

THE POST-2018 ETHIO-SOMALILAND RELATIONS AND FACTORS BEHIND ITS DYNAMICS

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Abstract: This article examines post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland relations and some major factors shaping them. The study utilised a qualitative approach, involving key informant interviews, archival materials, and published documents. The findings indicate that the post-2018 Ethiopian government's policy of re-unifying Somalia and of non-intervention in Somalia's domestic affairs harmed Ethiopia's previously friendly relations with Somaliland. Furthermore, tensions were increased by tripartite agreements between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia; Ethiopia's re-unifying attempts; and Ethiopia's hosting of an anti-Somaliland clan meeting. However, a gradual modest shift in Ethiopian foreign policy towards the region and Somalia due to regional factors, as well as the focus placed on Ethiopian access to the sea, altered the trend. The shift reflects that external regional and global factors, next to domestic factors, influenced Ethiopia's foreign policy, and the dynamics of Ethio-Somaliland relations.

Keywords: access to the sea, Ethiopia, Horn of Africa, international recognition, Somaliland

Introduction

Ethiopia and the *de facto* state of Somaliland are located in the Horn of Africa, where the countries have an interconnected regional security complex, wherein any development in one of them has an impact on the others either directly or indirectly¹ (Tafesse 2009). Historical linkages, political ties,

1 The Horn of Africa is the "bull horn" shaped Northeast region of the continent that faces the Red Sea to the East, the Indian Ocean to the Southeast, and the Nile Basin to the West. The Horn of Africa, like most geographic terms, is defined differently due to a lack of consensus among researchers

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traditional economic relations, and religious and cultural activities are all shared in the Horn of Africa. According to John Markakis (1998: 5), the Horn is more than just a geographical designation; it is also a cultural and socio-economical entity that distinguishes it from adjacent regions. Olikra Tafesse refers to this culturally, physically, and economically connected set of states as “a cultural and economic zone” (2009: 3).

The region has an important geopolitical importance due to its geostrategic location. First of all, the area is situated at a crucial geostrategic intersection of Africa, Europe, and Asia. It is bordered by the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. At the northern end of the region is the Suez Canal, at the southern end is the strait of Bab el Mandeb (approximately 28-30 km wide from Djibouti to Yemen), which is a choke point that connects the Indian Ocean and Red Seas. In addition, the region has a large population, a large geographic area, and promising economic performance that can be an enormous potential market place. It is also rich in natural resources (trans-boundary rivers) and commodities (gold, crude oil, lithium, potash, and diamonds) (Yirga 2021).

Moreover, the region is one of the world's most important international commercial corridors, carrying roughly \$700 billion in commodities and more than 40% of global oil supply each year. Every year, 30-40,000 ships travel through this Red Sea corridor. Furthermore, it is close to oil-rich Arab republics (Mabera 2020). This has resulted in the region becoming the focal point of intense geopolitical struggle among regional and global countries seeking military bases to protect their economic, political, and security interests. Despite its importance on a global scale, the Horn of Africa has been seen as one of the most unstable regions for interstate conflict and internal dissension. Along with high levels of political violence and instability, the region is known for its lack of democracy, recurrent droughts and famines, poverty, intrastate and interstate conflicts, and secession between *de facto*-Somaliland (1991) and *de jure*-Eritrea (1991) and South Sudan (2011) (Clapham 2017). This makes the region a land of paradoxes: one of the most strategically important and one of the world's most volatile and fragile areas.

about its scope. Some confine the scope of the region to the geographic Horn, which includes countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia (including the *de facto* state of Somaliland after 1991) (Tafesse 2009; Schmidt et al. 2019; Clapham 2017); while others have a broader approach and include much of Northeast Africa, including the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi (Kidane and Redie 2012; Fisher 2014). In the present study, the Horn refers to Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, including the *de facto* state of Somaliland.

Countries of the Horn maintained relations with one another, driven by the desire to safeguard, advance, and protect their respective national interests. Ethiopia has maintained long-standing foreign relations with several countries, including its neighbours. Its relation with the *de facto* state of Somaliland has continued to be exemplary and dynamic. The 2018 leadership change in Ethiopia, as well as the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his government's new foreign policy towards the *de facto* state of Somaliland, and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by both parties in 2024, had an impact on their bilateral relations. Given that the region serves as a centre of gravity for both great and intermediate powers, the dynamics of their connections have had an impact on Horn of Africa geopolitics (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Somaliland and the Horn of Africa (Shah 2024)

The aim of the present article is to explore trends of the post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland relations and to analyse key internal and external factors that have shaped the dynamics. The main argument of this study is that the complex interplay of internal and external factors influenced the Ethio-Somaliland bilateral relations after 2018. Internally, Ethiopia's 2018 political

reform and the new leadership's new foreign policy towards the republics of Somalia and Somaliland, as well as Somaliland's national interest that centred on gaining international recognition, and externally, geographical vulnerability, the nature of the Horn of Africa, and the interests of great and intermediate powers in the region played a crucial role.

Using neo-classical realism, the article attempts to look at the trends of the bilateral relations and major factors causing the relations swing between peaceful relations and mutual animosity. Neo-classical realism, also known as post-neorealism theory, was first introduced by Gideon Rose in his 1998 work "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." It is predicated on the idea that the systemic explanation of global politics offered by neo-realism or structural realism is insufficient and should be complemented by more accurate explanations of unit-level variables such as the perception of power and the exercise of leadership (Zakaria 1992). As a result, it made an effort to bridge the gap between global structural elements and unit-level elements, including state leaders' perceptions, state-society interactions, and state motivation. Regarding foreign policy, neo-classical realism, which explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, puts that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities (Rose 1998). A sovereign state's foreign policy is influenced by both internal and external factors. Neo-classical realists define these factors as systemic (anarchy, relative power distributions, security dilemma, and polarity), state-level (domestic politics, national interest, national capability, and states' identity), and individual-level (leaders' idiosyncrasies or beliefs, profession, leaders' background, and history).

Given the subject's recent and ongoing nature, as to our reading and reach, there is no academic scientific article that provides a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of the post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland relations. Meaning that the basic issue of this study did not get due attention from researchers and authors so far. The present article attempts to fill this gap by producing information to contribute to the literature as well as knowledge gaps that exist on the issue, and providing recommendations that will serve as input for concerned bodies that work to ensure amiable relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland.

Our article is structured into four broad sections. The first section provides a background analysis on how the Ethio-Somaliland relations started before the *de facto* state of Somaliland was re-born in 1991. Section two deals with major patterns of Ethio-Somaliland relations from 1991 to 2018 and the way

the Ethiopian government was handling the issue of Somaliland recognition. The third section analyses the new post-2018 foreign policy of Ethiopia towards the republic of Somalia and Somaliland, the major Ethiopian actions that affected Ethio-Somaliland's relations, and Somaliland's diplomatic reactions to this. The final section explores the regional implication of the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding, and the influence of foreign actors on the Ethio-Somaliland relations.

Data and Methods

Methodologically, the present study is designed to employ a qualitative research method, employing both primary and secondary sources. As primary sources of data, semi-structured interviews were used. Pursuant to this, the data are collected from purposively and carefully selected respondents of key informants from the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, ambassadors, diplomats, researchers, and experts. The informants include seven active ambassadors or diplomats, and two researchers, academicians, and foreign affairs analysts. Five of the seven are Ethiopian representatives in Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, and Egypt. The remaining two are from officials and diplomats representing Somaliland and Somalia in Ethiopia. The eighth interviewee is a high-ranking Ethiopian academic and foreign affairs expert who has written a variety of documents on international relations, the Horn politics, and foreign policy. The remaining interviewee of the study is a researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

Secondary sources included materials from the archives of different institutions (mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), books, journal articles, media reports, official documents, electronic sources, research papers, magazines, newspapers, web sources, reports, and others scholarly works or documents.

With regard to data analysis, the study adopted a general inductive approach. According to this approach, the analysis process started with the collection of data (raw data), which was then organised and prepared for analysis. The data was then looked through, segmented, and categorised (coded) in order to interrelate themes/issues. Finally, the analysis was completed by interpreting the meaning of associated themes and issues or generating meanings from the data (Creswell 2009). In order to improve the reliability and validity of findings, triangulation was used to synthesise information from both primary and secondary sources on crucial issues.

“Common Enemy” as an Embryo of pre-1991 Ethio-Somaliland Relations

The formal Ethio-Somaliland cordial political relations started from the day the *de facto* state, Somaliland, declared itself independent and joined the politics of the region in 1991. Before reasserting its independence in 1991, Somaliland (the former British protectorate of Somaliland) had achieved independence in 1960 (Matshanda 2020: 3). However, after five days of enjoying sovereignty, when the UN Trust territory under Italian control was liberated, it was united with this former Italian colonial section of Somalia to form the Republic of Somalia in 1960. The first democratic government in post-colonial Africa was created in Somalia at this period, according to Abdi Ismail Samatar (Samatar 2016). The motivation that made British Somaliland abandon the republic and join the union after five days of independence, and after being recognised by 35 nations (including all five members of the UN Security Council), has been debatable. An interviewee of the study, (KI1),² said “we [British Somaliland] accepted the Italian Somaliland to join us mainly to establish Somalis unity and to appease the popular desire for unification.” Another interviewee of the study, (KI2)³, put it differently saying, “what motivated Somaliland to seek union with Italian Somaliland was a fear of domination from its powerful neighbour, Ethiopia.” The unification was primarily influenced by pan-Somalian nationalism, which aimed at creating a single nation-state out of all ethnic Somali-inhabited areas in the Horn of Africa.

After British and Italian Somaliland joined to form a new Republic of Somalia in 1960, the new country’s relations with Ethiopia entered into animosity due to several reasons. To begin with, the Republic of Somalia attempted to put into practice the antiquated and disastrous “Greater Somali Republic” ideology,⁴ which aimed at unifying all Somali-speaking peoples under a single republic with Mogadishu as its capital. This irredentist goal pushed it into conflict with Ethiopia, which has a sizable Somali-speaking population in the eastern section of the country (Muhumed 2019). This later precipitated the Ethio-Somalian War (1977-1978) between the two nations, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of both combatants and civilians.

2 KI1: An official of the Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

3 KI2: Ethiopian Ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeisa).

4 Greater Somalia has been the pre-independence Somalian irredentist plan to combine the five Somali-inhabited territories of the then French Somaliland (current Djibouti), the Northeast Frontier Province of Kenya, the Ogaden (in Ethiopia), and Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland, which were united in 1960 to create an independent Somalia. In order to signify this plan the republic of Somalia adopted a flag that included a five-pointed star in its centre in 1960 (Arnold 2008).

In addition, Somalia's tyrant and military-led rule of Said Barre (ruled 1969-1991) instilled animosity for Ethiopia among Somalis. Ethiopia was labelled as the "number one enemy of Somali-ethnic people" throughout the region (KI1).⁵ It took significant work to persuade Somalis to accept the idea, which is still remembered today. It became stories that could be passed down to younger generations. Moreover, the military administration formed armed rebel groups to fight against Ethiopia. It also armed, hosted, and supported the struggle of various rebel groups against the Ethiopian government (Belete 2024).

The dictatorial government of the Republic of Somalia pursued an aggressive stance against all Somalilanders immediately following the unratified and unsuccessful unification of Somalia and Somaliland on 1 July 1960. The people of Somaliland opposed extra-judicial killings, rape, robbery, and crimes against humanity by Somalia's military administration. Between 1980 and 1990, 255,000 Somalilanders died, while over two million others fled to Ethiopia. An interviewee of the study, (KI1),⁶ said that "the socio-economic and political marginalisation forced the Somalilanders to start an armed struggle to reclaim their 5 days sovereignty of 1960." Accordingly, the Somali National Movement (hereafter SNM), was founded with the goal of resisting Siad Barre's harsh dictatorship in Somalia and achieving political independence for northern Somalia [Somaliland].

The military government made extensive military engagements to liquidate the SNM forces from Northern Somalia. The conflict between the SNM and Mogadishu's military government forced hundreds of thousands of the Somaliland population to evacuate their homeland. In that circumstance, Ethiopia received SNM and their fellow Somaliland refugees. According to an interviewee of the study, (KI2),⁷ Ethiopia's support is still in the hearts and minds of Somalilanders.

Ethiopia served the SNM, the group that later declared the re-birth of independent Somaliland in 1991, as a sanctuary, a base, and a major material and moral assistance supplier in its fight against the repressive government of the republic of Somalia (Elmi and Abdullahi 2006). Ethiopia sided with the SNM based on the common regional policy of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," because the Mogadishu regime's irredentist aspirations had led them both to fight in the Ethio-Somalian War of 1977-78, and even after the

5 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

6 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

7 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

war, the regime emerged as an active supporter of rebel elements opposed to the Ethiopian government. Thus, SNM's enmity towards the dictatorship in Mogadishu sparked the two countries' relations.

The Re-birth of Somaliland and Ethio-Somaliland Ties (1991-2018)

After the removal of Somalia's Said Barre's government by force in 1991, amid the disintegration and collapse of the Republic of Somalia, the SNM unilaterally declared the re-emergence of the independent Republic of Somaliland at the Grand Conference of Northern Nations, in Burao, in May 1991. Then, Somalia and Somaliland reverted to their original 1960 constituencies (Mohamoud 2015: 1). Though not yet acknowledged by the international community as "a sovereign state," this *de facto* state, dominated by the Isaaq clan, has been engaging in bilateral political relations with Ethiopia since 1991. The "reborn" Somaliland has been operating freely and independently since its re-birth. Even though the Somalian federal government considers Somaliland as its federal member state, it has no control over Somaliland other than through international institutions such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (Abdeta 2020: 9). Somaliland has its own passport, currency, identity, political system, military and security apparatus, economic system, and stability.

The post-1991 Ethio-Somaliland formal political relations started immediately after the re-birth of the *de facto* state of Somaliland when Ethiopia opened its quasi-embassy in the capital of the state, Hargeisa. This initiative made Ethiopia the first African country to open a consulate in Somaliland, which offers visas to Somaliland passport holders (Duale and Ahmed 2014: 1). Although Somaliland remained a *de facto* state because it lacks external recognition, this political entity fulfils the four basic criteria of statehood: population, territory, government, and the capacity to enter into a relation with other states (internal sovereignty). Ethiopia upgraded its diplomatic office in Hargeisa to the ambassadorial level in 2006. Ethiopia has also allowed Somaliland to establish its liaison office in the capital, Addis Ababa. Ethiopia Airlines travels to Somaliland multiple times per week (ibid.).

After 1991, Somaliland's foreign policy towards Ethiopia remained steady as a friendly country. This is related to the fact that the Somalian leadership has been either SNM warriors, leaders, or someone who watched how Ethiopia welcomed and aided Somalilanders during a tough period. Furthermore,

nearly 74% of the population is under the age of 40, having never seen another flag or country. Moreover, most of them are either the sons or daughters of liberation fighters or in some way related to them. As a result, they are unwilling to shift their positive foreign policy towards Ethiopia. An interviewee of the study (KI1) said:

Somalilanders are a culturally aware society that never forgets who stood by their side. Thus, unlike other nations where the enthusiasm is more administration-dependent, Ethiopia has popular support in Somaliland. This makes Somalilanders consider Ethiopia to be their friend, regardless of who holds the reins of power.

The 1993, the election of Muhammed Ibrahim Egal, an elder statesman and the former Prime minister, as the President of Somaliland, was a turning point in Ethio-Somaliland relations. Egal paid several visits to Ethiopia, where he received a warm welcome, and laid the foundation of bilateral diplomatic relations between the two countries. At an apogee of the relations, Ethiopian military forces in the Hararghe region of Eastern Ethiopia, and its counterparts of Somaliland contacted and agreed to work together in order to ensure the peace and stability of both countries' border areas. Ethiopia, a close ally of Somaliland, has been helping its partner in the state-building process, and giving military training to sustain the relative peace in Somaliland. On the other hand, the peaceful border between the two has been serving Ethiopia as a security buffer zone against jihadist groups who have been using Somalia as a safe haven since 1991 (KI2).⁸

An interviewee of the study (KI3)⁹ said:

Ethiopia gives much concern to Somaliland not only because of the regional security complex; but also due to geostrategical reason, because the de facto state of Somaliland is close to Jijiga, the capital of Ethiopia's Somali region, which is a security-sensitive spot in the country.

In 2017, President Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo and his groups visited Addis Ababa and met the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia. Both agreed to work on strengthening the shared language, culture, aspirations, and history between the people of Somaliland and Ethiopia (Horn Diplomat 2017). Ethiopia was later permitted to purchase a 19%

8 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

9 KI3: Horn Affairs Analyst and academician.

ownership stake in the Berbera Port in 2017, even though it was terminated in 2022 since Ethiopia could not meet the standards to do so (Hood 2022).

The Issue of the Recognition of Somaliland

The alpha and omega of the post-1991 Somaliland foreign policy has been gaining *de jure* recognition (KI1).¹⁰ As a result, in the Ethio-Somaliland political relations, the issue of recognition has been very much debatable. Despite several attempts on the side of the *de facto* state, no country or intergovernmental body, including the bordering states, has recognised Somaliland internationally. As one of the close allies, the reason why Ethiopia has restrained from recognising Somalia has been exposed to several interpretations.

As far as the stand of the Ethiopian government with regards to Somaliland recognition is concerned, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (ruled 1991-2018) has been with very clear justification. The Ethiopian foreign policy document, FANSPS (2002: 43) puts that:

Regarding the recognition of Somaliland as an independent state,[.] t[T]aking this initiative is not preferable to Ethiopia because it would create negative feelings on the part of Somalis living in the rest of Somalia and others would be suspicious of our intent. Therefore, our cooperation with this region should not include recognizing the regional administrations as independent states.

Corroborating the above claim, the head of the EPRDF, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi (ruled 1991-2012) mentioned that "Ethiopia is not going to be the first state to recognise Somaliland, and Ethiopia is not ready to take another accusation concerning the issue of Somaliland" (Rudincová 2016: 22). He also added that "...but Ethiopia won't be the third either".

There are different interpretations on Ethiopia's denial of Somaliland's *de jure* recognition. The Brenthurst Foundation (2011: 26) argued that Ethiopia's hesitation to recognise Somaliland was mostly due to its concern about Somalia's government's accusations that it was aiming to balkanise or fragment Somalia and weaken its unity. In addition to that, the paper of the foundation contends Ethiopia's status within international organisations such as the African Union and the IGAD, and its history of adhering to

10 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

the principle of the territorial integrity of African states hindered Ethiopia from recognising the *de facto* state (ibid.). This was linked to the assumption that the recognition of Somaliland would be opening a “Pandora’s box” of several succession claims in various parts of Africa. In conclusion, the Brenthurst Foundation (2011: 26) contended that the pragmatic goal of keeping Somaliland dependent on Ethiopia rather than the opposite forced Ethiopia not to provide it a *de jure* recognition.

An interviewee of the present study, (KI3),¹¹ contends that Ethiopia hesitated to recognise Somaliland due to its Federal Constitution’s article 39, which supports the secession of Ethiopia’s regional entities, (including the Ethiopian Somali regional state) if they meet the requirements of secession. Another scholar, Muhumed (2022: 4) claimed that Ethiopia delayed recognition because providing recognition to Somaliland would elevate Somaliland’s status to that of Ethiopia. Recognition would make it difficult to promote Ethiopia’s interest in Somaliland in comparison to the unrecognised and weaker nation. He also added that Ethiopia’s unfavourable perception of all Somali ethnic groups, stemming from the assumption that “Somali is typically Somali wherever it is,” had hampered the recognition thus far (2022: 3). Lastly, Duale and Ahmed (2014) linked the case to Somaliland, arguing that the lack of vibrant diplomatic pressure and drastic political bargaining from Somaliland and Hargeisa’s government’s failure to present a compelling economic development program to entice Ethiopia to invest in Somaliland was the main reason.

The Ethiopian government appears to have taken a cautious but practical stance between 1991 and 2018. Ethiopia apparently embraced the “recognise in practice, not in name” strategy to capitalise on Somaliland’s stability and avoid the diplomatic costs of granting *de jure* recognition. Therefore, without granting *de jure* recognition, it continued to retain close informal ties with the *de facto* state of Somaliland through economic deals, diplomatic exchanges, and security cooperation.

Finally, the real motive for Ethiopia’s denial of Somaliland’s *de jure* recognition was revealed under the post-2018 government in 2024 when Ethiopia used the recognition of Somaliland as a negotiation chip to end its three decades long landlockedness and geographical imprisonment. Hence, Ethiopia kept the recognition of Somaliland as a playing card in order to manipulate the government in the republic of Somalia. Ethiopia has been a landlocked country since its northern province (now Eritrea)

11 KI3: A Horn Affairs analyst and academician.

succeeded from it in 1991. As recounted in the next sections of this article, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2024, in which Somaliland committed to lease Ethiopia a coastal line in exchange for Ethiopia reconsidering the *de-facto* recognition.

The Post-2018 Ethio-Somaliland Relations

Ethiopia's New Direction and the Deterioration of Ethio-Somaliland Relations (2018-2024)

Neo-classical realists contend that a change in leadership or government might induce a foreign policy recalibration. This is because leadership changes might result in new views of dangers and opportunities, new strategic priorities, or a changed understanding of the state's role in the international system (Zakaria 1992). The Ethio-Somaliland political relations, like most of the interactions between Ethiopia and its neighbours, was never free of the influence of the mid-2018 Ethiopian political reforms. The rise of a new leadership to power, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (Ph.D.) with a new policy, brought about new geopolitical patterns in the Horn of Africa. The historically robust relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland, in which the *de facto* state sees Ethiopia as one of its closest friends and allies in the area, have been profoundly influenced by the new vision of Ethiopia's new leadership.

The 2018 government maintained pillars of giving priority to neighbours, an inside-out approach, regional integration, diversifying partnerships, prioritising the preservation of Ethiopia's national security and interests, peaceful conflict resolution, economic diplomacy, and other factors. Some policy shifts were also exhibited after 2018, including avoiding labelling neighbours as enemies or allies orientations; not limiting the importance of neighbouring states to security issues and emphasising both their economic and security importance; ensuring Ethiopian access to the sea; citizen centred and diaspora participating diplomacy; digital diplomacy; enhancing relations with Gulf countries; handling diplomatic contacts with neighbouring countries by leaders; and encouraging Ethiopian nationals to invest in neighbouring countries (Jalu and Adgeh 2025). Above all, Prime Minister Abiy's commitment to uniting the Horn of Africa, and his foreign policy strategy that prioritises non-intervention and regional integration changed the dynamics.

An interviewee of the study, (KI4),¹² stated that “despite the foreign policy principles stated in foreign policy documents, such as good neighbourliness, non-intervention, mutual benefit, and others, Ethiopia had been using a divide-and-rule foreign policy in the case of Somalia from 1991-2018. Ethiopia had been interfering in Somalia’s domestic politics and building alliances with various federal areas, warlords, and clan leaders until 2018.” The new government ended the pre-1991 intervention in Somalia’s domestic politics and relations with regional governments, including Somaliland, and tribes (Abebe and Asnake 2025). It focused on intra-governmental interactions with Somalia’s federal administration (KI2).¹³

After 2018, the following three important occurrences prompted Somaliland to reconsider its perspective of Ethiopia as a loyal friend.

Re-Unifying the Somaliland and the Republic of Somalia

The new Ethiopian Prime Minister’s doctrine, which emphasises Medemer (synergy or coming together), as well as the broader context of regional integration, compelled Abiy to view Somalia as a single entity. For Somaliland, which attempted the union from 1960 to 1991 but withdrew because all major positions in the union (including the offices of the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament) were dominated by personalities from Italian Somaliland, the re-union was viewed as a blasphemy to the SNM’s independence struggle and the relatively stable and democratic state it had been establishing since 1991.

Prime Minister Abiy had an early success in mediating the two. This was due to Somaliland’s willingness to discuss the matter, which stems from the notion that the Horn of Africa integration would help all countries to live in harmony as peaceful neighbours, and that it would be based on mutual understanding and respect between Somaliland and Somalia. Accordingly, accepting Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s request to strengthen Somaliland’s relations with the Federal Government of Somalia, President Muse Bihi of Somaliland confirmed his government’s willingness to strengthen Somaliland’s relations with Somalia in the future, including one-on-one and bilateral discussions with the Republic of Somalia. This progress between the two led to the first-ever high-level face-to-face meeting between the presidents of both nations in Addis Ababa on 11 February 2021, which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

¹² KI4: Ethiopian diplomat to the Republic of Somalia.

¹³ KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

brokered (All Africa 2020). However, the demands made by the Republic of Somalia to incorporate Somaliland to itself as any federal regional states of the republic of Somalia caused Somaliland to view the process with scepticism. Such demands ignored the legal and historical factors that had forced Somaliland to declare itself an independent state when the Somalian state was failed in 1991 (Peace Research Facility 2022).

According to an Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland, the new leadership's policy of re-unifying Somalia and Somaliland was not warmly welcomed by some Ethiopians. This disagreeing group claimed that it would be better for Ethiopia if both of them remained as they were, because Somaliland is a stable and peaceful territory in the region, in contrast to the rest of Somalia, which is home to terrorist organisations. This fear emanated from the assumption that if Somaliland would join the Republic of Somalia under the current weak central government it would be likely for Somaliland to become unstable and home to terrorist organisations like the rest of the country. This would, on the other hand, make Ethiopia lose the security advantage it has been enjoying with a stable Somaliland, which had been serving as a security buffer Zone (Abebe and Asnake 2025). Some of them proposed this notion because, considering that Somalia has been a top security danger since the 1960s, a fractured Somalia would provide a geopolitical advantage for Ethiopia.

However, despite internal pressure to stop the new policy since the country had never experienced terrorist attacks through its border with Somaliland, the federal government arranged conferences three to four times to bring the two leaders of Somalia and Somaliland together to resolve their differences.

Ethio-Somaliland people-to-people relations have progressed during the last more than thirty years. However, the new policy has negatively impacted it. An interviewee of the study (KI4)¹⁴ said:

The re-unifying policy has highly disappointed the majority of the people of Somaliland who were saying that they would rather prefer to be in union with Ethiopia than the Republic of Somalia. It is because over the last more than thirty years they have developed a significant difference with Somalia, as evidenced by the fact that a Somali passport holder needs a visa in order to enter Somaliland, which must be obtained from one of Somaliland's missions.

14 KI4: Ethiopian diplomat to the Republic of Somalia.

Trilateralism Among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia

In 2018, Ethiopia's new government responded to critical demands from Eritrea and the Republic of Somalia. It accepted as well as pledged to implement the 2000 Algiers Agreement,¹⁵ without any preconditions with regard to Eritrea, and it promised not to interfere in Somalia's domestic affairs. The three countries' positive climate led to the creation of a new trilateralism. Ethiopian Premier Abiy, Eritrean President Isias, and Somali President Abdullahi had a tripartite meeting in Asmara, Eritrea, in September 2018. Lastly, the three issued a joint declaration with four points: to maintain subregional peace and security; to strengthen political, economic, security, and social ties; to promote cooperation that advances the goals of their people; and to create a Joint High Level Committee to harmonise their efforts within the parameters of this Joint Declaration (Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation Between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea 2018).

The formation of a tripartite coalition between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea with the purpose of "regional integration" increased the suspicion of Somaliland. This is because the ratification of a tripartite agreement on regional integration directly affected Somaliland's sovereignty as it would seek international recognition for breaking away from Somalia. The growth of Ethio-Somali relations was viewed as a threat to Somaliland's relation with Ethiopia, as the government had long favoured the Republic of Somalia. Thus, Somaliland's central government considered Dr. Abiy, who regarded Somaliland as an extension of Somalia, hostile to the state (KI4).¹⁶

Furthermore, during the 2020-2022 Northern Ethiopian Tigray Conflict between the Ethiopian federal government and the regional government of the Northern Ethiopian Tigray region, Eritrea and Somalia supported the Ethiopian Federal Government in its fight against the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). Getachew Reda, the leader of the TPLF group, told the BBC that "Abiy is a crazy man because he wants our enemies, Somaliland and Somalia, to unite and destroy us." This statement, along with

15 The Algiers Agreement was the 2000 agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea to put an end to the 1998–2000 Ethiopian–Eritrean war over the town of Badme, a disputed border territory. A Boundary Commission was established under the Agreement, and its job was to draw their border. The commission decided that Badme was Eritrea's property. Nevertheless, Ethiopia disapproved of the ruling and declined to give Eritrea the town, which resulted in the two decades of diplomatic impasse or the "No peace, No war" era between the two countries from 2002 to 2018 (Kinfe 2006).

16 KI4: Ethiopian Diplomat to the Republic of Somalia.

propaganda of the TPLF that Dr. Abiy was an ignorant man who wanted to subjugate Somaliland to Somalia, aroused Somaliland's desire to form an alliance with the TPLF in order to remove Dr. Abiy (Muhammed 2022: 2).

Anti-Somaliland Clan Conference in Ethiopia

The dismay on the Somaliland side peaked when traditional leaders, religious experts, and members from major sectors of the Dhulbahante clan convened in Jigjiga, capital of the Ethiopian Somali-speaking regional state, from 10 to 15 December 2022 (Abebe and Asnake 2025). The group was from the Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn (henceforth SSC) regions of Somaliland. Since Hargeisa's government took it from Puntland in 2007,¹⁷ Somaliland has ruled over this Dhulbahante clan territory, also known as the Khatumo, who hold Lasanod as their capital. Both Somaliland and Puntland claimed Khatumo, an area that lies between them, and they backed their claims with colonial borders and clan loyalty. This clan has been calling for greater autonomy and regional sovereignty and accusing the Somaliland government of ethnic marginalisation (Hassan 2022). Prompted by the federal government of Somalia, an ally of Ethiopia, Dhulbahante nationalists launched their movement for autonomy and separation from Somaliland in 2022, joining the Republic of Somalia. They described the previous fifteen years in Somaliland as a repressive period in which one clan (the Isaaq Clan) had dominated and reigned, while their tribe had been marginalised. The Dhulbahante expressed their wish to join Somalia rather than continue to be governed by Somaliland (International Crisis Group 2023). Next, from 10 to 15 December 2022, their delegates convened in Jigjiga for a conference. They came to the conclusion that using force was the only way to put an end to the occupation after discussing the socio-economic and political marginalisation of their clan and establishing committees or councils (Hassan 2022).

Abdifatah Abdi (Hadrawi), a well-known politician in the opposition party of Somaliland from the Dhulbahante clan, was assassinated by armed assailants on 26 December 2022, in the town of Lasanod. His death turned the grievances into a non-violent protest. Later, the disturbance evolved into the Lasanod armed conflict in February 2023, between the Somaliland National Army and local Dhulbahante clan militia forces, also known as SSC forces (International

17 Puntland, formally known as the Puntland State of Somalia, is an autonomous entity in the northeastern section of Somalia. It declared independence from Somalia in 1998. However, it is now operating as a federal member state of Somalia because its autonomy has not been recognised by the international community.

Crisis Group 2023). Numerous people lost their lives and thousands were displaced as a result of the fighting. About 60,000 Lasanod escaped into Ethiopia (Hoehne 2023: 1). The government of Hargeisa placed the blame on other actors, including the government of Mogadishu, Ethiopia (the Somali region), Puntland, and extremists (International Crisis Group 2023). Thus, Ethiopia's anti-Somaliland cooperation flipped everything upside down (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Map of disputed territories between Somaliland and the Republic of Somalia (Shah 2024)

On the other hand, the incident at Lasanod indicated that there were divisions in Somaliland. The internal politics of Somaliland are heavily influenced by clan dynamics. Some regions and clans have voiced doubts or outright resistance to Somaliland's independence, especially in disputed territories such as Sool and Sanaag. Clans with historical ties to Somalia reside in these areas and might not entirely agree with the movement for the country's recognition as an independent state. In its pursuit of recognition, Somaliland's united front is weakened by this internal divide.

Somaliland's Reaction

To deal with Ethiopia's new foreign policy towards Somaliland, Somalia employed a double-track diplomacy. This included sustaining superficial diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, and strengthening bilateral ties with Ethiopia's regional rival, Egypt.

Superficial Diplomatic Relations with Ethiopia

Even if Ethiopia's new approach jeopardised Somaliland's major interests, the *de facto* state opted not to sever long-standing bilateral relations with Ethiopia. Rather, it superficially resumed managing bilateral intergovernmental diplomatic affairs. After Somaliland's president Muse Bihi Abdi had congratulated Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali on his rise to the position of prime minister, he made the first working visit to Addis Ababa on 20 February 2019, at the invitation of the new Ethiopian premier (The Somalia Star 2019).

On 25 December 2019, Somaliland welcomed a team from Ethiopia's regional states of Oromia and Somalia, who went there for an official visit (Horn Diplomat 2019a). This was followed by a high-level meeting between an Ethiopian team led by Finance Minister Ahmed Shide and the president of Somaliland on 22 July 2020 in Hargeisa, Somaliland. The president and the Ethiopian team discussed a variety of bilateral topics, including economic, security, and social concerns (Horn Diplomat 2020). Following this Ethiopian finance minister's visit, Ethiopia upgraded its diplomatic relations with Somaliland elevating Dr. Said Mohammed, the head of Somaliland's consulate, to the rank of full ambassador (Hiiraan Online 2022).

Somaliland also welcomed Mustafa Omer, the president of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, who paid an official visit to Hargeissa on 27 November 2021. During his visit, he met with Somaliland's president, Muse Bihi Abdi, and discussed socio-economic and security issues on behalf of Ethiopia (Somtribune 2021). Mustefa Omer finally said "As Somaliland is a sisterly nation we love, it is imperative that we hold consultations on the shifting dynamics and the impact of new developments in the region in order to avert negative effects and cooperate on how to mutually manage them" (ibid.).

The Somaliland government terminated Ethiopia's 19% ownership in the Berbera port in a way that did not sever the bilateral relations. Somaliland's Finance Minister Saad Ali Shire announced in June 2022

that “Ethiopia failed to meet the conditions required to acquire the stakes before the deadline. So it no longer has a stake, although it should be noted that ownership is irrelevant” (Tesfa-Alem 2022: 1). He went on to say that Ethiopia lost its share because it failed to contribute financially to the port’s construction as agreed. The termination gave the DP World UAE 65% of the share and the government of Somaliland the remaining 35%.

On 7 July 2022, Somalia warmly received a high-level Ethiopian team led by Transport Minister Dagmawit Moges and the National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister Ambassador Ridwan Hussein. Both countries’ representatives, Ridwan Hussein and Esse Kayd (Somaliland’s Minister of Foreign Affairs) inked an agreement to stabilise the price of Chat (Khat) and vegetables exported from Ethiopia to Somaliland. The deal was motivated by the fact that following the doubling of the price of Ethiopian Chat (Khat), Somaliland’s Chat (Khat) traders had warned not to import Chat (Khat) from Ethiopia and instead divert their attention to Kenya and Yemen (Abdi 2022). The agreement stated that the prices of Chat (Khat) and vegetables would be restored to their previous levels (ibid).

Strengthening Somaliland-Egyptian Ties

Ethiopia is a regional powerhouse with vast resources, a massive population, a strong army, a long history of statehood, and a long diplomatic history, with the potential to become a regional hegemon. Despite internal turmoil and insecurity, it has been among the fastest growing states in Sub-Saharan Africa. Egypt has consistently raised concerns about its water security when Ethiopia, (the source of the Blue Nile that flows into Egypt, began to use the Nile River in its own territory. An interviewee of the study, (KI5),¹⁸ said that “to prevent Ethiopia from utilizing its resources, primarily the Nile River, Egypt has been implementing policies that include preventing Ethiopia from receiving funding from international development institutions, encircling Ethiopia, cooperating with neighbours who are not friendly with Ethiopia, and destabilizing Ethiopia by sponsoring internal and external anti-Ethiopian actors.” After the completion of the Ethiopian dam became imminent,¹⁹ Egypt modified its policy from securing its uninterrupted water flow to making Ethiopia remain landlocked and not becoming a maritime actor working with Ethiopia’s neighbours. In

¹⁸ KI5: Ethiopian diplomat to Egypt.

¹⁹ The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was opened by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in September 2025.

order to balance against threats, neo-classical realism argues that nations can employ the enemy of my enemy is my friend argument. Ethiopian neighbours have used Ethio-Egyptian rivalry as a common approach to influence Ethiopia's position in the region. Accordingly, when Ethiopia turned its back on it, Somaliland began to build bilateral connections with Egypt, recognising how dangerous and sensitive this was to Ethiopia's national interests.

Egypt has long opposed Somaliland's independence due to its strategic calculation that Somaliland and Somalia's unity was critical to countering Ethiopia's hegemonic ambitions in the region. The growing Ethio-Somalian republic's relations, and the growing tension between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (the dam that Ethiopia began construction on the Nile River in 2011 and completed in September 2025) brought Egypt and Somaliland together. Thus, Somaliland President Muse Bihi hosted a high-level delegation from Cairo in Hargeisa in 2019 that was led by Ambassador Hamdi Sanad, Deputy Foreign Minister for African Affairs. They talked about ways to improve trade, livestock, and the socio-economic integration of the two communities. In return, a group of government representatives from Somaliland, headed by Liban Yusuf, a former Minister of International Cooperation and Deputy Foreign Affairs, travelled to Egypt on official business to discuss strategies for strengthening relations between the two countries. For the first time, they talked about forging diplomatic ties and expanding mutual collaboration in all fields (Horn Diplomat 2019b).

The relations between Egypt and Somaliland irritated Ethiopia when, at the height of tensions over the GERD, a top Egyptian delegation visited Somaliland to discuss Egypt's plan to create a military facility in Somalia's coastal areas in July 2022. In addition, both parties agreed to open offices in Cairo and Hargeisa. Egypt's presence in Ethiopian backyards was viewed by Addis Ababa's government as a national security danger since it allowed Egypt to keep a close eye on Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopia formally opposed the proposal and immediately deployed a high-level delegation led by Finance Minister Ahmed Shide to Hargeisa. During the delegation's visit, it was agreed to reconsider its relations with Somaliland and send an ambassador to Hargeisa in order to resume formal diplomatic relations (Hersi 2020).

The 2024 Memorandum of Understanding and the Resurgence of the Ethio-Somaliland Relations

From 1991 to 2018, Ethiopia's foreign policy approach to the port was one of broadening options to develop the Ethiopian economy, so that neighbouring countries competed to get Ethiopia to use their ports. Hence, the 1991 Ethiopian government accepted the landlockedness of the country and made no effort to restore Ethiopia to an international water partner. It perceived the port as just a service or any goods that can be bought and accessed (Jalu and Adgeh 2025). After 2018, however, the issue received greater attention and securitised, and subsequently a policy of having access to the sea, possessing a port that Ethiopia could manage, and becoming a naval power, was adopted (KI6).²⁰ The 2018 government held the position that the Nile and the Red Sea would shape Ethiopia's destiny and these two waters would either contribute to its progress or demise.

Referring to Ethiopia's population tsunami as well as to historical, geographical, economic, and ethnic claims, including Ethiopia's legitimate need for access to the sea, Prime Minister Abiy requested that the unofficial bloc containing Ethiopia (by neighbouring countries) be disbanded and that neighbouring countries assist the state in its existential question of sea-access. In the "Red Sea speech" of October 2023, Prime Minister Abiy described restoring sea access as an existential issue for Ethiopia and expressed Ethiopia's willingness to engage in negotiations with any state that would provide it access to the sea. He emphasised peaceful methods like federation/ confederation, land exchange, and granting the part of significant Ethiopian enterprises and projects including the GERD, Ethiopian Air Ways, and Ethio-telecom (Abebe and Asnake 2025). Somaliland remained mute, while other neighbouring states, primarily Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia, not only expressed their refusal to engage in conversations, but also saw the statement as tactless, bold, and a challenge to their sovereignty (Badar 2023). Two interviewees of the study (KI3²¹ and KI7²²) said that neighbouring states' responses, as well as some previous regional events,²³ have influenced Ethiopia's post-2018 government's vision and policies towards the region and Somalia. This pushed the government to re-examine its idealistic and hopeful policies, shifting its focus to Ethiopia's national interests.

20 KI6: Ethiopian ambassador to Djibouti.

21 KI3: Horn Affairs analyst and academician.

22 KI7: Researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

23 Sudan's invasion of the Ethio-Sudan borderland of Al-Fashga in 2020, and the gradual deterioration of Ethiopian relations with Eritrea and Somalia.

Ports are essential entry points for trade, connectivity, and strategic influence in the age of globalisation, and they have come to represent power. Since 90% of world trade occurs by sea, coastal countries are situated at the centre of global supply lines, giving them more freedom to project political and economic dominance. Undersea fiber-optic cables, which make up the world's digital infrastructure, are located beneath the oceans and serve as the foundation for international communication, highlighting the strategic significance of marine access. A more outward-looking global viewpoint and cultural confidence are frequently fostered by this seafaring identity. On the other hand, landlocked countries striving for regional influence are often limited by logistical challenges, and their geopolitical narrative leans more towards containment than expansion. Geographic isolation may result from this, influencing national identity and policies in more inward-looking ways. Landlocked countries face 30-50% higher trade expenses than coastal countries (World Trade Organization 2021). Besides, the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries estimates that their GDP is lowered by 1.5 to 2.2% per year (UN-OHRLDC 2025). Furthermore, the transit time of these states is often twice that of littoral states. Moreover, 85-90% of landlocked countries' trade channels are controlled by other states, making them more susceptible and reliant on international trade logistics. In terms of human consequences, landlockedness raises basic commodity prices, slows industrialisation, reduces foreign direct investment, and disempowers the global image (KI3).²⁴

Direct access to the Red Sea is essential for Ethiopia's security and economic development. Ethiopia requires relief from its reliance on Djibouti (95%) and Somalia (5%) for external trade, which has cost it \$2 million per day in transit and around \$1.5 billion per year (Hashem 2024: 6). Because Ethiopia is landlocked, its security is dependent on its neighbours, who are weak, fragile, and vulnerable to outside interference. Defending its foreign trade, which is entirely conducted by sea, ensuring national security, contributing to regional peace, and the need to protect its fiber-optic cables and microwave networks in the Red Sea, which connect it to the rest of the world via Djibouti, made sea access critical. The negative reaction of neighbouring states, the ascension to power of an anti-Ethiopian president in Somalia, and the convergence of interests between Ethiopia and Somaliland prompted the two countries to negotiate and end the era of mutual suspicion, ushering in a new era of friendship. On 1 January 2024 Ethiopia and Somaliland

24 KI3: Horn Affairs analyst and academician.

took the first historical step towards realising their three-decade dream of port ownership peacefully and *de jure* recognition respectively by signing a Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding in Addis Ababa (KI8).²⁵

The memorandum, which aimed to quench both actors three-decade thirst for access to the sea and recognition, and strengthen their claims to join the Red Sea Forum,²⁶ mentioned Somaliland's agreement to provide Ethiopia with a naval and commercial sea access (20KM of coastal area on a 50-year lease) in exchange for a fair share in the Ethiopian airlines, and Ethiopia's in-depth review of Somaliland's *de facto* recognition (Mehari 2024). According to the great personality behind the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), as an interviewee of the study (KI2) remarked,²⁷ this soon-to-be operationalised agreement would benefit both and not negatively affect any party or country. It could be perceived as an economic/commercial give-and-take deal that would foster regional economic integration, mutual prosperity, and regional peace and security.

On the benefit of the Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding, an interviewee of the study, (KI1),²⁸ said that:

The benefits of the MoU will extend beyond the boundaries and will not be limited to the two countries. It will help to implement global connectivity by connecting the region or continent to the rest of the world. The MoU would help to construct railways and other routes that will alleviate the region's economic issues. It will also support the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its policies in Africa. Aside from economic benefits, the MoU will contribute to world peace and stability [particularly maritime security] by stabilizing the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, which are extremely violent routes that no government in the region is contributing to. It will strengthen the international community's counter-terrorism efforts and contribute to the

25 KI8: Ethiopian ambassador to the Republic of Somalia.

26 The Red Sea Forum is a new project aiming at promoting collaboration between countries bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. To improve stability and safety in the region, members cooperate to tackle shared security issues such as terrorism, smuggling, and piracy. Ethiopia and Somaliland need to take part in the discussion of their regional issues. Ethiopia needs access to the sea in order to be a part of the Red Sea corridor, while Somaliland requires recognition.

27 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

28 KI1: An official of Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia.

defeat of violent extremism in the region. Most crucially, it will grant a long-forgotten right to both Somaliland and Ethiopians: the ability to exist as a country and the right to sea access.

Two scholars who conducted research on it, Khan and Ahmed (2024: 901) supported the above interviewees' idea concluding that the MoU could: greatly increase trade efficiency by boosting connectivity and logistics; strengthen regional security by coordinating efforts to counter common threats such as piracy and terrorism; create a more stable environment that would be favourable to economic growth and development; and open the door for a greater international recognition of Somaliland.

Generally, the correct implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding could have the following significances: transforming the feature of the region from mutual destabilisation to regional integration and cooperation; inter-connecting the states and making regional states concerned about each other's economic and security well-being; burying the "Greater Somalian Agenda" with the creation of a new Somaliland state; causing neighbouring states to take matters seriously when dealing with Ethiopia regarding its critical interests; influencing Puntland and Jubaland in their long-term aspirations for statehood; and strengthening Ethiopia's negotiation power and influence throughout the region. The MoU appears to have graduated Ethiopia from being a shy state that is reserved and hesitant in the region to a cunning state with the ability to navigate complex situations with cleverness in order to achieve its main national interest objective. At the same time its potential to cause security tensions and dilemma in the region should be emphasised.

Neo-classical realists contend that in order for *de facto* nations to be recognised internationally, they may use diplomatic ploys, seek patronage from strong powers, build up their domestic legitimacy and state capability, and take advantage of geopolitical chances (Zakaria 1992). Somaliland hopes to gain Ethiopia's support for international recognition by utilising its geographic advantages, promoting economic interdependence, coordinating with Ethiopia's regional interests, and manipulating internal and foreign pressures. By partnering with Ethiopia, an imperfect regional power, Somaliland hopes to garner legitimacy and support from other Horn of Africa countries and abroad. Ethiopia has enormous diplomatic potential in the region, continent, and world. Its capital, Addis Ababa, is generally referred to as the world's third largest diplomatic hub, after New York and Brussels. This classification is backed by the fact that the city is

home to nearly 150 foreign embassies and acts as the headquarters for major international organisations such as the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). Somaliland intended to capitalise on this potential to get an international recognition by utilising its geostrategic value. Furthermore, the lease would allow Somaliland to gain economic benefits from Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has been viewing the matter of re-evaluating Somaliland's recognition, which raised concerns about opening a "Pandora box" on the continent, through different perspectives. The *first* is the right to self-determination, which is protected by international law and Ethiopia's 1995 Constitution (Article 39) (KI2).²⁹ This right allows all nations to govern themselves and determine their socio-economic and political fate. The *next* is Ethiopia's unrevoked permanent (*de jure*) recognition of Somaliland in 1960. Ethiopia was one of the 35 countries to provide permanent recognition to Somaliland. The *de jure* recognition is not only unrevoked in principle, but Ethiopia has never attempted to rescind it officially. The *third* is Ethiopia's commitment to the Organization of African Unity's (hereafter OAU) principle that decolonised African nations should maintain their colonial territory and borders drawn by colonial powers should be honoured. Since redrawing borders could result in international conflicts and disagreements, possibly sparking civil wars and ethnic tensions, the OAU adopted this policy to spread stability and peace throughout the continent. Somaliland's current quest is for the recognition of the area and border with which it was decolonised in 1960. Thus, giving recognition to Somaliland, re-claiming recognition for the independence and territory it decolonised with in 1960, is consistent with the OAU's principle. *Finally*, the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial distinct histories of Somalia and Somaliland. There was no state called Somalia during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The Republic of Somalia was established for the first time in 1960, five days after the former British colony gained independence and the Republic of Somaliland emerged. It was founded when the Republic of Somaliland merged with Italy's colonised territories in Somalia. This union was dissolved in 1991, when Somalia's sovereignty crumbled. Since then, Somaliland has recognised itself as an independent state and has operated independently.

The first step in the area was taken when Ethiopia upgraded its consular office in Hargeisa into a full-fledged embassy status. Although there is no official statement confirming the upgrading from the Ethiopian government, this

29 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

was done in May 2024. Despite the heightened regional tensions as Egyptian expertise and weapons began to arrive in Mogadishu, Ethiopia appointed Teshome Shunde as its new ambassador to Somaliland on 30 October (Abdu 2024). This was viewed as going more than halfway to recognising Somaliland.

The Memorandum of Understanding and External Powers Influence on the Ethio-Somaliland Relations

Neo-classical realism, which places emphasis on how the balance of power in the international system shapes state behaviour, contends that small states frequently experience uneasiness or insecurity when they have large, powerful states as neighbours due to the power imbalance that exists between them and could lead to dominance and coercion (Rose 1998). Ethiopia is the second most populous region in Africa (Gebre et al. 2020: 1). It has a booming economy, a robust military, natural resources, diplomatic potential, an uncolonised history, and regional leadership experience. Ethiopia's internal insecurity is the primary reason why experts consider it an "imperfect regional hegemony" (Sonia 2018: 1). Some Ethiopian regional adversaries opposed the MoU, thinking that Ethiopia's access to the sea and building of a naval base in the region would make it considerably stronger.

The Somali republic, which claims Somaliland as its northern territory, protested the MoU, arguing that it violated the state's territorial integrity and sovereignty (KI9).³⁰ Somalia's leader replied to the MoU by claiming that "no one has the authority to cede any land in Somalia and that no piece of our land, sea, or air can be violated." An interviewee of the study (KI9)³¹ went on to say that "the country [the Republic of Somalia] views the MoU as an aggression and an obstruction to the region's good neighbourliness, peace, and stability, which is already facing numerous challenges."

Following this objection, Somalia took other actions, including recalling its ambassador to Ethiopia, calling the pact "null and worthless," denying Ethiopian Airlines permission to fly its high-level team to Hargeisa, organising international opposition to the pact, and urging friends and international organisations to help push Ethiopia to end the agreement, inciting "the Greater Somali agenda," claiming that Ethiopia had taken Somalia's land, and conducting a protest march in Somalia; forming

30 KI9: A Republic of Somali diplomat to Ethiopia.

31 KI9: A Republic of Somali diplomat to Ethiopia.

connections with anti-Ethiopian parties (after the President's visits to Cairo and Asmara), and citing Ethiopian peacekeeping forces in Somalia as a direct threat to its territorial integrity and calling for their withdrawal once the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) would conclude in December 2024 (Abebe and Asnake 2025). As previously said, Somaliland possesses its own identity, passport, currency, political system, economic system, military and security apparatus, and stability. For the past thirty years, since 1991, it has been participating in such agreements on its own and has functional sovereignty.

Because of its strategic geopolitical significance, the Horn of Africa has been the focus of major and medium power competition. The region is a gateway to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, has a maritime border with the Middle East, and overlooks important shipping channels that connect Asia and Europe. Including the USA and China, nine great and middle powers have more than ten military bases in the region for the protection of their national interest. These countries do not want strong local states to become coastal states since it could jeopardise their free influence in the region. Hence, the Republic of Somalia aggressively objected to the Cooperation and Partnership Memo-randum of Understanding because of their influence on it. An interviewee of the study, (KI7),³² argued that the return of Ethiopia was looked at with distrust by the great powers who have military bases in the region along the international waterways and have been sending their ships and doing whatever they want over the region's water bodies. This is because Ethiopia is a strong, independent state with a successful maritime history, a sizable naval force, and the potential to organise regional states that lease military bases to these great countries. He added that, despite its poverty, Ethiopia is a robust country with significant diplomatic, economic, and social potential that could affect the status quo. This prompted these big powers to oppose the MoU and persuaded the Somalia government to do the same (see Figure 3).

32 KI7: Researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

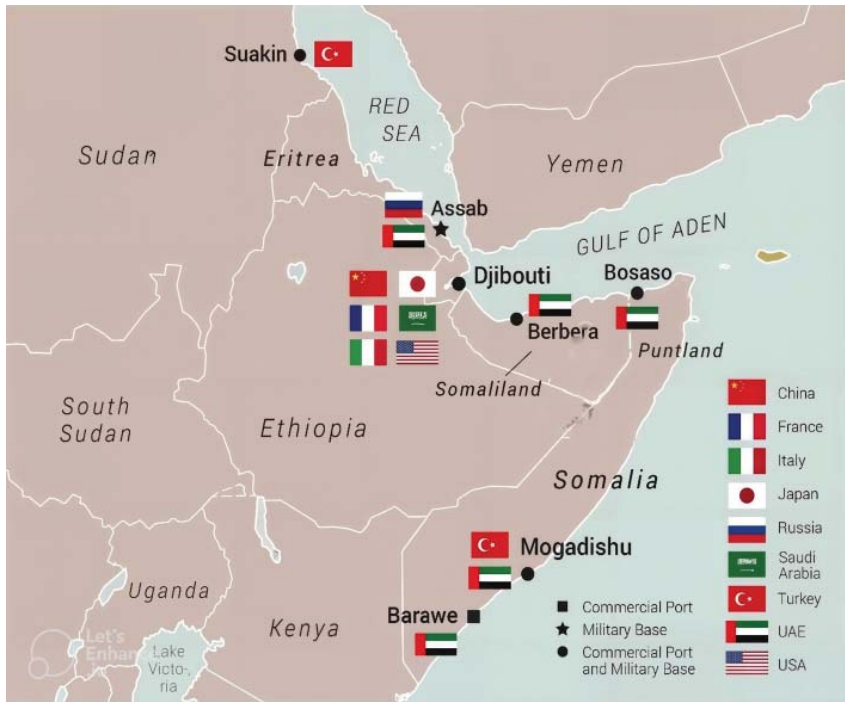


Figure 3. Map of foreign powers' military bases in the Horn of Africa (Fekede and Mulugeta 2023)

Stability in the region was threatened by the dispute between Ethiopia and Somalia over the MoU and the ensuing alliances between Egypt, Eritrea, and the Republic of Somalia. Egypt and Somalia have reached a security cooperation agreement. According to the agreement, the first shipment of troops, weapons, and military equipment arrived in Somalia on 27 August 2024 (Webb 2024). Ethiopia established a military alliance with Somaliland in retaliation for Somalia's military partnership with Egypt. Ethiopia trained most Somaliland soldiers, while Egypt supplied Somalia with arms. Additionally, Somalia's government demanded that all 10,000 Ethiopian peacekeeping forces depart the country by December 2024 and planned to bar Ethiopian forces from the post-ATMIS mission unless Ethiopia would withdraw from the MoU. This is in spite of reports of alliances between Al-Shabaab and Houthis in Somalia and Ethiopia's government's assertion of alliances between the Al-Shabaab and Oromo Liberation Fronts army.

An interviewee of the study, (KI7),³³ said that Ethiopian forces played a dominant role in Somalia's security and peacekeeping operations for more than two decades. This force is capable of operating effectively in Somalia in the same way that Somali forces do. The Ethiopian military have merged with the population; they can speak Somali and understand the psychology of the community. Most importantly, their protracted stay has allowed them to learn about the topography, psychology, and war tactics of terrorist groups. This insight allowed them to effectively paralyse terrorist organisations in Somalia. While the question of who would maintain the failed Somalia's security has been a source of concern, Somalia's plan to bring Egyptian forces to its country, as well as the tension it creates between Ethiopia and Egypt and Ethiopia and Somalia have made the future peace of Somalia and the region look bleak. Thus, the region's security was dire due to rising radicalism and Al-Shabaab influence, Egypt's arrival, the security of the Red Sea, and the growing interest of major and middle-sized powers in the area. Given the trajectory, numerous regional and international actors have called for diplomatic talks to de-escalate regional tensions caused by the Memorandum of Understanding.

After Somalia strengthened its military ties with Egypt, Ethio-Somalia disagreements continued to manifest themselves by allegations and counter allegations between the two states. In an interview in which he rejected Mogadishu's allegations that Addis Ababa's government was shipping weapons to Puntland, Field Marshal Birhanu Jula, commander of the Ethiopian National Army, warned that if accusations of interference or incitements of civil war against Ethiopia persisted, Ethiopia would not only transport weapons to Somalia, but would also take any necessary measures (Garowe Online 2024: 1). In December 2024, a military confrontation broke out between the Somali federal government and Jubbaland, a member state of the Somali Federation. In an effort to maintain its power in Somalia, Ethiopia stated that it would continue to maintain troops in the country after the December 2024 African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) withdrawal deadline. Ethiopia is a close ally of the Jubbaland leader, who, together with the South West State federal member states, openly opposed the Somali federal government's wish to expel Ethiopian forces.

Finally, the defeat of Somali federal government forces in a military clash that took place near Raas Kambooni forced it to relinquish its precondition of negotiating with Ethiopia (which was only after Ethiopia terminated the MoU contract with Somaliland) and signed the Ankara Declaration with Ethiopia the next day to ease tensions. Somalia acknowledged the sacrifices

33 KI7: Researcher at the Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs.

made by Ethiopian soldiers for Somalia's stability, rejected its objection to Ethiopia's involvement in the peacekeeping mission that would replace ATMIS, and promised to negotiate Ethiopian access to the sea (Thomas 2024). Following the Ankara Declaration, Somalia acknowledged the role and significance of the Ethiopian military in the post-ATMIS operation. This Ethio-Somalian reunion had a severe effect on the friendly post-MoU relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland. However, the hostility was never made public because the Ankara peace deal remained contentious as it did not reverse the MoU, and Somaliland remains the most viable path to Ethiopia's future access to the sea dream, not only because of its democratic culture and stability, but also because of its people's genuine positive attitude towards Ethiopia, and the public support Ethiopia has there. Following the MoU, Ethiopia earnestly pursued sea access as a foreign policy goal, while Somaliland pursued a diplomacy of utilising its geostrategic location as leverage to gain international recognition from great powers.

However, to recover the two countries' friendly relations, the strengthening of bilateral diplomatic relations need to be reflected in social and economic relation elements. Hence, it is critical to Ethiopia and Somaliland to strengthen and diversify connections beyond security and focus on other areas. Somalilanders participate in medical tourism on an annual basis. They travel to Ethiopia for therapy. Ethiopia obtains approximately \$20 million annually from this medical tour (KI2).³⁴ However, Ethiopia is not using this opportunity to boost its economic and social advantage. There is also work to be done to make it easier for Ethiopian investors to invest in Somaliland and the Somaliland investors to invest in Ethiopia. Because economic interconnection is crucial to sustain amicable relations between two actors.

Ethiopia should recognise Somaliland's desire for independence and refrain from publicly pushing the concept of a united Somalia and the restoration of Somaliland to the Republic of Somalia. Somalia is a failed state (Szuma 2015: 50) and Egypt's commitment to Somalia could not be stronger, given that the country is supporting Somalia to further its own interests. Even though internal conflicts and insecurity have been ravaging its economy since 2020, Ethiopia has managed to finish the GERD's construction, and its completion may compel Egypt to abandon its strategy of encircling Ethiopia and collaborating with anti-Ethiopian forces. If Ethiopia's domestic socio-economic and political problems are resolved, this will eventually boost Ethiopia's regional prominence.

34 KI2: Ethiopian ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeissa).

Conclusion

According to neo-classical realists, domestic politics including leadership changes play an important role in shaping foreign policy. Political leaders interpret systemic pressures differently depending on their perspectives, ideologies, and internal political restrictions. Ethiopia's foreign policy, in general, and its approach towards the republics of Somalia and Somaliland in particular, has shifted slightly as a result of the 2018 political transition. The new government's foreign policy pillars, such as "regional integration," "non-intervention in Somalia's domestic affairs," and "uniting Somaliland with Somalia" collided Ethiopia with Somaliland, a *de facto* state which had been autonomous for three decades and sought international recognition. This Ethiopia's policy, on the other hand, allied Ethiopia with the Somali Republic, which regards Somaliland as an integral part of its territory. Neo-classical realism holds that when states perceive that the distribution of power in the international system threatens them, they can counterbalance it by forming military alliances. Perceiving Ethiopia and Somalia as a danger to its aspirations for international recognition, Somaliland established a bilateral partnership with Ethiopia's arch-enemy, Egypt. As a result, Somaliland was able to resist the influence of its neighbours.

The change of president in Somalia in 2022, as well as the removal of a pro-Ethiopian leader and the rise to power of a pro-Egyptian president, had a severe impact on Ethiopian-Somalian ties. Ethiopia is the world's most populous landlocked country, with about 130 million people in 2025. The shortest distance from the tip of Ethiopia to the tip of the Red Sea, passing through Eritrea, is approximately 60 km. Since 1991, the country's economic development and security have suffered as a result of its landlocked status. Ethiopia's desire to make a business deal so that it might have access to the sea was not welcomed by all of Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti.

When a country's security and survival are at jeopardy, it will adopt every action necessary. The 2024 Cooperation and Partnership Memorandum of Understanding reflected the compatibilities of Ethio-Somaliland national interests. Even though the bordering countries, as well as certain great powers and regional powers, were dissatisfied with the agreement, it turned Ethio-Somaliland ties to cordial. As a result, the region's anti-Ethiopian governments, Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt, established a military alliance. Ethiopia responded by expanding its military ties with Somaliland. The strain posed a threat to the security of the already fragile Horn of Africa. However, internal and global pressures eventually forced Ethiopia and

Somalia to defuse hostilities and sign the Ankara Declaration in Turkey in December 2024. Though contentious, the Ankara Declaration is an important step that thwarted the bilateral tension and foiled anti-Ethiopian trilateral military axis. However, this deal ignored the MoU, sowing the seeds of future uncertainty. Acknowledging Ethiopia's legitimate sea access concerns and regional peacekeeping role, it has promoted Turkey's influence in the region. Above all, it implies how the regional and big powers influence the patterns of bilateral ties between states in the region.

Although the magnitude differs, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland have domestic issues. Premier Abiy's government is facing massive socio-economic and political challenges as a result of the prolonged domestic instability. The Tigray conflict (2020-2022), which caused a socioeconomic, political, and diplomatic crisis in Ethiopia, has also had a long-term negative impact, contributing to the conflict in the Amhara region (2023-now), another security crisis in Tigray (2022-now), and the restoration of mutual enmity between Ethiopia and Eritrea after 2022. Currently, the federal government is fighting rebel groups in the two major regional governments of Oromia (2018-now) and Amhara (2023-now), while the problem in Tigray worsens and the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments have mobilised their armies for war since the beginning of 2025. Likewise, Somaliland is in an internal security crisis due to clan division, territorial disputes, as well as disagreements on the issue of Somaliland's international recognition. The weak federal administration in Mogadishu is proving incapable of dictating regional member states, as evidenced by the recent confrontation between Jubaland regional states and Somalia's federal government, which arose as a result of Jubaland president's refusal to obey federal orders. The Al-Shabaab, an Islamic fundamentalist group, is also occasionally gaining more territory in Somalia.

Because inter-state tensions have an impact on regional stability, countries such as Ethiopia must be conscious that significant access to the sea objectives must be pursued peacefully and diplomatically, utilising their own economic, security, diplomacy, and geopolitical leverages. Other interested intermediate and great powers, as well as the region's main security threat, Al-Shabaab can exploit the situation and escalate tensions. Thus, direct negotiations between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Somaliland would benefit the entire region. Egypt's military engagement in the region, Somaliland's recognition, Ethiopia's sea access, and Somalia's sovereignty could all be addressed during such a negotiation. The negotiation will have the potential to both drain the interference of other regional states in their affairs as well as turn the conflict into an opportunity that benefits them all fairly.

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List of Key Informants (KI)

Code	Name	Position	Month/Year
KI1	Anonymous	An official of the Somaliland Embassy in Ethiopia	June 2024
KI2	Anonymous	Ethiopian Ambassador to Somaliland (Hargeisa)	January 2024
KI3	Anonymous	Horn Affairs Analyst and academician	July 2023
KI4	Anonymous	Ethiopian Diplomat to the Republic of Somalia	February 2024
KI5	Anonymous	Ethiopian Diplomat to Egypt	January 2024
KI6	Anonymous	Ethiopian Ambassador to Djibouti	January 2024
KI7	Anonymous	Researcher at Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs	August 2024
KI8	Anonymous	Ethiopian Ambassador to the Republic of Somalia	January 2024
KI9	Anonymous	Republic of Somalian Diplomat to Ethiopia	August 2024