

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, ARTS AND HUMANITIES

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Bilateral Relations between Ethiopia and Somalia since 2018: Challenges and Prospects

By

Mesoud Mohammed

Addis Ababa University

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A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Political Science and International Relations as Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree (MA) in International Relations and Diplomacy

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By Mesoud Mohammed

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DECLARATION

I, Mesoud Mohammed, hereby declare that this thesis titled "The Bilateral Relations between Ethiopia and Somalia Since 2018: Challenges and Prospects" is my original work, completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree (MA) in International Relations and Diplomacy at Addis Ababa University.

This work has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification at any institution. All sources of information and assistance used in this thesis have been properly acknowledged.

I affirm that I have adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by Addis Ababa University and that this research is conducted with integrity.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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May Allah S.W Be Praised!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Addis Ababa University
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AUSSOM / ATMIS	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
AU	African Union
DP World	Dubai Ports World
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FMS	Federal Member States (Somalia)
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FSNAU	Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit
GERD	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
HoAI	Horn of Africa Initiative
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICU	Islamic Courts Union
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IR	International Relations
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAPSSET	Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport Corridor
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service (Ethiopia)
OAU	Organisation of African Unity

ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
PMAC / Derg	Provisional Military Administrative Council
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
WHO	World Health Organization

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ABSTRACT

Background and Context: Ethiopia and Somalia share significant commonalities, including contiguous territory, overlapping communities of shared culture, language, and religion. Yet these two states have also exhibited profound divergences rooted in ideological orientation, opposing great-power alliances during the Cold War, and disputes over territorial jurisdiction, resulting in bloody inter-state conflicts, most notably the Ogaden War of 1977–1978. Since the last decade, developments unfolding within and outside these states – including regime changes, regional geopolitical competitions, and the growing securitisation of the Red Sea corridor – have fundamentally re-shaped the nature of their bilateral relations.

Research Problem and Objectives: Against this backdrop, the present research aims to disentangle the history, dynamics, and evolution of Ethio-Somali diplomatic relations by focusing on the period from 2018 onwards. The study examines how historical context, domestic political reforms, regional geopolitical rivalry, and the roles of external actors intersect to shape the bilateral relationship, and what this means for the security of the Horn of Africa region.

Methodology: A qualitative research design employing a case study approach was used. Data were collected through semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with experts and practitioners in diplomacy, security, economics, and regional politics. Primary interview data were triangulated with secondary sources including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports, official documents, and media sources. Thematic, comparative, and process-tracing analyses were applied.

Key Findings: The findings highlight constrained diplomatic relations shaped by unhealed historical wounds, including the Ogaden War and Ethiopia's 2006 military intervention. In the post-2018 era, several factors have exerted determining effects: internal political transitions, Ethiopia's sea access pursuit, the 2024 Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU, and the growing influence of external actors including Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt. The study finds that the bilateral relationship simultaneously exhibits areas of cooperation – in counterterrorism, trade, and

infrastructure – and serious structural bottlenecks rooted in historical grievances, contested sovereignty, and divergent national interests.

Conclusions and Implications: The study concludes that structural mistrust, unilateral diplomatic manoeuvres, and external actor involvement have repeatedly disrupted cooperation. Establishing a permanent bilateral commission, reforming regional governance, and pursuing multilateral approaches to sea access are among the key recommendations.

Keywords: *Ethiopia–Somalia Relations; Horn of Africa; Diplomacy; Regional Security; Red Sea Geopolitics; Somaliland; IGAD; AU; Al-Shabaab; Sovereignty; State Fragility.*

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

International relations (IR) is a multidisciplinary field that examines how states, institutions, and non-state actors interact within an anarchic global system. Classical realist theorists, such as Morgenthau (1948), argue that states prioritise national interest and power maximisation in a self-help world. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopia's historical dominance and Somalia's struggle for territorial integrity reflect realist power dynamics. Liberal institutionalists like Keohane and Nye (1977) emphasise interdependence and the role of international organisations in mediating disputes. Constructivists further complicate this picture by asserting that socially constructed identities and historical narratives shape state behaviour; the Somali–Ethiopian rivalry is rooted in colonial-era border disputes and competing nationalist ideologies that continue to influence contemporary diplomacy (Wendt, 1992; Buzan and Waëver, 2003).

In the post-Cold War era, new security challenges – including terrorism, climate change-induced conflicts, and mass migration – have demanded concerted multilateral responses. Terrorism in Somalia, spearheaded by the Al-Shabaab group against a weak state structure, made a regional approach through the African Union indispensable. Climate change has generated new conflicts over scarce resources (Brown, 2019), and the persistence of state fragility in Somalia has necessitated hybrid governance models (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009).

Several factors shape Ethiopia's foreign policy. Its historical status as an uncolonised African nation, its role as seat of the AU, and its commitment to pan-Africanism have contributed to a distinct diplomatic posture (Zewde, 2001). The current government under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has pursued economic transformation, including completion of the GERD, and has prioritised reversing Ethiopia's landlocked status by seeking port access through Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea (Yihun, 2020). This agenda gained credibility when Abiy resolved the Eritrea–Ethiopia deadlock, earning the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. However, the Tigray War

(2020–2022) inflicted considerable reputational damage and diverted resources from regional diplomacy (de Waal, 2021; Plaut, 2022).

The Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship has been shaped by territorial disputes, ideological conflicts, and proxy wars embedded in Cold War rivalries. The Ogaden War of 1977–1978 left lasting scars on both nations (Tareke, 2009). Following Somalia's state collapse in 1991, Ethiopia maintained an intermittent presence in Somali territory through the 2006 military intervention against the ICU and contributions to AMISOM/ATMIS. While some scholars interpreted these as genuine security imperatives, others viewed them as Ethiopian expansionism (Menkhaus, 2007; Barnes and Hassan, 2007).

The post-2018 period initially witnessed a diplomatic high point. Abiy Ahmed's government established warm personal relations with Somali President Farmajo and concluded a tripartite agreement with Eritrea and Somalia (Bekele, 2019). However, the bilateral relationship became severely strained following Ethiopia's engagement with Somaliland, culminating in the January 2024 MoU for Berbera port access (ICG, 2022). Somalia declared the MoU null and void, triggering a crisis that drew in Egypt (ICG, 2024).

Beyond these headline issues, climate change, cross-border communal conflicts, and Somalia's persisting federal fragmentation further complicate the bilateral relationship (FSNAU, 2022; Aalen and Tronvoll, 2023). This study examines the historical evolution and current status of Ethio-Somali diplomatic relations, focusing on the post-2018 period, and assesses implications for regional security.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Somalia represent one of the most complex, volatile, and consequential bilateral relationships in sub-Saharan Africa. Shaped by centuries of contested territorial boundaries, competing nationalist ideologies, the trauma of the Ogaden War of 1977–1978, and the persistent fragility of the Somali state, the relationship has historically oscillated between limited functional cooperation and outright confrontation (Touval, 1963; Tareke, 2009; Lewis, 2002). The 2018 political transition in Ethiopia, under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, appeared to inaugurate a decisive new chapter, marked by initial

rapprochement, a Nobel-winning regional peace deal, and renewed multilateral engagement. Yet by 2024, the relationship had deteriorated with remarkable speed, driven by Ethiopia's unilateral pursuit of sea access through the Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding and Somalia's counter-alignment with Egypt through a bilateral defence pact (ICG, 2024). This dramatic arc – from diplomatic warmth to acute confrontation in barely six years – raises urgent questions about the structural, institutional, and agential factors that shape state relations in the Horn of Africa.

The first dimension of the problem concerns Ethiopia's internal political transformation since 2018 and its uneven impact on regional diplomacy. The reform process initiated by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed produced significant early diplomatic gains, most notably the resolution of the Eritrea–Ethiopia deadlock, the tripartite Horn of Africa integration agreement, and the creation of new bilateral commissions with Somalia covering trade and infrastructure (International Crisis Group, 2019; Hagmann and Abbink, 2021; Bekele, 2019). However, optimism was rapidly undercut by the outbreak of the Tigray War in November 2020, which consumed Ethiopia's military, financial, and diplomatic resources, severely damaged its international reputation, and weakened the reform coalition that had underpinned Abiy's regional agenda (de Waal, 2021; Plaut, 2022). The post-Tigray period saw a reassertion of Ethiopian nationalism and a hardening of foreign policy, most visible in the unilateral Somaliland MoU. The scholarly literature has not yet fully accounted for how the interaction between Ethiopia's internal reform process and its military-political setbacks shaped its post-2020 bilateral diplomacy with Somalia. This gap motivates the present study.

The second dimension of the problem concerns Somalia's persistent state fragility and its impact on bilateral diplomatic capacity. Somalia remains one of the world's most fragile states, characterised by incomplete central government authority, active Al-Shabaab insurgency, contested relations between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its Federal Member States (FMS), and deep dependence on external support (Menkhaus, 2014; Hassan and Marchal, 2013; Williams, 2018). This fragility creates a paradox: Somalia simultaneously needs Ethiopia's security support – Ethiopia is the largest single troop contributor to AMISOM/ATMIS – yet resents Ethiopia's sustained presence on Somali soil and its engagement with autonomous regions, which Mogadishu interprets as deliberate prevention of

a strong, unified Somali state (Menkhaus, 2014). Furthermore, Somalia's federal tensions between the FGS and powerful FMS reduce Mogadishu's ability to maintain consistent bilateral policy positions, creating openings for Ethiopia to pursue FMS relationships that bypass and undermine central government authority (Feyissa, 2011; Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). The scholarly literature has insufficiently examined how Somalia's internal federal tensions shape its external bilateral diplomacy, representing a second gap this study addresses.

The third-dimension concerns Ethiopia's structural sea access imperative and the acute diplomatic crisis it has generated. Ethiopia became landlocked in 1991 following Eritrean independence, and its dependence on Djibouti for over 95 percent of its external trade has been identified as a critical economic vulnerability (Kibreab, 2022; Mesfin, 2022). By 2024, the Abiy government had moved from diplomatic exploration to conclude a concrete MoU with Somaliland for commercial and naval access to the Berbera port (ICG, 2024). Somalia's Federal Government, which claims Somaliland as an integral part of its sovereign territory under international law, declared the MoU null and void and launched a sustained diplomatic campaign to block its implementation (Hoehne, 2016; ICG, 2024). This episode illustrates a fundamental structural tension: Ethiopia's economic survival as a nation of 120 million people may depend on securing diversified port access, while Somalia's political survival as a unified state may depend on preventing the international legitimation of secessionist entities. These are not preferences that can be easily reconciled through goodwill or personal diplomacy. The scholarly literature has not yet produced a systematic analysis of how this structural tension shapes the full arc of post-2018 bilateral relations. This study fills this gap.

The fourth dimension concerns the growing role of external actors in shaping – and often distorting – Ethio-Somali bilateral dynamics. The Horn of Africa's strategic location has attracted intense competition for political, military, and economic influence from Gulf states, Turkey, Egypt, China, and Western powers (Verhoeven, 2018; Vertin, 2019; Bereketeab, 2020; Tanchum, 2020). These external actors pursue their own national interests, which frequently do not align with bilateral Ethio-Somali stability. The UAE's port investments in Berbera and Puntland, Turkey's comprehensive military and economic partnership with the FGS, and Egypt's strategic counter-alignment with Somalia in the context of the GERD water dispute have all introduced competing external agendas that complicate diplomatic resolution (ICG,

2022; Altunişik, 2020; Tanchum, 2020). The literature on external actor involvement has grown substantially, but a shortage of studies systematically integrates these dynamics into a comprehensive post-2018 bilateral analysis.

The fifth dimension concerns the recurring tension in the literature between structural and agential explanations for diplomatic outcomes. Structuralist accounts emphasise historical legacies, material capabilities, and geopolitical configurations (Morgenthau, 1948; Buzan and Waëver, 2003). Agency-centred accounts emphasise individual leaders, elite perceptions, and nationalist narratives (Clapham, 2017; Wendt, 1992). The post-2018 Ethio-Somali case offers a uniquely instructive test: the Abiy-Farmajo diplomatic warming appeared to demonstrate the power of agency to overcome structural obstacles, while the subsequent deterioration appeared to demonstrate the ultimate primacy of structural constraints. A theoretically sophisticated analysis requires moving beyond this dichotomy to examine how structural factors set the parameters within which agency operates. This study addresses this analytical gap by deploying a multi-theoretical framework capturing both structural and agential dynamics.

Research Gap

Despite the significance of the Ethio-Somali relationship for Horn of Africa security, existing scholarship exhibits several critical gaps. Most studies focus on discrete episodes – the Ogaden War, the 2006 intervention, or the AMISOM mission – rather than examining the longitudinal dynamics of bilateral relations across successive leadership periods (Williams, 2018; Kifle, 2021). There is an almost complete absence of systematic, primary-data-based scholarly analysis of the post-2018 period that integrates domestic, regional, and international dimensions in a coherent framework. Existing studies also tend to rely on single-theory frameworks – typically realism or historical institutionalism – without engaging with the multi-dimensional complexity the bilateral relationship demands. Furthermore, there is a significant deficit in primary field data from practitioner participants with direct knowledge of bilateral diplomatic interactions (Clapham, 2017; Mesfin, 2022). This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive, qualitative, multi-theoretically grounded analysis of the post-2018 bilateral relationship, drawing on Key Informant Interviews alongside a critically evaluated body of secondary literature.

1.3. Core Argument

This study advances the following central argument: the post-2018 Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship is characterised by a structural tension between the imperative of cooperation – driven by shared security threats, economic interdependence, and regional integration frameworks – and recurring episodes of confrontation rooted in unresolved historical grievances, competing national interests, and the destabilising influence of external actors. The relationship cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical lens. While realist dynamics dominate the bilateral landscape, the interconnected nature of regional insecurity (Regional Security Complex Theory) and the economic and institutional incentives for cooperation (interdependence theory) are equally important explanatory factors.

More concretely, the study argues that personalised political diplomacy, however effective in the short term, cannot overcome the structural constraints generated by historical mistrust, contested sovereignty, and divergent state interests. The leadership-driven diplomatic warming between Abiy Ahmed and President Farmajo illustrates this: it created a window of cooperation but failed to generate the institutional architecture necessary to sustain bilateral relations once leadership changed (Clapham, 2018; Fisher and Anderson, 2023). Ethiopia's unilateral pursuit of sea access through the Somaliland MoU of 2024 further exemplifies the tendency of Horn of Africa state actors to revert to realpolitik when structural interests are at stake.

The study therefore contends that durable Ethio-Somali bilateral relations require a shift from episodic, leadership-driven diplomacy to institutionalised frameworks – including a permanent bilateral commission, strengthened regional bodies, and cooperative approaches to maritime governance – that can survive leadership transitions and absorb the shocks introduced by external actors.

1.4. Research Objectives

1.4.1. General Objective

The general objective of this study is to examine the post-2018 diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Somalia, with emphasis on their challenges and prospects for sustained cooperation.

1.4.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

- Analyse the Ethiopian-Somali diplomatic relations in their historical context.
- Examine the key domestic, regional, and international factors that have contributed to the changing dynamics of the bilateral relationship since 2018.
- Assess the key challenges and prospects for further cooperation between Ethiopia and Somalia.

1.4.3. Research Questions

The study answers the following questions:

- How has historical context shaped the diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Somalia?
- What key factors (domestic, regional, and international) have driven the shifts in Ethiopia-Somalia bilateral relations since 2018, and how do they intersect?
- What are the key problems and prospects for future cooperation between Ethiopia and Somalia?

1.5. Research Methodology

1.5.1. Research approach

This study employed a qualitative research methodology appropriate for understanding complex social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved (Given, 2018). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks causal determination and generalisability, qualitative research seeks illumination, understanding, and contextual interpretation (Golafshani, 2013). The study adopted a case study design (Yin, 2018) focused on the Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship, employing process tracing to identify causal mechanisms linking political events to shifts in diplomatic dynamics (Beach and Pedersen, 2019).

1.5.2. Data Sources

Primary data were collected through semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with experts, policymakers, diplomats, and practitioners. Interviewees included Dr. Miftah Mohammed (Foreign Policy Analyst, Institute of Foreign Affairs), Dr. Mohammed Seid (Researcher, Institute of Foreign Affairs), Ambassador Mohammed Diqqa (former Ethiopian Ambassador to Somalia), and Ambassador Hassen Taju (former Ethiopian Ambassador to Kuwait). Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed articles, books, ICG policy reports, AU and IGAD official documents, and media sources.

1.5.3. Sampling Technique and Size

The study employed purposive sampling, intentionally selecting participants who had experienced the central phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2018). Sample size was determined by theoretical saturation – the point at which new interviews cease to yield substantively new information (Derbissa, 2018). Among the fourteen individuals initially targeted for interview, only four individuals were interviewed.

1.5.4. Instruments of Data Collection

Data were collected using two instruments: a semi-structured interview guide with fourteen open-ended question categories structured around historical context, current state of relations, key challenges, and opportunities; and a secondary data abstraction template.

1.6. Data Interpretation and Analysis

The study employed three complementary analytical frameworks: thematic analysis, comparative analysis, and data triangulation.

Thematic Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis served as the primary tool for analysing qualitative data. Initial coding was followed by identification of core themes including diplomatic engagement, domestic reforms, and external regional influences. Codes were clustered into broader categories such as "Economic Cooperation," "Political Tensions," and "External Actor Influence."

Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis highlighted shifts arising from Ethiopia's post-2018 reforms and Somalia's federal governance challenges, by contrasting the pre-2018 and post-2018 periods to identify where partnerships emerged and disputes persisted.

Data Triangulation

Triangulation was applied across interview accounts, official policy documents, and media records to enhance credibility and reduce individual bias (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Additionally, multiple theoretical lenses were applied to triangulate analytical perspectives and produce a holistic understanding of the bilateral relationship.

1.7. Significance of the Study

This study makes several important contributions. In terms of policy relevance, it provides evidence-based analysis of the structural and agential factors shaping Ethio-Somali relations, offering actionable recommendations for policymakers in both countries and for regional bodies like IGAD and the AU. In terms of academic contribution, it offers a case study for East African politics, contributes to the limited body of post-2018 scholarship on the bilateral relationship, and provides a model for integrating structural and agential analysis in bilateral relations research (Clapham, 2017; Hagmann and Abbink, 2021).

1.8. Limitations and Scope of the Study

This study acknowledges several inherent limitations and outlines measures taken to address them.

***Access to Informants*:** The sensitivity of the topic constrained access to some key informants, particularly serving diplomats and current Somali government officials.

Mitigation measure: Informants with extensive past experience in Ethio-Somali affairs were selected, including former ambassadors and senior researchers. Secondary sources were used to supplement gaps.

***Geographical Scope and Single-Country Interviewing*:** Interviews were conducted primarily in Addis Ababa, potentially over-representing Ethiopian perspectives.

Mitigation measure: Somali perspectives from secondary literature, ICG, UN, and AU documents were systematically incorporated.

***Potential Bias in Secondary Sources*:** Policy reports may reflect institutional priorities rather than neutral assessments.

Mitigation measure: Critical source appraisal was applied throughout, cross-referencing findings across multiple source types (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

***Time Constraints*:** The rapidly evolving nature of Ethio-Somali relations in 2024 meant some developments post-dated the primary data collection phase.

Mitigation measure: Up-to-date secondary sources, including recent ICG reports, were incorporated to the date of thesis submission.

Thematically, the study focuses on the diplomatic ties between Ethiopia and Somalia within the post-2018 regional and local security and political landscape. The thematic scope is limited to analysing the strategic weight of this bilateral partnership, its influence on the regional balance of power, and prospects for economic development and cooperation. The study does not cover other Ethiopian bilateral relationships or other Horn of Africa interstate dynamics except where directly relevant to the Ethio-Somali relationship.

1.9. Ethical Considerations

The rights of human research participants were protected throughout the study, including rights to informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and freedom from harm (Bryman, 2007). All participants were fully briefed on research procedures, objectives, and risks. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. All information was treated with strict confidentiality. Where participants are cited, they are referenced by agreed-upon designations (e.g., KII 1, KII 2), except where they gave explicit consent to be identified by name and title, as reflected in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER TWO

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Conceptual Perspectives

The conceptual framework of this study draws on a set of interrelated concepts derived from the disciplines of international relations, foreign policy analysis, and security studies. These concepts – bilateral relations, foreign policy, diplomacy, national interest, sovereignty, state fragility, federalism and centre-periphery relations, securitisation, regional security, and proxy conflict – together constitute the analytical vocabulary through which the Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship is examined. Each concept is discussed below with reference to its theoretical foundations and specific application to the Ethio-Somali context.

2.1.1. Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations, as a concept in the study of international relations and diplomacy, refer to the various types of institutionalised and non-institutionalised interactions between two sovereign states possessing the legal capacity to enter into agreements and to pursue shared or competing interests across multiple domains (Keller, 2020; Berridge and Lorna, 2013). Such interactions are typically multidimensional, encompassing diplomatic, economic, security, political, and cultural dimensions, and are shaped by factors including historical legacies, shared or contested identities, economic capabilities, resource endowments, leadership preferences, and the regional security environment (Holsti, 1992; Morgenthau, 1948).

Bilateral relations are inherently dynamic, evolving in response to domestic political changes in the participating states, shifts in the regional security environment, and the actions of third-party actors. They are also characterised by simultaneity: two states can cooperate in one domain (such as security) while competing or confronting each other in another (such as territorial sovereignty) at the same time (Berridge and Lorna, 2013). This multidimensional character is particularly evident in the Ethio-Somali case, where security cooperation on counterterrorism coexists with acute political confrontation over sovereignty and sea access.

The study of bilateral relations also requires attention to what Putnam (1988) has termed the "two-level game": the idea that state leaders simultaneously negotiate at the international level with foreign counterparts and at the domestic level with their own political constituencies. This framework is highly relevant to the Ethio-Somali context, where both governments are constrained by domestic political pressures – Ethiopian nationalist demands for sea access and Somali elite fears of state disintegration – that limit the space available for bilateral compromise. In the Ethio-Somali case, the bilateral relationship has historically displayed all three characteristics of cooperation, competition, and conflict. The conflict dimension is illustrated through the Ogaden War (Abdullahi, 2015; Tareke, 2009); the economic cooperation dimension through cross-border livestock trade; and the security cooperation dimension through shared counterterrorism against Al-Shabaab (Bekele, 2019; Williams, 2022).

2.1.2. Foreign Policy Analysis

Foreign policy refers to the set of strategies, goals, and actions that a state's government adopts to manage its external relations and advance its national interests (Holsti, 1992). Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) examines the internal and external determinants of state behaviour, including the role of domestic political dynamics, leadership preferences, bureaucratic interests, and structural systemic factors (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). Rosenau's (1966) pre-theory of foreign policy was among the first systematic attempts to identify the multiple variables – individual, role, governmental, societal, and systemic – that shape state external behaviour. More recent FPA scholarship has emphasised the role of cognitive factors, including leaders' belief systems, analogical reasoning, and threat perception, in shaping foreign policy choices (Jervis, 1976; Hudson, 2005). These cognitive dimensions are particularly relevant in the Ethio-Somali case, where the institutional memory of the Ogaden War and the 2006 intervention continue to shape how policymakers on both sides interpret each other's actions (Clapham, 2017).

Understanding the foreign policies of both Ethiopia and Somalia requires attending to all three levels of analysis. At the systemic level, both states are influenced by the competitive geopolitics of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea (Verhoeven, 2018; Tanchum, 2020). At the domestic level, both states are constrained by internal political pressures that limit the scope for

bilateral compromise. At the individual level, the contrast between the Abiy-Farmajo diplomatic warming and the Abiy–Hassan Sheikh Mohamud confrontation illustrates how leadership personality and interpersonal relations can significantly shape bilateral dynamics, even when structural conditions remain broadly constant.

Somalia's foreign policy has historically been characterised by the irredentist nationalist project of Greater Somalia, the constraints imposed by state fragility, and deep dependence on external support, which gives major external partners disproportionate influence over Somali foreign policy (Lewis, 2002; Menkhaus, 2014; Hassan and Marchal, 2013). The transition from the Farmajo to the Hassan Sheikh Mohamud presidency in 2022 reflected a reorientation towards a more assertive sovereignty-protection agenda supported by Arab League membership and ultimately the Egypt alignment (ICG, 2024). Ethiopia's foreign policy, by contrast, has been shaped by a strong state tradition, a commitment to sovereignty and non-interference as diplomatic principles, and the overriding economic imperative of sea access for a landlocked nation of over 120 million people (Yihun, 2020; Clapham, 2017; Zewde, 2001).

2.1.3. Diplomacy in Regional Context

Diplomacy, broadly defined, is the institutionalised practice through which states conduct their external relations, communicate their interests, negotiate agreements, and manage conflicts without resort to armed force (Berridge, 2015; Bull, 1977). As a concept distinct from foreign policy – which refers to the goals and strategies of a state's external behaviour – diplomacy refers to the instruments, processes, and institutions through which those goals are pursued, including bilateral negotiations, multilateral engagements, summit diplomacy, mediation, and a range of formal and informal communicative and institutional mechanisms (Sharp, 2009).

In the Horn of Africa, diplomacy operates at several interlocking levels. At the bilateral level, direct state-to-state negotiations and agreements constitute the primary channel. At the regional level, IGAD and the AU provide multilateral frameworks for coordination, dialogue, and conflict mediation. At the international level, the involvement of the UN, the Arab League, and partnerships with external powers adds further diplomatic complexity (Verhoeven, 2018; Altunişik, 2020). A distinctive feature is the prominence of what de Waal (2021) has called "political marketplace" dynamics: political relationships structured by transactional exchanges

of patronage, loyalty, and resources rather than institutionalised norms. This gives rise to highly personalised, leader-driven diplomacy that produces fragile achievements susceptible to reversal when leadership changes. As Clapham (2017) argues, sustainable bilateral relations in the Horn require institutional architecture operating independently of individual leaders' preferences.

Track II diplomacy – informal, non-official dialogue processes involving academics, civil society, diaspora communities, and religious leaders – has played a role in Ethio-Somali relations, though this has been underexplored in the literature (Ayalew, 2020). The potential for Track II processes to build cross-border social capital and prepare the ground for Track I diplomatic breakthroughs represents an important underexplored area of future engagement.

2.1.4. National Interest

National interest is a foundational concept in international relations, referring to the goals, values, and ambitions that a state's government defines as essential to the security, prosperity, identity, and prestige of the nation it represents (Morgenthau, 1948; Holsti, 1992). The concept has both a relatively fixed core – survival, territorial integrity, sovereignty – and a more malleable peripheral set of interests that vary depending on the ideological orientation of the government in power and the constraints of the international system (Nuechterlein, 1979). The realist tradition holds that national interest, defined primarily in terms of power, is the ultimate guide to state behaviour (Morgenthau, 1948). Liberal institutionalists argue that national interests are defined and pursued within international institutions and norms that can shape and constrain state behaviour (Keohane, 1984).

In the Ethio-Somali context, national interests have been both drivers of cooperation and sources of structural tension. Ethiopia's core national interests in relation to Somalia include: maintenance of a state that poses no conventional military threat; prevention of Somali irredentism; security of the Ethiopian Somali region against cross-border terrorism; and acquisition of secure, diversified sea access (Mesfin, 2022; Kibreab, 2022). Somalia's core national interests include: preservation of internationally recognised territorial sovereignty including over Somaliland; prevention of further fragmentation; maintenance of strategic autonomy; and construction of a coherent national identity (Lewis, 2002; Menkhaus, 2014).

The interaction between these two sets of interests is fundamentally asymmetric and partly contradictory: Ethiopia's interest in a fragmented Somalia conflicts with Somalia's interest in a strong, unified state; and Ethiopia's sea access agenda conflicts with Somalia's sovereignty agenda. These structural incompatibilities require creative institutional solutions, as this study argues.

2.1.5. Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

Sovereignty – the principle that states have supreme authority within their recognised territorial boundaries and are not subject to external interference – is one of the foundational norms of the international system, codified in the UN Charter and the Constitutive Act of the African Union (Jackson, 1990; Krasner, 1999). In practice, sovereignty is a contested and frequently violated principle, particularly in the context of weak or fragile states where the gap between nominal sovereignty (legal recognition) and effective sovereignty (actual territorial control) is wide (Krasner, 1999). In the Ethio-Somali context, sovereignty disputes are central to the bilateral relationship. Somalia's territorial sovereignty claim over Somaliland conflicts directly with Ethiopia's practical engagement with Somaliland as an autonomous actor capable of concluding port access agreements (Hoehne, 2016; ICG, 2022). This conflict between nominal and effective sovereignty creates what Krasner (1999) has called "organised hypocrisy" – a gap between the norm of sovereignty and the reality of political authority on the ground – that Ethiopia's Somaliland MoU exploited in a way that Somalia could not accept without effectively conceding that its sovereignty claims over Somaliland were meaningless.

2.1.6. State Fragility and Governance Challenges

State fragility refers to the condition of states that lack the institutional capacity, political legitimacy, or effective territorial control necessary to perform basic state functions (Fund for Peace, 2023; Rotberg, 2003). In the context of international relations, fragile states pose distinctive challenges: their inability to control territory makes them potential hosts for non-state armed groups; their governance weaknesses undermine their capacity to negotiate and implement bilateral agreements; and their dependence on external support gives outside actors disproportionate leverage over their foreign policy choices (Williams, 2018; Menkhaus, 2014). Somalia's state fragility creates a fundamental asymmetry in the Ethio-Somali bilateral

relationship: while Ethiopia's state institutions possess significant capacity to formulate and implement foreign policy, Somalia's capacity is severely constrained. As Ambassador Taju observed, "Somalia does not have a strong centralised government. There are breakaway regions not under direct control of the central government. Ethiopia's bilateral engagement with those breakaway regions complicates the roles of IGAD and undermines Somalia's federal authority". This structural asymmetry must be explicitly accounted for in any analysis of Ethio-Somali bilateral dynamics.

2.1.7. Federalism and Centre-Periphery Relations

Federalism – the constitutional arrangement dividing governmental authority between central and constituent units – is a defining feature of both Ethiopia and Somalia, with radically different histories and outcomes in each case (Feyissa, 2011; Hassan and Marchal, 2013). In Ethiopia, ethnic federalism introduced under the EPRDF in 1991 created a system in which regional states defined by ethnic identity possess significant formal autonomy (Aalen and Tronvoll, 2009). The Ethiopian Somali Region occupies a particularly sensitive position, sharing extensive cultural, linguistic, and kinship ties with the Somali population across the border, and thus serving as a potential conduit for Al-Shabaab infiltration and a complex site of competing federal and regional loyalties (Feyissa, 2011;). In Somalia, the federal model adopted in the 2012 Provisional Constitution has created persistent tension between the Federal Government and the Federal Member States. FMS have on occasion conducted their own relationships with external actors, including Ethiopia, that diverge from or contradict the central government's foreign policy (Hassan and Marchal, 2013). Understanding how federal dynamics on both sides of the border shape the bilateral relationship is therefore essential to any comprehensive analysis of Ethio-Somali diplomacy.

2.1.8. Securitisation

Securitisation, as developed by Buzan, Waëver, and de Wilde (1998) in Security: A New Framework for Analysis, refers to the process by which an issue is discursively constructed as an existential threat requiring emergency measures beyond normal political deliberation. Both Ethiopia and Somalia have, at various points, securitised aspects of their bilateral relationship in ways that have narrowed the space for diplomatic resolution. Ethiopia has historically

securitised its relationship with Somalia, framing Somali political developments through the lens of national security threat, which has justified military interventions and coercive diplomatic strategies (Barnes and Hassan, 2007). Somalia has securitised Ethiopia's engagement with Somaliland, framing it as an existential threat to national territorial integrity that justifies extraordinary diplomatic mobilisation, including the Egypt alignment. These securitisation moves create self-reinforcing dynamics of mutual threat perception that are extremely difficult to reverse through normal diplomatic channels, making de-securitisation a prerequisite for sustained diplomatic progress (Buzan et al., 1998; Menkhaus, 2014).

2.1.9. Regional Security in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa has historically been characterised by pervasive insecurity across multiple dimensions, including intrastate insurgencies, inter-state wars, transnational terrorism, organised crime, piracy, and climate-induced communal violence (Menkhaus, 2014; Williams, 2018; Clapham, 2017). The persistence and interconnectedness of these threats makes the Horn of Africa a paradigmatic case of what Buzan and Waëver (2003) call a "regional security complex." Instability in Somalia routinely produces spillover effects in Ethiopia – refugee flows, Al-Shabaab cross-border attacks, radicalisation of border communities – while Ethiopian military and political interventions in Somalia produce counter-effects that fuel anti-Ethiopian sentiment (Williams, 2018; Menkhaus, 2014). The regional security context has been further complicated by the growing militarisation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, driven by great-power competition for access to the strategic corridors of Bab-El-Mandab, and by the presence of multiple external military bases in Djibouti and Somalia (Lunn and Hoyos, 2013; Tanchum, 2020). As Vertin (2019) argues, the growing "Red Sea rivalry" between Gulf powers has effectively drawn the Horn of Africa's bilateral state relations into a web of external competition largely beyond the control of regional states themselves.

2.1.10. Proxy Conflict and External Interference

Proxy conflict refers to the phenomenon in which external powers pursue their own strategic interests by supporting, arming, or aligning with parties to a conflict in a third-party state, without directly engaging in that conflict themselves (Hughes, 2014; Mumford, 2013). The Cold War-era Ogaden War provides the classic historical example in the Ethio-Somali context:

the Soviet Union and Cuba backed Ethiopia, while the United States initially backed Somalia, turning a bilateral territorial dispute into a Cold War proxy confrontation (Tareke, 2009; Young, 2012). In the contemporary period, the same dynamic recurs in more complex form, with the UAE, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and other powers each supporting different parties and agendas in the Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship (Verhoeven, 2018; Vertin, 2019). Understanding the mechanisms by which external interference shapes bilateral relations – through military support, financial patronage, diplomatic backing, and media framing – is essential for a complete analysis of the post-2018 Ethio-Somali dynamic.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The complexity of the Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship defies explanation through any single theoretical lens. This study therefore adopts a multi-theoretical approach, drawing on classical realism, neorealism, constructivism, liberal institutionalism, and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as complementary analytical frameworks. Each theory is introduced, its core propositions outlined, its relevance to the Ethio-Somali case assessed, and its limitations noted. The section concludes with a synthetic theoretical proposition that integrates the most analytically productive elements of each framework.

2.2.1. Classical Realism

Classical realism, as developed by Morgenthau (1948) in Politics Among Nations and elaborated by Aron (1966), remains one of the most influential frameworks for analysing interstate relations, particularly in regions characterised by power competition, security threats, and weak institutional architecture. Classical realism posits that the international system is inherently anarchic and that rational state actors are therefore compelled to prioritise national interest, defined primarily in terms of power, security, and survival. States pursue power as both a means to security and an end in itself; alliances are formed and broken according to calculations of national interest; and cooperation, while possible, is inherently unstable as it depends on the continued convergence of national interests rather than on shared norms or institutional commitments (Morgenthau, 1948; Aron, 1966).

Classical realism also places significant emphasis on the role of human nature and political leadership in shaping foreign policy outcomes. Morgenthau (1948) argued that the lust for power and desire for security are fundamental features of human psychology, and that understanding the motivations and perceptions of individual leaders is essential for explaining specific foreign policy choices. This "classical" dimension – its attention to the role of statesmen – distinguishes it from the structural determinism of neorealism, and makes it particularly useful for explaining the highly personalised dynamics of Horn of Africa diplomacy (de Waal, 2021; Clapham, 2017).

The classical realist framework illuminates several key dimensions of the post-2018 Ethio-Somali relationship. Ethiopia's sustained military presence in Somalia, its strategic pursuit of sea access through the Berbera MoU, and its cultivation of FMS relationships that bypass the FGS all reflect classic realpolitik: the prioritisation of national security and economic interests over compliance with norms of non-intervention or territorial sovereignty. Somalia's counter-alignment with Egypt reflects classic balancing behaviour, in which a weaker state seeks to offset the power advantage of a stronger neighbour by cultivating an external patron (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). However, classical realism's tendency to treat states as unitary rational actors and underweight domestic politics, elite perceptions, and ideational factors points to the need for complementary theoretical frameworks.

2.2.2. Neorealism (Structural Realism)

Neorealism, or structural realism, as developed by Waltz (1979) in Theory of International Politics, shifts the focus from the motivations of individual states and leaders to the structure of the international system as the primary determinant of state behaviour. For Waltz, the anarchic structure of the international system creates powerful incentives for states to pursue self-help strategies, balance against threatening powers, and avoid dependence on unreliable institutions. The distribution of capabilities within the system determines state behaviour, not the characteristics of individual states or leaders. Neorealism predicts that states will tend to balance against rising or threatening powers, and that cooperation will be difficult to sustain because states are concerned not only with absolute gains but with relative gains – the fear that cooperation will benefit a rival more than oneself (Waltz, 1979; Grieco, 1988).

Neorealism offers important insights into the structural constraints shaping Ethio-Somali relations. The persistent power asymmetry between Ethiopia – a large military and economic actor with major regional influence – and Somalia – a fragile, aid-dependent state with limited central authority – creates conditions in which Somalia has strong incentives to seek external allies to balance against Ethiopian influence, and in which Ethiopia has incentives to prevent Somalia from acquiring capabilities or external backing that might alter this asymmetry (Waltz, 1979;). The Cairo-Mogadishu defence pact of 2024 is precisely the kind of balancing behaviour that structural theory predicts. However, neorealism's structural determinism leaves little room for the role of domestic politics, leadership personality, historical memory, and ideational factors that are demonstrably important in the Ethio-Somali case, pointing to the need for a framework incorporating both structural and agential factors.

2.2.3. Constructivism

Constructivism, as developed by Wendt (1992, 1999) and Onuf (1989), challenges the materialist assumptions of both classical and structural realism by arguing that the interests and identities of states are not fixed, objective facts but are socially constructed through processes of interaction, communication, and mutual recognition. For constructivists, anarchy is "what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992): the international system does not have a fixed objective logic compelling states to pursue power and security; rather, the meaning states attach to each other's actions is shaped by historically produced and intersubjectively shared norms, identities, and understandings.

Constructivism is highly relevant to the Ethio-Somali case, where the bilateral relationship is profoundly shaped by historically produced identities and narratives that cannot be reduced to material power calculations. The Greater Somalia ideology, the "Gragn Syndrome," Ethiopian nationalist narratives of anti-colonial resistance, and the institutional memories of the Ogaden War and the 2006 intervention are all ideational phenomena – shared beliefs, narratives, and identity constructions – that shape how policymakers interpret each other's actions and define their own interests (Wendt, 1992; Menkhaus, 2014; Clapham, 2017). The persistent securitisation of the relationship – the tendency of both sides to interpret even diplomatically benign actions through the lens of existential threat – reflects a constructed intersubjective

understanding of the bilateral relationship as fundamentally hostile, which persists even when material conditions might support cooperation.

Constructivism also highlights the potential for change: if identities and interests are socially constructed, they can in principle be reconstructed through sustained dialogue, exchange, and trust-building. The Abiy-Farmajo diplomatic warming represents, from a constructivist perspective, a partial and temporary reconstruction of the bilateral relationship that was ultimately unable to overcome deeper structural and ideational obstacles. This suggests that effective diplomacy in the Ethio-Somali context requires not only institutional architecture but also deliberate efforts to change the narratives, identities, and intersubjective understandings structuring the relationship. The limitation of constructivism is its relative underspecification of the constraints imposed by material power differentials and structural conditions (Hopf, 1998).

2.2.4. Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism, associated with Keohane (1984), Keohane and Nye (1977), and Ruggie (1992), argues that international institutions can mitigate collective action problems and mistrust, enabling states to achieve cooperative outcomes that they could not achieve through unilateral action. By providing information, reducing transaction costs, monitoring compliance, and establishing norms, international institutions can facilitate sustained cooperation even among states with competing national interests (Keohane, 1984).

Liberal institutionalism is particularly relevant for evaluating the roles of IGAD and the AU in shaping Ethio-Somali bilateral relations. The Abiy-Farmajo tripartite agreement, the Somalia Cross-Border Trade Pact, and the 2023 Joint Investment Commission all represent instances of institutional frameworks enabling cooperation that might not have occurred in their absence. However, the limitations are also clearly illustrated: IGAD's repeated credibility crises, its inability to prevent the 2024 MoU confrontation, and Somalia's willingness to bypass IGAD in favour of a bilateral defence pact with Egypt suggest that institutional frameworks in the Horn remain weak, under-resourced, and easily circumvented when they conflict with powerful national interests (ICG, 2024). This finding aligns with Mearsheimer's (1994) critique that

institutions can only facilitate cooperation where states have strong underlying interests in cooperating, and cannot overcome deep structural conflicts of interest.

2.2.5. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Waëver (2003) in Regions and Powers, provides the most analytically comprehensive framework for situating Ethio-Somali bilateral relations within their regional context. RSCT posits that security dynamics in regional sub-systems are deeply interconnected: the security of any one state in a regional complex is structurally bound up with the security of its neighbours, such that instability in one state inevitably spills over into others. Regional security complexes are defined by patterns of amity and enmity, security interdependence, and the involvement of external powers that seek to penetrate or insulate the complex. The Horn of Africa is recognised by Buzan and Waëver (2003) as a prototypical regional security complex, characterised by dense webs of security interdependence among Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda.

RSCT is particularly useful for explaining why developments within Somalia have direct implications for Ethiopian security and vice versa, and why external powers cannot be analysed as peripheral actors in bilateral Ethio-Somali relations. Turkey's military base in Mogadishu, the UAE's port investments, and Egypt's defence pact with Somalia are penetrations of the Horn of Africa security complex by external powers that reshape the threat perceptions of all complex members (Verhoeven, 2018; Menkhaus, 2018;). RSCT's concept of "securitisation overlays" – situations in which external power involvement comes to dominate a regional security complex – is increasingly applicable to the contemporary Horn, where Gulf power competition, Turkish strategic expansion, and Egyptian GERD diplomacy are overlaying and reshaping the region's indigenous security dynamics (Buzan and Waëver, 2003; Tanchum, 2020). RSCT's limitation is its security-centric focus, which requires supplementation with economic, institutional, and ideational frameworks.

2.2.6. Complex Interdependence Theory

The theory of complex interdependence, developed by Keohane and Nye (1977) in Power and Interdependence, challenges the realist assumption that security dominates all other issue areas in international relations. Keohane and Nye argue that in a world characterised by multiple channels of interaction, the absence of a clear hierarchy among issue areas, and the declining role of military force in resolving disputes, states are increasingly constrained by their mutual economic, social, and institutional dependencies. High levels of interdependence raise the costs of conflict and create institutional incentives for cooperation, even among states with competing security interests.

In the Ethio-Somali context, complex interdependence theory illuminates the functional areas of cooperation that have persisted despite repeated political crises. The estimated 65 percent of Somali port export livestock originating in Ethiopia, the mutual dependence on IGAD climate resilience programmes, and the shared imperative of Al-Shabaab containment all create economic and security interdependencies providing structural incentives for cooperation even when political relations are severely strained (Keohane and Nye, 1977; Tadesse and Schaefer, 2021). The challenge, as this study argues, is to develop the institutional architecture that can translate these underlying interdependencies into sustained cooperative outcomes, rather than allowing them to be repeatedly overwhelmed by security-driven confrontational dynamics.

2.2.7. Synthetic Theoretical Proposition

On the basis of the preceding theoretical review, this study advances the following synthetic proposition: the post-2018 Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship is best understood as a structural tension between two competing logics – the logic of power competition and national interest (captured by realist frameworks) and the logic of mutual vulnerability and shared incentives for cooperation (captured by interdependence theory and liberal institutionalism) – mediated by ideational factors (constructivism) and operating within the structural context of a densely interconnected regional security complex (RSCT). Neither cooperation nor confrontation is the natural equilibrium of this relationship; both are possible outcomes, depending on whether institutional frameworks, leadership choices, and ideational shifts are able to manage the structural tensions generated by competing national interests and historical mistrust. Explaining

and predicting the trajectory of Ethio-Somali bilateral relations therefore requires attending simultaneously to structural power dynamics, economic and security interdependencies, ideational and narrative factors, institutional frameworks, and the destabilising influence of external actors – a task that no single theoretical framework can accomplish alone.

2.3. Review of Empirical Studies

The studies reviewed are primarily analytical and interpretive rather than purely empirical in the positivist sense. They are based on historical documents, field observations, and secondary data analysis rather than controlled experiments or large-N statistical studies. This is appropriate for the Horn of Africa context, where the complexity of political and security dynamics requires interpretive rather than purely causal-statistical approaches (Yin, 2018). The term 'empirical' here refers to studies grounded in evidence – historical, documentary, and qualitative – rather than purely theoretical speculation.

2.3.1. Overview of The Ethio-Somali Diplomatic Relations

The diplomatic ties between Ethiopia and Somalia have long been shaped by geographical proximity, colonial legacies, overlapping ethnic and religious communities, and contested territorial claims. The rise of pan-Somali nationalism in the 1950s created political pressures that transcended colonial borders and established the irredentist agenda that would dominate Ethio-Somali relations for decades (Lewis, 2002; Tareke, 2009; Abdullahi, 2015). The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897 and the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1907 laid the colonial foundations for subsequent territorial disputes, effectively partitioning Somali-inhabited territories across several post-colonial states (Lewis, 2002; Hersi, 2018). Following Somali independence in 1960, the concept of "Greater Somalia" emerged as the animating ideology of the new republic, providing the justification for the Ogaden War of 1977–1978 and continuing to shape Somali elite perceptions of Ethiopian intentions (Menkhaus, 2014; Tareke, 2009). In the post-1991 period, Ethiopia maintained a de facto presence in Somali affairs through the 2006 military intervention against the ICU and extensive AMISOM/ATMIS contributions (Barnes and Hassan, 2007; Gebre, 2016; Mekonnen, 2018). Scholarly assessments of these interventions diverge: some emphasise stabilisation (African Union, 2020; Williams, 2018),

while others argue they generated blowback including Al-Shabaab radicalisation (Menkhaus, 2007).

2.3.2. The Ogaden War (1977–1978) and Its Long-Term Impact

The Ogaden War is widely recognised as the defining turning point in modern Ethio-Somali relations. Somalia's Siad Barre regime, emboldened by Cold War arms deliveries, launched a ground invasion of Ethiopia's Somali Region in 1977, aiming to incorporate ethnically Somali areas into a Greater Somali state (Tareke, 2009; Lewis, 2002; Hersi, 2018). The invasion was repelled by Ethiopian forces supported by the Soviet Union and Cuba, inflicting a decisive military defeat that fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Horn (Young, 2012; Abdullahi, 2015). The war's consequences were far-reaching: it deepened mutual hostility and institutional mistrust that persist to the present day (Menkhaus, 2014; Clapham, 2017), weakened the Barre regime, set in motion the internal fractures that led to state collapse in 1991, and created the conditions for Al-Shabaab's emergence through the resulting power vacuum (Menkhaus, 2007).

2.3.3. The Role of Nationalist Narratives in Shaping Bilateral Relations

The Ethio-Somali bilateral relationship has been profoundly shaped by competing nationalist narratives influencing elite and popular perceptions on both sides (Clapham, 2017; Menkhaus, 2014). The Greater Somalia ideology, rooted in colonial-era grievances and animated by ethnic self-determination, has historically been mobilised to justify irredentist claims and armed resistance (Lewis, 2002; Abdullahi, 2015). These narratives rely on clan allegiances, oral histories, and cultural symbols to sustain collective Somali identity transcending post-colonial borders (Hersi, 2018). On the Ethiopian side, nationalist narratives emphasise sovereignty, territorial integrity, and resistance to external aggression, and have periodically been deployed to justify military action and internal security measures (Gebre, 2016; Mekonnen, 2018). These competing narratives are embedded in social institutions, political practices, and elite perceptions, creating persistent security dilemmas that complicate diplomatic negotiations and inhibit trust-building (Clapham, 2017; Menkhaus, 2014).

2.3.4. Overview of the Post-2018 Diplomatic Relations

Since 2018, the Ethio-Somali relationship has undergone significant transformation. The rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed initiated a period of active regional diplomacy, including warm bilateral ties with Somali President Farmajo formalised in a tripartite Horn of Africa integration agreement (Bekele, 2019; Ayalew, 2020). However, this diplomatic warming was built on personal leadership ties rather than institutional foundations, rendering it vulnerable to leadership changes (Clapham, 2018). The transition from President Farmajo to President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in 2022 exposed the fragility of these personalised ties. Relations deteriorated sharply as Ethiopia pursued sea access through the January 2024 MoU with Somaliland, leading Mogadishu to declare the agreement null and void and sign a counter-alignment defence pact with Egypt (ICG, 2024; Hoehne, 2016). These developments drew additional external actors into the bilateral dynamic, complicating IGAD's mediation role and introducing new security risks into an already volatile regional environment (Bekele, 2019;).

CHAPTER THREE

3. BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND SOMALIA SINCE 2018: CHALLENGES

This chapter presents, analyses, and interprets the data collected from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) alongside documentary secondary sources. The chapter is structured according to the thematic categories derived from the research questions and interview guide. Data triangulation – cross-referencing interview accounts with secondary literature and documentary evidence – is applied throughout.

3.1. Ethio-Somalia Diplomatic Relations: Historical Context

3.1.1. Major Turning Points in Ethio-Somalia Relations Since 1960

Key Informant Interviews consistently identified the complexity of Ethio-Somali historical relations as foundational to understanding contemporary dynamics. As a Foreign Policy Analyst at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, noted: "A proper understanding of the contemporary diplomatic relations between the two states is incomplete without due reflection on what happened 500 years ago. Attributing the trajectories of Ethio-Somali relations solely to recent events misses the deeper historical sediment that shapes elite perceptions today" (Expert at Institute of Foreign Affairs, 1 October 2025).

The interviewees traced the historical roots to agrarian-pastoral conflicts over natural resources – pasture, water, and livestock – that characterized interactions between ancient Somali and Ethiopian communities. The medieval Adal-Ethiopia conflicts during the fourteenth century, particularly the Islamic expansion under Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (popularly known as Gragn), represented a formative episode creating what one informant described as a lasting "Gragn Syndrome" of mutual wariness and rivalry (a former Ethiopian Ambassador to Somalia, 8 October 2025). This finding is corroborated by Lewis (2002) and Hersi (2018), who document how the medieval Adal-Ethiopia conflicts established patterns of religious and political rivalry persisting into the modern period.

The colonial-era partition of Somali territories represented a second major turning point. As Ambassador Hassen Taju, former Ethiopian Ambassador to Kuwait, observed: "Colonialism divided the Somali nation, and the aftermath created contested territories between Ethiopia and Somalia that sowed the seeds of subsequent irredentism" (Ambassador Hassen Taju, 4 October 2025). This assessment aligns with scholarly accounts: the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897 and the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1907 effectively partitioned Somali-inhabited territories across multiple post-colonial states (Lewis, 2002; Tareke, 2009; Abdullahi, 2015). Somalia's independence in 1960 was identified by all informants as a critical juncture. "Somali forces advanced toward Dire Dawa in 1977, but the Derg defeated them" (Ambassador Mohammed Diqqa,). The Cold War was also highlighted as an amplifying factor: Siad Barre's decision to invade was emboldened by arms supplies and military training received in the context of superpower rivalry (KII 1, Dr. Miftah Mohammed), aligning with Tareke's (2009) detailed account of Cold War dynamics in the Horn of Africa.

3.1.2. Historical Grievances That Continue to Influence Post-2018 Diplomacy

The Ogaden War was universally identified by informants as the most consequential historical episode shaping post-2018 relations. As Dr. Miftah Mohammed noted: "The Ogaden War opened the Pandora's box of all problems that Somalia has yet to live with". Ambassador Diqqa elaborated on the institutional dimension of mistrust: "Ethiopia's national security institutions are heavily involved in monitoring neighbouring countries because their actions can directly affect Ethiopia. Between Ethiopia and Somalia, the historical turning points mentioned still influence present-day relations. These events are always taken into consideration in modern diplomatic and political relations" (Former Ethiopian Ambassador to Somalia). This observation is consistent with Clapham's (2017) argument that institutional memory and elite perceptions carry as much weight as structural factors in shaping diplomatic outcomes.

The 2006 Ethiopian military intervention against the ICU was identified as the second major turning point. Informants offered divergent assessments: Ambassador Diqqa argued that "Ethiopia attacked and removed the Islamic Courts Union because it was seen as a threat to national security. Any movement perceived as a risk to Ethiopia's security will prompt

Ethiopian intervention" (Former Ethiopian Ambassador to Somalia). Ambassador Taju offered a more critical assessment: "Besides national self-defence claims, the 2006 intervention was driven by Ethiopia's historic sense of threat from Somalia and its interest in preventing a powerful centralised Somali government that might revive border or Ogaden issues". These divergent perspectives reflect the broader scholarly debate (cf. Barnes and Hassan, 2007; Menkhaus, 2007), and highlight how the 2006 episode continues to be interpreted differently by different actors, complicating post-2018 trust-building efforts. Triangulation with secondary literature confirms: Menkhaus (2014), Clapham (2017), and Williams (2018) all document how the deep institutional memory of these events continues to shape threat perceptions and diplomatic calculations on both sides.

3.1.3. Current State of Relations

The post-2018 Ethiopian government exhibited both continuities and changes in its policies towards Somalia. In the initial years, the regime demonstrated significant policy change, characterised by warm personal relations between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somali President Mohammed Abdulahi Farmajo. As Dr. Mohammed Seid, Researcher at the Institute of Foreign Affairs, noted: "This was a highly personalised diplomatic relationship, and it produced genuine diplomatic warmth and early cooperation frameworks" (An Expert from Institute of Foreign Affairs, 1 October 2025).

However, this diplomatic warmth was disrupted following the regime change in Somalia in 2022. As Dr. Seid observed: "No matter how strong personalised political relationships may appear, they cannot insulate bilateral ties from fundamental structural conflicts. Structural mistrust rooted in long histories of conflict, interference in internal affairs, and territorial disputes reasserts itself when personal bonds dissolve". This directly supports Clapham's (2018) argument and aligns with Fisher and Anderson's (2023) documentation of how regime changes expose underlying structural tensions. The Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU of January 2024 marked the sharpest deterioration. Ambassador Taju characterised this as a predictable outcome: "The lack of mutual trust between the two states means that any diplomatic agreement pursued without inclusive negotiation is structurally fragile. The MoU confirmed

for many in Mogadishu that Ethiopia's intentions towards Somali sovereignty are expansionist".

3.2. Key Factors Driving Shifts in Ethio-Somalia Bilateral Relations Since 2018

3.2.1. Functional Areas of Cooperation

Despite the structural tensions described above, informants identified several functional areas in which Ethio-Somali cooperation has persisted, reflecting the economic and security interdependencies that create sustained incentives for bilateral engagement even in periods of political friction.

Security Cooperation: Counterterrorism as a Necessity

Counterterrorism cooperation against Al-Shabaab has been identified as the most critical and durable area of bilateral convergence. The two countries have established working modalities including bilateral agreements, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and coordination among police forces and local clan structures. Ethiopia's contributions to AMISOM/ATMIS have been indispensable to Somalia's security architecture; Somalia cannot afford to expel Ethiopian troops without jeopardising the security situation. Triangulation with secondary sources confirms this: Williams (2022) documents how Ethiopia's intelligence and military contributions have been central to the stabilisation effort, while Menkhaus (2014) notes that Al-Shabaab's cross-border terrorism creates a genuine shared threat incentivising security cooperation regardless of the political climate.

Trade and Economic Linkages

Cross-border trade represents a second major area of functional cooperation. Approximately 65 percent of the total head of livestock exported via Somali ports of Zeila and Berbera originates in Ethiopia (Dr. Mohammed Seid). This high volume of economic interdependence persists even when formal diplomatic relations are strained, facilitated by local and informal commercial networks. As Little (2003) notes, cross-border trade in the Horn is often sustained by informal economic actors even when formal state-level relations deteriorate. Both countries are also members of IGAD and AfCFTA, providing institutional frameworks for economic

cooperation on climate resilience, food security, and environmental protection (UNECA, 2019).

3.2.2. Institutional Frameworks Shaping Bilateral Ties

Informants consistently highlighted the roles of IGAD and the AU as the primary institutional frameworks shaping Ethio-Somali bilateral relations. IGAD provides the most significant regional platform for policy coordination, economic cooperation, development projects, and security management. The AU, through ATMIS/AUSSOM, provides the broader security architecture within which Ethiopian troop contributions are embedded. However, informants also highlighted important credibility deficits. As Ambassador Diqqa noted: "IGAD's role as a neutral mediator has long been challenged. The organisation's perceived support for Ethiopia's 2006 intervention cost it significant credibility among Somali actors, and its muted response to the 2024 MoU further damaged its neutrality". These observations are consistent with Bekele's (2019) analysis of IGAD's governance challenges.

3.3. Key Challenges: The Al-Shabaab Double Bind

The Al-Shabaab threat creates what informants described as a "double bind" in Ethio-Somali relations. As Dr. Miftah Mohammed noted: "Ethiopia's security and military presence in Somalia has become indispensable to Somalia's stability calculus. Al-Shabaab poses an existential threat to the Somali government and regularly attempts cross-border attacks into Ethiopia's Somali region. Somalia cannot afford to expel these troops". Yet as Ambassador Taju observed, "Somalia has leveraged its critical dependence on Ethiopian security forces as a means of political pressure in the sovereignty dispute, demanding Ethiopia withdraw its troops if the MoU is not rescinded". Triangulation with secondary sources reveals that Al-Shabaab has exploited Ethio-Somali tensions as a recruitment and propaganda tool, framing Ethiopian presence as foreign occupation (Menkhaus, 2014). The group's capacity to benefit from Ethio-Somali discord underlines the stakes of managing bilateral tensions effectively.

Ethiopia's relations with Somalia's FMS represent a further complicating dimension. As Dr. Seid noted: "Ethiopia has worked to maintain partnerships with most of Somalia's regional states, effectively cultivating bilateral relationships that bypass the Federal Government. Mogadishu views this as deliberate destabilisation". This dynamic – documented by Feyissa (2011) and Aalen and Tronvoll (2009) – reflects the intersection of Ethiopian ethnic federalism

and Somali state fragmentation, creating governance challenges that constrain both states' ability to negotiate coherent bilateral agreements.

3.3.1. Political Sovereignty: The Somaliland Dimension

The January 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU provoked the sharpest bilateral crisis of the post-2018 period. Ambassador Taju characterised the core issue: "The deal's core mechanisms – supporting Somaliland's recognition in exchange for commercial and naval access – are deeply controversial. Since no UN member state recognises Somaliland, the FGS views the MoU as an outright violation of its internationally recognised territorial integrity and therefore legally dubious". This is corroborated by ICG (2024) and Hoehne (2016). Ambassador Diqqa offered a pragmatic reading: "For a landlocked country with 120 million people and a history of being cut off from the sea since 1991, sea access is an existential economic necessity. Berbera offers the most viable and underutilised corridor. Ethiopia's engagement is pragmatic, not expansionist". These competing framings capture the fundamental incompatibility of Ethiopian and Somali national interests on this issue. Somalia's response included diplomatic mobilisation and a strategic security counter-alignment with Egypt through the Cairo defence pact of 2024 (ICG, 2024).

3.3.2. Economic Barriers: Informality and Infrastructure Gaps

Informants highlighted the duality of the economic relationship: a high volume of thriving informal trade coexists with an underdeveloped formal trade sector. As Dr. Seid noted: "For a landlocked country like Ethiopia, sea access through Somali ports is crucial. Yet the physical infrastructure – roads, railways, energy – remains woefully inadequate to facilitate formal trade at scale. The connectivity between the two countries is dominated by informal trade, which denies both governments revenue and resilience". Little (2003) and Tadesse (2021) corroborate this, arguing that formalising cross-border trade requires coordinated policy reforms and sustained investment in transport corridors. As Ambassador Taju observed: "The high volume of irregular exchange of goods and commodities highlights the urgent need for comprehensive customs and trade regulation reform at all levels, to convert high-volume informal economic activity into measurable, formalised trade corridors".

3.4. Opportunities for Cooperation and External Actors in Shaping Bilateral Dynamics

This chapter analyses the opportunities available for constructive Ethio-Somali cooperation and examines the roles of external actors in shaping bilateral dynamics, grounded in both KII data and secondary literature, with explicit triangulation throughout. The Horn of Africa's strategic location – connecting the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean – makes it a vital international trade corridor and a zone of intense competition for military footholds, trade corridors, and political influence (Vertin, 2019; Bereketeab, 2020).

3.4.1. Turkey's Deep Footprint in Somalia

Turkey has emerged as Somalia's most significant bilateral partner, with a comprehensive presence across defence, economic, and institutional domains. Turkey established its largest overseas military base in Somalia, TURKSOM, in 2017, delivering extensive support including training of the elite Gorgor special forces unit (Dr. Miftah Mohammed). As Ambassador Diqqa noted: "Ankara's involvement in Somalia is peculiarly strong and pervasive. Turkey has established comprehensive relations with the FGS across maritime, energy, infrastructure, military, security, and space and technology sectors". Altunişik (2020) corroborates this, documenting how Turkey's engagement, initially framed as humanitarian diplomacy following the 2011 famine response, has evolved into a strategic partnership underpinned by commercial and security interests.

Turkey is among Somalia's top trading partners and principal investment allies, formalised as a strategic economic and security partnership since 2011 (Hassan, 2021). Turkey also maintains strong bilateral relations with Ethiopia, with investment exceeding USD 2.5 billion and more than 200 Turkish firms operating in the country (Hassan, 2021). As Dr. Miftah Mohammed observed: "For Ethiopia, Turkey's presence in both Ethiopia and Somalia offers potential for trilateral cooperation in security, trade, and infrastructure, provided that political sensitivities are managed carefully". Triangulation with secondary sources suggests that Turkey's commercial interests in both countries give it a stake in bilateral stability that could be leveraged for constructive mediation (Altunişik, 2020; Verhoeven, 2018). However, as

Somalia's security capacity grows through Turkish support, Somalia may feel less dependent on Ethiopia's troop contributions, potentially altering the security cooperation calculus – a dynamic noted by Williams (2022).

3.4.2. UAE and Red Sea Alignment

The United Arab Emirates has emerged as a major external actor shaping the bilateral Ethio-Somali dynamic through port investments, security partnerships, and political alignments across the Red Sea corridor. The UAE has invested in the Port of Berbera through DP World, and has separately developed strategic ties with both Ethiopia and Puntland (ICG, 2022). As Dr. Seid noted: "The UAE has aligned with Ethiopia in the post-2018 period, providing significant economic and security cooperation. On the other side, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Eritrea have converged as a counter-block protecting the Red Sea maritime sphere". This polarisation of external actors into competing blocs has introduced additional complexity into Ethio-Somali bilateral dynamics, as each state is enmeshed in overlapping external alignments constraining its diplomatic flexibility.

Egypt's entry into the Ethio-Somali dynamic represents a particularly destabilising development. The Cairo-Mogadishu defence pact of 2024 – signed in the wake of the Somaliland MoU – brought into the bilateral dynamic a state already in direct confrontation with Ethiopia over the GERD water dispute (ICG, 2024). As Ambassador Taju observed: "If Egypt and Somalia make some sort of agreement, it could represent a national security risk for Ethiopia. Egypt's entry into the Somalia equation changes the threat calculus entirely". The Egypt-Somalia alignment reflects the broader Red Sea geopolitics analysed by Tanchum (2020) and Verhoeven (2018), in which the Horn of Africa's bilateral relations are increasingly shaped by external powers' strategic competition.

3.4.3. Unexplored Areas of Cooperation

Despite structural challenges, informants identified several promising areas for future Ethio-Somali cooperation that remain underexplored, reflecting the logic of interdependence: shared challenges and complementary interests creating mutual incentives for cooperation (Keohane and Nye, 1977).

3.4.3.1. Energy Development and Cross-Border Connectivity

Ethiopia's completion of the GERD positions it as a potential hub for regional energy connectivity. As Ambassador Diqqa noted: "The GERD could serve as a hub for regional cooperation in clean energy. Cross-border energy connectivity could alter the zero-sum dynamics of the Ethio-Somali relationship and transform it into a positive-sum arrangement benefiting both parties". This potential is supported by IRENA (2021) and Tadesse and Schaefer (2021), who document the economic and stabilising benefits of energy integration in the Horn of Africa.

3.4.3.2. Climate Change and Environmental Cooperation

Both Ethiopia and Somalia are among the world's most climate-vulnerable countries (Brown, 2019; FSNAU, 2022). As Dr. Seid noted: "Climate change is a common challenge across the region. A cooperative approach in resilience building could serve as a politically neutral entry point for trust-building between Ethiopia and Somalia". The IGAD Regional Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2023–2030) provides an existing institutional framework for collaboration on food security and disaster mitigation.

3.4.3.3. Education and Human Development

An informant identified education and human development as a further potential area of cooperation, pointing to the Turkish model of student exchange and institutional academic ties as a relevant example. Educational exchange could build cross-border social capital and professional networks underpinning longer-term diplomatic trust-building, aligning with Ayalew's (2020) argument that people-to-people dialogue is an essential complement to formal diplomatic engagement.

3.4.3.4. Formalisation of Cross-Border Trade

The high volume of informal cross-border trade represents both an existing economic interdependence and an unexploited formal cooperation opportunity. As Little (2003) and Tadesse (2021) argue, formalising this trade through coordinated customs reform and

investment in transport corridors would generate revenue for both governments, reduce security risks, and provide a concrete economic benefit from bilateral cooperation.

3.4.4. The Role of Regional Bodies in Facilitating Reconciliation

Informants expressed mixed assessments of IGAD's capacity to facilitate reconciliation. As Ambassador Diqqa acknowledged: "IGAD's role in mediating between these countries has long been challenged. Ethiopia's 2006 military intervention, for which IGAD was perceived to have provided cover, cost the organisation significant credibility in Somali eyes". The signing of the Somaliland MoU in January 2024 further eroded IGAD's frameworks, and the subsequent emergence of Egypt as a Somalia security partner via the Cairo defence pact reflects Somalia's loss of confidence in IGAD's neutrality (ICG, 2024).

Notwithstanding these challenges, the regional framework still provides essential infrastructure for negotiation, peace, security, and development cooperation. As Dr. Miftah Mohammed observed: "Coordinated, neutral mediation by IGAD and the AU, possibly in conjunction with international partners, remains necessary to de-escalate tensions. No bilateral resolution is sustainable if it lacks regional institutional endorsement". This assessment aligns with Williams (2018) and Clapham (2017), who argue that regional bodies, despite their imperfections, provide the only credible multilateral frameworks for managing the interconnected security challenges of the Horn. Triangulation with Bekele (2019) and Menkhaus (2018) supports the finding that IGAD's credibility deficit is partly self-inflicted – the result of perceived partiality in past crises – but also structural: the organisation's membership includes parties to the very disputes it is asked to mediate, limiting its institutional autonomy.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. CONCLUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

4.1. Conclusion

This study has examined the bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Somalia in the post-2018 period, with a focus on their historical roots, structural challenges, and prospects for cooperation. The findings demonstrate that despite Ethiopia's adoption of an ostensibly open and cooperative foreign policy towards its neighbours following the 2018 political transition, its relations with Somalia have continued to oscillate between cordial engagement and hostile confrontation. This oscillation reflects the persistence of structural tensions – rooted in the Ogaden War, competing nationalist narratives, and Somalia's contested sovereignty – that personal diplomacy and bilateral agreements have thus far been unable to overcome.

The post-2018 diplomatic high point demonstrated both the potential and the limits of leader-driven diplomacy. When leadership changed in Somalia in 2022, structural tensions resurged, and by 2024 the bilateral relationship had deteriorated to its most acute point since 2006 – driven by Ethiopia's unilateral pursuit of sea access through the Somaliland MoU and Somalia's counter-alignment with Egypt. These developments confirm the study's core argument: personalised diplomacy cannot substitute for institutional frameworks, and unilateral approaches to contested issues generate more confrontation than cooperation.

The study's multi-theoretical analysis confirms that no single lens is adequate to explain the complexity of the Ethio-Somali relationship. Realist dynamics dominate the structural landscape. RSCT illuminates how interconnected insecurity in the Horn makes bilateral stability a regional public good. Interdependence theory explains why, despite repeated political crises, functional cooperation in trade and security persists. Constructivism highlights how ideational factors – nationalist narratives, institutional memories, and securitised threat perceptions – shape how both states interpret each other's actions in ways that often preclude cooperative outcomes even when material incentives exist. Liberal institutionalism underscores the importance of institutional architecture, while simultaneously revealing its current inadequacy in the Horn context.

External actors – Turkey, the UAE, Egypt, and Qatar – have introduced additional complexity, simultaneously offering potential for constructive engagement and threatening to polarise the regional security landscape into competing blocs. IGAD and the AU remain the most credible institutional frameworks for managing these challenges, but their credibility has been damaged by perceived partiality and governance weaknesses requiring urgent reform. Despite these challenges, the study finds that significant opportunities for cooperation exist in energy development, climate resilience, trade formalisation, and education. Realising these opportunities requires structural trust-building, institutionalisation of bilateral dialogue, and development of a permanent bilateral commission with clearly defined mandates on security, trade, migration, and maritime governance.

4.2. Recommendations

For Ethiopia

- Prioritise multilateral negotiation through IGAD and the AU rather than unilateral port agreements that undermine Somalia's sovereignty and erode regional credibility.
- Strengthen confidence-building measures with Mogadishu, including joint trade commissions, security protocol negotiations, and transparent communication channels.
- Rebalance engagement with Somali Federal Member States to avoid undermining Somalia's federal architecture.
- Explore cooperative and multilateral maritime governance frameworks that address Ethiopia's sea access needs within a framework acceptable to Somalia.

For Somalia

- Develop a coherent national maritime strategy clarifying port governance and foreign investment rules, reducing ambiguity that invites unilateral external action.
- Strengthen internal cohesion between the Federal Government and Federal Member States to reduce external exploitation of internal governance divisions.

- Engage Ethiopia diplomatically to establish agreed red lines and shared security protocols.

For Regional Organizations (IGAD, AU)

- Reassert leadership by facilitating neutral, inclusive mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia on the maritime access and sovereignty disputes.
- Develop a regional maritime governance framework addressing the legitimate interests of landlocked states within a cooperative paradigm.
- Strengthen mechanisms for collective security cooperation against Al-Shabaab.
- Support the establishment of a permanent Ethio-Somalia bilateral commission with clearly defined mandates on security, trade, migration, and maritime governance.

For External Partners (Turkey, UAE, EU, US)

- Support inclusive regional dialogue and multilateral frameworks rather than bilateral security alignments that deepen polarisation.
- Invest in cross-border infrastructure, climate resilience, and energy connectivity projects generating shared benefits for both Ethiopia and Somalia.
- Tie development incentives to confidence-building measures and institutional reform.

For Future Research

- Examine the role of domestic political transitions in shaping foreign policy volatility in the Horn of Africa.
- Assess the long-term economic viability of Ethiopia's sea-access strategies and implications for regional maritime governance.
- Explore public perceptions in both countries regarding identity narratives and their diplomatic implications.

- Investigate the impact of external actors' military and economic presence on IGAD's institutional effectiveness.

Finally, both countries would benefit from establishing a permanent bilateral commission with clearly defined mandates on security, trade, migration, and maritime governance. Unlike ad hoc diplomatic engagements, a permanent commission would institutionalise dialogue, reduce the impact of leadership turnover, and provide a platform for crisis management (Bereketeab, 2020). The commission could also coordinate donor engagement, ensuring that external actors support rather than undermine bilateral priorities. Strengthening the institutional architecture of Ethio-Somali relations is essential for transforming episodic cooperation into long-term stability.

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF KEY INFORMANTS

The following individuals participated as Key Informants in this study. They are cited throughout the thesis using the designations KII 1 through KII 4. Their participation was conducted in accordance with informed consent procedures, and attributable quotes are reproduced with their explicit permission.

Name	**Position**	**Organisation**	**Date**	**Location**
Dr. Miftah Mohammed (KII 1)	Foreign Policy Analyst	Institute of Foreign Affairs	01/10/2025	IFA Office, Addis Ababa
Dr. Mohammed Seid (KII 3)	Researcher	Institute of Foreign Affairs	01/10/2025	IFA Office, Addis Ababa
Ambassador Mohammed Diqqa (KII 2)	Former Ethiopian Ambassador to Somalia	–	08/10/2025	Bulbula Park, Addis Ababa
Ambassador Hassen Taju (KII 4)	Former Ethiopian Ambassador to Kuwait	–	04/10/2025	Addis Ababa

Note on citation format: Key Informant Interviews are cited as (KII [number], [Full Name and Title], [Date]). For example: (KII 1, Dr. Miftah Mohammed, Institute of Foreign Affairs, 1 October 2025). Where a single informant is cited multiple times in proximity, shortened forms such as (KII 1) are used after the first full citation.

APPENDIX 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction and Consent

Good [morning/afternoon], [Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name or Honorific]. Thank you for making time to speak with me. My name is Mesoud Mohammed, and I am a postgraduate student at Addis Ababa University, Department of Political science and International Relations. I am conducting a study titled "The Bilateral Relations between Ethiopia and Somalia since 2018: Challenges and Prospects" as part of my MA thesis. The goal is to understand the current dynamics, challenges, and future opportunities in Ethiopia-Somalia relations. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question or pause/end the interview at any time without consequence.

Interview Questions

Historical Context

- How would you characterise the major turning points in Ethiopia-Somalia relations since 1960?
- What historical grievances still influence current diplomacy, with a special focus on the post-2018 period?

Current State of Relations

- Describe the functional areas of cooperation (e.g., security, trade, drought response).
- What are the most significant institutional frameworks (bilateral/multilateral) shaping the relationship?

Key Challenges

- Security: How do divergent interests in counterterrorism, Somali regional states, or Somaliland affect bilateral relations?
- Political/Sovereignty: To what extent does Ethiopia's engagement with Somaliland/Puntland create friction?
- Economy: What barriers hinder trade and connectivity?
- External Actors: How do Gulf states, Turkey, or Egypt shape bilateral dynamics?

Opportunities and Prospects

- What unexplored areas of cooperation could build trust?
- How could regional bodies (IGAD, AU) better facilitate reconciliation?

Future Trajectories

- What would a stable, productive Ethiopia-Somalia relationship look like in 2030?
- What confidence-building measures are feasible in the short term?
- What triggers could lead to escalation or breakthrough?

Closing

Before finishing, are there any critical issues you want to elaborate on further? Thank you very much for your time and insights.