



Ethiopia-Somaliland Deal: A Threat to Somalia and Regional Security and Stability in the Horn of Africa

By Ahmed Ibrahim, PhD

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Key Points:

- Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a deal on January 1, 2024, that grants Ethiopia access to the Red Sea through Somaliland and includes a military base.
- Ethiopia's default on its debt and subsequent pursuit of debt relief that has alarmed its creditors and investors, casts doubt on its intent and capacity to embark on new mega projects requiring significant investments such as new port investments.
- The deal is a serious violation of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and a threat to regional stability in the Horn of Africa, the greater East Africa and the Red Sea regions.
- The deal reflects Ethiopia's internal crisis and disregard for international norms and regional cooperation.
- Somalia has strongly opposed the deal and pursued peaceful and diplomatic resolution, while the president of Somaliland Muse Bihi has defied Somalia and the international community.
- Somalia has sought the support of the international community, especially the African Union, the United Nations, European Union, and the U.S., to resolve the crisis amicably and hold Ethiopia accountable.
- Somalia must respond with a range of measures to deter Somaliland and protect its national interests, including travel restrictions, imposing sanctions, supporting northern unionist and civil society against Muse Bihi and preparing for potential military intervention against any implementation plans for the MoU.
- Ethiopia is facing an economic crisis, exploding foreign debt, poverty, high level of un-employment, internal conflicts that threatens its stability and development, as well as the security of the region.

Background

Ethiopia and Somalia have had a complex historical relationship marked by tensions, conflicts and wars. The modern dynamics of their relations are influenced by factors such as territorial disputes, regional geopolitics, and internal political dynamics. Despite these conflicts, the relations of the two countries, underwent significant changes in the 21st century, recognizing the importance of cooperation in addressing common security challenges, including terrorism, piracy, and instability in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia intervened in Somalia's civil war to support the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and later the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) against Islamist insurgent groups such as Al-Shabaab. As the relationship between Somalia and Ethiopia showed signs of improvement, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia's recent deal with Somaliland is viewed as a potential step towards fostering unity within Somalia.



Prime Minister Abiy and President Bihi/Credit Addis Standard

The controversial and reckless MoU deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland, signed on January 1, 2024, has the potential to significantly undermine the geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa. This agreement, which grants Ethiopia access to the Red Sea through Somaliland and includes a military base, has been widely criticized by Somalia and the international community as a breach of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This development could have serious implications and not only undermines the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia, a key U.S. partner in the region, but also threatens to destabilize the already fragile region. This could potentially create a power vacuum that al-Shabaab and the Islamic State might exploit, posing a direct threat to the security in the region.

The deal also highlights the failures of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who despite winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his efforts to end the conflict with Eritrea and reform his country, has presided over a nation plagued by ethnic strife, human rights abuses, economic crisis, and political repression. His inability to deliver on his promises of peace, democracy, and prosperity has resulted in a deepening crisis within Ethiopia, threatening its stability and development.

Potential Implications for Counterterrorism Efforts and Regional Stability

The recent deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland, which grants Ethiopia access to the Red Sea and includes a military base, could have far-reaching implications for Somalia and the international community's counterterrorism campaign against al-Shabaab and ISIS. The deal will have a negative impact on regional security, stability and will promote radicalization, and terrorism. The deal will do the following:

1. **Undermining Counterterrorism Efforts:** The deal could undermine Somalia's sovereignty and the international community's counterterrorism efforts. By bypassing the Federal Government of

Somalia, the deal may weaken the government's legitimacy and its ability to effectively combat al-Shabaab.

2. **Increasing Radicalization and Terrorism:** The perceived violation of Somalia's sovereignty could fuel sentiments of injustice and marginalization, potentially leading to an increase in radicalization and terrorism in the region. This could provide extremist groups like al-Shabaab and ISIS with a potent narrative to boost their recruitment efforts.
3. **Fueling Insurgency:** The deal could strengthen al-Shabaab and ISIS by providing them with additional grievances to exploit for recruitment and propaganda purposes. This could lead to an escalation in insurgency activities and more terrorist attacks in Somalia and across the region.
4. **Religious Conflict:** The conflict could potentially take on a religious dimension, escalating from a political dispute into a broader Muslim vs Christian religious war. This could further complicate the conflict and make it more difficult to resolve, while also increasing the risk of sectarian violence.

Ethiopia's Unlawful Deal with Somaliland: A Challenge to Somalia's Sovereignty and Regional Stability

Somalia is currently facing a significant threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity due to a deal signed between Ethiopia and the breakaway region of Somaliland. This agreement, which grants Ethiopia access to the Red Sea and potentially recognizes Somaliland as an independent state, is a clear violation of international law and principles of good neighborliness. It poses a serious risk to the stability and security of the region. Somalia has rightly rejected this deal as an act of aggression and has recalled its ambassador from Addis Ababa. The international community, particularly the United Nations, the African Union, and Arab League, has strongly supported Somalia, condemned Ethiopia's unilateral move, and affirmed its solidarity with Somalia.

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre, and other political leaders have shown commendable leadership and courage in defending Somalia's rights and interests. They have so far pursued a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the crisis, demonstrating a commitment to the unity and reconciliation of the Somali people. However, Somaliland's leader, Muse Bihi, has rejected this offer and chosen to align with Ethiopia, betraying his own people and the Somali nation. Somaliland's actions are not only illegal and illegitimate but also counterproductive and self-defeating. They risk isolating Somaliland from the rest of Somalia and the region and exposing it to sanctions and pressure from the international community.

Somalia must take decisive and proportional measures to deter Somaliland from further violating its sovereignty and to protect its national interests. These measures include restricting travel to and from Somaliland, imposing political and economic sanctions on Somaliland's president and government officials, supporting the legitimate opposition and civil society in Somaliland, and should end the special treatments of Somaliland administration. The gloves must come off. Somalia must also continue to seek the support and mediation of the international community, especially the African Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States, to resolve the crisis and hold Ethiopia accountable for its actions. Somalia's stance against Ethiopia's aggression is not only justified but also necessary to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity and ensure peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

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Somaliland, a self-declared independent state in the Horn of Africa, has been seeking international recognition as a sovereign nation since 1991. However, it is not recognized as a separate country by any member of the United Nations.

Recently, Somaliland signed a port and military base deal with Ethiopia, which Somalia has deemed illegal and a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has signed a law nullifying the agreement, calling it "illegal" and void. The central government in Mogadishu has vowed to oppose the port agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland by any legal means, as it is not recognized internationally. Somalia has called the agreement an act of "aggression" and appealed for international support. The African Union, United States, European Union, and the Arab League have called for calm and for Somalia's sovereignty to be respected.

Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre has asserted that the "Somaliland" region is "an integral part of the Federal Republic of Somalia" and called on the Arab foreign ministers to "unite and stand together" against Ethiopia's plan to control the entrances to the Red Sea. This deal has been met with controversy and deemed illegal by Somalia. Somalia has nullified the agreement and called it a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Decline and Fall of Abiy Ahmed: From Peacemaker to Warmonger

According to regional and westerner diplomats who routinely interacted with Abiy Ahmed stated that "he is a self-aggrandizing leader with modest skills, low energy, and a craving for public praise. He thinks that he was born for greatness. He claims to be a voice of the common people, but he enjoys a privileged life and performs populist stunts. He is arrogant, distrustful of experts, and rash in his choices. He follows a perilous ideology of Oromumma, which aims for Oromo supremacy in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. He believes that he can and must defeat Somalia, Eritrea, Kenya, and other non-Oromo ethnic groups in Ethiopia to solve Ethiopia's complicated problems. He has a grand plan of getting sea access for Ethiopia, which has no coastline, by either talking or fighting."

They assess that "he has tarnished his image as a peacemaker and a reformer and has been caught up in clashes with the Amhara, the Oromo, and the Tigray. He is out of touch with his own limitations and the realities of the regional and international situations. He is rife with talk of a new war, which would be his fourth in five years, and has brought in weapons and readied his army. He has turned away his former friends and partners, such as Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, by demanding Ethiopia's "right" to a port and hinting at taking over Somaliland's coast and ports. He faces increasing opposition and resistance from various parts of the Ethiopian society, who want more freedom, democracy, and justice."

Ethiopia in Crisis: Challenges and Consequences

Ethiopia, once a beacon of hope in Africa, is now grappling with a deepening crisis that threatens its stability and development. The ongoing conflict with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Fano in Amhara region has escalated into a humanitarian disaster and a regional security concern. The war has laid bare the fragility of the Ethiopian state, which is beset by ethnic and political divisions and challenged by ethno-nationalist and opposition movements.

The conflict has also taken a severe toll on Ethiopia's economy. Ethiopia has formally defaulted on its only international bond, owing \$33 million in interest payments, and has sought debt relief from its creditors under the G20-led Common Framework. Ethiopia's default and its request for debt restructuring have raised alarm among its creditors and investors, who fear losing their investments or having to accept significant losses.

Ethiopia's debt troubles have also strained its relations with some of its neighbors and allies, who accuse it of using the conflict as a pretext to seek favorable treatment or evade its obligations. Ethiopia's crisis has far-reaching implications for the Horn of Africa and beyond, as it could destabilize the region and undermine the prospects of peace and cooperation.

Ethiopia, under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed, is currently embroiled in internal conflicts with the Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions. These conflicts pose a significant threat to Ethiopia's stability, the security of the region, and U.S. national security interests. The civil wars have had a devastating impact on Ethiopia, leading to a humanitarian crisis, economic instability, and political unrest. The conflicts have also exposed the fragility of the Ethiopian state, which is riven by ethnic and political divisions.

The conflicts have the potential to destabilize the Horn of Africa region. The spread of the war could lead to the fragmentation of Ethiopia, which would have far-reaching implications for regional security and stability. The instability in Ethiopia poses a threat to U.S. national security interests. The U.S. has strategic interests in Somalia and the region, including counterterrorism efforts and the promotion of regional stability and democracy.

Ethiopia in Crisis: Challenges and Consequences of the War in Tigray and Amhara

The Ethiopian military is facing a crisis of morale, cohesion, and capability as it confronts the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and other armed groups in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara. The military has suffered heavy losses in personnel, equipment and territory since the conflict erupted in November 2020, and has been unable to regain the initiative or restore its authority over the restive regions. The military has also been accused of committing atrocities against civilians, violating human rights and international humanitarian law, and collaborating with foreign forces, especially from Eritrea, which has further eroded its legitimacy and credibility.

The Ethiopian military's failures in Tigray and Amhara are partly attributed to its internal divisions along ethnic lines, which have undermined its unity and loyalty to the central government. The military, which was once dominated by the Tigrayan elite under the former ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has undergone a series of reforms and purges since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. Abiy, who is from the Oromo ethnic group, the largest in Ethiopia, has sought to reduce the influence and representation of the Tigrayans and the Amhara's, the second largest group, in the military and security forces, and promote more unqualified Oromo to leadership positions. However, these changes have also created resentment and resistance among some segments of the military, especially the Tigrayans and the Amhara's, who feel marginalized and discriminated against by the new leadership. Some of the most experienced and capable officers and soldiers from these groups have either defected to the TPLF, Fano or other opposition forces or have been sidelined or dismissed by

the government. This has left the military with a leadership vacuum and a lack of motivation and professionalism among the remaining forces, who are mostly from the Oromo and other ethnic minority groups that have historically been oppressed and excluded by the previous regimes.

A New Axis? The Prospects of a Somalia-Eritrea-Egypt Alliance against Ethiopia

Somalia-Eritrea-Egypt alliance to counter Ethiopia is a scenario that could emerge because of the ongoing conflict and crisis in Ethiopia and the region. Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea have historically had complex and contentious relations, marked by wars, border disputes, proxy conflicts, diplomatic ruptures, and political rivalries. However, in recent years, there have been some signs of rapprochement and reconciliation among the three countries, especially after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated a peace process with Eritrea in 2018, ending two decades of hostility and stalemate.

However, the outbreak of the war in Tigray has disrupted and strained the relations among the three countries and has created new tensions and uncertainties in the region. The war has exposed the fragility and vulnerability of Ethiopia, which has been facing multiple internal and external challenges and pressures and has weakened its position and role as a regional power and leader. Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt could share some common interests and objectives, such as weakening and containing Ethiopia's influence in the region, securing their sovereignty and territorial integrity, enhancing their security and development, and diversifying their partnerships and alliances with other regional and international actors. Somalia and Eritrea could also leverage their relations and cooperation with other countries that have been supportive and involved in their affairs, who could provide them with various forms of assistance and backing.

In conclusion, the Ethiopia-Somaliland deal is a dangerous and irresponsible move that violates Somalia's sovereignty and jeopardizes U.S. interests in the Horn of Africa. The deal exposes Ethiopia's internal turmoil and its disregard for international law and regional cooperation. The deal also provokes Somalia's legitimate resistance and demands for justice and dignity. The deal risks escalating the conflict and violence in the region, which could have devastating humanitarian and security consequences. The deal calls for urgent and concerted action from the international community, especially the U.S., to prevent further deterioration and to support a peaceful and diplomatic solution that respects Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and promotes stability and development in the region. It is crucial for the U.S. to reassess its policy and strategy and take initiative-taking measures to mitigate negative impacts of this deal on Somalia and the region.

Abiy Ahmed has subverted democracy, and he is acting as a dictator. His handling of the internal conflicts has been criticized, and there are calls for a regime change in Addis Ababa to prevent the civil war from expanding. In conclusion, the internal conflicts in Ethiopia under Abiy Ahmed's leadership pose significant threats to stability, regional security, and U.S. national security interests. A peaceful resolution to the conflicts is crucial to prevent further escalation and to ensure the stability of Somalia, and the region.

Policy Recommendations: Strategies to Influence Ethiopia and Foster Regional Stability

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Here are some policy recommendations to President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, and the Federal Government of Somalia to pressure Ethiopia. These recommendations should start with diplomatic front followed by other options aimed to mitigate the negative impacts of the current situation in Ethiopia and promote peace, security and respect the sovereignty and stability in the region.

1. **Diplomatic Pressure:** It is crucial for the international community to engage in diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute peacefully. This includes supporting Somalia's sovereignty, promoting dialogue between the involved parties, and maintaining pressure on Ethiopia and Somaliland to respect international norms and regional stability.
2. **Mediation in Somalia-Ethiopia Crisis:** Increase pressure on IGAD and members of the AU to support Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and discourage any actions that could lead to further instability in the region.
3. **International Coalition:** Continue to collaborate with international partners to form a coalition that exerts collective pressure on Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, and the Ethiopian government. This could include lobbying for similar actions from allies or pushing for resolutions in international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), and the Arab League, as well as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Funds (IMF).
4. **Suspend Air Travel:** Suspend Ethiopian Airlines flights to Somalia and ban its flights over Somalia. Lobby for the suspension of Ethiopian Airlines' access to U.S. and European airports. This would be a significant economic measure that could pressure the Ethiopian government to change its behavior.
5. **Sanctions:** Advocate for imposing targeted economic and political sanctions against key figures in the Ethiopian government who are implicated in destabilizing the region, human rights abuses, and anti-democratic practices.
6. **Cancel Loans:** Lobby the United States and the European Union to limit export credits to Ethiopia. The US Export-Import bank and the EU provide loans that allow Ethiopian Airlines to lease Boeing and Airbus aircrafts. This could further increase economic pressure on the government.
7. **Regime Change:** To stabilize Ethiopia, and prevent potential fragmentation, a regime change in Addis Ababa might be required. A weakened and delusional Abiy Ahmed is fragmenting Ethiopia and destabilizing the region. This could be achieved through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and support for opposition groups within Ethiopia.

Ahmed Ibrahim, Ph.D

Email: Ahmedyaremog@hotmail.com

Dr. Ibrahim is former senior United Nations official who served in the Africa, the Middle East, and the United Nations Head Quarters in New York. Dr. Ibrahim is a security and development consultant as well as freelance writer based in Nairobi, Kenya.

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