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## **The Horn of Africa-Persian Gulf nexus: inter-regional dynamics and the reshaping of regional order in geopolitical flux.**

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### **Introduction**

The Horn of Africa is a complex site of geopolitical and geostrategic importance, inextricably linked to key aspects of its history and geography. The uptick in engagement by external actors, and their attendant interests, alliances and agendas, underscore the pivotal role of geopolitics in shaping the security and economic trajectory of the region. The proximity of the Horn of Africa to the oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf, and the vital commercial lanes that transit the Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden, reinforce the region as a crucial maritime chokepoint and port of call in an increasingly connected global order.

The complex web of external actors and interests, the potentiality of increased geopolitical competition, regionalization of conflicts and shifting domestic politics intersect at various points in the interregional order with implications for the role and mandate of the regional mechanism, the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGAD) in promoting peace and stability in the region.

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## **Horn of Africa Regional Security Complex**

The Horn of Africa can be conceived as a regional security complex, defined as ‘a set of states whose major security preoccupations and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another’.<sup>1</sup> This is reiterated by Lake and Morgan<sup>2</sup> who describe a regional security complex as ‘a set of states continually affected by one or more security externalities that emanate from a distinct geographic area.’ The historical patterns of amity and enmity among the countries of the region, coupled with multifaceted layers of security interdependence has constantly animated the foreign policies of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, particularly with regard to state formation, regime security and visions of regional order.

A nuanced understanding of the emergent political and security dynamics in the Horn also needs to contextualise a web of complex geostrategic and geoeconomic developments that have increasingly influenced the trajectory of the regional political and security orders.

### **A history of interregional connectivity**

The interregional connectivity between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula is not a recent phenomenon and can be traced back to a long rich history of centuries old trade, coupled with shared religious histories across Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions. The proximity of the two regions also has a darker dimension in the form of the enslavement of thousands of Africans across the Arabian region in Hejaz, Nadj, Oman and Yemen.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the trajectory of interregional engagement was fundamentally altered by the imperialist era under Ottoman and British rule which shaped regional orders and political economies underpinned by shifting migratory flows and commercial links.<sup>4</sup>

The symbiotic relationship between Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism ideologies animated the struggle for independence on both sides of the Red Sea divide, with cultural and ethnic affinities playing a major role in state formation processes and the forging of transnational solidarities. The geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War period and the oil crisis of 1973 were additional macro-developments that not only established ideological factions among countries in the Horn and the Gulf but also transformed economic relations between the two regions. The end of global bipolarity resulted in shifting coalitions among countries as Gulf monarchies sought to counter the spread of communism in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The oil boom of the 1970s also altered the trade balance between the two regions in favour of the Gulf countries who used their largesse to offset balance of payments crises and debts in the Horn, coupled with an upscaling of official development assistance (ODA) disbursements. The 1990s marked a decade of disengagement from Africa by Gulf States as a result of re-orientation

of foreign policy and security priorities following key developments such as the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist *Derg* government in Ethiopia (1991), the independence of Eritrea (1993) and Islamist revolutions in Sudan orchestrated by Sheikh Hassan Al-Turabi (1989)<sup>5</sup>

The Arab Spring in 2011 and the toppling of a number of authoritarian regimes in the northern tier of Africa signalled to the Saudi-UAE axis that a reconfiguration of the Gulf regional order was well-advised in a pragmatic manoeuvre to counter an increasingly assertive Qatar-Turkey axis. Saudi Arabia was particularly wary of Qatar's and Turkey's support for Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

### **High-wire transitions in Ethiopia and Sudan**

Another pivotal development with regional impact is the 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea that ended the twenty-year border dispute rooted in Ethiopian refusal to concede the border town of Badme in accordance with the decision of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission (EEBC). Moreover, the political headwinds in Ethiopia between 2015 and 2017, including tensions within the ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led to the election of Abiy Ahmed to replace Hailemariam Desalegn as Prime Minister in 2018. The thaw in relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as the broad domestic reform agenda set up under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed heralded a shift in bilateral relations and foreign policy approaches of the two states, in addition to promoting regional stability and momentum for regional integration. Overall, the reset in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations will continue to have a net effect on the shaping of a regional order with Ethiopia at the helm.<sup>6</sup>

Sudan is also in the throes of high-wire transition in the wake of a popular uprising in 2019 that led to the ouster of strongman Omar al-Bashir who had held power since 1989. An interim transitional council, made up of 11 civilian and military members, was established in August 2019 to oversee the 39-month transitional process under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok. At the top of the transitional government's agenda is Sudan's removal from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism, in addition to reversing the economic downturn and the strengthening of political and civil liberties suppressed under al-Bashir's regime. Prime Minister Hamdok will have to navigate internal divisions, including resistance from former Bashir loyalists in intelligence and security services, as well as a weak economy plagued by high inflation, volatile oil revenue and over-dependence on Gulf states.<sup>7</sup>

### **The geostrategy of ports**

The Persian Gulf countries' strategic calculus towards the Horn gave way to interventionist foreign policies employing both chequebook diplomacy and acquisition of military facilities and logistics hubs in the littoral areas along the Red Sea and the Horn. Apart from the Gulf

states, the geostrategic significance of the Bab al-Mandeb strait as a crucial chokepoint with implications for maritime and energy security dynamics, also factored in the foreign policy agenda of a cross-section of geopolitical actors including the US, China, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, who operate a variety of military facilities across the region. The result is heightened geopolitical competition and increased militarization, with far-reaching implications for regional security and stability.<sup>8</sup> Alongside a number of anti-piracy naval deployments in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, Djibouti hosts the largest number of operational foreign military bases totalling 9, followed by Eritrea (GCC military base) and Somalia (Turkish military base). Plans are underway for the establishment of a Russian logistics base in Eritrea and a Turkish maintenance hub in the port of Suakin in Sudan. The UAE is also constructing a combined military air and naval base on a 25-year lease at Berbera on the coast of Somaliland. Multilateral military missions in the Horn of Africa have been active since 2002 including the US-led Combined Maritime Forces, EU Operation Atalanta, NATO Operation Ocean Shield, and the EU Training Mission in Somalia with various mandates such as counter-piracy, vessels protection and strengthening maritime security and naval capacity in the region.<sup>9</sup>

The external security politics of the Horn has several implications for the regional security order. The immediate effect is the overlap of commercial and military interests as a result of increased securitization and militarization following the build-up of foreign military actors in the region. A second effect is the integration of the Horn into broader geostrategic and geopolitical agendas such as the GCC rivalries and the Indo-Pacific strategic competition involving India, China and the US. Third, regional security in the Horn has been elevated on the political agenda, moving away from a narrow focus on continental security to a broader emphasis on maritime and transcontinental security dynamics.<sup>10</sup> Fourth, the geopolitical jockeying of external powers in the Horn raises the risk of further fragmentation and escalation of regional tensions, in addition to regional instability. For instance, the UAE fallout with Somalia has pivoted it towards Somaliland and other regional authorities, fuelling tensions with the federal government in Mogadishu.<sup>11</sup>

For their part, the countries of the Horn have not been passive beneficiaries, opting to leverage their geostrategic significance and the renewed interest by foreign powers for their benefit. Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia have opted to maintain a neutral stance on the GCC tensions, courting investments from both sides of the divide. Djibouti, Eritrea and Somaliland have sided with the Saudi-led bloc, benefiting from ODA, investments in infrastructure and economic rents from long-term leases of ports and hubs.<sup>12</sup>

The strategic imperative for enhanced ownership of the regional security agenda and a coherent policy approach to increased foreign military presence in the Red Sea corridor led the littoral states along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to establish a Red Sea Council in January 2020. Initiated by Saudi Arabia, the Red Sea Council is made up of Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen and is aimed at coordinating maritime security

initiatives in the Red sea, tackling piracy and illegal trafficking as well as managing security risks from the increased militarization and securitization in the Red Sea neighbourhood.<sup>13</sup> It is quite telling that Ethiopia and Somaliland were excluded from the Red Sea Council, given that both states have been critical of outsized Saudi influence over Red Sea political affairs.

## **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) tensions and the war in Yemen**

The jockeying for influence by Gulf states in the Horn of Africa played out along two major faultlines: tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) centred around Saudi-Iran rivalry and Gulf involvement in the war in Yemen; upheld by a mix of other systemic and regional factors such as the gradual US disengagement from the region as a result of the Obama administration's pivot towards Asia.<sup>14</sup> In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE led a coalition of Arab states in a campaign against the Houthi rebels aimed at recapturing a number of cities, including Sanaa, and restoring the ousted government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The Saudi-led coalition received logistical and intelligence support from the US and UK, who saw a Houthi-controlled Yemen as a potential stronghold for resurgent terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the risk of growing extremism in the southwestern flank of the Peninsula following the merger of AQAP Yemeni and Saudi wings. In addition to the counterterrorism rationale, the Saudi-led military operations in Yemen were presented as a strategic manoeuvre to counter Iranian influence in the Horn, based on Iran's historic ties with states such as Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti; and to limit its access to the strategic chokepoint of the Bab al-Mandeb strait.<sup>15</sup>

The Saudi-Iran rivalry at the core of GCC tensions is also underpinned by 'a fragmented multipolarity'<sup>16</sup> that defines the Middle East regional order. This regional order is made up of three competing poles; a sectarian bloc comprised of a Saudi-led Sunni bloc (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain); an Iran-led Shia bloc (Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militants and the Syrian Assad Regime); and an Islamist Qatar-Turkey alliance.<sup>17</sup> Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi sought to use their financial muscle and political leverage to gain proxy support in the Horn of Africa, especially in Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia, as a way of maintaining power balances in the Gulf and securing their national interests. For instance, both countries provided diplomatic and financial support to talks that realised the rapprochement between Eritrea-Ethiopia after a twenty-year stalemate. Qatar has also backed the Darfur peace process in Sudan and supported the National Congress Council in South Sudan during its independence process in 2011.<sup>18</sup>

## **The hydropolitics of the Nile Basin**

The transboundary Nile River is a shared resource in northeast Africa with dual potential for enhanced regional cooperation on one hand, and intense resource-based conflict on the other. A major source of regional tensions has been the hydropolitics around dam projects, specifically the near-completion of the mega Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)

which has exacerbated rifts between Ethiopia and Egypt. At the heart of the dispute is the utilization of water resources with Egypt, which claims historical rights over the Nile, flagging the GERD as a potential impediment to its water flow within a five to seven year filling period of the reservoir. For Ethiopia, the GERD forms a critical part of its national development plans, boosting hydroelectric supply with add-on benefits for regional integration in the long-term.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of several rounds of talks brokered by Washington at the end of 2019, the two states have failed to agree on a compensation mechanism for the filling of the GERD reservoir. According to Egypt, which has been backed by an Arab League resolution passed in February 2020, Ethiopia's 'defiant, unilateral stance' contravenes the 2015 Agreement on the Declaration of Principles (DoP) between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan.<sup>20</sup> Ethiopia slammed the resolution as 'partial and blind support' to Egypt with no due consideration of the facts in the GERD talks.<sup>21</sup> The contestations and tensions over the Nile have to be seen as a critical site for inter-state bargaining over the future of the regional order, intermixed with the political and security calculations of various states sharing the resource.<sup>22</sup>

## **Policy implications**

In light of the geostrategic significance of the Horn of Africa region and the proliferation of a range of geopolitical actors, with transformative effects on the regional security and political order, the unfolding geopolitical shifts at play have a number of implications for policymakers in the Horn:

### *For the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)*

- 1) As the main driver of regional integration in the Horn, IGAD must promote a governance agenda in accordance with its 2016-2020 Regional Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan, with a long-term emphasis on interlinkages across its pillars of cooperation to address governance deficiencies that are the structural basis for instability and conflict. A crucial first step in this regard is the finalization and operationalization of the draft Protocol on Democracy, Governance and Election.
- 2) IGAD should address capacity deficits and institutional bottlenecks that weaken its role as a legitimacy provider for intra-regional and extra-regional action. Accordingly, member states should translate their commitments to regional cooperation and financial independence into concrete actions.

### *For the states of the Horn of Africa:*

- 1) Policymakers will have to raise their strategic horizons in view of the evolving geopolitical environment in order to strengthen strategic capacities and mitigate associate risks. This calls for enhanced cooperation with track two actors such as civil society and think tanks.

- 2) States should aim for structural transformation and economic diversification as a way of boosting their negotiating positions *vis-à-vis* external actors, including the Gulf states, and moving away from engagement strategies premised on extraversion

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