

Egypt and Turkey in the Hornet's Nest of the Horn of Africa

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The Horn of Africa has emerged as one of the most volatile and strategically significant sub-regions within the broader Red Sea geopolitical landscape. Its instability is now defined by the interaction of overlapping crises that connect inland wars, maritime competition and external intervention, rather than by a single conflict or bilateral rivalry. In this context, Egypt and Turkey stand out as two actors whose recent engagement represents a significant qualitative shift, reflecting two distinct models of regional involvement: Egypt's approach is primarily strategic and security-driven, shaped by concerns over Ethiopia, Nile waters and Red Sea balances; Turkey has developed a broader and more flexible model combining diplomatic outreach, economic ties, humanitarian assistance and military cooperation.

Egypt's Strategic Reorientation toward the Horn of Africa

In recent years, Egypt has progressively redefined its regional posture, attaching greater strategic importance to Africa and, more specifically, to the Red Sea-Horn of Africa region. While the Arab dimension remains central to Cairo's external identity, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has articulated an increasing focus on a North-South strategic axis, linking the Mediterranean, the Nile Basin, the Horn of Africa and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific. From this perspective, the southern theatre is no longer viewed exclusively through the lens of water security, but also as

an area where access to the sea, political alliances and regional military balances are becoming increasingly important.

The rivalry with Ethiopia has been the main driver of this reorientation. The unilateral advancement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam by Ethiopia, which entered a new operational phase by late 2025, altered the balance of power along the Nile, increasing Addis Ababa's leverage over downstream states. For Cairo, this development imposed a new strategic reality. Rather than addressing the Ethiopian challenge solely through Nile diplomacy, Egypt has adopted a broader strategy aimed at containing Ethiopia's regional influence and increasing the number of areas in which pressure can be applied. This strategy has evolved along two complementary lines. Firstly, Cairo has increased its diplomatic engagement with Nile riparian countries and states in the Horn of Africa in an attempt to form political alliances capable of counterbalancing Ethiopia's growing regional influence. Secondly, Egypt has sought to exploit Ethiopia's strategic vulnerabilities indirectly, via neighbouring countries such as Sudan and Somalia.

The memorandum of understanding signed by Ethiopia and Somaliland in January 2024 was a significant development in this regard. The agreement potentially granted Addis Ababa access to the sea in exchange for recognition of Somaliland's independence, triggering a strong response from Cairo. Cairo viewed this as both a violation of Somali sovereignty and an extension of Ethiopian ambitions towards the Red Sea. In response, Egypt swiftly strengthened its ties with Mogadishu. The defence agreement signed in August 2024, followed by the deployment of a small number of Egyptian military personnel and equipment to Somalia, reflected a broader shift in Cairo's strategic outlook, moving from an almost ex-

clusive focus on the Nile to a wider concern with maritime access, coastal influence and the geopolitical importance of the Red Sea. From an Egyptian perspective, any prospective Ethiopian foothold along this maritime corridor would remain strategically unacceptable.

Constraints and Contradictions in Egypt's Regional Posture

However, Egypt's increasing involvement in the Horn of Africa is hindered by substantial structural limitations. The first of these concerns capability. Although Cairo has demonstrated political commitment, its ability to maintain an effective long-term presence in the region is uncertain. Somalia poses particular challenges in this regard, with a volatile security environment, the persistent threat of al-Shabaab and a fragmented political landscape. Under such conditions, unless Cairo is willing to assume a deeper and more sustained security role, Egyptian involvement risks remaining largely symbolic.

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A second limitation lies in strategic overstretch. Egypt is currently facing multiple regional challenges, including the war in Gaza, instability in Libya and the conflict in Sudan. These overlapping crises reduce Cairo's room for manoeuvre, making any attempt to project influence into the Horn of Africa more fragile and reactive. Rather than shaping a new regional order, Egypt often appears primarily concerned with preventing shifts in the balance of power that would be to its disadvantage. This helps to explain why, with Saudi backing, Cairo has sought to establish a counterweight to Ethiopia by strengthening ties with Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Sudan exposes these contradictions most sharply. For Cairo it is not a secondary theatre: it constitutes

the southern pillar of Egypt's national security, binding together concerns over the Nile, strategic depth and border stability into a single, indivisible equation. Yet since April 2023 it has become a fragmented proxy arena where Egypt's support for the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) clashes directly with UAE backing of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), severely constraining Cairo's ability to shape outcomes through the state-centric approach it traditionally favours.

Turkey's Multidimensional Strategy in the Horn of Africa

Turkey's regional engagement has followed a markedly different trajectory. Over the last two decades, Ankara has established a significant presence in the Horn of Africa by combining diplomatic activity with humanitarian aid, economic growth and military co-operation. A distinctive feature of Turkish policy has been the effort to present Turkey as an alternative partner, positioning itself as neither a Western power associated with political conditionality nor a Gulf actor primarily driven by transactional logic. Instead, Ankara has sought to cultivate legitimacy through the language of partnership, mutual respect and shared historical experience, a narrative that references to the Ottoman past in areas such as Sudan, Eritrea and northern Somalia symbolically reinforce. What sets the Turkish approach apart is its hybrid nature. Ankara has extended its influence well beyond state elites and into the social and religious fabric of partner countries through a dense network of public institutions, semi-public agencies and non-state actors. These include TİKA, Diyanet, the Maarif Foundation, humanitarian NGOs and business associations. This enables Turkey to operate not only at the formal diplomatic level, but also within the hybrid governance environments that characterize many fragile states in the Horn of Africa, where authority is fragmented and formal institutions do not fully monopolize power.

Somalia remains the paradigmatic example of this strategy. What started as a humanitarian response to the 2011 famine has evolved into one of Ankara's most significant foreign policy initiatives in Africa. Through infrastructure projects, educational programmes, diplomatic support and military cooperation, Turkey has established an institutionalized and

socially embedded presence. The opening of the TURKSOM military base in Mogadishu in 2017 signalled a pivotal shift from the role of humanitarian partner to that of security actor, while maintaining the discourse of solidarity and development that had initially underpinned Turkish legitimacy. In this sense, Turkey's approach illustrates how soft and hard power can be combined to create a single architecture of influence, rather than operating as separate domains.

Somalia and Sudan as Arenas of Differentiated Competition

Somalia and Sudan reveal not only where Egypt and Turkey are active, but also how different local arenas reshape external competition. While both states are active in these two regions, the nature of their engagement varies significantly depending on the local context. Somalia and Sudan are not merely two theatres of external activism; they are two distinct political environments that shape outside influence differently. In Somalia, the balance of power is asymmetrical. Turkey has accumulated influence through a long-term process of institutional embedding, social outreach and military cooperation. By contrast, Egypt is a more recent entrant whose involvement is primarily shaped by geopolitical concerns relating to Ethiopia and the Red Sea. Although both countries operate within the same national context, they do so from markedly unequal positions. Ankara's presence is deeper and more socially rooted, whereas Cairo's remains contingent on short-term strategic considerations and is still in the process of consolidating its political and security position.

The situation in Sudan is different. Here, the issue is not the uneven distribution of forces, but the fragmentation of the arena itself. For Egypt, Sudan is inextricably linked to national security and regional equilibrium, while for Turkey, it has long been a gateway to the Red Sea and a source of economic and symbolic influence. Yet both countries now face the same structural reality. Sudan is no longer a theatre in which influence can primarily be exercised through conventional state-to-state channels. Since the outbreak of war in April 2023, it has become an intensely internationalized and contested space where local armed conflict overlaps with the competing interests of regional powers.

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This transformation has reduced the manoeuvring space of both Cairo and Ankara, albeit in different ways. Egypt has openly aligned with the SAF due to a combination of geographical proximity, shared strategic preferences and security concerns. By contrast, Turkey has tried to maintain a more balanced position, partly to avoid friction with key Gulf partners such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia. However, in both cases, Sudan demonstrates the limitations of external influence in a context where fragmentation, proxy dynamics and overlapping interventions render any single actor's strategy ineffective.

Regional Implications

Egypt and Turkey's increasing engagement in the Horn of Africa and Sudan must be viewed in the context of the evolving Red Sea security landscape. The development is not merely a denser web of bilateral relations, but rather a strategic continuum that links the two shores of the Red Sea through a combination of inland wars, maritime competition, port politics and extra-regional rivalries. In this sense, the repositioning of Egypt and the expansion of Turkey are both expressions of a broader regional transformation, with the Horn of Africa and Sudan becoming increasingly integrated into the geopolitics of the Red Sea arena.

At the same time, however, the effects of this transformation are not solely determined by external actors. Local governments and political elites across the region have considerable scope for manoeuvre and frequently exploit competing external interests to their own advantage. Somalia offers the clearest example of this dynamic. Mogadishu has navigated the agendas of Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the United States by selectively strengthening ties with each of these countries in search of security assistance, financial support and

diplomatic backing, all the while preserving a degree of political autonomy. More broadly, this pattern suggests that actors in the Horn of Africa and Sudan are active intermediaries who filter and reshape external strategies according to their own priorities, rather than passive recipients of outside influence.

Conclusion

Egypt and Turkey have two distinct, though increasingly overlapping, approaches to engagement in the Horn of Africa and Sudan. Egypt's approach is primarily driven by strategic concerns, such as geopolitical balancing, Red Sea security concerns and containing Ethiopia's regional rise. By contrast, Turkey has developed a broader and more flexible model combining development assistance, economic ties, religious and societal outreach, and military cooperation. These differences matter because they influence how each country establishes partnerships, navigates rivalries and connects security with political order. At the same time, both countries are contributing to a broader regional transformation by incorporating the Horn of Africa and Sudan into the wider geopolitics of the Red Sea. While their growing involvement may create opportunities for institutional support and external partnerships, it also risks deepening securitization, sharpening competitive alignments and reinforcing fragmented political orders. Therefore, the central question is whether Egyptian and Turkish policies can move beyond competitive positioning to make a more lasting contribution to regional stability. For now, however, the available evidence suggests otherwise. The Horn of Africa and Sudan seem less like spaces of stabiliza-

tion and more like densely entangled arenas in which external intervention often ends up perpetuating the instability it aims to contain.

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