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## Bulletin

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### INSIDE

**Foreign Powers and the Geopolitics of Instability: The Case of North and the Horn of Africa** 1

**Inside Ethiopia's Troubled Transition: Achievements, Critical Challenges, and Opportunities for Progress** 14

**A Call for More Pandemic and Disaster Risk Sensitive Peacekeeping** 23

**African Context of Conspiracy Theories, Manipulation, Misinformation, Disinformation, and 'Sharp Power' in the Wake of COVID-19 Pandemic** 32

### About the HORN Institute

The HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies is a non-profit, applied research, and policy think-do tank based in Nairobi, Kenya. Its mission is to contribute to informed, objective, definitive research and analytical inquiry that positively informs policies of governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Its vision is a progressive Horn of Africa served by informed, evidence-based and problem-solving policy research and analysis.

## Foreign Powers and the Geopolitics of Instability: The Case of North and the Horn of Africa

By Edmond J. Pamba

### Abstract

In the last two decades, the Horn of Africa and North Africa have increasingly become new spheres of Sino-Russo-American rivalry on the one hand, and Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and UAE alliance, and the Iran-Qatar-Turkey axis on the other hand. The two regions have similarly witnessed increased influence from Western powers such as the European Union (EU), France, and the United States (US). As a result, the Horn of Africa and North Africa have risen to new levels of geostrategic significance with regard to maritime trade and security; energy resources (oil and gas); migration control; and counter-terrorism interests. The scramble has further exposed the Horn of Africa and North Africa to security, economic, and political risks such as increased militarization, resource conflicts, proxy wars, external interference, dependent economic relations debt trap, and ideological schisms. This article examines the destabilizing impact of this geostrategic competition and individual foreign power projection on governance, economic, and political and security dynamics of the Horn of Africa and North Africa.

### Introduction

The historical, cultural, and religious ties between North Africa and the Red Sea regions and the Middle East have partly sustained and intensified



*The Horn of Africa (especially Somalia) is one of the main regions in which the Turkish state has increased its presence (Source: ISPI)*

relations between the three regions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, the significant growth in the geostrategic importance of North Africa and the Red Sea has turned these regions into active spheres for geopolitical scramble by Middle Eastern powers such as UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, at least since the Arab Spring. However, geopolitical rivalries and competition from the Middle East happen to be flanking intensifying global geopolitical competition among major powers such as the EU, the US, China, Russia, and France. While the new scramble for Africa is an indicator of global changes in the balance of power (as new powers have emerged to play active roles globally and intensify geostrategic competition), it spells grave risks to Africa's independence, sovereignty, security, peace, and commercial, political, and economic stability. The scramble is opening a chapter for unchecked foreign interference and the weakening of regional diplomatic and institutional mechanisms. The aggressive involvement of major and middle powers in Libya, the Red Sea, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, and the attendant crises and conflicts continue to undermine local efforts to maintain peace, security, and stability as these cardinal values become subordinate to competing geopolitical interests. This is demonstrated in the following realities.

### **The Arab Spring, the Gulf Cold War, and the Muslim Brotherhood**

Turkey's problematic relations with North Africa began with the Arab Spring of 2010. During this time, Arab monarchies and autocracies in North Africa came under popular protests and rebellions, which ended in the deposal of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and sustained protests in Morocco, Algeria, and Sudan. In the Middle East, President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen was forced out of office, while protests rocked parts of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and civil wars ensued in Syria and Yemen (still ongoing). Turkey took the opportunity to assert its "majoritarian-democratic" identity in the wider Middle East by identifying with the popular protest movements and concomitantly supporting the democratization of the Arab world (Akturk, 2017). Political establishments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt as well as (ironically) Western allies of certain Arab states rejected Ankara's role, terming it "subversive" and undue interference. Turkey's "Islamist" foreign policy led to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman accusing Ankara of pursuing an "Ottoman Caliphate" (Akca, 2018).

However, the other factor leading to mounting opposition in Arab capitals against Ankara's role in the Arab Spring

was the underlying wave of political Islam demonstrated by the coming to power through post-‘Spring’ elections in Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi in 2012), Tunisia (Ennahda Party) and Libya (Justice and Construction Party). Turkey was perceived to be promoting closer ties with the Islamist movements in North Africa and introducing religious-based political ideologies which threatened the secular political order in the region. As a result, Erdogan’s visit to Morocco in 2013 ended in a snub by the palace and the business community in Rabat, with diplomatic relations between Rabat and Ankara oscillating between cold and lukewarm (Dahmani & Samba, 2020).

A wave of secularists in Tunisia and Egypt has, however, risen to check what they see as the growth of ‘islamism’ by installing a secularist constitution in 2014 and denying Ennahda parliamentary majority in Tunisia. Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi was deposed in Egypt in 2013 and replaced by secularist Fattah Al Sisi who Turkey refused to recognize (Dahmani & Samba, 2020). Turkey thus maintains a loose influence on Tunisia through Ennahda, and Libya through Justice and Construction Party, but lost its influence in Egypt, which remains Turkey’s geopolitical foe to date. The political establishment in Egypt is embroiled in an existentialist struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood, as seen in the mass crackdown of the Islamist group by the Egyptian government, a reality which risks the country’s national security and political stability.

## The Libyan Crisis

Several foreign actors plunged into Libya and have kept the country in an intractable politico-security crisis since 2011. During the Arab Spring in Libya, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces intervened militarily in an operation originally meant to “prevent” mass atrocities and crimes against humanity attributed to Muammar Gaddafi’s government forces. However, the NATO operation quickly turned into a regime change agenda, overthrew the Libyan government, and led to the killing of Gaddafi. The ensuing power and military vacuum in Libya have encouraged illegitimate political and military competition for power and territorial control as well as multiplicity of military and foreign power influence in what has become an intractable crisis for at least nine years now. Other factors fanning multi-actor involvement in Libya include the lack of acceptability for the UN-backed and internationally-recognized transitional Government of National Accord (GNA Tripoli) in Tripoli. The two-pronged anatomy of the Libyan crisis reveals

a country with two rival administrations, GNA led by Fayez al-Sarraj, and Government of National Salvation (GNS) led by General Khalifa Gwell Haftar. GNA is controlled by the Presidential Council in Tripoli, Parliament (General National Congress - GNC) elected in 2012 and based in Tobruk, and GNA forces, while GNS is backed by a “parliament” in Tripoli and Libyan National Army (LNA) forces (Fitzgerald & Toaldo, 2016, Dorsey, 2020b). The political and security risks further lie in the fact that GNA controls less than 25 per cent of the Libyan territory, with the rest falls under tribal and sub-state militias under LNA.

The second element of foreign influence in the Libyan crisis indicates competition for geopolitical interests such as Libya’s energy resources; the position of Libya as a transit country for illegal migration and human trafficking between Africa and Europe; and the rise of violent extremist groups such as Islamic State in Libya and al Qaida, especially in eastern Libya. The first geopolitical competition and rivalry emanate from the Middle East among UAE, Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt. GNA is thus backed by Turkey and Qatar, while LNA is backed by UAE and Egypt in the trap of cyclical armed confrontation and unstable transition. The GNC elected in 2012, for instance, had 64 seats to UAE-backed National Forces Alliance (NFA) and 34 seats to the (Turkey-and-Qatar-backed) Libyan Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, the Justice and Construction Party (JCP) which heavily backed GNA (the Presidential Council) (Fitzgerald & Toaldo, 2016; Dorsey, 2020b). The division in parliament undermined GNA’s operations including the stability and composition of the country’s first post-Gaddafi cabinet.

It is worth noting that Qatar and Turkey have, since the Arab Spring, pursued assertive foreign policies to extend influence over the Middle East, the Muslim world, and the Maghreb, while Egypt and UAE (and by extension Saudi Arabia as seen in the Gulf Crisis) are trying to restore the pre-Arab Spring status quo in the region’s balance of



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power. Ideologically, Turkey and Qatar have thrown their weight behind the Islamist-backed al-Sarraj's GNA, while Egypt and UAE are pursuing a secularist "Cairo counter-revolution" model through their proxy ally General Khalifa Haftar's LNA. Egyptian and Emirati airstrikes and LNA's war to capture Tripoli from GNA in 2020, contributed to a 12 per cent shrink in Libya's economy. LNA's freezing of oil terminals led to oil production cuts from 1.14 million barrels per day to just 120,000 barrels per day and a loss of

USD 2 billion in revenue, compounding Libya's economic and fiscal crisis (Megerisi, 2020). Turkey's interest in Libya's energy resources and USD 20 billion of pending contracts with the Libyan government are other factors underpinning its position in the Libyan Crisis (Megerisi, 2020). Other geopolitical players include France, Russia, the EU, and US-led NATO. Russia and France have taken sides in the conflict, behind LNA's Khalifa Haftar, as shown in Figure 1.

Peter Millett, a former British ambassador to Libya, tweeted that Haftar's stand was a signal that the general and his backers "still think he can win militarily".

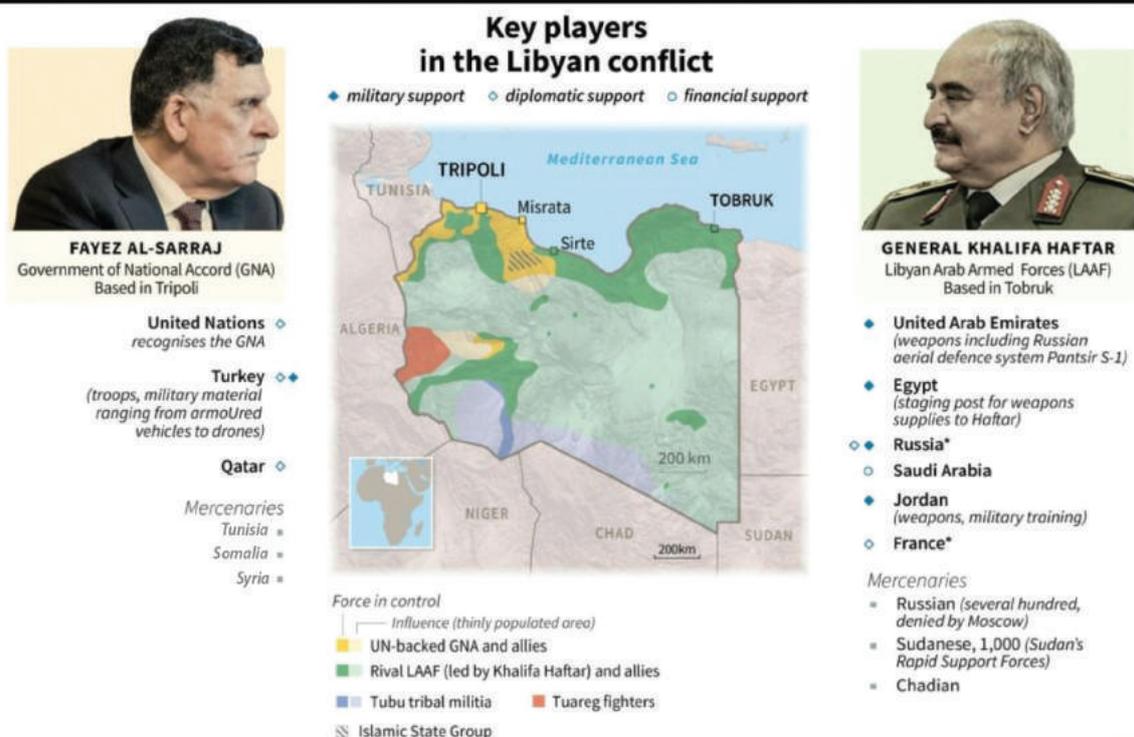


Figure 1: Key Players in the Libyan Crisis. Source: UN Panel of Experts on Libya (Photo Credit: UN Panel of Experts on Libya)

Russia, France, US-led NATO, and EU have thus further engulfed Libya in global geopolitical rivalry, with Russia attempting to widen its reach in the Mediterranean (southern Europe) as a strategic loop over Western Europe, to access Libya's energy resources, and expand ties with Egypt and UAE as part of its Middle East geopolitical scheme (Megerisi, 2020). The US-led NATO and EU, while diplomatically involved in the Libyan peace process, are keen on limiting Russia's objectives in Libya and the Mediterranean (southern Europe).

Separately, Libya is an extension of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia, Turkey, and France. France and Turkey are embroiled in the Mediterranean crisis over energy

resources and maritime boundaries involving Libya, EU and Greece, and the divided Island of Cyprus (as will be discussed later), as well as in Lebanon's internal crisis and the Macron's perception of Islam. French President Emmanuel Macron's "intellectual critique" of Islam and handling of Islamism in France in 2020 was countered by Turkish President Recep Erdogan's lambasting of historical French-Muslim relations and called for a Muslim boycott of French products. On the other hand, Turkey and Russia are pitted against each other behind allies, Azerbaijan and Armenia respectively, in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian Government of Bashar al Assad in the Syrian civil war.

The wave of instability is likely to spread southwards and spill across to the Red Sea through the involvement of proxies from Sudan, Chad, Syria, Tunisia, and Somalia in the conflict in Libya. UAE has tapped Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) with over 4,000 RSF soldiers arriving in Libya in July 2019 as well as Chadian militias, to fight alongside 1,200 Russia's private militia, the Wagner Group behind LNA (Downie, 2019; Nichols, 2020). On the other hand, Turkey has tapped Sudanese and Chadian militia to fight alongside its Syrian mercenaries totaling over 13,000 behind GNA. The Syrian fighters are on the Turkish payroll for USD 2,000 or 1,500 pounds monthly compared to 52 to 72 pounds in the Syrian theatre. The package also includes USD 500 for their families in Syria and thousands of dollars more in case of fatalities in combat (McKernan & Akoush, 2020; Megerisi, 2020). However, Russia has similarly been recruiting pro-Bashar

al Assad militia in Syria, to back up LNA; Russia and Turkey are fighting on opposing sides in the Syrian civil war, with Russia backing al Assad's government (Fahim & Zakaria, 2020). The UN arms embargo in Libya is thus collapsing under the heavy direct military involvement of foreign powers. In January 2020, the Turkish parliament further approved the deployment of Turkish forces into Libya, shifting Turkey's proxy policy into direct military involvement further risking deeper turmoil in Libya. In response to the unfolding intricacies in Libya, the head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Ghassam Salame, criticized foreign powers involved in the conflict saying, "[...] they cynically wink and nod towards efforts to promote peace and piously affirm their support for the United Nations and continue to pursue military solution" (Chazan, 2020 para. 6).

TABLE 1. EXTERNAL FORCES IN LIBYA'S CIVIL WAR				
		Political Agenda	Force Deployment	Stakes
Supporters of General Khalifa Haftar and the LNA	United Arab Emirates	Expand regional influence; Support its allies in Libya; Libya as client state	Equipment and training for militias; Drone and air support for the LNA	Political influence over MENA regional order; Economic gains; Domination of commercial thoroughfares; Oil diversification
	Egypt	Promote Sisi model through Haftar; Libya as a client state; Gain access to natural resources	Arms, supplies, intelligence, and funds through eastern Libya for LNA	Security on western border; Economic gains; Expanded regional influence
	Russia	Gain regional influence; Support its proxies in Libya; Gain access to natural resources	Wagner Group mercenary forces; Arms, equipment, supplies, and parallel currency	Economic gains; Access to southern Mediterranean; Enhanced posture as great power
	France	Redefine relationship with Libya	Security assistance through Egypt and UAE	Expanded economic partnership; Counterterrorism in Sahel; European policy
Supporters of the Government of National Accord	Qatar	Expand regional influence; Support Islamist opposition	Equipment and training for revolutionary militias	Political influence over MENA regional order
	Turkey	Secure the 2019 Maritime and Security Agreement; Expand regional influence; Block Emirati expansion and Russian influence; Maintain economic interests	Drones, air support, ground forces; Equipment, training, and other military resources	Economic partnerships; Maritime border disputes; Access and influence in MENA
	Italy	Maintain political and economic ties with Libya under GNA; Curtail irregular migration and refugee flows	Field hospital in Misrata; Intelligence and security assistance	Regional stability; Economic partnerships; European policy
	European Union	Reaffirm commitment to sovereign Libya; Block Russian expansion in Mediterranean; Curtail irregular migration and refugee flows	Naval deployment to enforce arms embargo through maritime routes	Regional stability; European unity; Russian aggression; Economic partnerships
	United Nations	Enforce Libyan Political Agreement; Uphold international law; Ensure regional stability	UNSMIL; Arms embargo	International order; Member state sovereignty

Figure 2: Geopolitical Players and Interests in the Libyan Crisis (Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies)

## Turkey, Libya, and Mediterranean Crisis

In 2019, exploiting the close ties and military and security cooperation with the Islamist-backed-GNA in Tripoli, Turkey signed a maritime boundary agreement with Libya. Turkey's interest with the memorandum of understanding with Libya on maritime jurisdictions in the Mediterranean Sea concerns Ankara's oil and gas explorations and drilling in the Mediterranean and off the coast of Turkish-Northern Cyprus. However, both the maritime

demarcations agreement between Libya and Turkey and the Turkey's energy explorations have been rejected by EU and Mediterranean neighbors such as Egypt, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus (Scazzieri, 2020). Egypt maintains that the Libya-Turkey maritime agreement is "illegal," while Greece insists that the agreement is "geographically absurd" given the position of the Greek island of Crete between the coasts of Libya and Turkey.

The Greek-Republic of Cyprus insists on being the sole authority on the Island and thus faults Turkish energy expeditions in Turkish-Northern Cyprus as a violation of international law and the Island's sovereignty. Tensions are rife in the Mediterranean with France, Russia, the European Union, and the United States deploying naval vessels and warplanes in the eastern Mediterranean

for monitoring, as the European Union contemplates sanctions against Ankara. On the other hand, naval drills between Turkey and Egypt have been escalating in the Mediterranean partly as a show of force as the crisis rages on (Carassava, 2020; BBC NEWS, 2020; Hosny, 2020). The Mediterranean Crisis is shown below.

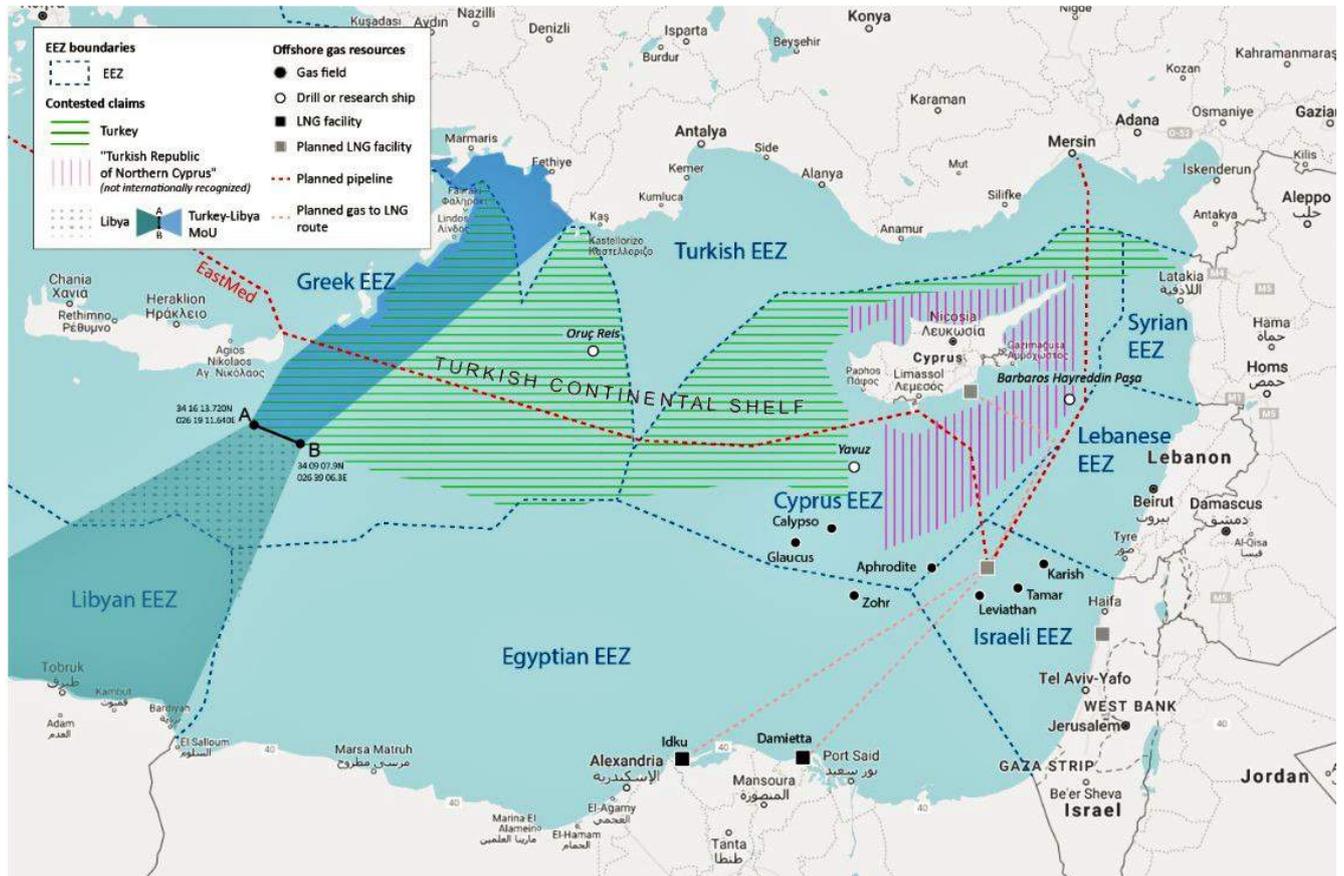


Figure 3: Turkey-Libya Maritime Agreement and its Implications (Source: European Parliament)

## The Militarization of the Red Sea

Over the last decade, the Red Sea has increasingly become militarized as foreign powers have stepped on each other's toes to establish military bases and naval facilities along the Red Sea strip. Three main factors have influenced the militaristic posture of major and middle powers including Middle Eastern powers in the Red Sea region: the economic, commercial, and maritime security interests in the Red Sea trade route, the civil war in Yemen, and counter-terrorism (Guzansky & Rakov, 2020). However, an overlying geopolitical factor relates to major power global military power projection and aggrandizement. The Red Sea trade route accounts for over USD 700 billion worth of goods and is a passageway for over 25,000 ships annually (Gurjar, 2020; Guzansky & Rakov, 2020). The Red Sea's chokepoints at Suez and Bab-

el-Mandeb around Djibouti and Yemen have increasingly become a maritime security priority and attracted threats from rogue state actors, pirates, and terrorist groups (Guzansky & Rakov, 2020).

The post-9/11, US-led global "war on terror" further zeroed in on the Horn of Africa among other southwestern Asia and Levant theatres. The US thus established its first permanent military base in Djibouti in 2003 to pursue "war on terror" objectives through Operation Enduring Freedom-Horn of Africa (OEF-HOA) and Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) (Melvin, 2019). The base hosted the African Command forces (AFRICOM) which increasingly adopted other mandates in different parts of the Horn of Africa and Africa. Western-allied militaries began to gradually



the Red Sea, announcing a 25-year deal with Sudan to build a naval base off Sudan's Red Sea coast close to Port Sudan in November 2020 (Luke, 2020). Moscow's naval base in the Red Sea comes after years of joint naval drills and operations in the Red Sea, with Chinese and Iranian vessels in what might appear as a show of naval force, "assertive" posture and signal to their Western rivals (and interests) in the region. The Red Sea is thus joining other world regions such as the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea, and the Crimean Peninsula among others, facing largescale military risks as shown by the distribution of foreign militaries in Figure 4.

## The Crisis of Transition and Stability in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia

### *i. The Case of Somalia*

Somalia has been rebuilding, stabilizing, and recovering from its 30-year civil war, primarily with the help of the African Union peacekeeping force, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) since 2007. However, Somalia's acute humanitarian conditions and underdevelopment, dysfunctional governance institutions, and weak security sector needs more than AMISOM's support, thereby opening the window for foreign intervention (International Crisis Group, 2018). In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE emerged as "brotherly" benefactors in Somalia's transition to a stable, democratic and prosperous nation with adequate defense and security capabilities. From humanitarian assistance, development assistance, budgetary support, military training and assistance (including payment of salaries for Somali forces by UAE and Turkey), and construction of roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and other infrastructure, the four powers projected their soft power in Somalia (International Crisis Group, 2019; 2018).

However, when the Gulf Crisis began in 2017 with the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, and Egypt and suspension of diplomatic ties with Qatar, the geopolitical rivalry spilled into Somalia, creating factions

in Somalia's parliament, cabinet, police, and military along Turkey-Qatar versus Saudi Arabia-UAE lines (International Crisis Group, 2019). The Saudi-Emirati alliance continued to put pressure on the Federal Government of Somalia and through parliament, to cut ties with Qatar. At some point, Saudi Arabia USD 80 million offer to cut ties was rejected by Mogadishu in 2017 (Alghoul, 2017), while another plane was seized carrying almost USD 10 million from UAE in 2018 (Maruf, 2018).

With Turkey and Qatar maintaining the upper hand in Somalia, and Somalia refraining from picking sides in the Gulf Crisis, UAE suspended its financial support to Mogadishu as well as its military training and support risking the paralysis in the security sector and budgetary deficits in Somalia. The withdrawal of US forces from Somalia and suspension of the US military training program for the Somali National Army in January 2021 (coupled with UAE's earlier withdrawal) leaves a major gap in the transition and capacity building of the Somali security architecture. Turkey is currently facing the significant challenge of fitting US and UAE's security roles in Somalia.

In the governance sector, UAE has taken its geopolitical feud with Turkey and Qatar to the core of Somalia's federalism, by entering into direct relations with Somalia's separatist regions of Somaliland, Jubaland, and Puntland. Turkey and Qatar are left clinging onto the Federal Government of Somalia, under significant strain from federal member states' increased hostility and "non-cooperation" with Mogadishu (International Crisis Group, 2018). Occasionally, Jubaland and Puntland have cut ties with Mogadishu, while Somaliland insists on independence. The first democratic elections in Somalia since 1969 based on universal suffrage, which were scheduled for mid-2020 continue to be derailed even after the new electoral timetable moved elections between December 2020 and February 2021 for the lower house, the upper house, and the presidency. The incumbent President Mohammed Abdullahi is accused by the opposition parties for alleged interference in the electoral

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process to secure his re-election by staffing the electoral commission with National Intelligence agents, pliant civil servants, and political supporters (Tastekin, 2020). With Turkey technically running Somalia's internal security and explicitly supporting the incumbent and legitimizing the heavily criticized electoral process, Ankara's actions border interference and have already irked opposition candidates in the presidential elections (Tastekin, 2020). Turkey has promised to deliver arms - 1,000 G3 rifles and 150,000 bullets to Turkish trained police unit, Haramaad forces ahead of the elections (Tastekin, 2020; *Arab News*, 2020). Jubaland and Puntland have threatened to boycott the polls while Somaliland's participation remains mute. The geopolitical rivalry thus continues to threaten not only the transition in the governance and security sectors but also the stability of the world's most fragile country.

### *ii. The Case of Sudan*

Geopolitical games in Sudan began with the Arab Spring, which incidentally warmed Khartoum's relations with Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in what appeared as "the fraternity for counter-revolution". When Shiite Houthi rebels overthrew the government in Yemen in 2014 with the backing of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and UAE pressured Sudan into cutting the long-established Islamic "fraternity of the sanctioned" ties with Iran. The Gulf powers began to end the 'encirclement' Iran had orchestrated against them through its presence in Eritrea, Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan. The Saudi-Emirati coalition further enlisted Sudan's Rapid Support Forces in their counter-insurgency campaign in southern Yemen in return for financial support to Sudan (Cafiero & Al-Jaber, 2019). However, the cash-strapped and increasingly fragile Sudan, burdened by Western pressure and sanctions, further opened up to Russia, Turkey, and Qatar for security and military cooperation, and financial support (Brachet, 2020; Dorsey, 2020a). The three entrants bagged strategic partnership deals with Sudan and gained influence with Bashir's government in 2017. The Gulf States generally injected USD 13 billion worth of investment in Sudan and Ethiopia between 2000 and 2017 (Calabresse, 2020).

The Gulf Crisis which hit in 2017 and lasted until December 2020, and the fall of Omar Bashir in 2019, heightened the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the United States on one hand, and the UAE-Saudi Arabia alliance against the Turkey-Qatar axis on the other. The United States quickly urged the transition to democratic rule, while the Sudanese military established Transitional Military Council which maintained ties with

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Russia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia (International Crisis Group, 2020). In fact, UAE and Saudi Arabia pledged to deposit USD 500 million into the Central Bank of Sudan alongside pledges of relief food and medical supplies, just days after Omar Bashir was overthrown. The move aimed at dislodging Qatar and Turkey and maintain RSF as UAE's military proxy in Yemen and Libya (Downie, 2019). After the transition talks, the military maintained actual power and control over the finances meant to fund the transition through its control of the Sovereign Council (International Crisis Group, 2020). UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt maintain and prefer strong ties with the Sudanese military as part of the counter-revolution campaign against political Islam, while the EU, US and the African Union shore up civilian leadership to bolster the transition. UAE and Saudi Arabia have, since Omar Bashir's fall, sent financial assistance to Sudan amounting USD 750 million, directly to the military and RSF. However, the financial support from the Gulf powers bolstered the Military Council's inertia in facilitating the transition to civilian and democratic rule (International Crisis Group, 2020). The military remains unaccountable to the civilian leadership and the public and continues to arrogate more decision-making powers which are increasingly fragmenting the transitional government in Khartoum. For instance, the moves to allow Russia's military base and near normalization of relations with Israel were exclusively pursued by the military (Alamin, 2020).

### *iii. The Case of Ethiopia*

After the death of Ethiopia's first Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi in 2012, there were deadly ethnic clashes and intense ethno-nationalist competition for power. Ethiopia's ethno-federalism as well as the ruling ethnic coalition, Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) were thus threatened by internal power struggles, leading to the resignation of the second Prime Minister, Haile Mariam Desalegn, in 2018, to pave way for

reforms. The reforms were meant to transform Ethiopia's political system and economic model, to guarantee civil liberties, open up the democratic space for larger plurality and inclusion, and guarantee shared prosperity through economic expansion and growth (Mohammed, 2020). The new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, who came into office in 2018 after Desalegn's resignation, represented the reformist faction of EPRDF and was charged with carrying out the reforms and preparing the country for democratic elections.

However, the longest-ruling coalition partner and Meles Zenawi's party, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), became a natural opponent to reforms and the transition, given its previous dominance over government, security sector, and the economy (Mohammed, 2020). Fiscal problems especially the forex crisis, significant foreign debt, high unemployment, numerous ethno-nationalist rebel groups, and a decade-long conflict with its northern neighbor, Eritrea added to the pile of problems for the transition. In 2018, Saudi Arabia and UAE moved into Ethiopia, mediating the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace agreement of 2018, and injecting liquidity into the cash-strapped economy to the tune of USD 1 billion into Ethiopia's Central Bank (Mahmood, 2020), thereby gaining leverage over Addis Ababa. On the other hand, UAE and Saudi Arabia's geopolitical rival, Turkey, had already established deeper ties with Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi and was riding on the continuity of relations. Ethiopia is Turkey's largest beneficiary of direct investment in Africa, estimated at USD 2.5 billion, with Turkish companies employing about 30,000 Ethiopians (Tessema, 2020). Ankara also maintains a stable military cooperation with Ethiopia as well as ties to Addis Ababa's security services, as both countries are playing in the same league in Somalia (Horton, 2020). As such, Turkey would not afford a geopolitical misstep in Addis Ababa.

However, Abiy Ahmed's transition reforms ran into headwinds as TPLF militated against what it perceived as systematic exclusion from Abiy's reform agenda as more TPLF functionaries were removed from power positions and became targets of Addis Ababa's bellicosity. Democratic elections which would have been the hallmark of the transition were postponed by nearly a year, escalating differences between TPLF and the new ruling Prosperity Party (an amalgamation of the previous ruling coalition except for TPLF) and finally leading to an armed confrontation turned the civil war from November 2020. In Abiy Ahmed's war with TPLF's regional base of Tigray in northern Ethiopia, which continues to destabilize the

country and escalate humanitarian crises, UAE's military drones (stationed at the UAE base in Assab in Eritrea) have allegedly been enlisted by the Ethiopian military (Horton, 2020; *Defense Global Corp*, 2020).

On the other hand, Turkey and Russia have expressed moral support to Abiy Ahmed's "Rule of Law" operation in Tigray, which has since acquired a risky ethnic cleansing dimension. The US is similarly quiet and allegedly not ready to call for an end to the Tigray war. The US expects Abiy Ahmed to embrace economic liberalization in his reforms, thereby opening Addis Ababa's economy and market to Washington, for which, its silence on the Tigray conflict is crucial especially with the outgoing US administration's foreign policy being transactional. Selassie (2020) observes that "top diplomats of the current US administration are busy shooting down every effort to end the war through mediation often claiming that they expect Abiy Ahmed to celebrate a military victory within days" (para. 15). Abiy Ahmed's "Rule of Law" in Tigray operation has further spilled over into Sudan as nearly 50,000 Ethiopians have fled to Sudan and the two countries continue to experience military confrontation over a border territory (el Fashaga) between Sudan and Ethiopia's Amhara region (Seleshie, 2020; de Waal, 2021).

While democratic elections have been scheduled for July 2021 and the Ethiopian government claimed victory in Tigray, it remains uncertain whether the country will be stable and ready for the elections. Fighting continues in Tigray while other ethno-nationalist groups such as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) have emerged, dragging the government into counter-insurgencies in various parts of the country such especially the Oromia region and into the temptation of "micro-managing" the federal system in Benishangul-Gumuz and Tigray regions (Teshome, 2020a). Armed groups on the resurgence cite impatience with Abiy Ahmed's administration's "disinterest" in peace talks (Teshome, 2020b) while public disquiet is beginning to build.



The exploitation of domestic political, fiscal, and economic weaknesses of the respective states for competing interests by major and middle powers, continues to undermine regional mechanisms for peace and security

## Conclusion

While regional and local dynamics in the Red Sea and North Africa precipitate instability, the impact of foreign direct involvement in the pursuit of geopolitical and geostrategic interests increase the scale of intractability. The exploitation of domestic political, fiscal, and economic weaknesses of the respective states for competing interests by major and middle powers, continues to undermine regional mechanisms for peace and security. The role of the African Union, for instance, has declined in various theatres, as foreign players wield leverage on local actors, sponsoring proxy conflicts, become direct parties to destabilizing events such as armed conflict, and pursue zero-sum games and military policies in

the two regions of Africa. The aggressive geopolitical strategies by foreign powers in North Africa and the Red Sea region, are transforming regional dynamics beyond the effective control of regional players, and titling Africa into their larger scheme of things. The new scramble for Africa will continue to undermine African countries' independence and sovereignty, as well as security, peace, and stability. If the conflict systems of North Africa, the Red Sea, and the Middle East merge, and integrally feed into the global geopolitical competition, foreign interference in respective regions is bound to endure and undermine Africa's peace, commercial, economic, and security prospects.

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# Inside Ethiopia's Troubled Transition: Achievements, Critical Challenges, and Opportunities for Progress

By Otieno O. Joel

## Abstract

This article analyzes Ethiopia's troubled political transition following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's ascension to power in 2018. It argues that although the transition had initially shown significant potential to transform Ethiopian politics from authoritarianism and years of political oppression to democracy, its current pack of challenges: the growing ethnic tensions, increasing political polarization, widening fissures between the federal government and regional member states, election disputes as well as other issues such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project stifles its progress. The recent military conflict in Tigray has further undermined the transition, adding pressure to what was already a highly polarized and fragmented political environment. Crucial measures are therefore needed if democratization is to be achieved. As a fundamental step, the federal government should institute an inclusive process of national dialogue aimed at building bridges and finding common ground on which to advance the democratic transition. Striking a balance between the competing agendas of ethnic nationalism and pan-Ethiopia is necessary as the country moves closer towards the upcoming election.

## Introduction

Ethiopia was set to hold its first democratic election on August 29, 2020 following the denouement of the decades-long authoritative rule. The resignation of Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018 and the ascent of Abiy Ahmed to the premiership in April that year placed Ethiopia on the path of a political transition from a culture of dictatorship toward an open and democratic governance system. Although the prospect of a new Ethiopia inspired hope and optimism globally at the onset of the transition, the transition has not been without its fair share of challenges. Abiy's move to do away with the old political order has weakened the Ethiopian state instead of building national cohesion and unity (Crisis Group, 2019a). The introduction of reforms and the swift transition from the old state has elevated ethnic nationalism and political factionalism leading to a highly divisive political environment that risks plunging the country into conflict and instability. Since mid-2019, there have been some mass protests in the country through which deaths, injuries, and displacement of some citizens reportedly occurred.

In March 2020, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced the suspension of its activities citing disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and stated

that a new electoral schedule would be communicated once the pandemic has subsided (Endeshaw, 2020). In June, the Ethiopian House of Federation (HoF) extended the tenure of the current government until elections are held and transfer of power takes place. Although a necessary public health precaution, the decision to postpone elections put Prime Minister Abiy and his reformist agenda in a precarious situation given the mounting criticism from the opposition's rank and file, and the ensuing constitutional challenges that the delay of elections proffer. Already, tussles over elections and the increasing ethno-political polarization have spiked tensions between the central government and the Tigray state, exacerbating the rift between Addis Ababa and peripheral regional states. As some analysts have stated, the combination of these factors, together with other outlying external imponderables "packs enough destabilizing power to upend" the ongoing transition (Abdi, 2020, p.1).

## The Onset of Transition

The widespread protests and civil unrest that occurred in 2015/16 across Ethiopia can well be said to have been the onset of the current transition. The protests



*People protest against the Ethiopian government during an Oromo festival in October 2017. Anti-government protests by young Oromo men began in 2015 and helped spur political change (Photo Credit: Zacharias Abubeker/ AFP/Getty Images/The Conversation)*

exposed the disbalances that existed within the ruling coalition, Ethiopian People's Revolution Democratic Front (EPRDF), particularly the skewed dominance of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). More than 1,000 deaths were reported with tens of thousands ending up in police custody (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In 2017, amidst a crumbling economy, intense disagreements within EPRDF (grievances over TPLF's control in the coalition and the unfair management of government institutions that were run mostly by Tigrayans) ratcheted up tensions that culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Heilemariam Desalegn in February 2018. In his replacement, Abiy Ahmed, then the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) chairman, was elected to lead EPRDF and sworn in as Prime Minister on April 2, 2018.

Upon assumption of office, Abiy embarked on a major political reform agenda. Through his 'medemer' concept – loosely translated to mean 'synergy' – he inspired hope and optimism at the prospect of a new Ethiopia, purposely stepping away from the authoritarian style of leadership adopted by his predecessors. Beginning with the release of all political prisoners and making significant steps to open up the political space by steering legal reforms, and allowing the return of exiled

opposition leaders back into the country, Abiy initiated a process of democratization. The appointment of a former opposition leader, Birtukan Mideksa, to lead the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia and to be at the forefront in planning for democratic elections demonstrated Abiy's commitment to creating an inclusive and democratic political system (Crisis Group, 2019b). In contrast with the previous governments, Abiy also embarked on a peace process with neighboring Eritrea, seeking to end a two-decades-long border conflict. In July 2018, a peace deal was signed bringing to life a historic rapprochement between the two countries.

However, Abiy inherited a country that was on the brink of political collapse. Although he succeeded in initiating a flurry of reforms, the sheer speed and breadth of these shifts, other than raising to unmanageable levels the expectations of many Ethiopians, created a highly factionalized political environment characterized by rising violent ethno-nationalist sentiments and political polarization. The subsequent increase in mass protests and ethnic profiling in various regions and the increasing collisions between the federal government and regional member states spell doom on the ongoing transition as a whole.

## Abiy's Achievements

Abiy's actions in transforming EPRDF into the Ethiopian Prosperity Party (EPP) and the Ethiopian-Eritrean rapprochement are worth examining given their implications on Ethiopia's internal politics, as well as the ongoing transition. This section discusses some of his notable achievements since he came to power.

### Turning a Coalition into a Single Party: Transforming ERPDF into EPP

Lying at the center of all major political shifts undertaken by Abiy has been the continuing transformation of ERPDF. Before the formation of EPP, ERPDF was at the helm of Ethiopia's politics (since the end of the military junta under Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, also known as the Derg regime, 1974-1991). Fashioned along ethno-regionalism, ERPDF reflected both an ethnic and a regional makeup. Despite staying in power for over three decades, ERPDF suffered serious internal challenges. Its dominance by TPLF (composed of the minority Tigray ethnic group) sparked resentment from majority groups, mainly, the Oromo, and Amhara. While lacking internal unity, ERPDF struggle over the years to "articulate and execute its vision for the country's future" (Mosley, 2020, p. 3).

In November 2019, through the then coalition's Executive Committee and Council, Abiy managed to gather a consensus and approval for the merger of ERPDF's four-member parties and the admission of other five 'allied' parties from Afar, Gambella, Harari, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Somali regions into a single national party, the Ethiopian Prosperity Party (EPP) (Crisis Group, 2019a). The formation of the EPP stems partly from Abiy's desire to reconfigure the ethnic formula of Ethiopian politics to one that promotes a national, pan-Ethiopian identity. EPP also seeks to bolster the legitimacy of the ongoing transition as stepping away from a past that many Ethiopians associated with ERPDF'S dysfunctionality

and incompetence. Signs of renewal were visible from 2018 when two of the coalition members renamed their parties: ANDM changed to Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) and the ODPO to Oromo Democratic Party (ODP).

Whereas viewed in line with Abiy's broader ambition to open up the political space and democratize politics in Ethiopia, the formation of EPP (which concluded in early 2020) has ratcheted tensions within ERPDF, splitting member parties into supporters and opposers. Since the new party's policies tend to shift from identity-based politics to a system that favors majoritarian politics, the merger was greeted with excitement in Oromo and Amhara constituencies, since it gives them the advantage of numbers. On the contrary, the TPLF and even other prominent figures in ODP (Abiy's critics) have rejected the merger seeing it as a lethal attack on 'federalism' and its multinational order which they believe "protects Ethiopia from its own history of coercive centralism and homogenization" (Crisis Group, 2019a, p. 11). Even outside the ERPDF and from Abiy's native region of Oromia, the formation of EPP stoked criticism with Jawar Mohamed, Abiy's main critic in Oromia, terming it a major political miscalculation by Abiy (see, Crisis Group, 2019a).

### Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement

Ethiopia's rapprochement with Eritrea is by far the most significant achievement made by Abiy during his first year in office. In 2018, Abiy single-handedly brokered the peace deal with his Eritrean counterpart, President Isaias Afwerki, ending the 20 year-long 'cold-war' between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The rapprochement elicited praise for Abiy both at home and abroad. Ethiopia and Eritrea had been locked in a 'no war, no peace' stalemate over a contested border stretching almost 1,000 kilometers and engulfing Badme plain (Mulugeta, 2011). The rapprochement, which was unilaterally pushed through by Abiy despite mild resentment from Tigray officials who felt alienated from the talks, was a clear break-way from Ethiopia's previous regime position regarding the conflict. By seeking a peaceful resolution of the conflict and ceding the control of Badme back to Eritrea, Abiy demonstrated his commitment to normalizing relations between the two countries and acquired peacemaker status. He was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

The peace deal has been touted to usher in a critical turning point in Ethiopian-Eritrean relations. It elevated



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prospects for cooperation on socio-cultural, economic, and political matters shifted the security landscape between the two countries as well the broader Horn of Africa region. In 2018, just after the signing of the peace deal, a flurry of economic and diplomatic activities was witnessed between the two countries, with the reopening of embassies and increased trade and travel across the borders. Flights by Ethiopian Airlines between Addis Ababa and Asmara were also restored. On the regional front, the rapprochement has been described as a significant milestone that promises to reshape peace and security dynamics in the region (Mosley, 2020; Stigant & Phelan, 2019). However, without institutional arrangements to safeguard and structure the new relationship, the peace process has stagnated. In April 2019, the Eritrean government re-introduced border restrictions for Ethiopians and limited trade especially the importation of goods from Ethiopia. As some analysts have posited, the reactions by the Eritrean government are consistent with President Isaias Afwerki's tight control over the country's formal economy and reifies his political heavy-handedness and grip on power (Mosley, 2020). Thus, with the peace process faltering, it will take time to fully normalize relations and offset robust bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement also dovetails with Ethiopia's internal politics. Particularly, it has amplified tensions between the federal government and Tigray (Crisis Group, 2020b). In what prominent Tigray leaders perceive as unity between Prime Minister Abiy and President Afwerki to neutralize and even decimate TPLF, Mekelle (Tigray's capital) has, since the beginning of their woes in the EPRDF (now EPP), criticized the peace deal. As it stands, the TPLF might capitalize on the faltering peace deal to criticize Abiy and widen the rift between Mekelle and Addis Ababa.

## Critical challenges on the Path of Transition

### *Ethnic Nationalism and Inter-Communal Violence*

Ethiopia's ethnic federalist model encourages narrow ethnic-identity politics and nationalistic sentiments. It tempers with the unitary agenda as it creates divisions between ethnic communities, and by extension, regional states. Although Abiy's takeover of power in 2018 resonated with major ethnic communities across Ethiopia, the change of leadership did not calm down communal violence that rose with the anti-ERPFD protests between 2015 and 2017. Instead, these have persisted and even worsened, with a corresponding growth in ethnic militias in various regions across the country (see, Crisis Group, 2019b, p. 21). Between 2018 and mid-2020, numerous incidents of inter-communal violence have been reported across the country, with regions bordering the Oromia-Afar states, Oromia-Somali states, Amhara-Gumuz states, the Oromo-Benishangul Gumuz, and the Oromo special zones in the Amhara region, being worst affected (Abdi, 2020).

More recently, the murder of the popular Oromo musician, Hachalu Hundesa on June 29, 2020, sparked the worst ethnic violence and chaos in Ethiopia since the onset of transition. Over 239 people were killed as a protest that began in Addis Ababa quickly spread into the Oromia region and turned into a violent ethnic attack targeting non-Oromos (AFP, 2020). At the time of writing, another ethnic standoff in building in Northern Ethiopia between Amhara and Tigray communities over a piece of land that Amhara claims to have been annexed by Tigray during the 1991 ethnic revolution that deposed the Derg regime (Crisis Group, 2020a). This remains a major flashpoint that might trigger ethnic violence and proxy war in Ethiopia and potentially stifle the ongoing transition.



Voters wait in line in order to enter a polling station during Tigray's regional elections in the city of Mekele, Ethiopia, on September 9, 2020 (Photo Credit: Edouardo Sotera/AFP/France24)

### Political Polarization, Factionalism, and the Transition

Despite the change of leadership, and political reorganization that were speeded up by Abiy's premiership, Ethiopia has remained highly politically polarized and factionalized. New trends and dynamics are observable in the recent fracturing of the Oromo and the continuing destabilization in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples where minority ethnic groups are agitating for regional autonomy. In Oromia, multiple splits seem to emerge, but a major division occurs between pro-nationalists and those who cling to the traditional edifice that supports regional identity politics (otherwise known as 'vernacularized politics of resistance') (Abdi, 2020). The centerpiece of this division is the rivalry between Abiy and Jawar Mohammed, a popular Oromo activist and influential media owner. Jawar has, since returning from exile in August 2018, gained popularity capitalizing on anti-Abiy rhetoric in the Oromia region. The result has been an intensifying battle for supremacy that has exacerbated intra-Oromo fragmentation with seismic reverberations across the country. Jawar was one of the high-profile politicians who was arrested in the recent government crackdown over protests that were linked to Hachalu's death. He is

now facing charges linked to terrorism, ethnic violence, and telecommunications fraud. With the weight of these charges, Jawar might be barred from participating in the upcoming elections. Jawar's absence (from the elections) could escalate tensions and possibly undermine the polls.

### COVID-19 and the Election Disputes

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic presents, at this stage, the most insidious challenge to Ethiopia's transition. The pandemic has not only posed a serious health emergency, threatening lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands, but has also deepened political crisis, ratcheting up political tensions. While the postponement of elections due to COVID-19 was a necessary health precaution, the federal government's unilateral decision opened up new scores and tensions with other actors, especially the opposition. Being the first democratic election in 15 years, (arguably only the 2005 elections in which the opposition almost toppled the ruling EPRDF coalition can be considered to have been democratic, the 2012 and 2015 elections were heavily controlled by TPLF, the then ruling party in EPRDF) the postponed August 2020 polls would have been important in charting the future of Ethiopia's politics and as such remained (and still does) a crucial test for the transition's legitimacy.

A common thread that resonates with many factions opposed to Abiy's reforms is resentment of Abiy's 'unilateral' style of leadership and 'unitary' reform agenda. With the postponement of the election in June 2020, sections opposed to Abiy accused him of planning an unlawful scheme to extend his reign (Kiruga, 2020). They demanded that Abiy consults them more, at least in the planning for election. Major tensions, however, have occurred between the federal government and Tigray officials. Despite the federal government's order to postpone elections, the Tigray State Council (the only such Council that did not join the EPP in January 2020) rejected the extension of mandates beyond the October 2020 constitutional deadline and went ahead to conduct its own elections in utter defiance of the federal government's order. This defiance led to a war of words between Addis Ababa and Mekelle. In November 2020, TPLF attacked the National military's Northern Command which is located in Tigray State. On November 4, 2020, the federal government ordered military action on TPLF (De Wall, 2020).

### The Tigray Crisis

The sounds of gunshots, military airstrikes, the firing of rocket missiles, and other artillery rent the air as the EPRDF-TPLF battle began, stoking fear of a crisis that would transform into a long-drawn civil war with a potential to rip the country apart (De Wall, 2020). More than 45,000 civilians fled their homes to seek refuge in neighboring Sudan (UNHCR, 2020). The humanitarian consequences of the war have been astounding with all sides allegedly being responsible for the atrocities.

Although the military confrontation officially halted on November 28, 2020, following ENDF'S takeover of Mekelle and Abiy declaring a military victory, the war, in reality, is far from its end. Some analysts have pointed out that the conflict in Tigray could turn into guerilla warfare as TPLF would turn into insurgent forces (Reuters, 2020). With TPLF's previous guerrilla experience that led to the ouster of the Derg regime, and now its leaders including Debretsion Gebremichael retreating to the mountains amidst sustained skirmishes in various parts of Tigray and across the border in Eritrea, there are indications that the conflict could turn into a long-drawn military insurgency. However, it remains uncertain the trajectory that Ethiopian politics will take as the country awaits to hold its national elections, tentatively now scheduled to happen on June 5, 2021.

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### GERD Conflict

The unending diplomatic fallout between Ethiopia and Egypt over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) continues to derail the ongoing transition. Ethiopia and Egypt have been locked in a major standoff over conflicting interests in the usage of the Nile waters – with Sudan trapped in the middle. In 2011, Ethiopia launched the mega GERD project on the Blue Nile at an estimated cost of USD 5 billion, a move that Egypt has always stood against. Egypt's fears are centered on the impact that the operation of the GERD will have on the availability of water downstream and invokes the colonial-era treaties of 1929 and 1959 to defend its priority rights over Nile waters. Ethiopia asserts its sovereignty over the utilization of its natural resources including the Blue Nile's water, and rejects the colonial treaties.

Attempts to resolve the conflict have largely fallen through. In February 2020, tripartite negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan sponsored by the US with the US Treasury and World Bank failed to reach a consensual agreement after Ethiopia pulled out from the negotiations. Between February and July 2020, tensions escalated as Ethiopia indicated its intentions to start the filling and operation of the GERD in July according to its previous plan. On its part, Egypt vowed not to allow Ethiopia to proceed with its plans without an agreement, with both countries expressing that they would exhaust all options available to protect their interests, including the military response. On July 15, 2020 the African Union (AU) through its chair, South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, convened another round of talks to break the deadlock and avert a military conflict between the two countries. However, as of September 1, 2020 these negotiations had largely failed to deliver a consensual agreement over the matter (AhramOnline, 2020).

## To avert growing tension between Addis Ababa and its federal member states, the federal government should ensure that any desired changes are reached through a consultative process and in full collaboration with the federal member states

GERD has political and economic salience in Ethiopia. Not only is it a national symbol that resonates with many Ethiopians both at home and in the diaspora, it also sits squarely within the government's economic transformation agenda. Egypt, using its influence, especially the diplomatic closeness with the US and membership in the Arab League, has also been accused of controlling the course of negotiations and gaining international backing over the matter (ECADF, 2020). Given Egypt's previous military threats, and Ethiopia's counter-threats, and the lack of agreement on the formulae for the filling and operation of GERD, GERD continues to deflect Ethiopia's government attention on addressing internal issues and pushing through with the transition.

### Pushing Through the Transition: Opportunities for Progress

The challenges and complexities discussed in this article put Ethiopia's transition at the brink of collapse. The aggravation of any single or a combination of the above factors has the potential to upend the ongoing transition and derail its gains thus far. More recently, the federal government has drifted into authoritarian practices; using force and arbitrary arrests to silence dissenting voices and punish the opposition. While this appears to be a choice action for Abiy who had initially shown much tolerance for the opposition and sought to expand the political space in Ethiopia, the crackdowns have instigated more violence and conflict. It is thus imperative that the federal government, the regional states, and other parties of interest in Ethiopia consider undertaking the following measures as opportunities and new avenues for pushing forward the transition.

#### *Engage in a Comprehensive National Dialogue to Identify Common Interests*

A comprehensive national dialogue established to identify a pact of common interests, enhance political tolerance and foster a shared vision and unity of purpose

for Ethiopia will be an answer to the country's current political woes. The fact that the constitutional mandate of the current government expired in October 2020 added to the lingering election dispute makes dialogue a more viable pathway to a peaceful and democratic transition. The success of such a dialogue will be determined by its inclusiveness, institutionalization, and the ability to build a political consensus between the different political factions as well as its strategies for implementing outcomes. The dialogue should prioritize fast-tracking the scheduling of elections and addressing the rift between the federal government and the regional member states.

#### *Safeguard Ethno-Federalism*

Ethiopia's ethno-federal system is meant to ensure that diverse ethnic groups are represented in the governance and political life of the country. The formation of the EPP jolted the system with fears that Abiy was engineering a political remaking of Ethiopia to centralize power and wipe it out. This has inspired resentment from various political quotas, with Tigrayan politicians standing opposing such moves. Although Abiy and the federal government leadership has maintained their commitment to the federal system at least verbally, their actions, especially, attempts to centrally concentrate political power, have largely failed to demonstrate this commitment. To avert growing tension between Addis Ababa and its federal member states, the federal government should ensure that any desired changes are reached through a consultative process and in full collaboration with the federal member states.

#### *Promote Unity and Democratic Citizenship*

Given the rise of inter-communal conflicts, promoting unity and solidarity among ethnic communities can help reduce the tension and prepare the country to further the ongoing transition. Empowering citizens to fully enjoy their democratic freedoms together with establishing an integrative and human rights-based political system is essential for Ethiopia's internal stability. However, in doing this, it is necessary to carefully strike balance between



*Ethiopians fleeing the Tigray region arrive on the banks of Tekeze River on the Sudan-Ethiopia border in eastern Sudan on December 1, 2020 (Photo Credit: Nariman El-Mofty/AP/csmonitor)*

the forces of unity and diversity (ethnic or otherwise) as enshrined in Ethiopia's constitution.

### **Seek Support of the International Community**

The Ethiopian situation requires broader and strategic international support to avert the ongoing crisis. Engaging a credible and legitimate external mediator who understands Ethiopia's political history and governing model can help steer the country towards dialogue and national cohesion. The African Union (AU) may respond to the situation. The current AU Chairperson, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa, could negotiate for consultation, especially on drawing up a new election schedule and dealing with the conflict with Tigray. Other international partners including the US, Western states, and partners in the Gulf could intervene to help safeguard Ethiopia's transition and persuade Ethiopian leaders to compromise their demands and positions on federal governance and regional autonomy and pave way for dialogue and national consensus building. International partners could consider sponsoring negotiations and talks over the GERD conflict to ensure a steady de-escalation of tension is maintained.

### **Conclusion**

When Prime Minister Abiy came to power in 2018, his ambitious move to transform Ethiopia's political

landscape resonated with many minds both at national and international levels. Abiy received numerous plaudits for his political reforms. However, some of his actions in reordering domestic politics have been opposed. Thus, although the transition has made some considerable positive achievements, the weight of the current challenges such as the increasing inter-communal violence, extreme political polarization, election dispute, and the GERD issue derail the transition. Abiy and other political stakeholders in Ethiopia must take the necessary measures to avert the negative impacts of the transition while ensuring that its gains are safeguarded. Fundamentally, the federal government should consider constituting a national dialogue to identify a pact of common interests including resolving the contentious re-centralization agenda.

“Empowering citizens to fully enjoy their democratic freedoms together with establishing an integrative and human rights-based political system is essential for Ethiopia's internal stability.”

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# A Call for More Pandemic and Disaster Risk Sensitive Peacekeeping

By Joseph Kioi Mbugua

## Abstract

Given the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is valuable to review the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping disease surveillance and disaster risk reduction preparedness framework and activities. The pandemic caught peacekeeping missions unprepared though there were previous health management systems put in place after the emergence of SARS in 2003. Using desktop review and a critical theoretical approach, the article presents measures put in place to contain the pandemic, challenges encountered and possible scenarios that would come into place given different strategic approaches to pandemic containment in the region. The article examines pandemic preparedness of peacekeeping missions based in eastern Africa. It presents challenges faced by peacekeeping missions such as the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), UN Organization Stabilization Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), (MONUSCO), and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). It finds that the lack of an integrated approach towards health security at the global level and specifically in Eastern peacekeeping efforts will determine the future of integration and pandemic DRR capability in the region. The article therefore calls for enhanced integrated health sector Disaster Risk Reduction DRR preparedness systems.

## Introduction

Health security as part of human security has been accepted as a crucial element of national and international security. The UN adopted a universal disaster risk reduction framework (DRR) in 2015 but many countries, not only the least developing ones, are yet to implement its provisions. Given the growing impact of climate change, diseases and pandemics are expected to increase. Pandemics and more frequent disease outbreaks are expected to strain the global national and global health systems. Mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, yellow fever, chikungunya, and zika virus are likely to spread to larger populations with global warming, depending on specific ecological systems (Haines & Christie, 2019). Severe storms also cause flooding especially in urban coastal areas creating a suitable environment for spreading cholera as recently witnessed in Mozambique.

The magnitude of peacekeepers' vulnerability to diseases even in the absence of pandemics is borne by statistics. For approximately 40,000 peacekeepers who have died since the first UN mission in 1948, more than twice the number of the dead succumbed to diseases compared to those who died in combat. Peacekeepers are threatened by diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and pneumonia in conflict areas. There are cases where

peacekeepers have been disease vectors such as when Nepalese peacekeepers spread cholera in Haiti which led to the death of about 10,000 people and infection of close to a million. To make the tragedy even worse the UN had limited capacity to support the country even after causing such a disaster (Alexandra et al., 2020). Several cases were lodged against the UN for causing that disaster including one in New York but the UN insisted on immunity. However, under the guidance of the then Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, the UN committed resources and personnel to combat the epidemic (Davies & Rushton, 2015).

Previously, Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) infected a large number of Japanese troops in China and South East Asia and eventually, the troops took the virus home. French and American veterans of Indochinese conflicts also took it to the USA (US) and France (Alexandra et al., 2020).

## Epidemics Disaster Preparedness in Peacekeeping

This challenge calls for a more enhanced international and national health emergency preparedness framework. Investing in measures for climate change adaptation, health research, disease prevention, and mitigation could



*A peacekeeper from the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) pours hand sanitizer into a child's hand (Photo Credit: MINUSCA)*

save thousands of lives and prevent huge economic losses occasioned by new viruses. Africa has suffered the immense impact of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola. Lack of effective global preparedness and support from the developed countries increased vulnerability but also ignited local agency and regional support. The control of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa attests to this resilience.

However, the politicization of Ebola in North Kivu (a province of the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC), suspicion of external health agencies, and resistance of local communities against foreign interventions have hindered effective management of the disease despite the presence of an international peacekeeping force. In 2005, under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO), all the 194 member countries signed the International Health Regulations (IHR). However, more than 80 per cent of the countries have been lagging behind in the implementation of the agenda and goals agreed. The Global Health Security Agenda launched in 2014 came as a follow up to IHR, and recognized the need for capacity building of different agencies to prevent, detect, respond to infectious diseases whether natural, accidental, or intentionally released. Despite a meeting in Kampala to extend the GHSA to 2024, there has been decreased political will to fund global health

(Bonnie, 2020). COVID-19 found the world less prepared despite the past experience of SARS, H1N1, and Anthrax pandemics.

Research is required to establish what type of capacity determines health security in the context of infectious diseases and how. This will inform policymakers' decision making on where to invest more resources. Evidence from the H1N1 pandemic in Asia point towards strengthening disease surveillance systems (Allen, 2014). Surveillance can establish patterns of progression to help anticipate, contain, and mitigate risks that are detrimental to health security. Through surveillance, the first cases of infection are identified and isolated and it also helps in lowering the mortality rate through a prior understanding of extreme health conditions. At the individual level, it demands responsibility towards the community through preventing infection of others. Surge capacity (resources and medical facilities to support health security), is also crucial in providing health workers with the ability to save many lives during pandemic outbreaks (Allen, 2014).

During public health crises, availability of adequate health experts, personal protective equipment (PPE), stockpiles of medicine and equipment, hospital beds, diagnostics, efficient health administrative systems, and allocation of resources according to the level of need are crucial in determining health disaster risk preparedness.

## Conceptions of National and Global Security

Realism has for decades dominated national and global security policymaking and academic discourse. The theory's main premise is that 'security is akin to the absence of military threat, or the protection of the state from external attack'. The balance of power is perceived to be an effective instrument of maintaining peace and international order. Non-military aspects of security are not given prominence. Buzan (2008) perceived security as the 'pursuit of freedom from threat and the ability of states and society to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against hostile forces'.

UNDP (1994) defines human security as 'safety from the constant threat of hunger, disease, crime, and repression and 'protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions to the patterns of our daily lives – whether in our homes, jobs, community, and environment'. Human rights, environment, and economic development are part of national security. The human security paradigm focuses on individuals rather than states as a referent for security and non-military threats to security.

Environmental threats encompass ecological threats, global warming, and destruction of species, food systems, and the emergence of infectious diseases. These threats have a significant impact on national and global security. Environmental degradation such as air, ground, and water pollution, land degradation and desertification, and climate change, which have been linked to the increased rate of cancer, heart diseases, and others are currently perceived as major sources of national and global security threats.

Perceptions of national and global security need to incorporate threats posed by infectious diseases such as COVID-19. Such diseases have a severe impact on health, economic, and social stability among nations. Securing populations from pandemics at the national and global level should be a prime focus of national and global security. Traditionally infectious diseases do not come into the radar of national or international security. This indifference has translated into a lack of preparedness and heightened vulnerability to pandemics.

## A Critical Theoretical Approach

The critical theoretical perspective is traced to Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, and French Philosopher, Michel Foucault. Critical theory attempts to question

the order of things as they are and their underlying foundations (Cox, 1981). The lens includes observing historical structures and ways and means of transforming them. It questions the parameters of the existing order and seeks to emancipate human beings from current dominant traditions. In the context of UN peace operations, deconstruction means uncovering the hidden potential for change while reconstruction means providing alternatives for more effective peacekeeping (Michael, 2004). Peacekeeping operations ideology is highly dominated by the Western liberal capitalist paradigm. However, since they operate mostly in non-Western environments, these ideological frictions have produced mixed models, failures, and also successes.

## Peacekeeping and Pandemics Preparedness

Though peacekeeping missions have standard medical preparedness frameworks, the emergence of new viruses of pandemic proportions renders such infrastructure inadequate. The COVID-19 health crisis has had an impact not only on the health sector but also on the economic, social, and political sectors. The security sector is no less vulnerable to the pandemic. Pandemics have a significant impact on peacekeeping and especially peacekeepers who work in fragile environments where basic health systems are weak. The DRC, South Sudan, and Mali missions where peacekeeping forces have faced significant obstacles pose even more challenges with the emergence of COVID-19 (Alexandra et al., 2020).

The UN currently deploys about 80,000 personnel in 13 peacekeeping operations most of which are in developing countries and Africa in particular. This number is expected to fall drastically as the world most likely enters a global recession after COVID-19. The United States has been the biggest financial contributor in peacekeeping. Given that



The UN currently deploys about 80,000 personnel in 13 peacekeeping operations most of which are in developing countries and Africa in particular. This number is expected to fall drastically as the world most likely enters a global recession after COVID-19

## The challenges emerging relate to the protection of civilians where movements of peacekeepers have been limited to prevent peacekeepers from spreading the virus or getting the virus from civilians

the US has been the worst-hit country by COVID-19, and the current President Trump's administration penchant for disengagement from global commitments, such as withdrawal of funding to World Health Organization (WHO), funding for peacekeeping might also be affected (Bonnie, 2020).

The aspect of comprehensive health management is not well mainstreamed in peacekeeping (Alexandra et al., 2020). Pre-deployment training rarely involves awareness of the prevalence of the disease in a conflict zone and prevention practices. This also means that the medical corps serving in the mission are not well prepared for specific war zone hazards such as diseases associated with toxic nuclear waste in Somalia or Environmental based diseases caused by ordinance explosions witnessed in Ethiopia-Eritrea War (1998-2000) and South Sudan.

Many peacekeepers have died or suffered due to complex infections that are rarely investigated. Due to the nature of armaments used during the Ethiopia-Eritrean war (1998-2000), some Kenyan peacekeepers serving in United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) were reported in local media to have suffered debilitating illness where they could no longer fend for themselves.

Like other organizations, the UN also adopted lockdown as a means of containing the virus. Rotations of the staff were suspended, movements and non-essential services were limited, and contingency plans were drawn for more effective responses. There has also been heightened use of technology including video conferencing as staff work remotely. The peacekeeping health facilities were not designed for emergencies occasioned by global disasters such as COVID-19. They do not have adequate test kits, protective equipment, or ventilators, and evacuations during emergencies have been hindered by border closures (De Coning, 2020).

With New York (UN Headquarters) being one of the most affected US states, even the Security Council can only meet remotely, therefore, mandates will be allowed to roll over till conditions stabilize. This means that if there were

urgent realities, risks, and needs for mandate revision, nothing will be done. However, field missions have been given more autonomy and leeway to make changes appropriate to the context of their area of operations (UN, 2019).

These measures kept infection among peacekeepers to less than 150, most occurring in Mali where also two deaths were reported. Previously the UN mission in DRC helped in protecting health workers fighting Ebola in DRC by providing logistical support and physical protection. Though there was local resistance to external interventions, basic health practices such as hand washing and temperature check was in place in North Kivu before COVID-19 global spread.

The challenges emerging relate to the protection of civilians where movements of peacekeepers have been limited to prevent peacekeepers from spreading the virus or getting the virus from civilians. A case in South Sudan where the first four cases of COVID-19 were reported from members of the UN. This led to poor relations with the government that limited the movement of peacekeepers and humanitarian staff. The government put roadblocks near UN camps to control their movements. To manage relations with the government and the public, the peacekeepers employ the use of Radio Miraya to pass information and correct misperceptions about COVID-19.

### Previous Audit of Peacekeeping Health Management Status

Audit of medical health practices done previously by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and UN Independent Panel in a number of missions revealed shortcomings. In UN Mission in Cote D'Ivoire (UNOCI), UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), and UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), there were cases of Troop Contributing Countries (TCC) sending troops without going through necessary medical checks or disease surveillance including updating vaccinations during pre-deployment. Some of these troops were thought to pose a risk of HIV/

AIDS and Tuberculosis to fellow troops and the local population (Davies & Rushton, 2015).

UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) placed responsibilities of health screening to TCC. The chief medical officer in a mission is supposed to confirm such measures were taken however given the number of troops and capacity of medical officers, these measures were not implemented on the ground (Davies & Rushton, 2015).

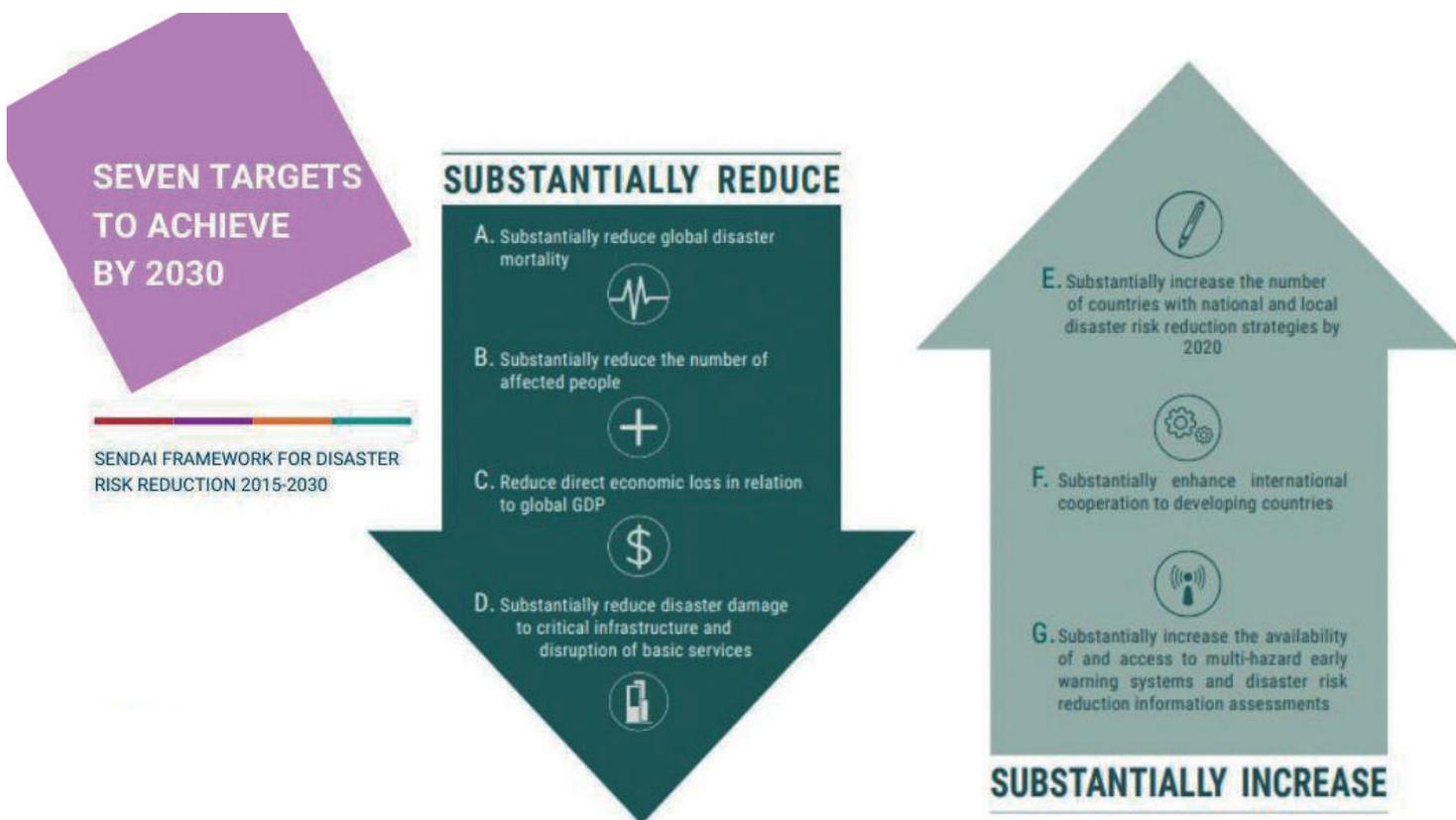
Previous recommendations included conducting screening against the suspected disease, going through recommended treatment, and vaccinating troops where possible. Given the emergence of more serious infectious diseases such as COVID-19, DPO might have to work more closely with TCC including providing funds and medical resources to support TCC's rigorous medical checks. Health impact assessments are necessary for all missions to prevent them from being disease vectors.

## Pandemics Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Framework

The purpose of pandemics disaster risk reduction (DRR) is to protect lives, health, livelihoods, environmental assets,

and human rights. DRR refers to 'reducing disaster risks through systematic efforts to analyze and manage the causal factors of disasters, including through reducing exposure to hazards, lessened vulnerability of people and property, wise management of land and the environment, and increased preparedness for adverse events' (UNDRR, 2015). The disaster risk reduction model was drawn during the global conference on disaster management in Sendai, Japan, 2015 dubbed Sendai Framework of Action (SFA), (UNDRR, 2015). It is based on the premise that if countries are doing effective DRR, the loss and damage from each disaster reduces every time, which enables them to break out of the events cycle and progress towards disaster prevention.

Applied to pandemics, DRR embodies disease surveillance, environmental and public health prevention mechanism, preparedness of health administrators, budgetary provisions, health specialist equipment and supplies, vulnerable population mitigation, response, relief, recovery and rehabilitation services. It also requires inter-agency coordination mechanism for national and local authorities, private sector and communities. It requires all of the society approach, participatory, affirmative, gender, age, disability and cultural



The Sendai Framework of Action developed during the global conference on disaster management in Sendai, Japan in 2015. (Photo Credit: UNDRR)

perspective, women, youth and voluntary contribution. State has primary responsibility while the involvement of other national, local and community stakeholders adds value. It is also supported by a comprehensive multi-hazard Early Warning System (EWS), including modern technology and traditional resources based on clear data system and dissemination (UNDRR, 2015).

Other factors determining the effectiveness of DRR are domestic resources and capabilities; capacity building (equipment, technical assistance, and technology transfer). It entails fostering resilience at all levels and addressing underlying health disaster risk factors. The overall architecture for the health DRR implementation framework encompasses laws, policies, institutions, goals, indicators, monitoring and evaluation system (UNDRR, 2015).

At the end of the day, an effective health DRR framework should include reduction of disaster mortality, number of people affected, the rate of economic loss, level of damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic

services such as health and educational facilities, and developing their resilience. DRR strategic plans form the bedrock of preparedness including coherent and sustainable international partnership and availability of and access to multi-hazard early warning system.

## Challenges of Peacekeeping Resilience against Pandemics

There is a lack of a clear political focus and a collective political will to address global pandemics. While WHO acts more like an advisory body, states have responded to the pandemic with their domestic policies that may not have been effective. Crises shake our mental conceptions of the world and our place in it to the very core. Amid a crisis, it is hard to see where the exit might be. Crises are not singular events. While they have their obvious triggers, the tectonic shift they represent takes many years to shape up. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not hard to spot abundant signs of problems to come before a crisis unfolds into full view. Indeed, the manner of exit



United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) personnel distributing Ebola awareness posters in South Sudanese communities near the DRC border in February, 2019. (Photo Credit: UNMISS)

from one crisis contains within itself the seeds of crises to come. Ruling regimes and the political class is aided by a security and surveillance state that is by no means loath to use its police powers to quell all forms of dissent in the name of anti-terrorism (Davies & Rushton, 2015; Bonnie, 2020).

### **Strengthening DRR Peacekeeping Preparedness**

Given the current threat of COVID-19, there is a need for peacekeepers to undergo a thorough medical test before deployment, coupled with continuous testing in mission areas to detect a threat in good time. This means peacekeeping troops should have disease screening facilities to detect pandemic prone areas. Pre-deployment training should include lessons in health education for both military and police troops and civilian peacekeeping workers. Sometimes the health facilities in mission areas have limited capacity. There have been cases of civilian peacekeepers who were infected with various diseases in the past seeking treatment outside the host country at their own expense.

Information on health statistics of those who get infected or die from various diseases is also not readily available. Lack of such systematized data bank limit acknowledgment of the severity of disease threats and consequently putting in contingency measures for prevention and management. In crises, well-equipped peacekeepers can provide logistical and protection support to health workers. Though health has not been highly prioritized in peacekeeping, given the emergence of global pandemics; there is a need for increased attention to the sector.

Application of DRR framework in peacekeeping at the national and international level focusing on preparedness could provide a better structure for the management of pandemics in conflict areas. Such a framework would increase the effectiveness of coordination among policymakers, experts and practitioners and increase the efficiency of resource mobilization and utilization. The level of vulnerability displayed in many countries, including so-called developed countries, demonstrates a lack of effective global and national pandemics response strategies.

### **Empowerment of Community Health Structures**

In many cases, peacekeepers have limited understanding or appreciation of local capacity for health management.

Given strong cultural traditions in peacekeeping areas, proactive engagement of local communities in order to boost their agency in health management is vital. The WHO has been the leading agency providing global leadership against COVID-19. It has provided guidelines on prevention and management of the pandemic although many countries are yet to adequately adhere to the health measures. However, WHO guidelines are not specific to the peacekeeping environment, therefore, the DPO needs to translate and adapt such guidelines for peacekeeping operations (Davies & Rushton, 2015).

### **Enhancing Inter-Agency Coordination**

There are many other global non-state actors contributing to disease prevention and management. However, there is no global health architecture that brings these efforts together with UN initiatives and host countries. The multi-dimensional impact of COVID-19 on health and security calls for new national and international institutional frameworks that bring together experts from different disciplines such as health and security. There are challenges of information management including tackling propaganda, illegal migration, refugees flow, border management, elections, health management capacity of troops and troops contributing countries and research capacity (Bonnie, 2020).

### **Scenarios**

Scenario building in peacekeeping offers policymakers a glimpse of the future implications of decisions made. By postulating possible alternative outcomes, policymakers can make decisions that will bring the most benefits and limit negative impact. Below are the possible outcomes of the COVID-19 impact in Eastern Africa.

### **Creative and Coordinated Management of the Pandemic**

Countries in Eastern Africa will manage the pandemic without heavy loss of human lives and low economic impact. This means that there are cross country seamless surveillance, detection, quarantine and treatment management regimes, but the efficiency will vary. The virus is brought under control within a year's life span, giving other sectors adequate time to bounce back and adapt. The high rate of unemployment and poverty does not translate into increased criminality, corruption and social unrest. The spirit of integration is given a boost where the road map for full EAC regional cooperation is further affirmed and the IGAD conflict management



Countries are unwilling to have collective approaches to containing the virus. This may already be seen in Tanzania and Burundi's lack of transparency in reporting cases and over-reliance on divine intervention rather than concrete strategic measures to control the pandemic

framework is enhanced. The cross-border trade and movement of goods is further enhanced with positive effects on peace and security.

Peacekeeping missions such as UNMISS, MONUSCO, and AMISOM have elaborate plans to share COVID-19 prevention knowledge and resources with local communities. They support government health services capacity and establish medical centers in outlying areas to serve peacekeepers and local communities.

### *Muddling Through the Crisis*

This means that countries resort to their most cherished beliefs and values. They will fall back on their previous experiences irrespective of how inappropriate they may be to the current challenge. They will not trust their neighboring countries and therefore they will put in place their strategic interventions without considerations of each other's welfare, risks, reality, and needs. This will allow the pandemic to flourish in unguarded cross border spaces and threaten the advances made in some countries. Such outcomes will increase mistrust between states and hamper advances of the EAC integration process and the IGAD conflict management framework.

Peacekeeping missions such as UNMISS, MONUSCO, and AMISOM will not have a strategy of assisting the host government's COVID-19 strategy. Their strategy will be limited to self-protection. Though this may reflect realities on the ground such as difficulties in coming close to civilians in a hostile environment and lack of adequate health resources to share with the community; they increase the risk of spreading the pandemic.

### *Breakdown of Eastern African States Cooperation*

COVID-19 brings heavy loss of human lives, skyrocketing inflation, unemployment and poverty in Eastern Africa. This means that there are disparate cross-country measures such as surveillance, detection, quarantine and treatment management regimes. Countries are unwilling to have collective approaches to containing the virus. This may already be seen in Tanzania and Burundi's lack of transparency in reporting cases and over-reliance on divine intervention rather than concrete strategic measures to control the pandemic. The virus continues to ravage society for more than one year with a devastating impact on other sectors. The high rate of unemployment and poverty increase criminality, corruption, social and political unrest. This reverses the gains made in the EAC integration process, the IGAD conflict management framework and creates an unfavorable environment for cross-border trade.

Peacekeeping missions such as UNMISS, MONUSCO and AMISOM do not coordinate their services with the host government. This will lead to mistrust and accusations of being tourists in troubled areas, or at worse, being vectors of the disease. This detachment with reality in a needy situation will make peacekeeping missions lose their credibility further leading to more hostile relations.

### *Learning from the Past*

Given the different historical, political, economic, military and social organizations of states formed in the region, an adaptation of seamless measures against COVID-19 is not foreseeable. However, given the level of globalization and the pandemic, states will move closer to the middle of the divide to avoid a pariah status that has an enormous political and economic cost. Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia will seek to harmonize their approaches while challenges will be experienced in Tanzania, Somalia, and Burundi. UNMISS is also expected to follow the leading state's strategic model in the region in order to enhance its legitimacy in South Sudan.

Given the breakdown of the US democratic, human rights and moral leadership icon under outgoing President Trump, and poor performance in COVID-19 management; the Eastern African region will be called to be more innovative and learn from unlikely quarters such as the much-maligned China and Cuba.

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# African Context of Conspiracy Theories, Manipulation, Misinformation, Disinformation, and 'Sharp Power' in the Wake of COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Misinformation through conspiracy theories is now a part of life in Africa, especially when it comes to elections and pandemics. The ulterior motives of conspiracy theorists, mainly theories directed towards the African continent, border on political subversion of governments. Presently, Africa has not been spared by COVID-19 disinformation campaigns spread mainly through social media. This has been enabled by high-speed internet connectivity and global mass connectivity. Narratives, constructs, and emotive memes, fabricated websites and authoritative identities, fraudulently altered and fabricated images and videos, and disinformation infiltrators and orchestrated campaigns, have dominated news outlets directly threatening lives and hampering the fight against the virus. This article explores manifestation of misinformation, disinformation, and 'sharp power' in Africa in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also explores the role of the West, China, and Russia in waging propaganda to exert their influence in Africa, and to shape public opinion and perceptions. For Africa to combat foreign manipulation, the article suggests a collaboration between news media agencies, research agencies to debunk lies and social media needs to be positively harnessed to influence African leaders, opinion leaders, and general publics in helping in battling conspiracies, misinformation, disinformation, and 'sharp power' all that are aiding manipulations of African governments and influencing their populations into approving mischievous actions of 'sharp power' wielders.

## Introduction

The rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have transformed the nature as well as the conduct of diplomacy and attendant services in modern times. Contemporary diplomatic services, above and beyond being faced with changing roles, shrinking resources, are also faced with the multi-stakeholder and multidisciplinary international arena. With the advent of the internet, it has become possible to use certain or several digital communication tools for diplomatic purposes leading to what is variously referred to as digital diplomacy or e-diplomacy which uses email, web forums, and blogs to exploit the communicative potential of computer networking for diplomatic purposes.

Digital diplomacy is majorly centered on the use of information and communication technologies in the conduct of international relations. In her work, *The Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) of Foreign Diplomatic Representation in Croatia*, Kristina Balenović argues that "governments are using the smart

approach. They see e-Diplomacy as "free of charge" publicity. They see a means of direct interaction with the citizens as well as a method of surveying public opinion and disseminating information" (Balenović, 2018, p. 6). However, Balenović is quick to point out that digital diplomacy can contribute to the success of performing diplomatic activities on one side or jeopardize them on the other. For instance, with the advent and penetration of social media, disinformation, misinformation, and fake news have widely been circulated across the world with malicious intentions including causing harm, deceiving, and manipulating public perception.

In the conduct of international relations, Africa has witnessed both disinformation and misinformation that contribute to fake news regarding the continent, but the primary difference between the two is intent. A lot of made-up stories about Africa have been told with a malicious intent to deceive, cause harm, and manipulate public perception against Africans. In the advent of digital



An activist explains how to wash hands to stop the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria. In Nigeria, radio dramas are set to bust myths around Coronavirus. (Photo credit: WSSCC)

media, a lot of misleading or false information without the intent to deceive finds its way to the masses in Africa.

## Communication, Propaganda, and Conspiracy Theories

Groups, states, organizations, and individuals communicate with the aim of passing a message. The motive of the message is only known by the source of the message and implications for propaganda and conspiracies usually inform motives of communication messages. According to Lasswell,

“propaganda relies on symbols to attain its end: the manipulation of collective attitudes...propaganda appeals to the heart, not to the mind. Emotional agitation is a favorite technique of the propagandist, because ‘any emotion may be ‘drained off’ into any activity by skillful manipulation—because propagandists attempt to do the other fellow’s thinking for him they prefer indirect messages to overt, logical arguments” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 627).

Thus, manipulation of information is a common practice employed by conspirators to achieve their goals. Digital diplomacy skillfully employs this technique to pass the intended message through either outright deceit or concealment of some message content.

Scholars have variously alluded to the existence of such concepts as “conspiracy thinking” or a general “conspiracy mindset” or “conspiracy belief,” which broadly refer to belief in a specific conspiracy theory or set of conspiracy theories. Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph, in their article *Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East* define conspiracy theories as explanatory beliefs of how multiple actors meet in secret agreement to achieve a hidden goal that is considered unlawful or malevolent (Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Michael Barkun identifies three constitutive elements of a conspiracy theory. First, it is the belief that in the world, nothing happens by accident, and the things you see are a result of willful action by a certain actor. Secondly, nothing is as it seems or looks. He argues that appearances are deceptive, and no group, individual, or any actor is benevolent or benign. Lastly, he asserts that nothing is random or accidental; that things are connected with patterns of behavior springing from them (Barkun, 2013).

The term has a judgmental or a pejorative connotation, implying that the appeal to a conspiracy is based on prejudice and or insufficient evidence. Conspiracy theories resist the act of being contradicted, scientifically referred to as falsification, and are reinforced by circular reasoning. Both evidence against the conspiracy and an absence of evidence for it are re-interpreted as evidence of its truth. Whereby the conspiracy gets hinged on faith

rather than on an idea that can be proved or disproved, in this way, it sets a stage for substituting truth with propaganda and fake news.

Contemporary scholars have argued that conspiracy theories are mainly a product of our modern digital age, facilitated and perpetuated by the 'Internet of Things' (IoT) and primarily through social media platforms. However, some believe that conspiracy theories have been prevalent among citizens throughout human history. The speed with which information and misinformation, is interpreted and misinterpreted, and spread around the globe continues to increase. There has been increased attention to how conspiracy narratives have been building around class, gender, and ethnicity.

### Africa's Misinformation and Disinformation Struggles

People tend to use the terms of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation to mean the same thing, but they signify slightly different types of information flow. However, in various texts, they are used interchangeably. Fake news refers to incomplete or partly false information,

often appearing as news, and typically expressed as textual, visual, or graphical content having an intention to mislead or confuse people. United States of America's (US's) outgoing President Donald Trump has been christened the king of fake news by his opponents but he has also been used similar terms against opponents and a section of the media in the US. Generally, fake news has always existed in the form of propaganda campaigns, 'spinning,' manipulation, falsehoods, rumors, conspiracy theories, and hoaxes (Anderson & Rainie, 2017).

Misinformation is now a part of life in Africa and without putting safeguards in place, it is likely that misinformation will increase as long as social media remains a crucial source of information for digital diplomacy. Both disinformation and misinformation contribute to fake news, but the primary difference between the two is intent. Disinformation is a made-up story with a malicious intent to deceive, cause harm, and manipulate public perception. Misinformation, on the other hand, is the spread of misleading or false information inadvertently without the intent to deceive. A sender of misinformation may not know the information is inaccurate (Ajulo, 2019).



*A member of Kenya Red Cross demonstrates hand-washing to members of the deaf community in Nairobi amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteers and activists worked to diffuse the spread of fake information as Kenya stepped up pandemic battle. (Georgina Smith/Al Jazeera)*

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Trump's disdain for the mainstream media is interpreted as the triumph of post-truth politics. He prefers to communicate via Twitter in what has been termed as 'twiplomacy.' Post-truth politics is a culture in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. The relevance of these concepts in Africa is ripe though contested, and its discourse remains incoherent. The idea of post-politics, post-truth era, fake news, and alternative facts has hit hard the African continent. It is essential to recognize that in the African context, the notion of a post-truth period, which by implication presupposes the existence of an era in which "truth" was self-evident, is folly (Ogola, 2017). The mainstream media on the continent has traditionally struggled to become credible. Since independence, many African states have muzzled private media, and governments invested heavily in state-owned media entities that were easy to manipulate. However, the current social media platforms have made it possible for audiences to circumvent state-controlled information infrastructures.

Nowadays, misinformation and disinformation strategies via social media can easily disrupt internal political and social systems within African democracies. These activities have a negative impact on ethnic harmony, public beliefs about health, science, and the status of reliable expertise. On this note, it is therefore essential for African nations to understand that fake news is neither a local nor an isolated phenomenon, but a trans-national battle, a struggle for freedom, and, as such, stakeholders must prepare and execute comprehensive responses.

The conspiracy that Africa is crime-infested was manifested by tweets directed to a congresswoman of Somali origin when she demanded justice for George Floyd, an African American citizen murdered by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. Trump questioned why a Democratic congresswoman didn't "go back and help fix the ... broken and crime-infested places from which *she* came." This was directed to Somalia as the maternal origin of the congresswoman. That is evidence of biased perception some powerful states and their leaders have towards people of African descent.

Another case of misinformation about Africa manifests itself during debates on democracy and elections where the standard of measure of credibility is not fixed but depends on the political and economic orientation of the contestants. When the ruling political regime is pro-western, international observers tend to quickly recognize that such elections meet the European and international standards. On the contrary, if the incumbent or the winner of the elections has no pro-western alignment, observers, as a rule, find numerous infringements at the election and, in this way, questioning the credibility of electoral victory.

In the 2007 election, for instance, European Union (EU) observers cleared the Kenyan disputed election as free and fair despite the chaos because they had a stake in the bid. However, E.U. lawmakers wanted aid support suspended until the Kenyan crisis over President Mwai Kibaki's disputed re-election was resolved. The lawmakers, who criticized the EU executive for disbursing 40.6 million Euros (USD 49,216,934.34?? / USD NZ 78.28 million) of aid a day after the election, that the result was not credible and called for a new vote if a fair recount was not possible (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2008).

France and Ivory Coast have had a conspiratorial relationship. France's persuasiveness on Ivoirians has made them wallow for three decades in dictatorship until the early 1990s, and this is so concerning its role in the France-Afrique diplomacy in which Ivory Coast was a dependable ally. Its point man, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, a dictator of Ivory Coast who died in 1993, enjoyed decades of support from France beginning in the 1960s. He rose to be a prime partner of France in the region whose works have been a major driving force of founding the notion of "France-Afrique" diplomacy.

In most of his public addresses, President Trump branded the COVID-19, a Chinese virus triggering a string of fake news and misinformation. Some of these arose from a well-respected French doctor, Didier Raoult, who claimed that the new coronavirus was created by the US and China to "destroy Africa" through the killing of 30



A strong false belief in the West about Africa is that its governance is rotten and that all its leaders are corrupt. There has been propaganda to demean the continent as corrupt and the practice a preserve of black people

million of its people, according to identical Facebook posts circulating in several African countries since May 12, 2020. One of them gained over three million views and were shared by more than 19,000 users. However, Raoult has since denied having made these assertions (van Mulukom et. al., 2020). Misinformation campaign has gained momentum concerning coronavirus such that state officials in African had to run spirited media campaigns to counter the viral circulation. It was shared that Chinese doctors had confirmed the “African genetic composition” resists the virus (Reuters, 2020). It was claimed that an African student had recovered from COVID-19 as a result of his genetic makeup found mainly in sub-Saharan Africans. So far, there is no documented scientific study to confirm this narrative. On the contrary, there are many Africans infected, with the current statistics standing over 350,000 total infections and over 9,000 deaths (Reuters, 2020).

A strong false belief in the West about Africa is that its governance is rotten and that all its leaders are corrupt. There has been propaganda to demean the continent as corrupt and the practice a preserve of black people. Contradicting this, former Liberian President Ellen Sirleaf was awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her “non-violent struggle for the safety of women and women’s rights,” and listed by Time magazine as one of the top 10 female leaders in the world (Cowell, Kasinof, & Nossiter, 2011). Kenya’s Professor Wangari Maathai (now deceased), former Assistant Minister, was awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for environmental conservation. Former South Africa President, Nelson Mandela (now deceased) is hailed as a reformist who fought apartheid in his country. Oxford economists have noted Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame’s prudent management of the economy by asserting that

“the reform-minded government has decided to play more of a supporting role in the economy’s development, putting policies in place that

promote entrepreneurial activities and that attract foreign investment. This has resulted in widespread development, with growth and foreign investment not only restricted to a few sectors” (Focus Economics, 2020, para.2).

## Medical Conspiracies in Africa

White supremacists in the US propagate scare-mongering notions concerning the growing population of blacks and other non-white people, arguing that sooner than later, the whites will be minorities in their own country (NewsOne, 2020). The thought of ‘white extinction’ fuels racism and conspiracy theories related to vaccination and the general Medicare services, and the fact that the death rate, especially from diseases and conditions that are difficult to treat, is usually higher among the people of color and non-whites (Bouie, 2020).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were projections that black people in the US (Ellis, 2020) and elsewhere were likely to be affected more than the white race. Coupled with trade tensions between the US and China, theories emerged that the virus is manmade (Broderick, 2020) and aimed at killing specific people and or is a tool to control populations, among other political reasons. It did not help that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the West in general, estimated grim numbers of fatalities in Africa (Anna, 2020). Most of the forecasts did not come to pass. This reawakened the continent’s mistrust of the west. It also emerged that some medical experts in France suggested that Africa should be used for vaccine trials (Okwonga, 2020). Fears arose that the vaccine tests and the test kit swaps would be contaminated and be a cover-up to infect the black population deliberately (Grobler, 2020).

This debate quickly coincided with similar discussions in Africa where it has been argued for decades that HIV/AIDS is manmade to decimate non-whites (Ross, Essien, & Torres, 2006) and more so people of African origin. Notable academics in Africa participated in the expansion of this theory, some terming HIV/AIDS a weapon of mass destruction (Kallings, 2008). A similar controversy revolved around vaccines recommended for infants or toddlers and women who had delivered. The argument is that those injections have components to sterilize women and children aimed at cutting down the population growth on the continent. However, a publication by Kent Heckenlively and Judy Mikovits revealed that vaccines pose dangers to the world over.



*A team of youth training the community how to produce bottles of disinfectants as part of their initiative in supporting community resilience against Coronavirus and addressing COVID-19 misinformation using local languages in Cameroon. (Photo Credit: Christian Achaleke)*

Doctor Mikovits claimed that pharmaceutical companies have been producing vaccines that lead to several ailments and deaths, causing diseases such as “leukemia, prostate cancer, autoimmune diseases, and Alzheimer’s” (Altaf, 2020). She was later jailed for allegedly fabricated charges. Her explosive revelations ‘threatened’ the business lifeline of hospitals and pharmaceutical companies (Mikovits & Heckenlively, 2020). The question therefore is, if hospitals and pharmaceutical companies can keep disease-causing and people killing agents on their shelves in Asia, Latin America, and the US, why not in Africa?

Africa has not been spared by COVID-19 disinformation campaigns spread mainly through social media. United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) observed that information meant to deceive and undermine the foundations of science were produced and widely shared, leading to confusion concerning the prevention and treatment of the disease. This has been enabled by high-speed internet connectivity and global mass connectivity. Narratives, constructs, and emotive memes, including “fabricated websites and authoritative identities; fraudulently altered and fabricated images and videos; and disinformation infiltrators and orchestrated campaigns” (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020) have dominated news outlets directly threatening lives and hampering the fight against the virus.

In his keynote address in the first global infodemiology conference held in July 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, warned that “we are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic” (Zarocostas, 2020). Ghebreyesus sees infodemic as an abundance of information (about the pandemic), some accurate and some not, during an epidemic arguing that this makes it hard for people to know which sources are trustworthy and reliable. And according to him, part of the problem in containing the pandemic is the widespread occurrence of misinformation (Zarocostas, 2020).

Efforts to reduce infection rates have been hampered in Sub-Saharan Africa due to disinformation concerning COVID-19, leading to stigmatization against those with the virus. For instance, Save the Children noted that 42 per cent of people interviewed believed that COVID-19 was a government campaign, while 27 per cent agreed that the stigmatization of those with the virus exists. A survey done by Africa CDC indicated that 55.8 per cent of people believed those who recovered from the infection should be avoided to prevent transmissions (Save the Children, 2020). Additionally, information about fake cures such as volcanic ash, chlorine disinfectant, colloidal silver, chloroquine, among other antibiotics, spread on social media posing direct dangers to life (Ahinkorah et al., 2020).

## 'Sharp power': Contextualization in Africa

There exists a vibrant debate on the value of 'sharp power' in serving state interests. It is thought that sharp involves manipulation and abuse of narratives. Muthiah Alagapp conceptualizes 'sharp power' as a regime's ability to influence perceptions of audiences in a target country to change their minds and behavior, undermine the political system, and thus shape favorable consensus through manipulative use of information (Alagappa, 2011). Its main difference from soft power is that it employs coercion. Soft power emphasizes "attraction" rather than "coercion or payment" as a means of persuasion, while 'sharp power' uses "distraction and manipulation." 'sharp power' gets its "sharpness" from authoritarian regimes which "pierce, penetrate, or perforate" the political or information environment of target countries, rather than appeal or attract the audiences (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). This term has been used to signify influence-expansion action from authoritarian states, such as China and Russia (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Litsas noted that conspiracy theories are usually employed as elements of 'sharp power' since they easily thrive among lower layers of the social hierarchy (Litsas, 2020).

Singh observed that 'sharp power' aims to hijack public opinion through disinformation or distraction and is an international projection of how authoritarian countries are not interested in 'winning hearts and minds' as Nye envisaged with soft power (Singh, 2018; Nye 2009). Over the years, China, U.S., and Russia have developed and perfected sophisticated strategies of manipulation aimed at target countries for their objectives (Nye 2009).

In the past 20 years, many international actors have shifted their interests and focused on Africa in different ways. China has made the continent a primary geopolitical target, focusing on investments in infrastructural development. Such investments are spread across the

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region. They include the Ethiopian dam projects such as the Gibe III, Entebbe-Kampala Expressway in Uganda, the standard gauge railway in Kenya, among others. Some have argued that these investment projects are veiled debt-trap diplomacy tactics because of the colossal amount of loans advanced to those states to execute them, and by so doing, it can use them in leveraging African countries.

Russia, too, has not been left out of the fray. The Russia-Africa Summit (October 23-24, 2019), which took place in Sochi, proves how it has pivoted towards Africa in past years, offering infrastructure services, energy, arms deals, different advisory services, among others. The outcome of this pivoting is quite beneficial for Moscow in strategic terms. The venue in Sochi, Russia, and not any other African capital, sent a signal on Russia's intentions and power games in Africa.

The Warsaw Institute states that the Russian strategy for the African continent involves benefiting favorable politicians through political and military advisors and offering control on media influence. In return, Russia gets military and energy supply contracts, mining concessions, and infrastructure building deals (Jurčák & Marek, 2020). Russia is keen on the Central African Republic, having peacekeeping troops on the ground. This is meant to ensure that Russian companies strike lucrative mineral deals. Other states with Russian presence include Sudan, Madagascar, Libya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, South Sudan, DRC, Chad, and Zambia (Jurčák & Marek, 2020).

The primary use of 'sharp power' in Africa by western countries and China included is not for benevolent acts, or to benefit Africans. There are arguments that it would be a blunder to believe that China, Russia, the U.S., and other hegemonic states interact with Africa for the continent's benefit. Their application of 'sharp power' in Africa is just a tool to help political allies get to control economies and populations and maintain it so that they can reap benefits optimally (Alba & Sheera, 2019)

Sometimes, states engage in criminal acts while pursuing their 'sharp power' objectives. Some countries like Russia once caused the intensification of social conflicts during the monitoring stage instead of quieting them. This is common when they have vested interests in the states with disputes. Such was the case in Comoros, where Prigozhin employees were tasked to explore the

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## Digital diplomacy will enable African states to manage their image on the global stage, amplify their media visibility, attract foreign direct investments, and amass soft power

possibilities of intensifying the conflict between the local government and the French administration (Grossman, Bush, & DiResta, 2019).

To counter this, Africa needs to use 'sharp power' by asserting black agency and respect by debunking myths and conspiracies about it. The continent can use 'sharp power' to develop an identity and enhance its image abroad. By doing so, the continent will minimize western democracies' influence and outright exploitation currently ongoing (Walker & Ludwig, 2017).

It is obvious that the growth of Russian and Chinese 'soft power,' which is tending toward 'sharp power' in Africa, is capable of influencing electoral processes, especially in the highest political office. African states should also monitor avenues through which external influence is being channeled.

### Conclusion

In this era of disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracies, African governments must master the skills of digital diplomacy in order to enhance their voice and visibility in global affairs. Digital diplomacy will enable African states to manage their image on the global stage, amplify their media visibility, attract foreign direct investments, and amass soft power. Through new media, the conventional view of African states as third-world nuclei of corruption may be annulled (Manor, 2016).

For Africa to counter foreign manipulation, a collaboration between news media agencies, research agencies to debunk falsehoods needs to be positively harnessed to influence African leaders, opinion leaders, and general public in helping in battling conspiracies, misinformation, disinformation, and 'sharp power' all that are aiding manipulations of African governments and influencing their populations into approving mischievous actions of 'sharp power' wielders.

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## Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

We are excited to release our seventeenth bi-monthly issue of *The HORN Bulletin* (Vol. IV, Iss. I, 2020). We bring to you well-researched articles and analysis of topical issues and developments affecting the Horn of Africa. We welcome contributions from readers who wish to have their articles included in the HORN Bulletin. At HORN, we believe ideas are the currency of progress. Feel free to contact the Editor-in-Chief for more details at [communications@horninstitute.org](mailto:communications@horninstitute.org).

Hassan Khannenje, Ph.D.  
Editor-in-Chief, The HORN Bulletin

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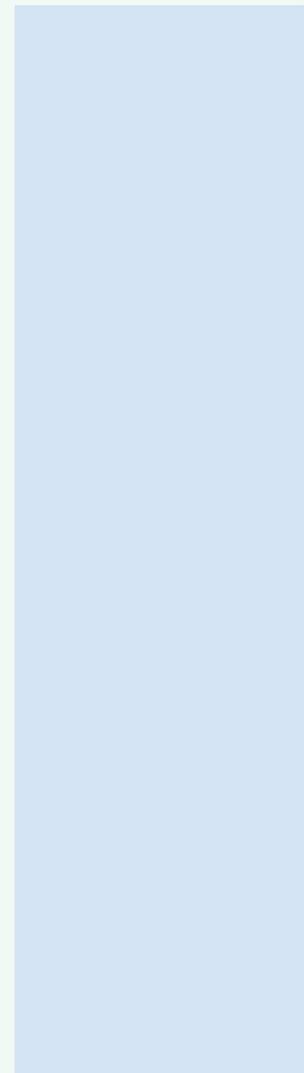
## Upcoming Event

### International Conference on Africa-Middle East Relations

#### Shared Peace. Shared Security. Shared Prosperity

HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies will hold an *International Conference on Africa-Middle East Relations*. The Conference, designed for both in-person and virtual attendance, will provide an opportunity for scholars and experts to discuss and exchange ideas on the nature and dynamics of Africa-Middle East relations. Participants from Africa, Middle East, and across the world will be invited to participate in the discussion.

The Conference, *inter alia*, will address the following areas in Africa-Middle East relations: geopolitics and Africa-Middle East Relations; trade and investment between Africa and the Middle East; Africa-Middle East relations in a multipolar world; significance of political ties between African states and the Middle East; among others.



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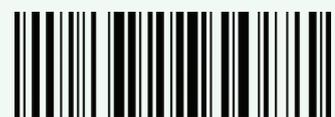
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