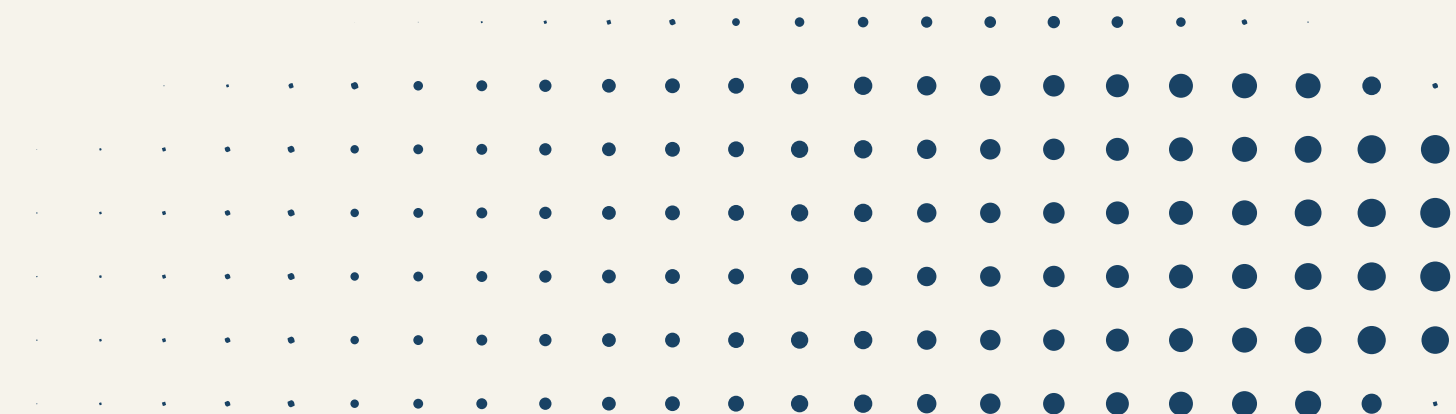


## ETHIOPIA'S ROLE IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: FOUR POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ethiopia's reclaiming regional position not just refers to the physical presence of the country in projecting power in adjacent areas; it also refers to the struggle Ethiopia finds itself in generating trust and legitimacy. Thus far, Ethiopia has faced challenges in both spheres. Ethiopia's current position in the Horn of Africa has continued to determine its regional role. In a similar vein, its aspiration to actively engage with the region is determined its position. Hence, there is reinforcement between the country's regional position and the concomitant role it seeks to play. Against the backdrop of the precarious regional position of the country, the future position of Ethiopia in the region and the region itself would fall in the following categories: Competing Hegemonic Power between Kenya and Ethiopia; Kenya will assert its ascendancy in the region; Ethiopia will reassert its 'hegemony'[1]/dominance-return to status quo and a Region without a Clear hegemon.

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

With the change of the global order in the wake of 1991, the “War on Terror”, the rise of the “Peacekeeping enterprise”[1], the country’s geopolitical position, its territory and population and the internal willingness to project power were among the chief factors making the Ethiopian state played a relatively dominant regional role. Cognizant of the attributes to regional power status-capability and recognition, Ethiopia had been deemed as a regional anchor state[1] in the Horn of Africa as a result.[2] During the early months of 2018, the incumbent government immediately started out to overturn twenty years of adversarial relation with Eritrea. This could be considered as a contribution to augment Ethiopia’s role in the region. Nevertheless, its dominance in the region is currently facing challenges both from within and outside.

For instance, the recent political uncertainties ensuing the northern conflict as well as the external troubled diplomatic relations Ethiopia has had with the Sudan and Egypt on the utilization of the Nile River and the Western states' diplomatic position regarding the northern conflict have brought challenges to its claim of regional position, role(s) and the concomitant identity the state seeks to project. Hence, reclaiming its rightful regional position as well as redefining its role entails a clear understanding of the regional and international contexts not leaving the domestic situation. Against this backdrop, this brief will present four possible scenarios as far as Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa is concerned.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR  
ETHIOPIA'S ROLE

IN THE REGION



Competing Hegemonic Power  
between Kenya and Ethiopia

Kenya will assert its  
hegemony in the region



Ethiopia will reassert its  
'hegemon'/dominance-return  
to status quo



A Region without a Clear  
hegemon

Four possible scenarios could be laid out regarding the future role of Ethiopia in the region by taking the domestic and regional circumstances as well as the international global order. These four scenarios reflect the possible position of Ethiopia in the region vis-à-vis potential contenders in their bid to achieve their security interests.

## 1.2.1 COMPETING HEGEMONIC POWER BETWEEN KENYA AND ETHIOPIA

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One possible scenario would be the competition between Kenya and Ethiopia to assert regional influence. When Ethiopia relieves from the domestic constraints, it will come back to the regional geopolitical space. The internal conflict has sapped the potential of the state. The conclusion of peace deal between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government in Pretoria and Nairobi seem to end the crisis accompanying the conflict. If this promising trend is accompanied by the cessation of hostilities prevailed in different pockets of the country, Ethiopia will have the opportunity to re-emerge as a regional actor.

At the same time, with the increasing recognition of the West to the role of Nairobi in the region and Kenya's increasing commitment to project power as recently witnessed in the Congo, Addis Ababa will find itself in competition for influence in the region. Indeed, the manifested divisions between the two states regarding the political trajectory in Somalia and South Sudan and if they are considered each other as rival, there will be difficulty in shaping the regional order. To equally engage in competition with Kenya and other possible contenders, Ethiopia needs to further buttress its diplomatic relations with neighboring states and regain the West recognition as a regional actor.

## 1.2.2 Kenya will assert its ascendancy in the region

The difficulty to address the domestic precarious situation in Ethiopia will continue to dampen the role the country seeks to play in the region. Ethnic-based insurgency movements are also currently challenging the state's monopoly of violence. Humanitarian crises are mounting as a result. Indeed, aside from the domestic constraints, the image and the problem of recognition associated with external actors will further encumber the state's capacity to regain its regional role. This circumstance in turn will continue to provide an opportunity for Kenya to seize the moment if it is willing and maintain a healthy diplomatic relations with America and the European Union. Since recent times, the official narrations of the West are gravitated towards giving legitimacy to the regional role of Kenya. The increasing cordial relation between the West and Nairobi has recently culminated in the latter's recognition as a major non-NATO ally. Furthermore, Kenya has demonstrated an interest to further engage with the East African Economic Community and the African Union Peace and Security Council to augment its regional presence and influence.

Internally, the credibility of the 2022 election which will demonstrate the country to be regarded as a “beacon” of democracy in the region that is often struggled to chart a political transition to democracy. Kenya’s democracy track record may use as a non-material aspect of the country that could back the material capabilities. Nairobi’s dominant role in the region will be realized if it has kept playing its mediation role in the region as it was demonstrated earlier in hosting the peace deal between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF. In this regard, its aspiration to hold a dominant position in the region will also be ascertained if can replicate its mediation role in other war-torn states in the region and beyond. Furthermore, Nairobi’s increasing economic performance may also help the country’s desire to wield regional dominance.

### 1.2.3 Ethiopia will reassert its 'hegemon'/dominance-return to status quo

The third scenario will be Ethiopia can regain its regional dominance. This cannot happen in a vacuum. Rather, it requires overturning the domestic factors that are compelling Ethiopia to retreat from the geopolitical space it had enjoyed so far. Addressing the lingering security problem bedeviling the state is a *sin qua non* to recalibrate Ethiopia's regional policy by demonstrating its capability as it is emerging from a situation of security recipient to a country stands firm looking not merely for its security but also offer a modicum of security to the region. Furthermore, the west and central parts of Ethiopia are also increasingly witnessing the mounting conflict and the subsequent humanitarian problems. Restoring law and order in the conflict-ravaged areas would certainly help the state well-placed in regional politics.

Besides the domestic determinants, settling the dispute the country has with Sudan over the contested territory could also be considered as a good opportunity to overcome one of the external challenges constraining the state in the domain of peacekeeping diplomacy. Indeed, the Ethiopian government consistently blamed the Sudanese government for its role providing support to TPLF fighters and backing the insurgent group in Benishangul-Gumuz region. Addressing Khartoum's foreign policy strategy aimed at exploiting Ethiopia's security vulnerability will support the latter's drive to re-assert its dominant role in the region. Indeed, without harmonizing diplomatic relation with the hitherto 'hostile' neighboring state, it would be possible to augment relative power position of the country to reassert one's dominance in the region, although it remains challenging.

Revitalizing its peacekeeping engagement will also entail to address its relations with the United Nations. Recently, reports confirmed that the future participation of Ethiopian peacekeepers will be subjected to scrutiny of the human rights records of every deployed soldier in the north Ethiopia conflict. Diplomatic rapprochement with the West could not be sidelined as far as the need to reassert Ethiopia's role in the region is concerned. The West has still the leverage to constrain the foreign policy choice of the country. Identifying the areas in which the interests of the West and Ethiopia are converged could be considered as an opportunity to work towards addressing challenges both parties want to address in the region.

Apart from the bilateral relations Ethiopia has had with the rest, its role in the regional security arrangement is a necessary condition to reassert its role in the region. Needless to say, Ethiopia made use of IGAD as a platform to execute its foreign policy. For instance, IGAD was a foreign policy vehicle of Ethiopia vis-à-vis securing its national interest as far as Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan were concerned. Reviving its influence inside the regional organization would be an opportunity to Ethiopia's journey to reassert its influence in the region.

### 1.2.4 A Region without a Clear hegemon

The region will not have a clear hegemon in that not a single state can play a regional security role with the recognition generated from the external actors as well as the hitherto recognized actors are still consumed by internal problems. Ethiopia, for instance, is still struggling to overcome internal security predicaments. Failure to adequately deal with the current circumstances will continue to damage the image of an “anchor state” in the region the country had earlier enjoyed. This in turn will affect the tendency to renew the tarnished image with which the state is constantly struggling. The lingering security problem is sapping the capacity of the state, thereby diminishing the potential of the country and the concomitant roles it plays in the region. Recent, albeit commitment demonstrated by the warring parties to the peace deal both are party to, it will take time for Ethiopia to recover from full-scale civil war and reinvent itself as a regional actor in the domain of peace and security.

Addis Ababa's fragile presence in the region could not only be anticipated by analyzing the domestic circumstances, its troubling relation with Khartoum over the contested boundary would continue to affect Ethiopia's role. Furthermore, Ethiopia's "abandoning its leadership role in South Sudan peace process" will also serve as an indication of the region devoid of a hegemon. Lacking a clear hegemon will also be possible in the Horn of Africa due to the lack of political will to shape regional security dynamics on the side of the member states. Kenya in this regard may refrain from sharing a security burden of the region. The recent geopolitical dynamics over access to the sea outlet may encourage immediate neighbors of Ethiopia to work in league and jeopardize Ethiopia's drive to escape from geopolitical retreat. In a nutshell, the above mentioned circumstances may make effective contributions to the region without a clear dominance.

## Conclusions

This brief has attempted to bring four possible scenarios vis-à-vis Ethiopia's roles in the Horn geopolitical space. To improve its regional position indeed requires adequately addressing the local security problem of conflict in the northern part of Ethiopia and increasing level of insurgency in different pockets of the country. Besides, revisiting a regional strategy that helps the state to recover from domestic and regional conundrums would in turn help consolidate its regional position.

## Disclaimer

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