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**Navigating regional dynamics
the Maritime Deal between Türkiye and Somalia**

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Somalia and Türkiye signed a defence and economic cooperation agreement in early February 2024. So far, Turkish officials remained rather silent as the deal is yet to be ratified by the Turkish parliament. But Somalian officials already hailed it as a “historic” pact that will empower Somalia to combat terrorism, piracy attacks, illegal activities and other external threats impinging on the country’s sovereignty.

What does the deal cover?

The cooperation agreement captured significant attention from both national and international media with a notable focus on its security implications. However, it also stipulates collaboration in the economic domain. The deal reportedly mandates Türkiye to develop Somalia’s maritime security, help build and modernize Somalia navy and provide training and equipment support to Somalia’s naval forces. It also includes the conduct of joint air, land and sea operations along with the operation of ports and other facilities¹. This would, in return, help the country protect its maritime sources and commercial activities.

Fishing is a crucial source of income for the coastal people and illegal fishing activities as well as incidents of armed robbery disrupts maritime commerce in the region. It poses other significant threats to the livelihoods of Somalians. Protecting the country’s coastline and patrolling activities will therefore help Somalia to benefit from its marine sources, develop key sectors and ensure the safety of maritime commerce. It has also been reported that Türkiye will receive 30% of revenues generated from Somalia’s maritime sources², an ostensibly minor yet significant detail warranting verification from the officials.

Building on this recent agreement, the two countries signed an oil and gas exploration deal on March 7, targeting the exploration and extraction of hydrocarbon reserves in Somalia’s exclusive economic zone.

Somalian officials reiterated that the deal is not against any country including Ethiopia. Somalia’s Minister of Defense, Abdulkadir Mohamed Nur also noted that it is the culmination of Somali’s solid relations with Türkiye built through a decade-long commitment.³ However, the fact that the signing of the agreement came shortly after Ethiopia and Somaliland concluded a Memorandum of Understanding might suggest otherwise.

Ethiopia’s regional power aspirations

Earlier in October, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed defined sea access as “an existential issue for Ethiopia”⁴. Following Eritrea’s secession in 1993, Ethiopia lost its sea access, thus remained over-reliant on its neighbours for its maritime exports. Being the world’s largest landlocked country with a population of 120 million⁵, Ethiopia’s pursuit for maritime access to the Red Sea has always been a source of confrontation in its relations with neighbouring

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/2/25/%d9%85%d8%a7-%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d9%83%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%b3-%d8%a7%d8%aa%d9%81%d8%a7%d9%82%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%88%d9%86?s=03>

² <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/somalia-tuerkiye-maritime-security-partnership-faces-stormy-waters>

³ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-turkiye-somalia-alliance-will-guarantee-stability-in-the-horn-of-africa/3148891>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/markets/somalia-president-signs-law-nullifying-ethiopia-somaliland-port-deal-2024-01-07/>

⁵ <https://www.euronews.com/2024/01/18/rising-somalia-ethiopia-tensions-could-plunge-the-horn-of-africa-into-chaos>

countries. It is estimated that 95 percent of Ethiopia's total trade goes through Djibouti's port.⁶ Such a reliance on this small African country makes Ethiopian economy vulnerable to external interventions.

The MoU signed between Ethiopia and the self-declared state of Somaliland would grant the former naval and commercial access through Somaliland's Berbera port. Somaliland unilaterally declared its independence in 1991 but lacks any international recognition. The deal with Ethiopia is expected to pave the way for its recognition as an independent nation.

Türkiye has warm relations both with Somaliland and Ethiopia and has a consulate in former's capital, Hargeisa since 2014. As part of its mediation efforts, it also played a leading role in facilitating peace talks between Somaliland and Somalia's federal government.

That being said, Türkiye has more established relations with Ethiopia. The Turkish Republic inaugurated its first embassy in the African continent in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Additionally, TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Türkiye's international aid agency, also opened its first office in Sub-Saharan Africa, in Ethiopia. Turkish companies also have huge investments in the country. Almost 200 companies now operate in Ethiopia with a total investment volume exceeding \$2 million⁷. On the other hand, the Turkish Maarif Foundation, being tasked to establish Turkish schools abroad, recently opened a school in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia.⁸

In seeking external support to counter Ethiopia's assertiveness, Somalia turned to Türkiye as a trustworthy ally, which has been investing in the country for more than a decade.

Why Türkiye?

Daud Aweis, Somalia's Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism, said in a post on social media platform, X that "...the cabinet has endorsed a defence collaboration pact between Somalia and the esteemed Republic of Turkey, a NATO member and close ally. This landmark 10-year pact will significantly bolster Somalia government's endeavours to safeguard its sovereignty."

This brief statement conveys three key messages: first, Türkiye's NATO membership refers to its robust military capabilities, sending a clear message to potential adversaries of Somalia; second, the reference to the 10-year pact and alignment with Türkiye signify the already strong relations between the two countries, indicative of a long-term commitment and third, it emphasizes that Somalia entrusts Türkiye for protection against threats to its sovereignty.

Somalia has been at the centre of Türkiye's Africa policy since 2011 when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the country during his tenure as the prime minister. Since then, Türkiye played an increasingly significant and visible role in the country's post-war reconstruction process through its humanitarian engagement, trade ties, state-building activities, mediation initiatives and military cooperation.

Somalia quickly emerged one of the primary beneficiaries of Türkiye's bilateral official development assistance. Turkish humanitarian and development assistance, covering several sectors including infrastructure, health and education, surpassed 1\$ billion⁹. Following this humanitarian venture, Turkish entrepreneurs made huge inroads in the country. Somalia's

⁶ <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/djibouti-ethiopia-economy-trade/#:~:text=With%20one%20of%20Africa's%20fastest,trade%20going%20through%20Djibouti's%20port.>

⁷ <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye-and-ethiopia.en.mfa#:~:text=While%20the%20number%20of%20Turkish,with%20approximately%20200%20Turkish%20companies.>

⁸ <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkiye/education/turkiyes-maarif-foundation-opens-school-in-post-war-tigray>

⁹ <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkish-president-meets-his-somali-counterpart-in-istanbul-15574954>

airport and seaport activities are now run by Turkish companies that help improve the country's infrastructure. Having established its largest military training facility in Mogadishu (TURKSOM), Türkiye has also been supporting Somalia's security sector. Troops trained by Turkish military experts at TURKSOM stand out as one of best trained and capable forces¹⁰.

The Turkish navy has already been engaged in operations in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somalia Coast, under Combined Task Force-151. Türkiye assumed the command of this multinational naval task force, established in 2009 to counter piracy attacks and armed robbery in the region for six brief periods. The recent deal between Türkiye and Somalia therefore extends their already existing defence cooperation to the maritime sector.

Despite ongoing challenges in asserting full control over its territory, Somali's battle against al-Shabab has been bolstered by Türkiye's extensive support and comprehensive peacebuilding approach. Hence it comes as no surprise that Somali Prime Minister, Hamza Abdi Barre, in his address to the parliament following the Cabinet approval of the deal, referred to Türkiye as a "true and reliable brother." The intricate nature of regional dynamics and external threat perceptions made it imperative for Somalia to enhance its military and naval capabilities. While Somalia aspires to navigate regional affairs, Türkiye will solidify its position as a "security provider" in the country and in its surrounding regions.

What's in it for Türkiye?

Türkiye is fostering close relations with other Horn of Africa countries as well. For instance, the defence ministers of Türkiye and Djibouti met in Ankara in February 19, to sign a military training cooperation agreement which also includes financial cooperation and cash aid.¹¹ Strategically positioned at the entrance of the Suez Canal, Djibouti holds a key location in the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia, Spain, Germany, the USA, France, Italy and China have military bases in this small African country,¹² having a population of 1.1 million.¹³ The escalating tensions in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden increased Djibouti's geostrategic importance.

As noted, Türkiye also enjoys close relations with Ethiopia. The two countries signed a military cooperation agreement in 2021 and the use of Turkish drones reportedly played a pivotal role in Ethiopia's recapture of Addis Ababa from rebel Tigray forces in 2022. Being traditionally among Türkiye's largest trade partners in the continent, Ethiopia is an important market and a promising investment destination for Turkish investors.

Following Ethiopia's controversial deal with Somaliland, the external actors, including the Arab League, the European Union, the USA and China sided with Somalia emphasizing the critical importance of its unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁴ Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs have also affirmed Türkiye's commitment to the same principles as a requirement of the international law.¹⁵ Among the risks associated with the deal is Türkiye's entanglement with regional conflicts. However, Türkiye does not intend to alienate Addis Ababa, nor does it seek any direct or indirect confrontation with it.

¹⁰ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4083622

¹¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkish-djiboutian-defense-chiefs-sign-military-training-military-financial-cooperation-pacts/3142065>

¹² <https://politicstoday.org/djibouti-surrounded-by-military-bases-of-china-us-france-uk-germany-others/>

¹³¹³ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/djibouti-population/>

¹⁴ <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-israel-egypt-and-uae-view-ethiopia-red-sea-deal> and <https://www.theafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/china-backs-somalia-ethiopia-somaliland-red-sea-port-deal-4489698>

¹⁵ https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-2_-disisleri-bakanligi-sozcusu-oncu-keceli-nin-etiyopya-ile-somaliland-arasinda-1-ocak-2024-tarihinde-imzalanan-mutabakat-zaptina-iliskin-bir-soruya-cevabi.en.mfa

True that Türkiye aspires to play a larger role in Somalia and in the wider Red Sea region, the deal signed with Somalia will provide it a significant leverage in solidifying its presence in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa. However, Türkiye's increasing engagement with the region should not be interpreted as an indication of heightened military ambitions including the establishment of overseas bases. Its recent involvement in fulfilling Somalia's quest for the protection of its territories against maritime violations and other external threats was initiated upon the request of Somali government. Although Türkiye's rising prominence in the Horn might be perceived as a potential threat by other extra regional countries, simplifying it as a mere stepping stone for increased military deployment in the region would be overly reductionist.

The same concerns were raised when Türkiye signed defence and military cooperation agreements with Western African countries, Niger, Togo and Senegal subsequently in 2020, 2021 and 2020. So far, there are no plans for a larger military reach in the Sahel. Contrary to some expectations, Türkiye does not seek to augment the number of its military bases in distant regions. Even if the country aspires to have a larger military reach in the region, the existence of more immediate foreign policy concerns, mostly stemming from its immediate vicinity might constrain its military assertiveness. For example, the political upheaval in Syria and the resulting refugee crisis continues to pose challenges in various domains. On the other hand, Türkiye's military engagement in Africa is often in the form of military training, conclusion of defence/military cooperation agreements or the participation in joint multinational missions. This approach positions Türkiye with the advantage of not being perceived as a country pursuing neo-colonial ambitions.

On the other hand, competition with other extra regional players appears to limit Türkiye's room for manoeuvre and complicate its relationships within the region. The Gulf countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have significant investments and other strategic interests in the Red Sea and the Horn which falls within their immediate neighbourhood. They both aspire to (re)shape the geopolitics of the region in one way or another.

Having good relations with both Ethiopia and Somalia, the UAE invested heavily in Somaliland's Port of Berbera. The Emirates also signed a military cooperation deal with Somalia in February 2023, but the agreement is still not ratified by the Somali parliament. The country terminated some of its financial assistance to Somalia military forces, sparking concerns that this could be followed by a lesser involvement in Somalia.¹⁶

Together with Saudi Arabia, the UAE supported the peace talks between Eritrea and Ethiopia.¹⁷ Stressing the need to adhere to the principles of good neighbourliness and regional security, Saudi Arabia recently affirmed its interest on the unity of Somalia and the country's sovereignty over its entire territory.¹⁸ Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud attended the Saudi-Arab Summit held in Riyadh in November 2023 in an effort to foster ties with Saudi Leadership.¹⁹ Another regional power, Egypt, has strained relations with Ethiopia over its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. After the signing of the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, Egypt's President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi invited Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to Cairo and went as far as to say that: "Egypt will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or affect its security" in a joint press conference with his counterpart.²⁰ Türkiye's relations with all those regional players were strained over a series of foreign policy issues.

¹⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/somalia-turkey-uae-defence-deal-torpedoed-rival>

¹⁷ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-of-africa/ethiopia-somaliland/stakes-ethiopia-somaliland-deal>

¹⁸ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2440131/saudi-arabia>

¹⁹ https://www.eurasiareview.com/02032024-turkey-gulf-states-converging-interests-in-horn-of-africa-oped/#google_vignette

²⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/21/egypts-el-sisi-says-cairo-will-not-allow-any-threat-to-somalia>

The increasing tensions in the region, coupled with ongoing regional rivalries might well undermine Türkiye's efforts. However, after a decade of stagnant relations, Türkiye's relations with the above-mentioned regional players, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt showed signs of normalization in the last few years. Türkiye's engagement with the region does not aim at outplaying other countries and disrupting established partnerships/alliances. Instead, the collaboration with those countries and their integrated efforts can contribute to address regional security challenges.

Türkiye has the second largest army in NATO while Turkish navy ranked the 10th most powerful navy in the world²¹. Turkish naval presence will certainly fortify its reputation in a region, plagued by instability and persistent conflicts. Türkiye also promotes its interests by exerting influence beyond its immediate surrounding and playing a leading role in regional stability. Türkiye's support will also enable Somalia to reinforce its maritime security, enhancing its capacity to safeguard its territorial waters. Strengthening Somalia's defence capabilities is also crucial for the safety of shipping routes and global supply chains amid increasing Houthi attacks to the Red Sea commercial ships and naval vessels.

However, it is necessary to reiterate here that the deal has both military and commercial purposes. Back in 2022, both Somalia and Somaliland inked oil exploration deals with different companies as it is estimated that the region may have rich offshore and onshore oil and gas reserves.²² Somalia's extensive coastline, potentially rich in hydrocarbon reserves and marine biodiversity,²³ might potentially intensify competition among the regional and extra regional countries vying for control over the country's resources.

Yet, both the defence and economic cooperation agreement and the more recent oil gas exploration deal require substantial investments from Türkiye, whether through government sponsorship or private investments. Türkiye should also prioritize ensuring the safety of personnel employed in the facilities in a region home to piracy attacks and other illegal activities. There is also the risk that the implementation of such large-scale projects may face disruptions due to policy changes or worsening security conditions. The economic benefits should therefore outweigh the financial costs or at the very least, that they can be offset by the revenues generated from the extraction rights.

Regional and global implications

Somalia and its neighbouring regions will continue to be a focal point of geopolitical tensions. The conflicting interests of regional and international actors contribute to the escalation of security concerns. This situation is likely to result in the formation of new alliances and the reinforcement of existing ones.

Collaborative efforts and coordinated actions of regional and external countries such as joint operations or intelligence-sharing mechanisms, are therefore essential to bolster Somalia's defence capabilities, address the interrelated maritime security challenges and contribute to the overall stability of the region. Otherwise, the long-term implications may lead to more profound and adverse shifts in regional dynamics and the region's power structures.

The region is grappling with further instability as Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels target Israeli-linked ships. An Iranian diplomat warned that the attacks will continue until Israel's war on Gaza stops²⁴. The ongoing attacks also have detrimental effects on the European countries as the attacks disrupt international trade on the shortest shipping route connecting Europe and

²¹ <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkish-navy-ranks-10th-among-worlds-strongest-navies-listing>

²² <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-somalia-signs-oil-gas-exploration-deal>

²³ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/somalia-tuerkiye-maritime-security-partnership-faces-stormy-waters>

²⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/iran-links-attacks-to-israels-war-in-gaza-intl/index.html>

Asia.²⁵ The EU already launched its naval mission Aspides to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Bab El-Mandeb and to counter attacks on merchant and commercial vessels²⁶. This is a “defensive maritime security operation” under the EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) that aims at reinforcing the EU’s capacity to swiftly address a global crisis.²⁷ As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on X: “Beyond crisis response, it’s a step towards a stronger European presence at sea to protect European interests.”²⁸

The Force Commander of the mission is Rear Admiral Stefano Costantino of the Italian Navy²⁹. Being a former colonial power in the Horn, Italy maintains significant ties and sway in the area. It provides logistical backing to Italian military operations in the region via its military installation in Djibouti.³⁰ Italy is also a member of the aforementioned CTF-151 alongside Türkiye, thus contributing to maritime security initiatives in the region.

Houthi’s attacks have already disrupted global supply chains with vessel traffic in the Red Sea reportedly dropped by nearly one-third due to rerouting.³¹ It also prompted the world’s largest shipping companies to temporarily suspend their activities or reroute their cargo ships. Diverted routes will have significant repercussions on fuel costs, ultimately leading to higher food prices considering that approximately 30% of global container shipping transits through the region.³² If the Houthis were to close the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, located between Djibouti and Yemen, the repercussions would affect the wider international community as witnessed after the Ukraine crisis.

This signals the increasing militarization of the region, further fuelling the negative perceptions associated with it. It is likely to precipitate another surge of illegal migrant flows to Europe. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the President of the EU Commission, von der Leyen, recently visited Cairo in order to finalize a deal with Egypt worth \$8 billion aimed at curbing the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean.³³ There are concerns that Israel’s war in Gaza could trigger an influx of refugees fleeing into Egypt en route to Europe. Italy ranks among the most popular countries of destination for immigrants³⁴ and tackling illegal migration remains a paramount concern for successive governments. The Central Mediterranean route (the route from Northern African countries to Italy and Malta) is Europe’s busiest migration route and in 2023 alone, 155,750 migrants arrived on Italian shores, which corresponds to a 50% increase compared to preceding year.³⁵

Indeed, everything is interconnected: the evolving dynamics within the wider Red Sea region and shifting perceptions towards the region has the potential to impact migration patterns. Joint endeavours and regional cooperation have become increasingly essential in tackling migration

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/4/how-have-red-sea-attacks-by-yemens-houthi-fighters-affected-companies>

²⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/02/19/eu-launches-mission-aspides-to-protect-red-sea-vessels-from-houthi-attacks>

²⁷ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eunavfor-operation-aspides_en?s=410381

²⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/02/19/eu-launches-mission-aspides-to-protect-red-sea-vessels-from-houthi-attacks>

²⁹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19/security-and-freedom-of-navigation-in-the-red-sea-council-launches-new-eu-defensive-operation/>

³⁰ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/with-operation-aspides-europe-is-charting-its-own-course/#:~:text=The%20EU%20operation%2C%20called%20EUNAVFOR,in%20charge%20of%20its%20operations.>

³¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/red-sea-container-shipping-down-30-over-attacks-imf-says/7464979.html>

³² <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/what-do-houthi-attacks-red-sea-mean-global-trade>

³³ <https://www.theafricareport.com/341058/eu-delivers-8bn-to-help-egypt-fight-illegal-migration/>

³⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/migration-2023>

³⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/italy-eu-africa-migration-strategy-energy-bfffac3ff93ad2a97aead324caa11130>

challenges exacerbated by the intertwined geopolitical factors, the long-term effects of which are yet to be fully understood.

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