

Ethiopia's Regional Position in the Horn of Africa: Constraints, Perspectives and Scenarios

Henok Getachew

Senior Researcher, Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopia

Gashaw Ayeferam,

Senior Researcher, Institute of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ethiopia's regional position does not just refer to the physical presence of the country in projecting power in adjacent areas; it also refers to the struggle Ethiopia finds itself in generating trust and legitimacy. Thus far, Ethiopia has faced challenges in both spheres. Ethiopia's current position in the Horn of Africa has continued to determine its regional role. In a similar vein, its aspiration to actively engage with the region is determined by its position. Hence, there is reinforcement between the country's regional position and the concomitant role it seeks to play. The research findings have demonstrated that Ethiopia's endeavor to play a regional security role is currently encumbered by both domestic and external factors, which in turn hampers Ethiopia's opportunity to seize the geopolitical space of the region. Cognizant of the trajectory of Ethiopia's security role in the regional security landscape, three perspectives are emerging: the optimist view; the realist or balanced view, and the pessimist view. Against the backdrop of the precarious regional position of the country, the paper argues that the future position of Ethiopia in the region and the region itself would fall into the following categories: Competing Hegemonic Power between Kenya and Ethiopia; Kenya will assert its hegemony¹ in the region; Ethiopia will reassert its dominance that is a return to status quo ante and a region without a clear hegemon.

Introduction

Nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War, the world has undergone through a new change if a keen observer closely scrutinized the politico-economic and security dynamics unfolding in different geopolitical spaces where contending powers are struggling to

mold the international order in their vested interests (Hurrel, 2019). Africa and its constituent units could hardly escape from the changing global order and it dares to say, as Singh noted that, African states are hardly in a position to challenge those seeking a status

¹ Although the concept of Hegemony is contested like most social science terms, it is applied here to denote the dominance or leadership the actor demonstrates in its vicinity. These include coercive force use (military), domination, influence, leadership, social recognition and generating trust and legitimacy from the peers and the view of others towards the hegemon.

quo. What matters most, as the author well-articulated “how it [rising strategic value] could be leveraged to achieve Africa’s collective political and developmental agenda” (Singh, 2022) and crafting a grand strategy for global powers (Fabricas, 2022). Scholars began to anticipate the power rivalry between powerful states could impact interstate relations in the continent. This is in fact not new to the geopolitical periphery subject to the core. Looking back to the eve of the onset of the Cold War and the early years of the “New World Order”, for instance, the domino effect of rivalry between competing states on the interstate system in the continent was visible. Over the past seven decades, with varying degrees of intensity, the Horn of Africa, a subsystem in the continent, has been vulnerable to external interventions originating from the adjacent region, particularly the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and far-off region(s). These external interventions are aimed at shaping either the regional or global order by galvanizing support and pressurizing member states to concede to their demands at different forums of multilateral institutions. To the worst, the politics of intervention has thus far complicated interstate relations and exacerbated the crises, thereby crippling initiatives to address the conundrums amicably (Belete, 2014; Schwab, 1978; Donelli & Cannon, 2019). Currently, the mounting pressure and the diplomatic navigation traditional and rising powers² are pursuing amidst the changing global order,

² Traditional powers in the region refer to Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt whereas emerging or rising powers in the region include Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Turkey.

³ Anchor state here can be used interchangeably with a regional hegemon, although Ethiopia is not a

and could affect regional states’ roles in the region either positively or negatively. Apart from the domestic circumstances, the efficacy of Ethiopia’s modus operandi in the region could also be discerned against this backdrop.

With the change of the global order in the wake of 1991, the “War on Terror”, the rise of the “Peacekeeping enterprise” (Jennings, 2018), the country’s geopolitical position, territory and population and the internal willingness to project power were among and the chief factors making the Ethiopian state played a relatively dominant regional role. Cognizant of attributes to regional power status-capability and recognition, Ethiopia had been deemed as a regional anchor state³ in the Horn of Africa as a result (Gouriellec, 2018; Ruth, 1993; Zahorik, 2014). During the early months of 2018, the incumbent government immediately started to overturn twenty years of adversarial relation with Eritrea. This could be considered as a contribution to augment Ethiopia’s role in the region. Nevertheless, its dominance in the region is currently facing challenges both from within and outside. For instance, the current political uncertainties ensuing from the northern conflict as well as the external troubled diplomatic relations Ethiopia has had with the Sudan and Egypt on the utilization of the Nile River and the Western states’ diplomatic position regarding the northern conflict have brought challenges to *its claim of* regional position, role(s) and the concomitant identity the state seeks to project. Hence, reclaiming its rightful regional position

champion of liberal institutions. Nevertheless, it encompasses the strategies employed by the Ethiopian government to cement its position in the region.

as well as *redefining* its role entails a clear understanding of the regional and international contexts not leaving the domestic situation. Against this backdrop, this paper examined the overall contexts that inhibit Ethiopia from making a conscious effort to regain its regional power status in the region vis-à-vis contender(s) and anticipates the future role of the state in the region.

Research Methods and Materials

The nature of the research entails the adoption of a qualitative research approach whereby the nature of regional power structures, actors, and dynamics are examined holistically. Furthermore, the interface between Ethiopia as an ‘agency’ in the region and actors and institutions (re)shaping the order is looked at. Both primary and secondary data were generated. Primary data sources were elicited by undertaking conversations with key informants with diverse perspectives who are working in different institutions such as governmental institutions, diplomatic communities and think tanks. Furthermore, primary data was generated from reports, speeches, communiqués, resolutions, and policy documents. Secondary data was generated from literature, media reports and other pertinent documents. A purposive sampling technique was employed. Accordingly, it selected resourceful individuals with expertise and knowledge in the area of discussion. Then, the qualitative data was summarized and presented.

⁴ In the recent past, the region was facing rivalry between the Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other hand. These states are struggling to

Ethiopia: A Regional Actor in the Horn

Overview of the Horn of Africa

The Horn as a region comprises Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia. South Sudan, Sudan, and Kenya are also included as a Greater Horn. The region is strategically significant owing to its proximity to the Middle East and is found at the crossroad between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is also bordered by the Red Sea which serves as a route for maritime transport. Its strategic location serves as both a liability and an asset. Indeed, the former outweighs the latter. For a long period, the region has been exposed to external interventions ranging from colonial powers, Cold War rivalry, and the war on terrorism, regional power rivalry⁴ up to the current unfolding competition between Beijing and Washington (Mesfin, 1999). These conditions demonstrated the crisis frequented the region is in part not their own making, although it is unfair to underestimate the local factors.

The colonial history, the dominant culture of intervention by proxy, external intervention and internal governance crisis have caused complicated and tense interstate relationships, thereby making the region one of the most conflict-prone regions of Africa (Bereket, 1980; Thompson, 2015). Accordingly, the region has hosted the most deadly interstate wars. Misguided domestic policies experimented by states in the region in tandem with external pressure have also crippled the states from delivering public

dominate in the region with disastrous consequences for the security of the region. Currently, the rivalry seems to be between Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

goods. Thus, most governments are losing legitimacy in the eyes of the wider public resulting in political unrest, coup d'état, civil war and humanitarian crisis. Although intrastate conflicts are dominant in the region, interstate wars are also featuring the region. The interstate war between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1964 and 1977/78 and war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998-2000, for instance, are most often mentioned (Bereketab, 2013). Furthermore, border disputes between neighboring states are also a common feature of the interstate relations of the region (Djibouti and Eritrea; Eritrea and Sudan; Kenya and Somalia and Ethiopia and Sudan). Apart from the foregoing issues that serve as sources of bone of contentions between and within states, there are also

uniting factors serving as glue between states of the region: shared history and culture, transboundary resources as well as a common aspiration in the face of daunting challenges.

Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and East Africa Community (EAC) are functioning regional organizations in the area. Except for Ethiopia, states in the region have membership in two or more regional organizations: IGAD, EAC, and the Arab League. Notwithstanding the existence of African regional organizations with the mandate of peace and security, regional integration, and development, they are still facing constraints to achieve their missions and objectives.

Table 1: The Material Resources of Horn of Africa States

Material Resources	Djibouti	Eritrea	Ethiopia	Kenya	Somalia	Sudan	South Sudan
Military Expenditure	3.5% of GDP (2019 est.)	10% of GDP (2019 est.)	0.5 of GDP(est.)	1.2% of GDP (2021 est.)	6% of GDP (2021 est.)	1% of GDP (2021 est.)	2% of GDP (2021 est.)
Regional Ranking	(approximately \$180 million)	(approximately \$640 million)					
Total Armed Forces	approximately 10,000 active troops (8,000 Army; 250 Naval; 250 Air; 1,500 Gendarmerie) (2022)	estimated 150,000-200,000 personnel, including about 2,000 in the naval and air forces (2022)	Approximately 150,000 active duty troops, including 3000 Air Force Personnel	approximately 24,000 personnel (20,000 Army; 1,500 Navy; 2,500 Air Force) (2022)	approximately 18-20,000 SNA personnel (2022)	estimated 125,000 active duty armed personnel; approximately 40,000 Support Forces (2022)	estimated 150-200,000 active personnel, mostly ground forces with small contingents of air and riverine forces (2022)
Regional ranking	7	1	3	5	6	4	2
Energy		No Production	No Production	No Production	No Production	66,999 bbl/day (2021 est.)	157,100 bbl/day (2021 est.)
Oil Production	No Production						
Natural Gas Production	No Production	No Production	Small reserve	No Production	No production		No Production

Economy GDP	\$4.432 billion (2021 est.)	\$9.702 billion (2017 est.)	\$278.945 billion (2021 estimation)	\$251.431 billion (2021 est.)	\$19.399 billion (2021 est.)	\$168.98 billion (2021 est.)	\$20.01 billion (2017 est.)
Regional Ranking	7	6	1	2	5	3	4
Global Competitiveness Index Rank 2019	Unknown	Unknown	126	95	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Regional Ranking							
Demographics Population	976,143 (2023 est.)	6,274,796 (2023 est.)	116,462,712 (2023 est.)	57,052,004 (2023 est.)	12,693,796	49,197,555 (2023 est.)	12,118,379 (2023 est.)
Regional Ranking	7	6	1	2	4	3	5
Land Area	23,180 sq km	101,000 sq km	1,096,570 sq km	569,140 sq km	627,337 sq km	1,731,671 sq km	644,329 sq km
Regional Ranking	7	6	2	5	4	1	3

Source: Compiled from CIA Factbook (2023)⁵

⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/summaries>

Ethiopia's Current Standing in the Region

Historically, Ethiopia is known for its role in actively participating in regional politics. Needless to say, the Imperial government of Ethiopia played a pivotal role in forging a continental organization that was known as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) later rebranded as the African Union (AU). The country's role was not limited to crafting the Pan-African organization. It was also channeling material, moral and diplomatic support to the decolonization project in the rest of the continent, and the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. Although its participation at different levels inside the OAU (AU) was necessitated by both material and ideational drives, the country's engagement with the organization since its inception helped the foreign policy to secure its regional position (Yonas, 2020). Nevertheless, the volatile regional environment, prevailing border dispute, and external intervention can be considered as major challenges facing Ethiopia during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.

It is widely acknowledged that Ethiopia had tried to seize the geopolitical space of the Horn of Africa and beyond through peacekeeping, mediation, and engaging in military instruments. The country has maintained traditional peacekeeping activities since the mid of the twentieth century. Since the 1990s, the Ethiopian government has demonstrated interest in engaging in peacekeeping diplomacy with the increasing twin interests in providing public goods to the conflict-ridden region and achieving geopolitical interests. Accordingly, Ethiopia deployed peacekeepers in

Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia, making the country the largest peacekeeping contributor among the nations (Firsing, 2014; Kidist, 2014). Its participation in different geopolitical hotspot sites in fact augmented Addis Ababa's regional position by earning the recognition of an "Anchor" state amidst an unstable region.

The country's regional dominant position also helped the government to project its national interest. The Ethiopian state actively participated in different ways to secure its national interest concerning neighboring states. Strengthening bilateral relations with Punt land and Somaliland, closely monitoring the peace processes in Somalia, weakening the strength of Islamic groups as well as reducing the influence of Asmara and Cairo on the political trajectory of Somalia were among the chief strategies pursued by the Ethiopian government to reduce the state's vulnerability and hence to consolidate its regional position. Apart from searching for security assurance through military-cum-diplomatic engagement, the Ethiopian government also succeeded in projecting its federal arrangement to the political dispensation of Somalia (Yonas, 2020).

Ethiopia's engagement in regional security should also be viewed through the lens of regional and global counter-terrorism frameworks. Ethiopia has developed overwhelming concern regarding the proliferation of radicalism and extremism in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Somalia. It took military measures against the perceived and actual threats posed to the security of the state in the late 1990s

(Mohamed, 2018). The emergence of the “War on Terror” helped the Ethiopian government to consolidate its regional position by allying itself with the West in the fight against terrorism (Barnes and Hasan, 2007; Kidist, 2014; Mesfin, 2012). This international condition in part helped the then government of Ethiopia to militarily engage the UIC and its subsequent offshoot Al-Shabaab in the subsequent years of 2006.

In the wake of the 2018 political transition, Ethiopia’s regional policy has demonstrated some changes in that it overturns a nearly two-decade policy of cornering Eritrea diplomatically. The rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Asmara has heralded a new opportunity for both parties in general and in particular for Ethiopia to enhance its regional position by making friends with the hitherto arch-enemy in the region. Ethiopia’s normalization of diplomatic ties with Asmara in tandem with changing the diplomatic course of action predominantly pursued vis-à-vis regional states in Somalia seemed to cause concern on the side of Nairobi.

The outbreak of conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia has caused political and diplomatic repercussions for the Ethiopian government. Cognizant of the eruption and the intensity of the conflict, Khartoum took the opportunity to invade the disputed territory of Ethiopia. This situation complicating the diplomatic relation between Addis Ababa and Khartoum culminated in the latter request for the removal of the Ethiopian peacekeeping force from the Abyei region (Dabanga, 2021). As a result, the dominant role of the country and the image associated with its traditional peacekeeping activities has been damaged. The withdrawal of troops has

in part scaled back its dominance in the domain of peace and security.

Arguably, Ethiopia’s position in the region is also in part determined by the nature of its diplomatic relation with the West, although it has a comparative advantage in material aspects of capability compare with the rest members of the region. Over the past couple of years, the internal conflict and the way the conflict is managed have caused trouble in relations with the West, particularly America and the European Union (The New York Times, 16 March 2022). The diplomatic pressure mounted on Addis Ababa contributed to the damage to the image associated with the Ethiopian state.

In a nutshell, Ethiopia’s Horn of Africa policy under the incumbent government demonstrates both changes and continuities. The changes are represented in different forms. This circumstance necessitated a change in its geopolitical position. The geopolitical position currently Ethiopia seizes also in turn determines the role it wants to play.

Challenges

It is not unusual to observe a state like Ethiopia to retreat from playing a regional role in the domain of peace and security. As stated earlier, Ethiopia has a tradition of participating in regional peace and security architecture. These roles, however, are currently facing challenges both from within and without. In this section, the domestic and external challenges facing the Ethiopian state will be discussed accordingly.

Domestic Challenges

Notwithstanding the domestic comparative advantages Ethiopia enjoys compared to other states in the region; its projection of power is currently constrained by different domestic factors with definitive consequences for its image and recognition. The commonly mentioned domestic factor is the political instability prevailed in the country over the past couple of years. The political difference between the TPLF and the Federal Government and the subsequent attempt by the former to solve the difference through military means culminated in the outbreak of conflict in November 2020. This confrontation lasted for nearly two years with disastrous consequences for the lives of innocent citizens and huge destruction inflicted upon the physical and social infrastructures in the regions of Tigray, Amhara, and Afar. The conflict has also left millions to be displaced in the war zones (The New York Times, 2022; USAID, 2022).

The conflict has sapped the potential of the state. Human and material resources were mobilized to the war zone. The conflict damages the security of the state and its images and constrains Ethiopia's capability to maintain regional power status. The conflict consequence is not limited to damaging the capability of the state. It has also disastrous consequences for the legitimacy of the government and its hitherto security roles in the region. Furthermore, the internal crisis has caused the state's vulnerability to Sudan's incursion into the western part of the country and has further strained the relationship

between the two countries since then. The conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia has attracted the wider attentions of the international community. Even after the cessation of hostilities between the Federal Government and the TPLF, the West, particularly the United States and the European Union as guarantors of the peace deal, is calling on both parties to put the Pretoria Agreement into practice (Gleixner-Hayat, 2023).

Aside from the crisis in the north, the political uncertainty demonstrated in different parts of the country has also been considered as another domestic challenge since 2018. In this regard, over the past four years, different pockets of the country have suffered from political instability, conflicts, internal displacement and human casualties. At the end of 2023, it was reported that around 2.9 million people were internally displaced, of which 794, 000 were caused by violent conflicts.¹ Different reports (Gleixner-Hayat, November 2023) documented that non-state actors are propping up and challenging the security apparatus of the state. Their increasing violence disproportionately affects civilians and has brought high civilian casualties. In some instances, the conflict situations in Ethiopia mirror most conflicts in different corners of Africa. Nevertheless, the degree and intensity of the conflicts as well as their consequences are much more complicated. If the economic condition of the country fails to yield economic growth and economic opportunities for the youth, bringing social justice and peace will be far from reality. Given the fact that the Horn of

¹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/ethiopia/>

Africa is more characterized by failed states, the internal situation will be getting more complicated.

External Challenges

Besides political instability, civil war, and violence, the regional context and the role of the international community remain the major challenges facing the state's endeavor to reposition itself in the region. With the changes of the governments, new power alignment emerged in the Horn of Africa. Prime Minister Abiy's demonstration of willingness to rehabilitate the hitherto hostile relations with Eritrea received a positive response from Asmara. This diplomatic rapprochement also extended to Somalia. Such a diplomatic trend was viewed by commentators as the Axis of Addis Ababa-Asmara and Mogadishu (Henneberg & Stapel, 2021) and raved the hope of peace and stability in the region.

The restored diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea heralded the end of the nearly two decades of a 'no war no peace' situation. Indeed, this normalized relationship also relieved the hitherto hostility reciprocated by backing insurgents against each other. The increasingly fostered bilateral relationship could have also positively impacted the security dynamics in Somalia since Eritrea was frequently accused of arming, financing and training Islamist militant groups fighting the fledgling Mogadishu government and its partners. Asmara was also charged for forging a closer tie with states' demonstrating hostility to the West (Lyons, 2009). Although it is possible to argue that Addis Ababa could have benefitted from the cordial relation it has forged with Asmara for its role in Somalia, the

political turmoil and the increasing wave of violence in Somalia continue to pose a security risk to Ethiopia. Undeniably, Eritrea was moving away from "counter[ing] Ethiopia's rise" (Dehez, 2008:13) to backing Addis Ababa to reduce the TPLF's threat. Nevertheless, the recent increasingly eroded diplomatic thaw between Asmara and Addis Ababa over the Pretoria agreement and the latter's recently unveiled position on the Red Sea may induce the former to resuscitate its previous plan of countering Ethiopia by adopting different strategies. Furthermore, Addis Ababa's future policy on the Red Sea would inevitably induce neighboring states save South Sudan to balance against the former's drive to secure its interest escaping from the fate of landlockedness. In this regard, the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between Addis Ababa and Hargeisa on January 1, 2024 that would help the former to lease 19 kilometers of the Somaliland coastline in a reciprocal political advantage for the latter to join the community of nations has caused a serious diplomatic tension between Ethiopia and Somalia since then. The deteriorated diplomatic relation between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa has clouded the stabilization effort in Somalia and the future security situation of the post-African Union Transition Mission in Somalia.

Aside from the violent threat posed by Al-Shabaab, Ethiopia's foreign policy to Somalia itself has caused concern on the parts of the regional units. The incumbent Ethiopian government was previously critiqued for supporting President Mohammed Abdullahi Mohammed's (Formajo) centralization policy in Somalia. Even the Ethiopian government is accused of backing the regional candidate

rivaling Mukhtar Robow during the race for the president of the South West state (Felbab-Brown, 2020). Such kind of allegation could have a downside effect on Ethiopia's stabilization role in Somalia. Divergent policies of Nairobi and Addis Ababa vis-à-vis the federal units and the Mogadishu government have also brought another challenge to Ethiopia's regional policy. As a result, failing to take a cautious approach to the complicated political dynamics of Somalia could exacerbate regional governments' anti-Ethiopia sentiment with adverse consequences for Addis Ababa's current and future role. Ethiopia's difference with Kenya is not only limited to its policy currently pursued inside Somalia. At worst, as Munene contends, Kenya is viewing Ethiopia with suspicion on the alleged ground that the latter has never relinquished "the imperial dream of reaching the Indian Ocean at Kenya's expense" (Munene, 2023: 5) If this assertion is shared by Kenya's officials, it implies Nairobi has a great security concern. In such circumstance, Ethiopia will be unable to earn trust and faith in its current and future regional policy in the Horn in general and neighborhood policy towards Kenya.

To the West, Ethiopia has experienced a troubled diplomatic relationship with Sudan. Khartoum and Addis Ababa have demonstrated differences regarding the construction and filling of the GERD, disputed territory as well as the course of the conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia over the past couple of years. Sudan's diplomatic position has oscillated between officially recognizing Ethiopia's right to harvest the Nile water during the time of Omar al-Bashir (Sudan Tribune, 5 April 2012) to expressing

its security concern together with Egypt over the construction of the GERD and the subsequent fillings of the reservoir as well as reaching a final binding agreement under Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan (Daily News, 17 April 2021). The securitization of the utilization of the Nile River has reached its climax when the Arab League's stance of *Arabizing* the water by making an inseparable tie between the security of Egypt with the security of the *Arab* world (The New Arab, 2022). This approach approves Egypt's intransigent position of considering the uninterrupted flow of the Nile River as a security concern. Furthermore, the organization's stance seems to detach the issue from the African domain to the Arab sphere.

Until mid-December 2020, the citizens of both Ethiopia and Sudan used to cultivate bordering areas between the two states until it was properly demarcated. Failure to demarcate the territory between the neighboring states hardly led to the outbreak of an all-out confrontation until the eruption of crisis in the northern part of Ethiopia. Khartoum seized the domestic crisis in the north as an opportunity by conquering the western part of Ethiopia. Khartoum is still occupying the area militarily, notwithstanding the frequent call by Ethiopia to withdraw its troops from the contested territory and the call for the return to *the status quo ante* (International Crisis Group, 2021). The deteriorated relations between the two states climaxed when Khartoum urged Addis Ababa to withdraw around 4000 peacekeepers from Abiyei (Alarabia news, 2021). The formal diplomatic request and the subsequent withdrawal of Ethiopian peacekeepers from the area downsized Ethiopia's geopolitical

presence in the region. Apart from its geopolitical ramifications, the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops has tended to damage the reputation the country enjoyed in its peacekeeping history.

The type of diplomatic relationship Ethiopia built with the West has long been the factor in influencing Ethiopia's regional policy since the mid-twentieth century. Maintaining cordial diplomatic relations with America and its partners partly helped the country to play a dominant role in the domains of peace and security. With the outbreak of war in the northern part of the country, the relation between Ethiopia and the West has deteriorated. The West, particularly America has pressurized the Addis Ababa government to come to terms with the insurgents by taking different measures *inter alia* removing Ethiopia from the preferential trade package and restricting the country's access to financial loans and aids. Furthermore, the West has moved away from recognizing Ethiopia as an anchor state of the region to the state grappling with its survival.² Such perception and the attendant policy options pursued by the West have adversely affected the reputation of the country in the region and beyond.

Perspectives on Ethiopia's Role

Different perspectives regarding Ethiopia's contemporary role in the Horn of Africa are emerging. These perspectives broadly can be categorized as Pessimist View; Balanced View and Optimist View. In this section, each view is discussed accordingly.

² Closely looking at the frequent statements made by the officials of the United States and their diplomatic position frequently uttered during their contact with their counterparts in Africa, particularly Kenya, it is

Pessimist View

The Pessimist view asserts that Ethiopia had a clear dominant role in the region previously. Nevertheless, it has increasingly lost its hitherto roles and the concomitant influence in the region. This view emphasizes Ethiopia has faced a temporary decline in the region. As the informant confirms to this perspective the political transition unfolding in the aftermath of 2018 and the entrenched polarized political space has caused political instability, internal displacement, economic crisis, and conflict. These conditions have shaken the domestic tranquility and impacted the regional role the state seeks to play. The internal crisis has transformed the state from playing the role of mediator to the state of the subject of mediation as currently witnessed in the Pretoria peace deal aimed at bringing cessation of hostilities between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People Liberation Front. Furthermore, the country's previous partners in fighting terrorism and radicalism in the region have demonstrated weak support to Ethiopia in the immediate aftermath of the eruption of the conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia. The challenges mentioned above, according to this narration, may deprive the predominant role of Ethiopia in the region. According to one of the informants, Kenya has modest experience that drives the country to play a predominant role in the region. Its previous roles under Kenyatta and currently under Ruto in the region are externally driven in that it is necessitated by the West interest.³ Closely looking at the diplomatic statements from the

possible to discover their foreign policy intentions regarding the regional politics of the Horn of Africa.

³ Interview with Key Informants I (KI I) and II

West, particularly Washington signaled the interest to accord the status of regional role to Kenya. As scholars succinctly state, internal capabilities alone cannot guarantee the regional status of a state in the respective region (Yonas, 2020). Recently, Kenya has secured a Non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally status which ranks the country among nineteen non-NATO member states that enjoy the privileges and the benefits generated from the membership.

Kenya has become the first country from Sub-Saharan Africa to designate as a major non-NATO ally.⁴ This is a social status and recognition accorded to Nairobi. The steadily increasing partnership would help Nairobi to benefit from Washington's security assistance-military, training, and loans- thereby solidifying its security role in the region by enhancing the country's capacity for violence. Indeed, recognition by external actors can be considered as one of the important variables to designate a state as a regional actor. By looking at the geopolitical dynamics, the Pessimist view courts the fear and concern that Ethiopia's regional power status and its legitimacy are increasingly eroded due to both internal and external factors. This situation has led to the retreat of Ethiopia from the geopolitical sphere. The country's geopolitical contraction remains visible in so far as the internal-cum-external stresses are failed to be addressed.

Balanced/Realist View

The second narration, the balanced or the realist, holds the view that although internal

and external factors cloud Ethiopia's position in the region, its contemporary regional standing remains relevant. According to this narration⁵, lack of security and political instability are the chief factors that impact the country's regional role since the domestic political situation has a potential impact on the country's foreign policy choices, external opinion, and perceptions. Another related domestic factor has to do with the deficiency of democracy in the country, leading to the recurrent features of internal political instability. This circumstance has adversely affected the state's capability to properly deal with regional security threats, leading to the formation of space in which the state interaction with the international community is getting precarious. Accordingly, the circumstance is making the state to be susceptible to the international community diplomatic pressure that clouds the country's regional position. Likewise the first narration, the balanced view holds the assumption that the internal capabilities of the state that drive from demographic size, geostrategic position, natural resource endowment, serve as the Headquarters of the African Union and East African Standby Force remained intact. Notwithstanding the comparative advantages the state possesses, reactive foreign policy as well as failure to clearly understand the regional and international contexts continues to affect the incumbent's drive to ensure national interest.

With respect to Kenya, the balanced view recognizes that Kenya has a relatively stable security situation and economic development. Nevertheless, these comparative advantages

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/22/kenya-non-nato-ally-status-visit-00159578>

⁵ Interview with Key Informant 3

enjoyed by Nairobi could not guarantee it to replace Ethiopia's role in the region in terms of providing security. This view admits Ethiopia has comparative advantages that Kenya does not have. For instance, Ethiopia has a large population size surpassing one hundred thirty million. This could be twice the population size of its counterpart. Aside from the demographic factor, Ethiopia has a geopolitical significance that is generated from its very location at the center of the region and its territorial size. The relative geopolitical contract of the state is not significantly impacted by the internal situation and the change of policy direction. It is rather because of external pressure. This perspective seems to deny the lingering domestic conflicts "stretching the capacity of the state" (Raleigh & Fuller, 2021) that undeniably have a repercussion for the foreign policy machinery and their modus operandi.

Optimist View

The optimist view has carried a narration that Ethiopia is a regional icon in the Horn and it has continued its hitherto traditional regional role, although it is often undermined by internal violent conflict. Indeed, the internal crisis challenges the status of Ethiopia as a powerhouse in the region. However, the internal problem could be a good opportunity for Ethiopia. It is not unusual for Ethiopia to suffer from an internal crisis. And yet play a dominant role in the face of mounting domestic problems. For instance, Ethiopia continued to provide support for the South Sudan Liberation Army/Movement while it was fighting for self-determination and

National Liberation Movement in Zimbabwe. In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War period, the EPRDF-led government continued the role of playing a predominant role in terms of providing security goods to the region and beyond as well as actively participated in crafting and supporting regional and state institutions. Ethiopia's traditional foreign policy resonates with such trajectory. According to this optimist narration, Ethiopia's internal strength continues and resists external pressures.⁶

According to KI 8 and interview with Mr. Mohammed⁷, the post-2018 foreign policy adopts a new path of engagement. For instance, "Ethiopia did not interfere in Sudan's affairs when the state was in a political transition" in the aftermath of the reign of al-Bashir. Another issue was the rapprochement with Eritrea caused a hope of peace, although it is not yet institutionalized. Another trend witnessed over the past four years was the frequent diplomatic visits to neighboring countries and vice versa. These instances, according to the optimist perspective, could be considered as a distinct approach that discards the pessimist understanding of Ethiopia's contemporary regional role.

Concerning the border dispute Ethiopia has had with Sudan, although the area is still conquered by Khartoum, Ethiopia seemed to drift away from adopting a military option and that, on the contrary Addis Ababa is still hoped to settle the issue through diplomacy. According to the optimist view, this is a new approach and a means to maintain the status

⁶ Interview with Key Informant 4

⁷ Interview with Mohammed, Lecturer at Jijiga University.

quo. According to the informant,⁸ although the country is in trouble, there are continued traditional roles of security provisions in Somalia and South Sudan. Furthermore, Addis Ababa has been involved in supplying water to Djibouti and electricity to Kenya and Sudan. These are parts of the wider regional integration scheme. The above mentioned measures taken by the government help the incumbent to reproduce its traditional role and hence maintain its position in the region against all odds. The argument further says that since it has not lost its all dominance, it has not engaged in reclaiming the hitherto roles the country has played so far in the region.

Possible Scenarios for Ethiopia's Role in the Region⁹

Four possible scenarios could be laid out regarding the future role of Ethiopia in the region by taking the domestic and regional circumstances as well as the international global order. These four scenarios reflect the possible position of Ethiopia in the region vis-à-vis potential contenders in their bid to achieve their security interests.

Competing Hegemonic Power between Kenya and Ethiopia

⁸ Interview with Key Informant 8

⁹ Concern may be raised by readers regarding why the scenarios are only taking Ethiopia and Kenya into consideration to map the future of the region. The reasons are the followings: First, these two nations over the past couple of decades are mentioned and recognized by other actors as regional states seeking for dominance. Indeed, not merely for sake of mentioning their names could be a sufficient guarantee to mention them here. Indeed, their internal capacities, willingness they demonstrate as well as the external recognition are the necessary reasons to mention here. Second, apart from Kenya,

One possible scenario would be the competition between Kenya and Ethiopia to assert regional influence. When Ethiopia relieves from the domestic constraints, it will come back to the regional geopolitical space. The internal conflict has sapped the potential of the state. The conclusion of the peace deal between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government in Pretoria and Nairobi seems to end the crisis accompanying the conflict. If this promising trend is accompanied by the cessation of hostilities prevailing in different pockets of the country, Ethiopia will have the opportunity to re-emerge as a regional actor. At the same time, with the increasing recognition of the West to the role of Nairobi in the region, the recently awarded status of a non-NATO ally to Kenya, Nairobi's increasing assertiveness on regional and international issues as well as the country's increasing integration into the peacekeeping structure as recently witnessed in the Congo (Africanews, 2022) and Haiti will help the country to solidify its regional actor position. These circumstances will gradually compel Addis Ababa to find itself in competition for influence in the region. Indeed, the lack of agreement between the two states regarding the political trajectory in Somalia and South Sudan and if they considered each other as

there is no actual competitor in the region to mention since some of them are riddled with prolonged internal crisis. For instance, Sudan has consistently infected with domestic crisis and recently escaped from Western-backed sanction. Somalia cannot be considered in the equation, given the fact that the state itself operates with the backing of external actors. Not too much far from the reality of Somalia, South Sudan has struggled to maintain fragile peace in the face of civil war. Concerning Eritrea, it is still struggling to rejoin the region as a 'normal' state and facing difficulty to normalize relations with the West.

rivals, there will be difficulty in shaping the regional order. To equally engage in competition with Kenya and other possible contenders, Ethiopia needs to further buttress its diplomatic relations with neighboring states and regain the West's recognition as a regional actor.

Kenya will assert its hegemony in the region

The difficulty in addressing the domestic precarious situation in Ethiopia will continue to dampen the role the country seeks to play in the region. Ethnic-based insurgency movements are also currently challenging the state's monopoly of violence. Humanitarian crises are mounting as a result. This situation reveals the difficulty of the state's security apparatus to deal with the security conundrums effectively. Indeed, aside from the domestic constraints, the image and the problem of recognition associated with external actors will encumber the state's capacity to regain its regional role. This circumstance in turn will continue to provide an opportunity for Kenya to seize the moment if it is willing and maintain a healthy diplomatic relations with America and the European Union. Since recent times, the official narrations of the West are gravitated towards giving legitimacy to the regional role of Kenya.¹⁰ Furthermore, Kenya has demonstrated an interest to further engage with East African Economic Community and the African Union Peace and Security Council to augment its regional presence and influence (Otieno, 2021). Internally, the credibility of the 2022 election which will demonstrate the

country to be regarded as a "beacon" of democracy in the region that is often struggled to chart a political transition to democracy. Kenya's democracy track record may use as a non-material aspect of the country that could back the material capabilities.

Nairobi's hegemonic role in the region will be realized if it has kept playing its mediation role in the region as it was demonstrated earlier in hosting the peace deal between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF. In this regard, its aspiration to hold a dominant position in the region will also be ascertained if can replicate its mediation role in other war-torn states in the region and beyond. Furthermore, Nairobi's increasing economic performance may also help the country's desire to wield regional dominance.

Ethiopia will reassert its 'hegemon'/and return to the status quo ante

The third scenario will be Ethiopia can regain its regional dominance which is a return to *the status quo ante*. This cannot happen in a vacuum. Rather, it requires overturning the domestic factors that are compelling Ethiopia to retreat from the geopolitical space it has enjoyed so far. Addressing the lingering security problem bedeviling the state is a *sin qua non* to recalibrate Ethiopia's regional policy by demonstrating its capability as it is emerging from a situation of *security recipient* to country firms looking not *merely* for its security but also offer a modicum of security to the region. Furthermore, the western and central parts of Ethiopia are also increasingly witnessing the mounting conflict and the subsequent humanitarian crisis. Restoring law

¹⁰ Interview with Nigus W/Tensay. Lecturer at Jigjiga University.

and order in the conflict-ravaged areas would certainly help the state well-placed in regional politics.

Besides the domestic determinants, settling the dispute the country has with Sudan over the contested territory could also be considered a good opportunity to overcome one of the external challenges constraining the state in the domain of peacekeeping diplomacy. Indeed, in the current environment, the embattled Khartoum government could not be in a position to continue its traditional role of providing support to insurgents fighting the Ethiopian government as it did previously (Al-Awsat, 2021; Tsegaye, 2022). Hence, under the current circumstance, Khartoum's foreign policy strategy could not be aimed at exploiting Ethiopia's security vulnerability. This condition will help Ethiopia grasp the opportunity for re-asserting its dominant role in the region.

Revitalizing its peacekeeping engagement will also entail addressing its relations with the United Nations. Recently, reports confirmed that the future participation of Ethiopian peacekeepers will be subjected to the scrutiny of the human rights records of every deployed soldier in the north Ethiopia conflict.¹¹ Diplomatic rapprochement with the West could not be sidelined as far as the need to reassert Ethiopia's role in the region is concerned. The West has still the leverage to constrain the foreign policy choice of the country. Identifying the areas in which the interests of the West and Ethiopia converge could be considered as an opportunity to work

towards addressing challenges both parties want to address in the region.

Apart from the bilateral relations Ethiopia has had with the rest, its role in the regional security arrangement is a necessary condition to reassert its role in the region. Needless to say, Ethiopia made use of IGAD as a platform to execute its foreign policy. For instance, Ethiopia has considered IGAD as a multilateral platform to implement its foreign policy vis-à-vis securing its national interest as far as Eritrea, Somalia, and South Sudan (Kidist, 2014). Reviving its influence inside the regional organization would be an opportunity for Ethiopia's journey to reassert its influence in the region.

A Region without a Clear hegemon

The region will not have a clear hegemon in that not a single state can play a regional security role with the recognition generated from the external actors as well as the hitherto recognized actors are still consumed by internal problems. Ethiopia, for instance, is still struggling to overcome internal security predicaments. Failure to adequately deal with the current circumstances will continue to damage the image of an "anchor state" in the region the country had earlier enjoyed. This in turn will affect the tendency to renew the tarnished image with which the state is constantly struggling. The lingering security problem is sapping the capacity of the state, thereby diminishing the potential of the country and the concomitant roles it plays in the region (Verhoeven & Woldemariam, 2022). Recent, albeit commitment demonstrated by the warring parties to the peace deal both are party to, it will take time

¹¹ Interview with Anonymous Source.

for Ethiopia to recover from full-scale civil war and reinvent itself as a regional actor in the domain of peace and security.

Addis Ababa's weakening presence in the region could not only be anticipated by analyzing the domestic circumstances, but its troubling relation with Khartoum over the contested boundary would continue to weaken Ethiopia's role. Furthermore, Ethiopia's "abandoning its leadership role in the South Sudan peace process" (Verje, 2021) will also serve as an indication that the region is devoid of a hegemon. Lacking a clear hegemon will also be possible in the Horn of Africa due to the lack of political will to shape regional security dynamics on the side of the member states. Kenya in this regard may refrain from sharing a security burden of the region. The recent geopolitical dynamics over access to the sea outlet may encourage immediate neighbors of Ethiopia to work in league and jeopardize Ethiopia's drive to escape from geopolitical retreat. In a nutshell, the above-mentioned circumstances may make effective contributions to the region without a clear dominance.

Conclusion

Today, reclaiming regional positions is not without constraints. Nevertheless, addressing the domestic and regional constraints would help Ethiopia perform its regional security role. Hence, adequately addressing the domestic security conundrums and building trust and confidence with neighboring states would help the state reclaim the regional space. Apart from addressing the foregoing pitfalls, re-engaging with the West, particularly the United States of America may open a new opportunity for the Ethiopian state to be

conferred legitimacy upon itself by the external actor - a precondition for a state like Ethiopia to play a regional role apart from endowing with internal capabilities. Reclaiming the geopolitical space through the prevailing national conception and role is not enough. It is also important to rethink the "new" roles commensurate with the political will, the regional political-security landscape, as well as the domestic capabilities.

Although there are signs of recovery witnessed, Ethiopia's future regional role and the region *per se* will fall into the following categories: a region without a hegemon; a region with the hegemony of Nairobi and Addis Ababa; a region with Kenya's hegemon; and a region with Ethiopia's hegemony. These circumstances to happen in the foreseeable future are in fact, *inter alia*, determined by Ethiopia's ability to recover from domestic and regional constraints, forge a healthy relationship with neighbors and the West, and Nairobi's ability to exploit the current circumstances of social recognition among peers and earn trust and legitimacy from members of the region and beyond.

In conclusion, the result of this paper has policy implications for policymaking and practices. At the policy level, the study informs policymakers to look into the possible coping strategies that help Ethiopia offset its eroding role in the region, in part anchored on Addis Ababa's desire and capability to pursue a mix of diplomacy, political, economic, and military resources. Indeed, the current circumstances could force the government to selectively apply the resources per their importance and priority. The findings of the research also demand that further research be

undertaken in the area of reclaiming geopolitical space by interrogating theoretical perspectives and undertaking comparative research that will dwell on states that have

experienced eroded roles in their vicinities and the determinant factors that either help them or not in reclaiming their losing status in their geopolitical spaces.

About the Authors

Henok Getachew (PhD)

Dr. Henok Getachew is a Senior Researcher of the African Affairs (IFA), Ethiopia. His research interest areas are focused on African Union Peacekeeping, Red Sea politics, and Foreign Policy. He presented dozens of conference papers at regional and international conferences in his expertise. He can be found at henokgetachew1983@gmail.com

Gashaw Ayferam (PhD)

Dr. Gashaw Ayferam Endaylalu is a junior researcher at the African Affairs Research Department of the Institute of Foreign Affairs. His research interests include geopolitics, hydro politics, energy transition, and climate change.

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