



Horntalk Report

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa continues to suffer the ripple-effects of the January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somalia's breakaway territory of Somaliland. Though never published, officials of both sides say the MoU controversially provided for Addis Ababa access to 20 kilometres of Somalia's Red Sea coastline in Somaliland in exchange for possible recognition of Somaliland independence.

These tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia have been rising to dangerous levels as the drawdown of the African Transition Mission fighting the al Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab militants in Somalia (ATMIS) comes to a close on December 31 to give way to a new African Union Support and Stabilization Mission (AUSSOM) by January 2025. In April 2024, the Somali government expelled Ethiopia's ambassador Mukhtar Mohamed. Since then, it has maintained that Ethiopia must pull out all its troops on Somalia soil by January 2025 largely due to the controversial Port deal. Since then, Somalia has used every public forum to lampoon Ethiopia. It has also reached out to allies in the region and beyond, signing defence pacts and signaling a new arrangement in security partnerships. Basically, security cooperation between Ethiopia and Somalia is broken. Ethiopia on its part has not withdrawn the MoU but instead accuses Somalia of rushing with new defence pacts without regard to the reality of Horn of Africa security problems. In between, mediation efforts offered by Kenya, and later by Turkey, have failed to find a solution.

Against this backdrop, experts gathered his week under the banner of *HornTalk* to discuss the way forward for both countries and the region. They included Dr Kenneth Ombongi, Associate Dean of Research at the University of Nairobi and Hon Yussuf Hassan Abdi, Kenya's Member of Parliament for Kamukunji Constituency and a member of the National Assembly's Defence, Intelligence and Foreign Relations Committee.

Ethiopia-Somalia tensions: What next?



Current Situation

Tensions reached a whole new level on October 16 as Ethiopia hosted a ministerial meeting of AU Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) to the African Transition Mission to Somalia (ATMIS)—Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda—without notifying or inviting Somalia. This is even as the meeting was called to discuss the transition from ATMIS to AUSSOM. Somalia saw this as a provocation.

Against this backdrop, on October 20-22, President Hassan Sheikh undertook a shuttle diplomacy to its partners in the East African Community (EAC)—Burundi, Kenya and Uganda—and Djibouti to agree on modalities of ensuring a flawless transition to prevent al-Shabaab from exploiting a potential security vacuum that could arise from the ATMIS-AUSSOM hand-over. Somalia would, on October 23, issue a statement warning it had lost 'trust' in Ethiopia as a troop contributing partner.

Yet Ethiopia is playing a high-stakes game in response to Somalia. On October 16, 2024, it allocated land to Somaliland and

witnessed Somaliland's Foreign Minister, Dr Ciise Kayd, officially breaking ground for a new embassy building in Addis Ababa, its first-ever full-fledged diplomatic mission.

To all intents and purposes, Ethiopia has technically made good its promise to recognise Somaliland as a sovereign state. Ethiopia is backing Somaliland President Muse Bihi Abdi to win a second 5-year term in the coming Presidential elections slated for 13 November 2024.

And as the clock ticks for Somaliland's election, Somalia and its allies want Bihi out to pave the way for a peaceful resolution of the dispute and possible reunification with Somalia.

In addition, an anti-Ethiopian alliance has emerged in the Horn and Red Sea region. On October 10, Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia held a trilateral summit to hammer out a framework to counter Ethiopia's plans to follow through on its port deal with Somaliland.

Meanwhile, the rounds of meetings hosted by Turkey in Ankara to resolve the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute are grinding to fruitless

end as between Somalia maintains that no future talks unless Ethiopia renounces claims to its territory and recognise its sovereignty.

The risk from tensions

There are ripple effects of the tensions flowing into other forms of diplomatic relations. A month after the MoU, Ethiopia and Somalia bickered over President Mohamud's security arrangements during the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa. Ethiopia is the seat of the African Union which means all heads of state and government or their representatives must be free to attend sessions. Yet this showed a bilateral tiff between two countries could play into the arena of the African Union. Even more worrying is the fact that any form of cooperation between Somalia and Ethiopia has somewhat broken down, as far as the war on al-Shabaab is concerned. On October 23, Somalia accused Ethiopia of arming illegal militia groups. And officials told media there was no line of communication on intelligence sharing.

This has come just as Somalia was celebrating the lifting of an arms embargo, election to the UN Security Council and admission into the East African Community. As tensions boiled with Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt established their own kind of alliance. Each of these countries has a bone to pick with Ethiopia in what is building to be an isolation of Addis Ababa.

That means there is a serious crisis in the Horn of Africa which is coming as an irony. In the past, it is Somalia which was accused by neighbours of planning to expand its territory. Now Mogadishu accuses Ethiopia of being expansionist and planning to dismember Somalia. Yet Ethiopia's ambition is a risk to African unity.

In Ethiopia itself, the ambition for access to the sea is fueled by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's personal goal, seeing himself as a modern-day imperialist. But it does not help that the MoU has galvanised Somalia's diplomatic outreach, convincing all world powers that it is important for everyone to respect its territorial integrity. This bilateral tension has, therefore, been internationalised.

There is also a misconception that Somalia, given its years in civil war and security threats, is weak and disorganised. Recent backing by world powers now suggest Ethiopia miscalculated. Yet if Ethiopia's ambition for sea access fails, it risks widening internal rifts between its ethnic regions who have recently been at war with one another. This poses a dilemma for Abiy especially

since Ethiopia's history is such that leaders who appeared weak in public were often removed from office.

Even if it were to gain the sea access via the method it has chosen: Which is to go ahead with Somaliland, the cost of guarding the corridor to the sea will be enormous. This is because Somalia's main clans are opposed to the separation of Somaliland from Somalia, seeing the northern regions as the cultural store of the Somali heritage and history and therefore the cradle of Somali being. A corridor symbolising division could be fought. And given the intense clan politics and connections between Somali regions of Ethiopia and Somalia, using force may be difficult to carry a united Ethiopia to go ahead with the project for the naval base. For Ethiopia, the MoU could hence prove to be a dangerous adventure.

Way forward

There is an overall risk of isolation, war or strengthening of al-Shabaab. But it shouldn't be his way. This is because the situation is not as easy as Ethiopia has made it look. Nor is it as dire as Somalia has marketed it. Somalis resist any annexations of their land, as they have shown in recent nationalistic stances. But the Horn of Africa is, generally a sick man of Africa where trouble countries are victims of their own history. Both Ethiopia and Somalia are old civilisations in the Horn. While Ethiopia was once a hegemony, internal ethnic tensions and wars have weakened it. Somalia's three decades of chaos has made it very divided too. However, both of these countries have historically fiercely defend themselves against perceived aggression. It is clear no one will give up without a fight.

Dialogue could, however, lower tensions. Some kind of negotiation are important to address concerns of each side. Establishing direct lines of communication can often signal intent to resolve the problem rather than bulldoze oneself. Besides, Somalia and Ethiopia have attracted various world powers keen to push their interest in the Horn. That pressure, presence and influence of these parties can likely widen the tiff, making it harder to solve.

It is important for the Horn to give peace a chance as using force can be mutually destructive. As to whether Ethiopia actually needs a new naval base is something worth an inquiry. It already uses Djibouti for logistics and some military activity. It didn't use force there. In fact, Ethiopia isn't the only landlocked country on the continent. None have tried to force their way to the sea. It should be an African tradition to use peaceful means.

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