

Ethiopia's Regional Security Challenges: An Appraisal

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Abstract

A combination of internal and external security challenges seems to have constrained the pursuit of Ethiopia's national interests. The external dimension mainly the regional one claimed to have featured prominence in this regard. This paper attempted to assess Ethiopia's regional security challenges. Legal and institutional first-hand as well as secondary data were amassed from relevant data sources and analyzed qualitatively based on themes. The analysis of the data obtained from various sources suggested that regional conflict dynamics; hydro-hegemony, the quest for access to the sea; weak regional institution; and threats such as terrorism, piracy and militarization of the region appeared to have challenged the security of the Ethiopian state. Strengthening regional peace building capacity, and regional economic cooperation through enhancing intra-regional trade, investment, and connectivity are important measures that need to be taken to address the security challenges posed.

Key Words: Ethiopia, Horn of Africa, Conflict, Hegemony, National Interest

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is geo-strategically significant. Its proximity to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden puts the region along the busiest international trade route, the line of communication between Africa, Asia, and Europe, and the transportation route of oil from the oil-rich Gulf States to consumers in Asia, Europe, and North America³. The region also bridges Africa to the cradle of the three world's dominant religions

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³ Mesfin, Berouk. "The Horn of Africa Security Complex." In *Regional Security in the Post-Cold War Horn of Africa*, by and Berouk Mesfin Roba Sharamo, 1-29. Addis Ababa: Institute for Security Studies, 2011.

in the Middle East – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Besides, the Horn region is endowed with both natural and strategic resources such as water, land, electric power, and ports.⁴ All these geo-strategic and resource assets have made the region a strategic magnet attracting the involvement of global powers such as the US and China, regional powers such as Egypt, Israel, and the Gulf States, and emerging powers such as India in the Horn politics with all the consequences to the conflict dynamics at play and the various insecurities thereof in the sub-region including in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia seizes central position in the geopolitically strategic Horn region. It is located at the center of the region, and shares (porous) borders as well as ethno-cultural groups with similar identity markers with almost all states in the region. Ethiopia, with over an estimated 123 million inhabitants⁵, constitutes almost half of the region's population and its largest Muslim community and is the second most populous state in Africa next to Nigeria. Furthermore, its geographic size makes it the second largest in the region and militarily one of the largest forces in the continent.⁶ Ethiopia is also well-endowed with natural resources such as water – it is a veritable water tower of the region that provides waters in varying degree to its neighbors and contributes over 85% of the Nile waters.⁷ Ethiopia's economy that has progressively grown since 2005 also makes it one of the fastest growing economy in the world and the shining stars in the Africa rising debate.⁸ Moreover, its leading role in Africa (and the Horn as well) is grounded on the country's key role in founding the African Union (then Organization of African Unity) as well as the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), and for hosting several international and regional organization and diplomatic missions.

As shall be seen later, a number of regional factors have constrained Ethiopia's ability to freely pursuing independent foreign policy and international transactions. These factors are very much linked to the geostrategic position, natural resources, demography, economy, and history of the country, and are included the regional

⁴ Hisham, Aidi. Geopolitics in the Horn of Africa. Policy Brief, Policy Center for the New South, 2020.

⁵ World Bank. Population. Washington, DC, July 7, 2023.

⁶ Gouriellec, Sonia Le. "Regional power and contested hierarchy: Ethiopia, an 'imperfect hegemon' in the Horn of Africa." *International Affairs*, 95 (5), 2018: 1059-1075. Ethiopia is ranked in sixth place in Africa in terms of its military capability, according to Global Firepower 2023. See for the detail <https://www.globalfirepower.com/>

⁷ Woldemariam, Mesfin. *The Horn of Africa: Conflict and Poverty*. Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press, 1999.

⁸ Tekalign, Yohannes. "Ethiopia's Economic Growth in the Context of the African Rising Debate." In *The Governance, Security and Development Nexus – Africa Rising*, by Kenneth Omeje, 237-251. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

conflict dynamics, power politics, hydro-politics, access to the sea and the desire for asserting regional hegemony in the sub-region.

2. Conceptual Issues

This paper is based on the minimalist approach of a region that informs essentially Barry Buzan and Ole Wæve have branded a 'regional security complex'.⁹ A regional security complex is a set of physically adjacent states whose economic, political, social, environmental, and military securities are linked and thus cannot be understood individually.¹⁰ It is predicated basically on the "distribution of power and the durable patterns of amity and enmity relations among the principle units"¹¹. The amity-enmity relations of states are shaped by territorial disputes, cross-border ethnic distribution, ideological orientations, suspicion and fear, and sustained historical links of genuine friendship of support or protection.¹² These are shaped in the region by a nexus of historical, political and material conditions, which, in turn, provided fertile ground for global powers "options for, and consequences of, projecting their influences and rivalries into the rest of the system".¹³ The Horn of Africa is characteristically a regional security complex, which embraces Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.¹⁴

A regional security complex is a useful conceptual tool to critically grasp the security-insecurity of states in a region including the Horn of Africa. It enables to explore transnational threats to a state in a particular region in the politico-military, economic, social, and environmental sectors. The regional security complex is also helpful to comprehend the need for collective mechanisms to redress these cross-border and trans-sectoral threats. Moreover, it is critically important to delve much into how the security dynamics at national and international levels are converged on the regional level. Ethiopia's security-insecurity and development are contingent on the regional politics and security dynamics in the Horn region and can only realistically be

⁹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæve. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. The maximalist approach takes rather more 'subjective' constructs in conceptualizing 'region' including a sense of shared history, identity, political struggle, consciousness, and interconnectedness.

¹⁰ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæve. *Regions and Powers*.

¹¹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998. 13.

¹² Barry Buzan and Ole Wæve. *Regions and Powers*.

¹³ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæve. *Regions and Powers*. 47

¹⁴ Mesfin, Berouk. "The Horn of Africa Security Complex." 2011.

examined in line with the conceptual constructs of the regional security complex perspective.

Based on the regional security complex perspective, this article attempts to critically explore the Ethiopia's regional security challenges for the reason that changes external to the state need closer attention and appropriate response measures if the country wants to achieve its national interests. Ethiopian cannot succeed its goal of peace and development without considering the threats and opportunities coming from the regional environment. It is boldly asserted in existing literature that regional factors have constantly constrained Ethiopia's ability to freely conduct its foreign policy and transactions¹⁵

3. An Assessment of Ethiopia's Regional Security Challenges

A number of regional factors have militated against Ethiopia's security and development in the Horn region. These include, among others, the volatile regional conditions; the perennial quest for access to the sea and the dependence thereof on neighboring states; challenges for the country's regional hegemonic aspiration; hydro-politics, economic fragility and weak regional institution; and emerging new security threats in and beyond the Horn region.

3.1 Regional Politics and Conflict Dynamics

One of the regional factors that profoundly constrained Ethiopia's security and development is the conflict dynamics in the Horn region.¹⁶ Ethiopia finds itself in the most conflict-ridden region in the world that has been ravaged by inter-states conflicts. None of the states in the region has escaped such conflicts.¹⁷ The two high intensity wars were fought between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1977-8 and Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998-2000. Inter-state disputes such as between Kenya and Somalia in 1964-7, Ethiopia and Somalia in the 1960s, Djibouti and Eritrea in 2008 and South Sudan and Sudan after the independence of the former in 2011 also led to confrontations.¹⁸ These conflicts are largely rooted in the internal political dynamics of each state in the region but acquired regional current (or regionalized) due to a

¹⁵ Mesfin, Berouk. "Ethiopia's Role and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa." *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 2012: 87-113; Tekle, Amare. "The Determinants of the Foreign Policy of Revolutionary Ethiopia." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 27 (3), 1989: 479-502.

¹⁶ Mesfin, Ethiopia's Role and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa 2012.

¹⁷ Bereketeab, Redie. "The Horn of Africa: Intra-State and Inter-State Conflicts and Security." In *Introduction*, by Redie Bereketeab, 3-25. London: Pluto Press, 2013.

¹⁸ Dias, Alexandra Magnólia. "Introduction: Understanding Conflict and Processes of State Formation, reconfiguration and disintegration in the Horn of Africa." In *State and Societal Challenges in the Horn of Africa*, by Alexandra Magnólia Dias, 3-13. Lisbon: University Institute of Lisbon, 2013.

nexus of historical and ethno-cultural factors and the interventionism of global and as well as extra-regional powers.¹⁹

At the heart of the regional conflict dynamics lays a number of variables in the region's states include the autocratic nature of the regimes, un-demarcated borders, underdevelopment, the 'politics of domination and exclusion', frequent drought and famine and weak center-periphery relations.²⁰ These factors have not only contributed to intra-states conflicts in varying intensity in all states in the region but reinforced by the 'culture of mutual intervention' of states to each other's affairs have also made such conflicts regionalized. Except Djibouti, all states in the region have begged the security of their neighbors by providing assistance to opposing forces across borders.²¹ According to Healy, this is the reason that "pursuing foreign [regional] policy through proxy forces in neighboring countries has been the 'normal' pattern of relations for decades" in the Horn region.²²

The alignment of the Horn states with global agenda such as during the Cold War (1945-1991) and the U.S. War on Terror in the post-cold war era have also amplified the incident of conflicts in the region and translated regional conflicts rooted in local politics to a global one. The U.S. and the Soviet Union competition during the Cold War galvanized the civil wars in Ethiopia and Somalia and the war between the two states in 1977-8 (Woodward, 2002). In addition, the US War on Terror has not only intensified the Sudanese civil war before the secession of South Sudan but the threat posed by the Islamist forces with Eritrea's assistance in Somalia also provoked Ethiopia's intervention in the latter in 2006.²³ Sudan's aggressive Islamist regional policy of the 1990s that Iran supported also reproduced a coalition of states against it – Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda – as Eritrea's hegemonic project precipitated the Ethio-Eritrean war and an alliance between Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen.²⁴

Recently, the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea is not formal, which is based on unprincipled personal attachment between the leaders of the two countries, exemplified by unexpected and repeated visits of the two leaders to each other's

¹⁹ Tekalign, Yohannes. The Dynamics of Security Threats to the Horn States: Implications for 'Prisoners of Geography'. The First Graduate Conference on Peace, Federalism and Human Rights. Addis Ababa: IPSS, AAU, 2015. 180-196.

²⁰ Mesfin, The Horn of Africa Security Complex 2011; Dias, "Introduction" 2013.

²¹ Mesfin, The Horn of Africa Security Complex 2011; Bereketab "The Horn of Africa" 2013.

²² Healy, Sally. Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa: How Conflicts Connect and Peace Agreement Anravel. Research Report, London: Chatham House, 2008. 39.

²³ Healy, Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa 2008.

²⁴ Tadesse, Medhane. Turning Conflicts to Cooperation: Towards an Energy led Integration in the Horn of Africa. Research Report, Addis Ababa: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2004.

country. These unofficial and informal relations may lead to unexpected consequences including repeating the history of the bloody war of 1998-2000. The relations between the two countries should be formal based on the accepted principle of relations between sovereign states.²⁵ Further, the quest for control of the Blue Nile waters by Egypt and the new competition for resources (such as water and food, and ports and military bases) between the US, China and Russia, and the Gulf states (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE) have continued to shape the conflict dynamics in the Horn region.²⁶

3.2 Regional Challenges to Ethiopia's Hegemony

Ethiopia assumes (though imperfectly) regional hegemony in the Horn of Africa.²⁷ Its foreign policy has geared towards ensuring its regional hegemonic interests, particularly since the post-1991 years with the backing of global powers and through international and regional institutions.²⁸ Ethiopia's regional hegemonic position is founded in its power projection capability, which is basically rooted in its growing economy, strong military, large population and territory, geostrategic location, and history.²⁹ The government-led rapid economic growth of the past decades aims not only at reducing poverty but also safeguarding its 'hegemonic control over the region's political economy'.³⁰ This has been displayed, as shall be seen later, by Ethiopia's versatile attempts at regional peace-building and regional cooperation and integration through energy-led cooperation and infrastructure connectivity.

In addition, Ethiopia's military, which is one of the largest force and has long experience in peacekeeping missions especially in the continent, enables it to depict itself as a security provider in the Horn region, on which its development and security depend.³¹ Its relative political stability in the last about two decades has enabled to position itself as a regional power.³² This together with the country's largest

²⁵ Amare Kenaw and Mohammed Seid. "The Ethiopia–Eritrea rapprochement: highly personalized and less-institutionalized initiative." *Third World Quarterly*, 2022.

²⁶ Hisham, Aidi. *Geopolitics in the Horn of Africa*

²⁷ Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy. 2018

²⁸ Woldemariam, Michael. "Regional Powers, Great Power Allies, and International Institutions: The Case of Ethiopia." In *African Foreign Policies in international Institutions*, by Jason Warner and Timothy M. Shaw, 371-388. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

²⁹ Clapham, Christopher. *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*. London: Hurst. London: Hurst, 2017.

³⁰ Taylor, Magnus. *Post-Meles Hegemony in the Horn of Africa*. Research Report, Zurich: ETH, 2012; Verhoeven, Harry. "Africa's next hegemon: behind Ethiopia's power plays." *Foreign Affairs*, 2015.

³¹ Ahmed, Abiy. Medemer. Addis Ababa, 2019; Dias, "Introduction", 2013

³² Mulugeta, Kidist. *The Role of Regional Powers in the Field of Peace and Security: The Case of Ethiopia*. Research Report, Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2014.

population and its strategic location in relation to the Red Sea and thousand-year history and hegemonic aspirations have enabled the country to assume hegemonic role in the region.³³ But its recent history shows that though Ethiopia attempted to grip its hegemonic role in the region it has seemingly lost its historical exceptionalism.³⁴

Ethiopia's foreign policy has been driven by its regional hegemonic interests particularly since the turn of the new century. Such interest has been structured along with the country's domestic policy that aims at ensuring its renaissance through bringing about rapid and sustainable development meant to reduce poverty and make the country a middle-income country by 2025.³⁵ Ethiopia has employed two foreign policy strategies to achieve this objective. First, it has attempted to stabilize the region by actively engaging in regional peace-building endeavors – namely, mediation and security provision through peace support missions. Second, Ethiopia has exerted its effort to create robust economic interdependence and integration through creating ties among states in the economy and energy spheres.³⁶

Ethiopia's regional hegemonic aspiration is being challenged by a nexus of internal and external factors. The internal dimension relates to its economy and demography. Ethiopia is too poor economically to effectively assume regional hegemony in the region³⁷ despite it has achieved notable economic growth in the past two decades. Demographic factor – that is lack of social cohesion and consolidation of the country's multiethnic society – has also militated against its regional hegemonic aspiration.³⁸ This demographic factor, in turn, makes Ethiopia vulnerable to the Horn regional context where manipulating 'ethnic divides to counterbalance the power of neighboring countries has been the norm for decades.³⁹ The regional conflict

³³ Taylor, *Post-Meles Hegemony in the Horn of Africa*, 2012; Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy", 2018

³⁴ Dehez, Dustin. "Ethiopia-A Hegemon in the Horn of Africa Region." BISA Annual Conference. 2008.

³⁵ Ministry of Information (MoI). *Ethiopia's Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy*. Policy document, Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information, 2002.

³⁶ Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy", 2018

³⁷ Tadesse, Medhane. "Making Sense of Ethiopia's Regional Influence." In *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, by Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet, 333-356. London: Hurst, 2015.

³⁸ Dehez, Dustin. "Ethiopia-A Hegemon in the Horn of Africa Region, 2008; Taylor, *Post-Meles Hegemony in the Horn of Africa*, 2012

³⁹ Dehez, Dustin. "Ethiopia-A Hegemon in the Horn of Africa Region, 2008; Healy, Sally. *Hostage to Conflict: Prospects for Building Regional Economic Cooperation in the Horn of Africa*. Research Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2011.

dynamics discussed above have also restricted Ethiopia's rise as a hegemonic power in the region.

Moreover, the proliferation of foreign military bases in Djibouti and other Horn countries has certainly challenged Ethiopia's military supremacy in the sub-region. Kenya and Uganda have also reportedly contested Ethiopia's hegemony within IGAD.⁴⁰ Ethiopia was particularly overwhelmed when Saudi and Emirates pressed both Djibouti and Eritrea to sever abruptly their ties with Qatar, the country that mediated and served as peacekeeper between the two. Qatari's positive influence in Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan prompted Saudi to secure a military base in Djibouti, get closer to the Yemen conflict, and curb Qatar's growing regional dominance.⁴¹

3.3 Hydro-politics and the Unsettled Question

Ethiopia's foreign policy has been partly determined by its water resources and the regional politics associated with it. In particular, the use of the Blue Nile waters has for long been the bone of contention between Ethiopia, on the one hand, and Egypt and Sudan, on the other hand. The contention has been drawn by the need to ensure the basin hydro-hegemony of the latter's established by the 1929 and 1959 colonial-inspired agreements mainly Egypt against the position held by Ethiopia and other non-hegemonic riparian states to 'equitable and reasonable' use of the Nile waters.⁴² Nonetheless, the hydro-hegemony of Egypt and Sudan to some extent has, very recently, been challenged by the non-hegemonic riparian states through establishing a multilateral legal framework (i.e. Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) and resource capture strategy (such as dam construction and irrigation) – a decision to exploit the Blue Nile waters practically dam constructions such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)).⁴³

Ethiopia is considered as the water tower of Africa. All neighboring countries receive water from Ethiopia. Ethiopia contributes more than 86% of the Nile River. Due to the colonial legacy and other factors, there have been tensions among the countries of the Eastern Nile Basin (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt), particularly between Ethiopia and Egypt. Egypt, located over 2500 kilometers downstream of the site, has been opposing any development activity including the construction of dams in

⁴⁰ Gouriellec, "Regional power and contested hierarchy", 2018.

⁴¹ Verhoeven, Harry. "The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order." *Civil Wars*, 2018: 333-357.

⁴² Tawfik, Rawia. "Changing Hydropolitical Relations in the Nile Basin: A Protracted Transition." *International Spectator*, 2016: 67-81.

⁴³ Ayferam, Gashaw. "Counter Hydro Hegemony Mechanisms and Their Roles in the Eastern Nile Basin." *International Affairs and Global Strategy*, 2019: 7-27.

Ethiopia, which it believes will reduce the amount of water available from the Nile. According to Yacob “The shared waters and common cultural heritage unify the peoples of the Eastern Nile basin, while the colonial legacy, a vestige of the cold war era, and unilateral and nationalistic strategies over water resources development have led to regional tensions and incompatible legal doctrines.”⁴⁴

The colonial powers in the Horn of Africa such as Great Britain, France, and Italy, were all involved in the conflicts over the control of the Nile River, resulting in many colonial treaties on the utilization of the Nile Water. They entered into conflicts with the states in the region on the one hand and among themselves on the other hand. In this context, the Nile was the arena of various tensions and conflicts. The European colonial powers used both force and diplomatic methods in their relations with Ethiopia over the utilization and flow of the Nile Water.

In the post-Cold War era, the most comprehensive Nile treaty, namely the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), was signed by the upper riparian states in 2010. It has not been signed either by Sudan or Egypt, as they claim it violates the 1959 treaty. The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) provides a framework for dialogue among all Nile riparian countries.

The relations between Egypt and Ethiopia have become more adversarial since Ethiopia started the construction of Africa’s biggest dam, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in April 2011. The potential impacts of GERD have been the source of severe regional controversy determining Ethiopia’s foreign relations. The Government of Egypt, a country that relies heavily on the waters of the Blue Nile, has demanded that Ethiopia cease construction on the dam as a precondition to negotiations. Egypt has sought regional support for its position, and some political leaders of the country have made a televised discussion on methods to sabotage it.⁴⁵ Egypt has planned diplomatic initiatives to undermine support for the dam in the region as well as in other countries supporting the project China and Italy.⁴⁶ However, other countries in the NBI have expressed support for the dam, including Sudan⁴⁷, the only other downstream country of the Nile.

⁴⁴ Yacob, Arsano. *Ethiopia and the Nile: Dilemmas of National and Regional Hydro politics*. Zurich: Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, 2007. 21.

⁴⁵ Witte, Griff. "Egypt frets, fumes over Ethiopia’s Nile plan." *Washington Post*, 2013.

⁴⁶ UPI (United Press International). "Egypt plans dam-busing diplomatic offensive against Ethiopia." 2014.

⁴⁷ For example, after meeting between the Minister of Water of Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan in March 2012, Sudan’s Present Bashir said that he supported the building of the Dam (Tesfa-Alem, 2012).

Ethiopia argues that the dam will not have a negative impact on downstream water flows and contends that the dam will, in fact, increase the water flows to downstream countries, particularly Egypt by reducing evaporation on Lake Nasser.⁴⁸ Stressing equitable utilization of the Nile River, Ethiopia has accused Egypt of being unreasonable in demanding to increase its share of the Nile's water flow from 66% to 90%.⁴⁹ In October 2019, Egypt started talks with Sudan and Ethiopia over the operation of US\$ 5 billion hydropower dam that Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile has reached a deadlock. Beginning in November 2019, United States Secretary of Treasury Steven S. Mnuchin began facilitating negotiations between the three nations. However, the United States and the World Bank appear to be siding with Egypt contrary to the co-observer role initially promised to Ethiopia. In general, the Nile River has been influencing Ethiopia's foreign relations, particularly with Eastern Nile Basin countries.

3.4 Landlockedness and the Quest for Access to the Sea

The quest for access to the sea and thus international markets has always been Ethiopia's core national interest across regimes.⁵⁰ Such a perennial quest for access to the sea has recently been succeeded with the UN-sanctioned federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952. But the status quo could only be sustained for almost four decades. Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in the early 1990s makes the latter the largest populous landlocked country in the world. This situation makes Ethiopia dependent on the goodwill of its neighbors for its foreign transactions and has largely constrained its freedom of action as a sovereign state in international relations.

Broadly, there are two approaches for landlocked states to have reliable access to the sea and international markets – international law and regional cooperation and integration. The legal approach is by far secondary due to the fact that it is twisted with two contradictory principles – the principle of free access, which is driven by juridical equality of States and freedom of the high seas, and the principle of sovereignty.⁵¹ As a result, landlocked states' desire for a guaranteed right of transit across sovereign borders is left to bilateral agreements⁵² and thus depends mainly on politics than issues of legality. It is this road that has dictated Ethiopia's regional

⁴⁸ Hussein, Hassan. "Egypt and Ethiopia spar over the Nile." *Al Jazeera America*, 2014.

⁴⁹ Reuters. "Egypt says talks over Ethiopia's Nile dam deadlocks, calls for mediation." 2019.

⁵⁰ See for this Zewde, Bahru. *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1991*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002; Dombrowski, Franz Amadeus. *Ethiopia's Access to the sea*. Leiden: E.J Brill, 1985.

⁵¹ Uprety, Kishor. *The Transit Regime for Landlocked States: International Law and Development Perspectives*. Research Report, Washington D.C: World Bank, 2006.

⁵² Glassner, Martin Ira. *Political Geography*. New York: Wiley, 1993.

foreign policy with regard to access to the sea and foreign trade since the sea-bound Eritrea seceded from it in the early 1990s.

In almost a quarter of a century, Ethiopia's foreign policy has therefore been dictated by the quest for reliable regional 'window on the world' to access the sea and foreign trade for its development. Prior to the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998, Eritrean port of Assab had served three-quarters of the country's foreign trade duty-free.⁵³ But Ethiopia found itself entirely dependent on the Port of Djibouti after the Ethio-Eritrean war unexpectedly broken, as was the case during the Ethio-Italian war of 1935-1936. Its overdependence (i.e. over 95% of its foreign trade) on the Port of Djibouti has largely constrained its freedom of action in its foreign relation and has incurred the country a number of costs. First, the use of the port, which is very expensive compared to other regional ports, has absorbed the country's US\$ 1.5 to 2 billion dollar per year mainly for port service, which is roughly 50% of Ethiopian export earnings.⁵⁴ The overdependence has also forced Ethiopia to make huge concessions to Djibouti over the last two decades – it has forced Ethiopia to provide Djibouti arable land and potable water for free, electricity at a cheap price, foodstuffs reportedly without customs charges and its citizen special privileges in Ethiopia.⁵⁵ Moreover, Ethiopia's overdependence on the Port of Djibouti has also increasingly made it vulnerable to the fact that Djibouti could exploit by foreign patrons or the Arab for the detriment of its development and security.⁵⁶

3.5 Emerging Regional Security Threats to Ethiopia's National Interest

For the reason of geographical proximity, Ethiopia is inescapable from the political dynamics in the Middle East. Ethiopia shares a common resource, common cultural affiliation, common problem, and common destiny with the Middle East society. Even if Ethiopia is the source of the River Nile, it is a common resource for Sudan and Egypt as well. Ethiopian oil consumption is satisfied by Sudan and other Middle East countries. The existence of millions of Sunni Muslim population in the country also entails there is cultural affiliation with the wider Muslim world and specifically

⁵³ Micheal L. Faye, John W. McArthur, Jeffrey D. Sachs, and Thomas Snow. "The Challenges Facing Landlocked developing Countries." *Journal of Human Development*, 2004: 31-69.

⁵⁴ Africa, Further. Berbera Port to be a game changer for landlocked Ethiopia. Research Report, Further Africa, 2021. It is reported, for instance, that Ethiopia earned US\$ 3.6 billion dollar from export in 2020/21 fiscal year. See for this <https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopia-earns-3-6-billion-revenue-from-export/>

⁵⁵ Tekalign, Yohannes. "Regional security dilemma for Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea." *African Security Review*, 2019: 189-206.

⁵⁶ Taylor, Post-Meles Hegemony in the Horn of Africa, 2012; Tekalign, Yohannes. "Regional security dilemma..." 2019

with the Sunni circle. As a result, the prevailing political and security problems in and around the Middle East and the Red Sea area have always had detrimental effects on the stability and prosperity of the Horn region and Ethiopia as well.

Foreign military bases in Djibouti, the Arab factor, terrorism, and piracy in the coast of Somalia have been intensifying. Extra-regional powers' involvement in the Horn has also constrained Ethiopia's national interests and security. Middle East countries especially Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq have persistently involved in the Horn politics. Most importantly, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States are bound together, yet far from being aligned. As long as political, military, and economic imbalance set the scene, short-term gains will define the development of security complexes over the Red Sea area. For example, when we take the GDP of Saudi Arabia, it is more than double that of Sudan, Egypt, Somalia, and Eritrea combined.⁵⁷

On the one hand, countries in the Horn of Africa consider the Gulf countries as a deep pocket best utilized in the form of aid and investment to maximize short-term gains. On the other hand, the Gulf countries consider the Horn countries as a cluster of allies that can be harnessed bilaterally or through nurtured networks to solidify influence on both sides of the Red Sea, which is geo-strategically relevant part of the world. In this regard, Abdeta argues "the Gulf gazes the sea and sees strategic locations held by actors with limited negotiating power, but huge financial needs". Ethiopian foreign policy decision makers functions within these regional and extra-regional contexts.⁵⁸

Ethiopia's Response to Terrorism in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa has been the main source for and target of terrorism for decades. Most of states in the Horn such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Sudan have been labeled as the main source of terrorism by the United States.⁵⁹ These states have also been the main target of terrorist attacks in Africa for decades.⁶⁰ Since the late 1990s, the Horn of Africa states have experienced a substantial terrorist attacks against both local and foreign citizens and interests. The Horn region ranked second in terrorist attacks (the first being Sahel region with 35 attacks) in Africa that accounted 22 out of 86 total terrorist attacks in the continent between October 1 and

⁵⁷ Abdeta, Dribssa Beyene. The Horn of Africa and the Gulf: Shifting power plays in the Red Sea. Research report, The Africa Report, 2020.

⁵⁸ Abdeta, The Horn of Africa and the Gulf., 2020.

⁵⁹ United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Terrorism in the Horn of Africa. Special Report, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2004.

⁶⁰ Woldemichael, Woldelessie. "International Terrorism in East Africa: The Case of Kenya." EJOSSAH, 2006; African Union (AU). Africa Terrorism Bulletin. Institutional Report, Addis Ababa: African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, 2019.

15, 2019, for instance.⁶¹ More specifically, ‘Kenya experienced the 1998 terrorist attack on the US embassy in Nairobi, the bombing of a Mombasa hotel and the missile attack on an Israeli commercial jetliner in 2002’.⁶² Ethiopia also exposed to a significant number of terrorist attacks of both local and foreign origins, which include in the latter case, Al Itihad Al Islamiya and Al Shabaab.⁶³ The fragility of the Horn states, to the extreme case Somalia, in political, economic, social and institutional terms have said to set fertile breeding ground and security shield to terrorist organizations mainly since 9/11 in the region.⁶⁴

The centrality of the Horn of Africa region as both as a source for and target of terrorism has made the region an epicenter, and Ethiopia as an anchor state to the US-led global ‘war on terror’ since 9/11. In the fight against terrorism, Ethiopia has taken two important steps. First, it has constantly and ruthlessly fought with jihadist forces mainly Union of Islamic Courts and Al-Shabab in Somalia since 2006.⁶⁵ This claims to have cemented Ethiopia’s counterterrorism collaboration with the West, helped the country to get political, security and economic benefits out of such engagement, and enabled Ethiopia to effectively deal with what it has labeled as an existential threat to its survival, Al-Shabab.⁶⁶ Second, the state of affairs enabled the EPRDF regime to reorient positively the prescription of the West in its favor, delegitimize internal opposition, and under covered its bad human rights records and democratic credentials.⁶⁷ Combating terrorism has thus remained central in Ethiopia’s regional foreign policy and security strategy in the Horn region.

Piracy and Its Security Threat

Piracy-off the Somali Coast has recently been one of the security threats to the Horn states in general and Ethiopia in particular. For instance, Poulin depicted the extent of threat of piracy in the region as follows: “Between 2007 and 2008, the rates of piracy in the Horn of Africa skyrocketed. Civilian mariners were increasingly

⁶¹ African Union (AU). Africa Terrorism Bulletin, 2019.

⁶² Mesfin, The Horn of Africa Security Complex 2011. 20.

⁶³ African Union (AU). Report of the Chairpersons of the commission on Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Africa. Institutional Report, Addis Ababa: African Union, 2014.

⁶⁴ Møller, Bjørn. The Horn of Africa and the US "War on Terror" with special Focus on Somalia, Aalborg Universitet. Research Report, Aalborg Universitet: Institut for Historie, Internationale Studier og Samfundsforhold, 2009; African Union (AU). Africa Terrorism Bulletin, 2019.

⁶⁵ Harry Verhoeven and Michael Woldemariam. "Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and U.S. foreign policy." Contemporary Security Policy, 2022: 622-650.

⁶⁶ Harry Verhoeven and Michael Woldemariam. "Who lost Ethiopia? 2022; Ketsela, Yonas. "Domestic sources of international action: Ethiopia and the global war on terrorism." African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 2016: 131-144.

⁶⁷ Ketsela, "Domestic sources of international action..." 2016.

targeted, hostages were taken, ransoms paid. Countries around the world were threatened. This phenomenon was created by weak state of Somalia and fueled by the inherent lawlessness that combined to sow vast instability.”⁶⁸ It is also documented that 111 attacks were registered in the waters surrounding the Horn region, which was almost twice of the incidents took place at the beginning of the surge in 2007.⁶⁹ One of the incentives that stimulated piracy off the Somali Coast has been ransom money. For instance, in 2005, USD 350, 000 ransom was paid for the Hong King ship Feisty Gas and ransoms continuously increased over the next several years, peaking at USD 9,500,000 paid for the Greek tanker Smyrni and her crew of 26 in 2013.⁷⁰

The collapse of Somali state has also exacerbated to the threat of piracy in the Horn region. For example, Ho contends that:

*After the withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops, instability continues. The weak transitional government, the anti-Islamist warlords, the anti-government clan militias and Islamic groups, some of whom have links to al-Qaeda elements, notably the Al Shabab, which has been declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. in March 2008 and which is behind terrorist attack on Ethiopia and U.S. interest in the region, struggled for power. To complicate matters, the TFG has no control over Puntland, which declared itself a semi-autonomous state in 1998 and is currently the base of piracy.*⁷¹

The above brief discussion and quotation clearly shows that piracy is one of the greatest threats in the Horn of Africa that is partly exacerbated by state failure in the regions. Ethiopia is one of the countries that has been affected by the activity of piracy. It is claimed that its commercial ships have occasionally been targeted by pirates. Ethiopia’s military intervention in Somalia in 2006 and its recent attempt by the Government to establish a naval force to protect its commercial ships in the coast of the Red Sea seemed to have been dictated by the extent of the threats of piracy off the Somali coast.

3.6 Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration

Ethiopia has always been committed to regional organizations. This has been shown by its active involvement in and being a signatory state to a number of regional

⁶⁸ Poulin, Andrew. "How the World Overpowered Piracy in the Horn of Africa." International policy Digest, 2016.

⁶⁹ Poulin, Andrew. "How the World Overpowered Piracy..." 2016

⁷⁰ Poulin, Andrew. "How the World Overpowered Piracy..." 2016

⁷¹ Ho, Joshua. "Combating piracy and armed robbery in Asia." Marine Policy, 2009: 432-434.

organizations – the UN, the OAU/AU, and IGAD. Ethiopia's commitment to regional organizations has been driven by the belief that its national interest in economic, political, and security terms could best be achieved through forging viable regional cooperation and integration at international, regional, and sub-regional levels.⁷² With regard to the IGAD region, Ethiopia's foreign policy has significantly changed since 1991. Its outward foreign policy looking that conceived hostile neighboring states (that had been meddling through its internal affairs) as security threats had loaded the country's foreign policy priority.⁷³ But this has been changed since 1991 by the inward foreign policy looking that has focused mainly on the country's internal vulnerabilities and problems – extreme poverty and paucity of democracy. Hence rapid economic development and democratization are depicted as the twin driving forces that are dictating the country's both bilateral and multilateral relations.⁷⁴ It is believed that the fates of the Horn states are intertwined and their national interests are believed to be realized mutually mainly through cementing regional integration under IGAD.⁷⁵

Ethiopia has played leading role in expediting regional integration in the IGAD region particularly in the post-Cold War period. This is basically meant to achieve its multiple national interest goals. The economic dimension of such endeavor includes securing reliable regional port access for foreign trade, expanding markets in the vicinity for foreign trade, and sustaining economic gains from regional peacekeeping missions and from regional shared development vision.⁷⁶ Port access is vital for any trading economy and is indeed crucial to Ethiopia's rapidly growing economy and population.⁷⁷ As the center of the region, Ethiopia has the opportunity to use more than half a dozen of regional ports but its port utilization (over 95%) for foreign trade mainly depends on the Port of Djibouti due to regional conflicts and weak regional connectivity in infrastructure and distance from ports.⁷⁸ But the unfolding positive developments in Horn could have provided Ethiopia additional port access through

⁷² Belachew, Belete. *Djibouti: A Measure of Ethiopia's Dependence*. Addis Ababa, 2012; Spencer, John. *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Sellassie Years (2nd Ed.)*. Hollywood: Tsehai, 2006.

⁷³ Mesfin, *Ethiopia's Role and Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa 2012*; Tadesse, Medhane. "Making Sense of Ethiopia's Regional Influence", 2015

⁷⁴ Ministry of Information (MoI). *Ethiopia's Foreign...*, 2002

⁷⁵ Ahmed, Medemer. 2019.

⁷⁶ Ayenew et al., 2017

⁷⁷ Tekalign, Yohannes. "Regional security dilemma..." 2019.

⁷⁸ Tekalign, Yohannes. "Regional security dilemma..." 2019.

the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, the Port of Asseb in Eritrea and Lamu Port in Kenya.⁷⁹

Ethiopia's regional peace building role through peace support operations and mediation has also helped it to access development assistance needed to boost its economy and enhanced its international recognition and credibility.⁸⁰ Its attempt at ensuring regional peace and stability has, however, not relieved the region from being the hotspot of conflict and instability due to a combined internal and external factor. The intra- IGAD trade, which is claimed to be an engine of regional integration and a key to Ethiopia's development project, has remained low compared to the already low intra-African trade.⁸¹

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Ethiopia's foreign policy has geared towards ensuring its regional hegemonic interests, particularly in the post-1991 period. Ethiopia's regional hegemonic aspiration is rooted in its growing economy, strong military, large population and territory, geostrategic location and history. Scholars claims that the government driven rapid economic growth of the past decades in the country aims not only at reducing poverty but also achieving its hegemonic aspiration to control the region's political economy. This is to be realized through creating a strong energy led economic tie among states in the region.

However, its foreign relations with regional, extra-regional and global powers have been constrained by domestic and external factors. Ethiopia's regional hegemonic aspiration has been challenged by a nexus of internal and external factors. The internal dimension relates to its economy and demography. Ethiopia is too poor economically to effectively assume regional hegemony in the region despite it has achieved a notable economic growth in the past two decades. Demographic factor, that is lack of social cohesion and consolidation of the country's multiethnic society, has also militated against its regional hegemonic aspiration. This demographic factor, in turn, makes Ethiopia vulnerable to the Horn regional context by manipulating ethnic diversity, divisions and competition to counterbalance the power of neighboring

⁷⁹ It is highly circulated in the government media that Ethiopia has started to develop 19% of its share of the Port of Berebera and has also planned to use as alternative access to the sea the Port of Asseb and Lamu Port in Kenya.

⁸⁰ Mulugeta, Kidist. *The Role of Regional Powers...* 2014

⁸¹ Ali Abdi and Edris Seid. *Assessment of Economic Integration in IGAD. Research Report*, Addis Ababa: The Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute, 2013; Tekalign, Yohannes. "Regional security dilemma..." 2019.

countries. The regional conflict dynamics and competition over shared resource including trans-boundary Rivers have also restricted Ethiopia's rise as hegemonic power in the region. Moreover, the concentration of foreign military bases in Djibouti has not only challenged Ethiopia's military supremacy in the region but some of the region's states have also contested the country's hegemony in Horn region. Djibouti is currently serving as garrison base for nearly a dozen extra-regional and global powers adversely affecting Ethiopia's hegemonic aspiration in the Horn of Africa.

The key factors that determine Ethiopia's security and development include, *inter alia*, regional insecurity in the Horn of Africa, unsettled issues of the Nile water sharing, access to the sea, and emerging security threats such as terrorism and piracy in the Horn region. Ethiopia considers regional cooperation and integration as panacea for addressing these key security challenges. Cooperation with neighboring states is thus one of the key priority areas for Ethiopia foreign policy. Before 1991, Ethiopia's foreign policy towards its neighbors has largely, been dictated by its enduring fear of being encircled by enemies, an age-old blockade mentality. Broadly, different strategies have been employed by Ethiopia's successive regimes to this end. Ethiopia's basic interests were, and continue to be, securing its territorial integrity, reducing external threats and ensuring regional security in the region. Thus, given the landlockedness of the country and unsettled Nile question, the country's foreign policy priority after 1991 has been how to escape from such siege mentality by promoting regional cooperation and integration in the region which is considered as a guarantee for access to the sea, equitable utilization of the Nile River and regional stability.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are forwarded to the foreign policy decision makers and other relevant stakeholders.

- **Maintaining and sustaining the economic development:** Domestic economic strength is the key issue in strengthening the country and to defend national interest in its relations with external actors. Ethiopia should be able to maintain its progressive economic growth to reduce the regional constraints to its foreign policy and relations.
- **Effectively managing multiethnic diversity of the Ethiopian society:** External powers (regional, extra-regional and global powers) may try to exploit Ethiopia's ethnic diversity to their own advantage. Ethiopian elites, therefore, should emphasize on strengthening national unity for a common cause instead of ethnic balkanization.

- **Equitable Utilization of the Nile River:** Unfair utilization and the claim of historical right by Egypt cannot address the concern of all Nile riparian states sustainably. Hence, Ethiopia should continue to push for equitable utilization of the Nile River to address the long term unsettled issues of the Nile.
- **Using alternative ports:** As different regional, extra-regional and global powers are coming to Djibouti with their own specific interests, Djibouti appears to be unreliable friend to Ethiopia. Ethiopia should not totally rely on Djibouti for its access to the sea. To this end, the restoration of relations with Eritrea should be further strengthened to reduce excessive dependence on Djibouti's port.
- **Strengthening regional cooperation and integration:** Geopolitically speaking, the Horn of Africa is geo-strategically relevant region that attracts the attention of great and super powers. To address the problem of regional insecurity, Nile issue, underdevelopment, and landlockedness, strengthening regional economic cooperation and integration in the Horn of Africa should be a top priority.

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