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BOTH NEAR AND FAR – Implications of the war in Ukraine for the Horn of Africa

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has provoked geopolitical shifts with global consequences and an increased emphasis on great power rivalry. The Horn of Africa has been hit hard by the economic impact of the war, but faces more immediate peace and security concerns. Increasing global polarisation risks exacerbating instability in the region, underlining the need for continued investments in dialogue and diplomacy.

In recent years, the Horn of Africa has experienced a period of deep uncertainty. Political transitions in the region face serious challenges. The civil war in Ethiopia, a country long seen as a pillar of regional stability, has consequences for the whole region and intertwines with inter-state conflicts, border disputes and disagreements related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The October 2021 coup d'état in Sudan has reversed the country's path of transition to democracy. Perennial challenges across the region include contested governance models, strained centre-periphery relations, scant opportunities for a growing youth population and terrorism. On the positive side, Somalia underwent a peaceful transfer of power in May and after the recent and very close election in Kenya, disputes are once again due to be settled in court rather than in the street, showing a consolidation of trust in the country's institutions.

As in other parts of Africa, reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have varied among states in the Horn. In the March vote on the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning the Russian attack on Ukraine, Djibouti, Kenya and Somalia voted for the resolution, while Eritrea voted against and Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda abstained, and Ethiopia declined to participate in the vote. Since then,

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- From the perspective of the Horn of Africa, the war in Ukraine is both near and far – near because of unintended consequences including increasing prices of food, fertiliser and fuel, but far since the region has more urgent challenges and interests to consider.
- Increasing economic challenges and food insecurity can trigger social discontent and unrest, with grave consequences for fragile governments in the region.
- Increasing global tensions and great power competition could increase tensions within the region, underlining the need for continued investments in diplomacy and dialogue.
- While global resources and attention are directed to Ukraine, the Horn has many peace and security challenges and unresolved conflicts. This also underlines the need for continued investments in dialogue and diplomacy, both by actors in the Horn and by partners.

Horn states have generally been reluctant to pronounce themselves for or against either party.

In Europe, these lukewarm reactions to the war have been met with some surprise and disappointment, and interpreted as the result of Russian propaganda. To some extent Africa and the Horn are seen as a battleground for narratives and ideologies – authoritarianism against democracy. There is, for example, a concern in the West that Russia is portraying in-

creased food prices as being caused primarily by Western sanctions, rather than by Russia's invasion.

But this reluctance of Horn states to take a position on the matter rather reflects a preoccupation with domestic interests and an unwillingness to prioritise alignment with specific global powers against others. The war is not seen as a conflict between just Russia and Ukraine, but as unfinished Cold War business and a confrontation between Russia and NATO,

where African states prefer continuing their long history of non-alignment, diversifying their partnerships and maintaining friendly relations with all major powers. Relations with Russia are influenced by historical and cultural ties, the support of the Soviet Union to various African anti-colonial freedom movements and current security concerns. Overall, states in the Horn have more immediate concerns, and are navigating this moment of global disorder and uncertainty guided by their domestic priorities and strategic interests.

The most direct consequences of the war in the Horn of Africa are economic. The region is one of the areas hardest hit by the global food crisis, adding to the effects of drought exacerbated by climate change. Prices of fuel, grain and fertiliser, which had already risen sharply throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, spiked after the breakout of the war, deepening food insecurity and further fragility in the region. Rising prices of basic commodities increase the risk of social unrest. In the wake of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, many countries have now realised that they need to diversify their food sources, but adaptation will take time.

While European sanctions are not intended to harm African economies, sanctions on individuals and industries have hit production and transaction chains at many levels. This could risk negatively influencing relations between Africa and the European Union, unless there is a careful assessment and mitigation of the impact of the secondary effects of sanctions.

There is also concern that conflicts in Africa will get less international attention, as funds and efforts are diverted to Ukraine. For example, the EU has long provided the bulk of funding to African Union peace operations, including its missions in Somalia (AMISOM/ATMIS). The European Peace Facility, which replaced

the African Peace Facility as the main instrument for EU peace operations support in 2021, has in six months channelled 2.5 billion euro to support Ukraine, around half of its original five-year budget.¹

At the geopolitical level, the war seems to be accelerating pre-existing global trends of increasing great power competition, weakened multilateralism and the resort to military means to resolve conflict. There could be a risk that increased global tension is exported and leads to more instability in the Horn. The Horn and the broader Red Sea region have long been an arena for competition between regional and global powers.

The war has already brought renewed attention to the Red Sea as a waterway of global strategic importance. Now that Europe seeks to diversify its energy sources, because of sanctions against Russian energy, the safe passage of energy imports through the Red Sea becomes increasingly vital. With Eritrea's alignment with Russia in the UN General Assembly, questions have been raised over Eritrea potentially offering Russia a foothold on the Red Sea, adding to the existing concentration of military bases and great power competition in the region. China, which has remained neutral on the war, also has increasingly important investments in the Horn, including its first overseas military base opened in Djibouti in 2017. Diplomatically, the assignment of the first Chinese envoy to the Horn of Africa in February 2022 is further evidence of a geopolitical shift in interest towards the Horn, whether assessed as China protecting its investment or reinforcing its partnership with the Horn.

The new era of global power politics also raises questions about the possibilities for Horn states to come together, strengthen regional cooperation and act jointly rather than react to external influence, as more emphasis is put on self-reliance and

self-interest. Even before the war in Ukraine, the multilateral structures in the Horn region faced profound challenges, including Sudan's suspension from the AU, Ethiopia's weakened role in the region and the overall dysfunctionality of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The 2018 tripartite agreement between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia has also been seen by some as weakening IGAD. However, the election of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Somalia could reverse that arrangement and revive broader cooperation through IGAD. In this vein, the recent IGAD summit held in July in Nairobi – the first since November 2020 – underscored the need “to collaboratively address and diplomatically tackle national political and security issues that bear greater significance on the IGAD region”².

At this time of mounting global tensions, weak multilateralism and increasing militarisation – and while global resources and attention are directed to Ukraine – states in the Horn of Africa continue to face important peace and security challenges, including several unresolved conflicts. This underlines the need for continued investments in dialogue and diplomacy, both by actors in the Horn and by partners.

This paper draws on informal discussions held as part of CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation's project “Enhancing constructive dialogue and cooperation on peace and security in the Horn of Africa” funded by the European Union.



1 Timeline - European Peace Facility

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-peace-facility/>

2 Communiqué of the 39th IGAD Extraordinary Summit of the Assembly of Heads of State & Government July 5, 2022

<https://igad.int/the-39th-igad-extraordinary-summit-of-the-assembly-of-heads-of-state-government/>