GLOBAL RIVALRY IN THE RED SEA

A 'Geopolitical' European Union should encourage cooperation in the Red Sea region

Geopolitical competition in Africa is here to stay, and the question for the EU is not if but how to position itself in this global competition. In the case of the Red Sea region, the EU should support regional initiatives to build effective regional maritime governance and promote global public goods such as maritime security and the blue economy.

Under the Presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission has branded itself a 'Geopolitical Commission'. With regard to geopolitics, the Red Sea has for years been seen as a primary focus of action, a point the European Council stressed in July 2021, when it identified the region as a 'geostrategic priority'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A 'geopolitical EU' should promote practices of regional cooperation among the countries of the region and between the two sides of the Red Sea
- EU diplomacy should assist countries along the Red Sea littoral to implement effective governance of the maritime domain with a view of ensuring security at sea and developing the blue economy
- The EU should support consultations on regional cooperative arrangements
- The EU needs to foster rule-based, low-politics cooperation between regional and great powers operating in the Red Sea

In 2018, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, finding that there was 'renewed geopolitical competition on both shores of the Red Sea'. The EU further stressed that 'at stake are the preservation of the security of the Bab el Mandeb maritime route through which a significant proportion of trade to and from Europe passes; the harnessing of irregular migration flows; the containment of terrorist threats; and the prevention of instability in the EU's wider neighbourhood'.
The Council also noted that the 'absence of an adequate system of cooperation and conflict prevention and [a] management mechanism' may 'jeopardise EU interests by impacting [on] freedom of navigation and further destabilizing the Horn of Africa'.

The Council resolved to 'revive', 'engage' and 'encourage an inclusive regional dialogue, economic integration, peace and security, including maritime security'.

> The geopolitics in the Red Sea points at clear pathways, where the EU should use its ability to inspire regional models.

EU ENGAGEMENT IN THE RED SEA AND THE GULF OF ADEN

- The EU has long appointed a Special Representative for the Horn of Africa.
- The EU has been working closely with both sides of the Red Sea towards 'the creation of an organized and inclusive regional forum for dialogue and cooperation around the Red Sea as a matter of urgency'.
- The EU has implemented EU NAVFOR Operation Atlanta, EUCAP Somalia, EUTM Somalia and other development cooperation programmes with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).
- Some of the Trust Fund for Africa has been allocated to the EU's work in the Horn of Africa.
- Through the Peace Facility, the EU has become the biggest funder of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).

In combining its 'geopolitical' ambitions with policies on Africa, the EU is faced with a number of historical and normative minefields. By definition, 'geopolitics' uses the language of power and influence. However, that same language is challenging for Europe to use in the African context. It is nonetheless being spoken by rival great powers in the region, most notably China and Turkey, and Russia and the United States. It was only a matter of time before the EU would realize the need to find its own place in this discourse.

Geopolitical competition in Africa is here to stay, and the question for Europe is not if but how to position itself in that regard. The geopolitics in the Red Sea points at clear pathways, where the EU should use its ability to inspire regional models.

Regional rivalries and Red Sea geopolitics
The Red Sea connects the strategic waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz and the Indian Ocean. It is a maritime domain with a military chokepoint and an efficient supply route for oil and gas, trade, information cables and military manoeuvres. With that come maritime boundary disputes, transnational threats and international crimes, including piracy and terrorism, the dumping of toxic waste and chemicals, illegal fishing, thefts of natural resources, the trafficking of arms, drugs and persons, oil spills and other forms of pollution.

On land too, the Horn of Africa has been central to global peace and security, an arena of competition among extra-regional powers, including the US, China and Russia as strategic global rivals. Other significant international powers, such as the EU and its members and India and Japan, are also present. Several Middle Eastern countries, mainly members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and Turkey, Iran and Qatar on the other, have also been entangled in competition in the region. The Red Sea hosts more

than four peacekeeping missions, with over 40 000 UN and African Union troops in the region (Darfur-Sudan, Abyei, Somalia and South Sudan). In addition, the presence of thousands of foreign military forces, especially in Djibouti, Somalia and until recently Eritrea, is a strong indication of the peace and security challenges the Horn of Africa is facing because of the global powers' interest in the region.

Proxy wars and a geopolitical battleground

Under the Trump administration, tectonic shifts in the Middle East, particularly the rift between the Gulf states, have brought more rivalry to the Red Sea region. Examples of the dire consequences of such rivalry are the wars in Yemen and Tigray in Ethiopia, while Somalia's proxy conflicts involving rival regional powers have now affected Djibouti and Sudan. It is widely believed that the UAE base in Assab, Eritrea, built in violation of the UN arms embargo on these two Horn of Africa states, was used as a base for launching military operations in the region.

Crucial geopolitical and geo-economic developments have caused, accelerated or triggered the current tensions in the Nile Basin and the war in Ethiopia. While Eritrea is already a major player in the war in Tigray, it is unlikely to remain the only foreign power involved in or affected by this war. The trilateral agreement signed in 2019 between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia to establish a common security front ultimately pulled Sudan into border skirmishes with Ethiopia at Al Fashaga. Since the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2018, the war on Tigray has been declared, and regional tensions have been on the rise. In addition to the relations between Sudan and Ethiopia, those between Somalia and Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti, and Ethiopia and Kenya are also passing through turbulent times.

The war on Tigray is partly a consequence of the shift in the region's relative geopolitical and geo-economic importance to the major powers. It has further reduced the importance the US gives to supporting the armies of countries in the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia. As for Egypt, it is so tightly locked into a strategic alliance with the US and Israel that it is difficult to imagine how the US or any other power in its orbit could be an impartial arbiter on the Nile dam question.

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE RED SEA

- The Red Sea is strategically positioned at the major geopolitical and geo-economic nexus of the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.
- The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden form a busy maritime domain with about 6960 km of coastline and natural deep-water ports.
- The Red Sea links Africa, the Far East, the Middle East and Europe.
- Countries in the Horn of Africa share access to the Red Sea with Middle Eastern countries and belong to the same economic, religious, historical, migratory, trade and security zone.

Towards a geostrategic transition

From a geostrategic perspective, the region is now in a post-'war on terror' period. The Horn of Africa is gearing itself up for a new order, triggered by national political mobilization in the countries in the region and global competition arising from the strategic positions taken towards Africa by the major powers. The competition in the Red Sea region extends to its supply routes and large market. By 2050, the Horn of Africa's population is expected to rise to 400 million, from 226 million. More than 55% of this projected population will be below twenty years of age.

> "The competition in the Red Sea region extends to its supply routes and large market."

Exploring natural resources in peripheral regions of the Horn of Africa, including the maritime domain, has also increased. However, a significant percentage of these hitherto unexploited resources is believed to lie within a maritime area with conflicting claims. As a

result, and mirroring the situation with land borders, maritime borders and transboundary resources have become the primary causes of disputes between states. Natural resources in the Horn of Africa's maritime domain include oil and gas reserves, fish and marine life, shipping, and port services. Some analysts estimate Somalia's on- and offshore oil reserves at around 110 billion barrels, which could make the country the world's seventh-largest holder of oil reserves. Somalia is also reportedly to have some 440 trillion ft^3 of offshore gas, which would give it the fourth-largest gas reserves globally.

Towards a regional geo-strategy of the Commons

Given this situation of geopolitical competition, geo-economics, political undercurrents and recent political and military crises in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea has become a centre for a number of dynamic multilateral initiatives.

One of these, coming from both sides of the Red Sea, is the newly founded Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden (the so-called Jedda Council), including the IGAD Member States. In February 2019, IGAD's Council of Ministers reiterated its commitment to a closer collaboration in the Red Sea region and established an IGAD Task Force for the region.

On the face of it, this is an ideal context for the European Union and its member states to enter. From the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and the Baltic, the EU has long championed sub-regional frameworks for cooperation in its vicinity. The Red Sea region can conceivably be regarded as 'neighbours of our neighbours', to use the EU's own jargon.

The EU has also advocated the need for rule-based 'effective multilateralism' for years and is recognized as an example, especially in policy areas where the European Commission has exclusive competence. Also, the European Commission is often identified as the world's most influential regulator, setting the global pace and standards on key issues such as climate and digital governance. The EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa has been actively concerned with Red Sea issues.

The ambition to play a more geostrategic role in the region should naturally follow from what the world regards as Europe's greatest assets: its ability to inspire regional models fostering peace and integration and thus to contribute to the governance of global public goods.

The next phase for the EU will have to involve it in turning this enduring credibility into a geopolitical advantage, a 'geo-strategy of the Commons' of sorts. In the Red Sea region in particular, this will entail promoting functional schemes of regional cooperation around low-politics areas of common interest. Such cooperation may take the form of support for the development of the blue economy, building the maritime governance capabilities of regional organizations and coastal states, and above all giving assistance to regional initiatives such as those launched by IGAD and the Jedda Council. Better governance of the maritime domain reduces piracy, terrorism and irregular migration while at the same time enhancing the livelihoods of coastal populations and the economies of the coastal states. The EU might also be able to help reduce the tensions between the great powers and regional rivals by working towards rule-based cooperation in the region.

By fostering the ownership of regional mechanisms and building trust and confidence in multilateral cooperation, the EU will fulfil the pledge of a 'Geopolitical Commission' that indirectly helps 'protect' European citizens.

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Coverphoto: The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen talks with the former Chairperson of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat, during her visit to the African Union in Addis Ababa, December, 2019. Photo: Eduardo Soteras/AFP/Ritzau Scanpix

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