



Horntalk Report

Contents

- △ Introduction
- △ The Nile question
- △ The Red Sea question and the emerging role of middle powers
- △ Somalia's own vulnerability

Introduction

The Horn of Africa, the expansive region on the eastern part of Africa, is rarely without incident. From drought to floods and security challenges such as civil wars and violent extremism, the region has had its fair share of problems, and global attention.

Over the past month, the new contentious issue has been Egypt's coming into Somalia ostensibly to offer military support to the Mogadishu's security problems. Egypt's military aid is not new but the new context is that it agreed to be a part of the next African Union's mission in Somalia, known formally as the African Union Stabilisation Support Mission (AUSSOM) which is set to replace the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) by the start of 2025.

This week, Egypt delivered more arms via a ship to the Port of Mogadishu, just a month after two planeloads landed at the Aden Adde International Airport to deliver the first batch of weapons. Some of the troops Egypt will deploy will be under a bilateral arrangement while the other pool will be a part of AUSSOM.

The Egyptian gesture has widely received political backing in Mogadishu, quite different from previous troop contributors that struggled to win hearts and minds of the political leaders and civilians in Somalia. Yet it has not gone without incident. Egypt joined other Middle Powers like Turkey in seeking to tight down relations with Somalia, upending their previous rivalry.

In this context, panellists gathered under the auspices of the Africa Policy Institute and the Council on Kenya-Somalia Relations discussed the various factors fuelling the reactions to Egypt's move.

As the Horn heats up, Middle powers see opportunity



The Nile question

Ethiopia, which has had troops in Somalia under ATMIS, as well under a bilateral arrangement with Somalia, has protested bitterly, joined in that by authorities in Somaliland, the breakaway part of Somalia that has been seeking to secede. Somaliland and Ethiopia controversially signed an MoU back in January, ostensibly to grant Addis Ababa a sea access to build a naval base in Somaliland in exchange for Somaliland recognition as an independent entity. That angered Mogadishu which accused Ethiopia in every forum of attacking Somalia's sovereignty. Somalia has gone on to seek help from every ally who agrees with its position and Egypt, Turkey and most Western allies agreed with Mogadishu.

Yet the context here is also about the past tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile. Addis Ababa is finalising construction and filling of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD), a 6GW project that could help improve

electricity access for most homes in Ethiopia. Cairo, however, saw that as a threat to its main water source and threatened to go to war. It didn't. So far, water, the water has continued to flow to Egypt but no one knows what will happen if a longterm drought hits the source of the Nile. But even a bigger question is whether that battle over the Nile is now over and the two sides are moving to another challenge: the struggle to get Somalia's ear.

It is true Egypt has often tried to influence Nile Basin countries to agree to its stance that the Nile be shared under colonial treaty. That has largely helped disunite Nile Basin countries on fronting joint demands to Egypt, prolonging the status quo. Somalia, which is not in the Nile Basin, had previously backed dialogue to iron out water sharing arrangements between Ethiopia and Egypt. The MoU between Addis Ababa and Somaliland may not directly change the stance on dialogue, but it has pushed Somalia to strengthen ties with Cairo.

The Red Sea question and the emerging role of middle powers

Egypt's coming into Somalia has been touted in Cairo as one of offering help for Somalia's unity. But it is not a free lunch. Egypt as a Middle power has one of the strongest militaries on the continent but also a major geopolitical player in the Middle East. Its Suez Canal is a link channel between the Indian Ocean, via the Red Sea on into the Mediterranean Sea, making it a crucial sea route for trade and general transportation. When Ethiopia and Somaliland first announced the MoU, the immediate threat was on Somalia's unity. The extended threat, in fact, may go as high up to Egypt which must keep ships flowing through the Suez Canal to maintain an import source of revenue which it charges vessels for sailing through the Canal. Therefore, Egypt is motivated to bring its troops in Somalia and show support for Mogadishu with a wider eye one ensuring the MoU is never implemented as Ethiopia's military access to the sea may directly bring a challenge to Egypt's maritime economy interests.

Egypt, of course, is an old friend of Somalia, having supported Mogadishu in the past when it went to war with Ethiopia. And although the circumstances have changed today, Cairo has also become one of the main Middle Powers in the region, alongside Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. They are Middle Powers because each of these countries has some kind of political and economic influence on a number of other countries in the region. Most of these countries have used military and humanitarian aid to keep friends in the Horn. Some like the UAE and Iran have played a role in arming warring factions in Sudan. In Somalia, Turkey's influence has grown on a foundation of sentiment: It first came in when Somalia was at risk of annihilation from a damaging drought, providing humanitarian and medical aid. Then it built relations by supporting the Somali National Army, training an elite squad of the security forces. It then built the largest embassy on African soil in Mogadishu, sent hundreds of Somalis on scholarships in Turkey and reached trade deals with Somalia. Turkish firms manage the main port and airport in Mogadishu today. Ankara's rise in Somalia is also consistent with its spread of influence in Africa, where it has

raised diplomatic missions and engagements as well as trade, buoyed by Turkish airlines.

Yet Turkey and Egypt weren't always friends, until at least last month when Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited Ankara. It was a pointer of converging interests. For one, flowing business in the Suez Canal can mean supporting extended export trade from Turkey. But by supporting Somalia, the two countries seek to sustain a troubled friend with resources such as oil and blue economy they can exploit in future.

Somalia's own vulnerability

The Middle Powers may have seen opportunity but it is also Somalia's vulnerability that has offered a blank canvas on which these powers can paint their picture. Emerging from years of civil war, and later al-Shabaab menace, Somalia's institutions are weak and perennially need support to grow and be able to provide services. That needs money and human resources. Turkey has offered to train hundreds of Somalis. Egypt has offered to boost the capacity of the army with weaponry. Egypt also brings in a new dynamic, that of sending troops and weaponry to Somalia without the traditional lamentations about who is funding or paying its soldiers. Somalia on its part is needy and has readily accepted these offers.

These services, as we have seen, are not free lunch. Even if Mogadishu isn't paying in immediately for them, it may do in future. For now, the offers can help portray Egypt as a friend in need, help get back at Ethiopia for Somalia and hence build foundations that could be exploited in future.

There is one other problem: Somalia's reforms and the nature of its politics have meant that its foreign policy is also under development. Which is why in the past, countries like the UAE were closest to Mogadishu only to be pushed to the periphery by Qatar. Turkey and Egypt appear now to be in the front seat of influence. Somalia also faces a security challenge in al-Shabaab, and lately in ISIS. These have put pressure on Somalia to enter in various security pacts with these powers as an insurance against falling back into the chaos of violent extremism. The powers are taking advantage of the opportunity.

Published by:

Africa Policy Institute

3rd Floor, Chaka Place Argwings Kodhek Road P. O. Box 34791-00100 Kilimanjaro Nairobi Kenya

Tel: (Office) +254 706 670 965

Email: info@apiafrica.org, www.apiafrica.org