



A Gift Unreturned: Siad Barre's Legacy and the Fractured Narrative of Djibouti's Birth

Horn Review Editorial

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About us:

Founded in 2021, Horn Review is a premier research and publication think-tank dedicated to exploring and amplifying African voices with a goal of interlinking subject matter experts, practitioners, and academics from Ethiopia, the Horn Region, and the African continent with the broader public. With a stated mission of Africa for Africans, Horn Review aims to amplify and mainstream uniquely African ideas and perspectives on sociopolitical, economic, and geostrategic issues relevant to the continent. Horn Review aims to connect African thinkers, practitioners, and policymakers with their respective communities to create greater synergy and a people-centered discourse on African matters.



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Editor's Note

Horn Review Magazine – 13th Edition

Dear Readers,

As we present this latest edition, we do so with a deep sense of purpose and responsibility. Our objective is not just to report but to critically examine the evolving dynamics that shape the region and its place in the broader geopolitical landscape.

In this issue, we explore the lingering consequences of post-colonial state formation in “*A Gift Unreturned: Siad Barre's Legacy and the Fractured Narrative of Djibouti's Birth*”. This piece revisits the political maneuvering, regional ambitions, and external influences that shaped Djibouti's emergence as an independent state, and how unresolved historical grievances continue to reverberate in the region today.

Our analysis of “*Ethiopia-Eritrea Tension: A Volatile History that Never Truly Ended - Could Assab Become Africa's Crimea?*” investigates the longstanding hostility between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the ongoing escalation of tensions and the possibility of war. In doing so, it also analyses the possibility of the historic Red Sea port of Assab being a potential risk of a geopolitical flashpoint that could reshape regional alliances and maritime security, if war arises between both nations.

We also engage with Omar Mahmood, senior researcher on Somalia and the Horn of Africa at the International Crisis Group, discussing “*Somalia: Al-Shabaab, Governance Struggles & Regional Diplomacy*”. His insights shed light on the persistent security threats posed by Al-Shabaab, the fragile governance structures in Somalia, and the intricate diplomatic balancing act required to stabilize the country while managing foreign interventions.

Economic imperatives take center stage in “*With War Off the Table, Economic Growth for Horn of Africa is Priority #1*”. This piece emphasizes the need for a long-term vision focused on regional economic integration, infrastructure development, and investment in human capital to unlock sustainable growth.

Meanwhile, “*The End of Pax Americana, the Rise of New Powers, and Africa's Place in a Multipolar World*” delves into the emerging global order where power is increasingly distributed among multiple centers of influence. This analysis explores how African states can navigate great power competition to assert greater agency in international affairs.

Strategic access to maritime trade is a recurring theme, highlighted in “*Breaking the Chains of Geography: The Blueprint of Hungary's Adriatic Gateway Mirrors Ethiopia's Fight for Access to the Sea*”. This comparative analysis provides a fresh lens through which to view Ethiopia's pursuit of a sustainable maritime corridor and the economic ramifications of landlocked status.

Finally, the shifting political currents in the West are also of significance, as explored in “*Europe's Nationalist Surge: The Crumbling of the Cordon Sanitaire and Opportunities for Africa*”. The article examines the rise of nationalist movements and their implications for Africa's economic partnerships, migration policies, and diplomatic engagements with European powers.

As always, we are committed to delivering nuanced, research-based perspectives that challenge conventional narratives. Our hope is that this edition serves as both an intellectual resource and a catalyst for informed policy discussions. We welcome your insights and reflections as we continue to explore the complexities of the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Thank you for being part of this critical discourse.

Warm regards,

Blen Mamo
Editor-in-Chief & Executive Director
Horn Review

A Gift Unreturned: Siad Barre's Legacy and the Fractured Narrative of Djibouti's Birth

By Horn Review Editorial



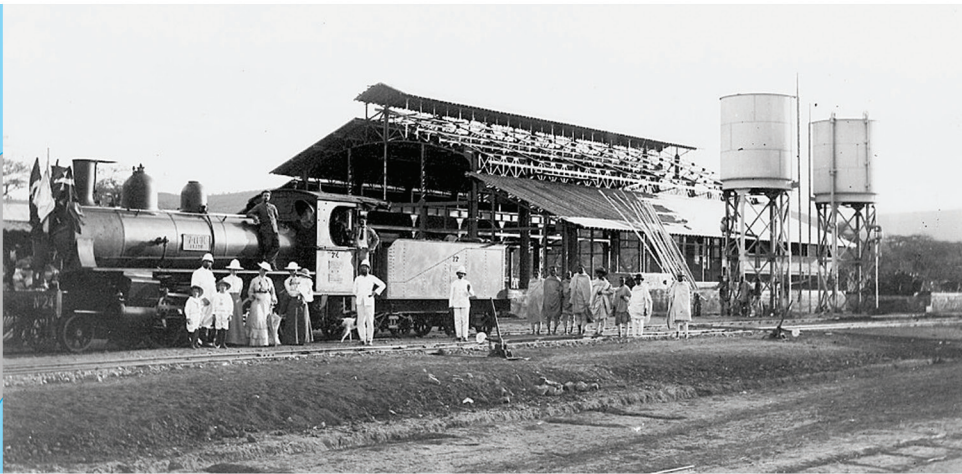
Mohamed Siad Barre,
Former President of Somalia (1969-1991)

The story of Djibouti's independence from France in 1977 is a fascinating chapter in the annals of African decolonization, marked by geopolitical maneuvering, regional alliances, and ultimately, a sense of betrayal. At the heart of this narrative lies the role of Somalia's Siad Barre government, which played a pivotal yet underappreciated part in facilitating Djibouti's transition to sovereignty.

However, the relationship between Somalia and Djibouti, forged in the fires of shared anti-colonial struggle, would soon unravel, leaving a bitter legacy of mistrust and disillusionment. How the Siad Barre regime supported Djibouti's independence, the motivations behind this support, and the subsequent betrayal that strained relations between the two nations has not been studied much.

Djibouti, a small but strategically significant territory located at the mouth of the Red Sea, had been under French colonial rule upon the Franco- since the late 19th century. Known as the land of the Afars and the Issas with strong ties to Ethiopia in its pre-colonialism, Djibouti was later referred to as the "French Somaliland" as recognised by the Franco-Ethiopian treaty of 1897, signed between Emperor *Menelik II of Ethiopia* and the French government, primarily addressing trade, border demarcation, and railway construction.

Prior to independence, Djibouti was a critical outpost for France, serving as a military base and a gateway to the Indian Ocean. However, by the mid-20th century, the winds of change sweeping across Africa had reached Djibouti's shores. The rise of nationalist movements and the global wave of decolonization placed immense pressure on France to relinquish its hold on its last African colony.



Ethio-Djibouti Railways, 1894. Connecting Addis Ababa to then French Somaliland.

The path to independence was fraught with internal divisions. Djibouti's population was deeply split along ethnic lines, with the Afars, who had historically enjoyed French favor, opposing independence, and the Issas, who identified culturally and ethnically with neighbouring Somalia, advocating for it. This ethnic tension was further complicated by the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa, where Somalia, under the leadership of President Siad Barre, harboured irredentist ambitions to unite all Somali-speaking territories, including Djibouti, into a Greater Somalia.

Siad Barre, who came to power in Somalia in 1969 through a military coup, was a staunch advocate of pan-Somalism, an ideology that sought to unify all Somali-inhabited regions, including Djibouti, the Ogaden in Ethiopia, and the Northern Frontier District in Kenya. *Barre's government saw Djibouti's independence as an opportunity to advance this vision.* By supporting the Issa-led independence movement in Djibouti, Somalia aimed to strengthen its influence in the region and pave the way for eventual integration, and prevent Ethiopia from ever making a sovereignty claim over Djibouti.

Somalia's support for Djibouti's independence was multifaceted. Politically, the Siad Barre regime lobbied extensively within the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and other international forums to pressure France into granting Djibouti its freedom. Diplomatically, Somalia provided a platform for Djiboutian nationalist leaders, such as Hassan Gouled Aptidon, to rally international support.

Militarily, there were unverified claims that Somalia provided covert assistance to Issa militants, though these allegations remain contentious.

The Siad Barre government's efforts were not entirely altruistic. *By championing Djibouti's independence, Somalia sought to weaken French influence in the region and create a buffer state against Ethiopia that could eventually align with Mogadishu's interests.* Moreover, Barre's support for Djibouti's independence was a calculated move to bolster his regime's legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, by positioning Somalia as a champion of anti-colonialism and African unity.

France, facing mounting pressure from both the Djiboutian population and the international community, eventually relented. In 1977, Djibouti held a referendum in which an overwhelming majority voted for independence. On June 27, 1977, as Ethiopia dealt with internal unrests and civil wars under the Dergue regime, Djibouti officially became an independent nation, with Hassan Gouled Aptidon as its first president. *The Siad Barre government celebrated this as a victory for pan-Somalism and a step closer to realizing its dream of a Greater Somalia,* hence him officially declaring irredentist claims over the Ogaden and most of Eastern Ethiopian Territory leading to the Ogaden war soon after Djibouti's independence.

The euphoria was short-lived. Almost immediately after independence, it became clear that Djibouti had no intention of joining Somalia.

Aptidon, a pragmatic leader, recognized the dangers of aligning too closely with Mogadishu, given the volatile nature of Somali politics and the potential for regional conflict. Instead, Djibouti adopted a policy of neutrality, seeking to balance its relationships with its neighbors and maintain its sovereignty.

For Siad Barre, Djibouti's refusal to join Somalia was a profound betrayal. The Somali government had invested significant political capital in supporting Djibouti's independence, only to see its hopes of unification dashed. This sense of betrayal was exacerbated by Djibouti's decision to align itself with Ethiopia, Somalia's arch-rival, during the Ogaden War (1977-1978). Djibouti's neutrality and its subsequent cooperation with Addis Ababa were seen as a direct affront to Mogadishu's interests.

The fallout from this incident had lasting consequences for Somali-Djibouti relations. Siad Barre's government, already grappling with internal instability and the fallout from the Ogaden War, viewed Djibouti's actions as a betrayal of the pan-Somali cause. This sense of disillusionment contributed to the erosion of trust between the two nations, a rift that persists to this day.

The role of the Siad Barre government in facilitating Djibouti's independence is a testament to the complex interplay of ideology, strategy, and self-interest in international relations.



Mengistu Hailemariam, Siad Barre & General Teferi Benti, 1976.



President of Djibouti, Hassan Gouled
Arriving at Addis Ababa, for Official Visit, 1981.

While Somalia's support was instrumental in Djibouti's journey to sovereignty, the divergent paths taken by the two nations in the aftermath of independence underscore the limitations of pan-Somalism as a unifying force. *For Djibouti, independence was not a stepping stone to Greater Somalia but a means of asserting its own identity and sovereignty. For Somalia, the experience was a painful reminder of the challenges of realizing its irredentist ambitions.*

The story of Djibouti's independence and the subsequent "betrayal" of Somalia's expectations is a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by post-colonial African states. *It highlights the tensions between regional solidarity and national interests, the challenges of navigating complex geopolitical landscapes, and the enduring legacy of mistrust that can arise from unmet expectations.*

As Djibouti continues to thrive as a strategic hub in the Horn of Africa - with stronger ties to Ethiopia, and Somalia grapples with its own challenges, the lessons of this chapter in their shared history remain as relevant as ever.

Ethiopia-Eritrea Tension: A Volatile History that Never Truly Ended - Could Assab Become Africa's Crimea?



By Blen Mamo, Researcher on National Security & Geopolitics

Tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea are once again rising, threatening to reignite one of Africa's longest-standing conflicts. The 2018 peace agreement, hailed as a historic step toward reconciliation, never fully resolved the deep-rooted animosities between the two nations. *Old wounds remain open, exacerbated by border disputes, military posturing, and competing regional interests.* Recent developments suggest that the fragile peace is unraveling, with both nations edging closer to a dangerous confrontation. If war were to erupt, one outcome seems increasingly plausible: Ethiopia, long denied access to the sea, could move to reclaim the strategic port of Assab. In such a scenario, *Eritrea's control over Assab could be permanently altered, akin to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.*



Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed & President Isaias Afewerki, 2018

The history between Ethiopia and Eritrea is marked by shifting alliances and cycles of war. Eritrea's independence in 1993 severed Ethiopia's maritime access, forcing it into a landlocked existence dependent on Djibouti. The border war of 1998–2000, which resulted in tens of thousands of deaths, deepened hostilities. While the 2018 peace agreement nominally ended the conflict, it failed to address key grievances. The issue of border demarcation remains unresolved, and tensions have been heightened by Eritrea's involvement in Ethiopia's Tigray war from 2020 to 2022.

Despite the Pretoria Agreement mandating the withdrawal of Eritrean forces, Asmara has remained defiant, arming and training Amhara Fano and Shene insurgents fighting to overthrow the FDRE government, further fueling resentment from Ethiopia's side. The recent port access deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland underscores Addis Ababa's determination to secure an independent maritime route, a move that Asmara sees as a direct challenge to its regional influence and potential leverage over Ethiopia.

Eritrea has now intensified its military preparations through mass conscription, travel bans, and the mobilization of reserves, signaling a heightened state of readiness. However, its small population and outdated Soviet-era weaponry limit its ability to sustain a prolonged conflict. Ethiopia, despite internal instability in Amhara, Tigray, and Oromia, remains the stronger military power, with a modernizing arsenal and superior economic resources. In response to Eritrea's military buildup, Addis Ababa has reinforced its military presence in and around border towns, particularly in Afar, while pursuing diplomatic efforts to ease tensions and avoid armed confrontation. However, President Afwerki's reluctance to engage in talks has forced Ethiopia to maintain defensive positions along its border. This development suggests that both nations are bracing for potential escalation.



Eritrean soldiers march during the country's Independence Day in Asmara in this May 24, 2007 © Reuters

Beyond the bilateral hostilities, external powers are shaping the conflict's trajectory. Egypt, locked in a long-standing dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), is widely believed to be courting Eritrea as a strategic ally. If Eritrea aligns itself with Cairo in this contest, it could find itself embroiled in a proxy war it cannot afford to fight. Ethiopia, despite its domestic struggles and the political developments in Sudan & South-Sudan perceived as less favorable to its interests, remains a formidable adversary. Hence, should Eritrea provoke a direct confrontation, it risks being outmaneuvered, outgunned, and ultimately isolated on the world stage.

In this unfolding crisis, Assab emerges as the most vulnerable piece on the chessboard. The city, once Ethiopia's principal gateway to the Red Sea, holds immense strategic and economic value. Ethiopia's need for unrestricted maritime access has never dissipated, and a military operation to seize Assab would not require an all-out invasion of Eritrea, just a swift, calculated maneuver framed as an economic and security imperative. If Eritrea initiates hostilities, Addis Ababa could justify the seizure of Assab as a necessary step to secure its national interests. The international community's response would likely be muted, particularly if Eritrea is perceived as the aggressor. Much like Crimea, which fell under Russian control with little effective resistance from global powers, Assab could become another contested territory whose fate is determined by force rather than diplomacy.



The port city of Assab

While war is not yet inevitable, the conditions for conflict are steadily aligning. Ethiopia's internal crises present a temporary distraction, but they do not eliminate the long-term strategic imperative of securing direct access to the sea. Eritrea's military limitations and economic fragility make it ill-equipped for sustained warfare. International actors, including the African Union and the United Nations, may seek to mediate, but their influence has historically been limited in the region. If hostilities erupt, Asmara could find itself in an unwinnable battle, with Assab slipping from its grasp.

For Eritrea, the stakes are existential. If President Isaias Afwerki miscalculates and leads his nation into war, he risks not only military defeat but the irreversible loss of territory. Unlike Ukraine, which has garnered widespread international support in its struggle against Russian aggression, Eritrea stands alone. Isolated, militarized, and economically constrained, it would bear the full cost of a conflict that could permanently alter its borders. In such a scenario, Afwerki would not be remembered as a leader defending his nation's sovereignty, but as one who gambled it away in a reckless pursuit of regional influence.

The Horn of Africa is once again at a critical juncture. *Whether Eritrea chooses the path of diplomacy or confrontation will determine not only its own future but the geopolitical landscape of the region.* If war comes, Assab may well be the first casualty, another piece of territory lost to the tides of history, as Africa watches its own version of Crimea unfold. But it won't probably stop there. It is going to be a war fought to the last end for it not to bereate another cycle or threat of violence that would destabilise the region and cause more human misery.



Omar Mahmood on Somalia: Al-Shabaab, Governance Struggles & Regional Diplomacy

Omar Mahmood, senior researcher on Somalia and the Horn of Africa at the International Crisis Group, sat down with Horn Review's Jalene Tesfaye to discuss Somalia's political and security landscape.



Horn Review: Thank you for being here, Omar. Given your extensive experience researching the region's political and security dynamics, what are the most critical research areas that warrant deeper exploration? Additionally, considering the intricate political, security, and socio-economic challenges at play, what methodologies do you believe are most effective in capturing these dynamics and producing impactful analysis?

Omar Mahmood: Thank you for having me. One key area that warrants further exploration is *reconciliation and the politics of grievance*. The Horn of Africa faces significant tensions at both the community and national levels, with deep-rooted trust deficits stemming from historical and contemporary factors. These issues shape how communities are governed and interact with one another. The lack of trust between populations and governing systems often obstructs progress, even when certain initiatives make economic sense. Understanding these dynamics and identifying common themes across different contexts could help establish a stronger foundation for the region.

Another crucial area is governance frameworks. There are pressing questions about how governments in the region can effectively accommodate their diverse populations. Federalism remains a contentious issue in Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan, raising broader questions about the best governance models for the region. Ensuring political stability while transitioning governments, such as in Ethiopia, Sudan, and potentially Djibouti and Eritrea, requires a more comprehensive understanding of governance structures.

Lastly, *regional integration* remains a largely untapped opportunity for prosperity. While economic benefits are often discussed, the political dimensions of integration need more attention. Understanding how political considerations shape regional cooperation could unlock new opportunities for the Horn of Africa.

In terms of methodologies, I find field research particularly valuable. While elite discussions in capital cities are important, they often fail to capture wider, localized perspectives. A more inclusive approach that incorporates grassroots insights would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the region's challenges and opportunities.

Horn Review: Given the complex and often volatile politico-security landscape of the Horn of Africa, what do you see as the key factors driving instability in Somalia and the wider region? What practical strategies could be employed to navigate and address these persistent challenges?

Omar Mahmood: In my view, the primary driver of instability is political. Many of the tensions, conflicts, and developmental setbacks in the region can be traced back to unresolved political issues.

In Somalia, a fundamental lack of reconciliation has hindered state-building efforts. Rather than addressing these underlying grievances, there has been an attempt to construct a state on top of unresolved issues. The assumption was that a functioning state could eventually address reconciliation needs, but this approach has fallen short. Instead of tackling the deeper political challenges, the state-building process has often sought to bypass them.

Somalia's political settlement remains fragile. Although the government shed its transitional label in 2012, it still operates in a transitional state. The ongoing constitutional review process highlights the unresolved foundational issues that continue to shape Somali politics. The country has achieved a basic political settlement at the elite level, but it lacks the depth needed for long-term stability. Meanwhile, deeper reconciliation efforts have not been sufficient to address the conflicts that have plagued Somalia since the government's collapse in 1991.

The emphasis has been on rebuilding central governance structures, but without addressing the root causes of instability. Instead of focusing solely on state-building, Somalia needs a stronger peace-building agenda, one that prioritizes reconciliation over technical governance structures. A bottom-up approach, combined with a deeper elite-level political settlement, is essential for long-term stability.

This political deficit also impacts security. *Al-Shabaab exploits governance weaknesses and unresolved grievances, while disputes over federalism and governance structures continue to fuel tensions.* Addressing these political challenges is key to breaking the cycle of instability.

Horn Review: In your expert opinion, what are the most pressing challenges Somalia faces in its state-building process? How can domestic and international actors effectively address these challenges to ensure a more stable and functional state?

Omar Mahmood: The biggest challenge is the lack of deep political reconciliation. Somalia's state-building process has often focused on creating institutions without fully addressing the grievances that underlie its political and social divisions. The country remains in a prolonged transition, with fundamental governance issues still unresolved.

Finalizing the constitution is critical. The fact that this process is still ongoing highlights unresolved disputes over power-sharing, governance models, and federalism. Addressing these issues through an inclusive dialogue will be essential for long-term stability.

Security remains a major concern, with Al-Shabaab continuing to exploit governance gaps.

While military operations have had some success, they must be complemented by political solutions that address the root causes of insecurity. A comprehensive approach that combines security, governance reforms, and local engagement is needed.

The governance framework also requires clarity. Tensions between the federal government and federal member states (FMS) continue to hinder state-building efforts. Resolving these disputes through a well-defined power-sharing mechanism is essential.

External actors play a significant role, but their engagement must align with Somalia's long-term stability goals rather than short-term political interests. International partners should support reconciliation efforts, regional diplomacy, and governance reforms that strengthen Somalia's institutions.

Ultimately, *Somalia needs a shift from a purely institutional state-building approach to a broader peace-building strategy, one that prioritizes reconciliation, political inclusion, and governance reforms.* Addressing these foundational challenges is essential for ensuring a more stable and functional state.

Horn Review: You've touched on several aspects of Somalia's governance and security challenges. In your view, what are the main agendas that have shaped Somalia's trajectory over the past two decades?

Omar Mahmood: Much of this ties into what I've mentioned earlier, security and domestic fault lines ultimately stem from politics. If we look at Somalia over the past 20 years, I would identify three main agendas at play.

The first is *state-building*, the effort to rebuild the structures of governance after state collapse. This has led to the establishment of a federal government, federal member states, and, in some places, district-level administrations. While there has been progress, the approach has heavily prioritized the technical aspects of state-building over deeper reconciliation.

The second is *counterterrorism*, aimed at combating Al-Shabaab and preventing it from becoming a dominant force in Somalia or a threat beyond the region. This agenda often overlaps with state-building, as strengthening government institutions is seen as a way to weaken Al-Shabaab.

The third, and most overlooked, is *peace-building*. This aspect has received the least attention, yet it is the most crucial. Without addressing underlying grievances and fostering reconciliation, both state-building and counterterrorism efforts will continue to face setbacks. While it's impossible to achieve perfect sequencing given Somalia's dynamic landscape, peace-building needs to be prioritized alongside the other agendas.

Regarding international partners, their role should be to incentivize Somali-led initiatives rather than dictate the process. A decade ago, the UN and Western actors like the US and UK played a dominant role. That phase has now shifted, Somalia has a federal government in place, albeit still reliant on external support. International partners must reassess their approach, focusing on strategic incentives rather than direct intervention.

Additionally, new actors have emerged in Somalia, including regional and middle-power states, shifting the balance of influence. While diverse interests will always exist, minimum coordination among international partners is essential to ensure a coherent approach toward Somalia's stability.

Horn Review: On a related note, how can the issue of Al-Shabaab and similar terror groups be effectively addressed? Do you see a path beyond military intervention, such as political engagement or socio-economic strategies, that could contribute to a lasting solution?

Omar Mahmood: Addressing Al-Shabaab requires a two-track approach: military and political. On the military side, it is clear that Al-Shabaab is a violent actor, and sustained pressure must be maintained to limit its operations. However, military action alone will not resolve the conflict. The idea that Somalia's security challenges can be solved purely through force is flawed.

This is where the political track comes in. At some point, engagement with Al-Shabaab must take place. This means understanding their vision for Somalia and exploring whether there is a path for negotiation within the country's political framework. This approach may seem contradictory, fighting while engaging, but it is a common feature in conflict resolution worldwide. Governments and insurgent groups often battle and negotiate simultaneously, shaping the trajectory of the conflict.

The key question is how Somalia envisions the end of this conflict. If the assumption is that military force alone will eliminate Al-Shabaab, then the strategy remains purely military. However, if a long-term political solution is considered necessary, preparations for engagement must begin now.

This process will be neither quick nor linear. There will be setbacks, and progress will take time. However, given that this war has persisted for 18 years with no clear resolution, failing to explore political solutions means losing valuable time. The Somali federal government still benefits from significant international backing and has an African Union-led mission supporting security. Using this window of opportunity to lay the groundwork for negotiations could prove crucial in shaping Somalia's long-term stability.

Horn Review: How do you assess regional dynamics from Somalia's security perspective? How do regional alliances, rivalries, and external influences shape Somalia's security landscape, and how should the country navigate these complexities to enhance its stability?

Omar Mahmood: Somalia faces a fundamental challenge: it is both politically weak and internally fractured. This makes it vulnerable to external actors who exploit its divisions. When foreign powers don't get what they want from Mogadishu, they turn to alternative power centers, whether in Somaliland, federal member states, or other political factions, undermining national cohesion. Unlike centralized states where diplomatic engagement is concentrated in the capital, Somalia's fragmented political environment allows multiple entry points for external influence.

This lack of a unified front creates a need for international coordination around a common objective, achieving sustainable stability. *Without at least minimal coordination, Somalia remains vulnerable to manipulation, and international efforts become counterproductive.*

The evolving partner landscape has further complicated this dynamic. Middle powers have entered the Somali equation, bringing much-needed investment and infrastructure opportunities. However, they also arrive with pre-existing rivalries that sometimes shape their engagement in Somalia through a zero-sum lens.

While these external actors aren't necessarily creating divisions, they often exacerbate them, emboldening Somali politicians to adopt more maximalist positions as they compete for external backing.

Internally, Somalia is a highly nationalistic society, yet its political elites frequently seek external legitimacy and support to strengthen their domestic positions. This contradiction weakens Somalia's ability to resist foreign interference and complicates efforts to resolve internal disputes on its own terms. A national dialogue is needed to reassert sovereignty over Somalia's political processes, ensuring that domestic divisions are not further inflamed by external interests.

Horn Review: How should we assess the trajectory of external interventions in Somalia? What key lessons can be drawn to ensure future engagements are more effective and productive?

Omar Mahmood: The most critical issue is the lack of coordination among external actors. While Somalia must take the lead in defining its own strategic approach, it also needs a clear and consistent policy on external engagement. Too often, Somali actors move from one partnership to another without a long-term vision, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent engagement.

For two decades, Western involvement in Somalia has largely centered on state-building and counterterrorism. However, over time, engagement has shifted into autopilot mode, and we are now seeing a gradual drawdown of Western support. This marks a transition to a new phase of external involvement in Somalia, where emerging middle powers are filling the vacuum left by waning Western interest.

While these middle powers bring enthusiasm and economic investment, they also carry geopolitical baggage from their own rivalries. Somalia's challenge is to engage productively with external partners while avoiding entanglement in external conflicts. The goal should be to maximize economic and security benefits from these relationships while keeping political interference to a minimum.

Horn Review: There is a persistent fear that Somalia's security dilemma is shaped by strategic proxy confrontations. How significant is regional integration in addressing this challenge?

Additionally, how do you assess Ethiopia's regional integration efforts, particularly the trilateral initiative launched by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia?

Omar Mahmood: The 2018 tripartite initiative was largely a leadership-driven pact, rather than an institutionally anchored framework. Ethiopia sought to engage Mogadishu directly, bypassing federal member states, while also bringing Eritrea into the fold. However, the initiative was deeply tied to individual leaders, particularly Somalia's former president Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo. Once leadership changed, the framework collapsed.

This underscores a key lesson: for regional agreements to endure, they must be institutionalized rather than leader-dependent. Stronger institutional ties ensure that relationships outlast political transitions and lead to more sustained cooperation.

Another important takeaway is the need for practical economic cooperation. One of the major talking points in 2018 was the development of Somali ports to serve Ethiopia's landlocked economy. However, very little progress was made, leaving the issue unresolved. Today, we are witnessing a return to the same discussions, as Ethiopia once again seeks port access through Somalia.

This highlights another lesson: regional cooperation must translate into concrete economic gains. If agreements remain purely political without practical benefits, they risk being short-lived. The renewed Ethiopia-Somalia engagement, following the Ankara Declaration, appears to be progressing in a more technical and structured manner, which is a positive sign.

Horn Review: How do you assess the current developments between Ethiopia and Somalia? Do you see genuine political will from both sides for a mutually beneficial arrangement, or are there underlying challenges that could hinder sustainable cooperation?

Omar Mahmood: Ethiopia and Somalia's bilateral relationship is currently strong, having improved significantly following Turkish mediation. There is visible diplomatic goodwill, with high-level visits between the two capitals. On the security front, Ethiopia has increased its support for Somalia's fight against Al-Shabaab, including airstrikes in areas where its troops are not even stationed. There is also a renewed effort to finalize an agreement on Ethiopian port access through Somalia.

With War Off the Table, Economic Growth for Horn of Africa is Priority #1

By Lawrence Freeman,
Researcher on Africa Development Policy



For more than a year, there has been constant talk of war in the Horn of Africa, involving Ethiopia. I have spoken out loudly and consistently against war mongers and scenario predictions of military conflict. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's presentation before his parliament on Thursday, March 19, where he declared: Ethiopia does not have any intention of engaging in conflict with Eritrea for the purpose of gaining access to the [Red] sea, should terminate all prattle of war. Unless there are political powers and bad actors outside and/or inside the Horn of Africa, who would actually desire such a horrific conflict.

Scenario for Somalia

For the entirety of 2024, there was continuous chatter on X and hundreds of articles predicting a potential military conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. With the foolish October 2024 security pact between Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia, this conflict could have been cataclysmic for Africa. Of course, it never materialized.

The concern was supposedly due to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland to allow Ethiopia access to the port of Berbera in return for recognition of an independent Somaliland. The port city of Berbera that lies on the Gulf of Aden, which flows into the Red Sea, would have given Ethiopia access to one of the most strategic shipping-trade routes in the world.

However, we should take note that the actual written content of this MoU was never publicly revealed, leaving the public and the war mongers ignorant of its full substance.

Also, there is a legitimate discussion of recognition of Somaliland, which has functioned as a separate political entity of Somalia for over 30 years.

It is beyond the scope of this article to elucidate the history of Somalia and Somaliland. There has been widespread discussion among many African nations on the validity of recognition of Somaliland, including nations outside of Africa, such as the United States.

It should be emphasized that despite all the threatening remarks by Somalian officials, to date, there has been no official recognition by Ethiopia of Somaliland. In fact, the opposite occurred. Ethiopia and Somalia have officially announced their intent for increased cooperation. Both leaders, Sheikh Mohamud, President of Somalia and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia, signed an official communique issued on February 27, 2025, which stated in part:

The two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening cooperation for mutual benefit. Recognizing the deep historical ties between their peoples and the shared border that connects them, they emphasized the importance of building trust through enhanced diplomatic, economic, and social cooperation.

Ethiopia and Somalia are independent nations with a common destiny and a shared vision for regional stability and prosperity. In this spirit, both leaders expressed their commitment to implementing strategic infrastructure projects to ensure sustainable development, economic integration and strengthen people-to-people ties.



Leaders of Ethiopia and Somalia Reaffirm their Commitments to Strengthen Cooperation. Mogadishu, Somalia

Will Tigray Lead to War With Eritrea

Following a two year bloody war (11/2020-11/2022) by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a peace settlement was reached in Pretoria, South Africa. This year there are reports of the potential for a new war in Tigray between two warring TPLF factions.

If accounts are accurate this intra-TPLF conflict could possibly result in the defense forces of Eritrea and Ethiopia fighting each other. Another war in the Horn of Africa would be catastrophic for Africans living in this region and must be prevented at all costs.

The Tigray Interim Administration headed by former deputy of the TPLF, Getachew Reda, is supported by the Ethiopian government. The dissident TPLF faction is led by Debretsion Gebramichael and allegedly backed by Eritrea, although the government of Eritrea denies this emphatically. Read: Rising Tensions in Tigray Risk Regional Conflict

If these two national armies and two opposing TPLF militias engage in combat, almost two and a half years after the last war in Ethiopia, it would be devastating not just for Ethiopians but for the entire region. Yet, dozens, if not hundreds of articles have flooded the media predicting this very scenario.

Peace vs War

The cessation of fighting and the ending of war does not equal peace. True peace and stability emanate from a higher domain of statecraft. Below are the two guiding principles for creating a durable peace.

In Europe during the first half of the 17th century, eight million people died in the Thirty Years War, which ended with the famous 1648 Treaty of Westphalia.

Article 1 of the treaty stipulated: ...That this Peace and Amity be observ'd and cultivated with such a Sincerity and Zeal, that each Party shall endeavour to procure the Benefit, Honour and Advantage of the other;

Article 2 stipulated: That there shall be on the one side and the other a perpetual Oblivion, Amnesty, or Pardon of all that has been committed since the beginning of these Troubles.

Nations of the Horn of Africa must move forward from the crimes and wars of the past, and design policies that are in their self-interest and in the interest of the other.

Pope Paul VI in 1967, wrote in his famous encyclical *Populorum Progressio*—"The Development of People"—that the new name for peace is development. The concept of economic development has disappeared from the thinking of all U.S. leaders.

For the last six decades, since the death of President John Kennedy, no American official has promoted a policy for real physical economic growth in Africa. Contrary to what most NGOs and so called democracy advocacy groups peddle for Africa, economic development is an essential human right.

Therefore, any true statesperson should be able to understand, that the way to bring durable peace and stability for the region of the Horn, is to design an economic program that benefits the common interests of all the peoples of the region: the elimination of poverty and hunger.

At the age of seventy-four, I am amazed that I am the only American specializing in African Affairs, who understands these two principles. I must also admit that I have encountered few Africans who share my outlook. Yet, it is transparently obvious, that by creating a common shared interest among nations for a more prosperous future, can we as wise men and women, journey on the only true path to peace.

2018 A Lost Moment

Prime Minister Abiy shocked the world, and Africa especially, when he ended two decades of a “state of war” between Eritrea and Ethiopia. He ceremoniously arrived in Eritrea’s capital, Asmara, on Sunday July 8, 2018, greeted by Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki. For this, Abiy Ahmed was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. President Isaias arrived in Addis Ababa one week later on July 14, for his first visit to Ethiopia in over 20 years. In twenty-five months, the war in Ethiopia erupted, with Eritrea’s military joining with Ethiopia’s National Defense Force to defeat the rebel TPLF. Since then, relations between the two nations dramatically changed.

On July 9, 2018, the two heads of state signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, in Asmara. Their joint agreement read in part:

Conscious that the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea share close bonds of geography, history, culture, language, and religion, as well as fundamental common interests;

2. The two governments will endeavor to forge intimate political, economic, social, cultural and security cooperation that serves and advances the vital interests of their peoples;
3. Transport, trade, and communications links between the two countries will resume; diplomatic ties and activities will restart;

5. Both countries will jointly endeavor to ensure regional peace, development, and cooperation...

What was needed after the signing of the 2018 agreement was: immediate implementation. A Grand Design for the development of the Horn of Africa anchored by Ethiopia and Eritrea should have been prepared and discussed. It should have included sharing of increased energy production, port access for Ethiopia to the Red Sea, expanded agricultural production and irrigation, and expansion of new roads and rail transportation systems connecting the two nations and extending to Djibouti, Somalia, and Somaliland.

The ability to act (or not) resolutely with pith and urgency can be decisive in determining the future. We must recognize that the failure to put “shovels in the ground,” after the signing of the 2018 agreement, before the start of the war in Tigray, was a mistake that cannot be repeated. Establishing shared-common economic benefits from collaboration between Eritrea and Ethiopia is pivotal for peace and stability in the Horn of Africa.

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While the relationship is on an upward trajectory, significant challenges remain. *The key question is: what can Somalia offer Ethiopia in terms of port access? Ethiopia’s concerns revolve around proximity to Ethiopian markets, infrastructure readiness, and security guarantees.* Any agreement must factor in the logistical and economic feasibility of different port locations, and the selected port must have, or be able to develop, the necessary infrastructure to support Ethiopian trade. Ensuring a safe and stable corridor for Ethiopian trade is also essential.

Turkey’s involvement as an external mediator and facilitator may help keep negotiations on track, but this is only one piece of the puzzle.

Beyond bilateral issues, broader regional questions remain unresolved. Two key challenges must be addressed: Regional economic integration – How can Ethiopia’s landlocked economy be sustainably linked to Somali coastal areas? Without clear economic linkages, investment in Somali ports lacks long-term viability. And Somaliland’s political status – The issue of Somaliland’s recognition remains unresolved, creating uncertainty for regional actors and complicating Ethiopia’s maritime ambitions.

While Ethiopia-Somalia relations are currently stable, these deeper regional issues must be addressed to ensure sustainable progress. If left unresolved, they could resurface as sources of tension in the future.



The End of Pax Americana, the Rise of New Powers, and Africa's Place in a Multipolar World

By Mahider Nesibu, Researcher, Horn Review

The world is experiencing a significant shift. The period known as Pax Americana, a time of relative peace and stability under U.S. leadership, is coming to an end. In its place, a new multipolar world order is emerging, fuelled by the rise of both traditional and new challengers to the West, such as Russia and China.

This shift has major consequences for Africa, a continent that has often fallen victim to external forces. As the global landscape changes, Africa is presented with both unique opportunities and formidable challenges. It is more crucial than ever for the continent to adapt to the new dynamics of international relations.

Pax Americana, or American peace, refers to the era of relative stability that followed World War II, led by one of its victors, the United States. Emerging from the war as an economic and military powerhouse, the U.S. established a liberal international order supported by institutions like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. These organizations promoted democracy, free markets, and collective security, while also granting the U.S. considerable influence over other nations.

During the Cold War, the U.S. reinforced its global influence through alliances such as NATO, economic programs like the Marshall Plan, and the exportation of American liberal culture. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the peak of American dominance, often referred to as the "unipolar moment," with the U.S. standing as the world's sole "hyperpower."



However, this dominance was short-lived. By the early 21st century, both internal and external pressures began to erode Pax Americana. Within the U.S., economic difficulties, political divisions, and military overreach took their toll. The 2008 financial crisis, which began in the U.S., revealed weaknesses in the global economic system and triggered a worldwide recession. By 2024, U.S. public debt had exceeded \$35 trillion, limiting its ability to maintain global commitments. Political polarization, evident in the stark divide in political views among both the political class and the American public, weakened America's image and global authority. Meanwhile, costly and prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, culminating in the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, signalled a retreat from its role as the world's police.

As the United States' global influence wanes, China and Russia have emerged as key players, reshaping the international landscape through their economic, military, and diplomatic manoeuvres. China's evolution from a developing country in the 1980s to the world's second-largest economy was unprecedented.



African leaders at the opening ceremony of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing, China. September, 2024. Credit: Al Majalla

Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1978, China's GDP has consistently grown by an average of 9% per year, accounting for 18% of the global GDP by 2023. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a \$1 trillion infrastructure project initiated in 2013, extends across more than 140 countries, solidifying China's global presence, including \$200 billion in investments in Africa. On the military front, China's defence budget of \$230 billion in 2023 supports the largest navy in the world and advanced technologies like hypersonic missiles. Diplomatically, China advocates for a multipolar world of "sovereign equals," offering partnerships to Africa through platforms like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

Russia, while not as economically strong, leverages its military power and strategic opportunism. Its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 challenged the Western-led order, while the Wagner Group enhances its influence in African countries such as Mali. With 20% of the world's natural gas reserves, Russia uses energy as a geopolitical instrument, particularly in Europe.

In the Middle East, traditional Western allies are less inclined to follow U.S. leadership. With growing influence in their region and neighbouring areas in Africa and Asia, Arab nations like the UAE are pursuing a more independent foreign policy, distancing themselves from Western leadership.

Moreover, the global political economy, which depends on the dollar and institutions like the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, is encountering increasing challenges from the BRICS alliance.

This coalition, with China and Russia as key players, is actively advocating for a different economic model that questions the financial governance dominated by the West for decades. By pushing for reforms that offer more representation and decision-making authority to emerging economies, BRICS aims to weaken the dominance of the Bretton Woods system. Their initiatives include creating new financial systems to lessen dependence on the dollar and developing institutions to compete with existing ones, thereby altering global economic dynamics and indicating a move toward a genuinely multipolar world order.

Amidst this turmoil, Africa stands as the most to gain or lose. Historically, the continent has often been caught in the middle of global power conflicts. From the colonial period to the world wars and the Cold War, external powers have frequently exploited the continent's resources, leaving its people with limited control over their own fate.

Today, as the liberal international order transitions to a multipolar world, Africa encounters both new opportunities and challenges. Without a cohesive and unified plan, African countries face the danger of falling into another cycle of reliance. The diminishing influence of the institutional framework once led by the United States means that Africa no longer operates in an ordered global arena. Instead, the current international landscape is characterized by temporary partnerships and a focus on national self-interest.



Breaking the Chains of Geography: The Blueprint of Hungary's Adriatic Gateway Mirrors Ethiopia's Fight for Access to the Sea

By Samiya Mohammed, Researcher, Horn Review



In a historic turn of events that could reshape the geopolitical and economic landscape of Central Europe, Hungary is on the cusp of reclaiming its long-lost access to the sea. A ground breaking ceremony for a new seaport in Trieste, Italy, marks the culmination of a century-long struggle to overcome the constraints imposed by the Treaty of Trianon. This \$209 million project, a 60-year concession on an 80-acre site, will grant Hungary 650 meters of Adriatic coastline and is poised to become a cornerstone of the nation's economic revival.

The port, capable of handling 78,000 TEU of cargo annually, is expected to significantly enhance Hungary's export capabilities, which currently stand at approximately \$155 billion yearly. Deputy Foreign Minister Levente Magyar underscored the strategic importance of the project, declaring that it will liberate Hungary from its dependence on other nations for maritime trade. This monumental achievement not only addresses the lingering consequences of the Trianon Treaty but also serves as a powerful symbol of Hungary's resilience and determination to reclaim its place on the global stage.



Hungarian-owned Part of Italian Harbor to Start Operations in 2026

Hungary's triumphant return to the sea finds a striking parallel in Ethiopia's ongoing efforts to secure its own maritime gateway. Like Hungary, Ethiopia was once a coastal power, with access to the Red Sea through its Eritrean territories. However, the secession of Eritrea in 1993 left Ethiopia landlocked, forcing it to rely on Djibouti for nearly all its maritime trade. This dependency has come at a significant economic and strategic cost, prompting Ethiopia to explore bold strategies to regain direct access to the sea.

In recent years, Ethiopia has intensified its diplomatic efforts, engaging in negotiations with neighboring countries and exploring innovative solutions such as port acquisitions and shared sovereignty arrangements. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has emphasized the importance of maritime access for the nation's economic growth and regional influence, framing it as a matter of national survival. Ethiopia's struggle mirrors Hungary's in its audacity and determination, highlighting the enduring significance of the sea in shaping the destinies of nations.



Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somaliland's President Muse Bihi Abdi signing the MoU on Port and Naval Access. January , 2024. Credit: @PMEthiopia X

The new seaport in Trieste represents more than just a logistical asset; it is a symbol of Hungary's resurgence as a maritime power. The port's strategic location on the Adriatic Sea will provide Hungary with direct access to global trade routes, reducing transit times and costs for Hungarian exporters. With a capacity to handle 78,000 TEU of cargo annually, the port is expected to become a vital hub for Hungary's export-driven economy, which includes key industries such as automotive manufacturing, electronics, and agriculture.

Deputy Foreign Minister Levente Magyar's remarks underscore the transformative potential of the project. "Securing our own seaport will free Hungary from reliance on other nations for maritime trade," he declared. "This is not just an economic milestone; it is a restoration of our national pride and a step towards rectifying the injustices of the past."

The Trieste port is part of a broader strategy to enhance Hungary's connectivity and economic resilience. Recent agreements with Bulgaria aim to create streamlined transport corridors linking Hungarian businesses to Black Sea ports, further bolstering the nation's access to global supply chains. These initiatives reflect Hungary's multifaceted approach to overcoming its landlocked status, combining infrastructure development, regional cooperation, and strategic diplomacy.

Hungary's relentless pursuit of maritime access offers valuable insights for Ethiopia as it navigates the complexities of its own quest. Despite facing formidable challenges, including regional tensions and logistical hurdles, Ethiopia has demonstrated remarkable ingenuity and resilience. The nation's efforts to diversify its trade routes, including agreements with ports in Somaliland and Kenya, highlight the importance of flexibility and adaptability in overcoming geographic constraints.

Moreover, Ethiopia's emphasis on regional integration and cooperation underscores the potential of collective action in addressing shared challenges. The African Union's Agenda 2063, which envisions a continent-wide network of transport and trade corridors, provides a blueprint for regional collaboration.

Hungary, too, could benefit from a similar approach, leveraging its position within the European Union to foster greater integration and cooperation among landlocked and coastal states.



Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud with Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed Ali, 2025. Credit @PMethiopia X

While Hungary's maritime aspirations are ambitious, they are not without challenges. The nation's reliance on neighboring countries for trade routes leaves it vulnerable to geopolitical shifts and regional tensions. Moreover, the high costs associated with infrastructure projects and the complexities of international diplomacy pose significant hurdles.

However, Hungary's efforts also present unique opportunities. By positioning itself as a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe, Hungary could emerge as a key player in the region's trade and transport networks. The nation's investments in digital infrastructure and innovation could further enhance its competitiveness in the global market.

Similarly, Ethiopia's quest for maritime access, though fraught with challenges, offers a glimpse of the transformative potential of geographic connectivity. By securing direct access to the sea, Ethiopia could unlock new avenues for economic growth and regional integration, setting a precedent for other landlocked nations.

Hungary's pursuit of maritime access, much like Ethiopia's, is a testament to the enduring importance of the sea in shaping the destinies of nations. In an era defined by globalization and interconnectedness, access to maritime trade routes is no longer a luxury but a necessity. For landlocked nations, the challenge lies not in accepting their geographic limitations but in redefining them.

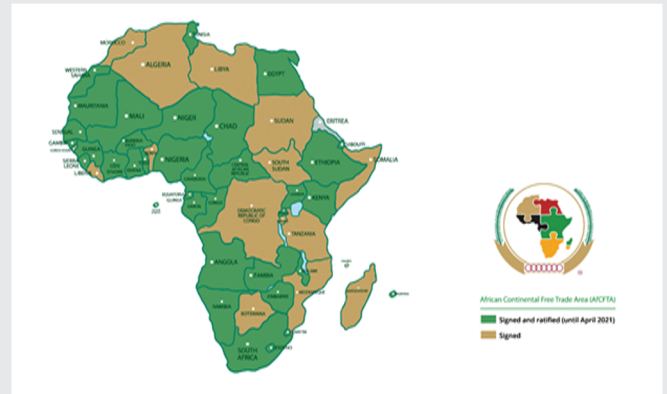


While Hungary and Ethiopia navigate the complexities of their respective quests, their efforts serve as a powerful reminder of the indomitable human spirit. Whether through diplomacy, innovation, or sheer determination, these nations are rewriting the rules of geography, proving that even the most formidable barriers can be overcome. Hungary's return to the sea marks the beginning of a new chapter in the nation's history, one defined by resilience, innovation, and ambition. The Trieste port is more than just a logistical asset; it is a symbol of Hungary's determination to overcome the constraints of its geography and reclaim its place on the global stage.

As the world watches Hungary and Ethiopia chart their courses, one thing is clear: the age of geographic determinism is over, and the age of human ingenuity has only just begun. These nations are not merely seeking access to the sea; they are redefining the limits of what is possible, proving that even the most daunting challenges can be overcome with vision, determination, and collaboration.

In the end, the stories of Hungary and Ethiopia are not just about access to the sea; they are about the relentless pursuit of opportunity, the refusal to be confined by borders, and the unwavering belief in a brighter future. As these nations set sail on their new journeys, they inspire us all to dream bigger, reach further, and never accept the limits imposed by geography.

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This change underscores the importance of Africa taking charge of its own destiny. African leaders are now at a crossroads: they can either stick with traditional non-alignment strategies or embrace a more proactive and united approach. Strengthening continental organizations like the African Union and promoting initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) can help create a unified and powerful voice. A united Africa is better equipped to negotiate more equitable economic and political agreements and to avoid being marginalized by larger powers.

In addition to political unity, there is an urgent need to enhance local economies and industries. Investing in local talent, modern infrastructure, and sustainable development will help ensure Africa's long-term economic prosperity. With a large, youthful population and abundant natural resources, Africa has the potential to become a significant player on the global stage, if it can overcome past divisions and establish the necessary institutions for collective strength. The declining influence of American-led institutions presents an opportunity for Africa to redefine its international role. However, in a world where power is increasingly distributed among several major players, there is still a risk that African nations could be treated merely as pawns in larger geopolitical games. To avoid repeating past patterns, Africa must adopt a clear, deliberate strategy that emphasizes unity, economic development, and independent policy making.

Europe's Nationalist Surge: The Crumbling of the Cordon Sanitaire and Opportunities for Africa

By Yonas Yizezew, Researcher, Horn Review



Hard-right parties across Europe have reached unprecedented levels of influence, fundamentally reshaping the continent's political landscape.

Once relegated to the fringes, these parties now hold significant sway in national parliaments and European institutions, directly challenging the dominance of traditional conservative and social-democratic blocs.

This seismic shift was starkly exemplified on late February 2025, when Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) secured over 20% of votes, effectively doubling its previous electoral performance. This truly represents the strongest showing for any hard-right group in Germany since 1933, a development previously considered unthinkable in Europe's economic powerhouse.

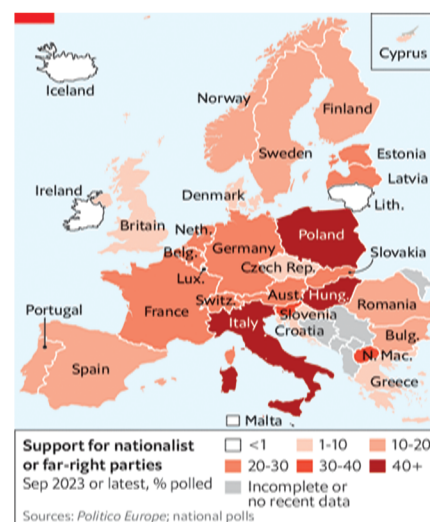
Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ) similarly achieved a historic 29% victory in the 2024 parliamentary elections, the strongest showing for the far-right since World War II. In Belgium, the conservative Flemish N-VA party narrowly won June 2024's parliamentary elections, with the far-right Vlaams Belang following closely behind, creating a political deadlock that remains, incredibly, unresolved six months later.

France has not been immune to this accelerating trend. The National Rally (RN) secured the most votes in European elections and led the first round of parliamentary elections, only to be blocked from power by an emergency coalition between left-wing and centrist forces.

This pattern of mainstream parties forming tactical alliances to prevent far-right governance reveals the increasingly strained "cordon sanitaire" strategy that has traditionally kept such parties out of power.

Beyond Germany, Austria, Belgium, and France, other nations are witnessing equally concerning shifts. In Poland, the far-right Konfederacja alliance is gaining support, with some polls placing it as high as 22% ahead of the May 2025 presidential election. This signals a potential breakthrough in a country where nationalist rhetoric has undeniably intensified.

In addition, Italy's Giorgia Meloni remains firmly in power, leading a hard-right coalition that has normalized nationalist rhetoric at the EU level. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats, once a fringe party, now wield significant influence over the government's immigration and security policies.



Support for Nationalist or Far-right Movements. Map by The Economist.



Giorgia Meloni, Italy's Prime Minister.

The Crumbling Cordon Sanitaire

The political firewall designed to exclude far-right parties from governance is under immense and unprecedented pressure. The normalization process is demonstrably underway, with far-right voices gaining prominence in parliamentary debates and policy discussions across Europe.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has produced a complex dynamic with his ideological counterparts in Europe.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has produced a complex dynamic with his ideological counterparts in Europe. Trump's Vice President J.D. Vance's speech at the February 2025 Munich Security Conference confirmed that the administration's worldview broadly matches that of European far-right parties. Simultaneously, Trump's ally Elon Musk has amplified European far-right discourse by live-streaming a conversation with AfD leader Alice Weidel ahead of Germany's February elections. He has also provided financial support to imprisoned British far-right figure Stephen Yaxley-Lennon.



A gathering of European Far-right leaders in Koblenz, Germany on the day of Donald Trump's Inauguration. Photograph by Roberto PFeil, Getty Images. Credit: The New Yorker.

However, Trump's expansionist ambitions have alienated even his natural allies. His renewed threats about acquiring Greenland prompted Danish People's Party member Anders Vistisen to firmly oppose the threat in the European parliament. In addition, Trump's demand that NATO allies spend at least 5% of GDP on defense has similarly unnerved European right-wing parties that previously admired his nationalist stance. As a result, several EU officials now view Trump's presidency as a catalyst for necessary and accelerated reforms.

The Five-Year Outlook

The dual pressures of Trump's transactional foreign policy and the rise of Eurosceptic far-right parties within member states pose clear uncertainties to EU cohesion.

With hard-right parties now holding unprecedented electoral power, traditional decision-making processes face increasing gridlock. The next five years will likely determine whether the EU can transform its current challenges into an opportunity for deeper integration or whether it succumbs to nationalist fragmentation. As far-right movements gain momentum and transatlantic relations face uncertainty, the EU finds itself at a critical juncture with multiple possible trajectories.

One emerging trend is the growing influence of far-right parties on EU policy, particularly in migration. This shift is no longer confined to mere rhetoric; it is shaping concrete legislative changes. Mainstream parties, such as the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament, are recalibrating their stance on illegal immigration to align more closely with far-right concerns. This hardening of positions has led to stricter asylum policies, directly reflecting a broader shift toward nationalism across the continent.



Simultaneously, the EU may respond by accelerating internal reforms, particularly in defense and energy. The unpredictability of a potential Trump administration and the rise of nationalist movements within Europe are likely to push leaders toward greater strategic autonomy. France and Germany, despite facing their own far-right challenges, could spearhead defense cooperation and even explore closer post-Brexit security coordination with the UK. The EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative is already laying the groundwork for enhanced military collaboration, thereby reducing reliance on the US for security guarantees.

Another possible trajectory is a "two-speed Europe," where core nations committed to deeper integration move forward while others adopt looser affiliations. This model would allow the EU to function without forcing uniform policies on nationalist-led governments. The idea gained traction in February 2025 when far-right leaders convened in Madrid to strengthen the Patriots of Europe party under the slogan "Make Europe Great Again." Their primary goal is to reshape EU policies through nationalist influence, directly challenging the bloc's cohesion. The most concerning scenario is the gradual erosion of EU unity as nationalist governments actively undermine its institutions by blocking key decisions requiring unanimity, which could paralyze EU policymaking.

These trajectories are not mutually exclusive, and the EU's path will likely involve elements of all four. The coming years will test whether Europe can balance its commitment to democratic values with the pragmatism needed to survive in a multipolar world, or whether centrifugal forces ultimately prevail.

Implications for Africa

For Africa, Europe's rightward shift and transatlantic tensions create both undeniable challenges and distinct opportunities. Far-right parties typically frame foreign aid as wasteful spending. As they gain influence in European governments, development assistance to African nations may decrease substantially, forcing African countries to seek alternative partnerships. This could accelerate collaborations with China and other emerging powers. Moreover, immigration remains the defining issue for European far-right parties. Harsher anti-immigration policies will likely impact African migrants and asylum seekers most severely, potentially creating diplomatic tensions between the EU and the African Union.

While these challenges pose short-term risks, they also open new avenues for Africa to redefine its global position. The potential vacuum created by a more inward-looking Europe could paradoxically enhance Africa's geopolitical agency.

African nations can leverage competition between the EU, US, China, and Russia to negotiate more favorable terms for cooperation, particularly in strategic sectors like rare earth minerals, energy resources, and agricultural products. For example, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), set to be fully implemented by 2030, could revolutionize intra-African trade, lessening dependence on European markets and fostering self-reliance. This initiative holds immense potential for economic growth and diversification across the continent.

Reduced reliance on European markets could also spur greater intra-African trade and economic integration. Leading countries within regional economic communities should take the initiative to lessen dependence on Europe and encourage self-reliance by fostering trade within the continent. At the same time, as traditional partnerships with Europe face uncertainty, African nations can explore new alliances with countries that share their development goals and respect their sovereignty.

This diversification could lead to more equitable and sustainable partnerships, allowing Africa to assert greater influence in shaping global economic and geopolitical dynamics. Simultaneously, African nations are actively exploring partnerships with the Gulf states, particularly in renewable energy projects, offering new investment opportunities and reducing reliance on traditional European donors. These emerging alliances reflect a broader shift toward South-South cooperation, empowering African nations to chart their own course in a rapidly changing global landscape.



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