

Research Article

# The Fluidity of Geopolitical Tension in the Horn of Africa

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## Abstract

The Horn of Africa region is geopolitically distinct and indispensable because of its geostrategic position linking Asia with Europe through Red Sea, Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea. This has made the region attractive to what some geopolitical analysts have termed in their jargon: extra-continental powers since time immemorial. This article seeks to provide in-depth analyses on the geopolitical tension in the region covering the entire Greater Horn of Africa including Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan as things stand now. The complexity and fluidity of the prevailing geopolitical tensions, fragility of the states, void of preventive diplomacy, unresolved internal conflicts, simmering border disputes, contested sovereignties and extra-continental geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa are succinctly unpacked to expose the looming disasters as things stand currently. Those peculiarities', contrasts, comparisons and generalities on peace, security and simmering conflicts in African are made to highlight the current state of peace and security in the continent, the region and beyond. Scientifically, the Horn of Africa Region cannot be discussed in isolation as the fluidity of the current geopolitical tension is continental, trans -regional and global. Extra-continental factors are also analyzed because they are the biggest part of the geopolitical tension in the Horn of Africa. Each aggravating factors of this loud and perilous geopolitical tension is analyzed in depth and at length to expose the danger it poses to the population of 300 million people in the region. In those substantive subtopic Domestic issues such as civil wars and contested sovereignties are also covered., regional, continental and the extra-continental issues pertinent to the fluidity of the prevailing geopolitical tension in the Horn of Africa are also analyzed.

## Keywords

Peace, Security in Africa, The Region

## 1. Introduction

With its cartographic compact shape and susceptibility to violent armed conflicts, the African continent has been metaphorically described by some western pundits as a loaded pistol. According to that sarcastic metaphor, the trigger of this pistol is located somewhere in the Gulf of Guinea region and Congo, with its ammunition magazine somewhere in the extreme Horn of Africa and with its barrel located on the southern tip of the continent (in South African Republic). This literally means that the African people live inside a loaded

automatic handgun ready to fire instantly at any time. Some African gurus in the academia and media have dismissed that as Euro-centric prejudice but the vitriol reality on the ground is that the continent has always been rocked by endless violent armed conflict since time immoral. Factually speaking, the East African Peninsula, which is shaped like rhinoceros' horn, is the ammunitions magazine of this pistol like- continent. It has always been volatile and fragile. Presently, it is militarized and awash with deadly weapons of mass destruction. Beside

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the ongoing internal civil strifes and fragility of the regional states, the military presence of the global nuclear powers in the region has brought the horn of Africa to the precipice. As observed in the recent 75<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations attended by the author, the same nuclear powers with this heavy military deployment in the region are the ones pushing the world closer to the brink of nuclear conflict as mounting distrust and divisions corrode the bedrock of international cooperation, driving the multilateral system towards gridlock and dysfunction. The UN Security Council has become a battle ground among the nations that control everything including the quality of the air we breathe. As demonstrated by the recent military confrontation between Israel and Iran on one hand and the Russia- Ukrainian war, which is escalating into nuclear tension in Eurasia between, NATO and Russian Federation on the other, the region is at imminent risk at the time of this writing. As outlined in the abstract, the geopolitical analyses will cover the following sub-topics: Fragility of the Regional States, Extra-continental Geopolitical Competition, the Unsettled Borders, Internal Civil Strives, Hydro Politics, Nile Basin Diplomacy and the Quest for Preventive Diplomacy.

## 2. Fragility of the Regional States

The Horn of Africa region is currently going through a critical juncture that puts its stability at imminent peril with regional and perhaps global repercussions. According to the most recent Conflict Assessment Framework (CAST), the four most fragile states in Africa are located in the Horn of Africa. Some of those conflicts are cyclical, protracted and intractable, rendering those states ungovernable. One conflict is resolved somewhere and another one flares up somewhere else within the region. The fluid nature of those conflicts has made the entire region geopolitically volatile. Any astute observer cannot miss the ugly specter that the fluidity of those conflicts has miserably overwhelmed diplomacy of the regional states. One of those deadliest wars is the ongoing violent conflict between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which is expanding by the day without any political process to end the cycle of that organized political violence. Peace has remained elusive in South Sudan as the parties to R-ARCSS failed to implement key provisions of that peace agreement since 2018 with extension after extension. Beside the tension with its northern neighbor of Eritrea, Ethiopia is at war with itself in the Amahara Region. The tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia has denied the country access to the sea ports such as Assab and Masswa in the coastal region of Eritrea. The most recent Ethiopia's attempt to access a seaport have caused tension with neighboring countries on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and caused Egypt to send a military expedition to Somalia amid escalating tension between Egypt and Ethiopia over the GRD.

Generally, the Horn of Africa is vastly volatile. The region has been devastated by several clusters of conflicts, which are

both distinct and similar. One of the most aggravating factors in most of those protracted armed conflict is the geopolitical fact that like much of the African Continent, the Horn of Africa is governed within the political boundaries delineated by former colonial powers, dividing peoples of the same ethno cultural groups into various geopolitical jurisdictions. In another word, the countries in the Horn of Africa do not only share borders but also ethnic groups claiming commonalities in language, religion, culture, and economic activities. Practical experiences have proven that the common people who live in two or more states often do not recognize those borders and that exacerbates the fluidity of those conflicts. In real life, people in those borderland have citizenship loyalty to neither country in which they are politically governed because the colonialists drew up those imaginary lines called borders without their consent. Hence, there is no conflict in one country that does not spill over to the country next door. The deadliest example with delicate fluidity is the raging conflict in Sudan, which is expanding, and attracting regional and international actors through ethnic and religious alliance painting a gloomier picture to resolve the destructive conflict.

Far and wide, the region has been perennially rocked by major crises over the recent years, from marine piracy to trans-world terrorism, civil strifes, mass displacement, unstable governments and environmental damages. With the global warming and climate change, the region has also suffered from weather-related disasters such as droughts, and floods which also tend to breed climate induced conflicts in term of competition for grazing lands, farm lands and water points.

Both internal armed conflicts and unsettled border conflicts have persisted over decades. Ethiopia and Eritrea have been locked in a fratricidal feud in which thousands of soldiers perished each time there are major confrontations on their common, contested border. That is another simmering dispute that has persisted despite resolution in the International Court of Justice. Up there, in the extreme end of the Peninsula (Somalia) there is political and security uncertainty due to internal political divisions. The country has been in turmoil since the fall of President Siad Bare's regime in 1991. The emergence of Al Shabab has also complicated matters to realize meaningful post war reconstruction. Thus, establishing an inclusive and stable national government in Mogadishu has remained a distant dream. The perpetual armed conflict has geopolitically fragmented the country with Somaliland demanding secession from the rest of Somalia. Somaliland in the North has been a self-governing region of Somalia for more than three decades, but its claim of independence is not recognized by Mogadishu, UN or AU. While this has limited Somaliland's access to international markets, it has in recent years, unilaterally struck major port investment deals with foreign powers, including Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), raising tensions with Somalia and further provoking frictions in the broader Horn of Africa. The geographical location of Somaliland on the edge of the continent gives its hundreds of miles of coastline along the [10] Gulf of

Aden to the north, and it borders Ethiopia to the south and west and Djibouti to the northwest. It also has some territorial disputes with Puntland, a semiautonomous state of Somalia. All of these conflicts are linked directly or indirectly by shared ethnic identities. Hence, the region's geopolitical dynamics have always been mindboggling. The name of the game in the intelligence of what we have called Bush Diplomacy is You who support my rebels, I will also support your rebels or create one for you if you don't have one yet. For example, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has led both governments to increase their military support to rival proxies in Somalia, thus igniting new rounds of deadly conflict, spreading instability to northern Kenya, re-legitimizing warlords and destroying hopes for internal peace initiatives. At one point in the past, the Sudan government supported the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in a campaign of destabilization in northern Uganda aimed at punishing the Sudan for supporting the Southern rebels of the SPLM/A (North). Those wars and other protracted conflicts are prevalent throughout the region. In truth, no country is completely settled in this region [2].

### 3. The Extra-Continental Geopolitical Competition

The Horn is geo-strategically located on Bab El-Mandeb Strait, Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. It also links Asia and Europe through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Mediterranean Sea. This geographical position at the easternmost extension of the African Continent has made it a region of geopolitical and strategic importance. Its proximity to Arabia and Mediterranean Region has made it open to the outside world for centuries. Hence, the Horn has always been epicenter of extra-continental competition since colonial wars, the two world wars and the cold war era as it provided the vital sea lanes to the Middle East and South West Asia. The region is still lifeline for multinational businesses in the high seas as it also provides the shortest east to west oil transportation routes. More than 20% of EU exports and imports pass off its coast. The countries that border the Horn of Africa are also players in any strategic consideration of the Middle East. This has also made the region attractive to terrorist organization, arms smugglers, drugs dealers and all kind of organized international crimes, for worse, the Horn of Africa region is still at the core of regional and international contentions as the major nuclear super powers, namely USA, Russia, China, EU and NATO have military bases in Djibouti. With the ongoing wars in the Middle East and the Gulf of Eden, the Horn is heavily militarized. Demilitarizing it has remained a daunting task as the global nuclear powers use their undue influence over the regional states through the financial aid and arms sale. Who pays the bills calls the tune, goes the saying. In another word, the extra continental donors or 'development partners call the shot almost in every affair pertinent to geopolitical

security in the region. [9]

With the ongoing global geopolitical realignment, the regional states will have to make tough decisions in term of geopolitical security as permanent presence of these powers challenges the IGAD's policy formulation. The current poor state of the economy makes the region even vulnerable to global predators to dictate public policy making in the Horn, to maintain this undue influence, they use proxies to harass the regional state in order to keep the region in perpetual dependency on their economies. That has always been scheme to create conducive geopolitical environment for external exploitation in the region. As recommended in the next top of quest for preventive diplomacy, this needs strong and concerted diplomatic engagement among the regional states to strategically avert the collective scourge of this geopolitical militarism and nuclear terror along the coastal belt comprising Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, and Somalia.

### 4. The Unsettled Borders and Internal Conflicts

Geographically, the Horn of Africa covers an approximate area of 2 million square kilometers with estimated population of 300 million of people. The region is a home to the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. The term "Greater Horn " includes Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. The complex web of cross-border relationships in the Horn of Africa has created a fragile geopolitical landscape, fraught with both opportunity and risks. The region has many overlapping and competing ethnicities and several demographic dimensions. These complexities lead to perpetual insecurity and geopolitical tension. The region's shared resources and overlapping spheres of influence have drawn the attention and meddling of various actors, adding to the instability. The sub-region's current instability stems from a combination of factors, including historical legacies and colonial imprints which are the cause of those unsettled boundary. One those example is the looming and simmering disputes in the Ilemi Triangle between and South Sudan. The British Colonial administrators assign Kenya to be temporarily administered by Kenya. The ethnic groups along the borders have complicated matters through migration. e.g. Turkana (Kenyans) have attempted several times to encroach on Toposa (Sudanese) territory who vow to resist resulting in simmering friction between the neighboring countries. These unsettled borders, political violence and contested sovereignties. Among all those all those countries, there is no single countries with completely settled borders. Sudan and South Sudan on one hand and Ethiopia and Eritrea on the other have serious unsettled borders. Those four countries have the common history of break up with unsettled borders. Uganda and South Sudan also have issues of disputed territories along the Southern borders of South Sudan which is Northern Uganda. Somalia and Kenya as well as Ethiopia [10] and

Somalia have the same problem. Some of the examples of simmering issues include the tension between the Sudan and Ethiopia over control of the disputed al-Fashaga triangle continues to pose apparent security risks. Jolene conflict disrupts trade, displace people and militarize trade zone [4].

While the colonial legacy in the sub-region is often cited as the major factor, the continuous lack of security also stems from socio-economic and political policies implemented by post-colonial regimes in recent months, relations between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Somalia have deteriorated significantly. Previously separate disputes have become intertwined: namely, the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia over the use of Nile waters and the disagreement between Ethiopia and Somalia on recognition of Somaliland. The three countries use threats to reinforce their respective positions in these conflicts. While an interstate military escalation does not seem imminent at present, geopolitical tensions remain high, which could further escalate into full blown inter-state conflicts. Preventive diplomacy is thus needed now more than ever before. [5]

## 5. The Hydro Geopolitics and the Nile Basin Diplomacy

Nile River is the longest river in the world covering about 6.825 KM crossing 10 countries, namely, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, South Sudan, Sudan, Egypt and Kenya, Ethiopia, and Congo. The Nile Basin treaties of 1929 and 1959 ignored up stream countries giving Egypt a monopoly on the use of the Nile. Even Ethiopia was not consulted although it was a sovereign and independent country that was the source of part of the Nile. When the British left, Egypt and Sudan cut a deal and continued to ignore Ethiopia. They also ignored the new post-colonial countries around the Great Lakes that had not been party to the 'treaty'. Since the issue of the 'Nile Treaty' has not been settled let alone resolved, it will continue to be a source of bad blood among the states in the region. South did not attain independence in 1956, it continued as a virtual colony of Khartoum. Today, it is a sovereign state to negotiate with. It is also another stakeholder to consult as the longest course of the Nile falls within its geographical territory. Thus, a collaborative diplomacy is critically imperative for fostering cooperation and preventing potential conflicts. During the colonial period, Britain effectively controlled the Nile through its military presence in Africa. Since Sudanese independence, Sudan has renegotiated with Egypt over the use of the Nile waters. The 1959 treaty between Sudan and Egypt allocated the entire average annual flow of the Nile to be shared among the Sudan and Egypt at 18.5 and 55.5 billion cubic meters respectively, but ignored the rights to water of the remaining eight Nile Basin countries. Ethiopia contributes 80% of the total Nile flow, but by the 1959 agreement is entitled to none of its resources. However, the treaty between Egypt and Sudan is not binding on Ethiopia, as

it was never a party to it. Since the early 1990s, Ethiopia has successfully countered Egyptian and Sudanese resistance to water development projects in Ethiopia to increase irrigation and hydroelectric potential. Since May 2010, Ethiopia and the other upper riparian states have launched the Nile Basin Co-operative Framework Agreement in a bid to ensure addresses the tensions around water resources development, including dam building, in the Nile and the role of the Nile Basin Initiative in addressing them (8.) The author once represented Sudan in his capacity as Charge De' Affairs in Daresalam Conference of the year 2009 and recommended that the role of the NBI can be defined as one of "conflict transformation with Sudan mediating between Egypt and the Up Stream Nile Riparian states". 20 years after its establishment, it is possible to show how the NBI process has contributed to transform the regional hydro political relations. Transformation into "what," how, and with what kind of outcomes is beyond the scope of this article, as the Nile Basin Diplomacy remained complex until the time of this writing. That takes the discourse to what the author has called the quest for preventive diplomacy [4].

## 6. The Quest for Preventive Diplomacy

Preventive Diplomacy as a term in itself has the meaning of prevention of conflicts within states, and between states. Bilaterally or multilaterally, it is a daunting task that requires a concerted diplomatic effort from sub-regional organizations, in collaboration with international organizations operating in the region. Unfortunately, the region has always been diplomatically fragmented. Proposals have been made to create another regional block out of the East African Community and IGAD to unify all the synergies for organic unity of the regional states but without success due to overlapping and conflicting geopolitical interests among the regional states that including some attachment to other clubs within the region, continent and beyond. Some regional value other geo-strategic interest in other regions more than what happens in the geographical neighborhood. One of those examples is the Eritrea's renewed participation in nascent initiatives like the "Red Sea Security Council that excludes key players such as Somaliland and Ethiopia, raises concerns about the potential for new political challenges. Similarly, the proposal by Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia to form a new regional bloc, the "Horn of African Cooperation," while aimed at promoting peace and trade, may risk alienating other countries in the East African region and undermine the security efforts of established organizations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, and the Eastern Africa Standby Force. [1, 6, 7, 13, 15]

Historically, the regional states never had any organic and functional multilateral body to do adequately do so. The first attempt to establish a functional regional organization have failed since the inception of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 1996 to supersede the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD)

which was founded in 1986 to mitigate the effects of the recurring severe droughts and other natural disasters that resulted in widespread famine. The central strategic role of IGAD is to promote regional cooperation and integration among its member states with the aim of improving the welfare of all citizens. To achieve this, IGAD works through the two programme areas of trade, industry and tourism, and infrastructure development. The current weakness of IGAD is that its structures function on adhoc basis. The regional body has remained a vulnerable prey to the global super powers due its over-dependent on extra-continental powers for many things which tends to incapacitate it. The regional member states of the organizations in Africa often fail to remit their dues to regional bodies either because they cannot or because they do not put as much value on the regional bodies as they should. In some instances, those countries that fail to honor their membership as a responsibility. Presently, IGAD suffers from lack of political commitment on the part of regional leaders and institutional capacity for early intervention in border disputes and guarantees for border security are needed, either between countries or as a standing regional capacity. Proposals also have been made to create another regional to block out of the East African Community and IGAD to unify all the synergies for organic unity of the regional states but without success due to overlapping and conflicting geopolitical interests among the regional states including some attachment to other clubs within the region, continent and beyond. Some regional value other geostrategic interest in other regions more than what happens in the geographical neighborhood.

In the area of conflict resolution, the only success story of IGAD since its inception was that of CPA that culminated independence of South Sudan but due to unresolved aspects of that conflict, Sudan is currently disintegrating before the eye of the IGAD member state. So far preventive diplomacy has totally failed in the region due to the overwhelming nature of the conflicts and what I have called fluidity of fragility. Lack of internal stability of the member states as in captivated its diplomatic powers as one conflict is resolved here and another intractable pop up with the state trying to resolve that conflict. Practical experiences have proven that preventive diplomacy has totally failed in the region due to the overwhelming nature of the conflicts and what I have called fluidity of fragility. That diplomatic condundrum Attempts has not spared even peace brokers in the persons of diplomatic giants and statesmen like Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin and Dr. Dirdiri Amhed who brokered the ARCSS to resolve conflict in South Sudan. Ambassador Mesfin got killed in the most recent war of his own country in Northern Tigray Region of Northern Ethiopia. Dr. Dirdiri Amhmad, who brokered R-ARCSS (final version of ARCSS a known as R-ARCSS escaped by the skin of his teeth and is currently exiled in the Middle East as a result of violent change in the Sudan that resulted in the fall of El Bashir's regime. [3, 12]

Beside those overlapping protracted internal and intra-state

conflicts, such as the turmoil in the Sudan, the internal conflict in Ethiopia, South Sudan, the tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia on hand and the tension between Ethiopia and Somalia on the other, the Horn of Africa is currently militarized amidst nuclear tension among extra-continental nuclear powers. Hence, the imperative quest for preventive diplomacy. The political leadership of the Horn must rise to the occasion to save the region from the looming disaster and this must start with stabilization and arrest of those fluid fragilities within the states by resolving that internal vendettas. The regional states must be first and foremost must sustainable internal peace. This must include finding political settlement in the Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea. There must also be solution to hydro geopolitical tension among the Nile Basin countries, especially the one between Egypt and Ethiopia. The regional and continental leaders must device diplomatic mechanisms to avert a lager war of mass destruction. There is no confliction without solution. Diplomacy is the first line of defense to address the hard issues surrounding the conflict at hand. The malady is always the absence of political will to dialogue. The case in point is the current Hydro geopolitical tension among the riparian states of Nile Basin region. The encompassing solution is renegotiating a basin-wide agreement, fostering benefit-sharing and collaborative development projects, and establishing adaptive water governance and conflict resolution mechanisms, the Nile riparian nations can transcend historical and hydro-political tensions and usher in an era of equitable water management. This should include project for controlling the flooding along the Nile Basin countries. Construct a dam to control flooding, generate hydroelectricity and irrigate farmlands. Development does play a central role to complement these efforts and can offer an entry point to continue dialogue during periods of heightened tensions and deepen cooperation in strategic sectors. It is also important to proactively address incipient risks and grievances—such as those regarding access to services or resources before they turn into full-blown crises that can spill across borders. Ultimately resumption of negotiation [14] over the use of the Nile River, involving riparian countries Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia on the Grand Ethiopian [6] Renaissance Dam (GERD) is in the quest for preventive diplomacy, even the support of AU and extra-continental with geostrategic interest in the region should be sought as part of a diplomatic strategy to avert the looming disaster. Diplomatic engagement with those countries and stakeholders from across the international community is critical as the regional stability is also in their best interest. Other strategic mechanism should include the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the Council of the Wise. [11]

## 7. Conclusion

This article emanated from a paper presented by the author at Dialogue on Regional Peace and Security in the Horn

of Africa held in Nairobi, Kenya on 21-22 November 2024. The point to drive home was and is to expose the risks posted by the prevailing geopolitical tension that is widely researched by cited references of various scholarly literature in this field of geopolitical science. It is a scary story of a geostrategic region that has always attracted extra-extra-continental predators since the scramble for Africa, to the European wars historically branded as World Wars, the cold war and up to this digital age of global nuclear tension. This is historical and geographically true as African continent has always been located here at the center of planet earth. the Horn of Africa region in particular has always been a global life line due to its geostrategic position here in the geographical center of the global South since time immemorial. This has attracted both risks and opportunities. Presently, the region is grappling with its internal challenges posted by overlapping inter and intra conflicts, fragility of the states, border disputes, hydro geopolitical tension and the extra-continental geopolitical tension. The geo-security environment of the region is undergoing far-reaching challenges and geopolitical threats as a wide variety of international security actors—from Europe, the United States, the Middle East, the Gulf and Asia—are currently operating in the region. Subsequently, the region has experienced a proliferation of foreign military bases and a build-up of naval forces. The external militarization of the Horn poses major questions for the future security and stability of the region. Thus, the regional political leadership needs to take collective action to avert the looming threats. As the regional states grapples with ongoing internal challenges, they must also address the looming collective threats. Preventive diplomacy and geostrategic action are urgently needed at the time of this writing. The leaders in political powers must realize that they ultimately owe it to their fellow citizens and the posterity to act now. Finally, it is critical addressing the complex and deep-rooted drivers of fragility and conflict is a long-term endeavor in which progress will not be linear. It is therefore imperative for development actors, in full partnership with the countries of the region and stakeholders from across the international community, to remain engaged and help the region fulfill its potential of a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous future as “-Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin articulated,” *the Horn of Africa must thoroughly address the scourge of terrorism and those protracted conflict in order to attain durable peace*”-Ambassador Seyoum Mesfin.(5)

## Abbreviations

R-ARCSS	Agreement on Conflict Resolution in South Sudan
IGADD	Intergovernmental Authority On Drought and Development
AU	African Union
ICEWAR	IGAD Conflict Early Warn and Response

CFA	Agreement on Nile Basin Framework
APSA	African Union’s Peace and Security Council
RSF	Rapid Support Force
NATO	Northern Atlantic Organization.
UN	United Nation
CAF	Conflict Assessment Framework
GED	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

## Author Contributions

Stephen Par Kuol is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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