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Regional Security Dynamics in the Horn of Africa

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The Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict-ridden and insecure regions in the world. Since the end of the colonial period, the region has experienced inter-state wars, inter-state disputes, and a wide range of intra-state wars, as well as cross-border communal conflicts and terrorism. One key explanation for this is the intertwined nature of domestic and regional security, which creates instability and hampers conflict resolution. Consequently, this paper argues that a regional perspective is needed to understand the prevalence of conflict and insecurity.

The Horn of Africa has been a hotbed of violent conflict and insecurity for a long time.[1] Yet, political changes at the end of the 2010s gave rise to hopes for the rise of a transformative new trajectory toward democracy and stability.[2] In Somalia, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (known as "Farmajo") was elected president in 2017 and awoke cautious optimism among many international observers who hoped he would lead Somalia in a more stable direction; advance against the Islamist insurgent group Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn, commonly known as al-Shabaab; and move the country's democratisation process forward.[3] In 2018, the TPLF-led coalition in Ethiopia was pressured to reform, after public protests, and Abiy Ahmed took office as prime minister.[4] The new PM was welcomed by the international community, which became excited when Ethiopia, just a few months after Abiy's inauguration, made peace with long-term rival Eritrea. The groundbreaking agreement was lauded as the removal of a major destabilising factor for the entire Horn.[5] Sudan similarly entered into a historical transition process in 2019, when long-term dictator Omar al-Bashir was ousted in a coup d'état, which caused many local and Western actors to again express hopes for a more democratic and stable region.

The optimism about the situation was brutally shattered in November 2020, when a civil war that is estimated to have resulted in around 600,000 deaths broke out, between the federal government of Ethiopia and the TPLF, in Ethiopia's Tigray region.[6] The TPLF and the Ethiopian government signed an agreement to cease hostilities in late 2022, but the main grievances that started the war are still unresolved. Several other conflicts that were awakened or exacerbated by the war in Tigray also remain unresolved, and continue to undermine Ethiopia's stability.

In Somalia, delayed elections and an attempt by Farmajo to extend his mandate led the country to the brink of civil war, in 2021. The internal political situation stabilised somewhat when elections were finally held in May 2022 and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who had already served as president from 2012 to 2017, assumed the position for a second time. Yet, insecurity remains high; al-Shabaab still controls large areas of the country and violent confrontations between clan militias, as well as between militias and government troops, are occurring repeatedly.[7]

In Sudan, after yet another coup d'état, by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2021, tensions between the two military leaders, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (SAF) and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (RSF), escalated into an armed conflict, in April 2023. To date, it has led to more than 1800 casualties and hundreds of thousands of people leaving their homes.[8] Simultaneously, the security situation in South Sudan is once again deteriorating, despite efforts toward implementing the 2018 peace agreement. Djibouti and Eritrea constitute relatively stable exceptions in the region, although Djibouti is experiencing irregular violent incidents involving rebel groups and Eritrea has been heavily involved in the Tigray war.[9]

A plethora of research has investigated the internal causes of instability in the states constituting the Horn. However, states in the region also have high levels of security interdependence and their interactions "support and sustain the conflicts within the states of the region in

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Map. The Horn of Africa. Design: Marianna Serveta, FOI.

systemic ways."[10] Yet, the international community has often understood and handled the conflicts and peace processes in this region in isolation from each other.

The purpose of this paper is to build a deeper understanding of how domestic and regional security are interconnected in the Horn of Africa. There is a growing community of scholars who analyse the Horn's regional security dynamics in order to understand its conflicts and security threats.[11] We contribute to this scholarship by empirically investigating four cases: the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea; the deteriorating relations between Sudan and Ethiopia; the emergence and dissolution of the Tripartite Agreement between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea; and al-Shabaab as a transnational security threat. These cases serve as examples of how a complex interplay of overlapping internal, transnational and regional factors contributes to regional instability. Before moving on to our cases, we discuss the shared characteristics and vulnerabilities of the Horn that we believe have a bearing on stability in the region, and provide an overview of a few of the central but non-exhaustive factors that make up the regional dimensions of security.

This paper is based on open sources, including academic publications, media reports, speeches, statements on social media and official documents, and on interviews with 31 key informants. Interviews were conducted in situ, in Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Washington DC, and Stockholm, as well as virtually, between September 2022 and February 2023.[12]

Shared vulnerabilities and regional dimensions of security

The Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict-prone regions in the world, as is underlined by ongoing developments. The three most populous countries, Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan, while vastly different in many ways, share some fundamental characteristics that contribute to instability.

Key characteristics

Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan are all trapped in continuous cycles of state formation and disintegration, where the very basis of statehood is challenged.[13] Ethiopia, for example, has changed regimes three times during the last fifty years and fought several wars. During the

same time frame, Sudan has experienced multiple coups and coup attempts, and Somalia, which often has been deemed the archetype of a "failed state," has seen several internal conflicts, including the war against al-Shabaab, which has been going on for almost two decades. The societies are either multi-ethnic (Ethiopia, Sudan), or clan/tribe-based (Somalia and Sudan, in varying degrees of importance), and identity politics has repeatedly been instrumentalised by political elites, in order to gain political and economic power. This exacerbates fragmentation and fuels tensions between different societal groups. The fragmentation is also partly a legacy of colonial rule, where borders were purposefully redrawn through ethnic communities in order to weaken them, and laws were "…designed to exploit local divisions rather than overcome them."[14]

All three states are characterised by complicated centre-periphery relations, and communities in the borderlands are often marginalised. There is a tug-of-war between political forces who seek to decentralise power and those who wish to centralise it. Fragmentation is further enhanced by the lack of a true monopoly of violence. Ethiopia has both federal and regional military forces, and numerous ethnically-based armed militias, on its territory. In Somalia, both the federal government and the federal member states have security forces of varying degrees, but most clans also have their own armed militias. In Sudan, a war is being fought between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary that was created by the previous president to balance the power of the national army.

That the Horn of Africa is home to two of the world's newest states, South Sudan and Eritrea, further illustrates the fragmentation. These states also share some of the characteristics mentioned above. Eritrea is an outlier in that it has one of the most repressive governments in the world. Governance structures elsewhere in the Horn of Africa are exclusive and undemocratic. As shown by their ranking in the Global Freedom Index, all are considered "not free."[15] Power is centralised and personalised, which means that there is a dearth of transparency, accountability and the rule of law. This situation also leads to unpredictable policymaking.[16]

Shared developmental challenges

All countries in the Horn contend with high levels of poverty and severe food deficits, which are further exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change. The region is currently experiencing the worst drought ever recorded anywhere in the world.[17] This means that the developmental needs in all the countries are great; however, recurring conflicts and mistrust towards neighbours means that state funds are often used for destructive purposes (such as to fund conflict), rather than constructive ones.[18] Around 70 percent of the population in the Horn are under thirty. The young are tired of the lack of economic opportunities and want change. This generation was the driving force behind Sudan's pro-democracy movement; they also played an important part in the Oromo/Amhara demonstrations that led to the removal of the TPLF from power, in Ethiopia. Their efforts have been thwarted by political and military elites who are unwilling to undertake true reform, with adverse effects. In Somalia, al-Shabaab (which means "the Youth") has benefitted from the exclusion of youth in Somali official political and economic life, since the organisation, in contrast, offers opportunities for young people to climb the ranks and reach leadership positions.[19]

How internal issues intertwine with regional security

> "Throughout the Horn of Africa, one country's 'periphery' is its neighbour's back door – with plentiful opportunities for troublemaking."[20]

In the Horn of Africa, internal security issues rarely remain confined within national borders. Olika has described intra-state conflict in this region as "… a moving cyclone" that quickly expands to the regional level, sometimes even morphing into inter-state conflict.[21] The Horn of Africa can be described as a conflict system, meaning that "… what might first appear as isolated conflicts in fact are part of a wider pattern of conflict regionally…" It can also be described as a regional security complex, which means that it is "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another."[22] Many factors contribute to this. For example, political power is often wielded through a "winner-takes-all" approach, and is generally underpinned by ethnic loyalties, which creates fragmented societies. Fragmentation paired with a lack of monopoly of violence facilitates meddling in the neighbours' affairs.[23]

There is an abundance of cross-border issues that permeate relations between the countries of the region. These range from landlocked Ethiopia's dependence on ports in neighbouring coastal countries, porous and contested borders, shared natural resources, the presence of large refugee populations in neighbouring countries and overlapping ethnic communities.

All of these are potential sources of conflict, and can be used as leverage by one actor against another.[24]

Relationships between countries in the Horn of Africa are characterised by historic rivalries and deep mistrust. Besides the region's inter-state wars (Ethiopia-Somalia 1964, 1977–8, and Ethiopia-Eritrea 1998–2000), some of the states in the region, such as Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, have a history of using rebel groups in neighbouring countries as a means to weaken adversaries, or to extract foreign policy concessions from them, creating a cycle of mutual interventions and proxy conflict.[25] The geostrategic location of the region, in the midst of important trade routes, also makes it susceptible to extra-regional interference, which in turn exacerbates intra-regional problems.[26] Additionally, the centralisation and personalisation of power in the Horn states affects internal security, hampers sustainable state-to-state relationships and negatively affects regional cooperation and responses to such transnational threats as terrorism, organised crime, piracy and the trafficking of illegal goods. Foreign and security policy-making and implementation are generally centralised to the highest levels of political leadership, with limited involvement from the ministries, or other government agencies.[27] This leads to limited institutionalisation of state-to-state relations, and sudden foreign-policy shifts and conflicts, depending on who is in charge of the state. This is not a new phenomenon. Mesfin has highlighted how historical leaders, such as Mengistu Haile Mariam, in Ethiopia, or Siad Barre, in Somalia, "were able to shape the political destiny of a state almost single-handedly and enter into either warm or conflictual relations with other states."[28] But, as is shown below, this is also highly relevant in today's context.

The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Whether friendly, or the opposite, relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia have a big impact on regional security. For most of Eritrea's existence as a sovereign state, relations with Ethiopia have been openly hostile, with the exception of the period just after Eritrea's independence, in 1993, and from 2018 to the present day. The TPLF-led coalition, which overthrew the Derg regime and took power in Ethiopia in 1991, supported Eritrean independence. Thus, initial relations between the Isaias Afwerki regime, in Eritrea, and the regime in Ethiopia were good. But, Eritrea's secession, in 1991, made Ethiopia landlocked, and eventually relations soured, over trade issues and access to seaports.[29] Ethiopia has since then relied mainly on Djibouti (and also, to some extent, Somalia) for access to the sea, adding to the strategic importance of Ethiopia's relations with these countries.

Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a destructive war over territory, from 1998 to 2000. Both parties signed a peace agreement in 2000.[30] In 2005, an international boundary commission concluded that the disputed territory belonged to Eritrea. Ethiopia did not comply with the ruling, and hostilities continued by proxy, with both sides supporting rebel groups against one another, fuelling conflict in the region. For example, both Eritrea and Ethiopia exploited the second Afar insurgency, where they supported opposing armed militias from the pastoral Afar minority. Since the Afar live in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, this conflict posed a security threat to all three states. During the war in Somalia, in the early 2000s, Eritrea supported Islamist groups, including al-Shabaab, in an effort to destabilise Ethiopia, and Ethiopia supported the Somali transitional government, on the opposing side.[31] This earned Eritrea a UN arms embargo that lasted from 2009 to 2018.[32]

The antagonistic relationship with Eritrea continued until Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia's prime minister, in 2018. Abiy Ahmed was partly chosen to succeed the incumbent prime minister because of his mixed ethnic background (he is both Oromo and Amhara), which the ruling establishment hoped would mollify these groups. Abiy overturned the previous TPLF-led government's hostile stance towards Eritrea and promised to return the disputed village of Badme to Eritrean control.[33] As Eritrean troops joined the war in Tigray on the Ethiopian government's side, they also took back control over Badme.

The 2018 peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia demonstrates the relevance of the personal relations between leaders, and the alignment of individual agendas. According to interlocutors in Ethiopia, the decision to make peace was not fully institutionalised, and came as a surprise to many, not least the TPLF.[34] Many interviewees brought up how the relationship between Abiy and Isaias was central to Eritrea's involvement during the war in Tigray. It has been speculated that perhaps it was the shared enmity towards the TPLF that prompted the swift reconciliation between the two countries' leaders. Some interlocutors believed that the election of Abiy as prime minister was viewed by Isaias as an opportunity to take care of his enemy, the TPLF, once and for all.[35] Others thought that Abiy convinced Isaias to join the Tigray war. Regardless, Eritrea's involvement in Ethiopia's civil war illustrates that there is little

distinction between domestic and regional security in the Horn of Africa.

The Tigray war lasted over two years, and caused immense destruction and suffering, with hundreds of thousands of casualties, and millions displaced. Ethnic militias from Ethiopia's regions mobilised on both sides. The war has had a very destructive impact inside Ethiopia, intensifying old societal rifts and creating new ones that will take generations to heal. It has also had negative consequences for regional security, as neighbouring countries have been affected by the war.

In late 2022, Ethiopia's federal government and the TPLF reached an agreement to cease hostilities. As per the agreement, the armed branch of the TPLF is to disarm, and government troops are to withdraw from Tigray. The agreement says nothing of Eritrea, except a vague sentence stipulating that the forces of the Ethiopian federal government shall protect Ethiopia from foreign incursions.[36] Judging by the agreed terms, the TPLF has agreed to considerable concessions. But, in choosing negotiations over continuing its difficult military campaign, the organisation is more likely to survive politically.[37] That the previous TPLF spokesperson, Getachew Reda, has been appointed head of the interim administration of Tigray points to this. Going forward, important questions remain. For example, there is the question of whether Eritrea can accept any kind of TPLF presence in Tigray. Many interlocutors in the region doubt that Eritrea and the TPLF can coexist in peace. The enmity runs deep, and, as one individual put it, Isaias blames the TPLF for Eritrea's exclusion from the global order.[38] Observers also speculate about Eritrea's long-term goals in relation to Ethiopia, whether perhaps it is in Isaias interest to weaken Ethiopia.[39] If that is the case, there are plenty of buttons that Eritrea could press.

Deteriorating relations between Sudan and Ethiopia

The deterioration of relations between Sudan and Ethiopia since 2020 is another example of how closely-tied policy is to individual leaders, and how vulnerable the relations between states are to volatile political circumstances.

There is an unresolved territorial dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia over the al-Fashaga region, which is a particularly fertile agricultural area that Sudan claims ownership over, in accordance with a treaty from 1902. During the Bashir and TPLF regimes, there was a tacit agreement that Ethiopian Amhara could live and farm in al-Fashaga, without formally settling the matter.[40] However, the political transitions in both countries and subsequent instability have reinvigorated the issue. Agriculture is the basis for the Ethiopian economy, and good-quality farmland is very desirable. Hence, agreeing that the land is Sudanese is not a preferable option for Ethiopians living in the area. They argue that the land belongs to Ethiopia.[41]

The dispute over al-Fashaga led to violence when Sudan decided to occupy the area, making use of the fact that the Ethiopian stakeholders were occupied, fighting each other in the Tigray war.[42] Ethiopians were forced out of al-Fashaga, which led to skirmishes with Amhara militias and the Ethiopian army on one side and the Sudanese army on the other.[43] The SAF's decision to occupy the area was likely informed by its need to show agency, given the ongoing political transition in Sudan at the time.

The Ethiopian federal government could do little to temper down the tensions, as it relied on political support from the Amhara constituency in the presidential election of 2021, and on military support from the Amhara regional forces in the war against the TPLF. Relations between Sudan and Ethiopia deteriorated further when it was reported that Sudan had given support to the TPLF.[44] The two countries have attempted to avoid direct confrontation, but sporadic clashes have continued to occur.[45]

The Amhara and Tigrayans are involved in another territorial dispute over Western Tigray that also impacts the conflict dynamic surrounding al-Fashaga. The Tigray war has enabled the Amhara to seize control of Western Tigray, which they claim to be rightfully theirs, from the Tigrayans. This reduces the need to seize control of al-Fashaga. However, the Western Tigray issue is not addressed in the cessation of hostilities agreement that was signed by the TPLF and the Ethiopian government in late 2022, and will likely remain a source of contention in the future. If the Amhara perceive that their control of Western Tigray is threatened, their pressure for control of al-Fashaga could increase.[46] In April 2023, Sudanese media accused Ethiopian forces of attempting to take al-Fashaga, while the SAF and RSF were busy fighting each other, but Ethiopia denied the claims.

Abiy Ahmed said that, unlike Sudan, which seized the moment and moved into al-Fashaga when Ethiopia was embroiled in war, Ethiopia will not take advantage of the situation. He also warned those who are working to incite conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia to stop doing so. [47] Who "they" are was left unsaid, but one plausible interpretation is that he was referring to Amhara actors who are unhappy with the federal government. The Ethiopian government has announced

its intention to integrate all regional armed forces into the federal defence structure.[48] This has caused strong negative reactions in Ethiopia, particularly in Amhara region, where there is a fear of not being able to protect themselves against potential attacks from other regional states, such as Tigray, or Oromia.[49] If successful, this initiative would improve government control over security; however, it does not, on its own, create a state monopoly on violence, because Ethiopia has a great number of armed militias. The lack of monopoly of violence is only one of Ethiopia's core challenges. There is an obvious risk that the integration of regional forces could add to pre-existing tensions and create more conflict. Such developments are likely to acquire regional dimensions.

The volatile bilateral relationship between Sudan and Ethiopia has affected trilateral negotiations with Egypt, concerning the management of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (hereafter GERD), which Ethiopia has been building on the Blue Nile. Sudan initially viewed the project positively. However, over the past few years, its position has fluctuated in tandem with changes in its relations with Ethiopia, moving between optimism over the access to energy that GERD could bring, to being concerned over its potential environmental impact.

In times of worsened relations with Ethiopia, Sudan has moved closer to Egypt's position. In 2021, perhaps in part meant to signal a united front on GERD, Sudan and Egypt agreed to strengthen military cooperation via more frequent joint exercises and training.[50] Egypt views the dam as an existential threat. Egyptian authorities worry that the dam will restrict Egypt's water supply and has even threatened military action, unless Ethiopia agrees to Egypt's terms for water management.[51] Egypt also contends that the dam is in an earthquake zone, which Ethiopia denies.[52] Egyptian representatives have said that all options are on the table if Ethiopia continues to operate the dam without coming to an agreement with Egypt and Sudan.[53] But, the military option is likely no longer viable, since the construction is all but complete, and a military attack at this stage would have extremely serious consequences downstream. Nevertheless, relations between Ethiopia and Egypt are still strained, and characterised by competition over regional influence.[54]

The region of Benishangul-Gumuz (where the GERD is situated) borders Sudan and, like most regions in Ethiopia, it is multi-ethnic and struggling with intercommunal strife. There are multiple conflicts, but one of the main issues of contention is between ethnic groups Gumuz and Amhara, over territory.[55] There is also a historic dimension, with grievances stemming from when the Amhara ruled Ethiopia. The Gumuz live on both sides of the Ethiopia-Sudan border. Ethiopia has accused Sudan and Egypt of supporting Gumuz rebel groups, and fuelling tensions there, in order to sabotage the GERD.[56]

Given the considerable amount of internal conflicts that the Ethiopian government has to deal with, problematic relations with Sudan are likely not desirable. During early 2023, relations between Ethiopia and Sudan seemed to thaw, and al-Burhan and Abiy stated that their views on GERD were aligned. Al-Burhan is considered to have close ties with Egypt, so reaching an understanding with him is a boon for Ethiopia. However, the ongoing conflict in Sudan makes Sudan's position on the GERD issue uncertain again. The Ethiopian government has made efforts to avoid choosing sides in the conflict.

According to official figures, over 425,000 have fled from Sudan to neighbouring countries since fighting began, in April 2023. Due to the situation on the ground and the difficulty in obtaining information, the real number is probably higher. Returning refugees might alter internal power balances in neighbouring states and put additional pressure on states already dealing with domestic problems. For example, out of the approximately 35,000 people entering Ethiopia from Sudan, it is probable that many are Tigrayans who took refuge in Sudan during the Tigray war.[57] A complete fragmentation of the Sudanese state would be highly destabilising for the entire region.

Regional alliances: The emergence and dissolution of the Tripartite Agreement between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea

Shifts at the domestic top leadership level, can, and often do, heavily influence the nature of regional security cooperation in the Horn of Africa. The emergence and dissolution of the Tripartite Agreement between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea (also called the Horn of Africa Cooperation) illustrate how personalisation of power and weak institutions lead to unpredictable foreign policies, such as rapid shifts in regional alliances and lack of institutionalisation thereof.

As discussed above, the swift and fairly unanticipated rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018 meant that the regional security balance shifted. This shift also came to include Somalia, since Somalia's President Farmajo (2017–2022) clearly prioritised the relationships with Ethiopia and Eritrea over those of Somalia's other neighbours. Due to Somalia's historically

tense relationships with both countries, this was an unforeseen move in its foreign policy. For Ethiopia, its close relationship with the federal government in Somalia also represented a shift in its policy, since it went against the tradition of cooperating with the federal member states of Somalia and of often trying to undermine the federal government.[58] The warmed relationship between the three countries was formalised when Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia signed a tripartite agreement in September 2020, in which the three states agreed to "build close political, economic, social, cultural and security ties" and work together to "promote regional peace and security."[59] The new alliance strained relationships with excluded neighbouring countries, such as Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya; in addition, the Somali president took on a confrontational tone towards the latter two. Somalia's relations with traditional ally Djibouti hit a historic low and Somalia and Kenya severed diplomatic ties twice during Farmajo's last two years in office. Sources of friction between Kenya and Somalia were, for example, a maritime dispute, Somali accusations of Kenyan interference in the then upcoming Somali elections and an import ban of Kenyan khat to Somalia. [60]

No concrete initiatives were taken under the umbrella of the Tripartite Agreement. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the tightened relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea provided grounds for Eritrean involvement in Tigray. The strengthened Eritrea-Somali relation also had internal implications in Somalia. In 2021, news broke that 5000 Somali soldiers had secretly been sent to Eritrea for training, something Farmajo admitted first at the end of his term. The issue caused widespread protests in Somalia and was a central topic during the election process.[61] Moreover, the deteriorating relations between Somalia, Kenya and Djibouti harmed the much-needed cooperation against al-Shabaab and other transnational security threats. At the time, analysts also warned that the Tripartite Agreement risked undermining regional multilateral institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).[62]

Seemingly, the Tripartite Agreement was not anchored in the Somali and Ethiopian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, but took many within the administrations by surprise.[63] Besides causing unpredictability, the lack of institutionalised relationships implies that neighbouring countries, or other external actors, might have much to lose, or win, depending on who is in charge. Thus, it raises the stakes higher and increases the incentive to meddle in neighbours' internal affairs. Accordingly, both Kenya and Ethiopia were accused of interfering in the election process in Somalia and the re-election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, in 2022, was warmly welcomed by Nairobi.[64] With his re-election, several changes occurred: Somalia's relations to its neighbours returned to more of a pre-2017 status, the Tripartite Agreement was reportedly dissolved, and Sheikh Mohamud has focused on repairing relations with Djibouti and Kenya.[65]

The almost 360-degree turn in Somalia's regional relations, first when Farmajo entered the scene, and then again after Sheikh Mohamud re-emerged as president, shows how weak institutions and personalised power dynamics lead to fluctuations in state-to-state relations, with implications for regional security cooperation. However, the personalisation of power is also a symptom of the region's unfinished processes of state-building. In interviews, this was referred to as "the institution vs. leader trap" and it was emphasised how Western actors reinforce this:

> They see a new leader and want to jump on that. Because they think that leader will build institutions, but that doesn't happen then. That is even what happened in Eritrea with Isaias, he was seen as part of new generation of African leaders. It also happened in Somalia, with Farmajo. West jumped on him. Of course th[ese leaders] won't build institutions then, that would weaken their own position.[66]

Thus, it was claimed that the anticipation that a new leader will represent a new opportunity to support state-building often backfires. Instead, new leaders get over-confident and start viewing strong institutions as a threat to their own power.

Al-Shabaab: A transnational security threat and regional responses

The al-Qaeda affiliated Islamist group, al-Shabaab, has since 2007 had a heavy influence on regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the group's emergence and activities, as well as the regional actions taken against it, clearly demonstrate how these internal security issues link to a larger regional security dynamic.[67]

Al-Shabaab's existence and growth have partly been enabled by intra-state conflict, governance failure and state fragility in Somalia. Besides the use of violence, by providing social services, the organisation uses the local-level governance void in Somalia to acquire legitimacy.[68] However, another key legitimising and mobilising strategy for al-Shabaab is the use of nationalism and xenophobia, mainly directed at Somalia's neighbouring countries and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). In 2006, Ethiopian troops supported the

then Somalia transitional government in overthrowing the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which had briefly taken control over Mogadishu, after almost two decades of civil war. Al-Shabaab, which was its armed wing, broke away when the union was dissolved and launched an insurgency against the transitional government and the Ethiopian troops. Partly due to the historic animosity between the two countries, the presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia led to rage among Somalis and fuelled a rise in nationalism and radicalism. Thus, the "complex cocktail of nationalist, Islamist, anti-Ethiopian, anti-American, anti-Western, anti-foreigner sentiments" that emerged benefitted al-Shabaab, which portrayed itself as the central source of armed resistance to the "occupying forces."[69]

Al-Shabaab has since then blended religious discourse with nationalism and anti-foreigner rhetoric against, for instance, AMISOM and its main participating countries (Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda). The presence of bilateral Ethiopian and Kenyan troops on Somali soil and Djibouti's perceived support to the fight against global terrorism, as well as its hosting of Western military bases, have been a further justification for al-Shabaab's fight. The group has carried out deadly attacks in Kenya, Uganda and Djibouti and has a presence in neighbouring countries, most notably along the Kenya-Somalia border, where it carries out frequent attacks against infrastructure, security personnel, and education and health facilities.[70]

The security threat from al-Shabaab inevitably makes neighbouring countries into stakeholders in Somalia's internal affairs. Kenya has a military presence in southern Jubaland, Somalia's southernmost state, and has been accused of trying to make the state into a buffer zone.[71] Ethiopia also has troops in Jubaland, but in the northern parts, which border Ethiopia and Kenya. This again demonstrates the interconnectedness of regional and domestic security. Their military presence complicated the election process in Somalia in 2020–2022, since Ethiopia and Kenya were accused of supporting opposite sides in a violent conflict between President Farmajo and the incumbent president of Jubaland, Ahmed Madobe.[72]

Al-Shabaab's recent activities in Ethiopia also illustrate how national and transnational security intertwine. After several failed attempts to carry out large-scale attacks on Ethiopian soil, approximately 500 al-Shabaab combatants made their way at least 150 kilometres into the Somali region in eastern Ethiopia, in July 2022. Ethiopian forces stopped the incursion, but al-Shabaab members likely remain in the area.[73] The timing of the attack in Ethiopia can be attributed partly to the war in Tigray, which has weakened Ethiopian security institutions and diverted the Ethiopian government's attention away from other issues, while providing an opportunity for al-Shabaab to cross the border. But it can also be attributed to an ongoing military offensive against al-Shabaab in Somalia, as an attempt to demonstrate strength to disguise the pressure the group is under.[74] Thus, increased internal pressure against al-Shabaab might lead the group to increase its transnational activities and presence in neighbouring countries, especially Ethiopia and Kenya.

AMISOM, or ATMIS, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, as the mission was rebranded in April 2022, constitutes an African initiative to contain the threat from the group. However, its operational record is mixed and the mission has engendered resentment in Somalia, due to human rights violations. Moreover, the fact that neighbouring states are troop contributors is often seen as a cover for pursuing their own interests in Somalia.[75] ATMIS aims to transfer the security responsibility to Somali security institutions and leave Somalia by the end of 2024.[76] However, Kenya's and Ethiopia's high stakes in Somalia make it unlikely that the two countries, which also have bilateral troops in the country, will leave Somalia completely, even if ATMIS exits as planned.[77]

To date, internal problems and state-to-state animosity have hindered efficient cooperation against al-Shabaab. However, in contrast to his predecessor and to an extent also himself, during his first term as president, Sheikh Mohamud seems to recognise the importance of regional support, including that of Ethiopia. In November 2022, Somalia and Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding on intelligence cooperation and, in February 2023, the presidents of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti met in Mogadishu, where they agreed to put up a "united fight" against al-Shabaab.[78] This was to partly take the form of a joint "search and destroy" military campaign, but they also highlighted the "importance of establishing a joint border security mechanism that intends to eliminate cross-border terrorism activities and ensures legal passage of trade and movement."[79] What remains to be seen is which practical initiatives will be taken, how this form of cooperation will be perceived among local populations, and whether it will survive any changes at the presidential or prime minister level in any of the countries.

Moreover, the cooperation and engagement of regional actors is central to long-term success against the

group, but it also brings with it some pitfalls. In contrast to previous military campaigns, which generally have been led by AMISOM, the latest offensive against al-Shabaab is Somali-led, a development that might increase its legitimacy and sustainability.[80] Neighbouring states can provide important military capability to the fight, but their support simultaneously risks undermining the legitimacy of the operation, as foreign military presence has been a key justifying factor for al-Shabaab.

Finally, analysts have highlighted that there are no final military solutions, but that, at some point, political dialogue with al-Shabaab will be needed.[81] The current Somali government's attitude to eventual negotiations is not clear, but if talks with the group do happen in the future, it is vital to get neighbouring countries on board, so as to decrease the risk of spoilers.[82]

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates the need for policymakers to apply a regional perspective when formulating policy related to conflict resolution and development efforts in the Horn of Africa. This argument is relevant beyond the few examples referred to in this paper, as most, if not all, conflicts in the region risk acquiring a regional dimension. The interconnectedness of domestic and regional security means that conflicts often have many stakeholders, and that successful conflict resolution requires not only the inclusion of both internal and regional actors in the process, but also preparedness to manage spoilers. Zero-sum thinking and lack of trust between actors in the region pose important problems. There is a need to strengthen state institutions, and to counteract the impact of personalised politics in the region, by institutionalising regional cooperation, in order to promote stability and decrease incentives for meddling in each other's affairs. That being said, this paper shows that the challenges that regional multilateral institutions have to address are highly complex, while the functioning of the institutions themselves suffers from trust deficits between their members.

Another important aspect that has not been addressed in this paper is the complex impact of extra-regional actors, who through their economic and military support can play a major role in regard to affecting political contestation in the Horn states and reinforce regional dimensions of insecurity and state-to-state competition. Egypt, with its policy towards the region, and its divisive relations with regional countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, is a clear example. Another is the West's massive and indiscriminate support, in the beginning of his term, for Abiy Ahmed. His new vision for Ethiopia inspired hope and optimism, but it did not take very long before his reform agenda was accompanied by some clearly apparent authoritarian tendencies. This underlines that policymakers need to be conscious of the risks that personalised politics and political rivalries in the Horn of Africa pose, when formulating policies of support towards separate countries, or the region. Support for one specific leader could have consequences, expected or unexpected, elsewhere in the region.

Extra-regional actors who aim for a more stable region should, besides strengthening institutions within the Horn States, encourage state-to-state trust-building, and demonstrate win-win scenarios. None of this is easy, but the region is at a precarious juncture. Ethiopia and Sudan, the second- and ninth-most populous countries in Africa, respectively, are struggling with severe security challenges that, if they really get out of hand, would have destabilising effects beyond the Horn and, potentially, beyond the continent. In Sudan, the war between the SAF and RSF could evolve into a proxy war, with regional and extra-regional involvement. In Ethiopia, the government's attempt to centralise power could fail and, in a worst-case scenario, result in a revamped civil war, with even more actors involved than in the Tigray war. ■

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Endnotes

1 Definitions of which countries comprise the Horn of Africa vary, but Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti are often counted as core countries. Many scholars also include Sudan (for example Cliffe 1999, and Berekteab 2013) and Kenya (for example, Olika 2008 and Mesfin 2011) because of their geopolitical and cultural connections to the four core countries. Wider definitions sometimes include Uganda because of its membership in the regional organisation IGAD. For the purpose of this paper the Horn of Africa refers to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan. Kenya is also discussed in connection to security issues related to Somalia. Bereketeab, Redie. 'Introduction'. In Bereketeab, Redie (ed.). *The Horn of Africa: intra-state and inter-state conflicts and security*. London: Pluto Press, 2013, 3; Cliffe, Lionel. 'Regional dimensions of conflict in the Horn of Africa.' *Third World Quarterly,* Vol. 20, No 1, pp 88–111, 1999; Mesfin, Berouk. 'The Horn of Africa security complex'. In *Regional Security in the post-Cold War Horn of Africa.* Roba Sharamo and Berouk Mesfin (ed), 1-30. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2011; Olika, Tafesse. 'Conflicts and Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa: Toward the Study of Regional Peace and Security.' *EJOSSAH* Vol. 6, Nos. 1 & 2, 2008.

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10 Healy, Sally. *Lost opportunities in the Horn of Africa: how conflicts connect and peace agreements unravel: a Horn of Africa group report.* London: Chatham House, 2008, 44.

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12 Interviewees were selected on the basis of their expertise on Ethiopian, Somalian, or Sudanese, politics; or their knowledge about the Horn of Africa, in general. They consisted of both men and women, of different nationalities, who work as government officials, representatives for multilateral institutions, ambassadors, researchers, analysts and journalists. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in either English, or Swedish. The interviews were coded and numbered randomly.

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