



# The Future of Turkey's Position in the Horn of Africa: Possible Scenarios and Implications

**Dr. Suadiq Sufian Ali**

Senior Researcher  
Middle East Affairs Research Directorate  
Institute of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

## **Abstract**

*Turkey's foreign policy has given a special place for the Horn of Africa as the two regions have religious and historical relationships for a long period of time. Their relationship dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century presence of the Ottoman Empire in the region (Omar, 2001). In modern times, Turkey has also shown keen interest in the Horn region owing to different determinant factors. Against this background, the current study investigated the future of Turkey's position in the Horn of Africa. Accordingly, the study highlighted that the recent Turkish-Horn engagement might advance Turkish international standing, and thereby the likelihood of its involvement in the Horn region will be increased in the years to come.*

**Index Terms - Horn of Africa, Turkey, Foreign policy, Scenario**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Horn of Africa occupies a geopolitically significant position in the world. Foreign countries, both regional and superpowers, have looked to the area as a key hub for security and trade activities. Competition for alliance and/or cooperation have recently increased in the region. Apparently, no other parts of the earth has accompanied a similar kind of global dynamics like the Horn of Africa (Clingendael Policy Brief, 2019). Rival superpowers including United States of America, Russia and China, and regional powers such as Turkey, United Arab Emirate and Saudi Arabia have sought a military base and commercial centers in the region. All these phenomena make the region a fierce battle ground for aggressive competitors and serves as a 'political laboratory' where different foreign policy instruments interact. In this respect, equating the recent new development in the Horn to a "Geopolitical Traffic Jam" seems perfect (Munich Security brief, 2021).

Apart from the traditional Western powers, Middle East rising powers have shown keen interest in the Horn region corresponding to the new process that can be generally dubbed as "militarization and commercialization of ports" in the Horn. Among the Middle East countries, the United Arab Emirates started the new scrambling of ports in the region by the year 2015. Qatar followed in 2018 while concluding a contract with Sudan for the sake of modernizing the port of Suakin. Turkey's involvement also appeared with a more militarized approach in the region (Cafiero and Cok, 2020).

More to the point, Turkey's foreign policy has given a special place for the Horn of Africa as the two regions have religious and historical relationships for a long period of time (Africa Vakfi Foundation, 2021). Their relationship dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century presence of the Ottoman Empire in the region (Omar, 2001). In modern times, Turkey introduced its first "Action plan for Africa" in 1998. Indeed, its involvement in Africa gained momentum in 2005 with the commencement of "Opening to Africa" strategy.

The strategy was accompanied by the assurance of Turkish observer status at the African Union in that same year. In response to the reaction of African Union, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has worked hard to show Turkey as an “Afro-Eurasian state” which is very close to Africa (Pinto, 2021). More importantly, this is best epitomized by the dramatic rise of Turkish-Horn engagement since 2011 by approaching the state of Somalia (Clingendael Policy Brief, 2019).

In sum, the aforementioned realities entailed that Turkey is becoming a key economic and security actor in the Horn of Africa. Yet, as several determinant factors tend to affect the Turkey-Horn engagement, the future of Turkey’s position in the region is apparently at a cross-road. With this background, the current study dealt with the central question: whether Turkey changes its position in the volatile region of the Horn of Africa.

## II. Determinants of Turkish Involvement in the Horn of Africa

Turkish future in the Horn of Africa will hinge on three important factors: political - economy context; its foreign policy towards the region and the geopolitical competition between global and regional powers (Pinto, 2021). Put in other words, pushing and pulling factors were behind the recent involvement of Turkey in the region. To begin with by political - economic factors, evidences suggest that the challenge posed by middle income trap is one of the root causes of Turkish current presence in the Horn region. The trap delays the transformation of Turkey from the category of middle-income countries to higher income countries. Accordingly, Turkey is trying to diversify its economy. To this end, it has eyed on new trade partners and sought a virgin business opportunities available, particularly in the Horn region (Anwar, 2016). Besides, Turkey’s recognition of its limited room in European market may force the country to see opportunities outside the Euro zone (Pinto, 2021). What is more, Turkey’s problems with the European Union (EU) accession process tilts her to seek alternative options in its foreign affairs. Consequently, one could argue that Turkey developed its “Opening to Africa” policy in 1998.

In a similar vein, the recent magnificent level of economic development in the Horn of Africa has probably attracted Turkey apart from its domestic derives. According to African Development Bank (2023), most of the African countries have registered an average annual 4% growth in GDP for successive years, which in turn, creates a fertile ground for Turkish involvement. In connection to this, from a geoeconomical point of view, three Horn countries are particularly important for Turkey: Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti (Pinto, 2021). Somalia provides a strategic access to Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Meanwhile, Ethiopia serves as a crucial destination for Turkish investment. Next to china, Turkey has huge investment in the country (Fahim, 2018). Likewise, Djibouti permits a free economic zone for Turkey as per their bilateral maritime cooperation deal (Middle East Monitor, 2020). Hence, it can be said that the enabling environment of the Horn region with respect to Ankara’s ambition determines Turkish engagement with the complex Horn region.

The geopolitical competition taking place in the Horn region has played a catalyst role in the Turkish-Horn engagement. Today, *Turkey's* actions in the *Horn* is partly motivated by *competition* with Gulf countries.

Last but not least, Turkey-Horn engagement is also partly determined by its foreign policy. According to CHR Michelsen Institute report of 2021, the goals of Turkey’s foreign policy is targeting on attaining strategic autonomy with a capability to maintain the country’s survival on its own; forging new partnerships while maintaining traditional alliances; and becoming an exceptional country in its region to achieve material and political regional supremacy and respect. Meanwhile, Turkey’s foreign policy recognized that solution of global challenges depends on collective efforts forged by cooperation and effective multilateralism. This reality guides Turkey’s active diplomacy within multilateral fora. For instance, under the motto of “the world is bigger than five” coined by His Excellency President Erdogan, Turkey has been advocating the reform of the UN Security Council and the UN. In this respect, it can be said that Turkey has supported the view that Africa should have a permanent seat in the Security Council. This is not surprising as Turkey has been known for its “Opening to Africa policy” since 1998.

## III. Key Areas of Turkey’s Involvement in the Horn Region

The Horn region has become an arena for geopolitical competition for super and regional powers. In this respect, Turkey is one of the leading actors to have involved in the region with various purposes. Its presence in the Horn region takes a variety of forms, from diplomatic and political representation to actual military presence. A close look at Turkey's involvement in the Horn of Africa highlighted that the following actions have been pursued in recent years.

1. Militarization of ports: Turkey established its first military base in Africa in the port of Somalia.
2. Utilization of tools of soft power: Turkey has provided humanitarian aid and scholarships and other mechanisms to maximize its presence beyond military operations in the region.
3. Commercialization of Turkish products: Turkey deepens its economic and trade relations with the Horn countries to find market place.
4. Commercialization of ports: Turkey has attempted to lease a number of strategic ports.

By using the aforementioned forms of intervention Turkey has tried to enlarge its influence in the Horn region. Some commentators underlined that Erdogan hopes to restore culturally, economically, militarily, and politically equipped Turkey through "neo-Ottoman" policies.

#### **IV. The Future of Turkish – Horn of Africa Engagement: Possible Scenarios**

Turkey-Horn engagement is determined by a wide range of pulling and pushing factors. Considering the current trends and positions adopted by various parties, two scenarios are likely for the future of Turkey's position in the Horn region.

##### ***Scenario 1: Increased Turkish – Horn Engagement***

With President Erdogan and his Justice and Development party set to remain in power, it is more likely that Turkey will insist on its long-term strategy for Africa in general and the Horn region in particular, at least for the coming five years. In this regard, the May 28/2023 presidential run off between Erdogan and his opponent *Kilicdaroglu* was profoundly crucial for Turkey's future in the Horn region. The recent election allowed Erdogan to continue Ankara's projects with a new spirit. This implied that so long as other global and regional actors increase their military and commercial engagement in the Horn, so does Turkey.

Turkish move perhaps bring more regional polarization as the very nature of Turkey – Horn engagement is competition driven. For instance, as the Qatar blockade is over and normalization between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is seemingly inevitable, the drift between Turkey and Saudi-led Red Sea Council may take the forefront in the geopolitical competition. Hence, at some time in the future, if not now, Turkey may find itself in the brink of conflict with the members of Red Sea Council that Turkey is not likely to win. Saudi Arabia is far more capable of mobilizing the countries of the region against Turkey (EFP, 2020). Nonetheless, Turkey may scale up its military presence and soft power projection in the Horn region to avoid any long lasting painful loss of the geostrategic location of the Horn region.

##### ***Scenario 2: Decreased Turkish – Horn of Africa Engagement***

In this scenario, Turkey reduces its military presence and soft power projection under some critical conditions. One instance can be Horn countries unresponsiveness to Turkish demands. Although it seems less likely, the chance of Turkey – Horn engagement may reach too low to the extent that either side loses interest in any risky cooperation is not null. The lesson obtained from Djibouti – Russia's engagement proved this reality. Reports showed that Djibouti refused to Russia's plan of building a military base since it did not want to become the terrain of proxy war for super powers (Melvin, 2019). In similar vein, the Horn States may deny Turkey to conduct any military activities.

Under various circumstances, Turkey may realize that there will be no room for her in the Horn region. Unanticipated political developments in different countries may lead to the fruition of this scenario. For example, in Sudan, the former president Omar al-Bashir and President Erdogan signed a deal. Turkey renewed its relation with Sudan and succeeded in concluding a bilateral deal of totaling 650 million dollar for militarization and commercialization of ports (Brookings, 2019). However, these agreements have lost strength, as the transitional coalition seems to favor engagement with the West rather than the Turkish government. Similar developments may affect Turkish involvement.



## V. Implications of Turkish Involvement in the Horn Region

The involvement of Turkey in the Horn region will have regional and national implications at large. Regionally, Turkish active participation meant that it is increasingly moving away from the West camp and get closer to the Red Sea region. This is perhaps a U-turn regarding what has been done for years in the present day of Turkey. Accordingly, Turkey would become another country in the Middle East – as some commentators argued (CMI Report, 2021). Besides, Turkish appearance in the Horn region with a more militarized approach may pose a regional security threat through exacerbating competitions among Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirate and Qatar. This is best epitomized during the Qatar blockade from 2017-2021. Put differently, the Horn region would serve as a battle ground for Middle East rivalries.

Furthermore, Turkish - Horn region engagement will enhance Turkey's international standing. Among others, it improves the position of Turkey in the global political ladder. William Hale (2000) noted that both the late Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey can be categorized as middle powers in international politics. Such position cannot allow Turkey to fight a successful war against any major power. Hence, it tend to defend external threats through alliances or manipulation of the balance of forces between the Great Powers. In this regard, the recent Turkey's involvement in the Horn region capitalizes its international standing by creating more alliances.

## VI. Conclusion

Turkey's role in the Horn of Africa is driven by different factors. Developmental and economic aspirations as well as the prospects placed in the Horn countries that reflect aggressive geopolitical interests are some of the determinants of its involvement in the Horn region. Indeed, though considerable overlap among the factors, Turkey has recently paid more attention to geopolitical interests. One indicator is that the shift in Turkey's foreign policy that dominated by economic relationship to a foreign policy that sought a geo-political partnership. The transition is believed to advance Turkish international standing, and thereby the likelihood of its involvement in the Horn region will be increased in the years to come.

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