

The Mashariki Today

Egypt's Security Pact with Somalia and Its Regional Implications in the Horn of Africa

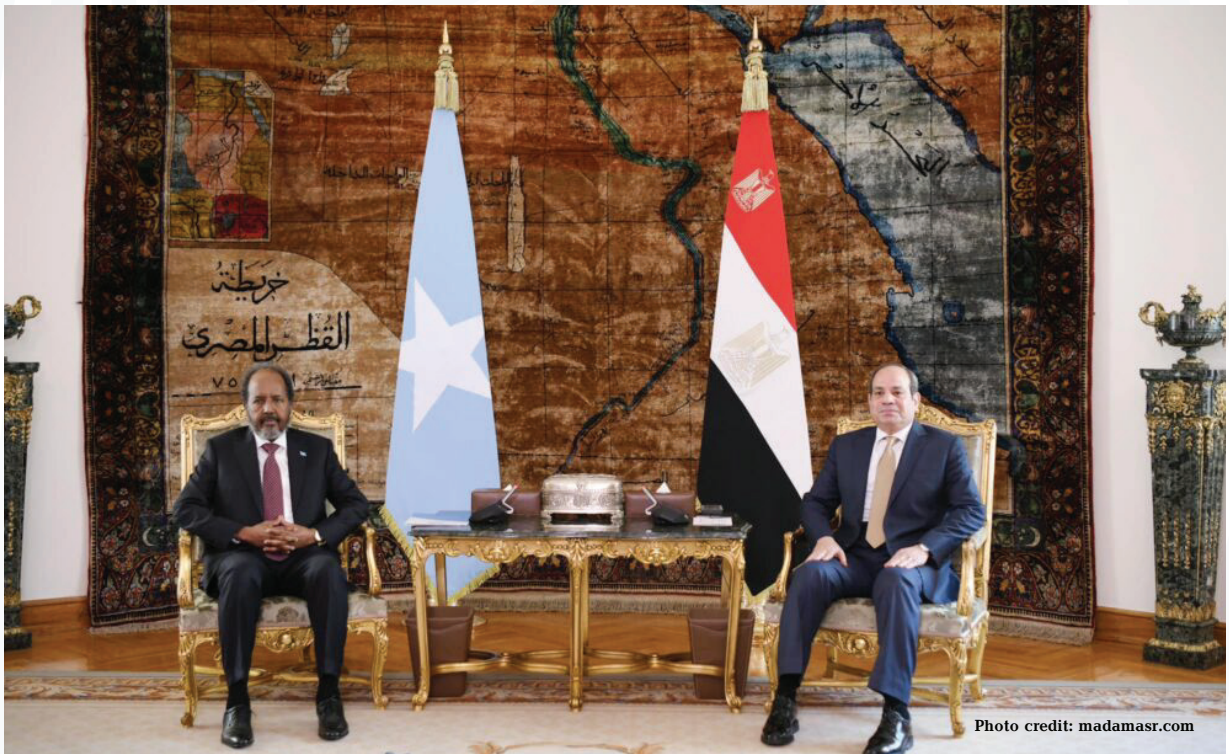


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Introduction

In August 2024, Egypt and Somalia signed a security pact¹, introducing significant changes to the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape. This agreement, which involves Cairo supplying military aid to Mogadishu, emerges amid escalating regional rivalries and historical disputes, particularly between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile River. While Egypt relies heavily on the Nile for its water needs, Ethiopia's ambitions with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) have fueled ongoing tensions. Somalia's shift towards Egypt, moving away from its traditional alignment with Ethiopia, is driven by its own security concerns, particularly the threat from Al-Shabaab and threats from external regional actors such as Ethiopia. This strategic realignment not only reflects broader regional changes but also risks deepening Somalia's involvement in the regional power struggle, potentially heightening tensions and attracting external actors with interests in the Horn of Africa's complex geopolitical environment.

The implications of this military aid, alongside Ethiopia's internal and external security challenges, highlight the necessity for this detailed examination of how these dynamics might influence the region's future stability.



Historical Context and Strategic Interests

The origins of the ongoing tension between Egypt and Ethiopia are traceable to the Nile River, a longstanding source of dispute between the two nations for decades.² For Egypt, the Nile is its lifeline, providing 90% of its freshwater needs.³ On the other hand, Ethiopia views the Nile as an important natural resource for development aspirations through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).⁴ The GERD is the largest hydropower dam in Africa and has been at the centre of diplomatic stormy weather. Egypt fears that the GERD will significantly reduce its water supply, fueling diplomatic friction between the two countries. In this context, Egypt's decision to extend military aid to Somalia is perceived as a strategic maneuver to counterbalance Ethiopia's growing influence in the region. Traditionally, Somalia was a close ally of Ethiopia, but recent developments indicate a shift in its alliances,⁵ making it a new battleground for geopolitical rivalry. The security pact between Egypt and Somalia, signed in August 2024 has allowed Cairo to supply arms and military equipment to Mogadishu, raising alarms in Addis Ababa. Based on a BBC interview with a Horn of Africa expert,⁶ the deal serves as a safeguard for Somalia, protecting its territory against any external violations.

Ethiopia's Security Challenges

Ethiopia's concern with Egyptian security pact with Somalia is driven by national security fears. To Ethiopia, Egyptian military aid to Somalia means more than just an agreement between two independent states; it is taken to be part of a grand strategy aimed at encircling and isolating Ethiopia. This perception has been further exacerbated by internal challenges that have persistently engaged Ethiopia, particularly the Tigray conflict, which began in mid-2020.⁷ The conflict arose after the Ethiopian government, led by the Prosperity Party, which had replaced the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

¹Egypt Sends Arms to Somalia Following Security Deal, Sources Say. U.S News, 2024. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-08-28/egypt-sends-arms-to-somalia-following-security-pact-sources-say>

²The Nile Dispute: Beyond Water Security, Sada, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/01/the-nile-dispute-beyond-water-security?lang=en>

³Nile River, National Geographic. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/nile-river/>

⁴The politics of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Climate Diplomacy, 2024. <https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/conflict/politics-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam>

⁵Ethiopia-Somaliland deal: Can the Horn of Africa rift be healed? BBC, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67911057>



(EPRDF) coalition, launched a military operation against the TPLF. This was in response to rising tensions and a perceived challenge to its authority. The conflict, which caused significant humanitarian and political turmoil, officially ended with the signing of the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022.⁸ However, the aftershocks of this power shift and conflict have left Ethiopia highly vulnerable to external pressures. The involvement of Ethiopia in Somalia has been quite vital, most especially in the war against Al-Shabaab, an Islamist militant outfit that has terrorized the Horn of Africa for more than a decade.⁹ Ethiopian troops, working under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and its successor, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), have been at the center of counterterrorism operations. However, this deluge of Egyptian military aid to Somalia may alter the regional balance of power and undermine Ethiopian influence, complicating its security calculus. Notably, Egypt has also expressed interest in contributing to a new post-ATMIS stabilization mission in 2025, as part of the troop-contributing countries, a development highlighted in an AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) Communiqué. This potential involvement further underscores the shifting dynamics and could significantly impact regional stability.¹⁰

Somalia's Strategic Position

For Somalia, this security pact inked with Egypt and subsequent delivery of military aid testifies to a significant turn in its foreign policy approach. Traditionally, relations between Somalia and Ethiopia have been informed by shared security concerns, with the fight against Al-Shabaab at the centre. However, it now appears that the Somalia government's move to adopt a posture closer to Egypt has started recalibrating its strategic priorities. At the

⁶Tensions rise between Ethiopia, Egypt and Somalia. BBC, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0jn3650?partner=uk.co.bbc&origin=share-mobile>

⁷Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story. BBC, Africa, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54964378>

⁸The Pretoria Agreement for Tigray: One Year After, 2023. <https://hoa.boell.org/en/2023/11/01/pretoria-agreement-tigray-one-year-after>

⁹Sustaining gains in Somalia's offensive against Al Shabaab International Crisis Group, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b187-sustaining-gains-somalias-offensive-against-al-shabaab>

¹⁰Africa File August 22, 2024: "AUSSOM" New AU Mission in Somalia; Burkina Faso Reaches Boiling Point. Institute For the Study of War. <https://understandingwar.org/background/africa-file-august-22-2024-%E2%80%99Causom%E2%80%9D-new-au-mission-somalia-burkina-faso-reaches-boiling>



juncture of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, Somalia shares a host of regional security concerns including resurgence of piracy, the Al-Shabaab threat and Houthi attacks on shipping vessels. For a government that is still fighting, the constant menace of Al-Shabaab and the political turmoil that has so deeply scarred the Somalia's political environment, receiving military assistance from Egypt might be perceived as solidifying its security apparatus. But this move also risks drawing Somalia deeper into the geopolitical rivalry between Egypt and Ethiopia, with potential consequences for its domestic stability. Further, this situation is complicated by Somalia's position on the Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal, which it views as an act of aggression and a potential precedent for further international recognition of Somaliland's independence.¹¹

Djibouti's Strategic Port Offer

Djibouti's recent offer to grant Ethiopia access to its new port could significantly shift regional dynamics.¹² As a landlocked country, Ethiopia has long regarded access to the sea as crucial. In recognition of this, Djibouti has underscored the importance of its relationship with Ethiopia by extending access to its newly developed port. The overture with Ethiopia concerning this new port is more than a goodwill gesture; it is calculated to make Djibouti's economic noose even tighter around Ethiopia and to entrench its position in the trade and logistics network of the region. In addition, the offer by Djibouti is seen as a strategic step to neutralize the emerging influence of Somaliland, a country that Djibouti feels could become a major threat to its merchant maritime interests. Somaliland's Port of Berbera is increasingly perceived as a challenge to Djibouti's port, especially following an agreement that granted Ethiopia 12 miles of shoreline access. This development has strained diplomatic relations between Somalia and Ethiopia. The situation has also drawn the attention of extra-regional actors, with countries like the UAE stepping in to mediate the dispute. The UAE's involvement, motivated by its strategic interests in the Horn of Africa, adds another layer of complexity to the region's geopolitics.¹³

¹¹Somalia rejects mediation with Ethiopia gov't over Somaliland port deal, Al Jazeera, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/18/somalia-rejects-mediation-with-ethiopia-govt-over-somaliland-port-deal>

¹²Djibouti offers port to defuse Ethiopia-Somalia tension. Voice of America, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/djibouti-offers-port-to-defuse-ethiopia-somalia-tension/7766797.html>

¹³Tiny Berbera Beats Mombasa Again in WB Port Rankings. Business Day Africa, 2024. <https://businessdayafrica.org/tiny-berbera-beats-mombasa-again-in-wb-port-rankings/>



The implications extend even further. This offer of Djibouti for an additional port to Ethiopia could, quite literally, take some of the sting out of the economic pressures that Ethiopia is now under, especially considering the multifront war it has engaged with, of which Egypt is apart. In this regard, increased utilization of sea trade routes may reduce the dependence on the GERD as a tool for economic advancement and, by extension, the tension levels between Ethiopia and Egypt. While this offer might provide a stabilizing factor in the short term, deeper security dilemmas have not been resolved to end this conflict between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Somalia.

Regional Implications

The impact of Egypt's military aid to Somalia extends beyond the interests of Ethiopia and Somalia. The Horn of Africa is a region of great strategic significance, not only to the countries which are in it but also to world powers with interests in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It is a critical region of passage for international trade, with a large percentage of the world's oil shipments passing through it, and it is increasingly a focal point for global security concerns, including terrorism and piracy.¹⁴ The involvement of foreign powers in the security dynamics of the Horn of Africa is not new. The United States, China, Russia, Turkey, India and the Gulf states have all established military bases or provided military support to countries in the region.¹⁵ Thus, Egypt's entry into Somalia's security landscape ushers in a new dimension into what has been an already complex geopolitical environment in the region. This development could very well heighten already broad tensions, not only between Ethiopia and Egypt but also within the wider context of Red Sea and Gulf security dynamics. The risk of proxy conflicts is perhaps the most significant danger arising from current geopolitics at play, as Somalia may become a theater of conflict in proxy wars. The concept of proxy wars is very old in the Horn of Africa, often instigated by powers exterior to the region seeking to advance interests through local proxies. The [Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict \(1998-2000\)](#), [the 1991 Somalia Civil war](#) and [the](#)

¹¹Somalia rejects mediation with Ethiopia gov't over Somaliland port deal, Al Jazeera, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/18/somalia-rejects-mediation-with-ethiopia-govt-over-somaliland-port-deal>

¹²Djibouti offers port to defuse Ethiopia-Somalia tension. Voice of America, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/djibouti-offers-port-to-defuse-ethiopia-somalia-tension/7766797.html>

¹³Tiny Berbera Beats Mombasa Again in WB Port Rankings. Business Day Africa, 2024. <https://businessdayafrica.org/tiny-berbera-beats-mombasa-again-in-wb-port-rankings/>

[2003 Darfur conflict](#) in Sudan all testify to the increased potential of external involvement in blowing up a local dispute into a broader regional conflict.

Military aid to Somalia from Egypt may be the incentive for a security dilemma, whereby it would be incumbent upon Ethiopia to reciprocate with more military presence or support to Somalia factions that are hostile to the government in Mogadishu. Events could unfold where either an arms race or, in the worst-case scenario, direct fighting between Ethiopian and Somalia forces could have disastrous implications for regional stability.



Policy Recommendations

To address the rising geopolitical tensions in the Horn of Africa and enhance regional stability, the following three specific recommendations are proposed:

1. **Facilitate Regional Dialogue:** The AU should take the lead in organizing a regional dialogue among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Somalia with a focus on security-related matters. The regional dialogue should be aimed at developing transparency regarding military cooperation for all involved parties.
2. **Launch a High-Level Diplomatic Initiative:** The UN should initiate high-level diplomatic engagement, entailing direct talks among heads of state from Ethiopia, Egypt, and Somalia. This initiative should prioritize de-escalation and encourage a collaborative approach to regional security, ensuring that tensions do not escalate into broader conflicts.
3. **Establish a Regional Security Forum:** IGAD must lead in establishing a region-wide security forum bringing all countries of the Horn of Africa and key external partners together in an all-inclusive discussions. The Forum should focus on counterterrorism, conflict prevention, and crisis management and support the development of regional mechanisms through increased cooperation and confidence-building measures. This would help mitigate risks of proxy wars and further reinforce common regional interests.

¹⁴The Horn of Africa - Its Strategic Importance for Europe, the Gulf States, and Beyond, CIRS.D. <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2016--issue-no-6/the-horn-of-africa---its-strategic-importance-for-europe-the-gulf-states-and-beyond>

¹⁵Militarization of the Horn of Africa and what this means for regional security. Good Governance Africa, 2024. <https://gga.org/militarisation-of-the-horn-of-africa-and-what-this-means- for-regional-security/>