

Looming Large Turmoil in East African Region: Options for Pakistan

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Executive Summary

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Amidst escalating tensions and geopolitical complexities in East Africa, the region stands on the brink of turmoil with far-reaching global implications. The Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal, the Sudanese civil war, and controversial elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are key flashpoints exacerbating instability. International actors, including the United States, are closely monitoring these developments. Pakistan, with diplomatic and economic ties in the region, faces critical decisions to safeguard its interests and contribute to regional stability. Recommendations include prioritising diplomatic engagement, facilitating citizen evacuation from conflict zones, and intensifying counterterrorism efforts.

Recommendations

Pakistan does not have geographical contiguity with the states in East Africa. In Africa, Pakistan has the largest volume of trade with Kenya. In the event of unrest in countries neighbouring Kenya, Pakistan might suffer losses in trade with Kenya. Pakistan should choose to remain neutral so as not to embroil itself in the complexities of East Africa.

Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal

Continue diplomatic and trade relations: Without siding with any of the conflicting parties—Somalia, Ethiopia, and Somaliland—Pakistan should prioritise its trade with these countries.

Sudan War

Evacuation and support for Pakistani citizens: Pakistan should prioritise the evacuation of citizens from Sudan and provide assistance to those who have already returned to Pakistan.

Elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Intensify efforts to fight terrorism: Pakistan should increase its counter-terrorism efforts to avoid the possibility of global terrorism taking the central stage one more time.

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Problem Statement

The escalating tensions, conflicts, and geopolitical dynamics in the East African region, coupled with the involvement of various international actors, pose a pressing concern for regional stability and global security, necessitating strategic assessment and action from Pakistan to safeguard its interests and mitigate potential risks.

Turmoil in East Africa

Unrest in various countries of East Africa points in the direction of a looming turmoil that has the potential to spread beyond the continent of Africa and have global consequences. Of the major developments in East Africa, the deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland has become the focus of international actors for the past few months. Somalia claims that Ethiopia is interfering in its internal affairs by signing a port deal with its disputed region. Ethiopia already has strained relations with its neighbouring countries. The rift between Somalia and Ethiopia might broaden the breathing space for the terrorist group, Al Shabaab, in Somalia. Islamist armed groups like Al Shabaab also operate in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). DRC is currently embroiled in controversy over recent elections in the country. It is very likely for protests in DRC to get violent as has been the country's history. In the neighbourhood of Ethiopia is Sudan, where a civil war is going on between two armed groups for their rule over the country. These armed groups are backed by international actors from the Gulf region who are trying to secure their interests in Sudan. Amidst these developments, there have been high-level visits by American officials to East Africa, which strengthens the suspicion that developments in East Africa are very serious.

Ethiopia-Somaliland Port deal

In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to lease the Red Sea port, Berbera, to land-locked Ethiopia. Somaliland is a breakaway region of Somalia since 1991 but it has not been recognised by any country yet. Ethiopia promises to recognise Somaliland in exchange for access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia is the most populous landlocked country in the world. It lost its direct

access to the Red Sea after its coastal region of Eritrea gained independence in 1993.¹ Since then, Ethiopia has been largely dependent on neighbouring Djibouti for almost all of its imports and exports through sea routes. Ethiopia does not have good relations with its neighbouring countries including Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Egypt, and Sudan. Moreover, the deal has raised concerns not only among the neighbours but across the region. Somalia has also started to mobilise international support against this port deal.

Countries from across the world are lining up behind the two opponents, Ethiopia and Somalia, which is only complicating the matter further. In an attempt to counter this port deal, Somalia has signed a naval deal with Turkiye. As part of this decade-long defence agreement, the Turkish Navy would facilitate the protection of Somalia's territorial waters and train its navy.² Besides, Somalia denied air traffic clearance to Ethiopian planes flying to Somaliland. It accuses Ethiopia of meddling in its internal affairs. The vague announcements made after signing the MoU, make Somalia suspicious of Ethiopia's ambitions. Somalia has an Islamist insurgent group, Al Shabaab—an Al Qaeda affiliate, operating on its territory. Tensions with Ethiopia and Somaliland may play into the hands of this insurgent group.

Ethiopia had been cooperating with Somalia to contain Al Shabaab. However, in the face of recent tensions, if Ethiopia pulls out its troops who are fighting Al Shabaab, the crisis might get out of hand. Djibouti has also expressed its displeasure over the MoU, as it would lose its trading partnerships in place with Ethiopia. For Ethiopia, regaining access to the sea is of existential importance to it.

Implications and Options for Pakistan

Pakistan has had lukewarm relations with both Ethiopia and Somalia. Pakistan exports rice, cement, and powder sugar to Somalia (\$85.4m), while imports scrap iron, hides and skins from Somalia (\$1.69m).³ Hundreds of Somali students are pursuing their studies in Pakistan. In recent years, because of Ethiopia's promising economy,

¹ 'Ethiopia Signs Agreement to Use Somaliland's Red Sea Port', Al Jazeera, 1 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/1/ethiopia-signs-agreement-to-use-somalilands-red-sea-port>.

² 'With Somalia Naval Deal, Turkey Steers into Strategic but Volatile Region', RFI, 23 March 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/podcasts/international-report/20240323-turkey-somalia-navy-defence-agreement-ethiopia>.

³ 'Pakistan (PAK) and Somalia (SOM) Trade', The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 2 April 2024, <https://oec.world/en>.

Pakistan has been trying to build close relations with Ethiopia. Ethiopia became a part of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) bloc on the very day it announced the MoU with Somaliland. In 2022, Pakistan exported awnings, tents, sails, rice, and woven cotton to Ethiopia (\$30.1m) and imported dried legumes, hides, and soybeans from Ethiopia (\$19.3m).⁴

A major concern is that the issue between Somalia, Ethiopia, and Somaliland may give rise to regional tensions, inviting extra-regional actors. Gulf powers, the US and China are already in competition in Africa. This port deal can open a new front for proxy warfare in the Horn of Africa, extending the already existing feuds between many international players. It is in Pakistan's best interest to not get involved in the regional imbroglio at the behest of any of its allies. Ethiopia has a promising future in the economy, and Pakistan should enhance its trade with it. Besides, Pakistan should have diplomatic and economic ties with both Somalia and Ethiopia.

Sudan War

Pakistan and Sudan have had cordial relations for decades now. Sudan supported Pakistan during its war with India and provided aid during natural disasters in 2005 and 2010. Conversely, Pakistan supported Sudan in its border disputes with Egypt and South Sudan, hosted the largest number of Sudanese students in a foreign land, and actively contributed to the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions in Sudan. Sudan has experienced various civil wars since the 1950s, which spanned over 4 decades of the 68 years of Sudan's independence.⁵ The latest civil war in Sudan started in April 2023 and has only expanded since then, killing 12000 people, displacing eight million, and forcing 19 million children out of school.⁶ Two generals, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Mohamed 'Hemedti' Hamdan Dagolo of Rapid Support Forces (RSF), are vying for control in Sudan. The two previously colluded to overthrow the 3-decade control of Omar al-Bashir in 2019.⁷

⁴ 'Ethiopia (ETH) and Pakistan (PAK) Trade', The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 2 April 2024, <https://oec.world/en>.

⁵ Greg Myre, 'Why Is Sudan so Prone to Civil War?', *NPR*, 10 May 2023, sec. Africa, <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/09/1175155164/why-is-sudan-so-prone-to-civil-war>.

⁶ 'Sudan's Calamitous Civil War: A Chance to Draw Back from the Abyss', International Crisis Group, 9 January 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudans-calamitous-civil-war-chance-draw-back-abyss>.

⁷ Ayesha Malik, 'The Sudan Crisis and the View from Pakistan', Mahbub ul Haq Research Centre at LUMS, 20 May 2023, <https://mhrc.lums.edu.pk/the-sudan-crisis-and-the-view-from-pakistan>.

Efforts of different regional—Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Saudi Arabia—and international actors—UN and the US—to mediate between the warring factions have not yet been successful.

The war in Sudan is not only creating a humanitarian crisis inside Sudan, but refugee outflows to other countries, instability in South Sudan, international gold smuggling, and reduced global wheat production.⁸ Over 1500 Pakistanis resided in Sudan and owned small businesses.⁹ Over half of them returned to Pakistan during the last year while the other half endangered their lives in Sudan for their families, property and business. The civil war in Sudan tends to spread to other neighbouring countries as they have an ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural affinity with communities living in Sudan.¹⁰ The war, if continued, would disrupt the fragile security situation and regional peace in Africa.

Implications and Options for Pakistan

In the aftermath of the Sudan war, over 700 Pakistanis had to return, and many of them had businesses there. For Pakistan, the priority should be to bring other Pakistanis home if they are willing to return. The crisis in Sudan do not seem to be calming down any time soon, hence, Pakistanis shouldn't return to Sudan or claim any damages to their property and businesses. Government should provide moral and financial support to returnees from Sudan, especially those who have lost their businesses.

Many Pakistanis have been killed in the UN peacekeeping missions in Sudan, the latest death was in January 2024. Pakistan may also offer humanitarian aid like medical supplies, food, and financial assistance to injured and displaced people in Sudan.

⁸ Aly Verjee, 'Five Potential Global Consequences of Sudan's Escalating Conflict', Lowy Institute, 4 May 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/five-potential-global-consequences-sudan-s-escalating-conflict>.

⁹ Abid Hussain, 'Journey to Safety: Pakistanis Escaping the Violence in Sudan', Al Jazeera, 25 April 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/25/pakistanis-make-arduous-journey-from-khartoum-to-port-sudan>.

¹⁰ 'The Sudanese Crisis and Implications for the Horn of Africa', Webinar Report (Good Governance Africa, 9 October 2023), <https://gga.org/the-sudanese-crisis-and-its-implications-to-the-horn-of-africa-takeaways-from-a-webinar/>.

Controversial Elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have spurred widespread protests and calls for a re-election. DRC held its elections—presidential, provincial, and local—on December 20, 2023. The Election Commission of Congo (CENI) announced that Felix Tshisekedi secured 74% of the vote.¹¹ The elections in Congo have been overshadowed by controversy and the resultant electoral crisis. Over 5000 cases of serious irregularities were documented by the joint observer mission from the Church of Christ of Congo and the Catholic Church. Amongst the documented irregularities, faulty voting devices, closed polling stations, violent attacks, dubious electoral lists, vote buying, and ballot stuffing are only a few to mention. Despite the controversy and the opposition's allegations of fraud, Tshisekedi was sworn in as president for the second time in January 2024.¹² Election disputes in DRC often lead to unrest that has lasting consequences.

DRC's synchronised presidential, local, provincial and national polls went on for seven days, which is not only unconstitutional but suspicious as independent observers are available only for one day of elections. US Intelligence Chief, Avril Haines, met Tshisekedi before the elections and visited Rwanda, claiming to have brokered a peace deal between DRC and Rwanda. Congo's purchase of Chinese drones has alarmed the US. The US is trying to be on the right side of the Tshisekedi regime out of the fear of losing Congo and its copper and cobalt to China.

Tshisekedi's previous win in 2019 was also controversial but it was the first peaceful transition of power that the country had seen in its 63 years of independence.¹³ Various armed groups operate inside DRC that have chequered Congo's 30 years with violence. Some of these groups seek territorial sovereignty while others claim to fight for the rights of marginalised groups. These groups are linked with various outside groups and countries. Locals protested the ineffectiveness of the UN peacekeeping

¹¹ Tafi Mhaka, 'DR Congo's Shambolic Election Should Be a Wake-up Call for the SADC', Al Jazeera, 18 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/18/dr-congos-shambolic-election-should-be-a-wake-up-call-for-the-sadc>.

¹² Mhaka...

¹³ "Five Key Issues at Stake in the DR Congo's Crucial Election," Al Jazeera, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/11/five-key-issues-at-stake-in-the-dr-congos-crucial-election>.

missions that are poised to exit the country. East African Community (EAC) troops are also withdrawing.

Implications and Options for Pakistan

Withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission and EAC troops from DRC would create a power vacuum. This power vacuum would encourage the armed groups which have affiliations with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). This might encourage the affiliates of Al Qaeda and IS in Pakistan's neighbourhood—especially Afghanistan. The groups operating in Afghanistan may not have a direct link with the ones in Africa, but they take inspiration from each other. Despite ideological differences, armed groups in Africa celebrated the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.¹⁴

Pakistan needs to intensify its efforts to fight terrorism at home and abroad. The threat of global terrorism continues to loom around. Concerted efforts by all the countries in the world are required to eliminate terrorism..

United States Concerns

In the past few months, many high-level officials from the US made their visits to Africa—indicating a heightened interest and involvement in Africa. In November 2023, US Intelligence Chief, Avril Haines, travelled to Rwanda and Congo. In January 2024, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director, William Burns, secretly visited Somalia and Kenya. In a fourth since the Biden administration came to power, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, visited West African states—Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Angola—for a week-long tour in January this year.

Growing tensions among the East African nations warranted a visit by the CIA Director, William Burns to Somalia and Kenya—especially in the aftermath of the Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal. During the meetings with the presidents of Kenya and Somalia, security and instability in the Eastern African states were brought under discussion. Washington is concerned as tensions amongst and within these states would encourage armed groups like *Al-Shabaab* in Somalia, the March 23 Movement (M23) and ISIL in Congo.

¹⁴ Catherine Byaruhanga, 'Africa's Jihadists: What Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan Means,' 20 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58279439>.

The US has previously expressed its desire to utilise Somaliland's port of Berbera and its airfield to effectively fight *Al-Shabaab*. The US already has a significant military presence in Djibouti. In the face of rising tensions with the Yemen-based Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, the US might want to enhance its military presence in the region. In 2022, the commander of the US Africa Command visited Somaliland to further diplomatic ties. The visit was coordinated by Somalia and the US stressed the need to resolve outstanding conflicts between Somalia and Somaliland. Most of the international countries sided with Somalia on the issue of the port deal. The US, too, stressed its support for Somalia's territorial integrity. However, Washington's interest in Berbera port may lead to a softening of position on the matter.

The M23 rebellion group is supported by Rwanda in the eastern parts of Congo. As Congo concentrates its power and troops to confront M23, IS starts to strengthen its hold. The unrest over elections in Congo would shift focus away from these armed groups posing terrorist threats to the region and the globe at large. As the US has partnerships with both Congo and Rwanda, tensions between these two countries could risk American interests in the region.

Congo recently bought Chinese drones to fight against the M23 rebels. Congo may be a poverty-stricken country but it is one of the largest producers of copper and cobalt—strategic minerals used in batteries and electric vehicles. Most of DRC's minerals are refined by China. China's investment in Congo's minerals raises US's concerns further. On January 27th, China signed a \$ 7 billion minerals-for-infrastructure deal with DRC.¹⁵ In July 2023, a bill was introduced in the House of Representatives to create a strategy to secure critical minerals from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In Sudan, the United States is trying to work with its Arab allies—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates(UAE)—to prevent disintegration in Sudan. However, these Arab states favour opposing factions in Sudan. UAE has connections with Hemedti's RSF as it helped fight Houthis in Yemen and Libya. Russia's Wagner group trained RSF troops and stationed some of its officials inside RSF bases. Egypt supports SAF because Sissi wants a like-minded general in power in Sudan. Also,

¹⁵ Pablo Valerio, 'CIA Director Secretly Visits Somalia and Kenya amidst Rising Tensions in East Africa', intelNews.org, 22 January 2024, <https://intelnews.org/2024/01/22/01-3330/>.

SAF has issues with Ethiopia which is in conflict with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in the Nile. Hence, despite Islamist inclinations of the SAF, Egypt sees it as a crucial partner in its dispute with Ethiopia. The US has made heavy political investments for peace in Sudan. If peace does not prevail in Sudan, America's credibility and fight against terrorism will be undermined.

Recommendations

Pakistan does not have geographical contiguity with the states in East Africa. In Africa, Pakistan has the largest volume of trade with Kenya. In the event of unrest in countries neighbouring Kenya, Pakistan might suffer losses in trade with Kenya. Pakistan should choose to remain neutral so as not to embroil itself in the complexities of East Africa.

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