
Rethinking Ethiopia's Relations with the Arab League

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Abstract

By drawing upon concepts extracted from the IR school of neoliberal institutionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this article argues that the Arab League (AL) could create a platform for Ethiopia to address its multiple political economy and security concerns with most of its neighbours. The article analyzed the primary data collected from the Ethiopian diplomatic circle and explored the potential areas of cooperation and challenges between Ethiopia and the AL. It finds out that there are multiple issues the AL discuss that concerns Ethiopia and the potential for future Ethiopian involvement is recognized; however, there is a fear from Ethiopian side that Egypt would not allow Ethiopia's membership in the AL. At a domestic level, the Ethiopian foreign policy tradition will thwart to encourage the Ethiopian aspiration to join the Arab League as an Observer member state.

Key Words

Regional Security Complex Theory; Ethiopia; Arab League

Introduction

This article examines the feasibility and advantages Ethiopia would gain by joining the League of Arab States (also called the Arab League) as an Observer member. It argues that there is a possibility Ethiopia's membership could allow the Arab League and Ethiopia to work together. The Arab League's proposal that comes in the form of the 'Arab Neighbouring Countries Policy'¹ provides an incentive for the Arab neighbours like Ethiopia to join the League. What is Ethiopia's position, if invited to join the League? And why Ethiopia needs to strive to join the Arab League? For long, successive Ethiopian governments have been blaming member/s of the League of Arab Nations (AL) for the constant destabilization of Ethiopia and current dismemberment of Ethiopia². Hence, the Ethiopian foreign policymaking establishment has remained suspicious of the AL and some of its member states.

1 The Arab Neighbourhood Policy (ANP) was proposed by the Arab League Secretary General, Amr Mousa, at the Sirte, Libya Arab League Summit (22nd AL Summit). The General Secretary's proposal includes Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iran, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Turkey. The proposal has not yet received a full approval by the AL states.

2 The Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front used to enjoy considerable financial and technical support from several Arab states.

In parallel to this, some member states of the AL may view Ethiopia as an antagonist that allies itself against the interests of the region. That is why talking about the possibility of Ethiopia joining the League of Arab States requires providing argumentum and temperantiamat at two levels. At the first level, one must argue that Ethiopia needs to join the AL and present sufficient reasons to demand membership. Second, the Arab League or its members should consider Ethiopia's membership important. As it stands, however, the two entities are often at odds. This paper gives priority to the former puzzle and pursues a course that sees through the lenses of neoliberal institutionalism and RSCT a point of moderation that enables the two actors to work together.

The argument pursued in this article is extracted from primary data collected in Ethiopia from August 2017 to September 2018. The data is gathered mainly from prominent political leaders and diplomats. The author also visited the different Arab League member states embassies and the Office of the Arab League in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first two parts focus on the background and theoretical perspective respectively. In the third part, the paper focuses on the possible reasons why Ethiopia should request a membership card. In the fourth part, the paper analyzes the challenges that might inhibit Ethiopia's aspiration to join the AL. In doing so, the paper concludes with the niche Ethiopia could play as an Observer state in the AL.

Background

Historically, Ethiopia has deep-rooted relations with the Arab World. Its culture is also predominantly influenced by religious and trade relations it had built with the Arab world for centuries. For instance, Christianity was introduced in Ethiopia by a Syrian clergyman named Abba Salama in the fourth-century AD. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) has strong affiliations with the Coptic Church of Alexandria, Egypt. EOC Patriarchs were appointed by the Church of Alexandria for 1600 years³. It was in 1959 under Emperor Haile Selassie I, EOC began to anoint its own Patriarch. Islam was also introduced to Ethiopia as early as the seventh century AD. The First *Hijira*, the flight of early Muslims, was to Ethiopia. The Ethiopian King's hospitable treatment of the early Muslims cemented a strong relation between Ethiopia and several Arab League states. Due to the geographical proximity and these historical linkages, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy document state that "the impact of the Middle East on Ethiopia is more prominent than that of the African states"⁴.

Recently, several geopolitical developments across the Horn of Africa overtly challenge the positions Ethiopia has been enjoying for the last two decades. Ethiopia, with its strong ties with the US and as one of the reliable allies in the war against terrorism, had cordial relationships with most of the prominent Arab League states. Similarly, Ethiopia had the principal role in the region's

³ FDRE Ministry of Information. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy. Addis Ababa 2002: 66.

⁴ FDRE Ministry of Information. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy. Addis Ababa 2002: 66.

economic and institutions such as IGAD. However, this has been changing recently on several grounds. For instance, the strategy to isolate Eritrea is no longer viable because of the crisis in Yemen that has increased the geopolitical importance of Eritrea⁵, which is now hosting United Arab Emirates (UAE) military base and Israeli radio marina and military contingent. In addition, Eritrea's recent military takeover of the Red Sea island of Doumeria is worrisome to Ethiopia, because of its strategic and security significance to the newly built Ethio – Djibouti railway system. Similarly, the growing appetite by extra-regional actors to have a military presence in Djibouti has opened geo-economic alternatives to Djibouti by reducing its economic dependence on Ethiopia. Somalia, as well, has been attracting diverse actors that challenge the relative-free-raid that Ethiopia has been enjoying since 2006⁶. These are principally the outcomes of the Sino-US rivalry, the recent Saudi-Qatar fallout and the war in Yemen.

More importantly, the shifting global security and political pivot increased the importance of regional powers in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Today, the United States security priority is no longer the issue of terrorism or the Middle East region at large; it is rather the containment of China and the Asia Pacific region. This has paved a way for the Gulf States to increase their influence and role in the Horn of African region. The Gulf States are filling the vacuum left by the United States in the Horn of Africa. Beyond other issues, this is exemplified by the joint, Saudi Arabia and UAE role played in the process of consolidating the Ethiopia – Eritrea Treaty that was signed in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in September 2018⁷.

Similarly, the Obama administration attempted to restore Iran's diplomatic and political posture that posed a challenge to some of the Arab League states to concoct a more assertive foreign policy that brought rival Middle Eastern powers to the Horn of Africa. In particular, the fear that Iran's assertive foreign policy orientation and size will dominate the Str. of Hormuz brought greater attention towards the Red Sea. The Red Sea, today, hosts the largest Saudi Arabian Naval fleet. More importantly, the so-called Gulf Crisis, which puts Qatar and its neighbours such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt at odds, has been manifesting its dreadful side in the politics of the Horn. This led to Eritrea and Djibouti cutting ties with Qatar; Somalia to shun out UAE and Saudi Arabia; while the de facto state of Somaliland strengthen ties with the UAE-Saudi camp.

The Arab League states such as Saudi Arabia and UAE are pursuing a more self-reliant approach in their foreign relations. The dwindling oil reserves and the need to secure a steadier as well as geographically close source of food and economic outlet has made the Horn of Africa, besides other variables, a favoured destination for several AL states investment ventures. The UAE's blue economic expansion across the coasts of the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean also is part of these activities. These developments brought heavy Arab League member states involvement in the Horn of Africa.

5 Currently, the newly appointed Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, has initiated a diplomatic move to restore the relations between the two states.

6 Abdi Zenebe, "Somalia – Ethiopia Security Relations and the US Africa Command since 2006". PhD Dissertation (unpublished), 2017. Addis Ababa University.

7 The Jeddah Treaty of 19 September, 2018, was signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea after series of discussion held between the two states in Saudi Arabia and UAE. The leaders of the two Horn of African states received the highest awards given to them by King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia and King Mohammed of UAE respectively.

In this volatile sub-region that entertains often rapidly changing discourses; Ethiopia should develop clearly articulated grand strategy and proactive foreign policy orientation that is capable of addressing the strategic, security and political economic interests of its people. More importantly, Ethiopia should learn to quickly adjust its strategic priorities in accord to global politico-security shifts. In addition, Ethiopia seeks to extend platforms that would enable it project its influence. One of the institutions where Ethiopia needs to have a presence in this regard is in the Arab League.

Most of Ethiopia's neighbours are members of the Arab League, i.e. four out of its six neighbours. Language wise, in three of these neighbours, viz. Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, Arabic is not the dominant language. Ethiopia has historically rooted and intricate relations with these and other Arab League states. Currently, Ethiopian troops are serving in Somalia. More than 95% of Ethiopia's import – export goes across the Port of Djibouti. The two AL states, i.e. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, are among the top five major sources of Ethiopia's import. According to 2017 WTEEx data, the AL states of Somalia (with USD 243.6 million), Saudi Arabia (with USD 206.2), United Arab Emirates (with USD 127.6 million), and Djibouti (with USD 96 million) are among the top ten Ethiopia's export destinations⁸.

Eritrea, up until very recently⁹, was locked with fifteen – years long security stalemate with Ethiopia. Sudan is part of the Nile Basin that is connected to Ethiopia in multiple ways. Egypt, which is member of the Arab League (AL) but not an immediate neighbour, is in a continued saga with Ethiopia over the Nile waters¹⁰. Saudi Arabia and UAE, which are also important members of the Arab League, are the sources of some of the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ethiopia.

However, it is important to emphasize the point that Ethiopia has never requested to join the Arab League. According to the conversations I had with high ranking Ethiopian diplomats there was a desire and proposal, which was prepared at the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) that encourages Ethiopia to become an observer member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)¹¹. The MoFA encouraged OIC membership because an estimated number of 40 million Ethiopians are Muslims and regional rivals, who have less number of Muslims such as Uganda, are members.

Here the article argues that Ethiopia has more than sufficient reasons to seek and request admission in the Arab League. The League discusses multiple issues that concerns Ethiopia. It raises issues connected to water security (including River Nile), maritime security in connection with the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, economic and cyber security. The League creates a platform to voice the concerns of its members; hence, having access to such a platform is important for Ethiopia to expound its discourse to friends and foes alike. Although the League has been criticized in

8 Daniel Workman, "Ethiopia's Top Trading Partners". WTEEx. 4 March 2018 <http://www.worldstopexports.com/ethiopia-top-trading-partners/>.

9 The rapprochement in mid-2018 ended the security statement and the diplomatic break between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

10 Daniel Kindie, "Egypt and the Hydro-politics of Blue Nile River" *Northeast African Studies*. Vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1999: 141-169.

11 Personal correspondence with Ambassador Abdulkadir and Ambassador Shemsedin at Radisson Blue Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The IOC is the second largest intergovernmental organization next to the UN. It has 57 members and most of Ethiopia's neighbours are members of IOC. It aims to protect the interests of Muslims and Ethiopia has more than 30 million Muslims around 33% of the total population.

failing to resolve internal disputes and sever political and security issues that continued to affect its members it remains a major entity that bring most Arab states together. In addition, it is true that because of internal strives its muscles are weak vis-à-vis powerful states, but could do damage on states like Ethiopia at diplomatic, economic, political and security areas. Hence, Ethiopia should quest an Observer member status in the Arab League as a necessity that will bolster its diplomatic image and political standing in the broader region at large.

Neoliberal Institutionalism And Regional Security Complex Theory

The normative side of this article is drawn from the school of Liberalism. The liberalist views of international politics as an arena of “progress and purposive change”¹² and the aspiration to enhance “cooperation” between states to address political and security challenges used as an instrument to encourage Ethiopia’s increased involvement in the Arab League. Particularly, neoliberal institutionalism, which advocates international institutions capacity to serve as a platform to manage differences between states orderly¹³, is essential to appreciate the Ethiopian aspiration to join the Arab League. International institutions are venues for cooperation and they play a crucial role in the process of building trust by promoting “collective interest...among egoistic agents”¹⁴.

This article also borrows important understanding of security and security relations from Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT, as espoused by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, promotes the regional level of analysis as the essential mode for security analysis and rejects the dominant coverage given to the national and system level analysis in the contemporary international security landscape¹⁵. Particularly, the demise of the bi-polar Cold War World Order paved the way for the emergence political and security actors that have the capability to determine security and political outcomes at the regional level. Hence, the *region* in the Post-Cold War World Order is where intense security interaction is manifest¹⁶.

Unlike the dominant international relations theories during the Cold War period, RSCT expounds the meaning of security that is diverse and broad. By deciphering the gist of security into sectors, which includes economic, environmental and social, RSCT presents a more comprehensive understanding of the concept. In turn, the multifaceted fathom of security facilitated for an in-depth analysis of security relations between states and regions across varied sectors.

Based on these imperatives, the paper takes two essential discourse of analysis from RSCT. Firstly, while rendering due attention to the continued importance of the state the paper extends the understanding of security beyond the military realm to include economic, diplomatic, ideational and

12 Martin Griffiths, Steven C. Roach and M. Scott Solomon, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (2nd edition). London: Routledge. 1999. Pp.65.

13 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1984.

14 Cornelia Navari, “Liberalism” in *Security Studies: Introduction*, edited by Paul D. Williams. New York: Routledge. 2008. Pp. 29-43, pp.39.

15 Barry Buzan, “Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World” in *Theories of New Regionalism*. ed. by F. Söderbaum, et.al. Palgrave Macmillan. 2003

16 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003.

political issues¹⁷. The current discourse on security encompasses multidimensional understanding of security and the diversified sources of insecurity. This will help us comprehend the importance of economic, cultural and political issues that are given attention by the Arab League as having hefty place in the calculus of the Ethiopian national interest and security narratives. Secondly, by taking also the level of analysis injected by RSCT, which is regional level of analysis, and referential nature of security the paper analyzes and set the security concerns of Ethiopia in juxtaposition to the Horn sub – region and its immediate neighbours, i.e. the Middle East¹⁸. The consequences of the waning role of greater powers such as the United States in the Horn of Africa and the shifting global security pivot to the Asia Pacific region has enhanced the role of regional powers in the Horn – Middle East politico-security dynamics. This has enhanced the AL states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar influence in the Horn of Africa.

The Arab League And Ethiopia: ‘Strange Bedfellows’

The founding objectives of the Arab League are more like the Organization of the African Unity (OAU). Both aim to oversee the end of colonialism and seek regional solidarity to fight against it. The AL and OAU (in 2002 transformed into AU) have played vital role in promoting economic integration in their respective regions. The Arab League also provides financial assistance to selected African Union peace operation such as the AU Mission in Darfur, where the Arab League provided USD 150 million. AL was established in 1945 followed by a proposal prepared by Egypt. Currently, the League has 22 member states and its permanent Headquarter is in Cairo, Egypt. As a regional political organization the primary stated goal of the Arab League is to uphold the interests of its member states and advance closer political, economic, cultural, and social relations. The League enjoys Observer Status in the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN) and Non-Aligned Movement. It has also observed several Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits. Furthermore, the League is expanding its cooperation with the European Union (EU) as exemplified in the, February 24-25, 2019, First EU-AL Summit, which was held in the Egyptian resort city of Sharma el-Sheik.

The non-Arab states in the League include Comoros, Djibouti and Somalia¹⁹. It has also states that are given Observer status. These include Brazil, Eritrea, India, and Venezuela. The Council of the League of Arab States, which is the supreme political organ of the Arab League, decided on issues of membership requests and withdrawal²⁰.

At the bilateral level there appear a harmonious diplomatic relation between Ethiopia and several Arab states. Ethiopia, for instance, hosts more than fifteen Arab states’ embassies and the Arab League has a small office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia²¹. It has strong socio-cultural ties with the Arab

17 Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd. 1983. See also Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner. 1998.

18 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003.

19 The Arab League has suspended the Syrian Republic membership status since 2012.

20 Andreas Kettis, “EU- League of Arab States Relations: Prospect for closer parliamentary cooperation” Policy Briefing (European Parliament- Policy Department). DG EXPO/B/PolDep/Note/2013_114 PE491.494. May 2013.

21 I visited the Office of the Arab League in late August. It is a small office that has one focal person and his secretary.

world, including large Muslim population, estimated around 40 million. The Coptic Church of Alexandria and the Syrian Orthodox Church are the closest churches to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Many Ethiopians reside in the Arab world and the remittance they send back to Ethiopia has been an important part of the economy.

On the flip side, the Arab League has been a point of retreat to several state and non-state actors that have been projecting manifest or latent security impediments towards Ethiopia. By far it has been an institution that hosts the larger 'coalition' of anti-Ethiopian forces. According to commentators, one of the primary reasons Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia joined the Arab League is to seek shelter from the 'Ethiopian pressure'. It is common to attain to the barrage of Arab League's diplomatic attack on Ethiopia whenever Ethiopia has economic, political and security problems with an Arab League member state. For instance, the Arab League warning read as, following the Ethio-Egypt discussion on the Nile, "Water security for Egypt is part and parcel of the Arab national security"²². Similarly, in connection to the Ethiopian military involvement in Somalia in 2006 as well the Arab League demanded expedite withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia²³.

If this has been the case, the question is: how Ethiopia should react and mitigate such and other projections from the Arab League? The first step as this paper argues is to join the League. Ethiopia could join the Arab League as an Observer status and that will give it space to express its concerns and extend its influence. At the same time, by joining the Arab League it challenges the uncontested political and diplomatic space its rivals have been enjoying for long. Ethiopia could draw lesson from existing Observer members such as India, Brazil and Venezuela. India's reason for joining the Arab League as an Observer is connected to its lingering security crisis with Pakistan, which is not an Arab League member state, but predominantly a Muslim state. India aspires to achieve a strategic purpose by having a seat at the League where its arch enemy has not.

Brazil joined the Arab League as an Observer member state in 2003. The main reason for Brazil is socio-cultural connection with the Arab world. Brazil has estimated number of 12 million people of Arab origin. Venezuela, which also joined the League as an Observer member, has large inhabitants of Arab descent. The Arab expatriate in Venezuela is estimated at around 1.6 million people. Moreover, the 2005 Arab League- South America (ASPA) target to enhance the relation between the two regions. Although economic diplomacy has been one of the dominant driving factor that contribute for recent cooperation between Latin America and Arab League states the US unilateral actions at a global stage have played vital role in consolidating the relationship between the two regions²⁴.

Why Ethiopia Should Request Observer Status?

22 This statement was given by Ahmed Aboul Gheir, the Secretary-General of the Arab League at the Fourth Arab Water Summit on November 12, 2017, at Cairo, Egypt.

23 Abdi I. Samatar .2007. "Ethiopian Invasion of Somalia, US Warlodrism and AU Shame" Review of African Political Economy, Vol.34, no.111.pp 155-165.p.155.

24 Alejandra Galindo Marines. 2018. 'Mexico and Brazil's Approach Towards the GCC Countries: An Assessment of Economic Diplomacy' Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.p.4.

Currently, Ethiopia pursues economic diplomacy that aims to maximize political and economic gains and enhance its regional role. Economic diplomacy refers to “the use of political means as leverage in international negotiations, with the aim of enhancing national economic prosperity and the use of economic leverage to increase the political stability of the nation”²⁵. Accordingly,

Ethiopia’s potential interest to join the Arab League, as an Observer, should be treated as part of the broader strategy for the country’s strong posture in the region. It also provides a platform to thwart potential threats and further project its concerns as well as influences across the region.

Today, one of the most important strategic priorities for Ethiopia is to have a diversified and uninterrupted access to the sea. The losses of its former outlets are not only calculated as economic lose but also as strategic lose. Its aspiration to emerge as a regional power has been seriously challenged by its dependency on small states such as Djibouti for access to the sea²⁶. Ethiopia should pursue a grand strategy that incorporate medium and long term tactics that would strengthen its strategic assets. It should also treat its fresh water resources as strategic resource that could serve as instruments to achieve strategic goals.

In addition to these, there are several issues the Arab League discusses that concerns Ethiopia at a strategic level. The League raises economic, security, political and social issues that concerns Ethiopia, mainly, because of its geo-proximity and socio-cultural ties to the region.

Maritime security

Recently, the Arab League states are actively involved in two-ways that has increased their naval military activities in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, both of which has major security implications for Ethiopia. Firstly, the war in Yemen and the subsequent Arab League states heavy involvement has raised the level of tension across these waters²⁷. What is happening in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is a national security concern for Ethiopia though it has no outlet to the waters. The heavy military presence of several Arab League states across these waters threatens the Ethiopian national security interest. These waters are Ethiopia’s economic bloodlines. It’s more than 95% of import-export pass through these waters across Arab League member states. Ethiopia should be consulted and allowed to partake, if needed, in any security apparatus that might be established along these waters. Since Ethiopia is also building its navy in a refined form it needs to work in collaboration with the other actors in the Red Sea²⁸.

In line with these developments, Saudi Arabia’s nascent plan to emerge as a prime controller of the Red Sea, and to use its Red Sea fleet as an alternative route for its lucrative exports. Saudi Arabia is reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz and the possibility of Iranian blockade of the

25 Okano-Heijmams, Maaik, *Economic Diplomacy: Japan and the Balance of National Interests*, (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2013) 29-30.

26 Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter.2017 “Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa” *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol.2, Issue 4. 7-21: 10.

27 The Horn of African states that are already involved in the Yemen War are Sudan (troop contributing state for Saudi led coalition), Djibouti (hosts Saudi troops), Eritrea (provided military base to the UAE’s air force contingent), and Somaliland (a de facto independent state rendered its water and air space to the coalition).

28 The Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, announced the Ethiopian government decision to re-establish the Ethiopian Navy in August 2018. It is broadcasted on the Ethiopian national television (etv) news segment.

Strait has been drawing Saudi more to the Red Sea area. Saudi is seeking to act as a hegemonic regional actor with implicit legitimacy.

Secondly, the League's members such as Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan are hosting extra-regional military bases, some of these extra-regional actors are rivals. These would allow the systematic control of the region including Ethiopia by foreign actors. It also brings issues that are not inherently of the region to dominate the politico-security agendas of the region. Ethiopia should pursue a strategy that would allow the region to have full control of its resources (strategic and otherwise) and mitigate the influence of alien military bases.

The safety and security of Bab al Mandeb Strait is a common top security concern for both the Ethiopian national security and the Arab League states such as those in the GCC and Egypt. Combating piracy and ensuring the safety of the internet Fiber Network and smooth flow of ships across the choke point requires a close coordination.

Development projects on trans-boundary waters

Ethiopia's trans-boundary rivers such as the River Nile and Wabe Shebelle physically connect the country to its Arab League member states neighbours. More often than not, water resources have been a source of tension between Ethiopia and its neighbours. The securitization of this natural resource by states in the Horn and Northeast Africa has created an intricate security conundrum with multiple and extended tentacles²⁹. Particularly, successive Egyptian governments' securitization policy and threatening rhetoric, often voiced through the Arab League, remained a daunting foreign policy challenge for the Ethiopian counterparts. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy posits that "As Egypt took the mantle of leadership of the Arab world, the subject of the Nile waters began to influence Ethiopia's relations with that region and still continues to do so"³⁰.

The Observer status within the Arab League would enable Ethiopia to present its aspiration to work with the Nile riparian state and fairly utilize the resource in a manner that would not harm the interest of the downstream states (both Arab League member states – Egypt and Sudan). It could also facilitate the opportunity to challenge the Egyptian version of the water security conundrum that persistently demonizes the Ethiopia aspiration and denounces Ethiopia's claims of the water.

The Arab League discusses the issue of water, i.e. trans-boundary waters, which concerns Ethiopia. Recently, the League forwarded a warning statement towards Ethiopia in support of Egypt. Ethiopia's freshwater reserves are important resources that have been serving more than economic purpose. The responsible utilization of these resources Ethiopia believes will reduce tension and there is a possibility of overcoming mistrust through cooperation. The Arab League is the only entity that brings almost all Arab states together and access to it enables Ethiopia to expound its arguments more closely.

29 El-Sayed, Mustapha Kamel and RashaSoheil Mansour, "Water Scarcity as a Non-traditional Threat to Security in the Middle East" *India Quarterly* 73(2), 2017: 227–240.

30 FDRE Ministry of Information. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy. Addis Ababa 2002 66.

Arabs investment in Ethiopia

Several contemporary political, economic, and security developments at regional and global levels has been bringing increased AL member states involvement to Ethiopia and the Horn of African at large. The pressure the changing global political economic environment has created on rentier economies such as numerous in the oil rich Arab states and the need to diversify the economic base coupled with the geographic proximity has made a Horn of African states such as Ethiopia a favoured destination. The AL states rivalry, security concerns and the desire to build a blue economy has recently enhanced the AL member states investment ventures in the Horn of Africa³¹.

Ethiopia's current foreign policy priority is built upon the principles of economic diplomacy. Its main objectives are - attract Foreign Direct Investment and ensure the transfer of technology³². The growing investment flow from the Arab world to Ethiopia in the form of FDI is a sign of a constructive engagement that needs to be encouraged. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexities report (2016), Arab League states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait are the top export destination of Ethiopia³³. The AL states are so far interested on investment connected mainly to food security and agro-industry. Saudi Arabia has purchased 124,000 hectares of land in Ethiopia³⁴. Arab League states such as the UAE are extensively engaged across Africa in the areas of infrastructural development and Ethiopia is interested to become an attractive destination. According to data from the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the 2012-2013 fiscal year alone The Ethiopian aspiration to become the major provider and source of food requires constant engagement across different platform. Arab League is one of the very important platforms to expand Ethiopia's connection to the Arab world.

More importantly, the Arab League member states and state sponsored companies such as UAE and DP World (DP) aggressive involvement in the construction and control of Ports across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has created strong ties between states in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East³⁵. DP World investment in port expansion at Berbera Port (Somaliland) and construction of port at Lamu (Kenya) are all the projected access points for Ethiopia's future import – export market. The P&O Ports (based in Dubai) is also set to upgrade the Bossasso Port (Puntland, Somalia). Ethiopia is already engaged in necessary infrastructure building process that would enable it connect to these ports easily³⁶.

31 Elana DeLozier, "Seeing Red: Trade and Threats Shaping Gulf-Horn Relations" Policy Analysis (Policy Watch 3079). The Washington Institute, 15 February 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/seeing-red-trade-and-threats-shaping-gulf-horn-relations>.

32 The FDRE Government Communication Affairs Office. Ethiopia, year book 2012-2-13. Addis Ababa: Branna Printing. Pp. 186-191.

33 Observatory of Economic Complexities shows in 2016 Ethiopia exports to Saudi Arabia was USD 287million, which makes Saudi Arabia the fourth top export destination for Ethiopian products. Kuwait on the other hand is one of the top import origins for Ethiopia with estimated USD 1billion.

34 Simon Allison and Joseph Dana, "Bridging the Red Sea: How to Build an Africa-GCC Partnership" *Emerge* 85, October 2017. Pp. 11.

35 Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa" *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol.2, Issue 4, 2017: 7- 29. See also Willem van den Berg and Jos Meester, "Ports & Power: the securitization of port politics" *Horn of African Bulletin*.

36 See Simon Allison and Joseph Dana, "Bridging the Red Sea: How to Build an Africa-GCC Partnership" *Emerge* 85, October 2017. DP World declared USD 422 million to upgrade the Port of Berbera (Somaliland), where Ethiopia has secured a bid to have a 19% share.

Ethiopian domestic workers in the Arab world

Ethiopia has historically rooted socio-economic relations with the Arab world. The Ethiopian geographical proximity to the Arab world has been one of the primary reasons for the presence of large number of Ethiopian citizens in the Arab world. Recently, however, the number of Ethiopians who seek employment opportunities in the Arab world has been growing exponentially. Studies conducted indicate that more than 60, 000 Ethiopians' have been migrating annually since 2008³⁷. In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia alone there are around half-a-million Ethiopians³⁸. The wellbeing of this large number of fellow citizens is a concern for Ethiopia. Most of the recent Ethiopian migrants are employed in the Gulf States as domestic workers. In addition, around 82% of the migrants are women. Changing domestic legal labour proceedings and human right issues in the Arab world affects large number of Ethiopians who reside in the Arab world. Besides working through the embassies and the state departments having a presence in the Arab League will help it to raise and discuss these issues with concerned Arab states.

In general, Observer status in the AL will bring several advantages to Ethiopia. It will enable the Horn of African state to have a venue to communicate its diplomatic, security, economic, social and political concern with the Arab world at large. In addition, Observer status will provide Ethiopia the opportunity to enhance its diplomatic sphere and present its views on contested issues that might threaten its national interest. Moreover, Ethiopia's increased involvement in the Arab world through institutions such as the Arab League will ease the tension between Ethiopia and many of its neighbours.

Challenges

The Ethiopian quest to join the League could face several challenges that can be divided into two, i.e. internal and external. The internal challenges that stymied a possible Ethiopia membership in the Arab League include political culture, weak institutional capacity and passive foreign policy posture. The Ethiopian foreign policy establishment that is keenly accustomed to portraying some of the Arab League member states as nemesis to the state of Ethiopia would find it difficult to transform its foreign policy orientation.

In a similar vein, some might see Ethiopian membership in the Arab League as a problematic to its own aspiration of strengthening the Ethiopian national identity. This is mainly because there is a fear that Ethiopia's membership in the Arab League will promote Arab identity that goes contrary or compete with what is perceived as the Ethiopian identity. On the contrary to this notion other commentators state that Ethiopia has historical ties that could enable her to move closer to the Arab World. The concept of 'identity', as Nikki Slocum and Luk Van Langenhove argued, is "...like other concepts – is used by actors toward various ends"³⁹. Identity, particularly

37 Bina Fernandez, "House Hold Help? Ethiopian Domestic Workers' Labour Migration to the Gulf Countries" *Asia and Pacific Migration Journal*, Vol.20, Nos.3-4, 2011.

38 Bilal Derso, "Labour agreement with Saudi crucial to Ethiopian employees: MOFA" *The Ethiopian Herald* 20 January, 2017. <http://www.ethpress.gov.et/herald/index.php/news/national-news/item/7385-labour-agreement-with-saudi-crucial-to-ethiopian-employees-mofa>.

39 Nikki Slocum and Luk Van Langenhove, "Identity and National Integration" in *Global Politics of Regionalism: Theory and Practice*, edited by Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne and Luk Van Langenhove. London: Pluto Press, 2005: 137-153. Pp 139.

to the Ethiopian involvement in the AL can be looked at from the perspective of strengthening the Ethiopian identity because the main aspiration for joining the League is to protect the Ethiopian interest. According to an Ethiopian foreign policy expert, ‘Ethiopia is in self-denial’ and ‘the Ethiopian government should present the face of Ethiopia that rhyme with the Arab World in its dealings with the Arab states’⁴⁰. A closer cooperation with the Arab World reduces tension and suspicion between Ethiopia and Arab League member states. More importantly, an observer status in the AL would not threaten the Ethiopian identity. The observer status does not require ratifying Arabic as a national language.

The other internal challenge is connected to weak institutional capacity and passive Ethiopian foreign policy practice. The Ethiopian Embassies and Foreign Affairs offices have been dormant in their duty of projecting and extending Ethiopia’s influence and connections. The foreign policymaking establishment has failed to produce a foreign policy orientation that goes inline and in response to the changing regional and global politico-security dynamics. Despite having strong influence on the national interest of the country, we rarely witness the Ethiopian voice on issues such as that concerns Ethiopian citizens living in the Arab World, securitization of the Red Sea, Gulf security crisis, or on Ethiopia’s communication to the broader Middle East on contentious trans-boundary water development projects⁴¹.

Likewise, there exists two possible external challenges. First, some Arab League states could refuse to accept Ethiopia’s bid to join the League as an Observer state. Drawing from the informal interviews with experts from the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopian possible request to join the Arab League as an Observer member state could possibly encounter resistance from the government of Egypt. According to the expert, Egypt is one of the important members of the Arab League – ‘the Anchor state’ - and it uses the League to galvanize the Arab support to its claim over the River Nile. Ethiopia expects challenge from Egypt because it uses the Arab League to project its diplomatic and political influence over its aspiration to continue to dominate the Nile waters⁴². This is one of the most serious concerns for possible Ethiopia’s request to join the Arab League as an Observer state, because the League’s Charter detects consensus based decision making and unanimous support to the bidding state⁴³.

Despite the long and rich history the two entities share, they have limited understanding of one another. This makes up the second external challenge. The Arab League states have limited knowledge about Ethiopia and possibly vice versa. This has led to “plant the seeds of hatred and suspicion [between Ethiopia and the Arab world]”⁴⁴. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy elucidate that the Arab

40 Interview Foreign Policy Expert. August 22, 2018. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

41 Interview with three High Level Diplomats and extensive discussion I had with the research team at the MoFA attests to the luck of proactive engagement at the embassy level across the Middle East.

42 Interview with Mr. Temesgen Oumer, Director I of Middle East Affairs at the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. August 29, 2018, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

43 Wanli Chen and Jun Zhao, “The Arab League’s Decision-making System and Arab Integration” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 2009. Pp 59-66.

44 FDRE Ministry of Information. *The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy*. Addis Ababa, 2002 66.

League member states ignorance about Ethiopia has led to the ensuing relationship between the two to be “plugged by suspicion, dislike and even contempt”⁴⁵. This makes the Ethiopian aspiration to join the Arab League more meaningful, because institutions have the potential to create an avenue whereby entities know each other more and resist prejudice that dominated the deleterious relations in between.

Conclusion

Despite having historically rich and intricate relations with states in the Middle East, Ethiopia has limited involvement with the institutions of the Arab World. Institutions such as the Arab League discuss political, economic, security and diplomatic issues that concerns Ethiopia. Issues such as maritime security, development projects on trans-boundary rivers, investment ventures, and domestic workers are, particularly at the center of Ethiopia-AL member states relations. More importantly, Ethiopia is a landlocked state that is dependent on the Arab League member states for its relations with the outside world. Ethiopia’s involvement in the Arab League as an Observer member will create a platform where Ethiopia could express its concerns directly and strengthen ties with its neighbours.

Beyond other political economic indicators, the quest for the Observer status will indicate Ethiopia’s foreign policy reorientation and readiness, to embrace and prioritize the region; unlike the periods of the past where the superpowers rivalry determined the relationship between states predominately.

Regional institutions such as the Arab League brings together the largest number of Arab states is an important network to enhance Ethiopia’s diplomatic, political, economic, and security interests. The Observer status would also help to build trust, cooperation on the economic front and global political arena as part of a lasting peace between Ethiopia and its surrounding world.

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