

The Horn of Africa proper is a region that has been beset by interminable conflicts within and between the countries in it – Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. Historically less impacted by Western colonialism, the region has been engaged in a turbulent process of reorganisation, including nation and state formation during the decades since decolonisation. The question of ethnic identity has been and continues to be crucial in this process. Three new states/entities – Eritrea, South Sudan and Somaliland – have been created in this region during the last two to three decades through splits from established states, and the pressure towards further fragmentation still continues to be a threat to the region.

On the other hand, this is a region where the inhabitants have a historical and geopolitical connection, economic interdependence, and common external challenges, and equal with the pressure for fragmentation, there has also been a realisation of and move towards regional integration which has been gaining momentum. The disintegration of Somalia, which had led to countries of the region divided and supporting proxies, now shows hope of slow improvement; the wars in Darfur and the southern fringes of Sudan are indeed subsiding with processes to solve them afoot, and the most devastating Ethio-Eritrean border war is finally showing signs of a solution. In fact, there is a consensus among all the countries of the region to move towards the formation of a “Horn of Africa Economic Community” similar to the East African Community. A meeting of the leaders of all five Horn countries was planned to be convened in Khartoum this past April and was only postponed because neither the Ethiopian Prime Minister nor the Eritrean President wanted to sit with each other at the time.

With the very positive democratising and liberalising changes in Ethiopia, and the new Prime Minister’s acceptance to ‘implement without condition’ the Ethiopia-Eritrea Arbitration Commission’s decision on the border between the two countries, Ethiopia and Eritrea have now agreed to solve their other issues – ports, freedom of movement of peoples, economic cooperation, etc. – amicably. An Eritrean delegation visited Ethiopia this month for the first time in twenty years, and the two sides agreed to quickly move towards formalising and start immediate air links between them. Eritrea’s tensions with Sudan and Djibouti were extensions of its conflict with Ethiopia and are expected to be resolved, along with the normalisation of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Although still facing multitudes of internal and bilateral conflicts, the Horn of Africa seems to be slowly turning a corner towards stabilisation and possible longer-term regional cooperation and integration.

The Horn region has tremendous economic potential. Despite its riches in natural resources, and the strategic geographical advantage the region has straddling the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the upper part of the Indian Ocean, there has been little development in all the countries of the region. Extensive agricultural and mining potential (particularly in gold, and possibly oil and gas) exists in Sudan. With the completion of the Millennium Dam in Ethiopia, which will allow the regulated flow of water and the generation of necessary power, extensive agricultural production and the development of agro-industry is possible in Sudan. Ethiopia has both agricultural, mining and industrial development potential with its over one hundred million inhabitants, a formidable productive force and market. The recent changes that followed the popular unrest and pressure for greater political and economic liberalisation in the country give much hope for greater stabilisation and the opening of opportunities for internal and international investment. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has announced that as a start of pushing towards a market-oriented economy, the government will open the two biggest government-owned monopolies in the country, Ethio-telecom and Ethiopian Airlines, for internal and external investment. With the normalisation of relations with Eritrea and Ethiopia’s ability to use Eritrean ports, Ethiopia would be able to exploit its huge potash deposits in the

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Danakil border area (only about 80 km from the sea), reduce overall transport costs and enhance its external trade.

The potential for Eritrea to develop its maritime facilities and tourism as well as small industry is also great, and it can be expected that the end of war and normalisation of relations with Ethiopia will necessarily lead to political reform and a degree of economic liberalisation in the country that would allow private investment, as is already being hinted by the current government. It was not possible to think of political stability and economic development in Somalia in the foreseeable future, but in the past two years, a Somali National Government has been peacefully elected, a National Federal Constitution adopted, borders between the federal states drawn and accepted (even if Puntland has border disputes with Somaliland which has led to sporadic clashes), and governments established in all the federal states through a process of recognised elections. Sporadic fighting continues by Shabab militias against the federal and state governments, but such fighting has more or less been contained within Somalia, diminishing the direct impact on the security of the neighbouring states (Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya). Possibilities and initiatives to address the Shebab and Somaliland issues politically are also appearing.

A complicating factor to peace and stability within the the Horn is the conflicting economic and political interests and relations Horn states have with countries in the Arabian Gulf. This has led to searches for allies, staging grounds, the economic advantages within the Horn and to Horn countries, shifting alliances with the feuding nations across the sea primarily to gain leverage against their neighbouring adversaries, thus increasing tension within the Horn. However, the general opinion in the Horn is now slowly shifting towards advocating the development of a common Horn strategy to defend the political stability and economic interests of the region. It may be too early to predict a short-run shift in strategy or distancing from current alliances across the sea, but all indications are that the impact of the Arab conflict across the sea on the security, stability and economic development of the countries of the Horn is more likely to increasingly become a uniting rather than dividing factor between them.



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