own policies or collect taxes in the ceded territory. When considering that DP World is

4. As described in (Advani, 2019)

owned by the Emirati public authorities, the concern over sovereignty only deepens – since the company becomes a vehicle not only for generating profit but also for advancing the UAE's own goals.

The UAE is also keenly interested in the Horn of Africa's livestock sector. Sheep, goat, and camel breeding is crucial for the region – over 60% of the Somali population depends on this industry (*Somalia Livestock Price Bulletin* 2024, 1). When exported – for example, to the Gulf[5] – the cargo is shipped through the Berbera port, which enables the UAE to keep track of the volume and quality of the exports. In this way, the UAE extends its local control over the food market, securing its access to meat.

As for food security in general, some parts of the continent – predominantly Arab North Africa – are affected by the UAE's control over the food supply chain and its internationalisation. Apart from Morocco and Tunisia, which rely more heavily on Europe for their food security, the rest of the Arab Middle East's crop supply chain is linked to the Gulf – through both Emirati and Saudi private companies, which often maintain close ties to public authorities (Hanieh 2018, 130). The Emirates are strengthening their leverage over yet another region through a series of intricate corporate links that inevitably lead to oligopolies or monopolies in a strategic sector on at least a regional scale. Since food security is a genuine problem in various regions of Africa, with the war in Ukraine further exacerbating the crisis (FAO, AUC, ECA and WFP 2023, v), the provisioning supply chain for local communities has become a vulnerable matter.

The increasing economic dependence is also evident through various investments in infrastructure. In Somaliland, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development has financed a road project to connect Togochale (Wajaale), in Ethiopia to the Berbera Port. Albeit costly, this investment is set to bring immense benefits both to the Emirati partner – serving as yet another venture into expanding its operations around Berbera – and to local Somali and Ethiopian stakeholders, as the new highway provides improved connectivity between the two states. This potentially facilitates the

5. The Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia, are crucial importers of Somali livestock. When the Saudis imposed a ban on those imports in 2016, the Somali economy suffered extensive losses, exacerbated to the extent of humanitarian crisis. See, for example: (EEAS, n.d.)

revitalization of trade and cultural relations while encouraging Ethiopia to use the Berbera port for its exports.

The UAE is also deeply interested in the political and military influence it can leverage on the continent. Its expansive foreign security policy focuses predominantly on the Horn of Africa and Muslim-majority states, with special emphasis on Arab-majority regions. As for the security situation in the Horn of Africa, the Emirati presence in the region has contributed to the enhancement of anti-piracy operations. The UAE's involvement in ensuring maritime safety at the entrance to Bab al-Mandab has contributed to the development of infrastructure used by local security forces, such as the Somali army and police, which were also said to have undergone training provided by the Emirates and were salaried by them.

In other parts of the continent, the UAE is deeply interested in military struggles. Its involvement in the Libyan civil war up to 2020/2021 was one of the major proxy conflicts for power in Arab-African states. Abu Dhabi is reported to have sent its equipment, instructors, and even troops (Bakir, 2020: 161) to Libyan territory to support the Libyan National Army, led by Khalifa Haftar. However, it later recalibrated its policy goals, ultimately opting for a transaction-based relationship with the current government of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh.

Similar to Libya, the civil war in Sudan has already claimed 15,000 lives and forced 8.2 million people from their homes, exacerbating the refugee crisis in the region. It remains one of the deadliest ongoing conflicts in the world, tearing the country apart and deepening humanitarian crisis. Alleged Emirati engagement is undoubtedly contributing to the prolongation of the conflict. It also constitutes an unjustifiable violation of Sudanese sovereignty. A third-party state's intrusion into the internal affairs of another country constitutes a grave infringement of fundamental principles of international law, specifically the United Nations Charter.[6]

3.2. Societies

6. Article 2(7) of the Charter of the United Nations, adopted on 24 October 1945 in San Francisco, XV UNCIO 335, amendments in 557 UNTS 143, 638 UNTS 308 and 892 UNTS 119.

Emirati security policies, driven by concerns over extremist Islamist ideologies, have significantly impacted local political struggles beyond the Gulf. As a result, democratic movements struggled to gain influence, ultimately being sidelined in favour of more moderate but hardly democratic governments. During the Arab Spring, the UAE observed and intervened in civil movements, predominantly in Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan, where the notions of political Islam gained momentum. Albeit the main actors of religious movements were at some point at least *accused of* supporting terrorism, their political agendas often extended beyond the sole fundamentalist postulates of aligning public law with Sharia. Proponents of political Islam advocated for initiatives aimed to accelerate the general development of the state and alleviate poverty. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood inspired the population to take a stance against the undemocratic regime. Some studies suggest that during their brief period in power, these groups made attempts at constructive dialogue and reducing polarisation, although with limited success. The Arab Spring's religious activists often espoused democratic rhetoric, which sparked concerns in Abu Dhabi (Kourgiotis 2020, 11), prompting the UAE to enhance its de-radicalisation efforts abroad, particularly in close cooperation with the Egyptian Al-Azhar University. As such, the UAE intensified soft-power initiatives designed to promote apolitical religion in society, becoming close allies with an aid-dependent Egypt under the rule of Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi,[7] whose rise to power was consequent to the forced removal of the previously elected president from the Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi. Although there are no grounds for ascribing the responsibility for the shrinking civic engagement space in Egypt (Fishere and Ezzedine, 2024: 13 ss) solely to the UAE, its strong stance on moderate (but not necessarily democratic) Islam, in addition to the ever-growing economic dependency of Cairo on Abu Dhabi, prompts the conclusion that the UAE's religious agenda pushed in Egypt is yet another obstacle to building an unrestricted civil society in Egypt.

Cultural ties bonding the UAE with Muslim-majority states in Africa position it to provide charitable assistance to the latter. It has been observed that the intensity of aid depends not only on similarities in religion or language – politically alignment also plays a crucial role, as countries that support

7. See, for example, the analysis of Emirati-Egyptian economic cooperation swings after 2011 (Elmassah, 2019: 47–55).

Emirati regional policies benefit the most from its financial assistance. This aid may in fact contribute positively to the overall well-being of targeted communities, particularly for their most vulnerable individuals. The prominent Emirati charity, Dar Al-Ber Society, currently operates in 13 African countries, conducting projects related to energy supply and food assistance. The extensive charitable work bolsters the UAE's already largely positive image among African populations. Nation-branding schemes have largely paid off – the UAE, and especially Dubai and Abu Dhabi, is perceived as "promised land" offering work opportunities and high quality of life, driving significant interest in both migration, or at least tourism, to the Gulf.

Foreign investments, security policies, and humanitarian efforts by the UAE have had a significant and often complex impact on societies across various regions. For example, DP World is Somaliland's biggest private-sector employer. However, the company has been accused of failing to uphold labour standards in the ports it manages. Workers in Berbera have protested salary cuts and complained that the company imports foreign workers and provides them with housing and medical care, even though local unemployment remains high. At the same time, there is little to no information available to confirm compliance with local labour laws or the accessibility of labour unions' assistance. When DP World first arrived in Berbera and absorbed employees previously salaried by the government, the company implemented severe pay cuts, triggering worker protests. Conversely, the UAE's maritime transport juggernaut is also reported to have donated significant funds for the upgrading and staffing of the local Berbera Hospital and for investing in local water infrastructure.

3.3. Environment

As for local ecosystems, the principal Emirati project with environmental implications is the activity of the Blue Carbon company. Blue Carbon is a relatively new enterprise, operating since 2022, however, it has already managed to secure high-value deals with Liberia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, and Kenya, securing a significant portion of these states' lands for wildlife conservation. This is intended to generate carbon credits for the company to subsequently sell and reinvest in the sustainable development of partner nations. While this mechanism may generate significant revenue for the host state, while simultaneously helping purchasing entities de-carbonize their activities, it remains a highly controversial practice. Some scholars suggest that carbon markets may not necessarily be an effective way of contributing to "zero emissions" goals in combating climate change. The main criticisms of the mechanism revolve around a lack of transparency in the methodology for quantifying carbon offsets and changes in forest management aimed at "producing" credits. A recent study on a development project aimed at producing offsets (Peña Valderrama, 2023) showed that generating "carbon value" may be conducted by reclassifying useful land (in this case, fallows, i.e. areas of land left for a long rest between cultivation periods) as waste. The land is then repurposed to grow carbon-sequestering forest types, while the original agricultural utility of the soil is disregarded.

Blue Carbon's website – currently unavailable – provided scarce information regarding crucial details of its projects. For instance, the archived sub-site for the Zimbabwean project[8] merely states that land cultivation is conducted through "reforestation, agroforestry, and improved agricultural management, all designed to sequester carbon effectively". It further notes that the methodologies used to calculate generated offsets are "CDM methodologies[9] (e.g. AR-ACM0003), Verra methodologies[10] (e.g. VM0047) – where applicable", yet provides no specific details and contextualization regarding the actions implemented. Any project specifics are only available after signing a non-disclosure agreement. This could be problematic in the future, as Zimbabwe already has a history of carbon credit certifications being revoked – rendering investments virtually worthless –) due to issues with the quality of forest conversation and the management of the Kariba REDD+ project. The Zimbabwean project booklet (Blue Carbon. Zimbabwe Project Booklet, n.d.) declares a commitment to enhancing farmer subsistence through improved agricultural management and community support and inclusion. However, the profit-sharing agreement is reportedly

8. (Blue Carbon. Expressions of Interest for ITMOS, n.d.) Note that the relevant information, included in the "Project Highlights" section, is written in white font and indiscernible from the white background of the website unless highlighted.
9. CDM Methodologies are United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's instructions to establish a project's emissions baseline.
10. Verra is a non-profit Corporation registered in the United States. Their activity focuses on management of the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) Program and providing methodologies for quantifying greenhouse gas benefits of a project and to generate carbon value.

set at 70% for Blue Carbon and 30% for the Zimbabwean government (Zenda, 2023; Ramachandran, *et al*., 2024).

Activist organizations also oppose the commoditization of carbon offsets. Various NGOs and representatives of local communities gathered in September 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya, for the Real Africa Climate Summit. The Summit produced "A People's Declaration", which contained, *inter alia*, a critique of carbon markets:

> 2. Carbon markets and carbon offsetting systems in reality allow companies and rich countries to continue their polluting activities without doing anything to reduce emissions, while imposing additional costs on their customers, including the African ones. Carbon markets also undermine land rights and displace small farming communities while profiting traders in financial markets.[11]

The overall effects of Emirati environmental and sustainability projects are likely to be two-fold. On one hand, they may contribute – at least to some degree – to forest preservation and deforestation prevention, and are expected to develop infrastructure for energy transition. They will also generate carbon credits, ready to be sold, contributing to a limited financial gain for the projects' host states and global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. That being said, these ventures should also be viewed as risk-inducing in terms of profit for local communities and entrusting a foreign-owned company with vast portions of a state's territory, raising concerns regarding national sovereignty.

4. The perfect (im)balance?

In terms of the regional power struggle, where Abu Dhabi is competing with emerging global powers, it focuses on pushing out non-African rivals and perceives the continent as a symbolic cake, ready to be divided. Such an approach fits perfectly the description of a "scramble for Africa" – a term first coined in the second half of the 19th century[12] to describe the power struggle between European states to acquire territorial gains through the

11. The manifesto was retrieved from the Summit's website on 5 July 2024; however, since then, the page (https://www.realafricaclimatesummit.org/) has been unavailable. [Translated by the author from Arabic.]

12. And then made especially notorious by Thomas Pakenham's book of the same title (Pakenham, 1991).

colonisation of Africa – as it is also a rush to secure as much influence and access to strategic resources as possible. It has also been described as such by commentators (Carmody, 2016; Greenfield, 2023; Obadare, 2023; Mari, 2017). This model of foreign policy does not take into consideration local interests and does not allow representatives of the regions in question to participate in decision-making or tactical planning. However, this label is by no means exclusive to the UAE; rather, it reflects a broader pattern among nearly all external powers vying for control over the continent.

On the macro-level, that is, for nation states, cooperation with the Emirates brings both benefits and increasing dependencies that can easily evolve into coercion. As such, the partnership with Arab North Africa fits well into the asymmetrical framework: the food security, a key point in relations between Morocco, Tunisia, or Egypt and the UAE, is regulated by international law and private contracts. The Emirati engagement in North Africa's political transitions during the Arab Spring became a manifestation of an expansion of political soft power that extends beyond mere asymmetrical partnerships; rather, it aims to ensure that the policies of independent states align with Emirati interests. This influence is particularly observable in Egypt, where the UAE leverages significant developmental assistance – while such involvement provides economic benefits, it also risks undermining civic action. Similarly in Sudan, although occurring several years after the Arab Sprin, Emirati involvement has moved beyond asymmetrical partnership into outright infringement upon sovereignty. By providing military and logistical support to factions aligned with its interests, the UAE has played a key role in shaping the country's internal power struggles and the ongoing civil war.

The relationship between the UAE and the Horn of Africa reflects a similarly complex dynamic, albeit one with an even stronger asymmetrical character. Infrastructure projects in the region primarily serve Emirati strategic interests. Ports and logistics networks funded and controlled by Emirati companies illustrate how these investments and military projects ensure the UAE's grip on critical trade routes. Nevertheless, there are also some gains that the region might realize if cooperating with the UAE, such as infrastructure projects – which, while primarily benefiting the stronger partner, also offer tax incentives and an overall enhancement of public utilities. Military presence generally contributes to the security of the host state (although it may also increase the risks of an arms race collateral damage). It should also be noted that several of the states in the Horn view the hosting of foreign military bases as a lucrative business opportunity. For example, Djibouti – most prominent host of other states' armies – has the highest GDP per capita in the region, predominantly due to its openness "for business", albeit that incentive is distributed only among the elites, without addressing the pressing issue of inequalities in the society.

Without strong regulatory mechanisms or counterbalancing policies, local communities may bear the burden of exploitative trade terms and environmental degradation, with their states not strong enough to mitigate it. If allowed to further develop, these relationships could reinforce imbalanced dynamics rather than fostering equitable growth.

The narratives surrounding deforestation in Africa are often rooted in the assumption that "original" forest cover was depleted due to human activity in the area, leading to the degradation of the natural environment. However, this might not necessarily be the case (Leach and Scoones 2015, 22–25), as there are various possible causes – other than anthropogenic ones – for forest deterioration. Nonetheless, spinning a story about local communities living off the land in question and, in consequence – contributing to deforestation and exacerbating environmental crises, serves as a building block for green conservation projects. Framing traditional land cultivation practices as a primary driver for forest loss, particularly when viewed through the lens of climate change provides a convenient justification. Therefore, large-scale nature conservation projects – such as those led by Blue Carbon – gain significant good publicity. Carbon market schemes, aimed predominantly at enabling rich states to buy themselves out of the emission reduction, only further harm already underprivileged South states under the guise of global action against climate change.

5. Conclusions

The Emirati approach to African foreign policy is based on several replicated patterns. The integration of economic and security objectives emerges as a central axis of the UAE's strategy, where commercial projects are set to serve also as an introduction to political influence or military presence. Another characteristic trait is the reliance on local actors to consolidate presence – be it through high-level political alliances or, more controversially, tactical support for armed forces or rebel groups, such as the RSF in Sudan. Lastly, the UAE consistently highlights its role as a supporter of development, actively using nation-branding narratives.

The UAE's strongest connections remain with Arab North Africa due to natural closeness facilitated by cultural, linguistic, and religious ties, as well as membership in the Arab League. In countries like Egypt, the UAE sees itself as a guardian of stability, intervening more boldly when internal dynamics pose risks to the regional balance. Further, the UAE pays close attention to public sentiment in the Arab Middle East, recognising that certain ideas – especially those linked to political Islam, religious radicalism, or civic freedoms – can spread quickly and undermine the UAE's own model of governance. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, the ideological and cultural distance provides a kind of buffer. The UAE is less concerned with domestic affairs of its partners in the central and south parts of the region, because possible transformations – be they democratic or authoritarian – are not perceived as threatening. In these regions, Emirati engagement is often confined to commercial cooperation, such as through projects led by Masdar or Blue Carbon, while political interference remains limited. Still, it remains clear that the Arab League states constitute the nucleus of Emirati foreign policy, and it is primarily in these states that the UAE seeks to exert a deeper, sometimes forceful, influence.

The final assessment of Emirati-African relations reveals a complex and unstable spectrum of asymmetry. Even though some engagements are undeniably exploitative, others bring tangible benefits to African states. On one end of the scale, these partnerships bridge the infrastructure gap, attract foreign investment, and enhance security, yet, they often operate on unequal terms, fostering dependency. At the other extreme, cases like Sudan highlight instances where the UAE's actions exceed the bounds of asymmetrical partnership, breaching the principle of state sovereignty and contributing to local instability.

Ultimately, the balance between cooperation and exploitation is precarious and approaching a tipping point. Without active lobbying for comprehensive change – ranging from stronger regulatory frameworks to more assertive local policies – these asymmetrical relationships risk devolving into deeper subjugation. The path forward requires greater accountability from the UAE as an external power and renewed efforts from African states to reclaim their agency.

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