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## *Issue Brief*

# Emerging Security Competition and Challenges in the Horn of Africa

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## **S***ummary*

Two recent deals have set off a diplomatic storm in the Horn of Africa bringing a couple of the region's enduring questions to the fore—Ethiopia's long-held desire for access to sea and uncertain status of Somaliland. Dealing with these issues simultaneously is proving to be a tricky proposition, given the regional and geopolitical posturing at play encompassing different flash points. These include the Ethiopia–Tigray conflict, civil war in Sudan, and continued tensions over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile River.

## Introduction

The Horn of Africa is experiencing a wave of geopolitical realignment. On 1 January 2024, Ethiopia, the world’s most populous landlocked country, signed a preliminary agreement with Somaliland which would give it direct access to the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup> Somaliland is expected to lease 20 kilometers of its coastline for a period of 50 years to Addis Ababa.<sup>2</sup> In return, Ethiopia could become the first country in the world to recognise the self-declared independent region of Somaliland. The deal has aggravated tensions in the region and has been condemned by the federal government of Somalia and the violent Islamist group al-Shabaab.

Somalia and Türkiye also entered into a new defence and economic partnership agreement which has a significant maritime dimension. Somalia sits at an important strategic location in the Indian Ocean astride vital maritime shipping lanes. Therefore, stronger maritime capacity and institutions are paramount for Somalia. Under the 10-year deal signed on 21 February 2024, Türkiye is expected to provide Somalia with training, information sharing, and maritime capacity building, in exchange for Türkiye getting 30 per cent share of marine revenue from activities in Somalia’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ).<sup>3</sup> Somalia’s vast EEZ also means that the country boasts of rich marine life and may have rich reserves of hydrocarbon resources.<sup>4</sup> This is why in addition to the defence agreement, Türkiye has also signed an offshore oil and natural gas cooperation deal with Somalia on 7 March 2024.<sup>5</sup>

The Horn of Africa is distinct because of its geopolitical as well as geostrategic value to extra-continental powers. The geopolitical challenges and problems in the Horn include territorial disputes, competition for scarce resources, ethnic and tribal divisions, political instability, economic inequality, refugee and migration pressures, external influence, trans-boundary issues, and climate change and environmental degradation.

## Flash Points in the Horn of Africa

### ***The Ethiopia–Tigray Conflict***

In November 2022, Ethiopia’s federal government and the rebellious authorities of Tigray, the northernmost part of Ethiopia, agreed to a ceasefire during talks in South

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<sup>1</sup> Kalkidan Yibeltal, “[Ethiopia Signs Agreement with Somaliland Paving Way to Sea Access](#)”, *BBC News*, 2 January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Faisal Ali, “[Ethiopia and Somaliland Reach Agreement Over Access to Ports](#)”, *The Guardian*, 1 January 2024.

<sup>3</sup> “[Turkey to Provide Maritime Security Support to Somalia – Official](#)”, *Reuters*, 22 February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> “[Somalia – Country Commercial Guide](#)”, International Trade Administration, Department of Commerce, United States of America, 22 January 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Can Sezer, “[Turkey Signs Energy Cooperation Deal with Somalia](#)”, *Reuters*, 7 March 2024.

Africa after two years of bloodshed involving alleged war crimes, human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing. The conflict between Ethiopia, acting in alliance with neighbouring Eritrea and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), started after elections were conducted in November 2020 which the TPLF called ‘unconstitutional’.

Tensions between Ethiopia’s three main ethnic groups—Oromos, Amharas and Tigrayans—are long-standing and underpin this civil war. The conflict has spanned several phases. Following the initial occupation of Tigray, the TPLF undertook a massive mobilisation and successfully recaptured the city of Mekelle in June 2021 and later advanced towards Addis Ababa. In November 2021, they retreated back to Mekelle after which the Eritreans, the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and Amhara militias launched their final offensive. This assault ended with the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) signed in November 2022.<sup>6</sup> According to researchers at Ghent University in Belgium, as many as 600,000 had lost their lives as a result of war-related violence and famine by late 2022.<sup>7</sup>

Following the Pretoria accord, peace holds in Tigray, but Ethiopia continues to remain fractured.<sup>8</sup> The task of rebuilding the country’s northern region is proving to be difficult with some sources estimating the cost of post-conflict reconstruction of the battle-scarred northern region to be around US\$ 20 billion.<sup>9</sup> This will undoubtedly require assistance from international institutions and investors. Additionally, security forces from the neighbouring Amhara, who sided with the ENDF during the war are now refusing to leave western Tigray in defiance of the Pretoria peace accord, raising tensions with Addis Ababa.

In order to weaken a nationalist militia, the Ethiopian government in April 2023 announced that all regional security forces would be integrated into the national security service. This decision was seen as an attempt to degrade the autonomy of the regions and subsequently sparked violent protests and militia activities in Amhara.<sup>10</sup> In a reversal of alliances, the ENDF has spent much of 2023 fighting against Amhara’s regional special forces and the Fano, the most powerful non-state militia in the region. There is little doubt that the destabilisation of Ethiopia has security implications for the entire Horn of Africa as the region is facing multitude of armed conflicts.

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<sup>6</sup> **“Turning the Pretoria Deal into Lasting Peace in Ethiopia”**, International Crisis Group, 23 November 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey York, **“Tigray War has seen up to half a million dead from violence and starvation, say researchers”**, *The Globe and Mail*, 14 March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> **“One Year On, Peace Holds in Tigray, but Ethiopia Still Fractured”**, *Al Jazeera*, 2 November 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Andres Schipani, **“Ethiopia Seeks Help to Find \$20bn for Post-conflict Reconstruction”**, *Financial Times*, 20 August 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Dawit Endeshaw, **“Gunfire, Protests in Ethiopia’s Amhara Over Plan to Disband Regional Force”**, *Reuters*, 9 April 2023.

### ***Sudan’s Civil War and Rocky Road to Civilian Transition***

Sudan is no stranger to conflicts. The country has experienced more than 15 military coups. Since 15 April 2023, two rival factions of the military government of Sudan, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), have been engaged in a violent civil war. The conflict between the SAF and RSF is primarily a power struggle between the two warring leaders for control of the state and its resources.

Once allies and now turned foes, both al-Burhan and Hemedti played a crucial role in the overthrow of former Sudanese military dictator Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. On 5 December 2022, the Sudanese military and various civilian actors signed a framework agreement, paving the path to a new civilian government.<sup>11</sup> However, Sudan’s promised transition to democracy and civilian rule never materialised. Even the deal brokered by the United States and Saudi Arabia known as ‘Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan’ signed in May 2023, failed to commit both the sides to a ceasefire.<sup>12</sup>

Efforts by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to open negotiations and host a peace summit in early December 2023 floundered after the SAF accused Kenyan President William Ruto of supporting the RSF. The Sudanese government has now also cut off ties with the IGAD and negotiation efforts are now at a standstill.<sup>13</sup> Fighting in Khartoum continues to persist and incidents of violence across the country are on the rise, including in Darfur.

However, one of the most worrying developments has been the expansion of the conflict into Sudan’s ‘breadbasket’, Al Jazirah state across the Nile River which has led to mass displacement of people and exacerbated the country’s food insecurity. The conflict between SAF and RSF not only continues to persist, but now Sudan is on the brink of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 7.8 million people have been displaced since April 2023. Of them, more than 6 million people are internally displaced, while over one million are refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries, particularly to Chad. More than 70 per cent of health facilities in conflict-affected regions of Sudan are inoperable or closed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> **“New Political Deal Amid Rising Disorder in Sudan”**, The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 3 March 2023.

<sup>12</sup> **“Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan”**, Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State, 11 May 2023.

<sup>13</sup> **“Sudan Suspends Membership in IGAD Regional Bloc”**, *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2024.

<sup>14</sup> **“UNICEF and WHO Warn that Further Attacks & Disruptions of Health and Nutrition Services in Sudan Could Cost Over 10,000 Young Lives by the End of 2023”**, UNICEF, 18 October 2023.

Sudan is facing extreme levels of food insecurity, with 18 million people—37 per cent of the population—experiencing severe levels of acute food insecurity.<sup>15</sup> If the fighting continues, the total number of refugees and internally displaced will increase, leading to women and children becoming more vulnerable to sexual assault and gender-based violence. Worryingly, there have also been reports of ethnically driven mass killings and weaponisation of sexual violence against the Masalit people, particularly in the West Darfur city of El Geneina.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)***

Water wars could soon become a reality in the Horn of Africa. The politics over the construction of the GERD on the Blue Nile River in the Benishangul-Gumuz region of Ethiopia has flamed tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan, which are downstream countries that rely on the Nile’s water. Upon completion, the GERD is expected to be the biggest hydroelectric power plant in Africa, capable of generating up to 6,450 megawatts of electricity, thereby propelling Ethiopia’s economic growth and diversification.

However, neighbouring Egypt is a desert state which sources 90 per cent of its water supply from the river Nile for its households and irrigation for agriculture. Historically, Egypt has had sole control over the usage of the Nile due to two colonial era treaties—the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Nile water agreement between Egypt and Sudan.<sup>17</sup> However, in recent years, upstream countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and particularly Ethiopia, have argued that they were never part of the agreement and are therefore not bound by its provisions.<sup>18</sup>

The most fundamental point of contention between Addis Ababa and Cairo is the timeframe and pace for filling up the 74 billion cubic metre reservoir behind the dam. According to some sources, Addis Ababa is eager to begin the process of filling up the reservoir as the construction of the dam has nearly completed. Unfortunately, years of talks and mediation attempts by the African Union and the United States have failed to produce a deal on how Ethiopia would fill and operate the dam. In September 2023, Ethiopia announced that the fourth and final filling of the GERD’s reservoir was complete.<sup>19</sup> The move was immediately criticised by the Egyptian

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<sup>15</sup> [\*\*“IRC Warns Unfettered Humanitarian Access and Scale-up of Funding Needed to Avert Catastrophic Hunger Crisis in Sudan”\*\*](#), International Rescue Committee, 24 March 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Maggie Michael, [\*\*“Sudanese Women Describe Being Gang-raped in Ethnically Targeted Attacks by Arab Forces”\*\*](#), Reuters, 30 November 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Salam Abdulqadir Abdulrahman, [\*\*“Agreements that Favour Egypt’s Rights to Nile Waters are Anachronism”\*\*](#), *The Conversation*, 8 November 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Mahemud Tekuya, [\*\*“Colonial-era Treaties are to Blame for the Unresolved Dispute over Ethiopia’s Dam”\*\*](#), *The Conversation*, 25 March 2020.

<sup>19</sup> [\*\*“Filling of Grand Renaissance Dam on the Nile Complete, Ethiopia Says”\*\*](#), *Al Jazeera*, 10 September 2023.

foreign ministry which said that the “unilateral” filling of the reservoir was “illegal” and a violation of the 2015 declaration of principles signed by Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan.<sup>20</sup>

As the diplomatic process over the resolution of the GERD dispute staggers on into its second decade, the possibility of Egypt beginning a military operation against Ethiopia over what it considers a vital national interest cannot be discounted. In 1979, Egypt’s former President Anwar Sadat had pronounced that “The only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water.”<sup>21</sup>

A decade later, then Egyptian Foreign Minister Boutros Boutros-Ghali warned that the next war in the Middle East would be fought not over politics but over the waters of the Nile. The Nile dispute is turning out to be a zero-sum competition between Ethiopian electricity versus Egyptian water.<sup>22</sup> Unless countries of the region shed their political biases, reach a compromise on the filing of the reservoir, and develop a cooperative water-sharing agreement in the Nile basin, the possibility of conflict escalating remains large.

### ***Houthi Disruptions and Piracy in the Red Sea***

Since November 2023, Iran-backed Houthi militias have been attacking merchant shipping using the Red Sea route in response to Israeli attacks and the bombing of Gaza. Reportedly, the Houthis rebels have employed wide array of weapons like drones, anti-ship ballistic missiles, have boarded ships, and have even hijacked vessels using helicopters. The associated disruptions in trade route and supply chains pose challenge for most African countries as nearly 12 per cent of global trade and 30 per cent of global container traffic passes through this maritime zone annually.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequently, shipping lines are avoiding the Suez Canal route and instead redirecting to the Cape of Good Hope off South Africa which is adding to the transit time and pushing shipping costs and insurance premiums by 60 and 20 per cent, respectively.<sup>24</sup> For African countries like Egypt and Djibouti which rely heavily on trade facilitation fees, continued disruptions in maritime trade along the Red Sea are

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<sup>20</sup> Moohita Kaur Garg, “[Egypt Protests Ethiopia’s Nile Dam Filing, Labels Move ‘Illegal’](#)”, *WION*, 11 September 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Natasha Hall, “[Guardians of the Nile: No Interstate War, No Peace](#)”, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 11 July 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Sherman, “[Damming the Blue Nile: Will Ethiopian-Egyptian Tensions Ignite? – Analysis](#)”, *Eurasiareview*, 8 April 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Yerushalmy, “[Red Sea Crisis Explained: What is Happening and What Does It Mean for Global Trade?](#)”, *The Guardian*, 19 December 2023.

<sup>24</sup> “[Red Sea Crisis May Push Shipping Cost by Up to 60 pc, Insurance Premiums by 20 pc: GTRI](#)”, *The Economic Times*, 6 January 2024.

a big fiscal dent.<sup>25</sup> The volatility in Red Sea appears to have resurrected the spectre of maritime piracy too, with growing number of incidents being reported. This has come as an unexpected development to most analysts since there were no successful hijackings in the Western Indian Ocean region since March 2017. However, piracy in the region was merely contained but never eliminated.

It is tempting to draw a link between the Houthis and Somali pirates but the nature of the threat that each pose is quite distinct. On the one hand, the Houthis have built up an arsenal of drones, anti-ship ballistic missiles and unmanned kamikaze vessels, while Somali piracy is opportunistic, far more localised and modest in capacity.<sup>26</sup> The dramatic resurgence of piracy in the region could be attributed to internal and external factors. The region of Puntland, an autonomous region of Somalia, has historically been a major source of pirate crews owing to its geography and political instability. Its regional government has been prone to corruption which subsequently has led to maritime crimes like piracy, trafficking and illegal trawlers.

The role of the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) which is responsible for anti-piracy efforts in the autonomous region has also been reduced to that of a ‘generic security provider’.<sup>27</sup> The external role of EUNAVFOR’s Operation Atalanta cannot be ignored either. As piracy in the Horn of Africa declined due to dedicated multinational efforts, the level of alert inevitably also declined. The focus of anti-piracy operations shifted to the Gulf of Guinea.

Additionally, the counter-piracy structures in the region have also collapsed in recent years.<sup>28</sup> The UN Security Council’s counter-piracy Resolution 2608 expired on 31 March 2022 for the first time since 2008.<sup>29</sup> The Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) was a vital multi-stakeholder body steering anti-piracy operations in the region since 2009. However, the group was reformed in 2022 as the Contact Group on Illicit Maritime Activity (CGIMA).

Unfortunately, participation in the group’s activity has witnessed a steady decline since. Furthermore, the United Nations Trust Fund that provided funding for prisons and prosecution of piracy suspects was also closed in 2022.<sup>30</sup> This burden-sharing mechanism in which international navies would arrest pirates, while regional states,

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel van Dalen, Menzi Ndhlovu and Ronak. Gopaldas, **“Impact of Red Sea Crisis on Africa – Red Flag or Red Herring?”**, Institute for Security Studies, 12 February 2024.

<sup>26</sup> George Hancock, **“Piracy is Back in the Horn of Africa – What’s Behind its Return?”**, Royal United Services Institute, 1 February 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Saul, **“Commercial Ship Still Hijacked Off Somali Coast – Sources”**, Reuters, 19 December 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Christian Bueger, **“Somali Pirates are Back in Action. A Strong Global Response is Needed”**, *Safe Seas*, 19 January 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Denys Reva and Timothy Walker, **“Is Somali Piracy Finally Under Control?”**, Institute for Security Studies, 21 April 2022.

<sup>30</sup> **“Counter-Piracy Trust Fund”**, United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, 2022.

like Seychelles and Kenya, would prosecute and incarcerate them was fundamental in the success of containing piracy. However, with the closure of the trust fund, regional prosecution or the transfer of pirates has become difficult.

## **Conclusion**

State-based approaches to conflict resolution and management in the Horn of Africa continue to be undermined due to multiple cross-border flows of violence and instability. The region is also witnessing a proliferation of foreign military bases which has become a source of tension for regional countries. Middle Eastern countries are playing an increasingly assertive role in the politics of the Horn of Africa. The competition over the use of the Nile River remains unresolved, whereas significant armed conflicts continue to persist in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen.

External actors like China have already demonstrated its big pocket and deep appetite for asserting itself in the Horn with a flurry of economic and military investments. To a lesser extent, Russia also maintains an interest in the region and has often opportunistically tried to capitalise by tapping into anti-Western sentiment. The Horn of Africa is therefore also emerging as a focal point for great-power competition. The aforementioned issues showcase the interwoven poly-crisis facing the Horn of Africa.



## About the Author



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