

Turkiye's Engagement in the Horn of Africa: Its Scenarios and Implications

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa region occupies a significant position in the theatrical stage of world geopolitics. Foreign countries, both emerging regional powers and superpowers, have considered the region as a key hub for security and trade returns. Consequently, competition for the alliance has increased in the region geometrically. The recent Turkish involvement epitomized this new dynamic. Against this background, the current paper sought to explore the future of Turkiye's position in the region in light of possible scenarios and implications. The paper highlighted that the likelihood of Turkish engagement in the region will be increased in the foreseeable future. Several factors may have determined Turkish engagement in the region. More importantly, Turkish developmental and economic aspirations, its potential to maneuver the geopolitical chessboard of the region, and the prospects placed in the Horn of Africa will affect Turkish assertive engagement in the future.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa occupies a geopolitically significant position in the world political economy. Foreign countries, especially regional and superpowers, have considered the region as a key hub for security and economic returns. In this connection, competition for alliances has recently increased in the area more than ever. Concomitantly, some analysts argued that no other parts of the earth have accompanied a similar trend of global dynamics including the Horn of Africa (Clingendael Policy Brief, 2019).

Rival superpowers including the United States of America, Russia, China, and regional powers such as Turkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have aggressively sought a military base and commercial centers around the ports of the

region. This new dynamic makes the arena of the Horn of Africa a fierce battleground. Beyond that, the region has been stretched to serve as a 'political laboratory' where different foreign policy instruments interact. At this point, equating the recent development in the Horn of Africa to a "Geopolitical Traffic Jam" does make sense (Munich Security Brief, 2021).

The presence of a new dynamic that can be generally dubbed "the militarization and commercialization of ports" in the Horn of Africa has attracted several geopolitical actors. Apart from the traditional Western Powers, Middle Eastern rising powers have shown keen interest. From the Gulf countries, the United Arab Emirates started the new scrambling of ports in the region by the year 2015. Qatar followed in 2018 while

concluding a contract with Sudan for the sake of modernizing the port of Suakin. Turkiye's involvement also appeared with a more militarized approach (Cafiero and Cok, 2020). In addition to this, Saudi Arabia and Iran are increasing their noticeable efforts in the region.

In this regard, the recent foreign policy of Turkiye gives special attention and place to the HoA, Turkish engagement in the region dates back to the presence of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th Century (Omar, 2001). Moving swiftly to modern times, Turkiye also demonstrated its interest in the HoA. It introduced its first “Action Plan for Africa” in 1998. Particularly, its involvement gained momentum in 2005 with the commencement of the “Opening to Africa” strategy. This strategy helped Turkiye to secure observer status at the African Union in the same year. In response to the unprecedented reaction of the African Union, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has worked hard to show Turkiye as an “Afro-Eurasian state” and very close to Africa (Pinto, 2021). Since then, the dramatic rise of Turkish-Horn engagement proved this fact (Clingendael Policy Brief, 2019). All these realities entailed that Turkiye is becoming a key economic and security actor in the Horn of Africa. Nonetheless, several factors may affect the fruition of Turkiye-Horn engagement. Indeed, the future of Turkiye's position in the region is apparently at a crossroads. It is, therefore, imperative to explore whether Turkiye maintains its current position in the volatile region of the HoA.

Turkiye's Engagement in the Horn of Africa: Lesson from Somalia and Ethiopia

The Horn of Africa occupies a geo-strategic location that determines countries' engagement in global politics and economy. Accordingly, from the geopolitical points of views, Turkiye's engagement in the region has a strategic importance. Indeed, some of its interactions with the countries of the HoA seemed to be highly personalized. For instance, some analysts argued that the cemented relationship between Turkiye and Somalia is a result of personal efforts driven by President R.T. Erdoğan himself. Erdoğan authored an English language piece in the Foreign Policy magazine entitled ‘The Tears of Somalia’, which called on the international community to assist Somalia. According to Foreign Policy (2011), His Excellency R.T. Erdogan.

The tears that are now running from Somalia's golden sands into the Indian Ocean must stop. They should be replaced by hopeful voices of a country where people do not lose their lives because of starvation and where they express their eagerness to develop and restore peace and stability. Regardless of which culture we come from or where we live, I am confident that our common heritage as human beings will motivate us to ease the suffering of Somalia.

Along similar lines, there is a massive improvement in the Ethio-Turkish relationship. Over the years, Ethiopia has

become a primary destination for Turkish investors. The Ethiopian Investment Commission announced that Türkiye is the second-biggest investor in Ethiopia, with an investment capital of 2.5 billion USD worth (Daily Sabah, 2021).

Türkiye, being a close friend of the two neighboring countries of the region namely, Ethiopia and Somalia, it may play a mediation role and thereby take it as an opportunity to fulfil its national interest. The recent Turkish engagement with Somalia amidst Ethio-Somalia tension could be one incident. Despite being wrongly interpreted as a means of annexation by the Somali government, Ethiopia hoped that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland would “pave the way to realize the aspiration of Ethiopia to secure access to the sea and diversify its access to seaports” (Ethiopian News Agency, 2024).

Regrettably, Turkish condemnation of the MoU endangers the very sacred role of mediation role that Türkiye could provide to the region. The MoU motivated Somalia to broaden its defense cooperation partnership with Türkiye. Based on its agreement, Türkiye sent its warship (called *Kinaliada*) to Somalia, sending a clear message to Ethiopia. More clearly, Turkish Ambassador, Alper Aktas reportedly said, ‘Somalia’s security is also Türkiye’s security’ (ADF, 2024). This Turkish move against the MoU seemed not strategically justifiable for the following reasons. First, its rejection of the deal is inconsistent with the tradition of Ethio-Turkish friendship. History witnessed that the Ethio-Turkish bilateral relationship was built on a rock foundation. To mention one of the

most chronic historical events, Türkiye supported Ethiopia and voted against Italy at the General Assembly of the League of Nations (UPI, 1935). In response, Emperor Haileselassie expressed his interest in strengthening their relationship. Likewise, more recently, during the outbreak of the Northern Conflict between the FDRE government and that of the TPLF, Türkiye stood up with Ethiopians though the West preferred to act unfriendly. Ethiopia will never forget Türkiye’s practical support during its hardest time. As in the past, therefore, it is hardly surprising that Ethiopia expects a similar determination from the Turkish government with respect to Ethiopia’s legitimate quest to access sea ports.

Second, being the second most populated landlocked country next to Nigeria, Ethiopia has a legitimate quest to access sea ports. Experiences support that Ethiopia has the right to establish commercial or military bases outside its borders, including the territory of Somaliland. This is a common practice in the international arena. Türkiye itself established multiple military bases in the Duhok governorate of Northern Iraq (Aljazeera News, 2024). Though Iraq’s government continued to protest against the presence of Turkish troops and called for their withdrawal, Türkiye has maintained its military presence in Iraq. The minister of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hakan Fidan, justified the presence of Turkish forces in Iraq by saying “We will fight to the end against the PKK terrorist organization within and outside our borders.” With this own experience, Türkiye’s rush and harsh rejection of the Ethio-Somaliland deal as a violation of

sovereignty and territorial integrity resembled an open double standard.

Third, the current Ethio-Somaliland port deal is neither a new development nor fundamentally different from the previous agreement. Ethiopia did try in the past to access the port of Berbera in Somaliland based on a tri-lateral agreement between Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, and Somaliland. The current signing ceremony, therefore, only marked Ethiopia's renewed legal steps on a path to gain access to sea port. Yet, this turn of the agreement provoked Somalia's anger. Some countries also recklessly exploited Somalia's concern, ostensibly arguing that the deal would affect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia. The reality speaks louder that Ethiopia is a good neighbor and Somalia's reliable partner. Right now, thousands of Ethiopian soldiers are fighting with Al-Shebab together with Somalia's national army. Therefore, Turkish concern about the current deal that presumed the territorial integrity of Somalia would be jeopardized and it cannot hold water.

Fourth, above all, the Ethiopian government affirmed that the MoU with Somaliland does not affect any country. This meant that Ethiopia was not seeking to violate Somalia's territorial integrity by signing the agreement. Certainly, the agreement intends to minimize economic costs and security threats. Ethiopia currently pays around 1.5 to 2 billion dollars in port fees and senses the Red Sea crisis more than any other country in the world owing to its landlockedness (Ethiopia Observer, 2018). All these premises nullify the accusation that Ethiopia threatens Somalia's territorial

integrity, and thereby Turkish government needs to understand Ethiopia's real motive in the deal. This is a concern that even the President of Somalia, Hassen Sheih Mohammed approved amidst the recent controversy. He unequivocally stated: "Somalia wants Ethiopia to have access to the sea", which clues the tension is surmountable.

In general, Turkiye has been one of the global actors that have engaged with the HoA through different avenues such as aid, military, mediation, etc. It has been perceived by other regional powers as posing a potential threat to their strategic interests, giving rise to competition and confrontation. In the following section, an attempt is made to outline key determinants of Turkish engagement in the region.

Determinants of Turkish Engagement in the Horn of Africa

Several pushing and pulling factors may determine Turkish engagement in the HoA. Turkish future in the region will hinge on three important factors: political-economy context, foreign policy, and geopolitical competition (Pinto, 2021). As to political factors, the challenge posed by the middle-income trap is one of the root causes of the Turkish current presence in the region. The trap delays the transformation of Turkiye from the category of middle-income countries to higher-income countries unless certain measure is taken. Cognizant of the dark side of the trap, Turkiye has tried to diversify its economy and searched for new trade partners where virgin business opportunities are available, particularly in the HoA (Anwar, 2016). Besides, Turkiye's recognition of its

limited room in the European market forced the country to see opportunities available outside the Eurozone (Pinto, 2021). What is more, Turkiye's problems related with the accession process to join European Union (EU) may enforced her to seek alternative options in its foreign affairs. Taking all these economic bottlenecks into account, Turkiye moved forward with its 1998 policy of "Opening to Africa".

Regarding the geopolitical competition, in the past 10 years, the geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea, by extension to the HoA region, has been fundamentally reshaped and changed. The dynamics further enhanced the relevance of the HoA. The region now links the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean security systems with their vested interests. These interests are sometimes overlapping and sometimes emerge as contradictory (USIP, 2020). Principally, three distinct categories of geopolitical interaction define the HoA: the "competition" between Superpowers, the 'interaction' between Super and Regional powers, and the struggle between Regional powers. Actors from each category encounter each other in different milieus. Areas of compromise, places of possible conflict and arenas of probable conflict commonly join these actors.

Furthermore, the recent magnificent level of economic development in the HoA has probably attracted Turkiye. This can be proved from the report of the African Development Bank (2023) whereby most of the African countries have registered an average annual 4% growth in their GDP for successive years, which in turn, creates a fertile ground for Turkish investment. From a geo-

economic point of view, Pinto (2021) identified three countries of the HoA that are particularly important for Turkiye: namely, Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti. In this regards, Somalia provides strategic access to the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Regarding the importance of Ethiopia to Turkiye, it serves as a crucial destination for Turkish investment. Next to China, Turkiye has huge investments in the country (Fahim, 2018). Likewise, Djibouti permits a free economic zone for Turkiye as per their bilateral maritime cooperation deal (Middle East Monitor, 2020).

Last but not least, engagement and concern of Turkiye in the region is also partly determined by its foreign policy. Michelsen Institute (2021) pointed out that the goals of Turkiye's foreign policy are to attain strategic autonomy with the capability to maintain the country's survival on its own; forge new partnerships while maintaining traditional alliances, and become an exceptional country in its region to achieve material and political regional supremacy and respect. Meanwhile, Turkiye's foreign policy recognized that the solution to global challenges depends on collective efforts forged by cooperation and effective multilateralism. This reality guides Turkiye's active diplomacy within multilateral fora of the HoA in particular and that of Africa at large. For instance, under the motto "the world is bigger than five" coined by His Excellency President R.T. Erdogan, Turkiye has been advocating the reform of the UN Security Council and the UN. In this respect, it can be said that Turkiye may support the view that Africa should have a permanent seat in the Security Council. This is not surprising since

Turkiye has been known for its “Opening to Africa policy” since 1998.

The Future of Turkiye’s Engagement in the HoA: Possible Scenarios

A wide range of pulling and pushing factors determine the future of Turkish engagement in the HoA as evident in the previous section. Considering the current trends and positions adopted by various parties (competitors), two scenarios are likely for the future of Turkiye’s position in the region.

Scenario 1: Increased Turkiye’s Engagement in the HoA

Economic and political drivers would increase Turkish increasing engagement in the region in the foreseeable future. Economically, domestic economic growth gave the Turkish state the means to engage in a more assertive foreign policy, and, in turn, successful Turkish companies (sometimes referred to as ‘*Anatolian tigers*’) have been encouraged to invest abroad, mainly in the Horn of Africa (Cligendael, 2019). Politically, with the President of Turkiye, H.E. R.T. Erdogan and his Justice and Development party set to remain in power, it is more likely that Turkiye will insist on its long-term strategy for Africa in general and the Horn of Africa in particular, at least for the coming five years. In this regard, the May 28/2023 presidential election allowed R.T. Erdogan to continue Ankara’s African-based projects with a new spirit.

Turkish assertive engagement in the HoA perhaps brings more regional polarization as the very nature of Turkiye’s engagement is competition-driven, and pursues a militarized approach. For example, Turkiye established

its largest foreign military base in Somalia in 2017. Importantly then, the Turkish assertiveness in the region may ignite fierce competition, which in turn, lead to greater Turkish engagement in the region. For instance, following the culmination of the Qatar blockade, and the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the drift between Turkiye and the Saudi-led Red Sea Council may take the forefront of the geopolitical competition. Hence, at some time in the future, if not now, Turkiye may find itself on the brink of conflict with the members of the Red Sea Council with less likelihood of winning the game (EFP, 2020). In response, Turkiye may scale up its military presence and soft power projection in the HoA to avoid any long-lasting painful loss of the geostrategic importance of the region.

Scenario 2: Decreased Turkiye’s Engagement in the HoA

In this scenario, Turkiye reduces its military presence and soft power projection under some critical conditions. One instance can be the unresponsiveness of most of the countries of the HoA to the rising demands of Turkiye. Although it seems less likely, the chance of Turkiye’s engagement may reach too low to the extent that either side loses interest in any risky cooperation. The lesson obtained from Djibouti – Russia’s engagement proved this reality. Djibouti refused Russia’s plan to build a military base since it did not want to become the terrain of proxy war for superpowers (Melvin, 2019). Similarly, the countries of the HoA may deny Turkiye to conduct any military activities. In turn, under various circumstances, Turkiye may also realize that there will be no room in the region.

Unanticipated political developments in different countries may lead to the fruition of this scenario. For example, after the signatory of bilateral agreements between the former president of Sudan, H.E. Omar al-Beshir, and the President of Turkiye, H.E. R.T. Erdogan, Turkiye renewed its relationship with the country and succeeded in concluding a bilateral agreement that amounts to 650 million USD for the militarization and commercialization of the ports of Sudan (Brookings, 2019). However, this agreement could not be in effect, as the transitional coalition seems to favor engagement with the West rather than the Turkish government.

Implications of Turkish Engagement in the Horn of Africa

The engagement of Turkiye in the Horn of Africa will have regional and national implications at large. Regionally, Turkish active participation meant that it is increasingly moving away from the western camp and getting closer to the Red Sea region. This is perhaps a U-turn regarding what has been done for years in the contemporary Turkiye. Accordingly, as some commentators argued, Turkiye would become another country in the Middle East (CMI Report, 2021). Besides, Turkish appearance in the Horn of Africa with a more militarized approach may pose a regional security threat by exacerbating competition among Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Iran. This is best epitomized during the Qatar blockade from 2017-2021. Put differently, the Horn of Africa would serve as a battleground for Middle East rivalries.

Turkiye has strived to broaden its presence beyond its territory and cemented its relation with the strategically selected countries of HoA thereby securing its national interest. Its acquisition of power, through the pursuit of alliances and putting pressure on the 'weak state' of the region, inclined to match to the Theory of Realism of Linchpin.

Furthermore, Turkish—engagement in the region may enhance Turkiye's international standing. It improves the position of Turkiye on the global political ladder through a political alliance. According to Hale (2000), both the late Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkiye can be categorized as middle powers in international politics. Such a position cannot allow Turkiye to maintain its strategic interest or win a war against any major power. In this regard, its recent engagement in the region capitalizes on its international standing by providing more alliances.

Conclusion

Turkiye's engagement in the HoA has been increasing by focusing on strategically important countries of the region. There are political - economy context, foreign policy and geopolitical competition factors that determine its engagement in the region. Indeed, though considerable overlap exists among the factors, Turkiye has recently paid more attention to its geopolitical interests. The shift in Turkiye's foreign policy from dominated by economic relationships to a geo-political partnership witnessed this fact. Importantly then, this transition is believed to advance Turkish international standing in general and the likelihood of its engagement in the Horn of Africa. There are two scenarios

whereby the engagement of Turkiye may be increased or decreased. By implications, this may have regional and national implications of the countries of the HoA in particular and that

of Ethiopia at large. Hence, the engagement of Turkiye in the region should be attentively identified and alignments should be made for the benefits of the countries of the region.

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