



## Somalia's Foreign Relations in the Context of the Latest Offensive Against Al Shabaab<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

The political and military weight of clans, foreign interventions, the relations between the local, provincial and federal levels, the strength of the national idea and attachment to political islam have historically been determining factors behind either success or failure of state policy in Somalia. 2021 was an annus horribilis in Somalia's annals, marked by an electoral crisis, mutiny, tensions between the president and prime minister, a conflict between the federal state and Puntland, the departure of the last American soldiers, intensifying crisis with Kenya and Djibouti and attacks of the capital by al Shabaab, which are on the offensive since 2019. 2022 however saw the stars aligning for the strengthening of the state and the recovering of Somalian sovereignty: election of president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, nomination of PM Hamza Amdi Barre, appeasement of the wars in Tigray and Yemen, setting of ATMIS to give the former AMISOM a clear mandate to support the Somali Transition Plan. Despite the new president's willingness to address the Shabaab menace not only militarily but ideologically, calls for dialogue and the appointing of a Shabaab co-founder as religion minister, 2022 also saw the deadliest engagements ever recorded by NGO ACLED in the country during an offensive that seemed to gain momentum in the second half of the year with the support of ATMIS and other foreign partners. This paper therefore aims to explore the new paradigms behind Somalia's foreign relations under her new leadership, to evaluate how much they help or hinder Somalia's war effort against al Shabaab and state consolidation and to explore possible scenarii in the near future.

### Keywords:

Al Shabaab, Islamic State, MENA Region Somalia, Terrorism

<sup>1</sup> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59569/jceas.2023.3.4.269>

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The political and military weight of clans, foreign interventions, the relations between the local, provincial and federal levels, the strength of the national idea and attachment to political islam have historically been determining factors behind either success or failure of state policy in Somalia. 2021 was an *annus horribilis* in Somalia's annals, marked by an electoral crisis, mutiny, tensions between the president and prime minister, a conflict between the federal state and Puntland, the departure of the last American soldiers, intensifying crisis with Kenya and Djibouti and attacks of the capital by al Shabaab (AS), which are on the offensive since 2019. 2022, however, saw the stars aligning for the strengthening of the state and the recovering of Somali sovereignty: election of president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, nomination of PM Hamza Amdi Barre, appeasement of the wars in Tigray and Yemen, setting of ATMIS to give the former AMISOM a clear mandate to support the Somali Transition Plan.

Despite the new president's willingness to address the Shabaab menace not only militarily but ideologically, calls for dialogue and the appointing of a Shabaab co-founder as religion minister, 2022 also saw the deadliest engagements ever recorded by NGO ACLED in the country during an offensive that seemed to gain momentum in the second half of the year with the support of ATMIS and other foreign partners (ACLED, 2023a). This paper therefore aims to explore the new paradigms behind Somalia's foreign relations under her new leadership, to evaluate how much they help or hinder Somalia's war effort against AS and state consolidation and to explore possible scenarii in the near future.

Six consecutive seasons with poor rainfalls – in Somalia, the Gu rain season typically lasts from March to June – caused the death of 3 million heads of cattle in 2022 and the loss of 80% of plantations, in a country where agriculture contributes to 2/3 of the GDP (Climate Change Knowledge Portal, 2021; United Nation News, 2022). Conversely, as is becoming more frequent across the Sahel (Mayans, 2020), flooding causes damage to infrastructure and farmlands, helps propagate disease and causes population displacement on a large scale (ReliefWeb, 2023a). Recent invasions of locusts have been the worst the country has known in 25 years (Mukami, 2021). While the Shabelle river broke its banks and submerged the city of Beledweyne last May, the satisfying rain levels in 2023 are unlikely to help the country recover from a drought that has been the gravest in the last 40 years (Harb, 2023; Reuters in Mogadishu, 2023). This situation, the recent COVID-19 pandemics, and the war in Ukraine have driven inflation to the highest in 15 years, notably for food products, fertilizer and fuel (Ahmed, 2022). Although the federal government is reluctant to officially acknowledge the situation, food insecurity affects half of the Somali population, with famine criteria technically being met (Outlook Web Desk, 2022).

The consequences are of diverse and far-reaching consequences, also from the point of view of international relations (Maystadt and Ecker, 2014). The high number of Somali refugees in neighbouring countries put a strain on bilateral relations, while those populations, subject to pressure to return to their homeland, are also vulnerable



to recruitment by AS (France 24). It is drought and famine, on the other hand, combined with efforts by the insurgency to raise heavy taxes on the population of territories it controlled, that allowed for certain clan militias in Hiiraan province to actively resist the organization, which in turn influenced the decision by the federal government to declare all-out war on AS (ACLED, 2023a).

Before the war in Ukraine, Somalia imported 90% of its wheat from either Russia or Ukraine, the remaining 10% coming from India (OEC, 2024). The latter banned wheat exports as a direct consequence of the war (Menon, 2022). Both Russia and Ukraine have placed food security, and particularly so vis-à-vis African countries, at the centre of their war narrative. Ukraine, likening the Russian war effort to the Holodomor – a man-made famine in Soviet Ukraine that killed millions in 1932-1933<sup>3</sup>, announced it would provide 50 thousand tons of wheat – funded by France and Germany – through the World Food Program to both Ethiopia and Somalia in September 2022 (Getachew, 2022). All the while, the yearlong Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) allowed for the export of 53,500 tons of wheat to Somalia (from July 2022 to July 2023) (United Nations, 2024).

On the other hand, Russia, which openly wages a war of influence on the African continent by framing herself as the subversive power of the hour against Western “colonizers”, has attempted to mitigate the criticism it attracted by pulling out of the Initiative by offering free grain to six African countries: Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic (CAR), Eritrea, Mali, Somalia and Zimbabwe. Of these, five cultivate close political and/or military ties with Moscow (Osborne, 2023; Sauer, 2023). Not all, however, were highly dependent on imports from Russia and Ukraine, nor were all African countries which were highly dependent on such imports beneficiaries of the Russian offer. Other announcements granting debt relief worth 684 million dollars to Somalia, while the latter is in discussion over such relief with the IMF and the World Bank, offering military supplies (as per Mohamud’s request) or the services of PMC Wagner (as per Russia’s request) point to a possible thaw in relations between the two countries (Hassan, 2023; Horn Observer, 2023b; Reuters, 2023).

Nevertheless, from March 2014 to February 2023, the Somali vote at the UN General Assembly and at the UNHRC has consistently been cast in favour of Ukraine – apart from the vote on April 7th 2022 on the suspension of Russia’s rights at the latter institution<sup>4</sup>. The effects of the Russian decision to pull out from the BSGI are making themselves felt, which could make such a move unpopular (AzerNews, 2023). Finally, the intervention of Wagner forces would certainly push away Western aid and military assistance, vital in the current offensive against AS, as has happened in the CAR and the

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<sup>3</sup>While the man-made nature of the famine is undoubtable, the issue of whether Holodomor should be labelled a genocide is still debated, while highly politicized. Some argue, for example, that ignorance and incompetence played a significant part (Marples et al., 2014); while others point to the ethnic question, and consider it sufficient to call the event a genocide (Marples, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>The Somali representative was absent during that particular vote.

Sahel in similar circumstances. It is notable that despite the announcement Somalia's president would attend the latest Russia-Africa summit, the Somali delegation was eventually led by the deputy PM Salah Ahmed Jama (TASS, 2023).

Russia's campaign for influence and arms exports has made it one of the most vocal opponents to the UN-imposed arms embargo – along with African members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The Somalia sanctions regime, as was extended on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2022, still opens the door, on Russia's request, to further bilateral agreements between Somalia and “any other State forces” to support militarily and train the Somali government, provided they inform the Council (Security Council Report, 2022). Of the four abstaining states (China, Gabon, Ghana and Russia), China's stance has been the most ambiguous. While nominally supporting Somalia's request to lift the sanctions, the explanation to her vote points to a staunch opposition, in principle, to any easing of the arms embargo, for fears that it would feed arms trafficking and put arms in the hands of AS (ReliefWeb, 2022).

Somalia is a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which translates into infrastructure projects including the renovation of the national stadium, Banadir hospital and north-south highway (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Federal Republic of Somalia, 2019). A bilateral agreement was struck in 2021 to modernize Somalia's media institutions (Xinhua, 2021). China ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> as a supplier of imports and Somalia's economy relies in part on fishing licences given to Chinese companies (OEC, 2022; Schipani, 2023). China's navy participated in anti-piracy operations off the Somali coast since 2008, which was its first deployment outside of the Asia-Pacific (Henry, 2016); and obtained a military base in Djibouti in 2017 (Bearak, 2019). The main driver of the Sino-Somali relationship, however, are the strong ties between Somaliland and Taiwan, both *de facto* independent states lacking international recognition (Dhaysane, 2022c).

The main market for Somali exports is the MENA region, notably camels (Brenton and Edjigu, 2021). The region is not only crucial for its economic importance to Somalia. Geographic, historical and religious proximity – the population is almost entirely of Sunni Muslim faith – make for a potent combination. The three pillars of Somali politics are clanism, nationalism and political islam (Abdullahi, 2012). The AS insurgency embrace those in its propaganda, thus requiring a response in kind by the legitimate authorities. This is why Mohamud's “three-pronged strategy” against AS includes not only a military offensive and cutting the insurgency's finances, but also ideology (Dhaysane, 2022b). The president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud himself has been described as a “moderate Islamist”, by opposition to the fundamentalist ideology and violent means of the insurgency (Ali, 2022; Gardner, 2023).

This, along with the intensity of conflicts or willingness for reconciliation in the Middle East, is one of the keys to understand Somalia's diplomatic posture in that region. Another is Mohamud's principle – and one of the most striking ruptures with



the policy of his predecessor – of “zero enemy outside”, priority being given to the fight against AS (CSIS, 2022). Exemplary to this approach is the Somali president’s attitude towards Israel. While the Abraham accords (with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 2020) and the subsequent normalization agreements with Morocco (2020) and Sudan (2021) initiated a positive dynamic in favour of recognition, Mohamud had already secretly visited Israel and met with PM Benjamin Netanyahu during his first tenure, in 2016. Overtures made by Somaliland might be an added incentive, so as to discourage mutual recognition between Israel and the breakaway Somali region. It is questionable, however, whether Somali public opinion is ready for such a move. While there were reports President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud may have met Israeli officials during his tour of the Middle East and East Africa in the summer of 2022, or even gone to Israel, such reports have been denied by the presidency (Times of Israel Staff, 2022).

Iran is a counterexample. The Iranian embassy was closed, and the Iranian Red Crescent and Khomeini Charitable Foundation banned in 2015, during Mohamud’s first mandate. They were accused of spreading Shiite ideology under the guise of humanitarian operations. He reiterated these accusations in June 2023 (Mahmoud, 2023). The civil war in nearby Yemen between forces loyal to the president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi supported by a Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi movement supported by Iran has direct consequences on Somalia and the Horn. Iranian naval presence in the Red and Arabian seas seems to have been instrumental in smuggling arms between Yemen and Somalia in both directions (Segall, 2022). Iranian arms have been found in possession of AS (Bahadur, 2021).

The rivalry between the UAE and Qatar is also reflected in Somalia’s international relations. While Qatar was widely seen as being the main backer of former president Farmajo, who has settled in the country after his electoral defeat, the current president Mohamud is understood to be backed by the UAE. Under Farmajo’s tenure, Somalia refused a financial incentive to sever ties with Qatar (Africa Intelligence, 2023; Middle East Monitor, 2017). The latter once had hoped to build and operate the port of Hobyo, in Galmudug (2019), although the contract was later awarded to a British-Turkish-Somali consortium (Global Construction Review Staff, 2020). It doesn’t seem to have lost interest in building stronger ties, offering aid in 2022 and 2023 and launching an initiative along with US and UK aid agencies to help Somalia face the current drought (Gulf Times, 2023; ReliefWeb, 2023b).

Relations between Somalia and the UAE have been rockier until Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s second tenure. The Emirates have first funded, trained and equipped the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) for anti-piracy purposes since 2010, and are reported to have kept supporting it to this day despite a scandalous termination of the contract in 2012 and later more difficult relations with the federal state under Farmajo (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2018). The PMPF has recently aided Dhulbahante militias against Somaliland security forces in Las Anod and have been used by the president of Puntland Said Abdullahi Deni amid electoral tensions in the region,

including deadly clashes in Garowe on June 20, 2023 (ACLED, 2023c; Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2023e; Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2023f).

In 2016, as consequence of the war in Yemen, the UAE tried to step up their involvement in the breakaway region of Somaliland, upgrading the port and airport of Berbera, setting up a military base in the same city, training Somaliland's police and army and building a highway to Wajaale, Ethiopia (AfricaNews, 2019; Dogan-Akkas, 2021). To this president Farmajo responded by calling to the UNSC and seizing \$9,6 million from a UAE plane (Al Jazeera 2018a; Al Jazeera, 2018b), bringing bilateral relations to their lowest point. UAE plans for a military base were scrapped in 2020, although it is unclear whether as consequence of Farmajo's actions, a UN report logically accusing the UAE of violating Somalia sanctions or of the lesser intensity of the war in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2018c; Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2020). The UAE had established a military training centre and a hospital in Mogadishu in 2015 (ReliefWeb, 2015); both have been disbanded as a result of the crisis (Reuters, 2018).

The Emirates are making a comeback on all accounts, however. Berbera's airport has been renovated and serves for civil purposes (Hawilti Desk, 2021); UAE investment, including in Somaliland, being "most welcome", says president Sheikh Mohamud (CSIS, 2022). Days after his election, president Sheikh Mohamud released the money with an apology, and shortly after received Emirati aid against the drought (Hassan, 2022). In Puntland, UAE soldiers have landed in October-November 2022 in support to president Deni (Garowe Online, 2022a). A deal struck in 2017 by Emirati company DP world to renovate the port of Bosaso in Puntland, later declared illegal by the Somali parliament (2018), was revived in December 2022 (Ship Technology, 2022).

The close ties the Emirates fostered in Jubaland since 2014 have been followed by concrete steps, with Emirati control of Kismayo's port and airport and plans to open a UAE military base there in order to participate in the second phase of the offensive against AS (Garowe Online, 2014; News Desk, 2023). This last move comes in the context of a security deal that was agreed upon by the federal government in January 2023, albeit with difficulties, which should allow it to bypass UN sanctions (Dhaysane, 2023).

Despite her FM prince Faisal bin Farhan attending President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's inauguration (Saudi Gazette, 2022), it is unclear whether regional power Saudi Arabia intends to seize the same opportunity as the UAE to support the fight against AS. The attendance of Sheikh Mohamud at the summit of the Arab League in Jeddah may have rekindled Saudi interests; the Somali and Saudi defence ministers have indeed met in June 2023 to discuss "cooperation and coordination" in the military field (Arab News, 2023b). The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, created in 2015, is most active in Yemen, Syria, Palestine and Somalia (\$256 m) (Arab News, 2023a).



The ties between Somalia and Turkey have irrefutably acquired a sentimental value that goes beyond political divides. The “common destiny” trope, often used in support of French- or Sino-African relations (Gotteland, 2023b; Sun, 2018), is now also predominant in the discourse on the Somali-Turkish friendship (Nur, 2023). A piece of concrete evidence of such a sentiment is the financial donation of \$5 m sent as a sign of support and solidarity at the time of the earthquake that struck Southern Turkey in March 2023, despite Somalia being herself in desperate need of aid (Gedi, 2023).

Dating back to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s visit to Somalia at the occasion of a severe drought in 2011, bilateral relations have only grown stronger since, in the fields of education, healthcare, trade, humanitarian aid, or the training of Somali police and national army (Bishku, 2019). A military base, camp TURKSOM, was installed in Mogadishu in 2017, while Turkish companies operate the capital’s port and airport (Middle East Monitor, 2022a). In 2020, concessions were obtained for oil, gas and mining operations in the country (Kenez, 2022); earlier this year, the first foreign banking licences to have been awarded in decades benefitted an Egyptian and a Turkish bank (Schipani, 2023).

The Gorgor elite forces, trained at TURKSOM, first graduated in 2021; while essential in the fight against AS, they are also accused of having participated in the repression of the opposition after former president Farmajo tried to extend his mandate and bypass elections (Kenez, 2022). Despite some exemptions to the Somalia sanctions, a UN report also accuses Turkey of breaching them by delivering Bayraktar TB2 drones for use by the Somali national army (SNA) in 2021, despite denials by the federal government. The Turkish air force takes part to operations against AS (Bozkurt, 2023). Qatar, Turkey and the UAE have been known to influence federal elections in 2012 and 2017 (Cannon and Donelli, 2021).

Somalia has a long history as a ground for covert operations and misguided interventions by the United States (US), either as the lead of an international coalition (Operations Provide Relief & Restore Hope, 1992-1993), the main provider to UN peacekeeping and humanitarian missions (UNOSOM I & II, 1992-1995), a backer to an Ethiopian intervention (2006-2009) (Malito, 2021). US involvement in the country has never ceased entirely since 1992, and has escalated since the beginning of the infamous “war on terror”, which itself motivated both the creation of a unified US Africa command (AFRICOM) in 2007, located in Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, as well as the ever-increasing use of drone warfare (Campbell, 2020).

Despite president Farmajo’s US links – he lived in exile in the country since 1985 and held dual citizenship until 2019, relations were marred under Donald Trump’s stay at the White House by both the “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States” act barring Somali citizens from entry, the suspension of US support to Somali forces (2017-2019) and the order to withdraw American troops from Somalia in 2020 (Babb, 2017; Cooper, 2020; Cordesman, 2017).

A decision reversed by the Biden administration last year, at the time of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's election, including on drone strikes and targeted assassinations within AS (as well as the smaller Islamic State (Macaulay, 2023)), a decision welcomed by the new Somali government (Savage and Schmitt, 2022). The US are currently the main provider of military assistance to Somalia, as well as humanitarian aid, and is one of the main backers of ATMIS (Dhaysane, 2022d; Yousif, 2023). It trained and funded the Danab brigade, an elite force active since 2014 and at the forefront of the fight against AS (Harding, 2022). In a symbolic but potent move, more than 61 tons of weapons and ammunition were delivered in March 2023 (Rédaction Africanews, 2023b).

Concerns about the legality of US support, the leftover consequences of earlier CIA interventions, such as the infamous Puntland Security Force (created in 2002), or the civilian casualties caused by US drone strikes have not so far blunted American efforts in the war against AS (Airwars, n. d.; Sperber, 2022). The US role in supporting the Somali state and its war effort, while crucial (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2022c), might be challenged as consequence of the upcoming presidential election.

The United Kingdom (UK), former colonizer of today's Somaliland (then British Somaliland, 1884-1960) and occupier of the rest of today's Somalia (then Italian Somaliland, 1941-1949), is also the home of a large Somali diaspora (3rd country of residence after Yemen and the US). The UK was the first Western country to re-open its embassy in Somalia in 2013 and is the penholder at the UNSC for the situation in Somalia<sup>5</sup>. It is a large provider of humanitarian aid, while also supporting the fight against AS. SNA troops are trained in a camp at Baidoa, in the South West (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2022b). Its contributions are steadily diminishing (Davies, 2023). Another point of contention since 2012 has been continued efforts by British firm Genel Energy to explore for oil in the breakaway region and *de facto* state of Somaliland, despite an earlier nod to UAE investments in the area (Middle East Monitor, 2022b).

The involvement of the European Union (EU) stems from the involvement of EUNAVFOR in a Djibouti-based anti-piracy operation in Somali waters since 2008 (Operation Atalanta). Currently, Atalanta can only count on one vessel, one chopper, one drone and one plane, all Spanish, although it is sometimes supplemented by French means based at Réunion island (Gros-Verheyde, 2022). Its mandate now encompasses the enforcement of UN Somalia sanctions, fighting against AS (finances) and drug trafficking. EUTM Somalia, launched in 2010, provides training, mentoring and advice to the SNA. EUCAP Somalia, launched in 2012, assists in the building of a Somali maritime police and coast guard. The mandates of all three operations have recently been extended up to December 2024 (Council of the European Union, 2022).

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<sup>5</sup>The US is the penholder for piracy-related issues in Somali waters and Russia for juridical questions linked to the latter (Sievers and Daws 2014, pp. 243-294.).





The winding down of anti-piracy measures does not mean the EU is becoming an irrelevant actor in Somalia. Milestones this year include the Somalia-EU Political Dialogue (March 6th), the Joint Operational Roadmap (May 2nd) and the EU Council Conclusion on Somalia (June 26th). The EU has been the first of Somalia's international partners to bring a budget support (2017), while being the largest provider of development and humanitarian assistance and the main financial backer of AU mission ATMIS (ECDPM, 2023). Like in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, Italy is currently pulling EU-Africa relations in a direction favourable to her immediate interests – the so-called but yet undefined “Mattei plan”: the tightening of the EU's Southern borders and energy investments (Pascale, 2023).

Relations between Somalia and its southern neighbour Kenya have often been execrable. This is partly due to the fact that since their respective independence, both countries claim a sizeable chunk of the other's territory. While Somalia eyed the Somali-populated Northern Frontier District (today divided between the Garissa, Wajir and Mandera counties), Kenya set their views on Jubaland, which was ceded by the UK to Italy in 1925 as consequence of the First World War (Castagno, 1964).

Al Shabaab operates on both sides of the border. This motivated the launching by the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) of Operation Linda Nchi (Protect the Country) in 2011-2012, the KDF then joining AU mission AMISOM. Today the Kenyan contingent of ATMIS, based in Dhobley, is responsible for security in the provinces of Gedo, Lower Juba, Middle Juba and Lower Shabelle (Sector Two), as well as Kismayo (Jubaland's capital, Sector Six) together with the Ethiopia National Defence Forces (ENDF) (ATMIS, n. d.). The land border, which is closed since 2011, was set to reopen in June-August 2023 in the wake of the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the signing of an IGAD (International Governmental Authority on Development) agreement on free movement of people and warming bilateral relations. The move was delayed following increasing AS activity in the border area (ACLEDA, 2023b; Wario, 2023).

The maritime border is another point of contention, as Somalia brought Kenya to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2014. While Kenya contested the jurisdiction of the ICJ and did not participate in the final hearings, a judgment was delivered in October 2021, favouring Somalia's border claim while dismissing a claim that Kenya's conduct in the disputed area (the granting of oil concessions) violated her international obligations (International Court of Justice, n. d.; Bamberger and Skovsted, 2016). The disputed waters are thought to be rich in oil, gas and tuna, although oil exploration has mostly been fruitless to this day (Business Daily, 2022). The Somali government has recently rejected the possibility of a mediation by Djibouti, considering the ICJ judgment to be final (Khalif, 2023).

Kenya has later cut diplomatic ties over the granting of oil concessions by Somalia in the same area (February 2019) (The EastAfrican, 2019). That issue, together with

bilateral agreements with Somaliland and the support of Kenya to president of Jubaland Ahmed Madobe and meddling in the electoral process in this latter state, have been cited as the main reasons for Somalia to break off diplomatic relations in November 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2020). Bilateral trade has suffered and the restarting of direct flights between Nairobi and Mogadishu has been announced and suspended on several occasions since 2017 (Garowe Online, 2017). The crisis was deepened by a ban on khat imports from Kenya in 2016 (BBC, 2016).

A Qatar-led détente allowed to mend ties as soon as May 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021). As a result, Nairobi seems to have scrapped any plans to allow for direct flights with Somaliland's capital Hargeisa. The election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud at the head of the federal state allowed for the lifting of the ban on the khat trade as well as a gradual warming of relations that has been exemplified by the creation of a Joint Commission for cooperation, as well as a recent agreement on bilateral air services (Dhaysane, 2022a; Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2022f; Kipkemoi, 2023). Such neighbourly relations are crucial to the long-term Somali ambition to join the East African Community (EAC). Somalia's application seems to have been fast-tracked, with the organization already looking into inviting Ethiopia to join (Mutambo, 2022).

Burundi and Uganda, while EAC members, are also troop-contributing countries to ATMIS, which mandate was extended until December 2024. Burundi's foreign minister has met president Mohamud in Mogadishu in April 2023 (Khalif, 2023); Burundi National Defence Forces (BNDF) are currently in charge of Sector Five, that is Middle Shabelle, and based in Jowhar (ATMIS, n. d.). Mohamud's election to the presidency seems to have also brought a new impulse to bilateral relations with Uganda, with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation that had been drafted in 2018 (Wright, 2022). Uganda is currently under pressure both in Somalia and at home over its support to the fight against AS. Her bases in Sector One, which covers Lower Shabelle and parts of capital Mogadishu, have been under attack (ATMIS, n. d.; Barigaba, 2023; Rédaction Africanews, 2023a).

The other troop-contributing countries are Djibouti and Ethiopia. Both of them as well as Kenya pledged more troops to ATMIS in December 2022 (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2023f). Djibouti Armed Forces (DJAF) are responsible for Sector Four (Hiiraan and Galgaduud), with ENDF occupying some areas. That sector saw the brunt of the first phase of the offensive against AS. ENDF are also co-responsible for Sector Six, together with KDF, and solely responsible for Sector Three, which includes Bay, Bakool and Gedo provinces (ATMIS, n. d.). Ethiopia has attempted a mediation in the recent clashes in and around Las Anod, but has been accused by Somaliland, alongside the UAE, to support the Dhulbahante clan (Ethiopia Insight, 2023). Meanwhile, Djibouti had to deny claims it is supplying weapons to the government of Somaliland (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2023c).



Ethiopia has a difficult history with her Eastern neighbour. Tensions over the Somali-populated Haud and Ogaden regions (today's Somali region), given by the British to Ethiopia in 1948, resulted in two wars in 1963-1964 and 1977-1978. Although dubbed a nationalist, president Farmajo, who had difficult relations with Kenya on similar accounts, has been an ally to both Ethiopia and Eritrea, notably during the Tigray war (begun in 2020). The election of opponent Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, which was seen as close to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) during his first tenure, along with alarming signs in the first months of his presidency, seem to have convinced the Ethiopian government to pursue a "dual-track policy"<sup>6</sup> in a way similar to that adopted by the UAE or Kenya when faced with a hostile federal government in Mogadishu (Addis Standard, 2022a). Ethiopian delegations met with President Deni of Puntland and Jubaland authorities while president Laftagareen of the South West flew to Adis Ababa and Jigjiga, where he met Ethiopian federal authorities and the president of the Somali region (Addis Standard, 2022b; Hiraan Online, 2022).

President Mohamud's avoidance of Ethiopia during his inaugural trip throughout East Africa and the Middle East, his Egyptian policy as made apparent during that same trip, the nomination of an AS founder as minister of religion and renewed AS activity across the border into Ethiopia during the summer of 2022 were reasons for alarm regarding Ethiopian-Somali relations (Kandil, 2022; Maruf, 2022a; Ingiriis, 2022).

These fears were alleviated in the beginning of September 2022, when a deal was unveiled for the development of the port of Gara'ad, in Puntland, completed by the construction of a road up to the Ethiopian border, thus making up for a torpedoed UAE investment in 2018 in Berbera, Somaliland (Ahmed and Marks, 2022). The announcement preceded the first visit of president Mohamud in Ethiopia, who thanked the sisterly nation for her involvement in the fight against AS, but did not mention Tigray (Addis Getachew, 2022). Access to a seaport for the landlocked country is considered a vital interest, and Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed has recently (July 2023) said as much while talking of negotiations with Somaliland, Djibouti and Eritrea, but not excluding the use of force, should diplomatic means fail to achieve the desired outcome (Horn Observer, 2023a).

Meanwhile a bilateral agreement has been inked in November 2022 to allow for information exchange and joint operations of Ethiopian and Somali intelligence agencies NISS (National Intelligence and Security Service) and NISA (National Intelligence and Security Agency) (FanABC, 2022). Intelligence has long been considered to be Ethiopia's decisive advantage to keep AS within Somali borders. Ethiopia, like Djibouti and Kenya, has pledged more troops for the second phase of the offensive, and an Ethiopian delegation visited Beledweyne in March 2023 to help coordinate (Hiraan Online, 2023).

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<sup>6</sup> An expression dubbed by the US government in the 2000s to signify engagement with all political levels in Somalia, from the local to the regional and the national.

The situation in Ethiopia is currently volatile however, the end of the Tigray war having translated into an augmentation of Amhara-Oromo violent incidents, while Adis Ababa's decision to integrate all regional special forces into either the federal army or regional police has rekindled conflicts with the Fano militia (Amhara), the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) and may destabilize the Somali region and favour AS (Ismail, 2023). An attack has been attempted and repulsed in the border town of Dollo, in June; others may follow (Al Jazeera, 2023b).

Relations with Eritrea were likewise forecasted to be difficult. Some five thousand Somali soldiers had been sent to this country for training under former president Farmajo. Public opinion at home has been hostile on the issue, with relatives claiming the soldiers were recruited under false pretenses and held captive. The Somali government only recognized the truth in this secret arrangement in May 2022, as president Farmajo was stepping down, and Eritrea in July, when president Mohamud came for his first visit, despite the first troops reaching the country as soon as 2019 (Garowe Online, 2022b). This first visit allowed for the signing of a MoU on defence, security, diplomatic and political cooperation, while a second visit, in November, allowed for the repatriation of the Somali troops (Maruf, 2022b; The EastAfrican, 2022).

Following warming ties with Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, Eritrea rejoined IGAD in June 2023, an organization it had left in 2007 to protest the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia (Al Jazeera, 2023a). Eritrean-trained Somali troops have been reported to have been taken to the frontlines in Tigray, despite Somali and Eritrean denegations (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2023e; Radio France Internationale, 2021). According to a former deputy chief of NISA, 370 Somali soldiers have died in Tigray (Garowe Online Staff, 2021). Qatar has called for a probe into the matter, until now to no avail (allAfrica, 2021).

Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's "zero enemy outside" policy seems to bear fruits. Feuds have been temporarily resolved with Kenya and the UAE; others, with Ethiopia and Eritrea, avoided. The US, UK, EU have increased their support; engagement with Russia has not barred support for Ukraine, and wheat deliveries have been less affected than they could have been. Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya have announced sending a very large number of troops in support to the second phase of the offensive (maybe 30 thousand as opposed to the 18,500 of 5 nations currently under ATMIS command (Hiraan Online, 2023b)); the UAE built a military base in Kismayo with the same intent. 12,000 soldiers have been sent for training in Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda in January 2023 (Maruf, 2023b). Thanks to Italy's involvement and success in the first phase of the offensive against AS, Brexit has not meant the end of EU support but its upscale. The cooling of tensions in Tigray and Yemen, the end of the Qatar blockade have likewise played in Somalia's favour.



Several underlying factors remain unaddressed however, and at least some of these successes are to be credited to the momentum the military operations in the fall of 2022 helped build. It remains to be seen, however, whether they will allow for the second phase of the offensive to succeed, in spite of or on cooperation with local clans. The destabilization of Ethiopia is a prospect that is nearer every day and has more potential to affect her Eastern neighbour than the war in Tigray may have had. The war in Sudan and the prospect of a regional spill-over have been until now contained; but with every supplementary week this conflict lasts, the future of the wider region seems dimmer (Gotteland, 2023b; Najimdeen, 2023). This explains Somalia's attempt at mediation and a wider IGAD initiative to deploy a regional force (Garowe Online Staff Reporter, 2023d; Al Arabiya News, 2023).

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

### **Notes on Contributor**

Mathieu Gotteland holds a PhD in History of international relations from University Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. His research interests include informal imperialism, terrorism, imperial and anticolonial networks at the global level, with a focus on China, India and Vietnam. An analyst for African think tanks IPSA (Initiative pour la Paix et la Sécurité en Afrique) and CRCA (Conflict Research Consortium for Africa), he now endeavours to apply the principles of the French school of international relations to the analysis of contemporary African conflicts and geopolitics. He has been awarded a Prize for Military History by the French Ministry for Defence.

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