

Vying for Regional Leadership in the Horn of Africa

Kenya and Ethiopia, Competitors or Partners?

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa is one of the most unstable regions in the world. It is a region with a long history of conflict, geopolitical tensions, and poor regional cooperation. These conflicts and tensions are deeply interlinked and are not limited by borders. The political and security challenges faced by the individual members of the region are deeply interconnected with developments in their neighbors. Continued instability in Somalia, the recent civil war and ongoing insurgency in Ethiopia, and the conflict in Sudan and South Sudan represent major conflicts defining the political and security landscape of the region. Territorial disputes, proxy wars, and interventions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya, Somaliland and Somalia, and Sudan and South Sudan continue to undermine relations between states and a regional response to the deepening crisis. The interdependence between these states mostly springs from the connectivity of communities across borders, which are mostly porous. The increased presence, role, and capabilities of middle powers in political and security developments of the region, as well as heightened geopolitical competition in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, further complicate the regional security complex.

The Horn of Africa, which is traditionally defined as the area that encompasses Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, covers nearly 2 million square kilometers with a population of about 150 million. A more liberal definition of the Greater Horn includes Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, and Sudan. When it comes to security, the Horn of Africa is as diverse and complex as the communities of countries that make up the region. On the aggregate, these dynamics have turned the Horn of Africa into one of the world's most volatile regions. It is an area where every single country, from Djibouti, the smallest, to Sudan, the largest, sees itself as a key actor in the region with leverage over the others. This manifests

itself in various ways, whether through competition for access to the sea, peace negotiations in the conflict in Sudan, or Ethiopia's domestic security challenges.

This paper considers the dynamics driving peace and security challenges and how they inform the scramble for regional leadership between Ethiopia and Kenya, two countries with the wherewithal to be an anchor state of the Horn of Africa. Given the size of the region and the plethora of conflicts and their ramifications beyond its borders, one may wonder whether one anchor state is enough or whether the regional dynamics require more than one anchor state. And if it is the latter, will the two anchor states engage as competitors or partners?

Regardless of the definition, Ethiopia is the only country that borders all other countries in the Horn of Africa, a gift of its size and location. It is also the seat of the African Union. Combined with its large population of 126 million, Ethiopia has great, historical influence in regional affairs. Over the years, Ethiopia has played a role in developments in Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, which include security engagements, economic partnerships, and peace negotiations. As such, Ethiopian leaders have come to see their country as naturally positioned to be a regional anchor. Internal dynamics, particularly past events, including the war in Tigray and related conflict, have dampened that position and increase the gap between the country's aspirations and the means of its foreign policy. This is largely due to the refocusing of resources on domestic needs.

At the same time, Kenya has worked to assert itself as the regional peace and security leader and claim some of the diplomatic and security roles that Addis Ababa has abdicated due to Ethiopia's internal conflict and external tensions.

Kenya has played different roles in various developments in the Horn of Africa since its independence from the United Kingdom. As the region's most vibrant economy, Kenya has engaged on different peace and security and diplomatic initiatives from South Sudan to Sudan to Somalia. These efforts overlap with Ethiopia's in terms of strategic importance and engagement.

Kenya has also enjoyed great momentum on the world stage and has gained support among members of the international community. This is due in part to Kenya's commitment to peace engagement beyond the Horn of Africa in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and across the Atlantic in Haiti. The efforts culminated with President William Ruto's state visit to the White House on May 23, 2024. It was the third state visit to the United States by a Kenyan head of state in the country's history.¹ The visit also resonated on the African stage, as it had been 16 years since the last official state visit to the United States from an African leader, Ghanaian President John Kufour, in 2008. Building on this momentum, how does Kenya move forward with its aspirations and ambitions as a potential anchor state?

This paper is an attempt to examine major trends in regional cooperation for peace and security as well as the need for a regional anchor in the face of the changing regional security architecture. This analysis is based on field research conducted in Nairobi, Kenya, and in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the fall of 2024. At the request of the interviewees, their comments have been kept anonymous. In conducting this study, the researchers met with a broad cross section of informants, including government officials, civil society leaders, diplomats, independent journalists, local political analysts, and academics.

The Context

Matters related to Africa account for nearly 70 percent of the peace and security questions posed at the UN Security Council.² Since the independence era in the 1960s and 1970s, when liberation movements led to everything from armed resistance and post-independence ethnic violence to armed rebellions and civil wars, the legacy of conflict and violence has lingered in the region.

The Greater Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict-prone regions of the African continent. In the past decade and a half, states in the region have experienced civil wars, coups, insurgency movements, protest movements, state failure, terrorism, piracy, secession movements, and cross-border organized crime. The regional security landscape is undergoing a complex set of cascading and multiplying crises. In the past few years, the dangers of protracted conflicts in the two largest states of the region, Ethiopia and Sudan, have exacerbated state fragility and undermined regional cooperation. Ethiopia has been contending with an extended period of multiple upheavals, where the state's monopoly on the use of force has been violently contested in key regions of the country.³ Meanwhile, Sudan's statehood is facing an unprecedented existential threat.

Against the backdrop of continuing internal crises, the geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa have become more volatile and unpredictable. A January 2024 memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland on maritime access is resulting in far-reaching implications—with the potential to redraw political, geopolitical, and administrative maps and alliances in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. Contested state-building in Somalia, fragility in South Sudan, political instability in Kenya, and an aging ruling elite in Eritrea add to the regional crisis. Entrenched traditional security issues, combined with expanding non-traditional security threats, have widened and deepened regional fault lines. As the region grapples with historical legacies and the politics of “state formation and decay,” the geopolitical context becomes a key determinant shaping efforts for a new regional security architecture.⁴

These developments are taking shape while the global order, multilateralism, and international cooperation are witnessing changes on a scale unseen since the end of the Cold War. The last decade has seen the fast militarization and securitization of the region. Great power competitors, ongoing contestation in the Mediterranean Sea, Middle Eastern rivalries, and the Gulf crisis are each impacting spheres of influence in the Horn of Africa, making the already fragile region a complex battlefield. These vulnerabilities are enabling external actors to more easily undermine democratization, peace processes, security sector reform, and inclusive political settlements.

Driven by its interest over the Nile River, Egypt has renewed its encirclement policy on Ethiopia, taking advantage of fast-deteriorating relations between Ethiopia and its neighbors. This is resulting in the securitization and militarization of Ethiopia's regional policy while weakening regional security and political cooperation.⁵ Meanwhile, deepening internal crises and widening differences among member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) undermine the regional organization's peace and security agenda in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and other regional conflicts, allowing more space for powers from the Gulf and elsewhere.

In the face of Ethiopia's internal challenges and declining external role, Kenya has been making efforts to fill the resulting vacuum in peace, mediation, and diplomatic efforts within the Greater Horn of

Africa region and beyond. This has been met with mixed results.⁶ Kenya's designation as a major non-NATO U.S. ally and Ethiopia's accession to the BRICS group took place months apart, highlighting the possibility of the two countries diverging in their understanding of the global order and their approaches to the regional security architecture.

Kenya has been among the African countries with the capacity and willingness to intervene before conflicts and violence escalate into widespread regional instability—something not infrequent, given that Africa's porous state borders are not consistent with ethno-demographic realities. This has made Kenya an important broker in peace and security in the region for the last six decades, ever since 1960—before it even gained independence—when Jomo Kenyatta, soon to become a leader in the freedom movement, led negotiations in the first civil war in the DRC.

It is striking that despite dramatic regime changes in Nairobi, peace and security have remained the centerpiece of Kenya's regional foreign policy. In September 2022, for example, as President William Ruto took the oath of office, he assigned his predecessor-turned-bitter-rival, President Uhuru Kenyatta, to lead Kenya's peace efforts in the Horn of Africa (the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia) and East Africa (stabilizing the eastern DRC).

It is worth noting that “leadership personalities play a significant role in shaping foreign policy.”⁷ The contrasts between Kenyatta's Pan-Africanist approach and William Ruto's more reactive and fragmented foreign policy are stark, with Ruto still struggling to define a cohesive peace diplomacy vision. President Kenyatta's vision for Kenya's role was strongly supported by regional peace and security bodies, especially IGAD, the East African Community (EAC), and the African Union; this not only lent legitimacy to Kenya's peace initiatives but also validated the country's credentials as a regional leader, stabilizer, and pacifier. In the words of an international studies and diplomacy professor interviewed for this study, “Kenya's peace diplomacy is a core element of its foreign policy, particularly in fragile regions like South Sudan, Somalia, and the DRC.”⁸ But how stunning is Kenya's performance? Through its mediation efforts, Kenya ended civil war in Uganda in 1985, ended Africa's longest civil war in Sudan (1955–2006) through efforts which birthed Africa's newest nation (South Sudan), stabilized one of Africa's most troubled countries (Liberia), and revived a collapsed state (Somalia).

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Kenya has deployed its diplomats, military forces, and financial and humanitarian resources to peace initiatives for conflict mediation and peacekeeping. However, a regional expert also noted that “personal dynamics and internal strife between Kenya's leaders and their relations [with] other regional heads of state also affect peace diplomacy outcomes, as seen in Ruto's uneasy relationships with regional leaders like Félix Tshisekedi of [the] DRC and Farmajo of Somalia.”⁹ The peace enterprise can

also be a great risk to Kenya's national security, as reflected by Al-Shabaab's terrorist attacks in response to Kenya deploying forces in Somalia as well as the more recent threats of war from ranking military officers within the Sudan Armed Forces. Furthermore, peacekeeping operations are expensive and cost blood and money, which a developing economy such as Kenya's may find difficult to sustain. In 2016, for example, President Kenyatta threatened to withdraw forces from Somalia following funding cuts to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).¹⁰

This leads to an important question: Why is Kenya sacrificing so much, especially for its immediate neighborhood in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, which is one of the most volatile regions in the world?

Kenya and Ethiopia: Partners and Competitors

Africa has experienced a lot of intrastate conflicts and violence from the 1960s through the 2000s due to three main factors: center-periphery struggles due to poor state formation, Cold War proxy conflicts at the state level, and ethnic conflict and violence. Military coups and civil wars have characterized the larger part of independent Africa, with political instability reverberating everywhere. This volatility has one of its epicenters in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, right at Kenya's doorstep.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the region was engulfed by civil wars, military coups, and insurgencies, including in Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), the DRC, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. Only Kenya and Tanzania experienced relative peace and stability in that period, which led to them shouldering the burden of peacemaking in the region. Over the years, Kenya had established a legacy as a fairly neutral arbiter that deferred to the sovereignty of others. This won it favor and legitimacy across the region, while some of Kenya's peers often interfered negatively with each other's internal affairs, national security, and sovereignty, losing them the necessary credibility to intervene as third parties. Uganda and Sudan had accused each other of sponsoring rebels in each other's territories, for instance, as had Ethiopia and Eritrea, Uganda and the DRC, Rwanda and the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda, and Burundi and Rwanda. As the most peaceful and stable state, Kenya naturally emerged as the region's foremost stabilizer. It would lead peace processes in Somalia, the CAR, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Uganda, while Tanzania would centrally drive peace processes for its immediate neighbors Rwanda and Burundi.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, has long held a strategic position in African politics and security. It is the only uncolonized African state and the seat of both the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. It is the second-most-populous country on the continent and strategically located in the Horn of Africa. With its long borders with Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Sudan, Ethiopia is the only country in the Horn of Africa that shares a border with all the other countries in the region. The central geographic location, historical and cultural ties, and long history of statehood have been perceived as both vulnerability and advantage by the Ethiopian state. Simultaneously, relative political stability, steady economic growth, and predictable foreign and security policy have improved Ethiopia's regional role for most of the past quarter century.

Since 2005, Ethiopia's leadership role in IGAD, the African Union, and international platforms saw significant improvement. Ethiopia also maintained a balance between strong security and development cooperation with the West and expanding economic relations with China and other middle and emerging powers. Ethiopia regularly represented Africa and the developing world at G20 and G7

summits and took leadership at numerous UN Climate Change Conferences. The reputation, image, and influence Ethiopia projected at the global level emanated from its contributions to regional peace and security efforts through multilateral arrangements and frameworks. In 2011, Ethiopia was the only trusted neighbor assigned to mediate between Sudan and South Sudan; it also contributed 100 percent of the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA). Ethiopia further took a leading role in the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), led the IGAD mediation process to end the civil war in South Sudan, and cosponsored UN sanctions with Djibouti against Eritrea for supporting Al-Shabaab. Addis Ababa's strategic cooperation with Nairobi also helped the formation of the transitional government in Somalia, which later transformed into the federal government.

Recent years, however, have seen a departure from Ethiopia's traditional foreign policy. The past six years have witnessed Ethiopia's foreign policy shifting from a multilateral-based normative approach focused on regional integration to a bilaterally rooted, assertive, and realist policy. The Abiy Ahmed government's stance on Ethiopia's right to maritime access is at the heart of the new regional and security strategy. Some Ethiopian foreign policy actors believe that with the current drive Ethiopia can regain its anchor-state status, provided it deals with some of its internal challenges.¹¹

While Kenya and Ethiopia have had to contend with their sometimes-converging, sometimes-diverging agendas and visions, they have also benefited from mutual participation in regional economic communities (RECs). RECs have structures and institutions to steer peace and security issues in the region, especially the East African Community (EAC) and the African Union. Both Kenya and Ethiopia participated strongly in the founding of these regional bodies (Kenya in the founding of the EAC and both in the founding of the African Union) and have occupied ranking positions in them. Historically, it has fallen upon Kenya to provide stable leadership in these RECs, given the frequent turmoil of other member states. However, today Kenya is facing growing competition from Tanzania and Ethiopia in its peace diplomacy efforts. Tanzania's involvement in DRC peace talks and Ethiopia's strategic positioning in IGAD demonstrate the shifting power dynamics in the region. The rivalry between RECs—especially the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the EAC—also challenges Kenya's influence, with other regional blocs vying for control over peacekeeping and diplomatic leadership in Africa.

Ethiopia's Transition, Challenges, and Shifts

In 2018, Abiy Ahmed became prime minister of Ethiopia after years of anti-government protests. Six years later, Ethiopia is still grappling with a fiercely contested political and economic transition. Initial reforms resulted in the release of thousands of political prisoners and the return of former rebels who were invited to peacefully compete for power in elections. The West welcomes the reforms, and Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for his domestic efforts and the rapprochement with Eritrea. However, the transition exposed deep contradictions at the heart of the Ethiopian state and society. Instead, contestation of territories, nationalist mobilizations, and boundary conflicts dramatically heightened communal tensions. This resulted in extraordinary levels of violence, displacement, and insecurity in many parts of the country. The war in Tigray and the protracted insurgency in the Oromia and Amhara regions have been but the most visible manifestations of fractured state-society relations. Moreover, the crisis has affected Ethiopia's relations with the outside world.

Political, security, and diplomatic developments in the past seven years have dented Ethiopia's regional role and diverted attention and resources to internal security challenges, with internal conflicts weakening Ethiopia's peacekeeping reputation.¹² Declining relations with Kenya and Sudan, as well as a security partnership with Eritrea, resulted in Ethiopia abdicating its regional role and influence.¹³ Ethiopia's 2018 rapprochement with Asmara was done with little or no consultation with Djibouti, which still considers Eritrea as a bully and a major security threat. Djibouti therefore observed the improving relations with nervousness and a sense of betrayal, while also being wary of Ethiopia's increasingly assertive narratives on maritime access and its MoU with Somaliland.

At the same time, the Tigray war worsened the decades-long territorial dispute between Addis Ababa and Khartoum and spilled over to widening disagreements on the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Nairobi has been concerned with changes in Ethiopian regional policy and unsure of long-term cooperation with the country—which was once the biggest African contributor to UN peacekeeping efforts, with more than 10,000 troops. Peacekeeping was one of Ethiopia's effective and successful foreign policy tools, but in 2021, accusations of human rights violations and worsening relations with Sudan resulted in Sudan demanding the withdrawal of Ethiopian peacekeeping troops from its territory.¹⁴ Divisions and standoffs between members of the Ethiopian peacekeeping forces in Somalia and Sudan also raised major security concerns.¹⁵ The emergence of a short-lived tripartite arrangement between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, along with the bilateral and personalized approach to foreign policy adopted by Addis Ababa and Asmara, further undermined multilateral organizations and initiatives for peace and integration in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's relations with numerous multilateral institutions and mechanisms have also deteriorated because of internal conflicts.

Increased security and political vulnerabilities, economic challenges, and strained relations with the United States and the European Union are leading to growing roles for middle and emerging powers in Ethiopia.¹⁶ The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, and Iran have provided Addis Ababa with the drones, surveillance technologies, and weapons and ammunitions desperately needed for the war in Tigray and the insurgencies in the Oromia and Amhara regions.¹⁷ The constant support Ethiopia receives from Russia and China at the UN Security Council and its accession to BRICS could further consolidate its move toward the East. The controversial MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland has sparked a regional tinderbox, evoking old fears and distrust that has lingered beneath the surface for many decades and threatening to become one of the latest fronts for proxy shadowboxing in the Horn of Africa.¹⁸ Crucially, the deal faced fierce resistance from Somalia, prompting shifting alliances in regional geopolitical dynamics, with far-reaching implications.

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Kenya: An Evolving Foreign Policy

The scope of Kenya's involvement in peace and security initiatives in the region has taken the shape of three broad eras: the independence era (1960s), the post-independence era (1970s-early 2000s), and the modern era (early 2000s-present). In the latter stage, a linkage between domestic and foreign policy has strongly dictated the thrust of Kenya's peace diplomacy. Generally, as observed by a regional peace and security expert, "different Kenyan presidents had distinct styles: President Daniel Moi (1978-2002) was an internationalist, Mwai Kibaki (2003-2013) focused on economics, and Uhuru Kenyatta (2013-2022) emphasized Pan-Africanism and regional integration, at the center of which were Kenya's economic interests."¹⁹

At face value, Kenya's peace diplomacy in the region appears to be rooted in altruism. A closer look at its foreign policy evolution since independence in 1963 reveals a deliberate actor driven by environmental factors (surrounded by fragility) and normative thrust and motivated by strategic interests to project soft power, boost its geostrategic leverage, and support its economic ambitions. Peace in the region serves all these goals, and financial, material, technical, diplomatic, and human resources are a worthy investment to attain it.

The independence and post-independence eras captured the zeitgeist of Pan-Africanism like none since. Kenya's independence president, Jomo Kenyatta, was among the luminaries of Pan-Africanism; as such, he advanced arguments for African unity, regional integration or confederation, and respect for colonial borders and state sovereignty. The foreign policy principle of "good neighborliness" was also an extension of Pan-Africanism, as is the humanitarian support to refugees Kenya has hosted on its territory. Regional multilateral mechanisms including the African Union, EAC, IGAD, and many other RECs across Africa emerged in this era and provided platforms for peer leadership and stability.

In the post-2002 period, as President Mwai Kibaki took office (2003-2013), Kenya adopted the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation, and economic and commercial interests became the centerpiece of Kenya's foreign policy. Kenya's economic growth increased from the low of 0.6 percent in 2002 to 7.1 percent in 2007.²⁰ With the adoption of the Vision 2030 economic development blueprint in 2008, Kenya intensified its economic diplomacy to achieve a middle-income status. Kenya's approach to regional insecurity and instability became informed by its economic and commercial interests. In fact, Kenya's former UN deputy ambassador affirms that "significant involvement in peace processes, such as in Somalia, South Sudan, and DRC, showcased a focus on humanitarian motivations and economic interests."²¹

Kenya's economy has grown to become the fifth-largest in sub-Saharan Africa, valued at approximately \$110 billion in 2021.²² It is the most advanced and largest economy in the Eastern, Central, and Horn of Africa regions. Kenya is thus the largest trading power in the region—in terms of purchasing power, exports and imports, and inflows and outflows of investment. Consequently, Kenya has a large stake in regional stability, peace, and cooperation. Kenya's peace diplomacy today is thus more of an inter-operationalization of domestic and foreign policy in service of Kenya's economic goals in a volatile region.

Evidently, as per a former UN deputy ambassador, "the expansion of Kenya's regional influence, including the integration of DRC into the East African Community (EAC), highlights strategic economic partnerships which allow Kenyan banks (Equity and KCB) as well as airlines (KQ and Jambo Jet) to expand in the

region.”²³ The economic thrust of Kenya’s foreign policy has occasionally cost it operational success, for instance, when Kenya’s intervention in conflict zones has been perceived as purely driven by commercial interests rather than a genuine wish for peace. However, the “peace for profit” model reflects a pragmatic approach where peace is seen as both a diplomatic and commercial opportunity.

In preferring to advance Kenya’s strategic security and economic interests in trade and investment through bilateral and multilateral cooperation with neighboring states, and by emphasizing regional integration, peaceful coexistence, and good neighborliness, Kenya attempts to obviate the need for coercive bargaining interactions or an unnecessary arms race within the greater EAC/COMESA and IGAD regions, which makes up the single-largest destination of Kenya’s export trade and cross-border investment. Even so, such inter-operationalization indicates Kenya’s evolving security thinking, which appreciates the complexity of the regional security landscape and is moving away from a fixation on military threats and toward the securitization of economic development. To stabilize the region is to control the spill-over impacts of volatility on Kenya’s security, supply chains, and expanding economy—hence, as a regional peace and security expert put it, “Kenya’s peace diplomacy is rooted in economic, security, and prestige motivations, with a strategic focus on protecting its economic leadership in the region.”²⁴

It can thus be deduced that “Kenya’s colonial past shaped its image as a stable and strategically important country in East Africa, leading to its prominence in regional diplomacy,” as observed by a history and international relations professor interviewed for this study.²⁵ Post-independence leaders like Kenyatta, Moi, and Kibaki built on this legacy with distinct approaches to regional engagement, balancing internal politics with external peace efforts. However, the professor went on to state that recent changes in leadership—especially from Kenyatta to Ruto—have resulted in foreign policy inconsistency: “Ruto’s foreign policy is still evolving, with ambitious attempts to assert Kenya’s role, but domestic political pressures and historical baggage may limit his ability to achieve long-term goals.”²⁶ Ruto’s administration is thus perceived to be struggling to maintain the coherent peace diplomacy agenda that his predecessors fostered due to internal challenges which might affect his foreign policy preferences.

Across the interviews with key informants for this paper, there was a consistent observation that Kenya’s foreign policy lacks coherence and long-term strategic planning. The ad hoc nature of engagement, especially under the current administration, has diluted Kenya’s effectiveness in regional peace efforts. This incoherence has been most visible in Kenya’s handling of relations with Somalia, Western Sahara, and the DRC, where missteps and reactive policies have created diplomatic frictions that undermine broader peace objectives.

The Projection of Soft Power

On the soft-power frontier, Kenya has embraced neutrality and impartiality, which have earned it the credibility and legitimacy to intervene in nearly all countries in the region affected by conflict and violence. When this is combined with its long-standing political stability, Kenya has emerged as the “anchor state” of the region, the “regional stabilizer” or “regional leader” in peace and security in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes. Kenya is keen to build on these credentials to increase its influence globally; its current involvement in Haiti is “part of a broader strategy to project its influence globally, although it faces criticism for allegedly doing the ‘dirty work’ of more powerful nations like the U.S.,” an international studies and diplomacy professor observed.²⁷

Regionally, Kenya has managed to turn Nairobi into a busy “peace capital” and hub of summit diplomacy, with delegations from various parts of Africa flocking to attend peace summits and mediation meetings or to report on the status and progress of various peace processes. Special envoys of regional countries and international partners and players sent to conflict theaters in the region—including the United Nations, European Union, China, and the United States—hardly miss passing through Nairobi to gather perspectives and tap into Kenya’s support for their efforts.

Kenya has also been one of the largest hosts of refugees globally and in the region—not to mention one of the first hosts of refugees and asylum during the instability that beset the Horn of Africa and East African regions in the 1960s. Kenya has hosted refugees since 1963, with a major influx in the 1980s and 1990s, when most of the region’s countries increasingly experienced political instability and violent conflicts. Kenya continues to host the displaced populations in the region, hosting over 780,000 refugees as of July 2024.²⁸ The refugees are mostly from Somalia, South Sudan, the DRC, and Burundi.²⁹ Refugees from the Great Lakes region—composed of Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC—account for 12.3 percent of this refugee population as of July 2024.³⁰ Kenya’s humanitarian support has thus increased its soft power in the region, especially among conflict-affected countries and with the global community of nations which support Kenya’s humanitarian budget through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Kenya is leveraging multilateralism and the African Union Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)—which elevated the role of RECs and Nairobi’s influence, given its leadership within them—to position itself for a larger role in regional peace and security. As such, Kenya has become a dependable security actor and partner in the Horn of Africa through IGAD, in East Africa through the EAC, and in the Great Lakes region through the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), backed by the African Union. However, according to a former EAC secretariat officer, “Kenya’s influence in regional organizations like IGAD has diminished [to a certain degree] due to inconsistent leadership and shifting priorities,” hence “despite strong historical involvement in conflicts like South Sudan, Kenya has lost strategic influence to neighboring countries like Uganda and Rwanda, particularly in IGAD.”³¹ Kenya is also vibrantly engaged in the UN system and hosts two UN agencies, the UN Human Settlements Programme (UNHABITAT) and the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP). However, there are tensions within multilateral frameworks, as Kenya strives to protect its UN presence in Nairobi from being decentralized, while simultaneously struggling to assert dominance in regional organizations like IGAD, where it faces increased competition, particularly from other regional countries.

Kenya’s leadership in peace diplomacy is being challenged by regional powers such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda, who have become more assertive in negotiations and peace processes, especially in the DRC. Kenya’s failure to maintain leadership in some peace processes reflects a growing regional rivalry for diplomatic and economic influence. For instance, Tanzania’s push for a political solution in the DRC rather than relying solely on military intervention signals a competing diplomatic approach that could overshadow Kenya’s efforts. This competition could undermine Kenya’s position as a peace broker unless Kenya reasserts its strategic focus.

Kenya is also keeping the region dependent on its logistical resources and assets for its own geostrategic and diplomatic leverage. It is located on the western shores of the Indian Ocean and enjoys deep harbors and a high level of global connectivity through its ports and shipping sector. This has elevated Kenya’s status in the region as the gateway to East and Central Africa or, just as crucially, as a crucial link for

most of the region's landlocked countries. Kenya is also sitting at the central node of the critical arterial trans-African highways running from the Port of Mombasa to Lagos and from Cape Town to Cairo. This interconnectedness is a lifeline for both Kenya and the region's landlocked economies; conflict and violence would disrupt these supply lines, hence the urgency for Kenya to ensure peace and stability.

Changing Security Dynamics, External Support, and Partnerships

Countries of the Horn of Africa are experiencing political instability, intense violent conflicts, elite fragmentation, communal division, and geopolitical and diplomatic crises. Economic hardships have been further exacerbated by drought, locust infestations, floods, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine conflict. Multiple ongoing crises and conflicts in the Greater Horn of Africa region, combined with intensified external interventions, have accelerated the collapse of the already fragile regional security architecture. Despite various diplomatic efforts and initiatives, the Horn of Africa is very far from any viable regional security architecture that could promote lasting peace at a regional level. For most of the past two decades, IGAD was considered an extension of Ethiopia's foreign policy. A former senior Ethiopian foreign policy official claims Ethiopia is partly to blame for IGAD's weakness: "We were not very responsible in the way we held IGAD—and it undermined its image and credibility."³²

Some observers claim that the era of a single regional power operating as an anchor state in the Horn of Africa is over.³³ The increasing role of highly resourced and ambitious middle powers working toward carving out spheres of influence autonomously from their sponsors is diminishing the role and stature of both Ethiopia and Kenya in the region.

The possibility of reforming IGAD into a regional bloc with a wider political and security mandate is facing serious challenges given the different approaches Nairobi and Addis Ababa could take on regional security and integration. Violence and instability, widening differences among member states, bilateral and ad hoc security cooperation, foreign interventions, and a weak IGAD secretariat are undermining multilateralism in the Horn of Africa. There is a proliferation of initiatives and forums working to resolve the war in Sudan, but most of these initiatives are accused of disregarding IGAD and the African Union. There is a view that the possible failure of these efforts to bring peace could emphasize regional efforts and Ethiopia's potential role.³⁴

Some observers claim that the era of a single regional power operating as an anchor state in the Horn of Africa is over.³⁵ The increasing role of highly resourced and ambitious middle powers working toward carving out spheres of influence autonomously from their sponsors is diminishing the role and stature of both Ethiopia and Kenya in the region. Global order is increasingly relying on these middle powers rather than official multilateral platforms to address security concerns. Because of this, the future politics and security of the region could be shaped by emerging alliances that have the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Sudan's Rapid Support Forces on one side, and Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, the Sudanese Armed Forces, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey on the other.³⁶ A senior official at the Ethiopian foreign

ministry rejects the “hegemon” and “anchor” labels but highlights the indispensable track record and current potential of Ethiopia in regional integration, peace, and security.³⁷ However, Kenya’s efforts to be the lead peace and security player in the region have been met with skepticism. Regional political and security experts in Addis Ababa refer to Kenya as a “civil society state” with limited military capability, commitment, and experience to be an anchor in a region with multiple violent conflicts.³⁸

Some commentators have proposed a twin-anchor mechanism where Ethiopia’s hardware and Kenya’s diplomatic goodwill could serve as the foundation for cooperation on issues of mutual interest—including improving IGAD’s capabilities, capacity, and legitimacy and merging the EAC with IGAD.³⁹ While Ethiopia still has a long way to go in resolving its internal political and security crisis and winning back the trust of its neighbors, Nairobi’s status as the Horn of Africa’s sole anchor state is challenged by political instability, Kenya’s geographic identity crisis (between the Horn, the EAC, and the Great Lakes) and insufficient institutional capacities. That leaves the Greater Horn of Africa with neither a strong regional organization nor an anchor state, further exposing it to external interventions.

External and regional partners for regional security and stability such as Ethiopia, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and others have been leveraging partnerships with Kenya since the 1960s. Regionally, an eminent professor notes that “the alliance with Ethiopia has historically bolstered Kenya’s role in the Horn of Africa, although this has shifted post-2018 with the rise of new regional dynamics under Ethiopia’s Abiy Ahmed.”⁴⁰ Externally, Kenya’s profile had been recognized even before its independence. In 1960, the United States, through U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and U.S. Ambassador William Attwood, sought Kenya’s help to intervene and rescue U.S. hostages in the DRC’s first civil war.⁴¹ Throughout Kenya’s peace initiatives, it has always been backed by external partners as peace guarantors, especially the United States, the European Union, and other influential Western powers. A former UN deputy ambassador remarked that “Kenya’s leadership is characterized by a push to keep the UN’s presence in Africa strong, especially in Nairobi (UNEP, UN-HABITAT).”⁴² Such partnerships have increased Kenya’s profile in peace and security globally and have seen it participate in many UN peacekeeping missions beyond Africa.

Kenya has deployed its forces to 44 peacekeeping operations around the world. By the early 2000s, Kenya was ranked globally among the top 10 force contributors to UN peacekeeping missions. Currently, however, Kenya ranks 22nd globally and the 13th in Africa, with troop contributions to UN missions in Central African Republic, Darfur, the DRC (until its recent exit), Libya, Mali, Somalia, and South Sudan. Kenya’s military officials have also served at the highest command levels of peacekeeping operations in Angola, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Somalia, and South Sudan, among others. That said, questions arise about the long-term sustainability of military-led peacekeeping, especially in countries like the DRC and Somalia, where peacekeeping missions sometimes face local resistance or a lack of clear post-conflict strategies. Kenya’s military strategy must therefore be complemented by governance programs or political and economic programs to achieve sustainable peace.

Kenya has been able to attract international defense and security partnerships to receive equipment and training assistance, including in special operations and tactics. For example, Kenya is one of the largest beneficiaries of U.S.-Africa security assistance for counterterrorism, with total U.S. counterterrorism aid to Kenya totaling \$400 million in the 2010s.⁴³ External support has helped Kenya emerge on global platforms, including serving three times as the African non-permanent member on the UN Security

Council, a competitive position which depends on majority votes at the UN General Assembly. Kenya has also had the privilege of participating in G7 meetings, where it spoke boldly against the Russian invasion of Ukraine (as it did in UN Security Council meetings).

Conclusion

Numerous factors underpin Kenya's leadership in peace diplomacy in the Horn of Africa. Key among them are the country's economic interests, geostrategic importance, competing leadership visions, and idiosyncratic variables. It also has an enviable stable posture in the region that allows it to be called upon as the most viable regional actor to step in whenever there is need to stabilize other countries. It is also noteworthy that Kenya's peace diplomacy has faced several challenges, among them competition from other emerging countries such as Rwanda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia; inconsistency in pursuit of its foreign policy goals; and shifting external dynamics.

It is worth noting that Ethiopia's relationship with Kenya has been the most stable Addis Ababa has had with any of its neighbors. Through different regimes and leaders, the two countries have often been able to identify, articulate, and cooperate on their long-term shared strategic interests. However, there were unprecedented tensions and standoffs between Addis Ababa and Nairobi between 2018 and 2021, widened by the shift in Ethiopia's Somalia policy. Numerous instances of standoffs between Kenyan and Ethiopian troops in Somalia have further worsened security cooperation.⁴⁴

It is worth recalling that many agreements were reached between the two countries on energy, infrastructure, and trade during the term of former President Uhuru Kenyatta. Currently, Kenya wants to increase its electricity imports from Ethiopia. Nairobi also wants to present the Lamu port as a vital infrastructure project for regional integration and as an alternative access route to southern Ethiopia. These trends demonstrate that economic and infrastructure ties and cooperation between the two countries have nonetheless survived the major security and diplomatic differences of the past six years. And in a context where Nairobi and Addis Ababa could work toward a collaborative regional policy, the two countries' internal political challenges and structural and resource limitations might improve.

Recommendations

The political and security situation in the Horn of Africa will continue to witness major changes. The speed and magnitude of geopolitical, international, and regional developments are resulting in shifting alliances, moving priorities, and changing capabilities. However, key interests, challenges, and aspirations of states and communities remain intertwined. The role and cooperation between Ethiopia and Kenya would be critical in articulating these structural challenges, emerging trends, and common positions for the Horn of Africa region. Envisioning a new regional peace and security architecture cognizant of old, new, and emerging threats and opportunities should be at the heart of efforts in developing mechanisms and reforming existing platforms like the IGAD and the EAC. To further these goals, Kenya and Ethiopia should pursue the following actions:

- Accelerate efforts to reform the IGAD and launch new initiatives to improve the autonomy and capabilities of the regional bloc.
- Improve the mandate and resources of the IGAD Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Taskforce to analyze and manage growing asymmetry between the Horn of Africa the eastern shore of the Red Sea.

- Coordinate their positions at the African Union and UN organs on regional peace, security, and governance matters.
- Articulate and identify areas of overlapping interests, spheres of influence, unaligned priorities, and points of disagreement.

Politically, Kenya has been able to position itself as a significant player in the international security space and a stabilizer in the region, boasting global diplomatic influence. Kenya's reputation reflects its proactive strategy of preventing conflicts from escalating and spilling over into its territory or destabilizing its immediate environment. But the most critical of Kenya's recent interests has been economic: It has been able to consolidate regional markets for investment and exports. However, foreign policy inconsistency and the daunting impact of internal pressures, such as the June 2023 youth protests, may leave a lasting mark on Kenya's credibility and legitimacy. Accordingly, to secure Kenya's profile, boost its waning influence, and make effective its role in peace and security in the region, the government of Kenya should pursue several actions:

- De-link domestic pressures from foreign policy to avoid detraction, which might reorient Kenya's regional strategy and foreign policy and fundamentally affect its commitment to regional leadership and peace.
- Pursue cooperative relations with competitors, especially Ethiopia and Tanzania, instead of adversarial relations, as unhealthy competition or duplicated efforts could undermine peace consolidation and place regional peace processes at risk.
- Promote synergy between RECs to consolidate regional peace efforts and prevent inter-REC competition from diminishing regional capacities for conflict prevention and resolution.
- Establish permanent structures and institutional mechanisms for peace diplomacy through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so as to avoid ad hoc initiatives and policy inconsistency.
- Promote regional market integration, with the goal of enabling its companies to freely invest and trade without ruining the integrity and credibility of Kenya's peace diplomacy.
- Pursue external and regional security partnerships that build the capacities of individual countries to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts as well as to carry out meaningful peacebuilding and governance reforms. ■

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