

Reconfiguring alliances in the Horn of Africa

Implications for regional stability and integration

Roba D Sharamo and Selam Tadesse Demissie



While the trilateral alliance formed in 2018 by Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia has resolved some obstacles to peace in the Horn of Africa, it has also created new risks for stability and regional integration. Tensions between and within states that arose or were fuelled by the alliance need to be dealt with by governments in the region along with regional and international actors.

Key findings

- ▶ The much-praised 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and their tripartite alliance with Somalia can promote regional stability and prosperity by resolving long-standing obstacles blocking regional peace.
- ▶ However, the advantages of both agreements are offset by the fact that the tripartite alliance has heightened tensions in some countries and has affected pre-existing inter-state relations in the region.
- ▶ The alliance could also undermine the work of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), with adverse effects on the integration process in the region.
- ▶ A common understanding among relevant state actors about the means and ends of the alliance is lacking. This has delayed the implementation of the deal.

Recommendations

- ▶ The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the improvement in relations between Eritrea and Somalia must be nurtured. These alliances are imperative for advancing economic and development prospects in the Horn region.
- ▶ The tripartite alliance's leaders must review its impact and create conditions that will defuse internal tensions.
- ▶ The federal government of Ethiopia must address grassroots grievances in Tigray.
- ▶ Leaders of the three countries must prioritise the holding of credible and inclusive elections in Somalia.
- ▶ Grievances on all sides must be addressed to create an enabling environment for implementing the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal.
- ▶ More inclusivity and in-depth regional consultation are necessary to safeguard regional harmony and stability.
- ▶ Heads of state of IGAD member countries must strengthen the organisation and address regional security challenges that continue to undermine integration.
- ▶ IGAD, together with the African Union, European Union, United Nations and the international community, should work with the newly appointed United States special envoys to find lasting solutions to the current regional crisis.

Introduction

Regional integration, particularly economic integration, has long been a central theme of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional bloc tasked with overall integration in the Horn of Africa. It is considered a means of increasing the economic standing of governments in the region while also ensuring stability by reducing distrust, competition and conflict.

The first step towards achieving such integration would be to resolve conflicts within and between states in the Horn region to promote harmony and unity. Besides, stabilising the internal political dynamics of Horn countries and resolving incessant violent conflicts and civil wars should be prioritised for regional integration.

The rebuilding of Somalia is a key priority. In the three decades since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime, Somalia has fluctuated between periods of stability and periods of violence, including attacks by the al-Shabaab extremist group.

In addition, in recent times, the estrangement between Somalia's federal government and the federal member states, which has deprived the country of unity and cohesive administration, has been a challenge.

The divisions within the country have resulted in neighbouring countries taking sides, which has further spread discord in the region.

Eritrea's withdrawal from IGAD forums undermined the region's peace, security and sustainable development, making integration difficult.

The resolution of tensions and improved relationships between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and Eritrea and Somalia in mid-2018 raised hopes both in the region and internationally that the normalisations of relations will help stabilise and integrate the region. Among the dividends has been the lifting in November 2018¹ of the United States (US)-sponsored United Nations (UN) arms embargo and travel bans and freezing of the assets of some Eritrean officials.

Another positive result was awarding the 2019 Noble Peace Prize to Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali (generally known as Abiy). The rapprochement has also brought a resumption of diplomatic relations, the reopening of embassies and the reintroduction of transport and telephone connections between the two countries. Most importantly, improved ties between the three Horn countries have given birth to new alliances that have reconfigured power dynamics in the region.

Horn of Africa region



Although it has contributed to improved stability and integration, the alliance has also created new fault lines and exacerbated existing tensions. This report explores the challenges and opportunities of the past three years, identifying them as:

- Increased tensions in the internal affairs of states
- A delay in the implementation of the high praised Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal due to internal issues in both countries
- Increased distrust and competition between states
- The duplication of regional mechanisms which threatens regional integration by dividing resources and focus.

The report concludes that the alliance – although significant in terms of resolving a key obstacle blocking regional peace – has created new fault lines that continue to threaten the stability and integration of the region. It finds that internal tensions partly caused by the alliance must be defused. Attention must be given to Eritrea and Ethiopia's political, economic and social dynamics, including addressing grievances, to create an enabling environment for the implementation of the peace deal. The need for consultation and broader inclusion to safeguard regional harmony and stability is also recommended.

Reconfiguration of power dynamics

The peace and friendship agreement signed by Abiy and President of Eritrea Isaias Afwerki in Asmara in 2018 has changed the dynamics in the Horn. The deal – announcing, among other intentions, that the two countries would endeavour to ensure regional peace, development and cooperation – reflects their official objectives and interests. It serves as a guideline for framing the two countries' bilateral relations.

The rapprochement symbolised the end of two decades of border military deployment between the two countries, resolving a key obstacle blocking regional peace.

The outbreak in 1998 of what would become a two-year war between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the contested border and the failure to implement the Algiers peace agreement that ended the war in December 2000 left the two countries with a toxic relationship and militarised

borders for 18 years. The leadership of both countries engaged in regional competition that destabilised the fragile Horn region, dragging neighbouring countries into frequent disputes and conflicts.

Changing geopolitics have shaped economic relations across the Horn. When, after 1998, Ethiopia moved its trade from ports in Eritrea to Djibouti, Eritrea accused Djibouti of supporting Ethiopia's war efforts. This caused Djibouti to break off relations with Eritrea in November 1998. They were only re-established in 2001.

The two countries undermined one another by, among other things, supporting each other's opponents. They also took opposite sides in regional issues such as Somalia's internal politics. In 2006 Ethiopia sent troops to back the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia to prevent the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from taking over power while Eritrea, according to the UN Security Council, supported the ICU.²

The power shift away from the TPLF marked a significant turning point in Ethiopia and the region

The United States, engaged in the 'global war on terror', supported Ethiopia's approach. In 2009 Eritrea faced US-sponsored UN sanctions for allegedly providing support to armed opposition groups in Somalia, undermining peace and reconciliation and failing to pull troops out of territory over which there was a dispute with Djibouti. The sanctions decision left Eritrea isolated.

The regional integration agenda was also affected when Eritrea pulled out of IGAD in 2007 in protest against Ethiopian forces entering Somalia in 2006. This limited IGAD's capacity to engage all its members constructively and effectively in the integration plan.

The rapprochement that reversed these threats to the region's stability resulted from a leadership change in Ethiopia and political transformation within the then ruling political coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in April 2018. These changes radically altered the nature of the relationship between the two countries.

The leadership change was symbolised by the rise of Abiy to the position of prime minister. Abiy is a member of the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), one of the parties that made up the EPRDF. He came to power in the wake of years of turbulent nationwide protests against the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated EPRDF regime that ruled Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018.³

The power shift away from the TPLF marked a significant turning point, both within Ethiopia and among the diaspora-based Ethiopian rebel groups and, regionally, among the Horn of Africa countries. Since the peace deal was signed, there have been significant changes and many high-level leadership visits have symbolised the rapprochement. In the second half of 2018 alone, Abiy and Isaias had seven face-to-face meetings.⁴

Four border posts were opened, although they were closed again after four months allegedly because of differences between the Tigray region and the federal government over the implementation of the alliance. The two countries normalised diplomatic relations and reopened their embassies.⁵ Daily flights between Addis Ababa and Asmara were established and international telephone connections resumed.

Talks were held about infrastructure and transport links, such as Ethiopia's use of Eritrean ports (including a feasibility study for a railway between the Eritrean port city of Massawa and Addis Ababa) and the rebuilding of roads from Assab to the Ethiopian border got underway.⁶ Many other symbolic interactions took place as well, demonstrating a high degree of popular support for the agreement.⁷ The removal of the 18-year-old tensions and the reopening of borders that enabled border communities to interact, although only briefly, indicated the possibility of economic integration that could bring lasting stability and development.

Several high-level bilateral and regional consultations were held at which⁸ pressing peace and security issues affecting the Horn were discussed. Among these issues were the conflict in South Sudan, the disputes between Somalia and Kenya over their maritime border and the prospect of negotiations between Somalia and Somaliland over the latter's claim to independence.

A few weeks after the rapprochement, Eritrea and Somalia agreed to resume diplomatic relations, ending

over a decade of tensions. The resumption of diplomatic relations led to tripartite discussions among Abiy, Isaias and President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (known as Farmajo) of Somalia. A resulting agreement produced a vague communiqué in late 2018 regarding enhanced comprehensive cooperation and ties but proposed little immediate concrete action.⁹ The agreement received a boost in January 2020 after another round of meetings in Asmara. A joint action plan for 2020 focused on peace, security and economic and social development was also short on detail. Still, some consider it the emergence of a new Horn of Africa cooperation bloc.¹⁰

The improved relations among the three Horn countries, particularly the renewed Eritrea-Ethiopia and Eritrea-Somalia friendship and Ethiopia's affiliation with the federal government of Somalia rather than with, and at the expense of, the federal member states, led to the emergence of new alliances, reconfiguring regional power dynamics.

Renewed ties between Eritrea-Ethiopia and Eritrea-Somalia led to new alliances that changed regional dynamics

Domestic and regional interests may have also driven the alliance. When it emerged, Abiy was steering a delicate transition at home that necessitated a peace deal with Eritrea. In Somalia, Farmajo faced a closely contested election scheduled for early 2021 [which has not yet taken place] and needed the support of both Eritrea and Ethiopia.¹¹

Isaias and Abiy's common problems with the TPLF also served as solid ground for the alliance. Eritrea had a long-standing grievance about the TPLF-led leadership, which had undermined the country's administration for almost two decades before Abiy came to power. For his part, Abiy was concerned that the TPLF, having been deprived of federal power, would undermine his new administration.

The alliance was believed to give extra power to its members, enabling them to resist or crush their opponents. This was especially true in the cases of regional states at odds with federal governments, as was the case in Ethiopia and Somalia, where

relations deteriorated and problems intensified. The alliance played a role in polarising internal relations and accentuating grievances.

The alliance also affected Ethiopia's relations with long-standing allies in the region, especially over issues relating to Eritrea. By excluding other countries in the region, the alliance spawned mistrust and competition between its members and those countries. The result has been the reconfiguration of alliances and power dynamics in the region. For these reasons, while threats to stability have been reduced, the new grievances can undermine the security and cohesion of the region.

Heightened tensions

One of the major developments has been the escalation of tensions in the internal politics of Ethiopia and, to some extent, Somalia because the alliance has aggravated the differences between the federal and regional administrations in the two countries. In Ethiopia's case this led to the outbreak of war between the state and the Tigray region in November 2020.

Although both the EPRDF and the Tigray region's leaders were generally in favour of the rapprochement with Eritrea, the Tigray leadership differed with the federal government over the means of engagement.

Abiy's promise that Badme, the flashpoint of the 1998-2000 border conflict between the two countries, would be returned to Eritrea, as directed by the 2000 Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission, was a significant contributor to the successful signing of the agreement. However, the area had been administered by the Tigray regional state and the TPLF, which had not been effectively involved in the peace deal, and disagreed with the decision.

The TPLF argued that the implementation should be carefully executed, considering geopolitical realities and involving the residents of the border region in the decision.¹² It also stressed the need for a structured peace process that included all relevant parties, not merely the two leaders, and that encompassed the inclusive settlement of the Algiers peace agreement.¹³

The federal government and Tigrayan leaders also differ over the agenda of the peace deal. While the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments portray it as advancing cooperation and communication between the two

countries, the TPLF views it as a joint mission to eliminate the party.

Although the national elections in Ethiopia were postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a regional election was held in Tigray in September 2020. The TPLF accused Addis Ababa and Asmara of joining forces to disrupt that election, which the federal government considered to be illegal.¹⁴ As a result, the federal government cut ties with the TPLF, which had won the election. Eritrea's government expressed its support for Abiy and its resistance to any effort to drive a wedge between Asmara and Addis Ababa,¹⁵ thus complicating the trilateral relations.

The continued political polarisation between Isaias and the ruling elite in the Tigray region, combined with the escalating tensions between the TPLF and the Abiy government, increased the TPLF's concerns about being sandwiched between the two. This situation created the impression that the peace deal was being used to eliminate the TPLF. It created confusion and internal resistance to the alliance, escalating the centre-periphery tension in Ethiopia.

The alliance aggravated differences between the federal and regional administrations in Ethiopia and Somalia

The alliance also played a role in the violent conflict in Tigray in November 2020 caused by escalating tensions between the federal government and the Tigray leaders. The TPLF, which, since the start of the war, had accused Eritrea of involvement, launched an aerial attack on the country.

After initially denying Eritrea's involvement in the conflict, Ethiopia's federal government praised it for its support at a critical time. Eritrea, for its part, claimed that its participation was necessitated by the TPLF attack and the threat the conflict posed to its national security. UN and US reports confirmed that Eritrean troops had perpetrated the human rights abuses and atrocities that characterised the conflict and requested them to leave the region.

Despite the federal government's acknowledgement of human rights abuses and promises to hold the perpetrators accountable, the conflict irreparably damaged the relationship between the two Ethiopian players, making

subsequent reconstruction processes problematic. Despite the federal government's claim of victory and announcement that the conflict had ended, several TPLF leaders went into hiding, and insurgency incidents continued, threatening Ethiopia's security. The fact that part of the border between the two countries runs through the Tigray region means the insurgencies have harmed arrangements between them, particularly concerning trade.

Beyond the human, social, economic and humanitarian costs, the war in the Tigray region has assumed local, regional and international dimensions that will massively affect inter-state relations in the Horn.

Turning to Somalia, developments in the region have contributed to strained relations between the country's central government and some member states. Ethiopia has traditionally supported federalism, not just internally but also in the region. However, its increased affiliation with Somalia's central government rather than its states and Eritrea's resumption of cooperation with Somalia after more than a decade of estranged relations have emboldened the Somali central government.

Somalia has traditionally had a federal government with member states that wield significant autonomy. But since Farmajo was elected in 2017, he has sought to rein in the perceived excess powers of the states to the point of outright interference in local affairs.¹⁶ In doing so, he has found allies in both Abiy and Isaias. Abiy upended years of Somali policy by pursuing a closer relationship with Mogadishu at the expense of long-standing relationships with other entities in the country.¹⁷ Isaias pursues a centralised governance system in Eritrea and opposes federalism in the region such as that in Ethiopia.

Since Abiy came to power, the emphasis on federalism (or at least on ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian context) has undergone a subtle shift. Abiy has remained a fierce nationalist. Perhaps the most significant demonstration of this has been his dismantling of the EPRDF Party in favour of the more united and less ethnically focused Prosperity Party.

To increase its chances of re-election in the national poll scheduled for September 2020,¹⁸ Somalia's central government sought to replace some of the federal member states' leaders with loyalists.

In one state – Jubaland – the alliance supported the move, and the government was accused of interfering

with the 2019 election in that state to undermine the chances of the incumbent state president, Ahmed Madobe, whose views on federalism are different from those of Farmajo. Days before the election, there was a tense confrontation between the government and Jubaland soldiers. The fact that Ethiopia's military delegation in Kismayo backed the government was an indication of Ethiopia's support.

Madobe was re-elected but the federal government immediately nullified the poll, exacerbating the tensions. Using the alliance as a source of power, the federal government was emboldened to take increasingly aggressive steps against Jubaland, including economic and travel restrictions. Mogadishu suspended the state's share of the national budget and introduced measures to reroute both local and international flights to travel via Mogadishu instead of Jubaland.

The alliance emboldened Somalia's federal government to take aggressive steps against Jubaland

The situation in the contested Gedo region of north Jubaland also highlights the alliance's aggravating role in Somalia's internal politics. Following the election, the deployment of Somali national troops in the region, allegedly to protect that border, was seen as an attempt to undermine the Madobe administration. The troops were accompanied by Ethiopian soldiers who weren't part of the African Union Mission to Somalia and who detained Jubaland officials who refused to work with the federal government.¹⁹ This led to repeated confrontations between Somali national troops backed by Ethiopian troops and Jubaland security forces in Gedo.

These events exacerbated existing differences in Somalia, preventing it from reaching a national consensus about election procedures. One of the main points of difference was that Jubaland made the withdrawal of troops from Gedo a condition for its participation in the election. The refusal of the federal government to comply led to a deadlock that lasted beyond the expiration of the parliamentary and presidential terms in December 2020 and February 2021.

Peace deal implementation delayed

The Eritrea-Ethiopia rapprochement removed the tensions that had existed for 20 years between the two Horn countries and re-connected the people. But it created other tensions, notably those in the Tigray region, that made it difficult to implement the peace deal.

Differences over the means and ends of the alliance accentuated the divisions between the federal government and the Tigray region, preventing cooperation over its implementation. The return of Badme, one of the pillars of the agreement, was not implemented because of the lack of political consensus.

The opening up of borders that had been militarised and sealed off for more than two decades was an important step. Still, it lasted for only four months because of the differences between the Tigray region and the alliance. These differences and the lack of enactment of new regulations to manage border relations and the movement of people and goods led to the borders being closed once again. The failure to capitalise on people-to-people interactions and normalised border relations denied the peace agreement the benefits of wider social acceptance.

Differences over the alliance accentuated divisions between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray region

In the absence of official communication, there was considerable speculation about the reason for Eritrea closing the borders. One reason was concerns about the outflow of people from the country and/or inflow of Ethiopian goods (mostly contraband), which, it was feared, would dominate Eritrea's fragile economy. Others included Eritrea's unhappiness that Ethiopian forces had not left Badme and the troubled relationship of the Tigray state government with both Asmara and Addis.²⁰

Regardless of the machinations behind the opening and closure of several border points, the fact that it happened exposed the legacy of mistrust between the political leaders in Mekele, the capital city of Tigray, and Asmara. This made Addis Ababa's alliance with Asmara a threat to Mekele.

Isaias, for his part, accused the TPLF of complicating the implementation of the boundary commission's decision.

The TPLF rejected the claim, saying it did not have the mandate to do so as this was a federal matter.

Isaias has also accused the TPLF of continuing to create divisions among Eritreans, organising ethnic-based opposition in Eritrea and spreading misinformation to damage relationships between the people of Eritrea and those of Ethiopia.²¹ The TPLF repeatedly accused Isaias of interfering in Ethiopia's internal affairs and claimed that Asmara and Addis were planning to attack the Tigray region.

The escalation of tensions between the Tigray region and the alliance, which persisted for nearly two years after the 2018 peace deal, prevented the agreement's implementation and culminated in the November 2021 conflict in Tigray. Although the conflict has officially ended, the insurgency that replaced it and the security challenges that it poses have made it unlikely that it will be implemented effectively.

In general, there has been little progress beyond the normalisation of relations between the two countries' leaders in terms of economic cooperation, the cross-border movement of goods and interaction at border community level. Given the security challenges in the Tigray region and the militarisation of the border area, proper implementation may not be feasible in the near future.

Regional implications

While relations among Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia have improved slightly, concerns expressed by other countries in the Horn could potentially undermine cohesion and security. Specifically, engagement among the three has brought into question Ethiopia's long-established ties with other IGAD member states, notably Sudan, Djibouti and Kenya.

In the absence of a clear vision for regional integration, and in light of the history of distrust and unresolved boundary disputes, the three countries' plans to cooperate on economics and security raised eyebrows in the other Horn countries. Djibouti, for instance, which is engaged in an unresolved boundary dispute with Eritrea, objected to the lifting of UN sanctions on that country, an effort supported by Ethiopia and Somalia.

Kenya, which has a maritime boundary dispute with Somalia, was suspicious of the development, given the shift of emphasis in Ethiopia's foreign policy towards

the central government of Somalia. Before Abiy came to power, Ethiopia had engaged equally with both the central government and federal member states of Somalia – an approach shared by Kenya. Ethiopia's administration at that time collaborated with neighbouring countries like Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya, and other regional countries that contributed troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), to isolate Eritrea.

The accord, unilaterally initiated by the new Ethiopian leadership, excluded the same neighbouring countries whose leaders had once supported Ethiopia's foreign policy in Eritrea. It also affected regional structures like IGAD and the African Union (AU), which had brokered the stalled Algiers Peace Agreement in 2002.

The nature of the 'tripartite alliance' has also undermined regional cohesion by raising suspicions among those countries that are not parties to it. There were concerns, especially initially, that some would be excluded, potentially affecting existing political and economic relationships in the Horn.

A prime example was Djibouti, whose unresolved border dispute with Eritrea, which had resulted in a short war between the two in 2008, was one reason for the UN-imposed sanctions against Eritrea. While neither the border dispute nor the status of the remaining Djiboutian prisoners of war captured during the conflict had been resolved, the sanctions had been lifted in late 2018 with support from Ethiopia and Somalia, despite Djibouti's objections.

The alliance also created a conflict of interests on the economic front. Djibouti's economic fortunes are closely intertwined with Ethiopia's. After the outbreak of conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998, the country became Ethiopia's sole access to the sea.

Undoubtedly, Djibouti benefited from Ethiopia's frosty relationship with Eritrea, which, combined with the unrecognised status of Somaliland, made it the only viable location for a significant import-export route along a large swathe of the coastline. This enabled Djibouti to receive a vast income from ports fees paid by Ethiopia.

The normalisation of ties between Eritrea and Ethiopia would naturally lead to a resumed economic relationship, including greater use by Ethiopia of Eritrean ports.²² Even though Djibouti port infrastructure and capacity far

outstrip those currently being developed in Berbera in Somaliland, Massawa and Assab in Eritrea, the dynamic may generally contribute to divergence in the Horn.

Amid such diplomatic and economic conflicts of interests, Ethiopia's embrace of Eritrea may result in Djibouti being viewed as a spoiler in the ongoing peace process if it fails to act appropriately.

Another example of increased contestation that ties into the reconfiguration of the alliance and interstate competition, revolves around the relationship between Ethiopia and Kenya. In particular, the issue is how this has played out in Somalia, where both countries have had troops on the ground for nearly a decade. Opposition to Somalia united the two countries in the post-colonial period, as both were wary that it did not respect colonial boundaries in its pursuit of a 'Greater Somalia' project. This led to a historic defence pact between them that has endured to this day.

The nature of the 'tripartite alliance' has undermined regional cohesion by raising suspicions among excluded countries

The new alliance has, at times, left Kenya out. Ethiopia's change of attitude to Somalia's administration and its increased ties with Somalia's federal government place Ethiopia and Kenya on opposite sides in the Jubaland region. In Jubaland, Kenya has formed a close relationship with regional leader Ahmed Madobe, establishing a buffer zone between Somalia and Kenya.

When elections in Jubaland were scheduled for mid-2019, these two divergent foreign policy approaches met each other head-on. Farmajo sought the removal of Madobe to extend his government's influence to Jubaland, an objective supported by Ethiopia. Kenya however wanted Madobe to be re-elected.

The increased tensions over the disputed maritime boundary between the two countries probably further aggravated the situation, given that Kenyan influence in Jubaland coincides with the maritime boundary area in question.²³ In the heat of the election, Ethiopian and Kenyan forces came close to clashing at Kismayo airport, signalling just how far the two would go to

protect their interests.²⁴ In the end, the Kenya-Madobe camp won the day.

The situation in Jubaland was further exacerbated during the confrontation between the federal government of Somalia and Jubaland in March 2020. The national army was allegedly backed by Ethiopian troops when it attacked Jubaland to capture the fugitive politician, Abdirashid Hassan Abdinur, who had escaped from Mogadishu. The Jubaland troops were allegedly hosted in the Kenyan border town of Mandera or the Kenya Defence Force camp during their retreat from the attack.²⁵

The new reconfiguration produced by the alliance further complicated Somalia's internal affairs. It contributed to a polarised relationship between the government and the regional states and provoked the confrontation between Kenya and Ethiopia.

IGAD

Another challenge to regional integration resulting from the reconfiguration of alliances is the duplication of mechanisms to implement integration. The emergence of the trilateral relationship of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia has raised concerns about the existing cooperation efforts in the region.

The proposed new trilateral mechanism will effectively serve as a mini- or high-speed IGAD

In September 2018, the three countries' agreement to a process of comprehensive cooperation resulted in a joint commitment to build closer political, economic, social and security ties and promote regional peace and security. The communiqué suggests that the trilateral mechanism has similar objectives to IGAD, effectively serving as a mini- or high-speed IGAD. But rather than facilitating regional integration, this may complicate it by creating duplicate agendas. The creation of platforms with similar integration agendas threatens implementation by diminishing both resources and focus.

Commenting on this concern, an Ethiopian government official argues that improved relations among the three countries will make the internal and external

dealings of IGAD smoother. Still, it is difficult not to see the development as either a competitor to existing institutions or a less-than-exclusive club.²⁶

Thus far, the tripartite dynamic has excluded essential nations such as Djibouti, Kenya and Sudan, which have a vested interest in such relationships. The lack of good communication on the details of the cooperation, together with Eritrea's deep resentment of and inactivity within IGAD, have raised concerns about what the new regional mechanism means and how it relates to the existing one.

The duplication of efforts, along with the exclusionary nature of the trilateral alliance potentially threatens the spirit of integration in the region. It also complicates the work of the existing regional body, delaying the achievement of its aims.

Conclusion

The resolution of outstanding conflicts related to interstate and intrastate tensions is essential for regional integration in the Horn of Africa. The normalisation of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia reverses the distrust and competition that destabilised the region for almost two decades. However, the improvement in this relationship and that between Eritrea and Somalia after almost a decade of estrangement has reconfigured alliance dynamics in the region.

In light of the tragic war in the Tigray region and the TPLF transforming into an insurgent group, timely post-conflict reconstruction is of paramount importance to regional stability and prosperity.

A shake-up of the status quo is bound to produce winners and losers. New areas of contention will likely continue to emerge, driven, in part, by shifting dynamics. New fault lines have exacerbated distrust within and between states, making integration difficult.

Notably, the new alliance has put pressure on the internal affairs of its members. The internal politics of Ethiopia and Somalia – an already troubled relationship between the federal governments and some of their regional states – has been exacerbated by the effects of the alliance, resulting in intrastate grievances that threaten regional stability.

Given the multifaceted destabilising role of past tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the rapprochement is

considered an important milestone. However, due to the lack of political consensus resulting from Tigray's grievances about the alliance, the peace deal has not been implemented effectively, and successful implementation may prove impossible, at least in the near future.

The war in the Tigray region and its aftermath has added another layer of security problems and aggravated the Tigrayans' sense of victimisation. Sustainable peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia needs the support of the borderland communities and the administration of the Tigray region.

The exclusive nature of the alliance has also given rise to suspicions among those in the region who have not been included, essentially introducing a new 'grievance' among IGAD member states. There were concerns, especially

when the new alliance first emerged, of certain countries being left out, potentially affecting pre-existing state relations and eroding the spirit of integration in the Horn.

The integration agenda was also threatened by the alliance when it established what appears to be a bloc parallel to IGAD. This had resulted in a duplication of efforts and complicated IGAD's work, delaying the achievement of its objectives, particularly on regional integration.

The reconfiguration of linkages in the Horn, as demonstrated by the tripartite alliance, could well pose risks for integration. Whether the alliance is used to suppress internal opponents, create new agendas that damage existing relationships or undermine IGAD, it may have adverse consequences for a wider integration process.

Notes

- 1 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/11/1025761>.
- 2 www.un.org/press/en/2009/sc9833.doc.htm.
- 3 In December 2019 the EPRDF was replaced by the Prosperity Party, which is believed to oppose ethnic federalism
- 4 These meetings included visits to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, aimed at strengthening the peace deal, and trilateral meetings that included Somalia.
- 5 www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/30/eritrea-and-somalia-agree-to-restore-diplomatic-relations/.
- 6 <https://eritreahub.org/ethiopia-plans-rail-link-with-eritrea/>; <http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/27965-president-isaias-met-and-held-talks-with-mr-neven-mimica/>; www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47773812.
- 7 <https://newbusinessethiopia.com/ethiopia-to-send-volunteer-doctors-to-eritrea/>.
- 8 In March 2019 Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta travelled to Addis Ababa to meet Abiy. The two leaders then flew together to Asmara to hold discussions with Isaias. Abiy and Isaias continued to Juba, after a planned stop in Khartoum did not materialise. Upon his return to Addis Ababa Abiy was greeted by President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed of Somalia, with whom he travelled to Nairobi for another meeting with Kenyatta.
- 9 www.shabait.com/news/local-news/27003-joint-declaration-on-comprehensive-cooperation-between-ethiopia-somalia-and-eritrea-.
- 10 www.shabait.com/news/local-news/30037-heads-of-state-and-government-meeting-between-eritrea-ethiopia-and-somalia-joint-communique/; <https://twitter.com/HarunMaruf/status/1221879638353424392>.
- 11 <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-another-regional-alliance-what-the-horn-needs>.
- 12 <http://addisstandard.com/news-tplf-says-ethiopias-recent-eritrea-economy-related-decisions-have-fundamental-flaws-calls-for-emergency-meeting-of-the-ruling-eprdf-executive-council-committee/>.
- 13 www.capitalethiopia.com/featured/prosperity-party-tplf-form-a-committee-to-discuss-the-way-forward/.
- 14 <https://eritreahub.org/tplf-accuses-eritrea-of-plotting-to-disrupt-elections-in-tigray-region>.
- 15 <http://shabait.com/categoryblog/30145-interview-with-president-isaias-afwerki-part-i-regional-issues/>;
- 16 Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, State of Somalia 2020 report.
- 17 This was clearly demonstrated when non-AMISOM Ethiopian troops helped Somali federal forces arrest a regional candidate ahead of elections in South West state in December 2018, out of concern that he would win and present a challenge to Mogadishu. Abdetay Beyene (2019): Winds of Change. FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG, December 2019; interview with Ethiopian government official, Addis Ababa, October 2019.
- 18 The election was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 19 Somalia: Ethiopian Troops Detain Somali Officials in Gedo Province, allAfrica.com; Ethiopian troops cross over to Somalia, set base in Gedo amid tensions (garoweonline.com).
- 20 Interview with regional analyst, Addis Ababa, December 2019; UNHCR recorded 70 129 new asylum seekers from Eritrea in Ethiopia in 2019, an increase from 21 215 in 2016 and 20 000 in 2017.
- 21 <http://shabait.com/categoryblog/30145-interview-with-president-isaias-afwerki-part-i-regional-issues>.
- 22 If well organized, the use of multiple ports by different IGAD states and nodes of economic interdependence and relations could drive the region towards more economic integration, with improved economic stability and better political relations.
- 23 International Crisis Group, Rashid Abdi, the Horn podcast (episode 6),
- 24 Matt Bryden, Somalia's Proxy Wars, 2019.
- 25 www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-security-idUSKBN20P29Z; www.nation.co.ke/news/Police-secure-Mandera-Somali-forces-clash/1056-5475850-j9vq1bz/index.html.
- 26 Interview with Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Addis Ababa, October 2019.

About the authors

Roba D Sharamo is Regional Director and Representative to the African Union, Horn of Africa and East Africa at the ISS in Addis Ababa.

Selam Tadesse Demissie is Research Officer in the Horn of Africa Security Analysis Programme at the ISS in Addis Ababa.

About ISS East Africa Reports

East Africa Reports provide the results of in-depth research on the latest human security challenges in the region. Some reports analyse broad conflict trends and threats to peace and security in specific East African countries. Others focus on challenges in the region such as terrorism, migration or intra-state violence.

About the ISS

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) partners to build knowledge and skills that secure Africa's future. The ISS is an African non-profit with offices in South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal. Using its networks and influence, the ISS provides timely and credible policy research, practical training and technical assistance to governments and civil society.

Development partners



Government of the Netherlands

This report is funded by the Government of the Netherlands. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union, the Open Society Foundations and the governments of Canada, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

© 2021, Institute for Security Studies

Copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Institute for Security Studies and the authors, and no part may be reproduced in whole or in part without the express permission, in writing, of both the author and the publishers.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the ISS, its trustees, members of the Advisory Council or donors. Authors contribute to ISS publications in their personal capacity.

Cover image: © Amelia Broodryk/ISS

