Energy Politics in the Horn of Africa

A Path Forward for American Foreign Policy

Oliver McPherson-Smith

INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, the Nile River has been a focal point of economic and military contention.[1] Today, its waters are the subject of dispute between the two largest economies and militaries of the northeastern quadrant of the African continent, Egypt and Ethiopia. While the Nile is perhaps most readily recognized as the economic lifeblood of Sudan and Egypt—leading a verdant trail through the desert that is visible from space—its waters also play an increasingly crucial role in the generation of hydroelectricity in otherwise energy-poor Ethiopia, as they have long done in Egypt.

The inability to forge a regional consensus on regulating the use of the Nile, from its headwaters in Ethiopia through Sudan and down to Egypt, has provoked tit-for-tat threats of military escalation. Furthermore, due to the centrality of the Nile to the Egyptian economy, and to Ethiopia's ambitions for economic development, this dispute has permeated the broader geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia is the world's most populous landlocked country, and 95 percent of its imports and exports flow through the port of neighboring Djibouti, including most of its hydrocarbon imports. As Ethiopia seeks greater direct access to the coast through an agreement with the self-declared but unrecognized Republic of Somaliland, Egypt has rallied to the support of Somalia and its claims of sovereignty over Somaliland. Beyond these protagonists, Djibouti, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates all have deeply vested economic interests that in varying degrees stand to suffer or benefit if Ethiopia develops greater coastal access through Somaliland. The United States, with its largest base on the African continent in Djibouti, adjacent to the Bab al-Mandeb and the crucial maritime trade route of the Red Sea, is not unaffected by these tense regional dynamics. Moreover, less than seven miles away from the five thousand American service members stationed at Camp Lemonnier sits China's first foreign military base, on the other side of Djibouti's capital city.

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How can the United States advance its national interests of free and safe commercial navigation, the prosperity of its allies, the promotion of democracy, and the prevention of the humanitarian suffering that accompanies armed conflict within this complex theater? This essay outlines the unique role the United States can play as a diplomatic broker among its allies and partners in the Horn. Through this role, there is an opportunity to forge a bargain to exchange American diplomatic endorsement of the Ethiopia-Somaliland memorandum of understanding (MOU) for Ethiopian compromise on an agreement to regulate the shared use of the Nile's waters and an Egyptian commitment to de-escalate its military threats. Overwhelmed by international crises on several continents, the Biden administration has adopted a policy of tactical disengagement in the hope that escalation will not ensue. However, the potential adverse impact of international military conflict in the Horn on the United States' economic and security interests is too great to ignore. Shifting from the current agenda of defensive tactics toward a strategy of engagement, the United States can reprise its role as a diplomatic broker—as exercised during the negotiations of the Abraham Accords—to advance its interests in the Horn.

This essay begins with an overview of the international economic importance of the Nile River, including Ethiopia's recent development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and the simmering conflict over the river's waters. It subsequently details Ethiopia's geographic vulnerabilities as a landlocked economic power, and its efforts to gain greater access to the coast through the MOU with Somaliland. The essay then assesses the Biden administration's approach toward competing interests in the Horn, including the misguided "One Somalia" policy. Recommendations for an American diplomatic strategy that forges a bargain between Ethiopia and Egypt follow.

GERDING THE NILE

At the heart of the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia is the GERD. Since antiquity, the Nile River has been fundamental to Egyptian agriculture and livelihoods. The completion in 1970 of the Soviet-built Aswan High Dam in southern Egypt provided Cairo with both the ability to regulate the annual flooding of the Nile[2] and the potential to generate hydroelectricity.[3] Though Egypt's population, and electricity demand, has soared since the Aswan High Dam's completion, hydro sources along the Nile continue to provide approximately 5 percent of the country's electricity generation.[4]

The Nile begins in earnest near the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, where two primary tributaries converge: the White Nile, whose waters originate in Uganda and flow through South Sudan, and the Blue Nile, which begins in Ethiopia. The latter of the two contributes approximately 80 percent of the Nile's flow, and in 2011 Ethiopia began construction to dam its waters near its northwestern border with Sudan. The $4 billion GERD represents a pivotal infrastructural project for Ethiopia. Around 19 percent of the population in the country live in poverty, while more than 50 percent have limited or no access to electricity.[5] As the largest hydro project on the African continent, the GERD is expected to add five thousand megawatts of electricity—thereby doubling Ethiopia's total electricity generation.[6] Moreover, according to the World Bank,

almost 100 percent of the Ethiopian electricity grid is currently powered by renewable sources.[7] The GERD will thus allow Ethiopia to dramatically expand its electricity generation without compromising the current government's decarbonization objectives.[8]

The Egyptian government has long voiced its opposition to the development of the GERD without a legal framework that would protect Egypt's access to the flow of the Nile. The downstream political and economic ramifications of Addis Ababa's control over the potential flow of the majority of the Nile's waters are profound; in 2020, more than 24 percent of Egypt's gross domestic product and 34 percent of the country's jobs were derived from agriculture or associated industries that are overwhelmingly reliant on the Nile's waters, while the majority of the population live proximate to the Nile or its delta.[9] In a dramatic scenario, the failure of the GERD, due to seismic activity, could unleash catastrophic flooding along the entire length of the Nile, submerging riverside towns, ruining nearby agriculture, and destroying bridges.[10] Located between Egypt and Ethiopia, Sudan would be subject to both the aforementioned potential risks and several potential benefits associated with the GERD. Sudan's proximity to the GERD would afford borderland communities access to cheaper electricity and potentially less flooding; in September 2020, the flooding of the Blue Nile destroyed almost one-third of Sudan's cultivated land.[11]

Despite the crucial nature of the Nile for the Egyptian and Sudanese economies, there remains a lack of consensus on how the Nile's waters should be managed. Earlier agreements on managing the Nile were brokered between Egypt and Sudan, offering no rights to upstream countries such as Ethiopia. In 1929, Cairo penned an agreement with the British government on behalf of Sudan to secure Egypt's access to the Nile's waters and to allocate Sudan a share for its agricultural needs.[12] The agreement also gave Cairo a veto over any development on the Nile that would prejudice its interests.[13] This agreement was temporarily amended in 1955 to grant Sudan greater access to water, yet it ultimately proved insufficient. Amid a contentious renegotiation of the 1929 agreement, the Sudanese government in 1958 conveyed to the revolutionary government in Cairo that it did not consider the previous agreement binding because it was not re-ratified after Sudan's independence in 1956. This, according to the Sudanese authorities, allowed them in June 1958 to begin raising the water level in the Sennar Dam in the country's south.[14] Subsequently, in addition to offering their mutual blessings for the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt and the Roseires Dam in Sudan, the two countries in 1959 agreed to apportion 66 percent of water to Egypt and 22 percent to Sudan, with the remaining 12 percent expected to be lost due to evaporation.[15]

The legal status quo of the bilateral agreements between Egypt and Sudan are at plain odds with the reality that the majority of the Nile's waters flow through Ethiopia. Moreover, Ethiopia and the other upstream, sub-Saharan African countries have long argued that they neither were party to nor are obligated to the Nile waters agreements between Egypt and Sudan.[16] Yet, efforts to tangibly regulate access to the Nile's waters have stalled. In 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative was formed to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among the nine riparian states. However, Egypt and Sudan have so far rebuked the initiative's Cooperative Framework Agreement, which has been signed or ratified by the other seven states.[17] The primary contention was that the agreement would have provided all the parties a right to

the Nile's waters, thereby diluting Cairo's and Khartoum's historical claims to the majority of the Nile's flow.

In March 2015, marginal headway toward a durable settlement was made through the signing of a tripartite preliminary agreement between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia in Khartoum. The agreement officially recognized the development of the GERD, thereby ending any fiction that Cairo's or Khartoum's opposition would stop the then-ongoing construction of the dam. Yet, on the fundamental issue of access to the Nile's waters, the agreement was so broad that it rendered the accord almost impossible to enforce. The fourth principle of the agreement reads, "The three countries shall utilize their shared water resources in their respective territories in an equitable and reasonable manner."[18] Without an additional accord to formalize clearer rights, the 2015 agreement offers little more than good intentions.

One reason for the lack of progress on these agreements is Egypt and Ethiopia's shared status as influential regional powers, which precludes Cairo from compelling Addis Ababa to accede to its demands. Egypt's regional prominence is derived from being the most populous Arab nation, the largest economy in North Africa, and in possession of the largest standing military force on the continent. Indicative of Egypt's stature, the Arab League's headquarters is located in Cairo. Ethiopia is home to a similarly sized population, albeit with a significantly smaller economy that nonetheless is the largest in East Africa. Ethiopia's military is significantly less powerful than that of Egypt, but it too remains the largest in East Africa. While the African Union's membership is drawn from across the continent, and Egypt is a member, the location of its headquarters in Addis Ababa points to Ethiopia's diplomatic clout. Along all these measurements, Sudan is in a smaller league than its powerful neighbors. Even without comparable military or economic might, Sudan's ability to pursue its interests has been hobbled by the civil war that began in 2023, following a shaky political transition that began with the toppling of longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019.

Despite its larger economy and military, Cairo's ability to exert pressure on Addis Ababa is limited, save for a military intervention. Cairo has long suggested that all options are on the table for Egypt to secure its access to the Nile's waters. Indeed, in 2013, then president Mohamed Morsi vowed of the Nile, "If it loses one drop, our blood is the alternative."[19] Yet, short of an air campaign, and a likely air battle above Ethiopia, Egypt has few alternatives to strike the landlocked host of the Nile headwaters. Separated by five hundred miles of Sudanese and Eritrean territory, Cairo is relegated to saber rattling from a substantial distance. Ethiopia's leaders have rebuked Egypt's threats in equally stark terms. In October 2019, amid speculation in the Egyptian media about the need for a military solution, Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed vowed—less than two weeks after winning the Nobel Peace Prize—that millions of Ethiopians could be assembled to fight Egypt.[20]

Distinct from direct military intervention, Ethiopia has long accused Egypt of fomenting unrest within its borders. Ethiopia's population is ethnically diverse, with the Oromo constituting approximately 36 percent of the population, the Amhara 24 percent, and the remainder from an array of different ethnicities.[21] Though interethnic animus is not the exclusive cause for

conflict in Ethiopia, almost every conflict within Ethiopia's borders in the twenty-first century has involved ethnic-based militant organizations. In November 2010, then Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi accused Cairo of supporting militant groups within Ethiopia to destabilize the country.[22] Those accusations were reiterated in 2016 by then president Mulatu Teshome,[23] and in October 2020 Prime Minister Abiy alleged that militants in the Benishangul-Gumuz region—where the GERD is located—were enjoying refuge and training in Sudan.[24]

Without armed coercion, an Egyptian economic boycott to compel a lasting agreement with Addis Ababa would be ineffective. An economic boycott is not a novel idea. Following the Sudanese government's repudiation of the 1929 treaty with Egypt in 1958, Cairo implemented a boycott on Sudanese goods. That year, Sudanese exports to Egypt fell by 55 percent.[25] By contrast, Cairo's ability to inflict economic harm on Ethiopia is minimal. A common observation across the continent is that, when compared with rates of international trade within Europe, Asia, or North America, African countries do relatively little trade among themselves.[26] Egypt and Ethiopia are no exceptions. In 2022, for example, Egypt exported goods worth $509 million to Ethiopia, constituting around 0.94 percent of Egyptian exports by value and 4.15 percent of Ethiopian imports.[27] Similarly, Ethiopia exported goods worth $5.65 million to Egypt, equivalent to 0.13 percent of Ethiopian exports and 0.3 percent of Egypt's imports. Though these figures are skewed in Egypt's favor due to the differing sizes of the two economies, their relative lack of integration means that a bilateral ban on imports or exports by either country does not constitute a dire economic threat. Even the most dramatic attempts of economic sabotage by Egypt—namely, the closing of the Suez Canal for shipments heading to or from Ethiopia—would be limited by existing trade flows and geography. More than half of Ethiopia's trade flows in the opposite direction toward partners in East Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.[28] Moreover, due to Ethiopia's absence of a coastline, most of its trade passes through third countries, thereby presenting an opportunity to use transshipment to disguise its Ethiopian connection.

Beyond bilateral negotiations, Cairo has sought to pressure an agreement with the help of third parties, albeit to no avail. In January 2020, a joint statement was issued by the United States, the World Bank, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia to signal that an interim agreement on filling the GERD had been reached, with a commitment to finalize a comprehensive plan by February.[29] Though Egypt had already initialed the final agreement "to evidence its commitment,"[30] Ethiopia refused and began filling the GERD in mid-2020. In response, then president Donald Trump personally directed the US State Department to cut aid to Ethiopia, warning that Egypt may resort to "blowing up that dam."[31] Yet such a move would make Sudan collateral damage. As Sherif Mohyeldeen observes, because of the direction of the Nile's flow, by destroying the GERD through an airstrike, "ordinary Sudanese in the borderlands will pay a greater price than their Ethiopian counterparts because of the direction of the flooding."[32]

In June 2021, the Arab League asked the United Nations Security Council to intervene and called on Ethiopia to conclude a lasting agreement.[33] The Security Council offered a toothless statement in response, noting that, "as a general rule, transboundary water issues do not belong on the Council's agenda" and encouraging dialogue between Egypt, Sudan,

and Ethiopia.[34] In lieu of international institutional support, the Egyptian government has sought to pursue closer economic relations with the countries of the Nile basin as an exercise in soft power.[35]

Despite continued Egyptian opposition, the development of the GERD has facilitated Ethiopia's efforts to become a regional powerhouse. In February 2022, the GERD began producing electricity,[36] and in September 2023 Ethiopian authorities confirmed that the dam's reservoir had successfully been filled.[37] This progress has allowed Ethiopia to further commit to providing its neighbors with greater electricity. In July 2022, Ethiopia agreed to a twenty-five-year electricity export deal with Kenya, under which exports would gradually increase as the GERD's production rises. Having first exported electricity to its southern neighbor in early 2023, Ethiopia now meets 11 percent of Kenyan demand and constitutes the fourth-largest single source of electricity in the country.[38] Due to the GERD's production, and Kenya's eager demand for cheap electricity, in early 2024 Kenya agreed to double its imports of Ethiopian electricity ahead of schedule.[39] Further Ethiopian electricity exports, in turn, are expected to facilitate Kenya's export of electricity to its poorer and more populous neighbor Tanzania.[40]

TURNING THE TABLES

For all the anxiety in Cairo around Ethiopia's potential control of the Nile's waters, Addis Ababa, too, has its own parallel fear: a lack of direct access to global maritime routes. This concern is not a new development. In the wake of the Second World War, imperial Ethiopia sought to absorb the former Italian coastal colony of Eritrea into its realm as a way to gain access to the Red Sea.[41] Striking an awkward compromise between the extremes of integrating Eritrea into Ethiopia and complete independence, the United Nations General Assembly recommended via resolution in December 1950 that the two entities be joined as a federation of separate nations under the Ethiopian crown. This structure quickly soured as the Ethiopian Empire sought to exert its influence over Eritrea, culminating in the dissolution of the federation and Eritrea's annexation in 1962. A long-running insurgency, coupled with the 1991 disintegration of the socialist regime in Addis Ababa, ultimately resulted in Eritrea's independence in 1993 through a referendum that was supervised by the United Nations.[42] Since then, for over thirty years, East Africa's largest economy has relied on its neighbors, and their good graces, to connect with the wider world.

This reliance is acutely evident in the Ethiopian energy industry. Although the potential development of Ethiopia's hydrocarbon resources has been discussed since the 1970s, the country's domestic oil and gas production remains negligible. An oil refinery complex in Assab (now in Eritrea) was inaugurated in 1967 with technical assistance from the Soviet Union.[43] Although Addis Ababa and Asmara forged an agreement to share the refinery after Eritrean independence, the refinery was mothballed in 1997. Moreover, the outbreak of armed conflict between the two countries in 1998 ended any hope of reviving the refinery for the Ethiopian market. Ethiopia has since relied on imports of refined petroleum products, worth almost $1 billion in 2022.[44] While the GERD is expected to produce an abundance of electricity,

many sectors of the economy will continue to require conventional fuels for the foreseeable future. One notable consumer is Ethiopian Airlines, which is the largest airline on the continent and is unsurprisingly reliant on aviation fuel.

Addis Ababa's volatile relationship with independent Eritrea has concentrated Ethiopia's international trade—energy or otherwise—through neighboring Djibouti.[45] According to the World Bank, "Over 95% of Ethiopia's import-export trade (by volume) uses the Addis Ababa-Djibouti corridor."[46] A Chinese-built railway, which was inaugurated in 2018, shuttles between Addis Ababa and the Port of Djibouti and facilitates this trade. Djibouti, located on the Red Sea opposite Yemen, is proximate to a major global trade route and the volatile southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, which has allowed it to court no fewer than five international bases on its tiny territory—Camp Lemonnier (of the United States), the first foreign base of the People's Republic of China, Japan's first foreign base, an Italian support facility, and a French base. Per the terms of a 2011 treaty that is currently under renegotiation, France has agreed to support the "the defense of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Djibouti."[47]

Though relations between Ethiopia and Djibouti, which has an ethnic Somali majority, are largely cordial, Djibouti holds an unusually strong bargaining chip. Djibouti's tiny population of around 1 million citizens is heavily overshadowed by Ethiopia's 120-million-strong landlocked population. Yet an inordinate international presence in Djibouti from three continents, coupled with the French defense treaty, limits Ethiopia's ability to take military action if Djibouti were to restrict trade flows to Ethiopia.[48] Consequently, in October 2023, Prime Minister Abiy publicly asserted that Ethiopia "has every right to pursue access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean," suggesting that shares in the GERD be offered for an interest in a port, "through purchase, leasing, or any mutual arrangement."[49] Although Abiy declared the need to pursue this objective peacefully, he equally warned that port access was vital to Ethiopia's survival. Abiy argued that Ethiopia had a right to access the Red Sea on "historical, geographical, ethnic and economic grounds."[50] The comments drew a swift rebuke from Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia for the perceived threat to their territorial integrity.[51]

ENTER SOMALILAND

Determined to secure its maritime access, Addis Ababa thus turned to the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland, which constitutes the northwestern third of Somalia along the Gulf of Aden and borders Ethiopia to the northeast. Somaliland was occupied by Great Britain during the colonization of sub-Saharan Africa and gained independence as the State of Somaliland in June 1960.[52] Five days later, it merged with the former Italian colonies to the south to form the Somali Republic. Following Siad Barre's genocidal campaign against the Isaaq clan in the Somaliland area in the late 1980s, and the disintegration of Barre's socialist Somali Democratic Republic, Somaliland redeclared its independence in 1991. Since then, without international recognition, Somaliland has developed an imperfect but continued democracy, while Somalia proper remains blighted by the al-Shabaab insurgency, perpetually reliant on external security assistance, and has failed to conduct one-person, one-vote elections.

In light of the broad rejection of Addis Ababa's maritime ambitions, on January 2, 2024, Prime Minister Abiy signed an MOU with Somaliland president Muse Bihi Abdi to grant Ethiopia's navy access to twenty kilometers of Somaliland's Gulf of Aden coast and to facilitate Ethiopia's use of Somaliland's commercial port at Berbera.[53] In exchange, Somaliland is set to gain a share in Ethiopian Airlines. Though Muse Bihi suggested that the agreement would lead Ethiopia to recognize Somaliland's independence,[54] the Ethiopian government subsequently declared that it instead would conduct an "in-depth assessment towards taking a position regarding the efforts of Somaliland to gain recognition."[55] Muse Bihi then clarified that Ethiopia would gain the lease for its navy concurrently with its recognition of Somaliland's independence, thereby suggesting that they were conditional on each other.[56] While the MOU—and, more specifically, the prospect of international recognition—garnered widespread celebration in Somaliland, opposition protests occurred in Somaliland's northwest Awdal region, where the naval base is expected to be located. The then minister of defense, Abdiqani Mohamud Ateye, who is from the Awdal region,[57] resigned in protest and declared that "Ethiopia remains our number one enemy."[58]

The suggestion of international recognition of Somaliland—which has been functionally independent for over thirty years—and the potential siting of a foreign military base have provoked outrage among Somalian politicians.[59] Foreign nations had previously pursued investment in Somaliland without generating such rancor: in May 2016, the Emirati-owned DP World signed a thirty-year agreement to manage Somaliland's port at Berbera, gaining 65 percent ownership of a joint venture to give effect to the agreement.[60] It is inconceivable that the agreement did not receive the blessing of DP World's majority shareholder—the government of Dubai. At the time, politicians in Mogadishu denounced the agreement as illegal.[61] Later, in 2018, a further agreement was reached with Ethiopia to join the project, thereby splitting ownership 51 percent for DP World, 30 percent for Somaliland, and 19 percent for Ethiopia.[62] Mogadishu again declared the agreement "null and void."[63] However, it was not Mogadishu that eventually killed the deal; one of the conditions of the 2018 agreement was reportedly an Ethiopian investment in the port that did not materialize. Therefore, in June 2022, Ethiopia lost its stake in the port and the ownership structure reverted to its initial composition.[64]

Yet, following the signing of the January MOU, Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has vowed to go to war with Ethiopia to prevent its implementation.[65] While the declaration has resonated with those in Mogadishu who have protested against the MOU, it stands in stark contrast with Somalia's military capacity. Around 14,500 foreign troops are currently stationed in Somalia to support the federal government's protracted war against al-Shabaab. Ethiopian troops are stationed in three of the six "sectors" of south and central Somalia that are under the watch of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia.[66] In an interview with state television in March 2024, Ethiopia's military chief Birhanu Jula suggested that the Ethiopian military controlled 60 percent of Somalia's territory and, consequently, its withdrawal would precipitate the downfall of Somalia's federal government.[67] Moreover, Somalia's ability to wage war on Ethiopia is limited by the fact that Mogadishu does not have a functional air force. Meanwhile, despite heavy foreign assistance, al-Shabaab continues to demonstrate its ability to overrun Somalian military bases, as recently as March 2024.[68]

With little credible ability to wage a physical war on Ethiopia, Mogadishu has sought to rally diplomatic opposition to the Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU. Djibouti's longtime leader, Ismail Omar Guelleh, denounced the MOU as a "stab in the back"[69] after he mediated discussions between Somalia and Somaliland just a month before the deal was announced.[70] Reportedly earning up to $2 billion in port fees from Ethiopian trade alone,[71] Djibouti has a clear interest in opposing any initiative that could rival its lucrative monopoly on Ethiopian trade.[72]

One particularly vociferous advocate for Somalia has been Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Shortly after the signing of the MOU, President Sisi vowed to protect Somalia and its security, warning Ethiopia by name that "Egypt will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or affect its security."[73] The vow rang somewhat ironic, given that Ethiopia contributed troops to the African Union peacekeeping mission in Somalia (2007–22) and contributes troops to the current African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (2022–present). Egypt, in contrast, does not at present contribute troops to the African Union's current peacekeeping mission in Somalia. Following an emergency meeting of the Arab League—of which Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti are members—in January 2024, the league denounced the MOU as a "fraudulent act that violates international security and stability."[74] Unsurprisingly, Addis Ababa dismissed the criticism.[75]

Egypt's commitment to Somalia's defense was subsequently overshadowed by the Turkish government under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In the wake of the MOU, the Turkish Foreign Ministry declared its commitment to "the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia."[76] Shortly thereafter, in February, Ankara and Mogadishu signed a defense agreement for Turkey to support Somalia's maritime security.[77] In March, this was followed by a bilateral agreement to facilitate the Turkish exploitation of Somalia's onshore and offshore oil and gas resources, which, as Can Sezer notes, followed a similar Turkish agreement in 2022 with Libya's internationally recognized government in Tripoli.[78] These agreements augment Turkey's broader energy diplomacy, which has also played a crucial role in Lebanon in recent years.[79]

The sudden rush to deepen Turkey's military and economic engagement with Somalia is not completely unforeseen. In recent years, Ankara has sought to deepen its relationship with the African continent, most visibly through a series of summits from 2008 onward.[80] Somalia has been a focal point of Turkey's engagement. Between 2015 and 2020, Somalia was the largest single recipient of Turkish aid in sub-Saharan Africa.[81] This engagement has also included the Turkish private sector. Since 2014, the prominent Albayrak group has operated the Port of Mogadishu, which, while relatively underdeveloped, constitutes a potential rival to Djibouti and Somaliland's port of Berbera. In addition to its economic engagement, in 2017 Turkey opened its largest foreign military base in Mogadishu. Known as Turksom, the base serves to train Somalian troops and assist the federal government amid the civil war.[82]

THE ROLE OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Amid tense relations between various American partners and allies in North and East Africa, the United States has the opportunity to broker a settlement that both resolves several key

issues and advances the United States' interests. Unfortunately, the Biden administration appears caught off guard and, in the absence of a coherent strategy, has employed a series of defensive tactics in hope of preventing a further deterioration of relations in the region.

At various points throughout President Joe Biden's tenure, the administration has sought to proactively define its foreign policy priorities. The December 2021 Summit for Democracy, the belatedly released National Security Strategy of October 2022 that established climate as a primary concern, and the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit of December 2022 were notable indications of the administration's interests. Yet the proliferation of international crises during President Biden's tenure—such as the mismanaged withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Hamas's massacre in Israel in 2023, and the perpetual concern of great power competition with the People's Republic of China—has drawn the administration's attention away from these priorities.

This is acutely evident in North and East Africa. Though the administration has declared climate change to be a primary and common security threat, relatively little effort has been invested in negotiating a durable agreement on the Nile's waters—which are vital for the development of carbon-free hydropower at the GERD and Aswan High Dam. Rather, the State Department has issued repeated, toothless statements about the need for a resolution to the issue and, on at least one occasion, a commitment to "Egypt's water security."[83] Though Egypt is a major non-NATO ally of the United States, and a crucial partner for advancing stability in the eastern Mediterranean, the Biden administration's approach reinforces the view that the United States' policy in East Africa has been deputized to Middle East policy and that the Horn is not a foreign policy priority. As Cameron Hudson has argued, even otherwise laudable initiatives have been blighted by this debilitating perception.[84] For example, in April 2021, the Biden administration created the position of special envoy for the Horn of Africa to engage with transnational issues in the region. Yet the first two appointees to fill the role were accomplished diplomats with extensive experience in the Middle East but relatively little experience in Africa. Though the third and current appointee brings marginally more Africa experience, having previously served as ambassador to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2018–22) on the other side of the continent, the administration's policy nonetheless remains one of managed disengagement and a hope that escalation does not ensue. Augmenting this perception of disengagement is the fact that, during the 2022 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, it was announced that President Biden would visit sub-Saharan Africa—a promise that was widely interpreted to mean a visit in 2023.[85] Now, less than six months before early voting begins in a closely contested election, the president's bandwidth for serious engagement in Africa—whether a belated visit materializes or not—appears minimal.

The approach of tactical disengagement and stalemate also extends to Somalia, where a reflexive reversion to the most ineffective policies has taken hold. Despite President Biden's commitment to supporting democracy around the world, the administration has breathlessly sided with the deeply undemocratic regime in Mogadishu over its democratic counterpart in Somaliland. Somaliland's democracy is not perfect. Yet without developing a conventional economic and diplomatic relationship with Hargeisa, the United States is left with little influence to tangibly support the respect for human rights and the democratic process. In lieu, the

Biden administration has opted to castigate Somaliland authorities from afar and criticize the "democratic backsliding" of a democratic regime it refuses to recognize,[86] while refuting their thirty-year history of independence by promoting its "One Somalia" policy.[87] From the perspective of public diplomacy, the phrasing of this policy is abysmal. It echoes the irredentist "Greater Somalia" ideology of uniting the Somali people across Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti into one state—an ideology that was central to Siad Barre's invasion of Ethiopia in 1977. Moreover, the "One Somalia" policy defies the most basic political common sense. Somaliland has developed relative peace and security across most of its territory, while Somalia proper is blighted by an active insurgency that produces near-monthly attacks on civilians. The Somalian regime has such tenuous authority over its territory that, in late March 2024, the Somalian state of Puntland—constituting around 15 percent of Somalia's claimed territory—declared itself independent from the federal system because its leaders disputed the Mogadishu government's constitutional amendments.[88] With limited state capacity and a heavy reliance on foreign security and financial support, Somalia does not resemble the People's Republic of China, and shoehorning the United States' unique "One China" policy into East Africa is deeply misguided.

Rather, the "One Somalia" policy is a pseudonym for prioritizing expedient stasis—irrespective of the cost to the advancement of global democracy—by an administration that is overwhelmed with international crises.[89] It was thus not a surprise when, following the announcement of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU, the United States' top diplomat for Africa, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee, called for "conversations between the peoples of Somalia and Somaliland about *their shared future*" (emphasis added).[90] Talk of a "shared future," even though Somaliland has been functionally independent of Mogadishu for over three decades and has no intention of sharing in the chaos and violence of Mogadishu's rule, illustrates how tone deaf, disconnected from reality, and futile the "One Somalia" policy is.

A PATH FORWARD: FROM DEFENSIVE TACTICS TO AN AMERICAN STRATEGY

Despite the Biden administration's reliance on defensive diplomatic tactics in the Horn, there nonetheless remains an opportunity to pursue a strategy that advances the United States' interests and peaceful prosperity in the Horn. Forging a durable framework to regulate the use of the Nile and resolve disputes around the use of its waters, while also recognizing Ethiopia's strategic geographic vulnerability, should be a priority. While Cairo appears eager to sign an agreement, Ethiopia remains reticent. The signing of the Somaliland-Ethiopia MOU, however, presents a novel opportunity to exchange American endorsement of the MOU for Ethiopia's compromise on a Nile agreement.

As a beneficiary of this bargain, Egypt would gain assurances around its access to its aquatic artery and, in exchange, be required to drop any notion of military opposition to the MOU. Ethiopia would be forced to take a more conciliatory approach to the Nile and the function of the GERD, in exchange for the United States' diplomatic endorsement of its agreement with the Somaliland government and its pursuit of peaceful and negotiated access to the

coast. Though this bargain would mandate a departure from the Biden administration's "One Somalia" policy, forging stability around the Bab al-Mandeb and the maritime trade route through the Red Sea, which American companies utilize daily, would advance the American national economic interest. Moreover, this agreement would further the economic stability of a major non-NATO ally, Egypt, and facilitate the economic benefits associated with the MOU for democratic Somaliland. The strategic use of American diplomatic endorsement in Africa to advance the national interest is not without precedent. In December 2020, the Trump administration recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara region,[91] as part of the agreement to normalize relations between Morocco and Israel. Although the American recognition of Somaliland's sovereignty, and thus its ability to conclude agreements such as the MOU, would be a first-best option,[92] an endorsement of the MOU would constitute a step forward for an administration that has been otherwise reticent to devote resources to substantial diplomacy in the Horn.

To safeguard the United States' interests in advancing its counterterror activities in Somalia, this diplomatic bargain should be paired with a reiteration of the United States' willingness to work with Mogadishu and the African Union on security issues in Somalia. A furious response from Mogadishu would likely follow an American endorsement of the MOU. This need not end security cooperation that advances mutual goals. For example, even as Mogadishu has sought to expel Ethiopian diplomats in protest of the MOU, Ethiopian troops continue to provide security assistance in Somalia through the African Union Transition Mission. The United States should thus seek to continue its engagement with the government in Mogadishu on security issues. However, if the Mogadishu government is not willing to engage with the United States, and consistent with US law, the United States retains the right to pursue its legitimate security objectives, as it does in similarly unwelcoming theaters in the Middle East.

An American strategy in the Horn of Africa must take into account the interests of other countries in the greater region. Djibouti, for example, cannot be ignored because the tiny country hosts around five thousand American service members at Camp Lemonnier and has a keen interest in maintaining the revenues it derives from its regionally preeminent port. Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have significant commercial interests in Somalia and Somaliland, while neighboring Kenya, having previously endured attacks from al-Shabaab, is acutely sensitive to the security of the region. Current fora remain too narrow to discuss the multitude of cross-regional economic and security interests in the Horn. Five of Somalia's most influential security partners—the "Somalia Quint" of the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—periodically meet with the Somalian leadership, yet these meetings do not give sufficient voice to the interests of Somalia's African neighbors. In a similar manner, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development draws countries from across East Africa to facilitate economic and security engagement, albeit without the active participation of Egypt or influential powers outside the continent. The United States thus has the opportunity to convene this multitude of interested parties to facilitate the dissemination of its strategy in the Horn, reassure partners that their interests are taken into account, and develop further cooperation in pursuit of shared objectives.

From Cairo to Mogadishu, the energy politics of northeastern Africa and the Horn constitute a potentially volatile flashpoint in a region that is home to more than three hundred million residents and proximate to one of the world's most trafficked maritime trade routes. In light of this humanitarian and economic sensitivity, the United States' foreign policy in the region demands more than the current tactical disengagement and hope for de-escalation. Echoing the United States' pivotal role in facilitating the Abraham Accords, Washington should look to pursue a strategy that meets the needs of the two largest countries in the region—Egypt and Ethiopia—while also supporting the democratic regime in Somaliland. In effect, this strategy would safeguard the economic lifeblood of an American ally, reduce tensions around a vital trade route on which American companies rely, and support a democratic regime that has emerged from the perpetual chaos of Somalia.

NOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OLIVER MCPHERSON-SMITH

Oliver McPherson-Smith is a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. He holds a PhD in politics from the University of Oxford, an MA in Middle Eastern studies from Harvard University, and a BA in land economy from the University of Cambridge. Before pursuing graduate studies, McPherson-Smith enjoyed a career as a broadcast journalist in Africa and the Middle East.

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The Caravan Notebook is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are more local or specific than the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*. We draw on the membership of the Hoover Institution's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work in that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

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Hoover Institution, Stanford University
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

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