

The geopolitics of the Horn of Africa and its impact on Somaliland

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is at war with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which was been the country's de facto ruling party from 1990s to 2018. This is because TPLF was the most dominant and powerful formation within the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

The ongoing conflict, which began in the northern part of the country in 2020, has resulted in [ethnic-based political entities](#) that have undermined the role, power and legitimacy of the federal government. The economy is in a [downward spiral](#), with recent reports indicating that [inflation is at its highest level in Ethiopia's modern](#) history. At the same time, the war has undermined the capacity of Ethiopia's security apparatus. Thus for the first time, [Al-Shabab's](#) has been able to launch an attack in the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia, challenging the widely held notion that Ethiopia was one of Africa's most security-oriented states.

As a result of the [United Nation's](#) findings that Ethiopia's federal government and the TPFL have both committed crimes against humanity and war crimes, Ethiopia's relations with western countries are also in a disastrous state. The war in Ethiopia has reshaped the regional security architecture, which previously included a role for Ethiopia as a regional security power, a status that has been held by Ethiopia for the past three decades. New regional players appear to be entering the game, with Eritrea taking on an increased role in the politics and security of the Horn of African region. Similarly, Djibouti, with a stable economy and security, seems to be increasing its agency in the region. Although the long-term stability of Djibouti has raised questions, due to the long-term domination of Djibouti politics by President Omar Gelle and the absence of a succession plan, the country seems to be getting increasingly concerned about the Horn's deteriorating security situation. Djibouti is particularly concerned with the war in Ethiopia and its poor diplomatic relations with Eritrea.

The region's security is further threatened by the increasing tensions and conflict between the Afar, who live in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti and the Somalis in Ethiopia. The fact that the Somalis are found in Djibouti, Somaliland, Somalia and Ethiopia risks igniting a transnational ethnic conflict in the region. These realities have equally worried Djibouti.

Hassan SH. Mohamoud was elected president of Somalia, unseating Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo, who had served in that role for the previous five years. The Hassan's government has declared war on the Al-Shabab terrorist group. Due to Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed's close connection with Farmaajo, Hassan has sought to distance his administration from Ethiopia while enhancing Somalia's relationship with Kenya. The relationship between Somalia and Ethiopia thus appears to be at its weakest point in the past five years a reality that makes the situation in the Horn more tense and precarious.

With the exception of Eritrea and Kenya, Somaliland shares borders with each of those countries and the political events in all those neighboring countries has a significant implication on Somaliland's security, economic, political and social well-being. Thus, the war in Ethiopia, the ongoing instability in Somalia, and Djibouti's hosting of foreign military powers (China) all have an effect on Somaliland's

foreign policy, as well as its security and stability. This paper investigates the relations that Somaliland maintains with its neighboring countries, drawing conclusions about the implications and consequence of the fast-moving geopolitics of the Horn of the African region.

2. Political transition and turmoil in the Horn of Africa

In the last half a century, the Horn of Africa has been characterized by droughts, famines, dictatorships, civil wars and proxy wars for global powers. These challenges have been products of internal factors such as authoritarian regimes, political, clan and ethnic rivalries; external factors such as global and regional geopolitics and global factors such as to climate change and cold war.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a significant reduction in the number of proxy wars. However, inter- and intra-state conflicts in the Horn of Africa have worsened. The hopes of the Horn of Africa for long-term stability and economic advancement have been severely hampered by authoritarian regimes, radical groups, and political rivalries. The end result is the emergence of terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab and a protracted refugee problem that has seen countries like Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti and Somaliland host a big number of refugees. Long considered a refugee host, Ethiopia has recently turned into a source of refugees escaping from the Tigrayan conflict.

The course of history in the Horn of Africa has been altered as a result of the war in Ethiopia, the regional influence of Eritrea, and the ongoing instability in Somalia. The region is currently mired in a conflict, the implications of which are difficult to predict and whose consequences are unclear to the majority of the key players. The global power reconfiguration, which includes the rise of China and the war in Ukraine, has also had an impact on the food security of the Horn of Africa, as well as caused high inflation and decreased productivity. This is due to the rapidly changing regional dynamics.

There are no signs that the conflict in Ethiopia will be resolved any time soon, and the key players in the conflict are committed to defending their positions. Ethiopia is Somaliland's closest neighbor, and the two countries are connected by a number of factors, including concerns over trade and security along their shared border. Despite the political upheavals in the region, Somaliland remains as one of the few politically stable countries in the region.

3. Ethiopia-Somaliland Relations

During the past three decades, the relations between Somaliland and Ethiopia have been shaped by a) Ethiopia's counter-terrorism war in Somalia; b) Ethiopia's strategy of isolating Eritrea; c) Berbera's strategic route for access to the sea; d) the rise of middle eastern powers influence in the Horn of Africa and e) Somaliland's de facto status with Ethiopia acting as a gateway for Somaliland's diplomacy towards international recognition. Nevertheless, following the fall of the TPLF's leadership and the ascent to power of Abiy's government, the historical relationship between Somaliland and Ethiopia has experienced a significant deterioration. This shift was caused by two factors: a) the tripartite

agreement between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, and b) Somalia's opposition to Somaliland's quest for international recognition.

The tripartite agreement recognized the federal government of Somalia as the only legitimate authority of Somalia through what Abiy Ahmed's government considers to be "one Somalia" policy. This policy downplayed the decades-long strategic relations between Somaliland and Ethiopia. In the new era, Somaliland was pressured to move toward reconciliation with Somalia, an endeavor that Somaliland vehemently opposed. These developments have threatened the potential economic, trade and security benefits of the Berbera Port, currently being developed by DP World, a maritime operator based in the United Arab Emirates

The win by Hassan Mohamoud in the recent Somalia election has however threatened to unravel the budding relationship between Somalia and Ethiopia. Having opposed the close relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia, Hassan has sought to downplay the tripartite agreement.

To a large extent, the tripartite agreement has not fully resolved the historical tensions between Ethiopia-Eritrea leaving Abiy in a precarious position. At the same time, Ethiopia's Somali region has been the target of attacks by radical groups such as Al-Shabaab a reality which further threatens the security of Ethiopia and its relationship with the neighbors.

Because of Abiy's internal economic, security, and political problems, Somaliland has become an important player in both the regional security of Ethiopia especially in the Somali and Eastern Oromia regions where Al-Shabab attacks have been prevalent. This reality adds more complexity to the longstanding conflict between the Oromia Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ethiopian government, the country's longest armed struggle movement.

Somaliland has thus become an important player in both the regional security of Horn of African region and the security of Ethiopia. Trade conducted across the border between Somaliland and Ethiopia, using both informal and formal channels, has continue to play an important role in the economies of both countries, with Somaliland acting as a key destination for Ethiopia's exports. Access to the sea has been the primary factor that has been driving Ethiopia's strategic interests for the past few decades. Most of Ethiopia's imports and exports pass through Djibouti. In a bid to reduce its overreliance on Djibouti for imports and exports, Ethiopia has been looking for an alternative access to maritime trade. The investment by DP World in Berbera thus remains attractive to Ethiopia. In view of the above realities, Ethiopia is increasingly re-embracing Somaliland and has recently resumed trade and transit agreement negotiations.

4. Somaliland-Djibouti Relations

Djibouti's policy toward Somaliland is predicated on its ability to project soft power over the country's non-recognition status. Djibouti is used by Somaliland for its international financial transactions. Somaliland's telecom companies also use Djibouti, and the country's major businesses conduct their international trade through the Djibouti Central Bank. The relations between Somaliland and Djibouti

have been shaped by those factors, which are significant given the enormous symbiotic soft power that Djibouti exercises over Somaliland. However, Somaliland and Djibouti's relationship has been complicated by DP World's investment in Berbera and the deterioration of relations between the United Arab Emirate and Djibouti as a result of later concerns regarding the unilateral termination of the DP World concession agreement with Djibouti. Thus, on one hand, the two countries continue to work together to ensure the security of their shared border, while on the other, demonstrating rivalry over their strategic interests.

Djibouti's policy towards the unity and territorial integrity of Somalia, which Somaliland has been opposing for a long time, seems to be taking a new turn as a result of the ongoing instability in Somalia. This shift can be attributed, in large part, to the fact that Somalia's alliance with Eritrea during the time that Farmajo was in power reshaped the traditional relations that existed between the two countries. In contrast to Somalia, Somaliland's alliance with Djibouti in its territorial dispute with Eritrea has remained unchanged. As a result of this support, Djibouti has also established diplomatic relation with Somaliland but continues to urge the two sides to find a way to resolve their longstanding status regarding the quest of Somaliland's independence from Somalia, a protracted dispute since in 1991. This is a strategic win for Somaliland, a reality which may help the country's cause in the long run as it works toward gaining international recognition.

The ongoing conflict between Afar and Somalis in Eastern Ethiopia is deemed to have an implication on Somaliland-Djibouti relations. Both Somalis (of the Ciise clan) and Anfar, also live in Djibouti's, with Somalis making 70% of the Djibouti's population. Because of the domination of the Somalis in Djibouti for the four decades, the Afar people have been feeling marginalized for decades, and as a result, are currently mobilizing themselves in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti to form a transborder pan-Afar unity, with Djibouti as their ultimate goal.

5. Somaliland-Taiwan relations

Having [established diplomatic relations in 2020](#) Somaliland and Taiwan have moved to enhance their trade ties. These maneuvers have however angered both Somalia and China which claim the two countries respectively. China vehemently opposed this move, citing the fact that Taiwan is an integral part of the mainland and that anyone who establishes diplomatic relations with Taiwan violates China's right to exist in its current territorial configuration. Somalia had the same view.

However, a diplomatic relationship with Taiwan is an opportunity for Somaliland to tap into Taiwan's vast economic and technological opportunities as well as an opportunity for Taiwan to invest in [Somaliland's vast natural resources](#). Deemed as two functional democracies cooperation between the two countries enables them to share experiences and mutually lobby for increased international recognition and collaboration. At the same time, cooperation with Taiwan increases Somaliland's access to the western world.

However, critics of the collaboration see it as counterproductive. In its pursuit of international recognition, Somaliland has to gain support from members of the African Union and the United

Nations. However, China (which is opposed to the Somaliland-Taiwan relationship) not only has influence at the UN by virtue of its permanent membership but also has influence over the AU and many African countries. In addition to this, the sole military outpost that China maintains outside of its borders is located in Djibouti, not far from Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland. This reality risks undermining Somaliland's budding relationship with Djibouti. The geopolitical implications of Taiwan's strategic partnership with Somaliland are not yet known, but the potential downsides far outweigh the potential upsides.

6. Somalia-Somaliland Relations

There has been no shift in Somalia's stance regarding Somaliland's unilateral pursuit of independence. Somalia thus continues to view Somaliland as an integral part of the country. On the other hand, Somaliland's stance toward Somalia- that the country is not part of Somalia, has not altered. In spite of mediation efforts by Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti, and the United Kingdom, the two sides have not moved any closer to the fundamental question of whether to remain united or separate. Negotiations between Somaliland and Somalia have repeatedly broken down, and it does not appear that the two countries will ever be able to reach a mutually agreeable resolution regarding Somaliland's quest for international recognition. Therefore, the case of Somaliland is not a Somali issue, which can be resolved only by Somalis, but rather a regional issue, which requires the attention of the region. Additionally, the case of Somaliland is a global issue, which would attract the interest of global powers to find a solution for the issue.

Relations between Somaliland and Somalia have been tainted by security and diplomatic mistrust as well as competition by regional powers for the past five years. However, following Farmaajo's fall from power, the new government of Somalia has adopted a more conciliatory stance with regard to its policy towards Somaliland, and Somalia's previously antagonistic stance toward Somaliland has become less extreme. But in his recent speech in the United States, Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud declared that Somalia will never accept Somaliland's international recognition. In his response, President Muse Bihi reiterated Somaliland's position and clearly articulated that Somaliland will never be part of Somalia and re-assured Somaliland's independence as a non-negotiable and irreversible.

The fact that the two countries are currently preoccupied with domestic problems means that talks are unlikely to resume. The current five-year term of Somaliland President Muse is set to expire in November 2022, and he is attempting to secure an extension of his presidency from the upper house. On the other hand, the government of Hassan is having trouble dealing with crippling economic conditions, devastating droughts, and the renewed complex operations of Al-Shabab. The current territorial status quo is therefore likely to continue into the foreseeable future. However, aid management is likely to change. As a direct consequence of Somalia's policy towards Somaliland's national development, it is hoped that aid will not be wielded as a political weapon against Somaliland's international status. As a consequence of this, it is hoped that both sides will find a way to settle the issue of how aid is distributed and managed.

7. Eritrea-Somaliland Relations

Due to historical Ethiopia's isolation strategy regarding Eritrea and Somaliland's precarious relations with Ethiopia, Somaliland and Eritrea have never had any kind of diplomatic relations with one another. Eritrea has historically supported Somalia's territorial integrity as a reward to Somalia's support during its war with Ethiopia. At the same time, Eritrea highly resented Somaliland's alliance with Ethiopia during TPLF's rule.

8. Somaliland and Kenya Relations

Both Kenya and Somaliland were British colonies. However, the two countries do not share a border with one another. In contrast, Somalia shares a long border with Kenya, a factor that contributes to the close ties between the two nations. Kenya's relationship with Somalia is based on mutual interests around security, trade, and immigration. Due to the maritime dispute between Kenya and Somalia as well as personal differences between Kenya's outgoing president Uhuru Kenyatta, and his counterpart, Farmajo, the relationship between Somalia and Kenya heavily deteriorated. Kenya rejected the decision of the International Court, which found in favour of Somalia, and continues to pursue its unilateral claim of the Somalia maritime. Somalia's ban on Kenya's Miraa, and Kenya's ban on direct flights with Somalia only served to worsen the situation.

Kenya and Somaliland have had long-term discussions on the establishment of diplomatic relations. In 2021, President Uhuru met President Muse to discuss bilateral issues such as Somaliland's interests in establishing a diplomatic office in Nairobi. Angered by this move, [Somalia severed diplomatic ties with Kenya](#). It's still unclear how the outcome of the recent Kenyan elections will affect Somaliland-Kenya relations. Raila Odinga, the opposition leader has historically been sympathetic to Somaliland's independence while President Ruto's view on the Somaliland situation remains unclear.

Notwithstanding the above, Kenya appears to be taking over the role of regional hegemon left vacant by Ethiopia's diminishing influence in the region. As a result, the approach that Ruto takes toward Somalia will be a significant factor in determining how Somaliland and Kenya will relate to one another in the years to come.

9. What lies ahead for Somaliland?

It has been determined that Somaliland will not be able to hold presidential elections on November 13, 2022 due to technical issues cited by the National Electoral Commission (the country's national electoral management body). This has resulted in the incumbent receiving a two years constitutional extension from the House of Elders. However, opposition parties have opposed this extension on the grounds that it should be based on a consensus accord between the oppositions and the administration, which the government has disregarded.

The geopolitics of the Horn of Africa could have significant repercussions for Somaliland's security as well as its economy and diplomatic relations. The war in Ethiopia has had an impact on Somaliland's economy, as the country's economy is largely dependent on the informal trade that takes place across the border with Ethiopia. The town of Wajaale, which sits on the border between Somaliland and Ethiopia, is the most important commercial center for both nations. The town is currently experiencing economic difficulties as a direct result of the weakening of the Ethiopian economy and the devaluation of the Birr, Ethiopia's currency. Many commercial centers have shut down, resulting in a significant drop in import and export activity. In addition, the Berbera corridor-a trade and transit corridor with heavy United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom investment has been impacted by the Covid-19 and the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, both of which have slowed down the import and export of Ethiopia through the corridor.