

Militarization and Commercialization of Ports in the Horn of Africa: Prospects and Implications for Ethiopia

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa has witnessed intense competition in the militarization and commercialization of ports. These developments are particularly significant for landlocked countries like Ethiopia. Therefore, Ethiopia must search for opportunities within the Gulf-Horn cooperation scheme. This study aims to examine the implications of port commercialization and militarization in Ethiopia. The findings reveal that the presence of foreign troops, an increase in military bases, and the impact of Gulf rivalries are causing serious security concerns. In light of this security conundrum, it is necessary to reconsider the concept of siege mentality from a different perspective. Indeed, Ethiopia could also benefit from a range of opportunities. For instance, the recent developments in the Horn of Africa could inspire the revival of the Ethiopian Naval Force and offer alternative port options to support Ethiopia's need for seaports. Additionally, this could encourage investment from the Gulf States. However, Ethiopia should also regularly monitor the security dynamics in the Horn region, advocate for multilateral African initiatives like the IGAD-led peace process, maintain a balanced relationship with the Gulf States, and promote a win-win approach to their engagement.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HOA) is home to 220 million people and represents one of the most geostrategic regions in the world. Each year, close to \$700 billion worth of goods passes through the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa (Waal, 2017). This enabled the region to be a theatrical stage for strategic power struggles in the past one and a half centuries (SSRC, 2007). Recently, the geopolitics of ports have

conjoined the Gulf regional powers and the Horn countries together. This development has affected the global political economy tremendously. As 80 percent of global trade takes place through maritime transport (UNCTAD, 2018), ports have become key determinants in the era of globalization. According to Cafiero and Cok (2018), ports shaped the 21st century as railways affected the 20th-century phenomenon.

The development of ports in HoA can be traced back to the presence of Arab traders along the East African coast. This led to the establishment of various port sites along the coastline. The traditional system of port development persisted until the 19th century, fueled by the ongoing Arab-African trade. On the other hand, the emergence of modern seaports in the HoA can be largely attributed to European colonization (Hoyle, 1967). Omar (2001) suggests that the origins of European military ports in the HoA can be traced back to the arrival of the Ottoman Turks and Portuguese in the 16th century. Initially, the European expeditions were motivated by the search for trading partners, but over time, their intentions shifted towards political gain. Italy's deceitful acquisition of the port of Assab in 1869 and subsequent occupation of Massawa in 1885 serve as notable examples.

The horn of Africa played a pivotal role during the Cold War. It served as a theatre of intense global power competition. As a result, they were heavily involved in regional matters in the form of proxy wars and humanitarian activities. Following the end of the Cold War and the costly Battle of Mogadishu in 1993, however, the international community and major powers paid little attention to the HoA (The Horn Bulletin, 2018). In addition, the value of ports in the HoA has remained constant due to internal and external factors. For instance, Eritrea looked inward and paid less attention to its coastal areas, where ports could play a central role. Somalia was frequently mentioned more for its piracy than for the geo-strategic positions of its ports. In effect, the ports of HoA garnered the least demand compared to the Suez Canal.

Recently, however, things seem to have been changed. Ports of the HoA are suddenly in the spotlight and have become an arena of fierce competition for commercial and military purposes (David, 2018). For instance, several countries from the Gulf region are operating in the HoA to serve their geopolitical interests.

The Gulf region, composed of eight independent states, has been described as 'conflict-oriented' and is an immediate neighbor to the HoA. It is unfortunate, that conflict is one of the defining features of these two regions. Theoretically, therefore, any cooperation between the two regions needs critical scrutiny assessment. Their union can be counterproductive - a surge in conflict. Furthermore, up until now, the cooperation between the Gulf States and the Horn countries has primarily focused on serving the commercial and strategic interests of the Gulf States rather than addressing the concerns of the Horn countries (Horton, 2019). This trend continues with the recent port-based bilateral relationship between the two regions.

In general, the new dynamics that are taking place in the region are attention-grabbing, especially for the landlocked Ethiopia. Ethiopia lost its ports and became dependent on neighboring countries' wills to access ports. This dependency has hampered Ethiopia's warm aspiration to become an uncontested regional power in the HoA (The Horn Bulletin, 2018). Notwithstanding, Ethiopia must hunt for opportunistic structures in the commercialization and militarization of ports and needs to focus on how the region could be transformed into an important geo-strategic area. The current study begs for answers to this central question.

Materials and Methods

Fieldwork for this research was conducted between January and February 2023. The research relied on the interpretation of primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through interviews with key informants from the Ethiopian Navy and the Ethiopia Maritime Institute. A review of published and unpublished materials also supplemented the primary data. The collated data were analyzed thematically and interpreted accordingly in light of the theory of realism. It is hoped that realism is capable of explaining important regional dynamics, such as the recent militarization and commercialization of ports in the HoA.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Realism is one of the theoretical perspectives in international relations. It is a familiar theory for looking at the situation in the Middle East in general and the Gulf States in particular. Beginning with the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the notion of the "Middle East," realism in the Middle East has demonstrated itself through various European interventions, for instance, colonialism (Althari, 2021). Despite its hoary nature, realism has dominated the 21st century with the potential to explain states behavior in their quest for international relations.

There are distinct varieties of realist theory. These include human nature-centric, state-centric, and system-centric realism. Human nature realism, also known as biological realism, emphasizes man's biological abilities and intrinsically selfish behavior. Most classical theorists, such as Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and

Max Weber fall into this category (Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006). The "Hobbesian state of nature," where individuals are assumed to be trustless (Herrerros, 2004) as well as the view of Machiavelli that argues "the end justifies the means," can reveal the nucleus of the underlying tenants of classical realism.

The classical realist's worldview is built upon the belief that human beings are naturally egoistic. Accordingly, the social world was created by the collective behavior of egocentric men. This social world would have catastrophic consequences if it is left unchecked (Donnelly, 2004). Within the domestic political sphere, the egocentric social world is under constant surveillance thanks to the existence of a hierarchical political structure, whereby the rule of law is put in place. However, in global politics, there is no supranational authority over others. Hence, the worst behavior of men would be expressed in the form of a state.

State-centric realism (neo-classical realism) explains international relations from the vantage point of individual states. Thus, instead of individual leaders or international institutions, states are the central actors in international politics to secure national interests (Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006). Therefore, the neo-classical realists cap state security at the top of all priorities. To this end, various states have rationally exercised high and/or low politics if deemed necessary. High politics is attributed to military security, whereas low politics is related to economic and social security (Viotti and Kauppi, 2012).

Last but not least, system-centric realism views the international system as naturally anarchic because no morally responsible

supranational state exists committed to the maintenance of world order. Seemingly in line with this perspective, some Gulf and Horn actors have carefully played on the political chessboard. This is best epitomized by the actions of Somaliland and the UAE. Reports indicated that Somaliland and UAE largely ignored angry protests from Somalia's federal government in Mogadishu, and United Nations organizations' notifications of arms embargo violations over port and base deals. The government of Somalia warned that the agreements constitute violations of sovereignty while giving Somaliland the green light for its decades-old bid for international recognition (Vertin, 2020). Despite the fact that the legality of the deals is purely debatable, the two parties cemented their contract with broader aid and multimillion-dollar commercial agreements (The National, 2017). Therefore, according to the theory of realism, it can be said that UAE-Somaliland cooperation enables them to play both high and low politics at the same time while defying the anarchic world order. In conclusion, in this study, an attempt was made to scrutinize important new dynamic developments associated with the militarization and commercialization of the HoA ports in light of the theoretical linchpin of realism.

Findings

Military and Commercial Presence of Gulf States in the HOA

The military and commercial presence of Gulf States in the HoA dates back to time immemorial. More recently, following their economic, political, and strategic interests, the Gulf States have a more visible presence in the

region (USIP, 2020). The Yemen civil war (Melvin, 2019), the Qatar blockade (Vertin, 2019), China's Silk Road initiative, sanctions (Feierstein, 2020) and America's decreasing role in guaranteeing regional security (USIP, 2020) are worth to be mentioned as important drivers of Gulf State's reengagement in the HoA.

Gulf-Horn cooperation (military partnerships and political alliances) has been made possible by a form of economic foreign policy that can be dubbed "economic statecraft." Economic statecraft, as an important foreign policy tool – actively working on strategic political, military, and economic interests. Hence, in the political economy of the Gulf States, the interests of the state, important business families, and investment entities are intertwined. This makes "*the Gulf - Horn cooperation problematic since its inception*" as the demarcation of the strategic interests of Gulf States and their economic statecrafts is blurred. For instance, locating the dividing line between the interest of DP World as a private company and the UAE as an assertive state in the HoA is challenging (Munich Security Brief, 2021).

Indeed, countries across the globe have acquired foreign military bases through various means over the years. These mechanisms include outright conquest and colonization (for example, the case of the Roman Empire), defeat and occupation (for instance, the transfer of Japan and Germany's military bases after WWII to the victor power), hand down (one case is the transfer of former British bases in Jamaica and Bahamas to the United states), removing original inhabitants (example, the peoples in

Okinawa, Japan were removed from their land so that the USA could build bases), formal alliances or less formal arrangements (as demonstrated during the cold war, the USA and USSR built global base structures in ideological friendly states) and Tangible *quid pro quos* (this is captured in Saudi Arabia's and UAE's military base formation in the HoA) (Dawit, 2020).

The Gulf States' military presence in the HoA has created a "Geopolitical Traffic Jam." Besides the Gulf, several actors have also entered the region with varying interests (Munich Security Brief, 2021). The Gulf States have long used their "petro-dollars" as a foreign policy instrument to interfere in the internal affairs of the HoA states. Through their investment in the HoA ports, they ostensibly pursue economic aims such as regional trade and economic diversification, but perhaps, more importantly, are political goals like challenging the presence of Iran in the Red Sea and the HoA. Similar to the 1970s & 1980s, the 2008 oil price boom led to the flow of a huge sum of Gulf money into the HoA and served as a foreign policy tool (Berg and Meester, n.d.,)

For instance, Ethiopia saw a notable increase in GCC investment and aid in 2018 and 2019, mainly from the UAE (USIP, 2020). Several projects run by the Gulf States in Ethiopia demonstrate that Ethiopia has been their choice for investment. The Gulf-Horn cooperation is believed to facilitate the fruition of the existing investment projects and the initiation of the new ones. For instance, the Global Construction Review (2021) mentioned that Ethiopia and UAE have agreed on 1 billion dollars to create a trade

corridor from Ethiopia to Berbera in Somaliland. The deal includes the construction of dry ports, silos, warehouses, container yards, refrigerated depots, freight forwarding and clearing activities. Dagnawit Moges, the then Ministry of Transport of Ethiopia commented on the importance of the deal in "propelling the country [Ethiopia] into becoming an African beacon of prosperity".

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the most assertive Gulf State in terms of commercialization and militarization of ports across the HoA. Its activities define the wider Emirati ambitions to shape economic and political developments both in Africa and the Middle East. Therefore, its involvement in the Horn Region has to be understood in a wider scope. UAE's agreements on commercial ports increasingly go hand in hand with the establishment of military bases (Bergenwall, 2019). Hence, commercial, security, and the future of maritime trade are perhaps the driving forces of Emirati's engagement in the HoA. In recent years, its involvement has been sharpened by two events: the Yemen civil war and the Qatar blockade (Vertin, 2020). Accordingly, the UAE has established four military bases in three countries of the HoA: Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia (Table 4.1). More importantly, it has military bases and commercial sites at the ports of Assab, Djibouti, Mogadishu and Berbera.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), on the other hand, historically, has maintained positive bilateral relations with HoA countries. This positive relation, however, was not promoted to a strategic level despite Saudi's geographic proximity to the region. More

recently, KSA recognized the region's dire need for collective action to protect and preserve regional stability. In response, KSA has noticeably increased its military presence in the HoA, particularly in connection with the conflict in Yemen. For instance, it concluded a security agreement with Djibouti intended to establish a military base in 2016 (Melvin, 2019). It also maintained a military footprint in the Horn region alongside UAE's soldiers at the Assab military base. This suggests Saudi Arabia's readiness to invest in the Horn region with a particular focus on ports. In a similar vein, KSA and Djibouti have signed an agreement on a direct shipping route that links the KSA with the East African market (Shams, 2022).

The De Faakto Intelligence Research Observatory (2019) listed a wide range of Saudi military operations in the HoA. Its activities target anti-piracy, anti-terrorism, stabilizing & securing business confidence in the region, encouraging foreign investment, protecting oil commerce, increasing Saudi presence and influence, deployment of troops to Yemen via the Red Sea, reducing war costs spent by the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen, enables Saudi to attack or contain the sea & air across the gulf of Aden, detect and intercept Iranian supplies to Houthi militias passing through the Somali coast. Therefore, it can be said that Saudi's operations in the Horn region are intended to protect economic and security interests.

Country	Location	Facility Type	Duration	Size of contingent	Official purpose
Saudi Arabia	Djibouti city, Djibouti	Military base	2015	No Saudi troops are known to be in Djibouti at this time despite tentative plans for a base.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for military operations in Yemen
	Djibouti city, Djibouti	Military base	2015	Unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for military operations in Yemen
			2015-Present	As of early 2019, it hosted a battalion of ground forces in addition to 800-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for military

UAE	Assab, Eritrea	Military base & Naval port Airbase		1200 naval, air, and support forces. This presence has reportedly decreased by up to 75 percent	<p>operations in Yemen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for naval operations for Yemen war • Training of Yemeni and other coalition forces • Transfer of coalition military forces to Yemen
	Mogadishu, Somalia	Military base	2015-18	30-40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of Somali National Army
	Berbera, Somaliland (Somalia)	Military base & Naval port Airbase	Projected opening 2019	Unknown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for military operations in Yemen Maritime security

Table 1: Gulf States’ Foreign Military Bases in HOA Region

As shown in Table 4.1, the Gulf states are increasingly using, if not manipulating, the Yemeni civil war as an “immediate cause” to launch a military base in the HoA. Here, one could ask that what would happen if Yemen’s conflict was abated. What would be the fate of the military bases? Would they be closed or remain permanent? Answering such questions requires understanding of the essence of Gulf and Horn countries’ deals vis-a-vis the war in Yemen. On all occasions, the

deal has a life span of more than 25 years with a possibility of extension highlighting that so long as the Yemeni war is there, Gulf States’ military presence is expected in line with the agreements. On the other hand, the current Saudi-Iran rapprochement ignites a hope of concluding the Yemeni war. Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that the permanent military presence of the Gulf States in the Horn region is less likely if Yemen’s war is over. In real *politik*, however, this is less likely

and the Gulf countries would not close their base easily.

Prospects of Militarization and commercialization of HOA ports for Ethiopia

To see any opportunistic structure from Gulf-Horn cooperation, it seems imperative to begin with Ethiopian foreign policy toward the Gulf States. Ethiopia's Gulf States policy was vividly stated in the 2002 Foreign Policy and National Security Policy and Strategy document within the context of the Middle East. The document says:

The policy we pursue toward the Middle East must be based on knowledge and must be supported by appropriate research and study. By no means should we be guided by feelings or whims. Our policy should aim at reducing the negative effects of the problems that hinder the development of our relationship. Ours has to be a policy of considerable detail, which takes into account the particular conditions of each country in the Middle East.

Therefore, the 2002 foreign policy and national security strategy paper is essentially important in recognizing the special attention the Middle Eastern region deserves in Ethiopian foreign relations and national security policy. Historically, Ethiopian foreign policy has emphasized non-partisanship and non-interference. This is confirmed by

Ethiopia's position on the Gulf Crisis which is derived from its long-standing policy of non-interference and mutual respect. Despite diplomatic pressures from the Saudi block, Ethiopia has maintained a neutral position on the Gulf Crisis preferring a non-partisan approach. It has instead called for a dialogue to end the political impasse. Perhaps, this is partly because the proliferation of "proxies" in the Horn region has been a serious concern for Ethiopia over the years. Some Ethiopian officials have remained wary of the new dynamics in the Gulf and its regional impact on Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea (Fakude, 2017). However, "this is does not meant that Ethiopians are pessimistic about the Gulf Horn cooperation in its entirety".

As mentioned frequently, the involvement of Gulf States in the Horn region is creating new geopolitical dynamics. Ethiopia needs to carefully assess these developments and seize available opportunities when conditions permit to do so. This helps Ethiopia protect its national interests while engaging in the complex interaction between the Gulf and the Horn. It is believed that a realistic understanding of Gulf-Horn cooperation can reveal opportunities at the far end of the spectrum. A summary report of key informant interviews with participants highlighted several opportunities for Gulf-Horn cooperation, including inspiring the revival of the Ethiopian Naval Force, exploring diverse port alternatives, promoting Gulf investment efforts, and encouraging the peace process.

Inspiring the Revival of the Ethiopian Naval Force

The Horn region has increasingly become militarized following the new project of

“scramble for African ports.” The competition has involved regional and global superpowers from Asia, America and Europe. These powerful actors have shown their assertiveness by establishing military and naval bases in the Horn region. Being located in the HoA, Ethiopia is no exception to the curses and blessings of what is going on in the region. For this reason, “Ethiopia should be alert to the developments that are taking place in the region. It has a security stake there.”¹

Several Ethiopian authorities, including the current Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Sa’are Mekonen, the late Chief of General Staff of the Ethiopian National Defense Force, and Field Marshal Birhanu Jula expressed their deep concern on the security of the Horn region vis-à-vis the involvement of different international actors. For example, after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December 2019, the Prime Minister stated:

The Horn of Africa today is a region of strategic significance. The global military superpowers are expanding their military presence in the area. Terrorist and extremist groups also seek to establish a foothold. We do not want the Horn to be a battleground for superpowers nor a hideout for the merchants of terror and brokers of despair and misery. We want the Horn to become a treasury of peace and progress.

In his statement, the Prime Minister hinted that his administration would no longer stay indifferent to the Horn region. Concomitantly, the BBC report shed light on the concern of the Ethiopian government regarding the proliferation of foreign military bases in the HOA. According to BBC, Roba Megerssa, head of the Ethiopian Shipping & Logistics Services Enterprise (ESLSE) underscored that "We are afraid perhaps in the future that even Djibouti may not have its say to decide on its fate. This is quite a threat to Ethiopia." The BBC added that being aware of the strategic and political threat posed to the Ethiopian interest by the proliferation of military bases, the Ethiopian government has adopted a new strategy to reestablish a Navy intended to protect its interest in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The revival of the Ethiopian Navy has got a warm welcome at least from France and Djibouti. Ethiopian Capital reads as follows:

...during his [Abiy Ahmed's] latest travel to Djibouti on the third week of October [2018] the naval base issue was discussed by Abiy with Ismail Omar Guelleh, President of Djibouti. France is helping the Ethiopian government rebuild the naval force and currently, some of the naval personnel have already trained in France, a major power supportive of Ethiopia's reforms.

The firm stance of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed on regional integration on the one hand, and the Western support on the other

¹ Interview result held with participant, 2023

hand catalyze the germination of the Ethiopian naval force from its ruins. One of the participants said, “The coming of Abiy Ahmed with a new spirit for regional integration helped the Ethiopian naval force to revive after more than 30 years of disbandment.”

Providing Diversified Port Alternatives

As a landlocked country, Ethiopia is compelled to use neighboring nation’s ports for import and export activities. The recent Gulf countries’ push for military bases and commercialization purposes may open an opportunity for Horn regional actors to consider similar activities. *“Some countries seemed to have followed the footsteps of the Gulf countries.”* In line with the 2017 agreement between Ethiopia, DP World, and the Somaliland Port Authority, Ethiopia has a 19% stake at the port of Berbera though it dropped the share (The East African, 2022).

Ethiopia currently uses ports from Djibouti, Somaliland, and Kenya. A quarter report of the 2022 fiscal year showed 94.5 percent of Ethiopia’s imports passed through the Djibouti port; three percent was handled at Berbera, 1.5 percent at Tadjoura, and 0.87 percent at Moyale corridor (The Reporter, 2022). That means, Ethiopia is predominantly dependent on the port of Djibouti. Accordingly, any harm on Djibouti port would automatically affect Ethiopia’s economy tremendously. For this reason, “the need for port diversification has been alarming.”³

The presence of the Gulf countries in the HoA is a “blessing for Ethiopia”. It would

provide diversified port alternatives. Key actors of port commercialization, such as the UAE may provide cheap port services and alternatives. On the other hand, Ethiopia may also get the chance to invest in port development like the Gulf State. A good starting point is Ethiopia’s commitment to take its share at Berbera Port, Somaliland. Nevertheless, such investments may bear different challenges. One of the challenges is the unequal competitive environment that was set up by the Gulf States in particular. The Gulf States have invested millions of dollars in port development, and they proved that they are good investors in this regard. On the contrary, besides financial constraints, Ethiopia has no previous experience in the development of ports on foreign soil. In any case, it seems more economical and rational to utilize available ports developed by the Gulf States if conditions permit it to do so.

Encouraging Peace Process in Ethiopia

Gulf countries have been known for their mediation role in the HoA. Most importantly, KSA and the UAE have been mentioned in this regard. The case of Ethiopia, for instance, offers a vivid illustration of Gulf States’ mediation role, at least, for the last five years (since 2018). The KSA and the UAE facilitated the preliminary rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. They also pushed Ethiopia and Egypt for dialogue. The Ethiopian Prime Minister visited Cairo and discussed with the Egyptian President important matters such as the GERD project. In their meeting, mutual understanding seemed to be reached (International Crisis Group, 2018). Therefore, it can be hoped that

² Interview result held with participant, 2023

³ Interview result held with participant, 2023

strengthened Gulf-Horn cooperation encourages a peace process in the Horn region in which Ethiopia can secure its peace dividend even if the region has been spoiled by terrorism. Also, KSA's consistent hosting of conferences and dialogue aimed at bringing Sudanese warring parties together since the outbreak of the civil war can be the Gulf's mediating role in the region.

Unfortunately, the HoA is the most conflicted part of Africa and is prone to terrorism (Shinn, 2003). The United States has considered the region and its countries - Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan as the major source of terrorism (USIP, 2004). In such critical disjuncture, the involvement of the Gulf States with a priority for the agenda of fighting terrorism in the HoA means Ethiopia gets powerful allies to fight terrorism. This is particularly important as Ethiopia is embattling with domestic and transnational terrorist networks, such as Al Shabab.

Implication on National Security

The proliferation of military bases in the Horn region may necessitate looking at siege mentality from a different perspective.⁴ Historically, a siege mentality has been seen in light of Islamic encirclement. However, Ethiopia's 2002 foreign policy and national security strategy document sought to move away from the traditional conception of such encirclement (Meester et al., 2018). The same holds for the draft foreign policy. Meanwhile, nowadays, the emergence of the Gulf States and other superpowers in the Horn region has

witnessed a new encirclement, which Ethiopia's foreign policy cannot disregard like the traditional idea of siege mentality. The former Chief of the Ethiopian defense force shares a similar feeling. General Sa'are Mokonin in his delegated speech in north command stated, "Our country is found in the strategic location of the horn of Africa. The competition to establish military facilities among rivals of the world in the region will not be ignored. We consider this situation too!"

The presence of foreign troops and the militarization of ports have heightened the already tense, fearful, and distrustful atmosphere in the Horn region causing additional concern for member states. A notable concern is the growing number of foreign military facilities in Djibouti which poses a significant threat to Ethiopia's national security and raises doubts about the reliability of on the port of Djibouti for Ethiopia as Igrouane (2019) described the fate of Djibouti as follows:

The presence of foreign military bases in Djibouti, however, is a double-edged sword for all involved parties.... the country [Djibouti] risks becoming a "nest of spies" where the international powers based there can watch each other closely. This congestion might also lead to friction among

⁴ Ethiopian foreign policy has traditionally stemmed from a siege mentality, considering the threat of Islamic encirclement.

these powers, turning Djibouti into a battlefield.

Ethiopia is almost entirely dependent on Djibouti's ports for import and export. Hence, any threat against Djibouti's ports would affect "Ethiopia's national security by and large."⁵ Moreover, the likely advent of Egypt in the Horn region would also risk Ethiopia's national security. By no means, Egypt's getting closer to the region with a military approach would create a comfort zone for Ethiopia.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Gulf-Horn Cooperation has spanned centuries of close interaction. The Gulf States, principally the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have participated in the new scramble for ports in the HoA. Geopolitical, economic, strategic, and ideological reasons are the motives behind their assertive engagement. Seeing through the realist lens, the militarization and commercialization of ports epitomized high politics and low politics, respectively. To ensure their military security, the Gulf States have aggressively scrambled for the ports of the HoA and established several foreign military bases. On the other hand, they have also cautiously invested in port development and actively worked on commercialization to protect their economic security. In so doing, the commercialization and militarization of ports in the HoA have sharpened Gulf-Horn cooperation - which created a fertile ground for Ethiopia to hunt available opportunities. Meanwhile, the proliferation of military bases is alarming and needs a timely strategy.

Ethiopia, therefore, needs to consider the following points to scale up the positive side of Gulf States' engagement in the commercialization and militarization of ports in the HoA:

- **Monitoring the regional security of the HoA:** Monitoring helps to put the threat-inducing activities of the Gulf-Horn engagement under check. One mechanism for checking the undesirable consequences of the Gulf-Horn engagement is to enhance regional and economic integration.
- **Encouraging multilateral African initiatives:** Improving multilateral initiatives could balance Horn-Gulf bargaining power. In this regard, the roles of the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) are worth mentioning. The role of AU and/or IGAD can level the playing field with the Gulf States, allowing Horn countries to deal with their Gulf counterparts on a more equal basis. Nevertheless, it has to be kept in mind that since some countries like Egypt have opposed the position of IGAD, accusing it of being an instrument of Ethiopia's interests in the Red Sea region (USIP, 2020), the contribution of the AU seems to garner more support.
- **Balancing relations with the Gulf States:** Establishing balanced relations with the active Gulf States in the Horn region is necessary. Being a dominant

⁵ Interview held with participant, 2023

state in the Horn region, competing Gulf countries need to strengthen ties with Ethiopia. Perhaps that is why all Gulf competitors opened their embassies in Addis Ababa. Crediting the value of each actor on an equal basis is vitally important for Ethiopia. In case, any confrontation happens between the Gulf's rivalries, a 'wait and see strategy' is advisable for countries such as Ethiopia, whose foreign policy prefers non-interference rather than taking sides.

- **Hunting for Opportunities:** Ethiopia needs to pursue opportunities within the framework of Gulf-Horn cooperation based on critical

geopolitical analysis. Given the volatility and unpredictability of the Gulf-Horn region, available opportunities have to be exploited promptly and put into action before another dynamic development disturbs the healthy geopolitical interaction.

- **Encouraging Gulf States to modify their engagement:** Gulf States have said that regional stability is their prioritized issue. Hence, the Horn countries need to encourage their Gulf counterparts to participate in the Horn region in a way that preserves the stability they claim to seek.

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