AFRICA'S THORNY HORN

Searching for a New Balance in the Age of pandemic

edited by **Giovanni Carbone**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**

ISPI

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First edition: November 2020

Print ISBN 9788855263726
ePub ISBN 9788855263733
Pdf ISBN 9788855263740
DOI 10.14672/55263726

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5
20121, Milan
www.ispionline.it

Catalogue and reprints information: www.ledizioni.it

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

This Report is realized with the support of the Policy Planning Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967.

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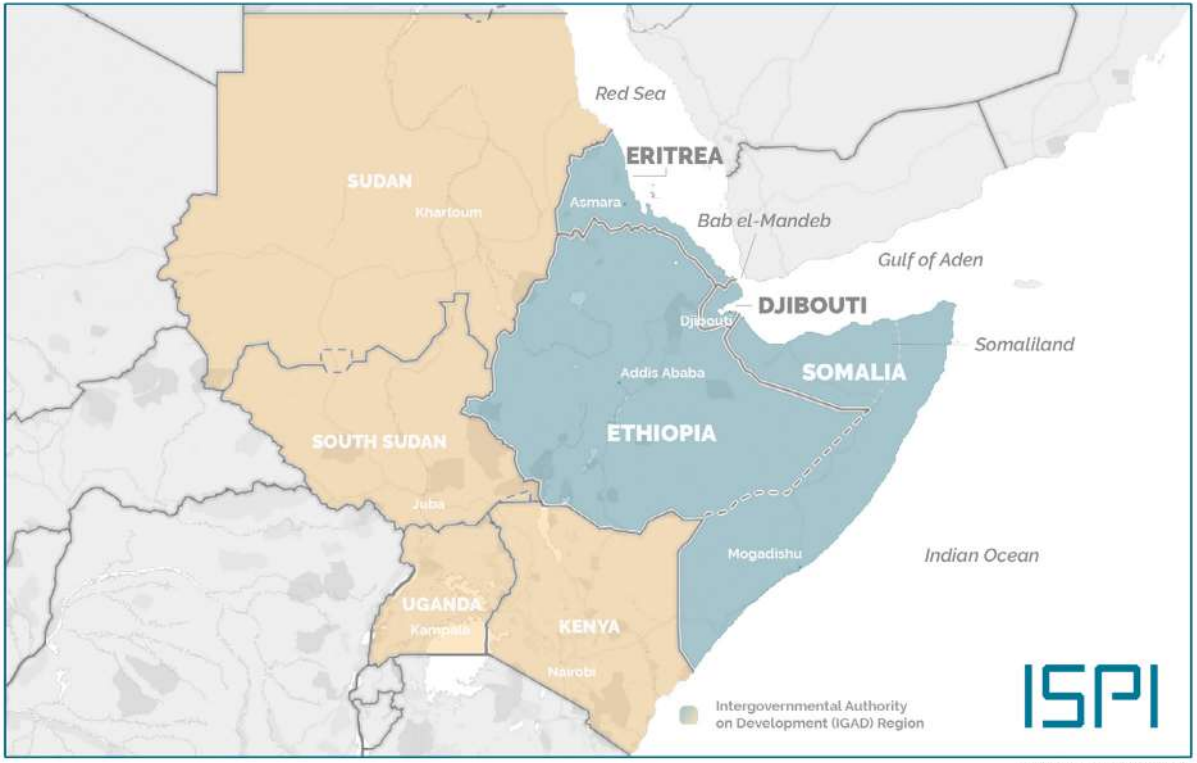

Introduction

One year ago Abiy Ahmed Ali, Ethiopia's Prime Minister, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to achieve peace with Eritrea. At the time this Report is going to press, his national army had just launched a war on the rebellious administration of the key Tigray regional state. Both events drew the attention of the wider public to the Horn of Africa, a far too often neglected region that has recently shown remarkable political and economic dynamism.

In-between the two abovementioned events in Ethiopia, the coronavirus emergency struck the world, and the Horn as well. This happened somewhat belatedly to the rest of the world, and with far lower numbers. Still, it eventually affected the Horn too, with devastating effects. Slowly yet inexorably, the spread of the pandemic highlighted the fragility of local health systems, ill prepared to cope with a novel disease. The pandemic fuelled a rise in extreme poverty, pushing millions to the brink of starvation in an insecure social environment where informal labour is the rule, and lockdowns are unsustainable measures. It worsened the economic vulnerability of states like Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti while challenging the soundness of the development model in Ethiopia, which just a few years back stood firmly among the world's top countries for GDP growth. The political impact of the pandemic has proved just as serious. A long-awaited election, deemed a milestone for the consolidation of political openings in Ethiopia, has been postponed until next year. Faced with the risk of an uncontrolled

spread of the virus, authorities have put the electoral process on hold, thus fanning the flames of regional and ethnic tensions, including those in Tigray.

In short, Covid-19 has disrupted the lives of Ethiopians, Somalis, Djiboutian and Eritreans just as it has ours. Nevertheless, ongoing political processes in one of the most dynamic regions of the continent have not halted. The area continues to garner geostrategic interest from external actors, global powers (suffice it to mention China, with Xi Jinping's Maritime Silk Road plans stretching toward the Horn) and medium-size powers with strong ambitions like the Gulf states.

Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, then, this ISPI Report examines the scale of political, social, economic and security dynamics across the Horn of Africa, and strives to understand how far the changes currently under way may impact Europe's political strategy and Italy's national interests in a region that has always been identified as the main priority of our Africa policy. The Report does so by taking an original approach: it reverses the established order of priorities with which one normally looks at the Horn's balance of power. Djibouti and Eritrea, always considered two minor players, have been given centre stage in the volume's structure in order to stress their often overlooked importance in the regional system; Somalia and Ethiopia, to which much of the analysts' attention is usually addressed, this time close the circle.

In the first chapter, Giovanni Carbone provides a regional overview. He outlines the main developments shaping the region's power structure, which historically revolves around Ethiopia, and discusses the recent events that have contributed most to making the Horn of Africa a dynamic, strategically relevant and potentially crucial area in the global landscape. The reason for the region's importance is crystal clear. On the one hand, it is afflicted by the most serious causes of instability on the continent, from direct exposure to the effects of climate change that are exacerbating ecological disasters, droughts and famines, to food insecurity that deprives local communities of

their livelihoods; from regional and international migration flows that affect local communities, to acts of Jihadi terrorism (in Somalia and beyond). On the other hand, the region is full of opportunities in terms of potential markets, a nascent industrial sector, and strategic maritime hotspots in an area through which 9% of the world's seaborne-traded oil flows. Such opportunities are limited in a time of pandemic, of course, but they are still there, waiting to be seized.

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the Horn of Africa has been examined by D'Alessandro, Zemelak and Putoto, who cast an experienced and well-informed gaze on what the ongoing emergency represents in terms of public health, from the spread of the virus to vulnerabilities in local response, and their social consequences. Their findings apply particularly to Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government acted in a timely manner to curb the spread of the pandemic, through the adoption of containment measures well in advance of many other African states. During the most acute phases of the emergency, Prime Minister Abiy played a pivotal role on the continent: he coordinated the institutional response to the crisis while urging – through an appeal published in the columns of the Financial Times – for a coherent and effective economic intervention by the international community to support Africa. As stressed by the authors, the effects of the pandemic threaten to wipe out nearly two decades of progress in the fight against poverty in Ethiopia and the rest of the region, where the most vulnerable social groups, first and foremost some two million internally displaced persons, are set to pay the highest price.

David Styan shifts the spotlight on Djibouti, the tiniest state in the region and one of the poorest in Africa. Overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that separates the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden, its position makes it a critical strategic hub. Djibouti has leveraged this to acquire crucial geopolitical relevance in the international system. It notoriously hosts a number of foreign military facilities – among them China's first overseas military base – and represents the main outlet to the sea for its regional

neighbour and hegemon, Ethiopia. Control over the country's harbours has been feeding fierce competition among external powers, while Beijing's growing influence has exacerbated Djibouti's outstanding debt exposure to China.

Eritrea has long been considered Africa's "North Korea", an "island" in the sea of international relations, and both politically and economically isolated. In chapter four, Michael Woldemariam explains how Isaias Afewerki's Eritrea seems to have embarked on a path of gradual opening to the outside world. As with Djibouti, it is a strategically relevant outpost for external actors eager to control commercial routes along the Red Sea. The peace deal with Ethiopia – boosted by Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in Addis Ababa – was indeed the most obvious manifestation of this process, providing the international community with a concrete sign of change. However, despite progress made in this respect, domestically, Eritrea still has a long way to go. Pushing young Eritreans to flee the country due to harsh repression and indefinite military conscription, Isaias' authoritarianism remains to date the most contentious obstacle to a complete normalization of Eritrea's international relations.

Afyare Elmi and Abdi Hersi investigate Somalia in chapter five. A prime example of a failed state since the early 1990s, Somalia is now struggling to rebuild its political and institutional systems, while the activities of al-Shabaab's jihadi militants in the south and centrifugal forces in Somaliland and Puntland hinder the development of state-building. Here, as elsewhere in the Horn, the presence of external actors is far from negligible. Italy too is involved in the country, participating in training missions for national armed forces and counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. A major role is played by Turkey, who have exerted a pervasive influence in Somalia for some twenty years, while the UAE's interests here project the geopolitical rivalry between the two middle-eastern powers.

Last, but surely not least, Ethiopia. A regional giant and would-be continental leader, Ethiopia is examined here by Aleksi Ylönen and Alexander Meckelburg. Since coming to

power in April 2018, Abiy has dramatically changed the face of the country, through economic liberalisation programmes and political openness, even if some of his pledges are still at an embryonic stage. As pointed out by the authors, the most spectacular shift has been Ethiopia's rising political and diplomatic protagonism well beyond regional borders. Of course, gaping wounds and deep rifts remain, in a state marked by ethnic and regional factionalisms, as well as local élites' ambitions for power. The current conflict against TPLF forces in Tigray, and the direct military involvement of Eritrea, threatens to greatly increase violence and instability in the region. On the international stage, the dispute over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) – which could have a severe impact on Egypt's and Sudan's capacity to exploit the Nile waters – risks attaining explosive proportions. In this respect, Donald Trump's stance and statements are not going to help the situation: he has addressed the issue in his own way, warning about a likely military intervention by Egypt to destroy the dam and preserve its vital interests in the Nile river.

To conclude, despite all the disruptions that the pandemic has brought to the region, ongoing political processes are transforming the Horn of Africa and making it increasingly central in this ever more interconnected world. In a nutshell, the pandemic has slowed down change, but has not stopped it. Today the Horn of Africa is still a thorny area to deal with, one that combines new and unresolved risks of conflict and human suffering with reasons for hope for more stability and prosperity.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President

1. A New Horn. Still Thorny

Giovanni Carbone

The Horn of Africa at the Beginning of the 2020s

The Horn of Africa (HoA) is going through a delicate time of change, both actual and potential. Processes that originated in Ethiopia have been shaking the country while also generating repercussions across the region at large, a reflection of both Addis Ababa's heavyweight role as well as of the deep interconnections that historically characterise states and societies in the area. After a long period during which regional developments were essentially shaped by the legacy of the 1991 events – if definitely not without a rich texture of new and unpredictable occurrences ever since – the Ethiopian leadership transition of 2018 opened up an entirely new phase, dense with both promise and uncertainty. Where this new phase will lead to is bound to affect – and to be affected by – not only domestic and regional dynamics, but also the international relations of a region whose strategic relevance is like no other's in Africa.

A number of quite extraordinary features have long made the Horn an outstanding region in the continent and beyond. A land straddling Africa, the Middle East and Asia, it shapes a key shipping route between Asia and Europe – the shortest, cheapest and busiest – via the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and through the Red Sea, all the way to the Suez Canal, whose opening, one hundred and fifty years ago,

had crucially increased the importance of this sea lane. A naval itinerary China's Maritime Silk Road initiative is currently adding extra relevance to. But the region's geographic location also makes the Horn a major access gate to African markets in the Eastern part of the continent and further inland, for Asian and Arab states in particular, prompting developments in a wide range of sectors, from agriculture to industrial de-localisation, from ports and railway facilities to ICT and submarine cable connectivity.[1] In addition, proximity to multiple crisis scenarios – notably jihadism in Somalia, the Yemeni civil war, and piracy in the Indian Ocean (the latter drastically declined due to international patrolling) – raises external interests and stakes in what goes on in the area and along its coasts. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, for example, see Eritrea and other Horn countries as key partners in ensuring control and security on the Western side of the Arabian peninsula, particularly with regard to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. Similarly, Ethiopians are the United States' established regional ally in countering Somali armed fundamentalism. Thus, complex local developments and growing international attention make this a region of great dynamism that demands constant effort to monitor, analyse and understand it.

The Horn of Africa is a roughly triangle-shaped peninsula that primarily consists of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. Sudan is at times added to the four, as are on occasions Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan within a "Greater Horn of Africa" notion. The eight are the members of IGAD – the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development –, the sub-regional organisation officially-recognised by the African Union and tasked with addressing common issues in three key priority areas, namely food security and environmental protection; economic cooperation, regional integration and social development; peace and security – a short inventory of the many deep, structural challenges the region faces.

[1] See, for example, Oxford Business Group, "Djibouti to utilise geostrategic location to develop ICT connectivity hub", 2016.

In substantial tracts of the HoA, development progress has long been limited, with today's living conditions in some countries arguably worse than they were in the past, particularly for war-torn Somalia and reclusive Eritrea. Food security remains an issue across the area, partly because the latter is especially vulnerable to substantial climatic and environmental threats. Worldwide, the last two officially-declared famines occurred in this area (Somalia in 2011 and South Sudan in 2017), which is also often subject to flooding and, in 2020, saw the vegetation, agriculture and pasture land of vast zones ravaged by the worst locust infestation in 70 years. Meanwhile, the population has been rising fast, along with urbanisation processes, increasing the pressure on land and water resources and feeding into social tensions, particularly in Ethiopia, a country of over 110 million people and by far the region's demographic giant. Primarily driven by limited economic prospects, political repression and instability, contemporary migration from the Horn has also been very substantial – north-eastbound towards Arab countries, northbound towards north Africa and Europe, and southbound towards South Africa. Finally, domestic tensions between different groups and communities, and transnational ones between states and nationalities, have historically crisscrossed the entire Horn, frequently escalating into inter- and intra-state conflicts.

As much as its countries are the prized target of external attention, the overarching feature distinguishing the Horn from much of the rest of Africa is the prevalence of regional dynamics – largely drawing from past events and historical patterns – over pressures originating from outside the region, with competition for state territories and boundaries more intense than anywhere else on the continent. The Horn hosts the one non-colonised African country – Ethiopia, which was able to defeat the Italians in 1896 and was only briefly occupied by them some forty years later – as well as sub-Saharan Africa's only large, 'classic' interstate wars for territorial annexation (between Ethiopia and Somalia in the late 1970s and between

Ethiopia and Eritrea in the late 1990s). It is also home to the only case of a fully collapsed state (Somalia) and the first case of successful secession on the continent (Eritrea, with the only other one not far away, namely South Sudan).

Numerous motives thus make the Horn's evolving scenario relevant beyond the region as such, both as a key area for Africa's development and stability as well as for international trade and geopolitics.

Post-1991 Political "Order"

The beginning of the 1990s was a revolutionary, defining moment for the politics and development of the contemporary Horn of Africa.[2] The end of the Cold War coincided with a time of major political destabilisation and fragmentation, including state reconfigurations and regime changes, as well as the emergence of entirely new regional and external relations in a context that, following Soviet disengagement and America's loss of interest, initially saw the relevance of the HoA decline.

In Ethiopia, Mengistu Haile Mariam's *Derg* regime, in power since 1974, had been weakened during the 1980s by the military defeats suffered at the hands of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), by the end of Soviet support, and by two successive famines. It was eventually brought down on 28 May 1991 as a result of parallel insurgencies by the EPLF and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The regime that was then established under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – an umbrella organisation for a Tigrayan-led coalition – turned out to be one of Africa's most successful development stories of the past thirty years – with annual growth rates to the tune of 9% for the entire 2000-2019 period – if long criticised for only allowing a strictly-controlled

[2] Cf. M. Guglielmo, *Il Corno d'Africa. Eritrea, Etiopia, Somalia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013; and C. Clapham, *Horn of Africa. State formation and decay*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

opening up of the political sphere. Economic progress was not primarily driven by any mineral or energy resource wealth, but from the firm implementation of a pragmatic, hybrid development model for which comparisons have often been drawn with Asia's "developmental states". Relying on an established tradition of functioning state institutions and bureaucracy as well as on an ethnic federal set up as the chosen strategy to address its complex domestic diversity,[3] the new government in Addis Ababa retained not only monopolistic control of key economic sectors – notably energy, telecoms, logistics and airlines – but formal ownership of the country's land too. The latter also aimed to limit speculation on land and the related risk that, if dispossessed of land, Ethiopia's massive and fast-growing rural population would be driven towards urban centres at an unsustainable pace. Reviving agriculture and agricultural exports by supporting both small farmers, particularly in the highlands, and large commercial enterprises in the lowlands was central to the regime's strategy of Agricultural Development-Led Industrialisation (ADLI). Large investments were meanwhile undertaken to develop Ethiopia's physical infrastructure, particularly the transportation network (roads and railways), as well as industrial parks and energy plants.[4] The strategies adopted essentially paid off. Besides the impressive national growth rates, absolute poverty was also dramatically reduced, from about half of the population in 1995-1996 to a quarter of it twenty years later, in 2015-2016.[5] The fight against destitution has been a constant concern and a priority in the national budget, as manifest in efforts to promote food security as well as health and education. Overall, the EPRDF was able to move beyond its Marxist roots and, while retaining

[3] C. Clapham (2017), pp. 65 ff.

[4] J. Mosley, Ethiopia's transition: implications for the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, 2020/5, March 2020, pp. 9ff.

[5] T. Woldehanna and M. Araya, "Poverty and inequality in Ethiopia, 1995-1996 and 2015-2016", in F. Cheru, C. Cramer and A. Oqubay (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of the Ethiopian economy*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

the hegemonic role of a vanguard party firmly led by Meles Zenawi, who managed to assert his leadership in the 1990s and to consolidate it in the subsequent decade, to adopt a pragmatic and adaptable approach towards both domestic as well as external issues.

The emergence of a new Ethiopia went hand in hand with the birth of Eritrea. The coastal region had been annexed to Ethiopia in 1962, putting an end to ten years of "federation", which spurred the creation of armed liberation movements. Isaias Afwerki's Eritrean People's Liberation Front ultimately came to control the region's territory and, with the collapse of the *Derg* regime in Addis Ababa, set up a new, separate state in 1991 that formally became independent via a 1993 referendum. Despite a relatively more promising beginning, Isaias's regime saw a gradual deterioration in relations with Ethiopia. This escalated into fully-fledged war – independent Africa's worst international conflict based on death toll – between 1998 and 2000. The end of the war did not imply a normalisation of Ethio-Eritrean relations, rather the opposite. The strains between the Horn's largest state and its comparatively tiny neighbour remained and dragged on for twenty years. Eritreans were the main casualties. While Ethiopia aptly manoeuvred to have Asmara internationally isolated – including by twice managing to have the UN impose sanctions on it – Isaias' regime used the rhetoric of an external existential threat to build an increasingly secluded and cruel state. A period of economic fragility and declining prospects ensued, resulting in massive flows of people fleeing the country's dire political and socioeconomic living conditions, year after year.

Several developments in contemporary Somalia have been a quintessential denial of Africa's post-colonial expectations. Long seen as one of the most viable states on the continent as the vast majority of the population shares a language, religion and lifestyle, the country's institutions and society have actually fragmented since the 1980s, following armed reactions to Siad Barre's repressive and discriminatory regime.

Somali's traditional clan-based structure and relations did not prove a sound constitutive element on which to build, as they ultimately nurtured the ever evolving nature of the country's identities and identity politics.[6] Siad himself fled the capital Mogadishu at the beginning of 1990, notoriously leaving the country with no central government at all. One of sub-Saharan Africa's most ambitious independent nations – the only one that renounced a continental agreement to accept and stick to inherited colonial borders, and openly claimed parts of Ethiopian, Kenyan and Djiboutian land – was turned into the most classic case of a failed state. Despite significant progress, it has essentially remained so ever since. The long process of reconstructing a national government and infrastructure was not simply challenged by breakaway Somaliland in the north-west, but, over the past fifteen years or so, primarily by the al-Shabaab militias operating at the opposite extreme of the country's territory. In the central and southern regions, jihadism has proven a successful mobilisation tool, cutting across clan affiliations and appealing to Somali nationalist sentiment and common Islamic identity as a response to external interference. In a clan-structured society dominated by the elderly, a promise of social change have proven particularly attractive to the youth.

The Federal Government of Somalia, set up in accordance with the 2012 Constitution and led by a president indirectly-elected via a byzantine, clan-based procedure – currently Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmajo" –, still struggles to transform its control of the capital and other major towns into a stable and functioning presence across substantial tracts of the national territory. Backing by the African Union's 20,000-strong AMISOM mission, Ethiopian and Kenyan troops, alongside a growing string of drone strikes by the US, has not been enough to terminate the conflict with the jihadists and restore nation-wide stability in Somalia.

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[6] D. Laitin and D. Posner, *The implications of constructivism for constructing ethnic fractionalization indices*, APSA-CP, Winter, 2001, p. 13-17.

A little-known country outside the region, Djibouti has seen its international geopolitical relevance escalate over the past two decades. The smallest among the Horn of Africa's states is also the most strategically located. A potential gatekeeper and launchpad, it lies both where the waters of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden meet – on the narrow Bab-al-Mandeb Strait – as well as where the sub-Saharan landmass gets closest to the Arabian Peninsula and thus the Middle East. It is this position that led to a dramatic surge in international attention in Djibouti, transforming it into a veritable military hub (see below) while also emphasising the key role of its port facilities for serving global and continental trade routes. Besides its outward orientation, however, the country ruled by Ismaïl Omar Guelleh for over two decades retains innate and dense relations with all its neighbours – Djibouti shares borders and ethnic ties with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somaliland/Somalia – in what remains an unstable region.

International Geopolitical Competition in the Horn

The geostrategic relevance of the HoA is primarily structural, rather than a new or recent phenomenon. Yet, since the turn of the millennium both international and African developments greatly raised external interest in the region. Nothing illustrates this better than the crowded foreign military presence in Djibouti, continental Africa's tiniest state after the Gambia and Lesotho and now a veritable hub where several non-African armed forces are stationed. Besides hosting a French military base since independence in 1977, the country today accommodates German and Spanish troops – also in the French base – but, most notably, the largest and only permanent US army barracks on the continent, set up in 2003 and also home to a smaller British unit, as well as, since 2017, China's only foreign military base. Italy has troops too, contributing to the EU anti-piracy initiative in the Indian Ocean, as has Japan (aimed at countering pirates as well as responding to Beijing's growing influence in

the area), whereas Saudi Arabia is in the process of establishing its own foothold. Geopolitical, commercial and military competition has driven the deployment of foreign soldiers to the region beyond Djibouti too, with Turkish troops stationed in Mogadishu, Israel in Eritrea, and the United Arab Emirates present both in Eritrea and Northern Somalia (in Boosaaso, in the Puntland semi-autonomous region).[7]

In the past, the HoA was a ground for confrontation, turns and twists of events between major international powers during the Cold war. The US was originally close to Hailé Selassié's Ethiopia, only to gradually turn its back on the communist regime established after the emperor was ousted in the early 1970s. At that point, Washington became closer to Somalia. The Soviet Union had meanwhile abandoned Mogadishu – which it had hitherto supported to gain influence and control over the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea maritime routes – to become a key ally of Addis Ababa in its response to Somalia's invasion of Ethiopia's Ogaden region. In the Horn, as across the rest of Africa, however, the end of the Cold War led to a decline in the region's relevance.

Today, an expanding number of global, emerging and regional powers have become increasingly engaged in the region. The overarching concern is the protection of key, strategic sea trade routes in a historically turbulent area straddling distinct world regions. That Saudi Arabia was recently forced to temporarily suspend oil shipments through the Red Sea lane, following Houthi rebel attacks on two Saudi tankers, illustrates the point. Even before the Yemeni crisis began, however, international schemes had been launched to counter piracy in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden, including the EU Naval Force (Operation Atalanta). Yet, as Alex de Wall noted, while "all players have a shared interest in maritime security … the mechanisms for coordination and implementation are lacking".[8]

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[7] N. Melvin, *The foreign military presence in the Horn of Africa*, SIPRI Background papers, April 2019.

[8] A. de Waal, *Horn of Africa and Red Sea Synthesis Paper*, Conflict Research Program,

China's Maritime Silk Road initiative further increased the strategic relevance of the Horn of Africa region. Beijing, for whom Eastern Africa represents a natural entry point to the continent, aims at ensuring privileged access to port facilities along the coast for merchant vessels flying its flag. But landlocked Ethiopia is also very much part of the picture, with China having developed close economic and diplomatic ties with the HoA's colossus and providing it with substantial financing for strategic infrastructure, particularly the new Addis-Djibouti railway and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam currently under construction on the Blue Nile. Energy resources are an additional inducement. The HoA region is not currently a major area of origin for oil and natural gas supplies. But important reserves have been discovered in the Ogaden region, with the gradual stabilisation of the area meaning the prospect of extraction and commercial exploitation is nearer, again with China already on board. Financial involvement in strengthening regional infrastructure and resource potential has come under scrutiny of late for fear that large borrowing on the part of African governments, should the latter at some point no longer be able to meet their repayments obligations, may leave them and their newly built transport, energy or mineral infrastructure prey to Chinese control and pressure.

The region's closeness to the Middle East has exposed its countries to the goals of wealthy Gulf states, driven, on the one hand, by a desire to diversify their national economies away from oil and to improve food security, and, on the other hand, by an effort to expand their political influence in a nearby and increasingly relevant area. They have thus grown prominent among investors in the Horn over the last ten years or so. Industrial and agribusiness ventures, alongside large land acquisitions, have been pursued by many Arab states. Sudan, historically closely linked to them, has been singled out as a major target. The reverberation of Middle Eastern rivalries into

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London School of Economics, 2017, p. 13.

the Horn of Africa has been a growing feature of the external presence in the region, pitting the likes of Saudi Arabia and its Arab partners against Iran (the latter, on the defensive, lost its previous allies of Eritrea and Sudan) but also the so-called Arab Quartet (the Saudis, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) against Qatar, accused of standing too close to Iran and the jihadists. Similarly, Turkey – which gained a solid foothold in Somalia[9] – and Israel have also joined the ranks of those drawn to the area with the aim of earning influence in the region. Egypt, on the other hand, stands as a case apart. Bordering the region, it has a vital interest in the Horn as the source of the Blue Nile, one of the two main tributaries to the river on whose waters the country's population and economy so entirely depend. A dispute about the filling of the new Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which grants Ethiopians control over the downstream flow of water, has heightened tensions and caused increasing wars of words between Addis Ababa and Cairo, with international mediation efforts failing to help the two strike a compromise thus far.

Besides geographic, economic and political drivers, a human mobility factor is at play too. Migration flows originating from the region have become a major concern for European nations (as well as for some more nearby states, including South Africa). While, in recent years, migrant routes from West Africa via the Western Sahel have attracted the lion's share of media attention, large numbers of Africans hailing from the Horn have crossed the Sahara to reach the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea via Sudan and then Egypt or Libya. Middle Eastern countries themselves are also major destinations for HoA migration, although, on the whole, they respond to it with relatively more open approaches. Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea all traditionally have large diasporas. The European Union set up an EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative (the Khartoum Process) to bring together origin, transit and

[9] B.J. Cannon and F. Donelli, *Involvement in the Release of Silvia Romano in Somalia*, ISPI, 26 May 2020.

destination countries to cooperatively address migration-related issues. The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, established at the Valletta Summit on Migration in 2015, devolved some €1.9 billion to humanitarian and development projects in the Horn of Africa region to improve local conditions so as to limit migration.

Despite relations with non-African nations often including asymmetric elements, Horn of Africa countries have, to different degrees, repeatedly shown they want their own agendas to be part of the process. At least for a time, for example, Eritrea and Sudan exploited external rivalries to hire port facilities or even their own troops – notably with regard to the war in Yemen – with a view to gaining external support from Saudi Arabia and circumventing international isolation. The very fact the 2018 peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea was officially signed in Riyadh testifies to the close relations between Asmara and the Saudi regime. In Somalia, Northern regions aiming at distancing themselves from Mogadishu have worked towards obtaining external sponsorships. Ethiopia, on the other hand, has often travelled a path of neutrality, one of its major mid-term goals being the opening of alternative trade routes to the sea – via Berbera in Somaliland and Assab in Eritrea – that would reduce its heavy reliance on the port of Djibouti.

Another Turning Point for the Region? The Changes Ignited in 2018

Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in Ethiopia was a surprising turn in a complex rebalancing of the political scenario that had dominated the country for the better part of three decades. What over time had asserted itself as the pivotal element of that scenario – i.e. Meles' leadership – vanished with the Prime Minister's sudden death in 2012. Political continuity itself had begun to be questioned with the choice of Hailemariam Desalegn as a new, non-Tigrayan head of government, stripping the ethnic minority that was closely identified with Ethiopia's

post-1991 regime of formal control over the reins of power. The move was forced upon the Tigrayan ruling elite by the need to respond to growing unrest among key sections of the Ethiopian populace who had grown increasingly frustrated as they felt essentially excluded under the existing political settlement. Popular discontent, however, did not abate but rather spread further, particularly among the Oromos – the country's largest community – with major protests taking place in both 2014-15 and 2016-17. The confrontation did not seem to lead to any softening of the regime, as a state of emergency was declared that would last ten months (October 2016 to August 2017) and result in a crackdown and some 11,000 arrests. A second state of emergency followed in the first half of 2018. Yet, the fact that demonstrations had led the government to abandon the controversial Addis Ababa Master Plan – a scheme meant to expand the capital territory and seen by the Oromos as a Tigrayan and Amhara plot that would leave local farmers dispossessed of their land – was not simply unusual. As observers pointed out, the "rejection of official plans by government members is unprecedented in Ethiopia. It is … historic, as it could be seen as acknowledging the legitimacy of the protests".[10]

The deteriorating situation convinced Hailemariam to resign to open the way for a different political solution. Few, however, envisaged this would lead to a figure like Abiy Ahmed taking over. The country's first-ever Oromo Prime Minister emerged as the result of the Oromo and Amhara components of the ruling EPRDF coalescing in a move aimed at dismantling Tigrayan control of the dominant alliance.

Abiy went further as he quickly moved not only to usher in a series of wide-ranging political and economic reforms, but also to dissolve the EPRDF itself and replace it with a new Prosperity Party – with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front opting for staying out of it – as a platform to run in the election

[10] "Ethiopia cancels Addis Ababa master plan after Oromo protests", *BBC News*, www.bbc.com, 18 January 2016

scheduled for 2020, which he promised would be the country's first free and fair election. While political space for dissent was dramatically expanded, it did not prevent a new wave of protests from emerging in 2018 and 2019, with a mixture of community clashes and centrifugal demands for the creation of new ethnic regions. A failed coup in the Amhara regional state, in 2019, was a further warning of the risks of a weakening power at the centre. Domestic unrest thus led Abiy to make more assertive moves, apparently in line with the idea that Ethiopia, in the words used by an observer half a century ago, is "a 'tough-man system'. At every level, and most of all in the national central government, it depends on powerful authority figures … In times of imperial weakness, the different elements in the state immediately start to drift apart ... There are indeed roots of national unity … but a powerful man at the top is needed to draw on them".[11] Persisting structural challenges add to the complex evolution of Ethiopia's internal politics, notably huge demographic pressures and key environmental challenges. In its external relations too, the impact of China's slowdown is still to be fully assessed, and growing national debt has also raised concerns.

Ethiopia's leadership transition acquired crucial regional importance the very moment Abiy reached out to Eritrea to strike a peace deal, an initiative that set the entire Horn of Africa on a new course, albeit undoubtedly neither a trouble-free nor a predetermined one. The détente in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations after two decades of latent war – tensions have eased enormously, although the border issue has not been fully normalised – was bound to generate spill-over effects across the region, notably in terms of a possibly broader stabilisation of the Horn and of new potential for regional economic integration, both formal and informal.

[11] C. Clapham, "Imperial leadership in Ethiopia", *African Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 271, 1969, p. 111.

Addis Ababa itself was quick to induce the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), up to that point backed by Eritrea itself, into ending a long rebellion in the country's Somali-inhabited South-eastern region. Abiy also assumed a high-profile mediatory role across the region, with involvement in mediation between Eritrea and Djibouti, Kenya and Somalia, as well as in peace talks between South Sudan's warring factions and in domestic negotiations in post-Bashir Sudan.

Eritrea is the country most directly affected by domestic changes in Ethiopia. United Nations sanctions were lifted in late 2018 after almost a decade. To the extent that it seizes the opportunity to adapt its course and end its international isolation, the small coastal state stands to gain both politically and economically. Eritrea and its ports are a natural export and import transit zone for the vast and expanding Ethiopian market. Asmara also agreed with Djibouti to normalise diplomatic relations that had soured since 2008 due to a border dispute. Sudan, on its part, reopened the frontier with Eritrea, which had been sealed in 2018 to stop arms trafficking. But any economic advances will require Asmara to directly address a number of domestic issues, including freeing up the extensive economic and human resources still devoted to the country's defence and removing the constraints that make it the second-worst business environment in the world (only followed by Somalia).[12]

Authorities in Mogadishu also stand to benefit from regional developments in terms of their efforts to stabilise Somalia and expand government control over the national territory. The ample al-Shabaab presence continues to feed the region's most prominent crisis. Since the turn of the millennium, the country has become the ground for a proxy war between Addis Ababa and Asmara, with the former backing the fragile central government, including through participation in the African Union's AMISOM mission, and the latter clandestinely

[12] See World Bank, *Doing Business 2020*, 2020.

supporting al-Shabaab (which led the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Eritrea). Following Ethiopia's openings, it did not take long for Eritrea and Somalia to re-establish diplomatic relations for the first time in about twenty years. Isaias Afwerki's first-ever visit to Mogadishu, in late 2018, testified to the new course between the two countries. Any progress in Somalia – home to jihadism and a key source of refugee flows, kidnappings and piracy in the region – would in turn have a broader stabilising effect across the HoA. A degree of stability in Somalia is also a near necessary condition for Ethiopia to exploit the recently-discovered oil and natural gas fields of the Calub and Hilala reserves, in the Ogaden region.

That a new era has been opened is also reflected by the regular meetings held by the leaders of Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea since 2018, as they established an alliance aimed at fostering comprehensive trilateral cooperation on political, economic and security issues. The alliance itself may favour Eritrea's return to IGAD after more than a decade, but it also raises questions about the relationship between the new grouping and the wider regional body.[13]

Horn of Africa in the Time of the Pandemic: 2020 and Beyond

The Horn of Africa region, an area in which stability and democracy fared poorly for the better part of the post-independence period, is going through a time of political transformation that was ignited by the domestic leadership transition in Addis Ababa. While the latter ushered in a phase of social and political uncertainty in Ethiopia – including the opening up of the political space and rising ethnic tensions – the Horn region as such appeared to embark on promising processes towards the normalisation and stabilisation of relations

[13] S.T. Demissie, *Is another regional alliance what the Horn needs?*, ISS Today, Institute for Security Studies, 24 March 2020.

among the countries belonging to it. Then Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) hit. In an area with a number of structural weaknesses – including endemic poverty, comparative state fragility, and challenging environmental conditions – the potential for the pandemic to become a most dangerous stress test for both domestic as well as regional dynamics is high.

In spite of the initial doomsday expectations, in terms of official numbers, Covid-19 in the Horn has not reached the kind of diffusion and lethality shown elsewhere – at least for now. Numbers of cases and deaths are still relatively low when compared to hard-hit countries in other world regions. The extent to which this is the result of weak testing and reporting or of an actually more limited presence and impact on health of the virus partly remains an open question. In the Horn as in much of Eastern Africa, food security in 2020 has already suffered a hit due the locust invasion.

Besides the health and economic impact, however, the pandemic could have major implications for governance, security and politics. Governments have become more inward looking – their primary concerns being the social and economic impact of the Covid-19 emergency and the responses required to limit the spread of the virus and protect the most vulnerable sections of the population, including the need to implement lockdowns and other measures – with bilateral and regional meetings, diplomatic initiatives, and discussions within the Horn being delayed or placed on hold. Similarly, relations with international donors and multilateral organisations are also suffering a slowdown if not a standstill.

Domestically too, the political price of Covid-19 could potentially be high. In Ethiopia, one major effect of Covid-19 was the postponement of a key election. This immediately spurred further domestic political developments, with opposition parties ratcheting up the pressure to go to the polls and Abiy somehow caught between the need to legitimise his initiatives and rule (the mandate for MPs has formally exceeded the five years envisaged by the constitution, and the PM's stay

in office was allowed to be extended by parliament) and the responsibility not to force through a vote in unsafe health conditions. Frustration and tension have grown, with violence ensuing. The stand-off with Tigrayan regional authorities, in particular, led the federal government to start a military intervention that risks igniting full-scale civil war. Anti-Abiy forces may try and seize this opportunity. Somalia followed suit: it abandoned plans for a definitive return to direct elections with universal suffrage – still difficult to arrange in a highly troubled and unstable country much of whose territory is hardly under government control – and postponed the entire multi-stage voting process for one year to 2021.

This Report digs into the recent developments in the Horn of Africa region, a traditionally highly dynamic area – and one of greatly increased international interest – where the turn of events was initially accelerated by Ethiopia's 2018 domestic leadership transition, before it had to face new challenges due to the advent of the pandemic. The book starts out from this last topic, with a chapter framing and examining the impact of Covid-19 in the region. It then moves on to individually deal with each of the four core Horn of Africa countries. But it does so by inverting what would be a more conventional order. Djibouti and Eritrea are examined first, in an effort to place more attention on them too and to stress how minor players are highly relevant to the political evolution of a historically intertwined region. Attention finally shifts to Somalia and Ethiopia, that is, the two countries that remain, respectively, the most unsettled state in the area and the political, economic and social giant in the region.

2. Covid-19 in the Horn: Health and Social Impact

Michele D'Alessandro, Zemelak A. Ayele, Giovanni Putoto

This chapter analyses the health and social impact of Covid-19 in Africa and the Horn. The first part outlines the spread of the pandemic by giving some figures and trends at both continental and regional level, paying particular attention to some specific regional dynamics in terms of health, migration patterns and peace and security threats. The second part examines the health and social impact of Covid-19 by focusing on three core aspects: the direct impact of the virus on mortality rates, the indirect impact of Covid-19 on other health conditions and the socio-economic consequences of the outbreak of coronavirus on the continent. The third part concentrates on the Ethiopian case by examining how the virus has impacted on the internal political, social and economic dynamics of the country. The fourth part analyses some key responses to Covid-19, first at health system level, and then in terms of regional and international initiatives to tackle the pandemic, before setting out the final conclusions.

The Spread of Covid-19 in Africa and the Horn

On 14 February 2020, Africa confirmed its first coronavirus disease (Covid-19) case in Egypt. Since then, more than 1.1 million cases have been reported and every country on the continent has officially recorded infections. As of 3 October

2020, a cumulative total of 1,187,689 Covid-19 cases have been reported in the African region, with 36,222 deaths.[1] Confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Africa have increased rapidly, following improved testing, in ten countries that account for about 88% of all reported Covid-19 cases in the African Region: South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Algeria, Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar and Senegal. South Africa alone accounts for about 60% of all reported cases.[2] However, the evolution of the pandemic on the African continent has been different compared to many other regions of the world. The exponential surge in cases that was expected to peak a few weeks after the outbreak, did not occur in Africa. Instead, many African countries are experiencing a gradual and quite diversified rise in Covid-19 cases, with different transmission patterns between and within countries.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Africa Centres for Disease Control (Africa CDC), new cases being reported in the last few weeks on the continent are apparently slowing down, with a total of 34,564 new confirmed Covid-19 cases and 1,173 new deaths reported from forty-five countries between 2 and 8 September 2020. This represents a 17% decrease in incidence cases as compared with the previous reporting period (from 26 August to 1 September 2020).[3] However, the Africa CDC warns that it is too early to say that the Covid-19 outbreak in Africa may have passed its peak, as many countries are still experiencing a sustained increase in cases, notably Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa, Namibia and Mozambique in Southern Africa and Ethiopia and Uganda in East Africa.[4] Data is fast changing,

[1] World Health Organization (WHO), *Covid-19 dashboard in the WHO African Region*, October 2020.
[2] Ibid.
[3] World Health Organization (WHO), *Covid-19 Situation update for the WHO African Region*, External Situation Report 28, September 2020.
[4] P. Mwai and C. Giles, "Coronavirus: Is the rate of growth in Africa slowing down?", *BBC News*, 10 September 2020.

and all these dynamics will definitely require further analysis.

With a population of roughly 170 million people (including Sudan), the Horn of Africa is home to some of Africa's fastest growing economies on the continental scene, with Ethiopia often heading the table in the last ten years. Moreover, the historic peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia reached in 2018, the stabilisation efforts in Somalia, and the recent though intermittent peace negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan have raised hopes for a new era of political and security cooperation in the region. Despite this progress, however, the Horn of Africa remains one of the most fragile regions in the world, where weak security and state governance still undermine long-term development objectives.

The last decades have shown that the Horn of Africa has been one of the world's most conflictual regions, with conflict dynamics caused and maintained by a wide range of underlying and interconnected factors.[5] The internal conflict in Somalia, for instance, was the epicentre of a regional conflict with interdependencies and collateral effects in both Kenya and Ethiopia. The countries of the Horn of Africa thus share common challenges in terms of economic development, health, migration patterns, and peace and security threats. Unemployment, protracted conflicts, and environmental degradation are some of the key determinants that have shaken this region for decades, forcing many local communities to migrate either internally towards the cities or abroad towards neighbouring countries. At the end of 2019, 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees were hosted in bordering Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya, while Somalia had 2.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and South Sudan 1.7 million.[6] A further spread of Covid-19 in the region would place an additional burden on the already complex humanitarian situation, with devastating consequences.

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[5] P.D. Williams, *Horn of Africa: Webs of conflict & Pathways to Peace*, Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011.

[6] IOM (International Organization for Migration) Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa, *A Region on the Move Report*, September 2019.

Ethiopia and Sudan announced the first cases of Covid-19 in the region on 13 March 2020. Somalia reported its first cases on 16 March and Djibouti on 18 March. Three days later, the first case in Eritrea was confirmed in Asmara, while on 5 April 2020, the virus was confirmed to have reached South Sudan. As of 3 October 2020, Ethiopia has 76,988 cumulative cases, representing 6.5% of all the cases in the WHO Africa Region; Sudan has confirmed 13,653 positive cases, Djibouti 5,417 cases, Somalia 3,593, South Sudan has recorded 2,715 positive cases, and Eritrea 381 cumulative cases. These regional disparities in the number of Covid-19 cases and different incidence rates might be due to several causes, including access and reliability of health data, differences in epidemiological and population factors, testing capacities and criteria, as well as clinical and public health practices. Moreover, discrepancies in the modality of implementation of Covid-19 containment strategies across the region might have contributed to variations in incidence and current prevalence.[7]

In May, Djibouti and Somalia were the countries reporting the sharpest-rising trend of cases in the region, with Djibouti recording the highest prevalence on the continent at the end of April.[8] Given the extensive cross-border movements through these countries to the entire region, both Somalia and Djibouti were key for the trajectory of the epidemic. In other countries such as South Sudan and Eritrea, the low number of detected cases might be linked to inadequate testing capacity or to the scarce availability of data, although Eritrea currently appears to have controlled the epidemic. The outbreak of Covid-19 in the Horn of Africa represents a tremendous challenge for the region, as it poses an additional and critical threat for already weak national

[7] M. Martini and M. Abdiker, *Migration & Human Mobility: New & Old Challenges for Global Health Security & Public Health in East Africa and Horn of Africa in the Context of Covid-19*, Situational Brief: Report on East Africa and Horn of Africa, Lancet Migration, 2020.

[8] "Coronavirus surges in Djibouti as population ignores measures", *Al Jazeera*, 24 April 2020.

health systems operating in fragile humanitarian contexts. Even if the Horn escapes a major Covid-19 outbreak, the economic and social impact of the virus is likely to be profound, and will soon reveal its effect on the economic and political progress that has been painstakingly achieved in recent years.

The Health and Social Impact of the Pandemic

As Covid-19 continues to spread throughout the globe, available data and trends related to the pandemic are changing, so the following considerations regarding the impacts of Covid-19 on the African continent will require further and more detailed analysis. This section outlines the health and social impact of Covid-19 by focusing on three key aspects: the direct impact of the virus on mortality rates, the indirect impact of Covid-19 on other health conditions and the socio-economic consequences of the outbreak of coronavirus on the continent. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, between 300,000 and 3.3 million people in Africa could die as a direct result of Covid-19 infection. The transmission and mortality rate will depend on the effectiveness of mitigation and containment measures that should take into consideration specific susceptibility and vulnerability of African populations, including social structure, culture, and mobility patterns.[9]

In particular, specific susceptibilities and vulnerabilities of the African context may lead to considerably differentiated impacts. Susceptibility – defined as the sensitivity to spread and impact – is critical among African countries, as the majority of the urban population is concentrated in overcrowded slums, with poor access to household handwashing facilities.[10] Vulnerability – defined as critical fragilities in Africa's response – is also a key factor, as the health systems of countries in Africa are generally

[9] UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), *Covid-19 in Africa Protecting Lives and Economies*, June 2020.
[10] Ibid.

weaker, with lower ratios of hospital beds, Intensive Care Units (ICUs), and health professionals to its population. Africa has on average 1.8 hospital beds per 1,000 people, compared to 5.98 in France.[11]

As of 3 October 2020, total Coronavirus deaths in the WHO African region amount to 36,222, of which about 6% are in the Horn, with 1,208 in Ethiopia, 836 in Sudan, 99 in Somalia, 61 in Djibouti, 50 in South Sudan, and 0 in Eritrea.[12] The availability and reliability of data related to mortality rates in developing countries, however, is a delicate issue. Especially in Africa, the lack of reliable health information is a major obstacle in terms of both improving the health of the population and having data reliable enough to be able to produce global estimates and trends.[13] In many sub-Saharan African countries, there is a poor stream of reliable health information. Sometimes this is simply because in many countries there are not enough trained staff and resources to collect and compile the needed information, thus preventing the development of tools and standards for the creation of proper health information systems. Other times, however, the reason is purely political, as governments control the access to and the stream of health information for the purposes of their political agenda.

The second key aspect concerns the indirect impact of Covid-19 on other health conditions. As Covid-19 continues to spread throughout the continent, many sub-Saharan African countries are still experiencing outbreaks of other infectious diseases such as cholera, measles and viral haemorrhagic diseases. These outbreaks have often occurred alongside humanitarian crises and other public health emergencies, forcing many countries to fight on multiple fronts. The Covid-19 pandemic is therefore putting additional pressure on already stretched and fragile health systems across the continent, and is underlining

[11] Ibid.

[12] Africa CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention), *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)*, October 2020.

[13] "Stumbling around in the dark", Editorial, *Lancet*, vol. 365, 11 June 2005, p. 1983.

once again the pressing need for improving the resilience of the health sectors in order to ensure effective outbreak response. Moreover, Africa has the highest prevalence of certain underlying conditions, like tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. The vulnerability of health systems of countries on the continent will thus impact not only on the Covid-19 response, but also on Africa's existing health challenges, as has already happened during other health emergencies.

Before the current pandemic, the 2014-15 Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak was the most severe in recent history, and it mainly affected three West African countries: Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. During the Ebola crisis, the number of women giving birth in hospitals and health clinics dropped by 30% and the maternal mortality rate increased by 75%.[14] In Sierra Leone, the trends concerning the utilisation of maternal and child health (MCH) services before, during and after the Ebola outbreak, clearly showed a decrease in all MCH indicators after the EVD outbreak, including institutional deliveries, paediatric and maternity admissions and paediatric and maternity deaths.[15] The study also concluded that a stronger health system enabled health facilities to maintain service provision and uptake during and after the Ebola epidemic in the country.[16]

Some reports have warned of similar trends for the current pandemic. The recently-released report of the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME) says that decades of progress on child and youth mortality are now threatened by the indirect effects of Covid-19.[17]

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[14] S. Davies and B. Bennett, "A gendered human rights analysis of Ebola and Zika: locating gender in global health emergencies", *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 5, 2016, pp. 1041-60 reported in J. Smith, "Overcoming the 'tyranny of the urgent': integrating gender into disease outbreak preparedness and response", *Gender & Development*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2019.

[15] G. Quaglio et al. "Impact of Ebola outbreak on reproductive health services in a rural district of Sierra Leone: a prospective observational study", *BMJ Open*, 2019.

[16] Ibid.

[17] United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN

While current evidence indicates that the direct impact of Covid-19 on child and youth mortality is limited, indirect effects can be crucial: these include limitations on preventative measures like vaccination and nutrition supplements, declining utilisation and provision of basic health services, as well as the reallocation of healthcare resources and personnel.[18] Following drops in household incomes and medical and food supply chain disruptions, the UN IGME report estimates that 6.7 million additional children could suffer from wasting in 2020, compared with projections for 2020 before Covid-19. At the same time, these children (mainly located in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa) are at greater risk of death from infectious diseases worsened by malnutrition.[19] Unfortunately, Covid-19 also threatens to slow progress on a series of other health and service indicators, such as immunisation coverage, malaria and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancer, diabetes, heart and lung disease and stroke, as recently demonstrated by the 2020 edition of the WHO annual World Health Statistics.[20]

The third key aspect of the impact of Covid-19 has to do with the economic and social consequences of the pandemic, and especially with its effects on hunger and poverty. Although it is too early to say what the virus will do to global hunger, Covid-19 is expected to worsen food security and nutrition, as it is disrupting food supply globally, in particular as regards farm labour, processing, transport and logistics, as well as critical shifts in demand.[21] Consequently, the pandemic could increase the total number of undernourished people in the world by between 83 and 132 million in 2020.[22] For sub-Saharan Africa,

IGME), *Levels and Trends. Child Mortality*, June 2020.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] World Health Organization (WHO), *World Health Statistics 2020*, May 2020.

[21] OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (Covid-19), *Food Supply Chains and Covid-19: Impacts and Policy Lessons*, June 2020.

[22] H. Kretchmer, *Global hunger fell for decades, but it's rising again*, World Economic Forum, 23 July 2020.

the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is projecting an economic contraction of 3.2% for 2020.[23] Between 2000 and 2015, on average, sub-Saharan economies grew faster than the rest of the world, but this region remains the world's poorest, and most countries have difficulties in mobilising the resources that are necessary to minimise the economic damage. Among G20 economies, stimulus funding averages about 22% of GDP, but for sub-Saharan African countries that average is just 3% – of much smaller GDPs.[24] The above-mentioned UNECA report estimates that in Africa Covid-19 will push below the extreme poverty line of US$1.90 per day between five and twenty-nine million people. For low-income households that spend an average of 36% of their income on healthcare-related expenses, access to health care will become almost impossible.[25] Consequently, the impact of Covid-19 is expected to increase informal and vulnerable employment (more than 60% of men and nearly 75% of women are informally employed in Africa), with the International Labour Organization (ILO) anticipating nineteen million job losses overall in Africa.[26]

Covid-19 affects every aspect of society, and it threatens the most vulnerable groups. Among them, one of the most exposed are people moving within and between countries, whether they are economic migrants, displaced persons, refugees or asylum seekers. The link between Covid-19 and these vulnerable groups is crucial, as many migrant and refugee populations live in conditions where physical distancing and precautionary hygiene measures are very challenging. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the extent of marginalisation faced by migrant and refugee populations and has also brought to light the normative

[23] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Regional Economic Outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa*, June 2020.

[24] Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *Covid-19. A Global Perspective*, 2020 Goalkeepers Report, September 2020.

[25] UNECA (2020).

[26] International Labour Organization (ILO), *Covid-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment*, 7 April 2020.

and political vacuum when it comes to health and migration, as migrants and refugees have been excluded from the Covid-19 response.[27] The case of irregular migrants and related forced expulsion of these groups in times of Covid-19 is of particular concern. Many international organisations have advised governments against returning irregular migrants during these challenging times, as the expulsion of irregular migrants to under-prepared countries puts migrants and communities at risk. The case of Ethiopia, as briefly outlined in the following section, is a clear example of how forced repatriations bring harsh consequences for both irregular migrants and their countries of origin.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Ethiopia

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Novel Coronavirus a global pandemic. Two days later, the first confirmed case of Covid-19 was reported in Ethiopia, the most populous country in the Horn of Africa region. The first person tested positive was a Japanese national who travelled from Burkina Faso to Ethiopia. Initially, the country did not have the technology for conducting the tests, so samples from suspected cases were sent to South Africa for testing, thus probably hindering a timely testing and tracing of the spread of the virus. Since then, the virus has been spreading incrementally in the country, despite the limited testing being conducted. At the time of writing, over 60.000 cumulative cases of Covid-19 infections were reported, out of a million tests conducted in the country.[28] Addis Ababa is the epicentre of the virus – with over 70% of confirmed cases being in the city – followed by the Oromia and Tigray regions. Over 900 people have died due to

[27] Lancet Migration, *Leaving no one behind in the Covid-19 Pandemic: a call for urgent global action to include migrants in the Covid-19 response*, 10 April 2020.

[28] Africa CDC (2020); Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Health, http://www.moh.gov.et/ejcc/

the Covid-19, while a little over half of those who have been infected with the virus have recovered.[29]

Even before the virus was declared a global pandemic, the federal government was taking some precautionary measures, such as requiring everyone entering the country to pass through temperature checks. After the first case was confirmed, the federal government required all its non-essential workers to work from home. Ethiopian Airlines, the most important airline of the continent, suspended all its flights with the exception of cargo flights. Seven days after the first confirmed case was reported, the federal government decided to close its borders. Only Ethiopians were allowed to enter into the country, on condition that they spent two weeks of mandatory quarantine upon arrival. Some regional states, such as Oromia and Amhara, took some preventive measures too. For instance, in some cities of Oromia, public transport was suspended for two weeks, and Bahr Dar, the capital of the Amhara state, was on lockdown for several days. Moreover, the Tigray state declared a three-month state of emergency and forbade any movement from urban areas to rural areas within the state, in addition to introducing a mandatory two-week quarantine for those entering the state.[30] This was followed by a federal state of emergency on 8 April 2020.[31] A regulation was issued by the Council of Ministers (CoM) detailing restrictions that would be imposed to contain the spread of the virus: it required everyone to wear a mask in public spaces; it forbade the gathering of more than four people, for any reason; cafeterias were allowed to remain open, on condition that they did not serve more than three people at the same table and that they kept each table two metres

[29] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Health..., cit.

[30] "Tigray Region declares a state of emeregency to prevent spread of #Covid-19", *Addis Standard*, 26 March 2020. Under Article 93 of the Federal Democratic Republic Constitution (1995), states have the power to declare a state of emergency, among others, to contain pandemics.

[31] "Ethiopia declares a state of emergency to fight coronavirus", *Al Jazeera*, 8 April 2020.

apart; buses, mini-buses and trains were required to use half of their capacity; schools and universities were closed, so public education had to be conducted exclusively online, despite the country's low internet connectivity; sports and games involving more than two people were banned; and the country's borders were closed, except for Ethiopian citizens upon permission of the Council.[32]

Some of the restrictions have now been eased, at least in practice, despite the fact that the virus is still spreading at a growing rate. Ethiopian Airlines has resumed flights to several cities in and outside Africa, and there is an evident relaxation in public movements in Addis Ababa even though the city is the epicentre of the virus. Moreover, the federal government has decided not to extend the state of emergency, which expired on 5 September 2020.[33]

The spread of the virus is already having adverse political, economic and social impacts. The country had just come out of massive public protests that began taking place in 2015 and continued until 2018. The protests, which were caused by, among other things, a lack of democracy in the country under the authoritarian rule of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), came to an end when the current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power. The Prime Minister was expected to introduce certain institutional reforms so that the sixth general elections, which were scheduled to take place in May 2020, would be free and fair. Most importantly, these

[32] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation 3/2020, also known as the *State of Emergency Proclamation Enacted to Counter and Control the Spread of Covid-19 and Mitigate Its Impact*, April 2020.

[33] A state of emergency expires automatically after six months unless explicitly renewed by Parliament. And Parliament has not renewed it which means the SoE would automatically expire. Moreover, according to the Reporter, the government has decided to attempt to contain the spread of the virus using normal law enforcement mechanisms. The government seems of the view that the SoE did not make any difference in containing the spread of the virus. Y. Anberbir, "የአስቸኳይ ጊዜ አዋጁ እንደማይራዘም ተጠቆመ (It is indicated that the SoE will not be extended)", *The Ethiopian Reporter*, 30 August 2020.

elections created many expectations both within and outside the country, as they were supposed to be the litmus test as to whether Ethiopia was indeed transforming into a democratic state. The elections, however, were postponed from May to August 2020, because the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) declared that it needed more time to make all the necessary preparations for administering the elections. Because of the outbreak of the virus, however, it was impossible to hold the elections in August.

With the term of the current parliament formally due to end in October 2020, how the country would be governed until the holding of elections became a major constitutional issue. The federal government took the matter to the House of Federation, the organ with the power to resolve constitutional issues, and the latter decided to extend the term of the legislature and all state councils until Parliament determines that Covid-19 is no longer a public health threat. The decision to postpone the elections indefinitely, while allowing the current government to remain in office in the meantime, is viewed by critics as thwarting Ethiopia's political transformation. It caused major political divisions in the country. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – the nucleus of the country's ruling coalition until it was marginalised under the new leadership – rejected the decision of the House of Federation and went on to hold the vote in the Tigray regional state, where it is the sole party in power. There is fear that the dispute between the federal government and the Tigray state may escalate to armed confrontation.

Covid-19 is also posing major challenges for the economy of the country. The Federal Job Creation Commission report shows that jobs have been lost thus far due to Covid-19.[34] A survey that the World Bank conducted in two rounds on the impact of

[34] የሥራ ፈጠራ ኮሚሽን በኮሮና ወረርሽኝ ምክንያት በሚሊዮኖች የሚቆጠሩ ሥራዎች ሊታጡ እንደሚችሉ ሥጋቱን ገለጸ ("The Federal Job Creation Commission fears that millions of jobs could be lost due to Covid-19"), *The Ethiopian Reporter*, 26 July 2020.

Covid-19 on 550 business firms in Addis Ababa shows that 41% of them ceased all activities, even though this figure fell to 29% in the second round of the survey.[35] Up to 40% of the firms reported zero earnings. This was mainly due to a drop of up to 80% in demand for the goods and services provided by these firms. Those in the informal sector, such as street vendors, are gravely affected by the pandemic.[36] A UN Ethiopia report indicates that the virus will cause a drop of up to 4% in the country's GDP growth.[37] A survey of the World Bank shows that 45% and 55% of urban and rural households, respectively, have suffered income losses due to Covid-19.[38] The government has reduced its own estimate of the country's economic growth for 2020, from 9 to 5.2%. Moreover, the virus emerged close to the main rainy season of the country, which is heavily affecting the agriculture sector, the backbone of the country's economy. The situation is worsened by a locust invasion in six of the nine states of the country. As a result, food inflation is now hovering at around 30%.

On the social side, the emergence of the virus is eating into the progress made in the last two decades in terms of making social services available and reducing poverty. If Covid-19 spreads further, thereby causing a GDP contraction, the number of those living under income poverty is expected to increase from 10 to 12.2 million. The closure of schools is leading to hundreds of girls being forced into early marriages in some states of the country, despite the government's effort to thwart such practices. Domestic violence is rising at alarming rates. This is worsened by the fact that courts were closed (and they are still not functioning at full capacity) due to the pandemic, so women did not have appropriate recourse to the judicial bodies.

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[35] World Bank, *Monitoring Covid-19 impacts on firms in Ethiopia,* June 2020.

[36] Ibid.

[37] UNICEF Ethiopia, *Socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa, April 2020.

[38] A. Dabalen and P. Paci, *How severe will the poverty impacts of Covid-19 be in Africa?*, World Bank Blog, 5 August 2020.

As seen in the previous section, an often-marginalised aspect of the social impacts of Covid-19 has to do with health and migration, and the case of Ethiopia is particularly revealing of this problematic nexus. Positioned at the centre of the migration crossroads of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia represents the point of origin, transit and destination for migratory flows within and beyond the region: to the Middle East via Djibouti and Yemen on the Eastern migration route; to South Africa via Kenya and other East Africa countries along the southern route; and to Europe through Libya and Sudan along the Northern migratory route. In this context, and in the midst of the Covid-19 epidemic, thousands of Ethiopian irregular migrants (together with other groups of migrants) have been forcibly repatriated from Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan and other countries, creating a second health emergency in Ethiopia. In both the border regions and the capital, the Ethiopian government converted schools, universities and other facilities into temporary quarantine centres, in order to contain these sudden flows of people for at least fourteen days, test them and – if necessary – activate contact tracing, before accompanying them to their respective regions. This situation has led the UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator in Ethiopia, Catherine Sozi, to call for a suspension of deportations on behalf of the UN community.[39]

Within less than four months, Covid-19 is already having devastating political, economic and social consequences in Ethiopia. Things seem likely to get worse in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the federal and state governments are taking some measures to ease the adverse effect of the virus, including tax exemption on imported materials and equipment that can be used in containing the spread of Covid-19. It also granted tax exemption to affected companies as well as cancellation of interest and penalties for unpaid taxes which were due between

[39] D. Endeshaw and G. Paravicini, "U.N. says Saudi deportations of Ethiopian migrants risks spreading coronavirus", *Reuters*, 13 April 2020.

2015 and 2018. Moreover, it introduced price controls on basic commodities. The National Bank also injected ETB15 billion as liquidity for private banks so that they could provide grace periods or debt relief to their customers. Employers are banned from dismissing their employees except in accordance with a protocol issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs. States and local governments are also introducing tax exemptions to small traders and businesses. These measures, though encouraging, are far from sufficient if compared to the magnitude of the emerging economic and social problems.

Health Systems and Pandemic Responses

Like anywhere else in the world, the response of African governments has been quite diversified and context-based, but at macro level we can distinguish three main layers of intervention to respond to the health emergency: the system-regulatory level, the hospital-health facility level, and public health measures of intervention. At the end of 2019, almost all African countries had undertaken a Joint External Evaluation (JEE) of the International Health Regulations (IHR), which helped countries to identify the gaps in their ability to prevent, detect, and respond to public health threats.[40] In their ongoing Covid-19 response, African countries have focused on intensive surveillance and case-finding, leveraging the Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response framework (IDSR) adopted by all countries of the WHO Africa region, which provides a framework for case-based and syndromic surveillance of forty conditions including influenza-like illness and severe acute respiratory illness.[41]

At hospital-health facility level, the most urgent commitment has been to securing the safety of health workers by providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to healthcare staff and

[40] C. Ihekweazu and E. Agogo, "Africa's response to Covid-19", *BMC Med*, vol. 18, no. 151, 2020.
[41] Ibid.

all the operators involved in the emergency management, and by providing the facilities with the minimum equipment for diagnosis and clinical management such as infrared thermometers to screen patients, oximeters to measure the status of blood oxygenation and oxygen concentrators for the supply of oxygen. Extraordinary commitment has been required in the training of operators and in the involvement of the communities, to promote proper behaviours and hygienic and protection norms. At the onset, Covid-19 mainly affected capital cities, but the virus is now moving from high-density urban areas to informal settlements and rural areas with a lower population density. A coordinated, effective risk communication and community engagement is therefore essential at this point to curb the virus.

In the past six months, African governments have imposed progressive lockdowns and key public health measures that have helped slow down the Covid-19 outbreak. Public health and social measures have been implemented across the continent. Countries have shut borders, established quarantine centres and introduced self-isolation for exposed persons. The rationale behind all these policies is that if public health measures flatten the rate of transmission, then the health systems will have fewer cases of severely ill patients, and they will be able to manage the overall burden of the pandemic. Over the last few months, preventive, diagnostic and treatment measures have been strengthened. The progressive scaling up of molecular testing across the continent has been impressive, with countries such as South Africa and Nigeria that are now using molecular laboratory diagnostic capacity that exists for specific disease programs like drug-resistant tuberculosis, Lassa fever and HIV to scale up testing for Covid-19.[42] All countries can now diagnose Covid-19, with 14 fourteen countries performing over 100 tests per 10,000 population. Production of oxygen, critical for severely ill Covid-19 patients, has also considerably

[42] Ibid.

increased, with the number of oxygen plants in the region rising to 119 from 68 sixty-eight at the onset, while the number of oxygen concentrators has more than doubled to over 6,000.[43]

Moreover, all fifty-four countries on the continent have recently expressed interest in COVAX, a global initiative led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Vaccine Alliance (Gavi), and the World Health Organization. The partners are working with governments and manufacturers to procure enough vaccine doses to protect the most vulnerable populations on the continent. The initiative aims to ensure access for both higher and middle-income countries, which will self-finance their own participation, and also for lower-middle income and low-income countries, which will be supported by the COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC).[44] Eight African countries have agreed to self-finance their vaccine doses through the COVAX Facility, while the remaining forty-six countries are eligible for support from the financing instrument. Despite the fact that the AMC instrument is still lagging behind the needed budget, this is an important initiative that would allow African countries to participate in vaccine and clinical trials that are taking place elsewhere, thus reaching beyond the continent to work together with other governments and manufacturers on a global scale.[45]

International cooperation is paramount to respond to the pandemic on the African continent. In April, the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund convened African leaders, partners and multilateral institutions to encourage faster action on Covid-19 response in African countries. During that meeting, the leaders applauded the important accord among G20 countries to temporarily suspend debt repayments, in order to provide much-needed support to the poorest

[43] World Health Organization (WHO), Regional Office for Africa, *Africa marks six months of Covid-19*, 13 August 2020.
[44] World Health Organization (WHO) Africa, "African countries engaging in ground-breaking Covid-19 vaccine initiative", 3 September 2020.
[45] Ibid.

countries.[46] Together, official creditors have mobilised up to US$57 billion for Africa in 2020 alone – including upwards of US$18 billion from the IMF and the World Bank, each to provide front-line health services, support the most vulnerable, and support economies. Private creditor support this year could amount to an estimated US$13 billion, but the African Finance Ministers have estimated the needs to be approximately US$200 billion dollars for the continent to absorb this shock – leaving a wide financing gap.[47] Large financing gaps between needs and capacity remain a crucial problem, and greater support is needed to ensure that African countries and institutions are able to respond effectively to the health crisis and to address the unprecedented economic challenges. The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the public health arm of the African Union, has estimated that it needs US$430 million to implement its Continental strategy, in particular to procure lifesaving medical supplies and increase testing capacities.

At the end of March, the Heads of State and Government of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – i.e. the regional organisation of the Horn of Africa – convened via video-conference for the Extraordinary Summit on Covid-19. The meeting produced an important Regional Health Response Strategy with the aim of developing an implementation plan to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in the IGAD region. Notably, the Response Strategy has also incorporated the protection of vulnerable groups such refugees, IDPs and migrants, who face major difficulties in accessing the national health systems. The IGAD Response Strategy also aims to establish an Emergency Unit at the IGAD Secretariat, analyse cross-border migration amongst the

[46] "Joint Statement by World Bank Group President David Malpass and IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on Outcome of G20 Finance Ministers' Meeting", The World Bank, 15 April 2020.

[47] "World Bank Group and IMF mobilize partners in the fight against Covid-19 in Africa, Opening Remarks by IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva", *Tralac*, 18 April 2020.

IGAD member states, enhance coordination and information sharing with the national task force of IGAD member states and enhance active surveillance, case investigation and contact tracing through training and capacity-building activities of healthcare workers.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned our world upside down, causing tragic loss of life and disrupting our social and economic fabric. The outbreak of Covid-19 is having a significant impact across Africa, where the socio-economic dimension of this pandemic is as crucial as the public health needs. Despite appropriate actions to contain the spread of Covid-19 and important advances in epidemic control, the Horn of Africa region remains particularly vulnerable. The high burden of HIV, tuberculosis and acute malnutrition, prevalent in many of the Horn of Africa countries, might exacerbate the severity of the disease once the virus gets deeply rooted. In the event of major transmission of Covid-19 in these countries, their respective health systems will be further weakened, and cholera, measles and other infectious diseases will thrive. The indirect impact of Covid-19 on these vulnerable groups will then be particularly severe, as seen during the 2014-15 Ebola crisis when measles, malaria, HIV/AIDS and maternal and child mortality rates claimed more lives than Ebola in the affected countries.

In addition, as seen above, the presence of large numbers of refugee and IDPs populations as well as migrants living in the region can make the virus explosively transmissible in these high-risk settings. In such contexts, the population is highly vulnerable and lives in often overcrowded settlements where distancing is impossible and with limited access to basic health services and hygiene. Covid-19 containment measures, testing and care for millions of refugees, IDPs and migrants living in the region is very complicated, as it implies intervening in scattered camps, detention centres, transit locations, urban environments

and cross-border areas. The pandemic has revealed a normative and political vacuum that initially excluded these groups from the Covid-19 response. Recent efforts have nonetheless proved that regional cooperation among states is crucial to face these complex, trans-border humanitarian situations, as the IGAD Response Strategy has demonstrated.

The impact of Covid-19 in such delicate contexts might also lead to social destabilisation, affecting the security situation in the region. Unless urgently and effectively addressed by regional and international partners, parts of the area might turn into ungoverned spaces in which terrorism, irregular migration and transnational organised crime flourish. As one of the most insecure conflict clusters in the world, the Horn of Africa region has often demonstrated that weak security and state governance becomes fertile ground for protracted conflicts among different identity groups, thus undermining those intermittent though evident signs of economic and political progress that the region has experienced in the last few years.

In view of the above and in response to the threats posed by further Covid-19 transmission, more and more funding and healthcare resources will be needed. It is fundamentally important to enhance public health capacity aimed at strengthening the resilience of national health systems, in order for both the continent and the region to absorb this extraordinary external shock. The pandemic is undermining the progress made so far on sustainable development goals,[48] as this year the world will regress on the vast majority of them.[49] So there is an urgent need for collaborative responses. All countries must work together to end the pandemic and begin rebuilding economies. This unprecedented crisis requires courageous political solutions and collective global action organised around a common sense of "shared vulnerability" and common interests.

[48] J. Thornton, "Covid-19 pandemic has derailed progress on sustainable development goals, says WHO", *BMJ*, May 2020.
[49] Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2020).

3. Djibouti: Geostrategic Balancing Between the Horn and Red Sea

David Styan

This chapter examines the state of Djibouti. It focuses principally on selected aspects of the regional and foreign policies of the Horn of Africa's smallest state. It seeks firstly to provide an overview of the contours of the "geostrategic" importance of Djibouti as a trade and military hub in the region. Secondly, it provides some insights into how the Djiboutian government juggles the contradictions of its regional foreign policies.

Djibouti is an enigmatic state. It is the dwarf of the Horn of Africa, and one of the poorest and smallest members of both the Arab League and the African Union. Yet its President, Ismael Omar Guelleh, is courted by superpowers and regional decision-makers alike. Having inherited power from his uncle in 1999, two decades later he is on his fourth Presidential term, having in the meantime considerably consolidated Djibouti's power and influence. While this has done little to improve the living conditions of the bulk of impoverished Djiboutians, he has spectacularly diversified Djiboutian diplomacy away from reliance on the largesse of France, the former colonial power. Paris quietly retains cultural and military capital in the country, but fading French influence is overshadowed by Djibouti's eclectic array of lucrative new partnerships. These include the US, China, Japan and the EU – all of whom have established military facilities in the country.

At the outset, it should be stressed that while Djibouti's geostrategic profile has several distinct dimensions, for key Asian and Western powers its importance is above all maritime. This is due to its location; sitting overlooking the Western approaches to the Bab Al Mandab, the 30km-wide gateway where the fickle winds and currents of the Red Sea meet the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. This makes it the principal port of call for both commercial ships and naval vessels transiting the region to and from the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal. As such, it is also the operational base for multilateral anti-piracy forces policing the Red Sea and Somali coasts. Indeed the "Djibouti Code of Conduct", which guides much anti-piracy activity, underscores quite how central the diminutive state has been to the anti-piracy industry.[1] Yet alongside this prominent international maritime dimension, Djibouti has its own, often fraught, strategic position within the Horn of Africa to manage. It has survived by navigating the frequently choppy diplomatic and military cross-currents between its fractious neighbours, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, the latter partially via its autonomous Northern province Somaliland. Each of these share borders and social clan structures with Djibouti. Finally, in addition to having a uniquely close relationship with China, as section four of this chapter illustrates, it also has managed complex, at times tempestuous, relations with Arab Gulf states, most notably Dubai.

Despite such complexity, and contrary to conventional theories of dependency or small-state vulnerability, Guelleh, his ministers and entourage nevertheless appear to wield considerable autonomy and influence. Analytically, Djibouti's dynamism appears to contradict the notion that small states require "strategic partnership" or protection from a larger

[1] For details of the "Djibouti Code of Conduct", on anti-piracy operations, see http://oceansbeyondpiracy.org/matrix/djibouti-code-conduct; and C. Bueger and T. Walke, *From Djibouti to Jeddah, the Western Indian Ocean Needs Security*, Pretoria, South Africa, Institute for Security Studies, 23 May 2018.

neighbouring power, or that Ethiopia is the dominant "hegemon" in the Horn of Africa.[2]

The chapter provides an introduction to these issues; it is structured in four principal sections; the first provides an overview of Djibouti's domestic politics, noting how domestic and regional policies are intertwined. Secondly, the text briefly examines the shifting regional context in which Djibouti finds itself. It notes in particular the impact of the 2018 accession of Ethiopia's premier Abiy Ahmed. At least on paper, the putative peace deal Abiy signed with Eritrea in mid-2018 (earning him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019) had the potential to significantly dent Djibouti's influence and role in the region. In practice, this threat has proved illusory.

The third section analyses Djibouti-China ties. Djibouti's unique and growing diplomatic role, both in the Horn and globally, is in part due to its location as a crucial hub within China's ambitious Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). Djibouti hosts China's only overseas military and naval facility, and is a node for its fast-growing global network of fibre-optic cables. Coupled with China's massive investments in rail and port infrastructure, this places Djibouti at the centre of China's growing regional roles in both the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Fourthly and finally, the text outlines Djibouti's fraught ties with the states of the Arabian Peninsula, mostly notably Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, before concluding by briefly considering future challenges to Guelleh's diplomacy.

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[2] For more detail on Djiboutian diplomacy, and a comparative view on small states' diplomacy, see D. Styan, "Djibouti; small state strategy at a crossroads", *Third World Thematics*, vol 1, no.1, 2016. On Ethiopia as a hegemon, see S. Le Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy: Ethiopia, an 'imperfect hegemon' in the Horn of Africa", *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5, September 2018. Overall, academic and policy literature on Djibouti remains meager: C. Clapham succinctly locates Djibouti's regional status in *The Horn of Africa. State formation and decay*, Hurst, London, 2017, pp. 170-175. See also: A.S. Chiré, (ed.), *Djibouti Contemporain*, Paris, Karthala, 2013; and S. Le Gouriellec, *Djibouti: la diplomatie de géant d'un petit Etat*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2020.

Patronage-Based Domestic Politics and Cross-Border Identities

Djibouti gained political independence from France in 1977; it has a population of under a million, and thus is a small, as well as a relatively young, state. It is by far the smallest state in the Horn in terms of population and territory. Its GDP is also tiny, both in absolute and per-capita terms, with a minuscule wealthy urban elite, surrounded by impoverished suburbs and arid hinterland. Geographically it is incorrect to call it either a "micro-state" or a "city-state"; although at least 80% of Djibouti's population do live in and around the capital city. On most indices it is comprehensively dwarfed not just by its neighbours in the Horn, but by all other members of the two regional bodies – the Arab League and African Union – of which it is an active member, and from which it draws considerable diplomatic influence and legitimacy.[3]

Similarly, in terms of its Red Sea and Gulf of Aden maritime neighbours, Djibouti is the regional minnow; to the east, Somaliland has a population of around 4m, including Gadaboursi and Issa Somali sub-clans. Members of these groups constitute over half of Djibouti's own population, engendering close, but at times fractious, ties with autonomous, but internationally unrecognised, Somaliland, for which Djibouti is the main transit point. Eritrea to the north of Djibouti has a population of around 5 million. Its port of Assab – potentially Djibouti's main competitor as a conduit for Ethiopia's trade – and the Danakil littoral, which lie just across Djibouti's Northern border, are sparsely populated, primarily with Afars who also share linguistic and clan ties with Djibouti's own Northern populace. All these coastal states are dwarfed by highland Ethiopia's 100 million population

[3] In population terms, Djibouti is the 5th smallest state in Africa; only the island nations of Seychelles, Sao Tome & Principe, Cape Verde and the Comoros have fewer people. However, with a territory of 23,000 km^2, it is larger in size than Israel or Slovenia (or indeed Tuscany).

and, across the Gulf of Aden, Yemen's 28 million beleaguered inhabitants. A fraction of Djibouti's own traders have Yemeni roots, and – as in the cases of Somalia and Eritrea – Ethiopia's own Afars and Issa-Somalis share cross-border clan ties with Djiboutian populations. Many in Djibouti's ruling elite have origins in Eastern Ethiopia, notably Dire Dawa, the historic hub of the railway that first linked Addis Ababa to the port of Djibouti a century ago. Somali-Issa migrants from Dire Dawa were instrumental in shaping the modern Djiboutian state and society. This mosaic of social and linguistic origins in part explains the inherent cosmopolitan and patronage-based nature of Djiboutian politics.

In domestic politics, power is largely a personal, patronage-based matter emanating from the presidential entourage. "Rent" accrues from foreign military bases, along with access to other economic assets – foreign direct investment, trade licenses, port revenues – which are then partially redistributed to maintain legitimacy. Personalised, patronage-based politics may partially account for Djibouti's unusual flexibility and innovation in terms of foreign policy. Nimble foreign policy has generated significant political and economic capital from inauspicious foundations, including, as we examine below, Dubai and China. Thus Djibouti's power and influence is disproportionately greater than the state's small size and ostensibly "dependent" roles would suggest.[4]

This does not mean domestic politics are friction-free. The opposite is true, above all in relation to the constitutional elasticity of presidential terms. Following his first re-election in the 2005 presidential election, Guelleh stated that he would not seek a third term in office. Political tensions were sparked by the need for constitutional amendments to allow Guelleh's

[4] See S. Gouriellec, "Djibouti's Foreign Policy in International Institutions: The Big Diplomacy of a Small State", in J. Warner and T.M. Shaw (eds.), *African Foreign Policies in International Institutions*, London, Palgrave, 2018; and D. Styan, "China's Maritime Silk Road and Small States: Lessons from the Case of Djibouti", *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 29, no. 122, 2020.

re-election for precisely such a third term in 2011. These sparked widespread opposition, including from within the presidential entourage. This in turn had far-reaching implications for Djibouti's relations with Dubai and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Guelleh breaking with Abdourahman Boreh, a close friend and business associate with political ambitions. At the time Boreh was a key broker for Dubai Ports World's (DPW) investments in Djibouti's container terminal.

Guelleh was elected for a fourth term in 2016. He won almost 90% of the 135,000 votes cast, being subsequently endorsed by all of Djibouti's main foreign allies. A similar dominance prevails in the legislature, where the 2018 election resulted in the ruling *Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle* (UMP) winning 55 of the 65 seats. However, that vote was completely overshadowed by the simultaneous announcement of the nationalisation of the Doraleh Container Terminal. This has left Djibouti with huge debts and a still unresolved, thorny set of contentious international legal dossiers, complicating relations with both Western and Asian partners.

The spat with Boreh and imbroglio with Dubai's DPW illustrate the complex cross-currents linking domestic and regional policies. Such challenges are also found in the complex ties – both official and personal – which members of Djiboutian elite's maintain with Ethiopian authorities. These exist at both the federal and regional level, the latter particularly via Ethiopia's local Somali, Afar and Dire Dawa administrations, all of whom share borders and cross-border pastoral populations with Djibouti.

Djibouti's Place in the Horn's Shifting Regional Context

Much of the prominence of Djibouti's geo-strategic profile arises from three facets of its geographical location: for commercial shipping and navies, it is the main bunkering and logistics port between the Red Sea and Indian Ocean; secondly, it is also Ethiopia's principal port. Finally, it lies at juncture of the African

and Arabian land masses, and as such it is simultaneously a cultural crossroads and a commercial *entrepôt*.

This translates schematically into four distinct foreign and economic roles for Djibouti's leaders. The first is a bilateral role, as a port and conduit for neighbouring Ethiopia, whose foreign trade has overwhelmingly transited via Djibouti since the rupture with Eritrea in 1998. Secondly, it acts as a corridor to the wider Horn of Africa region. This aspect is central to the state's "Vision 2035" economic developmental plan, which sees it as the Horn's natural regional and logistical hub. (This view is partially underpinned by the Horn's regional body, the Inter-governmental Authority on Development, IGAD, which has its headquarters in Djibouti). Thus, the Djiboutian authorities envisage their rail and port and pipeline services not simply as bilateral links with neighbouring Somaliland and Ethiopia. Rather they are presented as catalysts for broader regional economic growth and integration, encompassing all the Horn's states. In addition to the core Ethio-Djiboutian rail-port link (see below), examples include the northern port of Tadjourah, and an ambitious petro-chemical complex at Damerjog, where work was inaugurated in September 2020. This Djibouti Liquid Bulk Port (DLBP) is designed to serve oil fields in South-eastern Ethiopia.

The third distinct regional economic role is as a logistical hub for transhipments. Since 2009 this role was facilitated by what was, until 2018, DPW Doraleh Container Terminal (DTC), just to the west of the capital. Djibouti's Ports and Free Zone Authority (DPFZA) explicitly markets Djibouti as a global port and hub. It emphasises Djibouti's centrality to trade flows between Asia, Africa and Europe. Djibouti's longstanding potential as a centre of transhipments has been boosted by investment of China in infrastructure within Djibouti. As discussed in section three below, this includes an additional Multi-Purpose Port and vast international free trade zone at Doraleh.

The fourth and final aspect of Djibouti's geostrategic role and its regional policies is evidently its unique role as a military hub, examined in section three below. While external attention invariably focuses on Djibouti's military bases, above all US-Chinese rivalry, before examining this it is important to note the complex set of regional balances that Djibouti maintains within the Horn.

Its ties with the neighbouring autonomous territory of Somaliland are stable, but are periodically subject to strains due both to trans-border clan dynamics and Djibouti's ongoing role in attempts to reconstruct a central Somali state. Djibouti reopened its embassy in Mogadishu in 2018; President Guelleh hosting his Somalian counterpart, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, in mid-2019. In June 2020, he chaired talks in Djibouti aimed are reconciliation between Somali and "Somaliland" authorities. Djibouti also participates in the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). French and US troops based in Djibouti contribute to training both Djiboutian and AMISOM troops.

Djibouti's relations with neighbouring Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, are fraught, largely due to the incursion of Eritrean troops into Djibouti's territory at Ras Doumeira, in the far north-east of the country, in mid-2008. Eritrea's move was condemned by the UN Security Council, the Arab League, the AU and IGAD. Mediation by Qatar led to the withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Djibouti's territory in mid-2010. However, in 2017 Qatari observers were abruptly withdrawn. This was due to the rupture between Qatar and other GCC Arabian Gulf states, in which Djibouti sided with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Following the Ethiopian-Eritrean rapprochement, which began in mid-2018, Djibouti initially opposed the lifting of UN sanctions against Eritrea, requesting that the UN first facilitate the resolution of its own border dispute with Eritrea. While this was finally agreed in principle via UN Security Council Resolution 2444 of 2018, the border remains closed. Djibouti's bitter stand-off

with the UAE, outlined in section four below, complicates ties with Eritrea; the UAE maintains a naval base in the Eritrean port of Assab, adjacent to Ras Doumeira, as part of its intervention in Yemen's civil war. Assab is also believed to have been used as a staging post for UAE's operations in Libya and elsewhere.

Social and economic ties between Ethiopia and Djibouti are historically umbilical. They have become even more closely interdependent since 1998, due to Ethiopia's dependency upon Djibouti as a conduit for its foreign trade, following the outbreak of the Ethio-Eritrean border war and closure of the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa. Subsequent rapid economic growth in Ethiopia, coupled with significant new infrastructure developments, have facilitated the upsurge in bi-lateral transit trade. Politically, the two states' policies are closely aligned over a series of bilateral issues, notably border security across Afar and Issa areas; including the coordination of border controls due to Covid-19. In addition to rail and port investments, Ethiopia also supplies both hydroelectric power and drinking water to Djibouti. When Abiy Ahmed came to power in Ethiopia in 2018, he launched a series of ambitious plans for peaceful coexistence and integration in the Horn. On paper, these might have threatened Djibouti's role, particularly had Ethio-Eritrean peace led to the rehabilitation of Eritrea's ports and their use by Ethiopia. However, despite pledges of Saudi and Emirati funding for regional infrastructure, to date these plans have proved largely rhetorical. Eritrea's recalcitrant and isolated President, Isaias Afwerki, poses little threat to Djibouti's policies.

Foreign Military Bases and the Djibouti-China Relationship

Before providing a brief overview of China's ties with Djibouti, four factors behind them are worth highlighting. Firstly, many of China's motives in establishing a permanent naval presence in Djibouti are identical to those of Western powers. Secondly, somewhat paradoxically, the very fact that Djibouti already

hosts Western and Japanese militaries largely facilitated the establishment of a Chinese base. Thirdly, key reasons for China's presence in Djibouti relate to global, not regional factors, above all in the maritime domain. These include China's increased economic dependence on global shipping lanes, their navy's ambitious global "blue water" expansion, and the "Maritime Silk Road" component of Xi Jinping's flagship "Belt and Road Initiative". These factors are essentially all anchored at sea; as such they are maritime and unconnected with the Horn of Africa per-se. However, to a far greater degree than other external powers with a military presence in Djibouti, China does now have very extensive commercial and diplomatic interests in the Horn as a whole. While it has oil interests in South Sudan, Chinese FDI is concentrated in Ethiopia and Djibouti in particular

Djibouti's overseas military and anti-piracy presence

The US, France, Japan, the EU and now China all now have de facto permanent military presences in the country. Historically Djibouti's regional military role was as a French military base. Yet by 2020 Djibouti was also hosting an eclectic array of American, Asian and Arab naval and air forces. Its naval profile was magnified by the fact that since 2005 anti-piracy forces operating in the region used Djibouti as a logistical and administrative hub. In 2009 Djibouti hosted the meeting convened by the International Maritime Organization which led to the "Djibouti Code of Conduct". Under this, regional and naval powers agreed to co-operate under international law to arrest and prosecute persons who have committed piracy.

In 2009 Djibouti became the base for EUNAVFOR's *Operation Atalanta*. This is now by far the largest and longest-running European Union foreign policy mission under the framework of the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). *Atalanta* maintains around 600 naval personnel, several warships and Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Aircraft in constant rotation in the Gulf of Aden and Eastern

Indian Ocean at any one time, while coordinating activities with other multilateral Combined Maritime Forces in the region. Alongside France other key EU states maintain significant diplomatic presences in Djibouti, but collectively *Atalanta* represents the EU's most significant long-term engagement both with Djibouti itself and the Gulf of Aden more broadly.

At independence in 1977 there were approximately 4,000 French military personnel in Djibouti. France's military ties with Djibouti were scaled back in 2011, when the two states' mutual defence agreement was renewed and French Foreign Legion troops were moved from Djibouti to Paris' new military facility in the UAE. Nevertheless, in 2020 Djibouti remained France's largest military garrison in Africa. It maintains around 1,400 permanent troops there and pays the Government of Djibouti some €30 million annually for access to its military facilities.

In terms of the US's relationship with Djibouti, following the creation of US African Command (AFRICOM) in 2008 Djibouti became the US's sole permanent military base in Africa, led by the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), with around 3,200 US personnel. CJTF-HOA acts as a staging post for US missions in the Indian Ocean and Middle East. The US base is also the headquarters for counter-terrorism efforts. These include drone flights and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) strikes over Somalia and the Eastern portion of the Arabian Peninsula. Drone flights are now conducted principally from a second base at Chebelle, away from the built-up areas of Camp Lemonnier (the former French Foreign Legion complex). Under an agreement signed in 2014, the US pay $63 million per year for the 10-year lease, with an option to renew for a further decade.

Finally, in mid-2011 the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force established a base in Djibouti; significantly, this was Tokyo's first overseas military base since the end of the Second World War. Japan is a major aid donor to Djibouti and it has constructed an anti-piracy centre to the west of Doraleh port.

China's civil infrastructure and naval installations in Djibouti

As explained below, China has progressively expanded its civilian and commercial presence in Djibouti since 2012, with substantive investments in railway and port infrastructure. Militarily, at the beginning of Guelleh's presidency, China offered only limited training and medical assistance to Djibouti's armed forces. However, military cooperation accelerated as Chinese vessels increasingly participated in anti-piracy convoys from 2008 onwards. In this sense, China followed both the European Union and Japan, each of which expanded their physical presence on the back of anti-piracy activities based out of Djibouti. During 2012-17 Beijing funded and constructed several major infrastructure projects, as Djibouti became an increasingly prominent node in the "Maritime Silk Road" (MSR) economic initiative.[5]

In August 2017 China's Ministry of Defence formally opened what it termed a "naval support facility" in Djibouti. Both the opening ceremony, and the first live-fire exercises by Chinese troops operating from the base the following month, were publicized widely in both Western and Chinese media. Such coverage in China emphasised Djibouti's pivotal role in the MSR initiative.

The naval support facility is located alongside the Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port, and complements China's substantial investment in civil construction and infrastructure projects in Djibouti and neighbouring Ethiopia. These include the Ethiopia-Djibouti railway, the new Doraleh port itself and associated Free Trade Zone, the Ghoubet salt export facility, formally opened in 2017, as well as a Sino-Djiboutian Liquid Natural Gas terminal, known as the Djibouti Liquid Bulk Port, at Damerjog.

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[5] This section draws on D. Styan, "China's Maritime Silk Road: The Horn of Africa and Red Sea", in J. Fulton (ed.), *Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative*, London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 75-96.

Djibouti's vast port expansion programme is the counterpart to the Chinese funded, 750km Djibouti-Ethiopia rail-link. It connects the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa to Djibouti and the Red Sea and is the centrepiece of China's investment in the Horn. Formally inaugurated in 2016, commercial services for both cargo and passengers began fitfully in 2018. As such, the railway is arguably the most tangible component of the MSR in East Africa to date. While it should drastically cut costs for all of Ethiopia's foreign trade, its specific role is to provide a maritime outlet for Ethiopia's burgeoning industrial zones – themselves part-planned and financed by Beijing. These now attract Chinese and other, mostly Asian and Turkish, companies producing for a global market. With the first contracts signed in 2011 the railway "renovation" project cost an estimated US$3.5 billion. This entailed the complete replacement of the dilapidated rails and rolling stock, the electrification of the new tracks, and the construction of a string of entirely new stations, including a new terminus at Nagad, just outside Djibouti-ville. The Addis-Djbiouti railway was financed primarily by China Exim Bank, with the Ethiopian government contributing around 30% of the funds. Only the final 100km segment of the 750km tracks traverses Djibouti and was built by the China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) under a separate contract signed with the Djiboutian government in 2012.

The financial dimensions of Beijing's civil and military presence remain opaque, although substantial debt-rescheduling was agreed with China by mid-2019. Debates around so-called "debt diplomacy" have referred to Djibouti with increasing frequency since 2018, when US National Security Advisor, John Bolton, made such allegations about Chinese policies in Djibouti during a review of US policy in Africa. However, he offered no evidence to substantiate his claim that China was intent on seizing control of the Doraleh Container Terminal, following the rupture of relations between Djibouti and its joint-owners, Dubai Ports World (discussed in section four below).

Clearly, the expansion of Djibouti's debt to China is a significant issue for the state's economic and fiscal policy. Djibouti has seen a sharp rise in its debt-burden occasioned by the scale of Chinese infrastructure lending. Coupled with the reality of country's very weak fiscal system and limited abilities to repay, further rescheduling of debt appears inevitable. Indebtedness to China has risen steeply due to loans on the port and rail infrastructure outlined above. This has prompted direct comparison with Sri Lanka. There China Merchants Group foreclosed on unpaid debts from the Sri Lankan government relating to Hambantota port in 2017. Like Djibouti's Doraleh port, Hambantota's contained terminal and port is a key hub on the Maritime Silk Road, and CMG's leading role in both places prompted many analysts to speculate as to whether Djibouti's escalating debt levels might also end in foreclosure and China's full ownership of Djibouti's Port Authority and infrastructure.

This scenario is currently highly unlikely. China has already moved to reschedule Djibouti's debts. While these are significant in relation to Djibouti's tiny economy, in absolute terms they are dwarfed by Beijing's exposure to the debts of Ethiopia and other major African states, such as Angola or Kenya, to whom China has made loans. As such, debt rescheduling for Djibouti is likely to follow financial concessions made to Ethiopia. Signs of this emerged first on the margins of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit in Beijing in 2018. Rescheduling of railway debt was negotiated with both Ethiopian and Djiboutian officials. Ethiopia subsequently reported that the repayment period of its loan was extended from 10 to 30 years. Details of Djibouti's new repayment terms have not been published, but are believed to mirror those of Ethiopia.[6] The MSR comparisons with Sri Lanka's Hambantota is misplaced. In a detailed analysis of CMG's role in Hambantota, Zhang notes that the "debt-trap diplomacy"

[6] For a detailed analysis of Djibouti's debt to China, see: T. Pairault, "La dette chinoise de Djibouti", *Geoweb*, 28 July 2020.

narrative "… fails to capture the critical, changing role played by China's SOEs, the driving force of China's global economic expansion. It also underestimates the appeal of China's state capitalism for political elites in developing countries".[7]

China's presence in Djibouti's ports has grown from a managerial and equity stake in the Port Authority, to the construction of Doraleh's Multi-Purpose Port (MPP) and its associated Free Trade Zone. The Hong Kong and Shenzen-based maritime conglomerate, China Merchants Group (CMG), acquired a 23.5% equity stake in Djibouti's state-owned port authority in 2012-13. While negotiations over this investment pre-dated Xi Jinping's launch of the Maritime Silk Road in 2013, CMG has subsequently become a major player in China's maritime expansion globally along the MSR. It is the lead investor in Djibouti's main MSR project, the Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port (MPP).[8] Doraleh's MPP encompasses container, general, and bulk cargo facilities. Work on the US$590 million port began in mid-2013 and it opened in 2017; the Djiboutian authorities, CMG and Dalian Ports are the principal investors. The 1.2km quayside provides deep-water moorings that can accommodate the world's largest cargo ships. The new facilities massively increase Djibouti's trans-shipment trade capacity and introduces an element of competition into the Djibouti-Ethiopian trade corridor.

Contractually the Doraleh MPP is separate from the surrounding Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DIFTZ). The first phase of DIFTZ opened in 2018, adjacent to CMG's new Multi-Purpose Port at Doraleh. Such Free Trade Zones are

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[7] Hong Zhang, "Beyond 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Dissemination of PRC State Capitalism", *China Brief*, vol. 19, no. 1, Washington, DC, Jamestown Foundation, 5 January 2019.

[8] On CMG and the MSR see: M. Duchatel and A. Sheldon Duplaix, *Blue China: navigating the maritime silk road to Europe*, Brussels, European Council on Foreign Relations, 23 April 2018; on China's anti-piracy, see A.S. Erickson and A. Strange. *Six Years at Sea... and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press and Jamestown Foundation, 2015.

an integral part of the MSR. The blueprint for Djibouti's FTZ envisages that it will act as a hub and port for Ethiopia's inland logistics centres and "dry ports" close to Chinese industrial parks in the Ethiopian highlands. The economic geography of Djibouti is likely to be further reconfigured in the coming years, both as highland Ethiopia's rail links to the DIFTZ and Doraleh ports improve, and the city of Djibouti itself evolves. In September 2020 CMG signed a contract to completely rebuild Djibouti's old, downtown port facilities. If realised, these plans will radically alter the city, effectively ending a century of port activities in the heart of the city and replacing the offices.

Arguably, two factors which reflect Djibouti's geostrategic location, make the state's role in the MSR component of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) unique. Firstly, while the Gulf of Aden is a crucial maritime transit corridor to Europe for Asian trade and Middle Eastern oil, *beneath* the sea it is also a vital telecommunications hub at the crossroads of key African and Asian submarine fibre-optic cables. Relatively little attention has been focused to date on the telecoms and undersea-cable dimension of the MSR, but these are very present in Djibouti. The Pakistan-East Africa Cable Express, or "PEACE" cable, links Gwadar in Pakistan with Djibouti and Kenya in East Africa. It is a reminder that China is intent on decreasing reliance on Western-owned commercial cables, and that fibre-optics are very much part of BRI infrastructure.

However, it is the second factor, the military dimension of China's presence in Djibouti which has overshadowed the scale of infrastructure development; boosting Djibouti's broader geostrategic profile. Since 2017 Djibouti has been home to China's first permanent overseas naval base. Formally known in Chinese as the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) "logistics centre", the base is a fortified annex of the new commercial Multi-Purpose Port at Doraleh, sharing berths and quays with the civilian port. Officially inaugurated in 2017, the base can accommodate up to 400 marines (rather than the "10,000" claimed by hubristic Western reports) and comprises

ammunition depots, an office complex, plus a heliport with a short airstrip.

Just as BRI projects in Africa often partially subsume (but do not fully encompass) elements of pre-existing China-Africa policies on the continent, they also overlap with China's plans for global military and naval expansion. Beijing's 2015 Military Strategy white paper declared that: "It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests".[9] The paper announced that PLAN's role would expand to protecting strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs). It would maintain anti-piracy operations around the Horn of Africa, while enhancing maritime cooperation and supporting an enlarged Chinese role in international peacekeeping. All these have since developed in practice in the waters of the Horn of Africa, and Western Indian Ocean more broadly. Thus, it is at sea and in ports that great- and mid-ranking power rivalries have played out in the past decade around the Horn (with the Chinese navy's growing presence in the Indian Ocean generating the most debate in the West, as well as in India, which resents rivalry in "its" sphere), rather than their – to date limited – presence on land.

However, Djibouti's geo-strategic profile has been under the spotlight due to the broader symbolic importance of Djibouti hosting PLAN's first overseas base. The inauguration of the base coincided with President Xi's heightened emphasis on China's new global presence and status at the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China of 2017. Significantly, Djibouti's President Guelleh was then the first overseas head of state to visit China, immediately after the 19th Congress. His visit saw the two leaders announce a strategic partnership consolidating existing cooperation agreements, with Chinese media lauding the PLAN's expansion.[10]

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[9] State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, 2015.

[10] "China, Djibouti agree on cooperation", *China Daily*, 24 November, 2017. In the Chinese popular imagination, views of the Middle East and Horn of Africa

In addition to providing technical support to Chinese anti-piracy and other naval and merchant vessels in the region, three other policies underpin Beijing's permanent presence in the region. The first is to be able to physically protect Chinese interests and investments in East Africa and Arabia. Secondly, to reassure and if necessary be able to evacuate the large number of Chinese nationals now working in Africa and the Middle East. During the 2011 war in Libya and again in Yemen in 2015 the Chinese government had to rapidly evacuate its citizens, diverting ships from anti-piracy patrols in the Horn. A third policy underpinning a permanent logistics' presence in Djibouti is China's expanding multilateral role in Africa. China has a growing number of peacekeepers deployed with the UN in Africa, including 1,000 in nearby South Sudan, as well as in Liberia and Mali.[11] Beijing has pledged to increase these numbers. The Djibouti facility clearly enhances China's ability to project military power in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean and quickly deploy troops elsewhere in Africa. This is identical to the role Djibouti has long played for French and US militaries, linking their garrisons in central Africa, the Indian Ocean and Middle East. Nevertheless, to date China's only terrestrial multilateral intervention in the Horn has been to provide troops to the UN contingent in South Sudan.

Much Western media and policy coverage has focused on the incongruous closeness of the Chinese and US military facilities in Djibouti (barely a dozen kilometres separate the US troops in Lemonnier and the Chinese at Doraleh) as economic tensions escalated under Donald Trump. However, barring a fleeting spat over Chinese alleged use of weapons-grade lasers, there

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are coloured by "Operation Red Sea", the highest grossing film in China in 2018. This fictionalised account of the rescue of Chinese nationals from Yemen in 2015 features Djibouti and was sponsored by PLAN. A similar, East Africa-based and PLAN-sponsored, movie, "Wolf Warrior II", was China's most popular movie in 2017.

[11] C. Alden, A. Alao and Z. Chun (eds.), *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

is scant public evidence of any actual friction on the ground. Indeed it is fair to assume that tacit cooperation occurs, given that ostensible rivals share naval bunkering and airstrips in Djibouti's crowded capital, alongside myriad other forces.

Fractious Gulf Ties on the Arab-African Crossroads[12]

Overall, for the Djiboutian authorities themselves, it is not super-power confrontation which has been their primary diplomatic and economic preoccupations in recent years. These have been regional not global. The war in neighbouring Yemen and the repercussions of divisions in the Gulf Cooperation Council have posed serious challenges. These include the triggering of what many analysts have presented as a regional "cold war" within the Horn, as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates all seek allies and clients and military footholds in the Horn. Against this backdrop, Djibouti itself triggered a major rupture with its own primary economic backer to 2008, the Emirate of Dubai, regionally the most influential and powerful component UAE.

Djibouti's privileged ties with Dubai began to sour even before the flagship Doraleh Container Terminal, at the time the largest FDI project ever in Djibouti by far, had opened. As noted in section one above, in 2008-09 there were considerable domestic political tensions as Guelleh pushed through constitutional amendments. These triggered a rupture with Abdourahman Boreh, a close business associate who was instrumental in brokering Dubai Ports World's investment in Doraleh's container port. Following corruption charges, Boreh fled to the UAE; legal actions in London followed. While

[12] For more details on Gulf-Horn ties, see D. Styan, "Djibouti: bridging the Gulf of Aden?", in R. Mason and S. Mabon (eds.), *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, Influences and Instability*, Manchester University Press, forthcoming, 2021, on which this section draws.

DPW continued to manage the port until early 2018, relations with Djibouti became acutely strained from 2013 onwards. In 2014 Djibouti's Port Authority sought to nullify its existing management contract with DPW, alleging malpractice by Boreh. After protracted hearings, the cases against Boreh and DPW were rejected in 2016-17, the Djiboutian authorities being ordered to pay full costs.

Meanwhile bad blood over the DPW-Doraleh deal – which started at root as effectively an intra-Djiboutian personal dispute (between President Guelleh and his confidant Boreh) – spilled over into the military sphere. In early 2015 jets from the UAE were using Djiboutian landing strips as part of their intervention in Yemen's civil war. A personalised dispute over landing rights for UAE planes led to Dubai suspending diplomatic ties with Djibouti. At the time, senior members of the Djiboutian government viewed the incident as entangled in the broader DPW-Boreh dispute. While visa and flights were eventually restored several months later, trust and relations never recovered.

Almost three years later, in early 2018 Djibouti's government unilaterally terminated the Dubai Ports World's management contract and equity stake in the Doraleh Container Terminal. The port's seizure thus brought the increasingly embittered, six-year legal and commercial dispute between the Emirati-owned DPW and Djibouti's President to a climactic end. In turn, this reconfigured alliances in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea.

However, in one of the most commented-upon repercussions of this Africa-Gulf spat, as Dubai-Djibouti ties soured, in 2016 DPW had announced a US$440 million, 30-year deal to develop the port of Berbera, in neighbouring Somaliland, just 250km east of Djibouti on the Gulf of Aden. Ethiopia has been long keen to diversify access to ports. In early 2018, just days after Djibouti's seizure of DPW's stake in the container port, the Ethiopian government announced that it would take a minority stake in the Berbera port development, alongside DPW and the Hargeisa government. However, the deal had

been planned for many months; it was not a direct response to Djibouti's nationalisation of DCT.

Given this narrow African-Gulf dispute, pitting Djibouti's President and entourage against his ex-advisor and DPW, the matter might be dismissed as being as much about pride and personalities than hard-nosed commercial rivalry or geo-politics. However, Djibouti's domestic ports' dispute with the Emirates evolved in an exceedingly fraught regional context. This meant that UAE/DPW's problems in the Doraleh port, and DPW's investment in neighbouring Somaliland's Berbera port, had wider implications.

By 2018, the regional and global context in the lower Red Sea and Gulf of Aden meant that regional rivalries and alliances on both sides of the Red Sea coast, as well as global rivalries – above all between China and the United States – appeared to be being played out in a race for military and commercial port infrastructure spanning almost 1,200 kilometres of the Horn of Africa coastline.

The scramble for military and commercial influence and facilities contributes to political volatility and associated foreign policy choices facing all states in the Horn of Africa. This was most pronounced in terms of the implications of foreign government involvement in Somali politics, and how other actors, particularly the other Somali states (quasi-autonomous Puntland and the *de-facto* independent Somaliland), view Gulf Arab involvement. It is also of concern to Ethiopia and Djibouti, both of whom contribute troops to the AU mission in Somalia, AMISOM. The African Union also expressed unease about the impact that growing Middle Eastern rivalry had upon Somalia; Chad's Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairperson of the African Union Commission, voiced concern on in May 2018 at what he termed "increasing instances" of interference by "non-African actors" – a veiled reference to UAE, Turkey and Qatar.[13]

[13] "External actors urged to stop meddling in Somalia's affairs", *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2018.

The military and commercial rivalry between disparate Gulf and other powers in the Horn also complicates Western strategic responses to the rapid increase of Chinese naval power in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. In the short term, the developments pointed to a gradual hardening of positions into increasingly concrete and fractious regional blocs. In the longer term, US and EU concerns about strategic shifts in the region remain focused primarily on Chinese plans and the containment of Islamist threats emanating from Yemen and Somalia, rather than regional tussles between local powers, or indeed the fate of the Yemeni nation and peoples. As such, what Saudi Arabia, its allies and Qatar do in the Horn of Africa remains only of peripheral importance to US, European and Chinese stances over splits in the GCC as a whole. Nevertheless, the escalation of war in Yemen in 2015 and the blockade of Qatar in 2017 have had a profound impact on regional geopolitics in the Horn of Africa, as competition and patronage increasingly fell along an Egypt-Saudi-UAE vs Turkey-Qatar fault-line, disrupting established patterns of patronage and foreign policies.

Conclusion

The chapter has attempted to provide an overview of some elements of Djibouti's geostrategic roles as a port and military hub in the Horn of Africa and beyond. By surveying local, regional and global actors with whom the Djiboutian authorities interact, it has provided insights into the complex, multiple contradictions of Djibouti's regional foreign policies. It has also illustrated how aspects of small state's development strategies and priorities reflect such policies.

Somewhat paradoxically, and contrary to the view of some in Paris, Washington or Beijing, the real uncertainties and challenges facing Ismael Omar Guelleh and those around him in 2020 are *not* posed by global geo-strategic factors. Guelleh has proved masterful in his ability to extract substantial rents and commissions, coupled with guarantees of international

legitimacy and support, from the world's superpowers. He has adroitly played-off China against the US and other powers, in the process garnering considerable economic and political dividends for his family and entourage.

Instead, Djibouti's political uncertainties stem from factors closer to home. Domestically, Guelleh has been reticent to openly nurture or anoint a chosen successor. Nor has he been willingly to countenance political pluralism or improved freedom of expression. Having amended the constitution a decade ago, and already served four presidential terms, in mid-2020 all the signs were that Guelleh was preparing for re-election in 2021. Despite the poverty of many Djiboutians, the presidential patronage machine will have sufficient funds to ensure patronage networks deliver the 100,000 or so votes to ensure his re-election. What is less sure is whether he can subsequently ensure a consensus among his family and close followers as to who is best placed to maintain the delicate domestic clan-based system of patronage, while balancing local regional factors to ensure his own political longevity.

The impact of Covid-19 upon Djibouti has both a human and economic dimension. By September 2020 Djibouti had recorded 5,400 cases of Covid-19, with 60 deaths attributed to the disease. While absolute numbers are low compared with other African states, given Djibouti's tiny population, the state has some of the highest rates of infection per-capita on the continent. As such the potential threat from Covid itself to Djiboutians remains severe, although after an initial swift lockdown, travel restrictions with neighbouring states were lifted in mid-July 2020. The pandemic has also dented economic growth, with GDP anticipated to contract by 1% in 2020. As a consequence, in May 2020 the IMF announced US$43.4 million of emergency balance of payments funding, and options on up to US$8 million debt relief in an attempt to alleviate the impact of the slowdown on government finances.

Early in the pandemic, the US government announced a health emergency within its military facility at Camp Lemonnier,

underscoring the degree to which all foreign military bases in Djibouti have had to tighten controls on movement of troops and contractors around facilities in Djibouti.

In terms of the economic benefits of Djibouti's foreign and development strategies, the country's role as the pre-eminent regional port and hub are unlikely to be dented in the short term. With Yemen wracked by civil war, aggravated by the botched Saudi-UAE interventions, and neither Assab nor Berbera likely to be able to offer comparable port facilities to shippers in the short term, Djibouti is nevertheless likely to retain its preeminent logistical position on the Bab Al Mandeb. The same applies to its dominance of Ethiopia's merchandise trade flows. Despite incessant grumbles from the authorities and merchants in Addis Ababa about Djibouti's quasi-monopoly grip on Ethiopia's trade, Ethiopia's economic dependence on Djibouti's merchandise and container ports is unlikely to diminish in the near future. Indeed, with the development of a policy of inland "dry ports" within Ethiopia, the Djibouti-Addis corridor is likely to expand. This trend will be reinforced if China's industrial parks in highland Ethiopia expand as global trade and manufacturing recover post-Covid. This economic dynamic may be further boosted if Djibouti's vast International Free Trade Zone, attached to the Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port, starts to attract clients.

Briefly in mid-2018, there appeared to be a potential threat to Djibouti's economic dominance of the Horn's maritime trade and transhipments from the Ethio-Eritrean peace deal spearheaded by Abiy Ahmed. This threat has been postponed, thanks largely to the recalcitrance of Eritrea's aging President. Even when a change of leadership in Asmara eventually does occur, Eritrea's dilapidated ports of Assab and Massawa are unlikely to pose a major commercial threat to Djibouti's dominance of Ethiopia's maritime trade for many years; they will require substantial investment alongside a radical rethink of a reformed Eritrea's regional strategies.

A more immediate uncertainty in terms of Djibouti's ports' strategy, is the legal status of, and financial compensation owing from, the Doraleh Container Terminal. This will remain a key liability for Guelleh's administration. As narrated in section four, the Terminal was forcibly sequestered from DPW in 2018. Some estimates put the state's liabilities at well over US$500 million. It remains unclear how Djibouti proposes to meet this debt, though additional Chinese loans or debt-for-equity deals cannot be excluded.

Despite the uncertainties over these liabilities, and the unsustainable levels of debt owed to China, Beijing's embrace of Djibouti is likely to intensify in coming years. For China's government and parastatal companies, it is above all their ties with highland Ethiopia and Addis Ababa, which its vast internal market and African Union HQ, which are at the heart of their economic and diplomatic strategies in the Horn. As such, any rescheduling of debt owed by Djibouti is a relatively minor inconvenience when weighed against Beijing's diplomatic and economic ties with Ethiopia and the AU.

Similarly, the centrality of China to Djibouti's diplomatic and economic policies, and the complexity of the country's ties with neighbouring African and Middle Eastern states, are all reminders to what extent the EU is now just one player among many on the crowded Djiboutian chessboard. Nevertheless, the EU will continue to have a significant presence in Djibouti for the foreseeable future, not least because of the ongoing influence of both France and the EU's *Atalanta* EUNAVFOR anti-piracy mission.

4. Eritrea: Still an Island?

Michael Woldemariam*

The state of Eritrea is experiencing a significant shift in its international relations. Since the mid-2000s, the country has been a figurative "island", politically and economically isolated from its region and the international system. Yet the landmark 2018 thaw in relations with its large southern neighbour and rival, Ethiopia, has ushered in a new era, creating opportunities for the Government of Eritrea (GOE) to rehabilitate its external relationships. This chapter seeks to assess Eritrea's foreign relations since its rapprochement with Ethiopia. It argues that while the rehabilitation of the country's international relations is real, this process remains partial and incomplete. Despite a more hospitable regional and international climate, the character of Eritrea's governing structures impedes a full pivot in its foreign policy and external relations. A "garrison state" preoccupied with managing threats to regime security, the country's ruling elites pursue the same mix of muscular and uncompromising statecraft abroad and semi-isolationism at home that initiated, and for so long sustained, the erosion of its international standing. Eritrea is no longer an "island", but only significant reform of its governing system can deliver a full rehabilitation of its foreign relations.

The chapter proceeds in the following fashion. It begins by outlining the genesis of Eritrea's slide into international isolation

* The views expressed in this chapter are his own and do not represent those of his employer or any other institution he may be affiliated with.

in the years following its border war with Ethiopia, emphasising the complex interaction between external dynamics and Eritrea's domestic politics. It then describes the slow but still marginal improvement in Eritrea's international standing between 2015 and early 2018, before moving on to explore the dramatic shift in Eritrea's international fortunes after the summer 2018 rapprochement with Ethiopia. The final section illustrates why the rehabilitation of Eritrea's external relations remains partial and incomplete.

Eritrea as an "Island"

The breakdown in Eritrea's external relations was as swift as it was unexpected. Eritrea and its nationalist rebel movement-turned ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), spent much of the 1990s as a darling of the international community, so much so that the Clinton administration dubbed President Isaias Afwerki as among a select "new breed of African leaders" who would promote peace, stability, and economic growth on the continent. First Lady Hillary Clinton affirmed this view with a high-level visit to the country in March 1997.[1] Although Western donors occasionally found the Eritrean government to be prickly and inflexible on matters that it perceived as threatening its sovereign prerogatives, it generally received high marks on governance related matters – it remained committed, for instance, to the formula of market reforms and multi-party democracy, and tolerated little corruption. Eritrea was also a strategic partner of the US and its Western allies, playing an important role in the containment of Sudanese Islamists and the toppling of the notoriously corrupt regime of Mobutu Sese Seko.[2]

[1] D. Himbara, "How Would Bill Clinton Rate These Leaders He Famously Called 'New Breed'?", *HuffPost Canada*, 18 February 2015.

[2] P. Roessler and H. Verhoeven, *Why Comrades Go to War: Liberation Politics and the Outbreak of Africa's Deadliest Conflict*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University

Yet the country's fortunes on the international stage began to change in 1998, in part because its regional position became increasingly untenable. Eritrea fought a devastating border war with its one-time ally and much larger southern neighbour, Ethiopia. By most objective standards Eritrea was on the losing end of the fighting. The Algiers Agreement, signed between the two states in December 2000, ended the war but failed to resolve the underlying dispute. This chain of events, unfolding over a period of several years, had the effect of diminishing Eritrea in the regional pecking order just as it embarked on an intense strategic rivalry with the Horn of Africa's emergent hegemon. As the rivalry deepened and expanded, descending into mutual destabilisation, Ethiopia assiduously sought to impose a diplomatic blockade on Eritrea that would leave it isolated. The latter's regional and international relationships began to suffer as a result.

The regional dynamics that eroded Eritrea's international standing were reinforced by important global trends that involved the world's preeminent power and gatekeeper of international order, the United States. The attacks of September 11 turned the Horn of Africa, and Somalia in particular, into an important battleground in the "Global War on Terror". The US sought regional partners, and a newly ascendant Ethiopia, which possessed an extended land border with Somalia, seemed an obvious candidate. The secular trend from this point onwards was for Washington – which was among the guarantors of the Algiers Agreement and had hitherto remained equidistant from Addis Ababa and Asmara – to favour Ethiopia on matters related to the Eritrea-Ethiopia dispute. An explosive turning point came in 2002-03, when Ethiopia refused to honour its commitments under the Algiers Agreement, including relinquishing the disputed town of Badme. Yielding to intense lobbying from Addis Ababa, the Bush administration largely shielded Ethiopia

Press, 2017; J. Fisher, *East Africa after Liberation: Conflict, Security and the State since the 1980s*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

from the diplomatic fallout of this behaviour at the UN, to the frustration of the Eritrean side. When US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frasier attempted to push the peace process forward in 2006, her efforts at shuttle diplomacy further antagonised the GOE, not least because she tacitly endorsed Ethiopia's occupation of Badme by visiting the town without Eritrean permission.[3] By early 2007, it was apparent that the evolving triangular relationship between Washington-Addis Ababa-Asmara had severely damaged US-Eritrea ties.

Yet alone, this turbulence on the international scene was insufficient to transform Eritrea into a figurative "island". It was a set of linked internal developments that would seal the deal. In 2001, a group of 15 top PFDJ officials, and a broader network of their supporters within and outside the ruling party, mobilised against President Isaias, insisting that hitherto delayed national elections must be held and that a proper accounting of the war with Ethiopia was necessary. In power since Eritrea's *de facto* independence in 1991, this was the most serious challenge the incumbent President had faced in his time at the helm. In September 2001, he responded with a sweeping crackdown that eliminated organised political opposition, the free press, an independent civil society, plans for elections, and a working legislature. Disappearances and incommunicado detention were the primary tools used to consolidate power in this context. In order to control an increasingly boisterous student and youth population, the national service system was transformed into a sprawling apparatus of indefinite military service and forced labour. As a result, a pattern of severe human rights abuses gripped the country, and a massive human exodus began to take shape: by 2008, tens of thousands of Eritreans

[3] For a good summaries of this dynamic, see M. Woldemariam, "The Making of an African 'Pariah': Eritrea in the International System", in *Postliberation Eritrea*, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 2018; S. Odinga, "'We Recommend Compliance': Bargaining and Leverage in Ethiopian-US Intelligence Cooperation", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 44, no. 153, 3 July 2017, pp. 432-48.

were leaving the country a year.[4] Power at the top of the ruling party became highly personalized, and concentrated in the hands of the President and a loyal band of security elites. Given the tense external situation, the putsch was rationalized by invoking amorphous and all-encompassing concepts of "national security" and "states of emergency". Through the GOE's now dominant propaganda organs, the argument was made that rivalry with Ethiopia and the threat of invasion demanded such a radical closure of political space. As time wore on and the relationship with the international community worsened, the notion of an American inspired conspiracy – in support of Addis against Asmara – was increasingly invoked as a tool to legitimate the country's profound authoritarian turn.[5]

By the mid-2000s, it was apparent Eritrea had been transformed into what Tronvoll and Mekonnen called an "African garrison state" – a state organised along military lines, run largely by military elites, for the purpose of guaranteeing their security against militarised threats.[6] This transition had significant impacts on the country's international relationships. Facing what it judged to be a growing number of provocations from Ethiopia and the US, on the border question and other issues, an increasingly securitised decision-making apparatus in Asmara responded with a foreign policy marked by escalation, brinkmanship, inflexibility and intemperateness, all of which further isolated it politically.[7] Its turn to militarised autocracy

[4] M. Belloni, *The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe*, Berkeley CA, Univesity of California Press, 2019; M. Belloni, "Why Young Eritreans Are Going to Keep Risking Deadly Migration Crossings to Europe", *Quartz Africa*, 27 July 2019.

[5] For a good summary of these domestic developments and their origins, see G. Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred*, Oxford, James Currey, 2009; K. Tronvoll and D.R. Mekonnen, *African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2014.

[6] K. Tronvoll and D.R. Mekonnen (2014).

[7] Although the GOE would dispute this characterisation, Presidential Advisor Yemane Gebreab seemed to unwittingly acknowledge the underlying pathologies in the GOE's approach to the world when he noted "We have never changed our

– leading some to dub it "Africa's North Korea" – brought its human rights record under intense scrutiny and further damaged its ties with Western partners.[8] Deploying the rhetoric of "self-reliance", President Isaias worked to isolate the Eritrean population from external influences that might undermine his grip on power, expelling a long list of donors and/or curtailing their operations within the country at the cost of the GOE's international reputation.[9] In short, the international system had dealt Eritrea a bad and in many ways unfair hand; but its deteriorating internal situation meant the GOE played this hand poorly.

The cumulative effect of all of these developments began to take shape by 2009. Eritrea was hit with UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in December of that year for its support of the Somali Islamist militant group al-Shabaab – part of the mutual proxy war between Eritrea and Ethiopia – as well as an unresolved border dispute with Djibouti that turned violent in May-June 2008 but which Asmara largely refused to acknowledge.[10] In both instances, the US publicly and privately called on the GOE to modify its behaviour, and it was Asmara's subsequent failure to heed this guidance that eventually led the US to diplomatically engineer the sanctions regime. 13 of 15 UNSC members voted for UNSC 1907 – which primarily consisted of a two-way weapons embargo on Eritrea – with only Libya voting against and China abstaining.

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vision ... We are not very good at or very keen to play the game that we have been told we need to play". See E. Blair, "Crises Give Eritrea Routes for Closer Global Engagement", *Reuters*, 29 February 2016.

[8] "Why Eritrea Is Called Africa's North Korea", *The Economist*, 14 August 2018.

[9] E. Harris, "Eritrea Expels Three More Foreign Charities - Eritrea", *ReliefWeb*, 23 March 2006.

[10] The Eritrean government referred to the border dispute as "US fabricated" and largely denied the existence of any underlying disagreement. It was only after the sanctions regime was initiated that it acceded to Qatari mediation of the dispute, although this was ultimately unsuccessful. See Shabait, "A Shameful Day for the United Nations", Press Release, 23 December 2009.

The sanctions regime was later expanded in December 2011 with the passage of UNSC 2023, again with overwhelming diplomatic support at the UNSC. The resolution sought to target two key sources of revenue for the Eritrean government – mining and remittances – and called on UN member states to take "appropriate measures" in ensuring that funds from these sources were not used for military purposes, or in the cases of remittances, derived through government extortion. The result was an avalanche of scrutiny and in some cases outright prohibition of remittance collection by Eritrean officials in Western countries.

By 2012, the human rights situation in Eritrea created additional problems for the GOE. At the 20th session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) a resolution was adopted establishing a special rapporteur for the human rights situation in Eritrea, the first non-cooperative country mandate passed by consensus in the history of the UNHRC. After a series of explosive reports from Special Rapporteur Sheila Keetharuth, a Mauritian human rights defender, the Council approved the creation of a Commission of Inquiry (COI) to further investigate the human rights climate in country. This was also a landmark event in the history of the UNHRC, as it was only the third such commission created in the Council's existence, following those established to probe the situations in North Korea and Syria. After the COI released damning findings in 2015, the UNHRC decided to extend the mandate of both the Special Rapporteur and the COI, while expanding the COI's remit by tasking it with ascertaining whether the Eritrean government was guilty of crimes against humanity. The final report of the COI concluded that Eritrea's ruling elite were in fact guilty of such charges.

All of the developments at the UN that isolated Eritrea were reinforced by multilateral manoeuvring in Africa and the Horn region. Much of the initial diplomatic momentum behind the UN sanctions regime was generated by the unprecedented request of the African Union (AU) that the UN sanction Eritrea.

Prior to this request, Eritrea had diplomatically wounded itself by suspending its AU membership and President Isaias's non-appearance at a critical AU heads of state meeting in Libya that addressed the Eritrea file.[11] Eritrea was also effectively prohibited from rejoining IGAD after it suspended its membership in 2007 over Ethiopia's intervention in Somalia.[12] In 2010, a regional initiative sponsored by Ethiopia called the Sanaa Forum – which included Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan – was expanded to include Djibouti, which had long resisted joining because of the obvious fact that the Forum was designed to isolate Eritrea in the Horn and Red Sea arena.[13] Later, Horn states like Somalia and Djibouti – no doubt with Ethiopia's eager endorsement – co-sponsored key UNHRC resolutions targeting Eritrea.

This barrage of international setbacks, shaped by the complex interaction between a number of important regional and global developments not of Eritrea's making, as well as the GOE's own pathologies as a garrison state, is how the country became an "island" politically and economically isolated from its region and much of the world. It would be external developments that would erode Eritrea's international isolation, and internal constraints that prevented the country from seizing the opportunity to fully rehabilitate its international relations.[14]

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[11] Author's interview, Ethiopian diplomat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 2019.

[12] The preceding four paragraphs are primarily drawn from Woldemariam, "The Making of an African 'Pariah': Eritrea in the International System", in T.M. Woldemikael (ed.), *Postliberation Eritrea*, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 318-357.

[13] "FMs Attending Sanaa Forum Address Security Challenges in Somalia", *Global Times*, 2 August 2010.

[14] It should be noted that the Eritrean government would strongly dispute the narrative that it had become internationally isolated. And to be clear, the country did have solid ties with a small portfolio of countries whose exact membership evolved over time: South Africa, Libya, Egypt, Qatar, China, Russia. For a good articulation of this view, see F. Amahazion, "Eritrea: Global Ties and Diplomacy", *TesfaNews*, 17 March 2014.

Shifting Fortunes

While the shedding of Eritrea's status as an "island" was accelerated by the landmark thaw in its relationship with Ethiopia in 2018, the process was in motion well before this development, and apparent as early as 2015. There are three distinct but related external dynamics that played a role in stabilizing and marginally improving Eritrea's international standing in this period.

The first was the increasing engagement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Horn of Africa region.[15] This began with the onset of their war effort in Yemen in March 2015, which required the UAE to establish a military facility in the vicinity of the Bab el-Mandeb and Yemen's strategic Red Sea coastlines. The most obvious candidate to host such a facility, outside of war-torn Yemen itself, was Djibouti: there were already several foreign military bases in the country, including that of the Emirati's key ally, the US, and an Emirati company named DP World managed Djibouti's main port. But Djibouti and the UAE had recently fallen into a major diplomatic spat. In this context, Eritrea's Assab port, which was just 100 miles north of Djibouti's, appeared the next best option. The relationship was consummated during the April 2015 visit by President Isaias to Riyadh, and within months the UAE had developed a robust military-logistics hub on the Eritrean coast.[16] Eritrea's relations with the two Gulf monarchies further deepened after the summer of 2017, when it stridently aligned itself with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in their escalating rivalry with Qatar and Turkey.[17]

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[15] For good overviews of this dynamic, see H. Verhoeven, "The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order", *Civil Wars*, vol. 20, no. 3, 3 July 2018, pp. 333-57; J. Meester, W. van den Berg, and H. Verhoeven, *Riyal Politik*, Cligendael, April 2018.

[16] M. Woldemariam, "'No War, No Peace' in a Region in Flux: Crisis, Escalation, and Possibility in the Eritrea-Ethiopia Rivalry", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 3 July 2018, p. 416; "Saudi King Salman Receives Eritrean Leader in Riyadh", *Al Arabiya English*, 29 April 2015.

[17] This was extraordinary about-face, since Qatar had long been one of Eritrea's few

The upshot of these developments from the Eritrean perspective was tangible but hardly transformative. Asmara acquired powerful patrons that it could leverage diplomatically – across the Horn, at important multilateral institutions, and in Western capitals. On the other hand, because Saudi-Emirati engagement ran the risk of violating the UNSC Eritrea sanctions regime, there were limits to how far the Gulf monarchies were willing to take the relationship. Indeed, it is likely that Saudi-Emirati aid to Eritrea did not extend beyond limited "in-kind" assistance, in the form of refined fuel products, investments in energy, and some coastal maritime capabilities.[18]

A second important external dynamic that bolstered Eritrea's international relations was growing momentum in Western capitals around the idea of rehabilitating ties with Asmara. In the case of the Europeans, this was driven by the Mediterranean migration crisis that saw hundreds of thousands of African refugees arriving on Europe's southern shores after 2012. Eritrean refugees featured prominently in this drama: by 2015, Eritreans had become the single largest group of refugees entering Italy, accounting for 25 percent of the total.[19] Desperate to encourage domestic reforms that would stem Eritrean migration into Europe, the EU sought to leverage a €200 million development package for Eritrea in 2016.[20] There

diplomatic friends. M. Woldemariam, "How the Gulf Crisis Is Playing Out in the Horn of Africa", *World Politics Review*, 1 August 2017; J. Jawhar, "Eritrea Accuses Qatar, Turkey of 'Subversive Acts'", *Asharq AL-awsat*, 5 April 2019.

[18] M. Woldemariam, "'No War, No Peace' in a Region in Flux: Crisis, Escalation, and Possibility in the Eritrea-Ethiopia Rivalry"..., cit., p. 423; N. Manek, "Eritrea's Military Got Help From U.A.E., Foreign Firms, UN Says", *Bloomberg.Com*, 12 November 2017; Note that the UN's Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group claimed that Eritrea received US$500 million for leasing Assab base to the UAE, a claim denied by Eritrea. See T.-A. Tekie, "Eritrea Denies Leasing Port Assab to UAE", *Sudan Tribune*, 30 December 2016.

[19] B. Frouws, *The Eritrean Exodus: What Happened in 2016?*, Mixed Migration Centre, 9 February 2017.

[20] "European Union to Finance Development Projects in Eritrea to Curb Illegal Migration", *Diplomat News Network*, 30 January 2016.

were parallel developments occurring in Washington, where the lobbying efforts of a number of prominent think tankers and former US diplomats were creating a buzz around the idea that the US should recalibrate its policy towards Eritrea.[21] These efforts evidently found some support on Capitol Hill in the form of US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher.[22] The election of Donald Trump in 2016 was another catalyst for this conversation, as it marked the departure of key personalities in the Obama-Clinton orbit that had insisted on maintaining a hard line on GOE, including National Security Adviser Susan Rice. In April 2018, acting US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Donald Yamamoto visited Asmara – the highest-ranking US official to visit the country in a decade – with the explicit goal of improving US-Eritrea ties.[23]

In the end, neither the European nor American efforts achieved much traction. The EU sought to attach conditionalities to the aid package that the GOE predictably refused to comply with. And although Yamamoto's visit convinced some in the US government that a breakthrough in ties was possible (others in the administration were more sceptical), the GOE did not appear willing to accept the American concept for how relations should move forward.[24] But these episodes did re-establish a deeper level of diplomatic contact between Eritrea and key Western countries, and further punctured the narrative that Eritrea was destined to remain an isolated African state.

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[21] I refer here to the efforts of Bronwyn Bruton of the Atlantic Council and former US Assistant Secretary of State Hank Cohen, both of which sat on an Eritrea study group designed to shift US policy on Eritrea.

[22] D. Rohrabacher, "To Hold Back Iran, Cooperate with Eritrea", *The National Interest*, 29 August 2017; S. Solomon, "Congressman Calls for US Military Partnership with Eritrea", *Voice of America English*, 4 August 2017.

[23] To be clear, this visit was planned before the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in early April 2018. Author's conversation, US diplomat, January 2018, Washington, DC.

[24] Author's conversations with US officials in the Fall of 2018 and Spring of 2019, Washington, DC.

The final development that appeared to hold out promise for a shift in Eritrea's international standing was the changing nature of the sanctions debate at the UNSC. In short, the consensus behind the sanctions began to break down. By 2017, the body responsible for monitoring the Eritrea sanctions regime – the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG) – had reported on four separate occasions that it was unable to find conclusive evidence of Eritrean support for al-Shabaab. Leveraging this fact, Egypt, which held a UNSC seat and shared Eritrea's strategic animus toward Ethiopia, mounted an aggressive attempt to water-down the sanction's regime.[25] The diplomatic manoeuvre drew some support from UNSC permanent members Russia and China. But here too, events did not fully move in Eritrea's favour, as its unwillingness to formally engage with the SEMG mechanisms led the US and Europeans to block changes to the sanctions. Still, for many close observers of the UNSC, these events signalled it was only a matter of time before the opinion in the Council moved decisively against maintaining the sanctions regime.[26]

The Ethiopian Transition as a Turning Point

Events that transpired between 2015 and early 2018 thus placed Eritrea in a complicated international position. Its status as a figurative "island" persisted, and in some ways was further consolidated: in January 2018, for instance, Sudan shuttered Eritrea's last open land border, claiming that President Isaias had urged Sudanese Vice President Bakri Hassan Saleh and the Sudanese military to oust President Omar al-Bashir.[27] Yet several external developments had created a sense of momentum for the Government of Eritrea in the domain of foreign relations.

[25] "Somalia and Eritrea Sanctions Resolution", *What's In Blue*, 13 November 2017.
[26] Author's interview, Senior Ethiopian diplomat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 2019.
[27] Author's conversation, Senior official from a prominent multilateral organization, Washington, DC, January 2018; "The Story Behind The Sudan-Eritrea Falling Out", *Eritrea Digest*, 12 March 2018.

As Foreign Minister Osman Saleh noted in early 2016, "Eritrea wants to engage, and now the world wants to engage".[28]

But it was dramatic political developments in Ethiopia in the spring of 2018 that would play a decisive role in altering the external landscape that Eritrea faced. The selection of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's new Prime Minister created space for a rapprochement between the two countries for reasons that are complex and have been discussed elsewhere. The crux of the matter is that much of the Eritrea-Ethiopia rivalry was an elite affair, caught up in the historically fraught relationship between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the PFDJ, the two political parties that had long dominated Ethiopian and Eritrean affairs respectively. Abiy's side-lining of the TPLF created a willingness on the part of President Isaias to rehabilitate the Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship. After the critical breakthrough in relations in the summer of 2018, ties between Asmara and Addis Ababa appeared to blossom. Tiziana Corda of the Network for the Advancement of Social and Political Studies reports that between September 2018 and September 2019 alone, there were 12 high-level visits between the two leaderships, a greater number of such visits than each country had with any other state in that period.[29]

Whatever the causes of the rapprochement, its implications were significant for Eritrea. Ethiopia was a pivotal node in the diplomatic blockade of Eritrea, through its robust and successful lobbying at the UN, in Washington and other Western capitals, and throughout the Horn of Africa region. Under the new Prime Minister, Ethiopia changed course, removing the long-serving Ethiopian ambassador at the UN who had helped engineer the sanctions, and formally requesting that the UN lift the sanctions regime.[30] Within four months of the Ethiopian request, the UNSC dropped the Eritrea sanctions.[31]

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[28] E. Blair (2016).

[29] See https://twitter.com/tizianacorda/status/1173255967540154368/photo/1

[30] A. Ashine, "Ethiopia Requests UN to Lift Eritrea Sanctions", *The East African*, 10 July 2018.

[31] "U.N. Lifts Sanctions on Eritrea, but Keeps Somalia Arms Embargo", *The New*

The thaw also created an opportunity for Eritrea to re-engage with other states in the region. The resulting diplomatic activity was dizzying. President Isaias visited Kenya in December 2018, and PM Abiy brought Kenya's Uhuru Kenyatta to Asmara in March 2019. There was a landmark visit by Isaias to Mogadishu just prior to his Kenya trip. Foreign Minister Osman Saleh went on historic trips to Djibouti and Somaliland. Isaias convened with Djibouti's Ismail Omer Guelleh in Jeddah in September 2018. The Eritrean President went on a joint tour with Abiy in South Sudan. After Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir was toppled in April 2019, reciprocal high-level visits with Sudan's new leadership were quickly undertaken as well. And in more concrete terms, in September 2018 there was a tripartite agreement between Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia designed to align the three countries on regional economic and security matters, with two heads of state summits held subsequently to follow up on progress.

Eritrea's dramatically shifting regional position piqued the interest of Western states and their donor institutions, who sought to support new dynamics in the Horn that were in the interest of regional peace and stability. They thus sought to more fully engage the Eritrean leadership. Through the last-minute intervention of National Security Advisor John Bolton, the US dropped its opposition to the lifting of the Eritrea sanctions regime in November 2018, which played a key role in the removal of sanctions that same month.[32] Newly appointed US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Tibor Nagy visited Eritrea in December 2018. Three months later, three members of Congress visited Asmara – including the heavyweight chairwoman of the Africa subcommittee and Congressional Black Caucus Karen Bass – the first Congressional delegation to the country in 14 years. This was accompanied by a stream of senior-level delegations from Europe, including Italian Prime

York Times, 14 November 2018.

[32] "UN to Lift Sanctions on Eritrea after US Shift", *France24*, 2 November 2018.

Minister Giuseppe Conte, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, and EU Commissioner for International Cooperation Neven Mimica. The EU also re-started development assistance to Eritrea, dropping conditionalities in late 2018 in favour of a "dual track policy" that separated governance and human rights dialogue from development cooperation.[33] The World Bank, for its part, entered discussions with the GOE on restarting a development program for the country. Large business delegations from Germany and Italy arrived in Asmara keen to capitalize on the window of opportunity created by the new regional rapprochement.

The above-mentioned developments were just a few of several indications that by 2019 Eritrea was no longer an island isolated from its region and the world. Just as the onset of the strategic rivalry with Ethiopia in 1998 sent Eritrea's external relations into the abyss, so too did the thaw in relations between the two countries exactly twenty years later create a window for the GOE to rehabilitate its international standing.

Eritrean Foreign Policy and Its Limits

Despite the diplomatic successes of the last two years, Eritrea's external relations face challenges in the year 2020 that should not be dismissed. The GOE international standing has not returned to the pre-1998 status quo ante, and the reason is simple: if the regional and international situation around Eritrea has changed, Eritrea *itself* surely has not. It remains a "garrison state", with all of its attendant consequences for Eritrea's foreign relations.

To be sure, the rationale behind Eritrea's garrison state has shifted somewhat, but the essence is the same. The key enemy is now not TPLF-dominated Ethiopia writ large, but the TPLF ensconced in Tigray Regional State, a perch from which it

[33] V. Chadwick, "EU Foreign Chief Defends Aid for Eritrea amid Human Rights Concerns", *Devex*, 16 March 2020.

engages in subterfuge against the PFDJ and stalls the peace process. Remnants of its regional network in Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, the Eritrean diaspora, and the rest of Ethiopia are an added danger. There are also Islamist interests, backed by Qatar and Turkey, two external players President Isaias continues to regard as a destabilizing force. The steady diet of anti-American rhetoric from the GOE's information organs has dissipated, but the US and its Western partners are still not to be trusted.[34]

Wielding this narrative, which has some basis, the GOE continues to emphasize the precarity of its security situation and the reversibility of the external gains it has achieved, even as it asserts it has been vindicated by its improved international standing. So, in May 2019, President Isaias spoke of the "beginnings of a new era" just as he cautioned that "These momentous events should not prompt us to underestimate the challenges the new era brings" and that the GOE "cannot make hasty and emotional conclusions before we collect adequate information, analyse these data comprehensively with patience to have a clear picture".[35] The message being communicated here is clear: continuing national security concerns mean that Eritrea can no more afford political reform today than it could when it was in the throes of its strategic rivalry with Ethiopia.

And so the domestic political situation in Eritrea is mostly unchanged. There have been virtually no meaningful political reforms, even though the population anticipated the country's shifting international position would generate a domestic opening, and dashed expectations are generating some palpable signs of discontent. Eritrea remains a country governed along military lines, by military elites, for the purpose of guaranteeing their security against militarised threats. These hyper-securitised governing structures mean that many of the pathologies that have shaped the GOE's foreign policy persist: the diplomatic

[34] These observations are drawn from the GOE's public commentary, both written and those communicated orally by its officials.

[35] "President Isaias Afwerki's 28th Independence Anniversary Speech", *TesfaNews*, 24 May 2019.

abrasiveness, the inflexibility, and the tendency to embrace risky strategies that generate blow-back; the troubling human rights record; and the reflexive tendency to wall-off Eritrea from external influences that could shake President Isaias' hold on power.

The costs of these behavioural tendencies for Eritrea are obvious across a variety of foreign relations domains, although one must be clear that the GOE's responsibility on these matters is only partial. Asmara seeks to undercut key multilateral institutions in the Horn region instead of moulding them in their own interest, judging them to be too tainted by the legacy of the TPLF and their association with Western powers. Thus, it refuses to re-join IGAD, and has sought to limit the influence of the AU. The latter position was best illustrated by Asmara's efforts to disinvite the AU from the signing ceremony of the Jeddah Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in September 2018, or by its refusal to sign on to the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), a stance that eventually made Eritrea the final African holdout to the continental arrangement. The Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia tripartite initiative, advanced by Isaias, was part of this strategy and designed to serve as a narrower multilateral alternative. But it has no realistic chance of replacing IGAD, isolates Eritrea from important multilateral fora, and only serves to antagonize countries like Djibouti, Kenya, and Somaliland who feel threatened by the tripartite initiative for various reasons.[36]

At the bilateral level, Eritrea has not fully normalized its relations with key neighbours. Eritrea's ties with Djibouti have not advanced, as the border dispute remains live and relations between Isaias and Guelleh continue to be shrouded in mutual suspicion. Ties with Ethiopia, which Asmara regards as its most important regional partner, remain complicated by a stalled

[36] I. Henneberg and S. Stapel, "Cooperation and Conflict at the Horn of Africa: A New Regional Bloc Between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia and Its Consequences for Eastern Africa", *Africa Spectrum*, 18 August 2020; S.T. Demissie, *Is Another Regional Alliance What the Horn Needs?*, ISS Africa, 24 March 2020.

peace process. It is true that relations between Abiy and Isaias are strong, but normalisation between countries requires more than friendship between leaders. After a brief opening of the frontier, the last border crossing between the two neighbours was closed in April 2019. Meanwhile, bilateral links on trade, investment, the movement of people, port access, transportation, and a host of other important issues have not been formalized. Ethiopian sources indicate the government of Eritrea has been slow to respond to proposals on these matters.[37] There is no doubt that TPLF obstructionism and subterfuge, at least as perceived by Asmara, is a major reason why Eritrea has slow-rolled normalisation – it is the TPLF, for instance, that has blocked Abiy from relinquishing Badme and other Eritrean territories. But it is also true that full normalisation threatens PFDJ control over Eritrea. When the borders between the countries were opened in September 2018, tens of thousands of Eritreans, including members of the army, flooded across the Ethiopian border never to return. Moreover, the opening of the frontier created a massive cross-border trade in key goods that threatened the economic monopoly of PFDJ conglomerates in Eritrea.[38] The dilemma for the GOE thus seems stark: it can normalize its relations with its largest and economically most vibrant neighbour, or remain a garrison state. Both ends cannot be achieved at the same time.

The other challenge for Eritrea's bilateral diplomatic ties in the Horn is the GOE's tendency to lean into the politics of neighbouring countries in a way that leaves it vulnerable to major diplomatic reversals. In Ethiopia, President Isaias' recent public statements have led to speculation – unproven it must be emphasized – that he is meddling in Ethiopian affairs in support of Abiy's consolidation of power. In June 2019, these statements

[37] N. Ashenafi, "Ethio-Eritrean Rapprochement: Is It Stalling?", *The Reporter Ethiopia*, 27 July 2019; Author's conversations, Ethiopian analysts, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, June 2019.

[38] Author's interviews, Ethiopian diplomats and analysts, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January and June 2019. Also, author's telephone conversation with former PFDJ member, June 2020.

drew a strong rebuke from a high profile group of Oromo intellectuals.[39] In Sudan, the pattern of Asmara's engagement has created the impression it is working to guarantee the military's supremacy in Khartoum.[40] In Somalia, the story is similar, as the lack of transparency surrounding Asmara's training of Somali troops has contributed to suspicions that Isaias seeks to strengthen Farmajo ahead of the 2020 Somali elections.[41] Given the political volatility in many of Eritrea's neighbours, this kind of muscular and highly partial engagement comes with risk: should Asmara's preferred partners lose power or be diminished, it could well find itself in diplomatic difficulty in key capitals around the Horn region.

Outside of the Horn of Africa, Eritrea's key relationships are hardly on a solid footing. The lack of internal political reform has impacted the appetite of key Western actors to deepen ties with Asmara. The EU's dual-track approach has quickly run into political trouble. Human rights and diaspora groups in Europe mobilised against the policy, as evidenced by a lawsuit that tied EU aid for roadbuilding projects in Eritrea to the country's system of forced of labour.[42] In the German Bundestag, questions about the lack of human rights progress were raised by MPs, forcing German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to acknowledge the lack of forward movement – a public admission that drew a typically harsh response from the Eritrean Ministry of Information.[43] In June 2020, the European Parliament issued a resolution calling on the EU Commission to place human rights considerations front and

[39] "Open Letter to President Isayas from Oromo Scholars and Professionals", *TesfaNews*, 6 March 2020.

[40] See Asmara's opposition to AU sanctions on the TMC in June 2019 and rumors it is involved in Beni Amer-Nuba conflict in Eastern Sudan. Author's email communication with African diplomat based in Ethiopia, August 2020.

[41] Telephone conversation with European diplomats, May 2020.

[42] The road projects were to be built by state companies that used national service conscripts.

[43] "Germany Accused of 'meddling' over Eritrea's Absent Civil Liberties", *Deutsche Welle*, 28 October 2018.

centre in its aid relationship with Asmara.[44] Meanwhile, in the foreign ministries of a number of EU member states, scepticism about the EU's approach in Eritrea has grown.[45] By September 2020, the rancour forced the EU to withdraw its assistance for road-building projects in Eritrea, reallocate a portion of funds meant for Eritrea to other countries, and agree to re-evaluate its "dual-track" policy towards the country.[46]

Ongoing dialogue between the GOE and the US has also been difficult, although the details remain murkier to establish. No doubt, human rights considerations are one of several areas where there is continuing disagreement. More broadly, Asmara and Washington still have differences about the exact sequence of actions that would lead to an upgrade in relations, and in various parts of the US government there appears to be doubts that Asmara actually has interest in boosting ties. As of the current time, the two parties have not exchanged Ambassadors.

At the UNHRC, the scrutiny of Eritrea's human rights situation continues. Although the GOE has made diplomatic gains in the Council, including acquiring a seat on the body, overwhelming European support led to the renewal of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea in 2019 and 2020. Eritrea's refusal to engage with new Special Rapporteur Daniela Kravetz, despite what some believe to be her more conciliatory approach than her predecessor, has been one reason the GOE faces continuing pressure at the UNHRC. The top-line findings of Kravetz's reports have not assisted the GOE's cause either. As she noted in February 2020, "While Eritrea has increased engagement with regional and international actors, this engagement so far has not led to an actual improvement in the human rights situation in the country".[47]

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[44] M. Plaut, "European Parliament Calls on EU Not to Use Forced Labour in Eritrea", *Eritrea Hub*, 2 June 2020.

[45] Author's telephone conversation with European diplomats, May 2020.

[46] M. Plaut, "European Union Promises to Halt Building Eritrean Roads Following Criticism of 'Slave Labour'", *Eritrea Hub*, 23 September 2020.

[47] L. Bader, "UN Rights Body Maintains Scrutiny of Eritrea's Dire Rights Record",

Finally, the direction of the GOE's relations with its Gulf partners is hard to decipher. In January 2020 the GOE publicly rebuked the Saudi Minister of State for Africa for his claim that Saudi Arabia had played a major role in the Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement, calling his statements "grossly at variance with the genesis and facts of the historic agreement".[48] And while the GOE has joined the new Saudi-led Red Sea council – a body that includes all Red Sea states minus Israel – it demurred on attending the early organizing meetings and its overall attitude on the venture has been tepid. The relationship with the UAE is similarly complex. Abu Dhabi has tried to develop a commercial relationship with Eritrea, particularly as it relates to Assab port, but it has mostly received the cold shoulder. The GOE also rejected Covid-related assistance from the Emiratis, and appears to be keen on limiting the UAE's interaction with the local population in the Southern Red Sea region.[49]

Again, like so much of what has occurred in the domain of Eritrean foreign relations since 1998, the GOE is only partially responsible for some of the more recent challenges described above. The GOE has rationales for all of its foreign policy behaviour, and some of these do stand-up to scrutiny. Yet the simple truth is that the pathologies of garrison state governance impose major limits on the ability of the GOE to transform its external relations.

Towards a New Era?

Is Eritrea still and "island" isolated from its region and the international system? The answer to this question is clearly "no". Eritrea's 2018 rapprochement with Ethiopia accelerated

Human Rights Watch, 12 July 2019; "Statement of Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Ms. Daniela Kravetz", UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 20 February 2020.

[48] Shabait, "Eritrea Ministry Of Information", Press Release, 14 January 2020.

[49] "Issayas Afeworki gives Emirati base the cold shoulder", *Africa Intelligence*, 19 June 2020; Author's conversation, European diplomat, November 2019.

dynamics already under way, and have allowed the GOE to break the diplomatic blockade that has long encumbered its external relations. But the evidence also suggests that the rehabilitation of Eritrea's international standing remains partial and incomplete.

The crux of the matter is that the same issues that were partially responsible for propelling the deterioration of Eritrea's external relations after 1998, remains a significant obstacle today. The world around Eritrea has changed, but Eritrea has not; it remains a garrison state with all of its attendant consequences for Eritrea's foreign policy and the country's external ties. This means that only a sustained project of political reform at home will be sufficient to fully rehabilitate Eritrea's international position and consolidate recent gains. Here, it must be said, the picture looks uncertain. While President Isaias has been unwilling to change political course, he is in the twilight of his career and its possible his successors may pursue a different approach to governance. More immediately, there are forces like the Covid-19 pandemic, which is major shock that could create an impetus for political transformation, since the government has pushed a strict lockdown that successfully supressed transmission but rendered much of the population economically desperate. These kinds of dynamics – both known and unknown – are what will soon define Eritrea's domestic trajectory and foreign policy. For the people of Eritrea and the region, much is at stake.

5. State-Building in Somalia: Role of the Middle East and Horn of Africa Countries

Afyare Elmi, Abdi Hersi

Somalia celebrated its 60th anniversary of independence on 1 July 2020, but has had a functioning state for less than half of that period. The collapse of the central government of Somalia in 1991 was the beginning of a trying period of internal clan fighting, criminal piracy activities, and extremist groups taking root in the country. Two decades have passed since Somalia's so-called third republic was established in Arta, Djibouti, in August 2000. To date, besides the Arta peace process, two more reconciliation conferences (Kenya and Djibouti in 2004 and 2009 respectively), five presidents, thirteen prime ministers, hundreds of ministers and parliamentarians and several new regional authorities later, Somalia's state-building effort is, at best, very slow, if not stagnant. Nevertheless, the country is now making an effort to achieve its long-held dream of establishing a functioning and democratic state.

Somalia and Statehood

Classic definitions posit that a state is an organised entity which "successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory".[1] The characteristics

[1] M. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation", in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.),

of 'normal' states include "having control of their territory, having a strong domestic political system, and being politically stable",[2] but distinctions can be drawn between quasi-states and functioning states based on an underlying notion of different "degrees of statehood". Conceptual state-building frameworks have been advanced, with some scholars suggesting that peace-building and state-building are synonymous.[3] Ali and Matthews set forth four components to the task of peace-building: establishing a secure environment, revitalising the economy, building governance institutions, and dealing with issues of justice. Fukuyama comes to a similar conclusion and identifies three sets of institutions: state (security and economy), democratic accountability and the rule of law.[4]

Throughout history, Somalia's governments have struggled to exert full control over the country's territory. Lack of resources has hindered the country in establishing a viable state and a competent, non-politicised, professional and inclusive security force. In the absence of those attributes, in the early 1990s Somalia's military regime collapsed. Almost everything that symbolises statehood was lost, including the justice system (police, courts, correction houses). The characterisation of Somalia as *not* a "normal state" is partly due to the emergence of ruthless and powerful non-state actors, including armed warlords, tribal militias, insurgency groups, terrorists and extremist ideologues.

From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 77-128.

[2] C. Clapham, "Degrees of Statehood", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1999, pp. 143-157.

[3] T.M. Ali and R.O. Matthews (eds.), *Durable Peace: Challenges for Peacebuilding in Africa*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004; D.A. Lake, *The State Builder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2016; A.K. Talentino, "The Two Faces of Nation-Building: Developing Function and Identity". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2004, pp. 557-575.

[4] F. Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011; F. Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy*, Macmillan, 2014.

Assessing Political, Security and Economic Progress and Setbacks

An incomplete constitution, a sectarian/clannish political class, a political culture of distrust, a counterterrorism-centred security system, and over-reliance on the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces and the international community have produced ineffective and unsustainable institutions. Some scholars still relatively recently characterised Somalia as a failed state[5] and a "humanitarian fiasco".[6] While citing the emergence of informal alternative governance structures, Menkhaus described the country as a "functional failed state".[7] Despite these characterisations, Somalia's leadership and the international community have been making efforts to establish a functioning state, albeit with limited progress. Politically, the essence of the "state" of the "Somali Republic" has been contested for the last two decades. As the situation stands, although the national government in Mogadishu enjoys juridical sovereignty, the country is divided in many ways.

The Somaliland question

The Somali political class has not addressed the fundamental question of whether one state or more should have emerged out of the Somali Republic of the 1960s. Self-determination and secessionism in Somaliland are a case in point in this regard. When the military government fell in 1991, Somaliland, one of the regions that founded the 1960 republic, decided to secede from Somalia. Even though no country has recognised its

[5] J.J. Messner, *Fragile States Index X 2014*, Fund for Peace (FFP), 2014.

[6] M. Fahlen, "The Africa Union Mission in Somalia. Toward a New Vision of Regional Peace Keeping?", in P. Wallensteen and A. Bjurner (eds.), *Regional Organizations and Peacemaking. Challengers to the UN?*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 181.

[7] K. Menkhaus, "State Failure, State-Building, and Prospects for a 'Functional Failed State' in Somalia, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 656, no. 1, pp. 154-172.

sovereignty yet, Somaliland remains a *de facto* state, and it has been seeking independence persistently since 1991.[8]

At the time of writing, there are two parallel initiatives in train to facilitate and/or mediate between Somalia and Somaliland. The first, begun in 2012, is led by Turkey. To date, there have been four meetings between the parties in this Turkey-mediated process. The parties have not yet addressed the main problems and have delegated the more substantive issues to a joint technical team.[9] Meanwhile, Djibouti and Ethiopia are leading the second initiative. In June 2020, the parties met in Djibouti, albeit with no tangible results.[10] Notably, the United States, the European Union and the African Union supported this initiative. While it is clear that the restart of high-level negotiations in Djibouti is a significant step, all indications are that the parties will not adequately address final-status matters of union versus separation. A possible reunion/secession of South and North can happen when security is established, the economy keeps pace, and regional administration and central government relations improve in Somalia. So far, parties have not been negotiating in good faith and each has been trying to capitalise on the externally-sponsored mediation process. A growing mistrust between the parties risks rendering the process futile. Despite the difficulties around the question of secession or union, in comparison with the south of Somalia, state building in Somaliland showed progress in the areas of security, democratisation and rule of law.

[8] See M. Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland: Reconstructing a Failed State*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008.

[9] British Embassy Mogadishu, "Joint Statement on Djibouti Talks Between Somalia and Somaliland Leaders", 16 June 2020.

[10] O. Mahmood and Z. Yusuf, *Somalia-Somaliland: A Halting Embrace of Dialogue*, International Crisis Group, 6 August 2020.

Problems of clan-based federalism in the South

Besides the important issue of Somaliland status, state-building in the rest of Somalia is proceeding at a slow pace. Somali stakeholders that oppose secession have also been struggling to agree on the nature of the state that is to govern the country after the civil war. In 2004, the Kenyans hosted, and the Ethiopians dominated, a Somali reconciliation conference to prescribe a federal system for the country.[11] To date, drawing from the model of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, there are five clan-based federal member states in the country: Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, South West, and Jubaland. Two more regions (Banadir and Sool/Sanaag) have been campaigning to be added to this list. For the first years of the Somali Republic, Banadir (Mogadishu) had a regional status, but this was questioned by some of the factions after the civil war. As a result, article nine of Somalia's draft constitution affirms that Mogadishu is the capital of the country, but asserts that the parliament will determine its status through the constitution review process. Since 1991, the status of Mogadishu has remained a contested issue.[12] However, there is strong pressure from the communities of Mogadishu/Banadir, who are calling for regional status and representation in the senate. Somalia's House of the People passed a motion in June 2020[13] that granted thirteen seats for the representation of Mogadishu/Banadir, but its regional status remains in question.

Additionally, communities from the Sool/Sanaag regions that oppose Somaliland's secession have also sought a regional status that is independent of Somaliland and Puntland.[14] The

[11] United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Charter of the Federal Transitional Government of Somalia, Nairobi, February 2004.

[12] *Somalia's Parliament Should Produce a Constitution by and for the People*, Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, February 2017.

[13] "Impossible to Hold 2020 Polls - Somalia Elections Boss", *Africanews*, 27 June 2020.

[14] M.V. Hoehne. "Against the Grain: Somaliland's Secession from Somalia", in L. De Vries, P. Engelbert, and M. Schomerus (eds.), *Secessionism in African Politics:*

Somaliland and Puntland administrations oppose this for different reasons. Somaliland argues that these two regions are part of the Somaliland protectorate that the British Empire left behind, and therefore that Sool and Sanaag are part of Somaliland. On the other hand, Puntland contends that the two regions belong to the Darod clans that established the Puntland state in 1998. The Somali government has recognised these two regions as belonging to the Puntland. Representatives of these two regions were selected/elected in Puntland in the 2016 political dispensation of Somalia.

For some, the establishment of the regional authorities of Jubaland, South-West, Hirshabelle, and Galmudug represents at least limited progress. However, the constant bickering and disagreements between federal member states (FMSs) and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) is the biggest political setback facing the country. Additionally and more importantly, there is no agreement between the FMS and FGS levels of government on the power-sharing issue. The constitution is mainly silent on the functions that belong to each level of government. This remains a controversial issue between the centre and the regions, leading to the current stalemate. Moreover, federal member states question the ways in which the FGS is exercising its powers, or at least ignoring the FMSs as stakeholders. In its turn, the FGS questions the behaviour of the FMSs, who act as though they were independent states. One contentious issue is the displeasure of the FGS at how the FMSs conduct international relations and ignore the national government.[15]

Ironically, although the FGS and current parliament pride themselves on enacting the highest number of laws, they have not completed the constitutional review process and not

Aspiration, Grievance, Performance, Disenchantment, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 229-261.

[15]A. Muhumed,"Dysfunctional Federalism: How Political Division, Constitutional Ambiguity and a Unitary Mindset Thwart Equitable Distribution of Power in Somalia", Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, July 2020.

established a constitutional court. Strained relations between the FGS and its member states are by far one of the biggest setbacks the current Somali government faces. The best way to end this conundrum is to finalise the constitution and spell out the powers of each level of government.[16]

Related to the clan-based federalism is the contested 2020 political dispensation that some of the regions and the opposition groups advocated for. In the formation of the third republic of Somalia in 2000, hundreds of Somalis met in Djibouti, where they decided to establish a democratic state that is at peace with itself and its neighbours. Adopting democracy meant that there would be no regime security for the governing administration after its mandate expires. Universal suffrage is still a distant dream for the citizens. But, in line with the spirit of the delegates of the Djibouti peace process in 2000, and with the help of the international community, Somalia's political class has, at least, been socialised into accepting the rotation of power every four years. In fact, rotation of power has become the new normal for the political class – parliamentarians selected on a tribal formula determine the government of the day. The infamous 4.5 formula of clan representation was a by-product of this peace process.

Since 2000, the country has had five governments and presidents. The previous four presidents surrendered power peacefully after their terms ended.[17] Moreover, none of the six "elected" Somali presidents, since 1960, served more than one term. Interestingly, the current parliament's mandate is up in December 2020, while the President's time ends in February 2021. Legislators passed and the President signed an unimplementable election law. Opposition groups have complained that President Farmajo is determined to gerrymander the selection process or stage-manage a mandate extension.

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[16] Ibid.

[17] President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan (2000-04); President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed (2004-08); President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (2009-12); President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (2012-17).

So far, after three rounds of negotiations in Dhusamareb, the capital city of Galmudug, stakeholders have finally agreed on a complex indirect election model that fell short of the long promised direct public election of one man one vote. Although this has been hailed as an important milestone, the absence of both Puntland and Jubaland administrations in the third round of the Dhusamareb negotiations made the process incomplete.

At the time of writing (September 2020), the leaders of Jubaland (Ahmed Mohamed Islam) and Puntland (Said Deni) are in Mogadishu to negotiate with the other stakeholders. However, on the broader level, the policies of President Farmajo have deepened the trust deficit among the Somali stakeholders. As a result, the international community, under the leadership of the United Nations special representative of the secretary-general, Ambassador James Swan, and US Ambassador Donald Yamamoto, have had to step in and guide the process. In fact, the international community has been pressuring the parties and guiding the process from behind. As a result, all FMS leaders and the President agreed on conducting timely and indirect election that is largely similar to the 2016 political dispensation.

The challenges of building security

Security is the biggest challenge that successive Somali governments and administrations have faced throughout the past 20 years. A prerequisite to any improved security in Somalia entails the state owning the monopoly over the means of coercion. Regrettably, that has not been the case in the recent past, and there are no indications of that changing in the near future. On the security front, Somalia faces multiple challenges. For the sake of space, we will limit our discussion to three aspects: al-Shabaab; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of clan militias; and the establishment of a professional army, thus ending the reliance on the African Union peacekeeping mission.

Besides Somaliland's secession and clan-based federalism, the country is divided along ideological lines. Al-Shabaab, a Salafi-jihadi armed organisation, opposes all Somali authorities on two grounds. First, the extremist organisation calls for the implementation of Sharia in the country. The Somali government does not oppose this and argues that the draft constitution is based on Sharia. Many, however, including Somalia's moderate Islamic groups, reject al-Shabaab's interpretation of Sharia. Moreover, al-Shabaab demands that foreign troops should leave the country unconditionally, knowing well that the weaknesses of Somalia's security forces make this demand impractical, as AMISOM forces keep the current government on life-support.

Al-Shabaab poses a major threat to Somalia. The war with al-Shabaab is proving to be more difficult year by year. While the joint operations of the Somali armed forces and AMISOM troops were successful in driving al-Shabaab out of major cities, they have not reduced the overall threat levels posed by the group. International security experts report the adaptability of al-Shabaab in the new environment.[18] The extremist organisation employs various ways to undermine the security forces and destabilise the country.[19] At times, al-Shabaab has attacked the military bases of the government and its allied forces and inflicted substantial casualties. Often, it uses person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIEDs) and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) to inflict these deadly assaults.[20] The 13 August 2020 United Nations Security Council Somalia situation report[21] described the deteriorating security situation as follows:

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[18] A.L. Dahir, "Somali Terror Group Al Shabab Remains Resilient Despite Setbacks", *New York Times*, 29 December 2019.

[19] M.I. Shire and A. Hersi, "Brothers in Arms: The Phenomenon of Complex Suicide Attacks", *Terrorism and Political Violence, Routledge*, vol. 31, 9 December 2019.

[20] Ibid.

[21] United Nations Security Council, 13 August 2020, www.undocs.org/en/S/2020/798

> The security situation remained volatile, with 288 incidents in May, 269 in June and 218 in July. Most of those incidents were crime-related killings and shootings and al-Shabaab attacks, including those using improvised explosive devices. Levels of crime and armed conflict-related incidents have remained steady since January, with a slight decline in June and July. The number of terrorism-related incidents remained at an average of around 75 per month in May and June, with 53 incidents in July.

By any measure, even though there are more than twenty thousand AMISOM forces drawn from several African countries, security improvement in Somalia proceeds at a meagre pace. For instance, during the tenure of Farmajo government (2017-20), al-Shabaab killed thousands of civilians. In October 2018, in a single attack, al-Shabaab killed close to one thousand individuals in Mogadishu through a single vehicle-borne suicide mission. Unless al-Shabaab is defeated militarily or there is a negotiated settlement with the extremist movement,[22] the situation will remain the same.

Al-Shabaab aside, Somalia's armed clan militias are an impediment to establishing a functioning state as well.[23] After the state institutions collapsed in 1991, clans organised to defend and, at times, expanded to other areas. These militia groups have administered cities, ports and critical checkpoints, thus sustaining themselves for lengthy periods. The formation of clan-based federal member states has further provided a *raison d'être* for these militias. Unfortunately, although these militias are a security threat, Somalia's central government has always been too weak to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate them into the Somali security forces. As a result, there are militia groups in most regions that would in fact like to join the security forces for employment purposes but have not been reintegrated yet.

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[22] A.A. Elmi and A. Aynte, *Somalia: The Case for Negotiating with Al-Shabaab*, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 25 February 2012.

[23] V. Felbab-Brown, *The Problem with Militias in Somalia: Almost Everyone Wants Them Despite Their Dangers*, Brookings Institution, 14 April 2020.

Finally, Somalia's government has not succeeded in building a professional and inclusive army for the country. However, there has been some progress in terms of the administration and training of the forces. The Somali government has eliminated many of the "ghost soldiers" and created a reliable database for the security forces. Ghost soldiers are those who had never existed or had long ago deserted but were kept on the books by corrupt paymasters to siphon off their salaries. They include former military officers who should have retired from service as well as untrained young former militia men. The government has succeeded in the registration of uniformed forces such as the police, military and other militia groups using biometrics systems. This is an important accountability measure in building an effective national security architecture. Unlike the old system, the new registration system has restored integrity in the exercise. The government has also been paying the salaries of armed forces regularly remedying the previously haphazard (under)payment of soldiers. This is a big success for Farmajo's government. Additionally, since Turkey opened its training camp in Mogadishu in 2017, it has trained 2,500 Somali troops (commissioned, non-commissioned and foot soldiers).[24] That said, the government faces a number of political, contextual and operational challenges to establishing an inclusive and professional army that can secure the whole country.[25]

The pace of economic recovery

Raising the much-needed revenue base, addressing poverty and unemployment have been the foremost economic recovery objectives of successive post-conflict governments in Somalia. Amongst the key challenges facing the economy include resolving the currency (Somali shilling) crises. While facing

[24] L. Ilhan and Z. Demirci, "1 of 3 Somalian Troops to be Trained by Turkey: Envoy", *Anadolu News Agency*, 4 August 2020.
[25] P.D. Williams, "Building the Somali National Army: Anatomy of a Failure, 2008-2018", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2020, pp. 366-391.

many political and security challenges, different administrations (for the last two decades) have contributed to the rebuilding of the state economy, which albeit is still at the embryonic stage. Due to the lack of socio-economic infrastructure, Somalia's economy is susceptible to external shocks.[26] During the period of civil war, the informal economy and private enterprises were strong, showing the resilience of this sector.[27] Despite being labelled a failed state, the country has introduced some valuable initiatives, such as offering its citizens some of the world's cheapest international phone calls and implementing its widely used mobile phone money system. Reconstituting a functioning central bank is another prime example of these significant achievements.

The normalisation of Somalia's relations with international financial institutions and sustained efforts in securing debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) – reaching the Decision Point was a recent remarkable achievement[28] – is key to Somalia's economic recovery. The country is still going through a painstaking process of debt relief that requires belt-tightening and discipline, and it needs to show the relevant financial institutions that it is capable of meeting their requirements.

The reported economic recovery journey faces significant risk due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its required costly health response program.[29] The lockdowns and restrictions imposed by the Somali government as precautions to stop or reduce the spread of the coronavirus have potentially dented the economy, reduced domestic revenue sharply, and substantially increased expenditure. As a result, real GDP might shrink, making the economic outlook somewhat gloomy.[30] These new economic

[26] International Monetary fund (IMF), Somalia to Receive Debt Relief under the Enhanced HIPC Initiative, Press Release no. 20/104, 25 March 2020.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] African Development Bank Group, "Somalia Economic Outlook", 30 January 2020.

challenges plus an expected lower flow of remittances to boost the national economy risk derailing achievement of further milestones on the Completion Point for debt relief.[31]

Despite the above challenges, Somalia's parliament passed its revised budget in June 2020. The total is about US$650 million dollars, of which the government contributes only 31%. The international community has committed the remaining 69% (budgetary assistance and projects). The fact that the country relies on external support to this extent is disturbing indeed. This revenue base shows a lack of economic viability. The Somali government has argued that one way to address this issue is to fast-track the exploration of natural resources of the country, particularly oil. The Somali parliament has passed its petroleum act and established the country's petroleum agency.[32] However, there are legitimate warnings concerning a rushed approach to Somalia's natural resources without the proper policies and institutions.[33] While the country's development depends on this economic resource, oil can also be a curse. Therefore, caution is warranted on this issue. Lack of political agreement on resource sharing between the FGS and its FMSs can also jeopardise any prospect of collecting taxes to increase local revenue substantially. Besides limitations on domestic revenue generation, Somalia faces two further economic challenges. First, since the state collapsed, different administrations have been talking about printing the Somali currency. No decision has been made yet. Second, poverty and unemployment are serious problems that feed into the security and political problems in the country. In Somalia, unemployment levels of persons aged between 14 and 29 is estimated to be 67%.[34]

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[31] A.D. Hassan, "Impact of COVID 19 on Somalia's Economy: Will the Virus Be a Springboard to a Severe Crisis?", Modern Diplomacy, 9 July 2020.

[32] "Somalia: Petroleum Law Ratified", *African Energy*, newsletter no. 410, 27 February 2020.

[33] J. Gundel, "What's the Oil Rush in Somalia?", London School of Economics and Political Science, 17 June 2020.

[34] M. Dalmar, A.Y.S. Ali, and A.A. Ali, "Factors Affecting Unemployment in

The Rise of Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia: Implications for Somalia

The election of Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia's first Oromo ethnic Prime Minister shifted perceptions of Somalis about Ethiopia. For hundreds of years, Somalis and Abyssinians have had a hostile relationship. Differences in religion and ethnicity have fuelled the conflict. For the Somalis, Ethiopia was one of the colonial countries that participated in the partition of the Somali Peninsula.[35] Since independence, the two countries have fought twice (1964 and 1977). During the civil war, Ethiopia continued its support of warlords and factional leaders.[36] When the Islamic Courts Union removed these warlords, Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2007 under the pretext of counterterrorism, thus exacerbating the rise of extremism. In the recent past, Somalia has become the stage for proxy wars and rivalries between regional states, notably Eritrea and Ethiopia, and to an extent Ethiopia and Kenya. For example, the FGS nullified the election of Jubaland President Ahmed Madobe. Whilst Ethiopia generally supported the FGS, Kenya resorted to protect Ahmed Madobe's legitimacy as President of Jubaland. In other examples, Ethiopia was supporting the Somali warlords and the transitional government while Eritrea supported the opposition groups.[37]

In 2018 Ethiopia's ruling coalition (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) chose Abiy Ahmed as the Prime

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Somalia", *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, vol. 8, no. 22, 2017, pp. 200-210.

[35] Somali Republic, *The Somali Peninsula: A New Light on Imperial Motives*, Mogadishu, Somalia, 1962.

[36] A.A. Elmi and A. Barise, "The Somali Conflict: Root Causes, Obstacles, and Peace-Building Strategies", *African Security Studies*, vol. 15, no.1, 2006, pp. 32-54.

[37] K. Mulugeta, *The Role of Regional and International Organizations in Resolving the Somali Conflict: The Case of IGAD*, Addis Ababa, Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung, 2009, p. 26; A. El-Affendi, "The Perils of Regionalism: Regional Integration as a Source of Instability in the Horn of Africa?", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009, p. 10.

Minister of the country.[38] Unlike previous leaders of Ethiopia (Abyssinian highlanders), Dr Abiy Ahmed is an ethnic Oromo, which is the largest group in Ethiopia. When he came to power, Abiy Ahmed initiated several positive changes: reaching a peace agreement with Eritrea, releasing political prisoners, reconciling with opposition groups abroad and repatriating them home, and mediating regional conflicts. The new Prime Minister's reforms had a positive impact on the Somali Region, sometimes referred to as the "Ogaden" region, in Eastern Ethiopia, as Addis Ababa changed the regional administration and reconciled it with the armed Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). These achievements, plus his constructive rhetoric, conferred on the Prime Minister global appreciation. Since his election, the region has steered in a new direction toward development rather than conflict. This new phenomenon is recognised both within and outside the region, leading Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to win the Nobel Peace Prize.[39]

Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in Ethiopia affected Ethiopia's problematic relations with Somalia in three important ways. First, an Ethiopian-led tripartite integration project has divided the Somali political elite. Abiy has initiated and led what he called Horn of Africa Cooperation (HoAC),[40] a three-way integration project between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. For any meaningful integration in the Greater HoA region, excluding Kenya (the largest economy) and Djibouti (the most strategic country) from this project is counterproductive. It is also unclear how the existing Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), in which Ethiopia and Kenya dominate, can co-exist with the proposed new HoAC, which aims to bring peace and boost trade between the member countries. So far, the leaders of these three countries have met multiple times

[38] "Abiy Ahmed Elected as Chairman of Ethiopia's Ruling Coalition", *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2018.

[39] "Nobel Peace Prize: Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed Wins", *BBC*, 11 October 2019.

[40] I. Henneberg and S. Stapel, "Cooperation and Conflict at the Horn of Africa: A New Regional Bloc Between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia and Its Consequences for Eastern Africa", *Africa Spectrum*, 2020.

in Addis Ababa, Asmara and Mogadishu. Besides a few press releases and speeches, the parties involved have not provided sufficient public information. In one of their press releases, they announced that Ethiopia would invest in four Somali ports.[41] Many Somalis have rejected that Ethiopian move.

For Somalia, the integration initiative has further exacerbated the divisions among Somalis. The opposition groups and some civil society organisations have demanded the Somali government share the full agreement with parliament. So far, neither Villa Somalia (the official Presidential palace) nor other parties have done so. For some Somalis, the 2020 integration project is similar to the regional federation[42] of the 1950s that Emperor Haile Selassie called for. The Emperor argued that Ethiopia could not survive without access to the sea and went on to claim that the Somali Peninsula and Eritrea were part of Ethiopia. For Somalis, since then, Ethiopia has been holding on to this strategy, and different regimes have adopted different tactics to secure their aims.[43] In fact, Ethiopia's need for a permanent sea corridor is more urgent now. For the opponents of the integration project, it is nothing but a new tactical approach by Addis Ababa to secure its old ambitions in the region. On the other hand, the Federal Government of Somalia and its backers, including the United States, support this initiative.

Second, unlike the previous Addis Ababa administration that supported the regions and kept Mogadishu weak, Abiy empowered the central government of Somalia. Somaliland might be an exception in this case, as Ethiopia remains engaged with Hargeysa diplomatically. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's policy shift has meant a lot to the Federal Government of Somalia because Ethiopia has troops in the country. Some of

[41] A. Sheikh, "Somalia, Ethiopia to Jointly Invest in Four Seaports on the Red Sea", *Reuters*, 16 June 2018.
[42] J. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, Algonac, Michigan, Reference Publications, 1985, p. 141.
[43] Ibid.

these troops are under the African Union peacekeeping mission, but there are also Ethiopian battalions in Somalia that do not have an international mandate. Recently, these non-AMISOM forces have been involved in two incidents. In one, the Federal Government of Somalia has reportedly used these forces for the political dispensations of the South West region in Baidoa to arrest Mukhtar Robow (a former Shabaab leader who has quit violent politics).[44] This incident placed Ethiopia's forces in an awkward position as the international community demanded an explanation. As a result, the Somali government expelled the United Nations Secretary-General envoy Nicholas Haysom.[45] Additionally, Ethiopia's non-AMISOM forces shot down a civilian airliner in Berdale.[46] This accident further brought to the fore the Ethiopian involvement in Somalia. The Federal Government of Somalia has not been transparent about the presence of non-AMISOM Ethiopian forces in its territory.

Third, Abiy Ahmed's rise to power has further complicated the relations between Somalia and Kenya, which deteriorated at the same time as Ethiopia and Somalia developed closer ties. Historically, Somalia and Kenya have clashed over the Somali region in the North East of Kenya. But a maritime dispute between the two countries surfaced in which Somalia took the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This led Kenya to develop strong relations with the Jubaland administration and its leader, Ahmed Mohamed Islam Madobe, which angered the FGS, especially after Villa Somalia nullified his re-election as President of the Jubaland administration. On the other hand, Ethiopia has provided unconditional support to the Federal Government of Somalia. The irony here is that Ethiopia and

[44] "African Union Force Denies It Was Involved in Arrest of Ex-Al Shabaab Leader", *Reuters*, 15 December 2018.

[45] M. Bearak, "Somalia Expels Top U.N. Official After He Criticizes Crackdown on Dissent", *The Washington Post*, 2 January 2019.

[46] "Ethiopia Admits Shooting Down Kenya Aid Aircraft in Somalia", *Al Jazeera*, 9 May 2020.

Kenya have had a defence pact against Somalia since 1963.[47] Yet, in 2018, they almost went to war for the sake of their proxies in Somalia (Ethiopia supporting the central government and Kenya supporting the Jubaland administration). Moreover, the election of Abiy Ahmed has altered Somalia's relations with some of its closest allies, such as Egypt. At a time when Somalia is entering a new dawn of cooperation with its former arch-rival in the region, Ethiopia, the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) across the Nile is creating a dilemma for Somalia's foreign policy. Somali governments have traditionally supported Egypt in both the Arab League and African Union meetings. The rise to power of Abiy in Ethiopia has had an impact on this foreign policy.[48]

Middle Eastern States and Somalia

Besides the involvement of Somalia's neighbours in its domestic conflicts, the Middle Eastern states have become interested in the country for their own reasons.[49] In fact, one of Somalia's main curses is its strategic geopolitical position. The country's proximity to the maritime route of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea and its location on the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean is proving to be a constant challenge. Great powers (the United States, China and some European countries) have secured military bases in the Horn of Africa using the pretext of fighting maritime piracy and terrorism. Additionally, several Middle Eastern countries have shown a renewed interest in the region in the last decade. These can be grouped into two coalitions: the Turkey-Qatar coalition and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition,

[47] W. Kabukuru, "The Kenya-Ethiopia Defence Pact: Has Somalia Become a Pawn?", *New African*, 26 February 2015.

[48] Although diplomats confirmed that Mogadishu voted for the resolution, it has publicly withdrawn that support. See "Somalia Rejects Arab League Resolution on Egypt's Stand on Nile", *Garowe Online*, 25 June 2020.

[49] J. Gorvett, "Gulf Rivalries Play Out in the Horn of Africa, Sometimes with Deadly Consequences", *The Washington Diplomat*, 29 August 2019.

which includes the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt. Iran is mostly absent, while others such as Kuwait and Oman have confined their activities to traditional diplomacy.

The Middle Eastern countries have always had security and economic interests in the Horn of Africa region.[50] For instance, according to a World Bank report, piracy attacks in the Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean have affected the Gulf and Middle Eastern countries in a significant way.[51] Therefore, these countries have contributed to counter-piracy operations through the American- and European-led coalitions or individually.[52] Moreover, the Middle Eastern countries, like others, have been interested in establishing a military base in the area, particularly after the Yemen war. On the economic side, these countries have been interested in securing natural resources (oil) and markets for their products for some time. They have invested in different industries in the Horn of Africa countries. Eleonora Ardemagni summed up their motivations by saying that the Middle Eastern countries came to the Horn of Africa to compete "for local alliances, commercial ports, and/or military agreements and bases".[53]

Most Middle Eastern countries have had historical relations with Somalia. After it became an independent state in 1960, Somalia established diplomatic and economic relations with all the Middle East countries, except Israel. However, the Yemen conflict, Gulf crises, and Iran-Saudi competition triggered the renewed interest of these countries in Somalia. For example,

[50] H. Verhoeven, "The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order", *Civil Wars*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2018, pp. 333-357.

[51] World Bank, *The Pirates of Somalia: Ending the Threat, Rebuilding a Nation*, Washington, DC, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2013.

[52] A. Elmi and S. Mohamed, *Assessing the Role of the GCC Countries in Ending Piracy in the Horn of Africa*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha Institute, 2017.

[53] E. Ardemagni, *Gulf Powers: Maritime Rivalry in the Western Indian Ocean*, ISPI Analysis, no. 321, April 2018.

in 2016, because of Saudi Arabian pressure, Somalia expelled Iran's diplomatic mission.[54]

The United Arab Emirates have signed agreements with Somaliland on a Berbera port and military base.[55] Fly Dubai and Air Arabia started regular flights to Hargeysa. Moreover, a significant number of Somali businesses, particularly the money transfer agencies, have moved their headquarters to Dubai. In addition, the UAE's port operating company, DP World, has signed agreements with the Puntland authority on the Bosaso Port. The UAE has maintained a base in Puntland in order to support counter-piracy operations and it has helped the administration with the formation of the Puntland Maritime Police Forces.[56] On the other hand, Qatar has supported Somalia's central government economically.[57] It has invested in several infrastructure projects (two major roads) in Mogadishu and cities near the capital. Qatar has also secured the Hobyo Port with the help of the Federal Government of Somalia.[58] Qatar Airways started to fly to Mogadishu in 2019.

Turkey's renewed interest in Somalia started after the 2011 famine in the country, when Ankara's government significantly assisted Somalia in controlling the humanitarian effects of the crisis.[59] The then Prime Minister and now President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited the country several times and ordered Turkish companies and charities to help Somalia. For instance, Turkish companies managed and developed the airport and the Port of Mogadishu. Turkish Airlines started flying to Somalia, which was an isolated country at the

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[54] "Somalia Received Saudi Aid the Day It Cut Ties with Iran: Document", *Reuters*, 17 January 2016.

[55] "Somaliland Agrees to UAE Military Base in Berbera", *BBC*, 17 February 2017.

[56] The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, International Crisis Group, 6 November 2018.

[57] Ibid.

[58] "Qatar to Build New Port in Somalia's Hobyo", *Al Jazeera*, 20 August 2019.

[59] F. Donelli, "The Ankara Consensus: The Significance of Turkey's Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2018, pp. 57-76.

time.[60] The Turkish government opened its largest embassy in Mogadishu,[61] and Ankara started to provide budgetary assistance to the Federal Government of Somalia.[62] Besides hundreds of scholarships for students, Ankara opened its doors to Somalis who were travelling for tourism, medical, business and education purposes. More importantly, Turkey opened a military base that has trained hundreds of Somali security forces.[63] This head-start won Turkey a special place in the hearts and minds of the Somali people. But, like other countries, Turkey is also pursuing its strategic and economic interests as it considers Somalia as the gateway to East African market.

That said, what does the renewed interest of the Middle Eastern countries mean for Somalia? Their presence and the resources they invest in the country are a plus. For a long time, Somalia has been isolated from the rest of the world, and was considered a no-go zone. Most of the Western aid focussed on relief. The Middle Eastern countries and their charities have been contributing to the education, health and infrastructure of the country. Investments in infrastructure in Berbera, Bosaso, Mogadishu and other locations will certainly help the country.

However, the Middle Eastern countries' competition for allies has had negative consequences for the politics of the country by facilitating corruption. The international community has become concerned about cash being provided to politicians to buy votes and political positions. It is a public secret that Somali politicians in power (nationally and regionally) and those who want to replace them seek rent from these Middle Eastern countries and some international mining companies.

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[60] A. Elmi, "Transnational Islamic NGOs in Somalia: Challenges and Opportunities" in A.O. Farah and L. Xing (eds.), Transnational NGOs and Global Governance, Aalborg, Aalborg University Press, 2014.

[61] "President Erdoğan in Somalia Opens World's Largest Turkish Embassy, Other Projects", *Daily Sabah*, 3 June 2016.

[62] L. Pitel, "Somalia Reaps Rewards of Ankara's Investment", *Financial Times*, 25 May 2016.

[63] H. Orhan, "Turkey Opens Military Base in Mogadishu to Train Somali Soldiers", *Reuters*, 30 September 2017.

Sometimes, these rent-seeking politicians and their brokers get what they are looking for. More importantly, during elections, some of these countries contribute campaign money to allied politicians. The United Nations Monitoring Group reported that the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided financial support to their ally politicians in the last election.[64] As the situation stands now, Turkey and Qatar support the Federal Government of Somalia while the UAE has supported Somaliland, Puntland and Jubaland.

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa region remains strategic but volatile at the same time. Somalia's state-building project is still at an early stage. The sectarian political class and lack of resources are to blame for most of the political, security, and economic problems. Despite these, in its quest for finding a lasting solution to its protracted civil conflict, Somalia is attempting to assert itself again as a normal state that plays its part in regional, continental and global affairs. For that to happen, crucial areas for Somalia's return to normality include political stability, improved security, and economic recovery as well as the strengthening of institutional capacity. The state-building project is ongoing, and there is a limited progress in forging stronger political, security, economy, and judiciary institutions. Overall, re-establishing a functioning state in Somalia has, at best, been too slow.

However, as weak and fragmented as the country is, two external factors – changes in Ethiopia and the renewed interest of the Middle Eastern powers – have impacted on Somalia's security and politics. Whilst the rise of Abiy Ahmed is hailed as

[64] See United Nations, Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, New York, p. 29; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact*, ICG Middle East Reports, no. 206, 19 September 2019.

improving peace in the region, it has notably contributed to the already existing divisions among Somalis. An important factor that is often ignored by researchers and political commentators is the fact that Somalia's return to normal statehood is partly dependent on the behaviour of its neighbours and key international partners. We conclude here that the impact that Abiy Ahmed's rise to power in Ethiopia has had on Somalia is perceptible.

We also contend that renewed competition and rivalry between Middle Eastern states has had both positive and negative implications for Somalia's return to normalcy. The involvement of the Middle Eastern countries brings much-needed development support for infrastructure. Yet, these countries' competition for allies delays the political development of Somalia. In other words, the recent rivalry of the Middle Eastern countries has negatively affected Somalia by exacerbating the existing divisions within the political class.

6. Ethiopia: Between Domestic Pressures and Regional Hegemony

Aleksi Ylönen, Alexander B. Meckelburg

Ethiopia, due to its central position, large population, economic growth, and ostensible role as a security guarantor in the region, is central to understanding the Horn of Africa. Advocates of authoritarian tradition and repressive governance with an expansionist outlook, Ethiopian rulers have dominated the populations of the highlands and surrounding lowlands for centuries.[1] Since the political transition that began with the death of the long-time leader and architect of modern Ethiopia,[2] Meles Zenawi (in office 1995-2012), and taking a new turn in early 2018 with the peaceful transfer of the position of Prime Minister to Abiy Ahmed Ali, Ethiopia has seen a series of violent conflicts, political assassinations, and shifting alliances that have profoundly shaken the country. Domestically, centres of power have shifted. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that held central control over the ruling alliance for nearly 30 years has been forced into opposition by the new leadership although the current government is merely a continuation of the old regime with a reformist agenda. The reform agenda of the new camp has initiated reconciliation in domestic affairs, lending it international recognition and admiration, while also

[1] J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, James Currey, 2011.

[2] R. Lefort, "Ethiopia's Crisis: Things Fall Apart: Will the Centre Hold?", *Open Democracy*, 19 November 2016.

being highly assertive in the regional arena. Internationally, the landmark peace deal with Eritrea, Somalia's continued weakness, and the contested filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) have provided new opportunities and posed new challenges for Ethiopia's regional affairs; the way appeared open for the assertion of hegemony and for peaceful cooperation. However, with the central government's military campaign to subdue the regional leadership in Tigray, another scenario, the country's descent into a protracted conflict, has become a real possibility. The two-week-old campaign has made any prediction of the future difficult due to its complex dynamics and unpredictable outcome.

In this chapter, we discuss Ethiopia's domestic and international affairs from the perspective of continuity and change, with a focus on the whirlwind reformist landscape of the Abiy administration, in an attempt to understand the reform-conflict nexus that has overshadowed the last two years' political developments.

Ethiopia's Historical Trajectory

Ethiopia has played a central role in the politics of the Horn of Africa for a long time. In the course of the late XIX century, the empire expanded largely through conquest.[3] From the late 1870s, Emperor Menelik II and his generals extended the borders of the Ethiopian Empire by forceful incorporation and skilful diplomacy.[4] In 1896, Ethiopia fended off Italian colonial ambitions in the decisive Battle of Adwa and by the end of the XIX century, it had made treaties and established borders with Britain, France, and Italy, who occupied the surrounding territories. The victory of Adwa allowed Ethiopia to assume

[3] J. Young, "Regionalism and Democracy in Ethiopia", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1998, p. 192.

[4] R. Caulk, *Between Jaws of Hyenas. A Diplomatic History of Ethiopia (1876-1896)*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002.

international statehood and recognition unparalleled in the rest of Africa and carried the country's foreign relations for decades to come. The concentration of power and territorial demarcation under Emperor Menelik II led to the consolidation of a centralized imperial political system in and beyond the Ethiopian highlands.[5]

In the early XX century, Ethiopia underwent extensive modernisation. This was largely credited to *Ras* Tafari, who also increased Ethiopia's international exposure and ensured the country's membership in the League of Nations while promising to eradicate slavery. In November 1930, *Ras* Tafari was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie and the following year he introduced Ethiopia's first constitution in which power remained with the nobility in a bicameral legislature, but gradual democratisation was envisioned.[6]

The Italian invasion and occupation of Ethiopia in 1936 temporarily halted the political and economic trajectory of the country. The Emperor was forced into exile while Italian administration was established. Although Haile Selassie delivered an emotional speech in the largely defunct League of Nations to rally support, it took until 1941 for allied forces, with support from Ethiopian patriots, to liberate the country.

The increasingly interconnected post-WW2 world allowed Ethiopia to extend its influence, especially in its own neighbourhood. Haile Selassie envisioned an internationally active Ethiopia: in the course of the early 1950s, the country took part in the first significant United Nations peace missions and successfully lobbied among its Western allies for federating Eritrea as an autonomous part of Ethiopia in 1952. Towards the end of the decade, the Emperor tightened his grip on Eritrea

[5] D. Donham, "Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History", in D. Donham and W. James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 3-48.

[6] Ethiopian Constitution of 1931, 16 July 1931. See Chapter IV, Art. 32. for the aspired democratisation, albeit without timeline.

and despite local resistance succeeded in fully annexing it as an Ethiopian province in November 1962.[7] In the following year, Haile Selassie's grand project, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), hosted by Ethiopia, was inaugurated. However, as the Eritrean insurgency escalated, partly due to external support, Ethiopia became increasingly entangled in proxy wars, particularly in Sudan, while Arab states sought to use Eritrean rebels against Ethiopia and its allies.[8]

In the early 1970s, Haile Selassie sought to elevate Ethiopia above regional entanglements. The leadership continued to benefit from its alliance with the United States while establishing diplomatic relations with China, and played the role of peacemaker in the Sudanese civil war. However, in 1974, the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie came to an end in an army coup. The revolution of 1975 brought the military regime, the *Derg*, headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam, to power and caused an abrupt shift in Ethiopia's domestic politics and foreign relations.

As the new regime sought to stamp its authority, repression associated with the intended consolidation of a communist state led to the intensification of armed opposition. When the Eritrean liberation war escalated, other ethno-nationalist insurgent movements, most notably in Tigray, but also in Afar and Oromia as well as Ethiopia's Somali region, were established. Meanwhile, relations with Somalia had deteriorated to such an extent that, in response to irredentism in Ethiopia's Somali territory, the Somali regime, consumed by the nationalist idea of "Greater Somalia", launched a full-scale invasion of Eastern Ethiopia in July 1977 under the pretext of unifying the Somali people. Ethiopia's close relations with the communist bloc helped the regime to narrowly escape defeat when Soviet military

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[7] A. Ylönen, *Eritrea: A Rogue or a Strategically Constructed Threat?*, Note 14, Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Sécuritaires dans la Corne de l'Afrique, February, p. 11.

[8] R. Pateman, "Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Middle Eastern Powers: Image and Reality", *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2/3, pp. 23-39.

material and advisors, and a significant Cuban contingent, came to its aid. Although external support allowed Ethiopia to deliver a devastating blow to the Somali military, to the extent that its expansionist plans were abandoned and the regime in Mogadishu was forced to turn inwards, it did not help the *Derg* to escape increasing pressure from insurgent movements at home. Instead, during the early 1980s, the Eritrean insurgency inspired other regional liberation movements in and beyond Ethiopia. Faced with increasingly powerful insurgencies and declining Soviet support, the *Derg* regime made unsuccessful constitutional concessions in 1987. However, the opposition forces organized themselves as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led by its strongest faction, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). By 1991, the central government could no longer resist the rebel advance and collapsed.

The TPLF and Ethiopia's role in the Horn of Africa

The victory of the EPRDF marked the beginning of a new era of authoritarian rule in Ethiopia. Under the 1994 constitution, the TPLF-led government reorganized the country into a federal system built on ethno-linguistic criteria. This system was designed to reflect the realities at the end of the civil war and provide a framework for inclusive inter-ethnic cooperation through strong provisions for self-determination of Ethiopia's different ethnic groups.[9] Critics have since emphasised the resulting inflation of identity politics that led to ethno-national competition within and between federal states.[10] Indeed, over time, efforts to centralise power under the TPLF-led EPRDF

[9] M. Bassi, "The Relativistic Attitude in Development: Reflections on the Implementation of the Ethiopian Multinational Constitution", *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo*, vol. 21/2, no. 22, 2019, pp. 1-30.

[10] J. Abbink, "Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2006, pp. 389-413; A. Kefale, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study* , Abingdon, Routledge, 2013.

began to conflict with the contradictory idea of devolution through ethnic federalism under which ethnically defined regions were to enjoy wide autonomy and a constitutional right to secede.[11]

As the EPRDF consolidated its power at the centre of the political system and extended its control into the regions, the satellite party structure gave the ruling coalition ample space and authority to claim to correct historical marginalisation and exclusion. Despite this, the minority leadership of the TPLF within the coalition demanded tight control of the political context, making the coalition increasingly autocratic.

Meanwhile, the TPLF was forced to grant independence to Eritrea due to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front's significant contribution to overthrowing the *Derg*. Eritrea's independence in 1993, and the souring of relations between the two states soon after drew the TPLF's attention increasingly towards its northern neighbour. Landlocked Ethiopia, however, remained keen on using Eritrean ports and subsequently, to the dismay of Eritrean leadership, exerted increasing, especially economic, influence over the new country.[12] This evidently made the leadership in Asmara, accustomed to independence in its foreign relations, uneasy, and presented the renewal of Ethiopian domination as an existential threat. The wrangling, partly caused by Eritrea asserting itself as a new player in the neighbourhood, culminated in a devastating two-year war in May 1998 which served to draw attention away from Ethiopia's domestic repression and the TPLF's efforts to further consolidate power in the state peripheries where armed opposition was active.

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[11] A.M. Abdullahi, "Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution On Secession and Self-determination: A Panacea to the Nationality Question in Africa?", *Verfassung und Recht in* Übersee / *Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1998, pp. 440-455.

[12] A. Abbay, "'Not with Them, Not without Them': The Staggering of Eritrea to Nationhood", *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2001, pp. 459-491.

Building on Marxist-Leninist inspired, ethno-nationalist credentials and the credo of *abyotawi demokrasi* ("revolutionary democracy"), the TPLF and EPRDF entered into the post-Cold War global order, enabling at least the conjecture of ethno-nationalism and moderate market-liberalisation. The core emphasis and proclaimed backbone of the economy remained the peasantry. This, however, changed markedly when the TPLF/EPRDF undertook its next ideological move, the gradual shift towards and adoption of the "developmental state model" which followed the 2001 split within the TPLF and became the official creed of the EPRDF from 2007.[13] Ethiopia's growth was significant in the first two decades of the century, though this boom happened at the expense of a free market economy, with the government maintaining tight control over key sectors, like its monopoly of telecommunications,[14] as a type of "vanguard capitalism".[15] Starting in 2005, the government also established control mechanisms, like the "'one-to-five' system, where one person is charged to monitor, train, or mobilise five others".[16] This extended state control into the peripheries and likewise made the government the most effective employer and gatekeeper to investment and business, paralysing investment outside the government's grip.

The EPRDF's supremacy was tested in the 2005 election. The opposition scored significant victories in the urban areas, while the EPRDF continued to draw on crucial support in the rural areas where the government's developmentalist policies had made a greater difference. The protests that ensued faced

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[13] T.N. Gebregziabher, "Ideology and Power in TPLF's Ethiopia: A Historic Reversal in the Making?", *African Affairs*, vol. 118, no. 472, 2019, pp. 463-84.

[14] C. Clapham, "The Ethiopian Developmental State", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 6, 2018, p. 1156.

[15] F. Gebresenbet and B. Kamski, "The Paradox of the Ethiopian Developmental State: Bureaucrats and Politicians in the Sugar Industry", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2019, pp. 335-350; T. Weis, "Vanguard Capitalism: Party, State, and Market in the EPRDF's Ethiopia", Ph.D. Thesis, University of Oxford, 2016.

[16] F. Gebresenbet and B. Kamski (2016), p. 4.

violent suppression by the authorities.[17] The leadership, despite international condemnation, remained confident that internal political upheaval would not significantly change Ethiopia's partnership with its main external allies.

Strengthening regional dominance

In terms of its central role in regional relations, Ethiopia benefited from the launch of the African Union in 2002 as the successor of the OAU. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian regime expanded its alliance with the United States as part of the emerging War on Terror in which the Horn of Africa became one of the key strategic regions, in part due to its proximity to the Middle East across the Red Sea. As a result, the US established its Africa Command (AFRICOM) base in Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti and initiated close security collaboration, operating bases in Ethiopia. This converted Ethiopia into a bulwark against the surrounding "terrorism prone" states subject to radical Islamist propagation. Sudan, once a major hub for radical political Islam, Somalia, with growing radical Islamist tendencies, and Eritrea, seen to flirt with Arab interests in the Horn, seeking to weaken Ethiopia, and stir instability in the sub-region, cemented Ethiopia's role as the most strategically important state in the Horn.

In the aftermath of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War, Ethiopia forged increasingly close relations with Djibouti, while Eritrea became internationally isolated and portrayed as the "North Korea" of the Horn. Djibouti's being an important US and Western ally facilitated Ethiopia's closer relations with it. At the same time, despite its Western alliances, Ethiopia also looked to the East to diversify its external partnerships. Seeing Sudan's close collaboration with China from the mid-1990s as an example, the Ethiopian government looked towards Beijing for support. It recognised that Chinese backing had been

[17] J. Abbink, "Discomfiture of Democracy? The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and Its Aftermath", *African Affairs*, vol. 105, no. 419, 2006, pp. 173-199.

crucial in salvaging the Islamist regime in Khartoum when faced with international condemnation, US sanctions, and an increasing number of insurgencies in its peripheries, some of which Ethiopia itself had supported. Similarly, in the context of a gradually heating great power competition, Addis Ababa sought to capitalise on Beijing's desire to pursue economic interests in the strategically important Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia's partnership with Djibouti was ultimately cemented by Djibouti's intimate relations with China, which also helped Addis Ababa's relationship with Beijing. In this context, the mutual benefits gained by both Djibouti and Ethiopia were enhanced by Chinese involvement, which improved logistic infrastructure between the two states and increasingly interconnected their economies.

China, on the other hand, saw Djibouti as a stepping-stone to increasingly lucrative Ethiopian markets and readily financed a railway connecting the Ethiopian capital to the ports in Djibouti. Soon after, UAE's Dubai Ports World, a worldwide logistics company linked to state interests, sought to take advantage of the new landscape by striking deals both in Djibouti and Ethiopia, and elsewhere in the Horn. This increasing foreign interest proved beneficial to Ethiopia which succeeded in marketing its potential and broadening its external alliances with the leading Gulf States.

In the mid-2000s, Ethiopia's Western allies, especially the US, perceived the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia as a regional threat. The ICU extended its influence until it claimed to be in control of Mogadishu in June 2006. Meanwhile, Somalia's internationally recognized authority, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) which installed itself temporarily in Baidoa in 2005, called for assistance against the ICU which, according to the United Nations, was supported by external actors, including the Arab States and Eritrea. Soon after, Ethiopia, influenced and supported by the US, intervened in defence of the TFG, and occupied Mogadishu. The ICU disintegrated as a result, but remaining radicals

founded insurgent groups and armed opposition to the Somali government soon crystallized in the hard-line Islamic group al-Shabaab, resulting in escalation of the conflict in Somalia.[18]

Following the establishment of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Ethiopia partially withdrew from Somalia in 2009. However, from 2013 on, al-Shabaab sought increasingly to target Ethiopia, which responded by integrating its remaining contingent in Somalia into the AMISOM.

Meanwhile, as part of its approach towards Somalia, Ethiopia has continued to maintain a close relationship with the breakaway, self-declared independent Somaliland. Rooted in Ethiopia's provision of sanctuary to the Somali National Movement (SNM), an armed opposition group based in Somaliland in the 1980s, Ethiopia-Somaliland relations have remained strong. Ethiopia has endorsed Somaliland by maintaining political ties and engaging in economic activities.

Political Openings and Instability

Despite maintaining high levels of economic growth, the Government of Ethiopia has been unable to deliver economic integration. One reason for the persisting imbalance was probably the increasing gap between party and people, including the government's overpowering involvement in social life.

An important part of the discontent that led to political change was the regime's land policy. One aspect of the developmental economic strategy was a shift from small-hold agriculture to state-led, large-scale land investment.[19] The 2010s became "a decade of land grabs" in Ethiopia, as the government and local administration awarded large tracts of land in seemingly peripheral and unused areas to land investors.

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[18] M.H. Ingiriis, "From Al-Itihaad to Al-Shabaab: How the Ethiopian Intervention and the 'War on Terror' Exacerbated the Conflict in Somalia", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 11, 2018, pp. 2033-2052.

[19] J. Markakis(2011), p. 260.

The politics of land grabs became a testimony to the flexibility of the government "to override the local self-government ostensibly granted to indigenous peoples under the federal constitution".[20] Land leasing was done through the so-called *land bank* on the federal level and bypassed local offices to prevent corruption. Local authorities and people saw in this a severe infringement on their rights to self-administration.[21] The Addis Ababa masterplan announced in 2015 ignited protests which pushed for political reform, land reform, and democratic openings.[22] Opposition, often driven by regional youth, grew and spread to different areas of Ethiopia. The two largest protest movements centred on Oromia and Amhara. While these were initially separate movements, the response of the government drew them together and by 2016 the Amhara endorsed the fight of the Oromo and *vice versa*.[23] These were unprecedented alliances in the face of extraordinary decay in central government power. By 2016, observers saw looming either the possibility of an Ethiopian spring or a "descent into civil war".[24] The protest movement gained momentum and its peaceful stance won global recognition when Fayyisaa Leellisaa, during the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics, endorsed the protests and condemned the violence used against the young protesters.

[20] C. Clapham (2018), p. 1158.

[21] F. Gebresenbet, "Land Acquisitions, the Politics of Dispossession, and State-Remaking in Gambella, Western Ethiopia", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2016, p. 5-28.

[22] J. Záhořík, "Reconsidering Ethiopia's Ethnic Politics in the Light of the Addis Ababa Master Plan and Anti-Governmental Protests", *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 257-272

[23] J. Fisher and M.T. Gebrewahd, "'Game over'? Abiy Ahmed, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and Ethiopia's Political Crisis", *African Affairs*, vol. 118, no. 470, 2019, p. 201; A. Allo, "'The Blood Flowing in Oromia Is Our Blood Too': Why Oromo-Amhara Solidarity Is the Greatest Threat to the Ethiopian Government", *African Arguments*, 27 September 2016.

[24] R. Lefort, "The 'Ethiopian Spring': 'Killing Is Not an Answer to Our Grievances'", *Open Democracy*, 9 September 2016.

In a quick progression of events, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, who had succeeded Meles Zenawi, stepped down and the vice-chairperson of the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) was named his successor. Abiy Ahmed Ali "since his April 2018 inauguration, presided over a dramatic set of iconoclastic policy shifts".[25] His impressive record of rapid reforms included the freeing of political prisoners, an invitation to opposition parties (including those that had been labelled terrorist groups like the ONLF or OLF), and a peace deal with Eritrea,[26] which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize. Economically, he addressed increased privatisation and economic liberalisation. In the spirit of the demonstrations and protests that brought him to power (one of the slogans was "*down, down woyyane*" – demanding the retreat of the TPLF), Abiy began by distancing himself from the TPLF. The new Prime Minister extended apologies and sought reconciliation, "condemning his immediate predecessors within weeks of coming to office as overseers of 'terrorist acts ... and using force just to stay in power'".[27] This provided a pretext to reform the EPRDF at the expense of alienating the TPLF. Within a few weeks, Abiy changed the name of the OPDO to the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP)[28] and had key military and intelligence officers replaced. After Abiy propped up relations with Eritrea, the TPLF became confined to Northern Ethiopia and gradually alienated from the EPRDF.

Most significant was the reform of the EPRDF in November 2019. The EPRDF executive committee and council "plus the five parties that control the Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari and Somali regions and that are allied to, but are not part

[25] J. Fisher and M. T. Gebrewahd (2019), p. 194.

[26] A. Ylönen, "Is the Horn of Africa's 'Cold War' over? Abiy Ahmed's Early Reforms and the Rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea", *African Security Review*, vol. 27, no. 3-4, 2018, pp. 245-252.

[27] J. Fisher and M. T. Gebrewahd (2019), p. 194.

[28] D. Mumbere, "Ethiopia's Oromo Party Changes Name, Logo Ahead of 2020 Vote", *Africanew*s, 21 September 2018.

of it", agreed to merge into one single Prosperity Party.[29] This move was welcomed by some as ending ethnic particularism and promoting inclusion, but was denounced by others as a move to roll back ethno-national achievements and return to unitarianism and centralism. The TPLF did not join the new party.

Regional affairs: New opportunities or the same old?

The rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea gave credence to the new Ethiopian administration's ability to lead the way towards increasingly friendly relations in the Horn of Africa and the wider region. Prime Minister Abiy sought to mediate and ease tensions between federal Somalia and Somaliland, but as an interested party heavily involved in Somalia, such efforts have so far not been fruitful. The Ethiopian government's endeavours as one of the main mediators in the South Sudan crisis were somewhat more successful in the short-term in that the previously forged, externally induced peace agreement was revitalized. Recently, however, Ethiopia's relations with some of its neighbours have become more strained, with the country continuing to rely principally on close relations with Djibouti and Somaliland and trying to keep the leading Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states interested in the promising Ethiopian economy despite low oil prices.

These developments are largely due to Ethiopia's efforts to ensure strategically crucial and economically important sea access. Although Ethiopia's unprecedented rapprochement with Eritrea brought initial promises for resuming important economic ties and access to Eritrea's ports, these hopes have since waned, partly due to Eritrean reluctance and unrest in Tigray. To diminish dependence on Djibouti, Ethiopia has, for many years, also looked at the Berbera Corridor as an alternative access to a Red Sea port. In 2018, shortly before Abiy's ascendance to power, the Ethiopian government formally became part of a tripartite

[29] *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails*, International Crisis Group, Africa Report, no. 283, 16 December 2019.

consortium managing and developing the Berbera Port together with the United Arab Emirates-based Dubai Ports World and the Somaliland government. Although this has since put the Abiy administration in a somewhat uncomfortable position in its relations with Mogadishu, Berbera Port continues to play an important role in Ethiopia-Somaliland relations. This is despite Ethiopia's plans to seek access to port facilities in Sudan[30] and Kenya too. Mogadishu has vehemently resisted the project as a violation of its sovereignty.[31] Working with Somaliland on the project has therefore brought about an uneasy situation which, after some hesitation, the Ethiopian government has sought to remedy by promising to pursue port development elsewhere in Somalia as well. However, Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia has continued to feed political divisions and resembles a longstanding policy of preventing the rise of a strong and unified Somalia through heavy interference in Somali affairs.[32] The fourth option to access the Red Sea through Sudan via north-western Ethiopia has been considered more unreliable and less viable despite initiatives gradually moving towards that end. Ethiopia uses Sudanese ports for a rather insignificant level of exportation, but the project of building a new port mainly to manage Ethiopian trade has stalled. The final option for ensuring sea access is through the Kenyan Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia-Transport corridor (LAPSSET) mega project, which plans to connect especially southern Ethiopia to the Indian Ocean.[33]

Particularly since 2018, partnership with Ethiopia has also been one of the focal points of the leading GCC countries

[30] O. Ayieko, "Ethiopia to Lose $1b In Case it Exits Somaliland's Berbera Port", *East African Business Week News*, 20 August 2020.

[31] International Crisis Group, "Somalia-Somaliland: The Perils of Delaying New Talks", *Africa Report*, no. 280, 12 July 2019, p. 4.

[32] B.B. Yihun, "Ethiopian Foreign Policy and the Ogaden War: The Shift from 'Containment' to 'Destabilization', 1977-1991", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2014, pp. 683-686.

[33] LAPSSET Corridor Development Authority (LCDA), *LAPSSET Projects*, 2020, http://www.lapsset.go.ke/

in their attempts to extend their influence in the Horn. Recognizing Ethiopia's centrality in the sub-region, and the opportunities provided by political reforms, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have worked hard to turn the country from a longstanding bulwark against Arab influence in the Horn into a partner. Competition with Iran, the Yemeni civil war, and the GCC crisis have driven the Gulf States' interests in the Horn of Africa where Ethiopia's dominant status makes it a formidable ally. In partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who are not among Ethiopia's conventional allies but who have strong relations with Eritrea, Abiy's administration has settled the longstanding confrontation with Eritrea, made possible by the prior removal of the TPLF from the helm of power. Maintaining good relations with Arab states is also likely to yield domestic benefit for Abiy in terms of financial resources and support within Ethiopian Muslim communities while also strengthening his appeal in regional politics.

Since Abiy assumed power, Ethiopia's relations with its Western allies have been generally good. Abiy's initial reforms and rapprochement with Eritrea were especially applauded in the West, although the US itself played an important role in facilitating the latter. However, recent domestic political problems, the adoption of repressive measures and inflexibility in negotiations over the Nile waters have not been viewed positively by some political and civil society actors in the West.

New beginnings and inherited conflicts

Abiy's domestic agenda is known as *medemer* and is described in a book of the same name. It urges radical reforms of the public sector and civil service and the end of ethno-particularism. From an economic perspective, it diverges from the old developmental paradigm by fostering more privatisation, contrary to the *vanguard capitalist* paradigms of his predecessors.[34]

[34] L. Yohannes, "Abiy's Homespun Balancing Act: Medemer Reviewed", *Ethiopia Insight*, 26 January 2020.

Despite or because of the PM's largely reconciliatory approach, Abiy proved unable to gain control quickly over the imminent conflicts in the country. The first months of the new regime were tainted by conflicts flaring up in the Gedeo-Guji region as well as in the Gambella and Somali Federal States. The number of IDPs grew to 3 million, the highest in the world in 2018.[35] While some argued that these conflicts were inherited from the previous administration, the government's blatant paralysis made way for a shift in public opinion. Opponents and supporters alike started asking whether the new reform-minded administration would be able to deliver on national security.

The ascent to power of an Oromo politician gave members of the Oromo community the impression that the root cause of their protests would soon be dealt with; some believed they had finally captured political control of Ethiopia. In certain areas, disgruntled youth even insulted and attacked non-Oromos. Local administrations and police posts in Oromia were dismantled, the Ethiopian flag taken down, and the Oromia flag hoisted in its place. It became common to see sidewalks and fences across towns in Oromia painted in the colours of the regional flag. In other parts of the country too, the new government found it hard to handle the security apparatus, and local militias and groups filled the alleged security void. While the Abiy administration called the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) back into the political game, its political arm, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) expanded military operations in Western Wollega. It refused to agree to the political bargaining and instead defected from the party and has since operated independently. By March 2020 several hundred people had been killed by the military and the militias or fled to neighbouring Gambella.[36]

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[35] "Ethiopia - National Displacement Report Round 18: July - August 2019 - Ethiopia", *reliefweb*, 24 October 2019.

[36] Z. Zelalem. "Special Edition: Failed Politics and Deception: Behind the Crisis in Western and Southern Oromia", *Addis Standard*, 20 March 2020.

At the same time, calls for regional autonomy grew with the referendum in Sidama on the creation of a new regional state on 23 November 2019. This was preceded by waves of protests over the future status of the region's capital Hawassa and its role in the new regional arrangements; violent repression by the security forces began in July 2019.

Demographic and land issues

Hidden behind much of the current crisis is economic contraction. Widespread youth unemployment coupled with an inflated higher education sector and an economy incapable of providing employment for graduates unable to make a living from agriculture has caused widespread frustration. Young people across Ethiopia soon began contesting "the dominant portrayal of Ethiopia as 'Africa's fastest growing economy'".[37] Feelings of marginalisation are catalysed by identity discourse focused on land alienation. The issues of urbanisation and modernisation are therefore once again being viewed in an age-old perspective of victimhood and disaffection. This is the case across Ethiopian communities who have lost faith in the government.

The Oromo case is critical in this regard and arguably the most pressing political issue today. It also exemplifies the complex relationship between economic contraction, identity conflict, political bargaining and global interconnectedness. The protests, promoted over social media and supported by the diaspora, helped form the *qeeroo* movement that has driven Oromo unrest since 2014. "Qeeroo" is a term for "youth" loaded with Oromo traditional symbolism.[38] Also known as the Oromo Youth Movement, its internal organisation structure remains obscure.[39] Its followers are "largely educated youth

[37] T. Abebe, "Lost Futures? Educated Youth Precarity and Protests in the Oromia Region, Ethiopia", *Children's Geographies*, 2020, p. 6.
[38] T. Abebe (2020).
[39] M. Aga, "Qeerroo: A Regimented Organization or a Spontaneous Movement?", *Ethiopia Insight*, 21 August 2020; T. Østebø, "Analysis: The Role of the Qeerroo in

with rural backgrounds".[40] Critically, they are the first cohort of Oromo youth to substantially benefit from access to university education after mother tongue primary education.

Propelled by ongoing economic grievances that Abiy has been unable to address in his short presidency, and stemming from core demands like making Oromo a government language and grievances over the status of Addis Ababa, internal Oromo opposition to Abiy has grown. His opponents have emphasized the new PM's EPRDF background and insist he will ignore the Oromo. Instead, they have spun a narrative that Abiy is working toward autocratic rule backed by old unitarist elites. Within two years, the *qeeroo* have turned around, and "Abiy must go" has become the movement's new slogan.

Current Main Policy Issues and the Way Ahead

Oromo divisions

On the back of the *qeeroo* movement, the Oromo political elite is fighting a struggle over the political future of Ethiopia. Oromo protests since 2015 did not topple the old regime but merely ushered in Abiy Ahmed and his reforms. The new Prime Minister was seen as a governmental solution for the demands of the Oromo. When an Oromo was installed in the palace, many thought the time had come for the Oromo to lead the state. From day one, the expectations placed on the new administration were therefore overwhelming. The new leader had to satisfy demands for stability while introducing changes in government (especially following anti-TPLF inclinations) and not alienating hardliner ethno-nationalists. The current political impasse is both a crisis of all citizens over popular participation and an internal Oromo crisis over the future of

Future Oromo Politics", *Addis Standard*, 26 May 2020.

[40] T. Abebe (2020), p. 2.

Oromo political identity. While the Oromo are the largest ethnic community in Ethiopia, their success in political claims-making and state capture has been limited. This has resulted in discontent and opposition within the Oromo but large-scale support for Abiy Ahmed: the fragmentation of recent Oromo identity politics and the return of internal divisions is obvious.[41] Simultaneously, other communities are now voicing discontent about the current government's prioritisation of Oromo in terms of land access and political posts, especially in Addis Ababa.

The political stalemate was exacerbated by the murder of Oromo musician Hachalu Hundessa on 29 June 2020. The killing escalated the stand-off between the opposition and the government. The event was followed by an outburst of violence across Oromia and in Addis Ababa in which more than 200 people lost their lives. The government has imprisoned several thousand people since then, including opposition leaders like Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba.

The stand-off also exposes the extent to which the current political crisis is one of contested leadership of Ethiopia's future federal system. Framed by a conflict between nationalists (Amhara dominance), unitarists, and federalists, the *qeeroo* are back, reinvigorated by protests throughout the diaspora against atrocities committed against the Oromo. The government is framed as "neo-*neftegna*" ostensibly undermining the previous regime's achievements in self-determination. The term *neftegna* (meaning "gun carrier", once used to refer to the soldier settlers of the Menelik era) also identifies the recently formed Prosperity Party with the feudal expansion of the late XIX century and raises the spectre of national oppression.

[41] T. Østebø and K. Tronvoll, "Interpreting Contemporary Oromo Politics in Ethiopia: An Ethnographic Approach", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 2020, pp. 1-20.

The Nile stalemate

The Nile has been an important dimension in Ethiopian strategic regional relations. From Emperor Haile Selassie's ambitious modernisation efforts onwards, harnessing water resources has been a key part of the leaderships' attempts to develop the country. However, Ethiopia's weakness and political upheaval during the Derg regime, as well as the focus of foreign relations on the immediate neighbourhood did not allow the country to challenge the hegemony that Egypt had inherited over the Nile waters through the treaties of 1929 and especially 1959. Although the idea of building a dam on the Blue Nile had lingered for decades, it was well into the second decade of EPRDF rule before the project was pushed forward. As Ethiopia's assertiveness in its regional relations had grown significantly in the first decade of the new millennium, the government finally surveyed the dam site and concrete plans to build the structure were drawn up. Egypt's efforts to prevent upstream developments affecting water usage along the course of the Nile, which it had sought to safeguard through political influence, negotiations, and various agreements over the years, were frustrated. One year after the 2010 Cooperative Framework Agreement, in which upstream countries finally stated their intention to develop Nile water resources without seeking Egypt's approval, Ethiopia's massive dam plan was made public, stirring up relations with Egypt and Sudan. Since the beginning, Cairo has vehemently opposed the project which it perceives as an existential threat to Egypt's food, water, and energy security. In Sudan, news of the dam project was received with mixed reactions, largely due to uncertainty with regard to Ethiopia's ability to regulate the flow of the Blue Nile to the benefit of Sudanese riverine agriculture, fisheries, and hydropower production. In Ethiopia, the project – known as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) – gained an important nationalistic dimension, and its completion is now seen as crucial to the legitimacy of the ruling elite. Over the last decade, amidst continuous delays, Ethiopia has been able to convince the Sudanese government

of the benefits of a more regulated flow of the Blue Nile. Sudan subsequently became a mediator between Egypt and Ethiopia until the demise of Omar Bashir in April 2019. As the dam has come nearer to completion, Ethiopia has adopted a harder stance, despite major political changes since 2018. While Egypt and Sudan insisted on a comprehensive and definitive agreement on water allocation and upstream developments, Ethiopia opted for a piecemeal step-by-step approach and the involvement of the African Union, despite pressure by the US, including a partial suspension of aid. In July 2020, Ethiopia began filling the reservoir to take advantage of the rainy season, without reaching a prior comprehensive agreement with Egypt and Sudan. Both Cairo and Khartoum voiced their concern repeatedly – Egypt seeking to use its reach in the United Nations and other international bodies – and Addis Ababa's relations with both states have grown increasingly tense.[42] It has even been suggested that the recent political unrest in Ethiopia, which has caused considerable instability, is partly being fuelled by Egypt.[43] For the moment, a comprehensive solution on the Nile remains elusive.

The Covid-19 crisis and the national elections

Ethiopia has seen turbulent change since Abiy Ahmed came to power. Abiy's imprint on the domestic scene has been significant but overshadowed by resistance and conflicts that have broken out in various areas. 2020 was to be the year of general elections and an important test for the political future of the Prime Minister. While it would have been a decisive period for Ethiopia anyhow, the Covid-19 crisis has added to the complexity of the country's problems.

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[42] A. Ylönen, "Talking Nile: Historical Aspects, Current Concerns, and the Stalemate in Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Negotiations", *The Horn Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 4, July/August 2020, pp. 1-10.

[43] "Oromia cracks open again", *Africa Confidential*, vol. 61, no. 15, 23 July 2020, p. 2.

The Ethiopian response to the virus started slowly, but in a coordinated fashion; the Ministry of Health has been at the frontline in combatting the virus since the beginning. In late January 2020, the Ministry opened a call centre and, in coordination with the World Health Organization (WHO), started training a response team. The response of the government nevertheless appeared relatively lax to some, considering that Ethiopian airlines kept up its 30 plus flights per week to China, the epicentre of the expanding corona-crisis in late December 2019. Since May 2020, the rainy season has seen infections rise, and testing has been expanded accordingly.

The government finally declared *a state of emergency* which, logistical considerations apart, was also arguably used to postpone the elections. This led to opposition protests and changed the pace of events. Potentially the most critical result of Covid-19 policies, the postponement is seen to strongly support the opposition's claims that the government is working towards a totalitarian system and aims to cling to power while ostensibly claiming to be inclusive and calling for dialogue.

The TPLF has responded with revived calls for self-determination, primarily because of its own marginalisation in the new political order. The government in Mekelle even went ahead with regional elections, leading to further muscle-flexing between the TPLF and the national government.[44] Addis Ababa, citing a ruling by the House of Federation, declared the regional elections unconstitutional as they ignored the roles of the House of Peoples' Representatives and of the National Election Board.[45] Despite this, the regional vote was held in early September 2020 and the TPLF won a landslide victory. The government refused to acknowledge the result. The constitutional stalemate is not over. The national state of emergency declared because of the

[44] A. Asefa. "'Exit' Imminent as Abiy Neglects the Tigrayan 'Voice'", *Ethiopia Insight*, 22 August 2020.

[45] "News: House of Federation Votes Tigray Regional Election Contravenes Federal Constitution, Non-Binding & Non-Applicable", *Addis Standard*, 5 September 2020.

pandemic came to an end in late August. The government's legal mandate also ended in early October. This was resolved by an investigation by an independent constitutional committee, but, focusing on the health crisis, the government failed to use the chance to reopen a transitional dialogue and further address the consequent constitutional dilemma through inclusive politics.[46]

The Conflict over Tigray

The political deadlock between the TPLF and the government took an extraordinary turn when on the night of 4 November the TPLF attacked the Ethiopian military's Northern Command Post to seize military equipment. Immediately, the government launched an all-out military campaign involving air raids and ground forces to subdue the TPLF-led regional government. Two weeks into the conflict, hundreds have lost their lives and thousands of refugees have crossed into Sudan for safety.[47] According to some news sources, both parties have committed atrocities,[48] while TPLF has fired missiles both at Gonder and Lalibela airports in the Amhara region south of Tigray and across the border at Asmara in Eritrea, ostensibly to punish the Amhara and Eritrea for their support of the government's military campaign. The unfolding conflict has brought the reform-course of the government to a stand-still and the administration has rejected international offers for mediation, qualifying it as an internal affair.[49] Instead, the government is presenting its campaign as a punitive measure to bring the criminal "TPLF junta" to justice.

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[46] M.A. Salemot, "With Legal Roads Closed, a Transitional Government Should Take the Wheel", *Ethiopia Insight*, 26 May 2020.

[47] "Refugee Exodus to Sudan Swells as War Crimes Feared in Ethiopia's Tigray", *Reuters*, 13 November 2020.

[48] J. Burke and Z. M. Salih, "Both Sides in Ethiopian Conflict Are Killing Civilians, Refugees Say", *The Guardian*, 13 November 2020.

[49] "Tigray Crisis: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Rejects Peace Talks", *BBC News*, 11 November 2020.

However, a number of external parties in the region have interests in or result affected by the conflict. The Eritrean leadership has sought the demise of the TPLF and its troops have allegedly been involved on the ground. Tigray borders Eritrea and a friendler regional administration under the central government's influence would serve Eritrea. On the other hand, Egypt's interests would be served by a weak central government in Ethiopia which would cede ground in the Nile dispute. Others affected by the conflict are Djibouti, Ethiopia's main economic lifeline to the Red Sea, Somalia, which depends heavily on the Ethiopian military in its battle against al-Shabaab, and Sudan, which is forced to deal with a great number of refugees from Tigray at least in the short term.

In the official narrative of the government, the TPLF, since retreating from power, failed to join the new political project and worked against the new leadership and the constitution, ostensibly funded ethnic-based dissent groups (among them the OLA and Gumuz-based separatist group), and plotted with the government of Egypt, supporting those who would destabilize the country. In the view of the Abiy administration, the TPLF's "old guard" has made the country ungovernable by funding anti-peace elements that spread conflicts and weaken its reformist course.

Shrouded in this relentless fight between the new administration and the TPLF is the question of access to the political and economic arena. While the government seems to be determined to fully uproot the previous networks of power created during the last three decades, the TPLF is trying to shift the attention of the conflict to the international level in order to create a seat for itself at a mediation table and to regain access to the political future of Ethiopia, the country it had ruled for so long. The TPLF has done much to discredit the Abiy administration and has attempted to show that the new camp is unable to govern the country so long. In the meantime, a new administration, loyal to the central government, has been nominated to replace the TPLF leadership in Tigray. It is yet

too early to assess the full extent of the war since it occurs in an internet and telephone blockage under a six-month state of emergency in the region.[50] However, it is highly unlikely that the conflict will be resolved before a defeat, resulting in a direct loss of life of thousands and endangering the livelihoods of an unpredictable number of people for a long time.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's complex domestic political landscape is the major determinant of its regional and international relations and its central role in the equally complex politics of the Horn of Africa. Throughout Ethiopia's imperial and revolutionary political history, the country has continued both as a light-bearer and as a conservative actor in the region. While Ethiopia has often taken the initiative to shape political realities in the Horn of Africa, it has generally been more reactionary in its wider relations with the great and regional powers.

Hence, despite promising economic statistics, at a closer look, the important changes of recent years reveal conflicting political and economic legacies. The current government emerged with a promise to tackle the main political, economic, and social problems emanating from the tenure of past regimes, initiate its self-proclaimed reformist course and aspire to creating inclusion and prosperity. Success in this daunting endeavor would likely result in increased political stability. Instead, though, the reformist agenda is wrangled up in various conflicts on various fronts and any progress will depend on the outcome of the conflict in Tigray. At this point, it seems unlikely that, since the surgical intervention to take out the TPLF leadership has failed, any government military triumph will result in immediate peace. On the contrary, protracted civil strife, particularly between Amhara and Tigrinya along

[50] S. Allison, "Blackout Makes It Hard to Report on Ethiopia's Civil War", *The Mail & Guardian (blog)*, 16 November 2020.

their shared borders, and the deliberate targeting of Tigrinya speakers scapegoating them for the long years TPLF rule appear among the most dangerous future scenarios. Should they come true, such scenarios would potentially destabilize the country and set back the wellbeing and economic progress of the people of Ethiopia for years to come.

As the current situation shows, conflicts run within and between groups and between groups and the government. The reformist agenda, probably even the Noble Peace Prize Award itself, has made Abiy a target for various groups who want to prove that he is unable to peacefully transform the country and govern it. The quest for inclusive citizenship and the age-old nationalities question have still not been settled.[51] The current situation is complex and no simple formula for a "way ahead" can be identified. There have been seismic shifts in power balances and coalitions. The TPLF-era has ended and "with the dissolution of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, the subservience of the other ethnic political groups that were part of the EPRDF coalition is over".[52] Instead, the conflict lays open the fierce competition over power and over the renewal of the Ethiopian polity since Abiy emerged as the new leader. But given the current events in Tigray and violence across the country, the new Ethiopia seems more opaque than ever.

With new options for state capture on the table, the current situation invites various actors to fight for a seat at the table. The government is seen as more and more rigid in trying to sustain the upper hand in this race for power. Abiy Ahmed is viewed by some as genuinely driven by a will to establish peace and prosperity in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Others, however, see his efforts as a pretext to expand the autocratic rule of his own camp and extend Ethiopia's hegemonic aspirations in the region. His ambiguous position in the absence of elections is certainly making him increasingly vulnerable to such allegations.

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[51] R. Lefort, "Political Shake-up and Localism Can Edge Ethiopia Forwards", *Open Democracy*, 29 May 2019.

[52] W. Aberra, "Lemma's Disunity Drug", *Ethiopia Insight*, 17 December 2019.

At the moment it should not be underestimated though that the conflict in Tigray gains the Abiy administration enormous domestic support. What appears as a significant conflict also has the signs of a violent transformation of political and economic control from one camp to the next. Consequently, Ethiopia at present is indisputably going through some of the most far-reaching changes in its recent history.

Abiy's reforms and associated Ethiopian foreign policy have facilitated new alliances and opportunities for appeasement in regional relations, although the country's assertiveness in issues such as the Berbera Corridor and the GERD have also somewhat undermined relations with its allies and pitted Ethiopia more clearly against certain regional rivals. The fragmented political landscape in Ethiopia is also still susceptible to foreign influence and exacerbation, as the TPLF's suspected support by Egypt might indicate, although political fault lines and related conflicts have been largely generated by internal dynamics.

Vital to a peaceful future for Ethiopia is focus on dialogue between Oromo and Tigray elites, the positioning of the Prosperity Party with regard to the future of federalism, and, above all, the upcoming elections. But without prioritization of the plight of the sections of civilian population which are at a danger of further victimization, the government will divert markedly from the idea of transitional justice the new administration started with and likely open the door to protracted ethnic strife.

Equally crucial will be developments in the relationship with Eritrea, cooperation on issues related to the Nile waters with Egypt and Sudan, cross-border relations with the latter, continued interventions in Somalia, and Ethiopia's role in Somalia-Somaliland relations. Wider relations with regional and global powers will also help to define the future of international alliances in the Horn. One thing is certain: the success or failure of Ethiopia's quest for hegemony in the Horn of Africa will be largely determined by internal dynamics.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Giovanni Carbone, Camillo Casola

The Horn of Africa is one of the most dynamic regions on the African continent. The political processes currently under way have deep implications that reflect not only on domestic developments within the area's core states (i.e. Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti) but also on the unstable equilibria that characterise inter-state relations in the macro-region. The 2018 appointment of Abiy Ahmed as head of the Ethiopian government, in particular, proved a game changer. The impetus given by the Prime Minister to easing tensions with neighbouring Eritrea, the mediation he offered to regional actors for the solution of internal crises (in Sudan, South Sudan and Somaliland), the strengthening of relations with international partners (from China to Saudi Arabia), and a growing regional leadership that made the country a privileged reference point for Europe and the international community in the most acute phases of the pandemic, have all contributed to increasing the strategic centrality of Addis Ababa, while at the same time raising the geopolitical profile of a region whose relevance had been on the rise for a number of years.

As in the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a disruptive impact on the Horn, causing significant political and social consequences. In Ethiopia in particular, the health crisis presented the government with complex choices: the long-awaited parliamentary elections, seen as a fundamental test for the leadership of Abiy and his new Prosperity Party, were postponed indefinitely because of the risks of large-scale

contagion. This decision to protect public health at the expense of the democratic process exposed the government to (at times violent) criticisms from the opposition, who accused the Prime Minister of trying to consolidate power beyond constitutional time limits. The ensuing crisis in Tigray, where local political authorities controlled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) organised and won regional elections that Addis Ababa deemed illegitimate, exacerbated domestic and centrifugal tensions in a federal system already under pressure from the competing power ambitions of the Amhara, Tigrayan and Oromo elites. The deadlock between the federal government and the Tigrayan regional authorities recently led the former to initiate military action. The risk of rapid and dangerous escalation is extremely high. Meanwhile, minor ethnic groups have also raised their demands for autonomy. In June 2020, the Ethiopian government officially recognised a new regional state following the late 2019 referendum in which the Sidama communities had voted overwhelmingly in favour of this option.

In Somalia too, the political repercussions of Covid-19 have had a direct impact on the country's electoral processes. The virus added to an extremely fragile and patchy state apparatus, making the organisation and running of a proper popular election hard to conceive. Not only was the vote postponed to 2021, but a power conflict between Mogadishu and regional bodies ultimately imposed the abandonment of the plan to return to universal suffrage (the Somali population has not gone to the polls since 1969) and its replacement with an indirect and clan-based voting mechanism, as already used in recent years.

If the political impact of the coronavirus crisis on the region has been important, its social consequences have been even more profound. In a region marked by high levels of endemic poverty, chronic conflict and recurrent food crises, where some 20 million people were seriously food insecure even before the outbreak of the pandemic, and where an invasion of desert locusts has caused devastation since 2019, conditions have been

further aggravated by Covid-19. The most vulnerable sections of the population include refugees, asylum seekers and internally-displaced persons (Ethiopia alone hosts 800,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from South Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea, alongside 1.4 million internally displaced persons; the latter number is bound to increase due to the Tigray conflict), who are mostly short of sustenance resources and lack economic and social protection mechanisms. The very restrictions imposed by the need to contain the pandemic have impacted the distribution of food and humanitarian aid, as well as the sustainability of informal work activities. According to some estimates, in 2020 the number of individuals experiencing acute food insecurity (i.e. "crisis" level or worse) will be 25-30% higher than forecasted prior the outbreak of the pandemic.[1]

Beyond the direct and indirect effects of the coronavirus in the region, the Horn of Africa remains an area of dense, lively and intricate developments, both when one delves into the political and economic dynamics within each individual country, and when one looks at the regional interactions and the extensive involvement of external players that contribute to shaping current developments. In this Report, we also wish to emphasise how minor states in the region are fully part of these processes.

Despite its relatively diminutive size and of the irrelevance the latter may suggest, Djibouti has come to occupy an unprecedented strategic position. Overlooking the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the gateway to the Red Sea, and a crucial commercial maritime node for the transit of oil ships, the country has unexpectedly become a major international military hub for foreign powers aiming at a direct foothold in the area, whether at sea or on the ground. Long a post-colonial army outpost for Paris, the French presence has been joined by the United States and other European states, including Italy and Germany, as well as by Japan and China. Beijing's first military

[1] "Famine Early Warning System Network", *East Africa*, May 2020.

base abroad testifies to the attention paid to East Africa and the Horn as areas directly linked to Xi Jinping's Maritime Silk Road. The ability of Djibouti to leverage its strategic position and growing international competition (such as between Emirati and Chinese companies for the control of the Doraleh port) has helped it obtain investments, the revenues necessary to feed a neo-patrimonial distribution of prebends and handouts, and international legitimacy, despite the country's limited size, fluctuating economic performance, and serious deficits in democracy and human rights.

In Eritrea, the peace deal with Ethiopia signed in Jeddah marked a further step in the direction of progressive normalisation of political-diplomatic relations with regional and continental partners. This was recently evidenced by Asmara's participation in the Red Sea Alliance, a new platform launched by Saudi Arabia and allegedly meant to coordinate efforts in combating piracy and illicit trafficking, but *de facto* aimed at halting meddling in the region by Saudi Arabia's rivals (i.e. Iran, Turkey and Qatar). The persistent, harsh repression of rights and freedoms at the hands of Isaias Afwerki's government, however, continues to hinder the full rehabilitation of the regime by the international community, while the unending tensions with the TPLF and the Tigrayan elites across the border with Ethiopia – including Asmara's involvement in the recent conflict between Addis and Mekelle – remain a potentially destabilising factor. Eritrea is no longer the "pariah" state it was until a few years ago, completely isolated and opposed not only by the West but also by African states. Yet, the path towards a full return to the international community will need internal reforms and openings that are still to materialise.

The improvement of the political and security situation in Somalia has allowed the government to regain partial control over larger areas of the country. But the state-building process is still highly incomplete, and the scarce financial resources available represent a decisive limit. Secessionist and autonomist claims, in Somaliland and Puntland respectively, remain key

unresolved issues for the government of Mogadishu, whereas the presence of al-Shabaab jihadists in the south, though mainly limited to rural areas and villages, represents a wider threat, as demonstrated by the attacks that have hit the capital over the past year. Geopolitical competition among external actors weighs heavily on the country's present and future prospects for stabilisation, particularly the activities of mutually hostile powers such as Turkey – which over the past ten years has developed a pervasive presence in Somalia, inaugurating a military base and obtaining from the Farmajo government a formal invitation to explore offshore waters in search of oil – and the United Arab Emirates.

In Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed's new leadership initially boosted ambitions for regional and continental leadership. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam construction project is a plastic representation. Symbolically, it marks a shift from the country's past marginality on the continental scene to today's undisputed centrality, demonstrated by the strong position the Ethiopian government took in negotiations with Egypt and Sudan for the management of the Nile waters. While tensions with Egypt remain extremely high and far from resolved, the dam project also consolidates the economic and development prospects of a country that led the continent's growth rankings before the outbreak of the pandemic. Addis Ababa is strongly supported by the Chinese, attracted by a 110-million people market and a nascent industrial and productive reality.

Ethiopia's unresolved ethno-regional tensions represent the most problematic aspect of a political model whose most evident frailties are centre-periphery relations. The Prime Minister's attempt to overcome ethnic divisions led to the dissolution of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the reorganisation of the governing coalition around a unique national party, the Prosperity Party. But this clashed with the persistence of centrifugal forces – most notably in Tigray, as mensioned – and with the country's ethno-federal set-up. The ensuing tensions and complexities

prompted the government to respond decisively, in some cases using force, which in turn has damaged the image of mediator that accompanied the rise of the young Oromo leader. The government has also been forced to take greater note of ongoing developments, as when some local communities voted overwhelmingly in favour of establishing a new regional state, in 2019.

The Horn of Africa remains a precarious but geopolitically crucial region. The EU and Italy must therefore multiply efforts in support of positive political and economic developments in the area. In particular, the following recommended initiatives, actions and measures should be considered:

- **Fighting the pandemic**. For the duration of the pandemic, international cooperation and resources will be a key lifeline for already vulnerable populations and fragile health systems. The EU and Italy – the latter with historically close ties to the region – thus have a role to play in avoiding further deterioration of state structures, greater human suffering, and possible instability across much of the region.
- **Adopting an early warning approach**. State weakness increases the vulnerability of the area: Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, alongside nearby Sudan and South Sudan – both part of an expanded notion of the Horn – are all among the twenty-one states most at risk globally, according to the Fragile States Index.[2] This overall fragility requires close monitoring of ongoing and future developments on the part of Italy and the EU, who must stand ready to adopt new diplomatic and economic initiatives in this key region.
- **Defending the chances of democracy**. No country in the Horn qualifies as a democratic regime. Moreover, the growing presence of and efforts by China, Russia, Turkey and Middle Eastern states in the region carries

[2] *Fragile States Index 2020*, Fund for Peace.

with it the promotion of alternative political models. This is a critical time in which the EU and the West at large should make an extra effort to support whatever democratic voices, options and possibilities there are in the region – including in the fluid and unpredictable Ethiopian scenario.

- **Containing crisis-induced migration**. The EU and Italy should support current regional developments that favour stability and inter-regional relations, as the latter hold significant potential for reducing certain causes of migration.
- **Preventing backsliding in Eritrea**. The EU and Italy, working together with other international partners, should find appropriate ways of engaging Eritrea in a continuous dialogue, exploiting the recent appeasement of regional tensions to promote a gradual political and economic opening of the regime.
- **Keeping Djibouti**. Italy and the EU must strengthen their relations and political-diplomatic influence in Djibouti, a country targeted by China as an increasingly crucial geopolitical and commercial node. Opportunities for promoting more open and responsive governance should be pursued.
- **Promoting inclusive dialogue in Ethiopia**. External actors should press the government, which recently postponed a national election and extended its mandate beyond the term envisaged by the constitution, to pursue inclusive and cooperative dialogue with the national opposition and a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Tigray.
- **Moving towards a free and fair vote in Ethiopia**. To help domestic stabilisation in Ethiopia, the EU and Italy should support the creation of conditions conducive to a free and fair election in 2021.
- **Promoting dialogue in Somalia**. The EU, and particularly Italy, should exert diplomatic and political pressure and facilitate negotiations aimed at sorting out the

Somalia-Somaliland issue. Mogadishu is not currently living through such a defining moment as Addis Ababa and Asmara. Rather, the long-term process of state-reconstruction must continue, with the international community supporting the transitional tasks of constitution-making, good governance, and elections under universal suffrage.

- **Strengthening security forces in Somalia**. In view of the 2021 deadline for the withdrawal of AMISOM troops from Somalia, the EU should increasingly support the establishment and strengthening of professional, inclusive and apolitical national security forces.
- **Investing in infrastructure and education in Somalia**. While a continuation of humanitarian support to Somalia is recommended, the EU and Italy should also invest in high impact development projects in infrastructure and education, two key sectors for rebuilding the nation.

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