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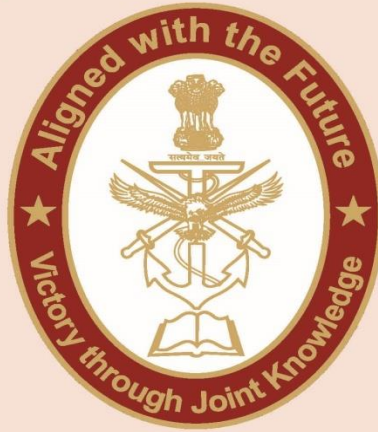
ISSUE BRIEF

# **THE STRATEGIC PLAY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR INDIA**

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### THE STRATEGIC PLAY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR INDIA



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### Abstract

The Horn of Africa has immense strategic significance in contemporary geopolitics. Surrounded by the fragile Gulf and Arab neighbourhoods, the region is mired in conflicts. With regional powers and the west increasingly trying to secure their interests in the Horn of Africa, the area is being characterised by external and intraregional competition. This partly explains the increase in foreign military presence in this region. It is noteworthy that China has significantly increased its military presence in Djibouti and Ethiopia. As a result, the resource-rich Red Sea region is the potential epicentre of competition and conflict in the near future.

This brief seeks to examine the geo-strategic relevance of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region in light of the evolving security dynamics. It would delve into the current challenges in the region such as terrorism in Somalia and conflict over the Nile River. It would analyse the strategic

presence of leading global powers, such as China and the United States and their moves. The strategic implications for India will also be studied with a focus on the plausible military, diplomatic and economic actions it should take to secure its interests in the region.

## **Introduction**

Africa is a resource-rich continent with significant export market potential. However, it is still considered underdeveloped due to its poor economy, long history of internal issues and inadequate infrastructure and technological development. The Horn of Africa lies in a geographically strategic position that links two international waterways – The Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It is separated from the Arabian Peninsula by the Bab el Mandeb strait. Gaining strategic significance with the opening of the Suez Canal, in recent years it has become a key geostrategic space of high level of maritime security importance and fierce global competition among foreign powers. As a consequence, the core of this region – consisting of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia – has taken on a more prominent role in global geopolitics, becoming a focal point for great power competition and posing considerable risks for conflict in the region.<sup>i</sup> The fast-changing dynamics and geopolitical shifts dictate many aspects of what is happening within these countries and the cross-border geopolitics that surrounds them.<sup>ii</sup>

Its significance is also defined by the availability of abundant energy and natural resources in the region. The great economic potential and diversity has also caused an underbelly of instability in this region, because of which the region finds itself at crossroads. While the world is focusing on the Russia-Ukraine war, the countries of this region are facing

economic, political and military challenges. The region is important for India's energy security and engagement with the African continent to serve its strategic and economic interests.<sup>iii</sup>



### **Geo-Strategic Relevance of Horn of Africa**

The Horn of Africa straddles a geographical space of geo-strategic importance. The “Bab el Mandeb” strait is considered a bottleneck between the Horn and the Middle East, linked between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean that has implications for energy and maritime security dynamics. The Red Sea has become the subject of new geopolitical interest because it is one of the world's busiest waterways.

About 30% of the mineral reserves, 8% of the natural gas reserves, and 12% of the oil reserves in the globe are found in Africa. Up to 90% of the world's chromium and platinum are found on the African continent, along with 40% of the world's gold. Africa is home to the world's largest cobalt, diamond, platinum, and uranium reserves. The Horn itself is rich with sufficient natural resources like hydropower and hydrocarbons for electricity production, oil and natural gas, minerals, metals, etc. Mahogany and Okoume woods bring significant revenue. In 2021, the GDP of the

countries of the Horn of Africa was USD 1.92 trillion. The Nile River, which is considered the longest river in the world, still serves as a vital trade route between African-European markets, and beyond. <sup>iv</sup>

Ethiopia and Eritrea are strategically imminent to Europe and the Middle East and with their easy access to the major ports of the region, facilitating international trade. Djibouti is located on the north eastern coast of Africa, near the Red Sea and Bab el Mandeb strait, and is of great geopolitical relevance due to its geographic location along the strategic maritime chokepoint that guarantees the flow of oil, natural resources, minerals and trade and commerce. Somalia also sits on the Gulf of Aden, one of the world's most important shipping routes where thousands of vessels pass every year. Due to its geographic location, the stability of the Horn depends on the stability of Somalia.<sup>v</sup>



## Current Challenges Present in the Region

These factors have contributed to the civil conflict and internal unrest, which in turn has drawn significant attention from external powers to exploit and to safeguard their strategic interests in the region.

## **ETHIOPIA**

Ethiopia is currently grappling with a brutal conflict between the Tigray government against the central one in Addis Ababa for two years now, which has resulted in an ethnic divide within the country. The instability was more than just a military conflict between the two sides, as the civilians also joined the war. As a result of the ensuing humanitarian blockade, millions of people are in desperate need of food and other social amenities due to climate change.<sup>vi</sup>

The civil war started on November 2020, between Abiy Ahmed's government and the Tigray people's liberation front (TPLF). The crisis has its origins in Ethiopia's federal governing system, in which multiple ethnic groups have controlled the region's affairs. The TPLF had already ruled for three decades till Abiy Ahmed became the Prime Minister in 2018. He forged a new political party – "Prosperity party" with all Ethiopian representatives and alienated TPLF members by depriving Tigrayans of authority in government. Tigrayans accused the administration of corruption, power grab, and failure to hold elections. In response to an attack on the government's military station, Ethiopia's central government launched a military offensive against TPLF that transformed the political crisis into a civil war.<sup>vii</sup>

This conflict has caused a humanitarian catastrophe in the region triggering refugee problems in neighbouring countries like Sudan as well as massacres, executions, food crises, crime against women and destruction of regional infrastructure. It has raised tensions on the Nile River as Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and many other countries rely on the river for their water requirements.<sup>viii</sup> It has serious ramifications on the Horn's economy, employment, migration, and food supply demands. It has also

allowed jihadist groups like Al-Shabaab, Al-Qaeda and Al-Ittihad al Islamiyah (AIAI) to establish bases in the region due to internal weaknesses.<sup>ix</sup>

Ethiopia is also facing a debt crisis as a result of civil war, the Covid-19 pandemic and a decline in the growth of foreign investments. In 2021, the national debt of Ethiopia amounted to around US\$ 44.07 billion. Ethiopia has requested a debt treatment under the G20 common framework for debt relief to reduce debt service obligations to achieve moderate debt vulnerability.<sup>x</sup>

Ethiopia's stability is crucial for India as the two countries share a strong bilateral partnership. Long-term peace will help India to safeguard the \$5 billion investment in various areas like agriculture, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals etc. India and Ethiopia also share a good working relationship at the UN Security Council as Ethiopia has supported India on various issues like Kashmir and the UNSC expansion at multilateral platforms.<sup>xi</sup>

## **TERRORISM IN SOMALIA**

Somalia is a failed state following the overthrow of Siyad Barre's regime in 1991. This was the period when terrorism was at its peak in several parts of the country. The only legitimate authority in Mogadishu is the federal government. Somalia has a long shoreline, and its weak borders allow for the unrecorded movement of weapons, currency, illegal trade, and people. This creates insecurity due to a lack of good governance, checks and balances and political structure which opens a safe door for terrorists to operate beyond the legislation. For the past two decades, Somalian authorities have been fighting against Al-Shabaab, linked with Al-Qaeda,

which is trying to establish a Shariah-run state in Somalia. It still controls substantial territories in the northern and southern regions.<sup>xii</sup>

Somalia remains a direct security threat as a passage through which goods and people flow unchecked into other African countries like Ethiopia and Djibouti. The emergence of terrorism has become a major security challenge not just for Somalia, but also for the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea basin and the Indian Ocean. The Hayat hotel in Somalia's capital Mogadishu was attacked in August 2022.<sup>xiii</sup> In October, a car bomb and shooting attack on a hotel in the Somali city of Kismayu killed nine people before security forces ended the siege at the hotel and killed the attackers.<sup>xiv</sup> Apart from this, Somalia has seen a rise in piracy off its coast, which besides affecting shipping, has hampered the supply of humanitarian aid to thousands of Somalis and have harmed the economies of the region.

India supports Somalia and the African Union in their stand against terrorism because both countries have longstanding bilateral and diplomatic ties. As a part of this, India has contributed to peacekeeping efforts in Somalia. The UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II) was the second phase of intervention in Somalia, during which Indian forces provided humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation work.<sup>xv</sup> India has also aided Somalia by donating USD 2 billion to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Indian Navy has been conducting anti-piracy operations and patrolling in Somalia and the Gulf of Aden.

### **THE TRIANGULAR CONFLICT OVER THE NILE**

The Nile is one of the longest rivers in Africa, providing livelihood to one-fifth of the continent's population. It has three major streams: The Blue Nile, The Atbara and The White Nile. In 1929, Egypt and Great Britain signed the original Nile water agreement. Countries including Ethiopia,



Kenya and Uganda refused to recognise the agreement's legality as they were not parties to it. In 1959, the water allocations were renegotiated between Egypt and Sudan without the involvement of Ethiopia.<sup>xvi</sup>

In 2011, Ethiopia commenced the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), without the participation of Egypt and Sudan. Ethiopia considers the construction of GERD to be critical for hydropower generation, drought mitigation and for national development. It will protect large reservoirs and profit riparian countries to acquire electricity generated by the reservoir's water. While Ethiopia has pronounced that the dam would enhance regional economic integration and also meet the energy and food demands of its people and neighbouring countries, the project is regarded as a threat to Egypt's and Sudan's water supplies. Tensions between these three countries over Blue Nile water allotment have become a key security challenge in the region. Egypt fears that the construction will negatively impact water supplies and also provide Ethiopia with more dominance over the power supply, ultimately weakening its own position in the region. Sudan is stuck between Egypt's and Ethiopia's competing interests, which also endangers its dam projects and makes it difficult for the government to handle its other development projects.<sup>xvii</sup>

In February 2022, Ethiopia stated that it is open to negotiating the GERD with Egypt and Sudan. Initially, there were debates among them about the filling of reservoirs. However, the third phase of filling has been completed successfully, with no negative consequences for Egypt, Sudan, or the riparian states.<sup>xviii</sup>

## **DROUGHT AND HUNGER CRISIS**

Despite its relevance, the Horn of Africa remains one of the poorest regions of the world with over 146 million people in desperate need of food, living in extreme hunger and poverty. Russia-Ukraine war has further exacerbated the region's humanitarian crisis.<sup>xix</sup>

## **STRATEGIC PRESENCE OF LEADING GLOBAL POWERS & THEIR MOVES**

The region has emerged as a “tug of war” between powerful countries seeking dominance in the region, by building military bases in these countries and entering into business partnerships with them. The substantial increase in the foreign presence includes a wide range of actors operating with the associated development of military facilities and logistics hubs in the coastal areas of the Red Sea basin and the Horn. Increasing Chinese economic and military related activities are changing the geopolitical dynamics in the region, as well as opening up avenues for development and integration. This has led to the region accommodating a large number of ports and military facilities for countries such as China, the US, Japan and European nations. In recent years, countries such as UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey have also increased their influence on port politics and infrastructural development of the region.

### **CHINA**

China has built its footprint in the region as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and maritime sea route for infrastructure projects. These include the Mombasa-Nairobi railway link, the Addis-Djibouti railway line, which will connect to Eritrea coasts, a naval station at Djibouti which serves as a key role in China's vision for Africa, construction of the African Union headquarters, military hardware markets in Ethiopia and massive investments in ports such as Doraleh multipurpose port, oil sectors,

etc.<sup>xxxxi</sup> To protect its marine lines of communication, China is fully aware of the importance of chokepoints like the Bab el Mandeb strait. Hence, it has established its military station at Djibouti along the Indian Ocean coast, which the Chinese government views as a tool for advancing its economic interests and a venue for pursuing naval diplomacy.<sup>xxii</sup> According to satellite photographs taken on August 18, 2022, the Chinese facility in Djibouti is now fully operational and supports Chinese warships stationed in the Indian Ocean.<sup>xxiii</sup> Even a Chinese type-071 battleship was observed taking part in a variety of military and civilian tasks.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Beijing has become a major diplomatic and economic partner in the region by using soft power diplomacy to guarantee its energy needs and fulfil its political motives in the region. The forum on China-Africa cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022-24) intends to strengthen “China-Africa development relations”. This initiative is expected to establish peace and stability, improve infrastructure, strengthen food security and open up additional doors for diverse economic growth of African nations.<sup>xxv</sup> China has also formulated the “China- Africa cooperation vision 2035” to assist African nations in finding solutions to their challenges by conducting joint military exercises, training programs, combating terrorism, counter-piracy operations, and assuring cyber security to build a safer Africa.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Above all, China is portraying itself as a regional security provider, pursuing stability in the region to secure its million-dollar investments and overseas assets.<sup>xxvii</sup> In June 22, it sponsored the “Horn of Africa Peace, Good Governance and Development” conference in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. It had appointed a Chinese Special Envoy to the Horn to showcase that apart from its economic ventures in the region, it is also taking steps toward soft diplomacy to address the region’s security crisis.<sup>xxviii</sup> The special envoy Xue Bing communicated that President Xi Jinping had proposed the Global Development Initiative and Global

Security Initiative to contribute to the peaceful development in the Horn of Africa through Belt and Road cooperation between China and Africa.<sup>xxix</sup> It is also playing a role as a contributor to regional peace by actively participating in UN missions in South Sudan, Sudan, Liberia, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo to secure its foothold in Africa, secure Chinese economic interests and protect Chinese citizens abroad.<sup>xxx</sup>

There have been many debates and questions on China's commitment to its non-intervention stance in its engagement with Africa. While China routinely declares that it does not interfere with the internal affairs of other countries and attaches no political conditions to economic cooperation with Africa<sup>xxx</sup>, Chinese development initiatives in Africa have resulted in a zero-sum game. Undoubtedly China has helped African nations through its financial incentives but many nations such as Ethiopia and Djibouti are experiencing debt crises. Clearly, the entire goal of the Chinese non-intervention policy, sponsoring peace conferences, or easing loans to African countries is to fulfil its political agendas in the region.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Currently, China owns most of the Djibouti's debt, which represents more than 70% of the nation's GDP. China has used the same debt trap diplomacy strategy with Doraleh port in Djibouti as it did with Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Both in Djibouti and Sri Lanka, China has made investments in ports, railway lines and infrastructure through its Belt and Road initiative projects. Both soon ran into debt and when that debt became a burden, they were forced to give majority control over the ports in the lieu of repayment. China has also used these ports strategically to get favourable access to their natural assets and also to gain easy access to the important trade routes that run along the Indian Ocean between Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

## **UNITED STATES**

The US has operated in the Horn since the era of the Cold War. The protection of vital maritime passages like the Bab el Mandeb strait and the Red Sea, as well as geopolitical and geoeconomic factors including anti-terrorism, energy security, the flow of oil and anti-piracy, led the US to establish its presence in the region. As a result of the 9/11 attacks, it immediately changed its security strategy and deployed its military in the region as a part of the “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOT). To combat radical Islamic terrorism, Operation Enduring Freedom-Horn of Africa (OEF-HOA) was launched in 2002.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It has strengthened its military presence in Somalia recently to conduct drone strikes and special forces operations against Al-Shabaab at its Baledogle base which was attacked by terrorists in 2019.<sup>xxxv</sup> It has also made significant efforts to fund and support African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) by providing training to Somali Danab special forces (Somali National Army).

The US has also established its primary base of operations for US-Africa command in Camp Lemonnier just a few miles from the Chinese base at Djibouti. Then US President Barack Obama stated, “Camp Lemonnier is tremendously vital not only to our activities throughout the Horn of Africa but throughout the region.” From Africa to the Gulf, the base serves as a focal point for aerial operations and surveillance missions.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The US is also moving forward with its commercial links with African nations under its new strategy “Prosper Africa” which aims to strengthen economic and bilateral connections, increase market access for US exports and encourage sustainable growth in the region.

Similarly, the UK has a military installation at Camp Lemonnier and a British Army training unit in Kenya. It has deployed special forces to undertake counter-terrorism operations in Djibouti and contributed its armed personnel to United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to provide training for the Somali National army under AMISOM at Baidoa

and Mogadishu.<sup>xxxvii</sup> China was not the only country to appoint special envoys to the Horn of Africa; the US and the UK did the same.

## **INDIA**

India has historical ties with Africa, particularly with countries in the Horn of Africa such as Ethiopia and Djibouti. The Red Sea and the Bab el Mandeb strait are important for securing India's economic interests and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) because these are the channels through which India's energy, oil and gas requirements pass. It has massive investments in oil reserves and energy supplies in this region. India will suffer on the diplomatic as well as the economic front if the Horn of Africa continues to experience crises like domestic unrest, terrorism, and humanitarian problems because the area offers future investment opportunities. Therefore, the stability and security of the region have direct and indirect ramifications for India.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

India has a limited footprint in the region as compared to China and the Chinese activities in the region towards anti-piracy patrols and freedom of navigation, its presence in key strategic locations and its ever-growing influence in the region are inimical to India's maritime security interests and its influence. India's trade with Africa remains far below China's and China aims to be Africa's most reliable economic partner by 2035 under China-Africa cooperation Vision.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Since PM Modi took office in 2014, India has boosted its investment in Africa. India's strategy for Africa is determined by PM Modi's ten guiding Kampala principles defined in July 2018, that serve as the foundation for India's engagement in Africa.<sup>xl</sup> It is now Africa's fourth-largest trading partner, with a total of USD 89.5 billion in bilateral trade (2021-22). At the recent "India-Africa Forum Summit 2022" Dr. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India has expressed strong commitment to growth and

development of India-Africa relations under India's Africa policy that provides insights into the importance of Africa to India.<sup>xli</sup> India has invested in 193 projects in various sectors such as solar electrification, power plants, transmission lines, etc. Also, African countries are home to around 3 million Indian diasporas.<sup>xliixliiii</sup> On 3rd October 2022, Indian Navy along with the navies of Brazil and South Africa participated in a trilateral naval exercise in Port Elizabeth in Namibia to tackle common maritime threats in the Indian Ocean.<sup>xliv</sup>

The civilisational links between India and Africa are maturing into strong partnerships, with defence cooperation being one of the potential areas of convergent interests. On the side-lines of the Defence expo 2022 held at Gujarat, India's growing global influence and the high priority accorded to India-Africa engagement in defence and security field was visible as fifty African countries, including 20 Defence Ministers, seven CDS/Service Chiefs and eight Permanent Secretaries African nations took part in the India Africa Defence Dialogue (IADD) in Gandhinagar. India's Defence Minister, Shri Rajnath Singh indicated India's readiness to fulfil security requirements of African nations and it was welcomed by all those in attendance. IADD will also look into new areas of collaboration and convergence for mutual engagement, including capacity building, cyber security, maritime security, UN peacekeeping operations, counterterrorism, and work for open and free oceans.<sup>xlv</sup> IADD will not only enhance India's defence footprint in Africa but it will bring politicians, scholars, business people and strategists in the same platform to foster opportunities for sustained and intensive dialogue between stakeholders from India and Africa.<sup>xlvi</sup>

## **ROAD MAP**

India needs to re-engage the region strategically by using its historical ties with Africa through soft power diplomacy. India's democratic tradition and values can act as a strength in dealing with African nations which can make it a more suitable partner for the region as compared to China or any other Western powers in cooperating on African related issues. India should use mediation diplomacy between Ethiopia and Tigrayan forces by introducing confidence-building measures and encouraging them to identify areas of cooperation to implement the ceasefire process. India should suggest parameters for a more viable truce such as credible monitoring benefits. <sup>xlvii</sup>

In addition to contributing to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, India should increase its military engagement with the continent by assisting in the training of African countries' armed forces because it is high time for them to fight against their own problems rather than relying on outside military support. South Africa is the only African country to have international representation in organisations such as G20 and BRICS while nations like Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Mali are severely underrepresented in global platforms. India should take advantage of its membership in multilateral platforms and strategic alliances such as "Quadrilateral security dialogue" (QUAD) by asking the member states to allow the representation of African nations along the Indian Ocean in the recent "Quad plus initiative". India should also guide these countries in incorporating democracy into their political system by hosting conferences, facilitating scholarship programs and emphasising more on people-to-people exchange rather than ministerial visits. <sup>xlviii</sup>

It should collaborate with like-minded nations for these initiatives. For example, given their shared interest in Africa, Japan and India should collaborate to form a partnership in Africa's growth and speed up the



process of effective resolution to their issues. As the world's strongest navies, a major step should be taken by India-Japan to conduct a naval drill such as "JIMEX" (India-Japan bilateral naval exercise) that will include the navies of Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and other African nations with converging interests in the Indian Ocean region to combat piracy along the Somali coast. <sup>xlix</sup>

The region offers an opportunity for facilitating private sector expansion. India should identify a few economic areas to cooperate in the region such as pharmaceutical, agriculture, technology and infrastructure. However, it needs to catch up with China which has a superior track record than any other foreign power when it comes to the completion of projects in the region.<sup>l</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Horn of Africa has immense strategic significance in contemporary geopolitics. The region is currently most vulnerable to radical Islamic terrorism, especially in Somalia, Eritrea, Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria.<sup>li</sup>

No doubt, India is taking considerable efforts to strengthen its relations with the Horn of Africa and the continent as a whole, but India has to ensure that its diplomatic, military and economic efforts continue to be relevant to Africa's evolving requirements.

Even while economic and commercial connections with the region have grown in recent years, it would be incorrect to say that India has achieved its full potential in the presence of China. Between India and the Horn, there are still a number of gaps and issues that needs to be addressed.

A good part of the resources devoted to military activities should be shifted to help the UN missions to deal with mounting food insecurity and climatic challenges in the region. This region needs a sustained plan to stabilise

these countries and help them toward a democratic path, peace and an accountable system of government.

India should work with nations with similar interests in the region, such as the US and Japan, to create a combined threat assessment provision that would help combat terrorism by sharing intelligence, providing technology and training their troops.

### **CERTIFICATE**

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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