



Horn Institute for Peace and Development

Policy Brief



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**New Political Developments in the Horn
of Africa and Their Future Implication**

Introduction

The Horn of Africa has unique geopolitical and geographic characteristics because of its strategic location and abundant economic resources, which have made it the focus of attention of international powers. Geographically, the Horn of Africa is shaped like a horn and locates west of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This region includes Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, but its political and economic dimensions extend to include Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda. According to this view, East Africa controls the resources of the Nile and the entrances to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

This vital extension of the Horn of Africa is strategic in the eyes of international forces because of the area's access to international trade routes. Thus, the region has attracted the attention of international and regional parties in their struggle for wealth and influence, especially as the Horn of Africa is in contact with the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula. Oil and gas, goods transportation, weapons, illegal migration and the dangers of piracy make this region attractive to the international community.

Many international and regional powers have begun to (re)establish their positions in the region to achieve their interests through the establishment of military bases and platforms for the exchange of intelligence with the countries in the Horn.

International presence has been in the region since the era of European colonialism and remains today, given its strategic importance in terms of economic, political, and security vitality. However, the most dangerous and long-standing issues in the region are the unprecedented frenzy and competition by

some western and Arab countries with traditional interests and the many emerging international and regional powers.

The present reality in the Horn of Africa points to the importance and gravity of the 'modern imperial' roles, especially the American, Israeli, Chinese, Iranian and Turkish. All indicators confirm that the current trends in the region tend to stimulate and sustain conflict. Thus, the balance of power and the associated international and regional balances are amongst the important factors in the re-framing of the region and expansion of the geopolitical map to include most of East Africa and the Great Lakes region. Therefore, the development of events and future mechanisms in the Horn of Africa depends mainly on external actors.

The region is characterised by a strategic peculiarity affected by changes in the international and regional policy map. Such changes span the period of European colonisation through World Wars I and II, the Cold War era, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the system of communist states, the attacks in the United States in September 2001 and revolutions of the so-called 'Arab Spring', which broke out in 2011. These alterations effected the political and security dynamics in this region.

The geopolitical map and the balance of power in the Horn of Africa have been constantly changing as a result of the intensification of internal struggles and the conflicts of interests as well as strategic calculations between the constituent parts and the international and regional powers in the region.

Over the past two decades, the Horn of Africa has suffered famines and wars due to political conflicts, drought and food insecurity, which have led to the death of thousands of civilians. The 1998 war between the ‘enemy brothers’ in Addis Ababa and Asmara, which culminated from conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, killed more than 100,000 people. Ethiopian forces invaded Somalia in late 2006, claiming to support the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia to fight the Islamic Courts Union—an Islamist group that ended warlord control in Mogadishu and expanded its influence across most of the country. Over two years of Ethiopian military presence in South Central Somalia caused the death of at least more than 20,000 civilians and forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes.

Since April 2018, the Horn of Africa has been undergoing major reforms that have created political developments intended to improve integration and co-operation between Ethiopia and Eritrea and between Djibouti and Eritrea. These political developments began after the nomination of new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, which marked Ethiopia’s entrance into a new era. He released members of armed opposition groups and political prisoners without condition.

Since then, the Horn of Africa has been witnessing political and diplomatic changes in all its countries. This policy brief discusses the key political developments in Ethiopia and their implications on the region and Somalia.

Key Development in the Horn

Since the election of Abiy Ahmed Ali as Ethiopia’s Prime Minister by the ruling EPRDF coalition on 2 April 2018, the country has been gripped by sweeping political and economic reforms with ripple effects reaching the entire region and beyond.

Capitalising on the momentum of his meteoric rise and the accompanying optimism, Abiy managed to end two decades of bloody border conflict with adversary Eritrea through the Agreement on Peace, Friendship and Comprehensive Cooperation signed by both countries in Saudi Arabia on 16 September 2018 under the auspices of King Salman of Saudi Arabia. The commitment by the Ethiopian and Eritrean leaders to end their costly conflict was hailed as a significant step in a region plagued by wars and climatic shocks leading to droughts and various forms of humanitarian disasters

The new prime minister also freed political prisoners, pledged to open up the state-controlled economy and promised to overhaul the nation’s security services, which have been blamed for widespread human rights abuses. To the surprise of many, Abiy publicly acknowledged that security forces have been involved in human rights violations and berated them for committing acts of terrorism against their own citizens.

Ethiopia’s parliament approved a government recommendation to remove three rebel groups from the country’s list of terrorist organisations. These groups—Oromo Liberation Front, Ogaden National Liberation Front and Ginbot —were each engaged in armed struggle against the government in Addis Ababa.

In the Somali State, which suffered egregious human rights violations under the previous government, authorities released prisoners, promised equality and improved access to justice for all citizens.

As part of his diplomatic charm offensive, Prime Minister Abiy pushed for peace talks in South Sudan and, along with Somalia, jumpstarted mediations between Djibouti and Eritrea to end a decade-long impasse following a border dispute that led to military clashes along the common border at Ras Doumeira. Eritrea and Djibouti agreed to normalise relations following marathon negotiations brokered by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This development serves as a further sign of what Eritrea's president called a 'season of peace' in the strategically important Horn of Africa.

Clamour for Sea Access

Landlocked Ethiopia, which has a population of over 100 million, has been engaged in a frenzied search to establish secure access to the sea to fuel its growth ambitions. On the economic front, Prime Minister Abiy and President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo of Somalia announced that they were jointly investing in four seaports in Somalia to attract foreign investment to their countries, the latest move in a tussle for access to ports along one of the world's most strategic waterways.

The announcement was made during a surprise visit to Mogadishu. In a communiqué issued after their meetings, both leaders spoke about the need for regional integration and cooperation and underlined that the progress and prosperity of the Horn of Africa depend on the utilisation of the region's potential given the size of its population and its geographical significance. Abiy visited also Sudan and Kenya and agreed that Ethiopia get shares in Port Sudan and Doraleh ports respectively.

He visited Kenya, too, and pushed for the refurbishment of LAPSS corridor project.

In 2016, Dubai Ports World, who has shown keen interest in port developments in the region, signed a 30-year concession with authorities in the northern State of Somaliland to develop the port of Berbera. The Federal government of Somalia accused DP World of violating Somalia's sovereignty after signing this agreement with Somaliland, which is not recognized as an independent nation. The federal government and described the agreement as null and void and banned DP World from operating in Somalia.

The Horn of Africa's Red Sea coastline, extending north of Somalia through Djibouti and Eritrea towards the critical Suez Canal, is already dotted with ports owned or run by countries locked in a regional struggle: the United Arab Emirates and its ally Saudi Arabia on one side and Turkey, which backs Qatar, on the other.

Shortly after his visit to Somalia, the Ethiopian Prime minister seemed to have assumed a more reconciliatory tone towards Somalia's issues. He expressed willingness to engage with Somalia's federal government as the sole point of contact with the country regarding foreign policy issues—a move that was interpreted as a clean break from past Ethiopian practice of engaging with Somalia's federal member states. As a sign of fostering relations between the two nations, for the first time in 40 years, Ethiopia National Airways landed at Mogadishu's Aden Adde airport while the state owned Ethiopian airlines announced the resumption of its regular flights to Mogadishu following hiatus of four decades.

Implication and Policy Recommendations

The change unfolding in Ethiopia is still in its infancy, and its failure or success is yet to be determined in the coming years. The implications of these changes are already being felt across the region despite the mammoth challenges facing the new prime minister in his quest to build a democratic and viable Ethiopia that is at peace with itself and with its neighbours. Introducing genuine political reforms within Ethiopia's diverse tribal dynamics—some with long-standing grievances—and securing freedom of expression for all Ethiopians are some of the challenges facing the new premier.

If Ethiopia emerges unscathed from these changes, then, this will be a valuable opportunity for the entire region, which has been blighted by recurrent conflicts and humanitarian disasters.

As the most populous country in the Horn of Africa, peaceful and democratic Ethiopia can be a regional power to emulate and a beacon of stability in the otherwise hostile region, which has suffered from terrorism and border conflicts. Soon after assuming power, the new Ethiopian prime minister spoke about the need for peaceful coexistence and harnessing of the natural and human resources of the region. In the eyes of the prime minister, close cooperation between all governments in the region can lead to economic integration, thereby potentially helping lift millions out of object poverty.

What does this mean for Somalia?

Ethiopia's commitment to engaging with only the Federal Government of Somalia, as the sole political unit that represents the Somali people, is new and encouraging, to say the least.

The integration of this feature into Ethiopia's policy towards Somalia will be welcome news for many Somalis who feel that the sovereignty of their homeland is being breached by foreign countries who have been engaging with regional entities without the knowledge of the Federal Government of Somalia.

Since the start of the so-called war on terror, Ethiopia has presented itself as the guarantor of regional stability and has always enjoyed the blessing of the United States. Washington gave Ethiopia tacit approval when it invaded Somalia in 2006 to crush the Union of Islamic Courts, which captured Mogadishu and occupied large swaths of Somalia. From this period, Ethiopia began seeing Somalia in the spectrum of security and only rarely spoke about regional integration and peaceful coexistence. With improved economic cooperation, Somalia has much to gain from this condition given the sheer size of its coast, which is critical for regional transformation.

New era of freedom in the Somali State

Residents in the Somali State, which was formally known as the Somali Region of Ethiopia, are also enjoying the initial fruits of the change. For the first time in the known history of Ethiopia, people can express their opinions without fearing danger or persecution.

The territory changed its name from Somali Region of Ethiopia to Somali State, and the flag was also changed. People proudly display symbols of independence and Somalism, such as the Somali flag, which they used to shun due to fear of association with Somalia. Senior rebel leaders from Ogaden National Liberation Front have returned home and started preliminary negotiations with the federal government of Ethiopia and Somali State. Both sides signed a peace agreement in the Eritrea. The agreement stipulates that both sides cease hostilities and that ONLF will pursue its political obligations peacefully. Historically, Somalis in Ethiopia have merely been peripheral participants in Ethiopian politics and have never had the chance to assume senior leadership positions in the country. Much will also depend on the outcomes of the negotiations between the Ethiopian government and the Somali rebels who have been calling for the secession of the Somali region from the rest of Ethiopia for the last two decades. Managing the newly found freedom will also be a major challenge facing the regional government of the Somali State.

Recommendations for the governments of Somalia and Ethiopia

- Ethiopia must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia and keep its promise in stopping engaging with Federal Member States. Somalia must develop a coherent foreign policy in response to the recent changes in the Horn and ensure that these policies can protect and defend the national interests of Somalia.
- The Somali Government must also ensure that all agreements regarding integration and economic development, such as port leasing, should be in the best interest of the Somali people. These agreements should be conducted in a transparent and accountable manner under the country's legal framework by allowing government institutions such as the parliament to legislate on them.
- Oromo–Somali ethnic clashes must be stopped, and their recurrence must be prevented. All conflicts or disputes should be solved through diplomatic negotiations.
- The government of Ethiopia should address the historical imbalances in the Somali State and ensure that peaceful resolution is reached with Ogaden National Liberation Front and if need arises Somalia should facilitate talks between the two parties.
- The governments of Somalia and Ethiopia should continue negotiations aimed at strengthening their economic ties.
- The Somali Government should engage with Arab countries such Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to maintain its interests without compromising its diplomatic relations.
- Somalia should strengthen its ties and economic cooperation with its all countries in East Africa to facilitate integration and trade relations.
- Somali government should resume stalled negotiations with Somaliland and try to solve their thorny issues in order foster economic development in the region and beyond.
- Somalia should maintain its diplomatic relations with Djibouti and other countries in the greater Horn Africa such as Uganda and Kenya