Rethinking IGAD's Role in Addressing Emerging Regional Security Threats*

Getachew Zeru Gebrekidan and Messay Asgedom Gobena

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Introduction

From a security perspective, the Horn of Africa (HoA) is cited as a region engulfed by struggles over economic and political power, famine, droughts, poverty and starvation, and civil conflicts and inter-state wars. It is also cited as a region of politicized historical fault lines, state interference in each other's domestic affairs, and prolonged violent conflicts, with a prevalence of armed resistance groups.[1]

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional organization, has legal norms and institutional arrangements that give it a mandate to address these complicated economic and security problems in the region. In this regard, Olika Tafesse stated that, in 1996, "cognizant of the danger of violent local conflicts with regional spillover effect, IGAD the member states restructured the organization and gave it[an] expanded mandate thereby making political, security, humanitarian, and economic affairs its priority areas."[2]

The vision of IGAD said that it should be "the premier Regional Economic Community (REC) for achieving peace and sustainable development in the region."[3] However, the reversal in the pattern of regional intrastate and interstate conflicts questioned optimism about the organization's ability to enhance security and stability. Many believe that the region still lacks the most rudimentary regional security framework.

Historically, IGAD has been criticized for being incapable of addressing security problems in the HoA. These include the civil war in Darfur; protracted state collapse in Somalia; deep hostility and a stalled peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea; a fragile peace agreement between North and South Sudan; a border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti; and violent conflict in northern Uganda.[4] This proved that IGAD was a fragile regional organization, as relations among states were marked by mistrust, suspicion, and uncertainty, and there is no single country in the HoA that has not been affected by violent conflict.[5]

IGAD, however, has achieved certain successes in mediating the peace processes of South Sudan and Somalia. The two agreements are important achievements in the era of IGAD's expanded mandate and offer a good example of mediation for other sub-regional organizations in other parts of the African continent.

This paper examines various challenges to IGAD's role in addressing long-standing and emerging regional security threats in the HoA. It begins with a brief account of IGAD's mandate to address regional security threats. It then examines emerging security threats in the IGAD region and IGAD's responses. The next section considers the overall structural impediments to the performance of IGAD. Finally, the paper puts forward some policy options and recommendations.

IGAD's Mandate to Addresses Regional Security Threats

IGAD is one of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) recognized by the African Union. It has eight member states: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda.[6] IGAD was founded in 1996 to supersede the Inter-Governmental Authority against Drought and Desertification (IGADD)that was created in 1986. When IGADD evolved into IGAD, a great emphasis was placed on the peaceful settlement of regional conflicts and the maintenance of regional peace, stability, and security.[7] In its constitutive act, IGAD was mandated to prevent, manage, and resolve inter- and intra-state conflicts, fundamentally through the means of the Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), political dialogue, and reconciliation.

To fulfill the new mandate, IGAD's legal and institutional frameworks were also streamlined. Normatively, IGAD has enacted a Protocol on CEWARN, the policy framework for the Eastern Africa Standby Brigade, Capacity Building against Terrorism, and the Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Framework.[8] IGAD also developed a peace and security strategy for 2011-2015 and 2016-2020.[9]

The IGAD secretariat was restructured to fulfill the new mandate and, in due course, it established a division responsible for peace and security.[10] The IGAD Political Affairs Program (PAP), under its Peace and Security Division (PSD), is tasked with contributing to the peace and security of the IGAD region through preventive diplomacy focused on democracy, governance, elections, and human rights, thereby paving the way for the gradual political integration of the region.[11] IGAD also maintains specialized institutions and programs of peace and security: the CEWARN and the IGAD Security Sector Program.

Emerging Security Threats in the IGAD Region and IGAD's Responses

The Conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray Region

Political differences between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)[12] and the Prosperity Party[13] resulted in an armed conflict. Even though there were earlier signs of war, it officially began on November 4, 2020. The Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali, declared war after accusing the TPLF of attacking the Ethiopian defense force's northern command base.[14] The war was started under the rubric of a "law enforcement operation" that targeted the TPLF's leadership.[15] However, it was conducted through the use of heavy artillery and military drones.[16] On November 28, the government of Ethiopia claimed the capture of the Tigrayan capital of Mekelle and declared the end of the war.[17] However, in June 2021 and after eight months of intense fighting, the TPLF forces have regained Mekelle. At the time of writing, the war has extended to Amhara and Afar regional states and heavy military fighting is still ongoing.[18]

The war has resulted in a dire humanitarian situation. More than sixty thousand refugees have fled to Sudan, more than two million people have been internally displaced, and more than 4.5 million people are currently in a dire humanitarian situation.[19] Mass extrajudicial killings of civilians, sexual violence, looting of civilian properties, and attacks on Eritrean refugees have all been documented.[20] Apart from acts of ethnic cleansing in western Tigray,[21] there are also allegations against the government of Ethiopia of forced starvation and sexual violence by its soldiers.[22]

The war has become more complicated due to the involvement of external actors. Evidence shows the deep involvement of Eritrea in the Tigray conflict.[23] Voices are also starting to be heard about the involvement of Somalia's army and the United Arab Emirates' drones in the conflict.[24] The war began as a domestic conflict but has grown into a regional security crisis.

The war in Tigray has intrastate and interstate elements. IGAD, as a first resort for regional security issues, has a primary mandate to address the conflict. However, IGAD has not taken any concrete action. It has also failed to follow in the footsteps of the United States and European Union in publicly denouncing perpetrators' actions.

Border Tension and Conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan

Border clashes between Sudan and Ethiopia erupted in December 2020 over agricultural land in the al-Fashqa area, which has been settled by Ethiopian farmers for more than 25 years.[25] The territory has been disputed for more than a century, with a number of failed attempts to reach an agreement. Treaties drawn up in 1902 and 1907 between Ethiopia and Great Britain (Sudan's colonial power) were intended to define the border between Sudan and Ethiopia.[26]

Recently, officials of Sudan stated that "Sudan has not and will not cross international borders or violate our neighbor Ethiopia."[27] Moreover, they said that what they control is their land in accordance with the 1902 agreement between Great Britain and Ethiopia.[28] There are also reports that the Ethiopian force and militia have ambushed Sudanese troops and killed civilians along the border.[29] However, Ethiopia alleges that troops of Sudan advanced into the disputed al-Fashqa border region in violation of international law.[30]

Ethiopia has also stated that "Sudan's military had organized attacks by using heavy machine guns and that many civilians have been murdered and wounded."[31] There is fear among the international community that this tension would escalate into a full-fledged war.[32] Even though the tension between the two countries has continued unabated, IGAD neither intends to manage nor would be capable of managing it.

The Tension between Kenya and Somalia

Somalia scheduled an election to be held in 2021. However, tensions are escalating between the federal government, based in Mogadishu, and Somalia's semi-autonomous regional states. There is a political divide between the federal government of Somalia and the Jubaland administration. In March 2020, President Mohammed Abdullahi Farmajo tried unsuccessfully to intervene to prevent the re-election of Ahmed Madobe, a key political opponent who serves as president of Jubaland.[33] However, this sparked violent clashes between federal troops and Jubaland's forces.[34] This incident put Kenya and Ethiopia on opposite sides. While the government of Ethiopia supported Farmajo's administration, Kenya continued to support the Jubaland administration.[35]

The government of Somalia accused Kenya of interfering in the internal affairs of Somalia by arming Jubaland militants.[36] However, Kenya strongly denies the accusation.[37] Besides, Ethiopia has ordered a withdrawal of some Ethiopian peacekeepers from Somalia and redeployed them to fight against TPLF.[38] The U.S. government has also ordered the withdrawal of its troops from Somalia.[39] These developments all provide a ripe terrain for the terrorist group Al-Shabaab to regain its power and complicate the peace and security of the region.

As compared to others, IGAD has taken initiatives to address the tension between Kenya and Somalia. It has established a fact-finding committee and released a report. In its report, IGAD stated that the allegation of the Somali government is unfounded. However, the Somali government rejected IGAD's report, claiming that it was unrealistic and biased,[40] and threatened to withdraw from IGAD.[41]

Structural Impediments to IAGD's Role in the Region

Although IGAD has the mandate to address intra- and inter-state violent conflicts, its actions fell short. Several underlying factors could account for the weakness of IGAD in dealing with both long-standing and emerging regional security threats. The concentration of power in the Assembly of Heads of States and Government and the current political deadlock between Ethiopia and Sudan, and between Kenya and Somalia, makes IGAD dysfunctional. Moreover, the involvement of non-IGAD actors in the region's conflicts, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE)[42] and Egypt,[43] is making the work of IGAD more complicated.

IGAD's excessive dependence on external funding is another structural obstacle to its success. IGAD is funded by IGAD Partners Forum and others outside of the forum including the UK, United States, EU, Turkey, and the UAE.[44] This raises basic questions aboutthe sustainability, predictability, and flexibility of the systems being put in place and ultimately undermines IGAD's legitimacy and leadership in addressing regional security issues. Besides funding, IGAD suffers a shortage of skilled manpower. Moreover, an entrenched culture of solving political problems through military aggression, and advancing political interest through the principle of "my enemy's enemy is my friend," are serious impediments to resolving violent conflicts through political dialogue and reconciliation.

Policy Options and Recommendations

To effectively tackle the challenges IGAD has faced in addressing long-standing and emerging regional security threats, the following measures ought to be considered:

1. **Devolve Considerable Power to the IGAD Secretariat**

   Member states have to surrender some degree of their sovereignty to IGAD either by agreeing to be bound by regional rules and decisions, or by giving an institutional secretariat some independent authority. IGAD is considered as the club of Heads of State and Government; therefore, it has to be transformed from an intergovernmental body into a supranational organization with autonomous decision-making power. Specifically, IGAD has to be reformed to make it a body that can promote trust among its member states so that its interventions in the region are not seen as serving the interests of some actors at the expense of others. Promoting the engagement of civil society in IGAD's peace and security initiatives has to be part of the reform.

2. **Enhance Institutional Capabilities**

   IGAD has to either recruit highly competent and qualified bureaucrats or improve the capability of its staff members through continual training.

3. **Promote the Principle of Self-reliance**

   To minimize if not eradicate a compromised regional autonomy, IGAD has to promote the principle of self-reliance. It has to consider adopting various financing packages to wean itself off external financing by raising from within the region to finance its peace and security projects. This would enhance the sense of ownership among its member states. Thus, IGAD member states should provide the financial means by paying their annual contributions based on the logic that investing in the maintenance of peace and security in the region amounts to "buying security" for their efforts to build better lives for their citizens. In this vein, IGAD has to take a lesson from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which put in place its resource mobilization strategy, the Community Levy, from its members.

4. **Propose Solution-oriented Mechanisms to the Security Threats in the Horn of Africa**

   IGAD should strongly condemn the violent situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and propose solution-oriented mechanisms. IGAD should further condemn the violent actions of governments of Eritrea, Somalia, and the United Arab Emirates in the Tigray Region. Specifically, IGAD has to ask for the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the territory of Tigray. IGAD should call upon leaders of Sudan and Ethiopia to immediately de-escalate tension and re-engage constructively. IGAD should also condemn the growing hostility between Somalia and Kenya and find pragmatic solutions to quell the tensions.

5. **Appoint an African Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa**

   To address the emerging interlinked regional crisis in the HoA, the U.S. administration has already appointed a Special Envoy. As of August 2021, the African Union had appointed an accomplished African elder, President Olusegun Obasanjo, as its High Representative for the Horn of Africa. In order to make progress, President Obasanjo must engage in shuttle diplomacy aimed at reducing the toughest foundational problem hobbling IGAD, namely the toxic distrust among the political leaders, and must be widely seen as fair and neutral, with zero pre-existing bias for or against any IGAD country or leader.

Dr. Getachew Zeru Gebrekidan is an Assistant Professor of Peace and Security Studies at Ethiopian Civil Service University. He is a former Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C.

Mr. Messay Asgedom Gobena is a Ph.D. Candidate in Peace and Security Studies at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University. He is a former Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C.

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