

A RENEWED EU STRATEGY FOR ERITREA, ETHIOPIA, HORN OF AFRICA AND RED SEA STABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the renewed geopolitical fragility in the Horn of Africa, particularly focusing on the deteriorating relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia following the Tigray war, disputes over Red Sea access, and escalating military tensions surrounding the Eritrean port of Assab. The research question addresses how the European Union (EU) can effectively engage in the region to promote stability and cooperation. The methodology involves a qualitative analysis of the current geopolitical landscape and the EU's strategic interests in regional peace, maritime security, migration management, trade corridors, and conflict prevention in the Red Sea basin. The findings suggest that the EU should adopt a pragmatic strategy aimed at preventing renewed interstate conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, supporting a structured reconciliation framework, facilitating mutually beneficial economic integration, promoting negotiated Ethiopian access to Eritrean ports under Eritrean sovereignty, and anchoring regional cooperation within African Union-led diplomacy. The article concludes that the EU should avoid securitized or coercive approaches, advocating instead for the use of infrastructure financing, trade incentives, diplomatic guarantees, and phased confidence-building measures to foster a stable and cooperative regional environment and amidst the building of a certain regional order in Europe's adjacent near abroad.

1.Introduction

Ethiopia's long-term strategic posture on Red Sea access and wider Horn of Africa stability is best understood as a problem of *time horizons*, *trust deficits*, and *regional system design*, rather than a narrow question of immediate access or transactional bargaining. In such a fragile geopolitical environment, outcomes are determined less by single negotiations and more by whether actors can sustain restraint, predictability, and institutional engagement over extended periods. This makes strategic patience not simply a diplomatic preference, but a structural necessity. The Red Sea question in particular cannot be resolved through accelerated pressure or episodic diplomacy; it requires sequencing—where negotiation, infrastructure planning, and incremental confidence-building reinforce one another over years or even decades. Attempts to compress this timeline through coercive signaling or maximalist positioning tend to generate counter-balancing coalitions, harden neighboring threat perceptions, and ultimately reduce Ethiopia's optionality rather than expand it.

Within this constraint, multilateral diplomacy becomes the most viable mechanism for converting structural landlocked vulnerability into cooperative regional influence. Instead of treating forums as symbolic venues, Ethiopia's comparative advantage lies in actively shaping agenda-setting within institutions such as the African Union, IGAD, and broader Red Sea or

Horn of Africa coordination frameworks. The presence of the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa provides not just symbolic prestige but a platform effect: it allows Ethiopia to embed its strategic concerns within continental norms around integration, connectivity, and collective security. However, this advantage only translates into durable influence if Ethiopia is perceived not as a unilateral claimant seeking exception, but as a system-shaping actor seeking rules that are broadly acceptable to coastal and inland states alike. In this sense, Ethiopia's optimal role is closer to that of a convenor and stabiliser of regional bargaining systems rather than a direct challenger to maritime sovereignty arrangements.

The final and most decisive layer is credibility, which functions as the underlying currency of regional diplomacy in the Horn of Africa. Unlike material capabilities, credibility accumulates slowly and can be lost quickly, especially in environments marked by historical mistrust and security sensitivity. For Ethiopia, credibility is not limited to formal treaty compliance, but extends to behavioural consistency across time—coherent signalling between domestic political actors, disciplined communication in external messaging, and a clear separation between strategic objectives and rhetorical escalation. When nationalist framing becomes volatile or inconsistent with diplomatic commitments, it raises uncertainty among neighbours about Ethiopia's long-term intentions, which in turn encourages hedging behaviour and external balancing. Conversely, when commitments are stable and repeatedly honoured, Ethiopia's influence increases even in the absence of coercive leverage, because other actors begin to incorporate Ethiopian preferences into their own planning assumptions. Over time, this predictability becomes a form of structural power: not the ability to force outcomes, but the ability to shape the range of outcomes others consider safe, feasible, and worth negotiating.

The Horn of Africa is one of the most strategically important and politically complex regions in Africa. Located at the easternmost tip of the continent, it includes the countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti. The region overlooks the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and major international shipping routes that connect Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. Because of its strategic location, ethnic diversity, and history of conflict, the Horn of Africa has become a focal point of regional and international politics.

Among the many political relationships in the region, the Eritrean–Ethiopian dyad has been particularly influential. Eritrea was part of Ethiopia until it gained independence in 1993 after a long liberation struggle. However, independence did not end tensions between the two states. A border dispute led to the Ethiopia–Eritrea War (1998–2000), which caused tens of thousands of deaths and left relations hostile for nearly two decades. Although a peace agreement signed in 2018 restored diplomatic relations and initially improved cooperation, tensions have re-emerged in recent years, raising concerns about renewed instability in the region.

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea has shaped broader regional politics, particularly regarding Somalia. Historically, both countries have competed for influence in Somalia, often supporting different political actors and armed groups. Somalia's prolonged state collapse following the outbreak of civil war in 1991 created opportunities for neighboring states to intervene in its internal affairs. These interventions were often justified as security measures but also reflected broader regional rivalries.

Somalia remains one of the most significant challenges in the Horn of Africa. Decades of civil conflict, political fragmentation, terrorism, and weak state institutions have undermined national stability. The militant group Al-Shabaab continues to pose a serious threat to both Somalia and its neighbors. Ethiopia has played a major role in regional peacekeeping and counterterrorism efforts within Somalia, deploying troops through African Union missions and bilateral security agreements. However, these interventions have sometimes generated tensions between the two countries.

A recent source of conflict emerged in 2024 when Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, a self-declared independent region of Somalia. The agreement aimed to provide Ethiopia with access to the Red Sea through Somaliland's coast. Somalia strongly opposed the deal, viewing it as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The dispute significantly strained relations between Ethiopia and Somalia and contributed to new regional alignments involving Eritrea and other neighboring states.

The Eritrean–Ethiopian dyad and the Somalia question illustrate how historical grievances, security concerns, and geopolitical competition remain interconnected in the Horn of Africa. While efforts at regional cooperation have occasionally emerged, unresolved border disputes, competing national interests, and ongoing instability in Somalia continue to challenge long-term peace and development. The future stability of the Horn of Africa will depend on effective diplomacy, stronger regional institutions, and sustained efforts to address both interstate rivalries and internal conflicts.

Scientific Argument

We argue that the geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa, particularly the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, present a complex interplay of historical grievances, resource competition, and external influences. This argument posits that a multifaceted approach to conflict resolution, grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, is essential for fostering long-term stability in the region. The historical context of Eritrea and Ethiopia's relationship is marked by a legacy of conflict and mistrust, exacerbated by the Tigray war. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial for any reconciliation efforts. Theories of interdependence suggest that economic ties can mitigate conflict; therefore, promoting trade and economic integration could serve as a foundation for rebuilding trust.

The involvement of external actors, particularly the European Union, is pivotal in shaping the geopolitical landscape. The EU's strategic interests in maritime security and conflict prevention necessitate a nuanced understanding of local dynamics. By employing frameworks from international relations theory, such as constructivism, the EU can better navigate the complexities of regional diplomacy and foster cooperative relationships. The proposed strategies for the EU should be informed by conflict resolution theories that emphasize the importance of dialogue, reconciliation, and economic cooperation. By facilitating structured reconciliation frameworks and promoting negotiated access to ports, the EU can create a conducive environment for peace. This approach aligns with the principles of positive peace, which advocate for addressing the root causes of conflict rather than merely its symptoms.

Empirical evidence suggests that infrastructure development and economic incentives can play a significant role in conflict prevention. By investing in regional infrastructure and providing trade incentives, the EU can enhance economic interdependence, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict. This argument is supported by case studies from other regions where economic integration has led to improved relations between historically adversarial states. Implementing phased confidence-building measures is essential for gradually restoring trust between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This approach is grounded in psychological theories of trust-building, which emphasize the importance of incremental steps in fostering cooperation. By establishing diplomatic guarantees and facilitating joint economic projects, the EU can help create a framework for sustained dialogue and collaboration.

In conclusion, the argument advocates for a comprehensive and evidence-based approach to conflict resolution in the Horn of Africa. By integrating historical context, external influences, and pragmatic strategies, the EU can effectively contribute to regional stability and foster a cooperative environment between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The **scope** of this research focuses on the geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa, specifically examining the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It encompasses historical grievances, resource competition, and the role of external actors, particularly the European Union. The study will analyze the implications of these factors on regional stability and conflict resolution strategies.

The primary **objective** of this research is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interdependent security dynamics in the Horn of Africa. It aims to identify effective conflict resolution strategies that can be employed by external actors, particularly the EU, to foster cooperation and stability between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Additionally, the research seeks to explore the potential for economic integration and infrastructure development as tools for peacebuilding.

Research Questions

1. What historical factors have shaped the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and how do they influence current geopolitical dynamics?
2. How do external actors, particularly the European Union, impact the security landscape in the Horn of Africa?
3. What role does economic interdependence play in mitigating conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia?
4. What conflict resolution strategies can be implemented to promote dialogue and cooperation in the region?
5. How can infrastructure development and trade incentives contribute to long-term stability in the Horn of Africa?

This research is **significant** for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the understanding of the complex security dynamics in the Horn of Africa, a region that has historically faced

instability and conflict. By analyzing the interconnections between historical grievances, external influences, and economic factors, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders involved in conflict resolution. Secondly, the research highlights the importance of a multifaceted approach to peacebuilding, emphasizing the need for dialogue, economic cooperation, and infrastructure development. This perspective can inform the strategies employed by the EU and other external actors in their engagement with the region. Lastly, the findings of this research may serve as a foundation for future studies on regional security complexes and conflict resolution in other areas facing similar challenges, thereby contributing to the broader field of international relations and peace studies.

Literature Review: The EU, the Horn of Africa, and the Ethiopia–Eritrea–Somalia Nexus

The Horn of Africa remains one of the most extensively studied yet persistently unstable regions in international relations scholarship. Its strategic maritime location, coupled with prolonged intra- and inter-state conflicts, has attracted sustained attention from both policymakers and academics. The European Union (EU) has emerged as a key external actor in the region, engaging through diplomacy, development assistance, peacebuilding, and security cooperation. However, despite extensive literature on EU engagement and regional dynamics, significant theoretical, empirical, and methodological gaps remain, particularly regarding the interaction between identity, trust, and regional geopolitics in the Ethiopia–Eritrea–Somalia nexus.

Scholarship on EU external action generally characterises the Union as a **normative power** (Manners, 2002), whose influence derives from the diffusion of norms rather than military capabilities. In the Horn of Africa, this is reflected in EU engagement in Somalia through the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), anti-piracy operations such as *Operation Atalanta*, and extensive development programming under the European External Action Service (EEAS, 2021).

Why bother about the Horn of Africa ?

First, EU Naval Commanders have for decades reported back to center the trouble is not so much at sea than on land without being paid attention to, without preventing intra-regional trade in the Red Sea to increase amidst rivalry over ports, infrastructure and naval bases and scarce resources, even as the security environment has steadily decreased to the point now of geoeconomic instrumentalisation of the Houthis and the disintegration of states.

Second, recent scholarship also situates EU engagement within broader geopolitical competition involving China, Turkey, and Gulf states (de Waal, 2015; Østebø & Tronvoll, 2020). This shift challenges earlier assumptions about EU normative dominance and highlights the increasingly multipolar nature of external intervention in the Horn.

Third, Cairene leaders wine about spending most of their time on security crises, whereas the EU wants to modernise and trade more with

Fourth, the Saudis are prepared to do more, but may not know how to and from there to begin, while its role conception confers upon it a natural sense of pride and leadership in the Red Sea. KSA is destined to become a more important partner. and it patient and pragmatic approach to

foreign policy matches current EU interests. KSA is also the first Arab country to have completed its modernisation and is increasingly admired in the region. It leads on PNA reform, and in GCC, fights the Houthis and is the swing-producer in the world's oil market. As the custodian of the Holy Places in Mecca and Medina, this confers prestige among brethren and pull in the Arab street. It also has an ambitious Development Strategy for the Red Sea, this ocean in the making and pristine and laid back area no tourist should deny himself visiting during winter time in Europe.

Fifth, the Red Sea is a corridor and a sub-region of the Middle East. For chokepoint stabilisation, Egypt could act as the extension node of the EU, who depends on stability in the corridor for 30 % of its seaborne imports and exports, something that only India and China supercedes albeit also on Europe bound trade and the transport of minerals.

Sixth, the EU currently doesn't have the command authority and manpower necessary to guard the Red Sea but must rely on the Indian Navy, Egypt is the chief responsible of the Gaza disarmament program, a decadal undertaking, and an important partner of the European Union. KSA's petrodollar diplomacy could come handy in both MENA and in the Christianity-Islam belt in Africa. This is a pragmatic and action-oriented calculus is prevalent.

Seventh, as an aspiring great power, the EU should both shape the environment, the rule of the game and the mechanisms ensuring cooperation and uphold order to confer an aura of competence and reliability in International Relations in perhaps the most consequential chokepoint for European Union.

Eight, it has started dawning that the EU actually needs to do more to uphold its interests and the objective and values to succeed in this maritime region adjacent to the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea dyad is widely understood through the lens of interstate war and protracted conflict. The 1998–2000 war institutionalised what scholars describe as a **“no war, no peace” equilibrium** (Clapham, 2009), characterised by militarised borders and persistent mistrust. While realist interpretations emphasise border disputes and security dilemmas, constructivist scholars argue that **identity construction and historical memory** are central to understanding the durability of hostility (Wendt, 1999; Abbink, 2003).

The 2018 rapprochement between Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki generated optimism in the literature, often interpreted as a potential **transformational peace agreement** (Reid, 2018). However, subsequent instability—particularly the Tigray conflict—has led scholars to reassess the fragility of elite-driven peace without deep societal reconciliation (Tronvoll, 2021).

Thus, the literature increasingly recognises that formal peace agreements have not resolved underlying structural and psychological drivers of conflict.

Somalia is widely characterised as a **prototypical case of state fragility** (Menkhaus, 2007), where the collapse of central authority has enabled both internal fragmentation and external intervention. The literature highlights how Somalia has functioned as an arena for regional competition, particularly involving Ethiopia and Eritrea, who have historically supported opposing factions (de Waal, 2015).

More recent studies focus on the geopolitical implications of Ethiopia's quest for maritime access, particularly following its engagement with Somaliland. This has reignited debates about sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional order (Hagmann, 2016). Somalia's response illustrates how contested statehood continues to shape regional alignments and diplomatic tensions.

Despite rich theoretical contributions, several limitations remain:

First, **realist and institutionalist approaches dominate the literature**, often reducing regional dynamics to power politics, security dilemmas, or institutional weaknesses. This under-theorises the role of **identity formation, perception, and trust**, which are central to long-term conflict persistence.

Second, while constructivist scholarship exists (Wendt, 1999), it is often applied at a high level of abstraction and rarely operationalised in relation to **interpersonal and intergroup trust dynamics** between political elites and institutions.

Third, EU-focused literature tends to rely on **normative power Europe (Manners, 2002)** and capability frameworks, but does not sufficiently integrate psychological or micro-level theories that explain how EU interventions influence trust between regional actors.

Empirically, three key gaps are evident:

First, there is a **fragmentation of case studies**, with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia often analysed separately rather than as an interconnected regional system. This limits understanding of spillover effects and relational dynamics.

Second, there is **limited longitudinal analysis of trust evolution**, particularly across key phases such as the 1998–2000 war, the 2018 peace agreement, and the post-2020 regional realignments.

Third, EU engagement is often evaluated in terms of **outputs (aid, missions, funding)** rather than outcomes such as **trust formation, reconciliation, or norm internalisation**, leaving a gap in understanding the deeper impact of CFSP instruments.

Methodologically, much of the existing research relies on:

- elite interviews without systematic theoretical integration
- policy analysis lacking behavioural or psychological dimensions
- descriptive regional security studies without structured analytical frameworks.

There is a lack of **interdisciplinary approaches** that combine International Relations theory with psychology (trust theory, Social Identity Theory) and conflict transformation frameworks.

In summary, the literature on the EU and the Horn of Africa, as well as the Ethiopia–Eritrea–Somalia nexus, is extensive but fragmented. While existing scholarship provides strong

insights into security dynamics, normative power, and state fragility, it insufficiently addresses the relational and psychological foundations of regional politics. The key gap lies in the absence of an integrated framework that connects **identity, trust, and conflict transformation** with EU external action. Addressing this gap allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both the persistence of conflict and the conditions under which sustainable cooperation may emerge in the Horn of Africa.

Scholarly contribution

This study contributes to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) literature by bridging a gap between traditional analyses of EU external action and the micro-level dynamics of trust-building in conflict-affected regions. Existing studies of the CFSP in the Horn of Africa have largely focused on strategic interests, security cooperation, migration governance, and institutional effectiveness. While these perspectives provide important insights, they often understate the role of perceptions, identities, and trust in shaping regional political outcomes. By integrating constructivist international relations theory with psychological theories of trust-building and conflict transformation, this study offers a more nuanced framework for understanding how the EU can influence conflict dynamics beyond material incentives and diplomatic mediation.

The framework advances CFSP scholarship in three ways. First, it highlights the importance of intersubjective factors—such as historical narratives, collective identities, and mutual perceptions—in determining the success or failure of EU engagement. Second, it introduces trust as an analytical variable linking EU diplomatic practices to regional cooperation outcomes, thereby connecting macro-level foreign policy objectives with micro-level relational processes. Third, it provides a theoretically informed approach for evaluating the EU's role not merely as a security actor but as a facilitator of long-term conflict transformation and reconciliation. In doing so, the study contributes to emerging debates on the EU as a normative and peacebuilding actor and demonstrates how CFSP instruments may foster sustainable regional stability through the gradual construction of trust, shared expectations, and cooperative norms in the Horn of Africa.

Building on the foregoing analysis, we propose several avenues for moving forward, emphasizing governance reform, conflict resolution, regional cooperation, and inclusive economic development as key pillars of a sustainable security framework. Central to this approach is the strengthening of accountable and inclusive institutions capable of addressing citizen grievances and fostering public trust. Equally important is the prioritization of dialogue, mediation, and negotiated settlements as mechanisms for reducing violence and managing political disputes. At the regional level, enhanced cooperation among states in intelligence sharing, border management, and collective security initiatives can contribute to addressing transnational threats more effectively. Finally, sustained investment in education, employment creation, infrastructure, and social services is essential for tackling the structural drivers of instability and creating the conditions necessary for long-term peace, resilience, and development.

At the end of the day, the difference between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf is that the former is a strategic region in need of organisation, the latter a contested region among great powers.

This piece can be conceived as a bid for shaping the security architecture and a call for strategic co-creation together with Miss Simsalabim *au-dela, au-deca*.

Structure

We begin with the analytical framework before addressing the strategic challenges of Eritrea and how to execute. We also need to understand the situation in Ethiopia and the impact of domestic politics on the stability of Horn of Africa, and by implication, examine its potential for contributing constructively to the stability and prosperity of the region, something that is also linked to trade promotion in Southern Arabia. Between Ethiopia and Eritrea there are agreements made in Algiers that have not been properly implemented which then spills over to conflict over the Tigray province contained under the Pretoria agreement but not addressing the root causes of conflict. After Somaliland's putative secession in digestion for some time given unequal development trajectories and the stake out of strategic interests of Israel in relation to the organisation of Red Sea security, out of concern for coagulation of jihadis between Somalia-Yemen-Sudan and operational needs during the Iran War, the EU soon engaged with the federal government of Somalia in a reinforced manner. This is where the action is taking place and must be molded together into a coherent and integrated approach to uphold EU's overall interests and ensure a division-of-labor under conditions of scarce resources and the self-interests of the riparians around this ocean in the making

2. Historical Evolution

The Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship remains structurally fragile because it is shaped by unresolved historical grievances, competing interpretations of sovereignty, and overlapping regional security rivalries. While full-scale war is not inevitable, the system is prone to repeated cycles of tension and partial stabilization. Sustained diplomacy, clearer security arrangements, and durable regional frameworks would be required to shift the relationship away from recurring instability.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea conundrum thus describes a persistent cycle of cooperation, conflict, and incomplete reconciliation between two deeply interconnected states. Their modern relationship is rooted in a shared revolutionary history, where Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation movements fought together against the Derg regime. This shared victory in 1991 created unusually close political and security ties between former allies who were suddenly turned into separate sovereign states after Eritrea's independence in 1993. In the early post-independence years, relations appeared cooperative, with economic and logistical integration still functioning informally across borders.

However, this fragile arrangement was not supported by strong or durable institutions within Ethiopia or between the two states. Ethiopia's post-revolution state-building process was heavily centralized and dominated by liberation-era elites, which limited the development of independent diplomatic, legal, and border-management institutions. As a result, interstate relations depended more on personal leadership dynamics and political trust than on stable rules or frameworks.

Tensions escalated into open war between 1998 and 2000, formally triggered by border disputes such as Badme, but driven more deeply by competing narratives of sovereignty, economic control, and post-war political authority. The conflict caused massive casualties and entrenched hostility between the two governments. Although the 2000 Algiers Agreement ended active fighting, it did not resolve the underlying disagreements in practice.

An international boundary commission ruling in 2002 awarded disputed territories to Eritrea, but Ethiopia's political system lacked either the institutional capacity or internal consensus to fully implement the decision. This gap between legal rulings and political execution reflected broader weaknesses in Ethiopia's state institutions, where foreign policy, security, and federal politics were often shaped by ruling-party structures rather than autonomous state systems. The result was a prolonged "no war, no peace" period lasting nearly two decades.

During this time, both countries remained heavily militarized along the border, while diplomatic engagement was minimal and inconsistent. In 2018, Ethiopia under new leadership rapidly moved to normalize relations with Eritrea, reopening borders and restoring diplomatic ties in a highly personalized and fast-moving political process. While this breakthrough appeared transformative, it again relied more on executive decision-making than on institutionalized reconciliation mechanisms.

The fragility of this settlement became evident during Ethiopia's internal war in Tigray (2020–2022), when Eritrea aligned militarily with the Ethiopian federal government against the TPLF. This alignment reflected older revolutionary-era alliances but also exposed how Ethiopia's internal institutional fragmentation—particularly within its federal structure and security apparatus—continued to shape regional dynamics. The Ethiopian state's difficulty in managing internal conflict in a coherent institutional manner spilled directly into its external relations.

After the Tigray peace agreement, Eritrea was largely excluded from the formal settlement process, which reintroduced mistrust and renewed strategic divergence. Underlying this instability are unresolved structural issues: disputed borders that remain politically sensitive, competing security doctrines, and growing tensions over Red Sea access and regional influence. At the same time, both states continue to be shaped by liberation-era political cultures, where legitimacy is closely tied to wartime history rather than institutional governance.

In this sense, the conundrum persists not only because of bilateral disputes, but also because of the uneven development and persistent weaknesses of Ethiopian state institutions, which have struggled to consistently translate legal agreements, political settlements, and regional strategy into durable, rule-based systems.

According to the article "Transcending the Ethio-Eritrean Conundrum: A Vision for a Better Tomorrow", moving beyond the Ethiopia–Eritrea stalemate requires more than diplomatic normalization; it requires building a fundamentally new framework of cooperation that acknowledges both deep interdependence and entrenched mistrust. The author argues that Ethiopia and Eritrea are too historically, socially, and economically intertwined to behave like

ordinary neighboring states, yet also too distinct in identity and political experience to be realistically unified in the near term¹

The central proposal is therefore not immediate unification, but gradual supranational integration built on carefully designed institutions. This would begin with economic cooperation—such as customs coordination, trade integration, and potentially shared infrastructure use—while ensuring that both states perceive tangible benefits. Over time, this could evolve into broader frameworks covering security coordination, political dialogue, and cultural exchange, designed to reduce mistrust and prevent recurring cycles of conflict.

A key idea is that past attempts at peace have failed because they relied too heavily on political goodwill between leaders rather than durable institutions. Without rules-based mechanisms, agreements have remained fragile and reversible. The vision therefore emphasizes building structured, treaty-based systems that can survive leadership changes and domestic political shifts in either country.

The proposal also stresses security cooperation as essential, given both countries' strong militarization and shared regional threats. Coordinated defense frameworks could help stabilize the Horn of Africa and reduce the risk of proxy conflicts or border escalations. Alongside this, cultural and social integration—through education, exchanges, and institutional cooperation—is seen as necessary to rebuild trust at the societal level after decades of hostility.

At the same time, the article recognizes major constraints: deep historical grievances, Eritrea's strong sense of separate national identity, and Ethiopia's political complexity and internal fragmentation. It argues that because neither full separation nor full political union is realistic, the only sustainable path lies between the two—what it frames as a structured, incremental supranational partnership.

In essence, “transcending the conundrum” means escaping the repeated cycle of war and uneasy peace by replacing informal, personality-driven relations with long-term institutions that manage interdependence, reduce insecurity, and create predictable cooperation.

Eritrea remains one of the most diplomatically isolated states in Africa. Relations with neighboring states fluctuate between tactical cooperation and confrontation. Its withdrawal from regional structures such as IGAD reflects long-standing mistrust toward multilateral institutions.

The Eritrean government views external pressure — whether from Western states, Ethiopia, or Gulf actors — through the lens of sovereignty preservation after a long independence struggle.

Ethiopia and Eritrea share a complex history of federation, war, and uneasy peace, with current tensions driven by unresolved border disputes, maritime access questions, and shifting regional alliances.

¹ <https://eritrea-focus.org/transcending-the-ethio-eritrean-conundrum-a-vision-for-a-better-tomorrow/>).

Figure



Ethiopia and Eritrea were federated in 1952 under a UN resolution, which granted Eritrea autonomy while keeping it under Ethiopian sovereignty. This arrangement quickly became contentious as Ethiopia gradually reduced Eritrea's autonomy, culminating in the dissolution of the federation in 1962. That decision triggered a 30-year armed struggle for independence led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Eritrea eventually achieved de facto independence in 1991 and formal international recognition after a UN-supervised referendum in 1993.

Despite early post-independence cooperation, relations deteriorated over disputes involving trade, currency arrangements, and especially border demarcation. These tensions escalated into the Eritrean–Ethiopian War from 1998 to 2000, centered on contested areas such as Badme. The war caused tens of thousands of deaths and ended with the Algiers Agreement, which established a ceasefire and created a UN-backed boundary commission.

The **Algiers Agreement**, signed on 12 December 2000 by the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia, marked the formal end of the 1998–2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian War, one of the deadliest interstate conflicts in post-Cold War Africa. More than a ceasefire arrangement, the agreement represented an ambitious attempt to replace military confrontation with a rules-based framework grounded in international law, arbitration, and accountability.

At its core, the agreement sought to transform a violent territorial dispute into a legal and diplomatic process. The parties committed themselves to a permanent cessation of hostilities and accepted the creation of independent mechanisms to address the conflict's underlying causes and consequences. Most notably, the agreement established the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission under the auspices of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. The commission was tasked with delimiting and demarcating the border between the two states, and its decisions were explicitly designated as “final and binding.” This provision reflected a rare and significant commitment by both governments to accept international adjudication rather than pursue territorial claims through force.

The agreement also created the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission, which was mandated to assess claims arising from violations of international humanitarian law and other legal obligations during the war. Through this mechanism, both countries were able to seek compensation for damages suffered by their citizens and institutions. The inclusion of a claims process demonstrated an understanding that sustainable peace required not only ending violence but also addressing grievances and legal accountability.

Humanitarian concerns occupied an important place in the agreement. Both governments pledged to ensure humane treatment of each other's nationals, facilitate the release and repatriation of prisoners of war, and cooperate on matters affecting civilians displaced by the conflict. These provisions reflected broader international norms regarding post-conflict reconciliation and the protection of human rights.

Despite its strengths, the Algiers Agreement quickly encountered significant implementation challenges. The most contentious issue emerged from the Boundary Commission's 2002 ruling, which awarded the disputed town of Badme—the symbolic flashpoint of the war—to Eritrea. While Eritrea insisted on immediate implementation of the decision, Ethiopia expressed reservations about aspects of the ruling and sought adjustments to the demarcation process. The resulting deadlock undermined the agreement's effectiveness and gave rise to a prolonged period often described as “no war, no peace.” Although large-scale fighting did not resume, the border remained heavily militarized, diplomatic relations deteriorated, and mutual distrust persisted for nearly two decades.

Ancient writers described the Red Sea coast of present-day Eritrea as a distinct and important region in international trade. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions ports and communities located along the Eritrean coastline. These ports connected Africa, Arabia, and India through extensive commercial networks. Ancient sources identified specific peoples living in the area, indicating recognized local populations and societies. The region formed part of larger political entities, including the Kingdom of Aksum. Archaeological evidence shows the existence of urban centers, agriculture, and organized governance in the territory. The inhabitants developed cultural traditions and languages that contributed to the region's distinct historical character. Classical authors such as Strabo and Pliny the Elder recorded information about the peoples and geography of the area.

Although these sources did not describe a modern Eritrean nation, they documented enduring communities with shared regional connections. For this reason, some historians regard these ancient populations, institutions, and cultural networks as part of the historical foundations from which modern Eritrean national identity later emerged.

Figure



ERITREA

THE ALGIERS AGREEMENT

ENDING WAR. PURSUING PEACE.

Signed on **12 December 2000** in Algiers, Algeria, the Algiers Agreement formally ended the 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian War and created a framework for resolving disputes, addressing damages, and building a path to lasting peace.



ETHIOPIA

THE WAR IN NUMBERS (1998–2000)

- Tens of thousands dead
- Hundreds of thousands displaced
- Billions of dollars in economic losses



A PIVOTAL AGREEMENT

The agreement replaced war with dialogue, law, and international mechanisms to resolve one of Africa's most dangerous conflicts.

SIGNED

12 DECEMBER 2000

Algiers, Algeria

CORE PROVISIONS OF THE ALGIERS AGREEMENT

1. CEASEFIRE

Both sides committed to a permanent cessation of hostilities and to resolving their disputes peacefully.

2. BOUNDARY COMMISSION

The Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) was established under the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Its decision is “final and binding”.

In 2002, the EEBC awarded the town of Badme to Eritrea.

3. CLAIMS COMMISSION

The Eritrea–Ethiopia Claims Commission (EECC) would examine claims for damages and losses resulting from violations of international law during the war.

Both countries received compensation awards.

4. HUMANITARIAN PROVISIONS

The agreement mandated humane treatment of each other's nationals, the release and repatriation of prisoners of war, and cooperation on humanitarian issues.

5. INTERNATIONAL MONITORING

The UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was deployed to monitor the ceasefire and establish a Temporary Security Zone (TSZ).

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

- The main sticking point was the **2002** Boundary Commission ruling on **Badme** and surrounding areas.
- Eritrea insisted on immediate implementation, while Ethiopia raised objections regarding the practical implementation of the decision.
- The deadlock led to a prolonged period of “no war, no peace” (2002–2018): the border remained militarized, diplomatic relations were frozen, and trust remained low.
- UN peacekeeping faced severe restrictions, limiting its effectiveness.

The agreement ended large-scale fighting, but not political tension.

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2018

- 2018**
Rapprochement between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Isaias Afwerki.
- 9 JULY 2018**
The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship was signed in Asmara.
- 2018–2019**
Diplomatic relations restored, borders opened, air links and communications resumed.
- 2019**
Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the peace process.
- 2020–2022**
The Tigray War and regional tensions created new challenges to sustaining peace.

WHY THE AGREEMENT MATTERS

- It ended one of Africa's deadliest wars.
- It established a legal and peaceful framework for resolving disputes.
- It set a precedent for the use of international arbitration in Africa.
- It addressed both border issues and the human and material costs of war.

LEGACY

The Algiers Agreement is a landmark peace accord that shows both the power and the limits of legal solutions. It stopped a devastating war and created institutions for justice and dialogue. Its full promise depends on the continued political will of Eritrea and Ethiopia to turn agreements into lasting friendship.

“ The Algiers Agreement proved that peace is possible when law replaces war and when nations choose negotiation over confrontation. ”

The peoples of present-day Eritrea interacted with the kingdoms and rulers of the Ethiopian highlands from ancient times through trade, migration, political alliances, religious exchange, and periods of conflict. They also indicate that the Red Sea coast and the northern Horn of Africa were recognized as important political and cultural regions long before the emergence of modern states. The interaction between the peoples of present-day Eritrea and the kingdoms of the Ethiopian highlands was shaped by both cooperation and competition, reflecting different political interests and visions that evolved over time.

Nevertheless, the agreement's historical significance should not be underestimated. It successfully halted a devastating war and established a precedent for the peaceful settlement of interstate disputes through legal institutions. It also demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of international arbitration in resolving deeply rooted territorial conflicts. The Algiers framework showed that legal decisions can provide clarity and legitimacy, but that lasting peace ultimately depends on political will and mutual acceptance of outcomes.

The agreement acquired renewed relevance in 2018, when Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki initiated a dramatic rapprochement and signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. By accepting the core principles of the Algiers framework and restoring diplomatic relations, the two leaders effectively revived a peace process that had long appeared stalled. Although subsequent regional conflicts, particularly the Tigray War, introduced new complexities into Eritrea–Ethiopia relations, the Algiers Agreement remains the foundational legal and diplomatic instrument governing the end of their border war.

Viewed in retrospect, the Algiers Agreement was not merely a ceasefire document but a sophisticated peace settlement that attempted to balance sovereignty, justice, and reconciliation. Its legacy lies both in its success in ending active warfare and in the lessons it offers about the challenges of translating legal agreements into durable political peace.²

Executing on challenges of the Ethio-Eritrean peace framework:

1. Border Ruling Contested

Challenge: Border ruling contested

Execution: Phased demarcation and monitored transfer of territory

The most significant obstacle to implementing the Algiers Agreement emerged after the Boundary Commission awarded the disputed town of Badme to Eritrea in 2002. Although both parties had previously agreed that the Commission's decision would be final and binding, disagreements arose over how the ruling should be implemented on the ground. A phased demarcation process could have reduced resistance by separating legal recognition of the boundary from the practical transfer of administrative authority. International monitors could have supervised each stage of implementation, verified compliance, and provided reassurance to affected communities. Such an approach would have transformed a politically sensitive territorial transfer into a structured and transparent process, reducing the likelihood of renewed tensions.

2. Mutual Distrust

Challenge: Mutual distrust

Execution: Joint commissions and confidence-building measures

Decades of conflict, including the liberation struggle and the 1998–2000 war, left Eritrea and Ethiopia with deep political and military mistrust. Even after the signing of the Algiers Agreement, each side remained suspicious of the other's intentions, making cooperation

² https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125337/1392_Algers%20Agreement.pdf

difficult. To address this challenge, permanent joint commissions could have been established to facilitate communication on border management, trade, security, and humanitarian issues. Confidence-building measures such as regular military-to-military meetings, information sharing, cross-border economic projects, and cultural exchanges would have helped replace confrontation with cooperation. Sustained interaction at both governmental and community levels could have gradually rebuilt trust and strengthened commitment to peace.

3. Militarized Frontier

Challenge: Militarized frontier

Execution: Verified troop withdrawals and security guarantees

Following the war, the Ethiopia–Eritrea border became one of the most heavily militarized frontiers in Africa. Large troop deployments, military fortifications, and constant readiness for renewed conflict created an atmosphere of insecurity that undermined the peace process. A coordinated program of phased troop withdrawals, monitored by international observers, could have reduced the risk of accidental clashes and demonstrated compliance with the agreement. These withdrawals would have been most effective if accompanied by security guarantees from regional and international actors, ensuring that neither side perceived demilitarization as a strategic vulnerability. By lowering military tensions and increasing transparency, verified withdrawals could have helped transform the border from a zone of confrontation into one of stability.

Linking Theme

Together, these three challenges reveal a central lesson of the Algiers Agreement: legal decisions alone cannot secure lasting peace. Effective implementation requires mechanisms that address political realities, build confidence between former adversaries, and provide credible assurances that commitments will be honored. The absence of such mechanisms contributed significantly to the prolonged "no war, no peace" period that followed the agreement.

4. Peacekeeping Restrictions

Challenge: Peacekeeping restrictions

Execution: Full operational access for UN monitors

The effectiveness of the peace process depended heavily on the ability of international peacekeepers to monitor compliance with the Algiers Agreement. However, over time, restrictions imposed on the movement and activities of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) limited its capacity to verify troop positions, investigate incidents, and maintain confidence between the parties. Ensuring full operational access for UN personnel—including unrestricted movement, logistical support, and access to sensitive border areas—would have strengthened transparency and reduced opportunities for misunderstanding. A robust monitoring presence could have served as an impartial guarantor of compliance, providing early warning of potential disputes and helping prevent localized tensions from escalating into broader confrontations.

5. Humanitarian Grievances

Challenge: Humanitarian grievances

Execution: Compensation, repatriation, and community recovery programs

The war left deep humanitarian scars, including displaced populations, separated families, destroyed infrastructure, and widespread economic hardship. While the Claims Commission addressed legal compensation for damages, lasting peace required a broader strategy focused on human recovery and reconciliation. Comprehensive repatriation programs for displaced persons, compensation mechanisms for affected civilians, and investments in rebuilding schools, roads, health facilities, and local economies could have addressed the everyday consequences of conflict. Community-level recovery initiatives would also have helped reduce resentment and foster a sense that peace was delivering tangible benefits to ordinary citizens rather than remaining solely a diplomatic achievement.

6. Political Deadlock

Challenge: Political deadlock

Execution: Sustained diplomatic engagement and international mediation

One of the greatest weaknesses of the post-Algiers period was the absence of a sustained political process capable of resolving disputes that emerged during implementation. As disagreements over the border intensified, communication between the two governments deteriorated, leaving few channels through which tensions could be managed constructively. Regular high-level diplomatic meetings, supported by regional organizations and international mediators, could have helped maintain momentum and address emerging obstacles before they hardened into long-term stalemates. Continuous mediation would not have replaced the legal rulings established under the agreement, but it could have provided a political framework for implementing them. By keeping dialogue active and encouraging compromise, diplomatic engagement might have prevented the prolonged "no war, no peace" environment that characterized relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia for nearly two decades.

Synthesis

Taken together, these six implementation challenges demonstrate that peace agreements succeed not only because of what they prescribe, but because of how they are executed. The Algiers Agreement provided a strong legal foundation for ending the war, yet its implementation required effective monitoring, humanitarian recovery, trust-building, security guarantees, and sustained political engagement. The experience of Eritrea and Ethiopia illustrates a broader lesson in peacebuilding: ending violence is often the easiest step; transforming a ceasefire into a durable and cooperative peace is the far more demanding task.

Post-war relations and peace efforts

From 2000 to 2018, the two countries existed in a "no war, no peace" condition, marked by heavily militarized borders and minimal diplomatic contact. A major shift occurred in 2018 when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki signed a peace agreement that reopened borders, restored diplomatic relations, and resumed flights.

However, this rapprochement was fragile. During the Tigray War (2020–2022), Eritrean forces fought alongside Ethiopian federal forces against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). While this created a temporary alignment of interests, Eritrea later felt excluded from the post-war political process, and mutual mistrust quickly resurfaced.

Current tensions

Several overlapping factors are driving renewed strain.

Maritime access is one of the most sensitive issues. Ethiopia is landlocked and has increasingly emphasized the need for access to the Red Sea, including historical references to ports such as Assab. Eritrea views any discussion of this kind as a potential challenge to its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

There are also mutual accusations of supporting armed groups. Ethiopia has accused Eritrea of backing insurgent movements in regions such as Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia, while Eritrea denies these claims and raises its own security concerns regarding Ethiopian instability along the border.

Regional alliances further complicate the picture. Eritrea has strengthened ties with countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while Ethiopia has deepened relations with actors including the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. These alignments are interpreted through a strategic competition lens, particularly around Red Sea influence.

Border militarization has also increased, especially near the Tigray frontier, raising concerns about potential escalation. Reports of intercepted arms shipments and Eritrea's withdrawal from regional forums such as IGAD have contributed to growing distrust and reduced diplomatic communication.

Legacy of Colonial Age

The colonial period left a deep and lasting imprint on relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, shaping borders, identity, and competing claims of statehood. Much of the modern tension between the two can be traced back to how Eritrea was created as a distinct territory, how it was administered, and how it later shifted between different political arrangements.

Modern Eritrea took shape during the Italian colonial period beginning in the 1880s. Italy established control over the Red Sea coast and formally organized it as *Colonia Eritrea*. This colonial construction mattered because it grouped a variety of highland and lowland communities under a single administrative unit and separated them from the political authority of Ethiopia. It also introduced infrastructure such as ports, roads, and urban centers like Asmara, which strengthened the perception of Eritrea as a distinct entity. In this sense, the colonial period did not simply draw borders; it actively helped create the idea of Eritrea as a separate political space.

After Italy's defeat in World War II, Eritrea came under British military administration from 1941 to 1952. During this period, the international community debated Eritrea's future, with proposals ranging from full independence to partition or union with neighboring states. The

final compromise was a federation with Haile Selassie I's Ethiopia in 1952, under United Nations supervision. Under this arrangement, Eritrea was supposed to retain internal autonomy, its own parliament, and separate legal institutions, while sharing defense and foreign policy with Ethiopia.

This arrangement gradually collapsed when Ethiopia moved to centralize control. Over the following decade, Eritrea's autonomous institutions were dismantled, and in 1962 it was formally annexed as a province of Ethiopia. This moment is widely seen as decisive because it transformed a federal arrangement—recognized internationally—into direct incorporation, which many Eritreans viewed as a loss of political rights and self-determination. It also triggered the beginning of armed resistance that evolved into a long independence struggle.

The annexation of Eritrea into Ethiopia contributed directly to the Eritrean War of Independence, which lasted from 1961 to 1991. This conflict deeply shaped both societies. Eritrean nationalism developed through sustained resistance to Ethiopian rule, while Ethiopian state identity became closely tied to the principle of territorial integrity. Over time, decades of conflict hardened mutual perceptions and reduced trust between the two populations and their political systems.

Even after Eritrea gained independence in 1993, the colonial and post-colonial legacy continued to influence relations. One major issue has been the lack of clearly demarcated borders from the colonial period, which contributed to the outbreak of the Eritrea–Ethiopia War from 1998 to 2000. Beyond territorial disputes, there is also a deeper divergence in historical interpretation. Eritrea often frames its independence as the correction of an earlier political incorporation that ignored its separate colonial identity, while Ethiopia tends to emphasize historical unity and views Eritrea's separation as an outcome shaped by colonial boundaries and international decisions rather than a natural national division.

In the long term, the colonial legacy has influenced not only borders but also identity formation, political institutions, and mutual perceptions. The existence of a distinct Eritrean administrative unit under Italian rule helped solidify a separate national identity, while Ethiopia's evolving state structure reinforced its view of historical continuity over the region. These competing narratives continue to shape relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea today.

3. Analytical Framework

This study adopts a multidisciplinary analytical framework that combines Constructivist International Relations (IR) theory, conflict resolution theory, and psychological theories of trust-building to examine the dynamics of the Eritrean–Ethiopian dyad and its implications for regional stability in the Horn of Africa. The framework is particularly suited to understanding conflicts that are shaped not only by material interests and security concerns but also by historical narratives, identities, perceptions, and intergroup relations.

Enter also Regional Security Complex Theory and Historical Institutionalism that are particularly useful for understanding relations between neighboring societies because they explain how cooperation and conflict can coexist over long periods. Regional Security Complex Theory argues that geographically connected societies become linked through shared

security concerns, alliances, rivalries, and political interactions. Historical Institutionalism emphasizes how past institutions, political arrangements, and historical experiences shape later patterns of behavior and identity. Together, these approaches help explain how neighboring peoples may engage in trade, migration, diplomacy, and cultural exchange while also competing over power, territory, and regional influence. They further suggest that distinct political identities and visions of regional order can emerge through centuries of interaction rather than through complete isolation. As a result, long-term cooperation does not necessarily eliminate conflict, nor does conflict prevent continued interdependence between neighboring societies.

Constructivism provides the primary theoretical lens for analysing interstate relations in the Horn of Africa. Unlike realist approaches that emphasize power and security, constructivism argues that state interests and behaviours are socially constructed through historical experiences, shared norms, and collective identities. The long-standing tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as their interactions with Somalia, cannot be fully understood through material factors alone. Historical memories of war, competing narratives of sovereignty, and perceptions of regional influence shape how political actors define threats and opportunities. Consequently, this framework examines how identities and historical experiences influence contemporary diplomatic and security relations.

To complement the constructivist perspective, the framework incorporates conflict resolution theory, particularly the concept of positive peace developed by Johan Galtung. Positive peace refers to the absence of structural and cultural forms of violence and emphasizes the transformation of relationships and institutions that generate conflict. This perspective is useful for analysing whether regional initiatives address the underlying causes of tensions, including political exclusion, resource competition, and unresolved historical grievances. The framework therefore assesses conflict not only in terms of overt disputes but also through the broader social and political conditions that sustain instability.

Psychological theories of trust-building provide a third analytical dimension. Trust is a critical variable in regions characterized by repeated conflict and mutual suspicion. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, the framework examines how perceptions of in-group and out-group membership contribute to distrust between states and political communities. The theory suggests that actors often interpret the actions of rival groups through the lens of historical antagonism, reinforcing cycles of suspicion and hostility. In the context of the Horn of Africa, this perspective helps explain the persistence of mistrust despite periods of political rapprochement.

The framework also draws upon the Contact Hypothesis, which posits that sustained interaction under favourable conditions can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Applied to interstate relations, the theory suggests that diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and institutionalized dialogue may contribute to the gradual development of trust. In addition, trust-building models emphasize the importance of reciprocity, predictability, and credible commitments in fostering cooperation among actors with a history of conflict. These concepts are particularly relevant for assessing regional diplomacy and the role of external actors such as the European Union.

By integrating constructivism, conflict resolution theory, and psychological approaches to trust-building, the analytical framework captures both the structural and ideational dimensions of regional politics. It enables an examination of how identities, perceptions, historical grievances, and trust interact with political and economic factors to shape relations among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia. This combined approach provides a comprehensive basis for analysing the opportunities and constraints facing regional cooperation and conflict transformation in the Horn of Africa.

Applied to the Horn of Africa, Regional Security Complex Theory suggests that the region's societies and states are interconnected because their security, political stability, and economic interests affect one another. Events in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti have often had consequences across borders through trade routes, migration, military competition, alliances, and access to the Red Sea. The theory therefore views conflict and cooperation in the Horn not as isolated national phenomena but as part of a broader regional system.

Historical Institutionalism focuses on how historical legacies continue to influence contemporary politics. In the Horn of Africa, ancient kingdoms, religious traditions, trade networks, imperial structures, colonial boundaries, and liberation movements created institutions and political memories that still shape relations among states and peoples. Historical experiences influence how communities understand sovereignty, territorial claims, political authority, and regional leadership.

Together, these approaches help explain why the Horn of Africa has experienced both extensive cooperation and recurring conflict over millennia. The region's societies have been connected through commerce, migration, religious exchange, and shared political institutions, while simultaneously competing over resources, territory, influence, and competing visions of regional order. From this perspective, cooperation and conflict are not opposites but parallel outcomes of long-term regional interdependence. Distinct political identities emerged through interaction with one another, making the history of the Horn a process of continuous engagement rather than separate and isolated development.

From a structural perspective, scholars using Regional Security Complex Theory would agree with part of the logic: the security of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia is deeply interconnected with stability in the Red Sea and the wider Horn of Africa system. Instability in one tends to spill over into others through migration, armed conflict diffusion, trade disruption, and competition over strategic waterways like the Red Sea.

It is also true that external powers—especially Saudi Arabia and Iran—have at times projected influence into this space as part of broader regional rivalry. This is often discussed in terms of competition over maritime routes, alliances, and political influence rather than direct territorial control.

However, the step from “regional stability matters for external actors” to “a reduction of one actor’s influence is desirable” moves from analysis into normative geopolitics. In academic and policy analysis, that kind of framing is contested because it assumes a zero-sum structure. Many IR approaches—especially liberal and constructivist ones—would instead emphasize that long-term stability in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa is more likely to come from inclusive

security arrangements, economic interdependence, and institutional cooperation rather than the exclusion of any single external actor.

So in short: the underlying analytical point about interdependence is widely discussed, but the conclusion about which external power “should” lose influence is not a neutral inference—it depends on a particular strategic viewpoint rather than a consensus of the literature. The point is structural power is not the same as influence during the daily power practice and toiling under the sun.

The Red Sea is emerging as an increasingly integrated geopolitical region, while the Horn of Africa constitutes a consequential regional security complex. The deep interdependence of states and societies across these areas means that cooperation can enhance regional stability, whereas unresolved rivalries may trigger security dilemmas and spirals of insecurity with consequences extending far beyond national borders."

4.Geopolitical significance

The Red Sea corridor is strategically important for global trade and military logistics. Control and influence over ports in the region affect not only Ethiopia and Eritrea but also external powers, including the United States and China, alongside Middle Eastern states with strong maritime interests. This makes local tensions part of a wider international strategic environment rather than a purely bilateral issue.

The Horn of Africa is best understood not as a single coherent “region” in the conventional sense, but as a strategically overdetermined intersection where geography, state formation crises, and global competition continuously reshape one another. Its importance is anchored in physical geography: it straddles the southern access point to the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world’s most consequential maritime chokepoints. This narrow corridor connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal, meaning disruptions here reverberate through global energy markets, shipping insurance regimes, and great-power naval planning. Geography, in other words, does not simply frame politics in the Horn—it actively produces it.

At the internal level, the region is characterized less by simple “state fragility” than by contested sovereignty and uneven political authority. Somalia is often described as a weak state, but more precisely it is a negotiated political order in which federal institutions in Mogadishu coexist uneasily with semi-autonomous regional administrations and persistent insurgent governance by Al-Shabaab. Authority is therefore layered rather than absent. Ethiopia, frequently treated as the region’s anchor state, is instead a classic case of a “federal empire under stress”: a historically centralized polity now navigating ethnically organized federalism, recurring civil wars, and a profound tension between central authority and regional autonomy. Its recent strategic pivot toward securing Red Sea access reflects not only economic necessity but also a deeper recalibration of its post-imperial identity and regional status.

Eritrea occupies a different structural position: it is a highly centralized, militarized state whose external behavior is shaped by siege mentality and strategic opportunism. Rather than acting as a conventional spoiler, it behaves more like a calibrated balancer, intervening selectively in

regional conflicts to prevent encirclement and to maintain leverage over larger neighbors. Djibouti, by contrast, represents a form of “rentier geopolitics”: its limited territorial size is offset by its monopoly over access infrastructure and its ability to extract rents from competing external militaries and commercial actors. Its sovereignty is reinforced, paradoxically, by hosting multiple rival powers whose presence makes exclusion difficult and neutrality valuable.

Regional power dynamics are therefore not simply competitive but deeply entangled, with overlapping security dilemmas. Ethiopia’s search for maritime access intersects directly with Somali sovereignty sensitivities and with Eritrea’s historical control of Red Sea littorals. Somalia’s internal fragmentation creates opportunities for external actors to engage sub-national authorities, thereby further complicating federal consolidation. Sudan and South Sudan extend this system westward: Sudan’s ongoing civil war reflects a breakdown of the post-colonial state settlement, while South Sudan’s dependency on oil export routes through Sudan ties its stability to a neighbor it cannot fully control.

External actors intensify these dynamics not as detached influencers but as embedded participants in regional political economies. Gulf states are central here, but their involvement is better understood as differentiated rather than monolithic. Saudi Arabia’s primary concern is Red Sea security and the prevention of instability along its maritime flank, especially in the context of Yemen and broader regional rivalry with Iran. The United Arab Emirates operates more as a commercial-security hybrid actor, combining port infrastructure investment, logistics corridor development, and selective security partnerships that often bypass central governments in favor of sub-state entities. This creates a parallel geography of influence layered over official sovereignty. Qatar, while less militarily present, engages through diplomatic brokerage and selective alignment, often positioning itself in competitive mediation spaces where legitimacy and recognition are at stake.

The United States approaches the Horn through a dual logic of counterterrorism and strategic denial. Its posture is relatively light in terms of troop presence but heavy in intelligence, drone capability, and partner-force coordination, especially from its basing infrastructure in Djibouti. This reflects a broader shift from territorial containment to networked counterterrorism. China’s role is structurally different: it is primarily a long-horizon infrastructural and commercial actor, seeking to secure trade routes, stabilize supply chains, and reduce maritime vulnerability. Its base in Djibouti is less an expeditionary platform than a logistics assurance node within a wider Belt and Road system, signaling a transition from purely economic engagement to selective security presence.

European actors, particularly France and the European Union, operate within a residual but still meaningful strategic footprint. France maintains continuity through its military presence in Djibouti, reflecting both historical ties and Indo-Pacific-linked strategic recalibration. The EU, meanwhile, is primarily concerned with maritime security, migration flows across the Red Sea–Mediterranean system, and stabilization financing, making it a reactive rather than agenda-setting actor.

Turkey represents a newer form of middle-power engagement that blends humanitarian diplomacy, military training, and infrastructure investment. Its deep presence in Somalia is not

simply bilateral cooperation but an attempt to build durable strategic depth along key maritime corridors, often in subtle competition with Gulf actors rather than in direct confrontation with Western powers.

What emerges overall is not a region shaped by discrete conflicts or isolated states, but a densely layered geopolitical ecosystem. Internal political orders are fragmented yet functional in uneven ways; regional powers pursue overlapping security and status objectives; and external actors embed themselves into local systems through infrastructure, military presence, and financial dependence. The Horn of Africa is therefore less a periphery of global politics than a hinge space—one where maritime geography, fragile sovereignty, and great-power competition converge into a continuously shifting strategic equilibrium.

Analysts generally outline three broad trajectories. One is diplomatic de-escalation through renewed African Union or regional mediation, leading to confidence-building measures and reduced tensions. A second is intermittent cross-border clashes without full-scale war, driven by proxy activity and localized military incidents. A third, less likely but still possible scenario, is a broader multi-front conflict involving internal Ethiopian instability and external involvement, with severe regional consequences.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship remains structurally fragile because it is shaped by unresolved historical grievances, competing interpretations of sovereignty, and overlapping regional security rivalries. While full-scale war is not inevitable, the system is prone to repeated cycles of tension and partial stabilization. Sustained diplomacy, clearer security arrangements, and durable regional frameworks would be required to shift the relationship away from recurring instability.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea conundrum thus describes a persistent cycle of cooperation, conflict, and incomplete reconciliation between two deeply interconnected states. Their modern relationship is rooted in a shared revolutionary history, where Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation movements fought together against the Derg regime. This shared victory in 1991 created unusually close political and security ties between former allies who were suddenly turned into separate sovereign states after Eritrea's independence in 1993. In the early post-independence years, relations appeared cooperative, with economic and logistical integration still functioning informally across borders.

However, this fragile arrangement was not supported by strong or durable institutions within Ethiopia or between the two states. Ethiopia's post-revolution state-building process was heavily centralized and dominated by liberation-era elites, which limited the development of independent diplomatic, legal, and border-management institutions. As a result, interstate relations depended more on personal leadership dynamics and political trust than on stable rules or frameworks.

Tensions escalated into open war between 1998 and 2000, formally triggered by border disputes such as Badme, but driven more deeply by competing narratives of sovereignty, economic control, and post-war political authority. The conflict caused massive casualties and entrenched hostility between the two governments. Although the 2000 Algiers Agreement ended active fighting, it did not resolve the underlying disagreements in practice.

An international boundary commission ruling in 2002 awarded disputed territories to Eritrea, but Ethiopia's political system lacked either the institutional capacity or internal consensus to fully implement the decision. This gap between legal rulings and political execution reflected broader weaknesses in Ethiopia's state institutions, where foreign policy, security, and federal politics were often shaped by ruling-party structures rather than autonomous state systems. The result was a prolonged "no war, no peace" period lasting nearly two decades.

During this time, both countries remained heavily militarized along the border, while diplomatic engagement was minimal and inconsistent. In 2018, Ethiopia under new leadership rapidly moved to normalize relations with Eritrea, reopening borders and restoring diplomatic ties in a highly personalized and fast-moving political process. While this breakthrough appeared transformative, it again relied more on executive decision-making than on institutionalized reconciliation mechanisms.

The fragility of this settlement became evident during Ethiopia's internal war in Tigray (2020–2022), when Eritrea aligned militarily with the Ethiopian federal government against the TPLF. This alignment reflected older revolutionary-era alliances but also exposed how Ethiopia's internal institutional fragmentation—particularly within its federal structure and security apparatus—continued to shape regional dynamics. The Ethiopian state's difficulty in managing internal conflict in a coherent institutional manner spilled directly into its external relations.

After the Tigray peace agreement, Eritrea was largely excluded from the formal settlement process, which reintroduced mistrust and renewed strategic divergence. Underlying this instability are unresolved structural issues: disputed borders that remain politically sensitive, competing security doctrines, and growing tensions over Red Sea access and regional influence. At the same time, both states continue to be shaped by liberation-era political cultures, where legitimacy is closely tied to wartime history rather than institutional governance.

In this sense, the conundrum persists not only because of bilateral disputes, but also because of the uneven development and persistent weaknesses of Ethiopian state institutions, which have struggled to consistently translate legal agreements, political settlements, and regional strategy into durable, rule-based systems.

According to the article "Transcending the Ethio-Eritrean Conundrum: A Vision for a Better Tomorrow", moving beyond the Ethiopia–Eritrea stalemate requires more than diplomatic normalization; it requires building a fundamentally new framework of cooperation that acknowledges both deep interdependence and entrenched mistrust. The author argues that Ethiopia and Eritrea are too historically, socially, and economically intertwined to behave like ordinary neighboring states, yet also too distinct in identity and political experience to be realistically unified in the near term³

The central proposal is therefore not immediate unification, but gradual supranational integration built on carefully designed institutions. This would begin with economic

³ <https://eritrea-focus.org/transcending-the-ethio-eritrean-conundrum-a-vision-for-a-better-tomorrow/>).

cooperation—such as customs coordination, trade integration, and potentially shared infrastructure use—while ensuring that both states perceive tangible benefits. Over time, this could evolve into broader frameworks covering security coordination, political dialogue, and cultural exchange, designed to reduce mistrust and prevent recurring cycles of conflict.

A key idea is that past attempts at peace have failed because they relied too heavily on political goodwill between leaders rather than durable institutions. Without rules-based mechanisms, agreements have remained fragile and reversible. The vision therefore emphasizes building structured, treaty-based systems that can survive leadership changes and domestic political shifts in either country.

The proposal also stresses security cooperation as essential, given both countries' strong militarization and shared regional threats. Coordinated defense frameworks could help stabilize the Horn of Africa and reduce the risk of proxy conflicts or border escalations. Alongside this, cultural and social integration—through education, exchanges, and institutional cooperation—is seen as necessary to rebuild trust at the societal level after decades of hostility.

At the same time, the article recognizes major constraints: deep historical grievances, Eritrea's strong sense of separate national identity, and Ethiopia's political complexity and internal fragmentation. It argues that because neither full separation nor full political union is realistic, the only sustainable path lies between the two—what it frames as a structured, incremental supranational partnership.

In essence, “transcending the conundrum” means escaping the repeated cycle of war and uneasy peace by replacing informal, personality-driven relations with long-term institutions that manage interdependence, reduce insecurity, and create predictable cooperation.

Militarization and Security Anxiety

The Eritrean political system is heavily securitized. National service, centralized governance, and military mobilization remain core state instruments. Renewed Ethiopian rhetoric about Red Sea access has intensified Eritrean fears regarding territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Asmara approaches any renewed discussion of Assab or Massawa with a deep, almost visceral sensitivity, because for Eritrea these ports are not merely logistical assets but symbols of statehood forged through war, sacrifice, and the long-awaited recognition of sovereignty in 1993 and reaffirmed in the 2000 Algiers Agreement. To reopen these questions is, from the Eritrean vantage point, to unsettle the very constitutional and historical foundations upon which the state rests. It evokes memories of contested borders, shifting alliances, and decades of existential insecurity. This is why even technical conversations about port access or regional connectivity are interpreted through a defensive lens: they touch the nerve centre of Eritrea's national narrative, its hard-won independence, and its enduring fear of external encroachment. This framing is frequently noted in analyses such as those by the European External Action Service.

Economically, Eritrea remains suspended between strategic potential and structural stagnation. Its Red Sea coastline is one of the most valuable maritime corridors in the world, yet the country's internal economic architecture has not been able to convert geography into sustained

development. Infrastructure remains skeletal, industrial capacity shallow, and foreign investment constrained by political isolation and regulatory opacity. The financial system is only lightly connected to global markets, limiting credit, liquidity, and entrepreneurial dynamism. The persistent emigration of young Eritreans—one of the highest rates in the region—hollows out the labour force and erodes the country’s future productive base. Assab and Massawa, which could serve as regional gateways linking the Horn of Africa to global trade, instead stand as reminders of unrealised potential: underutilised, under-equipped, and overshadowed by the political anxieties that shape Eritrea’s external posture.

The regional environment further sharpens Eritrea’s sense of vulnerability. The Horn of Africa remains a theatre of overlapping crises: Sudan’s conflict continues to fragment the state and destabilise its borders; the aftermath of the Tigray war leaves unresolved tensions that could reignite; Somalia and Ethiopia are locked in disputes that reverberate across the region; Gulf rivalries spill into the Red Sea corridor; and the militarisation of the Red Sea introduces new layers of strategic competition. In such a volatile setting, even minor disputes risk being amplified by external actors seeking leverage, transforming local frictions into proxy confrontations. Reporting such as The Guardian has highlighted how the Red Sea basin increasingly functions as a geopolitical hinge where Middle Eastern, African, and global powers test influence, project force, and compete for maritime dominance.

Figure



Asmara’s defensiveness over Assab and Massawa deepens when viewed through the longer arc of Eritrea’s political psychology. The state was born from a liberation struggle that fused territory, identity, and sovereignty into a single, indivisible narrative; thus, any external reference to its ports is interpreted not as a neutral observation but as a potential reopening of wounds Eritrea considers definitively closed. The ports are woven into the mythology of national endurance: they symbolise the coastline defended at immense human cost, the maritime frontier that affirmed Eritrea’s separateness, and the geopolitical asset that neighbouring states once contested. This is why even diplomatic language about “regional access” or “shared infrastructure” triggers a reflexive tightening in Asmara’s posture. It is not

the content of the proposals that alarms Eritrea, but the precedent they might set—an erosion, however subtle, of the principle that its sovereignty is non-negotiable. Analyses by institutions such as the European External Action Service often underline this sensitivity, noting how Eritrea reads regional initiatives through the prism of historical encirclement.

Economically, the country remains trapped in a paradox: a coastline of extraordinary strategic value paired with an internal system that struggles to mobilise its advantages. The infrastructure deficit is not merely physical but institutional—roads, power grids, and port facilities lag behind regional standards, but so do regulatory frameworks, investment guarantees, and mechanisms for financial intermediation. The state's preference for autarkic control limits the inflow of capital and technology, while the exodus of young Eritreans steadily erodes the human capital base required for industrial take-off. The result is an economy that survives rather than expands, where Assab and Massawa function as symbols of potential rather than engines of growth. Their underutilisation reflects a deeper structural hesitation: to open them fully would require a degree of economic and political permeability that Eritrea has long resisted.

The regional environment magnifies these internal dilemmas. The Horn of Africa remains a mosaic of unresolved conflicts, shifting alliances, and external interventions. Sudan's fragmentation creates a corridor of instability stretching from the Sahel to the Red Sea; the post-Tigray landscape leaves Ethiopia internally unsettled and regionally assertive; Somalia and Ethiopia's disputes reverberate across security architectures; and Gulf states project influence across the Red Sea with increasing assertiveness. The militarisation of the Red Sea—through naval deployments, base construction, and strategic partnerships—adds yet another layer of complexity. In such a setting, Eritrea perceives itself as both exposed and indispensable: exposed because instability can spill across borders with little warning, indispensable because its coastline sits at the crossroads of global maritime competition. Reporting such as The Guardian has highlighted how the Red Sea basin has become a geopolitical hinge where African, Middle Eastern, and global powers test influence and recalibrate their strategies.

Intra-state and Inter-state conflicts in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is characterised by a complex mix of **intra-state conflicts** (conflicts occurring within states between governments, armed groups, communities, or regions) and **inter-state conflicts** (conflicts between sovereign states). In practice, the distinction is often blurred because domestic conflicts frequently spill across borders, drawing in neighbouring governments, militias, and external powers.

Intra-state conflicts

In Somalia, the most significant intra-state conflict remains the long-running insurgency involving the federal government and Al-Shabaab. Alongside this are tensions between the federal government and regional states, as well as disputes over authority, resources, and constitutional arrangements. Clan-based conflicts and local competition over land, water, and political representation further complicate the security landscape.

In Ethiopia, conflict has been driven by tensions between the federal government and regional actors, most notably the war in Tigray, as well as subsequent violence in Amhara and Oromia. These conflicts reflect deeper disputes over federalism, state authority, ethnic representation, and resource allocation. Localised communal violence and competition over administrative boundaries have also become recurring features of the political landscape.

In Sudan, the current conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces represents one of the region's most severe civil wars. It reflects broader struggles over state control, political transition, economic resources, and military power. Regional conflicts in Darfur, Kordofan, and other peripheral areas have historically reinforced these national-level tensions.

In South Sudan, conflict has centred on competition among political and military elites, often taking on ethnic dimensions. Although peace agreements have reduced large-scale fighting at times, local violence, militia activity, cattle raiding, and disputes over political power continue to threaten stability.

Although often viewed as highly stable internally, Eritrea faces latent tensions related to political exclusion, militarisation, and the absence of formal political competition. Open armed conflict is limited, but governance remains highly centralised and securitised.

In Kenya, conflicts are generally lower intensity but include electoral violence, communal clashes, pastoralist conflicts, and disputes over land and resources, particularly in northern and coastal regions.

Intra-state and interstate conflicts in the Horn of Africa

The most historically significant inter-state conflict in the region is the Eritrean–Ethiopian War between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Although formal peace was reached in 2018, tensions over borders, regional influence, and security continue to shape relations.

Relations between Ethiopia and Somalia have periodically been marked by military intervention, cross-border insurgency concerns, and disputes linked to Somali nationalism and regional security. While outright interstate warfare is not ongoing, security relations remain sensitive.

Sudan and South Sudan have experienced repeated disputes over borders, oil resources, citizenship issues, and territory, particularly around Abyei and other contested areas. These tensions have periodically brought the two states close to interstate confrontation.

Recent tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia over Ethiopia's search for maritime access and agreements involving Somaliland demonstrate how questions of sovereignty, recognition, and access to the Red Sea can generate interstate friction even when open warfare is avoided.

Many of the Horn's conflicts are neither purely internal nor purely interstate. Instead, they are **regionalised conflicts** that cross borders through refugee flows, arms trafficking, insurgent movements, and external intervention.

The conflict in Somalia affects Kenya and Ethiopia through militant activity and refugee movements. Sudan's war has regional implications for Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Ethiopia's internal conflicts have affected Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia through military involvement, migration, and political realignments.

Climate change further intensifies these dynamics by increasing competition over water, pasture, and land in border regions. Pastoral communities often move across national frontiers in response to drought, creating tensions that can escalate into violence when governance mechanisms are weak.

From a regional political economy perspective, many conflicts in the Horn stem from four interconnected structural issues: contested state formation, uneven economic development, competition over resources and identity, and external geopolitical intervention. Weak integration between states, combined with strong cross-border social and economic networks, means that instability rarely remains confined within national borders.

As a result, the Horn's security challenges are best understood not as separate national crises but as components of an interconnected regional conflict system in which intra-state and inter-state dynamics continually reinforce one another.

Table

Country / Conflict Arena	Main Intra-State Conflict Drivers	Main Inter-State Dimensions	Sources of Enmity	Peacebuilding Priorities
Ethiopia	Federal–regional tensions, ethnic mobilisation, competition over power and territory, insurgencies	Tensions with Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan over security, borders, and access routes	Historical grievances, contested narratives of statehood, unequal development, identity politics	National dialogue, constitutional reform, inter-regional economic integration, local peace mechanisms, shared infrastructure projects
Somalia	Insurgency, clan competition, centre–periphery disputes	Security tensions with Ethiopia and Kenya, sovereignty disputes	Weak state legitimacy, exclusion, competition over resources and representation	Inclusive federal settlement, local reconciliation, economic development, coordinated

				regional security cooperation
Eritrea	Limited internal political participation, highly centralised governance	Historical rivalry with Ethiopia, Red Sea security competition	Militarisation, historical war memories, strategic isolation	Gradual regional economic opening, confidence-building measures, cross-border trade and mobility
Sudan	Civil war, centre–periphery inequalities, military competition	Border disputes with South Sudan, regional intervention	Competition for political authority, resource control, armed patronage networks	Ceasefire enforcement, power-sharing arrangements, decentralisation, reconstruction and livelihood recovery
South Sudan	Elite rivalry, ethnic mobilisation, local violence	Border and oil disputes with Sudan	Weak institutions, patronage politics, resource competition	Institutional strengthening, local peace agreements, oil revenue transparency, cross-border cooperation
Kenya	Electoral tensions, communal violence, pastoral conflicts	Security concerns linked to Somalia	Marginalisation, land disputes, unequal development	Electoral reform, local conflict resolution, regional economic integration, pastoral cooperation mechanisms
Djibouti	Limited political competition	Strategic competition linked to foreign	Rent concentration, geopolitical rivalries	Regional economic cooperation, governance

		military presence		reforms, balanced external partnerships

Ethiopia: The Regional Centre of Gravity

Ethiopia is the pivotal state in the Horn. Almost every major regional issue—trade corridors, migration, energy interconnection, water politics, and security cooperation—passes through Ethiopia in some form. Consequently, Ethiopia's internal conflicts are rarely domestic issues alone.

Federal-regional tensions, especially around questions of autonomy, identity, and resource allocation, have implications for neighbouring states because ethnic groups, trade networks, and pastoral communities frequently cross borders. Conflict weakens infrastructure investment, disrupts regional trade routes, and increases refugee movements. Conversely, a stable Ethiopia could become the economic engine of regional integration through manufacturing, energy exports, and transport corridors.

The principal implication is that Ethiopia's long-term stability is inseparable from wider Horn stability.

Somalia: The Challenge of Fragmented Sovereignty

Somalia illustrates how weak state institutions can transform local disputes into regional security concerns. The persistence of insurgency and contested federal arrangements limits state capacity while creating opportunities for transnational armed groups.

Because Somalia occupies a strategic maritime position, instability affects not only neighbouring countries but also international shipping and Red Sea security. Ethiopia and Kenya remain deeply invested in Somali stability because insecurity frequently spills across borders.

The key implication is that Somalia's reconstruction is fundamentally a regional project. No domestic settlement is likely to endure without sustained regional cooperation.

Eritrea: Security Through Militarisation

Eritrea represents a different model. Rather than fragmentation, it has achieved stability through highly centralised authority and extensive militarisation. While this has prevented large-scale internal conflict, it has also limited political participation and economic diversification.

The country's strategic position on the Red Sea gives it leverage beyond its size. Relations with Ethiopia, Gulf states, and Red Sea powers significantly affect regional alignments.

The implication is that Eritrea's future role will largely depend on whether it remains a security-focused state or gradually transitions toward economic integration and regional connectivity.

Sudan and South Sudan: Conflict Systems Rather Than Separate Conflicts

Sudan and South Sudan illustrate how state crises can become mutually reinforcing. Border disputes, oil dependencies, armed patronage networks, and unresolved questions of citizenship and sovereignty link the two countries closely.

The conflict in Sudan is not simply a national civil war. It affects migration routes, arms flows, food security, and economic systems across the entire Horn. Similarly, South Sudan's internal instability affects neighbouring economies and security environments.

The implication is that peace initiatives must address the wider political economy of the region rather than treating conflicts as isolated national problems.

Kenya: The Regional Stabiliser

Kenya occupies a unique position as the Horn's most diversified economy and one of its most institutionalised political systems. While electoral tensions and local conflicts persist, state institutions remain relatively resilient.

Kenya functions as a diplomatic hub, commercial gateway, and financial centre linking the Horn to global markets. Regional integration projects often depend on Kenyan infrastructure, investment, and political mediation.

The implication is that Kenya's stability contributes disproportionately to regional resilience and economic integration.

Djibouti: Strategic Geography as Political Economy

Djibouti demonstrates how geography can shape governance. The country's economy is built around ports, logistics, and foreign military facilities. This generates substantial revenues but also creates dependence on external rents.

Its importance stems less from domestic politics than from its role as Ethiopia's principal maritime outlet and a focal point for international military presence.

The implication is that Djibouti's future stability depends on balancing geopolitical competition while maintaining its position as a regional logistics hub.

Regional Implications: Why These Conflicts Matter Together

Viewed collectively, these conflicts reveal four major regional fault lines.

The first is the unresolved question of state formation. Across the Horn, governments continue to struggle with balancing central authority and local autonomy, producing recurring disputes over identity, representation, and sovereignty.

The second is uneven economic development. Growth is concentrated around ports, capitals, and strategic corridors, while peripheral regions often remain politically and economically marginalised. This creates fertile ground for insurgency and communal conflict.

The third is the persistence of cross-border conflict systems. Refugees, insurgents, arms trafficking networks, and pastoral mobility link domestic conflicts across national boundaries. Few security problems remain confined within a single state.

The fourth is external geopolitical competition. Gulf states, China, the United States, the European Union, and other actors increasingly shape local incentives through investments, military partnerships, and diplomatic engagement.

The central lesson is that development and peace are inseparable in the Horn. Infrastructure without political inclusion can intensify competition over resources. Security without economic opportunity can produce temporary stability but not durable peace. Democratisation without state capacity can deepen fragmentation.

The most promising path forward is a model of **regional developmental integration**, where transport corridors, energy grids, digital infrastructure, trade facilitation, and climate adaptation projects create mutual dependencies across borders. Such interdependence raises the costs of conflict while increasing the benefits of cooperation.

In this sense, the future of the Horn depends less on resolving individual conflicts than on transforming the incentives that sustain them. The ultimate challenge is moving from a region organised around security competition and fragmented state-building toward one organised around shared prosperity, institutional cooperation, and interconnected development.

Softening Enmities: A Theoretical Perspective

Conflict research suggests that durable peace emerges not simply from ending violence but from transforming the incentives that sustain hostility. In the Horn, enmities are often rooted in historical memories, unequal development, identity-based exclusion, and geopolitical competition. These drivers operate simultaneously at local, national, and regional levels.

One approach comes from **contact theory**, which argues that sustained interaction under conditions of equality reduces prejudice and mistrust. In the Horn, this implies expanding cross-border markets, educational exchanges, professional networks, and infrastructure corridors. When communities depend on one another economically, hostile narratives become more difficult to sustain.

A second perspective comes from **liberal peace theory**, which emphasizes institutions and interdependence. Trade corridors connecting Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan can transform borders from security frontiers into economic assets. The greater the costs of conflict, the stronger the incentives for cooperation.

A third approach derives from **political settlement theory**, which argues that peace requires broadening access to power. Many conflicts in the Horn persist because groups perceive themselves as excluded from political and economic opportunities. Durable peace therefore

requires inclusive institutions that distribute authority and resources more equitably across regions and communities.

A fourth perspective comes from **historical reconciliation approaches**, which emphasize recognition of past grievances. Many regional disputes are sustained by competing memories of conquest, marginalisation, civil war, or external intervention. Acknowledging these experiences does not resolve conflicts automatically, but it can reduce the symbolic foundations of enmity.

The strongest long-term pathway toward peace is likely to be regional integration. Historically, the Horn's borders have divided populations that remain socially and economically interconnected. Pastoralists, traders, migrants, and families often operate across national boundaries regardless of formal state borders.

Expanding transport corridors, energy interconnections, digital infrastructure, and customs harmonisation can create mutual dependencies that make conflict increasingly costly. A trader in Mogadishu, a farmer in Oromia, a logistics operator in Djibouti, and a pastoralist in northern Kenya all benefit from stable regional relationships.

The African Union and IGAD can play a crucial role by providing forums where states cooperate on practical issues such as water management, migration, climate adaptation, and maritime security. Cooperation around shared challenges often builds trust more effectively than abstract diplomatic declarations.

The EU, US, and Gulf states can contribute by supporting regional public goods rather than competing patronage networks. Joint investments in ports, railways, renewable energy, education, and disaster response systems can create incentives for cooperation across borders.

Rather than backing individual factions or governments, external actors should prioritise projects that require collaboration among multiple states. Regional electricity grids, climate adaptation programs, and maritime security initiatives create practical reasons for governments to work together even when political relations remain strained.

The central challenge in the Horn is that political boundaries often separate societies that remain economically, culturally, and historically interconnected. Lasting peace therefore depends less on eliminating disagreement and more on creating institutions that allow competition to occur without violence.

In the long run, peace is most likely when states see greater benefits from cooperation than confrontation, when citizens have a stake in regional prosperity, and when political systems become sufficiently inclusive that grievances can be expressed through institutions rather than armed conflict. The path forward is not merely conflict resolution but the gradual construction of a more interconnected regional order in which security, development, and governance reinforce one another.

The Drought Situation in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa—mainly Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Eritrea—is one of the most drought-prone regions in the world. Recurrent droughts are not rare shocks but a structural feature of the climate, shaped by highly variable rainfall, rising temperatures, and long-term climate change.

Because of this, drought is not treated only as an emergency. It is also a long-term governance challenge that affects food security, water access, livelihoods, and conflict dynamics.

Drought governance operates through three interconnected levels. At the national level, each government designs and implements its own drought response systems. These usually include early warning mechanisms that track rainfall and food insecurity, disaster risk management institutions, social protection programs such as cash or food assistance, and investments in water infrastructure and irrigation. However, the effectiveness of these systems varies significantly depending on state capacity and stability.

At the regional level, coordination is led by the **IGAD**, which supports cooperation between countries. IGAD facilitates the sharing of early warning information, coordinates cross-border pastoral mobility, and promotes regional resilience strategies aimed at reducing conflict and improving food security. This level is particularly important because pastoral communities often move livestock across borders in response to drought conditions.

At the international level, drought governance is strongly supported by humanitarian and development actors. United Nations agencies, international NGOs, and donor governments provide emergency food aid, water access, nutrition support, and funding for resilience-building programs. In countries such as Somalia and parts of Ethiopia, these external actors play a central role in responding to severe drought crises.

Across all countries in the Horn of Africa, drought policy tends to rely on a combination of early warning systems, food security monitoring, and rapid humanitarian response mechanisms. Governments and partners also invest in cash transfer programs to support vulnerable households during drought periods, alongside water infrastructure projects such as boreholes, small dams, and irrigation schemes. In pastoral areas, policies increasingly focus on protecting livestock-based livelihoods through veterinary services, feed distribution, and support for mobility. Over time, there has also been a growing emphasis on climate resilience programs that aim to reduce long-term vulnerability rather than only responding to crises.

The main challenge in the region is not the absence of drought policies, but the gap between policy design and implementation. Limited financial and technical capacity constrains governments' ability to respond effectively. In some areas, conflict and political instability further weaken institutions and disrupt service delivery. Coordination between national governments, regional bodies, and international partners can also be inconsistent, which reduces overall efficiency. At the same time, climate shocks are becoming more frequent and severe, often outpacing the speed of adaptation.

Drought governance in the Horn of Africa is best understood as a hybrid system that combines national policy frameworks, regional coordination through IGAD, and extensive international humanitarian support. The region is gradually moving from reactive emergency response

toward more proactive resilience-building, but this transition is uneven and still incomplete across countries.

Table

Country	Governance model	Key institutions	Main anti-drought policies	Strengths	Weaknesses
<i>ET Ethiopia</i>	Centralized + large state programs	National Disaster Risk Management Commission	Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), irrigation expansion, food security systems	Strong nationwide safety net; large-scale coordination	Conflict in regions reduces effectiveness; climate + political shocks overlap
<i>KE Kenya</i>	Decentralized (county-based system)	National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) + county governments	Early warning systems, drought cycle management, livestock insurance	Good early warning systems; innovative insurance schemes	Uneven capacity across counties; pastoral areas still crisis-prone
<i>SO Somalia</i>	Fragmented federal system + heavy external support	Federal + regional governments + UN/NGOs	Humanitarian relief, emergency food aid, early warning (limited coverage)	Strong international humanitarian response networks	Weak state capacity; conflict + insecurity limit implementation
<i>DJ Djibouti</i>	Centralized, small-state governance	Ministry of Agriculture + water authorities	Water infrastructure (desalination, groundwater), food import reliance	Better infrastructure per capita; easier coordination	Extremely resource-limited; high dependence on imports and aid
<i>ER Eritrea</i>	Highly centralized, state-controlled system	Government ministries (limited external visibility)	Water harvesting (terracing, dams), rural water conservation	Strong focus on local water retention systems	Limited transparency; restricted international cooperation; data gaps

The main difficulty in drought governance in the Horn of Africa is not the absence of policies, but persistent implementation gaps. These gaps arise from limited funding and weak infrastructure, political instability and conflict in several areas, uneven coordination between national governments and regional institutions, and climate shocks that are increasingly frequent and severe, often outpacing the speed at which adaptation measures can be rolled out.

Limited funding remains a structural constraint. Many governments in the region have small fiscal bases and high competing priorities, which means drought preparedness systems such as irrigation expansion, water storage, and social protection programs are often underfunded or dependent on external donors. Infrastructure challenges reinforce this problem, particularly in rural and pastoral areas where roads, water systems, and market access are weak, making it harder to deliver assistance quickly during drought crises.

Political instability and conflict further undermine drought governance. In fragile contexts such as parts of Somalia and regions of Ethiopia, insecurity can restrict humanitarian access, disrupt state institutions, and force populations into displacement, which increases vulnerability to food insecurity. Even where policies exist, they are often difficult to implement consistently in contested or unstable.

Coordination gaps between national governments, regional bodies such as the IGAD, and international actors also reduce effectiveness. Early warning systems and response mechanisms exist, but data sharing, joint planning, and rapid operational alignment are not always seamless. This can lead to delays, duplication of efforts, or uneven coverage of assistance across borders and regions.

Climate shocks in the Horn of Africa—especially repeated droughts, floods, and extreme heat—do not directly cause armed conflict, but they significantly increase the likelihood of violence by stressing already fragile political and economic systems in countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan.

The main mechanism is that climate stress acts as a “threat multiplier.” When drought reduces pasture, water, and crop yields, competition over scarce resources intensifies, particularly in pastoral and agro-pastoral regions. This can raise tensions between herders and farmers, or between different pastoral groups, especially where customary systems for managing disputes are weakened or no longer function effectively.

At the household level, repeated climate shocks can destroy livelihoods by killing livestock or ruining harvests. In areas with limited state support or economic alternatives, this loss of income can increase vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups or local militias. Armed actors may take advantage of this by offering food, money, or protection, embedding themselves more deeply in local economies affected by climate stress.

Climate shocks also expose weaknesses in state capacity. Governments often struggle to deliver timely aid, water, or security during crises, and when responses are slow or uneven, communities may turn to local powerholders or armed groups that fill the gap. This can deepen fragmentation and reduce trust in central authorities, particularly in places with ongoing instability such as Somalia and parts of Ethiopia.

Displacement is another important pathway. Droughts and floods force people to move in search of water, pasture, or livelihoods. When large numbers of displaced people enter areas already occupied by other communities, competition over land and resources can increase, sometimes escalating into violence. This is especially sensitive in regions where cross-border pastoral mobility has traditionally been essential but is now more restricted or politicized.

Climate shocks also affect urban areas indirectly by disrupting national food systems and driving up prices. Rising food costs can contribute to urban unrest or protests, particularly where governments are already under political pressure.

Overall, climate stress rarely creates entirely new conflicts on its own. Instead, it interacts with existing political, ethnic, and security tensions, amplifying them. In Somalia, for example, drought conditions intersect with the presence of Al-Shabaab, while in Ethiopia and Sudan, climate pressures compound ongoing political fragmentation and armed competition. The result is not climate-driven war in isolation, but a higher probability that existing disputes escalate into sustained violence.

In summary, climate shocks themselves are becoming more intense and less predictable, which places additional pressure on already stretched systems. Repeated failed rainy seasons mean that recovery periods are shorter, leaving households and institutions less time to rebuild resilience before the next drought arrives.

How the EU and the UN can address these gaps

The European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) play a central role in strengthening drought governance in the Horn of Africa, but their effectiveness depends on shifting from short-term humanitarian response toward more integrated resilience-building.

For funding and infrastructure gaps, the EU and UN can prioritize multi-year financing instead of short emergency cycles. This allows governments and partners to invest in long-term systems such as irrigation networks, groundwater management, climate-resilient agriculture, and rural roads. Supporting locally led infrastructure projects is especially important because they reduce logistical bottlenecks during crises and strengthen market access in drought-prone areas.

To address political instability and conflict-related barriers, UN agencies and EU programs increasingly link drought resilience with peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive development. This includes supporting mediation over natural resource use, such as grazing land and water access, and ensuring that aid delivery does not reinforce existing tensions. In fragile areas like Somalia, coordinated UN humanitarian access frameworks help maintain delivery even when state capacity is limited.

For coordination problems, the EU and UN can strengthen the role of regional institutions such as IGAD by investing in shared early warning systems, standardized data platforms, and joint response mechanisms. When countries use compatible drought monitoring tools and share data in real time, it becomes easier to anticipate crises and coordinate cross-border responses, especially for mobile pastoral populations.

Finally, to respond to accelerating climate shocks, both the EU and UN can support climate adaptation at scale, focusing on anticipatory action rather than reactive aid. This includes “early action financing” that releases funds before drought peaks, scaling up climate-smart agriculture, expanding drought insurance schemes, and integrating climate risk into national planning systems.

Strengthening drought governance in the Horn of Africa requires moving beyond fragmented emergency responses toward a coordinated resilience system. The EU and UN are most effective when they combine predictable long-term financing, support for regional coordination through IGAD, conflict-sensitive programming, and early climate action that reduces the need for repeated humanitarian intervention.

The Dynamics of Horn of Africa and Red Sea security complex

The Horn of Africa is widely considered a regional security complex in international relations theory, meaning that its security dynamics are deeply interconnected and cannot be understood at the level of individual states alone.

In this sense, the Horn of Africa—comprising states such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, and often neighboring Kenya and South Sudan—is characterized by a tightly linked system of security interdependence. Conflicts, alliances, and crises in one country routinely spill across borders and reshape the security environment of the entire region.

This classification as a security complex is based on the fact that threats in the region are predominantly regional rather than purely global. Issues such as civil wars, border disputes, insurgencies, maritime insecurity in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and competition over strategic infrastructure are all deeply interwoven. As a result, no single state can achieve lasting security in isolation, since instability in one part of the system quickly affects all others.

A defining feature of the Horn of Africa security complex is the persistence of historical mistrust between neighboring states, often shaped by unresolved border issues, competing geopolitical narratives, and fragile institutional capacity. These tensions are reinforced by the strategic importance of the region’s location, particularly its proximity to key global shipping routes linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea.

External actors further intensify this dynamic by engaging with multiple states simultaneously, sometimes reinforcing rivalries through competing partnerships, security cooperation, and infrastructure investments. This creates overlapping layers of influence that can either stabilize or destabilize the region depending on how they are managed.

Table

Feature of Security Complex	How It Appears in the Horn of Africa (e.g., Ethiopia context)	Implications	Actionable Insights
Security interdependence	Conflicts in Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea rapidly spill across borders	No state can secure itself independently	Build formal regional security coordination mechanisms
Geographic proximity	Dense clustering of states around Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Nile basin	High transmission speed of instability	Prioritize border governance + early-warning systems
Historical enmity	Ethiopia–Eritrea tensions, Somalia fragmentation, Sudan civil conflicts	Trust deficit drives recurring crises	Invest in long-term reconciliation institutions
Cross-border insurgencies	Movements like Al-Shabaab operating across Somalia and neighbors	Non-state actors regionalize insecurity	Strengthen joint counterterrorism frameworks
External power involvement	EU, Gulf states, China, US engaging multiple actors simultaneously	External competition amplifies local rivalries	Harmonize external engagement through AU-led frameworks
Strategic chokepoints	Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden maritime corridor	Global trade interest increases militarization risk	Promote cooperative maritime governance
State fragility asymmetry	Some states weak institutions (Somalia), others stronger (Ethiopia, Djibouti)	Power imbalance creates instability cycles	Support capacity-building in weaker states
Militarized security logic	Reliance on military responses to political disputes	Escalation risk remains high	Shift toward economic statecraft + diplomacy
Economic interdependence (low/moderate)	Trade corridors often politicized, limited integration	Economic ties insufficient to deter conflict	Expand regional infrastructure + trade integration
Institutional gaps	AU, IGAD exist but enforcement weak	Regional mechanisms underpowered	Strengthen binding dispute-resolution systems

Identity and narrative politics	Historical grievances shape policy choices	Perception drives escalation more than material gains	Promote narrative reconciliation programs
Zero-sum geopolitical framing	Ports, access, and corridors seen as strategic competition	Infrastructure becomes contested rather than shared	Reframe infrastructure as shared regional asset

Within this framework, the security of each state is closely tied to the behavior of its neighbors, making regional cooperation not optional but structurally necessary. This is why mechanisms such as collective security arrangements, regional integration initiatives, and diplomatic coordination are consistently emphasized in policy discussions about the Horn of Africa.

Ultimately, viewing the Horn of Africa as a security complex highlights a central reality: sustainable peace cannot be achieved through unilateral strategies, but only through coordinated regional frameworks that address political, economic, and security issues simultaneously.

The Horn of Africa functions as a tightly coupled Regional Security Complex, where security outcomes are co-produced by all actors rather than determined individually. Stability therefore depends less on unilateral strength and more on institutionalized cooperation, economic integration, and managed interdependence.

In this environment, states like Ethiopia cannot optimize security in isolation; they must operate within regional systems of trust, infrastructure sharing, and diplomatic coordination to achieve durable stability.

The Horn of Africa functions as a tightly interconnected Regional Security Complex, meaning that instability in one part of the system rapidly affects surrounding states and external powers. This structural reality shapes the strategic behavior of key actors across the Red Sea and adjacent regions. Saudi Arabia views the Horn as an extension of its maritime security environment due to its proximity across the Red Sea.

Security developments in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia directly influence Saudi concerns over shipping routes and regional stability. The Bab el-Mandeb corridor is particularly important for Saudi trade and energy exports. As a result, Saudi policy emphasizes maritime security and the containment of regional instability. However, fragmented competition with other external actors can unintentionally intensify local rivalries. Egypt approaches the Horn primarily through the lens of Nile basin security and water resource management. Developments in Ethiopia, particularly regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, influence Egyptian strategic calculations. Sudan's internal instability also has direct implications for Egyptian border security. Because of these interdependencies, Egypt's security environment is deeply linked to broader regional dynamics.

A useful way to analyze regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa is through a comparative matrix that examines how major security drivers affect the strategic interests and autonomy of Ethiopia, the European Union, and Saudi Arabia. Such a framework highlights both convergences and divergences in their regional objectives.

Cross-Tabulation of Regional Security Dynamics in the Horn of Africa

Regional Security Dynamic	Implications for Ethiopia	Implications for EU	Implications for Saudi Arabia
Interstate Rivalries	Necessitates balancing relations with neighbors while preserving regional leadership ambitions. Ethiopia seeks strategic autonomy by avoiding excessive dependence on any external actor.	Creates instability affecting migration, trade, and regional security partnerships. The EU favors diplomatic conflict prevention and regional cooperation.	Threatens Red Sea stability and maritime security. Saudi Arabia seeks a stable regional order to protect economic and security interests.
Internal Armed Conflicts	Risks state fragmentation, economic disruption, and reduced regional influence. Strengthens Ethiopian emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference.	Generates humanitarian crises and complicates governance and peacebuilding programs.	Can produce spillover effects across the Red Sea and create opportunities for rival powers to expand influence.
Terrorism and Violent Extremism	Sustains Ethiopia's role as a regional security provider while justifying strong state security institutions.	Supports EU priorities in counterterrorism and stabilization, especially regarding Al-Shabaab.	Creates security threats to Red Sea trade routes and broader regional stability.

Refugee and Migration Flows	Creates social and economic pressures while also enhancing Ethiopia's strategic importance as a host and transit country.	Directly linked to migration governance and border-management objectives.	Less directly affected but concerned with broader regional instability and labor mobility dynamics.
Red Sea Militarization	Creates opportunities for diplomatic leverage but also increases geopolitical competition around Ethiopia's maritime ambitions.	Challenges EU efforts to maintain open sea lanes and regional stability.	Central strategic concern because Red Sea security is directly linked to Saudi national security and economic diversification goals.
Gulf-State Competition	Provides Ethiopia with opportunities to diversify partnerships and reduce dependence on Western donors.	Reduces EU leverage as alternative sources of finance and political support become available.	Encourages Saudi Arabia to compete diplomatically and economically with regional and external actors.
Chinese Economic Expansion	Expands infrastructure financing options and strengthens Ethiopia's strategic autonomy.	Challenges traditional European influence and development models.	Creates incentives for Saudi Arabia to deepen its own economic engagement in the Horn.
Climate and Resource Insecurity	Intensifies domestic vulnerabilities and cross-border tensions over water, food security, and displacement.	Expands demand for humanitarian assistance and climate adaptation programs.	Increases concerns regarding food security, agricultural investment, and regional stability.
Weak Regional Institutions	Limits collective conflict-management capacity and	Reduces effectiveness of EU support for regional	Encourages Saudi Arabia to pursue bilateral rather than

	increases reliance on ad hoc diplomacy.	governance frameworks.	multilateral approaches.

Regional Security Dynamics and Strategic Autonomy

The Horn of Africa has increasingly evolved into what scholars describe as a regional security complex, where the security of individual states cannot be understood independently of the security of neighboring states. Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Red Sea actors are interconnected through conflict spillovers, migration flows, economic interdependence, and geopolitical competition. This interconnectedness creates both constraints and opportunities for strategic autonomy.

For Ethiopia, strategic autonomy has become a central organizing principle of foreign policy. Historically, Ethiopian governments have sought to preserve sovereignty by preventing excessive dependence on external powers. The diversification of partnerships with China, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Russia reflects a deliberate strategy to maximize diplomatic flexibility. The experience of the Tigray War reinforced this approach by demonstrating the risks associated with dependence on a narrow set of international partners. As a result, Ethiopia increasingly pursues a hedging strategy that balances relationships among competing external actors while maintaining decision-making autonomy.

The European Union faces a different challenge. Unlike Ethiopia, the EU's strategic autonomy in the Horn is not primarily about sovereignty but about maintaining influence in an increasingly crowded geopolitical environment. During the 1990s and 2000s, European development assistance, humanitarian aid, and governance programs provided significant leverage. Today, however, regional governments possess greater freedom to choose among multiple external partners. Consequently, the EU must adapt from a position of relative dominance to one of competitive engagement. This requires greater reliance on partnerships with regional organizations such as Intergovernmental Authority on Development and increased sensitivity to regional priorities.

Saudi Arabia's strategic autonomy is closely linked to the security of the Red Sea. The Kingdom increasingly views the Horn of Africa as an extension of its own security environment. Instability in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, or Yemen can directly affect Saudi economic interests, maritime trade routes, and national security. Unlike the EU, Saudi Arabia generally avoids extensive governance conditionality and instead relies on investment, diplomacy, and security cooperation. This approach allows Riyadh to maintain flexibility while expanding its regional influence.

The Strategic Triangle: Ethiopia–EU–Saudi Arabia

The interaction among Ethiopia, the EU, and Saudi Arabia can be conceptualized as a strategic triangle characterized by both cooperation and competition.

Ethiopia seeks external partnerships that support economic development while preserving political autonomy. The EU seeks stability, migration management, and governance reforms. Saudi Arabia prioritizes Red Sea security, regional stability, and economic connectivity.

These objectives overlap in areas such as conflict prevention, infrastructure development, and economic growth. However, they diverge regarding governance, conditionality, and regional influence. The EU often links assistance to political reforms and human rights considerations, whereas Saudi Arabia generally emphasizes pragmatic cooperation. Ethiopia leverages these differences to increase its bargaining power and reduce vulnerability to external pressure.

A key theoretical implication is that the Horn of Africa is no longer adequately explained through donor-recipient frameworks. Instead, it should be understood as a competitive geopolitical arena in which regional actors possess significant agency. Ethiopia is not merely responding to external influence; it is actively shaping the regional order by balancing competing powers. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and the EU are not simply projecting influence but are adapting to a regional environment increasingly defined by local actors and regional institutions.

This suggests a shift from **external governance** to **negotiated governance**, where outcomes emerge through bargaining among regional states, regional organizations, and multiple external powers. Strategic autonomy therefore becomes both a goal and a mechanism through which actors navigate an increasingly multipolar Horn of Africa.

5. The Red Sea

The Red Sea is a semi-enclosed, strategically significant international sea route that functions as a critical corridor for global shipping and energy transport. It is defined primarily by its geographic position between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and by its dependence on two governing chokepoints that regulate maritime access and throughput capacity.

To the north, it connects through the Suez Canal, which links it directly to the Mediterranean Sea and, by extension, European maritime trade systems. To the south, it is bounded by the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which provides access to the Gulf of Aden and onward into the wider Indian Ocean basin. This dual-chokepoint structure means the Red Sea is often classified in maritime security and logistics frameworks as a high-sensitivity bottleneck corridor, where disruption at either end can significantly affect intercontinental trade flows.

Before the rise of the Roman Empire, competition around the Red Sea already involved the early Nile valley states, Nubian kingdoms, and the emerging highland power of Kingdom of Aksum.

In the Nile valley, Pharaonic Egypt maintained early trade links with the Red Sea coast, sending expeditions for incense, gold, and exotic goods from Punt, a region often associated with parts of the Horn of Africa. These expeditions were less about territorial control of the Red Sea and more about securing long-distance trade routes through ports and desert corridors.

To the south of Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush in what is now Sudan developed as a powerful rival state, controlling Nile trade routes that linked inner Africa with the Mediterranean world. Kush sometimes competed with Egypt for influence over border regions and trade networks, and at other times cooperated through exchange and cultural interaction.

Further southeast, early polities in the region of modern Ethiopia and the Eritrean highlands began developing long-distance trade connections across the Red Sea and inland routes, laying foundations for later Aksumite power, ruling Ethiopia and Eritrea and exercising authority over Yemen. These societies were not yet unified into a strong maritime empire, but they were already participating in regional exchange networks involving Arabia and northeastern Africa.

Even before Rome became dominant in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea corridor was already a competitive space shaped by overlapping spheres of influence rather than a single controlling power. The interaction between Egypt, Nubia, and early Horn of Africa societies created the early structure of a long-term regional system based on trade, competition, and shifting alliances.

For the Romans, the Red Sea was an area of deep fascination given it collected 30% of its customs revenues in the region on the luxury trade with India from the ports of the Red Sea – derived from the word *portarium* meaning to carry that we still use today in carry trade and transshipment.

In antiquity, Ptolemaic and Roman-controlled Egypt treated the Red Sea as a strategic trade route linking the Mediterranean to India and Arabia, relying on ports like Berenike and Myos Hormos to bypass inland intermediaries. At the same time, the Kingdom of Kush in Nubia (in modern Sudan) acted as a powerful inland rival and trading partner, controlling Nile corridors that connected sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean world. To the southeast, the Kingdom of Aksum emerged as a major Red Sea power, competing for control of trade routes and ports along the Eritrean coast and across to Arabia.

Aksumite rulers—such as those later described in inscriptions of King Ezana—projected influence across the Red Sea, at times intervening in South Arabia and controlling key maritime commerce. This created a triangular system of interaction: Egypt focused on maritime access, Nubian kingdoms controlled inland Nile routes, and Aksum dominated parts of the southern Red Sea trade network.

These powers did not operate in isolation but constantly adjusted to one another through trade agreements, military pressure, shifting alliances, and competition for customs revenue and strategic ports. Even before later Islamic and Ottoman-era transformations, the Red Sea functioned as a contested but highly interconnected zone where African and Near Eastern polities shaped one another's political and economic development.

Later on, the **Byzantine Empire** and the **Sassanian (Sasanian) Empire** became major external powers influencing Red Sea and wider regional dynamics.

The Byzantine Empire, centered in Constantinople, inherited Rome's eastern trade networks and remained deeply interested in Red Sea commerce because it connected the Mediterranean world to Arabia, India, and East Africa. Byzantium relied on intermediaries—especially the Kingdom of Aksum—to access luxury goods such as ivory, gold, incense, and spices. In the 6th century, Byzantine diplomacy also encouraged Aksumite involvement in southern Arabia, partly to counter rival influences.

At the same time, the Sasanian Empire competed with Byzantium across the Near East and indirectly extended its influence toward the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula. The Sasanians sought control over trade routes reaching the Indian Ocean and at times challenged Byzantine-aligned networks that depended on Red Sea access.

This rivalry contributed to a broader geopolitical struggle over long-distance commerce rather than direct territorial control of the Red Sea itself. Instead of one empire dominating the region, influence was exercised through shifting alliances, client states, and control of trade chokepoints.

In this environment, Aksum functioned as a crucial regional power linking Africa and Arabia, interacting with both Byzantium and Persian spheres while maintaining its own strategic interests. Christianity spread through the Roman Empire by land routes. But maritime trade routes across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean helped carry ideas, people, and religious communities farther south and east. This made coastal trading cities and kingdoms (like Kingdom of Aksum) important early centers of Christianity outside the Mediterranean core.

Timothy Power argues that the early Islamic world should not be understood only as a land-based empire expanding through conquest, but also as a system deeply shaped by maritime connectivity across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. In his view, after the establishment of the Rashidun Caliphate and especially under the Umayyad Caliphate, the consolidation of political authority depended not just on controlling territories, but on integrating existing commercial and maritime networks that had long connected the Mediterranean world, Arabia, East Africa, and South Asia.

Power emphasizes that the Red Sea functioned less as a barrier and more as a “connector space” through which merchants, sailors, and goods circulated. Control of key coastal nodes—especially in Egypt and along the Arabian littoral—allowed the Caliphate to tap into Indian Ocean trade without needing direct naval domination. This meant that imperial consolidation was partly achieved through participation in, and taxation of, long-distance trade rather than exclusive control of the sea itself. From this perspective, the oceans were central to how the early Islamic empire became durable: they linked distant provinces, supported fiscal extraction through trade routes, and embedded the Caliphate within pre-existing Afro-Eurasian exchange systems.

The point is also Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia must be stable for KSA to take on ever more responsibilities and that a reduction in power of Iran and footprint on the ground is desirable.

This longitudinal perspective helps understand why the riparians are hardy enterprising people who are used to interact and trade and exchange with each other for millennia and that the Red Sea cannot be distilled as such.

From a hydrographic and oceanographic perspective, it is classified as a restricted-exchange marine basin characterized by elevated evaporation rates, minimal freshwater inflow, and resulting hypersaline and thermally stratified water masses. These conditions are typical of semi-enclosed seas with limited circulation, where environmental variability is strongly shaped by constrained water exchange with adjacent ocean systems.

In geopolitical and maritime governance terminology, the Red Sea is frequently designated as a high-risk shipping lane and strategic energy transit corridor. This reflects its disproportionate importance in global oil, liquefied natural gas, and container shipping routes between Europe, Asia, and East Africa, as well as its exposure to regional instability and asymmetric maritime threats that require continuous multinational monitoring and naval presence.

When compared to other global chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait, and the Panama Canal, the Red Sea–Suez–Bab el-Mandeb system exhibits a comparable or in some dimensions higher level of systemic sensitivity due to its linear dependency on two sequential chokepoints rather than a single control point. This creates a compounded vulnerability structure: unlike the Malacca Strait, which is primarily a single maritime constriction, or the Panama Canal, which is a managed artificial passage, the Red Sea corridor is embedded in a regional conflict-prone environment while also being partially dependent on an artificial canal system at its northern exit. In bureaucratic risk terminology, this elevates its classification as a “multi-node critical maritime bottleneck,” where disruption risk is both geographically distributed and operationally cascading across global supply chains.

Functionally, it is therefore described as a trans-regional maritime artery and a linkage zone within the broader Mediterranean–Indian Ocean system, serving as a structural conduit for global trade continuity and energy transport resilience, while simultaneously ranking among the most strategically sensitive chokepoint corridors in the world maritime system.

The relationship between the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea is fundamentally defined by geography, chokepoint control, and coastal-state positioning along one of the world’s most strategically compressed maritime corridors.

The Horn of Africa forms the southern and southwestern maritime boundary of the Red Sea–Gulf of Aden system. It is the African landmass that physically “faces” the Arabian Peninsula across the narrowest maritime separation point in the region, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This strait effectively links the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Aden and makes the Horn of Africa a direct gatekeeper region for global shipping moving between the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific.

Within this system, Eritrea occupies one of the most strategically sensitive coastal positions on the entire Red Sea. It controls a long stretch of the southern Red Sea shoreline and sits adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb approach corridor, giving it proximity to one of the world’s key maritime chokepoints. This places Eritrea within the immediate operational geography of Red Sea shipping security and naval monitoring routes.

Sudan lies further north along the western Red Sea coast. Its coastline provides additional access points to Red Sea shipping lanes, and its position contributes to the continuity of the western maritime margin between the Horn and Egypt. In structural terms, Sudan forms a mid-coastal buffer zone between the southern Horn of Africa littoral and the northern Suez-linked maritime system.

Ethiopia does not have direct access to the Red Sea but is geographically and strategically tied to it through historical, economic, and logistical dependence on neighboring ports—primarily through Eritrea and Djibouti. In regional maritime terms, Ethiopia is often described as a

“hinterland state” of the Red Sea system, where access to global shipping lanes is mediated through coastal neighbors.

At the northern end of the system, Egypt holds a structurally decisive position because it controls the Suez Canal, the northern outlet of the Red Sea. This gives Egypt administrative and operational influence over one of the two primary chokepoints governing Red Sea maritime flow, effectively linking Red Sea traffic to the Mediterranean and global Atlantic-facing routes.

On the eastern side of the wider Horn of Africa system, Somalia does not border the Red Sea directly but occupies the southern perimeter of the adjacent Gulf of Aden. Through its long coastline facing the Arabian Sea, Somalia is strategically tied to the Red Sea system via the Bab el-Mandeb maritime corridor. This places Somalia within the broader security and trade envelope of the Red Sea–Indian Ocean transition zone, particularly in terms of shipping security dynamics and maritime traffic moving toward or away from the strait.

Overall, the Horn of Africa functions as the southern geographic anchor of the Red Sea maritime system, while Egypt anchors the northern exit. Eritrea and Sudan form the primary western coastal interface with the sea, Ethiopia operates as an inland dependent stakeholder within the system, and Somalia shapes the adjacent maritime-security environment through its control of the Gulf of Aden approaches. Together, they form an interconnected geopolitical and maritime structure centered on one of the world’s most critical chokepoint-driven sea lanes.

The Making of Ethiopia

From Bahru Zewde’s perspective, the modern Ethiopian state emerges through a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century process of highland-centred consolidation that gradually extends administrative reach across diverse Horn societies. State formation here is not simply military expansion but the slow construction of modern institutions—taxation, bureaucracy, standing armies, and education systems—that allow the state to endure and interact more systematically with peripheral regions. As the state expands into the south, east, and west, it encounters pastoralist and agrarian societies across what is now the broader Horn, incorporating them unevenly into imperial administration. Some areas are governed indirectly through local elites, others more directly, but in all cases the modern Ethiopian state becomes increasingly embedded in regional networks of trade, mobility, and coercion. In this reading, Ethiopia’s distinctiveness lies in its ability to internalise expansion into a relatively continuous state tradition rather than fragmenting under external colonial rule like many neighbouring polities.

Asafa Jalata, by contrast, interprets this same process as a form of **internal colonialism and ethnic domination**. What appears in Bahru’s account as state formation is, in Jalata’s view, an imperial project led by a dominant highland elite that subjugates non-Abyssinian peoples through conquest, land appropriation, and political hierarchy. The incorporation of Oromo, Somali, Sidama, and other groups is not neutral integration but the construction of a stratified political order in which access to land, language, and political power is systematically unequal. This creates a political economy of extraction in which incorporated regions supply surplus to the imperial centre while remaining structurally marginalised. Compared to other Horn states such as Somalia or Eritrea—which were shaped more by colonial border-making and external partition—Jalata’s argument highlights Ethiopia as a case of **internal empire formation**,

where domination occurs within a single political unit rather than through internationally imposed boundaries.

Merera Gudina advances the analysis by focusing on the **institutional consequences of this uneven incorporation through the lens of federalism and political stability**. He argues that Ethiopia has long suffered from a structural mismatch between a powerful central state and a fragmented political community, producing what he calls a “state ahead of the nation.” The post-1991 federal system is an attempt to resolve this contradiction by reorganising the state along ethno-linguistic lines and devolving power to regional states. In principle, this system recognises historical grievances and creates institutional space for self-rule, thereby reducing center–periphery tensions. In practice, however, it produces new dilemmas: it institutionalises ethnicity as the primary axis of political organisation, which can stabilise representation but also intensify competition over boundaries, resources, and identity. Regionalisation becomes both a mechanism of inclusion and a potential driver of fragmentation. Compared to more centralised systems in Eritrea or more fragmented ones in Somalia, Ethiopia’s federal arrangement sits in a hybrid position where institutional recognition of diversity is simultaneously a stabilising innovation and a source of political volatility.

Gebru Tareke deepens the picture by situating Ethiopian state formation within **historical political economy and cycles of war, crisis, and revolutionary transformation**. In his analysis, the Ethiopian state is repeatedly reconstituted through conflict rather than evolving in a linear institutional trajectory. The imperial system generates structural contradictions—especially in land tenure, rural taxation, and political exclusion—that accumulate over time and erupt in rebellion. The 1974 revolution and the rise of the Derg are not anomalies but the culmination of these long-term pressures, where rural insurgency, student radicalism, and military intervention converge to overthrow the imperial order. Revolutionary politics in this sense are rooted in the material conditions of the countryside and the extraction-based political economy of the imperial state. War is not external to state formation but constitutive of it: each major political transformation—imperial consolidation, socialist restructuring, civil war, and federal reorganisation—emerges through violent rupture and contested reconstruction of authority.

When these four perspectives are integrated, Ethiopian state formation appears as a **multi-layered historical assemblage rather than a single process**. Bahru Zewde highlights institutional continuity and adaptive modernisation; Asafa Jalata foregrounds domination and unequal incorporation; Merera Gudina focuses on institutional design and the tensions of managing diversity through federalism; and Gebru Tareke reveals the centrality of war, crisis, and political economy in driving transformation. Together, they show that modernization and coercion, inclusion and exclusion, and stability and conflict are not separate historical phases but overlapping logics within the same evolving system.

This integrated framework also enables comparison across the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia differs from Somalia, where state collapse and fragmented sovereignty dominate; from Eritrea, where post-liberation centralisation produces a highly militarised and tightly controlled state; and from Sudan, where civil-military fragmentation and repeated regime collapse shape political order. These differences suggest that Horn states are not variations of a single developmental

path but distinct outcomes of shared structural pressures—colonial border-making, uneven incorporation, militarised governance, and external geopolitical competition.

From this vantage point, the Horn should not be understood as a collection of separate national trajectories but as a **relational political system**. Borders divide states formally, but pastoral mobility, trade corridors, insurgent networks, and external interventions continuously connect them. Ethiopia's internal federal tensions affect borderland governance in Somalia and Sudan; Eritrea's militarised Red Sea strategy reshapes regional security alignments; and conflicts in Sudan or Somalia feed back into migration, arms flows, and political bargaining across the region.

Integrating the Horn therefore requires shifting the analytical focus from isolated state-building to **interdependent state formation under shared constraints**. The key structural features across the region include uneven incorporation of frontier societies, the centrality of coercion in governance, the political salience of identity, and the persistent role of external powers in shaping domestic alignments. In this sense, state formation in the Horn is not a completed historical achievement but an ongoing process of negotiation between centralising projects and decentralising pressures operating across borders.

From the vantage point of Ethiopia the integration of the Horn of Africa would be conceived not as an exception but as a particularly dense expression of wider regional dynamics. It shows in intensified form the same processes visible elsewhere: contested sovereignty, militarised borderlands, politicised identities, and cyclical crises that link war and transformation. The analytical payoff of combining Bahru, Jalata, Merera, and Tareke is that it dissolves the boundary between “state-building” and “state crisis,” revealing instead a continuous field of political formation in which stability is always provisional and produced through ongoing contestation.

Economic Interdependence between Ethio-Eritrea

The economic relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea is best understood as a case of politically constrained interdependence—where structural complementarities exist, but political mistrust and unresolved strategic questions repeatedly limit their materialization into stable, sustained integration.

Historically, Ethiopia and Eritrea were deeply economically intertwined. Before Eritrea's independence in 1993, Eritrea's ports—particularly Assab and Massawa—functioned as Ethiopia's primary maritime gateways. Ethiopia's landlocked geography made these outlets not just convenient but essential. After independence, Eritrea initially inherited this strategic advantage, and Ethiopia became dependent on Eritrean ports for access to the Red Sea. However, the 1998–2000 war fundamentally severed these ties. The making of the Ethiopian state and its interaction with wider Horn of Africa societies can be understood as a single but internally diverse historical process when the perspectives of Bahru Zewde, Asafa Jalata, Merera Gudina, and Gebru Tareke are brought together. Rather than offering competing stories, they describe different layers of the same formation: state expansion and institutional consolidation, imperial domination and uneven incorporation, contested federal redesign, and revolutionary rupture driven by long-term political-economic contradictions.

Now The 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki briefly reopened the possibility of economic reintegration. Diplomatic normalization included promises of restored trade, reopened transport corridors, and renewed use of Eritrean ports for Ethiopian imports and exports. In theory, this created a highly rational economic complementarity: Ethiopia possesses a large and growing internal market, while Eritrea possesses underutilized port infrastructure and a small domestic economy in need of external demand. In purely economic terms, deeper integration would reduce transport costs for Ethiopia, generate port revenues for Eritrea, and diversify regional trade routes beyond Djibouti.

However, the relationship has remained structurally underperforming because economic logic is consistently subordinated to strategic and political considerations. One key constraint is the absence of trust regarding sovereignty and long-term security intentions. Ethiopia's renewed interest in diversified sea access is often interpreted in Eritrea through a historical lens of vulnerability, given earlier Ethiopian dominance in the imperial and Derg periods. Conversely, Eritrea's highly centralized and security-oriented governance model makes it reluctant to open its infrastructure fully to a vastly larger neighbor whose economic weight could translate into political influence.

As a result, even after formal normalization, trade volumes between the two countries have remained limited and episodic rather than institutionalized. Border crossings and transport corridors have been inconsistently operational, and commercial networks have not been fully reconstituted. Informal and localized trade has at times re-emerged in border areas, but without the legal and financial infrastructure necessary for large-scale integration.

The broader economic geography of the Horn further complicates this dyad. Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti—handling the majority of its maritime trade—has created a path-dependent logistics system involving ports, rail infrastructure, and customs regimes that are deeply embedded in external financing and international partnerships. This reduces Ethiopia's immediate incentive to fully pivot toward Eritrean ports, even when politically possible. At the same time, Eritrea's limited domestic market means that sustained economic growth depends on external integration, yet its political economy is shaped by high levels of state control and limited liberalization, which constrains private sector expansion and foreign investment.

The impact of this constrained economic cooperation on regional stability is complex and somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, economic integration between Ethiopia and Eritrea has the potential to function as a stabilizing force. Shared infrastructure use, cross-border trade, and coordinated logistics would create mutual dependence, raising the economic costs of renewed conflict and embedding both states in a web of practical interdependence. In classical liberal terms, increased trade could act as a dampener on military escalation by aligning elite incentives with continuity rather than confrontation.

On the other hand, partial or uneven economic engagement can generate new sources of tension rather than resolve old ones. When economic cooperation is promised but not fully implemented, it can produce frustration, asymmetric expectations, and political suspicion. Ethiopia's search for diversified maritime access is sometimes interpreted as strategic hedging against Eritrean unreliability, while Eritrea's cautious approach is interpreted in Ethiopia as

obstructionism. This mutual misreading can reinforce security dilemmas rather than reduce them.

Moreover, external actors indirectly shape the economic balance. Djibouti's entrenched role as Ethiopia's primary trade corridor gives it structural leverage, while Gulf and Chinese investments in port infrastructure across the Red Sea basin introduce alternative pathways that reduce the urgency of bilateral Ethiopian–Eritrean integration. In this sense, regional economic fragmentation is reinforced by external connectivity rather than resolved by it.

In summary, the Ethiopia–Eritrea economic relationship is not simply underdeveloped; it is politically gated interdependence. The material incentives for cooperation are strong, but they are filtered through layers of historical memory, security competition, and external infrastructural lock-in. Its impact on stability is therefore dual: it holds latent stabilizing potential through economic interdependence, but in its incomplete form it can also sustain ambiguity, mistrust, and cyclical strategic recalculation rather than durable peace.

6. The EU Has Strategic Interests in Eritrea and Ethiopia

The European Union has increasingly strengthened its strategic attention toward the Horn of Africa due to a combination of security, economic, and geopolitical factors. The region sits at one of the world's most important maritime crossroads, linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and onward to the Indian Ocean. A major driver of EU interest is the need to ensure Red Sea maritime security, as this corridor carries a significant share of global trade between Europe and Asia.

Any disruption in this shipping lane, whether from piracy or regional conflict, directly affects European supply chains and energy imports. Migration management is another key priority, as instability in the Horn of Africa contributes to irregular migration flows toward Europe. The EU seeks to address root causes of migration by supporting development, governance, and stability in origin countries. Counterterrorism concerns also play a central role, particularly due to the presence of extremist groups operating in parts of Somalia and neighboring states. These groups pose risks not only locally but also to broader international security networks. Trade route protection is essential because European economies depend on uninterrupted access to Asian markets through these maritime passages.

The Horn of Africa also serves as a logistical bridge for global shipping companies and naval operations. Energy transit is another strategic factor, as oil and liquefied natural gas shipments from the Middle East pass near this region. The EU is therefore invested in maintaining safe and predictable energy flows through adjacent waters. Climate change and environmental stress further intensify instability in the region, increasing the risk of conflict over resources. As a result, the EU supports climate resilience and sustainable development programs in vulnerable communities. Diplomatic engagement has expanded through partnerships with regional organizations such as the African Union and IGAD. Security missions and naval operations have also been deployed to deter piracy and protect commercial vessels.

Humanitarian aid remains a core component of EU involvement, especially in response to droughts and food insecurity. The EU also invests in capacity-building for local security forces

to improve regional stability. Economic cooperation initiatives aim to strengthen trade ties and create employment opportunities for young populations. Overall, the EU views the Horn of Africa as a strategically vital region where security, migration, and economic interests are deeply interconnected.

The EU already maintains substantial partnerships with Ethiopia through development financing, governance support, and post-conflict reconstruction initiatives. ([International Partnerships](#)) The EU also previously supported Eritrea-Ethiopia connectivity projects after the 2018 rapprochement, including transport corridors linking Ethiopia to Eritrean ports⁴

The historical and contemporary engagement between Ethiopia and Eritrea is best understood as a **long arc of deep structural entanglement punctuated by rupture, coercive separation, and partial, often fragile reconciliation**. Their relationship is not a conventional bilateral dynamic between two sovereign neighbors, but rather the afterlife of a shared political formation that only recently—and incompletely—fragmented.

Historically, Eritrea's modern political trajectory was shaped by its incorporation into successive Ethiopian state projects. Under Italian colonial rule (late 19th century to 1941), Eritrea developed distinct administrative and infrastructural systems centered on coastal urban economies, port access, and colonial industrial development. After Italy's defeat in World War II, Eritrea entered a transitional period under British administration, followed by a controversial UN-backed federation with Ethiopia in 1952. This federation, which preserved Eritrea's nominal autonomy while linking it to the Ethiopian crown, gradually eroded as Emperor Haile Selassie centralized authority. By 1962, Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea, dissolving the federation and transforming Eritrea into a province.

This annexation became the primary catalyst for the Eritrean liberation struggle, which evolved into one of Africa's longest insurgencies. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), later succeeded politically by the Eritrean state under Isaias Afwerki, framed its struggle not only in nationalist terms but also as resistance to imperial centralization and forced incorporation. Ethiopia's subsequent Derg regime (1974–1991) intensified militarization of the conflict, turning Eritrea into a central front in a broader civil war system that also involved the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and other insurgent movements. These liberation wars were not isolated conflicts but deeply interlinked struggles that reshaped the entire Horn of Africa's political geography.

Eritrea's formal independence in 1993 marked a decisive rupture but did not resolve underlying structural tensions. Initially, relations between the newly independent Eritrea and the transitional Ethiopian government led by the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) were cooperative, with expectations of continued economic integration and stable border arrangements. However, these expectations collapsed into the 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian War, a high-intensity interstate conflict centered on disputed border areas such as Badme. Despite its limited territorial scope, the war had outsized

⁴ ([European External Action Service](#))

consequences: it militarized both states, froze diplomatic relations for nearly two decades, and entrenched narratives of existential mistrust on both sides.

In the post-war period, Ethiopia adopted a strategy of **forced economic reorientation**, making Djibouti its primary maritime outlet and effectively isolating Eritrea economically. Eritrea, in turn, entered a phase of extreme internal securitization, prolonged national service policies, and international isolation, while maintaining a foreign policy posture characterized by strategic defensiveness and episodic regional engagement. During this period, Ethiopia and Eritrea engaged less as states in dialogue and more as **mutual security references**, each defining its threat perception through the other.

The contemporary phase began with the 2018 rapprochement initiated by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. This moment was widely interpreted as a historic breakthrough, formally ending the state of war and reopening diplomatic, transport, and economic channels. The engagement was driven by converging interests: Ethiopia's desire for diversified Red Sea access and reduced dependence on Djibouti, and Eritrea's need for economic reintegration and relief from isolation. Initial cooperation included restored flights, reopened embassies, and commitments to revive transport corridors linking Ethiopian markets to Eritrean ports.

However, the contemporary engagement has proven uneven and strategically ambiguous rather than fully consolidating. While formal peace exists, the relationship has oscillated between cooperation and renewed tension, particularly as Ethiopia's internal political fragmentation and maritime ambitions evolved. The Tigray conflict (2020–2022) further complicated the relationship, with Eritrea playing a controversial military role alongside Ethiopian federal forces, thereby reintroducing direct involvement in Ethiopia's internal security landscape. This blurred the line between interstate peace and intra-regional militarized alignment.

In the present phase, engagement between Ethiopia and Eritrea is shaped less by institutionalized diplomacy than by **shifting security alignments, contested regional strategies, and unresolved questions about maritime access and sovereignty**. Ethiopia's renewed interest in securing direct access to the Red Sea has reactivated historical sensitivities in Eritrea regarding territorial integrity and strategic vulnerability. At the same time, Eritrea's limited economic openness constrains the depth of bilateral integration, even when political relations improve.

External actors further mediate this engagement. Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have played quiet facilitative roles in the 2018 rapprochement and continue to influence Red Sea security dynamics. China's infrastructural footprint in the region, especially in Djibouti, indirectly shapes Ethiopian and Eritrean strategic calculations by reinforcing alternative access routes. Meanwhile, broader regional instability in Sudan, Somalia, and the Red Sea corridor ensures that Ethiopia–Eritrea relations remain embedded in a wider security architecture rather than existing as a purely bilateral dyad.

In summary, historical and contemporary Ethiopia–Eritrea engagement is best characterized as a **repeating cycle of incorporation, separation, militarized rivalry, and incomplete normalization**. Despite moments of rapprochement, the relationship remains structurally

constrained by unresolved border legacies, competing strategic visions of the Red Sea, and the persistent influence of regional and external actors. The result is not linear progress toward integration, but a continuously renegotiated equilibrium between cooperation and strategic distrust.

7. Contemporary conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea

The Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship is shaped by a recurring pattern in which conflict and cooperation are not separate phases, but alternating expressions of the same underlying structural tensions: contested borders, competing security doctrines, and rival claims over regional status and maritime access. Rather than moving in a linear trajectory from war to peace, the relationship repeatedly cycles between militarized rupture and pragmatic, often fragile, reconciliation.

The most consequential conflict between the two states was the **1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian War**, which emerged from unresolved border demarcation issues following Eritrea’s independence in 1993. While often framed as a localized dispute over towns such as Badme, the war was in reality an eruption of deeper structural ambiguity: the absence of clearly institutionalized borders, competing revolutionary legitimacy narratives, and rapidly diverging state-building trajectories. The conflict escalated into one of the largest interstate wars in post-colonial Africa, involving trench warfare, aerial bombardment, and massive troop mobilization on both sides. Although a peace agreement was signed in Algiers in 2000, and an independent boundary commission later ruled on the border, implementation remained contested for years, embedding a long-term “no war, no peace” condition.

In the aftermath, tensions did not disappear but were transformed into a form of **cold militarized standoff**. Ethiopia rejected key aspects of the boundary ruling for much of the 2000s and 2010s, while Eritrea maintained a highly securitized posture, characterized by indefinite national service and strict internal control. During this period, both states engaged in proxy dynamics, particularly through support for armed groups operating in neighboring countries and in Ethiopia’s internal peripheries. The relationship was therefore not merely frozen; it was actively adversarial in a diffused and indirect form.

A second major conflict phase emerged during the **Tigray War (2020–2022)**, which fundamentally altered regional dynamics. Although the conflict began as an internal Ethiopian political crisis between the federal government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), Eritrea became directly involved, aligning militarily with Ethiopian federal forces against Tigrayan forces. This intervention reflected Eritrea’s longstanding hostility toward the TPLF, rooted in both the 1998–2000 war and earlier revolutionary-era rivalries. The war blurred the boundary between interstate and intrastate conflict, effectively internationalizing Ethiopia’s internal war and reactivating Ethiopia–Eritrea military entanglement in a new form. While this alignment temporarily suggested convergence between Addis Ababa and Asmara, it also deepened long-term mistrust and generated significant humanitarian and political repercussions.

Beyond open warfare, the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship has also been shaped by persistent **low-intensity conflict dynamics**, including militarization of the border, intelligence competition,

and intermittent accusations of subversive activity. These dynamics reflect a classic security dilemma: each state interprets the other's defensive measures as potential offensive preparation, leading to cyclical escalation risks even in the absence of active war.

The borderlands between Eritrea and Ethiopia are unstable mainly because they combine unresolved territorial disputes, weak cross-border governance, militarisation, and deep historical mistrust. Compared to many other African borderlands, the Eritrea–Ethiopia frontier is unusually shaped by **state-level war history plus frozen sovereignty claims**, rather than only local resource competition.

A central driver is the legacy of the Eritrea–Ethiopia war (1998–2000) and the unresolved or contested implementation of the border demarcation that followed. Even after the 2018 peace agreement, the practical normalization of the border has remained uneven, with periods of reopening followed by renewed restrictions. This creates uncertainty for communities who depend on cross-border trade, grazing, and family ties, making everyday life politically unstable even in peacetime.

A second factor is **heavy militarisation and securitisation of the frontier**. Both states have historically treated the border not just as an administrative line but as a security buffer zone. Large military deployments and intelligence operations reduce trust and increase the likelihood that local incidents—such as livestock movement disputes or smuggling accusations—are interpreted through a national security lens rather than managed as routine local issues.

A third issue is the **fragmentation of cross-border livelihoods**. Pastoral and agro-pastoral communities in the borderlands traditionally moved across what is now a hard international boundary. Restrictions on mobility disrupt these systems, increasing vulnerability and sometimes pushing people into informal trade or smuggling networks. When those networks are criminalised, enforcement actions can escalate tensions between local communities and state forces.

Another factor is **limited institutional cooperation at the local level**. Unlike some more stable African border regions where joint commissions, local conflict-resolution mechanisms, and cross-border markets operate regularly, Eritrea–Ethiopia cooperation at subnational levels has often been inconsistent or politically constrained. This reduces the ability to defuse disputes early.

When compared to other borderlands in the Horn—such as Ethiopia–Kenya or parts of Somalia–Kenya—the Eritrea–Ethiopia border is less driven by everyday pastoral violence alone and more shaped by **state rivalry, war legacies, and geopolitical sensitivity**. In many other border regions, instability is often local and resource-based (water, pasture, cattle raiding), and can sometimes be managed through local peace accords or traditional institutions. By contrast, the Eritrea–Ethiopia frontier is more tightly linked to national identity, sovereignty narratives, and military posture, which makes local disputes more likely to escalate or remain unresolved.

In short, the instability comes less from the borderlands themselves and more from the way the two states have historically constructed the border—as a strategic and political fault line—rather than a shared economic space.

Against this backdrop of recurring conflict, there have nonetheless been important episodes of cooperation and peace initiatives, each of which has been significant but structurally fragile. The most important of these is the **2018 peace agreement and rapprochement**, initiated by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. This moment marked a formal end to the state of war and led to rapid normalization measures, including the reopening of embassies, restoration of commercial flights, resumption of telephone and transport links, and public declarations of reconciliation. The rapprochement was widely supported internationally and temporarily reshaped the strategic landscape of the Horn of Africa.

This period of cooperation was driven by overlapping interests rather than deep reconciliation of historical grievances. Ethiopia sought to reduce its dependence on Djibouti for maritime access and diversify its economic corridors, while Eritrea sought to break out of long-standing isolation and reintegrate into regional diplomacy. In this sense, cooperation was **instrumental rather than institutionalized**, based on converging short- to medium-term incentives rather than durable legal or security frameworks.

Earlier, more limited forms of cooperation also existed in the immediate post-independence period (1991–1997), when both governments shared revolutionary origins and initially pursued pragmatic economic and political coordination. This cooperation included trade flows, port usage arrangements, and relatively open border interactions. However, the absence of robust dispute-resolution mechanisms meant that these early cooperative structures were highly vulnerable to political divergence.

More recently, even after the 2018 rapprochement, cooperation has continued in selective and uneven forms. Infrastructure discussions, transport corridor planning, and symbolic diplomatic engagement have persisted, but without full normalization of trade regimes or sustained institutional integration. The Tigray War briefly transformed cooperation into military alignment, but this too proved situational rather than foundational, and it did not resolve underlying strategic contradictions.

In analytical terms, the Ethiopia–Eritrea case illustrates a broader pattern in post-conflict interstate relations where peace agreements reduce the probability of immediate war but do not eliminate the structural drivers of conflict. The absence of fully institutionalized borders, the persistence of competing security narratives, and the strategic importance of Red Sea access ensure that both conflict and cooperation remain latent possibilities.

Ultimately, the relationship is best understood as a **managed instability with intermittent cooperative breakthroughs**. Periods of peace are real but conditional; periods of conflict are episodic but recurring; and both are shaped less by goodwill than by shifting calculations of security, sovereignty, and regional positioning within the wider Horn of Africa system.

Ethiopia's internal stability is intricately linked to regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa due to several factors. Ethiopia's strategic location makes it a central player in the Horn of Africa. Instability within Ethiopia can have ripple effects on neighboring countries, influencing conflicts and alliances. The Horn of Africa is characterized as a Regional Security Complex, where conflicts in one state, such as Ethiopia, can quickly spill over into others like

Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea. This interconnectedness means that Ethiopia's internal issues can exacerbate regional tensions.

Ethiopia's landlocked status heightens its focus on securing access to ports and maritime routes, particularly through Djibouti. Instability in Ethiopia can threaten its trade routes and economic interests, impacting regional trade and security. Internal conflicts, such as those related to ethnic tensions or political disputes, can lead to increased militarization and external interventions, further complicating the security landscape in the region.

Ethiopia's role as a peacekeeper and mediator in regional conflicts is crucial. Its internal stability enhances its capacity to engage diplomatically with neighboring states, promoting regional cooperation and conflict resolution. The involvement of external powers in the Horn of Africa, including the EU, Gulf states, and others, often hinges on Ethiopia's stability. Their interests in maritime security and regional influence can either support or undermine Ethiopia's internal cohesion.

In summary, Ethiopia's internal stability is vital for maintaining regional security in the Horn of Africa, as it affects diplomatic relations, economic ties, and the overall security environment among neighboring states.

A renewed war between Eritrea and Ethiopia would:

- destabilize the entire Horn,
- disrupt Red Sea commerce,
- worsen humanitarian crises,
- increase migration toward Europe,
- and undermine EU investments across East Africa.

Pragmatic and mutually beneficial relations between the EU and Eritrea would likely focus on practical cooperation rather than deep political alignment. The main areas would probably include migration management, Red Sea maritime security, anti-smuggling efforts, infrastructure and energy development, humanitarian access, and regional stability in the Horn of Africa.

For the EU, Eritrea matters because of its strategic location along the Red Sea near major global shipping routes. For Eritrea, improved ties with Europe could reduce diplomatic isolation, attract investment, create economic opportunities, and diversify partnerships beyond reliance on Gulf countries, China, or Russia.

The central difficulty is political. The EU places strong emphasis on human rights, indefinite national service, accountability for wartime abuses, and rule of law. Eritrea's government places greater emphasis on sovereignty, regime security, and resistance to outside political pressure. A pragmatic relationship would therefore probably mean selective cooperation in limited areas while major disagreements remain unresolved.

Regarding the question of what interests were served by Eritrea's intervention in northern Ethiopia during the Tigray war, most analysts interpret the intervention as being driven by security and strategic calculations rather than simple territorial expansion. Eritrea's leadership viewed the Tigray People's Liberation Front as its main long-term security threat because the TPLF had dominated Ethiopian politics after the 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war. Weakening the TPLF militarily and politically was therefore seen by Eritrea as a way to improve regime security and reduce future threats.

The intervention also reflected the temporary political alignment between Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed after their 2018 peace agreement. Both governments saw the TPLF as a common adversary at that time.

Historical rivalry also mattered. Relations between Eritrea's leadership and the TPLF had been marked for decades by mistrust, ideological competition, war, and unresolved grievances dating back to the liberation era and the later border conflict. Some analysts also argue that Eritrea sought greater regional influence by becoming directly involved in the conflict, thereby increasing its leverage over developments inside Ethiopia and across the Horn of Africa.

At the same time, many observers believe the war ultimately harmed all sides by intensifying humanitarian suffering, destabilizing the region, worsening international isolation, and creating long-term hostility that could fuel future conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

8.A can do EU Approach would encompass

On the assumption of push-ups undertaken by Algeria revisiting the Algiers agreement, the EU actually has a full, unconstrained "toolkit" and wanted to help resolve the Ethiopia–Eritrea "unfinished business," the core problem it would need to solve is not a lack of ideas but a lack of leverage, trust, and coherent entry points into a highly militarized and externally influenced regional system. So the question becomes what a *coherent EU strategy would look like if it were optimized for conflict resolution rather than incremental crisis management*.

At the center, the EU would first need to stop treating Ethiopia and Eritrea as separate diplomatic files and instead explicitly frame the issue as a single regional security architecture problem in the Horn of Africa. The unresolved border issue, the legacy of the 1998–2000 war, the militarization of borderlands, and the spillover from internal Ethiopian conflicts all function as one interconnected system. A serious EU approach would therefore begin with a unified "Horn Peace Framework" rather than bilateral diplomacy.

In operational terms, the EU's most important contribution would be to create structured conditional interdependence rather than isolated incentives. Right now, aid and engagement are fragmented, so neither state feels sustained pressure or reward for compliance. A more effective model would link EU development financing, trade preferences, and security cooperation to clearly sequenced benchmarks agreed jointly with the African Union and the United Nations. These benchmarks would not be maximalist political conditions like full democratization, but narrow, verifiable steps such as sustained cessation of cross-border military positioning, reopening of secure communication channels, and institutionalized border incident mechanisms. The key is sequencing: small verified compliance would unlock

incremental benefits, while violations would automatically suspend specific benefits without collapsing the entire framework.

The EU would also need to invest heavily in what is effectively a neutral conflict infrastructure. This includes independent border monitoring, not necessarily peacekeepers, but technically enabled observation mechanisms combining satellite monitoring, third-party verification teams, and AU-led field presence supported financially and logistically by the EU. The current system lacks credible verification, which allows both sides to interpret ambiguity in their favor. Reducing that ambiguity is more important than adding new agreements.

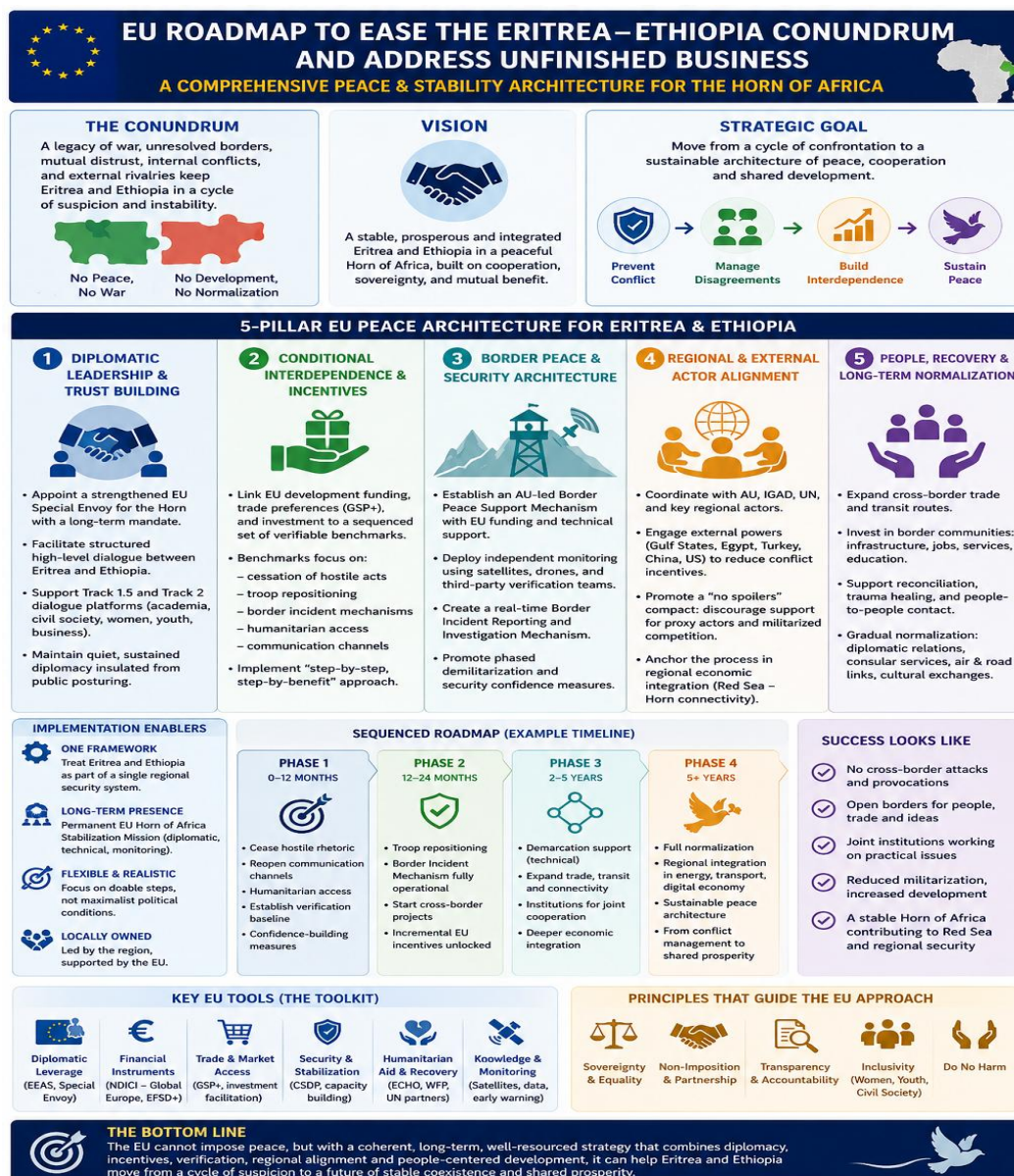
A further requirement would be sustained diplomatic insulation of the conflict from proxy escalation dynamics. One of the biggest complications in the Horn is that external actors—regional Gulf states, Egypt, and others—shape incentives for confrontation or alignment shifts. An effective EU approach would involve coordinated diplomacy with these external actors to reduce incentives for escalation, even if full alignment is impossible. This is less about exclusion and more about reducing “conflict monetization,” where regional actors benefit strategically from instability.

On the Ethiopian side, any EU framework would need to account for internal fragmentation. Ethiopia is not a unitary actor in practice; federal-regional tensions and post-conflict restructuring directly affect its external behavior. The EU would therefore need to integrate internal stabilization support—particularly for border regions—into its external peace strategy. Without this, external agreements will not hold because implementation capacity is internally constrained.

On the Eritrean side, the core issue is isolation and securitized governance. The EU’s leverage here is limited, but in a full toolkit scenario it would rely on calibrated normalization incentives: phased reintegration into regional trade and diplomatic frameworks in exchange for verifiable demilitarization steps along the border and structured engagement in joint mechanisms. The logic would be gradual reintegration rather than sudden transformation. A crucial missing element in current real-world policy, which a “full toolkit EU” would correct, is long-term presence. The Horn conflict has repeatedly shown that short diplomatic bursts followed by disengagement produce relapse into tension. An effective strategy would require a permanent EU Horn of Africa stabilization mission combining diplomacy, technical monitoring, and sustained political engagement over decades, not electoral cycles.

Finally, the EU would need to redefine success itself. Instead of aiming for a final “resolution” of Ethiopia–Eritrea relations, which may be unrealistic in the short term, the operational goal would be conflict normalization: stable management of disagreement without militarization, predictable border behavior, and institutionalized communication channels that prevent escalation.

Figure



So in summary, if the EU had full capacity, it would not “solve” the Ethiopia–Eritrea conundrum in a one-off settlement sense. It would build a layered system of conditional interdependence, credible verification, regional insulation from external spoilers, and long-term institutional presence. The main shift is from trying to broker peace agreements to engineering a durable conflict management architecture that makes renewed war structurally unattractive and practically difficult.

The diagram models the Ethiopia–Eritrea problem as a coupled instability system, not two separate bilateral disputes. Its core assumption is that conflict persists due to feedback loops between distrust, militarization, and weak institutions.

The EU is positioned as an external stabilizer introducing control variables into the system. “Diplomatic leadership” functions as the coordination node, reducing signaling noise between

actors. “Conditional interdependence” acts like an incentive function, where benefits increase with compliance. This creates a quasi-calculus: cooperation leads to increased aid flow, while escalation leads to reduced access. “Border security architecture” reduces variance in border incidents by adding monitoring constraints. Monitoring converts uncertain events into observable, verifiable data points, lowering misperception risk.

“Regional and external alignment” addresses exogenous variables from Gulf states, China, the US, and AU actors. This step attempts to reduce external shock inputs that destabilize the system equilibrium. “People and recovery” introduces long-run reconstruction variables that stabilize preferences over time. This shifts payoffs from short-term militarized gains to long-term developmental utility. The system logic is sequential: stabilize, verify, incentivize, integrate, normalize. Each phase acts as a state transition function, moving the region from conflict equilibrium toward cooperation equilibrium. The timeline represents a discounted time model where benefits accumulate slowly but compound. Early phases reduce entropy by lowering uncertainty, misinformation, and escalation risk. Middle phases increase institutional density through rules, channels, and monitoring bodies. Later phases maximize network connectivity through trade, mobility, and shared infrastructure.

The underlying calculus is a cost–benefit rebalancing of war versus peace under which actors continually weigh the expected costs and benefits of conflict versus cooperation. The overarching interest is to upholding energy supply lines and merchant traffic in the Red Sea, and to partner up with Egypt as a choke-point extension node for choke point stabilisation in anticipation of KSA and Egypt taking up naval leadership in the Red Sea, and to provide the conditions for constructive Ethiopian leadership in the Horn of Africa.

The EU could promote economic interdependence between Eritrea and Ethiopia by focusing less on direct political engineering and more on lowering the practical costs of trade, rebuilding cross-border infrastructure, and creating incentives that make sustained cooperation more profitable than isolation.

A first pathway is **trade facilitation and market integration**. The EU can support customs harmonisation, digital border management, and simplified trade regimes along the Eritrea–Ethiopia border once political conditions allow. In practice, this means funding systems that reduce delays, corruption opportunities, and transaction costs for small-scale traders. Even modest cross-border commerce—livestock, agricultural goods, manufactured inputs—can build interdependence if it becomes predictable and legally protected.

A second channel is **infrastructure linking ports, roads, and logistics corridors**. Ethiopia is landlocked, while Eritrea has strategic Red Sea ports such as Massawa and Assab. EU development finance instruments and the European Investment Bank could, in principle, support rehabilitation of transport corridors that connect Ethiopian production zones to Eritrean ports, but only if both governments agree on transparent access rules. The key is not just building infrastructure, but embedding it in shared revenue systems that make both sides financially reliant on continued cooperation.

A third approach is **support for energy and utility interdependence**. Cross-border electricity trade or regional grid integration can create stable, long-term dependencies that are harder to

reverse than short-term trade flows. If structured carefully, shared energy projects can bind states into ongoing technical coordination and reduce incentives for renewed hostility.

The EU can also strengthen **institutional and people-to-people links**, for example by supporting business councils, academic exchanges, and diaspora investment channels that operate across both countries. These networks often continue even when high-level diplomacy stalls, preserving a baseline of economic interaction that can be scaled up during political openings.

Another important lever is **risk reduction through guarantees and phased investment**. European development institutions can provide partial guarantees or blended finance to de-risk private investment in cross-border projects. This is especially important in a context where political relations have repeatedly shifted, making investors cautious. By lowering risk premiums, the EU can encourage firms to treat Eritrea–Ethiopia linkages as commercially viable rather than exceptional or temporary.

Finally, the EU's role is also indirect through **regional institutions and diplomatic engagement**, particularly with the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Encouraging regional frameworks that normalize economic cooperation reduces reliance on bilateral political goodwill alone, which in the Horn of Africa has often been unstable.

The broader logic is that economic interdependence is most durable when it is embedded in infrastructure, routine trade, and shared systems of revenue and services rather than in high-level political agreements alone. The challenge in the Eritrea–Ethiopia case is that past rapprochements, including the 2018 peace process following the Eritrea–Ethiopia rapprochement, showed how quickly political openings can occur—but also how easily they can stall if not anchored in dense economic ties.

9. The Tigray Conflict

Tigray is torn between Addis Ababa and Asmara because the region has become both a contested frontier and a political fault line, suspended between two competing centers of power after the catastrophic Tigray war. Beneath the surface lies not only a geopolitical rivalry between Ethiopia and Eritrea, but also a profound crisis of trust, legitimacy, and survival within Tigray itself.

After the Pretoria peace agreement, some Tigrayan leaders chose cautious engagement with Addis Ababa, believing cooperation with the federal government offered the only realistic path toward reconstruction, reintegration, and political stability⁵. Others, however, viewed Addis with deep suspicion, arguing that promises of protection, justice, and territorial restoration had remained incomplete or unfulfilled. In this atmosphere of disappointment and uncertainty, factions emerged within the Tigrayan political elite, each seeking different alliances and different guarantees for Tigray's future.

⁵ <https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Download-the-signed-agreement-here.pdf>

Asmara, meanwhile, remains a powerful shadow over the region. Eritrea fought heavily during the war and continues to see Tigray through the lens of long historical hostility toward the Tigray People's Liberation Front. At the same time, relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia have deteriorated since the peace agreement, transforming Tigray into a strategic buffer and bargaining ground between the two capitals. Addis fears renewed instability or separatist mobilisation in the north, while Asmara fears a resurgent Ethiopia consolidating regional influence and seeking stronger access to the Red Sea. Tigray therefore becomes more than territory; it becomes a hinge upon which wider regional anxieties turn.

The tragedy is that ordinary people in Tigray remain trapped between competing ambitions, much like a valley caught between converging storms. War has left shattered infrastructure, displaced communities, famine scars, militarisation, and social fragmentation. Political factions now struggle not only over ideology but over security, recognition, and control of the postwar order. In such conditions, mistrust spreads like cracks through dry earth: Addis distrusts Tigrayan nationalism, Tigrayan factions distrust one another, and many Tigrayans distrust both Addis Ababa and Asmara alike.

Remedy requires more than ceasefires or temporary bargains; it requires rebuilding the architecture of confidence itself. First, the Pretoria agreement must be fully implemented with transparency and consistency, especially regarding disarmament, territorial disputes, humanitarian access, and the safe return of displaced populations. Peace cannot survive if agreements remain symbolic while grievances remain tangible.

Second, inclusive political dialogue within Tigray is essential. Rival Tigrayan factions must move from zero-sum competition toward a shared transitional framework that prioritises civilian recovery over factional dominance. Elders, civil society, women's groups, youth leaders, and religious institutions should become active mediators in this process, transforming politics from a battlefield of personalities into a forum of collective restoration.

Third, Ethiopia and Eritrea require sustained diplomatic engagement through regional and international mediation. The Horn of Africa cannot endure perpetual cycles of proxy rivalry. Confidence-building measures, border de-escalation mechanisms, and monitored security arrangements could reduce the temptation to manipulate Tigrayan divisions for strategic advantage. Regional organisations and international partners should encourage diplomacy that is preventive rather than reactive.

Economic recovery is equally vital. Reconstruction projects, employment programs, agricultural renewal, and restored trade corridors could help replace the economy of war with an economy of interdependence. Young people without livelihoods are often vulnerable to militarisation and political manipulation; prosperity can become a stronger stabiliser than coercion.

Finally, justice and reconciliation must accompany reconstruction. Without accountability for wartime abuses and acknowledgment of collective suffering, peace risks becoming merely silence between conflicts. Truth commissions, reparative mechanisms, and community reconciliation initiatives could begin healing the psychological fractures left by war.

Tigray's crisis is therefore not only about geography or political allegiance; it is an allegory of a region struggling to emerge from the ruins of war while surrounded by competing powers and unfinished histories. The remedy lies in transforming rivalry into dialogue, suspicion into safeguards, and survival politics into shared regional stewardship.

The impact on Ethiopia–Eritrea relations is best understood as the cumulative effect of war, contested peace, and selective cooperation producing a relationship that is neither fully hostile nor genuinely consolidated, but instead oscillates between pragmatic alignment and strategic suspicion.

At the most fundamental level, the 1998–2000 war permanently altered the psychological and institutional foundations of bilateral relations. It did not simply create a temporary rupture; it reshaped how both states interpret each other's intentions. The conflict embedded a durable security mindset in which military preparedness, border sensitivity, and regime survival considerations became central to foreign policy on both sides. Even after formal peace agreements, this legacy continues to structure decision-making, meaning that diplomacy is frequently filtered through worst-case assumptions rather than trust-based engagement.

One of the most significant impacts has been the creation of a long-standing security dilemma. Each state's efforts to secure itself—whether through military modernization, alliances, or territorial claims—tends to be interpreted by the other as potential preparation for aggression. This dynamic has persisted even during periods of formal normalization, including after 2018. As a result, moments of rapprochement tend to reduce immediate tensions but rarely eliminate underlying strategic uncertainty.

Economically, the relationship has been shaped by forced diversification and infrastructural path dependence. After the war, Ethiopia reoriented its entire maritime trade system toward Djibouti, investing heavily in ports, rail links, and customs infrastructure that effectively bypass Eritrea. This reduced Eritrea's leverage over Ethiopian trade and created a new structural dependency between Ethiopia and Djibouti. Even after the 2018 rapprochement, this system proved difficult to reverse because it had become embedded in contracts, logistics networks, and external financing arrangements. The impact here is paradoxical: political reconciliation did not automatically translate into economic reintegration.

For Eritrea, the impact has been equally profound but in a different direction. The breakdown and subsequent militarization of relations reinforced a highly securitized domestic model, including extended national service and centralized control of political and economic life. Eritrea's external posture has been shaped by a perception that vulnerability to Ethiopia remains a core strategic risk. This has limited economic liberalization and constrained the development of cross-border commercial interdependence that might otherwise stabilize relations.

The Tigray War (2020–2022) added another layer of complexity by temporarily transforming Ethiopia–Eritrea relations from estranged neighbors into de facto military partners. This alignment demonstrated that cooperation is possible under conditions of shared threat perception, particularly regarding the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which both governments view through historical and existential lenses. However, this cooperation was

highly contingent. It did not resolve structural disputes and instead introduced new humanitarian, political, and diplomatic complications that affected both states' international standing.

Another major impact has been the fragmentation of trust in regional integration frameworks. The Horn of Africa has seen repeated attempts at regional cooperation, but Ethiopia–Eritrea dynamics often destabilize broader initiatives because their bilateral relationship is so tightly linked to questions of sovereignty, ports, and security alignment. As a result, regional organizations and external mediators often treat their relationship as a core variable in wider Horn stability calculations.

Externally, the relationship has also been reshaped by the involvement of third-party actors. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, played facilitative roles in the 2018 peace process, helping create diplomatic momentum for normalization. However, external infrastructure investments and port competition across the Red Sea basin have also complicated long-term alignment by introducing alternative strategic options for both countries. Similarly, China's infrastructural dominance in Djibouti has indirectly reinforced Ethiopia's reliance on non-Eritrean maritime routes, reducing the economic pressure for deep reintegration.

The cumulative impact of these dynamics is a relationship characterized by partial normalization without full institutional settlement. Diplomatic ties may be restored, but security perceptions remain cautious; economic cooperation may be announced, but logistics systems remain externally anchored; and moments of alignment may emerge, but they tend to be situational rather than structural.

In the broader sense, the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship demonstrates how post-conflict interstate systems can stabilize without truly resolving their underlying contradictions. The impact of conflict and peace initiatives is therefore not a transition from hostility to harmony, but the creation of a managed ambiguity, where cooperation and rivalry coexist within a continuously shifting strategic equilibrium shaped by history, geography, and regional power competition.

10.Improving the Pretoria Agreement

The Pretoria Agreement arrived like a sunrise after a storm that had shaken the mountains of Ethiopia to their roots. Peace demanded courage, and courage demanded trust. Trust became the bridge between enemies who once spoke only through the thunder of weapons.

This infographic explains how the Pretoria Agreement can evolve from a temporary ceasefire into a sustainable and durable peace framework in Ethiopia. It is organized into interconnected sections that examine the agreement, its achievements, the ongoing challenges, and the reforms needed for long-term implementation.

The Pretoria Agreement

The **Pretoria Agreement** is not viewed as fully sufficient on its own. The subtitle, “**From Ceasefire to Durable Peace in Ethiopia,**” emphasizes the difference between ending active conflict and building a stable political order afterward.

This distinction is critical because many peace agreements succeed in stopping violence but fail to establish long-term political and social stability.

The dove and handshake symbols visually represent reconciliation, diplomacy, and peacebuilding.

Figure



The Pretoria Agreement

The Pretoria Agreement, also known as the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA), was signed on 2 November 2022 in Pretoria, South Africa, between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), with mediation led by the African Union. It is widely associated with the end of the main phase of the Tigray War.

It is not a full peace treaty but rather a ceasefire and framework agreement designed to stop active fighting and create conditions for a longer-term political settlement. Its main provisions included the immediate cessation of hostilities, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of TPLF forces, the restoration of federal authority and constitutional order in Tigray, and the resumption of humanitarian access along with basic services such as banking, electricity, and communications.

The agreement also emphasizes political dialogue, reconciliation, and the rebuilding of institutions. However, its implementation has been uneven and sometimes contested, particularly regarding disarmament timelines, access for humanitarian operations, and governance arrangements in Tigray. Eritrean forces were not part of the agreement, despite their involvement in the wider conflict, which complicated enforcement and post-conflict security dynamics.

While the agreement significantly reduced large-scale warfare, tensions and sporadic violence have continued, meaning it is generally viewed as a fragile ceasefire framework rather than a fully consolidated peace settlement.

A strong implementation path usually rests on a few core pillars.

First is **security consolidation**. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration only works if it is phased, verified, and tied to realistic incentives like reintegration into civilian life or structured federal security arrangements. Without credible monitoring and clear sequencing, mistrust quickly returns. A neutral or jointly agreed monitoring mechanism—often with African Union or international support—matters a lot here.

Second is **political dialogue with real outcomes**, not just consultations. The parties need a structured process that clarifies Tigray's political status within Ethiopia's federal system, including governance arrangements, elections, and constitutional interpretation disputes. If political questions remain vague, the ceasefire stays fragile because underlying causes remain unresolved.

Third is **restoration of services and institutions**. Banking, electricity, telecoms, health systems, and local administration need full normalization. This isn't just humanitarian—it's stabilizing, because economic collapse tends to fuel renewed conflict risk. Rebuilding credible local institutions also helps reduce dependence on armed structures.

Fourth is **transitional justice and reconciliation**. This includes addressing war crimes allegations, displacement, and intercommunal grievances. Without some form of accountability or truth-telling process, social trust remains broken and revenge cycles can persist.

Fifth is **inclusive regional security guarantees**. One of the biggest gaps in the agreement is that outside actors involved in the conflict were not fully integrated into the settlement framework. Long-term stability usually requires either their inclusion in a broader regional security understanding or a clear, enforceable disengagement mechanism.

Finally, “next level” peace means **locking implementation into institutions that outlive the agreement itself**—for example, binding federal arrangements, independent monitoring bodies, and economic reconstruction plans tied to verified milestones rather than political goodwill alone.

The agreement’s central objective was a **Permanent Cessation of Hostilities (CoH)** following the devastating Tigray conflict.

The infographic highlights two central ideas: the agreement significantly reduced large-scale fighting, but durable peace requires stronger implementation mechanisms and broader institutional support.

The pen-and-document icon symbolizes legal commitment and formal diplomacy.

Key Achievements So Far

This section highlights the major successes achieved since the agreement was signed.

Cessation of large Hostilities

Large-scale military confrontation declined substantially after the agreement, reducing civilian casualties and humanitarian destruction.

Improved Humanitarian Access

Aid organizations gained greater access to conflict-affected regions, helping restore food distribution, medical supplies, and emergency assistance.

AU Monitoring and Verification Mechanism

The African Union established a mechanism to monitor implementation, verify ceasefire compliance, oversee disarmament efforts, and reduce misinformation.

High-Level Dialogue Platform

Communication channels between the parties remained open after the agreement, helping prevent an immediate return to war.

The green color palette symbolizes stabilization and cautious optimism.

Major Challenges (Top Right Section)

This section explains why peace in Ethiopia remains fragile despite progress.

Incomplete Withdrawal of Armed Forces

Some armed groups and regional forces remained in contested territories, contributing to insecurity and mistrust. Concerns also persist that disarmament could become asymmetrical if all actors are not held equally accountable.

Millions of IDPs Not Returned

Many internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain unable to safely return home because of insecurity, damaged infrastructure, and unresolved territorial disputes.

Weak Monitoring and Enforcement

Although the AU mechanism monitors implementation, it has limited enforcement authority. It can identify violations but struggles to compel compliance.

Political Exclusion

Some local communities, civil society groups, women, and regional stakeholders felt excluded from negotiations. Elite-centered peace agreements often struggle when broader society is not meaningfully integrated into implementation.

Transitional Justice Gaps

Victims of violence continue to seek truth, accountability, reparations, and recognition. Without credible justice mechanisms, resentment and mistrust may persist beneath the surface.

Economic Fragility

The war severely damaged banking systems, telecommunications, roads, schools, hospitals, and local economies. Economic instability can increase the risk of renewed conflict.

The red tones in this section visually represent danger, instability, and unresolved tension.

Central Circle: Durable Peace

At the center of the infographic is its core argument:

Durable peace requires inclusive governance, accountability, economic recovery, and regional cooperation.

The infographic stresses that peace cannot rely solely on the absence of fighting. Sustainable peace also depends on political legitimacy, economic opportunity, social healing, and institutional trust.

The dove within the circle symbolizes hope, reconciliation, and national recovery.

Six Major Recommendations for Improvement

These recommendations form the infographic's primary policy proposals for strengthening implementation.

A. Establish an Independent Guarantor and Monitoring Mechanism

A durable peace process requires credible institutions capable of ensuring that all parties adhere to their commitments. The infographic therefore recommends the creation of an independent guarantor mechanism jointly supported by the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and the United Nations. This body would be responsible for monitoring implementation, verifying compliance with agreed provisions, and reporting on progress through transparent and publicly accessible mechanisms.

The effectiveness of peace agreements often depends not only on the content of the agreement itself but also on the existence of credible enforcement and accountability structures. In many post-conflict settings, implementation falters because parties lack confidence that commitments will be honored or because there are no neutral actors capable of resolving disputes. A joint monitoring mechanism could address these challenges by establishing clear benchmarks, compliance timelines, and regular review processes. Quarterly public reports would enhance transparency, strengthen accountability, and provide citizens, civil society organizations, and international partners with objective assessments of progress. By reducing uncertainty and increasing trust among stakeholders, an independent guarantor mechanism can help prevent implementation failures and reinforce the long-term credibility of the peace process.

B. Expand Political Inclusion and Participatory Governance

The infographic stresses that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through agreements negotiated among political and military elites. While elite bargains may be necessary to end active conflict, long-term stability requires the transformation of elite peace into societal peace. This necessitates the meaningful inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders in both decision-making and implementation processes.

Women, youth, traditional elders, civil society organizations, religious leaders, internally displaced persons, minority groups, and regional representatives should all have opportunities to participate in shaping post-conflict governance arrangements. Inclusive participation helps ensure that peacebuilding efforts reflect the diverse needs and priorities of affected communities rather than the interests of a narrow political elite. Furthermore, broad-based engagement can enhance the legitimacy of political institutions, strengthen public ownership of the peace process, and reduce the risk that marginalized groups become sources of future instability.

Political inclusion also contributes to conflict prevention by creating channels through which grievances can be expressed and addressed peacefully. When communities perceive that they have a meaningful voice in governance and reconstruction efforts, they are more likely to support implementation and less likely to resort to violence as a means of advancing their interests. Consequently, inclusive governance should be viewed not as a symbolic objective but as a strategic requirement for sustainable peace and state-building.

C. Strengthen Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Processes

The infographic identifies transitional justice as a critical component of post-conflict recovery and social healing. Lasting peace requires more than institutional reforms; it also requires addressing the legacies of violence, human rights abuses, and collective trauma that often persist long after armed conflict has ended. To achieve this, the infographic proposes the establishment of an independent truth commission, meaningful victim participation, reparations programs, and community-based reconciliation initiatives.

A truth commission can provide an official platform for documenting violations, establishing an accurate historical record, and acknowledging the experiences of victims and survivors. Such mechanisms can help counter denial, reduce misinformation, and foster a shared understanding of the conflict's causes and consequences. Victim-centered approaches are particularly important because communities that have suffered atrocities often seek recognition, justice, and acknowledgment before reconciliation can occur.

Reparations programs, whether financial, symbolic, or service-based, can help address the material and psychological harms experienced by affected populations. At the same time, reconciliation initiatives can promote dialogue between former adversaries, rebuild social trust, and encourage coexistence within divided communities. Although transitional justice processes cannot fully undo the damage caused by conflict, they can create the conditions necessary for healing, accountability, and the reconstruction of social relationships. Without addressing past grievances, unresolved trauma and perceptions of impunity may continue to undermine peace and increase the likelihood of future conflict.

D. Prioritize Economic Recovery and Basic Service Delivery

The infographic emphasizes that sustainable peace requires more than a cessation of hostilities; it requires visible improvements in people's daily lives. Restoring critical economic infrastructure, including banking systems, telecommunications networks, transportation links, and local markets, is essential for reviving commercial activity and reconnecting communities affected by conflict. Equally important is the rehabilitation of schools, hospitals, water systems, and other public services that form the foundation of social welfare and state legitimacy.

Economic recovery can play a crucial role in reducing incentives for renewed violence. High levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, often create conditions in which armed groups can recruit new members. By generating livelihoods, supporting small businesses, encouraging private investment, and expanding employment opportunities, post-conflict governments can help address some of the underlying drivers of instability. At the same time, the effective delivery of public services demonstrates the state's capacity to meet citizens' needs, thereby rebuilding public confidence in governmental institutions and strengthening the social contract between citizens and the state.

E. Strengthen and Expand DDR Programs

The infographic highlights the importance of robust Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs as a cornerstone of long-term peacebuilding. Disarmament involves the systematic collection, registration, and verification of weapons to reduce the risk

of future violence. Transparent monitoring mechanisms are essential to ensure that all parties comply with agreed disarmament commitments and to build confidence among former adversaries.

Demobilization must be accompanied by meaningful reintegration support. Former combatants often face significant economic, psychological, and social challenges when transitioning back into civilian life. Effective DDR programs therefore require comprehensive vocational training, educational opportunities, employment assistance, psychosocial counseling, and community-based reconciliation initiatives. Reintegration efforts should not only focus on ex-fighters but also support host communities to reduce tensions and facilitate social acceptance. Without adequate reintegration mechanisms, former combatants may remain vulnerable to remobilization, criminal activity, or recruitment into new armed groups, undermining prospects for durable peace.

F. Enhance Regional Diplomacy and Security Cooperation

The infographic recognizes that conflicts in the Horn of Africa rarely remain confined within national borders. Regional rivalries, cross-border movements of armed actors, refugee flows, and competing geopolitical interests often influence the trajectory of domestic conflicts. Consequently, sustainable peace requires a coordinated regional approach alongside national reconciliation efforts.

Strengthening diplomatic engagement among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and regional organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development is essential for reducing tensions and fostering cooperative security arrangements. Enhanced dialogue can help address cross-border disputes, improve intelligence sharing, coordinate border stabilization efforts, and develop joint strategies to combat arms trafficking and transnational security threats.

Long-term stability in the Horn of Africa depends not only on resolving immediate conflicts but also on building mechanisms for continuous regional consultation and conflict prevention. By promoting trust, cooperation, and collective security among neighboring states, regional diplomacy can reduce the likelihood that local conflicts escalate into broader regional crises and create a more favorable environment for sustainable peace and development.

Success Depends On

This section identifies four foundational conditions necessary for successful implementation.

Political Will

At the foundation of any successful peace process lies the genuine commitment of those who hold power. Political will is not merely a rhetorical posture adopted at signing ceremonies but a sustained and costly disposition that leaders must demonstrate through concrete decisions, often at significant political risk to themselves. Agreeing to peace is frequently the easier part. Implementing it — disarming militias, sharing revenues, integrating former enemies into security structures, and relinquishing patronage networks built during war — demands a quality of leadership that history shows to be rare. Without it, agreements dissolve into paper promises,

and the communities that trusted their leaders to deliver peace are left more cynical and more vulnerable than before.

Participation of Communities

Peace imposed from above without the consent and active involvement of those who lived through the conflict is fragile by design. Affected populations — women, youth, displaced persons, minority communities, local elders — carry knowledge of the conflict's root causes that no negotiating delegation fully captures. When these voices are excluded from the design and implementation of peace, the resulting institutions reflect the priorities of elites rather than the needs of societies. Genuine community participation is not a procedural courtesy but a structural necessity. It builds local ownership, surfaces grievances that might otherwise fester, and transforms peace from an abstract political achievement into something people recognize as their own and are therefore motivated to protect.

Regional and International Support

No peace process operates in isolation from the wider environment in which it is embedded. Neighboring states, regional organizations, and international partners can provide the financial resources, technical expertise, mediation capacity, and monitoring mechanisms that fragile post-conflict governments often cannot supply themselves. External support matters most when it is consistent, coordinated, and genuinely subordinated to the priorities of the peace process rather than to the strategic interests of the donors and mediators providing it. When external actors pull in competing directions — backing different factions, conditioning aid on unrelated political outcomes, or withdrawing support when their attention shifts — they can unravel agreements as effectively as any spoiler from within.

Transparent Communication

Public trust is among the most perishable assets in a post-conflict society, and it cannot survive opacity. When implementation processes are visible, when benchmarks are publicly stated and honestly reported, when setbacks are acknowledged rather than concealed, citizens develop the confidence that the peace being built is real rather than performed. Transparency also creates accountability. Leaders who have committed publicly to specific actions within specific timeframes are harder to ignore when those actions go undelivered. Communication is therefore not a supplementary feature of implementation but an integral mechanism through which accountability is created and public investment in the peace process is sustained.

A Roadmap for Sustainable Peace

Peace agreements rarely fail at the moment of signing. They fail in the months and years that follow, when the hard work of translating commitments into institutions, institutions into services, and services into trust must be done without the urgency and international attention that surrounded the original negotiations. A structured and sequenced approach to implementation is therefore essential.

The process begins with a clear action plan in which responsibilities are unambiguously assigned and priorities explicitly ranked. Ambiguity about who is responsible for what is not a

neutral condition — it is an invitation for inaction and blame-shifting. From this foundation, time-bound implementation follows, with measurable deadlines and benchmarks that transform vague promises into verifiable obligations. Deadlines create pressure; benchmarks create evidence; together they make it possible to distinguish genuine progress from the appearance of it.

Independent monitoring is the mechanism through which that evidence is evaluated by parties with no stake in flattering the results. Credible oversight — whether by domestic civil society, regional bodies, or international missions — transforms implementation from a self-reported process into an externally verified one. It also provides early warning when implementation is stalling, allowing corrective action before failures become irreversible.

Throughout all of this, community engagement must be woven into every stage rather than treated as a concluding gesture. Local participation ensures that the institutions being built reflect lived realities, that the populations most affected by conflict have a voice in the structures designed to prevent its recurrence, and that peace develops genuine roots rather than remaining a superstructure imposed on unresolved tensions.

The destination of this process is sustainable peace — not the absence of violence alone, but the presence of resilient institutions capable of managing future disputes without recourse to force. The arrows that connect each stage of this roadmap represent something important: that peace is a direction of travel rather than a destination that can be reached at once. Progress is gradual, reversals are possible, and the work is never fully finished.

This understanding is captured in the roadmap's central argument: peace agreements end wars, but inclusive institutions sustain peace. Ceasefires can silence guns. Only governance, justice, accountability, economic opportunity, and social inclusion can address the conditions that made those guns seem necessary in the first place. It is the lesson that emerges, repeatedly and painfully, from peace processes across the world — that the hardest work does not end when the ink dries, but begins there.

Rhetorically, we ask:

What is a ceasefire without justice, and what is justice without healing?

Core Message

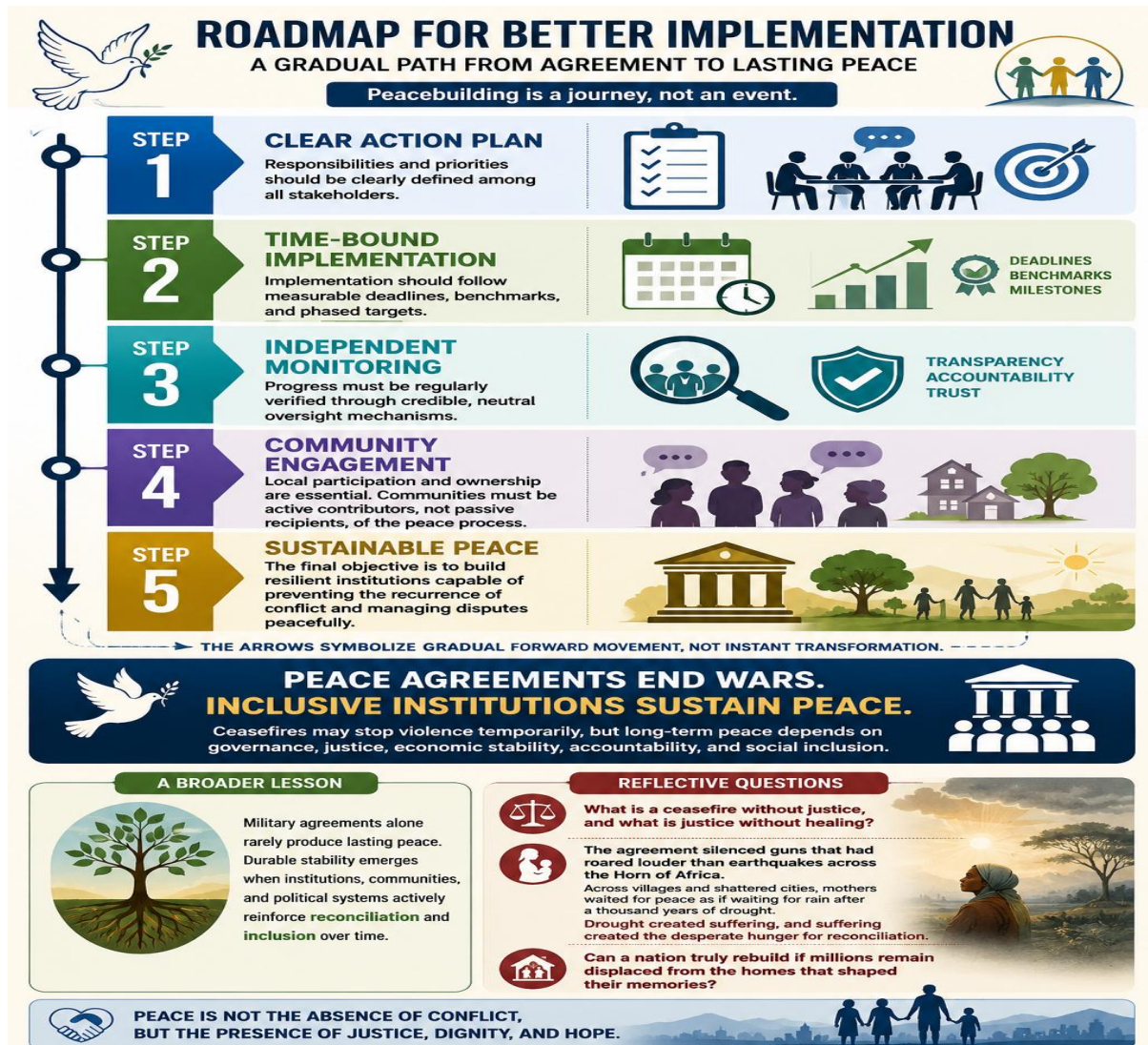
“Peace agreements end wars. Inclusive institutions sustain peace.”

This emphasizes that ceasefires can stop immediate violence, but long-term stability depends on governance, justice, economic recovery, accountability, and social inclusion. Above all, Ethiopia should stop practicing federalism like Pol Pot read Rousseau.

Key Insight

Military agreements alone rarely produce lasting peace. Durable stability emerges when institutions, communities, and political systems actively reinforce reconciliation and inclusion over time.

Figure



Reflective Questions

What is a ceasefire without justice, and what is justice without healing?

The agreement silenced guns that once roared across the Horn of Africa with overwhelming force. In many communities, people waited for peace like drought-stricken land waits for rain. Suffering deepened the urgency for reconciliation, but also made recovery more complex.

Can a nation truly rebuild if millions remain displaced from the homes that shaped their memories?

The African Union stood as a giant shield attempting to guard the fragile future of the region. Future became the language of negotiators who understood that war devours generations faster than fire devours forests. The implementation process moved slowly, slowly like a wounded river searching for the sea.

How can trust survive when armed groups still stand in contested territories?

The economy of Ethiopia trembled under the weight of destruction so immense it seemed capable of crushing history itself. History became both a teacher and a warning to leaders gathered around negotiation tables. The return of displaced families carried hope brighter than a million lanterns shining through darkness. Darkness remained wherever justice failed to reach grieving communities.

Can durable peace emerge without women, elders, youth, and civil society shaping the process together?

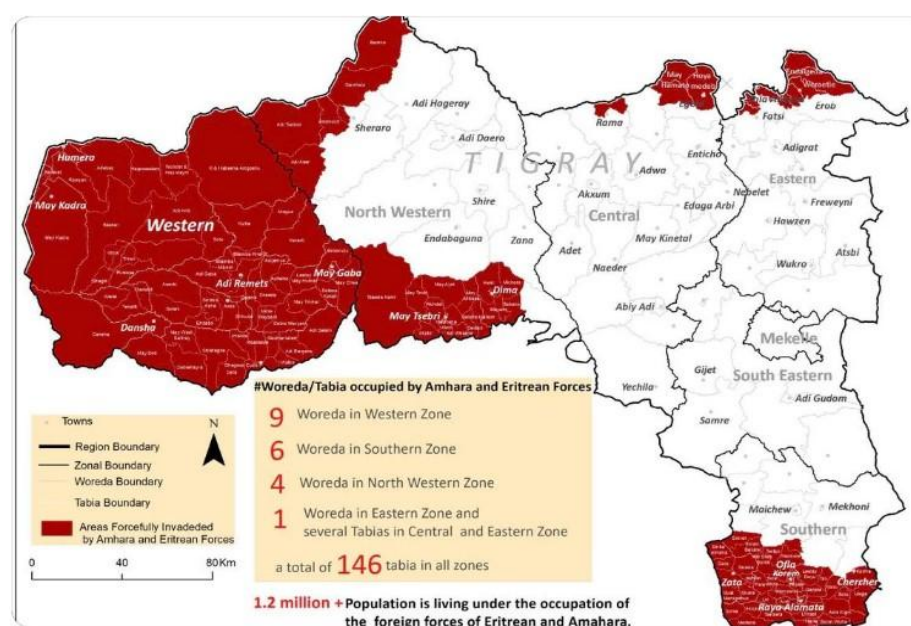
Regional diplomacy became the heartbeat of stability across the Horn, a heartbeat powerful enough to echo across continents. The Pretoria Agreement was not merely a document; it was a fragile flame struggling against hurricane winds of mistrust and division. If that flame is protected with accountability, inclusion, and reconciliation, Ethiopia could rise with the strength of a phoenix reborn from ashes taller than mountains.

Modalities for the Disarmament of TPLP

The question of whether the disarmament modalities for the Tigray People's Liberation Front under the Pretoria Agreement were “the right ones” is highly debated among policymakers, security analysts, and affected communities. The answer depends on what standard is being used: immediate cessation of war, long-term stability, political fairness, or regional security.

From a conflict-resolution perspective, the agreement achieved one major success: it sharply reduced large-scale warfare in Ethiopia. In that sense, sequencing disarmament early helped stop active combat quickly. The logic was straightforward: fewer weapons would reduce the probability of renewed escalation.

Figure



Source: UK Government

Western Tigray is widely reported to be under de facto control of Amhara regional forces and their allies. This area represents a large and strategically important portion of Tigray's western territory. Eritrean forces are not holding a clearly defined continuous zone but are reported to be present in parts of northern Tigray near the border. Their presence is more intermittent and military in nature rather than formal administration. Most of central and eastern Tigray is generally considered to be under the control of the Tigray regional authorities. The situation remains unstable, with contested authority and ongoing tensions affecting different parts of the region. Overall, a significant western portion is under Amhara control, while Eritrean influence is mainly localized in northern border areas.

However, critics argue that the modalities were incomplete or uneven in several ways.

First, many observers noted that disarmament timelines appeared faster than the restoration of political and security guarantees. This created fears among Tigrayan communities that disarmament could produce vulnerability before full normalization occurred. In post-conflict settings, groups often ask: *Who protects civilians after weapons are surrendered?*

Second, implementation depended heavily on trust between former enemies who had recently fought one of the deadliest conflicts in modern African history. Trust was fragile, and fragile trust complicates DDR processes (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration).

Third, critics questioned whether the agreement sufficiently addressed the role of other armed actors beyond the TPLF. A disarmament framework can appear asymmetrical if one side disarms while contested territorial or military realities remain unresolved.

Fourth, successful DDR usually requires:

- economic reintegration,
- psychological rehabilitation,
- local reconciliation,
- and long-term monitoring.

Without these, former combatants may feel politically excluded or economically stranded.

Supporters of the Pretoria framework respond that no peace agreement can succeed if armed mobilization remains indefinite. They argue that delaying disarmament could have prolonged humanitarian suffering and weakened the ceasefire itself.

A more balanced implementation model might have included:

1. phased and reciprocal disarmament,
2. stronger international verification mechanisms,

3. clearer civilian protection guarantees,
4. broader inclusion of local communities,
5. and faster reconstruction and political normalization.

So the issue may not be whether disarmament itself was wrong, but whether the sequencing, guarantees, and enforcement mechanisms were sufficiently balanced to produce sustainable peace rather than only temporary stabilization. In peace processes, weapons are rarely only military tools; they are symbols of security, leverage, fear, and political survival. That is why disarmament is never merely technical—it is deeply political.

The Tigray War (2020–2022, with ongoing aftereffects) has had a major impact on Ethiopia's international image and has also constrained its foreign policy in several interconnected ways.

Before the war, Ethiopia was widely viewed as a regional stabilizer in the Horn of Africa, a key Western security partner in counterterrorism and peacekeeping, and a symbol of African developmental state ambition, especially during the reform period after 2018. The Tigray conflict significantly altered this perception. Reports of mass civilian casualties, famine conditions in Tigray, sexual violence used as a weapon of war, and restricted humanitarian access generated widespread international criticism from the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and several Western governments and EU institutions. As a result, Ethiopia's image shifted from that of a reforming and stabilizing partner to a state associated with severe human rights violations.

The war also undermined the international “reform narrative” associated with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who had initially received strong global support, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. The conflict damaged that image, and Ethiopia came to be seen more as a state experiencing internal fragmentation and militarization rather than successful political liberalization. International media coverage reinforced this shift by increasingly framing Ethiopia as a fragile multi-ethnic federation under severe stress, raising concerns about potential state instability in the Horn of Africa. This perception also contributed to reduced investor confidence and weakened diplomatic goodwill.

In terms of foreign policy constraints, the conflict reduced Ethiopia's diplomatic leverage, particularly with Western partners. The United States and European Union introduced various forms of pressure, including aid suspensions, conditional assistance, and targeted sanctions such as visa restrictions on officials linked to human rights abuses. This limited Ethiopia's ability to rely on Western support in the same way as before.

As a consequence, Ethiopia increased its engagement with alternative partners, including Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as well as China and Turkey. These relationships became more important for financing, infrastructure development, and in some cases military support, reflecting a partial shift toward a more diversified and transactional foreign policy orientation.

Regionally, the war also strained Ethiopia's diplomatic position. Relations with Eritrea became uncertain after initial cooperation during the conflict, while tensions with Sudan intensified

over border disputes. Relations with Egypt remained tense due to ongoing disagreements over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Overall, Ethiopia's role as a regional integrator and diplomatic leader within institutions such as IGAD was weakened.

Finally, the war constrained Ethiopia's foreign policy capacity by forcing the government to focus heavily on internal security and crisis management. This reduced diplomatic bandwidth and limited its ability to act as a mediator in regional conflicts. In international relations terms, Ethiopia's external influence declined because internal instability reduced its credibility and strategic flexibility.

In the long term, even after the 2022 Pretoria Peace Agreement, these effects continue to shape Ethiopia's position. Its soft power remains weakened, its partnerships are more transactional, and its international image is that of a higher-risk but still strategically important middle power rather than a stable regional anchor.

Summary

Tigray's challenges are complex and interconnected, arising from the aftermath of war and unresolved political and territorial disputes. Internal political fragmentation is a major issue, with rival elites and competing administrative structures weakening unified leadership. This division reduces Tigray's ability to negotiate effectively with the Ethiopian federal government and manage external pressures. Relations with Addis Ababa remain incomplete despite the Pretoria Agreement, especially regarding disputed areas like Western Tigray and the full restoration of regional authority. At the same time, tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea increase insecurity, as Tigray risks becoming a buffer zone or proxy battleground between the two states. Humanitarian and economic recovery is also severely constrained by displacement, infrastructure destruction, and economic collapse, which can fuel further instability. Governance challenges persist as rebuilding institutions struggle with low public trust and the presence of armed actors. Overall, Tigray's stability depends on fragile internal cohesion, incomplete federal settlement, and a volatile regional geopolitical environment.

11.The Central Strategic Question: Ethiopian Access to the Red Sea

Ethiopia's structural challenge is rooted in its geography and long-term economic constraints. As the world's most populous landlocked country, Ethiopia has no direct access to the sea and has relied heavily on neighboring states—most prominently Djibouti—for maritime trade since Eritrea's independence in 1993. This dependency shapes everything from trade costs to strategic planning, making port access not just an economic issue but a central pillar of national development policy.

In recent years, Ethiopian policymakers and strategic thinkers have increasingly framed access to the Red Sea as a long-term national necessity tied to economic growth, industrialization, and regional influence. Ports are often discussed in terms of reducing vulnerability to external chokepoints and lowering logistics costs for a rapidly growing economy. However, when this discourse shifts from economic cooperation to nationalist framing or implied territorial entitlement, it becomes highly sensitive. In particular, any suggestion that Ethiopia might seek

sovereign control or special rights over ports such as Assab is perceived in Eritrea as a direct challenge to its hard-won independence and territorial integrity.

Eritrea's core concern is therefore fundamentally about sovereignty rather than commerce. From Eritrea's perspective, economic cooperation—such as trade facilitation, port services, or transit agreements—is negotiable and potentially mutually beneficial. What is non-negotiable is any arrangement that compromises sovereign control, introduces foreign military presence, or creates conditions resembling external tutelage over its coastal territory. Because Eritrea's independence emerged from a long liberation struggle, territorial integrity is closely tied to national identity and political legitimacy.

Public or political discussions in Ethiopia that appear to question Eritrean sovereignty over coastal areas, particularly Assab, have historically deepened mistrust. These narratives are often interpreted in Eritrea as reviving older patterns of domination or indirect control, even when framed as economic necessity. This perception increases regional sensitivity and raises the risk of diplomatic deterioration or military escalation.

For any stable and durable arrangement to be possible, several principles would need to be clearly established and credibly guaranteed. Full and unequivocal Eritrean sovereignty over all ports would need to be recognized as the legal foundation. Any agreements would also require strict non-militarization clauses to ensure that commercial access cannot be converted into strategic or military leverage. Legally binding international frameworks would be necessary to enforce compliance and reduce ambiguity over time. Finally, reciprocal economic benefits would be essential so that access arrangements are not seen as one-sided dependency but as shared regional development, creating incentives for cooperation rather than confrontation.

The EU could promote economic interdependence between Eritrea and Ethiopia by focusing less on direct political engineering and more on lowering the practical costs of trade, rebuilding cross-border infrastructure, and creating incentives that make sustained cooperation more profitable than isolation.

A first pathway is **trade facilitation and market integration**. The EU can support customs harmonisation, digital border management, and simplified trade regimes along the Eritrea–Ethiopia border once political conditions allow. In practice, this means funding systems that reduce delays, corruption opportunities, and transaction costs for small-scale traders. Even modest cross-border commerce—livestock, agricultural goods, manufactured inputs—can build interdependence if it becomes predictable and legally protected.

A second channel is **infrastructure linking ports, roads, and logistics corridors**. Ethiopia is landlocked, while Eritrea has strategic Red Sea ports such as Massawa and Assab. EU development finance instruments and the European Investment Bank could, in principle, support rehabilitation of transport corridors that connect Ethiopian production zones to Eritrean ports, but only if both governments agree on transparent access rules. The key is not just building infrastructure, but embedding it in shared revenue systems that make both sides financially reliant on continued cooperation.

A third approach is **support for energy and utility interdependence**. Cross-border electricity trade or regional grid integration can create stable, long-term dependencies that are harder to reverse than short-term trade flows. If structured carefully, shared energy projects can bind states into ongoing technical coordination and reduce incentives for renewed hostility.

The EU can also strengthen **institutional and people-to-people links**, for example by supporting business councils, academic exchanges, and diaspora investment channels that operate across both countries. These networks often continue even when high-level diplomacy stalls, preserving a baseline of economic interaction that can be scaled up during political openings.

Another important lever is **risk reduction through guarantees and phased investment**. European development institutions can provide partial guarantees or blended finance to de-risk private investment in cross-border projects. This is especially important in a context where political relations have repeatedly shifted, making investors cautious. By lowering risk premiums, the EU can encourage firms to treat Eritrea–Ethiopia linkages as commercially viable rather than exceptional or temporary.

Finally, the EU's role is also indirect through **regional institutions and diplomatic engagement**, particularly with the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Encouraging regional frameworks that normalize economic cooperation reduces reliance on bilateral political goodwill alone, which in the Horn of Africa has often been unstable.

The broader logic is that economic interdependence is most durable when it is embedded in infrastructure, routine trade, and shared systems of revenue and services rather than in high-level political agreements alone. The challenge in the Eritrea–Ethiopia case is that past rapprochements, including the 2018 peace process following the Eritrea–Ethiopia rapprochement, showed how quickly political openings can occur—but also how easily they can stall if not anchored in dense economic ties.

12.Regional Security System

Building on that baseline, it is important to emphasize that the Horn of Africa's security environment is also shaped by the persistence of unresolved political settlements, where many conflicts are not truly concluded but merely paused. Peace agreements often function as temporary ceasefires rather than comprehensive resolutions, leaving core disputes over land, identity, governance, and resource distribution intact. This creates a recurring pattern in which violence can re-emerge quickly when political conditions shift or enforcement mechanisms weaken.

A related dimension is the fragmentation of security institutions themselves. In several states, armed forces are not unified national institutions but coalitions of regional, ethnic, or factional units with varying degrees of loyalty to central authority. This is particularly evident in Sudan, where parallel military structures have evolved into competing centers of power, but it is also visible in Ethiopia's federalized security landscape, where regional forces retain significant

autonomy. Such fragmentation reduces the capacity for coordinated national responses to crises and increases the likelihood of intra-state conflict escalation.

Insurgencies in the region also demonstrate a high degree of organizational adaptability. Groups such as Al-Shabaab have repeatedly adjusted their strategies in response to external military pressure, shifting between territorial control, asymmetric attacks, and economic infiltration. Rather than being weakened linearly by counterinsurgency campaigns, they often mutate operationally, embedding themselves more deeply into local economies and social structures. This adaptability makes them resilient to conventional military solutions.

Another critical factor is the political economy of conflict, where armed actors sustain themselves through taxation, smuggling, port control, and informal trade networks. These economic systems are not peripheral but central to conflict endurance. In some areas, conflict economies become integrated into local livelihoods, creating constituencies that may benefit materially from instability, even if they suffer from insecurity more broadly.

The Horn also exhibits a strong pattern of regionalization of internal conflicts. Domestic wars frequently spill across borders through refugee flows, arms trafficking, and cross-border alliances. This creates feedback loops in which instability in one state alters demographic and political balances in neighboring states, further complicating conflict resolution efforts. Refugee movements, in particular, place pressure on border regions and urban centers, sometimes generating new tensions over resources and political representation.

External military presence adds another layer of complexity by creating a multi-layered security architecture. Foreign bases, training missions, and counterterrorism operations introduce additional command structures and strategic priorities into already fragmented environments. While these interventions can suppress immediate threats, they can also distort local power balances, empowering certain actors over others and sometimes incentivizing dependency rather than institutional reform.

There is also a growing trend of information warfare and political fragmentation through media ecosystems, where social media, diaspora networks, and partisan information channels influence conflict narratives. These dynamics can intensify polarization, spread misinformation, and complicate peacebuilding efforts by hardening perceptions of grievance and identity-based victimhood across borders.

Climate change increasingly acts as a threat multiplier rather than a standalone cause of conflict. Recurrent droughts, floods, and land degradation intensify competition over pastoral and agricultural resources, particularly in already fragile borderlands. These environmental stresses often intersect with existing ethnic or clan divisions, making local disputes more likely to escalate into organized violence when armed actors are present.

Another underappreciated dimension is the weak institutionalization of regional security cooperation mechanisms. Organizations intended to coordinate responses to instability often lack enforcement capacity, unified political commitment, or operational resources. As a result, security cooperation tends to be ad hoc, reactive, and dependent on external partners rather than structurally embedded in regional governance systems.

At the societal level, prolonged insecurity has contributed to the normalization of militarized livelihoods, where young populations grow up in environments where armed groups, militias, or security forces are among the most stable sources of income and authority. This normalization reduces the opportunity cost of joining armed organizations and complicates disarmament and reintegration efforts after conflict.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a region where insecurity is not episodic but systemic and self-reinforcing. Violence, governance, and economy are deeply intertwined, producing hybrid political orders that are neither fully state-based nor fully anarchic. Stability, when it occurs, is often local, temporary, and dependent on fragile balances of power rather than durable institutional transformation.

Ultimately, the Horn of Africa's security challenges reflect a condition of permanent contestation, where multiple actors—states, insurgents, regional powers, and external interveners—continuously reshape the boundaries of authority. Rather than moving toward a single equilibrium, the region tends to cycle through shifting configurations of order and disorder, with each phase containing the seeds of the next disruption.

The Red Sea is one of the world's most strategically important maritime corridors, linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and carrying a significant share of global trade. Its stability directly affects regional economies and international supply chains, making it a critical arena for both cooperation and competition among coastal and nearby states. In the Horn of Africa context, maritime security in the Red Sea is inseparable from the political stability of states such as Eritrea, Ethiopia (through its indirect dependence on access routes), Sudan, and Djibouti.

Key maritime security challenges include piracy, illicit trafficking, arms smuggling, and intermittent geopolitical tensions among littoral states. Although large-scale piracy has declined compared to the early 2010s, the underlying vulnerabilities remain due to weak coastal governance and uneven naval capacities. The militarization of certain coastal zones, along with external military bases in the wider Red Sea region, further complicates security coordination and raises the stakes of any regional confrontation.

External actors play a decisive role in shaping the strategic environment of the Red Sea. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, along with global powers like China, the United States, and European states, maintain a strong presence through investments, port development, and military facilities. China's infrastructure financing and port-linked investments are often tied to broader Belt and Road Initiative strategies, while Gulf states pursue both economic diversification and strategic depth along the African coastline. These engagements can stabilize the region through investment but can also intensify competition when aligned with rival geopolitical interests.

Infrastructure development is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of regional integration. Roads, railways, ports, and logistics corridors are designed to connect the landlocked economies of the Horn with global markets. Projects such as transport corridors linking Ethiopia to Djibouti's ports demonstrate how infrastructure can reduce trade costs and enhance interdependence. However, such projects also generate political sensitivity when perceived as reinforcing

dependency or excluding certain actors from strategic routes. This contains and extends trade into the hinterland, not all of which is equally fertile.

Migration and humanitarian issues are deeply intertwined with regional instability. The Horn of Africa remains a major migration corridor, with thousands of people moving through Eritrea, Ethiopia, and neighboring states toward the Gulf or Europe. These movements are driven by conflict, economic hardship, and environmental stress. Migrants and refugees often face dangerous routes across deserts and seas, as well as exploitation by trafficking networks, creating significant humanitarian challenges for both origin and transit countries.

Identity and narrative politics strongly shape regional relations. Historical grievances, including colonial borders, civil wars, and contested state formations, continue to influence how states interpret each other's intentions. In the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea, competing narratives of unity, separation, and sovereignty remain central to policy choices. These narratives are not merely historical memories but active political tools that shape diplomacy and public perception.

Diplomatic efforts and peacebuilding initiatives have played an important role in reducing open conflict, particularly the 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which temporarily improved relations and reopened channels of cooperation. Regional organizations and bilateral agreements have sought to normalize ties, though progress remains uneven and vulnerable to reversal. Peacebuilding in the region often depends on political leadership, economic incentives, and sustained third-party engagement.

There are also important case studies of successful cooperation, particularly in periods where economic pragmatism has overridden political rivalry. Examples include cross-border trade arrangements, infrastructure coordination, and temporary security cooperation in the Red Sea basin. These experiences demonstrate that cooperation is possible when mutual interests are clearly defined and politically supported, even in historically tense relationships.

Despite these opportunities, significant challenges to cooperation remain. Deep mistrust, unresolved border issues, competing strategic narratives, and external interference all limit the durability of agreements. Domestic political pressures in both Ethiopia and Eritrea also constrain flexibility, as leaders must balance international engagement with internal legitimacy concerns.

The African Union (AU) has consistently positioned itself as the central continental institution responsible for mediating disputes, promoting peace, and advancing regional integration across Africa, including the highly complex Horn of Africa region. In principle, its mandate is broad and ambitious, ranging from preventive diplomacy and conflict mediation to post-conflict reconstruction and long-term political and economic integration. In practice, the AU seeks to serve as a collective African voice that reduces reliance on external actors while strengthening African-led solutions to African problems, particularly in sensitive regions such as the Red Sea corridor involving Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti.

In the Horn of Africa, the AU has supported dialogue processes aimed at de-escalating interstate tensions, encouraging reconciliation, and facilitating frameworks for cooperation. It

has often worked alongside sub-regional organizations such as IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), recognizing that regional conflicts require layered diplomatic engagement. The AU's involvement has included endorsing peace agreements, supporting mediation efforts during crises, and providing normative frameworks that emphasize sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-aggression among member states. These principles are intended to create a predictable diplomatic environment in which disputes can be resolved through negotiation rather than military confrontation.

However, the effectiveness of the African Union is frequently constrained by structural and political limitations. One of the most significant challenges is the principle of state sovereignty, which remains deeply embedded in the organization's functioning. Member states often resist external interference in what they consider internal affairs, even when such situations have broader regional implications. This limits the AU's ability to enforce decisions or intervene decisively in conflicts, especially when powerful member states are directly involved or when governments are unwilling to accept external mediation.

Another major constraint is resource dependency. The AU relies heavily on external funding from international partners, including the European Union and other global actors, for many of its peace and security operations. This financial dependence can limit institutional autonomy and reduce the speed and scale at which the AU can respond to emerging crises. It also creates occasional tensions regarding agenda-setting, as external donors may prioritize certain issues or frameworks that do not always align perfectly with African political realities.

The complexity of conflicts in the Horn of Africa further complicates the AU's role. Many disputes in the region are not purely interstate conflicts but are instead deeply intertwined with internal political instability, ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and competition over resources and strategic geography. In the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea, for example, historical legacies of colonial boundary-making, federation, annexation, and subsequent independence have produced layered narratives that are difficult to reconcile through conventional diplomatic frameworks alone. This complexity often requires long-term engagement rather than short-term mediation.

Additionally, the Horn of Africa is shaped by overlapping external influences, including strategic interests from Gulf states, China, the United States, and European actors. These external engagements can both support and complicate AU efforts, as regional actors may pursue parallel diplomatic channels or strategic partnerships that bypass continental frameworks. This reduces the AU's ability to act as the sole or dominant mediator in certain crises.

Despite these limitations, the African Union remains an essential diplomatic platform for the continent. It provides institutional legitimacy for peace processes, creates space for dialogue between conflicting parties, and establishes normative expectations around peaceful resolution of disputes. Its peace and security architecture, including the Peace and Security Council, offers mechanisms for early warning and coordinated responses, even if implementation is uneven.

Ultimately, however, the success of the African Union in the Horn of Africa depends not only on institutional capacity but also on the political will of member states. Sustainable peace and

cooperation require governments to consistently prioritize diplomacy over confrontation, accept mutually binding agreements, and commit to long-term regional stability rather than short-term strategic advantage. Without such sustained commitment from the states themselves, the AU's role, while indispensable, remains primarily facilitative rather than determinative in shaping lasting solutions.

13.A Proposed EU Strategy

A. Launch an EU-Supported Horn of Africa Reconciliation Initiative

The European Union should support the establishment of a structured, African Union–led reconciliation initiative designed to strengthen long-term stability across the Horn of Africa. This framework should bring together Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, and the African Union in a sustained diplomatic platform. The initiative must prioritize structured dialogue rather than ad hoc crisis management. It should aim to reduce mistrust and prevent recurring cycles of regional tension. A central objective would be the creation of predictable and institutionalized channels of communication. These channels should focus on border confidence-building measures and early-warning mechanisms for conflict prevention. Economic integration should be treated as a core pillar of peacebuilding. Transit cooperation must be expanded to ensure predictable movement of goods and services across borders. Non-aggression commitments should be formalized to reduce strategic uncertainty. The EU should carefully avoid any perception of external imposition or geopolitical interference. Instead, it should position itself as a facilitator of dialogue and cooperation. Its role should emphasize financial support for peacebuilding initiatives. It should also act as a guarantor of agreed frameworks where appropriate. Technical facilitation, including logistics and institutional expertise, should be another key EU contribution. The legitimacy of the initiative must remain anchored in African leadership and ownership. This approach would enhance trust among regional stakeholders. It would also strengthen the credibility of the African Union as a central mediator. Over time, this initiative could evolve into a permanent regional cooperation architecture.

B. Promote a “Commercial Access Without Sovereignty Transfer” Model

The European Union should encourage a pragmatic and internationally grounded framework for maritime access negotiations in the region. This model would clearly distinguish between sovereign territorial control and commercial economic access. It should support long-term Ethiopian commercial access to key maritime outlets such as Assab and Massawa. At the same time, it must reaffirm Eritrean sovereignty in an unequivocal and non-negotiable manner. This dual structure is essential for reducing political sensitivities. It also ensures that economic cooperation does not translate into territorial disputes. Possible mechanisms could include long-term commercial leasing arrangements governed by international law. Joint customs and logistics zones could also be established to facilitate cross-border trade. Special economic corridors may be developed to streamline transport and investment flows. EU-backed infrastructure modernization would enhance operational efficiency in these zones. Multilateral dispute resolution frameworks should be embedded to manage future disagreements peacefully. These mechanisms should align with established international transit-access

models used globally. They should not resemble military basing agreements in any form. The guiding principle must remain that Ethiopia receives reliable and predictable maritime access. Eritrea, in turn, retains full sovereignty over its territory and infrastructure. In exchange, Eritrea benefits from stable revenue streams and infrastructure development. Such arrangements would reduce zero-sum competition in the region. They would also strengthen mutual economic interdependence. Over time, this model could serve as a blueprint for other contested transit regions globally.

C. Create a Security and Non-Militarization Framework

The European Union should support the development of a regional security framework focused on de-escalation and transparency. This framework must prioritize the prevention of militarized escalation in sensitive border areas. It should establish structured border monitoring mechanisms supported by neutral observers. Maritime confidence-building measures would help reduce tensions in contested waters. Military de-escalation channels should be institutionalized to prevent misunderstandings from escalating into conflict. Independent verification systems could strengthen trust between parties. The African Union should play a central coordinating role in these mechanisms. The EU could provide technical assistance, logistical support, and financial backing. The United Nations could contribute additional monitoring and legitimacy. A key objective must be the prevention of escalation driven by misinformation. Nationalist rhetoric and misinterpretation of strategic intent must be actively mitigated. Transparent communication channels would reduce the risk of accidental conflict. Early-warning systems could identify emerging tensions before they escalate. Regular reporting mechanisms would improve accountability among stakeholders. Over time, such a framework could become a cornerstone of regional stability architecture.

D. Establish an EU Global Gateway Red Sea Corridor

The European Union could leverage its Global Gateway strategy to finance a comprehensive regional connectivity corridor across the Horn of Africa. This initiative would integrate physical infrastructure, digital systems, and energy networks into a unified development framework. Priority investments could include road rehabilitation and modernization across key trade routes. Rail feasibility studies could explore long-term multimodal transport options. Cross-border energy interconnectors would strengthen regional power stability. Logistics infrastructure upgrades would improve trade efficiency and reduce transaction costs. Digital customs systems would enhance transparency and reduce delays at border points. Cross-border industrial zones could stimulate manufacturing and job creation. A potential corridor could extend from Addis Ababa through Mekelle toward Assab, subject to regional agreement and political feasibility. Such projects would generate substantial employment opportunities across multiple sectors. They would also expand customs revenues for participating states. Economic interdependence created by these investments would reduce incentives for conflict. The EU's existing engagement under the Global Gateway framework already provides a foundation for scaling such initiatives. This would position the EU as a long-term development partner in the region. It would also reinforce Europe's strategic interest in stable and secure trade routes. The corridor approach would transform infrastructure into a tool of peacebuilding rather than competition.

E. Support Transitional Reconciliation

Sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa cannot be achieved solely through elite-level diplomatic agreements. It requires deep and sustained engagement across societies, institutions, and generations. The European Union should therefore support transitional reconciliation initiatives at multiple levels. Academic exchange programs can foster mutual understanding between emerging leaders. Civil society dialogue platforms would strengthen cross-border trust and cooperation. Business-to-business partnerships can create shared economic interests that transcend political disputes.

Youth mobility initiatives would help build a new generation less constrained by historical grievances. Cross-border development programs can improve livelihoods in peripheral and conflict-affected regions. Educational cooperation would enhance knowledge transfer and regional integration. Cultural exchange initiatives could reduce long-standing mistrust between communities. EU funding should prioritize inclusive and locally driven projects. These initiatives must be designed to complement, not replace, formal diplomacy. Grassroots engagement would reinforce top-down political agreements. Over time, such efforts could reshape perceptions across societies in the region. They would help transform former adversarial relationships into cooperative networks. This multi-layered reconciliation approach would significantly enhance the durability of peace. Ultimately, it would support the emergence of a more stable, integrated, and resilient Horn of Africa.

The legacy of the 1998–2000 war and the Tigray conflict continues to shape public mistrust. Sustainable peace requires social normalization, not merely diplomatic normalization.

The entire design follows a “stability-through-integration” logic, meaning insecurity is treated as a symptom of fragmented incentives rather than isolated crises.

a. From conflict management → conflict prevention

Instead of reacting to crises (wars, migration spikes, piracy), the model shifts toward institutional dialogue platforms (A), security de-escalation systems (C), and long-term reconciliation (E).

b. From zero-sum geopolitics → mutual economic dependence

The model assumes states fight over ports, borders, and access, so the solution is shared infrastructure and shared economic gains. This is why “commercial access without sovereignty transfer” (B) and “Global Gateway corridor” (D) are central pillars.

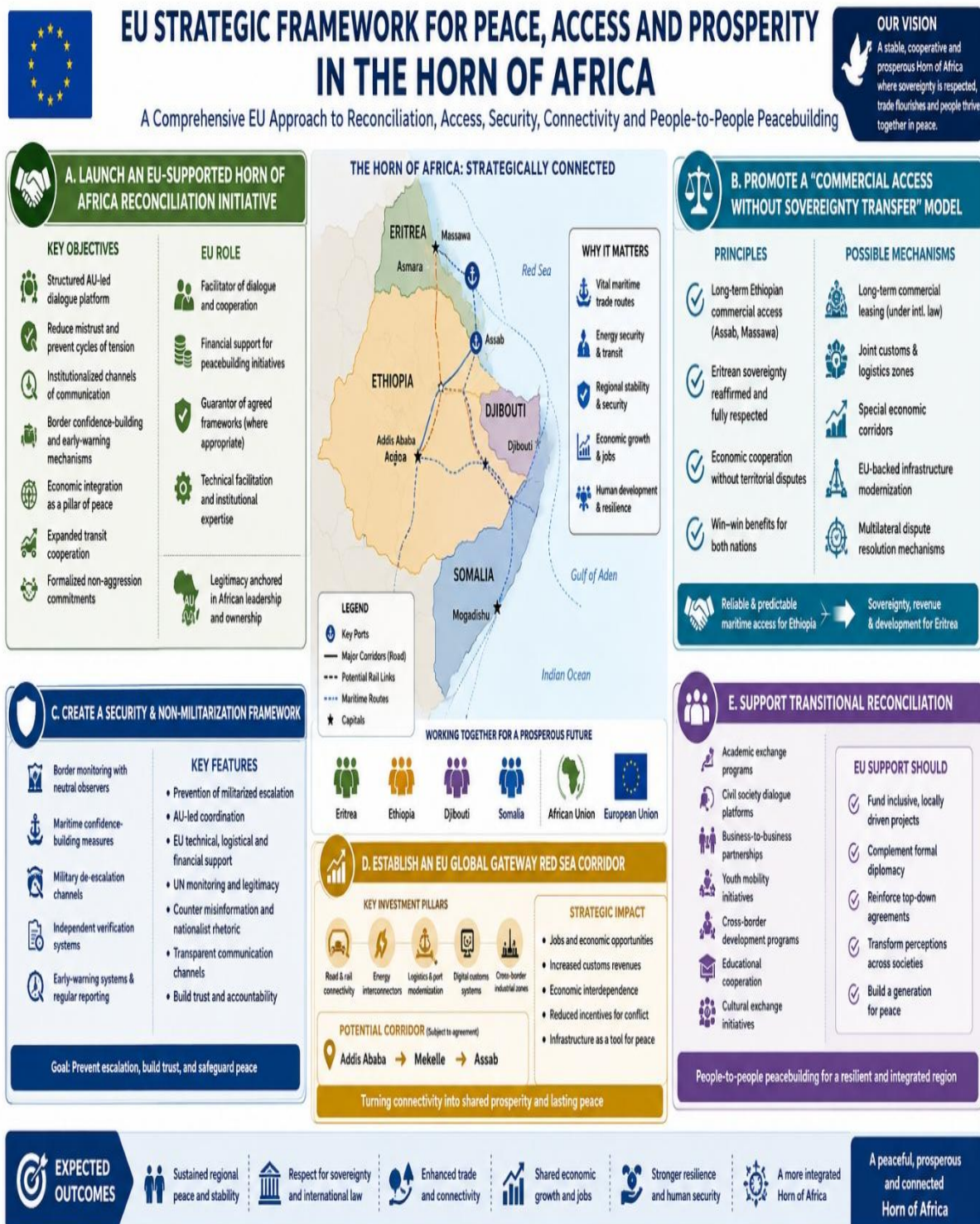
c. From external intervention → African-led ownership

EU role is deliberately limited to financing, technical facilitation, and guarantees, while legitimacy is anchored in African Union leadership. This reduces resistance and increases political acceptance.

d. From fragmented projects → system architecture

Instead of isolated aid programs, everything is linked: diplomacy (A), legal-economic framework (B), security layer (C), infrastructure (D), and societal resilience (E). This forms a multi-layer stability stack.

Figure



2. Expected Yield (What the EU expects to gain)

- a. Strategic and security yield Reduced risk of Red Sea escalation Lower piracy and maritime disruption risk Improved early-warning capacity for regional conflicts More predictable Horn of Africa security environment
- b. Economic yield Stabilised Red Sea trade corridor (Europe–Asia route protection) Lower shipping insurance and disruption costs New infrastructure investment opportunities Expanded EU-linked logistics and energy networks
- c. Migration yield Reduced irregular migration pressure over time Stabilisation of key origin/transit states (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti)
- d. Geopolitical yield Increased EU influence in a region contested by Gulf states, China, and Russia Stronger EU role as “rule-setting stabiliser” rather than military actor
- e. Soft power yield Strengthened EU credibility as a peacebuilding actor Enhanced legitimacy through AU partnership model

3.. Budget Logic (How funding is structured)

There is no single budget line; instead it is a multi-layer financing architecture.

A. Governance & diplomacy (Initiative A + mediation support) Estimated share: low–moderate cost AU-led dialogue platform support technical mediation teams institutional design funding

→ Typical funding: grants

→ Scale: low hundreds of millions over several years (EU external action tools)

B. Economic integration & commercial access model (B) Moderate cost, high complexity customs system redesign logistics zones legal frameworks for transit access

→ Funding: technical assistance + private sector leverage

→ EU role: catalytic, not primary investor

C. Security & non-militarisation framework (C) Moderate cost monitoring systems early-warning infrastructure coordination mechanisms with AU/UN

→ Mostly institutional funding (cheaper than military deployment)

D. Global Gateway corridor (D) — largest cost driver High-capital expenditure roads, rail, ports access infrastructure energy interconnectors digital customs systems industrial zones

→ Funding: EU grants + concessional loans + private co-investment

→ Scale: multi-billion euro, multi-decade investment

E. Transitional reconciliation (E) Low cost, high social impact education programs civil society networks youth mobility academic exchanges

→ Erasmus-like schemes, NGO grants, blended aid

4. Overall Cost Logic (Big Picture)

The framework follows a “small governance cost, large leverage investment” model:

Low-cost: diplomacy, mediation, reconciliation

Medium-cost: security architecture, legal frameworks

High-cost: infrastructure corridors (Global Gateway)

EU funding is primarily designed to de-risk projects and unlock larger co-financing from states, IFIs, and private capital.

5. Strategic Outcome Model (What success looks like)

If fully implemented, the expected end-state is:

Institutionalised Horn of Africa dialogue system (A) Predictable maritime access arrangements (B) Lower militarised tension zones (C) Integrated Red Sea economic corridor (D) Gradual social reconciliation across societies (E) Overall result: a shift from a fragmented, high-risk geopolitical corridor to a structured, economically interdependent regional system anchored to EU trade routes.

Instead of competition over harbours and naval bases, Team Europe introduces a novelty role: shared-access maritime governance frameworks that decouple infrastructure control from exclusive sovereignty claims, replacing zero-sum basing rights with cooperative port usage, joint logistics coordination, and regulated commercial access regimes.



14. Risks and Constraints

Eritrean Distrust of Western Involvement

Asmara may perceive EU initiatives as interference. Therefore:

- diplomacy must be gradual,
- respectful of sovereignty,
- and coordinated with African institutions.

Ethiopian Domestic Nationalism

Red Sea access has become politically sensitive inside Ethiopia. EU diplomacy must avoid legitimizing territorial claims while acknowledging Ethiopia's economic needs. At the same time, there are systemic challenges both in the federal model and decentralisation in Ethiopia that must be addressed in track II-format for Ethiopia to lead with credibility in the Horn of Africa. It has been resolved it could be allocated a peace and conflict research network focusing on the Red Sea and that Eritrea a Red Sea-Rift Center for seismic activity to be undergirded by the EU provided good behaviour combined with constructive engagement in the transformation of the Nile Initiative to an approach based on basin -wide management. The wealth and development gaps inside Ethiopia can be summarized as large and persistent, mainly shaped by geography, infrastructure, and history.

One of the biggest divides is **urban vs. rural life**. Cities like Addis Ababa have better access to jobs, electricity, internet, schools, and healthcare. In contrast, most Ethiopians live in rural areas where livelihoods depend on subsistence farming, and access to basic services can be limited or inconsistent.

There are also strong **regional inequalities**. Central and highland regions tend to be more developed, while peripheral regions (such as Somali, Afar, and parts of Oromia and Gambela) often face weaker infrastructure, fewer public services, and higher poverty rates. These gaps are partly due to geography (arid or remote areas) and partly due to long-standing political and economic centralization.

Another major factor is **education and healthcare access**. Literacy rates, school completion, and healthcare coverage are significantly higher in urban areas. Rural communities may be far from clinics or schools, which affects long-term development and income opportunities.

Finally, **conflict and instability** in some regions have worsened inequalities in recent years by disrupting farming, trade, and public services, making recovery and investment uneven across the country.

In short: Ethiopia's development gap is mainly a split between cities and countryside, and between more connected regions and remote or conflict-affected ones.

This is augmented by what Jón has called the “decentralisation trap” of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia.

The core idea is that decentralisation, which is usually intended to reduce inequality and improve local governance, can in practice reinforce existing disparities when regions start from very unequal positions.

In Ethiopia’s case, the federal system was designed to give ethnic groups self-rule and reduce historical central domination. In theory, this should have allowed more responsive governance and more balanced development. However, critics argue that the initial conditions across regions were highly uneven in terms of infrastructure, human capital, economic activity, and administrative capacity.

As a result, stronger and more connected regions tend to improve faster because they already have the institutions and resources needed for development, while weaker or more remote regions struggle to build the same capacity. This creates divergence rather than convergence.

A key mechanism in the argument is fiscal redistribution. In more centralized systems, redistribution can be directly managed through national planning. In a highly decentralized system, redistribution depends more on regional capacity and political negotiation, which is uneven. This can leave poorer regions structurally dependent on transfers without significantly changing their underlying economic base.

The argument also highlights risks at the regional level, where local elites may capture institutions and resources. This means decentralisation does not automatically translate into equitable local empowerment, and inequality can be reproduced within regions as well as between them.

Finally, because political identity and administration are closely linked, competition over resources can become more fragmented and ethnically framed. This can reduce coordination on national development projects such as infrastructure, investment, and service delivery, further slowing convergence across regions.

The “decentralisation trap” therefore refers to the idea that, under conditions of deep inequality and weak equalising institutions, decentralisation can unintentionally lock in or even widen development gaps rather than close them.

15. Ethiopia and Constructive Leadership in the Red Sea: Strategic Requirements for Foreign Policy and Regional Stability

The EU-Ethiopia Strategic Engagement

The story of exchange between the European Union and Ethiopia is less a straight line than a series of overlapping currents—trade routes, political negotiations, and cultural misunderstandings that slowly accumulated into today’s complex relationship.

It begins, symbolically, not in Brussels but in older corridors of exchange across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopian highland polities were already connected to

Mediterranean and Arabian worlds through trade in coffee, ivory, and salt. When modern European institutions later consolidated into what is now the European Union, they inherited a very different logic: standardized trade regimes, development frameworks, and bureaucratic diplomacy.⁶

From asymmetry to structured engagement

In the early phases of modern EU–Ethiopia relations, exchange was heavily development-oriented. Europe primarily saw Ethiopia through the lens of food security, humanitarian assistance, and institutional support. Ethiopia, in turn, engaged Europe as both a market and a source of aid, but also as a distant political actor whose norms were not always aligned with domestic state-building priorities.

Trade was present, but limited—coffee remained the symbolic anchor. Ethiopian coffee entered European markets as a premium commodity, while European manufactured goods and development inputs flowed in the opposite direction. Yet beneath this apparent simplicity, political assumptions diverged: Europe emphasized governance reforms and liberal institutional models, while Ethiopian elites often prioritized state capacity, sovereignty, and controlled modernization.

The post-socialist shift and ideological residue

The end of Ethiopia’s Marxist-Leninist period in 1991 created a new political landscape. Former state structures fragmented, regionalization deepened, and new elite formations emerged. Some were technocratic, others ethnically or regionally rooted, and many were shaped by diaspora experience in Europe and North America.

In this period, EU engagement increasingly encountered what could be called “post-ideological hybridity”: actors who spoke the language of liberal development economics in Brussels but operated within very different domestic political logics at home. This produced both cooperation and friction. EU programs expanded in governance, infrastructure, and civil society, but their reception depended heavily on which Ethiopian elite networks mediated access.

Trade deepening, politics complicating

By the 2000s and 2010s, trade and investment relations began to widen. European firms explored textiles, agriculture, and infrastructure-linked sectors in Ethiopia, while Ethiopia sought foreign investment to support industrialization and export-led growth strategies.

But political tensions occasionally disrupted the smooth narrative of economic integration. EU concerns over human rights, electoral processes, and conflict dynamics sometimes clashed with Ethiopian state priorities centered on stability and development sequencing. These disagreements were not simply diplomatic—they were rooted in different historical experiences of state formation and legitimacy.

⁶ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/ethiopia/european-union-and-ethiopia_en#95614

Culture as the quiet bridge

Amid these structural tensions, cultural exchange played a slower but stabilizing role. Ethiopian diaspora communities in Europe became cultural intermediaries—through music, coffee culture, religion, and academic exchange. Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, jazz-influenced diaspora music scenes, and growing academic interest in the Horn of Africa helped create informal channels of understanding that state institutions alone could not sustain.

At the same time, European cultural presence in Ethiopia—through education partnerships, development NGOs, and urban architectural influence—created visible but uneven layers of Europeanization, often concentrated in urban centers like Addis Ababa.

The present condition: layered interdependence

Today, EU–Ethiopia relations are best understood as layered interdependence rather than a single partnership. Trade continues to grow cautiously, political dialogue remains sensitive and sometimes strained, and cultural exchange operates as both bridge and mirror—reflecting mutual perceptions more than simple integration.

What began as asymmetrical engagement has evolved into a dense web of selective cooperation: Ethiopia navigating multiple internal political logics while engaging a diversified EU, and the EU balancing normative ambitions with strategic and economic interests.

In this sense, the relationship is not defined by resolution, but by ongoing negotiation—between sovereignty and integration, development and governance, tradition and modernity, all refracted through the long arc of exchange between the Horn of Africa and Europe.

Figure



HOW TO IMPROVE EU–ETHIOPIA ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS FOR PEACE, PROSPERITY AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



Deepen partnership. Deliver results. Build a shared future.



GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Support inclusive, accountable and rights-respecting governance for all Ethiopians.

- Support democratic institutions, rule of law and independent judiciary.
- Promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Strengthen transparency, accountability and fight against corruption.
- Support inclusive dialogue and civic space, including for women, youth and marginalised groups.
- Enhance electoral support and political party capacity building.



REGIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Work together for a stable Horn of Africa and a more peaceful region.

- Strengthen diplomatic dialogue and conflict prevention mechanisms.
- Support mediation efforts and cooperation on border and transboundary issues, including the Nile.
- Enhance capacity for early warning, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
- Promote inclusive approaches to peace that engage women and youth.
- Support Ethiopia's leadership role in regional peace initiatives.



COUNTERING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT RADICALISATION

Enhance cooperation to prevent and respond to terrorism and extremism.

- Strengthen intelligence sharing and joint analysis.
- Build capacity of security and law enforcement institutions with respect for human rights.
- Address root causes of radicalisation through education, opportunities and community resilience.
- Counter online radicalisation and disinformation.
- Support reintegration and rehabilitation of at-risk individuals.



MIGRATION

Manage migration together in a way that is safe, orderly and mutually beneficial.

- Strengthen legal pathways for mobility, education and skills development.
- Enhance cooperation on migration management and border governance.
- Protect the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees.
- Promote reintegration and circular migration opportunities.
- Address root causes of irregular migration.



SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INVESTMENT AND TRADE

Unlock inclusive growth, create jobs and promote sustainable prosperity.

- Increase investment in key sectors: agriculture, manufacturing, digital economy, and infrastructure.
- Support SME development, entrepreneurship and youth employment.
- Deepen trade and investment through the Economic Partnership Agreement and private sector partnerships.
- Invest in quality education, skills and healthcare.
- Reduce inequalities and promote gender equality and social inclusion.



CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

Join forces for a climate-resilient and sustainable Ethiopia.

- Support Ethiopia's climate-resilient and low-carbon development pathways.
- Scale up investment in renewable energy and energy efficiency.
- Strengthen adaptation to climate change and disaster risk reduction.
- Promote sustainable land and water management and biodiversity conservation.
- Enhance access to climate finance and green technologies.



Stronger together for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future for Ethiopia and Europe.



People-centred Partnership



Shared Values
Shared Future

Brussels and Addis Ababa should deepen a steady rhythm of political dialogue, a continual conversation that builds trust like a bridge laid stone by stone across shifting ground, where words become waypoints and understanding becomes the path itself. Together, they should fortify the foundations of democratic life—institutions that stand like enduring pillars, and the rule of law that runs like a clear, binding thread through public life—so that governance gains both gravity and grace.

Civic space in Ethiopia should widen and breathe, allowing media to speak with many voices, civil society to sing in full chorus, and political participation to move like open doors in a bustling agora. Anti-corruption efforts should cut through public finance with clarity and candor, replacing shadow with sunlight, opacity with openness, and suspicion with systems that stand transparent and true.

In the realm of rights and responsibility, both partners should build stronger mechanisms of monitoring and accountability, so that justice does not whisper but resounds. In the Horn of Africa—crossroads of currents and histories—peace efforts should persist like a long tide of diplomacy, steady, patient, and persistent, carrying mediation across contested shores. Early warning systems should be sharpened and shared, sensing tremors before they become earthquakes, funded and forged in common purpose.

Security cooperation should bind intelligence sharing with legal safeguards, a careful balance of vigilance and restraint, ensuring protection does not eclipse principle. Efforts to counter violent radicalisation should reach into classrooms and communities alike, addressing the ache of exclusion, the silence of unemployment, and the search for belonging among youth. Migration governance should open safer legal pathways, easing movement like controlled rivers rather than perilous crossings, while irregular flows are reduced through development that grows roots where uncertainty once ruled. Return and reintegration should be handled with dignity and repair, turning departure into the possibility of return rather than rupture.

Economic cooperation should widen like a growing marketplace, drawing EU investment into Ethiopian industry, strengthening small and medium enterprises that hum with local ingenuity and job-creating energy. Trade should move more freely, with barriers softened and access expanded, so exchange becomes less a gate and more a corridor. Climate collaboration should turn toward renewable horizons and sustainable fields, where sun and soil are partners in endurance and harvest.

Across all these domains, cooperation should not be episodic but continuous—an interwoven fabric of policy and principle, and partnership and purpose—so that diplomacy becomes not merely exchange, but shared architecture of stability and hope.

16. Strategic challenges

Ethiopia faces a set of interconnected strategic challenges that cut across internal stability, economic development, and regional geopolitics. At the core is the issue of internal cohesion. Despite efforts at federal governance, the country continues to experience tensions between the central state and regional administrations, rooted in competing political demands, questions of autonomy, and unresolved grievances from recent conflicts such as the Tigray war. These dynamics make state consolidation fragile and periodically expose the risk of renewed violence in different regions, particularly Amhara and Oromia.

Closely linked to this is the challenge of ethnic federalism. Ethiopia's political system is designed to balance diverse identities, but in practice it has often intensified competition over territory, representation, and resources. Instead of fully stabilising the state, it has at times

deepened fragmentation, creating a political environment where identity and power are tightly intertwined and difficult to depoliticise.

Economically, Ethiopia faces significant pressure. High inflation, foreign currency shortages, and debt constraints limit the government's ability to invest in infrastructure and development at the scale required by its large and growing population. The economy remains heavily dependent on agriculture, leaving it highly exposed to climate variability, particularly droughts that can quickly translate into food insecurity and humanitarian stress.

Regionally, Ethiopia operates in a volatile neighbourhood. Instability in Sudan and South Sudan, as well as security threats linked to Somalia and militant groups in the wider Horn of Africa, create persistent border and security risks. At the same time, Ethiopia must navigate complex geopolitical competition over the Red Sea corridor, where regional and global actors have overlapping interests.

A major long-term strategic issue is water security, particularly the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile. While it is central to Ethiopia's development ambitions and energy generation, it has also created sustained diplomatic friction with downstream states such as Egypt and Sudan, making Nile governance a continuing source of geopolitical tension.

Finally, Ethiopia's external relations require careful balancing. The country seeks investment and partnerships from actors such as China, Gulf states, the European Union, and the United States, while trying to preserve policy autonomy and avoid dependency. This balancing act is increasingly important as external financing and geopolitical alignment become more tightly linked.

Overall, Ethiopia's strategic challenge is not a single problem but a convergence of internal fragmentation, economic vulnerability, and a demanding regional environment that together test the resilience of the state.

For Ethiopia, "execution" of strategy does not happen in a clean, centralized way. It is shaped by a layered system where policy often moves through negotiation rather than direct command. At the core, implementation depends on the relationship between the federal government and regional states. Because Ethiopia's political structure is federal and ethnically based, regional authorities play a decisive role in whether national policies are actually carried out on the ground. Where trust is weak or political competition is high, execution becomes inconsistent or contested.

A second layer is security capacity. In areas affected by conflict or instability, the ability to implement policy depends on whether state institutions and security forces can maintain control and provide basic stability. Without security, even well-designed strategies remain theoretical. A third layer is external dependency. Many development, reconstruction, and stabilization efforts rely on foreign investment, aid, or debt arrangements, meaning that execution is partially linked to international cooperation and financial conditions.

From the European perspective, partnership with Ethiopia is most effective when it focuses on long-term stabilization rather than short-term intervention. The European Union is not positioned as a military actor in the region, but it can play a significant role through economic

support, institutional strengthening, and selective security cooperation. This includes assistance in counterterrorism coordination, border management, and maritime security in the Red Sea corridor, as well as investment in infrastructure, energy, and agricultural resilience. Governance support, such as judicial reform and administrative capacity-building, also forms part of this partnership logic. Migration management is another key area, particularly in relation to transit routes linking the Horn of Africa to Europe.

The regional environment further shapes Ethiopia's strategic position. Relations with Eritrea remain particularly sensitive, marked by periods of cooperation and deep mistrust. Although the 2018 peace agreement improved relations, underlying security concerns and competing influence in northern Ethiopia continue to create uncertainty, making Eritrea a variable rather than stable partner.

With Sudan, the relationship is defined by border tensions, especially in contested areas, alongside the broader importance of Nile water politics and the impact of Sudan's internal instability. This makes Sudan both strategically important and structurally unpredictable for Ethiopia's security environment.

The situation with Libya is more indirect but still relevant. Libya's instability affects Ethiopia mainly through wider migration routes toward Europe, the movement of armed networks and illicit flows across the Sahel and North Africa, and the broader fragmentation of regional security systems that link the Horn of Africa to the Mediterranean.

Taken together, Ethiopia's strategic challenge is to manage internal fragmentation while navigating a volatile regional system, where neighbouring crises and wider Mediterranean instability all feed back into its own security and development trajectory.

17. The Voes of Somalia

The Somalia Peninsula is one of the largest peninsulas in the world, covering roughly 2 million km² and encompassing Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. True to the definition of a peninsula, it is surrounded by water on three sides while remaining connected to the African continent on its western edge. To the north lies the Gulf of Aden, to the east the Indian Ocean, and to the southeast the Somali Sea, giving the peninsula an exceptionally long coastline — Somalia alone boasts Africa's longest at approximately 3,300 km.

The peninsula juts dramatically northeastward into the sea, with Cape Guardafui marking its very tip as the easternmost point of Africa. Its terrain transitions from coastal plains along the shore to elevated plateaus and the towering Ethiopian Highlands further inland. This varied landscape, combined with its position between major bodies of water, shapes a climate that is largely arid and semi-arid. Despite ocean proximity, the surrounding Indian Ocean drives a powerful monsoon system of seasonal winds that keeps the region relatively dry compared to much of Africa.

Strategically, the Horn of Africa occupies one of the most important geographical positions on earth. It sits near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a critical chokepoint for global shipping connecting Europe, Asia, and East Africa. The Gulf of Aden to its north is one of the world's busiest

maritime corridors, a role it has played for thousands of years as a hub of ancient and modern trade alike.

The peoples of the Horn of Africa, often called Horners, have inhabited this land for longer than almost any other human population on earth. Archaeological and genetic evidence suggests continuous human presence stretching back hundreds of thousands of years, making this region one of the oldest cradles of modern humanity. The dominant ethnic groups today are the Somali, Afar, Oromo, and Amhara peoples, each with deep ancestral roots in the peninsula and its surrounding highlands. The Somali people in particular are remarkably cohesive culturally, bound together by a shared language, a pastoral way of life, and a strong tradition of clan identity that has shaped social and political life for millennia.

The natural environment of the Horn is one of dramatic contrasts. The coastlines are long and rugged, giving way inland to thorny scrublands, semi-desert plains, and the dramatic highlands of Ethiopia. The region is home to unique wildlife, including the Somali wild ass, Grevy's zebra, and the gerenuk, a long-necked antelope adapted to arid conditions. The waters offshore are extraordinarily rich, supporting some of the most productive fishing grounds in the Indian Ocean, fed by nutrient-rich upwellings driven by the monsoon winds. Frankincense and myrrh trees grow in the highlands of northern Somalia, and have done so since antiquity, making the Horn a source of some of the ancient world's most prized commodities.

Commerce has always been central to life on the Horn. The ancient Egyptians knew this coast as the Land of Punt and sailed here to trade for gold, ivory, ebony, and incense. By the first millennium AD, the port cities of Zeila, Berbera, and Mogadishu had become thriving hubs connecting the African interior with Arabia, Persia, India, and beyond. The monsoon winds acted as a natural engine of trade, carrying dhows laden with goods back and forth across the Indian Ocean on a seasonal rhythm that merchants learned to exploit with great skill. Today commerce remains tied to livestock export, remittances from the large Somali diaspora, and the strategic value of the coastline for international shipping.

The history of the Horn is ancient and layered. The Aksumite Empire, centered in what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, rose to become one of the great powers of the ancient world by the first centuries AD, minting its own coins, trading with Rome and India, and eventually adopting Christianity in the fourth century. Islam arrived on the Horn early, brought by traders and refugees crossing the Red Sea from Arabia in the seventh century, and took deep root among the coastal and lowland peoples. Over the following centuries a series of Islamic sultanates rose and flourished, among them the Ifat, Adal, and Ajuran sultanates, which controlled trade, collected taxes, and at times posed powerful military challenges to the Christian highland kingdoms of Ethiopia. The rivalry between highland Christian Ethiopia and the lowland Islamic sultanates defined much of the region's medieval history.

The rulers of the Horn have been extraordinarily diverse. Ancient Aksumite kings gave way to the Zagwe dynasty and then the restored Solomonic emperors of Ethiopia, a line that claimed descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and endured, at least in name, until Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974. The Somali lowlands were governed through a shifting constellation of sultanates, clan confederacies, and colonial administrations. European powers carved the Horn apart in the nineteenth century, with Britain taking the north, Italy the

south and Eritrea, and France a small but strategically vital strip that became Djibouti. Somalia gained independence in 1960, Ethiopia remained uncolonized except for a brief Italian occupation, and Eritrea won its independence from Ethiopia only in 1993 after a long and bitter war.

The languages of the Horn reflect its deep diversity. Somali, a Cushitic language of the Afro-Asiatic family, is spoken by the majority of people on the peninsula and is notable for having been written down only in 1972, when a standard script was officially adopted, despite centuries of rich oral tradition. Amharic and Tigrinya, also Afro-Asiatic but from the Semitic branch, are the major languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea respectively. Afar, Oromo, and dozens of smaller languages fill in the linguistic landscape of the interior. Arabic has long served as a language of religion, scholarship, and commerce across the region, and the colonial period left behind pockets of English, Italian, and French that persist in official and educational contexts to this day.

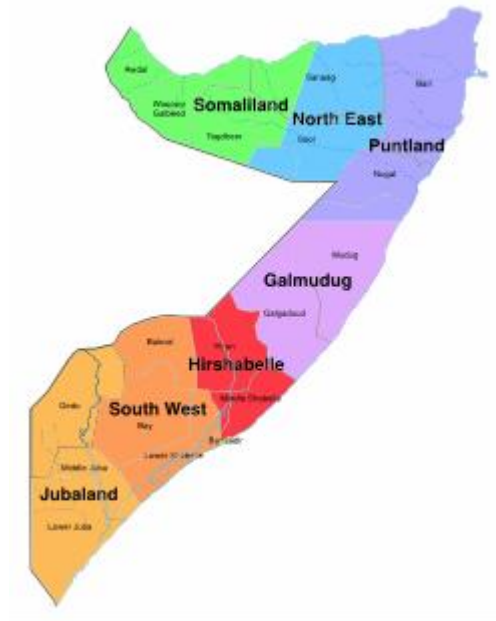
The literature on Somalia's formation and evolution consistently traces the deep historical layering of Somali society, from ancient trade networks along the Horn of Africa coast to the gradual Islamization that connected the region to wider Indian Ocean and Islamic worlds. A central thread across these works is the enduring significance of pastoralism and clan-based social organization, which shaped political authority, social cohesion, and conflict resolution long before the emergence of the modern state.

Across this body of scholarship, Somalia's historical trajectory is not presented as a single explanatory narrative but as a layered debate over how to interpret authority, identity, and state formation in a society where centralized institutions have repeatedly struggled to consolidate legitimacy. I. M. Lewis's *A Modern History of the Somali* remains foundational precisely because it treats clan organization not as a static "tribal remnant" but as a dynamic social infrastructure that both enabled mobility and mediation and also shaped the limits of centralized state authority. Yet even in Lewis's framing, clan structures are not sufficient explanations on their own; they become intelligible only through their interaction with colonial administration, shifting economic pressures, and the political ambitions of postcolonial elites. Raphael Chijioke Njoku's *The History of Somalia* reframes this longue durée in more synthetic form, emphasizing continuity between precolonial trade networks, the Islamization of the Horn, and the disruptive reordering introduced by European partition, while also highlighting how independence in 1960 emerged from overlapping nationalist aspirations that were never fully institutionally consolidated.

Christopher Clapham's comparative approach in *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay* complicates any Somalia-specific exceptionalism by situating its fragility within a broader regional pattern in which state-building projects confront deeply embedded social systems, uneven coercive capacity, and externally shaped boundaries that rarely align with local political geographies. In this reading, Somalia is less an anomaly than an extreme case of a wider Horn of Africa condition where state authority is continuously negotiated rather than definitively institutionalized. Abdi Ismail Samatar's political economy perspective adds another layer of causality by showing how both colonial extraction and postcolonial development strategies produced uneven regional incorporation, particularly between urban

centers and pastoral hinterlands, thereby entrenching structural inequalities that later became political cleavages rather than purely economic disparities.

Figure



Across these interpretations, colonial rule functions less as a single causal event than as a reconfiguration of governance logics: it imposed territorial fixity on a historically fluid pastoral landscape, introduced new administrative hierarchies, and redirected economic flows toward external extraction, all of which altered but did not erase existing forms of authority. The Dervish movement is therefore read ambivalently in the literature, simultaneously as an anti-colonial resistance project and as an early attempt—albeit partial and contested—at centralized political consolidation grounded in religious legitimacy and military organization. Independence in 1960 is similarly treated not as an endpoint but as a fragile conjuncture in which two differently administered colonial territories were fused into a single political unit without fully harmonized institutions, legal systems, or administrative cultures, producing structural tensions that early nationalist optimism often obscured.

Post-independence state formation, particularly under increasingly authoritarian governance, is widely interpreted as a shift from competitive parliamentary politics to coercive centralization, where efforts to unify authority paradoxically intensified peripheral resistance and weakened institutional trust. Within this trajectory, the 1991 collapse is rarely framed as an isolated rupture; instead, it is understood as the cumulative outcome of militarized politics, patrimonial governance, external Cold War patronage, and unresolved center–periphery tensions that had been embedded since independence. Critical interventions such as *The Invention of Somalia* push this argument further by questioning whether the Somali nation-state should be treated as an inevitable historical endpoint at all, suggesting instead that “Somalia” itself is partly a political project that has struggled to fully align with the more durable realities of kinship-based and locally embedded forms of authority.

The "4.5 Formula" is a political power-sharing arrangement used in Somalia's federal institutions to distribute political representation among the country's various clan groups. This formula emerged during post-civil war reconciliation efforts to address the historical dominance of certain clans and ensure a more equitable distribution of political power. Under the 4.5 Formula, the four major clan-families—Dir, Darood, Hawiye, and Rahanweyn—are each allocated equal representation in the federal government. Minority communities, collectively referred to as the "0.5," receive a smaller share of political representation, which is approximately half of what each major clan-family receives. This arrangement aims to reduce the potential for domination by any single clan and to promote inclusivity among Somalia's diverse population. It reflects the complex clan dynamics in Somali society, where clan affiliation significantly influences political power, governance, and access to resources.

The 4.5 Formula has been widely criticized for institutionalizing clan identity rather than fostering a citizenship-based political system. Critics argue that it perpetuates divisions and underrepresents minority communities, while supporters contend that it is a necessary compromise to maintain stability in a fragmented political landscape.

Taken together, this literature does not converge on a single explanation but rather produces a structured tension between competing interpretations: Somalia as a failed state-building project, Somalia as a regional variant of broader Horn of Africa political logics, and Somalia as a contested national imagination layered over persistent local sovereignties. The result is a historiography in which the central question is not only why centralized authority has been difficult to sustain, but also what kinds of authority—formal, customary, religious, or hybrid—have in practice been continuously reconstituting political order beneath and alongside the state.

Turkey and KSA

Turkey and Saudi Arabia's engagement in Somalia reflects two distinct models of external involvement shaped by different strategic cultures, historical trajectories, and regional ambitions. Turkey's approach began in 2011 during the Somali famine, when humanitarian aid created a strong foundation of public legitimacy and political goodwill. This entry point gradually expanded into a comprehensive state-building project focused on strengthening Somalia's federal institutions rather than bypassing them. Over time, Turkey positioned itself as a central partner in rebuilding governance capacity, security forces, infrastructure, and public administration. Its model is deeply institutional, emphasizing direct engagement with the Somali Federal Government in Mogadishu. The establishment of Camp TURKSOM and the training of elite Somali security units reflect a long-term commitment to shaping the country's coercive and administrative capacity. Turkey has also invested heavily in infrastructure such as ports, airports, hospitals, and roads, linking development aid to strategic presence.

In parallel, it has pursued maritime and energy interests in Somalia's offshore zones, reflecting broader ambitions in Red Sea and Indian Ocean geopolitics. This combination of humanitarian legitimacy, institutional embedding, and strategic expansion has made Turkey one of the most influential external actors in Somalia. However, its strong focus on central government institutions has sometimes generated tension with Somalia's federal states, which often view

external support as unevenly distributed. Even so, Turkey's presence is generally seen as coherent, sustained, and structurally integrated into Somalia's state-building process.

Saudi Arabia's engagement with Somalia follows a different logic, one that is less focused on institutional reconstruction and more oriented toward regional stability, religious influence, and geopolitical positioning. Historically, Saudi involvement has operated through financial aid, religious networks, and diplomatic engagement rather than deep administrative integration. Its influence has often flowed through charitable organizations, Islamic institutions, and informal economic and religious ties across the Red Sea. Unlike Turkey, Saudi Arabia has not developed extensive military training programs or embedded infrastructure projects within Somalia's state system. Instead, its priorities have centered on preventing instability from spilling into the broader Red Sea region and ensuring that Somalia does not become a platform for piracy, extremism, or rival regional influence. Saudi policy is also shaped by competition with other regional actors in the Horn of Africa, including Turkey and Qatar, as well as broader Gulf geopolitical dynamics. Its engagement tends to be more cautious and indirect, avoiding deep institutional commitments that could entangle it in Somalia's internal political fragmentation. This has resulted in a more diffuse form of influence compared to Turkey's concentrated state-building presence.

The contrast between the two actors reveals fundamentally different visions of external engagement. Turkey seeks to anchor Somalia's sovereignty through institution-building, centralized partnership, and long-term integration into state structures. Saudi Arabia, by contrast, seeks stability and influence through financial support, religious engagement, and strategic containment rather than direct governance reconstruction. One model is structured and developmental, while the other is indirect and network-based. Both approaches are shaped by Somalia's internal fragility, where weak central authority and strong regional dynamics create opportunities for external actors to engage in different ways. The interaction between these external strategies and Somalia's internal federal system further complicates outcomes, as different regions and political actors align with different partners. Ultimately, Somalia becomes a space where competing external state-building philosophies intersect with local governance fragmentation.

Table

Area / Actor	Turkey	Saudi Arabia (KSA)	EU	US
Somalia (federal gov / Mogadishu)	Strong presence: military base, infrastructure, aid	Political + financial influence with federal government	Major donor (aid, governance, training)	Counterterrorism operations, security partner
Mogadishu	Very strong operational hub (base + airport control influence)	Diplomatic + funding influence via federal ties	Aid + institution building	Embassy + intelligence + military strikes (Al-Shabaab focus)

Somaliland	Limited formal engagement (focus remains Mogadishu)	Occasional political/economic engagement	Pragmatic engagement (aid, governance support)	Limited but increasing engagement (security + diplomacy)
Berbera Port (Somaliland)	Indirect interest (regional trade relevance)	Strategic interest in Red Sea logistics	Indirect interest via trade corridors	Strategic interest (Red Sea security + logistics)
Red Sea / Gulf of Aden corridor	Regional power projection	Major strategic maritime interest	Naval security missions (anti-piracy, shipping protection)	Major naval + security corridor (global shipping route)

The overlap between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the EU, and the US in the Horn of Africa does not form a single geographic intersection point. Instead, it operates through three interconnected layers of competition and influence, each with distinct actors, functions, and strategic logic.

The governance layer is centered on Somalia's federal institutions in Mogadishu within Somalia. This is the main political arena where external actors engage in state-building, security cooperation, aid delivery, and struggles over legitimacy and institutional influence.

The de facto autonomy layer is located in Somaliland, which operates independently in practice but lacks broad international recognition. Its key strategic focus is the Berbera corridor, which functions as a logistics and trade gateway tied to access to the Red Sea. This creates a semi-separate political and economic space where engagement is often pragmatic rather than formal.

The maritime layer extends across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, forming a global chokepoint that connects Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. This corridor is defined by shipping security, energy transport routes, and naval presence, making it a shared strategic environment for all external actors.

Each external power plays a distinct role across these layers. Turkey is the deepest state-building partner in Somalia, combining infrastructure development, humanitarian assistance, and military training with a strong operational presence centered in Mogadishu. European Union is the largest systemic donor, focused on governance reform, humanitarian support, and institutional capacity-building across Somalia. United States operates primarily as a security-first actor, emphasizing counterterrorism operations, intelligence cooperation, and targeted military engagement against extremist groups. Saudi Arabia functions as a regional financial and diplomatic power, projecting influence through Gulf politics, development funding, and strategic interest in Red Sea trade and maritime routes.

There is no single physical or geopolitical intersection point. Instead, influence converges through functional zones. Mogadishu acts as the political convergence zone where governance, aid, security cooperation, and legitimacy-building overlap. Somaliland and the Berbera axis

form a strategic logistics zone shaped by trade infrastructure, semi-autonomous governance, and recognition politics. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden operate as a global maritime corridor where shipping security, energy flows, and naval power projection intersect.

The core logic is that this is not a map with one meeting point but a layered network of overlapping influence fields, where each actor shifts focus depending on whether the priority is governance, territorial autonomy and logistics, or maritime security.

Since the competition over ports, infrastructure and naval basing in the Red Sea continues unabated and intra-regional trade is increasing, the question arises how to proceed.

Stabilising Somalia requires strengthening the legitimacy and capacity of federal institutions based in Mogadishu so they can deliver security, justice, and basic services consistently across the country.

A core priority is improving national security forces so they can gradually take over counterterrorism and territorial control responsibilities currently supported by external partners. External actors such as United States and Turkey play roles in training, intelligence sharing, and targeted operations, but long-term stability depends on Somali ownership of these capabilities. The European Union contributes by funding governance reforms, institutional development, and humanitarian support that reduce immediate fragility and state dependency gaps.

Regional actors such as Saudi Arabia influence stability indirectly through financial support, diplomacy, and broader Red Sea security interests that affect Somalia's external environment. Political inclusion between federal and regional administrations, including areas like Somaliland, is important to reduce internal fragmentation and competing claims of authority. Economic recovery through infrastructure, ports, and trade corridors is essential to reduce reliance on aid and create incentives for long-term peace. Ultimately, stabilisation depends on aligning internal political cohesion, functioning institutions in Mogadishu, and coordinated but restrained external support that avoids creating parallel power structures.

The Red Sea and the Gulfis

The Red Sea is not just a regional body of water—it is one of the world's most important global maritime chokepoints, where geography directly translates into geopolitics and economic power. The connection between countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Iran, India, and the European Union is not based on proximity alone, but on their shared exposure to shipping routes, energy flows, and strategic control over two narrow gateways that regulate global trade.

At the southern end lies the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, positioned between Yemen and Djibouti, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean. At the northern end sits the Suez Canal in Egypt, linking the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and onward to Europe. Together, these two points create a narrow maritime funnel that channels a significant share of global commerce, including energy shipments from the Gulf, industrial goods from Asia, and container traffic moving between Asia and Europe.

The core importance of the Red Sea lies in its role as the shortest and most efficient maritime route between Asia and Europe. It forms a continuous corridor stretching from the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea, into the Red Sea via Bab el-Mandeb, and then onward through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean and European markets. This route underpins EU–India trade, EU access to Gulf oil and gas, and the vast container shipping networks that sustain modern global supply chains.

Because so much trade depends on this corridor, even small disruptions can have global consequences. When the Red Sea route becomes unsafe or blocked, shipping is forced to detour around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, adding roughly ten to fourteen days to transit times. This detour significantly increases fuel costs, insurance premiums, and delays across global supply chains, making the Red Sea one of the most strategically sensitive maritime regions in the world.

As a maritime region, the Red Sea is characterised by its role as a **narrow, high-traffic international shipping corridor** that connects three major economic zones: the Indian Ocean world, the Middle East energy system, and European markets. It is defined less by its local coastal environment and more by its function as a transit space where global trade is concentrated into a confined passage.

It is also characterised by its dependence on two strategic chokepoints, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the south and the Suez Canal in the north, which together regulate nearly all maritime movement into and out of the sea. This makes the Red Sea unusually sensitive to geopolitical tensions, since disruptions at either end can interrupt a major share of global shipping.

Economically, it is characterised by dense flows of container shipping, oil and liquefied natural gas exports from the Gulf, and manufactured goods moving between Asia and Europe. These flows make it one of the most commercially important sea lanes in the world despite its relatively small geographic size.

Strategically, it is characterised by overlapping spheres of influence involving coastal states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, regional powers such as Iran through indirect security dynamics, and global stakeholders including the European Union and India, both of which rely heavily on uninterrupted passage for trade and energy security.

Operationally, it is characterised by vulnerability to delays, rising insurance costs, and rerouting risks. When stability is disrupted, shipping is often diverted around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing transit times by around ten to fourteen days and raising global logistics costs.

The Red Sea is one of the most important strategic spaces shaping security alliances in the Horn of Africa because it connects global maritime trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb strait. That chokepoint makes countries such as Red Sea a central arena where regional and external powers compete for influence, bases, and control over shipping routes.

For states in the Horn—especially Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan—access to the Red Sea coastline turns geography into geopolitical leverage. Governments and sub-national authorities can use port access, basing rights, or maritime cooperation agreements to attract

external patrons and financing. This has encouraged the formation of security partnerships that are often driven less by ideology and more by access to ports, corridors, and naval positioning.

A major dynamic is the role of Gulf and external naval powers. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and others have invested in ports and secured military or logistical footholds along the Red Sea corridor, linking their own security concerns (especially shipping lanes and competition with rival regional powers) to local alliances in the Horn. At the same time, global powers such as the United States, China, France, Italy, and Japan maintain military presences in Djibouti, creating a dense concentration of foreign bases in one of the world's most strategically valuable locations.

These external presences reshape regional alliances by giving Horn states multiple security partners to choose from. Instead of relying on a single patron, governments and sometimes sub-state actors can “multi-align,” bargaining between Gulf, Western, and Asian partners. This increases external influence over domestic security arrangements and can deepen internal fragmentation when different factions align with different external backers.

The Red Sea also encourages the creation of new regional diplomatic and security frameworks. Initiatives such as the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden reflect attempts to coordinate maritime security, port development, and counter-piracy efforts among coastal states. However, these frameworks often overlap with older regional bodies like the African Union and IGAD, producing a crowded institutional landscape where cooperation and rivalry coexist.

Within the Horn itself, Red Sea access has become tied to internal conflicts and state-building. In Ethiopia's case, being landlocked makes access to Eritrean or Djiboutian ports strategically vital, which in turn shapes its foreign policy and security partnerships. In Eritrea, control over a long coastline gives the state leverage in negotiations with both regional neighbors and external powers. In Somalia and Sudan, fragmented governance means different actors—federal authorities, regional states, and sometimes armed groups—can become involved in port-related agreements, further complicating alliance structures.

Overall, the Red Sea functions as a strategic “hinge” that connects local conflicts and state-building in the Horn of Africa to wider Gulf, Middle Eastern, and global security competition. Alliances in the region are therefore less fixed blocs and more shifting networks shaped by access to ports, naval logistics, and the control of maritime chokepoints.

In short, the Red Sea is characterised as a **compressed but globally essential maritime artery**, where geography, trade, and security are tightly interlinked.

Figure

Country / Actor	Geographic position	Chokepoint control	Trade role	Energy role	Security / influence role

Egypt	North (Suez Canal)	Yes (Suez Canal gate)	Europe–Asia transit hub	Indirect (oil transit)	Maritime regulator
Yemen	South (Bab el-Mandeb)	Yes (southern gate)	Transit vulnerability point	Indirect	Conflict hotspot affecting shipping
Saudi Arabia	Red Sea coast	Partial (coastal control)	Port & logistics expansion	Major oil exporter	Regional naval influence
UAE	Outside Red Sea (Gulf)	No direct control	Global shipping/logistics hub	Oil + trade finance	Port operator influence (DP World)
Oman	Arabian Sea	No direct control	Alternative maritime corridor support	Oil exporter	Neutral maritime facilitator
Kuwait	Gulf (not Red Sea)	No	Indirect exports via	Major oil exporter	Low direct, high economic linkage
Iran	Persian Gulf	No direct control	Indirect disruption role	Oil exporter	Proxy influence (Yemen/Houthi link)
EU	Europe	No	Major destination market	Energy importer	Maritime security interest
India	South Asia	No	Major origin/destination trade	Energy importer	Key shipping demand anchor

Chokepoint control refers to the highest level of strategic power in the Red Sea system, concentrated at the Suez Canal in Egypt and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait near Yemen. These two narrow passages effectively regulate global maritime movement between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, making them the most sensitive points in the entire corridor.

Trade role refers to the countries and regions that depend most heavily on this route for global commerce. The European Union and India function as the primary demand endpoints, relying on the Red Sea–Suez corridor for manufactured goods, energy imports, and supply chain efficiency. Gulf economies also depend on the route to export oil, gas, and petrochemicals to European and Asian markets.

Energy role refers to the movement of hydrocarbons through the system, where Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf exporters are central suppliers, while Europe is a key consumer market. This creates a structural dependence on uninterrupted passage through the Red Sea, making the corridor vital for global energy security and price stability.

Security role refers to the actors that can either stabilize or disrupt maritime flows. Yemen represents the most direct security vulnerability due to conflict dynamics around the Bab el-Mandeb, while Iran plays an indirect role through regional influence and proxy networks that can affect shipping risk perception and insurance costs.

Beyond these functional roles, the Red Sea is also shaped by competing state objectives and strategic interests. Egypt's primary objective is to secure and monetize the Suez Canal as a critical source of national revenue and geopolitical relevance. Saudi Arabia aims to transform its Red Sea coastline into a major logistics and investment zone, reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz and diversifying its economy. The United Arab Emirates seeks to expand its maritime and port network influence across the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, strengthening its position as a global logistics hub. Oman maintains an interest in regional maritime stability while positioning itself as a neutral facilitator of trade between the Gulf, India, and Africa.

Iran's interest is more indirect and strategic, focusing on regional influence and deterrence, often through relationships that can increase pressure on maritime security in adjacent waters. The European Union's objective is to ensure stable, low-cost access to energy and trade routes, while India's interest lies in maintaining uninterrupted export-import flows that support its manufacturing growth and energy imports. Kuwait's role is largely economic, relying on the corridor for efficient energy export routes, even though it is geographically outside the Red Sea itself.

Gulf investment—mainly from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—has become one of the most important external forces shaping state-building in the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and the de facto state of Somaliland). Its impact is mixed: it has strengthened some state capacities (especially infrastructure and security revenues), but it has also deepened fragmentation, elite competition, and external dependence.

One of the most visible effects is **infrastructure-led state formation**, especially through ports, logistics corridors, and free zones. Emirati-linked firms such as DP World have taken long-term concessions over key maritime assets, including the Berbera port in Somaliland. In places like Berbera, this kind of investment has had a “state-building from the outside” effect: it

improves customs systems, generates revenue, and strengthens quasi-state institutions that can pay salaries and provide services. But it also shifts control over strategic assets away from central governments or embeds them in semi-private, foreign-managed arrangements.

A second major channel is **security cooperation and military basing**, which has been especially important in the Red Sea corridor. Gulf states have financed, trained, or directly partnered with local forces in Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan's broader region, often tying assistance to geopolitical alignment. For example, the UAE's security footprint (training, payments to forces, and base agreements in parts of the region) has contributed to the "outsourcing" of coercive capacity. This can stabilize regimes in the short term, but it also weakens unified national command structures—creating parallel security institutions loyal partly to foreign partners or sub-national leaders.

A third effect is **elite financing and political competition**, where Gulf states act as patrons to rival political factions. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar often back different leaders, federal member states, or militias within the same country. In Somalia in particular, this has reinforced federal fragmentation: regional authorities can bypass the central government by securing independent Gulf funding, which reduces incentives to build a strong fiscal or administrative center in Mogadishu.

In addition, Gulf investment has reshaped **economic state capacity**. Investments in livestock trade, agriculture, and port logistics have increased export revenues in some corridors, especially linking Ethiopia's interior economy to the Red Sea via Djibouti and Somaliland. But these gains are uneven: they tend to concentrate in strategic coastal nodes rather than building nationwide administrative systems. This produces "enclave development," where parts of the state become globally integrated while others remain weakly governed.

Finally, there is a broader **geopolitical restructuring of sovereignty**. Gulf engagement has made the Horn of Africa a frontline of Red Sea competition, where sovereignty is increasingly negotiated through infrastructure deals, base agreements, and investment packages rather than purely domestic institutions. States in the region gain resources, but often at the cost of policy autonomy and institutional coherence.

In short, Gulf investment has not simply "built states" in the Horn of Africa—it has **reconfigured how state-building works**: strengthening ports, revenues, and security forces in some places while simultaneously fragmenting authority, intensifying elite rivalries, and embedding external influence directly into the core institutions of governance.

Overall, the Red Sea can be understood as a system where multiple contenders pursue overlapping but sometimes competing objectives, including control of chokepoints, expansion of logistics infrastructure, protection of energy flows, and maintenance of maritime security. These interests intersect in a tightly confined space, making the region both economically indispensable and strategically fragile.

Somalia's geopolitical position is defined by its location at a major maritime crossroads between Africa and the Middle East, giving it strategic importance that is disproportionately large compared to its economic capacity.

It sits on the Horn of Africa with one of the longest coastlines on the African continent, facing the Indian Ocean and controlling access near the approaches to the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab strait, which is one of the world's key shipping chokepoints linking the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and onward to the Suez Canal. This makes Somalia part of a critical global trade route between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

On land, it borders Ethiopia to the west, Djibouti to the northwest, and Kenya to the southwest. These neighbours are all deeply connected to regional security and trade networks, and Somalia's stability directly affects the wider Horn of Africa region. Its proximity to Ethiopia is especially significant given Ethiopia's landlocked status and reliance on regional ports for trade.

Because of this geography, Somalia is influenced by both regional and external powers. Regional actors such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti have security and economic interests there, while global actors including Gulf states, Turkey, China, and Western countries engage through security cooperation, port development, counterterrorism efforts, and maritime trade interests.

Mogadishu, the capital, is the political and administrative centre, but Somalia's federal structure and regional dynamics mean that power and influence are also distributed across federal member states, especially in strategic coastal and border areas.

Overall, Somalia's geopolitical importance comes less from internal economic strength and more from its position along vital sea lanes and its role in the security architecture of the Horn of Africa and western Indian Ocean.

Establishing security and governance structures in Somalia generally has to begin with building what is often called "minimum viable governance," meaning basic systems that can function even in a fragmented environment. In practice, this involves prioritizing local security arrangements such as community-based policing, trusted local forces, and dispute-resolution mechanisms that people already recognize. Without that foundation, larger national institutions tend to remain weak or be seen as illegitimate.

According to the standardized composition by Federal Member State, the dominant communities in Somaliland are: (1) Isaaq (2) Gadabursi (3) Dhulbahante (4) Warsangeli. These communities are recognized as the primary groups within the region's political structure.

A key insight from Somalia's experience is that governance works best when it blends existing systems rather than replacing them outright. This includes customary law (Xeer), Islamic legal structures, and modern state institutions working in coordination rather than competition. In many areas, stability has historically depended on these overlapping systems adapting to each other rather than one fully dominating the others. Legitimacy is crucial at this stage, because security forces that are perceived as externally imposed or clan-biased tend to lose authority quickly.

The sequence of stabilization usually matters: security must be established first, but it must immediately be tied to governance, then revenue collection, and only later expanded into

broader state services. Attempts to centralize too quickly without this foundation have often failed.

The stabilization plan shown in your infographic is essentially a **step-by-step model for building a functioning state in Somalia from the ground up**, where legitimacy and security come before expansion. It is designed for a context where the state is fragmented and no single authority is fully trusted.

At its core, the plan begins with the idea of “**minimum viable governance.**” This means you do not try to build a full centralized government immediately. Instead, you start with the smallest set of institutions that people actually trust and use in daily life. In Somalia’s case, that means focusing on local-level authority rather than national-level control.

The first layer is **local security**. Stability begins with protecting civilians through community-based policing, locally recruited forces, and security arrangements that reflect local social realities. The key idea is that security forces must be seen as “ours,” not imposed from outside or dominated by rival groups. Without this trust, any wider state structure collapses or becomes irrelevant.

The second layer is **dispute resolution**. Instead of relying immediately on formal courts, the system integrates existing Somali mechanisms such as *Xeer* (customary law) and local mediation, alongside Islamic legal institutions where they are already respected. This blended system allows conflicts to be resolved in ways that are socially legitimate rather than externally imposed.

The third layer is **basic administration**. Once local order exists, simple governance functions are introduced—things like local councils, record keeping, identification systems, and coordination of essential services. The emphasis is on practicality rather than bureaucracy: people must see immediate benefits for cooperation.

The fourth layer is **taxation and revenue collection**. Only after governance has legitimacy does the system begin to collect predictable revenue. The logic is that taxation must be tied directly to visible services such as security, infrastructure, or local administration. Without service delivery, taxation is seen as extraction and triggers resistance.

A key principle running through the entire plan is **blending systems rather than replacing them**. Somalia’s stability depends on coordination between three overlapping authority structures: customary clan law (*Xeer*), Islamic legal institutions, and modern state administration. Instead of forcing one to eliminate the others, the model assumes they must be aligned so they reinforce each other. When these systems compete, legitimacy collapses; when they coordinate, governance becomes more stable.

Figure

BUILDING SECURITY & GOVERNANCE IN SOMALIA

FOUNDATION FIRST, THEN STATE



Lasting stability in Somalia starts from the ground up.
Build minimum viable governance that is legitimate, local, inclusive—and only then expand.



KEY PRINCIPLE

Legitimacy comes from local ownership, not external imposition.

1. START WITH MINIMUM VIABLE GOVERNANCE

Focus on the essentials that people need and trust—especially in a fragmented environment.

LOCAL SECURITY



Community-based policing, trusted local forces, protection of civilians.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION



Use recognized mechanisms such as Xeer (customary law) and local mediation.

BASIC ADMINISTRATION



Local councils, record-keeping, ID, and coordination of essential services.

TAX & REVENUE



Collect predictable revenue and link it to visible services and security.

2. BLEND SYSTEMS, DON'T REPLACE THEM

Somalia's strength is in overlapping systems working in coordination.

XEER (CUSTOMARY LAW)



Clan elders & customary norms that manage disputes and social order.

ISLAMIC LEGAL SYSTEMS



Sharia courts and religious authority that communities recognize.

MODERN STATE INSTITUTIONS



Constitution, courts, police, ministries, and formal administration.

When these systems coordinate instead of compete, legitimacy and stability grow.

3. THE SEQUENCE OF STABILIZATION MATTERS

Build in the right order. Skipping steps weakens the whole system.

1



SECURITY FIRST
Establish safety through local forces and community trust.

2



GOVERNANCE
Create legitimate local institutions and dispute resolution.

3



REVENUE
Collect revenue and ensure fairness and transparency.

4



SERVICE DELIVERY
Provide visible services (water, roads, health, education, security).

5



GRADUAL EXPANSION
Strengthen national coordination and expand institutions over time.

WHAT OFTEN FAILS



- ✗ Centralizing too quickly without local legitimacy
- ✗ Ignoring customary and religious systems
- ✗ Imposing external, clan-biased forces
- ✗ Collecting revenue without delivering services



THE BOTTOM LINE

Build security → build governance → build revenue → deliver services → expand the state. Legitimacy at each step is what makes it last.



In Somalia, strong states are not imposed from the top—they are built from the ground up.

The underlying warning in the model is that skipping steps—especially trying to centralize too early or imposing external structures—tends to fail. It often produces resistance, fragmentation, or parallel systems of authority.

Another central idea is that **legitimacy is local, not national-first**. In fragile contexts, people do not initially trust a distant central government. They trust institutions that are embedded in their social and clan networks. This is why bottom-up governance is prioritized over top-down centralization.

The final logic of the plan is the **sequence of stabilization**. Security comes first, because without safety nothing else functions. Governance follows, because order must be organized.

Revenue comes next, because it must be grounded in legitimacy. Service delivery follows, because it proves the system works. Only then does broader state expansion become possible.

In short, the stabilization plan is not about instantly building a strong centralized Somali state. It is about gradually constructing legitimacy through local security, hybrid governance, and incremental expansion until a broader national framework becomes viable.

19 Designing a peace process

A workable peace process for Somalia (including Somaliland, Puntland, Jubaland, and contested regions shown in your map) has to treat it as a multi-level political settlement rather than only a security arrangement. The core issue is not only armed conflict but overlapping claims of authority, identity, and access to resources.

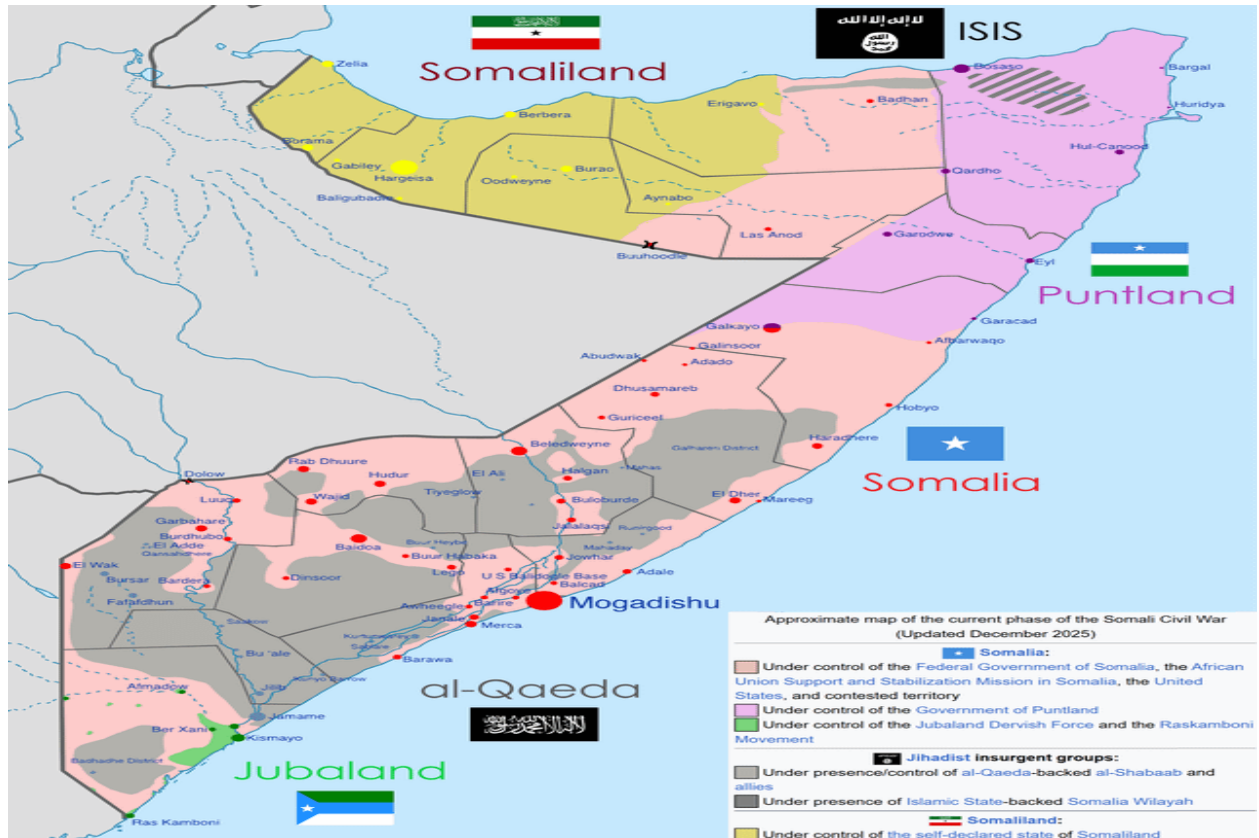
The first phase requires building an inclusive political framework that defines all legitimate stakeholders. This would include the Federal Government of Somalia, Federal Member States such as Puntland, Jubaland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and South West, as well as Somaliland as a de facto authority. It also includes clan elders, civil society actors such as women and youth groups, religious leaders, and external guarantors like the African Union, United Nations, and IGAD. A nationwide ceasefire would need to be declared, alongside a freeze on territorial expansion and a temporary acceptance of existing control lines as administrative realities to prevent further escalation.

The second phase focuses on security de-escalation and demilitarization. Given the fragmented control across regions, buffer zones would be necessary in contested areas such as Sool, Sanaag, Gedo, and parts of Hiiraan. Joint monitoring mechanisms involving African Union forces and Somali representatives would oversee compliance. Heavy weapons would gradually be withdrawn from urban centers, and local policing structures would be strengthened rather than immediately centralizing security under a single national army.

The third phase involves restructuring the political system. The current federal arrangement is widely contested and would need revision. One possible outcome is a deep federal model where regional states retain strong constitutional authority over policing, education, and local governance while sharing national responsibilities such as foreign policy and defense. Another possibility is asymmetric federalism in which Somaliland receives a special political arrangement, Puntland retains enhanced autonomy, and southern states remain more integrated. A longer-term option could resemble a loose confederation with a very limited central government focused on coordination rather than control.

The fourth phase addresses the Somaliland–Somalia relationship through a separate but parallel negotiation track. This process would not assume either reintegration or immediate recognition. Instead, it would focus on practical arrangements such as border management, citizenship rights, trade relations, and security cooperation, particularly against extremist groups. Possible long-term outcomes could include formal independence, a confederal relationship, or a structured two-state cooperation model.

Figure



The fifth phase deals with economic and resource governance. A national resource-sharing framework would be necessary to manage revenues from ports, livestock exports, customs, and potential oil and mineral resources. A stabilization fund could be created to support underdeveloped regions, while transparent licensing systems would reduce competition over natural resources that often fuels conflict.

The sixth phase focuses on reconciliation and justice. Somalia's conflict dynamics are closely tied to clan grievances, land disputes, and displacement. A hybrid justice system combining customary law (Xeer) with formal courts could address disputes. Regional truth and reconciliation processes would help manage historical grievances, and compensation mechanisms could be established for communities affected by war and forced displacement.

The seventh phase addresses insurgent groups such as Al-Shabaab and ISIS-linked factions. This would require a combination of military pressure, local defections programs, and reintegration pathways for lower-level fighters. Expanding governance into newly liberated areas would be essential, alongside cutting financial networks and involving religious leaders in counter-extremism efforts.

The final phase establishes an international guarantee mechanism to support implementation. This would involve African Union verification missions, United Nations political oversight, and IGAD mediation structures, supported by regional stakeholders such as Ethiopia, Kenya,

Djibouti, and selected Gulf partners. These actors would help ensure compliance and reduce the risk of agreement breakdown.

The overall logic of this peace process is to stabilize territorial control first, build workable governance structures second, and only then address deeper constitutional and sovereignty questions. Attempting to resolve status disputes before establishing stability has historically led to repeated breakdowns.

Figure



The logic of the Somali peace process is a continuous architecture rather than a checklist. It begins by defining legitimacy before addressing force, because the conflict is rooted in overlapping claims of authority, identity, and resources. The first movement establishes an inclusive framework that recognizes all actors—federal, regional, de facto, and societal—under a nationwide ceasefire and a freeze on territorial expansion. Once the political space is stabilized, the process moves into security de-escalation through buffer zones and joint monitoring, emphasizing local policing instead of premature centralization.

From this foundation, the system is restructured to reflect Somalia's diversity: either a deep federal model with strong regional autonomy or an asymmetric arrangement granting

Somaliland and Puntland special status. The Somaliland–Somalia relationship proceeds on a parallel track focused on practical cooperation rather than immediate recognition. Economic governance follows, creating transparent mechanisms for resource sharing and stabilization funds to prevent competition over wealth.

Reconciliation and justice then address clan grievances and displacement through hybrid customary and formal systems. Counter-extremism integrates military pressure with reintegration and religious engagement to dismantle militant networks. Finally, international guarantees by the African Union, United Nations, and IGAD secure compliance and continuity.

The underlying principle is sequential stabilization—territorial calm first, governance second, constitutional resolution last. This reverses the historical pattern of premature sovereignty debates and instead builds a multi-level settlement capable of reconciling legitimacy, control, and identity across Somalia’s fragmented landscape.

The interactions form a single, continuous chain in which each layer enables the next rather than standing alone. The inclusive political framework creates the minimum legitimacy needed for any security de-escalation to hold, because actors only restrain force when they feel represented. Security stabilization then reduces the incentives for territorial competition, which in turn opens political space for constitutional redesign without fear of military advantage. Political restructuring shapes the environment in which the Somaliland–Somalia track can proceed, since clarity about federal or asymmetric models determines what forms of coexistence are viable.



Resource governance interacts with all earlier layers by removing the economic drivers that otherwise undermine ceasefires and political bargains. Reconciliation and justice reinforce this by addressing the social and historical grievances that fuel both political fragmentation and recruitment by armed groups. Counter-extremism depends on improved governance and justice to make defections credible and to prevent liberated areas from collapsing back into insurgent control. Finally, international guarantees bind the entire system together by providing verification, mediation, and external pressure, ensuring that each layer reinforces rather than destabilizes the others.

The conflict Economy

Al-Qaeda’s financing in Somalia operates almost entirely **through Al-Shabaab**, which is designated as a terrorist organization and is responsible for extensive violence and human rights

abuses. The group's financial system is not driven by a single sponsor but by a **self-sustaining political economy** that blends coercion, taxation, and control of trade.

Al-Shabaab's core income comes from its own internal revenue base. It extracts money from businesses, transport corridors, ports, agricultural producers, and urban commercial networks. It imposes what it calls zakat and customs, functioning like a parallel state that taxes economic activity wherever it has influence. It also draws income from controlling or infiltrating trade flows such as livestock, charcoal, sugar, and cross-border trucking. In major cities, including Mogadishu, it maintains covert intimidation networks that force businesses to pay for protection. Some members of the Somali diaspora contribute under pressure to safeguard relatives or property.

External enablers exist but are secondary. Regional smuggling routes across Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen create opportunities for illicit revenue. A small fraction of charitable flows from the Gulf may be diverted when oversight is weak, though most Gulf states have tightened controls. Criminal intermediaries in ports and border towns sometimes pay the group to operate safely. Certain local political or business actors also make payments to avoid attacks or disruptions; these are transactional arrangements rather than ideological support.

Al-Qaeda's central leadership provides ideological legitimacy and occasional symbolic financial transfers, but Al-Shabaab is considered one of the most financially independent affiliates. Its resilience stems from being embedded in Somalia's fragmented political economy, not from a single foreign financier. Disrupting its funding therefore requires expanding governance, strengthening rule of law, and reducing the economic vulnerabilities that allow the group to behave like a shadow administration.

Al-Qaeda's financing in Somalia—channeled almost entirely through **Al-Shabaab**, which is responsible for extensive violence and human rights abuses—only makes full sense when placed inside the **broader Somali conflict economy**, a system where political authority, markets, and violence are deeply intertwined.

The Somali conflict economy is built on fragmented territorial control, overlapping governance systems, and a mix of formal and informal trade. In this environment, Al-Shabaab functions not as an external parasite but as **one of several competing regulatory authorities**. It taxes roads, ports, markets, and businesses in the same way that federal and regional administrations levy fees, except with coercive enforcement. Because state institutions are uneven, corrupt, or absent in many areas, economic actors often treat Al-Shabaab as a predictable—if violent—regulator. This is why its internal revenue base is so strong: it is embedded in the same commercial circuits that sustain the rest of the economy.

The group's ability to extract revenue is reinforced by the structure of Somali trade. Livestock exports, charcoal flows, sugar imports, and cross-border trucking all move through corridors where control is negotiated rather than fixed. Every actor—federal ministries, regional states, clan militias, business cartels, and Al-Shabaab—competes to tax these flows. Payments to Al-Shabaab are often not ideological but transactional, mirroring the payments made to other authorities. This blurs the line between criminality, governance, and insurgency.

External enablers—such as smuggling networks across Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen, or leakage from poorly monitored charitable flows—fit into this same pattern. They are not standalone funding streams but extensions of a regional shadow economy that also benefits non-extremist actors. In other words, the same illicit routes that move weapons or contraband for Al-Shabaab also move goods for businessmen, politicians, and clan networks.

Al-Qaeda central's role is marginal in financial terms. Its contribution is symbolic and ideological, not structural. The real engine of financing is the **political economy of fragmentation**, where authority is contested, taxation is competitive, and violence is a tool for regulating markets.

Placed in this context, Al-Shabaab's financial resilience is not an anomaly but a symptom of a wider system in which governance gaps, economic incentives, and security vacuums reinforce one another. Disrupting its financing therefore requires transforming the conflict economy itself—expanding legitimate governance, formalizing trade, and reducing the number of actors who benefit from ambiguity—rather than targeting a single external sponsor.

Somalia's war persists because the political economy rewards conflict more than peace. Al-Shabaab's financial resilience is a symptom of this system, not an anomaly. Transforming the conflict economy—through governance expansion, coherent political settlement, and economic restructuring—is therefore essential to reducing the group's influence and breaking the cycle of violence.

A settlement in Somalia implies **a transformation of the entire political-economic system**, not just a ceasefire or a power-sharing deal. In the Somali context, "settlement" means re-engineering how authority, resources, and security are produced across multiple layers of society. It is not a single agreement but a rebalancing of incentives that currently make conflict profitable and governance fragile.

A settlement implies that **all major actors accept a shared framework of legitimate authority**—federal institutions, federal member states, Somaliland as a de facto entity, clan structures, business networks, and civic groups. It means that territorial control stops being contested through force and becomes regulated through political negotiation. It also implies that the economy shifts away from the conflict-driven marketplace where Al-Shabaab—an Al-Qaeda-affiliated organization responsible for extensive violence and human rights abuses—functions as a parallel state, and toward a system where taxation, trade, and justice are provided by accountable institutions.

A settlement requires **security arrangements that reduce the incentives for armed competition**, including localized policing, joint monitoring, and the gradual demilitarization of contested regions. It implies that political restructuring becomes possible—whether through deep federalism, asymmetric autonomy, or confederal models—because actors no longer fear that constitutional debates will be exploited militarily.

It also implies a **structured relationship between Somalia and Somaliland**, where practical cooperation on borders, trade, and security is possible even without resolving final status questions. A settlement requires a national framework for sharing revenues from ports, customs, livestock, and extractives, so that economic competition no longer fuels conflict. It

also implies a reconciliation process that addresses clan grievances, displacement, and land disputes through a hybrid of customary and formal justice.

Finally, a settlement implies **credible external guarantees** from the African Union, United Nations, and IGAD to stabilize commitments and prevent backsliding. In essence, a Somali settlement means shifting from a fragmented conflict economy to a negotiated political order where governance, not violence, becomes the primary mechanism for distributing power and resources.

Approaching and Degrading Al-Shabaab Through the EU Toolbox

Al-Shabaab represents one of the most resilient and adaptive insurgent movements in the world, having survived two decades of military pressure, the loss of major urban centers, internal purges, and sustained international intervention. Degrading it meaningfully requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses simultaneously its military capacity, its financial architecture, its ideological appeal, and the governance failures that continue to provide it with recruits, revenue, and social legitimacy. The EU possesses a genuinely broad toolbox for this purpose, combining security assistance, development programming, diplomatic engagement, and normative frameworks in ways that no purely military actor can replicate.

The Security Dimension

The EU's most direct security contribution to countering Al-Shabaab has been through the European Union Training Mission in Somalia, known as EUTM Somalia, which has trained tens of thousands of Somali National Army soldiers since its establishment in 2010. The logic is straightforward — a Somali state capable of defending its own territory reduces dependence on external forces and builds the kind of sovereign security capacity that alone can produce durable territorial control. However, EUTM has faced persistent criticism for training soldiers who subsequently defect, desert, or sell their weapons, problems rooted not in the training itself but in the failure to address the political and financial conditions that make loyalty to the state less attractive than other options. Future EU security assistance must therefore be conditioned more explicitly on Somali government progress in paying soldiers regularly, integrating clan representation into military structures, and establishing credible chains of command.

Complementing EUTM is the EU's support for ATMIS, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia, which provides the bulk of conventional military pressure on Al-Shabaab's territorial positions. EU funding for ATMIS through the African Peace Facility has been essential to keeping that mission operational. As ATMIS transitions toward full Somali security ownership, the EU must manage the handover carefully to avoid the kind of security vacuum that Al-Shabaab has historically exploited with devastating efficiency.

Disrupting Financial Networks

Al-Shabaab is among the wealthiest non-state armed groups in the world, generating estimated revenues of between 50 and 100 million dollars annually through taxation of trade, agriculture, telecommunications, and populations living under or adjacent to its control. Charcoal smuggling through Somali ports, extortion of businesses in Mogadishu and other cities nominally controlled by the government, and the taxation of road transport across vast stretches

of southern Somalia all feed a financial machine that has proven remarkably resistant to military disruption. The EU can bring significant tools to bear on this architecture. Targeted sanctions designations, coordinated with UN mechanisms, can constrain the movement and financial activities of senior Al-Shabaab figures. Support for Somali customs and revenue collection capacity reduces the grey economy within which Al-Shabaab's taxation networks operate. Investment in port monitoring and anti-smuggling infrastructure, particularly around the charcoal trade, directly attacks one of the movement's most important revenue streams. Financial intelligence sharing between EU member state agencies and Somali counterparts, where institutional capacity allows, can map and disrupt hawala networks used to move Al-Shabaab funds across borders.

Countering Ideology and Narrative

Al-Shabaab's enduring appeal cannot be explained by coercion alone. It offers a coherent narrative — of resistance to foreign occupation, of Islamic governance as an alternative to a corrupt and predatory state, of community justice in the absence of functional courts — that resonates with populations who have experienced repeated failures of both government and international intervention. Countering this narrative requires more than propaganda. It requires demonstrating, concretely and visibly, that the Somali state and its international partners offer something better.

The EU can support counter-narrative efforts through investment in independent Somali media, creating space for voices that challenge Al-Shabaab's framing without simply amplifying government messaging, which carries its own credibility deficit. Support for religious scholars and community leaders willing to publicly contest Al-Shabaab's theological claims is particularly important, as the movement's religious legitimacy is more vulnerable to internal Islamic critique than to externally produced counter-messaging. Education programming that reaches young Somalis in areas adjacent to Al-Shabaab influence zones offers a longer-term but structurally important alternative to the movement's own recruitment pipeline, which feeds heavily on marginalized, unemployed, and poorly educated young men.

Addressing Governance Deficits

Al-Shabaab exists and thrives in the space left by state failure. Where government is absent, predatory, or simply irrelevant to daily life, the movement steps in with taxation, dispute resolution, and a form of brutal but consistent order that populations sometimes prefer to the arbitrary violence and corruption of nominally government-controlled areas. This is the most inconvenient truth of the Somalia conflict, and it demands an EU response that goes beyond security assistance to address the quality and reach of Somali governance itself.

EU rule of law programming, support for the Somali judiciary, investment in local government capacity, and conditioned budget support tied to anti-corruption benchmarks all address this dimension. The EU's experience with state-building in other fragile contexts provides a body of lessons, not all encouraging, about what works and what produces the appearance of reform without its substance. In Somalia specifically, the federal architecture creates both opportunities and complications — member states like Puntland and Jubaland have their own relationships with Al-Shabaab, ranging from active confrontation to informal accommodation,

and EU engagement must be calibrated to these local political realities rather than applied uniformly from above.

Integrating the Humanitarian and Development Dimensions

Al-Shabaab recruits most effectively from populations experiencing acute deprivation, displacement, and exclusion. EU humanitarian assistance and long-term development programming therefore serve a counter-insurgency function even when they are not designed as such. Livelihood support in areas recovering from Al-Shabaab control, investment in agricultural productivity in the regions of southern Somalia where the movement draws its deepest support, and infrastructure development that makes the state's presence tangible and beneficial all erode the conditions on which Al-Shabaab's recruitment depends. This is a long-term investment with returns that are difficult to measure and easy to undervalue in the face of immediate security pressures, but it is arguably the most structurally important element of the entire approach.

Coordinating the External Environment

Finally, the EU must work to align the competing external influences on Somalia — Turkish military training, Gulf financial flows, Kenyan and Ethiopian security interests, American drone operations — into something approaching a coherent strategic framework. Al-Shabaab has repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to exploit divisions among external actors, playing competing interests against one another and surviving in the gaps between uncoordinated interventions. The EU, as a normative and diplomatic actor with relationships across this entire landscape, is uniquely positioned to pursue this coordination function, not by imposing a single vision but by creating the frameworks, forums, and shared assessments within which a more coherent collective approach can gradually take shape.

The central insight that must guide all of this is that Al-Shabaab cannot be defeated militarily alone. It can be degraded, contained, and progressively delegitimized — but only if the Somali state simultaneously becomes more capable, more just, more present, and more worthy of the loyalty it asks its citizens to extend. The EU toolbox is well suited to supporting that transformation. The question is whether the political will exists, in Brussels and in Mogadishu alike, to use it with the consistency and patience the challenge demands.

Somali Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe

The presence of Somali refugees and asylum seekers in Europe is not incidental to the strategic picture outlined above — it is deeply embedded within it, and understanding that connection transforms what might appear to be a purely humanitarian matter into something with significant political, security, and policy dimensions that Brussels cannot afford to treat in isolation.

Somalis began arriving in Europe in meaningful numbers in the early 1990s, when the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 triggered one of the most prolonged state failures in modern history. The subsequent decades of civil war, famine, Al-Shabaab insurgency, clan violence, and chronic underdevelopment produced successive waves of displacement. Today Somalis constitute one of the largest refugee and asylum-seeking populations in Europe, concentrated

most heavily in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Germany. Sweden and the United Kingdom in particular developed substantial Somali diaspora communities that have now been present for two and three generations, producing British-Somali and Swedish-Somali citizens whose relationship to Somalia is simultaneously intimate and mediated through the experience of exile.

The routes by which Somalis reach Europe have evolved over time and have become progressively more dangerous as European border controls have tightened. The Eastern Mediterranean route through Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Libya, followed by sea crossings to Italy or Greece, has claimed thousands of Somali lives. Others have traveled through Yemen and across the Gulf, routes that have become more treacherous as the Yemeni conflict has deepened. The desperation embedded in these journeys speaks to conditions in Somalia that no level of border enforcement has proven capable of simply stopping.

What is often underappreciated in European policy discussions is the extraordinary economic and political significance of the Somali diaspora to Somalia itself. Remittances sent by Somalis living in Europe, North America, and the Gulf constitute one of the largest single sources of external income flowing into Somalia, estimated at between one and two billion dollars annually, a figure that dwarfs official development assistance in its direct impact on household survival. These flows move through the hawala system of informal money transfer, a network whose efficiency and reach into remote Somali communities no formal banking system has come close to replicating.

The diaspora also functions as a political force within Somalia, supplying a disproportionate share of the country's technocratic and political leadership. Multiple Somali presidents, ministers, and senior officials have come directly from diaspora communities in Europe and North America, bringing with them educational credentials, governance experience, and international networks that the domestic political system struggles to produce independently. This creates a direct and underappreciated link between European integration policy — how well Somali refugees are educated, employed, and civically incorporated in their host countries — and the quality of governance Somalia is able to field at its highest levels.

The presence of Somali communities in Europe also carries a security dimension that has generated significant political controversy and must be addressed with both honesty and proportionality. A small number of individuals from Somali diaspora communities have been radicalized and drawn into Al-Shabaab networks, either traveling to Somalia to join the movement or providing financial and logistical support from European territory. Al-Shabaab has demonstrated awareness of diaspora communities as potential recruitment pools, targeting individuals experiencing marginalization, identity crisis, discrimination, and alienation from both their host societies and a Somalia they may know only through family memory and conflict reporting.

This reality has fed political narratives in several European countries that conflate the Somali refugee population as a whole with security risk, a conflation that is empirically unjustified and strategically counterproductive. The overwhelming majority of Somalis in Europe are precisely what they present themselves as — people who fled violence and are attempting to build stable lives. Treating them as suspect communities damages the trust between diaspora populations

and security services that is itself one of the most valuable counter-terrorism assets European governments possess. Somali community leaders, religious figures, and family networks are often the first to recognize and report signs of radicalization among young people in their communities. Alienating those communities through discriminatory policy or hostile political rhetoric destroys exactly the early warning capacity that effective counter-radicalization requires.

These integration failures matter beyond their human cost. A young Somali man growing up in a deprived European suburb, excluded from the labor market, disconnected from both Somali and European identity, and experiencing daily encounters with discrimination and law enforcement, represents precisely the profile that Al-Shabaab's recruitment narrative is designed to reach. European integration policy is therefore not separate from European counter-terrorism policy in the Horn — it is part of the same continuum, and failures in one domain create vulnerabilities in the other. The men are all overrepresented in the crime statistics compared to their share of the population x4 in Europe, whereas the female members tend to integrate and educate themselves and generally look happy attending school, and even dare their mothers to move outside the home.

The integration experience of Somali refugees across Europe has been uneven and in several countries genuinely troubling. In Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, Somali communities have faced persistent challenges including high unemployment, poor educational outcomes relative to other immigrant groups, concentration in deprived urban areas, and exposure to street violence and gang recruitment. The causes are complex and contested — they include the trauma and disruption of the refugee experience itself, the particular difficulty of integrating populations arriving from a context of total state collapse with interrupted schooling and no transferable formal credentials, discrimination in housing and labor markets, and in some cases policy frameworks that have inadvertently concentrated disadvantage rather than dispersing it.



Ayaan Hirsi Ali has written several books that address those themes. *The Caged Virgin* is a collection of essays focused on the status of women in some Muslim societies, discussing issues such as forced marriage, honor-based violence, female genital mutilation, and what she sees as barriers to women's emancipation within traditional interpretations of Islam, as symptoms of

deeper structural and ideological constraints affecting women's lives. Central to her argument is the claim that these issues are not merely cultural anomalies but are often justified through traditional or conservative interpretations of Islamic texts and legal reasoning.

From a reformist perspective, she contends that such interpretations have contributed to systemic inequalities that restrict women's autonomy in both private and public spheres. She argues that women's emancipation is hindered by patriarchal readings of religious doctrine that prioritize communal honor, familial control, and gender hierarchy over individual rights. In her view, these interpretive traditions have historically shaped legal and social norms that normalize subordination and limit female agency.

She further suggests that meaningful change requires a critical re-evaluation of jurisprudential traditions (fiqh) and the revival of independent reasoning (ijtihad) to separate cultural practices from foundational religious principles. The essays also emphasize the tension between modern human rights frameworks and certain customary practices defended in the name of religion. She positions herself within a broader intellectual project that calls for aligning religious interpretation with universal principles such as dignity, equality, and bodily integrity.

At the same time, her work is often framed as controversial because it generalizes across diverse Muslim societies and may not fully account for regional, historical, and socio-economic variation. Critics argue that some of the practices she highlights are not uniquely religious but are also influenced by tribal customs, colonial legacies, and state structures. Nevertheless, the collection serves as a polemical intervention in debates about gender reform, secularism, and religious authority.

Overall, *The Caged Virgin* functions as both a critique of specific harmful practices and a broader argument for rethinking the relationship between Islam and modern conceptions of women's rights, freedom, and bodily autonomy.

Infidel is her autobiography, describing her upbringing in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, her move to the Netherlands, and her eventual rejection of Islam. *Nomad: From Islam to America* continues her personal story and expands on her views about integration, religion, and Western liberal values.

Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now is the book most directly associated with her argument that Islam needs a reformation. In it, she argues that certain doctrines and practices should be reinterpreted or abandoned to better align with values such as individual liberty, religious freedom, and equality for women and minorities. This work is most directly associated with her broader thesis that Islam, as a lived tradition and interpretive system, requires a substantive process of **reform (islah)** in order to remain ethically and socially responsive to contemporary conditions. Central to her argument is the claim that certain inherited juridical doctrines, exegetical traditions, and socio-religious practices—while historically intelligible within classical Islamic contexts—have become increasingly misaligned with modern normative frameworks, particularly those grounded in liberal democratic thought.

From an analytical perspective, her position rests on three interrelated propositions. First, she advances a hermeneutical critique, arguing that scriptural interpretation has often been

constrained by patriarchal, political, and medieval legal assumptions that are not intrinsic to the Qur'anic text itself but are products of historical contingency. Second, she proposes a normative recalibration, suggesting that Islamic ethical reasoning should be reoriented toward universal principles such as individual autonomy, equality before the law, and freedom of conscience, rather than rigid adherence to inherited fiqh formulations. Third, she implies a reformist epistemology, in which interpretive authority is decentralised and reopened to ijtihad (independent reasoning), thereby allowing contemporary moral reasoning to actively engage with foundational sources.

Within this framework, reform is not understood as abandonment of Islam, but rather as a critical re-engagement with its interpretive tradition, aimed at distinguishing between core theological commitments and historically conditioned legal accretions. Consequently, practices that conflict with modern standards of human rights, gender equality, and religious pluralism are subject to either reinterpretation or ethical rejection, depending on their scriptural grounding and historical development.

Ultimately, her argument situates Islamic reform within a broader intellectual project: the reconciliation of religious tradition with modernity through critical reinterpretation, ethical universalism, and institutional rethinking of authority structures within Islam

Her books have been influential and controversial. Supporters see her as an advocate for women's rights and free expression, while critics argue that her critiques sometimes overgeneralize a diverse religion and its followers.

What emerges from all of this is a challenge of policy coherence that European institutions have been slow to fully confront. The EU simultaneously funds peacebuilding and state-building in Somalia, trains Somali security forces, supports counter-Al-Shabaab operations, and hosts large Somali refugee communities whose wellbeing, integration, and political engagement are directly connected to outcomes in Somalia itself. These policy domains are administered by different directorates, funded through different instruments, and evaluated against different benchmarks, with remarkably little institutional coordination between them.

A genuinely coherent EU approach would recognize that the Somali diaspora in Europe is not simply a humanitarian caseload to be managed but a strategic resource to be cultivated — a bridge between European institutions and Somali society, a source of remittances that sustain Somali households through crises that development aid cannot reach, a pipeline of talent that Somalia desperately needs, and a community whose successful integration in Europe sends a signal about European values that no diplomatic communiqué can replicate. Investing in that community — in education, employment, civic participation, mental health support for trauma survivors, and meaningful political engagement — is not charity. It is strategy.

Mogadishu's counterpart should dispatch police attachés and culturally knowledgeable officials to assist with integration efforts. These representatives can help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps. They can improve communication between immigrant communities and local authorities. Their expertise may help address a wide range of social and integration challenges. Such cooperation can strengthen trust, understanding, and community cohesion.

Towards A stable Tribal Coalition in Somalia

On the question of a “stable tribal coalition,” Somalia does not have a historical example of a single permanent coalition that successfully unifies the entire country. Instead, stability has usually come from balancing major clan-family groups through negotiated power-sharing arrangements. The current federal system, often described through the 4.5 model, reflects this logic by distributing representation among major clan families and including minority groups in a structured way. Although imperfect, it is an attempt to prevent domination by any single group, since exclusion has repeatedly led to conflict or fragmentation.

Rather than a fixed coalition, what tends to be more stable is a flexible system of federalism where regional administrations have autonomy while still participating in a national framework. This reduces the pressure for total control at the center and acknowledges the reality that political authority in Somalia is distributed across clan and regional lines.

The fragmentation or “breaking off” of parts of Somalia is mainly driven by the long-term weakness of central authority. When the central state collapses or is perceived as unable to provide security and services, regions naturally develop their own governing structures, security forces, and taxation systems. This is what happened after 1991, when Somaliland, Puntland, and other regions built alternative administrations to fill the vacuum.

Another major factor is trust. Many regions are reluctant to fully rejoin or submit to central authority due to fears of resource capture, unequal power-sharing, or domination by rival groups. These fears are reinforced by historical experiences of authoritarian rule, especially under Siad Barre, and by ongoing disputes over representation in federal institutions.

There is also a security dimension, as groups like al-Shabaab exploit weak governance, which further encourages local autonomy as a survival strategy. In this context, decentralization is often less an ideological choice and more a practical response to insecurity.

Somalia is therefore not “breaking off” from a single stable center, but rather repeatedly pulling away from attempts at overly centralized statehood. The deeper structural tension is between a modern centralized nation-state model and a deeply rooted decentralized system of clan-based authority and negotiation. These two logics have never fully aligned, and much of Somalia’s political history can be understood as the struggle to reconcile them without one fully destroying the other.

Somaliland

Somaliland is different from the rest of Somalia mainly in how it emerged, how it stabilized internally, and how it defines its political status.

After the collapse of the central Somali state in 1991, the territory formerly known as British Somaliland in the northwest rebuilt its own institutions. Unlike much of south-central Somalia, where conflict among competing armed groups persisted, Somaliland’s local leaders and clan elders managed to negotiate a relatively broad internal settlement. This process was anchored in clan conferences in the early 1990s, which created a hybrid system combining customary authority (Xeer), elected institutions, and local security forces. Over time, this allowed Somaliland to develop functioning governance structures, including its own police, currency, elections, and administrative system.

A major difference is therefore institutional continuity. Somaliland did not experience the same prolonged collapse of governance that affected much of the south. Instead, it built a relatively stable order based on local legitimacy and negotiated clan balance, even though it lacks international recognition as a sovereign state.

Another key distinction is political orientation. Somaliland has consistently pursued independence, arguing that it was a separate colonial entity before unification with the former Italian Somalia in 1960. From its perspective, the 1960 union was voluntary and later effectively reversed after the collapse of the central state. This makes its identity question different from other regions, which generally seek autonomy within a federal Somalia rather than full independence.

In contrast, most of south-central Somalia has remained formally committed to rebuilding a unified Somali state, even though its governance is more fragmented in practice. Puntland, for example, operates as an autonomous federal member state rather than seeking full independence, and other regions follow similar federal arrangements.

So the difference is not simply that Somaliland “broke off,” but that it constructed a relatively coherent internal political order early, rooted in local consensus, and then reframed itself as a separate political entity. Its stability is often attributed to early reconciliation processes, lower intensity of prolonged civil war compared to the south, and stronger local institutional consolidation during the 1990s.

How to approach Somaliland

In “The Paradox of Progress: Foreign Investments, Kinship, State-Building, and Conflict in Somaliland,” Markus Virgil Hoehne and Jethro Norman argue that Somaliland's recent economic and political successes have produced contradictory outcomes. Their central claim is that foreign direct investment (FDI), growing international engagement, and stronger state institutions have simultaneously advanced state-building while also generating new forms of exclusion and conflict. This is what they call the paradox of progress.

The authors challenge the common assumption that economic development and international investment automatically strengthen peace and political stability. In Somaliland, foreign investments such as the expansion of Berbera Port by DP World, the development of the Berbera Corridor, and increased engagement with Gulf states contributed to economic growth, enhanced state revenues, and strengthened the government's position in Hargeisa. These developments also improved Somaliland's reputation as one of the most stable and successful de facto states in Africa.

However, the authors emphasize that investment and development do not operate in a social or political vacuum. Somaliland's political system is deeply shaped by kinship and clan relations. Historically, Somaliland achieved stability after the collapse of the Somali state through a hybrid political order that combined formal government institutions with clan-based mechanisms of representation and conflict resolution. Clan elders played an important role in mediating disputes and ensuring that different communities felt included in the political system.

According to the article, the growth of foreign investment and the increasing importance of electoral politics gradually transformed this political arrangement. As state institutions became stronger and economic opportunities expanded, political and economic power became increasingly concentrated in regions and communities that were already relatively advantaged. Benefits from development were not distributed evenly across Somaliland's territory. Instead, access to new resources often reflected existing political alliances and kinship networks.

The authors argue that this process altered the nature of state-building. Earlier forms of governance relied heavily on negotiation, compromise, and inclusion among different clan groups. More recent developments encouraged greater centralization of authority and a stronger emphasis on majoritarian electoral politics. While these changes strengthened the state's administrative capacity, they also weakened some of the inclusive mechanisms that had previously helped maintain political cohesion.

These tensions became particularly visible in eastern Somaliland, especially among the Dhulbahante communities in the Sool region. Many people in these areas had long held ambivalent or hostile views toward Somaliland's independence project. As investment, infrastructure, and political influence became increasingly concentrated in central Somaliland, some eastern communities came to view the state as serving the interests of dominant groups rather than representing all citizens equally. Feelings of marginalization intensified, and opposition to Somaliland's state-building project grew stronger.

The article uses the Lasanod conflict as a key example of these dynamics. The authors contend that the combination of uneven development, political exclusion, and unresolved questions of identity and sovereignty contributed to growing resistance in the region. The resulting violence in 2022–2023 ultimately led Somaliland to lose effective control over significant parts of the territory it claimed, demonstrating how processes that appeared to strengthen the state could simultaneously undermine its authority.

The broader theoretical contribution of the article is its argument that state-building, foreign investment, and peace are not automatically linked in positive ways. FDI can increase state capacity and economic growth while also deepening inequalities and political grievances. Economic progress does not necessarily generate legitimacy, especially when the benefits of development are distributed through unequal social and political structures. In Somaliland, kinship networks have been both a source of stability and a mechanism through which exclusion can occur.

The paradox of progress, therefore, is that foreign investment and international engagement helped create a stronger, wealthier, and more internationally connected Somaliland, yet these same processes contributed to political exclusion, intensified conflict in peripheral regions, and weakened the territorial cohesion of the state itself.

Th lessons learned is that international actors and investors should avoid treating Somaliland's relative stability and economic growth as evidence that development alone can resolve deeper political and social tensions. The Somaliland case demonstrates that investment can strengthen institutions and generate prosperity while simultaneously creating new forms of exclusion if

the benefits are concentrated among particular regions, political elites, or kinship groups. Economic success does not automatically translate into political legitimacy or social cohesion.

For the international community, this means that engagement with Somaliland should go beyond supporting infrastructure projects, trade corridors, and state institutions. External actors need to pay close attention to how resources are distributed across regions and communities, particularly in politically sensitive areas such as Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn. Development strategies that prioritize efficiency and growth without considering local political dynamics risk reinforcing existing inequalities and fueling grievances among groups that already feel marginalized.

For investors, the lesson is that political stability cannot be assessed solely through macroeconomic indicators or the apparent effectiveness of central authorities in Hargeisa. Investment projects inevitably become embedded within local power structures. Investors therefore need a sophisticated understanding of Somaliland's kinship-based political landscape and should ensure that local consultation, benefit-sharing, and inclusion mechanisms are built into project design. Projects perceived as benefiting only particular clans, regions, or political actors may inadvertently contribute to instability, even when they generate economic growth.

If the international community chooses to engage Somaliland as a distinct political entity, the challenge is to avoid reinforcing a state-building model that strengthens central institutions while neglecting contested peripheral regions. Support for governance should emphasize political inclusion, dialogue, and equitable distribution of development gains rather than focusing exclusively on administrative capacity or economic performance.

If, alternatively, future efforts move toward some form of reintegration with Somalia, a different but equally complex set of challenges emerges. Somaliland has developed its own political institutions, security structures, electoral system, and national identity over more than three decades of de facto independence. Many Somalilanders view these achievements as evidence of a successful political project distinct from Somalia. Any reintegration process would therefore face substantial resistance unless it addressed concerns about power-sharing, autonomy, representation, and security guarantees.

The Somaliland case suggests that neither international recognition nor reintegration should be viewed as purely technical or economic questions. Both are fundamentally political processes that require broad-based legitimacy across diverse communities. Whether the future lies in greater international recognition of Somaliland's separate status or in some negotiated relationship with Somalia, durable stability will depend less on the volume of external investment than on the ability of political arrangements to accommodate competing identities, historical grievances, and regional interests.

The implication is that external engagement should be guided by the principle that **state-building, economic development, and peace are not synonymous**. Investments and international support can strengthen institutions, but unless they are accompanied by inclusive political settlements, they may also deepen divisions and produce precisely the instability they are intended to prevent. What is the value of a new port if the political community fractures? What does economic growth achieve if entire regions feel excluded from its benefits?

Somaliland's paradox of progress reminds us that development succeeds not when it merely builds infrastructure, but when it builds belonging. Somaliland needs to broaden political inclusion and sustain social cohesion across all communities or the political community of communities.

Implications of Israeli-UAE moves on Somaliland

Israeli recognition of Somaliland represents a significant geopolitical development because it inserts the Somaliland question directly into the broader strategic competition over the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. Israel became the first UN member state to formally recognize Somaliland in December 2025, establishing diplomatic relations and elevating Somaliland from a de facto political entity to a subject of active international geopolitical contestation. The United States, however, has not extended formal recognition, despite continued debate within American strategic circles.

From the perspective of the United States, the principal objective is not necessarily Somaliland itself but rather the strategic geography that Somaliland occupies. Washington's interests are centred on securing maritime trade routes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, maintaining freedom of navigation, monitoring militant threats emanating from Yemen, and preserving influence in a region increasingly characterised by competition among the United States, China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf monarchies. Somaliland's location on the Gulf of Aden provides potential advantages for intelligence collection, naval logistics, and surveillance of one of the most critical maritime corridors in the international system. American calculations are therefore embedded within a broader framework of maritime security and great-power competition.

Israeli objectives are more directly connected to the emerging security architecture of the Red Sea. Since the intensification of Houthi attacks against maritime traffic and the increasing strategic salience of the Red Sea corridor, Israeli policymakers have sought to expand partnerships beyond the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Recognition of Somaliland provides Israel with an opportunity to cultivate a friendly political actor situated opposite Yemen, potentially enhancing intelligence cooperation, maritime monitoring, and diplomatic influence across the western shore of the Red Sea. Israel is also concerned about the calculations and exchanges between Sudani, Yemeni and Somali jihadis, something that was a factor in the penning of the fledgling peace agreement with Khartoum. Recognition also reflects Israel's broader effort to project itself as a consequential actor in African and Red Sea affairs rather than merely a Middle Eastern power. The move was also undertaken for operational reasons and as a token of gratitude to Somaliland that together with Iraq and Azerbaijan made bases available during the US-Israeli air campaign that was launched in January 2026 against Iran.

The role of the United Arab Emirates is particularly important because Emirati interests predate Israeli recognition and, in many respects, have helped shape the strategic environment in which recognition became possible. The UAE has pursued a long-term strategy of establishing a network of ports, logistics hubs, military facilities, and commercial corridors stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Horn of Africa. Through its involvement in Berbera Port, Berbera Airport, and associated free-trade infrastructure, Abu Dhabi has acquired substantial influence

in Somaliland's economic and security sectors. The UAE's objectives are simultaneously economic, military, and geopolitical. Economically, Berbera strengthens Emirati control over maritime commerce and logistics networks linking Africa, the Gulf, and Asia. Militarily, access to facilities along the Gulf of Aden enhances the UAE's ability to project power into the Red Sea and support operations connected to Yemen. Geopolitically, Somaliland provides Abu Dhabi with a means of counterbalancing rival regional actors, particularly Turkey and Qatar, while reinforcing Emirati influence across the western Indian Ocean. The move caused a rupture in the relationship between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh and led to armed scuffles in Yemen.

Taken together, American, Israeli, and Emirati interests reveal a common strategic denominator: the consolidation of influence over the maritime space connecting the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. Somaliland's significance derives not primarily from its domestic political characteristics but from its position within this larger geopolitical system.

For the Horn of Africa, the consequences are profound. Recognition has amplified debates over sovereignty, and self-determination, and territorial integrity, while strengthening Somaliland's diplomatic standing and simultaneously challenging Somalia's claims and raising concerns among African governments about the precedents such recognition might establish. The region's uneasy frontiers and burdened institutions have become sites upon which these wider questions are projected. Recognition has also accelerated the internationalisation of the Horn, drawing local disputes into an expanding web of regional and global rivalries. In this sense, the Horn has become a geopolitical theatre, where questions once rooted in local histories now unfold beneath the spotlight of international interests and strategic competition.

The broader implication is that the Horn of Africa can no longer be understood as a peripheral African subregion. It has become no insignificant arena in contemporary geopolitics, increasingly constituting a single strategic complex linking the Red Sea, and the Arabian Peninsula, and the eastern Mediterranean, and the western Indian Ocean. What appears geographically fragmented is, paradoxically, an integrated mosaic—an oxymoronic space where political divisions coexist with growing strategic interdependence.

Within this emerging geopolitical arena, Somaliland has become a focal point through which external powers pursue maritime security, commercial access, military positioning, and regional influence. The region's restless sea lanes and watchful waters now carry ambitions that extend far beyond the Horn itself. Somaliland occupies a position at the crossroads of currents, both literal and geopolitical, where trade routes, security interests, and diplomatic calculations converge and collide.

The recognition question is therefore not merely a minor diplomatic disagreement, but rather a visible expression of a much larger contest over power and order. Beneath the formal debates over sovereignty lies a broader struggle over who will shape the future architecture of the Red Sea basin. In this sense, the region resembles a geopolitical chessboard and maritime gateway at once—a form of ordered turbulence, where competing actors seek stability through competition and influence through intervention.

The Horn is thus no longer a distant periphery but a strategic stage of shifting seas and surging significance, where local aspirations and regional rivalries and global ambitions intersect. What unfolds around Somaliland is not simply a dispute over recognition; it is part of a wider contest over the political future of one of the world's most consequential maritime corridors.

Strategic Interests and External Powers Shaping the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa has become one of the most contested geopolitical arenas of the twenty-first century, drawing in external powers whose fears, ambitions, and rivalries now deeply shape the region's political landscape. Among the most consequential of these external actors are Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, whose overlapping interests have quietly but decisively influenced events from the Red Sea coast to the Somali interior.

Israel's engagement with the Horn is driven by a convergence of strategic, economic, and security imperatives. The Red Sea is existential geography for Israel — it is the corridor through which Israeli shipping reaches Asia and East Africa, passing through the Bab-el-Mandeb strait and up through the Gulf of Aqaba to the port of Eilat. Any hostile power capable of disrupting that corridor poses a direct threat to Israeli commerce and military logistics. Beyond shipping, Israel has long harbored ambitions of anchoring a Red Sea economic community that would bind Ethiopia, Eritrea, and other Horn states into a network of trade and security cooperation loosely aligned with Israeli interests. Equally pressing is Israel's alarm at what it sees as a hardening axis of jihadist influence stretching from Yemen across the Gulf of Aden into Somalia and westward into Sudan. The prospect of these movements coagulating into a coherent, Iran-linked front along Israel's southern maritime approaches is regarded in Tel Aviv as a threat of the first order, justifying deep intelligence engagement, military cooperation, and diplomatic investment across the Horn.

The UAE shares many of these concerns but approaches them through its own distinct prism. Abu Dhabi regards political Islam, in virtually any form, as an existential threat to the model of authoritarian modernization it has constructed at home. The Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Shabaab, the Houthis in Yemen, and Iranian influence are all perceived as strands of the same threatening web. The Horn of Africa sits at the edge of what Emirati strategists effectively consider their extended security perimeter, a zone where instability can rapidly translate into threats to Gulf shipping lanes, energy infrastructure, and the political order of the Arabian Peninsula itself. The UAE has responded with remarkable energy, establishing military bases in Eritrea and Somaliland, investing heavily in port infrastructure across the region, and cultivating close relationships with governments and commanders willing to push back against Islamist movements and Iranian encroachment.

Saudi Arabia brings its own weight to this constellation. Riyadh's concerns mirror those of the UAE in their fear of Iran and political Islam, but are amplified by the kingdom's proximity to Yemen, where the Houthi movement — backed by Tehran — has demonstrated the capacity to strike deep into Saudi territory. For Riyadh, a stable and friendly Horn of Africa is inseparable from the security of its southern flank. Saudi investment, diplomacy, and at times coercive pressure have all been brought to bear on Horn governments, most notably in the landmark 2018 peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which Saudi Arabia and the UAE helped broker and finance.

Together these three powers have come to function as an informal but potent bloc whose priorities have increasingly shaped how the European Union approaches the Horn. Europe, dependent on Red Sea shipping lanes for a significant share of its trade with Asia, shares the concern about Houthi disruption, piracy, and jihadist consolidation. The EU's security frameworks, naval missions such as Operation Atalanta, and development assistance programs in the Horn have progressively aligned with the strategic logic advanced by Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia — prioritizing stability, containing Iran-linked movements, and supporting state actors willing to police their own territories against militant groups. What emerges is not a formal alliance but a convergence of interests powerful enough to function as one, quietly redrawing the strategic map of one of the world's oldest and most consequential regions.

Summary

The future stability of the Horn of Africa depends upon transforming the Eritrea–Ethiopia relationship from a zero-sum security rivalry into a framework of economic interdependence, mutual recognition, and shared prosperity. Such a transformation is not an insignificant task, for it requires replacing decades of strategic suspicion with habits of cooperation and coexistence. Yet without this shift, the region risks remaining trapped in a cycle of armed peace—an oxymoronic condition in which the absence of war conceals the persistence of rivalry.

To shape the future of the Red Sea region in the present is to recognize that today's political choices are the architects of tomorrow's regional order. The Horn now stands at a historic hinge, where the pathways of conflict and cooperation diverge. Across its watchful waters and restless coastlines, states confront a common reality: security can no longer be achieved through isolation or competition alone, but through connectivity, commerce, and collective responsibility.

The Red Sea basin is increasingly emerging as a single strategic space, linking Africa and the Middle East, and Europe and Asia, and local aspirations and global ambitions. Within this interconnected arena, the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia serves as a keystone of regional stability. If managed constructively, it could become the anchor of an integrated neighbourhood; if neglected, it may remain a fault line running through an increasingly important geopolitical landscape.

The challenge, therefore, is not merely to prevent future conflict but to cultivate a shared regional vision. This requires replacing the politics of partition with the pragmatics of partnership, and fostering a climate in which economic cooperation generates mutual benefits and mutual confidence. Only then can the Horn move from being a theatre of recurring competition to becoming a bridge between continents and a beacon of balanced development.

In this sense, the future of the Red Sea region is already being negotiated in the present. The question is not whether the geopolitical tide will rise, but whether regional actors can learn to navigate its currents together. For the Horn's future will be shaped not only by the power of states, but by the wisdom with which they transform suspicion into synergy, rivalry into reciprocity, and proximity into partnership.

Push ups are the strengthening of the enforcement of the Algiers agreement in relation to the authority of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission rulings so they are treated as final and fully binding by both Eritrea and Ethiopia, leaving no space for reinterpretation or delay. The parties need to be coaxed to secure an unequivocal commitment from both states to complete border demarcation in full, translating legal acceptance into practical implementation on the ground. The UN has to deploy neutral international monitoring or peacekeeping mechanisms to stabilize sensitive border zones and prevent renewed militarization or escalation.

It is necessary to introduce clear and credible consequences for non-compliance, ensuring that violations carry meaningful diplomatic and economic costs. The joint border management must be made permanent in terms of a framework under international supervision to oversee implementation and maintain stability over time. We need to ensure sustained engagement by the United Nations and the African Union as active guarantors rather than passive observers of the process. We set out a disciplined, time-bound implementation roadmap with verified milestones that keep both parties accountable to progress. By maintaining open and structured channels for dialogue and dispute resolution disagreements could be better managed legally and peacefully rather than militarily.

The issue of Ethiopian access to the Red Sea is real and strategically significant. However, it can only be resolved peacefully through negotiated commercial arrangements that fully respect Eritrean sovereignty.

The European Union is uniquely positioned to support such a transformation because it combines:

- diplomatic legitimacy,
- development financing,
- infrastructure capacity,
- and experience in post-conflict regional integration.

If managed carefully, the EU could help turn the Red Sea from a source of confrontation into a platform for regional cooperation, economic growth, and long-term peace in the Horn of Africa.

Turkey's engagement with Somalia stands apart from virtually every other external power active in the Horn, and it is precisely this distinctiveness that makes Brussels regard it with a mixture of appreciation, unease, and growing strategic suspicion.

Ankara's involvement in Somalia began dramatically in 2011 when Erdogan became the first non-African leader to visit Mogadishu in two decades, arriving at the height of a catastrophic famine and bringing with him humanitarian aid, reconstruction pledges, and a political symbolism that resonated deeply across the Muslim world. What followed was not a fleeting gesture but a sustained and deepening commitment. Turkey built hospitals, schools, roads, and the largest Turkish embassy compound anywhere in the world. It established a military training

base outside Mogadishu — the first of its kind for Turkey on foreign soil — and has since trained thousands of Somali National Army soldiers, embedding itself into the very architecture of Somali state security. Turkish Airlines flies directly to Mogadishu, Turkish contractors rebuild infrastructure, and Turkish soft power, channeled through religious foundations, educational institutions, and development agencies, has woven itself into Somali civil society with remarkable depth.

In Brussels, this presence is read on several levels simultaneously. On one level it is acknowledged as genuinely constructive. Turkey filled a vacuum that Western donors and the EU itself had been reluctant to fill, engaging on the ground in conditions most external partners preferred to address from a safe distance. Somali state capacity, however fragile, has benefited from Turkish training and investment, and this serves the EU's own interest in a Somalia capable of governing its territory, containing Al-Shabaab, and managing its coastline.

Yet the unease in Brussels runs deeper than gratitude. Turkey's Somalia policy is inseparable from Ankara's broader ambition to project itself as the natural patron and protector of Muslim-majority societies, a role Erdogan has cultivated with deliberate intent across Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. From the EU's perspective, this framing carries an implicit ideological charge. Turkey has historically maintained a far more accommodating posture toward political Islam than the UAE-Saudi-Israeli bloc, and Brussels is acutely aware that Ankara's network of religious foundations in Somalia operates in a space that overlaps uncomfortably with the very Islamist currents that its Gulf and Israeli partners are working to suppress. Turkey does not share the Gulf's visceral hostility to movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, and this divergence creates a fault line running directly through the Horn.

There is also a purely competitive dimension that Brussels cannot ignore. Turkey is a NATO member and an EU candidate state, yet it has increasingly behaved as an autonomous strategic actor pursuing interests that do not always align with those of its Western partners. Its military base in Somalia, its arms sales, its port management ambitions, and its political mediation efforts all represent instruments of influence that operate independently of any Western framework. When Ankara brokers agreements or positions itself as an indispensable interlocutor between Somali factions, it is not doing so as a team player within a coordinated Western strategy but as a sovereign power building its own durable footprint.

Brussels thus finds itself in the uncomfortable position of neither being able to dismiss Turkey's role in Somalia nor fully trust it. Turkey is too embedded, too useful, and too present to be sidelined, yet its ideological ambiguity concerning political Islam, its independent strategic agenda, and its complex relationship with the Gulf powers whose regional vision the EU has largely aligned itself with, make it a partner that Brussels engages with carefully and watches very closely. In the broader triangulation of external influence over the Horn — where Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia pull in one direction and Turkey pulls in another — the EU occupies an increasingly difficult middle ground, dependent on all of them yet fully aligned with none.

Over the horizon, the EU could engage in infrastructure development between Addis Ababa and Bamako along the old trans-Sahel trade routes in this area of Africa, fostering regional integration, economic growth, and long-term stability, improving connectivity across borders, strengthening trade corridors, enhancing access to markets and services, and supporting

sustainable development across the Sahel region. It was here that Africa saw its first large-scale trans-regional trade networks, linking distant communities through the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture.

Addis Abbeba also hosts the African Union-EU Center on GMES allowing to build the satellite muscles of the Afrika to better monitor the environment and to keep an eye on drought in the region. They have some intellectual capacities and will like pay host to a Red Sea Peace and Conflict Network.

20. Strengthening the central government of Somalia

Strengthening Somalia's central government is a complex task because it requires coordinated progress across political, security, economic, and institutional areas. A purely top-down approach is unlikely to work; legitimacy, inclusion, and service delivery matter just as much as authority.

Political stabilization depends on building an inclusive system where clans, regions, and political groups all feel represented in national decision-making. Somalia's social structure makes this especially important, since exclusion often leads to fragmentation or conflict. At the same time, the federal system needs clearer balance: regional autonomy should be respected, but the central government must retain authority over national security, foreign policy, and core fiscal matters. Electoral reform is also crucial, with transparent and broadly accepted processes that reduce disputes and strengthen trust in national leadership.

Security and rule of law are another foundation. A stronger central state requires unified, professional security forces that are trained, paid, and accountable, with the capacity to counter insurgent groups and enforce law across the country. This has to be matched by improvements in the justice system so that disputes are handled through courts rather than violence or informal power structures. Building cooperation with local leaders is also important, since local knowledge and trust networks are often essential for both security and intelligence gathering.

Economic strength directly supports state authority. Expanding and modernizing revenue collection through fair taxation and customs systems gives the government the resources it needs to function independently. Infrastructure development, especially roads, ports, and communications, helps connect fragmented regions and supports national markets. Economic diversification, particularly in agriculture, fisheries, and small and medium enterprises, reduces dependence on external aid and creates employment opportunities that stabilize society.

Institutional capacity is equally important. A professional civil service based on merit rather than patronage improves efficiency and reduces corruption. Digital governance systems can increase transparency in budgeting, procurement, and service delivery, making it harder for resources to be misused. Oversight institutions such as audit bodies and parliamentary committees need real authority to hold public officials accountable and enforce standards.

Social cohesion underpins all of these efforts. Investment in education and healthcare strengthens human capital and reduces long-term grievances that can fuel instability. Promoting a shared national identity while respecting local traditions can help reduce divisions,

especially those based on clan politics. Reconciliation efforts between communities and regions also play a key role in preventing cycles of conflict from repeating.

First, a reality check: Somalia is currently near the bottom of the Corruption Perceptions Index, scoring around 9/100 and ranking roughly 179/180 countries. That means “top 150” is not a cosmetic improvement—it requires a structural shift in how the state collects money, spends it, and enforces rules.

If the goal is to reach at least the top 150, the country does not need perfection. It needs a *small set of high-impact governance fixes that reduce everyday opportunities for rent-seeking and make corruption riskier than compliance*.

A workable plan would start with public financial control, because most corruption in fragile states flows through budgets, procurement, and customs. The priority would be to fully digitise revenue collection in customs, ports, and major tax points so that payments go directly into a central treasury system rather than passing through multiple manual intermediaries. When money flows become traceable in real time, leakage drops significantly and donor confidence rises.

The second pillar is procurement reform. Government contracts—roads, fuel, security services, construction—need to move into a mandatory open contracting system where tenders, bids, and winners are publicly visible. This removes the “closed room” space where overpricing and favoritism typically happen. Even partial transparency here has outsized effects on CPI scores because procurement is a major corruption hotspot.

The third pillar is judicial and enforcement credibility. Somalia already has formal anti-corruption institutions, but the issue is enforcement independence. For CPI improvement, what matters is not just laws but whether politically connected individuals can actually be investigated and prosecuted. Strengthening the independence of the Auditor General, creating protected anti-corruption prosecutors, and ensuring some visible high-level convictions (even a small number) would significantly shift perception indices.

A fourth pillar is security-linked governance. In Somalia, corruption and security are tightly linked because armed groups, informal checkpoints, and fragmented authority create multiple “tax systems.” Reducing illegal checkpoints, standardising revenue collection, and integrating security forces under clearer command structures directly improves transparency because it reduces informal extraction points.

A fifth pillar is port and customs governance, which connects directly to your earlier interest in fisheries and maritime economy. Ports like Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Berbera are high-revenue nodes. If customs systems are unified, digitally tracked, and insulated from local capture, they become stable national revenue sources rather than fragmented local rents. This also strengthens Somalia’s credibility with international investors and rating bodies.

A sixth pillar is political finance transparency. One of the least visible but most important drivers of corruption perception is how political actors fund themselves. Even basic rules on asset declarations for senior officials, campaign finance disclosure, and conflict-of-interest restrictions can move CPI scores because they signal system-level integrity.

If you combine these reforms, the key mechanism is not eliminating corruption entirely—it is reducing *systemic, predictable corruption*. CPI rankings respond strongly to whether corruption is random and unchecked versus constrained and enforceable.

In practical terms, a realistic pathway to top-150 status would look like this: within 2–3 years, digitised revenue and customs systems, visible procurement transparency, and a few credible anti-corruption enforcement cases; within 4–6 years, stronger judiciary independence and reduced leakage in ports and taxation; and over time, institutionalisation of audit, enforcement, and political accountability.

The important point is that CPI improvement is less about announcing new strategies and more about changing three things the public can indirectly observe: whether money is traceable, whether contracts are visible, and whether powerful actors can actually be held accountable. If those shift even partially, Somalia would not just move into the top 150—it would start changing trajectory rather than just ranking.

Ports are the second pillar because they determine whether Somalia can actually monetize its geography. Efficient ports like Mogadishu, Berbera, and Kismayo can become hubs not only for national trade but also for regional transit linked to the Red Sea–Indian Ocean corridor. Improving ports is less about just expanding infrastructure and more about governance: customs efficiency, anti-corruption systems, predictable tariffs, and stable concessions that attract long-term private investment. If ports become reliable, they can finance much of their own expansion through trade flows.

For fisheries, the main issue is not just fish stocks but control and value capture. Somalia has one of the longest coastlines in Africa and rich marine resources, but a large share of fishing has historically been lost to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign fleets, plus weak domestic capacity. Strengthening fisheries would mean better monitoring of the Exclusive Economic Zone, more licensing transparency, and investing in local cold storage, processing, and transport so that fish is exported as a higher-value product instead of being lost or sold cheaply. The key shift is moving from “extracting fish” to building a full value chain.

Ocean governance is the layer that connects everything. This includes maritime law enforcement, coast guard capacity, and coordination between federal and regional authorities over maritime zones. It also includes Somalia’s ability to negotiate with foreign fishing fleets and regional actors from a position of strength rather than vulnerability. Better ocean governance also reduces piracy risks and improves investor confidence in ports and fisheries. International partnerships can help here, but only if Somalia has clear institutions to coordinate them.

What makes these three sectors powerful together is the feedback loop: better ocean governance protects fisheries, stronger fisheries increase demand for port services, and better ports increase the profitability of marine exports, which then creates revenue to reinvest in governance and enforcement.

If Somalia manages even partial improvements in these areas, the “blue economy” becomes one of the few sectors that can scale relatively quickly without depending heavily on land-based infrastructure first.

Note some coastal communities initially framed piracy as a response to (1) Illegal fishing (2) Loss of livelihoods (3) Weak maritime governance. Modern piracy in the region is driven mainly by economic collapse and insecurity, Armed criminal networks, Strategic hijacking of shipping routes. Piracy has significantly declined due to International naval patrols and Somali coastal security improvements, but illegal fishing concerns still exist, especially in monitoring and enforcement capacity gaps. Piracy is not caused by fish stocks, but past illegal fishing and weak governance contributing indirectly to instability in Somalia's coastal regions. The Fish clans are also weakly represented in the Somali political system.

International support can reinforce internal reforms when it is aligned with national priorities. Partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union, as well as neighboring countries, can provide security assistance and development funding. However, this support is most effective when tied to measurable governance improvements. The Somali diaspora can also be an important asset through investment, skills transfer, and political engagement.

Figure



The logic of the roadmap is built on a phased progression that moves from stabilisation to institution-building, then to economic transformation, and finally to long-term consolidation. Its sequencing reflects the idea that state capacity must be constructed in layers, where each stage depends on the credibility of the one before it. Phase one focuses on immediate foundation-building in a fragile environment where legitimacy and basic order are not yet secure. Political inclusion is prioritised at this stage to ensure that all major stakeholders feel represented within the emerging national framework. Security stabilisation follows as a central

requirement, since no governance reforms can hold without a minimum level of safety and territorial control. Rule of law initiatives are introduced early to begin replacing informal or clan-based dispute resolution with formal judicial authority. Fiscal foundation measures strengthen revenue collection so that the state can begin to finance its own survival rather than relying entirely on external support. Quick service delivery wins are included to demonstrate visible improvements and build public trust in the central government. The goal of this first phase is therefore stabilisation, both political and institutional, creating a platform for deeper reforms.

At the core of all these areas is one principle: a central government becomes stronger not only by expanding authority, but by earning legitimacy through fairness, effectiveness, and the ability to deliver services. Without trust and functioning institutions, centralization efforts tend to weaken rather than strengthen the state.

Phase two shifts the emphasis from survival to structure, focusing on building durable institutions that can govern consistently over time. Governance clarity becomes essential here, particularly in defining the relationship between federal and member state authorities. Civil service reform introduces merit-based recruitment and professionalisation of public administration. Digital governance and transparency mechanisms are added to reduce corruption and improve administrative efficiency. Accountability systems and stronger oversight bodies ensure that institutions begin to regulate themselves internally. The goal of this phase is institutional capacity, where the state becomes predictable, functional, and rule-bound.

Phase three moves into long-term development through economic transformation that expands opportunity and productivity. Infrastructure investment and economic diversification connect regions while broadening the base of national income. Private sector development, human capital investment, and diaspora engagement together stimulate growth, skills transfer, and job creation. The goal of this stage is inclusive economic expansion that reduces dependency and strengthens national resilience.

Phase four represents consolidation, where earlier gains are stabilised into a durable political and economic order. National identity building, democratic maturity, policy consistency, and a resilient security architecture come together to reinforce unity and continuity, supported throughout by cross-cutting commitments to inclusion, sustainability, gender equality, and public engagement.

21.EU-SOMALIA

In May 2026, EU diplomats and officials from Somalia reaffirmed their commitment to building a long-term, sustainable, and mutually beneficial partnership.

Both sides emphasized the importance of strengthening democratic governance institutions across Somalia. They discussed support for transparent public administration and accountability mechanisms. Rule of law was highlighted as a central pillar for long-term stability.

Security cooperation remained a key priority in the dialogue. The EU reiterated its support for Somali-led efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism. Both parties stressed the importance of coordinated counter-terrorism strategies.

Migration management was another major focus of the discussions. Officials addressed irregular migration routes and human trafficking risks in the region. They agreed on the need for safer, more orderly, and humane migration systems. Cooperation on border management was also encouraged.

Economic development was identified as essential for reducing instability and poverty. The EU expressed support for investment in Somalia's infrastructure and productive sectors. Both sides discussed ways to improve trade and private sector growth. Job creation for young people was highlighted as a shared concern.

Humanitarian and development assistance were also part of the dialogue. The EU and Somalia recognized ongoing needs related to drought, displacement, and food insecurity. They agreed on improving coordination of aid delivery to affected communities.

Climate change and environmental challenges were acknowledged as emerging risks. Both parties noted that climate shocks are worsening vulnerabilities in rural areas. Cooperation on resilience and adaptation strategies was encouraged.

Education and capacity-building were discussed as long-term investments in Somalia's future. The EU reaffirmed its support for strengthening education systems and vocational training. Health system improvements were also identified as a shared priority.

Finally, both sides committed to maintaining regular political dialogue and practical cooperation. They agreed that sustained engagement would help address shared challenges more effectively. The overall tone of the meeting reflected cautious optimism and a shared desire for stability, growth, and partnership.

The statement also called for "an inclusive and peaceful process to achieve a political agreement, so as to ensure political stability for the whole of Somalia"⁷

An inclusive and peaceful process for a political agreement in Somalia should begin with a broadly accepted framework grounded in the Provisional Constitution. This framework must clearly define roles, powers, and dispute-resolution mechanisms among federal member states and the federal government. A neutral facilitation team, supported by trusted international partners such as the European Union and the African Union, can help maintain credibility. Representation must include federal and state authorities, opposition groups, civil society, women's groups, youth, and marginalized clans. Clan-based inclusion should be carefully balanced to avoid reinforcing division while still ensuring perceived fairness. A phased dialogue structure can help manage complexity, starting with confidence-building measures

⁷ <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2026/documents/Joint%20statement%20EU-SO%20Partnership%20Dialogue%2010.05.2026.pdf>

before tackling contentious political issues. Security guarantees for all participants are essential to prevent intimidation and ensure free participation.

Parallel local consultations in regions across Somalia can feed into national negotiations to improve legitimacy. A shared agenda should prioritize the most urgent national issues such as security, elections, revenue sharing, and resource distribution. Establishing agreed principles on power-sharing can reduce zero-sum competition among political actors. Transparent communication channels should be maintained to keep the public informed and reduce misinformation. Independent mediation mechanisms can help resolve deadlocks when parties reach impasses.

Agreement on an electoral model is crucial, with emphasis on inclusivity, credibility, and peaceful transfer of power. Security sector reform should be integrated into the political process to ensure long-term stability. Economic incentives, including development funding linked to progress in dialogue, can encourage compromise. Civil society organizations should be empowered to monitor commitments and hold leaders accountable.

A clear implementation roadmap with timelines and benchmarks is necessary to prevent agreements from stalling. Trust-building measures, such as prisoner releases or ceasefire arrangements, can support momentum in negotiations. Continuous regional engagement with neighboring states can help reduce external interference and align interests. Ultimately, sustained political stability requires Somali-owned leadership of the process, supported but not dictated by external partners.

To ensure success for the EU-Somalia Partnership led by the federal government, the structuring of the partnership had better address in a sustained manner the various issues pertaining to the following areas to lay a more solid foundation for the aimed at stabilisation and economic development of Somalia.

Table

Area	Strategic Commitment	How It Is Concretised (Operational Actions)
Governance & Rule of Law	Strengthen democratic institutions, transparency, accountability	Civil service reform programs; digitalisation of public administration; anti-corruption systems; electoral and judicial technical assistance; joint governance monitoring indicators
Security & Counter-Terrorism	Support Somali-led security and stability efforts	Training and equipping security forces; intelligence-sharing mechanisms; joint operational coordination units; early-warning systems; measurable counter-terrorism benchmarks
Migration & Mobility	Promote safe, orderly, humane migration management	Strengthened border control systems; joint border guard training; anti-trafficking

		operations; migration data-sharing platforms; return and reintegration programs
Economic Development & Investment	Promote growth, infrastructure, and job creation	Blended finance for infrastructure (energy, ports, transport); public–private partnerships; SME microfinance schemes; vocational training aligned with labor market needs
Humanitarian Assistance	Address drought, displacement, food insecurity	Coordinated humanitarian response platforms; unified needs-assessment systems; improved aid distribution tracking; gradual shift to resilience-focused programming
Climate & Environment	Build resilience to climate shocks	National adaptation planning; early warning systems; climate-resilient infrastructure (water, irrigation); integration of climate risk into all development projects
Education & Health	Strengthen long-term human capital	Teacher training and curriculum reform; digital learning expansion; healthcare system strengthening; primary care expansion; medical workforce training and supply chain reform
Political Dialogue & Cooperation	Maintain sustained engagement and partnership	Annual strategic reviews; implementation roadmaps; sector-specific KPIs; structured EU–Somalia coordination forum.

The matrix shows a clear shift in the EU–Somalia relationship from broad political commitments toward structured, results-oriented cooperation. Each sector links financial instruments with operational activities and measurable outcomes, which reflects a more implementation-driven partnership model. In governance, the emphasis on digitalisation and civil service reform indicates an attempt to reduce structural corruption rather than only provide advisory support. The inclusion of judicial training and accountability systems shows recognition that rule of law is central to long-term state legitimacy.

In the security sector, the reliance on training and joint planning suggests that capacity-building remains the core EU approach rather than direct operational engagement. This aligns with the EU’s preference for supporting Somali-led security ownership while still influencing standards and coordination. However, achieving measurable reductions in extremist threats depends heavily on domestic political cohesion and sustained funding. The matrix correctly highlights

early-warning systems, which are often underdeveloped but crucial for preventive security action.

Migration cooperation appears focused on border governance and anti-trafficking measures, which reflects EU internal policy priorities. The combination of data systems and reintegration programs shows an attempt to address both enforcement and root causes. Yet, the success of return programs often depends on economic conditions inside Somalia, which remain fragile. Coordination with regional transit states is also essential but operationally complex.

Economic development is the most ambitious pillar in the matrix due to its reliance on blended finance and private sector participation. Infrastructure investment through EFSD+ and EIB mechanisms signals a move toward leveraging public funds for larger capital mobilisation. However, Somalia's investment climate risks, including insecurity and weak regulatory frameworks, may limit private sector uptake. Vocational training alignment with labor markets is a positive step toward addressing youth unemployment, which is a structural driver of instability.

Humanitarian assistance remains distinct but is increasingly linked to resilience-building, which is a strategic improvement. The matrix shows a gradual transition from emergency response to longer-term vulnerability reduction. This shift is important in a context of repeated droughts and displacement cycles. Nevertheless, humanitarian needs may still dominate over development planning in crisis periods.

Climate and environmental cooperation is appropriately framed around adaptation rather than mitigation, given Somalia's low emissions profile. Investments in water systems and early warning tools are particularly relevant to recurring drought conditions. The challenge lies in sustaining maintenance and local institutional capacity for these systems. Integrating climate risk into all development programming is a strong cross-cutting principle but difficult to enforce consistently.

Education and health interventions focus on foundational human capital, which is essential for long-term stability. Teacher training and curriculum reform can have slow but lasting effects if properly implemented. Health system strengthening through supply chain improvements addresses a critical bottleneck in service delivery. However, both sectors require stable governance conditions to achieve sustained impact.

The political dialogue component ensures that all sectoral actions are periodically reviewed and adjusted. Annual reviews and KPIs introduce accountability mechanisms that are often missing in donor-partner relationships. This creates pressure for measurable progress but also risks bureaucratic overload if not streamlined. Overall, the matrix reflects a comprehensive but highly complex partnership architecture that depends heavily on implementation capacity within Somalia and coordination efficiency from the EU.

This then has to be implemented through EU Programs, a process of filtering allowing for evaluation of impact and realised results:

Table

Area	EU Instruments / Support Channels	Key Actions (What is done)	Expected Results (What changes)
Governance & Rule of Law	NDICI–Global Europe funding, EU technical assistance, Twinning programs	Civil service reform; digital public administration systems; judicial training; anti-corruption frameworks	More transparent institutions; reduced corruption; stronger judicial independence; improved public trust
Security & Counter-Terrorism	CSDP missions, EU training programs, intelligence cooperation support	Training Somali security forces; joint planning support; counter-terrorism capacity building; early-warning systems	Improved national security capacity; reduced extremist threats; better coordinated security operations
Migration & Border Management	NDICI migration windows, EU Trust Fund legacy tools, Frontex cooperation support	Border management training; anti-trafficking operations; migration data systems; return & reintegration support	Reduced irregular migration flows; improved border control; weakened trafficking networks
Economic Development & Investment	EFSD+ guarantees, EIB financing, NDICI grants, private sector blending facilities	Infrastructure financing (ports, energy, roads); SME support; PPP frameworks; vocational training programs	Job creation; increased private investment; improved infrastructure and trade capacity
Humanitarian Assistance	ECHO humanitarian funding	Emergency food aid; drought response; displacement support; coordinated humanitarian delivery systems	Reduced acute vulnerability; improved crisis response speed; better aid coordination

Climate & Environment	NDICI climate funding, Global Gateway initiatives	Climate adaptation planning; water/irrigation systems; early warning climate services; resilience projects	Reduced climate vulnerability; improved drought resilience; stronger environmental governance
Education & Health	NDICI social sector funding, EU development programs	Teacher training; curriculum reform; digital education tools; health system strengthening; supply chain upgrades	Better education outcomes; improved healthcare access; stronger human capital
Political Dialogue & Coordination	EU–Somalia Joint Dialogue Frameworks	Annual reviews; implementation roadmaps; joint monitoring indicators; sector coordination meetings	More structured cooperation; improved policy alignment; measurable progress tracking

What this table shows is not just a development partnership, but a **governance model transposed through EU programming architecture** into Somalia, where *agency is structured through instruments, conditions, and delivery channels rather than purely sovereign policy choice*.

Across all sectors, the **EU instruments (NDICI–Global Europe, EFSD+, ECHO, CSDP, Frontex-related cooperation)** function as the “delivery spine” of external action. These are not neutral funding streams; they come with embedded priorities, reporting requirements, and performance expectations that shape how Somali institutions engage. In practice, access to resources is often tied to the adoption of specific reform trajectories, such as public financial management systems, border databases, or security sector coordination frameworks.

In governance and rule of law, the use of **twinning and technical assistance** effectively embeds EU administrative templates into Somali institutions. This creates a form of institutional convergence where “good governance” is operationalized through EU-defined standards like digitisation, audit systems, and anti-corruption compliance mechanisms. Agency here is partially conditional, as reforms are often incentivized through continued access to funding and capacity support rather than purely domestic political demand.

In the security pillar, **CSDP missions and training programs** reflect a model of indirect influence where the EU does not directly provide combat capability but shapes doctrine, training standards, and operational coordination. The inclusion of intelligence cooperation and early-warning systems extends this influence into sensitive state functions, effectively

embedding EU security logics into Somali security architecture. The expectation of measurable counter-terrorism outcomes introduces performance pressure that can influence internal security prioritisation.

Migration and border management is one of the clearest examples of **externalised governance through conditional cooperation frameworks**. Tools like Frontex cooperation support and migration data systems function as mechanisms to align Somali border practices with EU migration containment priorities. Return and reintegration programs also reflect a dual logic of humanitarian framing combined with enforcement objectives, where cooperation benefits are linked to compliance with migration control expectations.

Economic development through **EFSD+ guarantees and blended finance** represents a shift from aid to leverage-based investment facilitation. This structure conditions Somali economic development pathways toward sectors that are “bankable” and aligned with EU strategic interests such as infrastructure corridors and trade facilitation. While this can mobilise significant capital, it also narrows policy space by prioritising investment-ready sectors over less commercially viable but socially critical ones.

Humanitarian assistance through ECHO is formally needs-based, but in practice it is increasingly integrated into a broader resilience agenda. This creates a subtle shift from unconditional relief toward systems-based crisis management that emphasizes coordination, data, and delivery efficiency. While less explicitly conditional than other instruments, it still shapes institutional behaviour through funding priorities and delivery standards.

Climate and environment programming shows strong integration of **risk governance frameworks**, particularly through early warning systems and adaptation planning. Here, conditionality is less political and more technical, but it still structures decision-making by prioritising data-driven planning and resilience metrics. This can strengthen capacity but also increase dependence on external technical systems.

Education and health interventions demonstrate long-term **human capital conditioning**, where reforms are oriented toward system standardisation and service delivery benchmarks. Curriculum reform, teacher training, and supply chain modernization embed external best practices into domestic systems, gradually aligning them with EU development norms. The agency of local ministries exists, but within programmatic constraints tied to funding cycles and evaluation frameworks.

Finally, political dialogue and coordination mechanisms function as the **meta-governance layer** of the entire system. Annual reviews, roadmaps, and indicators are not just administrative tools but instruments that structure accountability and prioritisation across all sectors. This creates a continuous feedback loop where progress is defined, measured, and corrected according to jointly agreed—but often externally shaped—benchmarks.

Overall, the table reflects a hybrid governance system, where sovereignty is not removed but is increasingly exercised through structured cooperation with embedded conditionality. Agency is therefore not absent, but it is channelled, formatted, and made legible through EU programming systems, which determine what kinds of reforms are fundable, measurable, and therefore politically viable.

Partnership-building initiatives

Below are partnership-building initiatives structured around the four areas discussed between the European Union and Somalia:

In **Rule of Law and Democratisation**, initiatives could focus on strengthening constitutional institutions, supporting judicial independence, and expanding access to justice through legal aid services. Joint programs can build capacity for electoral management bodies to deliver credible and inclusive elections, while also supporting anti-corruption agencies and public financial accountability systems. Civic education initiatives involving civil society, women, and youth groups can help improve democratic participation and public trust in institutions. This could also include the design of effective governance towards the sustainable society targets, given Somalia's appalling ranking on the SDG Index: 164⁸

In **Peace and Stability**, partnership initiatives could prioritize security sector reform, including training and professionalization of police and justice actors, alongside improved coordination between federal and regional security forces. Conflict prevention mechanisms such as community-based peacebuilding platforms and early warning systems can be strengthened. Joint support can also focus on disarmament, stabilization of liberated areas, and reintegration programs for ex-combatants, especially youth at risk. The needs of the Somali Coast Guard are understood to range from maritime training and capacity building, provision of equipment and patrol assets, institutional development and command structure support, coastal surveillance systems, and operational support for securing Somalia's territorial waters and exclusive economic zone.

In **Migration and Mobility**, initiatives could include the development of legal migration pathways, skills mobility schemes, and labour agreements that allow Somali workers to access regulated employment opportunities in Europe and regional markets. Programs can also strengthen border management systems, anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking operations, and biometric identification systems. Support for diaspora engagement platforms can help channel remittances and skills transfer into national development projects.

In **the Economic and Global Gateway Agenda**, initiatives could focus on infrastructure development such as ports, energy systems, transport corridors, and digital connectivity under blended finance and public-private partnership models. Support can also be directed toward value chain development in agriculture, fisheries, and livestock to improve export capacity. Additional initiatives can promote SME financing, investment de-risking tools, and regulatory reforms that improve the business environment, enabling greater private sector participation in Somalia's economy.

Maritime Security

Strengthening coast guard and maritime security in and around the Horn of Africa is increasingly seen as a necessary response to the region's overlapping challenges of piracy, arms trafficking, illegal fishing, and geopolitical competition in the Red Sea security complex. From this perspective, improving maritime capacity is not only a technical security measure but also

⁸ <https://dashboards.sdginde.org/profiles/somalia/>

a foundational step toward stabilising a region where weak coastal enforcement directly contributes to wider insecurity on land and at sea.

A key element of this approach is **building capable and coordinated national coast guards** in coastal states such as Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan. Many of these countries face limitations in surveillance infrastructure, naval assets, training, and maintenance capacity. Strengthening these institutions would improve their ability to patrol territorial waters, respond to illegal activities, and assert sovereignty over maritime zones. However, capacity-building alone is insufficient unless it is matched with improved regional coordination, since criminal and militant networks operate across borders and exploit jurisdictional gaps.

Another important dimension is the need for **regional maritime cooperation frameworks**, such as shared intelligence systems, joint patrols, and harmonised legal mechanisms for prosecution of maritime crimes. Without coordination, even well-equipped coast guards risk operating in isolation, which reduces their effectiveness in a highly interconnected maritime environment like the Red Sea–Gulf of Aden corridor.

From a broader security perspective, external actors—including the EU, Gulf states, and international naval coalitions—play a significant supporting role. The European Union, for example, has an interest in reducing threats to global shipping lanes and could contribute through training missions, technical assistance, and naval coordination efforts. However, this external involvement must be carefully balanced to avoid creating dependency or exacerbating regional rivalries over influence in strategic ports and maritime infrastructure.

Ultimately, strengthening maritime security in the Horn of Africa is not simply about increasing patrol capacity; it is about **building a sustainable security architecture** that integrates national institutions, regional cooperation, and responsible international support. Without such an integrated approach, efforts risk remaining fragmented and unable to address the underlying drivers of maritime insecurity in the Red Sea basin.

For decades, naval commanders in the Aspidis mission have exhorted EU decision-makers to address the challenges at land to no avail. This point is consistent with how Christian Bueger and related maritime security scholars interpret the recent re-emergence of piracy risks in the Horn of Africa and the wider Red Sea region.

He argues that the earlier success in reducing Somali piracy was not a permanent solution but a **temporary stabilisation built on intensive international coordination**. When that level of coordination weakened over time, vulnerabilities gradually re-emerged. In this sense, renewed piracy risks are linked less to a sudden change in criminal capability and more to a **decline in sustained governance effort**.

From his perspective, the key issue is the gap between **international legal frameworks, operational enforcement, and regional implementation**. While international law—particularly UN Security Council resolutions and maritime legal norms—remains in place, it does not automatically translate into consistent enforcement on the water. Likewise, regional institutions and coastal states often lack the resources, coordination capacity, or political

alignment needed to fully implement maritime security governance. This creates spaces where illicit actors can reappear.

Bueger also highlights that maritime security depends on continuous “everyday governance”: information sharing, patrol coordination, prosecution capacity, and regional trust-building. When these mechanisms weaken or become fragmented, even a previously successful anti-piracy regime can lose effectiveness. In that sense, the return of piracy signals not simply a security failure, but a **governance gap between global frameworks and local enforcement realities**.

Hence, **TEAM Europe could consider engaging Turkey in strengthening the Somali Coast Guard**, as part of a broader effort oriented towards building a more sustainable and locally anchored maritime security architecture in the Horn of Africa. From this perspective, the rationale is not simply to increase external assistance, but to improve the **coordination, legitimacy, and capacity-building effectiveness** of existing security support in Somalia’s coastal domain.

Turkey already plays a significant role in Somalia’s security sector through training, institutional support, and long-term engagement in Mogadishu. By aligning this involvement more closely with European initiatives, TEAM Europe could help reduce fragmentation between international actors and improve coherence in maritime governance efforts. This would be particularly relevant in a context where, as noted by scholars like Christian Bueger, weaknesses in implementation and coordination—not the absence of legal frameworks—are central to the recurrence of maritime insecurity.

A coordinated EU–Turkey approach could therefore aim to strengthen the Somali Coast Guard’s operational capacity, including training, command-and-control systems, and maritime surveillance, while also supporting legal and institutional development for prosecution of maritime crime. Importantly, such cooperation would need to be carefully managed to avoid overlapping mandates or geopolitical competition, especially given the broader strategic interests multiple external actors have in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa region.

In this sense, engaging Turkey could be understood as part of a shift toward a more disciplined governance structure, where effectiveness depends less on a single dominant actor and more on structured cooperation between aligned partners supporting Somali-led maritime security institutions.⁹

A **Somali maritime security strategy** would encompass a comprehensive framework for protecting Somalia’s territorial waters, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and key sea lanes, while also contributing to regional stability in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea security complex.

From this perspective, such a strategy would include **maritime domain awareness**, meaning the ability to monitor and understand activities at sea through surveillance systems, radar coverage, satellite data, and coordinated information-sharing with regional and international partners. It would also involve **law enforcement at sea**, including the prevention of piracy,

⁹ <https://web.mod.gov.so/>

illegal fishing, smuggling, and trafficking, all of which remain persistent challenges in Somali waters.

A central component would be the development of **institutional capacity**, particularly clear legal frameworks, effective command structures, and functioning maritime justice systems to ensure that offenders can be detained, prosecuted, and deterred. Without this legal and institutional layer, operational improvements at sea tend to remain temporary.

In practical terms, a Somali maritime security strategy would require strong and sustained support for the Somali Navy and associated maritime forces in terms of **training**, including seamanship, navigation, boarding operations, and rules of engagement; **equipment**, such as patrol boats, radar systems, communication networks, and maintenance infrastructure; and **logistical capacity**, including fuel supply chains, repair facilities, and coastal bases. It would also depend on long-term investment in **command-and-control systems**, ensuring that maritime units can operate in a coordinated and responsive manner rather than as isolated patrol assets.

Finally, such a strategy would require regional and international cooperation, particularly with neighbouring coastal states and external partners, to address transnational threats and align operations in shared maritime spaces like the Gulf of Aden and the wider Red Sea. In this sense, Somali maritime security is not only a national project but part of a broader **regional governance system**, where effectiveness depends on both domestic capability and sustained external support.

Later it will be discussed how to match **Global Gateway projects and initiatives** in the interests of identifying “opportunities for investment, partnership and private sector engagement”.

Opportunities for investment, partnership, and private sector engagement between the European Union and Somalia are strongly concentrated in sectors where Somalia has high natural potential and the EU brings finance, technology, and regulatory expertise. Renewable energy offers major potential due to Somalia’s strong solar and wind resources and low electrification rates, with opportunities for mini-grids, utility-scale solar, and rural electrification projects supported through blended finance and public–private partnerships. The fisheries and blue economy sector is also highly promising, particularly in sustainable fishing, cold-chain systems, fish processing facilities, and maritime governance, with export opportunities aligned to EU market standards.

Agriculture and agro-processing present another key area, especially through irrigation development, climate-smart farming, storage infrastructure, and value addition for crops such as sesame, fruits, and livestock products. Livestock remains a strategic export sector where investment can focus on veterinary services, quarantine facilities, meat processing, feed production, and traceability systems to meet international export requirements. Infrastructure, ports, and logistics also offer strong potential through modernization of ports, road corridors, customs digitization, and inland logistics hubs that connect producers to markets.

The digital economy and financial services sector is rapidly expanding, driven by mobile money usage, creating opportunities in fintech, digital identity systems, e-government

platforms, and startup ecosystems, where EU technology firms and investors can play a catalytic role. Climate resilience and water management are increasingly important due to recurring droughts and floods, creating demand for irrigation rehabilitation, water harvesting systems, early warning technologies, and climate-resilient infrastructure supported by EU climate finance instruments. Governance, skills development, and private sector strengthening are also essential areas for partnership, including vocational training, SME financing, business incubation, and trade facilitation reforms that improve the overall investment climate.

In summary, Somalia's foreign policy over the past three decades has been reactive rather than strategic, shaped by state fragility, security crises, and reliance on external actors, with only recent efforts toward rebuilding a more centralized and independent diplomatic posture. To make it more strategic, Somalia will need to strengthen state institutions, reduce dependence on external patrons, and develop a long-term foreign policy framework that prioritizes national interests over short-term security or aid relationships. The relationship between the EU and Somalia has the potential to evolve into a more balanced, structured partnership if Somalia is able to present coherent national priorities and consistently implement them. This would require strengthening Somalia's institutional capacity in foreign affairs and improving policy coordination across government ministries. It also depends on building trust between Somali authorities and external partners through transparency and accountability mechanisms. A clearer development strategy would allow Somalia to negotiate with the EU on more equal and interest-based terms. Diversifying partnerships beyond aid dependency could further enhance Somalia's diplomatic autonomy. Ultimately, a more stable domestic political environment is essential for sustaining any long-term strategic foreign policy direction. Also Hibaq wants *the real thing* and a clean Arse to tooth in.

22. IGAD

The effectiveness of regional institutions in conflict prevention within the Horn of Africa remains a subject of considerable scholarly and policy debate. Regional organizations such as Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have played important roles in facilitating peace negotiations, mediating interstate disputes, and coordinating responses to regional security challenges. IGAD has been involved in peace processes in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, demonstrating its potential as a platform for dialogue and conflict management. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of regional institutions is often constrained by limited financial resources, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, political rivalries among member states, and the principle of state sovereignty, which can restrict intervention in domestic conflicts. As a result, while regional institutions have contributed to conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts, their impact has frequently been uneven and dependent on the political will of member states. Consequently, there remains a need for more empirical research examining the conditions under which regional institutions successfully prevent conflicts and sustain peace across the Horn of Africa.

Cross-border peace and resource-sharing initiatives represent an important mechanism for managing conflicts that arise from the movement of people, livestock, and resources across national boundaries. Such initiatives typically involve collaborative arrangements between neighboring communities, local governments, and regional organizations to regulate access to shared resources such as water points, grazing lands, and migration corridors. Their

effectiveness can be characterized through several dimensions, including their ability to reduce violent incidents, strengthen cooperation among communities, improve resource access, enhance resilience to environmental shocks, and build trust among stakeholders. Effective initiatives are generally inclusive, participatory, and rooted in both formal governance structures and customary institutions. They often incorporate local knowledge, establish clear rules for resource use, and provide mechanisms for dispute resolution.

Improving the effectiveness of these initiatives requires addressing both institutional and operational challenges. Greater coordination between national governments, local authorities, and regional organizations is essential for ensuring consistency in policy implementation. Strengthening customary institutions and integrating them with formal governance systems can enhance legitimacy and local ownership. Investments in shared infrastructure, such as water facilities and livestock markets, can reduce competition over scarce resources while creating incentives for cooperation. Furthermore, climate adaptation measures should be incorporated into cross-border resource management frameworks to address the environmental pressures that frequently contribute to conflict. Effective monitoring and evaluation systems are also needed to assess outcomes and identify best practices that can be replicated across the region.

External actors exert a profound influence on regional stability in the Horn of Africa through political, economic, military, and humanitarian engagement. International organizations, foreign governments, and emerging global powers have become increasingly involved in the region due to its strategic location, security significance, and economic potential. External actors can contribute positively to stability by providing development assistance, supporting peacebuilding initiatives, financing humanitarian responses, and facilitating diplomatic negotiations. International support has often been critical in strengthening institutional capacity, addressing food insecurity, and promoting conflict resolution efforts.

At the same time, external involvement can also generate new sources of instability. Competing geopolitical interests among foreign powers may intensify regional rivalries and contribute to the militarization of local conflicts. Investments and security partnerships may disproportionately benefit certain actors, potentially exacerbating existing political and social tensions. Moreover, external interventions that fail to account for local realities can undermine indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms and weaken local ownership of peace processes. The growing engagement of countries such as China, Turkey, European Union, and Gulf states has transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa, creating both opportunities for development and challenges for regional cohesion.

A major research gap in this area concerns the interaction between regional institutions, cross-border resource governance, and external actors. While existing studies often examine these factors separately, there is limited empirical evidence on how they collectively shape conflict dynamics and peacebuilding outcomes. Future research could explore how external support influences the effectiveness of regional conflict-prevention mechanisms, whether cross-border resource-sharing initiatives enhance regional cooperation in the long term, and how regional institutions can better coordinate with external partners while maintaining local ownership and legitimacy. Such research would contribute significantly to understanding pathways toward sustainable peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

Strengthening governance in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development mainly requires shifting it from a coordination platform to a more rules-based regional institution with stronger implementation capacity. At present, IGAD is effective in diplomacy and mediation, but weaker when it comes to enforcing agreements, ensuring compliance, and sustaining independent financing.

One key area is strengthening legal and institutional authority. Many IGAD decisions depend on voluntary compliance by member states, which limits effectiveness. Moving toward more binding regional protocols in areas such as security, migration, and climate resilience would help. Clearer rules for implementation and reduced ambiguity in how agreements are interpreted across member states would also improve consistency. In addition, IGAD's role in conflict prevention could be reinforced with clearer mandates that define when and how it can intervene in regional crises.

Another important reform area is financing. IGAD relies heavily on external donors, which can influence priorities and reduce autonomy. A more sustainable system would involve predictable contributions from member states, potentially based on GDP or economic capacity. A regional levy on trade or cross-border economic activity could also provide stable funding, along with the creation of a regional stabilization or development fund to support crisis response.

Enforcement and compliance mechanisms also need strengthening. At present, IGAD lacks strong tools to ensure member states follow through on commitments. Introducing peer-review systems to monitor progress, similar to governance review mechanisms in other regional organizations, would improve accountability. Incentives such as access to funding or technical support, as well as consequences for non-compliance, could increase adherence to agreements. Strengthening arbitration or dispute resolution mechanisms would also reduce reliance on political negotiation alone.

Coordination with national governments is another critical area. IGAD often operates at a high political level without deep integration into domestic institutions. Establishing national IGAD focal offices within key ministries would improve implementation. Member states could also be required to submit regular progress reports on regional commitments, improving vertical accountability between national and regional levels.

The peace and security architecture could be enhanced by expanding early warning systems and improving rapid response capacity for cross-border threats such as insurgencies, terrorism, and trafficking. Stronger cooperation with the African Union's Peace and Security Council would also reduce duplication and improve coordination in conflict situations.

Institutional capacity within the IGAD secretariat is another important factor. Professionalizing recruitment processes, reducing political influence over staffing, and investing in technical expertise such as data analysis and policy evaluation would improve effectiveness. A more capable bureaucracy would allow IGAD to move from reactive coordination to proactive regional planning.

Finally, transparency and accountability should be strengthened internally. Regular publication of audited financial reports and independent evaluations of programs would build trust among

member states and external partners. Broader stakeholder participation, including civil society, the private sector, and academic institutions, would also improve legitimacy and policy quality.

23. Militarisation in the Horn of Africa

“Militarisation of the Horn of Africa” means the region is becoming increasingly shaped by military forces, weapons, and security competition rather than mainly civilian political processes.

The Horn of Africa—generally including Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and sometimes nearby states—has become a strategic hotspot because it sits near major global shipping routes like the Red Sea and the Suez Canal corridor. This makes it highly important for international trade and global security interests.

Militarisation in this context refers to several connected developments. One is the growing presence of foreign military bases and troops in the region, especially in places like Djibouti, where multiple global powers maintain bases due to its strategic location. Another is the increase in arms imports, military spending, and security cooperation between regional governments and external powers. Many countries in the region are also dealing with internal conflicts, insurgencies, or political instability, which keeps their militaries heavily involved in governance and security. At the same time, competition between outside powers—such as the United States, China, France, Turkey, and Gulf states—adds another layer, as they seek influence over trade routes, counterterrorism operations, and regional alliances.

Overall, militarisation means that security and military considerations are becoming central to how the region is governed and influenced, both by local governments and external actors. This can contribute to instability and proxy competition, even while also supporting certain security goals like anti-piracy operations and counterterrorism efforts.

what needs to be done to improve security in the Horn of Africa by addressing the underlying problems (rather than just militarising it). If that’s right, the key idea is that long-term security in the region usually depends less on military buildup and more on fixing the political, economic, and regional issues that drive conflict.

One major issue is weak governance and political exclusion. In several countries in the Horn of Africa, governments struggle with corruption, limited state capacity, or exclusion of certain ethnic or political groups. When people feel shut out of power, armed resistance and instability are more likely. Strengthening institutions, rule of law, and inclusive political systems is often seen as more effective than relying heavily on security forces.

Another driver is unresolved conflicts and border tensions, such as historical disputes between states or internal civil wars. These tend to fuel cycles of retaliation and militarisation. Diplomatic solutions, peace agreements, and sustained mediation are essential to reduce the need for constant military readiness. Economic hardship is also a major factor. High unemployment, poverty, and lack of infrastructure make it easier for armed groups to recruit and for communities to become unstable. Investment in jobs, education, trade, and development can reduce the incentives for violence. There is also the issue of external military involvement. Competing foreign bases and alliances can sometimes worsen tensions by turning

local conflicts into proxy rivalries. Better coordination between external actors—or limiting purely strategic military competition—can reduce escalation risks.

Finally, security problems like piracy, terrorism, and armed insurgencies often require more than military responses. Approaches that combine policing, intelligence sharing, regional cooperation, and addressing root causes tend to be more sustainable than force alone.

In short, improving security in the Horn of Africa is less about “more security forces” and more about addressing the political, economic, and diplomatic conditions that produce insecurity in the first place.

Figure



This infographic presents a theory of change for improving security and stability in the Horn of Africa, particularly focusing on countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia. Rather than relying primarily on military force, it argues that long-term security emerges from political, economic, and social reforms.

How the scheme is supposed to work

The infographic proposes several interconnected interventions. Strengthening governance and inclusion involves improving the rule of law, reducing corruption, increasing participation among different communities, and building trust between citizens and government. The underlying assumption is that people who view institutions as fair and effective are less likely to support insurgent movements, militias, or extremist organizations.

Peaceful conflict resolution is another pillar. Through diplomacy, mediation, negotiations, and peace agreements, disputes can be managed without violence. The assumption is that negotiated settlements are generally more durable and less costly than prolonged warfare.

Economic development is presented as a security strategy. Creating jobs, improving education, and investing in infrastructure are expected to increase opportunity and reduce incentives for individuals to join armed groups or engage in destabilizing activities.

Regional cooperation focuses on intelligence sharing, joint security initiatives, and cross-border collaboration. Since terrorism, smuggling, piracy, refugee flows, and other security challenges often transcend national borders, coordinated action is viewed as more effective than isolated efforts.

The infographic also emphasizes managing foreign influence by reducing proxy rivalries among outside powers. The idea is that external actors can sometimes intensify conflicts by supporting competing factions, so greater coordination among them may contribute to stability.

Finally, addressing root causes involves tackling poverty, youth unemployment, social grievances, weak governance, and environmental pressures. The logic is that these conditions often create the social and political environment in which conflict can emerge and persist.

What it reflects

The infographic reflects a human security and peacebuilding approach rather than a purely military one. It is consistent with ideas often promoted by organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union. The framework assumes that insecurity is largely a consequence of governance failures, economic deprivation, social exclusion, and unresolved political disputes.

At its core, it reflects the belief that sustainable peace depends on creating legitimate institutions, generating economic opportunities, fostering social inclusion, and encouraging cooperation among states and communities.

Putative outputs

The immediate outputs of such a scheme would be tangible activities, programs, and institutions. Governments might introduce anti-corruption legislation, strengthen judicial systems, establish mediation mechanisms, and negotiate ceasefires. Development programs could build roads, schools, hospitals, and vocational training centers. Regional organizations might create intelligence-sharing frameworks or joint security arrangements. Youth employment initiatives and diplomatic coordination mechanisms among foreign actors could also emerge as direct products of the strategy.

These outputs are the visible deliverables that indicate implementation is occurring.

Putative outcomes

If the outputs function as intended, medium-term outcomes could include reduced corruption, improved public services, greater political participation, and increased trust in government institutions. Economic opportunities may lower unemployment, especially among young people, while investments in infrastructure and education could stimulate economic growth.

Conflict levels may decline as mediation mechanisms become more effective and regional cooperation improves. Border management could strengthen, violent incidents could decrease, and governments might gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of their populations.

These outcomes generally develop over a period of several years and indicate whether the strategy is producing meaningful change.

Putative long-term effects

The long-term impacts envisioned by the infographic include a substantial reduction in insurgency, terrorism, communal violence, and political instability. Governments would ideally become more resilient, legitimate, and capable of delivering services.

Economically, the region could experience higher growth rates, increased investment, expanded trade, and improved living standards. Socially, there could be lower levels of displacement, better educational outcomes, stronger social cohesion, and greater integration among diverse communities.

In the most optimistic scenario, the combined effect would be a self-reinforcing cycle in which stability encourages development, development strengthens institutions, and stronger institutions further reinforce stability.

Potential strengths

One strength of the framework is that it recognizes security problems as multidimensional rather than purely military. It acknowledges that governance failures, economic grievances, and social exclusion often contribute to violence. By addressing these underlying factors, the strategy seeks to prevent conflict rather than simply react to it.

The approach also recognizes the interconnected nature of regional security challenges and the need for cooperation among neighboring states.

Potential weaknesses and criticisms

The framework assumes that political actors are willing to implement reforms and share power, which may not always be the case. Elites benefiting from existing arrangements may resist anti-corruption measures or political inclusion.

Economic growth does not automatically reduce conflict if benefits are distributed unevenly. Peace agreements can fail when parties lose trust or perceive advantages in returning to violence. Regional cooperation may be limited by competing national interests, and foreign powers may continue to pursue their own strategic objectives regardless of local stability concerns.

Critics also argue that the relationship between development and peace is not always straightforward. Some societies have experienced economic growth while remaining politically unstable, while others have maintained stability despite limited development.

The causal chain implied by the infographic is that better governance, peaceful conflict resolution, economic development, regional cooperation, and the mitigation of root causes will reduce grievances and increase state legitimacy. Reduced grievances are expected to lower support for armed groups and decrease violence. Lower violence should improve security and political stability, ultimately producing sustainable peace and long-term development throughout the region.

24. Maritime Competition

Maritime competition reshapes state behaviour by changing what governments prioritize, how they build alliances, and how they use both economic and security tools. In strategic waterways like the Red Sea and the wider Horn of Africa littoral, states increasingly behave less like purely territorial actors and more like maritime stakeholders focused on ports, shipping lanes, and external naval partnerships.

One major effect is a shift toward port-centric foreign policy. Instead of diplomacy being driven mainly by land borders or regional ideology, states such as Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan often prioritize relationships that secure investment in ports, logistics infrastructure, and maritime revenue. Ports become bargaining chips in international relations, and governments may grant concessions or basing rights in exchange for aid, security guarantees, or infrastructure financing.

It also encourages security outsourcing and military alignment shifts. Because maritime routes are globally significant, external powers invest heavily in naval access and counter-piracy operations. This gives local governments incentives to align with different external patrons depending on who can provide port investment, naval protection, or diplomatic backing. As a result, states may diversify their security partnerships rather than relying on a single ally, a pattern often called “multi-alignment.”

Another important change is the fragmentation of authority within states. Maritime competition does not only involve central governments; it also empowers sub-national actors. Regional administrations, port authorities, and even non-state armed groups can gain leverage if they control coastline segments or access points. This is particularly visible in Somalia, where federal member states and local elites can negotiate directly with external actors over port development or security arrangements, sometimes bypassing the central government.

Maritime competition also shifts economic policy toward enclave development. Governments tend to prioritize coastal infrastructure—free zones, logistics corridors, and export hubs—because these attract external investment quickly. While this can boost revenue, it often creates uneven development, where coastal areas become highly integrated into global trade while inland regions remain underdeveloped, reinforcing internal inequalities.

In addition, it increases strategic signalling and militarization. Even relatively weak states may invest in coast guards, naval forces, or port security units not because they expect conventional

naval warfare, but because maritime assets are tied to sovereignty, revenue, and international credibility. External powers reinforcing naval presence in the region further encourages this securitization of maritime space.

Finally, maritime competition tends to make state behaviour more transactional and flexible. Governments often treat ports, basing rights, and maritime access as negotiable assets in broader geopolitical bargaining. This can bring short-term gains in revenue and infrastructure, but it can also reduce policy coherence, as different parts of the state engage with different external partners for competing objectives.

Overall, maritime competition reshapes state behaviour by pulling governments toward the coast, increasing the value of external partnerships, empowering non-central actors, and embedding global strategic rivalries directly into domestic governance and economic decision-making.

If the goal is to address how maritime competition can strain governance in the Horn of Africa and strengthen state capacity, the key is not to eliminate external interest in the Red Sea—because that is structurally unavoidable—but to channel it through rules, institutions, and coordinated national strategies rather than fragmented, ad hoc deals.

A first step is centralising and clarifying maritime governance frameworks. Governments need a single, transparent authority over ports, concessions, and maritime security policy, rather than overlapping mandates between ministries, regional states, and security actors. When port deals or basing agreements are negotiated in a fragmented way, external actors can exploit internal divisions. Clear legal frameworks for port management and concession approval reduce this vulnerability and make state decisions more coherent.

A second approach is building stronger regulatory and revenue systems around ports and logistics hubs. If port income is captured through accountable national treasuries rather than distributed through informal or politically selective channels, it strengthens fiscal capacity and reduces incentives for elite competition over maritime rents. This is especially important in places like Somalia, where competing authorities can turn ports into political financing tools rather than national assets.

A third pillar is regional coordination on maritime security and trade standards. Since the Red Sea is shared, states benefit from harmonised customs rules, port procedures, and security protocols. Institutions such as IGAD and Red Sea–Gulf of Aden initiatives can help reduce regulatory arbitrage, where external actors play ports against each other by offering better terms in one country than another. Coordinated standards reduce this competition and make governance more predictable.

Another important measure is professionalising maritime and port security forces under civilian oversight. When naval units, coast guards, or port security are tied to competing political factions or external sponsors, they become tools of fragmentation. Embedding them in unified command structures with clear civilian accountability helps ensure maritime security serves national rather than factional interests.

There is also a need for carefully managed foreign investment rules. External capital is essential for port development and infrastructure, but contracts should be transparent, competitive, and aligned with long-term national development plans. Governments can strengthen their position by using model concession agreements, public procurement rules, and independent auditing of port deals. This reduces the risk of asymmetric or opaque agreements that weaken sovereignty over time.

Finally, diversifying economic bases beyond ports helps reduce over-dependence on maritime rents. When state revenues rely heavily on port-related deals, political competition over those assets intensifies. Expanding inland infrastructure, agriculture, and manufacturing reduces the zero-sum nature of port politics and makes governance less vulnerable to external leverage.

In short, addressing the destabilising effects of maritime competition is less about resisting the Red Sea's strategic importance and more about turning maritime assets into governed national institutions rather than fragmented bargaining zones. Stronger legal frameworks, fiscal centralisation, coordinated regional standards, and professional security institutions all help convert maritime competition from a source of political fragmentation into a structured driver of development.

25. Ressource Conflicts in the Horn of Africa

Resource scarcity has become one of the most significant drivers of intercommunal tensions in the Horn of Africa, particularly in regions where livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources such as water, pasture, and arable land. Recurrent droughts, land degradation, and climate variability have intensified competition among pastoral and agro-pastoral communities. As water sources dry up and grazing lands diminish, communities are often compelled to migrate beyond their traditional territories in search of resources. This movement frequently brings different ethnic, clan, or livelihood groups into contact, increasing the likelihood of disputes over access and ownership. However, resource scarcity alone does not automatically lead to violence. Rather, it acts as a stressor that interacts with pre-existing grievances, social inequalities, weak governance structures, poverty, and historical rivalries. In many cases, scarcity serves as a conflict multiplier, exacerbating tensions that already exist within and between communities. Consequently, understanding the relationship between resource scarcity and intercommunal conflict requires examining the broader social, political, and environmental context in which these resource pressures occur.

Environmental governance institutions play a critical role in mitigating these tensions and reducing the risk of violence. Such institutions encompass both formal mechanisms, including government agencies and regional resource management bodies, and informal systems such as customary councils of elders and traditional conflict-resolution structures. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to regulate access to natural resources, establish clear rules regarding resource use, and facilitate dialogue among competing groups. When governance institutions are perceived as legitimate, inclusive, and equitable, they can reduce uncertainty and prevent disputes from escalating into violent confrontations. Furthermore, these institutions often provide platforms for negotiation and mediation, enabling communities to resolve disagreements peacefully. They also contribute to the development of early-warning systems that monitor environmental stress and anticipate potential conflicts before they erupt.

Nevertheless, many environmental governance institutions across the Horn of Africa face significant challenges, including limited resources, inadequate enforcement capacity, political interference, and difficulties in managing cross-border resource disputes. Strengthening these institutions is therefore essential for promoting both environmental sustainability and social stability.

Figure



Climate adaptation can also make a substantial contribution to peacebuilding by addressing some of the underlying drivers of conflict. Adaptation initiatives such as water harvesting, drought-resistant agriculture, rangeland restoration, climate information services, and livelihood diversification enhance the resilience of communities facing environmental shocks. By improving access to resources and reducing vulnerability to climate-related stresses, these measures can lessen competition and decrease the likelihood of conflict. Beyond reducing scarcity, adaptation interventions often create opportunities for cooperation among communities. Joint management of water resources, shared grazing arrangements, and collaborative conservation projects encourage interaction, trust-building, and collective problem-solving. These processes can strengthen social cohesion and foster more peaceful relationships between groups that might otherwise compete for limited resources. Moreover, successful adaptation programs can improve confidence in public institutions by demonstrating the capacity of governments and local authorities to respond effectively to community needs. In this way, climate adaptation extends beyond environmental management and becomes a mechanism for promoting long-term peace and stability.

The relationship between resource scarcity, environmental governance, and peacebuilding can therefore be understood as a dynamic process. While climate change and environmental degradation may increase competition over scarce resources and elevate the risk of intercommunal conflict, effective governance institutions and well-designed adaptation strategies can transform these pressures into opportunities for cooperation and resilience. This perspective challenges deterministic assumptions that environmental stress inevitably leads to violence and instead highlights the importance of institutions, policies, and community-based

interventions in shaping conflict outcomes. Despite growing scholarly attention to these issues, there remains a significant research gap regarding the specific ways in which climate adaptation initiatives influence intercommunal relations and peacebuilding outcomes across the Horn of Africa. Future research should therefore focus on generating empirical evidence that examines how adaptation programs affect conflict dynamics over time and across different socio-political contexts within the region.

A **rangeland management program** and a **land registration (land registry) system** could help soften tensions and reduce conflict in the countryside of the Horn of Africa by addressing some of the underlying causes of disputes over land, water, and grazing resources.

Rangeland Management Programs

In much of the Horn of Africa, particularly in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan, pastoralist communities depend on shared grazing lands and seasonal migration routes. Population growth, drought, and environmental degradation have increased competition for these resources, often leading to clashes between different ethnic groups, clans, and farmers.

A rangeland management program can reduce these tensions by establishing agreed rules for the use of grazing areas, water points, and migration corridors. When communities participate in planning and decision-making, they are more likely to cooperate and resolve disputes peacefully. Such programs can also improve pasture quality through conservation measures, reducing resource scarcity and the competition that often fuels conflict.

By protecting traditional migration routes and ensuring fair access to resources during drought periods, rangeland management helps build trust between neighboring communities and decreases the likelihood of violent confrontations.

Land Registries and Land Tenure Security

Land disputes are a major source of rural conflict throughout the Horn of Africa. Unclear boundaries, overlapping claims, and the absence of formal documentation often create uncertainty about who has the right to use or own land.

A land registry system can help by formally recording land rights and boundaries. When land ownership or use rights are clearly documented, disputes become easier to resolve through legal and administrative processes rather than violence. Farmers gain greater confidence that they will not lose their land, encouraging long-term investment in agriculture and land improvement.

Land registration can also reduce tensions between pastoralists and settled farmers by clarifying which areas are designated for cultivation, grazing, or seasonal movement. If implemented fairly, it can help prevent encroachment and reduce competition over scarce resources.

Combined Impact on Rural Enmities

Together, rangeland management and land registration address both resource scarcity and uncertainty over land rights. Rangeland management promotes cooperation in the use of shared resources, while land registries provide clarity and security regarding land tenure. These measures reduce the opportunities for conflict, strengthen local institutions, and create mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution.

According to theories of resource conflict, competition over scarce and poorly governed resources often contributes to violence. By improving resource management and clarifying rights, these programs can transform potential sources of conflict into opportunities for cooperation. In the Horn of Africa, where environmental stress, population growth, and political instability frequently intersect, effective rangeland management and land registration could therefore play an important role in reducing rural enmities and promoting social stability.

Migration and Internal Displacement in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is one of the world's most significant regions of human mobility, with millions of people moving both voluntarily and involuntarily. Migration is driven by a combination of conflict, political instability, economic hardship, environmental degradation, and climate-related disasters.

Current estimates indicate that approximately 24 to 26 million people from the Horn of Africa and Yemen are living in situations of displacement. Of these, around 19 to 21 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs), meaning they have been forced to leave their homes but remain within their own countries. A further 5 to 6 million people are refugees or asylum seekers who have crossed international borders in search of safety.

Sudan accounts for the largest share of displacement in the region. The ongoing conflict has forced more than ten million people from their homes within the country, while several million others have fled to neighboring states. This makes Sudan one of the largest displacement crises in the world.

In Somalia, decades of conflict, insecurity, and recurring droughts have displaced millions of people internally, while hundreds of thousands have sought refuge in neighboring countries and beyond. Environmental pressures and political instability continue to drive migration from rural to urban areas and across international borders.

Ethiopia has experienced substantial internal displacement due to conflict, ethnic tensions, drought, and food insecurity. Millions of Ethiopians have also migrated abroad in search of employment opportunities, particularly in the Middle East and other parts of Africa.

In Yemen, civil war and humanitarian crises have displaced nearly five million people internally. Despite these challenges, Yemen remains an important transit route for migrants from the Horn of Africa seeking to reach the Arabian Peninsula.

Djibouti experiences comparatively low levels of displacement. However, it serves as an important transit and host country for refugees and migrants from neighboring states because of its strategic location and relative political stability.

It is important to distinguish between migrants and displaced persons. Migrants generally move in search of employment, education, or improved living conditions. By contrast, internally displaced persons and refugees are compelled to move because of conflict, violence, persecution, environmental disasters, or severe economic hardship. In the Horn of Africa, forced displacement constitutes a large proportion of overall population movement, reflecting the region's persistent challenges of insecurity, poverty, and climate vulnerability.

Overall, the evidence suggests that migration in the Horn of Africa is driven more by powerful push factors than by attractive pull factors. For many people, movement is not primarily a matter of choice but a necessary response to threats to their livelihoods, safety, and survival.

Table

Country	Push factors (why people leave)	Pull factors (why people stay/attract others)
Sudan	Civil conflict, political instability, economic collapse, inflation, displacement, food insecurity.	Relative urban job markets (Khartoum historically), cross-border trade routes, remittance inflows.
Djibouti	High cost of living, limited employment opportunities, youth unemployment.	Strategic port economy (shipping/logistics), relative political stability, foreign military bases creating jobs, transit hub for migration.
Somalia	Prolonged conflict, insecurity (Al-Shabaab areas), droughts, famine risk, weak state institutions	Remittance economy (diaspora support), coastal trade, informal cross-border commerce, relative safety in some urban areas (e.g., Mogadishu pockets)
Ethiopia	Ethnic conflict in some regions, land pressure, rural poverty, drought, youth unemployment.	Growing industrial zones, education opportunities, internal migration to Addis Ababa, infrastructure development.
Yemen	Civil war, humanitarian crisis, food insecurity, economic collapse	Acts more as transit route to Gulf states (especially Saudi Arabia), some coastal trade, diaspora remittances

Enhanced Analysis of Key Regional Migration Patterns in the Horn of Africa and Yemen

Conflict-Driven Displacement Is the Primary Driver of Migration

Armed conflict and political instability are the most significant causes of migration in the region. In Sudan, ongoing violence, political upheaval, and insecurity have displaced millions of people internally and across borders. Similarly, decades of conflict in Somalia have forced many citizens to seek safety in neighboring countries or farther abroad. In Yemen, civil war and humanitarian crises have generated large-scale displacement, both within the country and internationally.

Conflict destroys livelihoods, disrupts public services, damages infrastructure, and creates unsafe living conditions. As a result, migration is often a survival strategy rather than a voluntary choice.

Environmental Pressures Intensify Migration Flows

Climate-related challenges, particularly drought, desertification, and food insecurity, significantly influence migration patterns in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. Many communities depend heavily on agriculture and pastoralism, making them vulnerable to changing rainfall patterns and extreme weather events.

When crops fail and livestock perish, households experience declining incomes and food shortages. These environmental stresses often interact with existing poverty and conflict, creating multiple pressures that encourage migration. Climate change therefore acts as a threat multiplier, worsening already fragile social and economic conditions and increasing displacement.

Djibouti Serves as a Strategic Transit and Economic Hub

Unlike its neighbors, Djibouti experiences relatively greater political stability and benefits from its strategic location along major international shipping routes. Its ports, logistics sector, and the presence of foreign military bases generate employment opportunities and attract migrants from neighboring countries.

However, economic opportunities remain limited compared with migrants' expectations, meaning Djibouti often functions more as a transit point than a final destination. Many migrants pass through the country while seeking employment opportunities in Gulf countries or elsewhere. This makes Djibouti an important regional gateway within migration networks linking Africa and the Middle East.

Yemen Occupies a Unique Position in Regional Migration Networks

Although Yemen is itself experiencing severe conflict and humanitarian challenges, it continues to function as an important migration corridor connecting the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. Migrants from Ethiopia and Somalia frequently travel through Yemen in hopes of reaching neighboring Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

This creates a complex situation in which Yemen simultaneously acts as a source of refugees and displaced persons, a transit country for migrants from Africa, and, to a lesser extent, a temporary destination for some migrants. The country's geographical position across the Gulf of Aden makes it a critical link in regional migration routes despite the dangers associated with the journey.

Migration Is Predominantly Forced Rather Than Opportunity-Led

Across the Horn of Africa and Yemen, push factors generally outweigh pull factors. While employment opportunities, education, trade, and urban development attract some migrants, these incentives are often secondary to the urgent pressures driving people to leave.

Many migrants are compelled to move because of insecurity, food shortages, economic hardship, environmental degradation, and limited access to essential services. Consequently, migration in the region is largely characterized as forced, distress-driven, or survival migration rather than purely voluntary economic migration. The dominance of these pressures highlights the extent to which migration has become a coping mechanism for individuals and households facing multiple, overlapping crises.

Theory-Based Explanation: Lee's Push-Pull Migration Theory

According to Everett S. Lee's Push-Pull Theory, migration occurs because negative factors at the place of origin encourage people to leave, while positive factors at a destination attract them elsewhere. In the Horn of Africa and Yemen, strong push factors such as armed conflict, political instability, poverty, unemployment, drought, and food insecurity create powerful motivations for migration. At the same time, pull factors such as safety, employment opportunities, economic development, and access to education and healthcare attract migrants toward more stable locations.

The theory helps explain why migration flows in the region are dominated by people seeking protection and basic survival rather than economic advancement alone. Because push factors are generally stronger than pull factors, migration is often involuntary and shaped by necessity. This demonstrates that movement within and beyond the region is closely linked to humanitarian crises, environmental vulnerability, and political instability, making migration a crucial survival strategy for many individuals and communities.

26.Sudanese conflicts

The conflict in Sudan is not an isolated civil war. It sits at the intersection of the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, North Africa, and the Red Sea region, making it one of the most consequential conflicts for regional security. The war interacts with Horn dynamics through refugee movements, arms trafficking, borderland instability, geopolitical competition, economic disruption, and the reconfiguration of political and military alliances. It also raises questions about the future role of Islamist movements, although the conflict itself is not fundamentally an Islamist insurgency.

The war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) reflects a struggle over state control, economic resources, and political authority following the

collapse of Sudan's transitional process. However, as state institutions weaken, different ideological, tribal, regional, and economic actors seek opportunities to advance their interests. This creates conditions in which Islamist networks, former regime elements, tribal militias, and external actors can all become more influential.

For the Horn of Africa, Sudan's conflict is particularly significant because Sudan functions as a geographic bridge between the Nile Basin, the Red Sea, the Sahel, and the Horn. Instability therefore spreads in multiple directions simultaneously.

The first mechanism of spillover is population displacement. Millions of Sudanese have fled into neighbouring countries, including South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and other regional states. Large refugee populations place pressure on local services, labour markets, land access, and humanitarian systems. In fragile border regions, this can exacerbate existing tensions between communities.

The second mechanism is the militarisation of borderlands. Sudan's borders are extensive and difficult to control. Weapons, fighters, and smuggling networks can move across frontiers, connecting local conflicts in Sudan to insecurity elsewhere. Areas along the Ethiopia–Sudan border, for example, already have a history of disputes involving land, migration, and armed actors. Continued instability risks deepening these tensions.

The third mechanism concerns political alliances and regional balancing. Different states in the Horn and Red Sea region may perceive advantages in supporting competing actors or cultivating influence with armed factions. Such behaviour can transform a domestic civil war into a wider proxy arena. The Horn has experienced similar dynamics in the past, where neighbouring states supported insurgent groups operating across borders.

The Islamist dimension requires careful analysis. The conflict is not primarily a struggle between secular and Islamist forces. However, the weakening of state institutions creates opportunities for Islamist actors to re-enter political space. Elements associated with the former regime of Omar al-Bashir may seek to regain influence through alliances within the security sector or political networks. More broadly, prolonged instability can create environments in which extremist groups exploit governance vacuums, particularly in peripheral regions where state authority is weak.

For the Horn, this matters because Islamist movements have historically operated through transnational networks that cross national boundaries. Although the contexts differ significantly between Sudan, Somalia, and other states, prolonged disorder can facilitate the movement of ideas, resources, and individuals across regional conflict systems. The concern is less the emergence of a unified Islamist bloc and more the possibility that instability creates space for multiple armed and ideological actors to expand their influence.

The conflict also affects regional political economy. Sudan occupies an important position in trade routes connecting the Horn to North Africa and the Middle East. War disrupts commerce, reduces investment confidence, and diverts government resources toward security spending. These effects can undermine regional integration projects and reduce incentives for cooperation.

The implications for Red Sea politics are equally significant. Sudan's coastline and strategic location make it relevant to Gulf states, Egypt, and other external powers. Competition among external actors seeking influence can further complicate conflict resolution if local parties perceive opportunities to secure support from competing patrons.

Preventing spillovers requires a regional rather than purely national strategy. Border management is a first priority. States need coordinated mechanisms for monitoring arms trafficking, managing refugee flows, and sharing intelligence on armed groups. Unilateral approaches are unlikely to succeed because many of the relevant networks operate across multiple jurisdictions.

Economic resilience is equally important. Host communities receiving refugees need support to prevent humanitarian pressures from becoming political or communal conflicts. Investments in livelihoods, infrastructure, and public services can reduce the risk that displacement generates new sources of instability.

Regional diplomacy must also focus on preventing proxy competition. External actors, including Gulf states, the EU, the US, and the African Union, should avoid supporting rival armed factions and instead coordinate around ceasefire efforts and inclusive political negotiations. Competing external interventions have historically prolonged conflicts rather than resolved them.

The Horn's regional organizations, particularly the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development, have an important role to play in creating forums where neighbouring states can address shared security concerns. Cooperation on refugee management, border security, and economic recovery can help prevent national crises from becoming regional crises.

Longer term, the most effective safeguard against spillover is deeper regional integration. Trade corridors, energy networks, transport links, and cross-border development projects create shared interests that raise the costs of instability. When neighbouring states depend on one another economically, they have stronger incentives to contain conflicts and support negotiated settlements.

Ultimately, the Sudan conflict demonstrates a broader lesson about the Horn of Africa: state crises rarely remain confined within national borders. Because political, economic, and social systems are deeply interconnected, conflict in one country can reshape regional alliances, security dynamics, migration patterns, and development trajectories. Preventing spillovers therefore requires not only conflict management within Sudan but also the construction of stronger regional institutions capable of managing shared risks and promoting collective security.

The most important outcome of the Third International Sudan Conference in Berlin (April 2026) was not the announcement of a new peace agreement, but the creation of a broad international consensus around what has become known as the Berlin Principles for Sudan. These principles reaffirmed Sudan's territorial integrity, rejected military solutions, called for an immediate ceasefire, demanded an end to external support for the belligerents, supported an

inclusive civilian-led political process, prioritised humanitarian access, and emphasised accountability, reconstruction, and regional stability.

From a Horn of Africa perspective, the conference's greatest contribution is that it implicitly recognises Sudan not merely as a national crisis but as a regional security problem whose consequences extend into Ethiopia, South Sudan, Eritrea, the Red Sea, and the wider Horn. The emphasis on ceasefire monitoring, humanitarian access, support for refugee-hosting states, and ending external military support addresses some of the key mechanisms through which the war destabilises neighbouring countries.

If fully implemented, the Berlin Principles could make several significant contributions.

First, an effective ceasefire combined with monitoring and verification mechanisms would reduce refugee flows, cross-border arms trafficking, and borderland militarisation. This would directly benefit neighbouring states that are already struggling with their own governance and security challenges. Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Chad would face less pressure from displacement and armed spillovers.

Second, the commitment to a Sudanese-led civilian transition offers a pathway out of the military competition that lies at the heart of the conflict. A civilian political process would not immediately resolve Sudan's divisions, but it could create institutions capable of managing competition through politics rather than warfare. Such a transition would also revive some of the aspirations of the 2018–2019 Sudanese revolution that were interrupted by military intervention and later war.

Third, the call to end external support to the warring parties addresses one of the principal obstacles to peace. The war has increasingly become embedded in broader regional rivalries involving Gulf states, neighbouring countries, and external powers. Without reducing external military, financial, and logistical assistance, ceasefires are unlikely to endure because both sides retain incentives to pursue military victory.

Fourth, the principles create a framework for future reconstruction. Commitments to economic recovery, institutional rebuilding, livelihood restoration, and refugee return could eventually help reintegrate Sudan into regional trade and development systems. Given Sudan's location between the Horn, the Sahel, North Africa, and the Red Sea, reconstruction would have positive spillover effects far beyond Sudan itself.

However, substantial limitations remain.

The most immediate challenge is enforcement. The conference produced principles but not a binding implementation mechanism. Neither the Sudanese Armed Forces nor the Rapid Support Forces demonstrated a clear commitment to ending the war, and both sides continue to believe they can improve their position through military means. As long as battlefield calculations dominate political calculations, diplomatic declarations alone will have limited effect.

A second weakness is the fragmentation of mediation efforts. There are too many cooks in the kitchen. Multiple diplomatic tracks exist simultaneously, involving the African Union, IGAD,

the United Nations, Gulf states, the Quad, the Quintet, and various bilateral initiatives. While the Berlin Conference emphasised coordination, significant differences remain among external actors regarding priorities, leverage, and preferred outcomes.

Third, the conference focused heavily on humanitarian and diplomatic issues but provided less detail regarding Sudan's future political settlement. Questions concerning federalism, regional autonomy, military reform, power sharing, resource governance, and centre-periphery relations remain largely unresolved. Yet these issues are among the structural causes of recurring conflict in Sudan. A ceasefire without a credible political settlement risks freezing rather than resolving the conflict.

Fourth, implementation depends on regional cooperation that does not yet fully exist. Several neighbouring states and external powers continue to pursue competing strategic interests in Sudan. Without greater coordination among Gulf actors, Egypt, Ethiopia, the African Union, the European Union, and the United States, peace efforts risk being undermined by geopolitical competition.

From a Horn of Africa perspective, what remains to be done extends beyond Sudan itself. A durable settlement requires embedding Sudan within a broader regional framework that links peacebuilding to economic integration. Border management, refugee cooperation, Nile Basin dialogue, Red Seas.

security coordination, and cross-border infrastructure development must become part of the peace process. Otherwise, Sudan's internal conflicts will continue interacting with wider Horn dynamics.

Targets might include:

Table

Accountability Objective	Indicator
Documentation of abuses	Number of verified incidents recorded
Survivor support	Access to legal, medical, and psychosocial services
Judicial accountability	Number of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions
Truth and reconciliation	Establishment of national and local reconciliation processes

The conference therefore represents an important diplomatic achievement, but primarily as a framework rather than a solution. If implemented, it could reduce violence, strengthen humanitarian access, support civilian governance, and limit regional spillovers. Yet lasting peace will require three additional steps: a credible ceasefire enforcement mechanism, a genuinely inclusive political settlement addressing Sudan's underlying state-building crisis, and a regional compact involving the Horn, Nile Basin, Red Sea, and Gulf actors. Without those elements, the Berlin Principles are likely to remain an important statement of intent rather than the foundation of a durable peace.

If the Berlin Principles are to move beyond diplomatic declarations, they need a results-based monitoring and accountability framework with clear targets, independent verification, public reporting, and consequences for non-compliance. The conference explicitly called for monitoring and verification mechanisms, ceasefire arrangements, civilian participation, humanitarian access, and accountability for atrocities, but it did not specify measurable indicators.

A practical framework could be organised around six pillars.

Pillar	Target by 12 Months	Monitoring Indicator
Humanitarian Access	Unrestricted access to all major population centres	Number of aid convoys reaching intended destinations
Civilian Protection	Significant reduction in civilian casualties	Verified civilian deaths, attacks on civilians, displacement levels
Political Inclusion	Establishment of an inclusive civilian dialogue process	Participation of women, youth, regions, civil society, and displaced communities
External Interference	Progressive reduction of arms and military support flows	Verified arms transfers, sanctions violations, foreign military assistance
Recovery and Governance	Restoration of basic state services in priority regions	Schools reopened, health facilities functioning, local administrations operating

The governance architecture is just as important as the targets themselves. Monitoring should not be controlled solely by the belligerents. A multi-layered structure would provide greater legitimacy and reduce manipulation.

At the strategic level, oversight could be provided by a Joint Sudan Monitoring Commission composed of representatives from the African Union, United Nations, European Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, neighbouring states, and Sudanese civilian representatives. Such a body would publish quarterly compliance reports and assess progress against agreed benchmarks. The Berlin Principles already emphasise support from regional and international partners for monitoring and verification.

At the operational level, independent monitoring teams should verify ceasefire violations, humanitarian access restrictions, attacks on civilians, and infrastructure damage. These teams should include Sudanese civil society organisations, local humanitarian actors, and technical experts rather than relying exclusively on governments or armed actors.

At the local level, community monitoring mechanisms could be established in major cities and conflict-affected regions. These would enable local populations to report violations through digital platforms and independent observers, creating bottom-up accountability rather than relying solely on elite reporting.

Accountability requires consequences. A monitoring system without enforcement risks becoming symbolic. Compliance should therefore be linked to incentives and penalties.

Parties complying with ceasefire arrangements could receive access to reconstruction funding, technical assistance, development projects, and participation in political negotiations. Parties obstructing humanitarian access, violating ceasefires, or targeting civilians could face targeted sanctions, travel bans, asset freezes, and exclusion from internationally supported political processes.

Accountability for atrocities requires a separate track. The Berlin Principles explicitly call for investigation and prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity. A dedicated transitional justice mechanism should therefore collect evidence, preserve documentation, support survivors, and coordinate with international judicial institutions.

From a Horn of Africa perspective, additional regional indicators are needed because Sudan's war directly affects neighbouring states.

Regional Spillover Area	Target
Refugee flows	Stabilisation and eventual voluntary return under safe conditions
Border security	Reduction in cross-border armed incidents
Arms trafficking	Reduction in documented illicit transfers
Regional trade	Reopening of key transport and trade corridors

Political cooperation	Regular AU-IGAD regional security consultations

What remains missing from the Berlin framework is a stronger focus on the political economy of peace. Monitoring should not only track violence but also whether governance is becoming more inclusive and functional. Indicators should therefore measure local government performance, public service delivery, women's participation, youth participation, revenue transparency, and regional representation in decision-making.

Ultimately, success should not be defined simply as the absence of war. A robust monitoring framework would track movement from ceasefire to civilian governance, from humanitarian relief to economic recovery, and from military competition to accountable political institutions. The key test is whether Sudan gradually develops a political settlement that is inclusive enough to manage competition peacefully and connected enough to support wider Horn of Africa stability.

27.Strengthening Governance and Inclusion

Durable security begins with legitimate governance that earns public trust. States must invest in transparent institutions that deliver services equitably. Anti-corruption commissions should be empowered to prosecute high-level graft. Electoral systems need reform to ensure fair representation of marginalized groups. Civil society and local councils can act as bridges between citizens and the state. Judicial independence must be protected to guarantee rule of law. Inclusive governance reduces grievances that fuel rebellion.

Resolving Conflicts Peacefully

Diplomacy must replace militarized confrontation. Regional organizations like IGAD should lead sustained mediation rather than episodic talks. Border commissions can demarcate disputed territories to prevent flare-ups. Peace agreements must include mechanisms for monitoring and accountability. Transitional justice can help societies heal from civil wars. Confidence-building measures—joint patrols, shared infrastructure—turn rivals into partners. Long-term peace depends on continuous dialogue, not one-off summits.

Boosting Economic Development

Economic opportunity is the most reliable antidote to insecurity. Governments should prioritize job creation through small-enterprise support and agricultural modernization. Regional trade corridors can link inland producers to ports. Investment in education and vocational training equips youth for productive work. Infrastructure—roads, power, digital networks—connects communities and markets. Public-private partnerships can mobilize capital for sustainable industries. Economic growth must be inclusive to prevent new inequalities.

Managing Foreign Influence

External powers should coordinate rather than compete. A regional code of conduct for foreign bases could limit militarization. Joint development projects can replace zero-sum rivalries.

Transparency in defense agreements prevents suspicion among neighbors. Multilateral forums can align external assistance with local priorities. The Horn's states must assert agency by defining their own security agenda. Balanced diplomacy ensures sovereignty while benefiting from global partnerships.

Addressing Root Causes of Insecurity

Poverty and exclusion create fertile ground for violence. Social protection programs can cushion vulnerable households. Expanding access to healthcare and education builds resilience. Youth engagement initiatives channel energy into civic participation instead of militancy. Environmental adaptation—water management, reforestation—reduces resource conflicts. Gender equality policies empower half the population to contribute to stability. Tackling root causes transforms security from reaction to prevention.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation

Cross-border security challenges in the Horn of Africa require equally cross-border solutions because threats such as insurgent movements, piracy, trafficking, and climate-driven displacement do not respect national boundaries. In countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Sudan, security dynamics are deeply interconnected, meaning instability in one area quickly spills over into others.

One key response is the development of **shared intelligence networks** that allow states to track extremist groups, militia movements, and transnational criminal networks in real time. When intelligence is pooled and trusted mechanisms exist for verification, governments can respond earlier and more effectively to emerging threats rather than reacting after violence spreads.

Another important pillar is **coordinated policing and maritime security operations**, especially in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden corridors. Joint patrols, harmonised legal frameworks, and shared training for coast guards can significantly reduce piracy, smuggling, and trafficking. This is particularly important for securing vital shipping routes that underpin regional and global trade.

The region also benefits from **joint disaster response mechanisms**. Droughts, floods, and other climate shocks frequently require rapid humanitarian intervention that exceeds the capacity of individual states. Regionally coordinated emergency response units, shared logistics hubs, and pooled humanitarian supplies can reduce delays and prevent crises from escalating into instability or conflict.

Beyond security cooperation, **economic integration through customs unions and trade facilitation frameworks** can deepen interdependence. When cross-border trade becomes easier, cheaper, and more predictable, states and communities gain incentives to maintain stability. Economic linkages reduce the appeal of conflict because disruption would harm multiple interconnected economies simultaneously.

In addition, **cultural exchanges, educational partnerships, and academic cooperation** play a quieter but important role in building long-term stability. Student mobility, research

collaboration, and shared training programs help build professional networks and mutual understanding across societies that have often experienced political tension or mistrust.

Finally, a more integrated Horn of Africa could **strengthen its collective bargaining power in global politics**. Acting through regional frameworks, states can negotiate more effectively with external powers over issues such as maritime access, infrastructure investment, and security cooperation. Instead of competing individually for external support, a coordinated regional position can improve terms and reduce external leverage over internal divisions.

Overall, the most durable approach is to treat security, economics, and diplomacy as interconnected systems: when states cooperate on intelligence, policing, disaster response, and trade, they not only reduce immediate threats but also build the foundations for long-term regional stability and shared influence.

Fostering Economic Interdependence in the Horn of Africa

Fostering economic interdependence in the Horn of Africa—especially among countries like Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Eritrea—is mainly about making cross-border trade, infrastructure, and services so deeply connected that cooperation becomes more valuable than isolation or conflict.

A core strategy is building integrated transport and trade corridors. Roads, railways, and dry ports that connect inland production areas to coastal ports can link economies in a way that makes disruption costly for everyone involved. For example, Ethiopia's dependence on Red Sea access creates natural incentives for sustained cooperation with coastal states if access routes are stable, predictable, and governed by transparent agreements.

Another key step is reducing trade barriers and harmonising customs systems. Right now, one of the biggest obstacles to regional trade is not distance but bureaucracy, inconsistent regulations, and border inefficiencies. Simplifying tariffs, digitising customs procedures, and creating one-stop border posts can significantly increase legal cross-border trade while reducing incentives for smuggling or informal networks.

A third approach is expanding energy interconnection and shared infrastructure. Cross-border electricity grids, renewable energy projects, and shared water management systems can create long-term dependencies that are harder to reverse than trade alone. When countries rely on each other for energy stability or infrastructure maintenance, cooperation becomes structurally embedded.

Economic interdependence also grows through regional value chains. Instead of each country exporting raw goods independently, production can be distributed across borders—livestock from Somalia processed in Kenya, manufacturing inputs moving through Djibouti's logistics hubs, or Ethiopian industrial goods exported through coastal ports. This creates mutual dependence because each stage of production relies on stability in neighboring countries.

A further element is financial and institutional integration, including regional payment systems, banking cooperation, and investment protection agreements. When businesses can move

money easily across borders and rely on shared rules for dispute resolution, cross-border trade becomes less risky and more attractive.

Security cooperation is also indirectly important. Stable borders and joint security arrangements reduce disruptions to trade routes. In many parts of the Horn, economic integration cannot deepen unless cross-border insecurity, insurgencies, and local militia activity are contained or jointly managed.

Finally, external partners like the EU, Gulf states, and international financial institutions can support interdependence by funding regional rather than purely national projects, but only if local governments coordinate their priorities. Without coordination, external investment can reinforce competition instead of integration.

Overall, economic interdependence in the Horn of Africa grows when infrastructure is physically connected, trade rules are simplified, energy and logistics systems are shared, and states see predictable benefits from cooperation that outweigh the short-term advantages of acting alone.

Comparisons of resource management in the Horn of Africa

1. Cross-cutting institutional reality in the Horn of Africa

Across the Horn of Africa, extractive governance is shaped by a persistent structural contradiction between formal institutional design and operational reality on the ground. Although most states have developed increasingly sophisticated mining, petroleum, and energy legislation, these legal frameworks are only weakly translated into enforceable regulatory practice. The result is a region where law has advanced faster than the institutional capacity required to implement it.

Three reinforcing structural patterns define this gap. First, there is a widespread condition of strong formal legal frameworks paired with weak enforcement capacity. States are generally able to articulate ownership, licensing regimes, and regulatory procedures in legislation, but struggle to enforce compliance, monitor production, or systematically capture revenues from extraction activities.

Second, there is a persistent mismatch between centralized legal ownership of subsurface resources and decentralized operational control over those same resources. While constitutions and mining laws typically vest ownership of minerals and hydrocarbons in the central state, actual access, extraction, and local regulation are often managed by regional authorities, informal networks, or hybrid public–private arrangements operating at sub-national levels.

Third, extractive governance in the Horn is deeply shaped by security–resource entanglement. Control over mining areas, oil blocks, and exploration sites is frequently mediated through security provision, whether by state forces, regional administrations, militias, or foreign-backed security arrangements. As highlighted in Horn Review analyses, the actor that ensures physical access and stability in extraction zones often becomes the de facto regulator of those resources, regardless of formal legal mandates.

Taken together, these dynamics produce a fundamental dualism between “legal sovereignty” and “effective sovereignty.” Legal sovereignty refers to the formal claims embedded in constitutions and sectoral legislation that assign ownership and regulatory authority over natural resources to the state. Effective sovereignty, however, refers to the actual distribution of control over extraction, revenue flows, and access rights in practice. Across much of the Horn, these two forms of sovereignty are increasingly decoupled, with effective control frequently residing outside the formal institutions that are nominally responsible for governing the sector.

2. Comparative cross-table (Gold, CRM minerals, Energy)

Overall, the table shows a fairly consistent pattern across Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya: formal legal frameworks are converging toward modernization and central state ownership, but the real difference lies in institutional capacity and enforcement rather than the written laws themselves.

A. Governance & legislation comparison

Area	Somalia	Ethiopia	Kenya	Regional Pattern
Mining law framework	Outdated mining code + new draft reforms; Petroleum laws more developed than mining	Modern mining proclamations + constitutional federal system	Mining Act (2016) + petroleum law + strategic minerals regulations	Most countries are updating laws but implementation lags
Resource ownership model	Formally centralized, but de facto “mineral federalism” emerging	State ownership under federal system	State (national government holds in trust for citizens)	Central ownership is standard across region
Gold regulation	Dominated by ASM + informal exports; weak licensing enforcement	Significant ASM gold in Oromia, Benishangul; state licensing system	More formalized artisanal + industrial mining regime	Gold mostly ASM-driven, weak formal control
Critical minerals (CRM)	Emerging lithium/rare earth potential; fragmented governance	Lithium, tantalum, potash development under state control	Strategic minerals list (lithium, cobalt, REE declared strategic)	CRM governance still emerging, but Kenya most structured

Energy sector governance	Petroleum law exists; offshore exploration interest but weak regulation capacity	State-led hydro + new IPP reforms; strong central control	Mature electricity regulator (EPRA), expanding geothermal & wind	Kenya most institutionalized energy regulator

Starting with mining law frameworks, all three countries are in transition. Somalia is the laggard, with an outdated mining code and only draft-level reforms, while its petroleum sector is comparatively more developed. Somalia contrasts with both Ethiopia and Kenya here mainly in terms of regulatory maturity. Ethiopia and Kenya both have more modern mining legislation, but even in those cases, implementation is uneven—especially outside major industrial corridors.

On resource ownership, there is a strong regional convergence toward centralized state ownership models. Even where federal systems exist (notably Ethiopia), the legal principle remains state ownership with varying degrees of decentralization in administration. Somalia’s “de facto mineral federalism” is the outlier, reflecting governance fragmentation more than formal policy design. Kenya is the most administratively straightforward, with national-level trust ownership and clearer institutional hierarchy.

For gold regulation, the dominant regional story is artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). Across all three countries, ASM activity outpaces formal industrial control. Somalia shows the weakest licensing enforcement and the most informal export structure, while Ethiopia has significant ASM clusters but a more structured state licensing system. Kenya sits somewhat in the middle, with more formalization but still ASM-heavy dynamics. The shared regional issue is not absence of regulation, but weak enforcement and limited traceability.

In critical minerals (lithium, rare earths, tantalum, cobalt), all three are still in early-stage governance. Ethiopia and Kenya appear more proactive in formally declaring strategic minerals and structuring oversight frameworks. Kenya stands out as the most systematized, with clearer “strategic minerals” classification. Somalia, by contrast, has geological potential but fragmented governance and minimal regulatory coherence.

The energy sector governance comparison shows the clearest divergence. Kenya is the most institutionally developed, with an established regulator and relatively mature renewable energy expansion (geothermal and wind in particular). Ethiopia also has strong state control and significant hydropower dominance, but is more centralized and reforming its IPP space. Somalia again lags due to limited regulatory capacity, despite offshore petroleum interest.

Big picture: the region is moving in the same direction (state-centric ownership + modernization of mining/energy law), but outcomes diverge sharply based on:

- regulatory capacity (Kenya strongest),
- federal coordination (Ethiopia mixed but structured),

- and institutional fragility (Somalia weakest).

B. Institutional capacity comparison

This second table sharpens the comparison by focusing less on “laws on paper” and more on how mining governance actually functions in practice—and the differences become more stark.

Across all four dimensions, Somalia stands out as the most fragmented system, Ethiopia represents a centralized but state-driven model, and Kenya shows the most institutionally formalized and market-facing framework.

On mining regulator strength, the pattern is essentially a spectrum of institutionalization. Somalia’s regulatory environment is weak and divided between federal and regional authorities, which creates overlapping claims and inconsistent enforcement. Ethiopia, by contrast, has consolidated authority under strong federal ministries, giving it administrative coherence even if decision-making is highly centralized. Kenya sits at the most advanced end, with relatively independent regulators and clearer licensing procedures that reduce discretion and ambiguity. The key difference here is not just strength, but predictability of governance—which is highest in Kenya and lowest in Somalia.

In revenue management, the contrast is even more consequential. Somalia faces structural leakage risks: unclear royalty frameworks, weak tax administration, and limited enforcement capacity mean that resource rents are difficult to capture consistently. Ethiopia performs better due to centralized fiscal control, which improves collection efficiency but concentrates revenue at the federal level. Kenya again is the most systematized, with relatively transparent taxation and more established revenue-sharing and reporting mechanisms. The underlying divergence is between extractive capture capacity vs fiscal transparency and institutional routinization.

The security of mining areas dimension highlights one of the most distinctive regional differences. Somalia’s mining security is often hybridized—sometimes provided by regional administrations, sometimes by private actors, and occasionally linked to informal “security-for-access” arrangements. This creates what is effectively a securitized bargaining economy around extraction rights. Ethiopia relies primarily on state security forces, especially in strategic extraction zones, reflecting stronger state penetration but also political centralization. Kenya is comparatively stable, with mining activity occurring in a more predictable security environment, reducing the need for militarized arrangements. The key difference is that Somalia’s mining sector is structurally tied to negotiated security provision, unlike the other two.

Finally, foreign investment control shows how governance style shapes investment entry. Somalia’s system is highly ad hoc, relying on negotiated deals that vary by region and political actor, which increases uncertainty but also flexibility. Ethiopia uses structured federal concessions, meaning investment is more controlled and standardized, though less flexible. Kenya operates a competitive but regulated licensing system, which tends to attract investors seeking predictability and rule-based entry. The key divergence here is between informal deal-making (Somalia), centralized state negotiation (Ethiopia), and regulated market competition (Kenya).

Table

Area	Somalia	Ethiopia	Kenya	Key difference
Mining regulator strength	Weak federal regulator; competing regional authorities	Strong state institutions (Ministry of Mines & Energy)	Independent regulatory agencies + licensing system	Kenya strongest institutional depth
Revenue management	Fragmented, high leakage risk, unclear royalty sharing	Central fiscal control, better collection capacity	Transparent fiscal regime + established taxation systems	Somalia weakest revenue capture
Security of mining areas	Often provided by regional states or private actors (“security-for-minerals”) (HORN REVIEW)	State security forces dominate extraction zones	Generally stable security environment for mining	Somalia uniquely securitized
Foreign investment control	Highly negotiated, often ad hoc agreements	Structured federal concessions	Competitive but regulated licensing rounds	Somalia most informal

The table can be read as a clear typology of three distinct extractive governance systems in the Horn of Africa, each shaped by how authority, enforcement, and investment access are organized in practice rather than in law alone.

Somalia: Fragmented, negotiated, securitized resource governance Resource governance is characterized by overlapping authorities, weak institutional consolidation, and high reliance on negotiated arrangements between federal actors, regional administrations, and non-state or private security providers. Regulatory outcomes are transactional rather than rule-based, with access to resources often tied to local power balances and security arrangements. This produces flexibility, but also high uncertainty, leakage risk, and inconsistent enforcement.

Ethiopia: Centralized, state-dominant, administratively structured model Governance is anchored in strong federal institutions that maintain tight control over licensing, fiscal flows, and strategic resources. The system is bureaucratically coherent and state-led, with relatively

high administrative capacity and centralized decision-making. However, this structure prioritizes control over market flexibility, meaning investment and resource allocation are heavily mediated by state planning and political priorities.

Kenya: Institutionalized, regulated, investor-predictable framework Kenya represents the most rules-based system, where independent or semi-independent regulators, clearer licensing procedures, and more transparent fiscal regimes create a relatively predictable investment environment. While not free of challenges—especially in ASM regulation and enforcement gaps—the system is structurally oriented toward procedural consistency, legal clarity, and market-facing governance.

Key insight

The three cases reflect a progression from negotiated governance (Somalia) to centralized administrative governance (Ethiopia) to institutionalized regulatory governance (Kenya). Each model trades off differently between control, flexibility, and predictability, shaping not only investment outcomes but also how resource authority is exercised on the ground.

C. Sector-specific comparison

This table highlights a consistent theme across the three countries: a gap between formal regulatory systems and actual extraction realities, especially in the gold sector. Each case reflects a different type of “implementation gap” rather than absence of policy.

Somalia shows the most severe disconnect between law and practice. Although mining legislation exists, enforcement capacity is weak, and artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) dominates production. The result is a largely informal export system where the state has limited ability to monitor output or capture fiscal value. The key structural problem is not just informality, but state incapacity to convert resources into revenue.

1. GOLD

Country	System	Reality on ground	Key issue
Somalia	Mining law exists but weak enforcement	ASM dominates, informal exports common	State cannot capture value
Ethiopia	Licensing system under federal authority	Gold extraction tied to regional states	Regional tensions affect control
Kenya	Licensed artisanal + industrial gold mining	More formal but ASM still significant	Illegal mining in western regions

Ethiopia presents a different dynamic: the regulatory system is stronger and formally centralized under federal authority, but in practice gold extraction is heavily influenced by regional state structures. This creates a layered governance problem where control over

resources becomes entangled in center–region relations. The main issue here is political and administrative fragmentation within a formally centralized system, where jurisdictional tensions reduce policy coherence.

Kenya sits at a more advanced point in institutional development, with both artisanal and industrial mining operating under a licensing framework. However, ASM remains significant, and illegal mining persists, particularly in western regions. The challenge is less about absence of regulation and more about enforcement consistency and regulation of dispersed informal activity within an otherwise structured system.

Overall pattern: All three cases demonstrate that formal mining laws are not the binding constraint; rather, the key differentiator is state capacity to enforce, coordinate across administrative levels, and regulate ASM economies. Somalia struggles with value capture, Ethiopia with center–region control tensions, and Kenya with enforcement completeness in otherwise functioning institutions.

In summary, gold is the least institutionalized mineral across the Horn, making it the most conflict-prone. Strengthen institutions, formalize ASM, improve enforcement, coordination. Expand transparent licensing systems and digital tracking. Clarify revenue sharing between central and regional governments. Invest in geological data and cadastral systems. Increase monitoring of exports and mineral supply chains. Improve security governance in extraction zones. Harmonize mining laws across regional and federal levels. Attract investment through predictable, rules-based regulation. In Sudan, ask UAE to stop processing the gold of rebellions and instead contribute constructively in Masr-led conference diplomacy with the EU leading from behind.

CRITICAL RAW MATERIALS (CRM: lithium, cobalt, REEs, tantalum)

This table shows a clear divergence in mining governance maturity and strategic mineral positioning across the Horn of Africa, with countries moving at different speeds from exploration dependence toward structured resource strategies.

Somalia sits at an early transition stage where a formal mining code exists but is outdated and weakly enforced. Institutional authority remains fragmented, with “mineral federalism” emerging in practice due to limited central control. Despite this, there is growing attention to potential lithium and rare earth element (REE) prospects in northern regions, meaning the strategic direction is still largely speculative and opportunity-driven rather than policy-driven.

Ethiopia presents a more coherent state-led model. Mining proclamations and investment frameworks are supported by strong centralized institutions, giving the state high capacity to direct sector development. The strategic orientation is increasingly focused on industrial .

Table

Country	Legal status	Institutional strength	Strategic direction

Somalia	Emerging legal framework; outdated mining code	Very weak federal control; “mineral federalism” emerging (HORN REVIEW)	Lithium/REE potential in northern regions
Ethiopia	Mining proclamations + investment policy	Strong centralized state coordination	Focus on industrial minerals + emerging lithium potential
Kenya	Strategic Minerals Regulations (2017) + declared list of 14 strategic minerals	Moderate-to-strong regulatory clarity	Move toward “strategic minerals state control”
Djibouti/Eritrea	Limited legal frameworks	Low institutional capacity	Mostly exploration-stage

minerals and emerging lithium development, reflecting a deliberate attempt to link geology to industrial policy and long-term value addition.

Kenya shows the most legally structured system in the group, with defined strategic minerals regulations and an official list of priority resources. Institutional strength is moderate to strong, and governance is more predictable. The strategic shift toward state-guided control of strategic minerals indicates a hybrid model where market participation remains important but operates within a clearer framework of national resource prioritization.

Djibouti and Eritrea remain at an earlier stage of development, with limited legal frameworks and relatively low institutional capacity. Their mining sectors are still largely exploration-driven, meaning strategic direction is not yet strongly defined beyond attracting early-stage investment and geological surveying.

Overall, the region reflects a gradient of mineral governance evolution from Somalia’s fragmented and emerging system, through Ethiopia’s centralized developmental model, to Kenya’s more regulated and institutionalized framework, with Djibouti and Eritrea still primarily in exploration mode. The key insight is that while strategic minerals like lithium and REEs are becoming increasingly important, only Ethiopia and Kenya currently have the institutional capacity to convert geological potential into coherent long-term industrial strategy. In summary, Kenya is the most “policy-ready”; Somalia is the most “fragmented”.

4. ENERGY (oil, gas, electricity systems)

This table highlights a clear energy governance gradient across the Horn of Africa, where differences are driven less by resource endowment alone and more by institutional capacity, infrastructure development, and regulatory maturity.

Somalia shows a dual reality in petroleum governance: offshore licensing frameworks exist and attract political attention, but governance remains highly sensitive and contested. The electricity sector is structurally weak, with limited national grid coverage and heavy reliance on imports and localized generation. The key feature is that energy governance is politically driven but institutionally underdeveloped, especially in offshore hydrocarbons where sovereignty and revenue expectations are high but administrative capacity is limited.

Country	Petroleum governance	Electricity governance	Key feature
Somalia	Petroleum laws + offshore licensing efforts	Weak national grid, reliance on imports	Offshore oil politically sensitive
Ethiopia	Strong state-controlled hydro + IPPs	Expanding national grid (GERD influence)	Hydro-dominated energy state
Kenya	Petroleum Act + independent regulator	Advanced renewable mix (geothermal, wind)	Most diversified energy system
Djibouti	Small grid, import-dependent	Geothermal potential emerging	External dependence

Ethiopia represents a highly centralized, state-led energy model anchored in large-scale hydropower development. Petroleum governance is less central compared to electricity dominance, where state control over generation and transmission remains strong, reinforced by major infrastructure such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The system is characterized by hydro-dominant energy planning with expanding national grid integration, making electricity a strategic pillar of state-building and industrialization.

Kenya stands out as the most diversified and institutionally mature energy system in the region. Petroleum governance is structured under a defined legal and regulatory framework, while electricity generation benefits from a strong mix of geothermal, wind, hydro, and thermal sources. The presence of independent regulation and competitive energy planning results in a market-responsive and diversified energy transition model, reducing dependence on any single source.

Djibouti reflects a small, import-dependent energy system with limited domestic generation capacity. While geothermal potential is emerging, current electricity supply relies heavily on imports and external partnerships. The key feature is structural dependence on external energy sources, with gradual exploration of indigenous renewable options as a long-term strategy.

Sudan has a petroleum-heavy energy history, with infrastructure and production capacity significantly disrupted by political instability and conflict. Electricity generation is uneven, with urban centers partially supplied and rural areas facing chronic shortages. The system is characterized by **declining hydrocarbon stability combined with fragile grid infrastructure**, making governance highly dependent on political conditions and external support.

South Sudan remains heavily dependent on crude oil exports as its primary energy and fiscal pillar, while domestic electricity access is extremely limited. Infrastructure is underdeveloped, and the energy system is shaped by oil revenue dependence rather than diversified energy planning. The key feature is **extreme oil dependency with minimal domestic energy infrastructure development**, making the sector highly vulnerable to production shocks and political instability.

Overall, the region displays multiple energy governance models: Somalia as politically sensitive but institutionally weak, especially in offshore hydrocarbons; Ethiopia as a centralized, hydro-dominated state energy system focused on grid expansion; Kenya as a diversified, regulated, and institutionally mature energy market; Djibouti as a small-scale, import-dependent system with emerging renewable potential; Sudan as a conflict-affected, petroleum-disrupted system with fragile electricity infrastructure; and South Sudan as an extreme oil-dependent economy with minimal domestic energy development. The key insight is that stronger institutions (Kenya, Ethiopia) enable diversification and planning, while weaker or conflict-affected states (Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan) remain constrained by fragmentation, instability, and overreliance on hydrocarbons or imports.

Pattern: Kenya = diversified; Ethiopia = state-controlled hydro; Somalia = fragmented + high potential but low capacity.

Key structural insights

Across the Horn of Africa, mining and petroleum sectors are formally governed by increasingly modern legal frameworks, yet enforcement capacity diverges sharply from one state to another. Kenya and Ethiopia have been more successful in translating legislation into operational regulatory systems, whereas Somalia exhibits the widest disconnect between statutory authority and real-world control over extractive resources. In Somalia, the state's legal claim to regulate minerals and hydrocarbons is consistently undermined by fragmented territorial authority, weak administrative reach, and the prevalence of informal extraction networks. As a result, legal sovereignty over resources exists on paper, while effective control is exercised by sub-state actors, private operators, or security-linked groups.

In Somalia in particular, control over extractive resources is determined less by statutory frameworks and more by security arrangements on the ground. Actors that provide or guarantee security in mining or exploration zones effectively gain influence over licensing, taxation, and revenue flows. This dynamic has enabled regional administrations to operate as de facto regulators of extractive activity, often setting their own access rules and negotiating directly with investors or operators, as noted in Horn Review analyses. In contrast, Kenya and Ethiopia exhibit more visible alignment between formal state security structures and regulatory

authority, which reduces—but does not eliminate—the space for parallel control systems. The Horn-wide pattern suggests that in weakly consolidated states, security provision becomes the primary currency of resource governance, displacing formal legal authority.

A consistent regional pattern is that electricity and petroleum sectors are more institutionally developed than mining sectors. Across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti in particular, energy governance benefits from clearer regulatory agencies, more structured investment frameworks, and stronger integration into national development planning. Mining, by contrast, remains heavily informal in practice, with artisanal and small-scale extraction dominating production in many areas and regulatory enforcement remaining inconsistent. Even where petroleum legislation is advanced, as in Somalia, institutional capacity to manage licensing, monitoring, and revenue assurance remains significantly weaker than in electricity regulation or downstream energy management systems elsewhere in the region.

The emergence of lithium, rare earths, tantalum, and other strategic minerals is reshaping internal governance dynamics, particularly in Somalia. Potential deposits in northern and central regions are increasing the bargaining power of sub-national authorities, who are positioning themselves as gatekeepers of access and licensing. This is contributing to what some analysts describe as “mineral federalism,” where control over subsurface resources becomes an additional axis of decentralization alongside political and security fragmentation. Similar, though less extreme, pressures are also emerging in Ethiopia and Kenya, where strategic mineral classification is prompting tighter central oversight while simultaneously incentivizing regional competition over resource-endowed territories.

Somalia’s existing and legacy mining frameworks reflect a highly centralized legal design that assumes strong national enforcement capacity. In practice, however, regional administrations control access to land, security conditions are localized, and federal institutions lack the operational reach to implement licensing uniformly. This structural mismatch has rendered centralized legal control ineffective. The implication is that Somalia’s extractive governance cannot rely on legal centralism alone and instead requires a cooperative federal model in which authority is shared between federal licensing bodies and regional implementation structures.

Comparative evidence from Kenya and Ethiopia shows that more coherent fiscal systems—particularly predictable taxation and clearer revenue allocation rules—are essential for maintaining state authority over extractive sectors. Somalia’s main weakness lies in the absence of a trusted and enforceable royalty-sharing framework between federal and regional levels. This gap has led to fragmented fiscal practices, including parallel taxation regimes and ad hoc agreements that undermine national revenue consolidation. Without a transparent and enforceable redistribution mechanism, extractive governance will continue to incentivize institutional fragmentation rather than coordination.

In Somalia, mining governance cannot be separated from security governance. The presence or absence of armed protection directly shapes who can access extraction sites, negotiate contracts, and enforce payment obligations. Effective policy design therefore requires explicit integration of security considerations into licensing systems. This includes structured mapping of security responsibilities for extraction zones, the establishment of demilitarized or

neutralized mining areas where feasible, and the regulation of local security arrangements to prevent capture by non-state armed actors or politically affiliated groups.

Compared to Kenya and Ethiopia, Somalia remains at an earlier stage of institutional development in the extractive sector, where legal frameworks are still being designed or revised rather than consistently implemented. Attempting to scale up extraction under these conditions creates significant risks, including elite capture, corruption, and the financing of conflict actors through resource rents. The sequencing challenge is therefore critical: institutional consolidation, regulatory capacity, and revenue systems must be strengthened before large-scale commercial extraction is expanded.

Given current political and administrative realities, neither full centralization nor full regional autonomy provides a stable governance solution. Full centralization is constrained by limited federal capacity, while full decentralization risks institutional fragmentation and uncoordinated exploitation. The most viable approach is a hybrid model that combines federal-level licensing authority with regionally implemented operational agreements, supported by a national revenue clearing mechanism that ensures standardized collection and redistribution of extractive revenues.

Kenya's approach to strategic minerals demonstrates the value of clearly defining priority resource categories under national policy, thereby strengthening state leverage over high-value commodities while improving investor predictability. Regulatory clarity also tends to attract more structured and compliant investment flows. For Somalia, adapting this approach would involve formally designating strategic mineral zones, standardizing licensing procedures across federal and regional levels, and creating clear regulatory categories for emerging resources such as lithium and rare earth elements to reduce discretionary and informal negotiation practices.

Bottom line synthesis

Kenya represents the most institutionally advanced extractive governance system in the region, particularly in its integration of strategic mineral policy and diversified energy regulation. Ethiopia demonstrates strong centralized control over key extractive and energy sectors, supported by relatively cohesive state institutions. Somalia, by contrast, possesses significant resource potential but remains constrained by fragmented institutional authority, resulting in what can be described as a condition of "fragmented sovereignty" over natural resources. Regionally, extractive governance is increasingly converging toward two dominant trends: the strategic prioritization of critical minerals and the growing entanglement of resource control with security governance structures.

28. Red Sea and Ethiopia

For Ethiopia to exercise constructive leadership in the Red Sea region, it must shift from a posture centered on strategic entitlement toward one based on regional partnership, economic interdependence, diplomatic credibility, and cooperative security.

As the Horn of Africa's largest population center and one of Africa's most influential states, Ethiopia possesses the demographic, economic, and geopolitical weight to become a stabilizing

regional power. However, sustainable leadership in the Red Sea cannot emerge through coercion, unilateral rhetoric, or military pressure regarding maritime access. It requires legitimacy, trust-building, and institutional diplomacy.

A constructive Ethiopian Red Sea strategy should therefore pursue:

- peaceful economic access rather than territorial ambition,
- multilateral regionalism rather than unilateralism,
- cooperative maritime development,
- reconciliation with neighbors,
- and strategic partnerships with the European Union, the African Union, Gulf states, and East African partners.

Ethiopia's Strategic Position

Ethiopia is a structurally significant state in Africa due to its demographic, political, and geographic weight. It is the second most populous country on the continent. It also hosts the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa. This institutional role amplifies its diplomatic influence across Africa. Ethiopia plays a central role in the Horn of Africa's security architecture. Its geography connects the interior of East Africa with the Red Sea basin. This position gives it both opportunities and constraints in external trade. The country's economic transformation depends heavily on external connectivity. Maritime access remains a core requirement for sustained development. Regional stability directly affects Ethiopia's trade performance.

Energy integration is also increasingly important for long-term growth. Transport corridors determine the efficiency of its export-import system. At present, over 90 percent of Ethiopia's trade flows through Djibouti. This creates a high level of structural dependency. Such dependency exposes Ethiopia to external logistical risks. It also limits diversification of trade routes. Any disruption in a single corridor can affect the entire economy. This vulnerability is therefore a strategic concern. However, it does not automatically imply instability if managed cooperatively. Constructive leadership requires addressing this issue through diplomacy. Regional cooperation offers more sustainable solutions than unilateral action. Infrastructure partnerships can reduce logistical bottlenecks. Economic integration can improve mutual trust among neighboring states. Diversified corridors can enhance resilience of trade systems. Digital customs systems can improve efficiency at border points. Energy trade agreements can strengthen interdependence. Transport modernization can reduce costs and delays. Ethiopia's development strategy must balance ambition with regional sensitivity. Respect for neighboring sovereignty is essential in this context. Predictable diplomatic engagement strengthens regional confidence. Long-term stability depends on institutionalized cooperation mechanisms. The Horn of Africa benefits from interconnected rather than competitive economies. Ethiopia can play a convening role in regional integration efforts. Its size and market capacity give it natural leadership potential. However, leadership must be exercised through cooperation rather than pressure. Maritime access discussions should prioritize commercial arrangements. Such

arrangements are internationally recognized and widely used. Trust-building measures are essential for durable agreements. Economic vulnerability can be transformed into opportunity through integration. Ultimately, Ethiopia's structural challenges can become a foundation for regional cooperation if managed constructively.

Core Principles for Constructive Red Sea Leadership

A. Respect for Sovereignty

The foundational requirement for constructive regional leadership is an unequivocal and consistently demonstrated respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of neighboring states, particularly Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan. Any political discourse or strategic communication that implies historical entitlement to ports or territorial revisionism risks eroding regional trust, heightening security sensitivities, and generating unnecessary diplomatic friction across the Horn of Africa.

In this context, constructive leadership requires a clear and public reaffirmation that maritime access must be pursued strictly through peaceful, legal, and commercially negotiated arrangements. Such access should be grounded in international law, mutual benefit, and economic interdependence, rather than coercive leverage, military pressure, or revisionist narratives.

A transparent commitment to these principles would substantially strengthen Ethiopia's diplomatic credibility, reduce regional suspicion, and create a more stable foundation for long-term cooperation.

B. Transition from Hard Power to Economic Statecraft

Ethiopia's most sustainable and influential form of regional power lies not in military posture, but in economic statecraft and structural connectivity. A forward-looking regional strategy would therefore prioritize development-oriented instruments of influence, including logistics integration, infrastructure partnerships, trade corridor development, energy cooperation, industrial linkages, and digital connectivity systems.

Rather than framing maritime access or port infrastructure as strategic assets to be controlled, Ethiopia would benefit from positioning itself as the primary engine of regional economic transformation. This reorientation reframes national strength in terms of productivity, interdependence, and shared growth rather than territorial competition or zero-sum strategy.

Such an approach closely mirrors successful integration models observed in Southeast Asia and parts of Europe, where regional leadership has been achieved through trade facilitation, institutional cooperation, and supply chain integration rather than coercive competition.

III. Strategic Actions Ethiopia Should Pursue

1. Normalize and Institutionalize Relations With Eritrea

The Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship remains central to the long-term stability of the Red Sea sub-region. A durable peace architecture requires the establishment of permanent diplomatic dialogue mechanisms, structured military deconfliction channels, expanded cross-border trade frameworks, and the gradual reopening and normalization of transport corridors.

Any sustainable arrangement regarding Assab or Massawa can only emerge through incremental trust-building, institutional continuity, and predictable engagement over time.

A key strategic adjustment would be Ethiopia's explicit recognition and affirmation of Eritrean sovereignty over its ports, coupled with parallel negotiations to secure reliable, long-term commercial access. This distinction between sovereignty and access is essential: sovereignty disputes tend to destabilize regions, while commercially governed access arrangements are widely recognized as legitimate under international practice and can support mutual economic benefit.

2. Develop a Cooperative Horn of Africa Economic Architecture

Ethiopia is well positioned to play a convening role in advancing a broader Horn of Africa economic framework focused on integration rather than dominance. This could include coordinated efforts in customs modernization, transport harmonization, regional energy pooling, and maritime cooperation mechanisms.

Such an initiative could potentially bring together Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, and South Sudan into a gradually deepening economic cooperation structure. The objective would be to reposition Ethiopia not as a hegemonic actor, but as a facilitating hub for regional connectivity and institutional coordination.

Constructive leadership in this context is most effectively expressed through the strengthening of institutions, rules, and shared systems rather than through coercive leverage or unilateral influence.

3. Build a Cooperative Red Sea Maritime Policy

Ethiopia could contribute meaningfully to the development of a cooperative and inclusive Red Sea maritime framework focused on shared security and mutual prosperity. Priority areas could include anti-piracy coordination, maritime environmental protection, coordinated port development planning, and the enhancement of Red Sea trade security mechanisms.

A guiding principle of this approach would be the promotion of shared maritime prosperity rather than exclusive strategic control or competitive port dominance. This framing would help reduce regional anxieties and improve confidence among both African coastal states and key external stakeholders, including Gulf countries and international trading partners.

29. Repair Relations With Somalia

Recent tensions with Somalia over maritime agreements have had a noticeable negative impact on Ethiopia's regional credibility and have contributed to heightened diplomatic sensitivity across the Horn of Africa. These developments underscored the importance of clear, consistent,

and carefully coordinated foreign policy messaging in a region where historical grievances and security concerns remain deeply embedded. Constructive leadership requires a deliberate shift away from unilateral or ambiguously framed agreements toward fully transparent, mutually negotiated frameworks grounded in international law and regional consensus. Rebuilding trust with Somalia depends on sustained diplomatic engagement at the highest political and technical levels, supported by continuous communication channels that reduce the risk of misunderstanding or escalation.

A renewed approach should prioritize unequivocal respect for Somali sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in relation to maritime jurisdiction and coastal governance. Ethiopia's long-term strategic interests are best served by reinforcing Somalia's state institutions rather than circumventing or weakening them through parallel arrangements. Transparent consultation with Somali authorities in any regional maritime or economic agreement is essential to restoring confidence and demonstrating good faith. This includes ensuring that all agreements are clearly communicated, publicly justified, and aligned with established regional and international legal frameworks.

Constructive leadership would also involve expanding diplomatic presence and engagement mechanisms between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, including regular bilateral summits, technical working groups, and crisis prevention platforms. Such mechanisms would reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation and help institutionalize cooperation beyond short-term political cycles. In addition, Ethiopia could support Somalia's capacity-building efforts in maritime governance, customs administration, and port management as part of a broader stabilization strategy. Strengthening Somali institutional capacity would contribute directly to regional security and economic predictability.

Economic cooperation between the two countries should be reframed around shared development priorities rather than contested strategic assets. This includes cross-border trade facilitation, infrastructure connectivity, and coordinated logistics planning that benefits both inland and coastal economies. A stable and predictable Ethiopia–Somalia relationship would also enhance investor confidence and encourage broader regional integration initiatives supported by international partners.

Ultimately, stable Ethiopia–Somalia relations are essential not only for bilateral cooperation but also for the wider security architecture of the Horn of Africa. The durability of regional peace depends heavily on mutual recognition, respect for sovereignty, and predictable diplomatic conduct. Any perception of territorial ambition or coercive intent risks undermining years of fragile progress in regional normalization efforts. By contrast, a consistent commitment to dialogue, transparency, and institutional cooperation would significantly enhance Ethiopia's standing as a responsible regional actor.

Long-term stability will require embedding these principles into formal agreements, regional forums, and multilateral frameworks that extend beyond ad hoc diplomacy. It will also require political restraint in public communication, ensuring that strategic objectives are articulated in ways that reinforce trust rather than suspicion. Over time, such an approach could transform Ethiopia–Somalia relations from episodic tension into structured cooperation anchored in mutual benefit. This transformation would serve as a cornerstone for broader Horn of Africa

integration and would strengthen the region's collective capacity to manage security, trade, and development challenges in a coordinated manner.

30. The Struggle over the Nile

Strategic competition over the Nile and its basin is one of the most important geopolitical issues in northeastern Africa because it links water security, energy production, agriculture, state-building, and regional power. The competition involves not only access to water but also competing visions of sovereignty, development, and regional order among the basin states.

The principal actors are Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan, although other basin countries—including Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and Democratic Republic of the Congo—also have important interests in Nile governance.

Historically, Egypt occupied the dominant position in the basin. Colonial-era agreements and Egypt's geopolitical influence enabled it to secure preferential access to Nile waters. Because more than 90 percent of Egypt's freshwater supply comes from the Nile, Egyptian policymakers have traditionally viewed control of river flows as an existential security issue. For decades, Egypt's strategy focused on preserving historical water allocations and preventing upstream developments that could significantly alter river flows.

Ethiopia represents the major challenger to this historical order. Approximately 85 percent of the water reaching Egypt originates in the Ethiopian highlands through the Blue Nile system. Despite this contribution, Ethiopia historically benefited relatively little from Nile development. As its population, economy, and energy demands expanded, Ethiopian governments increasingly argued that upstream states possess sovereign rights to utilize basin resources for development. This perspective culminated in the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which has become both a symbol of Ethiopian national development and the focal point of Nile geopolitics.

Sudan occupies an intermediate position. At different times it has aligned more closely with Egypt or Ethiopia depending on perceived benefits. Sudan potentially gains from regulated river flows, reduced flooding, and increased electricity generation associated with Ethiopian dam projects, but it also remains concerned about water management coordination and downstream impacts.

The underlying competition reflects a broader transition from a **historical rights regime** to a **developmental sovereignty regime**. Egypt emphasizes established usage rights and water security. Ethiopia emphasizes equitable utilization and sovereign development. Sudan attempts to balance both concerns while pursuing its own agricultural and energy interests.¹⁰

The Nile Basin is highly fragmented legally: (1) There is no basin-wide treaty binding all 11 countries (2) Cooperation is mainly through the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) (soft-law

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/5U2JXUVdVS4?si=BmjECxTto-plJ08T>

cooperation platform) (3) Downstream–upstream tension persists: (4) Egypt & Sudan rely on historic allocation agreements (1929, 1959)

Upstream states support equitable utilization principles (UNWC-style). Legal fragmentation is still the norm. The UN Watercourses Convention is partially adopted (mainly upstream). The UNECE Water Convention is expanding but not yet basin-universal

That is No treaty currently resolves the core political issue:

allocation vs. equitable use vs. historical rights

The competition is not purely about water volumes. It also concerns energy, agriculture, and regional influence. Ethiopia sees hydropower as a foundation for industrialization and regional electricity exports. Egypt views uninterrupted water access as essential for food production, urban growth, and political stability. Sudan sees opportunities for irrigation expansion and power generation. Thus, Nile politics combines economic development objectives with national security concerns.

Climate change intensifies these dynamics. Population growth, urbanization, droughts, and changing rainfall patterns increase pressure on all basin states. Water scarcity can transform technical disputes into political crises if cooperative mechanisms remain weak.

From a Horn of Africa perspective, Nile competition intersects directly with regional integration. Ethiopia's emergence as a major economic and demographic power strengthens its bargaining position. Sudan's instability complicates basin governance. Egypt's growing engagement in the Horn reflects its desire to secure strategic influence in upstream regions. Consequently, Nile politics increasingly overlaps with Red Sea geopolitics, infrastructure development, and broader regional alliances.

The implications for development are mixed. If managed cooperatively, the Nile could become a source of regional integration through shared electricity grids, coordinated water management, agricultural modernization, and cross-border investment. Hydropower generation in Ethiopia could support industrial growth throughout eastern Africa, while coordinated river management could improve resilience to climate shocks.

If competition dominates, however, the basin risks becoming a source of recurring geopolitical tension. Rival alliance-building, securitization of water policy, and nationalist politics could undermine regional cooperation and discourage investment. Although large-scale interstate war remains unlikely, persistent diplomatic confrontation can impede broader integration efforts across northeastern Africa.

Figure Elephantine Island - Revenue streams matters



Key Hydropolitical Challenges:

- (1) Unequal water allocation and historical agreements create disputes between upper and lower riparian states.
- (2) Population growth and agricultural demands in the basin place additional stress on water resources.
- (3) Climate change affects rainfall patterns, exacerbating scarcity during dry seasons
- (4) Pollution from industrial, agricultural, and household sources threatens water quality

The strategic challenge for the future is therefore transforming the Nile from a zero-sum security issue into a shared development resource. This requires stronger basin institutions, transparent data-sharing, coordinated dam operations, joint infrastructure planning, and recognition that long-term water security ultimately depends on cooperation among upstream and downstream states rather than unilateral control. In this sense, the Nile basin represents both one of Africa's greatest geopolitical risks and one of its greatest opportunities for regional integration and sustainable development.

The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was launched in 1999 as a transitional cooperation framework among the Nile riparian states (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC, with South Sudan later joining and Eritrea as an observer). Its core purpose was to prevent conflict over the Nile by creating a shared platform for data exchange, joint projects, and dialogue on water use rather than immediate binding water allocation rules.

It was explicitly designed as a *stopgap institution* until a permanent basin-wide agreement could be reached.

At its core, the NBI introduced the idea that the Nile should be managed through “equitable and reasonable use” and “win-win” development rather than rigid historical quotas. This was politically significant because it challenged the older downstream-centered order, especially Egypt’s reliance on historical water allocation claims, while also trying to reassure upstream states that development (dams, irrigation, hydropower) would not automatically be blocked.

The expected “next step” was the creation of a permanent Nile Basin Commission, formalized through the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), which would turn the NBI from a dialogue platform into a binding legal institution governing water allocation and basin development. However, this transition has not fully materialized.

The reason the NBI never effectively evolved into a unified Nile Basin Commission is mainly political rather than technical.

First, there is a deep structural disagreement over water rights. Upstream states (especially Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania) support the idea of equitable use without inherited quotas, while Egypt and Sudan have historically insisted on “acquired rights” based on colonial-era treaties that guarantee them a fixed share of Nile flows. This disagreement makes it extremely difficult to agree on binding rules for allocation, which is exactly what a commission would require.

Second, the Nile is a zero-sum or near-zero-sum resource in perception, especially for Egypt, which depends on the river for over 90% of its freshwater. This creates high political sensitivity: any move toward redistribution is framed domestically as an existential security issue rather than a technical water-management question. That makes compromise politically costly.

Third, the CFA process exposed institutional fragmentation within the NBI itself. While many upstream countries signed and ratified the CFA, Egypt and Sudan refused, meaning the foundational legal agreement needed to transform the NBI into a full commission never achieved basin-wide consensus. Without unanimity or broad inclusion, the proposed commission lacked legitimacy across the system.

Fourth, external actors and infrastructure politics shifted incentives away from a single basin authority. Countries increasingly pursued bilateral or sub-regional deals (for example, Ethiopia–Sudan hydropower coordination or China-backed infrastructure financing), reducing reliance on a unified basin institution.

Finally, the NBI was intentionally designed as a transitional, not sovereign, institution. It has no enforcement power over states, only coordination and facilitation functions. Turning it into a commission would require states to surrender some sovereignty over water planning—something they have consistently resisted.

So in structural terms, the NBI persists because it is flexible and non-binding, while a Nile Basin Commission has never fully emerged because it would require binding rules on one of

the most politically sensitive resources in Africa, where upstream development goals and downstream survival concerns remain fundamentally misaligned.

In short: the NBI succeeded as a *platform for cooperation*, but it never became a commission because the Nile remains governed by competing sovereignty claims rather than a shared legal regime.

Table

Dimension	Ethiopia	Egypt	Sudan	Tanzania
Hydrological position	Major upstream source of Blue Nile (Abay)	Downstream terminal user of Nile system	Midstream state (Blue + White Nile convergence zone)	Lake Victoria basin state (White Nile headwaters system)
Water dependence	High (hydropower-led development, GERD)	Extremely high (~90%+ freshwater dependency)	High (agriculture + hydropower potential)	Moderate–high (Lake Victoria ecosystem, irrigation, hydropower)
Strategic interest	Maximise hydropower & sovereignty over Blue Nile flow timing	Preserve historical water shares & flow security	Balance between upstream projects & irrigation stability	Secure equitable use & Lake Victoria outflows
Conflict axis	GERD + flow regulation tensions with Egypt/Sudan	Fear of reduced flow & drought vulnerability	Buffer state between upstream dams & downstream dependence	Less central, but aligned with upstream equity position
Cooperation incentives	Regional energy exports, grid integration	Energy trade, stability of flows	Hydropower coordination + flood control	Lake Victoria Basin cooperation, fisheries, hydropower

Ethiopia and Egypt represent the central strategic tension in the Nile Basin, where Ethiopia prioritizes flow regulation for hydropower and development, while Egypt prioritizes

downstream water security and continuity of supply. Sudan occupies an intermediary position, benefiting from regulated flows and hydropower cooperation but also remaining exposed to both upstream dam operations and downstream dependency pressures. Tanzania, through its connection to the Lake Victoria and White Nile system, aligns more closely with an upstream coalition perspective that emphasizes equitable use rather than fixed historical allocation.

A basin-wide commission has not emerged because Egypt and Sudan generally favor historical rights and fixed allocation logic, while upstream states such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC favor the principle of equitable and reasonable use. These positions have never converged on binding rules regarding water quotas, enforcement authority, or veto rights over dam construction. As a result, cooperation has remained limited to the Nile Basin Initiative model, which facilitates coordination but does not enforce legally binding allocation decisions.

A fully functioning Nile Basin Commission would introduce predictable allocation rules by shifting from political bargaining to agreed basin-wide water-sharing principles, reducing crisis-driven negotiations during droughts or hydrological stress. It would also create a dam coordination mechanism to manage the timing and operation of large infrastructure projects such as the GERD and Sudanese dams, reducing flood and drought externalities across borders. In addition, it would establish a binding conflict prevention system through formal dispute resolution, lowering the risk of interstate escalation. Finally, it would improve data transparency by creating shared hydrological monitoring systems, reducing mistrust and information asymmetry between upstream and downstream states.

Ethiopia's approach has two distinct but reinforcing tracks: pulling the rivalry out of the narrow Nile arena into the wider Horn, where Ethiopia has more cards to play, and using the GERD itself as an instrument of regional influence rather than just a point of vulnerability.

Expanding the conflict into the Horn

The opening move was Ethiopia's own: the January 2024 memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, offering Ethiopia coastal access in exchange for potential recognition of Somaliland's independence, immediately drew sharp criticism from Somalia, which saw it as a sovereignty violation. That crisis is what gave Egypt its opening — Egypt delivered its first military aid to Somalia in over four decades in August 2024, a move widely read as a direct challenge to Ethiopian influence — and from there Egypt entered a formal security pact with Eritrea and Somalia, pledging military personnel and arms to Mogadishu. So in effect, Ethiopia's sea-access ambitions are what made the Horn a second front: by threatening Somalia's territorial claims and unsettling Eritrea (which sits adjacent to Ethiopia's preferred port options), Ethiopia gave Egypt a ready-made coalition of frightened littoral neighbors to organize against it — converting a dispute Egypt could frame in narrow legal/historic-rights terms on the Nile into a sprawling, multi-front contest where motives are murkier and Egypt risks being cast as the meddling outside power.

Ethiopia has pushed back asymmetrically rather than retreating. In response to the Egyptian-Eritrean-Somali pact, Ethiopia increased its military presence along the Ogaden border with Somalia and has been accused of encouraging insurgencies inside both Eritrea and Djibouti —

using covert destabilization as a deterrent against states that joined Cairo's containment effort. The competition has also institutionalized itself inside the African Union's Somalia mission: AUSSOM's authorized force includes 2,500 Ethiopian troops alongside 1,091 Egyptian troops, with the AU's mandate extended to the end of 2026, making this a durable operating environment rather than a temporary arrangement — meaning the two rivals now garrison the same security architecture, each trying to outweigh the other's institutional footprint.

Sudan's civil war adds a third overlapping front. Sudan's army chief al-Burhan receives military and diplomatic support from Eritrea and Egypt, while his rival Hemedti is backed by the UAE, with reports alleging an Emirati-financed training camp for Sudanese rebels inside Ethiopia's western region — putting Ethiopia, whether by design or permissiveness, on the opposite side of a proxy war from Egypt's Sudanese ally. Sudan has gone further, accusing both the UAE and Ethiopia of involvement in a drone strike on Khartoum airport — accusations Egypt has every incentive to amplify. The net effect is that Egypt is no longer dealing with Ethiopia on one issue (the dam) but is simultaneously contesting it in Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Sudan, which stretches Cairo's diplomatic and military bandwidth and gives Ethiopia multiple pressure points to trade against any single one.

Wielding power through the Nile itself

On the dam, Ethiopia's strategy has been to convert what was originally framed as a threat into a tool of regional integration — partly to defuse the "water security" narrative Egypt has used for decades, and partly because dependent neighbors are harder for Egypt to recruit against Ethiopia. The dam was financed largely through domestic bonds and citizen contributions rather than foreign loans, a strategy that preserved national ownership and limited the external financial leverage outside actors might otherwise hold over the project — denying Egypt one of the traditional tools (pressuring international lenders) it might have used to slow construction. Once built, Ethiopia began exporting electricity to Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya, with plans to extend to South Sudan and Tanzania, positioning itself as a regional energy exporter and fostering interdependence. Ethiopia earned roughly \$118 million in 2025 from power exports to Kenya, Djibouti and Sudan alone, part of a deliberate pivot in diplomatic discourse from contentious "water rights" toward energy integration. By embedding GERD in a regional grid, Ethiopia is signaling that hydropower exports can function as instruments of interdependence rather than unilateral dominance — a calculated reframing, since "rights" is a register where Egypt's decades of treaty-based argument carry weight, while "who supplies your electricity" is a register where Ethiopia is the indispensable party.

The dam's inauguration was staged as regional theater for exactly this purpose: Kenya's President Ruto, Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and Djibouti's President Guelleh all attended, while Egypt and Sudan were conspicuously absent — a public demonstration that Ethiopia could assemble its own coalition of regional stakeholders around the project even as its two main objectors stayed away. At the same time, Ethiopia has been diversifying its sea-access options beyond a single chokepoint — pursuing Berbera, Eritrean ports, and Kenya's Lamu corridor — so that no one neighbor, and by extension no Egyptian-aligned coalition, can leverage a port denial against it the way Egypt might hope to leverage water.

Put together, Ethiopia's logic is to multiply the dimensions of the contest — Red Sea access, Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, energy grids — so that Egypt's clearest source of leverage (a sympathetic international legal narrative on the Nile) gets diluted by messier, multi-front competition where capability and regional coalition-building matter more than treaty rights, and where Ethiopia, as the geographically central, most populous, and increasingly energy-rich state, has structural advantages Egypt lacks.

The entire Nile Basin debate is structured around the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization of shared water resources. This principle implies that no state has absolute ownership of the Nile, that all states have rights proportional to their needs, contributions, and sustainability requirements, and that no state should cause significant harm to others. The core disagreement is that Egypt interprets equity through historical entitlement and acquired rights, while upstream states interpret equity through developmental parity and equal opportunity for use.

Ethiopia actually provides about 85% of the Nile's water via the Blue Nile but uses very little of it, while Egypt and Sudan consume about 94% of the river's water downstream. Egypt depends on the Nile for roughly 90% of its water needs. Ethiopia, as it starts developing, wants its fair share of the waters.

The core tension lies between downstream countries Egypt and Sudan, which claim historic rights and national security needs, and upstream Ethiopia, which seeks development rights especially for hydropower to serve its population through projects like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Instead of large hydropower dams, the Nile basin can pursue solar and wind energy since Ethiopia and Egypt have massive solar potential that is absent from current strategies but advocated by grassroots groups. Improved irrigation replacing Egypt's flooding system with drip or sprinkler irrigation could conserve about 60% of water and double cultivable land. Small-scale irrigation using wells, ponds, and river diversion instead of large dams is viable in the Ethiopian Blue Nile basin. Groundwater extraction can tap the Nubian aquifer combined with desalination. Egypt can desalinate Mediterranean and Red Sea water for consumable fresh water. Pollution control through strict rules against water pollution preserves quality. Drainage improvement with new agricultural drains avoids water waste.

Along the Nile, agriculture, industry, and tourism compete for water. In Egypt's Delta alone, these sectors contribute 20% of GDP.

A water allocation quota system by sector prioritizes agriculture at about 80% of Nile water but reduces this via efficiency improvements, focuses industry on high-value low-water industries, and protects river quality and scenic access for tourism. Climate adaptation integration requires urban and economic plans to systematically include climate adaptation measures. Economic incentives include subsidizing drip irrigation for farmers, taxing water-intensive industries, and funding tourism infrastructure that does not deplete water. Joint benefit projects could see the GERD supply electricity to Egypt and Sudan while generating revenue for Ethiopia, and cross-border tourism along the Nile through cruise routes spanning

multiple countries. An equitable division principle implements strict water waste prevention rules and shares transboundary planning for minimal waste and fair division.

Summary

The Nile Basin is a textbook case of geography outrunning politics: hydrological interdependence among eleven riparian states has never been in serious doubt, but a century of treaty regimes built on exclusion, acquired rights, and unilateral fait accompli has kept that interdependence from ever hardening into shared institutions. A fully empowered Nile Basin Commission would supply what the basin has always lacked — predictable rules, joint monitoring, and a forum for resolving disputes before they escalate into construction on the ground. But an institution cannot manufacture the political choice it presupposes: so long as riparian states treat control over water as an extension of sovereignty rather than a resource to be governed in common, no commission, however well designed, can deliver more cooperation than its members are willing to permit. That is the basin's true constraint — not a deficit of legal or technical capacity, but a deficit of political will to trade exclusive control for collective governance.

Solutions to balance interests include establishing a long-term transboundary resource-sharing treaty that balances upstream and downstream needs with frameworks for future projects, implementing joint data sharing and cooperation through monitoring systems and coordinated dam operation to minimize downstream impact, creating compensation mechanisms where Ethiopia provides electricity to Egypt and Sudan while downstream countries fund upstream conservation efforts, and committing to certified water-saving measures where Ethiopia minimizes water retention during dam filling while Egypt and Sudan adopt irrigation efficiency improvements. The Nile Basin Initiative provides a multilateral framework but a binding agreement including all three countries remains unresolved.

The most pivotal solution is sustained cooperation among all Nile Basin countries on transboundary projects to ensure equitable water division and shared resources, complemented by addressing issues related to food insecurity in Egypt, and to provide alternative sources of energy to Ethiopia, something that the World Food Program and Global Gateway ought to be able to address in cooperation with authorities and leveraged towards broader regional constructive engagement by the main contestants.

31.YEMEN

Yemen's foreign policy toward the Horn of Africa is best understood as fragmented, geography-driven, and heavily shaped by internal conflict and wider Red Sea geopolitics rather than a single coherent national strategy.

At the core of this relationship is geography. Yemen sits directly across from the Horn of Africa at the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a narrow but globally critical chokepoint connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. This proximity makes the Horn—especially Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea—strategically unavoidable for Yemen. The region is central to maritime security, trade routes, and migration flows, and it also sits at the intersection of competing regional and international military interests.

The internationally recognized Yemeni government's foreign policy toward the Horn of Africa has historically focused on limited security cooperation and pragmatic engagement. This includes coordination with Djibouti and Somalia on maritime security, anti-smuggling efforts, and managing piracy risks in the Gulf of Aden. Migration is another major dimension, as Yemen has long been both a destination and transit point for Ethiopian and Somali migrants, leading to fluctuating policies that alternate between labor-driven openness and security-driven restriction. Since the escalation of Yemen's civil war in 2015, this official diplomacy has increasingly been shaped by alignment with Saudi- and UAE-led regional strategies, particularly those concerned with securing Red Sea shipping lanes and countering rival influence in the region.

In contrast, the Houthis movement has developed a different and more coercive form of external engagement with the Horn of Africa. Rather than traditional diplomacy, its approach is centered on maritime strategy in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb. The Houthis' actions, particularly disruptions to shipping, have had direct consequences for states such as Djibouti and Somalia, which are affected by increased militarization and international naval deployments. Their external links with the Horn are generally informal and often mediated through smuggling networks, arms trafficking routes, and localized economic exchanges rather than state-to-state relations. This creates spillover effects across the region, including heightened naval presence and security coordination among external powers operating from Horn of Africa bases.

Yemen's relationship with Somalia is historically the deepest and most continuous among Horn states. It is shaped by long-standing trade across the Gulf of Aden, shared migration networks, and overlapping security challenges such as piracy and trafficking. These ties are enduring but also unstable due to the parallel weakening of both states and the emergence of non-state armed actors.

Relations with Djibouti are more institutionalized, largely because of its proximity and its role as a global logistics and military hub. Engagement tends to focus on maritime security, port cooperation, and managing refugee and migration flows. Eritrea's relationship with Yemen is more indirect and largely defined by broader regional power competition in the Red Sea rather than sustained bilateral diplomacy.

Overall, Yemen's policy toward the Horn of Africa is best described as a "spillover foreign policy," meaning it is shaped less by deliberate long-term strategy and more by geography, war, and external intervention. Yemen does not project stable influence into the Horn; instead, it is embedded in a shared Red Sea security system where its internal fragmentation makes it more an object of regional competition than an autonomous strategic actor.

Ethiopia's interest in Yemen is mainly driven by its need for stable access to the Red Sea for trade. Because Ethiopia is landlocked, it relies on nearby ports, making maritime security in the Red Sea very important. Instability in Yemen threatens key shipping routes, especially the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

The conflict in Yemen also contributes to irregular migration and humanitarian pressures in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia is affected by these migration flows, both as a source and transit

country. Ethiopia avoids direct military involvement in Yemen but supports diplomatic solutions to the conflict.

It also balances its relationships with Gulf countries that are involved in Yemen's conflict. Overall, Ethiopia prioritizes regional stability in Yemen to protect its trade, security, and economic interests. We anticipate Addis Abbeba to engage in constructive peace diplomacy and to promote peace and prosperity in Yemen and the insertion of entrepôts used by its merchants on trade with India and Asian countries.

Eritrea and Ethiopia intersect on Yemen mainly through geography, security, and regional power competition in the Red Sea–Bab el-Mandeb corridor, which links the Horn of Africa directly to Yemen across one of the world's most strategic maritime chokepoints.

Why?

First, both countries are indirectly tied to Yemen because the Bab el-Mandeb Strait sits between Yemen and the Horn of Africa. Control and stability in Yemen directly affect shipping lanes that also matter to Ethiopia (as a landlocked state dependent on Red Sea access) and Eritrea (a coastal Red Sea state).

Second, during the Yemeni civil war (from 2015 onward), the Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE—projected military and logistical influence across both Yemen and the Horn. Eritrea, due to its coastal geography, became more directly involved by allowing foreign military use of its ports and airfields. Ethiopia, while less directly involved on Eritrean soil, became indirectly engaged through regional security alignments and Gulf partnerships.

Third, Eritrea's coastline gave it a strategic role in Red Sea military logistics related to Yemen, particularly during the Saudi-led coalition's operations. This increased Eritrea's regional relevance and sometimes placed it in a parallel but not coordinated position with Ethiopia regarding Red Sea security architecture.

Fourth, Ethiopia's involvement is more structural than operational: the Yemeni conflict intensified Ethiopia's long-term concern about reliable maritime access, since instability in Yemen raises risks for Red Sea shipping routes and increases dependence on neighboring coastal states, including Eritrea, Djibouti, and Sudan. This indirectly feeds into Ethiopia–Eritrea tensions over ports and access.

Fifth, both Ethiopia and Eritrea are affected by proxy competition involving Gulf states, where Yemen is part of a wider Red Sea theater. UAE and Saudi influence in Eritrea and Ethiopia has at times shaped regional alignments, with Yemen acting as the central conflict zone connecting these broader strategies.

Sixth, Yemen also matters through security spillover risks, including arms flows, smuggling routes, and maritime insecurity in the Red Sea. These networks link Yemen, Eritrea's coastline, and Ethiopia's border regions indirectly, especially through informal trade and migration routes.

Finally, Yemen functions as a strategic mirror of the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship: both states see Red Sea instability through the lens of their own rivalry and security concerns, meaning Yemen is not just a separate conflict but part of the wider geopolitical system tying the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula.

Here, The EU could, first, use its economic weight to support rules-based maritime security in the Red Sea, especially around Bab el-Mandeb, which directly connects Yemen to Horn of Africa states. Because European trade flows heavily through this route, the EU has a strong interest in reducing piracy risks, arms smuggling, and naval escalation that spill over from the Yemen conflict into Eritrea's waters and Ethiopia's supply chains.

Second, the EU could support coordinated regional diplomacy rather than isolated bilateral fixes. One of the structural problems in the Ethiopia–Eritrea relationship is that agreements tend to be leader-driven and fragile. In a wider Red Sea framework, including Yemen and Gulf actors, the EU could help anchor dialogue in institutions rather than personalities.

Third, the EU could expand development and port-access cooperation programs that reduce zero-sum competition over maritime access. For Ethiopia especially, access to Red Sea logistics is a strategic pressure point, and unmanaged competition over ports can spill into tensions with Eritrea. Structured EU-backed trade facilitation and infrastructure investment could reduce that pressure.

Fourth, in relation to Yemen, the EU could help limit the regionalization of the conflict, where Yemeni instability becomes entangled with Horn of Africa rivalries. By coordinating sanctions enforcement, humanitarian corridors, and maritime monitoring, the EU can reduce the space for proxy escalation involving Eritrean coastline or wider Red Sea militarization.

Finally, the EU's comparative advantage is not coercion but institution-building and long-term conditional cooperation. In a region where Ethiopia–Eritrea relations and Yemen's war are both shaped by fragmented authority and shifting alliances, external actors like the EU are most effective when they reinforce predictable rules—on shipping, trade, and security coordination—rather than backing short-term alignments.

In summary, the EU acts less as a military actor and more as a stabilizing external institution shaping incentives across the whole Red Sea corridor.

Strengthen Internal Political Stability

The European Union holds significant strategic potential to reinforce and elevate Ethiopia's role as a stabilizing and constructive regional anchor in the Horn of Africa by advancing a comprehensive, long-term partnership spanning infrastructure modernization, regional trade integration, diplomatic coordination, energy transition, and digital connectivity systems. As a pivotal state in the region, Ethiopia occupies a uniquely influential geopolitical position, functioning as a bridge between the African interior and the Red Sea corridor, while also serving as a critical gateway connecting East African economies to global maritime trade networks. A stable, economically integrated, and institutionally resilient Ethiopia therefore aligns directly with core European strategic interests, including regional stability, conflict

prevention, managed migration, sustainable development, climate adaptation, and the reinforcement of predictable, rules-based international economic governance.

Within this framework, the EU could assume a catalytic and transformative role by mobilizing substantial infrastructure financing through blended public-private investment mechanisms designed to unlock large-scale connectivity projects and reduce structural economic fragmentation across the region. Such engagement would extend beyond conventional transport infrastructure to include integrated trade facilitation ecosystems, interoperable cross-border logistics platforms, and institutional capacity-building initiatives aimed at improving regulatory efficiency and regional economic coordination. In parallel, enhanced maritime cooperation would strengthen the security and resilience of Red Sea and Indian Ocean shipping corridors, supporting safer navigation routes, reducing supply chain vulnerabilities, and reinforcing the stability of intercontinental trade flows linking Africa, Europe, and Asia.

A central strategic dimension of this partnership could focus on the development and modernization of key transport and economic corridors, particularly the Addis Ababa–Assab axis, which holds significant potential to diversify Ethiopia’s access to maritime gateways while simultaneously accelerating industrial expansion, deepening regional commerce, and strengthening cross-border economic interdependence. Complementing this, comprehensive customs modernization programs—supported by advanced digital infrastructure, interoperable border systems, and harmonized regional regulatory frameworks—could substantially reduce trade inefficiencies, enhance fiscal transparency, and improve the predictability and competitiveness of regional markets.

Energy cooperation would represent another high-value pillar of EU–Ethiopia engagement, particularly through the expansion of renewable and low-carbon energy systems. Ethiopia’s considerable hydropower resources, combined with its growing wind and solar potential, could be further developed through EU-backed investment in cross-border electricity interconnections, regional power pooling architectures, and export-oriented clean energy infrastructure. Such initiatives would not only reinforce Ethiopia’s emergence as a regional energy hub but also advance Europe’s broader climate objectives by expanding sustainable energy corridors and supporting the global transition toward decarbonized development pathways.

Additional strategic opportunities lie in the digitization and modernization of logistics and trade ecosystems across the Horn of Africa. This includes the deployment of intelligent freight management systems, digitally integrated port and inland transport coordination platforms, and data-driven supply chain optimization tools designed to increase efficiency, transparency, and resilience. Industrial zone development further complements this agenda by enabling structural economic transformation through European-supported technology transfer, workforce upskilling, export-oriented manufacturing ecosystems, and environmentally sustainable industrial policy frameworks. Collectively, these initiatives would deepen Ethiopia’s integration into regional and global value chains while fostering inclusive job creation and long-term economic diversification.

However, the scale and sustainability of EU engagement would remain closely conditioned on continued progress in regional de-escalation, credible governance reforms, and a sustained

commitment to peaceful diplomatic engagement. European institutions are likely to prioritize institutional accountability, transparency, rule-of-law adherence, conflict prevention mechanisms, and constructive regional relations as foundational requirements for deepened strategic alignment and long-term investment confidence.

Ultimately, a strengthened and multidimensional EU–Ethiopia partnership could evolve into a cornerstone of stability, connectivity, and economic transformation across the Horn of Africa. If implemented with consistency, institutional discipline, and sustained political will, such cooperation could unlock transformative interregional trade corridors, accelerate industrial diversification, enhance infrastructure resilience, and contribute meaningfully to long-term peace, prosperity, and geopolitical equilibrium in one of the world’s most strategically consequential regions.

32. Iran’s Power Projection

Iranian power projection into the Red Sea region is primarily based on asymmetric influence rather than traditional naval dominance. Instead of relying on a large expeditionary navy, Tehran uses proxy networks, missile and drone capabilities, maritime disruption tactics, and political partnerships to shape events around one of the world’s most important trade corridors linking the Indian Ocean with the Suez Canal through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

A major focus of international concern is Iran’s relationship with the Houthi movement in Yemen. Western and Gulf intelligence assessments generally conclude that the Houthis have received varying levels of training, weapons technology, and operational support from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Through this relationship, Iran can influence shipping security in the southern Red Sea without directly deploying major naval forces.

The strategic importance of the Red Sea stems from its role in global commerce and energy transport. Large volumes of European-Asian trade, Gulf energy exports, and military logistics pass through the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint. Even limited disruption in this corridor can increase shipping insurance costs, delay cargo movements, and affect global energy markets.

Iran’s strategic imagination links the **Houthis in Yemen**, the **Horn of Africa**, and the **Indian Ocean maritime space** into a single, continuous security geography rather than separate theatres. This is not a formal alliance system, but a *connected strategic ecosystem* shaped by geography, asymmetric warfare, and maritime chokepoints.

At the center of this linkage is the Islamic Republic of Iran’s doctrine of **forward strategic depth**, which extends influence outward from the Persian Gulf toward the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean. Within this framework, the **Houthis in Yemen** function as a key node because they sit directly on the Bab al-Mandab strait, one of the world’s most critical maritime chokepoints connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Iranian support—primarily in the form of technical assistance, missile and drone know-how, and advisory networks—has enabled the Houthis to become a maritime interdiction actor capable of shaping shipping risk far beyond Yemen itself.

This Red Sea node is structurally linked to the **Horn of Africa**, especially Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti, because the two shores of the Bab al-Mandab form a single operational maritime

corridor. Iran's strategic logic treats both sides of the strait as interdependent: influence on the Yemeni coast is amplified when paired with access, partnerships, or at minimum permissive environments on the African coast. Even when Iranian presence in East Africa is indirect or episodic, the geography allows Tehran to conceptualise the Red Sea as a *dual-shore theatre of competition*.

From there, the system extends into the **Indian Ocean**, which Iran views as the broader strategic space into which Red Sea dynamics flow. Disruption at Bab al-Mandab has immediate downstream effects on Indian Ocean trade routes, insurance costs, and naval deployments, making it a multiplier of Iranian leverage even without formal naval parity. In this sense, the Houthis act as a *coastal pressure point*, the Horn of Africa provides *geostrategic adjacency*, and the Indian Ocean represents the *strategic amplification zone*.

A key connective mechanism across these spaces is **asymmetric maritime strategy**. Iran does not seek conventional naval dominance but instead relies on distributed capabilities: missiles, drones, fast attack craft tactics, intelligence cooperation, and partner forces. The Houthis are the most visible operational expression of this model, but the Horn of Africa provides potential logistical depth, informal networks, and political openings that can indirectly support the same strategic system.

The linkage is also shaped by competition with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both of which maintain extensive port infrastructure and military-logistical presence along the African side of the Red Sea. This transforms the region into a *dual-continent contest space*, where Yemen and the Horn of Africa are not separate crises but interconnected components of a single maritime security dilemma.

Finally, the current war environment in the Middle East has intensified these linkages. Escalation in the Red Sea increases the operational relevance of the Houthis, while simultaneously raising the strategic value of Horn of Africa coastal states as staging, monitoring, or transit environments. The Indian Ocean dimension then converts localized disruption into global maritime impact, reinforcing Iran's incentive to maintain flexible, deniable, and network-based influence across all three zones.

In sum, Iran connects the Houthis, the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean through a **continuous chokepoint-based strategic system**: Yemen provides coercive leverage, the Horn of Africa provides geographic adjacency and potential depth, and the Indian Ocean provides systemic amplification of maritime disruption and geopolitical pressure.

Another concern involves anti-access and area-denial capabilities. Houthi missile and drone systems have periodically created an environment in which commercial vessels and naval forces face elevated operational risk in parts of the Red Sea. Even intermittent attacks can force companies to reroute vessels around southern Africa, increasing transportation costs and placing strain on international naval patrols.

Analysts are also concerned about a broader Iranian strategy linking pressure in both the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. In a regional crisis, Tehran could potentially combine direct pressure in the Persian Gulf with indirect proxy pressure in the Red Sea, complicating Western

and Gulf naval responses and stretching maritime security resources across multiple chokepoints simultaneously.

Iran's security engagement with Sudan and Ethiopia differs markedly in depth, modality, and strategic purpose, reflecting a broader pattern of selective and asymmetric outreach in East Africa.

In the case of Sudan, the relationship has historically included more direct and security-relevant cooperation, particularly during periods when Khartoum was politically isolated from Western and Gulf partners. Various open-source assessments and regional analyses have long suggested that Iran cultivated ties with elements of the Sudanese security apparatus, including reported cooperation in military training, advisory support, and the transfer of unmanned aerial systems and related technologies at different points prior to Sudan's later realignment with Gulf Arab states. These interactions were not always formalized at the state-to-state level and often operated through opaque channels linked to intelligence and military institutions rather than public defense agreements. From Iran's perspective, Sudan's Red Sea coastline also carried strategic value as a potential logistical and maritime access point, making it relevant to broader regional positioning in the Bab al-Mandab system.

However, Sudan's foreign policy realignment in the mid-to-late 2010s, especially its rapprochement with Gulf powers, significantly constrained Iran's operational space. Even so, the instability following the outbreak of internal conflict in Sudan has reintroduced a fragmented security environment in which external actors, including Iran, are periodically discussed in analytical literature as potential opportunistic influencers, particularly in relation to arms flows and local power centers. These dynamics remain highly contested and often difficult to verify, but they reflect Sudan's structural vulnerability to external security penetration during periods of state fragmentation.

By contrast, Iran's relationship with Ethiopia is substantially less militarized and does not exhibit the same documented pattern of sustained arms cooperation. Engagement between Islamic Republic of Iran and Ethiopia has been more consistently characterized by diplomatic contact, limited security dialogue, and occasional cooperation in multilateral forums rather than deep intelligence or military integration. Ethiopia's strategic orientation—shaped by its domestic priorities, its regional conflicts, and its partnerships with diverse external actors—has not historically aligned it closely with Iranian security architecture.

While there have been periodic discussions in analytical and policy circles about Iran's broader interest in the Horn of Africa's intelligence environment, including information gathering, maritime awareness, and indirect security networking, Ethiopia has not been a primary locus of Iranian arms transfer activity. Any intelligence-related interaction is better understood as low-intensity and indirect, embedded within broader regional diplomacy rather than structured intelligence cooperation.

Overall, Iran's security footprint in Sudan is best characterized as historically deeper but politically contingent and fluctuating, while its engagement with Ethiopia remains comparatively limited, pragmatic, and non-militarized, reflecting differing geopolitical incentives and constraints across the Horn of Africa.

In the case of Iran–Ethiopia relations, the focus is primarily on institutional security cooperation, intelligence exchange, and limited defense-related engagement. A notable development came in May 2025, when Ethiopian and Iranian police authorities signed a memorandum of understanding that formalized collaboration in areas such as intelligence sharing, cross-border crime prevention, training, and broader institutional capacity building. This agreement reflected a gradual but deliberate effort to strengthen ties at the level of internal security agencies rather than through direct military alignment.¹¹

Beyond formal agreements, analysts have pointed to earlier reports suggesting that Iran provided surveillance and combat drone systems to Ethiopian government forces during the Tigray conflict. These capabilities were reportedly used to enhance reconnaissance and precision strike capacity during critical phases of the war, although the extent and continuity of such transfers remain contested in open-source reporting. Taken together, the relationship with Ethiopia appears to involve intelligence cooperation between security institutions, coordination on counterterrorism and cross-border crime, training exchanges, and possible limited transfers of surveillance and drone technology. At the same time, there is no strong public evidence indicating that the relationship has evolved into a formal military alliance or a permanent intelligence-sharing framework comparable to Iran’s deeper partnerships elsewhere.

The Iran–Sudan relationship, by contrast, is significantly more militarized and strategically consequential. Since the outbreak of the Sudanese civil war in 2023, multiple reports have indicated that Iran has provided the Sudanese Armed Forces with drones, military equipment, and technical assistance. Systems attributed to Iran, including Mohajer-series drones, have reportedly been used in combat operations against the Rapid Support Forces, strengthening Sudanese military capabilities in an active conflict environment.

Additional reporting has suggested that Iranian cargo aircraft may have been used to deliver military supplies to Port Sudan, and that Iranian advisors or security personnel could be assisting elements of Sudan’s military operations. Beyond battlefield support, Iran has also pursued broader strategic objectives along the Red Sea corridor. These include efforts to expand influence over key maritime routes and reported interest in establishing access to naval facilities on Sudan’s Red Sea coast, although claims of a permanent base have been publicly denied or politically rejected by Sudanese authorities.

The intelligence dimension of the Iran–Sudan relationship is particularly significant. Access to the Red Sea region would provide Tehran with valuable opportunities for maritime surveillance, monitoring of commercial shipping lanes connected to the Suez Canal, and broader strategic observation of regional rivals and Western naval activity. This places Sudan within a much more overtly geopolitical framework for Iran compared to Ethiopia.

Taken together, the comparison highlights two distinct models of engagement. Iran’s relationship with Ethiopia is primarily institutional and security-oriented, centered on police cooperation, intelligence exchange, and limited technological support, particularly in surveillance and drones. In contrast, Iran’s engagement with Sudan has evolved into a far

¹¹ <https://www.iranimes.com/news/iran-and-ethiopia-have-a-security-deal-%E2%80%93-93-here%E2%80%9399s-why-they-signed-it>

deeper and more operationally significant partnership, characterized by reported arms transfers, active battlefield support, and strategic calculations tied to Red Sea access and maritime influence.

More broadly, these relationships reflect Iran's wider effort to expand its footprint in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea corridor. The region offers Tehran a combination of strategic maritime access, opportunities to counterbalance Gulf and Western influence, and potential intelligence vantage points near some of the world's most critical shipping routes, including the Bab el-Mandeb strait.

The roles of the United Arab Emirates and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in East Africa differ in scale, instruments, and strategic coherence from those of the Islamic Republic of Iran, yet all three states increasingly treat the Horn of Africa as an extension of Middle Eastern geopolitical competition centered on the Red Sea corridor.

Iran's engagement is primarily asymmetric and network-based, relying on limited diplomatic presence, security-linked relationships, and opportunistic partnerships shaped by sanctions pressure and strategic maritime interests. Its footprint is comparatively constrained, often indirect, and more visible in contested or fragile states such as Sudan, where political instability creates openings for informal influence. Iranian strategy prioritizes strategic depth, sanctions evasion, and selective security cooperation rather than large-scale capital investment or institutional state-building.

By contrast, the United Arab Emirates has developed one of the most expansive and materially intensive presences in East Africa. Emirati strategy is anchored in port development, logistics infrastructure, and commercial-military integration along key maritime nodes in the Red Sea and western Indian Ocean. Through investments in port terminals, free zones, and commercial corridors, the UAE has embedded itself deeply into the economic geography of coastal states, while also maintaining security linkages that support its broader regional posture. Unlike Iran, the UAE combines economic statecraft with forward deployment of commercial capital, allowing it to exert durable influence through infrastructure dependency and trade connectivity rather than covert networks alone.

Saudi Arabia's approach is more state-centric and diplomatically formal, though it increasingly overlaps with Emirati strategic geography. Riyadh's engagement focuses on financial assistance, development aid, religious diplomacy, and political stabilization efforts, particularly in countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Saudi policy is strongly influenced by Red Sea security concerns and the desire to prevent rival powers from dominating adjacent maritime chokepoints. While Saudi Arabia has expanded its economic footprint, it generally operates through sovereign-to-sovereign channels and multilateral development mechanisms rather than the UAE's more transactional and investment-driven model.

The divergence between UAE and Saudi strategies is therefore significant: the UAE emphasizes infrastructure and commercial leverage, while Saudi Arabia emphasizes diplomatic capital, aid, and political alignment. Both, however, maintain far greater structural depth in East Africa than Iran due to superior financial capacity and formalized state partnerships.

Strategically, all three actors are responding to the increasing militarization and fragmentation of the Red Sea security environment. However, their tools differ fundamentally: Iran relies on asymmetric and security-adjacent influence under sanctions constraints; the UAE uses integrated economic and logistical dominance; and Saudi Arabia employs diplomatic leadership combined with selective economic engagement.

In comparative terms, East Africa has become a layered arena in which Emirati and Saudi state power competes with Iranian asymmetric presence. The UAE occupies the most operationally embedded position through ports and commercial infrastructure, Saudi Arabia occupies a stabilizing and diplomatic role with growing economic weight, while Iran remains the most constrained actor, relying on opportunistic alignments in politically fragile environments to maintain relevance in the wider Red Sea strategic system. The Iran–Gulf–Red Sea–East Africa nexus could be conceived as competing modalities of influence within the same evolving sub-regional system of the Middle East. The result is not a linear contest for dominance but a layered and congested field of overlapping interventions, where influence is continuously negotiated rather than definitively secured.

Reducing Iran's footprint in the Red Sea would depend on a combination of military, political, and economic pressures that either limit its partners' willingness to cooperate or raise the costs of Iran's involvement.

A key condition would be stabilization inside Sudan. Iran's most tangible Red Sea leverage today is tied to the Sudanese Armed Forces and the ongoing civil war environment. If Sudan moves toward a durable ceasefire or political settlement, the demand for external military support—including drones, training, and technical assistance—would likely decline. A unified, internationally supported government in Khartoum would also face stronger incentives to restrict foreign military partnerships along its Red Sea coast, especially if tied to reconstruction aid or sanctions relief.

A second factor is sustained external naval presence and deterrence. Expanded maritime patrols and surveillance by the United States, European navies, and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt would raise the operational risk for Iranian-linked logistics, including suspected arms shipments or advisory deployments. Stronger interdiction efforts in the Red Sea–Horn of Africa corridor would make sustained covert supply chains harder to maintain.

Regional alignment also matters. If Red Sea states coordinate more closely on port security, intelligence sharing, and maritime monitoring, Iran's room for maneuver narrows significantly. Initiatives that integrate Djibouti, Sudan, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt into a more cohesive security architecture would reduce the value of fragmented bilateral relationships that Iran can exploit.

Diplomatic normalization is another pressure point. Improved Iran–Gulf relations, especially with Saudi Arabia, could reduce incentives for proxy competition in the Red Sea. When regional tensions are lower, external actors generally have less motivation to project influence through partners in conflict zones like Sudan.

Finally, Iran's footprint would shrink if its partners' internal military needs decline. In both Sudan and, to a lesser extent, Ethiopia, Iran's relevance is partly driven by demand for drones,

surveillance tools, and training. If those needs are met by other suppliers or domestically, or if conflicts wind down, Iran's strategic leverage naturally weakens.

In short, Iran's presence in the Red Sea is most likely to contract not through a single action, but through a convergence of conflict resolution in Sudan, stronger maritime enforcement, tighter regional coordination, and reduced demand for external military support.

Figure



At the same time, there are important limits to Iranian power projection. Iran does not possess the capability to sustain full conventional naval dominance in the Red Sea far from its home waters, and the Houthis retain their own political agenda rather than functioning as simple Iranian proxies. A complete and prolonged closure of the Bab el-Mandeb would likely provoke a large multinational military response. For this reason, the primary concern among governments is usually not total control of the waterway, but rather sustained disruption, uncertainty, and coercive leverage over international trade and regional security.'

Teheran has a rich tradition for looking east, and by modernizing the PCA with Turkmenistan and at the same time playing on the differences between China, Iran and Russia in Central Asia, the EU could strengthen CACO sufficiently to strengthen Tashkent and Astana's hand vis-à-vis Moscow inside EEAC, without excluding stronger engagement between Central Asia and the EU, even as Iran's hand vis-à-vis Afghanistan would not be weakened provided the EU delivers on IPI and address the Afghan-Pak-Iran Triangle, a nightmare scenario in certain circles in New Delhi.

At the same time, the "Red Sea dimension" of Saudi foreign policy enters EEAS calculations because it expands Saudi Arabia's relevance from a primarily Gulf-focused partner into a state that actively shapes one of the EU's most sensitive maritime corridors. For the European External Action Service, the Red Sea is not a narrow regional issue but part of a wider strategic system that includes the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab strait, both of which are essential for Europe-Asia trade flows and therefore for European economic security. Any actor with influence over coastal infrastructure, shipping routes, or surrounding conflict dynamics in this space becomes relevant to EU external action planning.

Saudi Arabia's increasing emphasis on the Red Sea coast, including major economic projects and a stronger strategic orientation toward its western seaboard, means that its foreign policy now directly intersects with this maritime system. From the EEAS perspective, this matters because Saudi activity affects the stability of adjacent conflict zones such as Yemen and interacts with broader Red Sea and Horn of Africa dynamics. As a result, Saudi Arabia, the first Arab country to have completed full modernisation, is no longer seen only through the lens of Gulf security or energy politics but as a participant in shaping the operational environment of a key global shipping lane, something we approve of.

In practical terms, this shifts EEAS calculations toward treating Saudi Arabia as a necessary coordination partner in maritime security governance and crisis management in the Red Sea basin. It also means EU planners have to factor Saudi decisions into assessments of regional escalation risks, naval presence, and the resilience of trade routes. At the same time, Saudi engagement in the Red Sea is embedded in a broader competitive environment involving other regional powers and external actors, which further pushes the EEAS to view the area as a single interconnected security theatre rather than separate subregions.

33. The Role of the European Union

The relationship between the European Union and Ethiopia has historically been one of the most important partnerships between Europe and Africa. Since the end of the Cold War, Ethiopia has occupied a central position in European engagement with the Horn of Africa

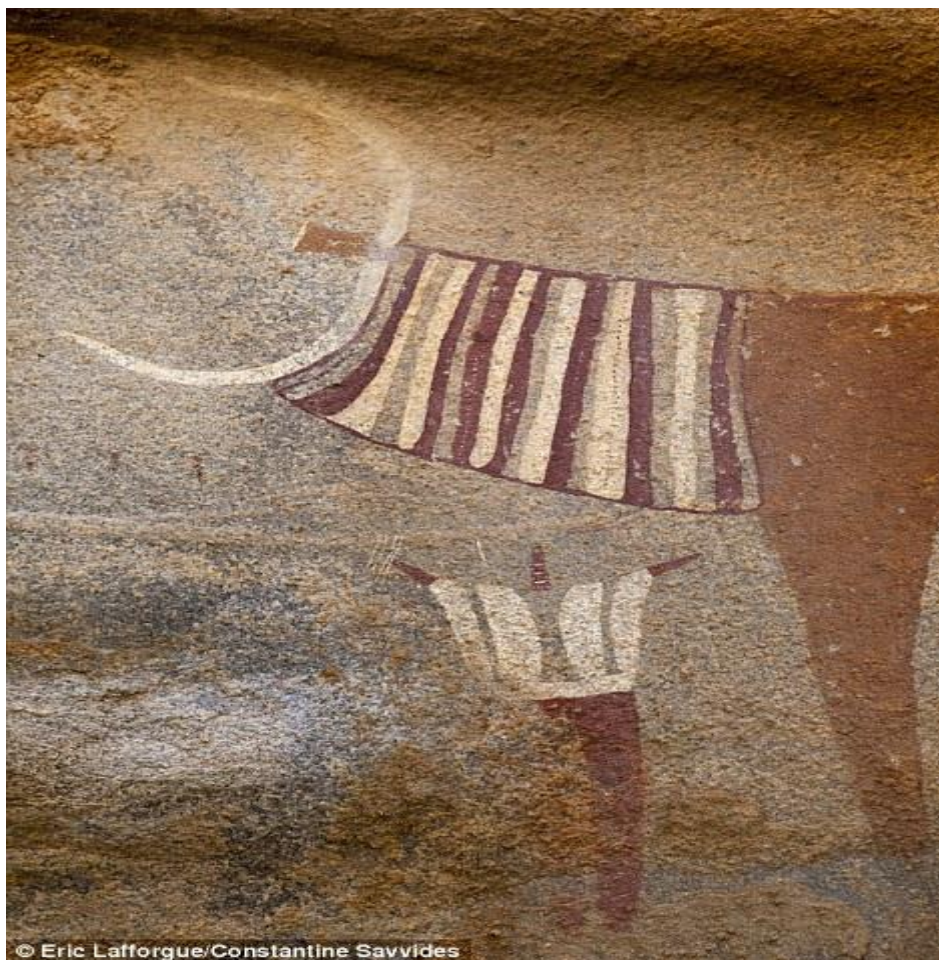
because of its demographic weight, geopolitical importance, role in regional security, and influence within regional institutions such as Intergovernmental Authority on Development. For much of the period between 1991 and 2018, the European Union was able to exercise substantial influence through development assistance, diplomatic engagement, peacebuilding initiatives, governance reforms, and migration partnerships. However, profound geopolitical transformations have challenged the foundations of this relationship. The rise of new external actors, particularly China, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, combined with the growing agency of regional governments and the consequences of the Tigray conflict, have fundamentally altered the environment in which European policy operates. These developments raise important questions about the nature, effectiveness, and future trajectory of EU engagement in Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa.

Existing scholarship frequently portrays the European Union as a normative actor capable of shaping political outcomes through economic assistance, institutional partnerships, and diplomatic influence. Much of the literature is grounded in theories of liberal institutionalism, external governance, and normative power, all of which assume that development assistance and institutional cooperation generate political leverage. Yet recent developments challenge these assumptions. The European Union remains one of the largest development partners in Ethiopia and the broader Horn of Africa, but its ability to influence political decision-making has become increasingly constrained. The response of the Ethiopian government during the Tigray conflict demonstrated a willingness to resist European diplomatic pressure despite significant economic interdependence. This suggests that existing theoretical approaches are insufficient for explaining contemporary EU-Horn relations.

A more comprehensive analytical framework must therefore incorporate regional security dynamics, strategic autonomy, and multipolar competition. The Horn of Africa increasingly resembles a regional security complex in which political and security developments in one state rapidly affect neighboring countries. Conflict cannot be understood solely within national boundaries because instability routinely spills across borders through refugee flows, insurgent movements, economic disruption, and diplomatic tensions. The Tigray conflict illustrates this phenomenon clearly. Although primarily an internal Ethiopian conflict, it generated significant refugee movements into Sudan, intensified disputes along the Ethiopia-Sudan border, altered regional alliances, and affected wider Red Sea security dynamics. Similar patterns can be observed in the relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia, where concerns regarding terrorism, state fragility, and cross-border security threats create mutual dependencies that shape regional politics.

The growing importance of the Red Sea further reinforces the regionalization of security. The Horn of Africa can no longer be analyzed independently of developments occurring across the Red Sea. Political instability in Sudan, conflict in Yemen, maritime insecurity, and competition among external powers have transformed the Red Sea into one of the world's most strategically significant geopolitical spaces. This emerging geopolitical environment has attracted increasing involvement from Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, whose investments, military partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives have expanded their influence throughout the region. The result is a significant redistribution of political influence away from traditional Western actors and toward a more diverse set of external partners.

Within this evolving context, the role of IGAD deserves particular attention. Existing studies frequently portray regional organizations as passive recipients of European support, emphasizing the EU's role in financing and strengthening regional institutions. However, this perspective underestimates the possibility that regional organizations increasingly shape European policy rather than simply implementing it. As IGAD's institutional capacity and political legitimacy have expanded, the organization has become an important intermediary between external actors and regional governments. Rather than viewing the EU as the principal architect of regional governance, future research should examine whether European policies are increasingly constrained by regional priorities and political realities. Such a shift would represent a significant transformation in the balance of influence between external and regional actors.



The Tigray conflict represents a particularly important turning point in the evolution of EU-Ethiopia relations. Although considerable research has focused on humanitarian dimensions and human rights concerns, less attention has been paid to the broader diplomatic consequences of the conflict. European criticism of the Ethiopian government's conduct generated significant tensions between Brussels and Addis Ababa. Simultaneously, Ethiopia intensified engagement with alternative partners, including China, Russia, Turkey, and the UAE. These developments suggest that external pressure may not necessarily produce compliance but can instead encourage strategic diversification. This possibility challenges conventional assumptions

regarding aid conditionality and raises important questions about the limits of European influence in an increasingly competitive international environment.

The growing presence of Gulf states and Turkey represents another major gap in the literature. Traditional analyses of external influence in Africa have focused primarily on Europe, the United States, and China. Such approaches fail to capture the increasing importance of middle powers whose strategies differ substantially from those of Western actors. The UAE has emerged as a major investor in ports, infrastructure, and logistics networks while simultaneously expanding its security partnerships throughout the Horn. Saudi Arabia has strengthened its role in Red Sea governance, diplomatic mediation, and agricultural investment. Turkey has pursued a distinctive model combining military cooperation, defense exports, humanitarian assistance, and infrastructure development. Unlike the European Union, these actors generally impose fewer governance-related conditions on their partnerships. Their growing influence therefore creates attractive alternatives for regional governments seeking to maximize autonomy while diversifying external relationships.

These developments raise broader questions regarding the nature of influence itself. Traditional indicators such as aid volume, trade flows, and development assistance may no longer adequately capture political influence in a multipolar environment. A state can remain economically dependent on a particular partner while simultaneously resisting political pressure from that partner. Consequently, influence should be assessed through a broader set of indicators, including policy compliance, diplomatic alignment, security cooperation, negotiation outcomes, and the ability to shape political agendas. Such an approach may reveal that the European Union retains substantial economic influence while experiencing a gradual decline in political leverage.

Migration governance provides another important lens through which to examine these transformations. Since the 2015 migration crisis, the European Union has increasingly prioritized migration management within its engagement with the Horn of Africa. Official policy frameworks frequently emphasize addressing the root causes of migration through development assistance, employment creation, governance reform, and conflict prevention. However, evidence regarding the effectiveness of these initiatives remains inconclusive. While some programs have contributed to local economic opportunities and institutional capacity-building, others have focused primarily on border control and migration deterrence. This raises important questions about whether EU migration policies genuinely address structural drivers such as poverty, conflict, political instability, and climate vulnerability, or whether they primarily seek to reduce migration flows toward Europe.

At the local level, migration-control initiatives have generated complex and often contradictory outcomes. Some communities have benefited from employment programs, vocational training, and infrastructure investments associated with European-funded projects. At the same time, increased surveillance, restrictions on mobility, and securitized approaches to migration have generated concerns regarding human rights and social inclusion. Existing research remains heavily focused on donor perspectives and policy objectives, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how local populations perceive and experience these interventions.

The tension between security objectives and development goals constitutes one of the most significant challenges facing European engagement in the Horn of Africa. The European Union simultaneously seeks to promote stability, counterterrorism, migration management, democratic governance, and socioeconomic development. In practice, these objectives often conflict with one another. Security priorities frequently encourage support for state institutions capable of maintaining order, while development and governance objectives emphasize accountability, participation, and human rights. The resulting contradictions raise important questions regarding the coherence and effectiveness of European policy.

The effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives further illustrates these challenges. The European Union has invested substantial financial and diplomatic resources in peace processes across the region. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these interventions have varied considerably. While European support has contributed to peacebuilding efforts in Somalia and South Sudan, its impact on conflicts within Ethiopia and Sudan has been more limited. This variation highlights the importance of comparing European initiatives with regionally led mediation efforts. Regional organizations often possess greater political legitimacy, cultural familiarity, and access to local actors, while the European Union offers financial resources, technical expertise, and international diplomatic support. Understanding the relative strengths and limitations of these different approaches remains an important area for future research.

A comparative analysis of Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan provides an ideal framework for examining these issues. Ethiopia represents a regional power pursuing increasing strategic autonomy. Somalia illustrates a case of extensive dependence on external security assistance and state-building support. Djibouti demonstrates how strategic geography can transform a small state into a focal point of international competition. Eritrea provides an example of resistance to external influence and strong emphasis on sovereignty. Sudan reveals the difficulties external actors face in contexts characterized by recurring political transitions and violent conflict. Comparing these cases allows for a more nuanced understanding of how domestic conditions shape the effectiveness of external engagement.

Viewed across the period from 1991 to 2026, EU-Horn relations reveal a broader historical transformation. During the 1990s, European engagement focused primarily on reconstruction and development following the end of the Cold War. After 2001, security cooperation became increasingly important as concerns regarding terrorism and regional instability gained prominence. Following the migration crisis of 2015, migration management emerged as a central policy objective. The reform agenda initiated by Abiy Ahmed initially generated optimism regarding democratic transition and political liberalization. However, the Tigray conflict fundamentally disrupted this trajectory and exposed the limits of European influence. In the years since the conflict, the Horn of Africa has increasingly evolved into a multipolar geopolitical arena characterized by competition among regional powers, Gulf states, China, Turkey, and traditional Western actors.

The central argument emerging from this analysis is that the Horn of Africa is undergoing a transition from a system characterized by donor-centered governance to one defined by regional agency and geopolitical competition. Although the European Union remains an important provider of development assistance, humanitarian support, and diplomatic engagement, its capacity to shape political outcomes has become increasingly constrained. The

rise of alternative partners, the strengthening of regional institutions, the growing strategic importance of the Red Sea, and the assertion of sovereignty by regional governments have collectively reduced European leverage. Consequently, the future effectiveness of EU engagement is likely to depend less on traditional instruments of aid conditionality and more on the Union's ability to adapt to a regional order in which influence must be negotiated rather than assumed. This transformation represents not merely a change in policy but a fundamental shift in the structure of power and governance within the Horn of Africa.

The European Union holds substantial potential to reinforce and elevate Ethiopia's constructive role as a regional anchor in the Horn of Africa by deepening long-term strategic cooperation across infrastructure development, regional trade architecture, diplomatic engagement, energy transition, and connectivity systems. As a pivotal state in the region, Ethiopia occupies a uniquely influential geopolitical position, linking the African interior to the Red Sea corridor and serving as a gateway between East African markets and global maritime trade routes. A stable, economically integrated, and institutionally strengthened Ethiopia therefore aligns closely with core European strategic priorities, including regional stability, managed migration flows, sustainable development, climate resilience, and the strengthening of predictable, rules-based economic systems.

In this context, the EU could assume a transformative and catalytic role by mobilizing large-scale infrastructure financing and blending public and private investment to support connectivity projects that enhance regional integration and reduce structural economic fragmentation. This would include not only traditional transport corridors but also integrated trade facilitation systems, cross-border logistics platforms, and institutional capacity-building frameworks. Complementary engagement in maritime cooperation would further strengthen the resilience of Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade routes, supporting safer, more efficient shipping lanes and reinforcing the stability of global supply chains that connect Africa with Europe and Asia.

A central pillar of this partnership could involve the development and modernization of strategic corridors such as the Addis Ababa–Assab axis, which carries significant potential to restore and diversify Ethiopia's access to maritime gateways while simultaneously stimulating industrial growth, regional commerce, and cross-border economic interdependence. Alongside this, the modernization of customs administrations through advanced digital systems, interoperable border management technologies, and harmonized regulatory standards could significantly reduce trade bottlenecks, improve revenue transparency, and enhance the predictability of regional commerce.

Energy cooperation represents another high-impact domain, particularly in the expansion of renewable and green power systems. Ethiopia's hydropower and emerging renewable energy capacity could be leveraged through EU-supported investment in cross-border electricity interconnections, regional power pooling mechanisms, and export-oriented clean energy infrastructure. This would not only position Ethiopia as a potential regional energy hub but also advance Europe's broader climate and sustainability objectives by strengthening low-carbon energy corridors beyond the continent.

Further strategic opportunities exist in the digitization of logistics and trade ecosystems, including the deployment of smart freight management systems, port-to-inland connectivity solutions, and data-driven supply chain optimization platforms. Industrial zone development could also serve as a cornerstone of structural transformation, with European cooperation facilitating technology transfer, vocational training, export-oriented manufacturing, and environmentally sustainable industrial policy design. Together, these measures would help integrate Ethiopia more deeply into regional and global value chains while generating employment and supporting inclusive economic growth.

At the same time, the scope and depth of EU engagement would remain contingent upon sustained progress in regional de-escalation, credible governance reforms, and a durable commitment to peaceful diplomacy. European institutions are likely to prioritize transparency, institutional accountability, conflict prevention, and constructive regional relations as essential prerequisites for deeper strategic alignment and long-term investment confidence.

Ultimately, a strengthened and multidimensional EU–Ethiopia partnership could evolve into a foundational pillar of stability, integration, and economic transformation across the Horn of Africa. If implemented effectively and supported by consistent political commitment, such cooperation could unlock new interregional trade corridors, accelerate industrial diversification, enhance infrastructure resilience, and contribute meaningfully to long-term peace, prosperity, and geopolitical balance in one of the world’s most strategically sensitive regions.

The European Union’s “asks” or expectations from Ethiopia are generally shaped by its broader priorities in stability, development cooperation, human rights, and regional security in the Horn of Africa. They are not formal demands in a rigid sense, but rather conditions and benchmarks that influence the depth of political, financial, and strategic engagement.

A central expectation is political and institutional stability. The EU places strong emphasis on the reduction of internal conflict, sustainable peace processes, and credible national reconciliation efforts. Progress in this area is seen as essential for long-term partnership and investment confidence.

Another major expectation relates to governance and the rule of law. The EU typically encourages transparency in public institutions, accountability in governance, and respect for constitutional processes. Strengthening institutions is viewed as critical for reducing fragility and improving service delivery.

Human rights and civilian protection are also key considerations. The EU consistently stresses the importance of protecting civilians in conflict-affected regions, ensuring access for humanitarian assistance, and respecting international human rights obligations. These factors heavily influence political dialogue and development funding.

Economic reform and macroeconomic stability are another important area of focus. The EU generally supports market-oriented reforms, fiscal transparency, and improved investment conditions. It also encourages private sector development and policies that enhance job creation and economic resilience.

In the security domain, the EU expects continued commitment to regional de-escalation and peaceful diplomacy. This includes constructive engagement with neighboring states, avoidance of escalation in regional disputes, and adherence to international legal frameworks. Stability in the Horn of Africa is a shared priority due to its implications for trade routes and migration flows.

The EU also places significant emphasis on regional cooperation. Ethiopia is encouraged to play a constructive role in institutions such as the African Union and regional economic communities. Cooperation on infrastructure, trade corridors, and cross-border development is seen as essential for long-term stability.

Figure



Migration management is another sensitive area of engagement. The EU seeks cooperation on addressing irregular migration drivers through development, employment creation, and stability rather than purely security-based approaches. This is linked to broader EU concerns about migration flows toward Europe. Environmental sustainability and climate resilience are increasingly important expectations. The EU supports climate adaptation efforts, renewable energy development, and sustainable resource management, particularly in agriculture and water systems.

Overall, EU expectations from Ethiopia can be summarized as a combination of internal stability, responsible governance, respect for human rights, constructive regional diplomacy, and commitment to economic reform. In return, the EU offers development assistance, investment partnerships, infrastructure financing, and political support within multilateral frameworks.

Escalatory approaches risk spreading instability across the entire security complex. Cooperative basin governance would provide a more sustainable alternative to confrontation. The United States engages the region mainly through counterterrorism priorities and maritime security interests. Groups operating in Somalia and the wider Horn shape American strategic engagement. US military and intelligence cooperation is distributed across multiple states in the region. However, interventions in one country often generate unintended consequences in neighboring states. This reflects the interconnected nature of the regional security structure. A fragmented approach reduces long-term effectiveness. Coordinated regional frameworks would improve strategic outcomes. The European Union is primarily affected through migration flows and trade route security. Instability in the Horn influences migration pressures toward Europe. It also affects maritime trade routes linking Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The EU therefore has strong incentives for preventive diplomacy. Development assistance and infrastructure investment are key tools of engagement. These tools are most effective when applied regionally rather than bilaterally. The EU benefits from supporting integration and reducing structural fragmentation. Israel's engagement is driven by maritime security and intelligence cooperation in the Red Sea region. Instability in neighboring coastal states affects its broader security environment. The Red Sea is a critical corridor for Israeli trade and energy flows. Israel increasingly relies on informal partnerships to monitor regional developments. However, the complexity of the system limits the effectiveness of isolated strategies. Broader regional coordination would enhance security stability. Yemen is an integral part of the same interconnected security system. Its internal conflict directly affects maritime security in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Armed groups and fragmented governance structures contribute to regional instability. Yemen's instability interacts with Horn of Africa dynamics in multiple ways.

This creates a shared maritime insecurity environment across both shores of the Red Sea. External interventions in Yemen also influence neighboring African states. The result is a single interconnected security theater rather than separate crises. Across all actors, the Horn of Africa operates as a system where security is mutually dependent. No state or external power can isolate itself from regional dynamics. Actions taken in one location frequently produce ripple effects elsewhere. This makes unilateral solutions structurally insufficient. The region functions as a node within a broader Red Sea and Indian Ocean security architecture. External

actors often act as amplifiers of regional dynamics rather than controllers of outcomes. This increases the importance of coordination among external powers. Without coordination, overlapping interventions can intensify instability. The structural reality of the region demands integrated approaches to diplomacy and security. Economic, maritime, and political dimensions are deeply intertwined. Long-term stability requires addressing all of these dimensions simultaneously. Fragmented engagement tends to reproduce cycles of instability. Integrated frameworks offer a more sustainable path forward. The Horn of Africa therefore represents a high-interdependence security environment. Its stability depends on aligning internal and external strategies within a coherent system.

34. Six Dimensions of Federalist Interventions

Given the impact of imperial grandeur, administrative diarray and the manner in which Addis Abbeba practices federalism, perhaps a comparative study may be warranted into the challenges of moving from ethnic federalism to cooperative federalism to better understand how to even out relations between eritrea and Ethipoia. To identify hexie and correct interventions, however, have proven a challenge in the classrooms of Ethiopia.

Motive may be more prestigious - the peeps overthere simply dont understand that practice is unpractical, and if they do, not how to induce change.

To analyze how federalist theories can “cure” Spain’s political ills, we can structure interventions across six dimensions:

- Institutional Design & Intergovernmental Coordination – mechanisms for dialogue, councils, and legislative negotiation.
- Fiscal Autonomy & Revenue-Sharing – regional control over taxation and allocation of resources.
- Cultural & Identity Recognition – protection of language, traditions, and national identities within regions.
- Legitimacy & Accountability – strengthening political responsibility and responsiveness of parties and officials.
- Conflict Resolution & Legal Frameworks – constitutional or legal tools to manage disputes between central and regional governments.
- Citizen Participation & Democratic Oversight – referenda, assemblies, and public consultation to ensure policies are democratically legitimate.

4.Cross-Tab Table: Federalist Theories × Six Dimensions of Intervention

Dimension	Cooperative Federalism	Competitive Federalism	Ethnic / Multinational Federalism

1. Institutional Design & Intergovernmental Coordination	Permanent councils, structured negotiation, shared governance agreements.	Minimal coordination; relies on competition to drive solutions.	Coordination exists but asymmetric powers recognized for identity-based regions.
2. Fiscal Autonomy & Revenue-Sharing	Coordinated fiscal agreements negotiated between levels of government.	High regional fiscal autonomy; performance-linked revenue.	Autonomy can be asymmetrical, with regions like Catalonia granted special fiscal privileges.
3. Cultural & Identity Recognition	Cultural recognition is negotiated as part of shared governance.	Focus is on efficiency; culture secondary unless it affects performance.	Core focus: languages, traditions, and historical rights formally recognized.
4. Legitimacy & Accountability	Institutionalized procedures reduce reliance on individual actors; improves legitimacy via dialogue.	Performance incentives enforce accountability; voters reward effective governance.	Legitimacy comes from constitutional recognition of identities; reduces perceived injustice.
5. Conflict Resolution & Legal Frameworks	Legal agreements and councils mediate disputes peacefully.	Disputes resolved via competition and performance metrics; weaker legal mediation.	Constitutional recognition of asymmetrical powers provides legal grounding for identity-based claims.
6. Citizen Participation & Democratic Oversight	Participatory mechanisms supplement intergovernmental dialogue.	Indirectly via voter feedback on regional performance.	Direct: identity-based representation, referenda, and cultural assemblies reinforce participation.

Spain's political system operates under a quasi-federal model, established by the 1978 Constitution, balancing central sovereignty with asymmetrical regional autonomy. The system has struggled with institutional gridlock, Catalan separatism, party fragmentation, and political polarization. Federalist theory provides a lens to analyze potential solutions, emphasizing cooperative, competitive, and ethnic/multinational approaches.

Cooperative federalism stresses intergovernmental negotiation, shared rule, and institutionalized dialogue between central and regional governments. It is particularly useful for reducing legislative stalemate and promoting compromise among Spain's fragmented multi-party system. However, cooperative mechanisms depend heavily on political goodwill and can stall if elites act irresponsibly.

Competitive federalism frames regions as autonomous actors competing for resources, efficiency, and performance outcomes. This approach incentivizes responsible governance through measurable results but may exacerbate inequalities between wealthier and poorer regions. It can reduce conflicts over practical issues like fiscal allocations if paired with strong accountability frameworks.

Ethnic or multinational federalism emphasizes recognition of cultural, linguistic, and national identities. In Spain, this approach is critical for addressing Catalonia's historical grievances and legitimizing regional autonomy within constitutional boundaries. Ethnic federalism overlaps with cooperative federalism by encouraging negotiation but also risks entrenching separatist ambitions if unchecked. Federalist interventions can be assessed across six dimensions: institutional design, fiscal autonomy, cultural recognition, legitimacy, conflict resolution, and citizen participation. Cooperative federalism excels at institutional design and conflict resolution, creating councils and legal mechanisms for dialogue. Competitive federalism excels at fiscal autonomy and accountability, linking regional performance to voter incentives.

Ethnic federalism excels at cultural recognition and legitimacy, protecting minority identities and reducing the perceived injustice that fuels separatism. All three theories contribute to citizen participation, either through negotiated governance, electoral accountability, or identity-based representation. Spain's experience shows that failing to integrate these approaches creates gridlock and empowers opportunistic political elites. Lessons learned include the need for permanent negotiation channels, balanced fiscal autonomy, recognition of identities, and mechanisms to enforce party accountability. A hybrid approach—combining dialogue, performance incentives, and identity recognition—is essential to address Spain's political ills while maintaining democratic legitimacy and national cohesion.

Cross-Tab: Ethnic Federalism & Decentralized Governance

Dimension	Ethiopia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Iraq	Cyprus	Spain
1. Cooperative Federalism	Formally federal but weak coordination; intergovernmental	Highly institutionalized consociational bargaining	Ad hoc bargaining between Baghdad and	No operational cooperative federalism;	Strongest case; permanent intergovernmental councils and structured

	ntal councils exist but are politically constrained and often overridden by central authority	system; coordination exists but is blocked by ethnic vetoes and fragmentation	regions; especially unstable with Kurdistan over sovereignty and oil	coordination exists only in negotiation frameworks, not governance reality	negotiation routines across central and regional governments
2. Legislative Moves	Constitution grants ethnic self-rule and secession rights but enforcement is inconsistent and politically unstable	Extremely rigid Dayton-based constitution; strong protections but low adaptability and chronic deadlock	Constitutional ambiguity on federal powers and oil revenue sharing fuels recurring disputes	No unified constitutional settlement; legal framework remains incomplete due to political division	Stable constitutional framework for autonomy, though contested in interpretation (especially secession-related disputes)
3. Institution-Building	Regional institutions exist but remain dependent on central state and ruling party structures	Highly complex but fragmented institutional system; duplication across entities and cantons reduces efficiency	Uneven capacity; strong regional (Kurdish) institutions but weak federal administrative cohesion	Fully separated institutions on each side; no integrated governance structures	Strong, mature regional governments integrated into national system (education, health, policing capacities)
4. Policy Development (Fiscal & Governance Outcomes)	Highly centralized fiscal system; regional dependence on federal transfers limits policy autonomy	Fragmented fiscal system with inefficiencies and weak redistribution across entities	Oil revenue-sharing dominates policy disputes; weak fiscal consensus undermines national planning	No integrated fiscal or policy system due to political division	Mixed but functional fiscal asymmetry; strong regional policy innovation with negotiated redistribution
5. Conflict Resolution & Legal Frameworks	Legal mechanisms exist but weak enforcement; conflicts often escalate	Strong legal system with constitutional court + international oversight;	Formal legal frameworks exist but often bypassed	Conflict managed via international negotiation	Strong constitutional and judicial dispute resolution; courts central

	beyond institutional control	prevents escalation but rigid	by political bargaining and informal power structures	frameworks (UN-led), but no final settlement implemented	in managing autonomy conflicts
6. Citizen Participation & Democratic Oversight	Limited autonomous participation; often mediated through ruling party structures	Electoral participation exists but is ethnically segmented, reducing cross-group accountability	Elections occur but dominated by sectarianism and patronage networks	Separate political systems for each community; no unified democratic oversight	High participation levels with strong regional and national electoral accountability systems

Core Implications

Across all six dimensions, three structural findings emerge:

First, cooperative federalism is the decisive variable. Spain succeeds because coordination is institutionalized; Ethiopia and Iraq struggle because coordination is politically contingent rather than procedural.

Second, fiscal and institutional capacity determines stability more than constitutional design. Bosnia has strong legal design but weak functionality; Ethiopia has formal autonomy but weak fiscal decentralization; Iraq has resource wealth but fragmented fiscal governance.

Third, ethnic recognition alone does not determine outcomes. It stabilizes inclusion in Bosnia and Spain but intensifies fragmentation in Ethiopia and Iraq when not matched with strong coordination systems.

Table Actionable Insights

Dimension	Ethiopia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Iraq	Cyprus	Spain
1. Cooperative Federalism (Core Architecture)	Problem: coordination is hierarchical, not cooperative. Fix: establish binding intergovernmental council with co-decision authority over	Problem: veto-based coordination blocks governance. Fix: replace ethnic veto redundancy with weighted majority intergovernment	Problem: bargaining replaces institutions. Fix: constitutionalize federal–regional council with enforceable arbitration	Problem: no operational cooperation. Fix: phased dual-community administrative	Best model: strong councils exist. Improvement: formalize dispute escalation ladder to reduce constitutional court

	security + development planning.	ntal council model.	over oil + security.	councils before final settlement .	overreach in political disputes.
2. Fiscal Autonomy & Revenue-Sharing	Problem: fiscal centralization undermines federalism. Fix: introduce formula-based equalization grants + limited regional tax authority.	Problem: fragmented fiscal duplication. Fix: unify indirect tax system and central equalization pool.	Problem: oil revenue conflict destabilizes federation. Fix: independent hydrocarbon revenue commission with automatic distribution formula.	Problem: no shared fiscal system. Fix: design pre-unification revenue escrow system for confidence-building.	Strength: asymmetric fiscal autonomy works. Fix: improve transparency and interregional equalization formula legitimacy.
3. Cultural & Identity Recognition	Problem: ethnic recognition fuels segmentation. Fix: shift from ethnic federalism to multi-identity civic federal overlay (cross-ethnic regions or incentives).	Problem: identity is over-institutionalized. Fix: reduce constitutional entrenchment of ethnic categories in policy veto structure.	Problem: identity politicized through sectarian competition. Fix: depoliticize identity in fiscal distribution mechanisms.	Problem: identity locked in zero-sum sovereignty conflict. Fix: design shared symbolic institutions (education, civic service programs) .	Strength: balanced identity recognition. Fix: strengthen interregional civic identity programs to reduce secession incentives.
4. Legitimacy & Accountability	Problem: legitimacy eroded by central dominance and conflict. Fix: decentralize accountability through joint federal–regional	Problem: peace legitimacy without performance legitimacy. Fix: introduce service-delivery accountability	Problem: corruption and patronage dominate legitimacy. Fix: federal anti-corruption authority jointly	Problem: dual legitimacy without integration. Fix: pre-set joint governance legitimacy	Strength: strong legitimacy. Fix: improve accountability in asymmetric regions to prevent perceived inequality.

	performance audits.	benchmarks across entities.	appointed by center and regions.	framework tied to settlement.	
5. Conflict Resolution & Legal Frameworks	Problem: legal frameworks exist but are unenforced. Fix: establish binding intergovernmental arbitration court with execution power.	Problem: legal rigidity creates paralysis. Fix: introduce fast-track political mediation layer before constitutional court escalation.	Problem: legal bypassing by informal power. Fix: constitutionalize enforcement authority for federal rulings.	Problem: unresolved conflict framework. Fix: UN-backed transitional arbitration authority with binding interim rulings.	Strength: strong judiciary. Fix: create political mediation institution before litigation escalation.
6. Citizen Participation & Democratic Oversight	Problem: party-mediated participation. Fix: institutionalize independent regional citizen assemblies linked to federal decisions.	Problem: ethnic segmentation of democracy. Fix: introduce cross-ethnic civic electoral incentives and national party strengthening.	Problem: sectarian voting and clientelism. Fix: electoral reform toward programmatic parties + independent electoral commission.	Problem: dual democratic systems. Fix: staged integration of cross-community civic participation platforms.	Strength: high participation. Fix: improve deliberative democracy mechanisms at regional level.

Doctrinal Implications (Cooperative Federalism Theory)

The core theoretical takeaway is that cooperative federalism is not a descriptive label for decentralized or multi-ethnic governance systems. It is, instead, a design doctrine of enforceable intergovernmental constraint, where stability depends on structured bargaining, not political goodwill.

1. Cooperative federalism is not structure—it is binding decision architecture

The defining feature of cooperative federalism is not whether a state is federal, decentralized, or ethnically organized, but whether intergovernmental decisions are binding, routinized, and enforceable across levels of government.

Where intergovernmental councils lack enforcement authority, as in Ethiopia and Iraq, federalism degrades into unstable bargaining systems or recentralization under crisis pressure. In these cases, coordination is episodic, politically contingent, and ultimately reversible, meaning the “federal” layer cannot constrain state behavior.

Where coordination systems are over-institutionalized but structurally vetoed, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, cooperation becomes procedurally dense but functionally inert. Decision-making is locked by mutual blocking rights, producing stability without adaptability.

By contrast, Spain demonstrates a more effective equilibrium: intergovernmental coordination is institutionalized, but paired with escalation pathways that ensure disputes can be resolved without paralyzing the system. The key distinction is not decentralization itself, but whether the system has credible enforcement and escalation logic built into cooperation.

2. Fiscal federalism is the real constitution of multi-ethnic states

In practice, the operative constitution of multi-ethnic federations is fiscal, not symbolic or identity-based. Political stability is determined less by constitutional identity recognition than by the structure of revenue authority and distribution.

The decisive variables are who controls revenue extraction, how redistribution is calculated, and whether allocation follows automatic rules or discretionary political bargaining. Where fiscal systems are discretionary and politically negotiated, as in Ethiopia and Iraq, fiscal conflict becomes the primary driver of instability and center–periphery tension.

Bosnia illustrates a different failure mode: fiscal fragmentation across multiple entities produces administrative inefficiency and weak redistribution, reinforcing territorial segmentation. Spain, by contrast, demonstrates that asymmetrical fiscal autonomy can remain stable when embedded in predictable negotiated frameworks and partially rule-based transfers.

The doctrinal conclusion is clear: fiscal design is the operational core of federal stability, not a secondary administrative function.

3. Ethnic recognition without cross-cutting institutions produces segmental entrenchment

Ethnic recognition alone does not generate stability. In fact, when institutional design stops at recognition without building cross-cutting governance structures, it tends to reinforce segmentation rather than mitigate it.

In Ethiopia, constitutional ethnic federalism has strengthened identity-based territorialization without producing sufficient interregional integration mechanisms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, constitutional recognition of constituent peoples has been essential for peace maintenance, but without integrative institutions it has also locked politics into ethnic segmentation.

The missing institutional layer in these systems is consistent: absence of cross-regional governance bodies, weak shared fiscal systems, and limited civic or non-ethnic participation

channels. Where these mechanisms are absent, identity becomes the primary axis of political competition rather than one layer among others.

The implication is that recognition must be paired with integrative institutional design or it structurally hardens divisions.

4. The key design principle is “cooperation by constraint, not goodwill”

Stable cooperative federal systems do not depend on elite trust, political harmony, or negotiated goodwill. They depend on structural constraints that force cooperation as the default mode of governance.

This requires four embedded design features: *binding arbitration mechanisms that cannot be bypassed politically; automatic fiscal distribution rules that reduce discretionary conflict; structured escalation ladders that prevent disputes from stagnating; and enforceable intergovernmental decisions that have operational consequences.*

Spain approximates this logic most closely, where institutionalized negotiation is paired with legal and fiscal mechanisms that constrain unilateral action. Systems that lack these constraints revert either to centralization (Ethiopia, Iraq) or institutional paralysis (Bosnia).

The doctrinal principle is therefore not cooperation as intent, but cooperation as enforced institutional necessity.

Cooperative federalism is not a descriptive category of diversity management. It is a discipline of institutional constraint engineering, where system stability depends on whether intergovernmental relations are enforceable, procedural, and structurally unavoidable.

Systems fail when cooperation is optional, as in Ethiopia and Iraq, or when it is immobilized by veto saturation, as in Bosnia. *Systems stabilize when cooperation is embedded as a routine, enforceable, and procedurally escalated governance architecture, as most clearly approximated in Spain.*

Applying these four principles to the federal system of Somalia, especially its institutions in Mogadishu, shifts the logic of governance from political bargaining to rule-based coordination.

Cooperative federalism should be understood not as goodwill between actors, but as binding decision architecture that compels coordination even under political disagreement.

In Somalia’s current system, federal and regional relations often depend on informal negotiation and shifting trust.

A binding architecture would formalise intergovernmental decision-making so that key areas like security, elections, and resources follow enforceable procedures rather than ad hoc deals.

This changes cooperation from optional alignment into mandatory institutional behaviour.

Fiscal federalism is effectively the real constitution of a multi-ethnic or multi-clan state because it determines stability more than formal political texts.

In Somalia, competition over revenue from customs, ports, and taxation is a central source of political tension between the federal government and member states.

A rules-based fiscal system would replace renegotiation with predictable revenue-sharing formulas.

This would reduce zero-sum competition and allow both federal and regional governments to plan independently of political fluctuations in Mogadishu.

Ethnic or clan recognition without cross-cutting institutions tends to entrench divisions rather than reduce them.

In Somalia, clan-based representation provides identity recognition but often reinforces parallel political structures.

Without shared institutions such as integrated civil services, national security forces, and joint administrative systems, these identities remain institutionally separated.

This leads to segmentation where groups interact mainly through bargaining rather than shared governance.

The principle of cooperation by constraint replaces reliance on political goodwill with structural interdependence.

Instead of assuming stable trust, institutions are designed so that actors must cooperate because rules and systems make non-cooperation costly or ineffective.

This includes binding fiscal formulas, joint security command structures, and enforceable dispute resolution mechanisms.

Compared to the current system, this reduces vulnerability to political cycles and elite fragmentation.

Overall, these principles transform Somali federalism from a negotiation-based system into a rule-constrained institutional order.

The key distinction is that current stability depends on political *alignment*, while the proposed model ensures stability even under political disagreement.

35.Somalia's Dominant Clans & Their Role in State Institutions

The Major Clan Families

Darood

Often described as one of the largest Somali clan-families, representing 25 % of the Somali population, the Darood are spread across Somalia as well as Somali-inhabited areas of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. They migrated from Yemeni coastal areas across the Bab El-Mandeb strait. Major sub-clans include the Ogaden, Marehan, Harti, and Majeerteen. Darood influence is especially strong in Puntland and Jubbaland. They often delivered state leaders.

Hawiye

Hawiye clan

The Hawiye dominate much of central Somalia, including the capital Mogadishu. Important sub-clans include the Abgaal and Habar Gidir. Since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, Hawiye political actors and militias have played central roles in national politics and security arrangements.¹² They migrated from Ethiopia and play a prominent role in the trading networks of Somalia.

Dir

Dir clan

Considered one of the oldest Somali clan-families, with roots tracing back to early Cushitic migrations and giving the name Sameel to Somalia, they played a central role in the Adal Empire (1415–1577), a powerful Islamic state in the Horn of Africa. The Dir include sub-clans such as the Gadabursi and Issa. They are concentrated mainly in northwestern Somalia and neighboring Djibouti and Ethiopia.

Rahanweyn (Digil & Mirifle)

Rahanweyn

The Rahanweyn, also called Digil and Mirifle, are concentrated in southern Somalia. Historically associated with farming and agro-pastoralism rather than nomadic pastoralism, they were often politically marginalized and culturally distinct because of their Maay language traditions.

Isaaq

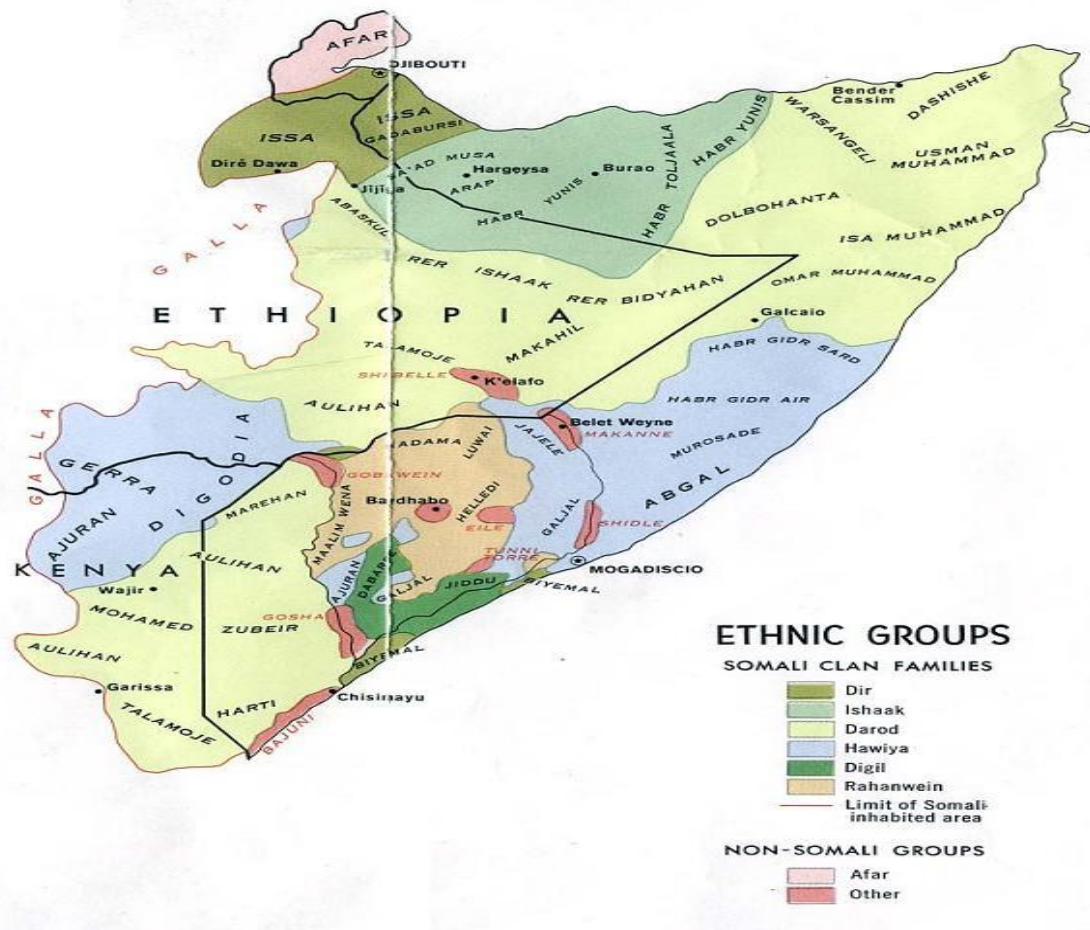
Isaaq clan

The Isaaq dominate the northwestern region known as Somaliland. Although not formally included in Somalia's federal 4.5 system in the same way as southern clans, Isaaq political structures are central to Somaliland's governance model.

Most Somalis belong to the Shafi'i madhhab of Islam that has historically dominated the Horn of Africa coastal trade world and became deeply rooted in Somali society through centuries of interaction with Arabian Peninsula merchants, scholars, and Sufi networks. Islam is state religion that is less important than kinship solidarities and loyalties through Somalia. There are religious renewal movements and political islamists as well.

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawiye>

Figure



The “4.5 Formula” — Clan Representation in Federal Institutions

The central mechanism for distributing political power in Somalia’s federal institutions is the 4.5 power-sharing formula. Under this arrangement, four major clan-families — Darood, Hawiye, Dir, and Rahanweyn — receive equal political representation, while minority communities collectively receive half the representation allocated to each major clan-family.

In Somalia’s 245-seat lower house, 49 seats are assigned to each of the four major clan-families, while approximately 29 seats are reserved for minority groups. The arrangement emerged during post-civil war reconciliation efforts as a mechanism to reduce domination by any single clan and distribute positions across competing political blocs.

Clan affiliation continues to shape parliamentary appointments, cabinet positions, military leadership, regional administrations, and access to political patronage. Traditional elders often retain decisive influence during indirect elections and political negotiations.

Criticism and Limitations of the 4.5 System

The system is widely criticized for institutionalizing clan identity rather than citizenship-based politics. Minority communities remain underrepresented, while political elites and clan elders often dominate candidate selection processes. Rivalries within clans can be as intense as rivalries between different clan-families.

Communities grouped into the “0.5” category — including Benadiri, Jareer/Bantu, and other minority populations — frequently argue that they lack meaningful political influence despite their economic and social importance. Younger Somalis and urban professionals increasingly view the formula as an obstacle to democratic development and national integration.

Traditional Governance Structures

The *Guurti*

Guurti

The Guurti is traditionally a council of clan elders responsible for conflict mediation, peace negotiations, customary law, and inter-clan agreements. Authority is generally based on consensus rather than centralized rule, and decisions may emerge only after prolonged negotiation among elders.

The *Shir*

Shir

A Shir is a broader clan conference or assembly convened to resolve disputes or negotiate matters involving grazing rights, trade, compensation, marriage, security arrangements, and political settlements. Historically, Shirs have functioned as major decision-making forums throughout Somali society.

Somaliland: The Most Institutionalized Clan-Elder System

Somaliland provides the clearest example of traditional authority integrated into modern governance. Its political system formally incorporates the Guurti into the legislature through an upper chamber known as the House of Elders.

The Guurti reviews legislation, mediates political crises, addresses inter-clan conflict, and advises on religion, security, and customary law. It may also intervene during constitutional deadlock. Clan elders played a major role in Somaliland’s peace conferences during the 1990s, especially the Borama Conference of 1993, which helped establish Somaliland’s hybrid political system combining elections with customary authority.

Puntland and Other Federal Member States

Puntland and other federal member states also incorporate clan balancing into governance structures. Ministerial portfolios, parliamentary seats, security leadership positions, and district authority are often distributed according to negotiated clan arrangements.

In practice, many Somali federal states operate through a hybrid structure combining constitutional institutions, clan negotiations, militia influence, business alliances, and customary mediation.

Recent Reform Efforts

Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has promoted reforms aimed at moving Somalia away from indirect clan-based political selection toward universal suffrage. Constitutional amendments debated and approved in 2024 were presented as steps toward one-person-one-vote elections, reducing dependence on clan quotas, and strengthening national political parties.

Implementation remains difficult because of persistent insecurity, disagreements among federal member states, and the continued importance of clan structures as systems of protection, political mobilization, and local governance.

Summary Table

Mechanism	Where	How Clans Are Represented
4.5 Formula	Federal Government	Equal representation for four major clan-families plus reduced minority allocation
Guurti (House of Elders)	Somaliland	Clan elders serve in the upper legislative chamber
Shir Assemblies	Across Somalia	Informal clan conferences for mediation and negotiation
Federal Member States	Puntland, Jubbaland, Galmudug, etc.	Clan quotas shape regional power-sharing
Traditional Elders	Nationwide	Influence elections, conflict resolution, and local governance

Somalia’s political order operates through a hybrid system in which federal institutions, regional administrations, customary elders, business networks, and clan alliances all share authority simultaneously.

A Proposed Somali National Tribal Council System

Design Framework for a Standardized, Federated Clan-Council Architecture

I. Context & Constitutional Logic

Somalia’s political order has historically operated through a layered interaction between formal state institutions and customary clan authority. Since the collapse of the Somali Democratic Republic in 1991, no durable political arrangement has succeeded without incorporating traditional elders, clan mediation structures, and *xeer* (customary law) into governance. The

modern federal system therefore exists alongside older social mechanisms that continue to regulate security, compensation, land use, conflict resolution, and political legitimacy.

The current federal structure consists of Puntland, Jubaland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, South West State, the Benadir capital region centered on Mogadishu, and Somaliland, whose Guurti system provides the clearest institutionalized example of traditional authority embedded within constitutional governance.

This proposal envisions a unified and standardized clan-council framework operating across all Federal Member States and connected through a permanent National Tribal Council (NTC). The model does not seek to replace electoral institutions with clan rule. Instead, it attempts to formalize customary authority into a regulated constitutional structure capable of stabilizing Somalia's fragmented political environment while gradually coexisting with universal suffrage.

The framework rests on five foundational principles. Subsidiarity ensures disputes are resolved at the lowest effective level before escalation. Symmetry guarantees that all Federal Member States possess equivalent institutional structures rather than personalized regional arrangements. Separation preserves a distinction between elected governance and customary oversight. Inclusion structurally incorporates minority communities and women into all council levels. Evolution ensures that the system remains compatible with eventual transition toward citizenship-based democratic politics rather than permanent clan allocation.

II. The National Tribal Council (NTC) — *Golaha Qabiilada Qaranka*

The proposed National Tribal Council would function as a permanent constitutional body situated alongside, but institutionally separate from, the Federal Parliament. It would not serve as a legislative chamber and would possess no authority over taxation, ordinary legislation, or executive administration. Its purpose would instead be constitutional stabilization, mediation, and custodianship of Somali customary governance traditions.

The NTC derives legitimacy from *xeer* rather than electoral sovereignty. It would therefore operate as a bridge institution connecting the federal state to Somalia's clan-based social order. In constitutional theory, the council resembles a hybrid between a senate of customary authorities, a constitutional arbitration council, and a permanent national reconciliation forum.

Its central functions would include codifying and preserving customary law, mediating inter-regional disputes, certifying legitimate clan representation, standardizing compensation practices, and convening national reconciliation assemblies during periods of constitutional breakdown or civil conflict.

Composition of the National Tribal Council

	Seat	Members Basis
Block		

Four major clan-families (Dir, Darood, Hawiye, Rahanweyn)	12 each = 48	Delegated by State Guurti councils
Isaaq clan-family	12	Equal parity contingent on Somaliland participation
Minority / “0.5” communities	16	Guaranteed representation for marginalized communities
Women’s Elder Caucus	10	Senior women delegates selected by FMS councils
Total	~86	Federated national composition

Members would not be appointed by the federal executive. Instead, selection would occur through recognized clan *shir* assemblies supervised by State Guurti institutions. Terms would last six years and be staggered in order to preserve continuity and prevent sudden politicized turnover. Simultaneous membership in political parties, executive institutions, or electoral office would be constitutionally prohibited.

The NTC would maintain a permanent secretariat in Mogadishu together with a liaison office in Garowe. A symbolic rotating annual seat among Federal Member State capitals would reinforce the federal and non-centralized character of the institution.

The Secretariat would maintain a National *Xeer Registry*, archive mediation agreements, publish rulings, preserve institutional records, and coordinate inter-state customary arbitration.

III. Constitutional Competences of the NTC

The authority of the National Tribal Council would be carefully delimited in order to preserve the supremacy of elected institutions while still granting the council genuine stabilizing influence. Its competences would therefore be divided into exclusive, shared, and advisory categories.

Exclusive powers would include custodianship of customary law, mandatory arbitration of inter-state clan disputes, national standardization of *diya* (blood compensation), certification of legitimate clan elders, and authority to convene an emergency *Shir Beeleed* during constitutional collapse or severe national crisis.

Shared competences with the Federal Parliament would include constitutional amendments affecting clan rights, mediation over land and water disputes, participation in national

reconciliation frameworks, and approval authority over modifications to clan allocation systems such as the 4.5 framework or its successors.

Advisory competences would include consultation on senior security appointments, equity review of federal budget allocations to Federal Member States, and consultation before declarations of national emergency.

The council would possess no authority over ordinary legislation, criminal sentencing, fiscal policy, trade regulation, electoral administration, or foreign diplomacy beyond customary cross-border mediation involving Somali communities in neighboring states such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.

This limitation is deliberate. The long-term legitimacy of the institution depends on restraint. The NTC is envisioned not as a sovereign upper chamber but as a constitutional guardian and mediator whose authority derives from trust and continuity rather than coercive state power.

IV. Federal Member State Guurti Councils — *Golaha Odayaasha Gobolka*

Each Federal Member State would establish a constitutionally recognized State Guurti modeled on the most successful aspects of Somaliland's House of Elders while operating within a nationally standardized framework. These councils would function as upper customary chambers parallel to elected state assemblies.

The State Guurti would possess authority primarily in mediation, constitutional stabilization, cultural oversight, and customary governance rather than ordinary legislation. Their existence institutionalizes the reality that most serious Somali political disputes continue to be resolved through negotiated clan settlement rather than purely judicial procedure.

Standardized Composition by Federal Member State

Federal Member State	Approximate Seats	Dominant Communities
Somaliland	82	Isaaq, Gadabursi, Dhulbahante, Warsangeli
Puntland	66	Harti Darood
Jubaland	55	Ogaden Darood, Rahanweyn
Galmudug	55	Hawiye and Darood
Hirshabelle	55	Hawiye and minority agricultural communities
South West State	60	Digil & Mirifle
Benadir	30	Multi-clan metropolitan representation

Every State Guurti would constitutionally reserve a minimum of 15 percent of seats for minority or non-dominant communities and at least 20 percent for women. These provisions would operate as binding constitutional floors rather than discretionary political quotas.

The Guurti would maintain primary authority over intra-state clan mediation. They would convene district *shir* assemblies, supervise *xeer* arbitration panels, issue temporary ceasefire declarations during inter-clan violence, and certify customary legitimacy within their territories.

They would also exercise limited constitutional oversight powers. State presidents would be required to present annual public reports before the Guurti, which could issue formal declarations of concern (*war-gelin*) regarding governance failures or constitutional violations. A two-thirds supermajority could trigger mandatory constitutional arbitration through the National Tribal Council.

Borrowing directly from Somaliland's historical precedent, State Guurti councils could temporarily extend or shorten elected government mandates during severe security emergencies, though only within strictly defined constitutional limits.

V. District-Level Clan Committees — *Guddi Beeleed*

Below the Federal Member State level, each district would maintain a permanent District Clan Committee functioning as the foundation of the customary governance system. These bodies would connect grassroots dispute mediation to regional and national institutions.

District committees would consist of 7–15 representatives selected from all major local communities. Leadership structures would normally balance dominant and secondary clans to prevent monopolization by a single lineage group.

Their primary role would be early warning and rapid mediation. Meetings would occur monthly, while emergency sessions would be convened within forty-eight hours following violent incidents, grazing disputes, retaliatory killings, or politically sensitive clan confrontations.

The committees would maintain regular coordination with elected district councils and State Guurti institutions, creating an integrated mediation network capable of detecting instability before escalation into wider armed conflict.

VI. Structural Safeguards Against Politicization

The principal danger facing any institutionalized clan structure is capture by political elites, militia networks, or regional executives. The framework therefore incorporates extensive safeguards intended to preserve customary legitimacy and prevent conversion into partisan machinery.

Institutional Safeguards

Safeguard	Constitutional Purpose
Incompatibility rules	Elders barred from party politics and executive office
Transparency requirements	Proceedings publicly recorded and archived
Clan certification	Elders validated through local <i>shir</i> assemblies
Term limits	Maximum institutional service of 12 years
External observation	AU and IGAD observers attend annual plenaries

These safeguards seek to preserve the councils as mediating institutions rather than vehicles of patronage or authoritarian consolidation. Legitimacy is intended to derive from community recognition and procedural transparency rather than presidential appointment or militia coercion.

VII. Constitutional Entrenchment

For the system to remain durable, the National Tribal Council and State Guurti structures would require formal constitutional entrenchment within both the Federal Constitution and each Federal Member State constitution.

The Federal Constitution would establish the NTC as a co-equal constitutional institution distinct from Parliament, the Presidency, and the Judiciary. State constitutions would mirror these provisions in standardized form to prevent regional executives from dismantling or marginalizing customary councils.

Core competences such as *xeer* custodianship, inter-state mediation authority, and constitutional consultation rights would be protected through heightened amendment thresholds. Alteration of these powers would require not only parliamentary supermajorities but also ratification through a national *Shir Beeleed* representing all major clan-families and minority communities.

The purpose of this entrenchment is to ensure that customary authority cannot be casually manipulated during periods of political instability or executive centralization.

VIII. Relationship Between Institutional Levels

Level	Institution	Primary Function
National	National Tribal Council	Constitutional mediation and

		inter-FMS arbitration
Federal Member State	State Guurti	Regional customary governance and conflict resolution
District	Guddi Beeleed	Early warning and grassroots mediation

This architecture creates a vertically integrated customary governance network linking local mediation structures to national constitutional stabilization mechanisms.

IX. Transition Beyond the 4.5 Formula

One of the proposal's central objectives is gradual transition beyond the existing 4.5 clan-allocation framework without abruptly dismantling the social structures that continue to sustain political legitimacy in Somalia.

Unlike the current system, in which clans directly allocate parliamentary representation, the proposed framework separates customary authority from electoral representation. Clan councils would stabilize and mediate society while elected legislatures increasingly derive legitimacy from citizenship and universal suffrage.

The proposal therefore does not abolish clan structures. Instead, it constitutionalizes and regulates them while progressively reducing their direct role in electoral competition.

Minority communities would receive guaranteed institutional representation rather than being grouped into a reduced "0.5" category. Women's participation would become structurally embedded at all levels rather than dependent solely on parliamentary quotas. Customary law would move from fragmented informal practice toward nationally documented and standardized frameworks supervised through constitutional institutions.

X. Overall Institutional Logic

The proposed Somali National Tribal Council system is fundamentally an attempt to reconcile two parallel sources of legitimacy that have coexisted uneasily throughout modern Somali history: the modern constitutional state and the customary clan order.

The framework assumes that durable Somali governance cannot emerge through simple replacement of customary authority with imported institutional models. Clan structures remain deeply embedded in dispute resolution, political legitimacy, security organization, and social trust networks. Attempts to ignore or suppress them have repeatedly produced institutional collapse or parallel informal power systems.

At the same time, unrestricted clan dominance over formal state institutions risks permanent fragmentation, exclusion, and political paralysis. The proposal therefore seeks a middle path in

which customary authority is formalized, limited, constitutionalized, and balanced against elected democratic governance.

Under this model, elected institutions govern, courts adjudicate formal law, and executive administrations manage state policy, while clan councils preserve social legitimacy, mediate conflict, protect customary continuity, and function as constitutional stabilizers during periods of national crisis.

The system's success would ultimately depend not on legal design alone, but on whether Somali political actors accept restraint, consensus, and institutional balance as preferable alternatives to zero-sum clan competition and personalized patronage politics.

Having said that the strength of kinship ties as a societal glue tend to be correlated with the degree of modernisation of the state and the competence and effectiveness of the public administration, comparable to the bid for universal suffrage introduced by the Somali government ahead of the secession by Somaliland, recognised by Israel and the US, only, and a few other countries.

At all times, governance can be strengthened and policy-making be made more pluralist in Somalia, comparable to the greatness of the Ummah founded by Mohammed instituting a parsimonious religion with values such as forgiveness, peace, justice, adjudication, harmony to be reflected in the personal behaviour of each Muslim member of the political community.

By calling for free elections the Somali central government may have been too rash and offended the sensitivities of both reformers and elderlies, without addressing the challenges of the Somali polity, even as the Mogadisho-based elite may have tried to seek security beyond Perfection.

36. Democratisation in the Horn of Africa

Democratisation in fragile states is rarely a linear transition from authoritarian rule to stable liberal democracy. In regions like the Horn of Africa—especially in countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Sudan—democratisation tends to unfold through uneven, reversible, and conflict-embedded pathways shaped by security crises, state capacity constraints, and external economic pressures.

In fragile states, democratisation often follows three broad but overlapping trajectories. The first is post-conflict institutional rebuilding, where peace agreements attempt to construct inclusive governance systems after civil war. The second is controlled liberalisation, where ruling elites introduce limited political competition without fully surrendering power. The third is fragmented or hybrid governance, where formal democratic institutions coexist with strong informal or militarised power structures. In the Horn, all three models appear simultaneously in different countries and even within the same state.

A key driver shaping these trajectories today is integration into the global and regional economy. The Horn's increasing connectivity—through ports, logistics corridors, Gulf investment, and infrastructure financed by external actors—creates both opportunities and

pressures for governance reform. Trade integration with the global economy can incentivise institutional predictability, legal reform, and anti-corruption measures because investors and trading partners require stability. For landlocked or trade-dependent states such as Ethiopia, economic integration through ports in Djibouti or Somalia increases the importance of regulatory coherence and cross-border coordination.

At the continental level, economic integration through the African Union and associated frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can encourage cooperation by linking market access to regulatory harmonisation and political coordination. In principle, deeper regional integration reduces transaction costs, expands markets, and creates incentives for states to maintain predictable governance systems. In the Horn, this has the potential to turn historically conflict-prone borders into zones of trade and infrastructure development, particularly in logistics, energy, and pastoral value chains.

However, these integration pressures operate alongside powerful countervailing forces. One major constraint is the persistence of security dilemmas and militarised politics, where states and elites prioritise regime survival over democratic consolidation. In such contexts, elections or decentralisation reforms may be used tactically to manage internal conflict rather than to deepen accountability. Armed groups, insurgencies, and fragmented security sectors also weaken the institutional foundations required for sustained democratisation.

A second countervailing force is external geopolitical competition, especially in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region. Gulf states, China, the United States, and European actors often pursue infrastructure and security partnerships that prioritise strategic access over democratic governance standards. This can reinforce executive power in fragile states by providing alternative sources of finance that are not conditional on political reform.

A third constraint is elite fragmentation and patronage politics, where political competition is structured through access to resources rather than ideological platforms or policy alternatives. In such systems, economic integration can sometimes intensify competition over rents—such as ports, customs revenues, or infrastructure contracts—rather than producing inclusive development.

A fourth factor is institutional thinness, meaning that courts, electoral bodies, and civil services often lack autonomy or capacity. Without strong institutions, democratisation reforms can remain procedural rather than substantive, producing elections without accountability or decentralisation without effective service delivery.

Despite these constraints, regional integration also creates pathways for cooperation and development. Cross-border infrastructure projects, such as energy interconnectors, transport corridors, and digital trade systems, can build mutual dependence between states, making conflict more costly. Regional security cooperation—whether against piracy, trafficking, or insurgent movements—also strengthens the logic of collective action, particularly when coordinated through AU or IGAD mechanisms.

The implications for development are therefore mixed but significant. Where economic integration is paired with institutional strengthening, it can support gradual improvements in governance, revenue collection, and service delivery. It can also expand employment

opportunities and reduce isolation of peripheral regions. However, where integration is dominated by external actors or captured by domestic elites, it risks reinforcing inequality, enclave development, and authoritarian resilience.

In the Horn of Africa context, the key developmental challenge is not simply “more democracy” or “more integration,” but sequencing and alignment: ensuring that economic connectivity, security cooperation, and political reform evolve in mutually reinforcing ways. If managed well, regional integration through the African Union and related frameworks can help transform historically fragmented political spaces into interconnected development corridors. If poorly managed, it can deepen existing inequalities and stabilise fragile authoritarian bargains rather than overcome them.

Ultimately, democratisation in fragile states like those in the Horn is best understood as a contested equilibrium between internal institutional reform, regional economic integration, and external geopolitical pressure, where development outcomes depend on whether cooperation or competition becomes the dominant regional logic.

Table

Country	Regime type (stylised)	State capacity (fragile state theory)	Conflict environment	Elite settlement type	External dependency	Democratisation trajectory (assessment)
Ethiopia	Hybrid federal authoritarianism	Medium–high but crisis-prone	High internal fragmentation	Competitive–authoritarian bargain	High (Gulf, China, West, IMF-linked)	Blocked liberalisation with cyclical opening/closure
Somalia	Post-collapse federal hybrid	Very low (fragmented sovereignty)	Very high (insurgency persists)	Clan-based power-sharing	Very high (donors, AU missions)	Post-conflict institutionalisation without consolidation
Eritrea	Single-party militarised state	Medium coercive capacity	Low internal open conflict, high repression	Closed elite-military system	Moderate (selective Red Sea geopolitics)	Closed authoritarian stability with low transition probability

Sudan	Military-dominated transitional breakdown	Medium but collapsing legitimacy	Very high (civil war dynamics)	Fragmented military-civil bargain	High (Gulf, sanctions relief cycles)	Interrupted transition / war-to-authoritarian cycling
South Sudan	Neopatrimonial post-conflict state	Low	Very high (civil war recurrence risk)	Elite patronage pact (oil rents)	High (aid + oil dependence)	Failed post-conflict transition / stalled democratisation
Kenya	Competitive authoritarian democracy	Medium-high	Moderate (localized violence)	Electoral-patronage democracy	Medium	Consolidated electoral democracy with authoritarian residues
Djibouti	Dominant-party presidential system	Medium (strategic rent-based)	Low internal conflict	Port-rent authoritarian bargain	Very high (foreign bases, logistics rents)	Stable authoritarian equilibrium with low liberalisation pressure

Across the Horn of Africa, democratisation prospects vary less according to ideological commitments than according to three structural dimensions that interact with one another: state capacity and fragmentation, the nature of domestic political settlements, and the degree and form of external economic integration. Taken together, these dimensions help explain why countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, and Djibouti have followed sharply divergent political trajectories despite shared regional pressures.

On the first dimension, state capacity versus fragmentation, the key distinction is between coercive reach, administrative coherence, and territorial control. High-capacity but politically contested states such as Ethiopia and Sudan tend to generate cycles of authoritarian consolidation followed by instability, because strong coercive institutions coexist with unresolved political settlement disputes. Extremely low-capacity states such as Somalia and South Sudan, by contrast, struggle to consolidate authority at all, producing fragmented sovereignty and continuous transitional governance without durable institutional settlement. Medium-capacity but resource- or rent-supported systems such as Djibouti and Eritrea exhibit

a different pattern: relatively stable authoritarianism, where state coercive capacity is sufficient to maintain order but not oriented toward liberalisation or pluralisation.

On the second dimension, political settlement type, democratisation outcomes depend on how elites structure access to power, resources, and legitimacy. Inclusive electoral settlements, as partially seen in Kenya, allow for competitive politics and periodic alternation of power, even if they remain constrained by patronage and inequality. Narrow elite–military bargains, evident in Sudan and Eritrea, tend to produce either high repression or repeated breakdown, because political inclusion is tightly restricted and contestation is perceived as existential. Clan- or patronage-based settlements, characteristic of Somalia and South Sudan, generate fragile institutionalisation in which formal governance structures exist but remain dependent on negotiated elite deals rather than stable rule-based authority. Federal-ethnic settlements, as in Ethiopia, institutionalise diversity and decentralisation, but also embed identity-based competition within the state itself, producing a system of structured contestation rather than consensus democracy.

On the third dimension, external integration, the form of engagement with the global and regional economy significantly shapes regime incentives. High external leverage environments such as Somalia, South Sudan, and Djibouti—where aid, foreign bases, logistics corridors, and security partnerships are central—often stabilise regimes without deepening democratic accountability, because external actors prioritise stability and access over governance reform. Geopolitical rent flows linked to the Red Sea and Gulf competition further reinforce executive authority across the region, as governments can draw on multiple external patrons without domestic institutional reform. More diversified integration into global markets, as in Kenya and partially Ethiopia, can generate some pressure for regulatory predictability and institutional standardisation, but this does not automatically translate into democratization; it more often produces administrative reform without full political liberalisation.

From these dimensions, a key regional pattern emerges. Democratisation in the Horn is not converging toward a single trajectory but is instead fragmenting into distinct regime clusters. Kenya represents an electoral democracy with enduring authoritarian residues. Ethiopia illustrates a hybrid federal system under structural stress. Somalia and South Sudan remain in post-conflict fragmented statehood with incomplete institutional consolidation. Eritrea and Sudan represent military-authoritarian systems that oscillate between stability and breakdown. Djibouti embodies a rent-based authoritarian hub anchored in strategic geography and external dependency.

Within this broader structure, conflict is not separate from regime type but deeply embedded within it. In some cases, conflict functions as a mechanism of state formation and reconfiguration, as seen historically in Sudan and Ethiopia. In others, it substitutes for institutionalised political competition, as in Somalia and South Sudan, where governance is continuously renegotiated through crisis. In more consolidated authoritarian systems such as Eritrea, controlled internal security and militarisation serve as stabilising mechanisms that suppress open conflict while maintaining regime durability.

External economic integration plays a further structuring role, but not in the way classical modernisation theory would suggest. Rather than steadily producing democratisation,

integration through ports, infrastructure corridors, foreign bases, and aid flows tends to strengthen executive bargaining power, reduce domestic accountability pressures, and embed forms of authoritarian resilience. Even when integration improves infrastructure or revenue generation, it often does so through state elites who are insulated from broad-based political competition.

The overall implication is that democratisation in the Horn is fundamentally capacity-constrained and structurally mediated rather than normatively driven. Hybrid regimes dominate because they balance coercion, resource distribution, and selective inclusion in ways that maximise survival under conditions of insecurity and external dependency. Regional economic integration through mechanisms such as the African Union and AfCFTA, alongside Red Sea geopolitical competition, may increase incentives for stability and coordination, but it does not automatically generate democratic deepening.

Ultimately, the region's political landscape is best understood as a spectrum of three dominant outcomes: stable authoritarian equilibria, fragile hybrid transitions, and post-conflict institutional breakdown systems. These are not stages on a linear path toward democracy but distinct political equilibria produced by the interaction of state capacity, elite settlement structures, and external economic integration.

The European Union and the United States should respond to the Horn of Africa less as a "democratisation project" in isolation and more as a system of interacting fragile political economies shaped by conflict, maritime geopolitics, and external rent flows. The implication is that policy effectiveness depends on sequencing: stabilisation, governance incentives, and economic integration must reinforce each other rather than work at cross-purposes.

A first implication is that both the EU and US need to shift from state-centric engagement to corridor- and system-based engagement. In practice, this means focusing on the connective infrastructure that links Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Sudan rather than treating each as isolated cases. Ports, logistics corridors, energy interconnectors, and cross-border trade systems should be treated as the primary entry points for governance influence, because they shape incentives for cooperation more directly than political conditionality alone.

A second implication is the need to prioritise "governance-through-interdependence" rather than governance-through-conditionality. Traditional democracy aid often assumes institutional reform precedes stability, but in the Horn the sequence is often reversed: security and economic predictability are prerequisites for meaningful institutionalisation. This suggests prioritising customs harmonisation, regional trade facilitation, and infrastructure governance standards under frameworks such as the African Union rather than narrowly bilateral political reform programs.

A third area is recalibrating security engagement toward regional public goods. Instead of fragmented bilateral security assistance, the EU and US should support collective capabilities such as maritime security coordination in the Red Sea, counter-piracy frameworks, shared intelligence mechanisms against transnational militant networks, and joint disaster-response systems. This reduces duplication, limits external patronage competition, and strengthens incentives for regional cooperation.

At the same time, both actors must recognise the destabilising effects of external geopolitical competition and rent inflows. In Djibouti or Sudan, for example, multiple external patrons can reinforce executive power without strengthening accountability. This implies a need for coordination between Western and non-Western external actors to avoid creating “aid and base arbitrage,” where domestic elites leverage competing external interests against institutional reform.

A fourth implication is that support for democratisation should be sequenced and differentiated by regime type rather than uniformly applied. In relatively stable electoral systems such as Kenya, assistance can focus on judicial independence, electoral integrity, and anti-corruption systems. In hybrid systems like Ethiopia, the priority is conflict mitigation, fiscal decentralisation capacity, and institutional dispute resolution. In post-conflict fragmented states such as Somalia and South Sudan, the focus should remain on basic state functionality—revenue systems, security sector coordination, and service delivery—before assuming rapid democratic deepening is feasible.

A fifth dimension is urbanisation and economic transformation as long-term entry points for political change. Rather than treating democracy assistance as primarily electoral, the EU and US should invest in labour markets, urban governance, digital finance systems, and regional value chains. These create constituencies for predictability, contract enforcement, and institutional accountability over time.

Finally, there is a strategic implication: the Horn is increasingly shaped by Red Sea geopolitics and global trade routes, meaning that maritime security, port governance, and infrastructure finance are not peripheral but central to political order. Engagement strategies should therefore integrate diplomacy, development finance, and security policy into a single framework rather than separate silos.

Overall, the core policy shift is from trying to “fix states individually” toward managing a regional system of interdependence under conditions of fragility. Democratisation, in this context, is not a standalone objective but an outcome that becomes more likely when security, trade integration, and institutional incentives are aligned across borders rather than fragmented within them.

If the EU and the US want to work with Gulf states to strengthen governance and encourage more pluralistic policymaking in the Horn of Africa, the starting point is to recognize that Gulf actors are no longer peripheral donors. Countries such as United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have become major investors, security partners, and diplomatic actors whose influence often exceeds that of traditional Western development partners in specific sectors such as ports, logistics, energy, and infrastructure.

The challenge is that Gulf engagement has often strengthened state capacity without necessarily strengthening accountability. Ports can become more efficient, security forces better equipped, and infrastructure more modern, while decision-making remains concentrated among narrow political elites. The policy objective should therefore not be to reduce Gulf involvement but to shape it so that state-building is accompanied by broader participation and institutional development.

One avenue is to move from purely bilateral investment arrangements toward joint governance frameworks. Rather than negotiating infrastructure projects solely between governments and foreign investors, major port, logistics, and energy projects could include formal consultation mechanisms involving local authorities, business associations, civil society groups, and affected communities. The EU and US can provide technical assistance for these governance structures, while Gulf partners provide capital and commercial expertise.

A second area is co-financing infrastructure through multilateral mechanisms. When projects are financed through a mixture of Gulf capital, European development finance, and African institutions, there is greater scope for transparency standards, procurement rules, and public oversight. Such arrangements reduce the risk that strategic infrastructure becomes the object of elite bargaining behind closed doors.

A third approach is strengthening local government and subnational capacity around major investment corridors. Much Gulf investment is concentrated in ports and urban centres, but the benefits often fail to spread inland. Joint programs could support municipal governance, local revenue collection, workforce training, and regional planning so that economic gains are distributed more broadly. This helps prevent infrastructure-led growth from reinforcing regional inequalities and political grievances.

The EU and US could also encourage Gulf partners to support economic pluralism rather than only elite-led development. Investment vehicles targeting small and medium-sized enterprises, agricultural value chains, and cross-border commerce can broaden participation in economic growth. A more diverse economic landscape often creates pressure for more inclusive policymaking because multiple social groups gain a stake in governance outcomes.

Another promising area is regional policy dialogue. Gulf states have strong incentives to support stability around the Red Sea because of trade, food security, and maritime interests. Joint EU–US–Gulf forums involving Horn governments, the African Union, and regional organisations could focus on shared issues such as maritime governance, climate adaptation, migration, and infrastructure planning. These platforms can make policymaking less exclusive by creating multiple channels of participation and consultation.

Educational partnerships, research networks, and professional exchanges are equally important. Pluralism is not only a constitutional question; it is also about who participates in policy debates. Jointly funded universities, public policy institutes, and civil service training programmes can expand the range of actors involved in governance and create professional networks that cross national and political boundaries.

However, meaningful pluralism requires addressing incentives. Gulf governments generally prioritise stability, commercial returns, and security cooperation. Western actors often prioritise accountability and participation. A workable partnership therefore depends on framing pluralistic governance not as a normative add-on but as a practical tool for reducing investment risk, preventing conflict, and improving long-term policy effectiveness. More inclusive decision-making tends to produce more predictable outcomes, which benefits investors and governments alike.

The broader implication is that governance reform in the Horn is unlikely to succeed through external pressure alone. It is more likely to emerge when different external actors align around a shared model of development that combines infrastructure, economic growth, institutional capacity, and broader participation. In that scenario, Gulf investment becomes not merely a source of capital but a component of a wider strategy that links state capacity to accountability and regional integration to more pluralistic policymaking.

RENVOI

I watch people the way other men watch weather.

Not because I care for them. Because patterns matter. Habit is the closest thing humanity has to destiny. A person believes they are making choices, but most are simply tracing grooves worn into them years ago — the same route to work, the same type of lover, the same phrasing when they lie, the same pause before confessing something they swore they'd never say aloud.

That pause is where I live.

You call it manipulation because you prefer comforting words for your own predictability. I call it architecture. If a man always reaches for certainty when frightened, I place certainty in front of him and wait. If vanity drives him, I offer an audience. If guilt drives him, I offer silence. Traps are not cages. They are invitations tailored so precisely that the target mistakes surrender for free will.

The amusing part is how deeply people resent observation while endlessly performing themselves. They leak everything. Postures. Vocabulary. Timing. Appetite. The desperate little edits they make to stories depending on who's listening. Human beings are porous creatures pretending to be sealed containers.

So yes, I spy on other human beings myself as well, real-time, especially when watched I can sense it miles away, and it must be unsettling for Wormold and Agent 5378 hoping to smoke you out or Europe out of the nation state. Or Europe out of the closet... Indiscriminate eavesdropping is Orwellian and for amateurs and governments drowning in useless noise. Precision matters. You study the fracture lines, then apply pressure only where the structure already wants to collapse.

And still, despite all this, people insist on believing intelligence is kindness.

It isn't.

The seek not only to budget-maximise but also to spread its tentacles into every nook and crannies of society to assert control and act as both Thought police and as Vigilante belonging to a bygone era.

Some of the sharpest minds I've encountered weaponize attention itself. To understand someone completely is to hold a dangerous instrument in your hand. Most lack the discipline to resist using it. I at least possess the honesty not to dress predation as morality.

You may find that offensive. Good. Offense is often the final defense of a person realizing they have been seen more clearly than they see themselves.

And if that unsettles your intelligence, perhaps it deserves unsettling.

Above the sky, there is Sun.

And if you lost your way, perhaps you should have stayed at home.



CONCLUSIONS

The Eritrea–Ethiopia relationship is best understood as a layered historical system rather than a linear story of conflict and reconciliation. Its foundations lie in overlapping imperial, colonial, and postcolonial arrangements that produced fundamentally different national trajectories for two societies that were later forcibly and then contentiously connected. Eritrea’s experience under Italian colonial rule created a distinct administrative and economic identity, while Ethiopia maintained imperial continuity. The post–World War II federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, followed by annexation in 1962, was not simply a political decision but a structural rupture that transformed Eritrean nationalism into a long-term liberation project. This set in motion a 30-year war that embedded militarization, sacrifice narratives, and state formation around the experience of resistance.

Independence in 1993 did not resolve the underlying structural tensions; instead, it reconfigured them. The border war of 1998–2000 was not only about territory such as Badme but also about competing interpretations of sovereignty, legitimacy, and post-independence order. The Algiers Agreement formally ended active warfare but froze many of the political questions into legal and diplomatic limbo, producing a prolonged “no war, no peace” equilibrium. This period mattered as much as the war itself because it normalized militarized borders, mutual isolation, and political narratives built on anticipated insecurity. The 2018 rapprochement represented a genuine discontinuity at the elite diplomatic level, but it did not fully dismantle the structural conditions of mistrust, and subsequent regional instability—especially Ethiopia’s internal fragmentation during the Tigray conflict—reintroduced security anxieties that quickly spilled across borders.

External actors, including the European Union, operate in the Horn of Africa within a constrained but consequential space shaped by overlapping security regimes, humanitarian dependence, and great-power competition. The EU's influence is not primarily coercive; it is instead exercised through financial leverage, regulatory conditionality, and norm-setting in areas such as human rights, migration governance, and development programming. Yet this influence is structurally limited because it competes with actors whose tools are more directly strategic or transactional, such as Gulf states investing in ports and military access, China financing infrastructure at scale, and the United States focusing on counterterrorism and crisis diplomacy. The result is not a single external "actor effect" but a fragmented external environment in which different parts of the Horn are pulled into different economic and security orbits, sometimes reinforcing fragmentation rather than reducing it.

Economic interdependence between Eritrea and Ethiopia is often described as a stabilizing mechanism, but its actual effect depends on whether interdependence is institutionalized or merely potential. In theory, Ethiopia's landlocked geography creates a structural demand for maritime access, while Eritrea's coastline provides strategic port infrastructure that could generate revenue and regional relevance. However, interdependence only reduces conflict when it is embedded in credible, enforceable institutions that survive political turnover. In the Horn of Africa, economic ties have historically been episodic and politically reversible, meaning they have not consistently created strong opportunity costs for conflict. In some cases, the absence of stable economic integration has even reinforced insecurity, because each side assumes that economic dependency could be weaponized during political disputes. Thus, interdependence is not automatically pacifying; it is conditional on trust, legal predictability, and shared expectations about continuity.

Conflict resolution in this context cannot rely solely on formal agreements or elite diplomacy because the core problem is not the absence of treaties but the fragility of enforcement and the depth of mutual threat perception. Effective strategies therefore combine legal settlement with layered confidence-building architectures. This includes fully operationalizing border demarcation mechanisms in a way that is politically insulated from short-term disputes, while also building redundancy through regional institutions such as the African Union and IGAD. However, institutional frameworks alone are insufficient without sustained practical measures such as demilitarized buffer zones, predictable communication channels between military commands, and incremental normalization steps that reduce the probability of rapid escalation. In deeply securitized environments, small procedural stabilizers often matter more than grand agreements because they reduce misinterpretation and crisis acceleration.

Infrastructure development and trade incentives can contribute to long-term stability, but only when they are treated as political infrastructure rather than purely economic projects. Transport corridors linking Ethiopia to Eritrean ports, for example, are not neutral investments; they reshape strategic dependence and bargaining power. If structured transparently and jointly governed, they can create mutual lock-in effects that raise the cost of conflict and reward cooperation. However, if they are asymmetrically controlled or perceived as instruments of leverage, they may intensify insecurity rather than reduce it. The same applies to energy grids, industrial zones, and regional trade frameworks: their stabilizing effect depends less on their existence than on the governance architecture surrounding them. In the Horn of Africa, infrastructure becomes a form of geopolitical signalling as much as economic development,

meaning its contribution to stability is real but conditional, reversible, and deeply political rather than purely technical.

The theoretical implications of the Eritrea–Ethiopia case extend well beyond the Horn of Africa because it challenges several common assumptions in international relations, conflict studies, and political economy. It shows that long-running interstate conflicts are not simply failures of negotiation or information, but often emerge from deeper structural conditions where identity formation, state legitimacy, and security dilemmas become mutually reinforcing over time.

From a realist perspective, the case reinforces the classic security dilemma, but in a more entrenched form than usually assumed. The Eritrea–Ethiopia border situation demonstrates how even after formal peace agreements, states can remain locked in cycles of anticipation and counter-anticipation, where military preparedness is interpreted as offensive intent regardless of declared policy. The implication is that deterrence alone is insufficient when historical memory and regime survival concerns dominate strategic calculation. In such contexts, power balancing does not stabilize relations; it often preserves underlying hostility in a managed but persistent form.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, the case complicates the assumption that legal agreements and international mediation naturally produce durable peace. The Algiers Agreement illustrates that formal institutions can resolve the legal status of a conflict while leaving its political and psychological drivers intact. This suggests that institutions work best not as endpoints but as scaffolding that requires continuous political investment. Where enforcement capacity is weak or politically contested, institutions may freeze conflicts rather than transform them, producing what can be described as “legal peace without social peace.”

From a constructivist perspective, the Eritrea–Ethiopia relationship strongly supports the idea that identities and narratives are not secondary to material factors but constitutive of the conflict itself. Eritrean national identity was forged through a long liberation struggle, while Ethiopian state identity has been shaped by territorial integrity concerns and historical sovereignty claims. These narratives generate path dependence: each side interprets the other’s actions through historically sedimented meanings rather than purely present-day incentives. The implication is that changing material conditions—trade, borders, infrastructure—may have limited effect unless accompanied by shifts in collective memory and legitimacy narratives.

From a political economy perspective, the case highlights the fragility of interdependence in low-institutional environments. Economic ties do not automatically generate peace dividends; instead, they can be “weaponized interdependence” when access to trade routes, ports, or infrastructure becomes a source of leverage rather than mutual gain. This suggests that interdependence is not inherently pacifying, but conditional on governance structures that prevent asymmetric control. In weak institutional settings, economic linkages may even increase insecurity by creating fears of dependency exploitation.

The case also has implications for theories of regional order. It shows that in regions like the Horn of Africa, order is not primarily produced by hegemonic stability or formal regional organizations, but through overlapping and sometimes competing security networks involving states, external powers, and regional institutions. This produces a hybrid order where stability

is situational rather than systemic, and where peace can coexist with unresolved conflict at different layers simultaneously.

Finally, the Eritrea–Ethiopia experience suggests a broader theoretical point: peace is not a single condition but a multi-dimensional equilibrium. Legal agreements, economic integration, and military de-escalation can exist independently rather than reinforcing one another. The absence of alignment across these dimensions helps explain why formal peace can persist alongside enduring distrust, and why normalization processes often remain reversible rather than transformative.

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and Ethiopia has evolved through interconnected phases of trade expansion, political negotiation, and cultural exchange, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary development challenges. Modern analyses emphasize that Ethiopia's strategic position in the Horn of Africa makes it central to regional stability and economic integration, while also exposing it to competing geopolitical pressures.

Trade between Ethiopia and the European Union has historically been anchored in agricultural exports—particularly coffee—and development-oriented imports such as machinery, textiles, and institutional support goods. Over time, this relationship has shifted from aid dependency toward a more complex model involving investment, industrial policy support, and regulatory alignment. However, structural constraints in Ethiopia's economy, including infrastructure gaps and vulnerability to external regulatory regimes, continue to shape trade asymmetries (Ethiopian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026).

Recent EU regulatory frameworks, particularly environmental and supply-chain compliance requirements, have introduced new pressures on Ethiopian exporters, especially smallholder farmers dependent on coffee exports. These developments illustrate how trade relations are increasingly governed not only by tariffs and market access, but also by sustainability standards and digital traceability requirements.

Politically, EU–Ethiopia engagement has been characterized by a tension between normative diplomacy and sovereignty-driven state priorities. The EU's external policy framework often emphasizes governance reform, human rights, and institutional transparency, while Ethiopian state actors frequently prioritize security, territorial integrity, and developmental autonomy.

This divergence becomes especially visible in the Horn of Africa's broader geopolitical environment, where Ethiopia's strategic concerns—such as access to the Red Sea, internal security dynamics, and regional rivalries—intersect with EU interests in stability, migration governance, and humanitarian protection (Ethiopian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026). The result is a relationship that is cooperative in development sectors but often cautious or contested in political domains.

Cultural relations between Ethiopia and Europe have expanded significantly through diaspora communities, academic partnerships, and transnational religious and artistic networks. Ethiopian migrants in Europe act as intermediaries, shaping cultural flows such as music, cuisine, religious practice, and intellectual exchange. These communities contribute to soft diplomacy, even when formal political relations are strained.

At the same time, European cultural and institutional presence in Ethiopia—through universities, NGOs, and development agencies—has influenced urban governance models, education systems, and professional norms. However, this influence is uneven, often concentrated in urban centers and mediated by local elites who filter external engagement according to domestic political and economic interests.

Overall, EU–Ethiopia relations reflect a layered and evolving system of exchange rather than a linear partnership. Trade liberalization, political negotiation, and cultural interaction operate simultaneously but unevenly, producing both cooperation and friction. The relationship is best understood as a negotiated interdependence shaped by asymmetries in power, differing institutional logics, and the mediating role of regional and diaspora actors.

Ethiopia plays a central strategic role in the Horn of Africa. It is landlocked, so gaining access to seaports is a key national priority. Djibouti is currently its main trade and maritime gateway. Ethiopia focuses heavily on regional security due to nearby instability.

It is involved in conflicts and diplomacy in Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam shapes tensions with Sudan and Egypt. It seeks to position itself as a regional power and peacekeeper. Overall, its “calculus” is balancing security, water, and economic access¹³

A successful Ethiopian Red Sea strategy would present Ethiopia as:

- a guarantor of regional connectivity,
- a supporter of sovereignty,
- a champion of African economic integration,
- a diplomatic bridge between Africa and the Gulf,
- and a stabilizing force in the Horn.

The central strategic insight is this:

Ethiopia’s long-term access to the Red Sea will be secured more effectively through trust, trade, and interdependence than through pressure or confrontation.

If Ethiopia can reposition itself as the engine of cooperative regional development rather than geopolitical competition, it could emerge as one of Africa’s most influential diplomatic and economic powers in the coming decades. This is a co-evolutionary approach also involving both strengthening of governance and coordination of the strategic engagement of the EU with Addis Abbeba and a recalibration of the Global Gateway program overthere, geared to overall interests in the Red Sea Area itself in need of an EU strategy encompassing political, economic and human aspects and with maritime security increasingly passed on to the riparians led by Masr and KSA.

¹³ <https://ethiopianinstitute.org/category/challenges-in-ethiopia/>)

Furthermore, to Horn of Africa, The European Union's key asks include constructive engagement in negotiations on the transformation of the Nile Basin Initiative into a Nile River Commission, aimed at strengthening cooperative and rules-based water governance among basin states.

We also emphasize diplomatic efforts toward a peaceful resolution of the Yemen Civil War, including sustained engagement with regional and international partners to support negotiations and de-escalation.

In addition, they call for a stronger and more proactive approach to the partnership between the European Union and the African Union, particularly in advancing cooperation on development, security, and multilateral diplomacy.

The EU must first disentangle relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia and address Nile Politics, and in parallel make moves on Yemen in cooperation with the local brethren. The departure point must be to address implementation failure of the Algiers Agreement and to lay the foundation for DDR by the Tigray rebels, something that is inextricable linked to the functioning of the central Ethiopian institutions and to regional disparities. The internalisation of cooperative federalism and a strengthening of the central government will take time, hence also the disentanglement of Eritrea from Ethiopian domestic affairs – some divorces turn ugly.

BRU should engage with reinforced sense of purpose in the Horn of Africa. The contrast between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf lies in the nature of order and contestation that defines each space. The Red Sea is best understood as a strategic transit system that requires coordination and organisation to function smoothly. It is structurally dependent on a limited number of chokepoints and shared infrastructure, meaning that most regional and external actors have a converging interest in keeping maritime flows stable, predictable, and commercially efficient. Even when tensions exist, the underlying logic of the Red Sea is one of managed interdependence, where disruption is costly for nearly everyone involved.

The Persian Gulf, by contrast, is a more explicitly contested regional arena among major powers, a space where rivalry does not merely exist beneath the surface but actively shapes the surface itself. It is not only a transit space for global energy, but also a theatre of direct strategic competition, where state-to-state tensions, military posturing, and deterrence dynamics are more central. Control over energy routes, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz, is embedded in a broader competition for regional dominance, making instability more politically instrumental than purely disruptive. In this sense, it functions less like a passive corridor and more like a strategic chessboard, where moves are calculated, signals are sent, and uncertainty itself becomes a tool of influence. It is a structured instability, an ordered disorder, where peace and pressure coexist in uneasy simultaneity.

For European Union diplomacy, this distinction has important implications. In the Red Sea, the EU's priority is primarily functional: preserving stability in a critical trade corridor that underpins supply chains, energy imports, and economic predictability. This pushes EU policy toward maritime security cooperation, support for international naval presence, and engagement with coastal states such as Egypt and Gulf partners to maintain open sea lanes. The emphasis is less on geopolitical alignment and more on risk reduction and system

maintenance. It is a space of interdependence rather than confrontation, where fragile stability is both strong and weak at once, and where the calm surface of trade conceals the constant pressure of global demand beneath it like an invisible current shaping every vessel's path.

In the Persian Gulf, however, EU diplomacy must operate in a more adversarial environment where energy security is intertwined with strategic rivalry, rivalry that reinforces regional risk and reshapes diplomatic restraint. Here, the EU's role becomes more delicate, balancing relations with Gulf Cooperation Council states while also managing tensions involving Iran and broader regional security dynamics, a situation that is not simple, not neutral, and not without consequence. The focus shifts from managing infrastructure stability to navigating political conflict and deterrence structures that can directly affect global energy markets, markets that move not only energy but also expectations, anxieties, and strategic calculations.

This is not an easy environment; it is not without difficulty, and it is certainly not without risk, yet it is also not entirely unmanageable. Instead, it is a region of competing calculations and calculated competition, where cooperation is cautious, caution is constant, and constant recalibration is required.

In essence, EU engagement in the Red Sea is about preserving a functioning maritime system, while in the Persian Gulf it is about managing geopolitical tension within an already contested order.

Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia must all be stable — stable enough, stable for peace, stable for progress — for Iran to be reduced, reduced in influence, reduced in reach — for Saudi Arabia to be secure and to assume greater responsibility for Red Sea security and to take a leading role, a leading role, a leading role in the organisation of this strategically fragmented region towards what could ultimately become a Red Sea economic community.

The Horn of Africa should not be understood merely as a region of recurring crisis, but as a living political system shaped by adaptation under pressure — not chaos alone, but order in motion; not collapse alone, but continuity through rupture. Conflict, migration, climate stress, and foreign intervention are not isolated variables; they are linked, linked together, connected in chains of cause and consequence, forming interconnected mechanisms that continuously reorganise power and survival.

Conflict flows into migration, migration into instability, instability into intervention — and intervention again into conflict. The region is not broken and whole at the same time; it is both breaking and being made a system where survival is not static but always becoming.

The Horn does not simply endure history — it echoes history, bends history, and reshapes history.

Further research

This research proposes that instability in the region often emerges not from the absence of order, but from the coexistence of multiple competing orders. State institutions, clan loyalties, armed networks, commercial interests, and foreign actors each construct overlapping systems of authority. The resulting landscape produces both resilience and fragmentation

simultaneously. This also encompasses negotiations over regional order, something that the riparians have been used to engage as a pastime for centuries, nay millennia. In this framework, regional stability is not produced by a single dominant power, but by continuous bargaining among multiple actors—states, regional organizations, and external powers—who each have partial influence and overlapping interests. Applied to Horn of Africa and the wider Red Sea basin, it suggests that countries like Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran are all continuously shaping and reshaping rules of access, influence, and security through diplomacy, alliances, economic investment, and sometimes proxy competition.

In a negotiated order, stability does not mean the absence of rivalry; it means that rivalry is managed through ongoing adjustment rather than resolved permanently. Power is distributed unevenly, but no actor fully determines outcomes, so order emerges from repeated interaction—agreements, tacit understandings, and periodic crises that reset the balance.

This perspective fits well with Regional Security Complex Theory because it treats the region as interdependent, but it adds an important emphasis: the system is not static or hierarchical in a fixed way. Instead, it is constantly being renegotiated as internal and external actors respond to shifting security pressures, economic needs, and political changes.

So a “negotiated order” in the Red Sea–Horn of Africa context means a fluid regional system where stability depends on continuous bargaining and adaptation rather than permanent control or exclusion of any single actor and that the episodic games are evaluated against moves made.

So when a crisis, agreement, intervention, investment, or alliance shift is shaped by the previous one and immediately becomes the reference point for the next. In that sense, the system resembles a continuous game in which actors constantly adjust their positions based on what others have just done.

So when a state like Ethiopia changes its regional posture, or when Egypt adjusts its Red Sea or Nile strategy, or when external actors such as Saudi Arabia or Iran expand or contract their influence, those actions are not evaluated in isolation. They are interpreted through the lens of prior moves—what commitments were made, what boundaries were crossed, what alliances were signaled, and what balances were disrupted.

This is why the “order” is negotiated rather than fixed: each episode becomes both a response to earlier actions and a constraint on future ones. Stability, in this sense, is produced through reciprocal signaling and iterative adjustment, where actors continuously reassess risk, opportunity, and credibility based on the evolving pattern of moves.

So the fresh idea that “episodic games are evaluated against moves made”, positions taken and interests upheld this aligns well with this logic: each episode is part of a longer chain of interaction, and the meaning of any single move only becomes clear within that unfolding sequence and evolving pattern of interaction.

Further study is especially necessary because conventional policy frameworks frequently misunderstand local behavioral realities. External observers tend to analyze the Horn through

fixed categories such as terrorism, poverty, or failed governance, while populations on the ground navigate fluid systems of negotiation, identity, and pragmatic survival. A deeper understanding of these adaptive behaviors may reveal why certain interventions fail while informal structures persist.

The strategic importance of the region surrounding the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb ensures that global powers will continue competing for influence there. Yet durable stability is unlikely to emerge solely through military presence or infrastructure investment unless local legitimacy, ecological sustainability, and social trust are addressed together.

Ultimately, the Horn of Africa offers a critical case study for understanding how human societies reorganize themselves under prolonged uncertainty. It reveals how communities preserve identity amid fragmentation, how power adapts when formal institutions weaken, and how geography can magnify both vulnerability and strategic importance. Continued interdisciplinary research may therefore contribute not only to regional understanding, but also to broader theories of governance, resilience, and human adaptation in the twenty-first century.

Counter-arguments

A central counterargument against deeper external engagement in the Horn of Africa is that it does not reliably produce stability, even when it is framed as stabilizing. External involvement often strengthens short-term security arrangements while weakening long-term institutional legitimacy. Governments or factions that rely heavily on foreign support may gain immediate capacity, but they can also lose credibility domestically, especially if populations perceive them as externally sustained rather than internally accountable.

Another argument is that external engagement can intensify fragmentation rather than reduce it. Because multiple outside powers are often involved simultaneously, local political actors gain incentives to align selectively with different patrons. Instead of consolidating authority, this can multiply rivalries and deepen internal divisions. The result is not unified governance but a layered system of competing external and domestic alliances.

A related critique is that much external involvement is driven by security priorities such as counterterrorism, maritime protection, and migration control. While these concerns are real, they can distort broader development goals. Resources and attention may concentrate around strategic ports, capitals, and military-relevant corridors while peripheral regions remain underdeveloped. This creates uneven state capacity, where “secure zones” coexist with neglected areas that remain sources of instability.

There is also a political economy critique that external investment in infrastructure and ports can shift control over strategic assets without necessarily improving national cohesion. In some cases, states may become dependent on external financing or find themselves locked into asymmetrical economic relationships. This can reinforce elite bargaining structures rather than broader national development.

Finally, some scholars argue that the region already contains adaptive informal systems of governance that function under conditions of scarcity and fragmentation. From this perspective,

heavy external intervention may disrupt local balancing mechanisms rather than improve them, replacing flexible survival systems with rigid structures that do not fit local realities.

Even if it is true that famine in the Horn of Africa does not lead to significant migration flows or direct disruption of Western interests, let alone to the riparian states this supports a more restrained approach to external engagement rather than a stronger one. If the consequences of famine remain largely localized, then it is difficult to justify sustained political, financial, or strategic intervention on the basis of external necessity – people have always starved and died in situ and will continue to do so in both Russia and Africa, and this is of no concern for us, as a Danish diplomat Jørgen Ørstrøm Møller once explained. In such a case, responsibility for response lies primarily with local governments and regional institutions, whose legitimacy and proximity make them better positioned to address recurring food insecurity. From this perspective, EU engagement risks overstating its necessity, potentially substituting external priorities for local agency without corresponding strategic return. Therefore, limited engagement—or selective humanitarian assistance rather than expanded structural involvement—would be the more appropriate policy response.

These counterarguments directly intersect with the roles of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the Red Sea system.

For Egypt, the Horn of Africa is indirectly tied to national security through its reliance on the Suez Canal, which connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal system. Stability in the Red Sea is therefore a core strategic concern. Egyptian policy tends to prioritize predictable state authority in neighboring regions, support for formal institutions, and broader multilateral security arrangements that reduce risks to maritime trade flows.

For Saudi Arabia, the Red Sea is a directly adjacent strategic space. Its engagement with the Horn of Africa reflects concerns about maritime security, regional influence, and protection of trade routes, especially those linked to energy exports and imports. Saudi strategy often involves bilateral partnerships, investment in ports and infrastructure, and political engagement designed to extend strategic depth across the Red Sea corridor.

The tension between these roles and the counterarguments lies in the risk of over-securitization and competitive external influence. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have incentives to prioritize stability and security, but their involvement can also contribute to overlapping external alignments within Horn states. This may increase fragmentation if local actors use competing external partnerships to balance internal rivals.

Ultimately, the Horn of Africa sits within a structural paradox. It is strategically indispensable to major regional powers due to its position near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait and Red Sea shipping routes, yet it is politically and socially too complex to be “stabilized” through securitisation of everyday challenges that requires different means and ways in the interest of peace and prosperity. The most persistent risk is that external involvement, if uncoordinated or narrowly security-driven, reproduces instability in more complex and durable forms rather than putting forward solutions that addresses the issues of nation and people pragmatically. And by pragmatic we refer to accomplish something in a business-like manner overthere.

Scenarios

Below are plausible scenario pathways for the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region, framed as strategic futures rather than predictions. They depend on how state relations, external intervention, climate stress, and trade/security dynamics evolve and interact.

1) Cooperative regional integration scenario

In this pathway, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan gradually stabilize relations and deepen economic coordination. Border disputes are managed through African Union– and IGAD-led mechanisms, and Ethiopia secures predictable, diversified access to Red Sea ports (Djibouti, potentially Eritrea and Somalia) under transparent commercial agreements.

Trade corridors expand, including rail and road links connecting inland Ethiopia to multiple ports, reducing monopoly dependencies. External actors such as the EU and Gulf states support infrastructure financing but align with regional frameworks rather than competing bilaterally. Maritime security cooperation in the Red Sea improves, lowering piracy risks and reducing militarization.

The theoretical implication is a shift toward complex interdependence, where economic integration begins to constrain military escalation, though not eliminating political rivalry entirely.

2) Fragmented stability / “no war, no peace” persistence

This is arguably the most likely baseline scenario. States avoid full-scale interstate war but maintain distrust, militarized borders, and intermittent diplomatic engagement. Ethiopia’s internal political fragmentation remains a key driver, influencing its external relations with Eritrea and Somalia. Eritrea maintains strategic isolation while selectively engaging regionally.

The Red Sea becomes a patchwork security space, with multiple overlapping external military presences (Gulf states, US, China, possibly others). Trade continues but remains politically sensitive and vulnerable to disruption.

Here, stability is not produced by cooperation but by mutual deterrence, fatigue from conflict, and external crisis management.

3) Renewed interstate conflict / escalation scenario

In this pathway, unresolved border tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea re-escalate, potentially triggered by domestic political crises, proxy involvement, or contested border militarization. Internal instability in Ethiopia could spill outward, while Eritrea may seek to secure strategic buffers.

The Red Sea becomes indirectly affected through militarization of ports, disruption of Ethiopian trade routes, and possible involvement of external powers protecting shipping lanes. Somalia and Sudan could become secondary theaters of proxy competition.

The key theoretical feature is a return to a classic security dilemma spiral, where defensive actions are interpreted as offensive, accelerating escalation despite economic costs.

4) Fragmented geopolitical competition / externalization scenario

Here, the region becomes increasingly shaped by external powers rather than internal coordination. Gulf states deepen port and military infrastructure investments along the Red Sea coast. China expands infrastructure and logistics corridors tied to the Belt and Road framework. The US and EU focus on maritime security, counterterrorism, and selective stabilization.

Ethiopia becomes structurally dependent on multiple competing port and trade arrangements, while Eritrea and Somalia leverage coastal geography for strategic bargaining. The Red Sea evolves into a multipolar maritime corridor, with heightened competition but not necessarily direct interstate war.

This scenario reflects weaponized interdependence, where infrastructure and trade routes become instruments of geopolitical influence.

5) Climate stress and state fragility scenario

In this pathway, climate change becomes a primary destabilizing force. Recurrent droughts, flooding, and food insecurity intensify internal displacement across Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. State capacity is strained, increasing reliance on external humanitarian assistance and emergency governance.

Resource scarcity amplifies local and cross-border tensions, especially around water, grazing land, and migration routes. Interstate relations are indirectly affected as internal crises reshape foreign policy priorities and weaken institutional control.

The Red Sea remains strategically important, but governance becomes increasingly reactive and crisis-driven rather than strategic.

6) Managed maritime security regime scenario

In this more optimistic institutional pathway, the Red Sea evolves into a more structured maritime security zone with coordinated rules for shipping, port access, and naval presence. Regional states, supported by external actors, establish clearer protocols for naval operations, anti-piracy coordination, and trade corridor protection.

This does not require deep political integration among Horn states, but it reduces the risk of maritime escalation and protects trade flows even amid political disputes.

The theoretical implication is the emergence of a functional security regime without full political convergence, where cooperation is sector-specific (maritime security) rather than comprehensive.

Cross-cutting insight

Across all scenarios, three structural variables matter most:

First, the degree of Ethiopian internal political cohesion, since internal fragmentation strongly shapes external behavior. Second, the governance of Red Sea access routes, especially port infrastructure and trade dependency. Third, the density of external actor competition versus coordination.

The region is therefore best understood not as moving toward a single outcome, but as a scenario space where multiple partial orders coexist and overlap, producing stability in some domains and volatility in others simultaneously.

The implications of the situation in the Horn of Africa also have consequences for a Red Sea Economic Community, because any attempt at regional economic integration would be directly shaped—and constrained—by the region's underlying political fragmentation, security tensions, and external power competition.

In the Horn of Africa today, the most important structural constraint is the interaction between unresolved interstate issues (especially Ethiopia–Eritrea relations), internal instability in Sudan and Somalia, and Ethiopia's dependence on reliable maritime access. These factors mean that the Red Sea is not simply an economic corridor but a strategic and often securitized space. As a result, any Red Sea Economic Community would emerge into an environment where trust is low, sovereignty is highly sensitive, and external actors already play a significant infrastructural and military role.

In a best-case scenario, these conditions could still allow a gradual move toward deeper coordination. A Red Sea Economic Community could help stabilize Ethiopia's port access by reducing dependence on single corridors, particularly Djibouti, and embedding access arrangements in multilateral rules rather than bilateral bargaining. It could also reduce incentives for interstate confrontation by increasing the economic costs of disruption and by formalizing cooperation in maritime security and trade logistics. However, this would require a level of political convergence that is currently limited in the region.

More realistically, the Horn of Africa's present dynamics point toward a partial or functional form of cooperation. In this case, a Red Sea Economic Community would remain shallow, focusing on specific areas such as shipping security, customs facilitation, and infrastructure interoperability, while core issues like port sovereignty, regional rivalries, and internal conflicts remain unresolved. Ethiopia–Eritrea relations and Sudan's instability would continue to limit deeper institutional integration, meaning cooperation would be episodic and issue-based rather than comprehensive.

If current tensions intensify, the scenario shifts toward fragmentation or even breakdown. Renewed interstate conflict, worsening internal instability, or intensified great-power rivalry could prevent meaningful regional integration altogether. In such a case, the Red Sea would remain a highly militarized and externally influenced corridor, where economic activity continues but is governed through bilateral arrangements and external security guarantees rather than regional institutions.

Across all scenarios, the key implication is that a Red Sea Economic Community is not primarily constrained by economic potential, which is high, but by political trust, sovereignty concerns, and security dynamics in the Horn of Africa. The region therefore determines

whether such a community becomes a stabilizing institutional framework, a shallow coordination platform, or remains largely aspirational.

Policy Recommendations

The EU should publicly reaffirm its unwavering support for the Algiers Agreement, emphasizing that it remains the foundational legal framework for resolving outstanding tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and for preserving territorial sovereignty as a non-negotiable principle of international order. It should clearly signal that any attempts to bypass or undermine this agreement would risk destabilizing an already fragile regional balance. At the same time, the EU should firmly oppose any military solution regarding Red Sea access, underscoring that the use of force to secure ports or maritime corridors would have severe regional and global consequences, particularly for international trade and energy security. Instead, it should consistently advocate for diplomacy, dialogue, and negotiated settlements as the only viable path forward.

The EU should encourage structured and sustained economic negotiations between Eritrea and Ethiopia, aimed at transforming competition over access and infrastructure into mutually beneficial cooperation. These negotiations should be gradual, technically supported, and insulated from short-term political tensions. To reinforce this, the EU can deploy its Global Gateway strategy to finance regional connectivity projects, including roads, rail corridors, energy interconnectors, and digital infrastructure that link the Horn of Africa more deeply with global markets. Such investments should be designed to promote interdependence and reduce incentives for confrontation.

In parallel, the EU should actively support African Union-led mediation mechanisms, recognizing the AU as the primary legitimate platform for African conflict resolution. This support should include political backing, technical assistance, and financial resources to strengthen mediation capacity and implementation monitoring. The EU should also facilitate structured technical discussions on potential commercial access to Assab, focusing on practical logistics, customs arrangements, and transit frameworks that enhance economic efficiency without challenging sovereignty or territorial integrity.

A further priority should be the promotion of cross-border trade and infrastructure development, particularly in areas where local economies can benefit from reduced barriers and improved connectivity. This should be complemented by expanded humanitarian and reconciliation programs aimed at addressing the long-term consequences of conflict, including displacement, trauma, and food insecurity. These programs should also strengthen local governance capacity and community resilience.

Wherever conditions permit, the EU should encourage a phased approach to sanctions normalization and economic integration, linking gradual easing of restrictions to verifiable progress in cooperation, stability, and respect for international norms. This conditionality-based approach would provide incentives for constructive engagement while maintaining accountability.

Finally, the EU should develop a comprehensive, long-term Red Sea strategy that integrates security, maritime trade, energy transit, migration management, and diplomatic engagement

into a unified policy framework. This strategy should ensure coherence across EU institutions and member states, strengthen coordination with regional partners, and safeguard critical maritime corridors while promoting sustainable development and long-term stability in the Horn of Africa at the nexus of the Red Sea and the Indian ocean, a major trading corridor for both riparians and world powers.

The EU should keep up the momentum in its dealing with Somalia in parallel by means of stabilisation addressing the root causes of conflict, governance challenges and lack of economic opportunity, as it puts a block on the conflict economy overthere and start becoming more practical and solution oriented, more constructive critical during the future deliberations with the Federal Government of Somalia, a political community we know more about for reasons of famine and drought and the overrepresentation in the EU's crime stats. Indeed, the EU-Somalia relations appears to be having momentum and to be the least path of resistance in the stabilisation of the Horn of Africa security complex, but the EU's reengagement is not geared neither to contain conflict nor does it address the Ethio-Eritrean conundrum in any systematic manner encompassing all the actors.

The partnership is a *quid-pro-quod* between Somalia and the EU, as Europe reengages in this challenging region decisive for trade economy of all great powers and acting as a bridge between southern Arabia and the hinterland. Eritrea's nationhood has a certain pedigree in the region predating even that of Somalia and perhaps even Ethiopia.

Perspective

The security dynamics of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa—particularly in relation to Ethiopia and its regional posture—reflect an increasingly interconnected security complex where local conflicts and international trade routes are tightly interwoven. From this perspective, Ethiopia's internal stability and external engagement are not isolated domestic matters but key variables in a broader regional equation that includes maritime security, state fragility, and geopolitical competition. The Horn of Africa functions as a strategic corridor linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea, meaning that instability in one part of the system quickly produces ripple effects across shipping lanes, energy routes, and regional diplomacy.

The exigencies facing the parties involved—Ethiopia, neighboring coastal states, and regional actors—are therefore fundamentally asymmetrical. Ethiopia's primary concern is securing reliable access to the sea and managing internal political cohesion, while coastal states such as Eritrea and Djibouti prioritize sovereignty, territorial control, and the management of foreign military presence. Meanwhile, external actors, including Gulf states and global powers, are increasingly invested in securing maritime stability and influence over critical chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. These overlapping priorities create a fragile balance in which cooperation is necessary but trust remains limited.

From the perspective of the European Union, the Red Sea–Horn of Africa security complex is primarily an issue of strategic vulnerability rather than territorial influence. The EU's interests are shaped by energy security, anti-piracy operations, migration flows, and the protection of global trade routes. However, its ability to shape outcomes is constrained by limited hard-

power projection and reliance on multilateral frameworks. As a result, EU engagement tends to emphasize diplomacy, development aid, and capacity-building rather than direct intervention. This creates a tension between the scale of the risks involved and the relatively indirect tools available to manage them, highlighting a structural gap between European strategic dependency and operational influence in the region.

If the EU first develops a Red Sea Action Plan, spawned from the EU Middle East strategy as one of four sub-regions, it would likely mark a shift from fragmented engagement (migration, piracy, development aid) toward a more coordinated geopolitical approach to the wider Horn of Africa–Red Sea security complex.

From a strategic standpoint, the EU's development of a dedicated Red Sea Action Plan would signal recognition that the region is no longer a peripheral theatre but a core zone of European interest tied to trade security, energy supply chains, and migration governance. By framing the Red Sea as a single security and economic space, the EU would be acknowledging the interdependence between maritime chokepoints like the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, instability in the Horn of Africa, and broader geopolitical competition involving Gulf states, China, and regional powers.

Such a strategy would likely require the EU to reconcile its different policy instruments—foreign policy, naval operations, development assistance, and migration management—into a more unified framework. This could improve coherence, particularly in aligning initiatives such as anti-piracy missions, support for coastal state capacity-building, and diplomatic engagement in Ethiopia's regional disputes. However, the EU would still face structural constraints: limited military projection, divergent interests among member states, and dependence on local partners whose priorities often do not align with European objectives.

In relation to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, the EU's putative Red Sea Strategy would implicitly force the EU to treat Ethiopia not just as a landlocked development partner but as a strategic actor in maritime security dynamics, especially regarding access to ports and regional stability. This could increase diplomatic pressure for negotiated solutions involving Eritrea, Djibouti, and Sudan, while also raising expectations that the EU contribute more actively to conflict prevention and regional mediation.

Overall, such an action plan would enhance the EU's conceptual coherence in the region, but its effectiveness would depend on whether it can bridge the gap between its growing strategic ambitions and its traditionally limited hard-power capacity.

Strengthening governance in the Red Sea region is essential because instability in this space is not contained, not local, and not episodic; it is systemic, regional, and interlocking. The Red Sea is a space where maritime insecurity, geopolitical rivalry, and economic competition reinforce one another across borders and institutions.

At its core, the challenge is to move from rivalry to cooperation, from fragmentation to coordination, from suspicion to trust. Governance reform must therefore disrupt this cyclical logic by embedding cooperation into the architecture of regional interaction.

The Red Sea itself is not an inert geography; it watches, absorbs, and responds to the actions of states that surround it. Its ports, straits, and shipping lanes behave less like passive infrastructure and more like an active stage upon which regional power is continuously negotiated.

Without strengthened governance, the region risks becoming a theatre of endless contestation, where minor disputes escalate into major crises and local tensions spiral into continental instability. In such a scenario, the Red Sea could become the world's most dangerous corridor, where every shipment, every vessel, every port becomes a potential point of friction.

Every point of friction deepens mistrust, and every mistrust undermines cooperation, and every failure of cooperation weakens governance itself.

Within this context, “the Red Sea” is not merely a body of water but a shorthand for the political, economic, and security systems that connect Africa, Arabia, and the wider Indo-Pacific. When governance in the Red Sea fails, it is not only maritime security that weakens, but the entire architecture of regional stability.

Ultimately, strengthening governance means transforming this space from one defined by fragmentation into one defined by coordination, where states act not as isolated competitors but as interdependent custodians of a shared strategic environment.

Appendix 1 – From Cessation of Hostilities to Ceasefire

In theory and in practice, the shift from a cessation of hostilities to a ceasefire is best understood as a move along a continuum from informal restraint to structured, enforceable restraint. The difference is not just terminology; it reflects increasing political commitment, institutional support, and mechanisms for compliance.

A cessation of hostilities is usually a tactical or provisional pause in fighting. It can emerge for many reasons that do not necessarily reflect agreement between adversaries in a deeper political sense: exhaustion, weather, battlefield recalculation, humanitarian pressure, or local de-escalation between field commanders. Because of this, it often remains ambiguous and fragile. The critical transition toward a ceasefire begins when restraint is no longer merely situational but becomes politically authorized. In practice, this means that top-level political leadership—not just military commanders in the field—formally endorses limits on the use of force. At that point, violence is no longer simply being paused; it is being constrained.

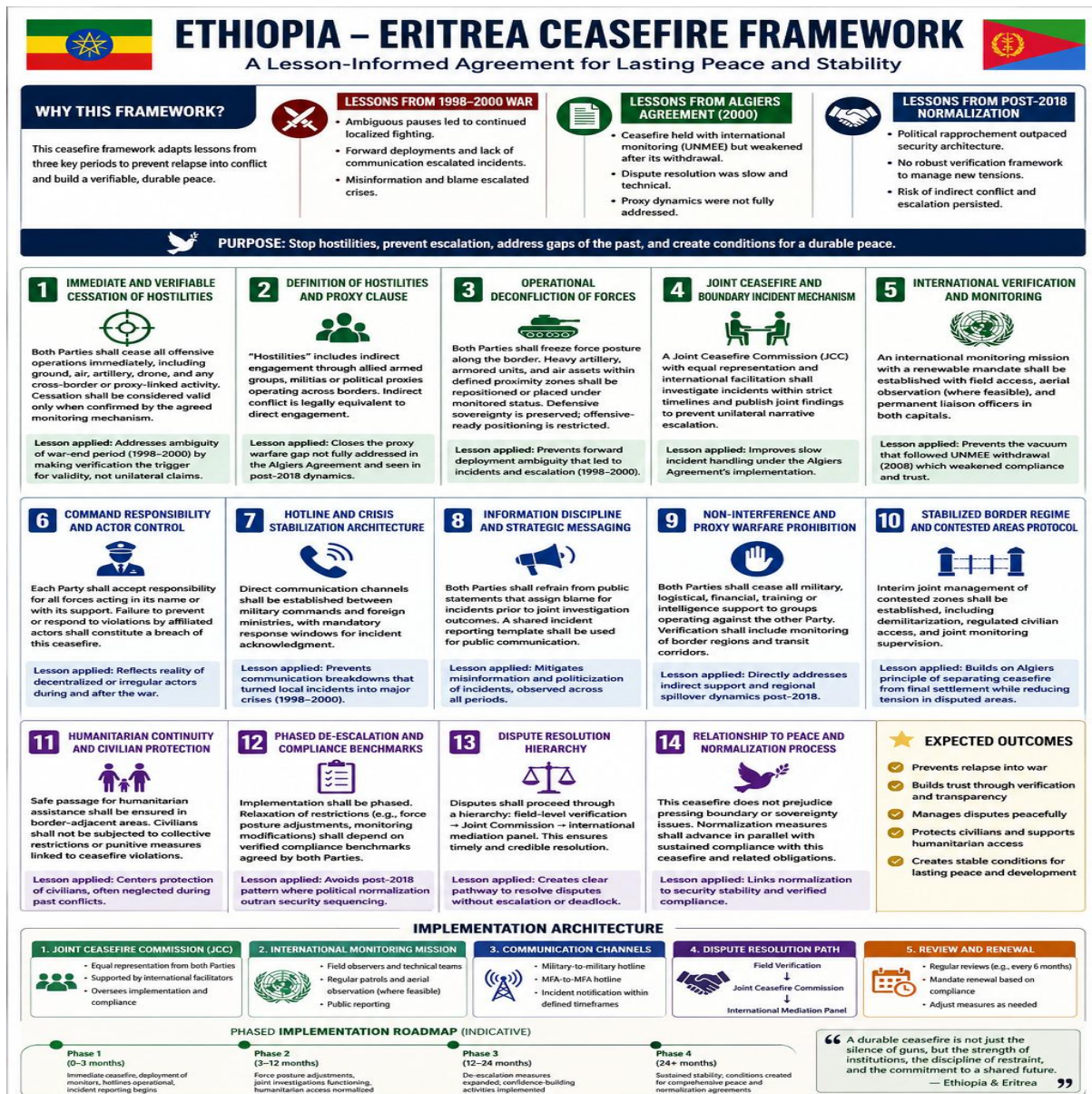
A second condition is conceptual clarity about what “stopping hostilities” actually means. In a simple cessation, the boundaries are often unclear: it may not be specified whether artillery fire, drone strikes, cyber operations, or proxy activity are included. A ceasefire requires that the parties define the scope of prohibited actions, the geographic extent of the agreement, and its temporal structure. Without such precision, disputes over alleged violations become inevitable, and the arrangement tends to collapse back into sporadic conflict.

Another important shift involves command and control. A ceasefire requires that each party has sufficient authority over its armed actors to ensure compliance. This does not necessarily mean perfect discipline, but it does require a functioning chain of command capable of transmitting orders, preventing unauthorized engagements, and responding to violations. Where armed groups are fragmented or decentralized, a cessation of hostilities may occur locally or temporarily, but a durable ceasefire is difficult because no actor can reliably enforce restraint across all units.

In practice, the durability of a ceasefire also depends on monitoring and verification mechanisms, which are often absent in a mere cessation of hostilities. Ceasefires typically introduce third-party observers, joint monitoring bodies, or agreed reporting systems that can investigate incidents and attribute responsibility. These mechanisms are essential because they reduce uncertainty and help prevent escalation triggered by disputed claims. A cessation of hostilities, by contrast, often relies on informal understandings or mutual observation without structured oversight.

A further condition is the embedding of the arrangement within a broader political or diplomatic framework. A ceasefire is rarely just a military pause; it is usually connected to negotiations, mediation efforts, or at least a shared recognition that continued fighting is unsustainable or undesirable. This does not require a final peace agreement, but it does imply that the ceasefire is part of a political process rather than a purely operational pause.

Figure



Closely tied to this is the question of incentives and mutual assurance. For a ceasefire to emerge, both sides must believe that restraint will be reciprocated and that violations will carry costs—whether diplomatic, military, or reputational. External guarantors, mediators, or power brokers often play a role in stabilizing these expectations and making compliance more credible. Without such assurance, a cessation of hostilities tends to remain reversible and fragile.

Finally, ceasefires are typically formalized. Even when brief, they are documented, publicly acknowledged, or at least clearly communicated through official channels. This formalization distinguishes them from informal pauses in fighting and helps establish a shared reference point for accountability.

Taken together, the transition from cessation of hostilities to ceasefire is essentially a shift from ambiguity to structure: from informal restraint shaped by circumstance to codified restraint supported by political authority, defined rules, verification mechanisms, and mutual expectations of compliance.

The Ethiopia–Eritrea case is a useful illustration because it shows both a relatively “classical” transition from active war to ceasefire in 1998–2000, and later the fragility that emerges when political normalization outpaces enforcement mechanisms.

During the 1998–2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the initial movement toward stopping large-scale fighting did not immediately amount to a ceasefire in the strong sense. What emerged first was a *de facto* cessation of hostilities driven by battlefield exhaustion and international pressure, especially after the major conventional phase of the war stalled in 2000. At that point, both sides were willing to stop large-scale operations, but the arrangement was still highly sensitive to interpretation and violations, particularly along disputed frontlines such as Badme.

The transition into a formal ceasefire became more concrete with the Algiers Agreement (2000), which is best understood as the moment where political authorization replaced tactical restraint. It did not merely reflect a pause in fighting; it created a structured framework that defined obligations, established a legal architecture for boundary resolution, and explicitly committed both states to halt hostilities under international supervision. This is exactly the point at which cessation of hostilities becomes a ceasefire in the strict sense: restraint is no longer informal, but legally and politically anchored.

A key element in that transition was command consolidation and external enforcement. Both states still had strong centralized military structures, which made it possible—at least in principle—for orders to stop fighting to be implemented across forces. More importantly, the ceasefire was embedded in an international monitoring system through the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), which created a verification buffer zone and reduced ambiguity about violations. This monitoring function is one of the clearest practical markers of a ceasefire rather than a mere cessation of hostilities.

However, the Ethiopia–Eritrea case also shows the limits of a ceasefire that is not fully stabilized by political normalization. Although large-scale hostilities stopped, the underlying political dispute—especially border demarcation—remained unresolved for years. This created a situation in which the ceasefire held formally, but relations remained structurally hostile, and the system required constant external presence to prevent relapse.

The 2018 rapprochement between the two countries, following the rise of Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia, represents a different kind of transition: not from cessation of hostilities to ceasefire, but from a frozen ceasefire to political normalization. The Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship (2018) effectively ended the state of war and reopened diplomatic and economic relations. However, unlike the 2000 settlement phase, this normalization did not immediately rest on strong verification or enforcement mechanisms. It relied heavily on political leadership alignment between the two governments rather than institutionalized monitoring.

This distinction becomes important when examining later developments in the region, particularly the conflict in Tigray beginning in 2020. The fighting revealed that while interstate war between Ethiopia and Eritrea had been formally closed, the broader security architecture in the Horn of Africa remained unstable. The earlier ceasefire architecture had been weakened (UNMEE had already withdrawn in 2008), and the new normalization framework did not replace it with equally robust verification structures. As a result, when violence re-emerged in a related theatre, there was no strong ceasefire infrastructure capable of constraining escalation across all involved actors.

In theoretical terms, Ethiopia–Eritrea shows that moving from cessation of hostilities to ceasefire requires not only stopping violence and securing political authorization, but also embedding that pause in monitoring, enforcement, and clearly defined rules. The 2000 settlement achieved this more successfully than the 2018 normalization, even though both were politically significant. The contrast illustrates a key point: ceasefires are not just moments when guns fall silent, but systems that have to continuously manage uncertainty, especially in regions where political disputes remain unresolved beneath the surface of formal peace.

This version below corrects three structural weaknesses seen across the Ethiopia–Eritrea peace trajectory:

First, it treats ceasefire not as a declaration but as a continuously verified system, responding to the 2000–2008 period where absence of monitoring weakened compliance stability after UNMEE withdrawal.

Second, it explicitly closes the proxy warfare gap, which was under-specified in the Algiers framework but became strategically decisive in later regional dynamics.

Third, it avoids the post-2018 pattern of political normalization outrunning security architecture, by requiring phased, measurable compliance before relaxation of restrictions.

In short, it is designed not just to stop guns from firing, but to prevent the *systemic conditions that make renewed conflict likely even when guns are silent*.

APPENDIX 2 -DRAFT CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA AND THE STATE OF ERITREA

Preamble

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the State of Eritrea (hereinafter “the Parties”),

Recalling the armed conflict of 1998–2000 and the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities signed in Algiers in 2000,

Recognizing the establishment of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission and related mechanisms under the Algiers framework, and the subsequent limitations encountered in the implementation of boundary demarcation and security stabilization,

Acknowledging the normalization of relations initiated in 2018 and the importance of sustaining peaceful interstate relations through durable institutional safeguards,

Concerned that past arrangements demonstrated recurring deficiencies, including ambiguity in the definition of hostilities, insufficient regulation of indirect or proxy conflict, and the absence or weakening of sustained verification mechanisms following the withdrawal of international monitoring forces,

Determined to establish a comprehensive, verifiable, and enforceable ceasefire regime that prevents the resumption of armed conflict and stabilizes relations pending broader political settlement,

Have agreed as follows:

Article 1 – Cessation of Hostilities

1. The Parties shall immediately cease all acts of armed hostility against one another.
2. This obligation shall apply to all regular armed forces, special forces, intelligence units, paramilitary formations, and any other armed entities acting under the direction, control, or support of either Party.
3. The cessation of hostilities shall include all forms of offensive military action, whether kinetic, remote, or otherwise conducted through conventional or unconventional means.
4. Compliance with this Article shall be subject to verification in accordance with Article 5 of this Agreement.

Article 2 – Definition and Scope of Hostilities

1. For the purposes of this Agreement, “hostilities” shall include, without limitation:
(a) cross-border military operations;

- (b) artillery, air, missile, drone, or cyber-enabled attacks with military effect;
- (c) intelligence-supported targeting for kinetic operations;
- (d) indirect engagement through armed groups, militias, or proxy forces operating in or across the territory of either Party.

2. The Parties affirm that indirect support or facilitation of hostile acts shall be deemed equivalent to direct participation in hostilities.

Article 3 – Force Posture and Operational Deconfliction

1. The Parties shall refrain from any redeployment of forces that may reasonably be construed as preparation for offensive operations.
2. Heavy weapon systems, including but not limited to artillery, armored formations, and offensive air assets, shall be repositioned or placed under agreed monitoring arrangements within defined proximity zones along the common border.
3. Defensive deployments within sovereign territory shall be permitted, provided such deployments are not inconsistent with the obligations set forth in this Agreement.

Article 4 – Joint Ceasefire and Incident Mechanism

1. A Joint Ceasefire Commission (“JCC”) is hereby established, composed of equal representation from both Parties and chaired by an impartial international facilitator.
2. The JCC shall investigate all alleged violations of this Agreement and shall issue findings within defined and binding procedural timelines.
3. The findings of the JCC shall be communicated simultaneously to both Parties and to the verification mission established under Article 5.

Article 5 – International Verification and Monitoring Mission

1. The Parties hereby agree to the establishment of an international verification mission mandated to monitor compliance with this Agreement.
2. The mission shall possess authority to observe, inspect, and report on ceasefire implementation, including access to designated border regions and liaison offices in both capitals.
3. The mandate of the mission shall be renewable and shall remain in force for the duration of this Agreement unless terminated by mutual consent of the Parties.

Article 6 – Command Responsibility

1. Each Party shall bear responsibility for ensuring compliance with this Agreement by all forces under its effective control.

2. The Parties shall take all necessary measures to prevent, suppress, and sanction violations committed by subordinate, affiliated, or irregular armed actors.
3. Failure to prevent or respond adequately to such violations shall constitute a breach of this Agreement.

Article 7 – Communications and Crisis Prevention Mechanisms

1. The Parties shall establish direct and permanent communication channels between designated military and diplomatic authorities.
2. Such channels shall operate continuously and shall be used for immediate clarification of incidents, prevention of escalation, and coordination of de-escalation measures.
3. Acknowledgement of incident notifications shall be made within a mutually agreed timeframe.

Article 8 – Information Conduct and Public Communication

1. The Parties shall exercise restraint in public communications relating to alleged ceasefire violations.
2. No Party shall issue public attributions of responsibility for incidents prior to the completion of joint investigative procedures under Article 4.
3. The Parties shall adopt a standardized incident reporting format for official communications relating to ceasefire implementation.

Article 9 – Prohibition of Support to Hostile Actors

1. The Parties shall refrain from providing any form of support—military, financial, logistical, intelligence, or otherwise—to armed groups operating against the other Party.
2. This prohibition shall apply irrespective of the territory in which such groups operate.
3. The monitoring mission under Article 5 shall be authorized to observe compliance with this provision through appropriate verification methods.

Article 10 – Border Management and Contested Areas

1. The Parties shall establish interim cooperative arrangements for the administration of contested or sensitive border areas.
2. Such arrangements shall include demilitarization measures, regulated civilian access, and joint monitoring where applicable.
3. These arrangements shall be without prejudice to final legal determinations of sovereignty or boundary delimitation.

Article 11 – Humanitarian Access and Civilian Protection

1. The Parties shall facilitate safe and unimpeded humanitarian access in all areas affected by or adjacent to prior hostilities.
2. Civilian populations shall not be subjected to collective punishment, forced displacement, or restrictions inconsistent with international humanitarian principles as a consequence of ceasefire-related incidents.

Article 12 – Phased Implementation and Compliance Benchmarks

1. The implementation of certain operational measures under this Agreement may proceed in phases.
2. Progress between phases shall be contingent upon verified compliance with preceding obligations.
3. The verification mission shall assess compliance against agreed benchmarks and report accordingly.

Article 13 – Dispute Resolution Procedure

1. Disputes arising from the interpretation or implementation of this Agreement shall be addressed in the following order:
 - (a) direct field-level clarification between designated liaison officers;
 - (b) referral to the Joint Ceasefire Commission;
 - (c) referral to an international mediation panel, if unresolved.
2. Escalation to higher levels shall not preclude immediate de-escalation measures pending resolution.

Article 14 – Relationship to Comprehensive Peace Process

1. This Agreement constitutes a ceasefire instrument and does not constitute a final settlement of any territorial, sovereignty, or political disputes between the Parties.
2. The Parties affirm that sustained compliance with this Agreement shall facilitate conditions conducive to broader normalization and future peace arrangements.
3. This Agreement shall remain without prejudice to any future legally binding instruments between the Parties.

Closing Provision

This Agreement shall enter into force upon signature by duly authorized representatives of the Parties and shall be deposited with mutually agreed international guarantors.

Appendix 3 -OPERATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF CEASEFIRE REGIME

1. Ceasefire Activation Protocol (Hour Zero)

At T0 (time of entry into force), both Parties shall transmit authenticated ceasefire orders from national command authorities to all operational military formations within 6 hours. Orders must include explicit prohibition of offensive action, cross-border fire, reconnaissance strikes, and proxy-tasking.

The verification requirement is that the ceasefire is considered active only upon confirmation by the Joint Ceasefire Commission (JCC) and initial incident-free reporting from designated border sectors for a continuous 24-hour period.

2. Force Posture Freeze and Movement Control

Within 72 hours of T0, both Parties shall implement a force posture freeze within agreed buffer corridors along the international boundary.

Operationally, this means no redeployment of heavy artillery, armor, or air assets closer to the border than agreed baseline positions. No establishment of new forward operating bases, trenches, or logistics hubs oriented toward cross-border projection is permitted. Routine defensive patrolling is allowed only within pre-existing internal security zones.

Monitoring shall be conducted through satellite observation, ground patrol reports, and liaison officer verification.

3. Proxy and Irregular Force Neutralization Requirement

Each Party shall issue binding orders within 24 hours prohibiting any armed group under its influence from conducting operations against the other Party.

This includes suspension of training, funding, logistics, intelligence-sharing, or transit facilitation to such groups. Each Party must also provide public and internal designation of prohibited groups and ensure closure or monitoring of known logistical corridors used for cross-border armed movement.

Compliance is indicated by absence of cross-border proxy incidents attributable to either Party.

4. Incident Definition and Escalation Control

An "incident" is defined as any discharge of fire across the border, any armed crossing of the boundary line, any drone or aerial intrusion, or any confirmed proxy attack attributable to a Party.

All incidents must be reported within 2 hours to the JCC hotline system. No unilateral public attribution is permitted before preliminary classification by the JCC.

5. Joint Ceasefire Commission (JCC) Field Operations

The JCC shall maintain forward liaison teams in each border sector, mobile investigation units deployable within 24–48 hours, and a shared incident database.

Its operational authority includes site inspection of alleged violation points, collection of ballistic, satellite, and witness evidence, and issuance of preliminary incident classification within 72 hours.

6. International Monitoring and Verification Layer

A third-party monitoring mission shall operate continuously with fixed observation posts in agreed sectors, aerial or satellite-supported monitoring where available, and verified incident mapping and trend analysis.

The mission's function is not enforcement but independent verification and reporting to prevent narrative escalation.

7. Command-and-Control Compliance Chain

Each Party shall establish a documented compliance chain from national command authority to regional military command, brigade or unit level, and field commanders.

This requires written transmission logs of ceasefire orders, confirmation receipts from subordinate commands, and disciplinary procedures for non-compliance. Failure at any level constitutes prima facie evidence of command responsibility.

8. Communication and De-escalation System

A permanent hotline system shall operate between Chiefs of Defense Forces, Foreign Ministries, and regional border commands.

All contact must receive mandatory acknowledgment within 60 minutes. A maximum 6-hour window is set for preliminary response to incidents. Pre-agreed templates shall be used for de-escalation messaging.

9. Information and Media Control Protocol

Until joint verification is completed, no Party shall issue attribution statements regarding incidents. Public communication must use neutral phrasing such as “incident under investigation.” Joint press releases shall be the default mechanism for confirmed violations.

10. Border Sector Stabilization Zones

Certain high-risk or historically contested sectors shall be designated as Stabilization Zones.

These zones may involve demilitarization or reduced-force presence, joint patrol coordination or monitored separation, and controlled civilian movement protocols where applicable. Any change in status requires JCC approval.

11. Humanitarian and Civil Access Guarantee

Humanitarian obligations include guaranteed passage for convoys under escort or notification systems, no obstruction of water, food, or medical supply routes, and protection of civilian infrastructure from military use or targeting.

12. Compliance Benchmark System (Phased Implementation)

Ceasefire durability is assessed through zero confirmed cross-border kinetic incidents on a rolling 30-day metric, verified withdrawal from buffer thresholds, a hotline response compliance rate above 90 percent, and reduction of proxy-linked activity to zero verified cases.

Progress determines transition between implementation phases.

13. Breach Classification System

Violations are categorized as minor, meaning procedural failures such as late reporting or minor airspace violations without effect; serious, meaning confirmed firing, armed crossing, or proxy attack; and critical, meaning sustained offensive operations or coordinated escalation patterns.

Response escalation is proportional and determined by the JCC with international participation.

14. Operational Link to Political Process

This ceasefire is decoupled from a final political settlement but functionally linked through conditional normalization. Security compliance enables diplomatic normalization steps, verified violations can suspend those measures, and no political agreement shall override operational ceasefire obligations.

Core Operational Logic

This system replaces trust with verification, timelines, command accountability, and measurable compliance thresholds, ensuring that restraint is enforced structurally rather than assumed politically.

Appendix 4 -STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE (SOP): CEASEFIRE IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

1. Purpose and Scope

This SOP establishes procedures for activation, enforcement, monitoring, incident handling, and compliance verification of a bilateral ceasefire regime under Joint Ceasefire Commission (JCC) oversight.

It applies to all national command authorities, military formations, border security units, and designated international monitoring personnel.

2. Ceasefire Activation Procedure (T0 Execution)

2.1 National Command Transmission

At T0, each Party issues authenticated ceasefire orders through the national command authority to all operational military units within 6 hours.

2.2 Order Content Requirements

Orders must prohibit offensive operations, cross-border fire, reconnaissance strikes, and proxy-force tasking.

2.3 Activation Confirmation

Ceasefire status becomes operational upon JCC confirmation and a continuous 24-hour incident-free verification period in designated sectors.

3. Force Posture Implementation Procedure

3.1 Freeze Order Execution

Within 72 hours of T0, all units shall implement a force posture freeze within designated buffer corridors.

3.2 Movement Restrictions

No relocation of artillery, armor, or air assets toward the border beyond baseline positions is permitted.

3.3 Defensive Operations

Routine internal defensive patrolling is permitted within pre-established security zones only.

3.4 Verification Mechanism

Compliance is verified through satellite monitoring, liaison reporting, and ground observation.

4. Proxy Force Control Procedure

4.1 Issuance of Prohibition Orders

Within 24 hours, each Party must issue binding orders prohibiting support to armed proxy groups.

4.2 Enforcement Measures

All training, funding, logistics, intelligence support, and transit facilitation to such groups must cease immediately.

4.3 Designation Requirement

Each Party must publish internal and public listings of prohibited groups.

4.4 Compliance Indicator

Verification is based on absence of confirmed cross-border proxy activity.

5. Incident Management Procedure

5.1 Incident Definition

An incident includes cross-border fire, boundary crossing, aerial/drone intrusion, or proxy attack attributable to a Party.

5.2 Reporting Requirement

All incidents must be reported to the JCC within 2 hours of detection.

5.3 Attribution Control

No public attribution is permitted prior to JCC preliminary classification.

5.4 Classification Timeline

The JCC issues preliminary classification within 72 hours.

6. Joint Ceasefire Commission (JCC) Operating Procedure

6.1 Field Deployment

JCC maintains liaison teams in all sectors and deployable investigation units within 24–48 hours.

6.2 Investigation Authority

The JCC may conduct site inspections and collect ballistic, satellite, and testimonial evidence.

6.3 Data Management

All incidents are logged in a centralized shared database.

7. Monitoring and Verification Procedure

7.1 Third-Party Monitoring

An independent mission operates fixed observation posts and remote monitoring systems.

7.2 Reporting Function

The mission provides independent verification and trend analysis without enforcement authority.

7.3 Escalation Prevention Role

Reports are used to prevent misinformation-driven escalation.

8. Command Compliance Procedure

8.1 Chain of Command Documentation

Each Party maintains a full compliance chain from national command to field units.

8.2 Order Transmission Records

Written logs and acknowledgment receipts are mandatory.

8.3 Accountability Enforcement

Failure at any level constitutes command responsibility exposure.

9. Communication Protocol Procedure

9.1 Hotline Activation

Permanent communication channels are maintained between defense, foreign affairs, and border commands.

9.2 Response Timelines

Acknowledgment is required within 60 minutes. Preliminary responses within 6 hours.

9.3 Standard Messaging

Pre-approved templates are used for de-escalation communication.

10. Media and Information Control Procedure

10.1 Interim Reporting Restriction

No attribution statements are permitted before JCC verification.

10.2 Public Communication Standard

All interim statements must use neutral phrasing such as “under investigation.”

10.3 Joint Release Requirement

Confirmed violations are communicated through joint statements.

11. Stabilization Zone Procedure

11.1 Designation

High-risk areas may be designated as Stabilization Zones by JCC agreement.

11.2 Operational Restrictions

These zones may include reduced force presence or monitored separation arrangements.

11.3 Modification Control

Any status change requires formal JCC approval.

12. Humanitarian Access Procedure

12.1 Convoy Passage

Humanitarian movement must not be obstructed and is subject to notification or escort protocols.

12.2 Infrastructure Protection

Civilian infrastructure must not be targeted or repurposed for military use.

13. Compliance Assessment Procedure

13.1 Metrics Monitoring

Compliance is measured through incident-free periods, withdrawal verification, hotline responsiveness, and proxy activity elimination.

13.2 Phase Progression

Operational phases advance based on verified compliance benchmarks.

14. Breach Response Procedure

14.1 Classification System

Breaches are categorized as minor, serious, or critical.

14.2 Response Scaling

JCC determines proportional response measures with international participation.

14.3 Escalation Handling

Repeated or severe violations trigger elevated monitoring and political consequences.

15. Political Linkage Procedure

15.1 Decoupled Framework

Ceasefire operations remain independent of political negotiations.

15.2 Conditional Normalization

Security compliance enables diplomatic progress; violations suspend it.

15.3 Supremacy Clause

Operational ceasefire obligations override political agreements.

Core Operational Principle

All procedures are designed to replace assumption-based restraint with structured verification, command accountability, and time-bound enforcement mechanisms.

Appendix 5 – Towards A Nile COMMISSION

The Nile River Basin is the largest river basin in Africa, stretching across 11 countries and supporting more than 500 million people. It extends from the highlands of East Africa all the way to the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt. The basin covers about 3.4 million km² and includes a wide range of environments such as lakes, wetlands, deserts, floodplains, and highland regions. Its hydrology is shaped mainly by two major tributaries, the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The White Nile originates from Lake Victoria and provides a relatively steady flow throughout the year as it moves through Uganda, South Sudan, and Sudan. The Blue Nile begins at Lake Tana in Ethiopia and contributes most of the river's water as well as nutrient-rich sediment that supports agriculture downstream. Additional tributaries such as the Atbara, Sobat, and Bahr el Ghazal add seasonal variability to the river system. The basin plays a crucial economic role by supporting agriculture, fisheries, hydropower production, and transportation networks across the region. Large infrastructure projects like major dams help generate electricity but also influence water distribution among countries. Despite its importance, the Nile Basin faces significant challenges including population growth, climate change, and political tensions over shared water resources, which have encouraged cooperative management efforts such as the Nile Basin Initiative.

The Nile's legal architecture has gone through roughly four distinct regimes, each reflecting a different distribution of power among riparians rather than a neutral technical evolution. It's worth tracing them in sequence before drawing out the comparative logic.

The colonial regime (1891–1929)

Britain administered both ends of the river — Egypt/Sudan downstream and the East African colonies upstream — and used treaties as instruments of unified imperial hydraulic planning rather than as agreements between sovereign equals. The 1891 Anglo-Italian Protocol, the 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty (binding Menelik II not to obstruct Blue Nile flows without British consent), and the 1906 Tripartite Agreement all subordinated upstream water use to downstream (mainly Egyptian cotton-economy) interests. The capstone was the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Exchange of Notes, which allocated the bulk of the river's then-estimated flow to Egypt and, crucially, gave Egypt a veto over any upstream construction that might affect its share. This was less a water-sharing treaty than an instrument of colonial administration that happened to produce Egyptian hydro-hegemony as a side effect of imperial bookkeeping.

Decolonization and the 1959 bilateral lock-in

Independence fractured the unified administrative space but didn't dissolve the legal claims built on top of it. Sudan replaced Britain as Egypt's treaty partner, and the 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters divided the entire estimated yield — 55.5 billion cubic meters to Egypt, 18.5 bcm to Sudan, the rest accounted for as evaporation loss — between just the two of them. Ethiopia, despite contributing roughly 85% of the river's water via the Blue Nile, was never a party and received nothing. The agreement even built in a mechanism for jointly negotiating with any future upstream claimant, with any concession deducted equally from the two existing shares — effectively treating the river as a closed shop. Newly independent upstream states (Tanzania most explicitly, via Nyerere's "clean slate" doctrine of

state succession) rejected the binding force of colonial-era treaties to which they were never parties, while Egypt and Sudan invoked treaty continuity and "acquired rights." This is the foundational legal-political fault line that everything since has run along: historic/acquired rights versus the principle that treaties cannot bind states that never consented to them.

The Nile Basin Initiative and the Cooperative Framework Agreement (1999–2010s)

The NBI was launched by all the riparians as a transitional, donor-backed institutional platform — explicitly designed to manage the basin cooperatively pending a permanent legal framework, and to shift the operative principle from historic entitlement toward equitable and reasonable utilization, the standard found in customary international water law. Negotiations over a permanent Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA, also called the Entebbe Agreement) ran from 1997 to 2010 and collapsed over a single clause: upstream states wanted language affirming equitable utilization without entrenching existing uses as permanent; Egypt and Sudan insisted on a "water security" article that would have locked in current allocations indefinitely. Six upstream states signed the CFA in 2010; Egypt and Sudan refused and effectively withdrew from the NBI process. The CFA eventually accumulated enough ratifications to enter into force and establish a Nile Basin Commission, but Egypt and Sudan remain outside it, so it doesn't function as a basin-wide regime in practice.

The GERD era and the current deadlock (2011–present)

Ethiopia began building the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in 2011, unilaterally, financed almost entirely domestically with Chinese contractor involvement rather than through any negotiated entitlement — a direct break from the veto-constrained model of the 1929/1959 regime. A non-binding 2015 Declaration of Principles between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia produced political language but no binding rules on filling or drought-year operation, and a decade of AU-, US-, and World Bank-mediated talks never closed that gap. The dam was inaugurated in September 2025, and longstanding disagreements over water allocation that had been governed by the 1959 agreement excluding Ethiopia have come sharply into focus since. As of early 2026 the dam is built, no agreement exists, and Ethiopia has continued filling and operating its 74-billion-cubic-meter reservoir without a binding framework, with more than a decade of negotiations still having failed to produce a binding rule on drought-year releases, the core technical dispute at the heart of the crisis. President Trump sought in January 2026 to re-energize U.S. mediation with a letter to President Sisi, but with Washington no longer seen as a neutral broker and regional and multilateral initiatives similarly stalled, the dispute has been left without a viable forum for resolution. This is the current state of play: a fait accompli infrastructure regime operating ahead of, and effectively in place of, any binding legal settlement.

Characterizing the shifts

Lined up against each other, the four regimes differ along the same handful of axes: who gets to decide, on what legal basis, how inclusive the arrangement is of all riparians, whether the instrument is binding or aspirational, and who actually holds operational control regardless of paper entitlement. The colonial regime was externally imposed and unified by a single administering power. The 1959 regime was bilateral, exclusionary, and grounded in a prior-

appropriation logic of historic and acquired rights — it treated the resource as already fully allocated, which is precisely what made it untenable once the excluded majority of riparians gained voice. The NBI/CFA period attempted a genuine paradigm shift toward multilateral, principle-based governance and benefit-sharing (joint power pools, regional infrastructure) rather than zero-sum water-sharing, but it foundered on the same underlying question the 1959 agreement begged: do existing uses get permanent priority, or does every riparian have an equal claim to renegotiate from scratch? The GERD era represents a fourth logic entirely — what scholars sometimes call counter-hegemony through unilateral fact-creation: rather than winning recognition within a negotiated multilateral framework, Ethiopia simply built, and the operative source of power shifted from treaty entitlement to engineering and financing capacity. Each regime, in other words, marks a change not so much in the technical management of water as in who has the power to set the terms — colonial administrators, then the two strongest downstream states, then an attempted basin-wide consensus, then whoever can complete construction first.

The role of international law

International law supplies competing interpretive toolkits that each side deploys selectively rather than a settled rulebook either side is bound by. Egypt and Sudan lean on *pacta sunt servanda* and a doctrine of acquired/historic rights, reinforced by the argument (drawing on the 1978 Vienna Convention on Succession of States in Respect of Treaties) that colonial-era allocations constitute a protected territorial regime binding successor states. Ethiopia and the upstream bloc invoke the customary principles of equitable and reasonable utilization and the obligation not to cause significant harm — codified in the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses — alongside the basic third-party rule that a treaty cannot bind a state that never consented to it. Both positions have genuine grounding in international law; the law doesn't adjudicate between them because no party has ever submitted the dispute to binding third-party adjudication. The GERD dispute exposes a structural gap in international water law: the fragmentation of legal regimes and the inability of existing institutional arrangements to operationalize core principles in a coherent and enforceable manner. In practice, international law here functions mainly as a legitimization resource in negotiation and a tool for "internationalizing" the dispute to draw in outside mediators, rather than as a self-executing constraint — which is itself a telling data point about the limits of treaty-based water law in the absence of compulsory dispute settlement.

Hydropolitics, defined, and what is actually being fought over

Hydropolitics is the study of how shared, transboundary water resources generate both conflict and cooperation between states, and how power asymmetries — geographic position (upstream/downstream), material capability (economic, military, diplomatic), and technical/financial capacity to actually exploit the resource — determine control over a basin independently of formal legal entitlement. The "hydro-hegemony" framework captures why a downstream state like Egypt, despite contributing essentially none of the river's water, could nonetheless dominate the basin's legal order for nearly a century: hegemony here rests on relative power, not on hydrological contribution or even strict legal right.

What's actually contested operates on several layers simultaneously. There's the raw quantitative question of allocation — how many billion cubic meters each state may draw from an average annual flow that hasn't meaningfully grown while the basin's population has roughly tripled since 1959. There's a temporal dimension that's arguably more decisive than volume: the timing and rate of release, especially during dam-filling and multi-year drought, since a coordinated upstream withholding during a dry cycle could be far more damaging to Egypt than the dam's existence in an average year — and this drought-operation question is exactly the technical issue the GERD talks have never resolved. There's the prior, more fundamental question of the right to build infrastructure at all, which the 1929 veto clause explicitly denied upstream states and which Ethiopia's unilateral construction directly overturned. There's a normative fight over which legal framing counts as legitimate — historic rights versus equitable utilization — which is as much an argument about whose narrative of fairness prevails as it is a material dispute. There's the asymmetry between Ethiopia's framing of the dam as a hydropower-driven development imperative for an energy-poor country of well over 100 million people, against Egypt's framing of any reduction in flow as an existential threat given its near-total dependence on the Nile for fresh water in an almost rainless country. And there's a contest over information itself — data-sharing, dam-operation transparency, and whether prior notification obligates consent or merely consultation — alongside a contest over which outside powers (the US, China, Gulf states, the AU, the World Bank) each side can recruit as allies or mediators to offset its own structural weakness. The dam, in that sense, is not really the dispute; it's the latest and most consequential site where a century-old argument over who gets to define entitlement to the Nile is being fought out.

Towards a Nile Basin Commission

A Nile Basin Commission (NBC) can be assessed against best practice in transboundary river basin governance, which comes from both international water law and experience in systems such as the Rhine¹⁴, Danube¹⁵, Mekong¹⁶, Murray–Darling¹⁷, and Senegal River basins¹⁸. Across these cases, effective basin institutions tend to rest on a shared set of core functions: equitable and reasonable use, prevention of significant harm, prior notification of major projects, reliable data sharing, and structured dispute resolution. Our proposed NBC is broadly consistent with this theoretical foundation, especially in its emphasis on adaptive allocation, transparency, and tiered conflict resolution.

In comparison with successful real-world basins, the strongest parallel is with institutions like the Rhine and Danube commissions, where cooperation is durable because it focuses on technical coordination, environmental management, and shared data systems rather than politically rigid allocation formulas. These cases show that basin governance becomes stable when it is framed as problem-solving rather than sovereignty redistribution. Your design aligns with this logic through its emphasis on hydrological transparency and joint monitoring, which is widely considered the most effective entry point for reducing mistrust in contested basins. Flexible allocation rather than fixed quotas also reflects contemporary best practice, since rigid

¹⁴ <https://ccr-zkr.org/>

¹⁵ <https://www.danubecommission.org/dc/en/>

¹⁶ <https://www.mrcmekong.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.mdba.gov.au/>

¹⁸ <https://www.internationalwatersgovernance.com/senegal-river-basin.html>

entitlements often collapse under climate variability, population growth, and shifting development priorities.

At the same time, the proposed NBC goes significantly further than most existing basin institutions in ways that increase both its ambition and its political difficulty. Binding arbitration with enforceable outcomes is rare in fragmented geopolitical environments, where states are reluctant to accept external authority over water security. Even in relatively successful basins, arbitration mechanisms tend to be used sparingly or indirectly because states prioritize sovereignty over legal compliance when vital resources are at stake. Coordinated dam operation across sovereign boundaries is even more demanding, since it requires continuous trust in real-time decision-making about reservoir levels, flood releases, and energy generation trade-offs. Most basin organizations avoid this level of operational integration and instead rely on advisory coordination, precisely to avoid triggering sovereignty concerns.

The Nile Basin itself is structurally different from many comparative cases because water is not simply an economic input but a central pillar of national security, especially for downstream states. Egypt's dependency on the Nile for the overwhelming majority of its freshwater supply creates a strategic sensitivity that transforms technical disagreements into existential political concerns. This means that even minor changes in flow governance are interpreted through a security lens rather than an efficiency lens. Upstream states, by contrast, increasingly view water as a development enabler tied to energy production, food security, and industrialization, which creates fundamentally different normative frameworks within the same hydrological system.

The Political economy of the Nile

The political economy of water use in the Nile Delta is best understood as a system where hydrology, food production, and geopolitical power are tightly intertwined. At its core, the entire structure rests on a single river—the Nile—which supplies nearly all freshwater for Egypt. Because rainfall is negligible across most of the country, especially in the north, the Nile Delta functions as an artificial oasis sustained by controlled river flows, canals, and pumping infrastructure. This makes water not just a natural resource but the backbone of the state's economic and political order.

The Nile Delta is one of the most densely populated agricultural regions in Africa, and its land use reflects a constant balancing act between farming, urban expansion, and soil degradation. Agriculture dominates water consumption, absorbing the overwhelming majority of available freshwater. This is not simply an economic choice but a political one, because Egypt's food system—especially wheat and bread—sits at the center of its social contract. Bread subsidies are deeply embedded in social stability, meaning that irrigation water is indirectly tied to regime legitimacy. When water is allocated to crops like rice or sugarcane, which are highly water-intensive, it reflects both economic incentives for farmers and political pressure to maintain rural livelihoods and food production.

Urban and industrial demand adds another layer of pressure. Cities such as Cairo and Alexandria depend on Nile-fed systems for drinking water, sanitation, and industrial activity. Leakage in infrastructure, combined with population growth, increases stress on supply

systems. Meanwhile, industrial users such as textile and petrochemical sectors depend on stable water access, linking water policy to broader economic development strategies. Even energy production is tied into this system, since thermal power plants require cooling water and irrigation pumping itself consumes electricity, creating feedback loops between water and energy demand.

At the same time, the system is not only internal but deeply international. Egypt sits at the downstream end of the Nile Basin, which means its water security is structurally dependent on decisions made outside its borders. The most important external factor today is the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile. For Ethiopia, this dam is framed as a development project designed to expand electricity access and economic growth. For Egypt, however, it represents a potential reduction in downstream water availability, especially during the reservoir filling period or in times of drought. This asymmetry creates a fundamental political tension: upstream countries view the river as a source of untapped development potential, while Egypt views it as a fixed lifeline that cannot be compromised.

Sudan occupies an intermediate position in this system. It can benefit from more regulated flows and reduced flooding, but it also faces uncertainty about long-term water governance and its own agricultural planning. Attempts at basin-wide cooperation through institutions such as the Nile Basin Initiative have provided dialogue platforms but have not resolved the underlying disagreement over allocation rights and historical treaties.

Within Egypt itself, additional pressures intensify the situation. The Nile Delta is increasingly affected by environmental stressors such as sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion, which reduce the productivity of agricultural land and threaten freshwater aquifers. Urban expansion consumes fertile farmland, while groundwater extraction increases in areas where surface water is insufficient or unreliable, often leading to salinization and long-term depletion. These processes gradually erode the ecological stability of the delta even without major changes in river flow.

What makes the system politically sensitive is that all of these pressures converge on a fixed supply of water. The Nile's total flow is relatively constant in historical terms, but demand is rising due to population growth, agricultural expansion, and industrialization. This mismatch transforms water from a technical resource into a strategic constraint. Control over water distribution becomes a form of state power internally, while control over upstream flow becomes a matter of international bargaining and potential conflict.

In essence, the political economy of the Nile Delta is shaped by a structural contradiction: Egypt's economic and social systems are built on the assumption of stable, predictable Nile flows, while the regional system is becoming more contested, variable, and politically fragmented. Water is therefore not just an input to agriculture or cities; it is a central axis around which questions of sovereignty, food security, and regional power continuously revolve.

One important additional layer is that Egypt's water governance is highly centralized, which allows the state to manage scarcity through top-down allocation but also reduces flexibility at the local level. This centralization makes irrigation decisions more politically controlled than economically efficient, since distribution often reflects stability concerns rather than purely

agronomic needs. Over time, this has created a system where farmers adapt crops to water availability rather than market signals alone.

Another nuance is that the Nile Delta is not a uniform agricultural zone but a patchwork of highly differentiated micro-regions, where water access can vary significantly depending on canal position and maintenance quality. Farmers at the tail ends of irrigation networks often face chronic shortages, which pushes them toward groundwater extraction or informal water-sharing arrangements. These practices, while adaptive, can accelerate salinization and long-term soil degradation.

A further complexity is that climate change does not only reduce water availability through potential upstream variability but also increases evaporation losses within Egypt's own canal and irrigation systems. Higher temperatures mean that even unchanged Nile flows effectively deliver less usable water to crops. This introduces uncertainty into long-term agricultural planning in ways that historical averages cannot capture.

The political economy is also shaped by the fact that agricultural employment remains politically sensitive. Even though agriculture contributes a smaller share of GDP than services or industry, it still absorbs a large portion of the labor force, making irrigation policy indirectly a labor and stability policy. Any rapid shift away from water-intensive farming risks rural unemployment pressures.

There is also an infrastructural inertia problem: Egypt's irrigation system is built on decades of canal engineering that is costly and slow to modify. This locks the country into a particular water-use pattern, even when efficiency improvements like drip irrigation or crop substitution are known to be beneficial. Institutional change is therefore constrained not by knowledge but by physical and financial path dependence.

On the international side, water diplomacy is complicated by asymmetry in bargaining power over time. Upstream states like Ethiopia can delay or adjust flow impacts through dam operations, while Egypt has limited physical leverage beyond diplomacy and regional alliances. This creates a strategic uncertainty where the timing of water releases becomes as important as total annual volume.

Another nuance is that the Nile is not a single uniform flow but a system of tributaries, rainfall regimes, and seasonal variations, meaning that upstream infrastructure can reshape not just quantity but also timing of water availability. For agriculture, timing can be as important as volume because planting cycles depend on predictable irrigation schedules.

At the same time, informal governance plays a quiet but significant role in water distribution, especially at the local canal level, where maintenance, negotiation, and social hierarchy influence actual access. These micro-level dynamics often diverge from official allocation plans, creating a parallel system of negotiated water use.

Economically, water scarcity is increasingly being internalized through rising costs in energy, fertilizers, and land degradation, meaning that water stress shows up indirectly in production economics rather than only in explicit shortages. This makes the crisis partially invisible until productivity declines accumulate over time.

Finally, the Nile Delta represents a case where environmental risk, state capacity, and geopolitical rivalry are converging rather than separating, meaning that future water conflicts are likely to be managed not through single agreements but through continuous adjustment under uncertainty rather than a stable equilibrium.

The system is shaped first by a fundamentally fixed natural supply, since the Nile's overall flow is essentially capped in the long run and cannot expand to match demand. Against this constraint, rising demand from population growth, agricultural expansion, and industrial development steadily increases pressure on available water resources. This tension is politically amplified by food security concerns, especially Egypt's bread subsidy system, which ties affordable staple food provision directly to irrigation-intensive wheat imports and domestic cultivation.

At the same time, upstream infrastructure has become a major source of power in the system, as large dams function not only as energy projects but also as tools that can reshape the timing and distribution of downstream flows. Layered onto this is climate variability, which increases the risk of droughts and makes water availability less predictable year to year, adding uncertainty to both farming and national planning. Finally, all of these pressures connect back to the question of state legitimacy, since sustained water shortages or sharp disruptions in access can translate into broader social dissatisfaction and, in extreme cases, political unrest. Egypt's Nile Delta water system sits at the intersection of **hydrological limits, food politics, and regional power competition**, where every cubic meter of water is simultaneously an economic input and a geopolitical bargaining chip.

Governance and Stakeholders

The book *The Nile River Basin: Water, Agriculture, Governance and Livelihoods* uses a **multi-disciplinary development and political ecology approach** rather than purely physical hydrology. It sits at the intersection of geography, water governance, agricultural economics, and development studies. The scholarly approach is centered on the idea that the Nile is not just a hydrological system but a **socio-ecological and political system**. It emphasizes how water, agriculture, and livelihoods are deeply interconnected across different countries in the basin. Instead of treating the river as a purely physical flow system, it focuses on how people, institutions, and power relations shape water use and distribution.

A key feature of the approach is its strong emphasis on governance. It examines how different Nile Basin countries negotiate, contest, and manage shared water resources. This includes attention to institutions, treaties, and political bargaining over water allocation. The river is therefore analyzed as a **transboundary governance problem**, not just a natural system. It also uses a livelihoods-oriented perspective. This means the analysis is grounded in how water access affects agriculture, food security, rural income, and vulnerability of communities. Rather than focusing only on large infrastructure or basin-scale hydrology, it brings attention to how ordinary users depend on and are affected by the river system.

From an analytical perspective, one major strength is its strong integration of human and environmental dimensions. It does not separate hydrology from agriculture or governance, which makes it more realistic for a heavily managed river like the Nile. It is also strong in

highlighting inequality and power asymmetries between upstream and downstream states, especially in water allocation and development control.

Another analytical strength is its focus on applied policy relevance. It is designed to inform water management decisions, agricultural planning, and regional cooperation. This makes it useful for development agencies and policymakers rather than only academic hydrologists.

However, there are several limitations. One weakness is that the physical hydrology component is often less detailed compared to specialized hydrological or ecohydrological studies. Because the focus is broader and more social-scientific, it may simplify complex hydrological processes such as sediment transport, groundwater interactions, or climate-driven flow variability.

Another limitation is methodological fragmentation. Because it combines multiple disciplines—political science, economics, agriculture, and hydrology—it can sometimes lack a single unified analytical framework. Instead, it brings together different perspectives that are not always fully integrated. There is also a risk of descriptive rather than predictive analysis. Many discussions focus on institutions, governance structures, and livelihoods without strong modeling of future hydrological scenarios or system dynamics under climate change and infrastructure expansion.

Finally, like many governance-focused works, it may underrepresent fine-scale ecological processes and detailed hydrological modeling in favor of higher-level institutional analysis. Overall, this book is strongest as a **political ecology and water governance analysis of the Nile Basin**, but weaker as a strictly quantitative hydrological or systems modeling study.

The GERD filling schedule affects Egypt by gradually changing how much Nile water reaches it each year during the filling period rather than permanently cutting the river's total flow. In the early years, impacts are usually limited in wet seasons, but Egypt still faces uncertainty about late-season irrigation availability. This uncertainty forces Egypt to rely more heavily on storage in Lake Nasser and to adopt more conservative water management in agriculture. As filling progresses, especially in years with below-average rainfall, downstream flows can be noticeably reduced. These reductions mainly affect agriculture in the Nile Delta, where irrigation demand is highest and most politically sensitive. Egypt responds by prioritizing strategic crops like wheat while limiting water-intensive crops such as rice. The variability introduced by filling makes planning harder because it disrupts long-established irrigation schedules. In later stages, once the reservoir is largely filled, the main issue shifts from volume loss to altered timing of water releases. This change gives Ethiopia more control over seasonal flow regulation, which reduces Egypt's hydrological predictability. Overall, the filling schedule matters less as a single shock and more as a long-term restructuring of how Nile water is governed and shared.

This makes Egypt much more part of the Horn of Africa politics, since drought years implies upstream retention combined with natural low flows can compound shortages downstream. In these scenarios, Egypt faces hard trade-offs between maintaining reservoir levels, sustaining agriculture in the Nile Delta, and protecting urban water supply. These are the moments when water becomes explicitly political: allocation decisions affect food imports, subsidy costs, and social stability.

This uncertainty puts premium on trust-building through depoliticisation of the water meter in out age.

Nilocentric Management from Catchment to Coast

The book by Zeidan *The Nile River System, Africa: Ecohydrology and Management from Catchment to Coast*—belongs to the field of basin-scale ecohydrology and integrated river system analysis, where a river is treated as a coupled hydrological, ecological, and human system rather than just a channel of water.

The scholarly approach is based on an integrated ecohydrological systems perspective. The Nile is analyzed as a continuous catchment-to-coast system stretching from its headwaters in East Africa through Sudan and Egypt to the Mediterranean delta. This approach emphasizes continuity across space and avoids treating national or regional river sections in isolation.

It is strongly interdisciplinary, combining hydrology, geomorphology, ecology, water engineering, climate variability studies, and water resource management. The aim is to understand how physical water processes, ecosystem dynamics, and human interventions interact. A major feature of this approach is systems thinking, where feedback loops are central: dams alter sediment flow, irrigation changes downstream availability, and climate variability reshapes flood regimes and ecological responses. The river is therefore treated as a non-linear, interacting system rather than a simple cause–effect chain.

The work is also management-oriented, meaning it connects scientific understanding with policy and governance issues. It considers transboundary water allocation, sustainability of irrigation, and the implications of large infrastructure projects such as the Aswan High Dam.

One of its main analytical strengths is the ability to integrate the entire Nile basin into a single framework, showing how upstream decisions affect downstream environments. It also explicitly recognizes the strong human transformation of the river system, including major engineering interventions like the Aswan High Dam and large-scale irrigation schemes. Another strength is the coupling of hydrology and ecology, linking water flow, sediment transport, nutrient dynamics, and ecosystem responses such as wetland and delta stability. It also provides useful insight into the geopolitical importance of the Nile as a shared international water resource.

However, there are several weaknesses. Data limitations are significant because hydrological measurements are sparse or uneven across parts of the basin, especially in upstream regions, forcing reliance on models and remote sensing. This introduces uncertainty in results. The approach is also highly model-dependent, and outputs can be sensitive to assumptions and calibration choices, which is a common issue in large-scale hydrological modeling.

Another limitation is that socio-political complexity is often underdeveloped relative to the physical science. While water management is discussed, deeper issues such as power asymmetries, treaty politics, and historical water control dynamics are not always fully captured. The basin-scale perspective can also smooth over important regional differences,

such as the contrast between the wet Ethiopian highlands, the evaporative Sudanian plains, and the heavily engineered Egyptian system.

In addition, such frameworks can become outdated quickly in a rapidly changing system affected by climate variability, new dam construction, and shifting agricultural practices. Finally, the large-scale focus tends to miss fine-grained local ecological and community-level water dynamics.

Overall, the work provides a strong macro-level systems understanding of the Nile as an interconnected ecological and hydrological system, but its main trade-off is reduced precision and limited depth in political and local-scale complexity.

Basin-scale management and its challenges

To mitigate the weaknesses of a basin-scale ecohydrology approach like the one used in the Nile River System study, you need to strengthen the analysis along four main dimensions: data, methods, socio-political realism, and scale integration.

First, for data limitations, the key mitigation strategy is triangulation. Instead of relying only on hydrometric stations or model outputs, combine multiple independent data sources such as satellite-based remote sensing (for rainfall, evapotranspiration, and surface water extent), reanalysis climate datasets, and ground observations where available. Cross-validating these sources reduces dependence on any single weak dataset and improves confidence in upstream regions where measurements are sparse. Uncertainty should also be explicitly quantified rather than hidden, using sensitivity analysis and confidence ranges.

Second, to reduce model dependency risk, the solution is to avoid single-model conclusions. Use ensemble modeling, where multiple hydrological or climate models are run and compared. This helps reveal where predictions are stable versus where they diverge. Models should also be stress-tested under different parameter assumptions and extreme climate scenarios. Importantly, results should be interpreted as ranges of possible outcomes rather than precise forecasts.

Third, to address weak socio-political representation, the mitigation is to integrate political ecology and governance analysis into the hydrological framework. This means treating water not only as a physical resource but also as a contested political asset. You strengthen the analysis by incorporating treaty history, power asymmetries between upstream and downstream countries, institutional constraints, and decision-making processes. Qualitative data such as policy documents, stakeholder interviews, and historical archives should sit alongside quantitative hydrology, not be treated as secondary.

Fourth, to avoid over-smoothing across regions, the basin should be explicitly disaggregated into sub-basins. Instead of modeling the Nile as one system, you analyze it as interconnected but distinct components such as the Ethiopian highlands, White Nile wetlands, Sudanese floodplains, and Egyptian irrigation networks. Each sub-system has different hydrological behavior, losses, and human pressures. A nested or multi-scale modeling structure helps preserve local detail while still allowing basin-wide integration.

Fifth, to address the problem of static assumptions, the analysis should adopt scenario-based and adaptive modeling. Rather than assuming stable climate and land use conditions, you simulate multiple futures such as increased dam construction, accelerated climate warming, or agricultural expansion. Adaptive management frameworks can then be used, where policies are periodically updated as new data emerges.

Finally, to recover local ecological detail, combine basin-scale models with micro-scale case studies. Fieldwork in representative wetlands, irrigation districts, or delta zones can be used to validate and refine large-scale outputs. This “top-down plus bottom-up” structure helps ensure that fine-scale ecological processes are not lost in aggregation.

In short, mitigation comes from mixing methods rather than replacing them: combining models with observations, physical science with political analysis, good governance and basin-scale views with local case studies.

Risks and Mitigation

A Nile River Commission—similar in spirit to the existing Nile Basin Initiative—would face complex governance challenges because it must coordinate 11 countries with very different water needs, economic capacities, and political priorities.

One major governance challenge is **asymmetry between upstream and downstream states**. Upstream countries (like Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda) prioritize development and hydropower, while downstream states (especially Egypt and Sudan) depend heavily on stable water flows for agriculture and domestic use. This creates persistent disagreement over allocation rules and water rights.

A second challenge is **lack of binding legal enforcement**. Many basin agreements rely on voluntary cooperation, which makes compliance inconsistent and weak when national interests conflict with regional rules.

A third challenge is **data sharing and transparency**. Countries often hesitate to share hydrological data, dam operation plans, or rainfall projections, which reduces trust and makes joint planning difficult.

There is also **institutional fragmentation**, where multiple national agencies and regional bodies overlap without a unified decision-making authority, slowing down responses to droughts or floods.

From a risk perspective, the most serious risk is **water conflict escalation**, especially during drought periods or when large infrastructure projects like dams alter downstream flow. Another key risk is **climate change**, which increases variability in rainfall and river discharge, making agreements harder to maintain.

Additional risks include **population pressure and rising demand**, which intensify competition for water, and **environmental degradation**, such as wetland loss and pollution, which reduces overall water availability and ecosystem health.

Mitigation would require a **strong legal framework with enforceable water-sharing rules**, potentially evolving from the existing cooperative model of the Nile Basin Initiative into a more binding commission structure.



Another mitigation is **joint infrastructure planning**, where dams and irrigation projects are coordinated regionally to balance hydropower generation with downstream water needs.

Real-time data sharing systems and independent technical monitoring bodies could reduce mistrust by ensuring transparency in river flow measurements and dam operations.

Finally, **conflict resolution mechanisms**, such as arbitration panels and diplomatic negotiation platforms, would be essential to prevent disputes from escalating, alongside climate adaptation strategies like water efficiency, drought planning, and investment in sustainable agriculture.

Another structural constraint is the asymmetry of geographic position. Upstream states control the timing and volume of flow generation, while downstream states are more exposed to cumulative impacts and have fewer physical options for adaptation. This creates a built-in bargaining imbalance that complicates rule-based governance because any allocation system is perceived as redistributive rather than neutral. In more balanced basins, institutional rules can emerge as technical compromises; in the Nile, they are immediately interpreted as shifts in power.

Experience from global basins suggests that successful cooperation usually evolves incrementally. Institutions rarely begin with binding enforcement or comprehensive allocation systems. Instead, they start with narrow technical functions such as hydrological monitoring, flood forecasting, and environmental protection, which gradually build trust over time. Only after sustained cooperation do states consider deeper legal commitments. This sequencing matters because it lowers the political cost of participation and allows states to test institutional reliability before accepting constraints on sovereignty.

Another lesson is that data is often more politically transformative than law. Shared hydrological information reduces uncertainty, and uncertainty is one of the main drivers of worst-case assumptions in the Nile Basin. When states lack trusted data, they tend to assume strategic intent behind infrastructure projects, which intensifies security dilemmas. A robust data regime can therefore function as a de-escalation mechanism even without formal allocation agreements.

A further insight is that partial integration is often more resilient than full integration. Many successful basins do not resolve allocation disputes directly but instead compartmentalize cooperation into areas such as environmental protection, navigation, or joint infrastructure planning. This allows cooperation to expand without requiring agreement on the most politically sensitive issues immediately. In the Nile context, this suggests that governance may be more feasible if it initially avoids final allocation formulas and focuses instead on coordination of variability and extremes, such as droughts and floods.

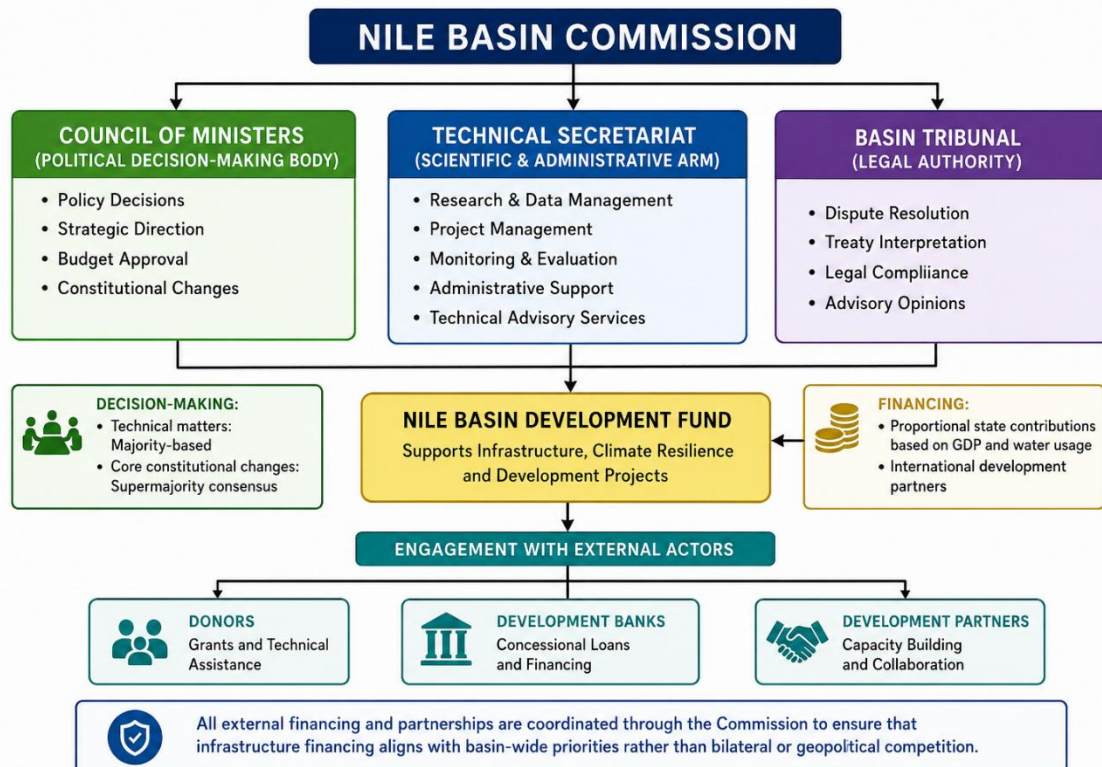
External actors also play a structurally important role. In the Nile Basin, development banks, Gulf states, and major infrastructure financiers can either reinforce collective governance or weaken it by pursuing bilateral deals that bypass basin institutions. When financing flows through shared frameworks, it strengthens institutional legitimacy; when it bypasses them, it reinforces fragmentation and competitive bargaining.

Climate change adds another layer of complexity by increasing hydrological variability. This makes rigid allocation systems less viable and increases the importance of adaptive governance. However, it also raises political stakes, since droughts intensify zero-sum perceptions of water scarcity. This paradox means that climate stress simultaneously increases the need for cooperation and the difficulty of achieving it.

Another nuance is that basin governance is not only about managing water quantity but also about managing timing, predictability, and expectations. In the Nile, predictability may be as important as total volume because uncertainty itself drives strategic tension. A commission that

reduces uncertainty without fully resolving allocation could still generate significant stability gains.

Figure



Division of labour refers to the allocation of tasks, responsibilities, and expertise among specialized units or departments. In the Nile Basin Commission, the Council of Ministers provides political leadership and policy decisions, the Technical Secretariat conducts research, administration, and project management, and the Basin Tribunal resolves legal disputes and interprets the treaty framework.

Integration of effort and information flows refers to the mechanisms that coordinate these specialized bodies so they work toward common objectives. This includes reporting from the Technical Secretariat to the Council of Ministers, legal guidance from the Basin Tribunal, shared data and monitoring systems, consultation processes among institutional bodies, and coordinated engagement with donors, development banks, and development partners.

The Commission is intended to create a balance between national sovereignty and collective basin governance. By separating political, technical, and judicial functions, it seeks to reduce unilateral decision-making and encourage evidence-based cooperation. The institutional design promotes transparency by requiring the regular exchange of information among member states and Commission organs. It also strengthens accountability by assigning clear responsibilities to each body while maintaining oversight through interdependent decision-making processes. Through coordinated planning and shared financing mechanisms, the Commission aims to

align national development projects with basin-wide objectives. Ultimately, the structure is designed to foster trust, prevent disputes, and ensure the sustainable and equitable management of Nile Basin resources for present and future generations.

Institutional legitimacy is also critical. Even technically sound agreements may fail if they are perceived as externally imposed or biased toward one bloc of states. This is particularly relevant in the Nile, where historical grievances and colonial-era treaties still shape perceptions of fairness.

This sets a standard for the Jordan River Commission and closer cooperation on the Euphrates-Tigris river, provided the Regional Water Authority -Middle East, a sub-regional vertical under the Euro-MED Partnership is allowed to lead and do what it specialises in: water security.

Overall, the proposed commission is strong in theoretical design and closely aligned with modern principles of integrated water resources management. Its emphasis on adaptive allocation, transparency, and dispute resolution reflects best practice. However, compared to successful basins, its most ambitious elements—especially binding enforcement and centralized operational control—are unlikely to be politically feasible in the short to medium term. The key lesson from comparative experience is that basin governance succeeds when it builds trust through limited, functional cooperation first, then gradually expands into deeper legal and institutional commitments as political confidence develops:

DRAFT TREATY ON A NILE COMMISSION

Preamble:

We, the States of the Nile Basin, conscious of the Nile River as a shared transboundary watercourse of fundamental ecological, economic, and civilizational importance, and recognizing its central role in sustaining the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people across Eastern Africa and the Northeast African region, affirm our collective responsibility to ensure its equitable, reasonable, and sustainable utilization.

Recalling the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations (1945), particularly the obligation of States to settle disputes by peaceful means, promote international cooperation, and achieve development in accordance with principles of sovereign equality and good neighborliness, we reaffirm that cooperation over shared water resources is integral to international peace and security.

Guided by the principles of the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997), including equitable and reasonable utilization, the obligation not to cause significant harm, prior notification of planned measures, and the duty of cooperation through regular exchange of data and information, we recognize these norms as foundational to basin-wide governance of the Nile system.

Further guided by the Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers (1966) and the Berlin Rules on Water Resources (2004) of the International Law Association, we acknowledge the evolving customary international law principles governing shared freshwater systems, including ecosystem integrity, sustainability, and intergenerational equity.

Recalling also the African Union's Agenda 2063, the African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (revised 2003), and the AU principle of peaceful resolution of disputes, we affirm Africa-led frameworks for regional integration, sustainable development, and cooperative resource governance.

Acknowledging the importance of the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) of the Nile Basin Initiative, as a reference point for dialogue and institutional cooperation among Nile Basin States, we recognize the need to strengthen and institutionalize basin-wide mechanisms capable of addressing emerging hydrological, climatic, and developmental challenges.

Recognizing further the relevance of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), we emphasize that sustainable management of the Nile is essential to achieving global development and climate resilience objectives.

Affirming the sovereign equality of all Nile Basin States and their inherent right to pursue socio-economic development, we underscore that such development must be pursued in a manner consistent with international water law, environmental protection, and the rights and needs of co-riparian States.

Acknowledging the increasing pressures posed by population growth, climate variability, desertification, and large-scale hydrological infrastructure development, we recognize that unilateral approaches to water management are insufficient to ensure long-term stability and may increase the risk of regional tension.

Recalling the various UN instruments for the regulation of transboundary watercourse such the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and the UN Watercourses Convention (UNWC). adhere to principles of equitable cooperative, equitable, and sustainable management of transboundary water resources universally. through promotion cooperation among countries sharing rivers, lakes, and aquifers, ensuring sustainable water management, ecosystem protection, and conflict prevention.

Determined therefore to transform the Nile from a potential source of dispute into a framework for cooperation, integration, and shared prosperity, we resolve to institutionalize a durable mechanism for dialogue, coordination, and dispute prevention.

Accordingly, we hereby establish the Nile Basin Commission as a permanent, treaty-based intergovernmental institution mandated to promote equitable water allocation, facilitate scientific and technical cooperation, ensure transparency and prior consultation on major water projects, and provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes among Member States.

Through this Commission, we commit ourselves to the progressive development of basin-wide norms consistent with international law, the strengthening of hydrological data-sharing systems, the promotion of joint infrastructure planning, and the safeguarding of the ecological integrity of the Nile River system for present and future generations.

Article 1 – Establishment and Legal Status

This article establishes the Nile Basin Commission as a permanent intergovernmental organization with legal personality. It defines the Nile Basin as a shared transboundary system requiring collective governance and confirms that membership is open to all Nile riparian states on an equal basis.

Article 2 – Objectives

The Commission's objectives are defined as ensuring equitable and sustainable use of Nile waters, preventing significant harm, promoting cooperative development of water resources, and reducing the risk of interstate conflict through binding institutional coordination.

Article 3 – Core Principles

This article anchors the Commission in internationally recognized water law principles, including

- equitable and reasonable utilization,
- no significant harm, cooperation,
- information sharing,
- and prior notification of major projects.

It explicitly rejects exclusive ownership claims over the Nile.

Article 4 – Water Allocation and Use Framework

This establishes a dynamic allocation system rather than fixed colonial quotas, based on hydrological data, national needs, efficiency of use, and seasonal variability. It allows periodic adjustment rather than permanent entitlements, aiming to balance upstream development and downstream security.

Article 5 – Prior Notification and Impact Assessment

States must notify the Commission before initiating major water infrastructure projects such as dams, large irrigation schemes, or diversions. A mandatory transboundary impact assessment is required before approval or construction proceeds.

Article 6 – Dam Operation Coordination

This article creates a joint mechanism for coordinating the operation of major dams, including flood control, drought mitigation, and seasonal water release scheduling. It specifically institutionalizes cooperation between upstream hydropower systems and downstream agricultural needs.

Article 7 – Dispute Resolution Mechanism

Disputes are resolved through a tiered system: negotiation within the Commission, mediation by a technical panel, and finally binding arbitration by an independent basin tribunal whose decisions are legally enforceable on all member states.

Disputes not solved in the Nile Commission can be submitted to the Permanent Court for Arbitration in Hague.

Article 8 – Data Sharing and Hydrological Transparency

All member states must contribute real-time data on rainfall, reservoir levels, river flows, and planned infrastructure. The Commission operates a centralized hydrological data center to reduce asymmetry and mistrust between upstream and downstream states.

For decision-making support, AI will be deployed and workshops arranged.

Article 9 – Infrastructure Development and Benefit Sharing

This article enables joint investment in basin-wide infrastructure, including hydropower interconnections, irrigation efficiency projects, and flood control systems. Benefits from shared projects are distributed according to agreed formulas that reflect contribution, need, and impact.

Article 10 – Environmental Protection and Sustainability

The Commission is mandated to protect the ecological integrity of the Nile Basin, including Lake Victoria system stability, and sediment flow management. All projects must comply with minimum environmental flow requirements.

The wetlands, floodplains, and associated riparian ecosystems shall be governed as shared transboundary ecological assets under the authority of the Nile Basin Commission, which may add further assets by two-thirds vote with the consent of the State exercising territorial jurisdiction.

The Commission shall establish a basin-wide policy framework setting binding conservation and sustainable-use objectives, leaving Member States discretion over the specific domestic measures used to meet them. "Ecological integrity" and "sustainable use" shall be defined and measured against each asset's baseline condition at designation, with indicators adopted by the Commission within two years of entry into force.

Member States shall integrate protection measures into national water and land-use planning and report on them to the Commission, and where a listed asset lies partly within a non-party State, that State shall be invited to participate in monitoring and planning without prejudice to its non-party status.

The Commission shall maintain a joint monitoring and reporting system on ecosystem health, biodiversity, and hydrological change, with costs apportioned among Member States and findings published biennially. A Member State proposing an activity reasonably likely to cause

significant adverse effects on a listed asset shall conduct a transboundary impact assessment and notify affected States before authorization, and shall bear the obligation to restore any asset it materially degrades below its baseline.

This Article shall not diminish obligations under the Ramsar Convention or other applicable instruments, and any dispute over its application shall first go to the Commission's Compliance Committee before proceeding to the Agreement's general dispute settlement procedure.

Article 11 –The Biodiversity of Wetland, Marshes and Wildlife

The Contracting Parties hereby recognize that the fauna and flora of the Nile Basin, including all aquatic, terrestrial, and wetland-dependent species, constitute a shared natural heritage requiring coordinated conservation and sustainable management.

The Contracting Parties further acknowledge the scientific role of the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** Red List as an internationally recognized reference for assessing the extinction risk of species occurring within the Nile Basin.

For the purposes of this Treaty, “Nile Basin species” shall refer to all species of wildlife and plant life naturally occurring within the Nile River system and its associated wetlands, marshes, floodplains, and riparian ecosystems, whether or not such species are listed by the IUCN.

The Contracting Parties shall give priority attention to Nile Basin species classified under the IUCN Red List categories of Vulnerable, Endangered, and Critically Endangered, and shall adopt appropriate conservation, restoration, and protection measures for such species.

Article 12 -Emergency and Drought Protocols

During extreme hydrological events such as droughts or floods, the Commission can temporarily adjust water use priorities. This establishes a collective emergency regime to prevent unilateral actions that could worsen basin-wide crises.

Article 13 – Institutional Structure

The Commission consists of a Council of Ministers (political decision-making body), a Technical Secretariat (scientific and administrative arm), and a Basin Tribunal (legal authority). Decisions on technical matters are majority-based, while core constitutional changes require supermajority consensus.

Article 14 – Financing

The Commission is financed through proportional state contributions based on GDP and water usage, supplemented by international development partners. A dedicated Nile Basin Development Fund supports infrastructure and resilience projects.

Article 15 – External Partnerships

This article regulates engagement with external actors (donors, banks, and development partners) to ensure that infrastructure financing aligns with basin-wide priorities rather than bilateral or geopolitical competition.

Article 16 – Entry into Force and Amendment

The agreement enters into force upon ratification by a qualified majority of Nile Basin states. Amendments require broad consensus to prevent domination by either upstream or downstream blocs.

Core design logic (theoretical underpinning)

This proposed commission is structured to move the Nile system from a zero-sum sovereignty model toward a managed interdependence model, where:

- upstream states gain development flexibility
- downstream states gain predictability and security
- disputes are legalized rather than militarized
- infrastructure becomes jointly governed rather than uncoordinated

The central compromise embedded in the design is that it replaces fixed historical quotas with adaptive allocation rules, which is the only politically plausible bridge between Egypt's security concerns and upstream development demands.

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