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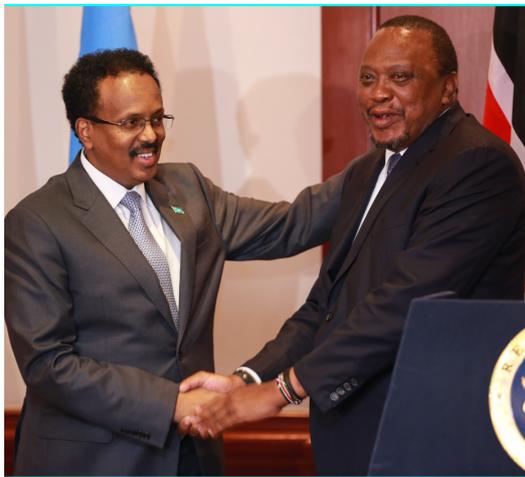


Photo Credit: Villa Somalia

The future of renewed Kenya-Somalia diplomatic relations

Janet Kiguru

The recently renewed diplomatic relations between Kenya and Somalia under the Qatari-led negotiations continue to attract mixed signals across the region and internationally with the expected benefits beginning to fade. Our Research Fellow for Diplomacy and Foreign Policy, Janet Kiguru, assesses the factors at play.

Dr. K.O. Asembo, Editor-in-Chief

Introduction

The Qatari-led restoration of the Kenya-Somalia diplomatic relations is not likely to hold due to tensions emanating from the Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute, mutual mistrust, geopolitical interference and Somalia's internal dynamics. President Farmaajo accepted Qatar's mediation due to domestic and international pressure caused by delays in presidential elections, violence and mass displacements recently witnessed in Mogadishu. Consequently, simmering issues may cause Somalia to cut ties with Kenya once again.

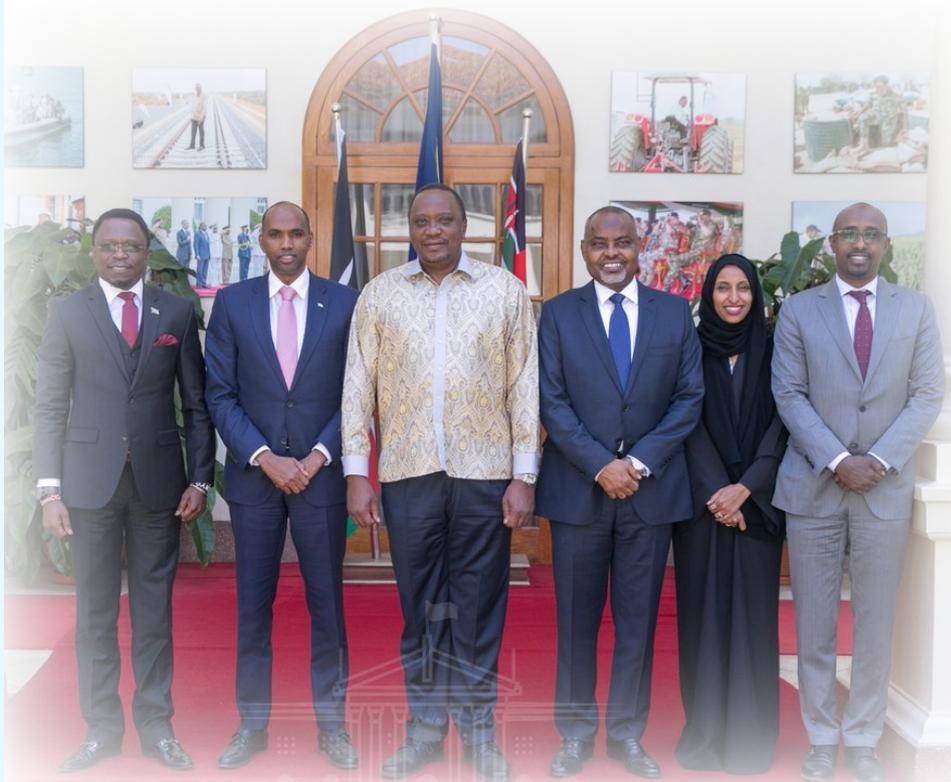


Photo Credit: Universal Somali TV

The Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute

The Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute currently at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) remains a major threat to the renewed relations. While Somalia's remarks insinuate that Kenya has agreed to respect her sovereignty, territorial integrity and good neighbourliness, she is resolute that the ICJ will rule in her favour and therefore will not discuss the dispute any further. On the other hand, Kenya has withdrawn from the ICJ and tabled more evidence to defend her case. Among them are reports that show her occupation of the parallel boundary

since 1980 and Somalia oil activities respecting the parallel boundary as late as 2013. This portends gruesome out-of-court settlement negotiations if at all they will be held.

Somalia's irrational and rapid severing of diplomatic relations is yet to yield a substantive reaction from Kenya. She spoke on behalf of Kenya without even issuing a note verbale to inform the latter that the relations have resumed. Her move to release a statement affirming that she has reconsidered her position is likely to substantially weaken

her strategic bargaining position in the event of bilateral negotiations on the maritime dispute. Kenya's tone was unenthusiastic as she simply noted that she expects better normalization of the diplomatic ties. Therefore, Somalia's position of weakness is likely to hamper future negotiations since she perceives Kenya to be a condescending neighbour. It is imperative that Kenya moves with caution in order to avoid possible misinterpretation and miscommunication as it happened during the 2014 negotiation on the maritime dispute.



Photo Credit: The National



Mutual historical distrust

The Kenya-Somalia relationship has been riddled with mutual distrust. The Kenya-Jubaland and Somaliland relations have been a key issue for Farmaajo who has been claiming that Kenya is empowering Federal Member States (FMS) to antagonize his government. Kenya hosted Somaliland President, Muse Bihi Abdi, in December 2020 and committed to have direct Kenya Airways flights to Hargeisa, to recognize Somaliland travel papers and grant visas on arrival for her top government officials.

More countries are also subtly beginning to recognise Somaliland's independence and this may lead to Somalia cutting ties with Kenya if they feel threatened by the perceived legitimacy of Somaliland. Sheikh Madhobe of Jubaland, a political nemesis of President Farmaajo, has been

one of Kenya's strongest allies against Al-Shabaab and his region serves as a buffer zone for Kenya. His continued relationship with Kenya has been one of the aggravating issues in the Kenya-Somalia diplomatic ties.

Kenya equally has historical strife with Somalia's aggression and irredentist claims on Kenya's North Eastern region that led to the 1963–1967 Shifta war. Kenya has had to deal with the Al-Shabaab menace, incursions by Somali bandits in the maritime zone and piracy which has led to her blacklisting as a maritime high-risk area. The other key historical vendetta stems from the Dadaab refugee camp, which mainly hosts Somali refugees but has become a recruitment ground for the al-Shabaab terror group. However, Kenya's decision to close down the camp has been blocked by

legal and international actors. She had connoted that she was no longer obliged to keep the camp open as she had no diplomatic ties with Somalia. It is possible that the threat to close this camp pressured Farmaajo into renewing the relations.

Nonetheless, the underlying historical differences are still simmering. Days after the restoration of the ties, the Kenya Aviation Authority has suspended all flights to Somalia while the latter has demanded the replacement of John Dramani Mahama, the African Union (AU) envoy to Somalia, accusing him of siding with Kenya. Somalia has also retained the ban on Kenyan miraa exports, and this is another indication of mixed signals which may hinder the normalization of relations.



Photo Credit: Madote

Geopolitical actors

Geopolitical actors such as Ethiopia and Eritrea are likely to derail the normalization of relations between Kenya and Somalia. The two actors were just beginning to assert themselves in Somali politics before Kenya came back into the fray. Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, has crafted an alliance with Farmaajo's Marehaan clan and expressed his support for him.

Abiy is however against Sheikh Madobe due to his close association with the Tigray People's

Liberation Front (TPLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front, a former Ethiopian rebel group and Abiy's main antagonists in the Somali region of Ethiopia. Kenya has supported Madhobe and is leaning towards his Ogaden clan, which is also dominant among Kenyan-Somali elites and politicians.

The divergent postures of Kenya and Ethiopia in Somalia clan politics have been displayed in the difficulty of merging AMISOM military

operations in Kismayo's sector two, occupied by Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and sector six, occupied by the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF). These tailbacks raise concerns on the extent to which the two actors may go to militarily support their respective Somalia clan allies to the detriment of the renewed relations. A pact between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which has also been providing military training for the Somali army, will attempt to influence Somalia's foreign policy against Kenya.



Photo Credit: Twitter

Internal dynamics in Somalia

Domestic factors such as nationalism, diaspora influence and the crisis surrounding presidential elections are still likely to hinder the normalization of Kenya-Somalia diplomatic relations. The revival of the Kenya-Somalia relations has caused divisions within Farmaajo's supporters, the diaspora Somalis and Somali political elites. The diaspora in Europe has voiced contempt for the renewed relations as they view it as imbalanced. They opine that Somalia no longer needs Kenya. However, diaspora Somalis in Kenya and Kenyan-Somalis are happy with the renewed relations given that

the animosity had hampered travel, business and even the status of refugees in Dadaab Camp. Somalia heavily relies on diaspora remittances and their opinion on the state of Kenya-Somalia relations is likely to influence the future of these ties.

The upcoming presidential elections have huge stakes as popular media have dubbed them 'the maritime elections'. Initially, Farmaajo had taken a nationalistic stance on Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute and this earned him the admiration of the Somalia people who are yearning for radical

'independent' leaders. When he extended his term, Farmaajo ramped up support by claiming that he would never be blackmailed and that Somalia is an independent sovereign state. However, former Prime Minister Hassan Khaire has been gaining international support at a time when Farmaajo's popularity has been waning. The possibility of losing his popularity may cause Farmaajo to stir up nationalistic sentiments on the maritime dispute and rally up support for his presidential bid. This will further weaken relations with Kenya.



Conclusion

The Kenya-Somalia dynamics have not changed and are likely to end in future hostilities, especially if Farmaajo's term extends much longer. The revival of these diplomatic ties has weakened Somalia's leverage as Kenya has largely allowed the debacle to play itself out. Thus, while the restoration of diplomatic relations is the first step towards an amicable resolution, the geopolitical chemistry and pending elections will amplify the frothing issues.

Recommendations

- a) Kenya should continue to lobby geopolitical allies to influence Somalia to agree to a mediated out of court settlement on the Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute and expedite elections in Somalia.
- b) Kenya should continue to engage the Federal Government of Somalia on formalization of the renewed diplomatic relations as announced by Somalia in order to forestall the looming tensions.

Janet Kiguru is GLOCEPS Research Fellow for Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Pillar. She has previous experience in research and teaching at the university level. Her particular areas of expertise include international development, regional integration, bilateral relations, multilateral relations, and diplomatic strategy. Janet is currently a PhD candidate at the United States International University-Africa. She holds a Master's degree in Development Studies and a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Political Science from the University of Nairobi.

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