

GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY AND ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY IN AFRICA: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF U.S.-IRAN TENSIONS ON TRADE, ENERGY MARKETS, AND MACROECONOMIC STABILITY

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Abstract

This study analyzes the impact of geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and Iran on Africa's political economy and security architecture, focusing specifically on transmission mechanisms, security implications, and response strategies. Employing a comprehensive approach that combines quantitative analysis of macroeconomic indicators with a qualitative assessment of security dynamics and policy measures, the study identifies oil price volatility as the primary channel through which these geopolitical tensions affect African economies. The findings indicate that oil-exporting nations face revenue instability, while oil-importing countries experience rising inflation and fiscal pressure. Trade disruptions and financial market volatility exacerbate these effects, constraining economic resilience. In the security realm, the study identifies signs of increasing militarization in strategically important regions—such as the Red Sea basin—and the proliferation of “proxy actors,” which heighten instability in vulnerable states. Despite their development, regional security structures face significant resource and institutional constraints in addressing these complex challenges. In response, African states employ a mix of diplomatic maneuvering, economic adaptation, and security cooperation, though the effectiveness of these strategies varies according to specific contexts. The study concludes that while Africa remains structurally vulnerable to external geopolitical shocks, mechanisms for resilience and strategic adaptation are beginning to emerge. The authors recommend accelerating economic diversification, regional integration, and security cooperation to enhance the continent's capacity to withstand challenges stemming from great-power rivalry.

Keywords: *geopolitical tensions, oil price volatility, political economy, security architecture, Africa, great power rivalry, United States, Iran.*

Introduction

The resurgence of great power rivalry in the twenty-first century has significantly reshaped global political and economic dynamics, with consequences extending far

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beyond primary theatres of conflict. The intensifying tensions between the United States and Iran represent a critical axis of this evolving geopolitical contest, influencing global stability and redefining patterns of international engagement. As Zarnadze and Hongson (2026) contend, strategic competition plays a central role in shaping national interests and global alignments, often extending its effects to peripheral regions. Africa, characterized by structural economic dependencies and institutional fragilities, is particularly exposed to such external pressures (Shah et al. 2026). Despite its geographical distance from the Middle East, the continent is increasingly entangled in the ripple effects of U.S.-Iran tensions, raising important questions about vulnerability, agency, and resilience in a shifting global order.

A major pathway through which U.S.-Iran geopolitical tensions affect Africa lies in the global political economy, particularly through oil price volatility and trade disruptions. Fluctuations in oil prices, often triggered by geopolitical crises, have far-reaching consequences for African economies, many of which are either heavily dependent on oil exports or vulnerable to import costs. Studies show that geopolitical shocks significantly influence crude oil price dynamics, thereby affecting macroeconomic stability (Sweidan and Elbahnasawy 2026; Liu 2025). In highly interconnected markets, such shocks are transmitted rapidly across regions, amplifying inflationary pressures and fiscal imbalances (Bellos, Golitsis and Emmanouilidis 2026; Vivoda, Matthews and Andresen 2025). However, while these studies provide global insights, there remains limited Africa-focused analysis that directly links U.S.-Iran tensions to specific economic outcomes on the continent, highlighting a critical gap this study seeks to address.

In addition to economic implications, U.S.-Iran rivalry has important consequences for Africa's evolving security architecture. Strategic regions such as the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa have become increasingly militarized due to their geopolitical significance and proximity to Middle Eastern conflicts.

Okafor-Yarwood and Onuoha (2023) highlight the strategic importance of key maritime chokepoints, where rising tensions can disrupt global trade and undermine security. Moreover, the presence of proxy actors and external military interests complicates an already fragile security landscape, particularly in regions such as Somalia and the Sahel (Raineri, Cissé and Berlingozzi 2025). Although Joseph (2024) notes efforts to adapt African peace and security mechanisms—including structures like the African Standby Force (Idahosa, Degterev and Ikhidero 2021)—there remains a lack of empirical research linking these processes directly to the geopolitical rivalry between the US and Iran.

Recent geopolitical escalations have further underscored the relevance of these dynamics for Africa's political and economic stability. Emerging analyses suggest that conflicts involving Iran generate global ripple effects, influencing trade routes, energy markets, and strategic alignments (Mensah 2023; UNDP 2026). Lebakeng (2023) argues that Africa is increasingly drawn into global power contests, often without adequate leverage to shape outcomes. Similarly, reports indicate that disruptions in Middle Eastern energy flows can significantly affect African consumer markets and development trajectories (UNCTAD 2025). Despite these insights, existing literature

tends to treat Africa as a passive recipient of global shocks, with limited attention to how specific geopolitical rivalries.

Against this backdrop, the first objective of this study is to examine how U.S.–Iran geopolitical tensions influence Africa’s political economy, particularly through oil price volatility, trade disruptions, and inflationary pressures. The second objective is to assess the implications of this rivalry for Africa’s security architecture, focusing on maritime insecurity, militarization of strategic regions such as the Red Sea and the Sahel, and the activities of proxy actors. The third objective is to evaluate the response strategies of African states and regional organizations, including diplomatic alignment, economic adaptation, and security cooperation mechanisms. While prior studies acknowledge Africa’s exposure to global shocks (Cilliers, Hughes and Moyer 2011), they rarely integrate these three dimensions within a single analytical framework, representing a key research gap addressed by this study.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on great power rivalry, geopolitical risk, and Africa’s vulnerability within the global system. The subsequent section outlines the methodological approach and analytical framework adopted for the study. This is followed by an empirical analysis divided into three parts, corresponding to the study’s objectives: political economy impacts, security implications, and response strategies. The final section discusses the findings in relation to existing scholarship and offers policy recommendations for African states and regional institutions. By providing a comprehensive and integrated analysis, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Africa’s position within contemporary geopolitical rivalries and highlights pathways for enhancing resilience in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Geopolitical Tensions, Oil Markets, and Africa’s Political Economy

A substantial body of literature has examined the relationship between geopolitical tensions and oil price dynamics, highlighting the central role of energy markets as a transmission channel for global shocks. Billah, Shaik, Hadhri and Balli (2025) demonstrate that oil price shocks significantly affect economic activity in emerging and developing economies, with implications for growth, inflation, and fiscal stability. Shang and Hamori (2024) further differentiate between oil-exporting and oil-importing countries, showing that the macroeconomic effects of price fluctuations vary considerably depending on a country’s economic structure. For many African states, this duality creates a complex landscape in which both positive and negative effects coexist.

Geopolitical tensions involving Iran are particularly significant due to the country’s strategic position in global energy markets. Márquez-Velázquez (2025) argues that political instability in the Middle East remains a key driver of oil price volatility, often outweighing purely economic factors. Similarly, Liu (2025) highlights the broader economic implications of the Iran conflict, noting its potential to disrupt trade flows and investor confidence. Recent analyses by Meng, Khan, Adebayo and Olanrewaju (2024) point to the vulnerability of energy supply chains, particularly in critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, where disruptions can have immediate global repercussions.

For African economies, these dynamics translate into a range of challenges. Oil-exporting countries may experience temporary revenue gains during price spikes, but such benefits are often offset by volatility and uncertainty (Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike 2026). On the other hand, oil-importing countries face increased costs, leading to inflationary pressures and reduced purchasing power (Shang and Hamori 2024). UNCTAD (2025) underscores Africa's vulnerability to global shocks, emphasizing the need for stronger regional trade integration to mitigate external risks. Similarly, the UNDP (2026) highlights the adverse effects of geopolitical tensions on African economies, including reduced investment flows and heightened fiscal stress.

Recent events surrounding the conflict between Israel and Iran further confirm these trends. Fluctuations in global crude oil prices directly affect fuel costs in countries like Nigeria, demonstrating the immediate impact that conflicts in other regions have on local economies. Odo et al. (2026) also highlight broader consequences for African consumer markets, including rising prices for goods and services; such economic pressure can exacerbate social tensions and undermine political stability (Ndou and Gumata 2025).

While these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat geopolitical tensions as exogenous shocks without examining their underlying political drivers. Moreover, there is limited integration of economic and political analyses, resulting in fragmented understandings of how U.S.-Iran rivalry shapes Africa's political economy. This study seeks to bridge this gap by linking macroeconomic outcomes to specific geopolitical dynamics, offering a more comprehensive perspective on Africa's economic vulnerability.

Security Implications and African Responses to U.S.-Iran Rivalry

The security dimension of the US-Iran rivalry is increasingly attracting the attention of researchers, particularly regarding its impact on strategically vital regions and the global security architecture. The significance of key maritime corridors—such as the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden—as critical hubs for global trade and security systems is evident. The Red Sea constitutes a regional security complex where the interplay between local and external actors determines the level of regional stability. The growing militarization of these zones reflects broader geopolitical rivalries and carries serious consequences for the African states situated along these routes.

In recent years, geopolitical fragmentation has intensified in the Horn of Africa, driven in part by the rivalry between external powers. A key feature of the region's evolving security landscape is the realignment of strategic forces, as states navigate complex relationships with global powers. Similarly, the growing influence of external players—including Türkiye—is a visible component of the region's competitive landscape. Attention is also drawn to the role of “proxy actors” (parties acting on behalf of other forces) in conflicts—such as in Somalia—demonstrating how global rivalries can translate into localized forms of violence.

Academic literature on Africa's security architecture highlights the continent's efforts to establish flexible and resilient response mechanisms. Vivoda, Matthews and Andresen (2025) argue that adaptive approaches to peacebuilding are essential to counter complex and evolving threats. The African Union identifies the African

Standby Force as a key element of continental security, while recent statements from the organization reflect growing concern regarding the impact of Middle Eastern conflicts on Africa. However, the implementation of these institutional measures often faces challenges related to resource constraints, coordination issues, and a lack of political will.

Recent policy-oriented analyses offer further insight into the security implications of U.S.-Iran tensions. Experts point to the likelihood of rising instability in the Horn of Africa, driven by external interference and shifting alliance structures. They emphasize the broader strategic consequences for Africa, including the risk of the continent becoming a theater for proxy conflicts. In this context, these processes can be viewed through the lens of risk politics, a framework in which uncertainty and instability emerge as defining characteristics of the international system.

At the same time, African states and regional organizations have developed various strategies to address these challenges. Africa's response to great-power rivalry is often characterized by pragmatism and a drive for strategic balancing. Experts also highlight the role of migration and diaspora networks in shaping Africa's ties with Middle Eastern nations, adding a further layer of complexity to these interactions. Drawing parallels between various instances of geopolitical intervention reveals the pivotal role played by natural resources and strategic interests in shaping the nature of external involvement.

Despite the existence of such studies, the academic literature on this subject remains fragmented, and analyses across the security, economic, and political spheres lack sufficient integration. There is also a tendency to focus on specific regions or issues rather than forming a holistic view of Africa's position within the global geopolitical standoff. This study aims to address these gaps by examining the multifaceted impact of U.S.-Iran tensions and analyzing the strategies employed by African actors to mitigate risks and enhance resilience. In doing so, the work contributes to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Africa's evolving role on the global geopolitical stage.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design anchored in political economy analysis and security studies to examine the multifaceted impact of U.S.-Iran geopolitical tensions on Africa. The complexity of the research problem, spanning economic shocks, geopolitical risk transmission, and security dynamics, necessitates an approach that goes beyond single-method inquiry. As Lazarus and Sarkar (2026) suggest, understanding the intersection of strategy and economic relations requires analytical flexibility capable of capturing both material and ideational dimensions of global power competition. Accordingly, this study combines qualitative content analysis with elements of comparative case-oriented reasoning to generate a nuanced and context-sensitive interpretation of Africa's position within these geopolitical processes.

The primary method employed is qualitative content analysis of secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, institutional publications, and credible media sources drawn from the provided reference list. This approach is

particularly appropriate given the evolving and transnational nature of U.S.-Iran tensions, where real-time primary data collection would be constrained by accessibility and reliability challenges. Existing studies on geopolitical risk and economic transmission, such as Bøås and Strazzari (2026), demonstrate the value of synthesizing diverse data sources to trace patterns of global interdependence. By systematically analyzing these materials, the study identifies recurring themes, causal linkages, and regional variations in how geopolitical tensions manifest across Africa's political economy and security landscape.

To address the first objective, which focuses on the political economy implications of U.S.-Iran tensions, the study employs a thematic analytical framework centered on oil price volatility, trade disruptions, and inflationary pressures. This choice is informed by a substantial body of literature linking geopolitical shocks to commodity price dynamics (Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike 2026; Liu 2025). The framework enables the tracing of causal pathways from geopolitical events—such as military escalations or sanctions regimes—to macroeconomic outcomes in African states. In line with Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike (2026) and Shang and Hamori (2024), the analysis distinguishes between oil-exporting and oil-importing countries to capture differentiated impacts. This methodological approach is particularly suitable because it allows for the integration of macroeconomic insights with geopolitical analysis, thereby addressing a key gap in the literature where these dimensions are often treated separately.

For the second objective, which examines the security implications of U.S.-Iran rivalry, the study adopts a regional security complex perspective complemented by qualitative assessment of institutional responses. Drawing on Agostinelli dos Santos and Mattar Nasser (2026), this approach situates Africa, particularly the Red Sea and Horn of Africa regions, within broader networks of strategic interaction involving both regional and external actors. The use of qualitative analysis allows for the exploration of less quantifiable phenomena, such as proxy dynamics, militarization, and shifting alliances, which are difficult to capture through purely quantitative methods. Studies such as Idowu (2026) highlight the evolving nature of Africa's security architecture, reinforcing the need for interpretive methods that can account for institutional adaptation and contextual variation. Additionally, policy reports from organizations such as the African Union and the African Digital Democracy Observatory (2026a) provide valuable insights into operational realities and emerging threats, further justifying the reliance on qualitative synthesis.

The third objective, which evaluates the response strategies of African states and regional organizations, is addressed through a comparative analytical lens that identifies patterns of adaptation across different contexts. This involves examining diplomatic positioning, economic policy adjustments, and security cooperation mechanisms as reported in sources such as Muyebe and Kabandula (2025), UNCTAD (2025), and UNDP (2026). The comparative dimension does not aim to produce exhaustive country-level case studies but rather to highlight representative patterns and divergences that illustrate broader trends. This approach is particularly appropriate given the diversity of African states and the varying degrees of exposure to geopolitical shocks. By focusing on patterns rather than isolated cases, the study is able to generate insights that are both analytically robust and broadly applicable.

Furthermore, the study incorporates elements of process tracing to establish plausible causal linkages between U.S.-Iran tensions and observed outcomes in Africa. While acknowledging the limitations of attributing causality in complex global systems, this method allows for the identification of sequential relationships between geopolitical events and their economic or security consequences. For instance, disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, as discussed by Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike (2026), can be linked to subsequent fluctuations in global oil prices and their downstream effects on African economies. Similarly, the proliferation of proxy actors in regions such as Somalia can be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of externalized conflict dynamics. This combination of thematic analysis and process tracing enhances the explanatory power of the study.

The choice of a qualitative and integrative methodology is further justified by the limitations of existing quantitative approaches in capturing the full scope of geopolitical dynamics. While econometric models provide valuable insights into correlations and trends, they often lack the capacity to account for the political and strategic factors that drive these outcomes. As noted by Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike (2026), understanding Africa's vulnerability to geopolitical risk requires attention to both structural conditions and agency. By combining insights from political economy, security studies, and policy analysis, this study offers a more holistic perspective that aligns with the interdisciplinary nature of the research problem.

Finally, the study acknowledges certain methodological limitations, including potential biases in secondary sources and the challenge of isolating the effects of U.S.-Iran tensions from other concurrent global developments. However, these limitations are mitigated through careful source selection, triangulation of data, and critical evaluation of evidence. The use of a diverse range of sources, from academic journals to policy reports, enhances the reliability and validity of the findings. Overall, the adopted methodology is well-suited to the study's objectives, providing a rigorous and flexible framework for analyzing the complex and evolving relationship between great power rivalry and Africa's political economy and security architecture.

Results and Discussion

The results presented in Tables 1 to 4 reveal a consistent pattern: U.S.-Iran geopolitical tensions exert multidimensional effects on Africa through interconnected economic and security channels, while African responses remain adaptive but uneven across states and regions. In terms of political economy, oil price volatility emerges as the most immediate transmission mechanism, influencing fiscal stability, inflation, and macroeconomic performance. The findings confirm that oil-exporting economies experience revenue fluctuations tied to global price movements, whereas oil-importing countries bear the burden of rising energy costs and inflationary pressures. Trade disruptions and financial market instability further amplify these effects, reflecting Africa's deep integration into global economic systems.

From a security perspective, as reported in Table 2, the results highlight increased maritime insecurity and the militarization of strategic regions, particularly in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. These developments are accompanied by the proliferation of proxy actors and growing strain on regional security institutions. The findings also

indicate that Africa's existing security frameworks, while evolving, face significant capacity constraints in responding to complex and externally driven threats.

Table 1. Political Economy Impacts of U.S.–Iran Geopolitical Tensions on Africa

Dimension	Key Indicators	Observed Effects in Africa
Oil Price Volatility	Crude oil price fluctuations; supply disruptions	Revenue instability in oil-exporting countries; increased fiscal uncertainty
Inflationary Pressures	Rising fuel and import costs	Increased cost of living; currency depreciation; reduced purchasing power
Trade Disruptions	Shipping delays; increased transport costs	Reduced trade efficiency; higher import/export costs
Financial Market Stress	Capital flow volatility; investor uncertainty	Declining foreign investment; increased borrowing costs
Consumer Market Effects	Price transmission to goods/services	Rising prices in food, energy, and basic commodities

Source: Author (2026)

Regarding response strategies, as reported in Table 3, the results show that African states and regional organizations adopt a combination of diplomatic balancing, economic adaptation, and security cooperation. However, these responses vary considerably depending on national interests, institutional capacity, and exposure to geopolitical risks. While some countries pursue diversification and regional integration, others rely on short-term policy measures such as subsidies and strategic alliances. Overall, the results underscore a central theme: Africa remains structurally vulnerable to external shocks, yet it is not entirely passive, as evidenced by emerging patterns of strategic adaptation.

Table 2. Security Implications of U.S.–Iran Rivalry for Africa

Dimension	Key Indicators	Observed Effects in Africa
Maritime Insecurity	Increased naval activity; chokepoint tensions	Threats to shipping routes in Red Sea and Gulf of Aden
Militarization of Strategic Regions	Foreign military presence; base expansion	Heightened tensions in Horn of Africa and Sahel
Proxy Conflicts	Non-state armed groups; external support	Intensification of conflicts in fragile states (e.g., Somalia)
Institutional Strain	Pressure on regional security frameworks	Limited capacity of African Standby Force and AU mechanisms
Regional Instability Spillovers	Conflict diffusion; cross-border insecurity	Increased migration pressures and humanitarian risks

Source: Author (2026)

Table 3. Response Strategies of African States and Regional Organizations

Strategy Type	Key Actions	Observed Patterns
Diplomatic Alignment	Neutrality; selective partnerships	Strategic balancing between global powers
Economic Adaptation	Diversification; regional trade strengthening	Efforts to reduce dependence on external shocks
Energy Policy Adjustments	Subsidy reforms; alternative sourcing	Attempts to stabilize domestic fuel markets
Security Cooperation	Joint operations; AU-led initiatives	Strengthening regional security frameworks
Strategic Realignment	New alliances; policy shifts	Increasing engagement with multiple external actors

Source: Author (2026)

Table 4. Integrated Analytical Summary Across Objectives

Objective	Core Findings	Key Implication
Political Economy	U.S.–Iran tensions transmit through oil markets, trade, and finance	Africa remains highly vulnerable to external economic shocks
Security Architecture	Rivalry intensifies militarization and proxy dynamics	Existing African security mechanisms face capacity constraints
Response Strategies	African states adopt mixed strategies of adaptation and balancing	Greater regional coordination is needed to enhance resilience

Source: Author (2026)

The findings on political economy impacts reinforce and extend existing literature on the transmission of geopolitical shocks through global commodity markets. Oil price volatility, as identified in Table 1, reflects the central role of energy markets in linking distant geopolitical events to African economic outcomes. This aligns with Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike (2026), who demonstrate that oil price shocks significantly influence economic activity in developing economies. However, the results also suggest a more nuanced dynamic: while price increases may temporarily benefit oil exporters, the accompanying volatility undermines long-term fiscal planning and investment stability. This observation is consistent with Asafo-Adjei, Adam and Darkwa (2024) and Jiang (2026), who argue that oil-dependent economies are particularly vulnerable to cyclical shocks.

Moreover, the differentiated impact between oil-exporting and oil-importing countries highlights structural asymmetries within Africa. Shang and Hamori (2024) note that oil-importing economies face stronger inflationary pressures due to rising energy costs, a finding supported by recent evidence from African markets (UNDP 2026; Afşar, Polat, Afşar and Kahraman 2026). The broader implication is that U.S.–Iran tensions exacerbate existing inequalities within the continent, creating uneven economic outcomes. This dynamic is further compounded by trade disruptions, as increased shipping costs and logistical uncertainties affect both imports and exports

(Bøås and Strazzari 2026). In line with UNCTAD (2025), the results underscore the need for greater regional trade integration to mitigate external vulnerabilities.

The role of financial market stress, as indicated in Table 1, also merits closer attention. Geopolitical uncertainty tends to reduce investor confidence, leading to capital outflows and increased borrowing costs. Eslami and Akbarzadeh (2025) highlight the growing importance of financial channels in the transmission of geopolitical risk, particularly in an era of globalized capital markets. For African economies, this translates into reduced access to external financing and heightened fiscal constraints, further limiting their capacity to respond to shocks. Importantly, the findings suggest that these economic effects are not isolated but interact with broader socio-political dynamics, including rising living costs and public discontent.

Turning to security implications, the results presented in Table 2 confirm that U.S.-Iran rivalry contributes to the militarization of strategically important regions. The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as highlighted by Agostinelli dos Santos and Mattar Nasser (2026), serve as critical chokepoints in global trade, making them particularly sensitive to geopolitical tensions. The increased presence of external military actors in these regions reflects broader patterns of great power competition, with significant implications for African security. Sadeqi Mohammadi and Weaver (2025) conceptualize this dynamic as part of a regional security complex, where local and global actors interact in ways that shape stability and conflict.

The proliferation of proxy actors represents another key dimension of the security landscape. The findings indicate that external rivalries are often manifested through localized conflicts, particularly in fragile states such as Somalia. This observation is supported by the African Digital Democracy Observatory (2026b), which documents the role of proxy dynamics in shaping conflict outcomes. Such developments complicate efforts to maintain stability, as they introduce additional layers of complexity and unpredictability. Melkon, Salgado and Putter (2025) further note that geopolitical fragmentation in the Horn of Africa is driven by overlapping interests and shifting alliances, reinforcing the idea that external rivalries exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

Institutional responses to these challenges, while significant, appear constrained. The African Union's security mechanisms, including the African Standby Force, represent important steps toward collective security. However, as Idowu (2026) argues, these frameworks are still evolving and often lack the resources and coordination needed to address complex threats. The results suggest that while regional organizations play a crucial role, their effectiveness is limited by structural and operational challenges. This finding aligns with broader critiques of Africa's security architecture, which emphasize the need for greater capacity-building and institutional reform.

The discussion of response strategies, as summarized in Table 3, reveals a pattern of pragmatic adaptation among African states. Diplomatic balancing emerges as a dominant strategy, with countries seeking to maintain neutrality while engaging with multiple global actors. Mueyba and Kabandula (2025) characterize this approach as a form of strategic autonomy, allowing African states to navigate an increasingly polarized international system. However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on

the ability of states to leverage their positions without becoming overly dependent on external powers. Economic adaptation strategies, including diversification and regional integration, are also evident in the findings. Muyebe and Kabandula (2025) emphasize the importance of resilience in the face of global shocks, a theme echoed in the efforts of African states to reduce dependence on volatile external markets. Nevertheless, the reliance on short-term measures such as subsidies and price controls highlights the limitations of these strategies. UNDP (2026) notes that while such interventions can provide temporary relief, they often impose long-term fiscal burdens.

Security cooperation represents another important dimension of African responses. Initiatives led by the African Union and sub-regional organizations aim to enhance collective security and address shared challenges. However, as indicated in the results, these efforts are uneven and often constrained by resource limitations. The broader implication is that while African states are actively responding to geopolitical pressures, their capacity to do so effectively varies significantly. The integrated findings presented in Table 4 underscore the interconnected nature of economic and security dynamics. U.S.–Iran tensions not only affect Africa through discrete channels but also create feedback loops that reinforce vulnerability. For example, economic instability can exacerbate security challenges, while conflict can further disrupt economic activity.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry significant policy implications for African governments, regional institutions, and development partners, particularly in managing external vulnerabilities arising from great power rivalries. First, there is a clear need for African economies to strengthen macroeconomic resilience against oil price volatility and external shocks. Policymakers should prioritize economic diversification strategies that reduce dependence on oil exports and imports, especially in countries highly exposed to global energy market fluctuations. This aligns with the arguments of Ekpo, Oyewole and Isike (2026), who emphasize the destabilizing effects of oil price cycles on developing economies. In addition, fiscal stabilization mechanisms—such as sovereign wealth funds and countercyclical fiscal policies—should be reinforced to cushion the impact of revenue volatility. Strengthening domestic revenue mobilization systems can further reduce reliance on external financing, which is often constrained during periods of geopolitical uncertainty (Lob and Yilmazkuday 2025).

Second, trade resilience must be enhanced through deeper regional integration and the operationalization of frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The study shows that trade disruptions linked to geopolitical tensions increase transaction costs and supply chain vulnerabilities. Expanding intra-African trade can mitigate these risks by reducing dependence on external markets and shipping routes exposed to conflict. UNCTAD (2025) highlights that regional trade integration can serve as a buffer against global shocks, while Bøås and Strazzari (2026) demonstrate how trade diversification reduces exposure to geopolitical disruptions. Policymakers should therefore focus on improving trade infrastructure, harmonizing regulations, and facilitating cross-border commerce to strengthen economic resilience.

Third, the study underscores the importance of addressing inflationary pressures and rising living costs associated with geopolitical tensions. Governments should adopt targeted social protection measures to shield vulnerable populations from the adverse effects of price increases, particularly in energy and food markets. However, as noted by UNDP (2026), such interventions must be carefully designed to avoid long-term fiscal imbalances. In this regard, a shift toward more efficient subsidy systems, including targeted transfers rather than universal subsidies, can enhance both equity and sustainability. Additionally, monetary authorities should strengthen inflation-targeting frameworks to maintain price stability in the face of external shocks (Shang and Hamori 2024).

Fourth, the security implications of U.S.–Iran tensions call for a more coordinated and proactive approach to regional security governance. The militarization of strategic regions such as the Red Sea and the proliferation of proxy actors necessitate stronger maritime security frameworks and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. The African Union and sub-regional organizations should enhance their operational capacity to monitor and respond to emerging threats, building on existing initiatives such as the African Standby Force. As Idowu (2026) argues, effective security governance in Africa requires not only institutional frameworks but also adequate resources and political commitment. Strengthening partnerships with international actors, while maintaining strategic autonomy, can further support capacity-building efforts.

Fifth, African states must refine their diplomatic strategies to navigate the complexities of great power competition. The study highlights the prevalence of diplomatic balancing as a response to U.S.–Iran rivalry, reflecting efforts to maintain neutrality while engaging multiple partners. Muyebe and Kabandula (2025) suggest that such strategic autonomy can enhance Africa's bargaining power in global affairs. However, this approach requires coherent foreign policy frameworks and strong institutional coordination to avoid fragmentation and policy inconsistency. Regional organizations can play a critical role in articulating common positions and representing collective interests in international forums.

Finally, there is a need for integrated policy approaches that address the interconnected nature of economic and security challenges. The study demonstrates that geopolitical tensions create feedback loops between economic instability and security risks, necessitating holistic policy responses. Muyebe and Kabandula (2025) emphasize the importance of resilience-building strategies that cut across sectors, while Márquez-Velázquez (2025) highlights the interconnectedness of regional security dynamics. Policymakers should therefore adopt cross-sectoral frameworks that integrate economic planning, security governance, and diplomatic engagement. Such approaches can enhance Africa's ability to respond effectively to complex and evolving geopolitical challenges.

Conclusion and discussion

This study set out to examine the impact of U.S.-Iran geopolitical tensions on Africa's political economy and security architecture, with a particular focus on transmission mechanisms, security implications, and response strategies. The findings reveal that Africa remains highly exposed to external shocks transmitted through global commodity markets, trade networks, and financial systems. Oil price volatility emerges as a central channel through which geopolitical tensions affect economic stability, with divergent effects on oil-exporting and oil-importing countries. At the same time, trade disruptions and financial market instability further compound these challenges, underscoring the structural vulnerabilities of African economies.

In addition to economic impacts, the study highlights significant security implications associated with great power rivalry. The militarization of strategic regions, particularly in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, and the proliferation of proxy actors contribute to an increasingly complex security environment. While regional institutions such as the African Union have made important strides in developing security frameworks, their capacity to address these challenges remains constrained. This underscores the need for continued investment in institutional development and regional cooperation.

Despite these vulnerabilities, the study also finds evidence of adaptive responses among African states and regional organizations. Diplomatic balancing, economic diversification, and security cooperation emerge as key strategies for navigating geopolitical tensions. However, the effectiveness of these responses varies across countries, reflecting differences in institutional capacity and exposure to risk. Moving forward, strengthening resilience through integrated policy approaches and enhanced regional collaboration will be critical to mitigating the impact of external shocks and ensuring sustainable development.

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Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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