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The Horn of Africa and International Relations

by Volker Matthies, Hamburg *

All the countries abutting on the Red Sea and on the Gulf of Aden as well as the East African coast will gain in economic, political, and strategic importance as soon as the Suez Canal is reopened to shipping. The present article discusses the situation in an important subregion of this area, the so-called Horn of Africa which owes an eminent position under political and strategic aspects.

When the Suez Canal reopens in 1975, the likelihood is great that this will produce noticeable changes in a number of countries and regions as to their economic, political, and military and strategic significance. For world shipping, the route round the Cape will lose in importance, and the immense shortening of maritime trade routes reflected by lower freight rates might reduce the exaggerated transport costs for trade between Europe and overseas, as well as for European oil supplies. At the same time, the canal's reopening will reduce the journeys of both eastern and western navies for deploying their strength in the Indian Ocean, and this may very well contribute to growing military strength and rivalry of the big powers in this area. The economic importance of countries situated on the shores of the Red Sea, on the Gulf of Aden, and on the East African coast will be greatly enhanced, through the boom of their port activities, as will the part they play politically and strategically, through their control over one of the major lanes of maritime transport.¹ Knowledge about political conditions and developments in this region, which is important for international shipping and for European oil supplies, is therefore becoming more and more essential.

A Complex Pattern of Conflicts

Therefore, it is the intention of this discussion to investigate the political and strategic situation in an important subregion of this area, viz. the so-called Horn of Africa. Politically, the "Horn" consists of Somalia, Ethiopia, the French-ruled Territory of Afar and Issa (Djibouti), and the north-eastern part of Kenya. From the political and strategic point of view, it is a potential source of crisis. From this littoral, it is possible to control the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden, and the north-western waters of the Indian Ocean. Moreover, within the Horn itself, there exists no mean accumulation of potential conflicts. Somalia

alone, through its claims on vast border areas of its neighbours, is a dangerous powder keg. Both Somalia and Ethiopia also claim Djibouti as their own. Since the US is strongly engaged in Ethiopia and the Soviet Union in Somalia, the area is also tied up with the conflict between East and West. As both Arab and Israeli interests are touched by the inner-Ethiopian struggle for Erythrea, recent years have embroiled Erythrea more and more in international quarrels. The newest political revolution in Ethiopia also attracted massive interests of the outer world to the political and strategic implications of all that happens and changes within the Horn of Africa.

All these different conflict formations in the Horn of Africa have combined in a highly complex pattern of conflicts. It is intended to give a brief survey of this pattern with special attention devoted to the newest developments, and to define some of the major influences there, which might lead to a shift in the present balance of power in the Horn of Africa.

For a Greater Somalia

The frontier quarrels between Somalia and its neighbours² all focus on Somalia's striving after a "Greater Somalia" through a union with all the lands inhabited by Somali tribes in the neighbouring countries. This nationalist-irredentist policy of Somalia can only be explained as a historical reaction to the territorial fragmentation and penetration of the Somalis' residential areas by the former colonial powers. Colonialisation of the Horn of Africa was a direct sequel to the Suez Canal being opened in 1869. By the end of the 19th century, the Somali tribes in the Horn had become subject to a multitude of foreign masters: British, Italian, French, and Ethiopian. However, the Somalis, knowing their own strong cultural and ethnic identity (Islam, language, segmental nomadic society, etc.) were driven to defending themselves

* German Overseas Institute.

¹ Suez: Opening Africa's Blocked Artery, in: *African Development*, May 1974, pp. 11 et seq.; and *Neue Hafenanlagen vom Roten Meer bis Madagaskar* (New Port Installations from the Red Sea to Madagascar), in: *Blick durch die Wirtschaft*, No. 196, Aug. 1974, p. 2.

² Important studies of this conflict include: A. A. Castagno, *The Horn of Africa and the Competition for Power*, in: A. J. Cottrell and R. M. Burrell (eds.): *The Indian Ocean. Its political, economic, and military importance*. New York, 1972; J. Bowyer Bell, *The Horn of Africa*. New York, 1973.

and their common civilisation against foreign overlordship. Their common aim became national reunion in a single Somali state in the Horn of Africa.

When the present Republic of Somalia was formed in 1960 from the two former colonies, British and Italian-Somaliland, this aim was not yet fully met: In south-eastern Ethiopia, in north-eastern Kenya, and in Djibouti, there are still living "unredeemed" Somalis. Since it was born, the Somali Republic's political main aim has been the completion of Greater Somalia, and to it the young Republic devoted sizeable economic, political and military forces. However, the neighbours of Somalia, being multi-ethnic states in contrast with the ethnically homogeneous Somalia, felt threatened in their territorial integrity as well as in their ethnic-political balance through the Greater Somalia policy, which set in movement the struggle of their Somali minorities for secession. There have been many armed conflicts on this issue: frontier clashes, and a frontier war between Somalia and Ethiopia in 1964, the Shifto War between Somalia and Kenya that lasted from 1963 to 1967/68³, and the crisis between So-

malia and Ethiopia over Djibouti in 1966/67. However, due to insufficient military strength, unbearable high costs for a settlement of the conflict by force (i.a. adverse effects on Somalia's banana exports through the blocking of the Suez Canal), and lacking support of the other African states to the Greater Somalia policy (the majority of OAU members rejected all frontier revisions in Africa), late in 1967, Somalia had to give up its policy of confrontation, replacing it by a détente without, however, scrapping its longer-term aim of building a Greater Somalia.

New Escalation

From 1969 onwards, Somalia has been ruled by a military regime which began by continuing the policy of détente and concentrating its efforts on fostering the country's social and economic development. But continued negotiations for a peaceful settlement of the conflict failed, and in the early seventies, political threats again became the tools of Somalia's foreign policy, reviving strong tensions in the Horn of Africa (OAU conferences in 1973 and 1974)⁴. There are three notable factors

³ cf. Volker Matthies, *Der Shifto-Krieg in Kenia (The Shifto War in Kenya)*. In: *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee (Constitutions and Law in Overseas)*, No. 4, 1973, pp. 429–443.

⁴ cf. *Africa Research Bulletin (Political Series)*, May 1973, pp. 2843 et seq.; June 1974, p. 3255 et seq.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE HAMBURG INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS

Klaus Bolz und Peter Plötz

ERFAHRUNGEN AUS DER OST-WEST-KOOPERATION

(Experiences gained from East-West Cooperation)

The present study offers the first detailed analysis of cooperation experiences, which West German firms made with enterprises in COMECON-countries (Bulgaria, German Democratic Republic, CSSR, Poland, Roumania, USSR, Hungary). On the basis of abundant empirical material, that to a large extent has been obtained through direct questioning of participating firms, type and extent of cooperation, size of firms and their motives, the realisation of first contacts, the course of negotiations, the legal framework, and the special formulation of co-operation agreements are investigated. (In German language).

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which have probably contributed to the renewed escalation of the conflict:

□ In the first place, the massive strengthening of Somalia's armaments with the aid of the Soviet Union. Unlike in the sixties, Somalia is no longer hopelessly inferior to its main adversary, Ethiopia, in the military field: Ethiopia has still more soldiers under arms (44,000 men, against 23,000 in Somalia) but some of the Somali units are much more strongly equipped with armoured vehicles, war planes, and artillery.⁵

□ Secondly, as commercially significant gas and oil strikes have been reported from south-eastern Ethiopia, the conflict has gained a new dimension.⁶

□ Thirdly, Somalia, after its disappointment over the attitude of the "Black African" states in the frontier question has joined the Arab League, thus finding new support through the Arab-Islamic states.

As Somalia continues to adhere to its Greater Somalia policy and can now give it more forceful support through its own military strength and through its new alliance, it is now not at all impossible that new military clashes may break out in the Ethiopian-Somali frontier area within the foreseeable future.

East-West Rivalries

The frontier conflict and the armament race caused by it in the Horn of Africa gave the main opponents in the East-West contest a fulcrum for looking after their global strategic big-power interests in the region.⁷ The US engaged itself in Ethiopia, the Soviet Union in Somalia. As an equivalent for substantial military and economic aid, the two were granted claims to military bases and political influence.

Since the end of World War II, the Americans extended their intelligence base near Asmara in the Ethiopian province of Erythrea to one of the most important links in their worldwide military telecommunications network.⁸ In exchange for this, they armed the Ethiopian Army, trained it and supplied it with advanced armaments systems. After a time-lag of several years, the Soviets did approximately the same in Somalia, thus outbalancing US influence in Ethiopia. In 1963, the government of

Somalia had rejected an offer of Western military aid (proffered by the US, Italy, and the Federal Republic of Germany) as too small, and subsequently, the Soviet Union became Somalia's principal source of military and economic aid.⁹ In exchange for this aid, the Soviets were allowed to build — as the opposite number to Kagnew — a big telecommunication station, and they also obtained naval bases there.

Revived American Engagement?

For the Soviet Union, Somalia's main importance is of naval strategic nature (establishment of a chain of naval bases across the Indian Ocean).¹⁰ In July 1974, Soviet President Podgorny visited Somalia, which strengthened the ties between it and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the lease agreement for Kagnew was on the point of running out, and satellite surveillance became more and more important and thus made Kagnew's operations less crucial, which all led to the Americans tending slowly to disengage themselves from Ethiopia. But in view of the Soviet's massive engagement in Somalia, more recent trends in the US seem to turn round to a revival of its engagement in Ethiopia.¹¹

Discussions about the future of Djibouti after France will have left the territory (independence; partition; a full takeover by either Somalia or Ethiopia; an international administration, possibly by the UN)¹² seem to have little significance at present. In the spring of 1973, the late French president, M. Pompidou, visited Djibouti, and Djibouti port is constantly being enlarged and modernised. More and more French troops and Marine units are being sent there, clearly demonstrating French intentions to retain France's presence there and in the adjacent seas.

The Conflict Round Erythrea

The Erythrean Liberation Front (ELF) which, during its early days, still was a relatively wide reservoir into which flowed all opposition of both Christian and Moslem parts of the population, who wanted to fight the overlordship of the Amharic Central

⁵ cf. *The Military Balance 1974-75*, London, Institute for Strategic Studies, 1974, p. 42 et seq.

⁶ cf. *Gas Starts the Oil Rush*, and: *Oil Fever Grips the Horn of Africa*. Both in: *African Development*, May 1973, p. 5, and December 1973, p. 14, respectively.

⁷ cf. SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), *The Arms Trade with the Third World*. Stockholm 1971, pp. 649-655.

⁸ cf. *Hearings before the Sub-Committee on United States Security Agreements Abroad of the Committee on Foreign Relations*, United States Senate, 91st Congress, Second Session, Part 8, Washington, June 1970.

⁹ cf. Wynfried Joshua and S. P. Gilbert, *Arms of the Third World. Soviet Military Aid Diplomacy*. Baltimore-London, 1969, p. 40; and Falk Döring, *Wirtschaftsbeziehungen zwischen kommunistischen Staaten und Entwicklungsländern* (Economic Relations between Communist States and LDCs), 1960-1970, Vol. VI: Nepal-Somalia, pp. 370-406. Studies and Reports of the Research Institute of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

¹⁰ cf. Edward Wegener, *Moskaus Offensive zur See. Eine Untersuchung der seestrategischen Rolle der sowjetischen Marine-streitkräfte im Ost-West-Konflikt* (Moscow's Offensive at Sea. A Study of the Naval Strategy of the Soviet Naval Forces in the East-West Conflict). Bonn-Bad Godesberg, 1972.

¹¹ see: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Foreign Edition No. 197, July 20, 1974, p. 5.

¹² cf. Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *Djibouti and the Horn of Africa*. Stanford, Calif., 1968; Nancy A. Shilling, *Problems of Political Development in a Mini State: The French Territory of the Afars and the Issas*. In: *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 7, July 1973, pp. 613-634; Thomas A. Marks, *Djibouti: France's Strategic Toehold in Africa*. In: *African Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 290, Jan. 1974, pp. 95-104.

Government, has become, during recent years, an instrument of a purely Islamic resistance movement, which presses for separation of Erythrea from the Ethiopian state¹³. The movement received support from Arabic-Islamic states, whose main interest lay in controlling the Erythrean littoral along the shores of the Red Sea, in order to be able to interfere with Israeli shipping from there. Conversely, Israel has helped Ethiopia in its fight against the Erythrean rebellion. Nonetheless, after the recent Arab-Israeli war, Ethiopia — as other African countries did — broke off relations with Israel under the pressure of the Arabs.

In view of the external threat from Somalia, the new military government of Ethiopia will surely be interested in settling the conflict in Erythrea as quickly as possible but, in view of new oil strikes and of the economic and strategic importance of Erythrean ports, the officers in charge of Ethiopian government power could hardly tolerate complete secession of the province. Threats of the ELF to take up again guerilla warfare have already been answered by the new Addis Ababa Government with military force. At best, the Ethiopian army leadership might be willing to make a compromise with Erythrea, granting it a large measure of autonomy but on condition that the territorial integrity of Ethiopia must be preserved.

Changes Within Ethiopia

No knowledgeable observer of the Ethiopian scene can have felt great surprise at the replacement of the old regime by a military regime, since the Ethiopian army was the only political force, able to fill the power vacuum that was bound to follow the Emperor Haile Selassie.¹⁴ The new system has set

¹³ cf. Pierre R o n d o t, *La Guerre d'Erythrée*. In: *Revue Française d'Etudes politiques africaines*. Jan. 1971, pp. 21–34; John F. C a m p b e l l, *The Red Sea and Suez*. In: A. J. C o t t r e l l and R. M. B u r r e l l (eds.), *op.cit.*, pp. 129–153; Mordechai A b i r, *Red Sea Politics*. In: *Conflicts in Africa*, Adelphi Paper No. 93, London, Institute for Strategic Studies, 1972, pp. 25–41.

up comparatively favourable conditions for the social and economic development of Ethiopia. However, it seems that the scope for reforms by the military regime is rather restricted. Potential conflicts within the army, the country's underdeveloped infrastructure, the basic conservatism of the rural population, the rising in Erythrea, and external dangers lurking from Somalia all impose serious obstacles on action by the military rulers. There seems to be no option for them but to continue along the basic lines of the previous regime's foreign policies, perhaps with a more neutralist and nationalist slant. But for the time being, it is highly likely that the US will remain Ethiopia's most reliable ally and its main source of economic and military aid.

The permanent presence of latent and open conflicts in the Horn of Africa might, in the long run, have two important effects:

□ The fantastic amounts that are being spent for armaments and the incessant thought of the Somali and Ethiopian governments of having to deal with conflicts might deflect them from their true and most decisive tasks: how to foster economic and social development of their respective countries, which are among the poorest of the whole world;

□ They might, in a similar way as in the Middle East or, more recently, in Cyprus, bring forth uncontrolled escalation of political and military tensions and drag the Big Powers once more into regional conflicts.

In any case, the Horn of Africa is very likely to remain a source of unrest for international relations, and it must therefore be keenly watched.

¹⁴ cf. Volker M a t t h i e s, *Militär, Gesellschaft und Gewalt in Äthiopien* (The Military, Society, and Violence in Ethiopia). In: *Quarterly Research Reports of the Research Institute of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, No. 54, Dec. 1973, pp. 355–374.

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