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## A SCRAMBLE OF EXTERNAL POWERS AND LOCAL AGENCY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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The Horn of Africa rarely makes international media headlines. Issues such as the Tigray conflict, extreme drought conditions and the Nile waters dispute have gained occasional global attention, but consistent and contextualized coverage is often missing. Nevertheless, the Horn is a strategically important and dynamic African sub-region that has been subject to the interplay of foreign interests and local forces for centuries.

Despite recent efforts to propel economic development, external players in the Horn of Africa have often engaged in rivalries that have had destabilising consequences for the wider region. Their involvement in the Horn of Africa has mostly been adventurous and self-serving without much concern for the repercussions of their actions. Meanwhile, local state and non-state actors have taken advantage of foreign interests to strengthen their position. This analysis suggests that external actors should tone down their rivalries and engage more responsibly in the Horn of Africa to encourage local players to work for mutual benefit.

Events in the Horn of Africa usually often fail to capture international media focus. However, the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray, the deepening drought in the region, and the Nile waters dispute have periodically breached the global news threshold. The Tigray conflict, which initially started in November 2020, recently resumed after the humanitarian ceasefire intended to set the stage for negotiations over a political solution was broken. Like the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, the prolonged drought conditions in part of the Horn of Africa have disrupted livelihoods and resulted in massive displacement and dependence on external food aid. However, the necessary assistance has not been forthcoming, resulting in a failure to prevent famine-like conditions taking hold in parts of the African sub-region.

External involvement in the Horn of Africa dates back hundreds of years, as major powers and regionally influential state and non-state actors have found the sub-region strategically important. As a result, they have entered into periodic power rivalries while seeking to influence the political, economic and social development of the local states and societies. However, although external involvement over recent decades has encouraged economic development, the competition between foreign powers for influence and local actors' exploitation of such rivalries have favoured the persistence of endemic political instability in the Horn of Africa.

What are the destabilising repercussions of external involvement in the region? And, what is the role of local actors in these dynamics?

**Figure 1. The Horn of Africa**



Source: *United Nations maps.*

## Geographical and historical context

The Horn of Africa mainly refers to the Somali Peninsula, including the coastal lowlands of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and the interior arid extensions rising to the temperate Ethiopian highlands. Narrowly defined, it covers the current states of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia and their diverse peoples, who inhabit the generally resource-rich land and sea territories. The Horn of Africa occupies a strategic location on the African shores of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, which connect it with the southern Arabian Peninsula via the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a narrow stretch of sea approximately 26 kilometres wide through which a significant proportion of world trade passes.

For centuries, external powers have competed to control the strategically located Horn, once the seat of great empires. During the European imperialist scramble, the Horn was among the first areas in Africa to experience the horrors of external invasion and the imposition of colonialism. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the French bought land on the shores of the Gulf of Tadjoura from the local Afar Sultan and went on to establish French Somaliland (today Djibouti). This formed part of a larger plan to establish a string of French territories from the Atlantic to the Red Sea and thereby disrupt

the British attempt to connect Cairo and Cape Town via continuous British-controlled territory. However, after their **diplomatic defeat at Fashoda** (today South Sudan), the French were forced to withdraw.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other colonial competitors, namely the Italians and the British, had established themselves in what is now Eritrea (Italian Eritrea), federal Somalia (Italian Somaliland) and Somaliland (British Somaliland). The colonial scramble also involved Ethiopia, which, as a significant local power, initially beat back invading Italians at the **Battle of Adwa**, causing outrage in Europe, and then annexed Somali-inhabited Ogaden and Haud, which Britain ceded as a reward for Ethiopian support against raiding Somali groups.

Among the most tragic legacies of the partition of the Horn of Africa were the arbitrary borders thrown up by colonial treaties, which separated local population groups and forced them to live in territories of distinct political entities. As a result, **the Somalis**, for example, were divided among today's Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. The legacy of colonialism also contributed to the structure, governance and politics of the post-colonial state. Various European administrative cultures, together with authoritarianism, marginalisation, exclusion and violence, left a deep wound that has continued to fester since decolonisation. Although not formally colonised, imperial Ethiopia, a largely agrarian feudal polity, also continued with the tradition of autocratic governance.

## The Cold War, War on Terror, and renewed Chinese involvement

Post-colonial social, economic and political conditions, the perpetual weakness of states emerging from colonialism and a growing need for external financial resources meant states in the Horn of Africa were subjected to another wave of external involvement. In the heat of the Cold War (1947–1991), the competing superpowers (**United States [US]** and **Soviet Union**) aspired to maintain a level of control over the strategic Red Sea and Gulf of Aden maritime routes which connect the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean. By seeking local allies, they sought to build spheres of influence in the Horn sub-region, with Ethiopia considered the centrepiece. The 1974 Ethiopian revolution by communist officers sent shockwaves through the Horn of Africa as well as among external powers and led to a flurry of changing superpower alliances. Over the course of the 1970s, regional powers Egypt and subsequently Saudi Arabia also engaged in efforts to advance their interests, namely limiting Israeli influence, attempting to control the Red Sea, and promoting pan-Arabist and pan-Islamic agendas among the Horn's Muslim populations. At the end of the 1980s, the Cold War competition in the

Horn of Africa came to an end with the withdrawal of superpower support from its governments, which often faced potent, externally backed, armed local opposition groups. The Islamist military takeover in Sudan (1989) propelled the growth of political Islam as an ideological current in the sub-region, while regime collapses in Somalia and Ethiopia (1991) led to unprecedented crises.

Although the superpower competition in the Horn of Africa came to an end, by the second half of the 1990s foreign powers were again making their way to the sub-region. **Iran** and **China** took advantage of the **Afro-pessimism** prevalent in the West after the **Rwandan genocide** and **failed intervention in Somalia** and developed strong ties with **Sudan**. This contributed to the survival of the Islamist Sudanese government, which faced insurgencies, US-orchestrated international isolation and military incursions by neighbouring states. Eritrea's assertive foreign policy of challenging all its direct neighbours paved the way for Ethiopian antagonism and the onset of the Eritrean–Ethiopian War (1998–2000), the most devastating interstate conflict in post-Cold War Africa. Eritrea suffered a military defeat but gained a favourable verdict in the border dispute from the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission. Ethiopia, however, did not recognise the ruling, and politics in **the Horn of Africa** began to be characterised by an antagonism that also involved neighbouring Somalia and Sudan.

In 2002, following the September 11th attacks, the US revamped its engagement in the Horn. As part of Operation Enduring Freedom Washington established the Combined Joint Task Force -Horn of Africa, followed a few years later by the **United States Africa Command**, headquartered in Djibouti. The **US** approach has centred on security concerns, especially terrorism, in the wider Red Sea region and in this respect it enjoyed a honeymoon period with Ethiopia as its major partner until **the recent souring of relations** owing largely to the Tigray conflict.

Meanwhile, **China's** renewed engagement with Africa since the early 1990s has been mainly economic. During the first decades of revived relationship, China considered African resources vital for fuelling its industrial growth. While this has not altogether changed, China has more recently engaged in an effort to capture emerging African markets for its surplus exports through deepening economic engagement, which has, in turn, brought it significant political influence. After entering **Sudan** in the 1990s, **China** rapidly established relations with resource-rich African countries, offering generous loans, often for developing much-needed infrastructure, with the expectation of

collateral in extractive sectors. More recently, Chinese investors have acquired and built manufacturing and production facilities that now abound on the continent. Their access has been facilitated by the economic relations based on debt that African governments have accumulated through loans. On many occasions, the debt has reached barely manageable levels and some countries have begun to pay through political, economic and contractual concessions. This strategy, which some call "**debt-trap diplomacy**", has led to major Chinese influence in the Horn countries Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and to an extent Eritrea. It has also led to Beijing seeking to secure Chinese investments and business interests by increasing its military presence, initially through peacekeeping and more recently by starting to operate its first overseas naval support base next to Doraleh Port in Djibouti in 2017. This, in turn,

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has contributed to the further securitisation of the Red Sea/Horn of Africa neighbourhood, mainly involving great powers and proximate Arab states.

### Djibouti as an epitome of external power rivalries

Great power competition in the Horn of Africa is well exhibited in Djibouti. The small country is located on the African side of the strategic Red Sea chokepoint of Bab al-Mandab, which has attracted external power interest for a long time and is the main import–export route to Ethiopia. Due to Djibouti's strategic location the US has maintained the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa at Camp Lemonnier since 2002, while other countries, including **China**, **western European states**, **Japan** and **Saudi Arabia**, also have bases in the country. Chinese relations with Djibouti have been driven by economic statecraft to seek presence at the mouth of the Red Sea, which is seen as an essential strategic and logistics location in the "string of pearls" that form part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. In 2014, China looked for an opportunity to engage in port operations in Eritrea but also approached the Djibouti government for the same. Four years later, Djiboutian authorities took away **Dubai Ports World** (DP World)'s 30-year concession to operate the Doraleh Container Terminal and handed it over to the Hong Kong-based China Merchants, which has since signed a **\$3 billion contract** to expand the old Djibouti city port.

As part of Beijing's strategy to establish itself in Djibouti in the long term, Chinese creditors have provided extensive loans and built infrastructure to control the key logistics access to the Ethiopian market. By revamping the colonial Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway and accompanying highway, China has gained significant control over Ethiopia's main import–export route. Djibouti, which owes **over 70% of its total external debt to Chinese** creditors, and Ethiopia, which is estimated to have a barely sustainable debt of **almost \$14 billion** to China, have been overwhelmed by the Chinese economic presence. These countries exemplify the Chinese push for influence in this resource-rich region with significant market potential. Through its economic presence, China has gained opportunities to influence political decision-making and affirm its position in the Horn of Africa and more generally in the African continent.

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As a result, **China** has become the leading external actor in the Horn of Africa. It has partnered with most Horn governments, with one notable holdout – Somaliland, which has sought to align itself with the US and the West to gain international recognition for its **de facto independence**. Strategically located, Somaliland has forged close ties with the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** and Taiwan and continues to maintain a close relationship with Ethiopia. With the Berbera Corridor that connects Addis Ababa to the Gulf of Aden now operational, it provides an alternative import–export route for Ethiopia, even if for the time being Djibouti is likely to remain a more important strategic logistics and military hub. However, US interest in Somaliland in the context of the regional **US–China** competition may open new avenues for cooperation and regional realignments.

### The new scramble and local agency

Since the early 2000s, regional powers have joined the **new scramble for Africa**. Notably, in recent years the leading Persian Gulf states and Turkey have intensified their involvement in the Horn of Africa. In the case of the Gulf states, the rising oil prices and security concerns in the Horn and the Red Sea that resonate through the Arabian Peninsula have brought heightened competition. While higher food prices during the 2007–2008 financial crisis saw **Saudi Arabia** revive its breadbasket strategy and embark on controversial land acquisitions in Ethiopia and **Sudan**, the **UAE** used the DP World logistics conglomerate to

gain a strategic foothold in Djibouti and control over Ethiopia's import–export logistics lifeline to the Red Sea. Meanwhile, Iran, **Saudi Arabia's** main regional rival, established strong ties with Sudan and Eritrea, providing the latter with a platform to influence internal politics in **Yemen** across the narrowest stretches of the Red Sea. Qatar also got involved by establishing itself as a mediator and peacemaker in the Horn of Africa's various conflicts while facing **accusations of supporting Islamic movements**.

The 2011 Arab Spring revolts brought new turbulence to the Horn of Africa. The wave of revolutions particularly resonated in economically precarious Sudan, which is connected to the Arab world through its neighbours **Egypt** and **Saudi Arabia**. Fears of instability in the Horn extending to the Persian Gulf drove external Arab powers into an escalating competition over regional influence. After initially being involved in **Sudan**, religious and aid organisations from **Turkey** expanded their soft power activities in the context of the humanitarian emergency in Somalia, which, together with Turkish investment

and flourishing trade, converted Mogadishu into the cornerstone for Ankara's regional ambitions. The Turkish leadership then courted Ethiopia, which agreed to engage in economic cooperation, making Ankara one of the most influential regional actors in the Horn. Saudi–Iranian rivalry, particularly Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's attempts to thwart the revolutionary tendencies Doha, Tehran and Ankara were seen to encourage, engulfed the Horn. Offering generous financial and material assistance to Sudan, which suffered severe economic problems after the independence of South Sudan (2011), Saudi Arabia was able to **convince the Sudanese government to end its relationship with Iran**. Riyadh and its junior partner Abu Dhabi also successfully persuaded Asmara to downgrade its partnership with Tehran and in this way foil Iran's support of the Zaidi Shiite Houthi movement in **Yemen** through Eritrea.

The escalation of the civil war in Yemen in 2015, with the Houthi occupying most of the country and al-Qaeda active in the Arabian Peninsula, especially the east, had further repercussions in the nearby Horn of Africa. The intervention by the Saudi-led coalition seeking to minimise the regional threat of the Iran-aligned Houthi heightened rivalries among the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries** because Saudi Arabia and its closest allies singled out Qatar as having a destabilising impact in the region through its connections with Islamist movements, the Muslim Brotherhood and its **alleged close relations with what they considered terrorist groups, as well as Iran**. The leading Persian Gulf monarchies feared that Qatar,

**Iran** and **Turkey** would seek to encourage grassroots uprisings and revolutions, as occurred in Bahrain and Yemen, respectively, during the Arab Spring.

Consequently, in mid-2017, **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE** orchestrated the isolation of Qatar, which elevated tensions in the GCC and also involved the increasingly powerful **Turkey**. This tension was felt in the Horn of Africa, where the **Persian Gulf states and Turkey had competed for regional influence** in the context of the **intensifying great power rivalry between the US and China**. After initial involvement in Sudan, Turkish religious and aid organisations expanded their soft power activities in Somalia, which, together with Turkish investment and flourishing trade, made Mogadishu the cornerstone of Ankara's regional ambitions. The Turkish leadership then courted Ethiopia, which agreed to engage in economic cooperation, making Ankara one of the most influential regional actors in the Horn. Saudi Arabia and the UAE – expelled by Djibouti in 2015 in favour of **China** (although in 2016 Riyadh was allowed to establish a military base in the country) – also sought increasing influence in Ethiopia, the main potential market in the Horn of Africa. They first improved relations with Eritrea, with the **UAE** establishing a military base and refurbishing the port and airfield in Assab, while Abu Dhabi, through DP World, also established a presence in Berbera (Somaliland), and supported the Puntland and Jubaland federal states in Somalia despite falling out with the leadership in Mogadishu, which had come under strong Qatari and Turkish influence. This made Somalia a battleground of regional external influence between **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE** – which mainly supported the federal states and Somaliland – and **Qatar** and **Turkey**, which stood with the federal government. At the same time, other powers and neighbouring countries continued their involvement mainly through the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM, currently the **African Transition Mission in Somalia, ATMIS**) stabilisation force, as well as also having stakes in Somalia's internal politics.

At the same time, various governments in the Horn have flirted with **Russia**, which has aspired to establish a presence in the Red Sea region. Active in mineral extraction and security provision in various countries in interior north-eastern Africa, Russia seeks to also exert its power in the strategic waterway connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean where the Soviet Union used to have a presence. In 2017 Moscow struck a deal with the since-toppled Omar al-Bashir regime in Sudan to build a naval support base in Port Sudan, **which the current Sudanese military government has endorsed**. More recently, **Ethiopia signed a defence**

**pact with Russia** in the context of the Tigray conflict and **Eritrea has approached Russia for cooperation**, including offering its Red Sea ports for use by the Russian navy after the departure of the **UAE**, which had used the port city of Assab for its Yemen operations. Governments in the Horn countries seem interested in cooperation with Russia because it is seen to be able to deliver financial resources, arms and (private) military assistance, as well as diplomatic support, in exchange for raw materials, such as gold from Sudan and Eritrea.

### **Ethiopia: key to the Horn**

In 2018, Ethiopia underwent significant political changes. Following several years of incessant protests in the Oromo and Amhara regions, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led government allowed new reformist leadership to emerge under the premiership of a former security official and Oromo politician Abiy

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Ahmed Ali. This opened space for external influence by **Saudi Arabia** and the **UAE**, which had forged close relations with Eritrea. With the **US** in the background, **they engineered a remarkable rapprochement** between the two countries after almost two decades of rivalry following the Eritrean–Ethiopian War.

The reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea gave room for further collaboration among the Horn leaders. Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias Afwerki, respectively, invited the president of Somalia, Mohamed Abdullahi "Farmaajo", **to engage in tripartite cooperation and coordination of the affairs of the sub-region**. One of the main difficulties for the Ethiopian leadership was that the TPLF continued to wage formidable opposition against Prime Minister Abiy's political reforms and efforts to forge a new system of power after over two decades of ethnic federalism had institutionalised ethnonationalist political identities and encouraged alliances and feuds along those identity lines. The TPLF was also perceived as a threat in neighbouring Eritrea, where the highlands-based leadership seeks to emphasise "Eritreanness" as distinct from the Ethiopian Tigrayan highland identity to minimise the potential for ethnonationalist expansionism that threatened Eritrea in the past. Concerns about the TPLF's military strength and attempt to remain a significant political force led to the Tigray conflict in early November 2020.

International attention on the Tigray crisis and the perception of Ethiopia's central role in the Horn propelled external involvement. The Ethiopian government's allies intervened and assisted it in swiftly occupying most of Tigray. But the conflict intensified after the TPLF, which had established a regional militia, the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), as the main rebel formation, staged a successful counter-attack. The TDF then started advancing towards the capital, Addis Ababa, and **forged an alliance** with another significant rebel force, the Oromo Liberation Army, which led the Ethiopian government to reach out to its external partners for further support.

From the early stages of the conflict, the **US** criticised Addis Ababa for its conduct and **imposed sanctions** on

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Eritrean government-related individuals and entities. Claims of human rights violations and the lack of access to humanitarian aid affected Washington's position, which at times appeared to privilege the TPLF. Meanwhile, several other powers backed the Ethiopian government. Addis Ababa secured deliveries of **Chinese arms with Emirati logistical assistance**, as well as shipments of **Turkish** and Iranian weapons, which changed military fortunes on the ground and helped Ethiopian forces and associated militias stop the rebel advance and subsequently drive the TDF back to Tigray. Despite a **humanitarian ceasefire in March 2022**, aid to Tigray has not been sufficient to prevent a conflict-related food crisis **which has since escalated to famine-like conditions for part of the local population**. The fighting resumed in late August, **although the African Union effort to bring the parties to the negotiation table has shown some progress**.

### **Somalia: a battleground for external rivalries**

In recent years, rivalries between regional actors have particularly played out in Somalia. The external involvement has been driven by competition between **Persian Gulf powers** and **Turkey** for influence in the most fragile state in the Horn of Africa. In the 2017 presidential election, **Qatar** and the **UAE** led the behind-the-scenes support for their preferred candidates. Doha's assistance to Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo was instrumental to him gaining the presidency, which led to the alienation of the UAE, Mogadishu's close partner under the previous head of state Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. While Abu Dhabi preferred to continue working with the

Somali federal states and Somaliland – often at odds with the federal government – Ankara, **which some have accused of exploitation**, developed strong economic and political relations with Farmaajo's leadership. **Turkey** established a military base in Mogadishu in 2017 and has continued to support the federal administration by training security forces irrespective of its leadership. It has gained concessions to operate key infrastructure, such as the Mogadishu port, and **engaged in discussions** for cooperation in Somalia's hydrocarbon exploration after being **invited to explore oil offshore**.

In the delayed presidential election in May 2022, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud returned to the helm of power. He faces the daunting task of combatting al-Shabaab, the main violent anti-government militant group, which controls part of the country, while seeking to advance peace- and state-building and address the severe effects of recurrent drought which threatens to escalate into a famine. Known for his Emirati ties, Hassan Sheikh has reinforced relations with the UAE and **Saudi Arabia**, but he also seeks to maintain strong ties with **Turkey, Qatar** and great powers **US** and **China**.

### **The Nile waters dispute**

In recent years, the tension between **Egypt** and **Ethiopia** over the Nile waters has escalated, drawing in external powers. In **2011 Ethiopia unilaterally announced** the beginning of the construction of the Millennium Dam (currently the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam [GERD]) on the Blue Nile. Planned during the 1950s, the Ethiopian political elite consider the dam an exceptional example of its development efforts and a source of national pride. The announcement shocked Egypt, which has held a dominant position on the Nile's waters through **the 1959 treaty which allocated it 75% and Sudan 25% of the Nile's average annual flow**. Egypt engaged in diplomatic efforts in all riparian countries – and internationally – to secure an ideal share of the water. It seeks to ensure livelihoods (e.g. irrigation, electricity and household needs) and has insinuated the possibility of adopting military measures against what it considers an existential threat. Ethiopia, on the other hand, has insisted on the importance of electricity production to address its power needs and claims to reserve the right to engage in other water-related projects on the Blue Nile.

The Nile dispute has also directly involved **Sudan**, where the river is also an important source of water for agriculture, electricity production and consumption.

Sudan has long historical ties with Egypt, as well as **Saudi Arabia**, but it has periodically sided with **Ethiopia** in the dispute. However, the nearing completion of the GERD and filling its basin have heightened Sudanese concerns about the dam's effect on water regulation and availability. **Not altogether disconnected from the Nile dispute is the conflict in al-Fashaga**, a fertile borderland territory belonging to Sudan but where Ethiopian farmers have been settled for decades. Since the beginning of the Tigray crisis and the escalation of tensions over the first rounds of filling the GERD basin, Sudan and Ethiopia have engaged in a border conflict of varying intensity in al-Fashaga. External powers and international organisations, including the **US**, the **European Union** and the **African Union**, have sought to mediate the Nile dispute and lower tension in al-Fashaga, but the parties consider few external powers to be neutral.

### Final remarks

The Russian invasion of **Ukraine** has had a negative impact on livelihoods in the Horn of Africa. In the Horn, which is suffering from recurrent drought that generates food shortages, war in Ukraine has **diminished the availability of badly needed imports of foodstuffs** and resulted in rapidly rising food prices. The lack of availability of food and water, also affected by conflicts and instability, has led to crises, such as those in south-central Somalia and Ethiopian Tigray. The war in Ukraine has also caused energy prices to rise and consequently increased consumer fuel, logistics and transportation costs in the Horn countries. The rise of both food and energy prices are highly detrimental in the Horn of Africa, where poverty levels among the general population remain high.

The Horn of Africa continues to experience the effects of external power involvement. While this has contributed to economic development in the sub-region, competition among external players, which local actors often seek to exploit, has generated political instability. In the Horn, the implications of the war in Ukraine for external rivalries are largely linked to local responses to the conflict. Most governments in the sub-region have viewed **Russia** as a strategic partner with the potential to favour their internal consolidation and international standing. This has sent a message to other external actors that most Horn states silently accept the Russian invasion, but it has had little effect on the approaches of these external players except in the case of the **United States** and some **Western states**, which have sought to pressure local governments for more Ukraine-oriented policies.

In the end, external actors engage in the Horn of Africa in an adventurous and self-serving manner without much concern for the repercussions of their rivalries.

While local state and non-state actors have sought to exploit the foreign competition, the externally induced rivalries have had a destabilising effect in the sub-region. As a result, the consequences of external competition should alert the foreign players to tone down their rivalries and engage the Horn of Africa more responsibly in a mutually beneficial manner. However, at the same time, given the deep-seated political, economic and social problems in the Horn, external involvement will continue to be a mixed blessing at best.