

MIDDLE EAST

Shifting Tides: Egypt's Strategic Deployment to Somalia and Its Regional Implications

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At the end of August, Egypt began sending equipment, ammunition and a small number of soldiers to Somalia, with the aim of reaching ten thousand troops in the coming months. Egypt intends to be the main force in the peacekeeping mission announced by the African Union to replace the current ATMIS. This initiative follows the Defense Pact signed in early August between Egyptian President Abdel al-Sisi and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, which was designed to reinforce ties between Egypt and Somalia. The signing of the defense agreement came amid growing tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia. The strengthening of Somali-Egyptian relations marks a significant shift in Egypt's engagement in the Red Sea. At the same time, it is bound to change the regional balance and dynamics. The Red Sea region is facing significant instability. While the region is already known for its conflicts, it has never before experienced such simultaneous and interconnected sources of instability. Sudan's internal conflict, the delicate situation in South Sudan, tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia, power struggles in Djibouti, Houthi attacks causing insecurity in the Red Sea, ethnic power shifts within Ethiopia, al-Shabaab's offensive against the government in Mogadishu, and the rise of an Islamic State affiliate in Puntland are all contributing to the region's insecurity and conflict. It's like a hornet's nest in there. Why did Cairo decide to intervene in such a hornet's nest, and what are the possible consequences of its intervention?

Since 2020, Egypt has reasserted its influence in the south by placing a new emphasis on its Africa policy. This shift in political strategy also indicates a shift in the perception of Egypt's desired role in the region. While acknowledging the longstanding pan-Arab aspect of Egyptian policy dating back to the Nasser era, President al-Sisi has gradually reasserted the importance

of the country's Mediterranean and African ties. As a result, Egypt's foreign policy has begun to exert influence along a vertical North-South axis, as opposed to the East-West axis that prevailed during the Mubarak years. The Red Sea region, including the Nile Basin, is now part of this new strategic framework. Here, too, there has been a gradual change, especially in the rivalry with Ethiopia. For two decades, tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia centered on the Nile River. Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile led to a crisis in its relations with Egypt at the turn of the millennium. This mega water project shifted the balance of power between the countries along the Nile. As an upstream riparian, Ethiopia gained a significant strategic advantage that it had not fully exploited due to its limited domestic resources and capabilities. Egypt was particularly concerned about the impact of filling the dam's reservoir on downstream water flows. The GERD gives Ethiopia leverage over Egypt and the potential to provide cheap energy to other energy-hungry countries in the region, thereby increasing its influence. In addition, Sudan has been caught in the middle of the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt.

Therefore, the completion of the GERD created a new reality for Egypt, which had to adjust its approach to the region and widen the areas of contention. In response, President al-Sisi pursued a double-track strategy. On the one hand, Egyptian President al-Sisi has sought to politically isolate Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and reduce Addis Ababa's influence in regional affairs. To achieve this goal, Egypt has reinvigorated its diplomatic presence in the region, expanding beyond Sudan. President al-Sisi has steadily improved relations with most Nile riparian states in an effort to form a united front against Ethiopia. Cairo has engaged in shuttle diplomacy through high-level visits to regional states. These included al-Sisi's first visit to South Sudan and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly's participation in the inauguration ceremony of the Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. Even within institutions such as the African Union, Egypt has been actively building alliances against Ethiopia. Cairo has used various soft power tactics, exploiting inter-Arab and inter-religious ties. Its strongest card, however, is its role as an energy partner. Over the past decade, Egypt has become a key energy hub linking East and West. It has also focused on contributing to the development of sub-Saharan Africa by stepping up its electrification efforts. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has consistently expressed Egypt's willingness to share 20 percent of its energy surplus with the countries of the Horn of Africa, a

move intended to foster goodwill with Ethiopia's adversaries. For this reason, Egypt has promoted development programs in the energy sector. On the other hand, Egypt has become increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa and Ethiopian affairs through a less-visible approach. Following the outbreak of conflict in Tigray, Egypt sought to exploit the situation indirectly. Cairo supported Sudan's decision to reclaim the disputed territories in the al-Fashaqa area. This Egyptian decision raised tensions with Addis Ababa and its main ally at the time, Eritrea. While there is no direct evidence of support for the TPLF's actions, Sudan, particularly the Sudanese Armed Forces under General al-Burhan, has on several occasions offered shelter and assistance to several Tigrayan officers and fighters. The Egyptians have been indirectly trying to disrupt Ethiopian stability for some time. Together with Sudan, they have been supporting another insurgency in the Metekel region near the GERD site. The conflict in Metekel, named after the region along the Black Nile in the Benshangul-Gumuz regional state, has pitted the Gumuz Liberation Front (GLF) against federal authorities since 2019. Addis Ababa has consistently accused Sudan and Egypt of providing aid and resources to the Gumuz militias to destabilize the region and prevent the GERD plant from coming online. The practice of supporting insurgencies and opposition groups within a rival state is not unique to Egypt. Rather, it has been a common strategy in the security dynamics of the Horn of Africa since the region's states gained independence. Operating under the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," countries in the region have contributed to instability and conflict for many years, making the Horn of Africa one of the most unstable regions in the world.

The agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland marks a new chapter in the ongoing rivalry between Ethiopia and Egypt, with implications for regional dynamics and politics. The focus of Egyptian foreign policy in the region has now shifted to the Red Sea. As a result, the center of regional politics and rivalries is moving from the Nile to the coast. Several internal and external factors have contributed to this shift. The agreement between Addis Ababa and Hargeisa has unmistakably confirmed Ethiopia's desire for maritime access, which has been a major concern for Ethiopian leaders over the years. Economic and strategic motives drive this desire to establish a route to the Red Sea. Historically, Ethiopia has viewed itself as the dominant power in the region. It is therefore frustrated by the growing involvement of non-regional actors in the Red Sea, an area it considers to be its primary sphere of influence. Hence Ethiopia's decision to

build a navy. At the same time, Egypt has traditionally viewed the sea between Suez and Aden as an Egyptian lake. Therefore, it seeks to expand its presence in the region, taking advantage of its more advanced and better equipped regional navy. It's also important to consider external factors. In recent years, the Red Sea region has become a theater of competition among various external actors, such as the United States and China. It serves as a small-scale representation of the global dynamics of alliance, competition, and cooperation. When viewed in the context of its reach into the Indian Ocean, the region's geostrategic importance becomes even more pronounced. It's likely that major global rivalries will intensify and play out in this macro-region. In this sense, the Red Sea could potentially become what the straits – the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles – were in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Therefore, presence in and control of the Red Sea could become crucial in future geopolitics. In the aftermath of the October 7 terrorist attacks, both dimensions have assumed greater urgency. The Israeli invasion of Gaza, in response to Hamas attacks, triggered the actions of the Houthi group, which disrupts the free passage of commercial vessels. Initially, Egypt didn't prioritize the Houthi actions due to its challenges in dealing with the Palestinian issue. However, it later realized the potential impact on its already fragile economy. A reduction in shipping through the Suez Canal could have a serious impact on political stability. So when tensions rose between Ethiopia and Somalia and Mogadishu sought support, Cairo saw an opportunity to establish a footprint in the region.

However, many concerns remain about Egypt's decision. First, it remains uncertain whether Egypt has the capacity and effectiveness to maintain a presence in such a volatile environment. The willingness to lead the AU's upcoming peacekeeping mission risks conflicting with the reality that Egyptian troops lack operational expertise. Another worrying issue is the threat posed by al-Shabaab. Despite their shared anti-Ethiopian stance, the Egyptian military is likely to be targeted by the terrorist group. Any resulting casualties could expose the Egyptian military's shortcomings and exacerbate the country's internal problems. In addition, Cairo is currently dealing with several crises in its neighborhood, including the Gaza crisis, the internal conflict in Sudan, and the ongoing instability in Libya. The al-Sisi government is already under considerable pressure, and an expanded presence in Somalia could add to these challenges. There are also concerns about how other regional players will react. While Saudi Arabia

appears to approve of Egypt's involvement in Somalia, the attitudes of other countries, particularly Turkey and the UAE, are different. As a result, Egypt's decision could reignite broader regional rivalries and upset the period of general appeasement. Consequently, there's a sense that President al-Sisi is embarking on a risky venture that could leave him in a vulnerable position.

Since the arrival of the first Egyptian aircraft, attention has shifted to possible developments between Ethiopia and Egypt. However, it's unlikely that there will be a conflict between the two countries on Somali soil. Ethiopia is redeploying troops along its borders with Somalia and reorganizing its defenses. The decision to relocate some logistics sites, especially air bases, was made a long in advance because of the instability in Amhara and Oromia. Addis Ababa has no interest in and cannot afford to escalate tensions with both Egypt and Somalia. The period between November and December is also expected to be very critical. Somaliland will hold elections in a few weeks, and Mogadishu is trying to influence them. Tensions and even clashes are likely. Ethiopian troops will have to withdraw from Somali soil at this sensitive time. It will be crucial for the international community, especially the United States, to monitor the situation closely. Despite the delicate days in Washington due to the presidential election, the United States will need to maintain a constant presence in the region and use its influence with all parties to prevent actions that could lead to a large-scale conflict.

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