

Concept Note for a Virtual Conference on

Current Developments, Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa

The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) and Somali International Rehabilitation Centre (SIRC)
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Background

The Horn of Africa (HOA) is the most conflict prone region in Africa. It suffers from several inter-related pathologies. They include festering wars, state crisis, environmental degradation, poverty, youth unemployment, migration, exclusion of women and youth, external interventions and democratic deficiency. The year 1991 constituted a watershed in the history of the Horn of Africa (HOA). Rebel movements ousted the two most brutal regimes. The Mengistu Haile Mariam regime was replaced by the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Democratic Front) a coalition of ethno-nationalist movements. The demise of the Siad Barre regime marked the collapse of the Somali state.

The demise of the regimes also brought change in the territoriality of the two states. Following, thirty years war of liberation, Eritrea became independent in May 1991; and Somaliland declared unilateral independence the same year. While Somaliland succeeded in building peaceful and democratic de facto state, Somalia spiralled down the road to mayhem and chaos. South Sudan got its independence from Sudan in 2011, but soon was plunged in civil war that broke out in December 2013

Unexpectedly, in May 1998, a war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Although the war ended in December 2000, through internationally mediated agreement known as Algiers Agreement, a no-war no-peace continued until July 2018. The consequences of the war was not only limited to Ethiopia and Eritrea, but it had dire consequences to the entire region too. Therefore, the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict was defined as epicentre of the conflicts in the HOA.

The powerhouse of the region, Ethiopia, was gripped by youth uprising that picked up momentum in 2015. Consequently, Ethiopia was plunged into economic, political and security crisis. The EPRDF was forced to make change of guard in its leadership that brought Dr Abiy Ahmed Ali, an Oromo to power. Dr Abiy conducted sweeping political changes and extended an olive branch to Eritrea. Eritrea considered the invitation as genuine and responded positively. The two leaders signed peace and friendship agreement on 9 July 2018 ending the state of war that existed between them for twenty years. This was followed by signing a comprehensive cooperation agreement between Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea raising hopes and expectation.

The transition in Ethiopia however proved to be a daunting task. Intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic, regional state-federal state conflicts continued to flare up. The most serious challenge to the reform came from the TPLF. The rivalry between the Federal Government and the TPLF finally culminated in the November 2020 military confrontation. The lack of peace and stability in Ethiopia cast a shadow in the HOA. We have Ethiopia-Sudan border dispute complicated by tensions related to the GERD pitching Egypt and Sudan on one side, and Ethiopia on the other. Kenya and Somalia are involved in serious border dispute. Election related controversies are also adding to the festering conflicts.

Rationale, Context and Arguments

The people of the Horn of Africa (HOA) have suffered from convoluted political, economic, social and environmental crisis for too long. A combination of manmade and natural problems have exposed the peoples to abject poverty, disease, wars, drought, starvation and mass exodus. Today, the HOA is one of the mass refugee/migrant producing regions of the world. The irony is the HOA is endowed with rich natural resources that could support its peoples and provide them descent life. War and concomitant instability, corruption and mismanagement have derailed development. Underdevelopment is pushing, particularly, the youth to seek for greener pasture in the developed world. They follow dangerous routes through the Sahara desert, Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea on the way to Europe or the Middle East.

The peoples of the HOA are closely tied by culture, history, language, demography, socio-economic mode of live, etc. These are fundamental requirements that would enable them to live together in peace, harmony, prosperity and unity. Nevertheless, despite these commonalities, the HOA is well known for its intra-state and inter-state conflicts. While some of these conflicts are purely domestic production, others are incited by external interventions. External interventions that include Cold War, war on terror, piracy and scramble for resources have contributed to the instability of the region. The region's strategic location makes it attractive to international big and middle-big powers. Today we have several powers from the West, East and the Gulf regions present militarily in the region. The presence of these military forces is justified by the fight against terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism and piracy that in recent years have afflicted the region. The presence of external forces, however, instead of curbing these social evils most of the time aggravates them.

The expansion of terrorism, radicalism and fundamentalism in the vicinity of the Red Sea have brought closer the regions in both sides of the Red Sea. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the crisis within the GCC and the consequent emergence of two blocs, on one side Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirate and Egypt, and on the other, Turkey and Qatar have complicated the political and security situation in the HOA. The role of Saudi Arabia and UAE in facilitating the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea was very positive. It is hoped, it could lead to investment and economic cooperation with the HOA, which could kick off development in the region, one of the prerequisites for the youth to stay in the region.

Nevertheless, the solutions to the region's problems need to come from within itself. There are several things; leaders of the region could do, in order, to address the convoluted pathologies the region faces. The first is to mobilise its own resources (economic, intellectual, demographic), capacity (organisational, technical, technological). The second would be to exert every possible efforts to resolve the intra-state and inter-state conflicts that are the major source of the pathologies. Without peace and security there will not be development. The third would be to ensure unity, integration and cohesion of the region. This would mean ownership of defining, planning and resolving of the problems the region faces, through employing domestic mechanisms, institutions, capacities and authorities. This will minimise external interventions and meddling. The fourth would be building institutions at local, national and regional levels; and opening the political space. This will induce the participation of all stakeholders in all sphere of life.

The wisdom of depending on internal initiatives, goodwill and mechanisms, is evidenced in the Ethiopian and Eritrean rapprochement. Several years of external mediation and interferences failed to yield positive outcome, indeed it complicated the conflict. Propelled by internal dynamics and developments, the two countries reached on their own what seems to be a lasting peace. This is also a lesson to the international community, on the one hand, that they could only provide a supporting hand, on the other; they should be neutral, objective, balanced and avoid to be dictated by geostrategic interests and calculations when dealing with problems in the HOA. This conference provides opportunities to draw lessons from the Ethiopia-Eritrea-Somalia rapprochement and further study the factors, structures,

conditions and scopes that drive conflicts, instability and disunity in the HOA. It will examine and analyse the current situation. It provides the opportunity to interrogate the methodologies, concepts, theories and mechanisms that have been deployed in dealing with protracted conflicts.

Expected Outcome

The HOA is going through a fundamental change, which the region has never seen in the last thirty years. The changes that are taking place in the region open both possibilities and risks. Ethiopia, the country, which is going through the most profound change, is at a crossroads. Many positive changes are taking place. At the same time, the country is also facing serious problems related to inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic and federal-regional state conflicts, split within the ruling coalition party. Those who lost power, particularly at the regional state level are challenged the federal government that ended in military confrontation in the Tigray region. This transition period in Ethiopia needs to be consolidated. Failure would have dire consequences to the entire region. It is against this backdrop a conference on Current Development, Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa is of great significance, and deliberations and outcomes would contribute to the consolidation of peace, stability and development in the region.

The complex threats of insecurity and instability that have devastated the HOA for long are not only menace to the region, however. Because of its extreme strategic location as well as the abundance of resources the region collectively possess, it affects the world as a whole. It is in this regard the region as well as the larger world need to address collectively the menaces the region faces and make sure the window of peace that opened in July 2018 stays open. This conference aims to, through deliberations, identifying challenges and opportunities, targeted awareness raising and publications, thrust forward the peace endeavour in the HOA.

It is against this background the Conflict and State Building in the Horn of Africa research project, Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) and Somali International Rehabilitation Centre (SIRC), plan to hold a two-day conference on current development, peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. The conference is organised around four themes,

- Border disputes
- Election related conflicts
- Ethnic and clan federalism
- The Nile and the GERD

The conference intends to bring together about 30 participants (scholars, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, civil society actors, diplomats and experts) from the region and Nordic countries for a two-day intensive deliberations and debate. The conference will seek and invite high calibre scholars to present high quality papers that are to be organised into 5 plenary sessions (2-3 paper each) with academic papers plus opening and closing sessions with policy matters. Our ambition is to produce an edited book volume of the papers to document the proceedings of the conference in an adequate, high calibre format and publication. We have also the ambition to produce shorter policy dialogue that would serve needs of policymakers, NGOs and civil society organisations with interest and involvement in the region as well as student of the HOA and policymaker in the HOA. We therefore respectfully ask presenter to prepare full papers that would serve as chapters of the book volume. We are hopeful and convinced the conference and subsequent publications would contribute to better understanding and enhancement of peace, security challenges and opportunities leading to peaceful, stable and prosperous HOA.