

GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES



Fragmented Transitions in the Context of Competitive Regionalism: The Case of Ethiopia

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Key Findings

- ▶ The case of Ethiopia suggests that governments invested in national transitional projects tend to complement these transitions with pursuing regional ambitions. In Ethiopia's case, this conflation relies on teaming up nationalist mobilisation with diplomatic initiatives and a regional projection of power, for instance through investing in a rebuilt navy to re-engage with the Red Sea region.
- ▶ After taking over the role as Prime Minister in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed has started an attempt to dismantle the model of ethnic federalism, one of the cornerstones of post-communist Ethiopia since 1991. At the same time, Abiy maintained good international relations and reshaped the regional landscape, not the least through a peace treaty with Eritrea in August 2019 that resulted in the Nobel Peace Prize for him.
- ▶ The outbreak of the civil war with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in November 2020, a consequence of Abiy's attempt to reconfigure Ethiopia's political settlement has reshuffled Ethiopia's international and regional relations. Both sides have, in part aggressively and by using social media campaigning, aimed to influence external perceptions. Playing with international perceptions have become an integral element linking Ethiopia's domestic and international policymaking.
- ▶ Rapidly shifting alliances around the Tigray war side-lined Western powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom, and strengthened the role of non-Western powers, especially China, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey — which also plays a substantial role in supporting the Ethiopian National Defence Force. Alliances, however, change constantly, and all actors in Ethiopia, first and foremost the Ethiopian government, apply and demonstrate geopolitical pragmatism and flexibility.
- ▶ In such fragile, rapidly shifting regional configurations, Western powers, in turn, prefer a stabilisation-focused approach. This relapse back from a transition perspective emboldens the non-Western powers to pursue their norm challenging roles with the aim of defying the unipolar leadership led by the West and ensure in a way the realisation of a multipolar world with specific spheres of influence.

- ▶ Responding to the global pressure and challenge from Egypt with relation to the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethiopia intends to build military bases in the Red Sea region and re-establish its navy. This is a clear manifestation of political confrontation or regional and/or hydro-political rivalry between non-Western powers, Ethiopia, and Egypt, where the latter signed and implemented military agreements with Nile Basin countries. This is indicated in Ethiopia's recent re-engagement strategy that aims to improve the shattered relations with Western powers.
- ▶ The regional configuration in the Red Sea region does not attune to any kind of "architecture", as suggested by contemporary regional security concepts. Instead, it resembles a complex mesh of rapidly shifting alliances and multi-layered nodes that intrinsically link regional interests with local conflict settings. The Red Sea security complex cannot be approached by an attempt of ordered governance, but requires constant pragmatic but, at the same time, ambitious involvement from all actors.

Introduction

This report aims to explore the new regional configuration in the Wider Horn, with Ethiopia as its centre. It analyses perceptions and expectations of all relevant actors in this configuration, treating Ethiopia as both a country subject to regional power projection in its own fragile political transition, and as a regional player in its own right. After a first outlook on the interlinkages of internal and regional dynamics, the report will expand on the historical pretext of the current configuration that evolves around Ethiopia's transition. It will then analyse the perceptions and expectations between Ethiopia and the regional players, before suggesting some preliminary conclusions on what could be learned from the dynamic structural setup in the Wider Horn for other transitional regional configurations.

Ethiopia's transition, induced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, is highly conflictive (Verjee, 2021). In light of this contestation, Ethiopia's government pursues a strategy that aims to link internal and regional stability. It wants to be perceived as a stabilising anchor in a highly fragile region (Interview 1), and, as a consequence of this role, expects external support for its strategy of violent internal reconfiguration. This political strategy is intrinsically linked with power projection. Currently, Ethiopia plans to create a Navy to obtain a naval presence in the Red Sea (Interview 2). Paradoxical to this aim, Ethiopia is also willing to rewrite long-standing regional alliances and to reshape the given political configuration. The internal and external dimensions of Ethiopia's transition have been a primary motivator, and the regional configuration around the wider Horn and the Red Sea region can no longer be seen through the lens of an architecture. Instead, they are best understood as a mesh of complex interests and institutional contingency.

Ethiopia performs an act of a hegemony in the wider Horn of Africa region, which is adjacent to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Eritrea's breakaway in 1991 left Ethiopia landlocked, which motivated it to become a more proactive regional actor and link its national security with the behaviours of Western and non-Western powers existing and intervening in the region for security reasons (Le Gouriellec, 2018). Withstanding the pressures of the most turbulent region, Ethiopia managed to win partnerships from both Western and non-Western global and regional powers. It also managed to strongly impact the regional political and economic landscape for the last three decades, and become an active actor in diverse multilateral areas, such as peacekeeping (*ibid.*), climate change negotiations (Hoste & Anderson, 2011), and global war against terrorism (Ketsela Mulat, 2016). Its national security issues, especially relating to its northern war, have become a constant preoccupation since November 2020, and revealed one of the divisions between Western and non-Western dichotomy.

In 2018, after Abiy Ahmed, the fourth Prime Minister of Ethiopia since the removal of the Derg regime, took over, the fragile internal consensus based on a carefully administered balance of power in an ethno-federalist framework shifted. From the outset, Abiy aimed for changing the structures of the political settlement in the country. Portrayed as a progressive agenda, Abiy soon faced resistance, especially from Tigray, whose representatives were removed from structural positions of power (Interview 3). Coincidentally, Abiy's rise to power was accompanied by an increasing disintegration of the structural set-up in the region. The outbreak of the war in Yemen had exacerbated the tensions within the Gulf, and between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The armed conflict in Libya added to these increasing regional tensions. One of Abiy's answers to the increasingly dynamic situation was to instigate peace – or, rather, a strategic alliance – with Eritrea ([Stigant & Phelan, 2019](#)), which resulted in him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Almost exactly a year after Abiy became Prime Minister, the Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir was removed after months of public protests. Bashir's removal not only resulted in an unstable transition in Ethiopia's neighbourhood, it also changed Sudan's position to Ethiopia's prime infrastructural project, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Since its planning stage, the GERD was the main source of tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt. The strong relation between the military elite that collaborated in the removal of Bashir with Egypt shifted Sudan's position substantially from a collaborative interest to an increasingly stiff resistance. This position peaked after the military coup from October 2021, after which the military regime under the Egypt-trained Abdel Fattah al-Burhan had to strongly rely on the political and material support from its northern neighbour.

In this dynamic situation, the internal tensions between Abiy's reform project and the self-confident federal states escalated in Tigray. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had, historically, critically observed its removal from political power in the centre. Abiy's peace initiative with the TPLF's primary foe, Eritrea, added to the deep mistrust. The outbreak of an armed conflict after an election dispute (Tigray decided to conduct state elections even though the central government called off the elections because of the Covid-19 pandemic) were the consequence. The subsequent Tigray war has further contributed to dynamic developments in the region.

Internal and Regional Dynamics

Ethiopia portrays its stability as a flicker of hope in the Horn of Africa (HoA), as there are incompatible national, regional, and international geopolitical aspirations and interests in the wider region (Interview 1). These divergent regional interests have hitherto often resulted in deaths, displacement, hunger, and political conundrum. This Pandora's box was opened more than a century ago along national and regional political sweltering. The tipping point for Ethiopia's role was the removal of the TPFL from EPRDF, and a new generation of political players assuming power in 2018. Most of the current geopolitical processes in Ethiopia and the HoA region can also be explained against this background ([Gardner, 2020](#)).

The new Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, launched a new set of measures that significantly affected both the national and regional governance dynamic and attracted global attention. The new Prime Minister followed a centripetal approach for both national and regional politics to embrace peripheral regions in the core nationally. He also aimed to reincorporate Eritrea into the IGAD region. Threatened by this move, after almost three decades of implementing centrifugal ethno-national federalism, the TPLF cornered itself within its domain and became the main opposition group — notably, after the dissolution of EPRDF and its rebirth as Prosperity Party ([Allo, 2019](#)).

The sixth national elections were the main point of departure for the evolving conflict between these two main forces. Using Covid-19 as a pretext, the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) interpreted the constitution unilaterally in favour of postponing the elections. The TPLF-led Tigray Regional State rendered this move as unconstitutional. It organised its own electoral management body at regional level, and held a regional election on September 9, 2021. In turn, the elections were considered illegal by the GoE, and the House of Federation annulled the process and institutions of the election. The Tigray Regional State consequentially declared its non-cooperation with the GoE and its institutions, as it considered the government as unconstitutional. The last step of the political escalation saw the GoE declaring an interruption of budget transfer to the regional state. These events provide the background for the start of the Ethiopian civil war.

Regionally, these moves by Abiy Ahmed ended a 20-year “no war, no peace” situation, created rapprochement with Eritrea, and lobbied the UN to lift decade-long sanctions on Eritrea. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee awarded [Abiy Ahmed the 2019 Nobel prize](#) “for his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation”. This has infuriated the TPLF, who view Eritrea as their main political enemy, and in particular, mistrust Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki.

Historical Background

Ethiopia and Geopolitical Dynamics

Ethiopia has a unique history in the HoA region, where state formation is characterized by the reinvention of stories across centuries. Ethiopia has relied on its history of pre-emptively fighting colonialism. In doing so, it has been able to influence the pan-African and anti-colonial agenda globally; Ethiopia's example, for instance, led to the creation of an African agency to lead the decolonization project. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) decided to keep the borders that were arbitrarily created by colonial powers. As such, Ethiopia and the HoA are victims of historical decisions that led to long-standing disagreements and devastating clashes such as the Ethiopian-Somali border conflict (1982), the Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict (1998 – 2000), or the border conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan since 2020.

For decades, Ethiopia claims to have a unique role to play in what is now increasingly called "the wider Horn", a region that stretches far into East and North Africa and includes the Red Sea. Its successful resistance to colonialism is a historical element that is still used in these projections, as are its religious and linguistic particularities. At the same time, this claim has been used to pacify and partly suppress internal minorities which do not fit this picture. After the downfall of the communist Derg regime and the secession of Eritrea, the Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) under Meles Zenawi established a system of "Ethnic Federalism" that guaranteed an — albeit fragile — internal stability.

Externally, Ethiopia developed into a comparably stable cornerstone, surrounded by highly fragile neighbouring countries such as Somalia and the Sudan. Economically, Ethiopia progressed with comparable success, and even developed one continental industry leader with Ethiopian Airlines. As the seat of the African Union (AU) and one of the dominant players in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the EPRDF-led Ethiopia soon developed regional ambitions. An active involvement in international peacekeeping — first and foremost as the sole troop contributor to the United Nations mission in Abyei (UNISFA) — have been part of the effort. These ambitions were combined with a carefully mitigated international strategy that aimed to have good relations with both the United States and China.

Ethiopia enacted dominant influence on IGAD and stirred regional affairs through multilateral institutions, as evidenced many instances. These include providing political protection for Al-Bashir from ICC's arrest, imposition of sanctions on Eritrea, and fighting Al-Shabab in Somalia as a key ally of the United States in its Global War on Terrorism (GWOt). Ethiopia also managed to lay the foundation for regional integration through infrastructural development (Interview 1). The GoE mediated conflicts in neighbouring countries since the colonialist time. Its involvement in peacekeeping operations in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia are high profile operations that resulted in global recognition, support, and cooperation. It was the determinant of what evolved as the HoA security architecture.

Pan-African Roles and Legacy

In defining its regional role, Ethiopia very much relies on its historical singular role and its fundamental contribution to pan-Africanism. It is not only a founding member of the United Nations (UN), but was also the first nation to join the League of Nations from the sub-Saharan world. Former South African President, Nelson Mandela, has thus recognised Ethiopia as a “a seedbed for pan-African solidarity movement”. He believed that “the fundamental tenets of the Ethiopian Movement were self-worth, self-reliance and freedom” and contributed to the formation of ANC in 1912 ([Mandela, 1992](#)). Insurgent movements from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia benefited from Ethiopia's military and diplomatic supports in its anti-colonial and anti-apartheid activism in Africa. Being the inception and seat of the continental body, leader of a Horn REC for a long time, and involved in conflict mediation and security provision in the Horn and beyond, Ethiopia claims to have substantially contributed to normative, institutional, and cooperative frameworks for global development and stability.

Stabilising Force in the HoA and Role in the IGAD Region

These elements were formative for Ethiopia's self-perception as a stabilising force in the wider region, which is its entry point into regional politics (Interview 4). As part of its ambitions as a regional power, it contributed to stability and peace within its sphere of influence, especially in the IGAD region. It has been extending its powers beyond its borders. As a now landlocked country (after Eritrea's independence), Ethiopia is the second most populous in Africa. Its population is more than forty seven percent when the populations of Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya are combined.

Nevertheless, given its limited economic capacity and internal turbulences, it can equally be argued that Ethiopia lacks the required ingredients to act as a regional power.

In terms of its military strength, Ethiopia dominates in comparison to its surrounding countries. Its regional and global level diplomatic efforts, in addition to its contribution to peacekeeping operations, are used to support its claim to be not only the most stable country in the region, but also a stabilising power. Its intervention in Somalia against the Islamic Courts and Al-Shabab, the subsequent involvement in AMISOM, and until most recently, its peacekeeping forces in UNISFA in Abyei, UNAMID in Darfur all demonstrate this. Its ongoing presence in UNMISS in South Sudan make it one of the most important uniformed personnel contributors to the UN. Its partnership with the US on the War on Terrorism project has historically supported its rise to a regional power.

The Tigray war and the subsequent fallout with the main Western partners, in particular the United States, have resulted in a deep disappointment within government ranks. It has been answered by a strong nationalist campaign, embedded in slogans such as "hands off Ethiopia", where Ethiopia was presented as a test case for rejecting Western post-colonialist interference in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, these events — especially the dispute with the United States — have developed into a clear threat to Ethiopia's sustainable effort to be a regional power. They have also shown the clear need for political leadership to be more flexible and pragmatic in a constantly changing regional landscape. Further, they have demonstrated the need to increase efforts to forge political alliances as well as, in combination with containing its internal conflicts, to continue flourishing its economic capacity to be a hegemon in the Horn.

Ethiopia's foreign policy does not take ideology as its precursor for international relations. Instead, it follows consideration of national security when forging relationships with any country. This approach makes its relationship building both pragmatic and firm. Ethiopia's strategic presence in the Horn of Africa and its inevitable role in influencing the Red Sea security have historically helped to acquire partnerships from both Western partners and regional and emergent powers. The recent conflict in Tigray and the strong Western condemnation of Ethiopia's approach has pushed the country strongly towards the latter.

Regional Implications of Ethiopia's Political Transition

The Transition

The events in Ethiopia since 2018 are not caused by a revolution. The current transition is the result of a long-simmering economic and political grievance that inspired and shaped changes in the leadership of the previous TPLF-led incumbent party, EPRDF (Interview 5). The EPRDF was relying on performance legitimacy which can only be expressed in terms of economic performance; this was commended internationally but, at the same time, was struggling to accommodate domestic demographic demands. A substantial democracy deficit has been a defining characteristic of the regime that furthered into a crisis of political legitimacy. These conditions were the background of younger elements within the party to reconstitute the internal political leadership settlement, by forming a new version of the EPRDF that would side-line the once dominant TPLF and involve fresh political elements.

The inaugural speech by Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister of Ethiopia was understood as the constitution of the transitional period, which would ignite new horizons of dawn of hope across the country. Significant changes in the political and economic domains were widely expected. Abiy allowed no doubts that these changes were embedded in the overcoming of the 1994 constitution, and of ethnic federalism. The opening up of political and economic space resulted in a promising start for the project. However, the negotiation and mitigation of regional demands remained a constant challenge. Abiy proposed and then implemented a trilateral cooperation among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, a regional alliance that resulted in significant concerns in some of the regions within Ethiopia, first and foremost, in Tigray.

Reinventing System of Governance in the Transition Period

Ethiopia's governance system, ethnic federalism, has been questioned for almost three decades. The system worked in a highly centralised manner and was dominated by the TPLF, representing a comparably small ethnic minority in the country. This form of federalism has been under strain since 2018. The transition induced by Abiy put its superannuation or continuity into question.

The TPLF and other federalist forces oppose substantial changes to the current system of governance, as they interpret it as a substantial threat to the hard-won gains that have reversed long-standing policies of ethno-political homogenisation and a centrist governance structure before 1991. The outbreak of the Tigrayan war is the ultimate consequence of this evolving power struggle. If there is one common perception between both sides in this brutal civil war, it is that the Ethiopian constitution is not able to provide a political solution to these tensions that is acceptable for both sides. The suggestion by Abiy in early 2022 to implement a National Dialogue ([Harter, 2022](#)) needs to be read against this background and is a recognition by the GoE that new avenues in negotiating Ethiopia's "formalised political unsettlement" (Bell & Pospisil, 2017) towards a more sustainable configuration.

Ethiopia's Transition Meets a Rapidly Changing Regional Context

Ethiopia's internal political transition evolved in an increasingly unstable regional context, in which almost all of Ethiopia's neighbours face substantial political challenges. Both the wider Horn and the Red Sea region is in constant flux. Political alliances form and transform around conflicts such as in Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and additionally Sudan and South Sudan. These conflicts are only nominally national. In fact, they are multi-scalar and work as a magnet that binds regional politics with often subnational conflict settings. As a result, partnerships change rapidly, are structurally unstable, and multi-faceted. The conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan, for instance, has not hindered the Vice-Chairman of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council, Ahmed Hamdan Dagalo, or "Hemeti", from undertaking two private yet highly political visits to Addis Ababa, where he, inter alia, met with the Ethiopian Prime Minister (Interview 6).

Relationships have evolved to become increasingly competitive and transactional. They also turn into inherently regional affairs and are therefore less related to specific configurations within countries. These new conditions force Ethiopia to reinvent itself at the regional and international stage. Its renewed strategy to evolve as a regional player that represents both internal and external stability as it has been pursued by the GoE after its successes against the TPFL in late 2021 must be understood against this background. The military partnerships the GoE utilised in its fight against the TPLF, in particular with Turkey and Iran, should be read as geopolitical statements and as a message of national self-confidence. The Abiy-led government appears determined to pursue its quest for a national transition with a double-edged strategy of stabilisation that links an externally oriented regional role with its internal ambition for national stability under its dominance.

The most recent initiative, a renewed emphasis of the landlocked country, to build a Navy, must be put into this context. Only a country that can project its power along the full spectrum of military capabilities is going to be taken seriously as a stabilising force in this unstable region, an interviewee from the Ethiopian government sector suggested (Interview 1). Indeed, the required relationship building with potential regional allies who have appropriate harbours adds to this picture. Djibouti – it has been suggested that appropriate contracts are already in place – and Eritrea are the two primary contenders. A possible deal of using Somaliland's harbour in exchange for recognising its national independence also appears to be also under consideration. All of these are actions that would significantly impact the regional power configuration.

Contentions within the Region and Transboundary Resources

GERD Conflict

The Nile rivalry is one of the most contentious hydro-geopolitical security complexes in the world. There is significant ongoing political and economic change in the upstream and downstream countries, such as Ethiopia and Egypt, as well as Sudan respectively since the beginning of the construction of the GERD in 2011. The rejection of Ethiopia's multilateralist approach through the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) by Egypt ended with the prior's unilateralist hydro-political approach. The failure of the initiative intensified the rivalry. References to historical treaties, such as the 1929 Nile Water Agreement between UK and Egypt, the 1959 Agreements for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters, and consecutive institutional and normative frameworks and political debates have not been able to solve the conflict.

Ethiopia argues to support an equitable use of Nile water resources across the basin, thereby also easing the risk of flooding in neighbouring Sudan. Egypt, in contrast, wants to maintain the status quo referring its "historical right". Sudan swings between the two governments, most of the time aligning with Egypt. Egypt fears that any construction on Nile waters affects its vital hydro-political interests and, as a result, its national security. Ethiopia, in turn, claims it owns the source of the Nile and, thus, has the right to use it when no harming commonly agreed principles. The shared perception in both countries is that it was predominantly the newly won internal stability after 1991 that enabled Ethiopia to pursue this monumental project.

In recent years, Ethiopia has accused Egypt of supporting armed opposition groups to destabilise the country (Interview 1). Ethiopia changes its passive hydro-political status and has started to increase its ideational, material, and bargaining investments in the emerging conflict. The escalation attracted significant interest from the United States, which is the key ally of Egypt since the Camp David Accords in 1978. The US picked sides with Egypt and tried to persuade Ethiopia to sign a mandatory agreement. At the same time, Egypt has tried to intimidate Ethiopia through bilateral military and economic cooperation with Ethiopia's neighbours and through direct military threats – Egypt's President al-Sisi, on several occasions, has hinted towards his willingness to use the Egyptian Air Force to destroy the dam, should an agreement not be reached. Egypt has also strengthened its political ties with Sudan, especially after the military takeover from October 2021 ([Szuba, 2021](#)).

Ethiopia succeeded in bringing the issue before the AU, which has contributed to its worsening relationships with the United States. Egypt still claims to be in favour of an agreement with Ethiopia to force the latter against any construction on the Nile waters. Ethiopia, however, says this would contradict its political responsibility since it would also act as a custodian of the interest of future generations and their interest in Nile resources. The hydro-political hegemony is gradually shifting towards Ethiopia.

Egypt does not favour any multilateral solution to this hydro-political contestation. Instead, it has started a significant effort in regional and international diplomacy. President al-Sisi sent his foreign minister to the thirty fifth AU Summit, in order to build further relationships while still demonstrating his disapproval with the AU's involvement. In November 2020, as the first Egyptian head of state to do so, al-Sisi visited South Sudan's capital Juba — presumably to win an additional friend in his contestation with Ethiopia. He was also in attendance at the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022; after this, he met the President of Djibouti to discuss the GERD and other political matters.

The current relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt resembles a cold war. On both sides, the nationalist mobilisation unites sharp political interest. While the dam issue serves as an important unifying factor in the political campaign of the Ethiopian government against the “unpatriotic” TPLF, which is often accused of accepting support from Egypt, in Egypt even the former President Mohammad Morsi, himself ousted by al-Sisi, was arguing for a strategic intervention against Ethiopia to weaken its state capacity.

Border Issues

The main border contestation Ethiopia is currently faces is with Sudan. This contestation also presents the biggest regional implications. The conflict about various parts of the border is a manifestation of a long-standing regional rivalry that has been interrupted, and, at times, even coexisted, with periods of bilateral cooperation. Observers argue that the outstanding issues, especially the recently escalated armed confrontation around al-Fashaga ([de Waal, 2021a](#)) — which was taken over by the Sudanese army in the midst of the Tigray war — could be solved by an arbitration at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). However, the allegedly technical issues constituting the disputes prove hard to solve.

In 1891, Britain and Italy agreed on the border lines. After the defeat of the Mahdi regime in Sudan in 1903, the border lines were renegotiated. The 1937 demarcation of Ethiopia-Sudan border was not accepted by Ethiopia as it has not participated in the demarcation exercise. On both sides, the border conflict is perceived as a matter of national interest and used as a tool in nationalist mobilisation. Especially in the context of the Tigray war, the conflict around al-Fashaga was used by Ethiopia to argue the ruthlessness of the Sudanese neighbour, due to their exploitation of the Ethiopian Armed Forces' stretched resources.

The border dispute also has considerable implications on Ethiopian national politics. It is one of the issues where the interest of regime survival directly meets regional ambitions. The Amhara, which dominate the largest region bordering Sudan, are large in number and play an important role in Ethiopian national politics. The Amhara hence are both able and willing to exercise more voice than other ethnic groups, which makes addressing the border issue an inherent matter of national politics (Interview 5). While there would be conflict resolution mechanisms in place, keeping the border issue open has potentially positive aspects for both sides, Ethiopia and Sudan, especially in terms of internal political mobilisation. The open conflict around al-Fashaga, for example, demonstrates an interchangeability for political scapegoating and showing national strength. Here, it is commonly assumed that Sudanese military elites have a personal interest in land and are supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in pursuing this endeavour, an observation which is supported by the UAE's own interest to obtain fertile land (Interview 3).

Rapprochement with Eritrea

The political, economic, and military processes unfolding in the wider Horn would necessitate enhanced cooperation among neighbouring countries. This pretext was used by the Abiy government to pursue a deal with Ethiopia's former enemy, Eritrea. Immediately after the initiative became public, it was interpreted as a historical achievement, and has resulted in Abiy Ahmed winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Cited reasons for Ethiopia's support for Eritrea's reincorporation in efforts of regional integration were political and economic. As Abiy has described it previously, the rapprochement with Eritrea would change the "deathless war" to truly peaceful relationships. The war resulted in the loss of human lives in the tens of thousands, and the deconstruction of political and economic integration and social fabric in both countries. Over decades, the two countries had been blaming each other for the lack of peace and security in the border areas.

The synergy between Ethiopia and Eritrea is meant to enable them to formulate a joint partnership strategy to ensure a win-win situation for both the Horn and Gulf regions (Interview 1). Undoubtedly, the new partnership could ensure peace and economic development strategically. The interest to engage Eritrea to project naval power to the Red Sea region, therefore, was a second incentive for Abiy to pursue the newly won peace. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia has been hugely dependent on ports for its import-export business in the region. Geographically, Ethiopia is only a few kilometres away from the Red Sea. It interprets itself to be part of a Red Sea geopolitical security complex and, thus, sees its new alliance with Eritrea as a useful precondition in its development to a true regional power that can add the control of the Red Sea shipping routes to its geostrategic arsenal.

The new partnership, however, has also important implications internally. Eritrea is a historical rival of Tigray and the TPFL, who ally themselves with the strategic interest of the Abiy government. Consequently, the rapprochement was not welcomed by the TPLF; it was seen as a threat by external actors when the two countries included Somalia to propose the establishment of Horn of Africa Cooperation (HoAC) to address transnational and cooperation problems among the three countries. When the Eritrean army became actively involved in the Tigray war, the TPFL saw its concerns confirmed on a practical level. As it appears, the alliance with Eritrea has been one of the decisive preconditions for Abiy to launch a military operation against the TPFL and has been a crucial factor of military support in the early phases of the war (Interview 5). At the same time, the military component of the alliance has alienated many who have initially highly welcomed the rapprochement and has substantially contributed to the emerging rifts between Ethiopia and former partners in the West.

New Orientations

The decision of the Council of Ministers to lift the six-month state of emergency ahead of its expiration is an indication that the high-risk gamble of the Abiy government of linking its regime survival with an active regional reengagement based on new alliances has worked out. At the time when the state of emergency was declared in November 2021, Ethiopia found itself in a politically tense period. The Tigray Defence Forces (TDF), a broader army that developed out of the TPLF (Chothia, 2021), appeared able to pose a severe threat to the Ethiopian government. Since January 2022, not the least due to drone support from China, Turkey, and Iran, tides have turned. The Ethiopian Armed Forces have been able to push the TDF back to the Tigrayan region in the North. Even though the war is continuing, the threat for regime survival has decreased substantially.

The thirty fifth AU Summit in Addis Ababa has been another indication for the GoE's capacity to control the situation. The GoE is also working on a strategy to reformulate its political communication around what it calls a "survival operation"; In particular, a reengagement with Western actors is sought for. Strict media control is still pursued, and the control to Tigray is restricted in a way that has no modern precursors (Interview 7). Still, the Abiy government has been able to prevent most International Organisations, not the least the United Nations, from taking an antagonist stance. Increasingly, tough measures and relentless social media campaigning — for instance, against the acting Tigrayan WHO director who was seeking a second term in office — were accompanied by confidence building measures and a softened political stance.

The main element of this softened stance has been the declaration of a National Dialogue, which will last for at least three years and could be expanded by another two. To what extent it is planned to engage armed opposition movements in this dialogue, especially through active steps of dialogue and compromise, remains to be seen. Chances for political negotiations with the TPLF are presently hard to predict: Influential elements within the GoE are still determined to decimate TPLF., and TPLF's attack in Afar has strengthened this position. The House of Peoples Representatives has approved substantial unprecedented funding to augment the capacity of the Ethiopian Armed Forces, which are severely weakened by an enemy from its own ranks that, moreover, relies on some of the most experienced commanders in Ethiopia.

Secondly, the government plans to embark on a reengagement initiative with international partners it has lost during the Tigray war. Besides the aforementioned strategy to forge a new partnership with the United States and other partners from the West, these steps also include the suggestion of creating a Horn of Africa Cooperation (HoAC) as an economic and political bloc. The aims of this would be to pursue peaceful relations and to boost regional trade, goals which have elevated the distrust among IGAD members from the beginning and complicated their relationships (Interview 1).

HoAC as a new regional bloc would pose challenges to a regional architecture that, especially over the last decade, is in a state of flux. The introduction of one further layer of regional cooperation in the region is an expression of both over- and under-institutionalisation. Regional organisations are less interested in functional effectiveness, as traditional institutionalist approaches would suggest, but instead are ambivalent tools in a pursuit of regional power projection and regime survival simultaneously. Unsurprisingly, the HoAC membership has been immediately criticised by fellow international organisations, since memberships overlap with IGAD, East Africa Standby Force and COMESA.

While arguments about sovereignty and economic benefit – regarding landlocked Ethiopia and two countries with sea access and harbours – are regularly raised, it is undoubtedly the case that the Abiy government aims to use the alliance for regional political interests. A strategic undermining of IGAD might be one of the potential consequences that are shared by both Abiy and Isaias, as there is hardly any doubt that Eritrea's President wants to boost his regional interest by alienating IGAD (Interview 6).

The proposal for the HoAC may, however, force IGAD to a substantial reform. IGAD is officially recognised as AU's REC and a formal part of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The use of Eritrea and Somalia sea outlets by Ethiopia may jeopardise the economic ties between Ethiopia and Djibouti. If the HoAC materialises, Djibouti may not have a choice except joining this new club as it is surrounded by the three countries. Yet, this is not going to be an easy task for Djibouti, since it is not only the home of IGAD but also hosts several international military bases. Other IGAD members such as Kenya will also be affected economically and politically by the HoAC. Kenya has established economic ties with Ethiopia and South Sudan through infrastructural development. Its preferred channels are, therefore, IGAD and the EAC.

While the concrete outcomes of the initiative remain to be seen, even the suggestion of a new regional organisation shows that the dominant players in the Horn are willing to constantly reshape the given political configuration. Thinking in terms of established architectures, as it has been the idea of an UN-led global governance that trickles down to the regions, may reflect a, however limited, reality of the past. Contemporary relations are dynamic, changing, and even can involve partnership and conflict in parallel. Reliable partnership structures, however, are undoubtedly in decline.

Competitive Regional Interests

The current regional configuration involves a high number of players. Some of these are international powers, such as the United States, Russia, and China, and some are regional and emergent powers, for instance Turkey and the Gulf states; some former international powers with now severely restricted regional influence, such as the United Kingdom, or the European Union, are also involved. The interactions between these players are at a different level of involvement and overlapping, sometimes competing, sometimes converging interests. Even the relationship between Ethiopia and Sudan is much more flexible than its recent armed confrontations would suggest.

The following table provides an overview of the multitude of interests and actors in the wider Horn and the Red Sea region, interests that converge in the Ethiopian transition:

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of Wing Loong drones • Opposed foreign interference in Sudanese affairs • Supports AU-led negotiations over GERD dispute • Influence the UNSC over Ethiopia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructural development • Provision of scholarships • Large investment in Sudan • OBOR game – strategic alliance with Ethiopia • Supporting Ethiopia's satellite technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commerce • Penetration of AGOA • Investment in the AU • Proxy war • Global dominance along a political non-interference agenda
Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports AU-led negotiations over GERD dispute • Influence the UNSC over Ethiopia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ink military cooperation with Ethiopia but also with Sudan • Naval base in Sudan • Nuclear power deal as an alternate option for renewable energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global dominance pursued by regional power projection

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
UAE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of drones (Chinese origin) • Pulled Sudan to Yemen conflict • Called for restoration of civilian led government in Sudan • Interest to be a mediator in GERD issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgetary support • Housing development • Investment in Agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food security by acquiring fertile land • Alternate source of income • Regional dominance
Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called for restoration of civilian led government in Sudan • Supports Sudan on GERD issue • Alienated Ethiopia from the red sea council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budgetary support • Investment in agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food security • Alternate source of income • Regional dominance

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
Qatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediation in Sudan (reduced tensions but did not resolve it) • Check book diplomacy – short lived political settlement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investments in housing • Investment in agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food security • Alternate source of income • Regional dominance
Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic, commercial investment • Showed interest to help building drone assembly • A dozen of agreements in Sudan • Reconstruction and restoration of Suakin island • Military ties with Sudan • Religious ties – reversing the Gulen movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional dominance (counterbalance ME countries) • Social investment dominance

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
Turkey		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage against Egypt 	
Sudan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports opposition groups • Border conflict – instigating clashes • GERD dispute • Refugees as bargaining chip 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudanese investors in Ethiopia • Provision of ports to Ethiopia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional dominance • Border conflict settlement
Ethiopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports opposition groups • Abiy-supported negotiations • Border conflict • GERD dispute • Refugees as bargaining chip • Regional peacekeeping forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of 1000MW of electricity • Dominating the Nile issue – the right to development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional dominance • Border conflict settlement

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
Eritrea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting opposition groups • Border conflict still exists • Rapprochement with Ethiopia • Intervention in the current conflict • Suspected presence in Al-Fashaga 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undermined AU and IGAD • Trilateral regional organization • Potential economic ties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional dominance • Border conflict settlement
Kenya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditating Ethiopia – TPLF conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-border development • Joint border development • Furthering economic cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional dominance • Economic cooperation (private sector)

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
South Sudan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditating Ethiopia – TPLF conflict • Mediating Ethiopia – Sudan border conflict • Mediating around the GERD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethiopian investors in SS • Strategic engagement in Sudanese peace process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regime survival • Regional relevance
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided by concerns over the Nile river – maintaining its historical right • Tries to acquire military bases • Involved in Sudan's politics • Suspected to destabilise both countries • Proxy war in Ethiopia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military pact with Sudan • Maintainer of status quo in the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlling the Southern neighbours • Internal stability

Non-Western Power	Peacemaking (where and how)	Transitional Engagement (where and how)	Strategies and Motivations
Djibouti		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong trade ties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional hub of world powers
IGAD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditating Federal-TPLF conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace and Security Office in Addis Ababa • Formal mediation role in South Sudan, Sudan • Cancer treatment centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance as a regional body, in particular in peacemaking efforts
AU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediated Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict • Meditating Federal-TPLF conflict • Mediating GERD conflict • Supported civilian-military agreement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HQ in Addis Ababa • Approved the June 21 elections – peaceful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional regional body

Strengthening Regional Relations and International Re-Engagement

The new re-engagement strategy states that Ethiopia has faced enormous challenges due to the war which was ignited by TPLF on 4 November 2020 (Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). The document reiterates that it takes re-engagement with countries and international organisations through a variety of bilateral and multilateral levels to reverse and renew relations with these actors. The strategy aims to approach the international community through correcting the unbalanced and biased positions of the international community and Ethiopia's international standing on the international stage.

The GoE has been accused of human rights violations, using hunger as a weapon of war, blocking humanitarian aid, and mass rape (de Waal, 2021b). The re-engagement plan aims to counter the accusations with a predefined communication strategy that aims to reframe the Tigray war as a "survival operation" and to present Ethiopia as a reliable guarantor of regional stability. In a nutshell, the strategy suggests continuing the war against the TPLF while normalising the international relations.

The GoE accuses Sudan of invading Ethiopia after the war started in the northern part of Ethiopia. It singles out Sudan by accusing it to contradict the sovereignty principle that is accepted by other neighbouring countries that consider the problem as internal matter. From the beginning of the Tigray war, Abiy's government was clear that it would not tolerate international critique (Interview 5). AU's sovereignty and non-intervention principles helped Ethiopia considerably, especially also vis-à-vis more critical stances within the UN system. The AU assigned a special envoy that has been formally accepted by Ethiopia with reference to the "African solutions to African problems" slogan (Interview 6). Yet, political space for the special envoy to pursue a meaningful initiative has not been provided, as Prime Minister Abiy constantly questioned the need for any mediation or even negotiation.

These debates also spill over into the GERD issue, where Egypt and Sudan aim to motivate South Sudan to support their GERD strategy. Ethiopia perceives both Egypt and Sudan of supporting the TPLF not only politically, but also militarily. It also accuses Egypt to lobby Djibouti against possible Ethiopian military bases (Interview 2). Both South Sudan and Djibouti played their cards carefully and have avoided taking clear sides, as is to be expected of comparably small and militarily weak regional players. Ethiopia sees Russia, Turkey, and China as its staunchest allies, particularly in the current situation of prevalent political tensions with former partners in the West. Russia and China, in particular, are also seen as important allies against possible critical resolutions at the UN Security Council.

Over recent years, Ethiopia's stance on core liberal values have hardened. In its regional policy, it identifies human rights protection and humanitarian assistance as instruments of the West's strategic interest. It also questions the effectiveness of UN's multi-billion peacekeeping operations in DRC, CAR, Mali, or South Sudan, and prepares itself strategically and institutionally for countering any potentially disturbing influences that come from the West (Interview 8). The GoE and the incumbent party of Abiy Ahmed aim to pursue an original political agenda that distinguishes itself from Western political thought. The long-standing story of Ethiopian exceptionalism remains a fundament of both domestic and international politics.

Conclusions

The regional setting is highly competitive. Alliances shift quickly, the institutionalisation of a regional political settlement remain elusive. The transitional process in Sudan has a major influence on the political transition in Ethiopia. Thus, the bilateral relations proceed in an ambivalent manner – contested issues, such as GERD and the unsolved border conflicts act as catalyst of broader regional interests and involvement. There is also an absence of stabilising international power — neither China nor Russia are perceived to have strategic interests in the Ethiopian transitional crisis, and the United States lack political interest and capacity. Therefore, regional alliances evolve as intrinsically unstable and in need of constant management and maintenance. Historically, the level of formal institutionalisation of shared interests, a cornerstone of the concept of global governance has never been reached historically in the region, and is currently in further decline.

It comes as no surprise that international organisations show little effectiveness. IGAD, struggling with its limited capacity since its inception, has been de facto decapitated by Sudan's chairmanship, which lies formally with a Prime Minister that is not named since Abdallah Hamdok's resignation. Even before that Hamdok has been rejected by Abiy as a potential mediator in Ethiopia's internal crisis. AU's mediation attempt in Ethiopia has proven equally shallow. Interestingly, the mediation initiative by Kenyan president Kenyatta has seen the most traction, even though it proved to be unsuccessful in the end.

The experience of the failed regional mediation in the Tigray war demonstrates that African regional organisations — especially in East Africa and the Horn, where a fragile power balance is at play between Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda — need to rely on an alignment of some of the major actors to act effectively. R-ARCSS, in South Sudan, is another example of this. Moreover, regional organisations predominantly remain an instrument of regional powers. This becomes even more prevalent when, in cases such as Ethiopia and Sudan, regional ambitions become intrinsically linked with regime survival.

With several long-lasting armed conflicts in the region and many regional powers involved, attempts to establish a security architecture become increasingly elusive. The cited examples of IGAD's and AU's attempts to engage in resolving Ethiopia's internal war support this argument. Contemporary regionalism in East Africa and the Horn is transactional and pragmatic. National sovereignty, which is not only highlighted by Abiy Ahmed but by all major players under domestic pressure, remains the only reliable ideological cornerstone that unites the otherwise highly flexible regional players.

The severe risk of this constellation is to follow the argument currently pursued by the Ethiopian government whereby stability is the cornerstone of an overarching regional needs assessment. The experience of all international attention shifting from the military coup in Sudan to the Ethiopian crisis, resulting in an effective easing of the international pressure on the coup leaders, has shown this clearly. There is an undoubtable need for reasonable and pragmatic approaches of political engagement in competitive regionalism that can mediate between actors and manage emerging tensions without necessarily sacrificing liberal norms at the altar of stability. The more stable configurations look like, the more fragile they often are.

Ethiopia and the wider Horn have been the geopolitical battle grounds for global and regional actors. The battle at the UNSC regarding the war in the northern part of Ethiopia and GERD issue has been a manifestation of the norm challenge to the established global governance which is led by the US in general. Ethiopia and some countries of Africa also called for a structural change at the UNSC where they claim that African matters are decided by veto holders that didn't include Africa. The conception and initiation of the HoAC and the G4 are also vivid examples of challenging to the regional and global principles and norms that affect the national, regional, and global security complex.

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