United States’ Foreign Policy in the Horn of Africa: A Profile

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Key Points

- Although the Horn of Africa region was largely overlooked by the US after the Cold War era, in the last decade it has once again become a salient foreign policy concern.

- The 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent “War on Terror” saw a shift in US foreign policy. The promotion of democracy in the region has largely taken a backseat to the more pressing issues of combating terrorism and the spread of radical Islam.

- The United States’ relations with the Horn of African states are varied and complex. Ethiopia and Kenya are key US allies; relations with Sudan, Eritrea and the failed state of Somalia are more challenging. The latter three have been accused of supporting terrorism and have contributed to the destabilisation of the region.

- As a hotspot for the spread of radical Islam, piracy and other transnational issues, the stability of the Horn of Africa region will remain a key strategic interest to the US in the years ahead.

Summary

The February 2012 announcement that Somali militant group al-Shabaab was to join forces with al-Qaida highlights the growing importance of the Horn of Africa region to the interests of the United States.

In many ways, the importance of the Horn of Africa was overlooked in the last few decades, particularly as its strategic importance diminished with end of the Cold War and engagement
in the Middle East took precedence in the minds of strategic thinkers in Washington. As US foreign policy advisor and Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, told NPR in 2007, ‘Africa has been ... the poor stepchild ... and not gotten [sic] the full attention it deserves.’ The terrorist attacks of 2001 and the subsequent “War on Terror” saw a shift in US foreign policy. International efforts to combat the spread of radical Islam and transnational issues, such as piracy, saw eastern Africa become an important strategic interest.

To a large extent, US foreign policy within the Horn of Africa continues to be shaped by these concerns. Washington’s relations with several African countries are therefore complex and challenging, while the issues of radical Islam, counter insurgency and piracy remain as pressing as ever.

**Analysis**

**Ethiopia**

With more than 80 million people, shared borders with all other Horn nations, and one of Africa’s largest armed forces, Ethiopia is of great importance to the US in the region. The US views the country as a critical ally within East Africa, especially in regard to terrorism and the spread of radical Islam.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Ethiopia, a predominantly Christian country, has become a key strategic partner of the US in the so-called “War on Terror”, particularly against al-Shabaab in Somalia. In 2007, Ethiopia invaded Somalia, seizing Mogadishu and driving out the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) regime that had taken control. Some analysts have speculated that the US financed, or at least encouraged, Ethiopia to invade, especially given the reluctance of the US to engage in direct combat in Africa following the earlier, failed attempts in Somalia.

The removal of the UIC regime brought a new set of problems, with the formation of al-Shabaab, a youth splinter group of the UIC. In response to the growth of al-Shabaab and the failing Somali government, Ethiopia again invaded in late 2011 to assist Somali, Kenyan and African Union forces fighting al-Shabaab.

Another prolonged Ethiopian occupation, however, is highly unlikely. Ethiopia’s previous occupation was deeply unpopular among the Somali populace and, in part at least, led to the formation of al-Shabaab. Even if Ethiopia were prepared to once again occupy Somalia, an unpopular occupation would almost certainly work to promote support for al-Shabaab, which has often espoused nationalistic and anti-Christian/Ethiopian rhetoric and propaganda to gain further support. Given that, the US will continue to support Ethiopia’s military efforts in Somalia but would much prefer a Somali government to take power, rather than rely on foreign occupation, which has proved unsuccessful in the past.

Aside from US-Ethiopian co-operation in Somalia, Washington is also wary about separatists in Ethiopia who might also pose a threat to stability in the Horn region. The Ogaden National Liberation Front, in particular, has the propensity to destabilise the region, while the Oromo people in southern Ethiopia have also displayed separatist tendencies. Generally speaking,
Ethiopian Muslims have not been receptive to Islamic fundamentalism and lack a centralised authority. While religious extremism is rare in Ethiopia, there is still potential for conflict and instability with so many terrorist organisations and pockets of radical Islamists within the immediate region, especially in war-torn Somalia.

As domestic stability within Ethiopia is vital to both the region and US interests, the alleged human rights abuses by the government of President Meles Zenawi have not commanded great attention. Over the long term, the need for Washington to maintain warm relations with East Africa’s own “keystone state” should see that situation continue.

Ethiopia is also one of the largest recipients of US foreign aid, which totalled US$586 million in 2011. The aid was focussed on reducing famine, increasing military training and capabilities and other economic and social policy reforms. According to Human Rights Watch, however, much of the aid money has been used to erode democracy and strengthen the current regime.

The US, along with the United Nations, continues to help Ethiopia, and the wider Horn region, as it looks to recover from a devastating drought lasting from July 2011-January 2012. The drought affected more than 13 million people and was labelled by many as the worst drought in 60 years.

Overall, relations between Washington and Addis Ababa remain solid. Ethiopia is an important strategic ally of the US in the region, engaging al-Shabaab forces in Somalia while providing some stability in what is an otherwise unstable region. In the long-term, the US may wish to promote democracy in Ethiopia but, currently at least, Addis’ strategic and military importance far outweighs such initiatives.

Kenya

Kenya is also an important ally of the US in the region. Although the Indian Ocean state has not always been a high US foreign policy interest, the al-Qaida terrorist attacks on the US Embassy in Nairobi on 7 August 1998 intensified bilateral co-operation as the two countries looked to address insecurity in the region. In addition, like Ethiopia, the post-9/11 environment saw Kenya, Somalia’s southern neighbour, become an important US partner in the War on Terror.

In October 2011, Kenyan forces invaded Somalia in response to kidnappings and attacks from al-Shabaab militants. The Kenyan forces engaged al-Shabaab in an unusual regional effort to spread al-Shabaab thin on several fronts and, thus, eliminate them. While the Ethiopian army engaged Shabaab forces to the north in Beledweyne, Kenya’s military exerted pressure in the south, in and around Kismayo and, in western Somalia, from Mogadishu on the coast.

The joint offensive, which included African Union soldiers from Burundi, Djibouti and Uganda, has thus far proven to be successful. The Economist reported on 7 January 2012 that ‘... for the first time in years, the Shabaab is on the defensive outside Mogadishu ... Kenyan and Ethiopian forces ... are slowly but methodically going after them.’ Kenya is thus
an important ally and military partner for the US, as Nairobi continues to tussle with al-Shabaab forces in southern and western Somalia.

Kenya is also an important partner in helping to combat piracy in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. Piracy remains a major threat to Kenyan tourism. In addition to participating in the London Anti-Piracy Conference on 23 February 2012, Kenya also held its own international conference on piracy, the “Conference against Piracy off Somalia”, on 9-10 February. The conference involved the UN, the US and many other countries. A foreign ministry official, Anthony Safari, told journalists the aim of the conference was ‘to formulate a strategy to fight [the] piracy that has contributed to the escalating lawlessness in Somalia.’

Finally, the US also provides substantial aid assistance to Kenya. In summary, US-Kenya relations are likely to remain positive and will continue to be built around these main objectives: fighting disease and poverty; advancing shared democratic values and human rights; co-operating to fight insecurity and terrorism; and, collaborating to foster peace in the Horn of Africa.

**Djibouti**

The US has enjoyed warm relations with Djibouti since the tiny Islamic state gained independence from France in 1977. It is viewed as a strategically vital country in an unstable region, where terrorism, radicalism and piracy remain prominent threats to US interests.

With close ties to France, Djibouti is also military ally of the US and hosts the only permanent US military base in sub-Saharan Africa, Camp Lemonnier, which was established in 2002. The purpose of the base is to disrupt and defeat international terrorist groups posing an imminent threat to the United States and its allies and interests in the region. The base, which hosts some 2,000 US troops, offers a valuable toehold in the region, where unmanned anti-terrorist drones are deployed against targets in the Arabian Peninsula and Somalia.

Additionally, ‘the US ... [also uses] Djibouti’s harbour as a sanctuary to conduct anti-piracy operations,’ wrote Aly Verjee for *Foreign Relations* in 2011. The Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) currently uses the camp for the purpose of building relationships in the region but military missions are also undertaken from the camp. In addition, Djibouti is also building a regional anti-piracy centre, the Djibouti Regional Training Centre.

Djibouti should therefore remain a key strategic partner in the region and should continue to facilitate US efforts against al-Shabaab forces and Somali pirates.

**Somalia**

US relations with Somalia remain complex and challenging. Somalia has been without a functioning government since the fall of Siad Barre 1991. Since then, the failed state has remained largely divided due to conflict involving warlords, militias and, most recently, between al-Shabaab forces and the fragile Transitional Federal Government (TFG).
Officially, Washington continues its support of the TFG while providing assistance to the self-declared Republic of Somaliland to eradicate al-Shabaab forces as part of its “dual track” policy for Somalia. Overall, Washington enjoys a good dialogue with the TFG. Both want to see the demise of al-Shabaab.

Although the TFG is recognised by the US and the United Nations as the legitimate government of Somalia, it has failed to assert itself within Somalia, where al-Shabaab forces continue to occupy large tracts of southern Somalia, and operate as a Taliban-style administration. Most experts agree that even if al-Shabaab forces were eliminated, the weak TFG faces an uphill battle to control and govern one of the most lawless places on earth.

While the TFG continues to be confined to Mogadishu, it would be foolish to abandon it entirely. Most likely, the US will continue to try and keep the TFG alive, at least structurally, in the hope of enabling a more assertive and effective administration to govern in the future.

Should that fail, a power vacuum may well develop and protracted fighting between different groups may arise, plunging the region into violence and instability once again. That would allow terrorism and piracy, two key US concerns, to prosper.

The US, therefore, continues to support the TFG in the hope it may permanent consolidate its hold on Mogadishu and be the first government to control the whole of Somalia since 1991. The situation remains as tenuous as ever, however.

Aside from terrorism and the rise of radical Islam, piracy remains an important regional issue for the US. According to a recent article in the Daily Telegraph, illegal piracy costs an estimated £10 billion ($15.6 billion) per year in global trade, impeding deliveries and increasing shipping expenses and insurance premiums. Increased international co-operation has seen piracy decrease in the last year. By the end of 2011, pirates had managed to seize only four ships off the coast of Somalia. This was 18 fewer than the 26 that had been captured in the previous two years. As of June 2012, only one vessel has been hijacked off the Somali coast this year – a fishing vessel with 15 crewmembers on 26 March.¹

While the US enjoys cordial relations with the TFG, its inability to effectively govern is a concern for Washington as it aims to tackle terrorism and piracy in the region. The US may, therefore, wish to work with more powerful polities across Somalia in certain cases, especially in Somaliland (although it is unlikely to recognise Somaliland’s independence), while continuing to support the weak TFG.

**Sudan**

US-Sudan relations are extremely complex. The United States is critical of Sudan’s human rights record and war crimes in Darfur and its efforts to destabilise the region, especially South Sudan. It has frequently served as a transit point for the movement of personnel and materials and has even hosted terrorist organisations before.

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It has harboured al-Qaida and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in the past and unofficial reports indicate that it is still secretly supporting the LRA in the hope of destabilising South Sudan.

President Omar al-Bashir has been wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes since 2008. With its close foreign relations to much of the Arab World and strong economic ties with China, there is little prospect of al-Bashir being brought to justice any time soon. Any regime change is unlikely.

Under al-Bashir’s National Congress Party, Sudan is facing huge internal challenges. Increasing economic hardships, higher food prices, escalating debts, the loss of the South and its oil production, armed opposition groups in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains – and government responses that seemingly do not discriminate between militia members and civilians – are all working against the Bashir regime. Meanwhile, corruption affects the morale of, and divides, the Sudanese army, posing another threat to the Bashir regime going forward.

So far, however, Bashir has resisted calls for change and so the US has few options other than to promote democracy and accountability while trying to improve relations between Khartoum and the southern capital, Juba. The peace agreement signed on 11 February 2012, in which the two Sudans pledged to end aggression and respect each other’s territorial sovereignty, was broken in April, when South Sudanese forces crossed into Sudanese territory.

South Sudan

Since becoming independent on 9 July 2011, South Sudan has enjoyed warm relations with the United States, which wants it to succeed as a stable, prosperous independent country.

Unfortunately, South Sudan faces a range of challenges that are taking its toll on the world’s newest country. Its economy, one of the weakest in the world, is almost solely dependent on oil exports, which make up nearly 98 per cent of its revenue. Ongoing disputes with Sudan about oil prices have meant that South Sudan has not always been able to use the north’s pipelines and oil terminals to export its oil, despite producing almost 85 per cent of Sudan’s oil output before independence. In response, the South suspended oil production in January 2012.

Outbreaks of armed conflict continue, most recently in April 2012, when Southern forces occupied the Sudanese town of Heglig and Sudanese Air Force jets bombed the South’s Unity State in retaliation. It appears that neither Khartoum nor Juba have fully renounced their generations-old conflict. In such an atmosphere of deep mutual distrust and high stakes, the situation still threatens to ignite into all-out war.

The US should therefore aim to reinforce the African Union’s efforts at facilitating further peace and oil price agreements between the two in the hope of fostering greater trust and co-operation and reduced animosity. This, in turn, would see the region become more stable.
**Eritrea**

US relations with Eritrea have been notably strained since the Washington strengthened its ties with Eritrea’s rival, Ethiopia. The close relationship that the US enjoys with Ethiopia means that the prospects of improvement in Washington-Asmara relations are very low, particularly while President Isaias Afewerki and his People’s Front for Democracy and Justice party – the only legally permitted political group in Eritrea – remain in power.

The US has been a strong critic of the Eritrean Government, which remains a regional pariah. Asmara is accused of supporting the al-Shabaab militia in Somalia and even planning terrorist attacks in Ethiopia. The Afewerki Government has denied the charges, but the fact remains that Eritrea can be a difficult neighbour. Eritrea has engaged in border clashes with US allies Djibouti and Ethiopia.

The US has welcomed United Nations sanctions against Eritrea aimed at ending the sponsorship of terrorism by Asmara. Washington has vowed to support future sanctions should Eritrea continue to support terrorism or attempt to destabilise the region further. On this issue, as with others, the chances of the two countries finding common ground appear unlikely.

**In Conclusion**

While the US largely overlooked the Horn of Africa region in the years after the end of the Cold War, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the spread of radical Islam throughout northern Africa and the Middle East has seen it once again become a salient foreign policy concern. Over the past decade, the US has been working steadily to promote stability in the region, especially in the failed state of Somalia and newly independent South Sudan.

Relations between the US and many Horn of Africa states remain complex and challenging, however. Ethiopia and Kenya are crucial US allies in the region, helping to promote stability and fight terrorism and piracy, but Eritrea and Sudan have hindered that process, supporting terrorism and rebels in Somalia and South Sudan. US relations with these states remain strained as a result. The Aferki and Bashir regimes will continue remain thorns in the side of the US. Longer term, the US remains committed to ensuring that Somalia does not fall into the hands of al-Shabaab, although the weak TFG does not look strong enough to govern the whole country as yet. Given this, achieving stability in the Horn of Africa will remain a major challenge for US foreign policy for many years to come.

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