

THE RECONFIGURATION OF POWER DYNAMICS IN THE WIDER EASTERN AFRICA: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES SHAPING THE REGION

ANALYSIS



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Abstract: The wider Eastern Africa region, whose lands stretch from the Red Sea Basin to the Great Lakes area passing through the Horn, is a dynamic, complex, and evolving political space, rife with violent conflicts and humanitarian crises, but also opportunities piquing the interest of many extra-regional powers. The past few years even exceeded such expectations, as major political events within and between countries have swept the region swiftly and widely with external actors more closely involved in them. Recent empirical evidence points to remarkable power shifts across the region with some countries rising and others slipping. Among the latter is Ethiopia, once considered by many as a linchpin of regional stability and recently turned into a source of destabilization. Among the former is Kenya, at present on a quest to emerge as the new uncontested pillar of regional stability despite internal political fragility. This paper aims to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of these recent power shifts, facilitating a better understanding of the factors behind such trajectories and the effects these new dynamics will have on relations across the region and beyond.

Introduction

A series of major political events within and between the countries around the Red Sea Basin, the Horn, and the Great Lakes area in Africa over the past few years have triggered what can potentially become a major process of reconfiguration of the balance of power across the wider Eastern Africa region. Transitions and violent conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia, new bilateral and multilateral security alliances, and water management disputes have all impacted many power trajectories across the region with some countries rising and others slipping when compared to previous trends. It was, for the most part, the escalation of violent conflicts in Ethiopia – of which the one in and around Tigray stood out distinctly for the high level of violence and suffering¹ – which caused major ripple effects throughout the whole region over the past year and a half. The wider Eastern African lands have long been marked by conflict, and those in the Horn having peculiarly been associated, almost indissolubly, to it and its humanitarian side effects.² Yet, this time the situation is even more concerning because the country long identified as the linchpin of regional stability has turned into a source of destabilisation.

After reaching a “no peace no war” stalemate in the 1998–2000 border war with Eritrea and teaming up with the United States in the post–2001 regional war on terror, Ethiopia was the “darling of the transatlantic (western) world

For nearly two decades, after reaching a “no peace no war” stalemate in the 1998–2000 border war with Eritrea and teaming up with the United States in the post–2001 regional war on terror, Ethiopia was the “darling of the transatlantic (western) world”³ wrapping itself in a new, albeit imperfect, hegemon’s outfit with the task of containing regional crises.⁴ It contributed as such to the stabilisation efforts of post-independence South Sudan and terror-stricken Somalia. In the former, under a 2011 UN Security Council resolution, it deployed most of the troops participating in the UNISFA peacekeeping mission in Abyei with a mandate to protect civilians. In the latter, Ethiopian forces, whether operating under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) or independently, were deployed to stem the rise of Islamist militias upon the request of the Somali government.⁵ However, four years into the so-called democratic transition set in motion in April 2018 with the appointment of Abiy Ahmed Ali as Prime Minister and the side-lining of the former ruling Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), Ethiopia has gone through its worst crisis since its 1991 liberation. The Tigray conflict, whose military dimension broke out in early November 2020, was just the most visible manifestation of long-simmering political tensions in the country. And, as in a classic zero-sum game, other regional competitors saw their own chance of rising and establishing a dominant position in the region through Ethiopia’s troubles in terms of economic, political, and military power. Who has risen and who has slipped in the wider Eastern Africa’s balance of power? Are the recent trends irreversible or just temporary adjustments? Which factors can account for these dynamics and how much sway do extra-regional powers have over them?

To answer these questions, this paper will first analyse data on recent economic and political trends in the region to understand changing patterns in the regional distribution of power, hereby intended as the ability to control resources or actors and influence outcomes.⁶ On this basis, subsequent sections will draw inferences on the current and future outlook of the major regional countries, testing various hypothesis about the causes, duration, and reversibility of these trends. A special focus will be on the three regional powerhouses with hegemonic ambitions in the wider Eastern Africa, namely Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kenya, evidently so according to classic indicators of power such as

This paper also encompasses this relational understanding of power that takes into account the political interactions and regional diplomatic activism regional powers have embarked on to develop credible and sustainable partnerships with other countries

economic, human, and military capabilities; they together account for the 20% of the whole African population and 22% of the continent's 2021 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and are among the leading African states in either military expenditure or manpower.⁷ With these capabilities, they can shape the destiny of the other regional countries, in terms of trade opportunities through their own domestic prosperity, but also in terms of disruptions or stagnation as a result of their own domestic instability.⁸ Finally, the concluding part of this paper will also explore contrasting explanations regarding the sway of extra-regional actors over these changing regional dynamics in light of the growing interference in the region's political and security affairs, especially of West Asian countries.

A Power Analysis of Regional Trajectories

Power is an essentially contested concept which has always been a key concern of political theory in the discipline of international relations.⁹ There has been a growing need for coherent approaches to conceptualise and measure power,¹⁰ given that scholars often use different lenses and measures which eventually generate contrasting findings. This article assumes an understanding of power as a multidimensional concept, without limiting its conceptualisation as a set of resources¹¹ but also as causal social relationships.¹² Regarding the former, this paper acknowledges that various resources can be used to exert influence, yet given today's highly globalised world, economic capabilities remain an inescapable power base in light of their ability to cut across the conventional hard-soft spectrum.¹³ Regarding power as a causal social relationship, its distinction from power as resources calls into play the notion of potential power across relations as opposed to that of property. As a result, this paper also encompasses this relational understanding of power that takes into account the political interactions and regional diplomatic activism regional powers have embarked on to develop credible and sustainable partnerships with other countries to sway the regional balance of power in their favour.

Regional Economic Trends

In light of the essential role economics plays as a power base, the assessment of the recent shifts in regional power dynamics starts by looking at the economic situation of the wider Eastern African countries in terms of GDP growth rates and contrasts the 2021 post-pandemic rates against those registered over the previous decade (that is the compound annual GDP growth rate for the period 2011-2019, hence excluding the year 2020 from the comparison). Using data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to calculate these rates, conventionally used in these analyses, **figure 1** reveals some initial insights into recent divergent regional trajectories.¹⁴ Overall, in 2021, most of the countries in the region and the world were still dealing with Covid-related restrictions given the still ongoing pandemic, but some rebounded better than others from the 2020 historic slowdowns with some preliminary winners and losers.¹⁵

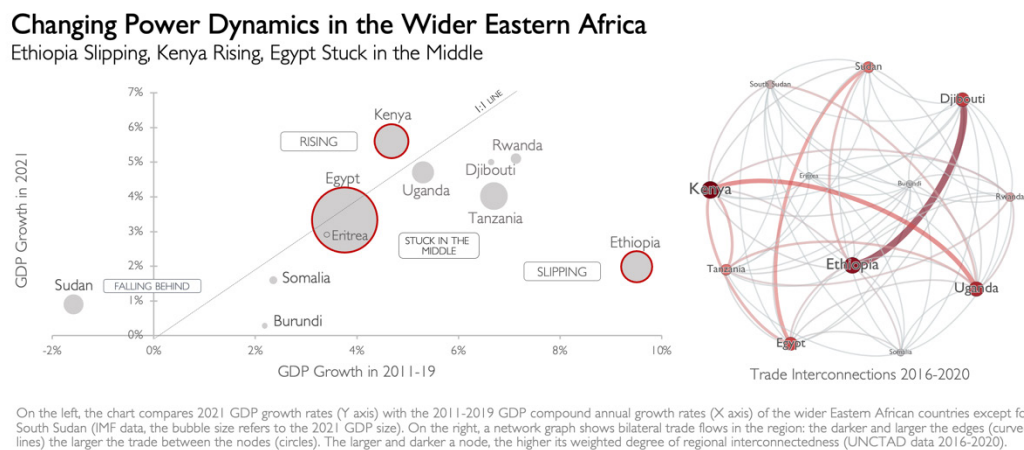


Figure 1. Taxonomy of countries in the wider Eastern Africa region on the basis of their economic performance. (International Monetary Fund, <https://data.imf.org/>)

Although the IMF could well readjust its 2021 projections in the future, at the moment Ethiopia's economy appears to be one of the worst performers (a mere +2% in the fiscal year 2020/2021) due to a combination of Covid-related global effects and internal conflicts. For more than ten years, Ethiopia's GDP growth rate was among the highest worldwide and in the region with annual rates frequently going beyond 10%. GDP per capita grew decisively as well, suggesting that this aggregate growth became somewhat beneficial to Ethiopian citizens as well. This economic performance was also certainly used to contribute to promoting Ethiopia's regional political status. After 2001, as the global war on terror reached the Eastern African lands, Ethiopia was identified by the US as the pillar of regional stability. This move, coupled with the outstanding growth rates just previously described, earned Ethiopia the title of aspiring regional hegemon.

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One yearly data point does not make a trend, but Ethiopia's 2021 slip can jeopardize this previous regional status for good, unless the country finds soon a truly lasting solution to its numerous violent conflicts, including the one in Tigray.¹⁶ In 2020 (namely the Ethiopian fiscal year starting in July 2019 and ending in June 2020), before the Tigray war broke out, Ethiopia's GDP still grew by 6%. The 2% recorded for 2021 (that is, from July 2020 to June 2021) instead unveiled the economic repercussions of the war. Due to the uncertainty generated by these events, the IMF even decided to omit the 2022 projections for Ethiopia in its latest Regional Economic Outlook release (dated October 2021), but lower-than-average growth rates should also be expected for the next fiscal year (July 2021-June 2022). In light of the US decision (effective as of January 1, 2022) to expel Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and its duty-free access to the US market, a severe blow will be dealt to the Ethiopian export industry given that AGOA exports are estimated to account for 47% of Ethiopia's 500+ million exports to the United States.¹⁷ Reports circulated in mid-January and those related to the first days of implementation of this expulsion from AGOA confirmed Ethiopian companies' troubles with exporting leather products to the US because of higher taxation.¹⁸

Diametrically opposed to Ethiopia's growth rate is Kenya's 2021, as it is, so far, the best regional post-pandemic performer. Its 5.6% GDP growth rate in 2021 is accompanied by other promising economic data which substantiates the rising status of the country in the region.¹⁹ Kenya Airways' launch of new regional flights (to Sudan and South Sudan)²⁰ and cooperation agreement with South African Airways²¹ further adds to its rising economy, although the predominance of Ethiopian Airlines in the African air transport market has never been questioned despite Covid transport disruptions¹ and the allegation of transporting soldiers and weapons during the war in Tigray.²² Covid-19 restrictions had negative effects on the population as reports about the setbacks in young women's health, employment, and security gave grim evidence of.²³ Yet, on an aggregate economic level, the country did better than anyone else in the region and further solidified its centrality in regional dynamics: Kenya is the country with the highest weighted degree of interconnectedness in the wider Eastern Africa's economic network, ahead of Ethiopia (see **figure 1**), thanks to higher levels of trade partner diversification.

1- It repurposed its passenger flights for cargo flights including the transport of Covid-19-related personal protective equipment.

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Somewhere stuck in the middle of a rising Kenya and a slipping Ethiopia are those Eastern African countries which averaged both in pre-pandemic years and in post-pandemic 2021 some 4%+ growth rates, such as Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, and Djibouti as well as Egypt. To understand if regional countries can reverse (Ethiopia), sustain (Kenya) or improve (Egypt) these trends, systemic shifts such as those developing around the Russian invasion of Ukraine are clearly important, not just those related to global shocks in energy and wheat prices.²⁴ This paper argues that one first needs to look at the domestic security and political challenges which primarily constrain regional governments' ability to fully deploy their economic capabilities to build regional influence. Under constant global conditions, there are factors which determine regional power shifts. Under changing global conditions, it is still the domestic lens that can magnify or mitigate extra-regional shocks. In this sense, the impact of the Northern conflict on Ethiopia's future outlook is a case in point. More than the rise of energy and commodity prices, it is the status of domestic stability that will impact the country's reversal of current disappointing trends. Ethiopia managed to strike some major investment deals over the past year.²⁵ However, the damage that the war in Tigray and its spill-over effects in Amhara and Afar after June 2021 caused on the purchasing power of private consumers (in December 2021 Ethiopian inflation reached the highest rates in nearly a decade)²⁶ and on the country's reputation as a safe destination for foreign investments remains difficult to repair in a short time. The threat of a reignition of the conflict risks frustrating the government's fresh attempts to launch funds and lure foreign investments back again to recover economic momentum.²⁷ This is because the investment-led growth model Abiy's Ethiopia is pushing in place of the previous regime's state-led development model. In order to truly become a regional economic powerhouse, Ethiopia needs internal stability to make the most, including some basic commitment to rule of law if these privatisation reforms are to be pursued not only with Chinese partners but also with European ones as desired.²⁸

Beyond the Economy: Socio-Political Trends and Regional Initiatives

In order to draw inferences on the future outlook of this region's balance of power, one also has to look into regional countries' non-economic capabilities and their ability to develop credible and sustainable partnerships. In the following section, for each of the

three regional powerhouses, the text will examine domestic socio-political issues as well as regional diplomatic strategies aimed at counterbalancing rivals. It will argue that this relational lens of power analysis allows us to draw inferences on a trends reversibility by exposing the challenges some countries face to sustain such measures.

Ethiopia's turnarounds and trump cards

From mid-to-late 2020, with the decision to postpone elections due to Covid-19, the reintroduction of a state of emergency in several parts of the country, and finally the start of the war in Tigray, Ethiopia has gone through a period of political (and later military) domestic instability. Initially described as a law-and-order operation, the federal government's intervention in the northern regional state of Tigray immediately turned into a textbook case of civil war: a sustained, bloody armed conflict between the incumbent government and its challengers.²⁹ Like elsewhere, this civil war could not be solved in a short time span, and rather brought with it far-reaching economic, political, and military consequences. That is not to mention the unspeakable humanitarian disaster, for it and for much part of the region.

This situation of domestic political and security instability had major domestic economic repercussions on prices, investments, and loans which affected the economic performance addressed above. It deteriorated its armed forces' military capabilities so much that the government had to take the extraordinary step to call on ordinary citizens to join the war, but it also generated side effects on the country's diplomatic status and foreign policy.³⁰ This is because the efforts to settle the civil war required, expectedly, an adjournment or readjustment in some major foreign affairs. One of these effects was the downsizing of Addis' diplomatic network abroad as a result of the domestic economic troubles at a time it was actually needed the most. Another was the withdrawal of some federal troops from peacekeeping missions in South Sudan and Somalia, to redeploy them internally.³¹ Additionally, the war directly affected the ability to ensure the security of cross-border flows with Djibouti and Somaliland, the northern Somali region which self-declared independence from Somalia in 1991, to the benefit of insurgents and smugglers. In the case of Somaliland, the war in Tigray also raised some questions about the feasibility of bilateral infrastructural projects like the port of Berbera when the fighting moved outside Tigray. The same questions

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puzzled the Djiboutian authorities too. Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the conflict in Tigray have had a significant impact on its economic activity. The latter exposed, once again, the country's vulnerability to trade disruptions along its Ethiopian trade corridor.³² In a recent interview, the Djiboutian Foreign Minister estimated the conflict in Tigray had reduced bilateral trade by 80%, already costing his country \$1.7 billion, half its GDP.³³ To make up for the trade losses, the 2022 budget passed last December had to contain several tax increases, a measure which can destabilise already tense relations among opposed domestic political groups.³⁴ The same destabilisation patterns also affected the Sudanese-Ethiopian border area after the war-triggered refugee outflows compounded the tension that was already mounting between the two countries over the border dispute and stalled GERD negotiations. On top of this, relations with some part of the international community soured in light of growing evidence of human rights violations within the conflict. These include many humanitarian organizations and United Nations agencies (accused by the federal government of siding with, and even smuggling weapons to, the TPLF)³⁵, the United States (accused of planning a regime change campaign to reinstall the TPLF), and many European Union countries. As a result of internal instability, then, over 2020-21 Ethiopia's regional and international status was significantly damaged.

This is not to say Ethiopia ever became a complete regional pariah during the civil war though. In fact, it still managed to strengthen the newly recovered ties with Eritrea and Somalia. In early 2020,³⁶ the three leaders of Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, all sharing some bitter opposition to political decentralization, forged a new trilateral bloc and later cooperated during the war.³⁷ Turning around decades of political grudge, Eritrea became Ethiopia's strongest supporter after the rise of Abiy and directly supported him in the Tigray war with its army.³⁸ Most remarkable of them all was perhaps the African Union's tacit support to the Ethiopian federal government throughout the war, which provided protection against anti-Ethiopian measures also in international fora. Nonetheless, two considerations sound the alarm over Ethiopia's regional status despite these links: first, the regional and international support in its favour today is much less than the one it used to enjoy in the recent past despite attempts to show otherwise.³⁹ Second, those who are providing primary support to its federal government are known as fairly-weather friends who can quickly ditch current partners for their own advantage.⁴⁰

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As a result, for Ethiopia to recover its regional standing, it remains of primary importance to negotiate an end of internal conflicts, despite major resistance from some hardline constituencies.⁴¹ In addition to that, it also needs to recover regional partnerships that the war put on hold. Through a conceptualisation of power as a causal social relationship, this remains just as important as the end of hostilities. To this end, however, Ethiopia has some trump cards to play, a most interesting one being electricity export. Conditional on the effective development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a symbol of pride across the whole domestic political spectrum, Ethiopia can play the card of leveraging energy exports to relaunch diplomatic relationships and strengthen integration with neighbouring countries. Fresh evidence shows the government intends to walk this path once internal issues are solved.⁴²

Kenya's ascent as a partner of choice for many

It was already noted that Kenya recovered quicker than others from the Covid downturn; the IMF data shows Kenya is set to grow close to 6% not only in 2021 but also in 2022-2023. But it was not only the economic performance which drew attention to the country; capitalising on Ethiopia's difficult political moment, Kenya's political clout across the region and beyond has also improved over the past year and a half. This rising status has come at a time in which the country has a chair at the UN Security Council (2021-2022) and has stepped up its mediation role in regional crises.

Indeed, the rise of Kenya's regional standing has a lot to do with the declining reputation of other regional countries, Ethiopia above all, but also to its own ability to capitalise on their debacles and emerge as a credible crisis mediator at a time in which it has unrivalled visibility through the UNSC chair. Kenya is concerned about Ethiopian instability because of the economic and security challenges migration and arms outflows crossing their shared border could pose to it, hence its intervention to facilitate a solution. Differently from others, Kenya's role was immediately accepted by both the warring parties thanks to President Kenyatta's reputation as an honest broker in the dispute from their point of view.⁴³ Kenyatta shared many of Abiy's concerns⁴⁴ but also firmly pressed him on the peace talks with the TPLF.⁴⁵ The fact that Kenya was the only country in the region to have a military agreement with Ethiopia (Eritrea formally does not), dating back nearly sixty years, gave Nairobi a unique

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comparative advantage. But this was also the result of Kenya's economic inducement through business initiatives the country had recently scaled up with its neighbour. Apart from shared infrastructural development projects (including within the energy sector), Kenyan Safaricom was recently granted the licence to invest in the Ethiopian telecommunications sector. Kenya also increased its exports to Ethiopia – scoring a 68% increase in the third quarter of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 mainly because of growing food consignments Kenya delivered to the conflict-stricken neighbour.⁴⁶ By growing more interconnected with Ethiopia, Nairobi acted to reduce reasons for direct hostilities between them and strengthen its bargaining position. There was more than this, though.

Kenya's rising regional status was also reflected in the improvement of relations with other regional countries, including Egypt. President Kenyatta's visit to Cairo in October 2020 and a series of ministerial and military visits in Spring 2021 highlighted Egypt's willingness to join hands with Kenya for the security and stability of the region. Regional mediation roles aside, what further enhanced Kenya's political fortunes in its quest for regional primacy is also its special relationship with both China and the US. In October 2021, Uhuru Kenyatta was received by US President Joe Biden, becoming the first African leader to visit the White House since Biden's inauguration.⁴⁷ This special attention was reinforced the following month by the visit paid by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Kenya in his first tour on the continent (he also visited Nigeria and Senegal). The intensity of these contacts confirmed the new US administration's soft spot for Nairobi as the "partner of choice" in the region in contrast to the recent marginalisation of Addis.⁴⁸ At the same time, Kenya remains solidly at the centre of China's Africa policy too, as it was recently signalled by the attention the Chinese Foreign Minister gave Kenya in his traditional new year tours of the continent.⁴⁹ Its engagement with both ensures Kenya some freedom of action from foreign powers' encroachment, especially China's economic grasp, as befits an aspiring regional hegemon.

But, again, just like Ethiopia, the litmus test for Kenya and its aspirations to become the undisputed leader of the region may well be domestic, rather than regional or international. Against a gloomy backdrop of bloody electoral precedents and still

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widespread diffusion of corruption and “ethnic politicking,” the democratic conduct of the forthcoming August election will be an important test case for Kenya’s maturity and regional power ambitions. The periods running up to, and after, general elections have been the most violent in Kenya’s post-independence history, with thousands killed and displaced in election cycles since 2007.⁵⁰ As a result, a repeat of post-election violence can frustrate Kenya’s efforts to expand its regional clout in the same way Ethiopia’s recent domestic challenges have done.

Egypt’s multi-layered engagement

Egypt’s ambition to go down Kenya’s rising path faces also some current internal political and security constraints beyond the sole economic performance, not least the ones related to the food and water sector. These latter problems were compounded by a region-wide dispute over the management of the Nile waters that erupted after Ethiopia began building the hydro-electric Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile in 2011. Entrusting Addis for the first time with the power to manage the Nile waters, until then left in the hands of downstream countries, the project can potentially overhaul regional power balances. Ten years on, with 80%+ of the construction completed, the project is approaching the third phase of the filling of the reservoir after the first tests of electricity generation.⁵¹ Although all the riparian states acknowledge the potential benefits of this dam, it became an issue of contention between Ethiopia, Egypt, and to a lesser degree, Sudan because of the threat stemming from Ethiopia’s unilateral control of the flow without a binding agreement on the technical management of the dam. Ethiopia’s stiff opposition to reaching a binding agreement, mostly because of regional power competition and domestic audience costs, has so far thwarted any mediation attempt to find a compromise.

The stalemate regarding the negotiations for a binding agreement on the GERD dam is a danger for the food security and socio-political stability of Egypt, whose 90%+ water needs depend on the Nile alone and whose 28% labour force depends on the agricultural sector.⁵² To counter these weaknesses and recover the prestige of managing the Nile waters, Egypt had two options: boost capabilities to mitigate water scarcity domestically or constrain the activities of the upstream countries.⁵³ Given the numerous limits of the former, it eventually predominantly focused on the latter, relying largely on the strength of its diplomatic action to try to negotiate an agreement with Ethiopia. This consisted primarily in embarking on a regional campaign aimed at securing

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support for its position among other riparian states. This required overturning decades of apathy among African countries about Egyptian concerns, peaking with the Nile Basin countries decision to sign the Cooperative Framework Agreement which ensured water quotas for development projects without Egypt's consensus nor its participation.

Since Ethiopia's first GERD filling in the summer 2020, Egypt has engaged many Eastern African countries with a view of strengthening its region clout and lure them away from Ethiopia's own sphere of influence.⁵⁴ Ethiopia had extensively resorted to diplomatic practices to shore up its regional standing, and in this regard hosting the African Union headquarters has always been of great help. However, these practices were unprecedented for Egypt given its traditional prioritisation to other areas. Recalibrating its focus onto the Africa south of the Sahara, then, Egypt scaled up its diplomatic visits to the region and its economic intervention,⁵⁵ increasing the bilateral trade with nearly all the countries in the region⁵⁶ and winning tenders for infrastructural projects.⁵⁷ Because these initiatives were not purely business-driven, but more about Egypt's political role in the region, they generally also came with new bilateral agreements for military and security partnerships. Although only the one with Sudan signed in March 2021 looks like a proper military pact,² the relevance of a series of security and military cooperation agreements Egypt struck in a few months cannot be downplayed either (see **Table 1**).⁵⁸ The objective of this outreach was evidently that of increasing pressure on Addis ahead of the second GERD filling in summer 2021 as indicated by the chronology of the events. Egypt was also looking to develop a long-term ties that it can leverage later on in case it could not prevent the unilateral filling of the dam. Because Ethiopia plans to export part of the electricity produced by the dam, a regional boycott from neighbouring countries would deprive it of the economic and diplomatic dividends related to the export.⁵⁹

2. Few details are public, but the two countries also carried out numerous joint military drills in the past two years, including "Nile Eagles-1" in November 2020, "Nile Eagles-2" in March 2021, "Guardians of the Nile" in May 2021.

Al-Sisi's state visits to/from:

South Sudan (11/2020)	First visit of an Egyptian president to South Sudan
Sudan (03/2021)	State visit of al-Sisi to Khartoum, Sudan
Djibouti (05/2021)	First visit of an Egyptian president to Djibouti
Kenya (10/2020)	State visit of Uhuru Kenyatta to Cairo
Sudan (10/2020)	State visit of Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan to Cairo
Sudan (01/2021)	State visit of Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan to Cairo
Burundi (03/2021)	State visit of Evariste Ndayishimiye to Cairo
Sudan (10/2021)	Unconfirmed visit of al-Burhan to Cairo the day before the October 25 coup ⁶⁰
Tanzania (11/2021)	State visit of Samia Suluhu to Cairo
Djibouti (02/2022)	State visit of Omar Guelleh to Cairo

Military and security cooperation agreements or MoU Egypt signed with:

South Sudan (11/2020)	Strategic partnership (with possible security dimension) agreed in Juba
Sudan (03/2021)	Military pact (followed by a number of joint military drills)
Uganda (04/2021)	Military intelligence-sharing agreement signed in Kampala
Burundi (04/2021)	Military cooperation agreement signed in Cairo
Kenya (05/2021)	Defence cooperation agreement ⁶¹ (Kenya has also had one with Ethiopia since 1963)
DRC (06/2021)	Letter of intent on developing bilateral defence cooperation

Table 1. Egypt's diplomatic outreach and security cooperation agreements with Eastern African countries following Ethiopia's first GERD filling in July 2020

It is not clear whether these numerous economic and security partnerships launched (or re-launched) in 2020 and 2021 with regional countries will be enough to convince Addis that a binding agreement is in its interest, nor to convince the other regional countries to take Egypt's side in the dispute. To succeed in making Addis' plans harder to implement, Cairo needs to effectively reduce these countries' dependence or attraction towards Ethiopia. Yet, many regional countries not only already receive Ethiopia's electricity but are also in talks for expansions.⁶² Similarly, on the front of hard security, while it is true that Ethiopia does not have actual defence alliances except with Kenya, it does have numerous bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries as well. Although these agreements mostly amount to joint agreements for border security, they do also help build mutual trust.⁶³ As a result, major obstacles to Egypt's regional influence remain despite its recent multi-layered offensive.

Promising countries such as Sudan and Somalia have long been mired in difficult processes of political transition or reconstruction which have prevented them from keeping up with the three regional powers

Beyond the big three, no serious competitor

Beyond the big three, there are no serious regional competitors capable, on their own, to tip the regional balance of power in favour of any. Promising countries such as Sudan and Somalia have long been mired in difficult processes of political transition or reconstruction which have prevented them from keeping up with the three regional powers. Yet, their internal challenges remain relevant, for better or worse, to contribute to regional power dynamics changes. A recent case in point was post-Bashir Sudan's convergence towards Egypt on issues related to security, including the GERD dispute. That is, Sudanese internal changes and the rise of a new leadership allowed Egypt to mend ties with its southern neighbour and embark on its new campaign of regional initiatives aimed at breaking its isolation on some major regional dossiers through new diplomatic and military partnerships south of the Sahara. Yet, Sudan's protracted instability following the military's October 25 coup⁶⁴ has since generated not only domestic economic repercussions⁶⁵ but also regional spill-over effects which may eventually prove detrimental for Egypt's regional strategy too, depriving it of its staunchest supporter so far. A first signal in this direction came from Sudan's second-in-command General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti)'s first visit to Ethiopia in early 2022 after more than a one-year hiatus in which he softened his tones towards the GERD and the border disputes.⁶⁶ It can be argued these disputes used to be convenient to the military leadership in Sudan to justify its dominance in Sudan's post-Bashir politics as a better security provider than the civilian front, but as this strategy for accountability progressively lost relevance after the October coup, in which civilians were side-lined, new foreign policy positions have since emerged.

Extra-regional actors' sway over regional power dynamics

Regions do not exist in isolation, however. Power structural constraints from the international system do exist and cannot be ignored. Even more so when they border the region itself. Although the primary focus of this paper remains on internal dynamics, it is worth exploring a corollary to its primary argument: What role do extra-regional powers have in the wider Eastern Africa's shifting power dynamics? Is it truly the case that, as some commentators recently put it,⁶⁷ the road to peace and war in the wider Eastern Africa passes through Ankara, Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh, with little to no chances for the local actors to change these foreign scripts and for US or European powers to deter such behaviour?⁶⁸

Promising countries such as Sudan and Somalia have long been mired in difficult processes of political transition or reconstruction which have prevented them from keeping up with the three regional powers

Extra-regional powers have taken an interest in the wider Eastern Africa for ages.⁶⁹ This was confirmed in present times by the relevance the region was given in China's Belt and Road initiative and in other foreign powers' strategies, considering that many have military bases in the area.⁷⁰ In the past few years, the wider Eastern Africa also became the site of fierce competition related to the intra-Gulf political rivalry⁷¹ which involves Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as well as Iran and Israel.⁷² All these countries have since dramatically expanded economic, diplomatic, and security engagement in the region,⁷³ having not directly interfered in the domestic politics of those regional countries.⁷⁴

A common interpretation based on these recent facts is that peace, war, and political stability in the wider Eastern Africa region passes through external powers, especially Gulf capitals. While it is true that extra-regional powers are largely involved in the region, they do not have outright control of regional dynamics. This paper maintains an alternative hypothesis according to which extra-regional powers' involvement in regional dynamics, Gulf powers being no exception to this, is extensive but translates into actual local leverage only through domestic politics choices. On a closer inspection of many recent events, one can observe that Gulf powers' intervention in the region has not automatically translated into more leverage, and even less so outright control, over the regional countries' behaviour.⁷⁵ Local actors have often been welcomed when not invoking their intervention, yet they have also demonstrated their ability to play extra-regional powers against each other in these foreign interactions to their own benefit, hence not acting as if they were fully controlled by external powers. This already used to be the case in Sudan's and Somalia's rebuffs to Saudi Arabia and the UAE's request to close the Qatari embassy in 2017.⁷⁶ But it is also substantiated by more recent evidence such as the case of Burhan's decision to re-establish relations with Doha in early 2021, after they were frozen with Bashir's ouster⁷⁷; the case of Abiy's decision to keep up and even strengthen military ties with Iran in the summer of 2021 despite the close partnership with the UAE and Israel⁷⁸; and the case of the intra-Somali dispute between Prime Minister Roble and President Farmaajo about repairing relations with the UAE⁷⁹ after they were broken in 2018.⁸⁰ Therefore, ample empirical evidence points to this more nuanced interpretation of Gulf powers' intervention in the region which, by

distinguishing involvement from leverage, suggests an intervening variable mediating these external powers' sway over the region, or local agency. As a result, in painting future trajectories of the regions, the role of extra-regional powers remains relevant but is not an exclusive variable in the equation. Eastern African countries' domestic politics matter just as well. As a result, while external factors can affect the pace of regional transformations, such as speeding up a peace deal or a military operation, they do face local constraints. Domestic challenges and their impact on the development of relational power capabilities and assets need to remain of primary consideration when formulating hypotheses and collecting evidence to explain power shifts in the region.

Conclusions

Ethiopia's slip into historically exceptional economic and political turmoil generated ripple effects that have shocked the whole region in a potentially irreversible way. This paper explored these effects and the strategies regional competitors designed to claim regional leadership, capitalising on Ethiopia's setbacks. It was also argued that the length and depth of these emerging regional trajectories, as well as their reversibility, depend primarily on regional countries' ability to address internal challenges, a precondition to successfully develop credible and sustainable partnerships to sway the regional balance of power in their favour. Finally, against common interpretations which give external actors a primary role in regional transformations, it was argued that extra-regional powers' involvement in these dynamics is extensive but often translates into actual local leverage only through domestic political choices. As a result, it was suggested that regional powers' domestic challenges and their impact on the development of relational power capabilities and assets should remain of primary consideration when formulating hypothesis and collecting evidence to explain power shifts in the region.

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