

Situation between Ethiopia and Somalia

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Today (17 January) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council is set to convene a session on the situation between Ethiopia and Somalia.

Following the opening statement of the Chairperson of the PSC for the month, Amma A. Twum-Amoah, Permanent Representative of Ghana to the AU, Bankole Adeoye, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) is expected to brief the PSC. Representatives of Ethiopia and Somalia are also expected to make statements.

This session was not on the program of work of the PSC. The convening of this session came in the context of the tensions escalating between the two countries after the announcement of an MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, a territory that declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but received no recognition from any member of the international community.

It was on 1 January 2024 that Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somaliland President Muse Bihi Abdi signed the MoU. According to reports, this deal will grant Addis Ababa twelve miles of sea access along the Somaliland coast for the next five decades, where it plans to construct a naval base. Ethiopia currently relies on Djibouti as a major trade partner, as 95 percent of Ethiopia's imports and exports pass through Djibouti. Addis Ababa has indicated its strong desire for ways to diversify its access to the sea.

Somalia deemed Ethiopia's latest MoU with Somaliland as a threat to its territorial integrity. In response, Somalia recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia. Amid the nationalist fury that this development triggered, Somalia officials pronounced

their determination to go to war in defence of the territorial integrity of their country. Somalia has also sent requests to the AU and the United Nations (UN) Security Council (UNSC) to convene meetings on the issue.

Rather than the deal on access to the sea for Ethiopia along the Somaliland coast on its own, the main centre of contention that sparked the tension seems to be the report that in exchange for access to the port of Berbera, Ethiopia would look to recognize Somaliland as an independent country at some point in the future. If indeed this were to happen, Ethiopia would end up being the first country to recognize Somaliland as an independent state.

Apart from bringing the relationship between Ethiopia and Somalia to near breaking point, the situation is also fuelling regional tensions. Somalia's President announced that his country is willing to enlist the support of anyone willing to help the country secure its territorial integrity.

The regional body, Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) called for an Extraordinary Summit to be hosted by Uganda on this situation on 18 January. It is to be recalled that IGAD Executive Secretary issued a statement on 3 January expressing deep concern about these developments between the two countries and calling on the IGAD leaders to be seized with the matter. On 16 January, it is reported that Ethiopia sent a letter to the Chairperson of IGAD, Djibouti, indicating its inability to attend the summit due to short notice and prior commitments.

Regionally, Djibouti, which is also the Chairperson of IGAD, issued a statement calling for respect for territorial integrity of all member states of IGAD. The AU Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat also issued a statement on 3 January calling for calm and mutual respect to de-escalate the simmering tension. Additionally, Mahamat's statement stressed 'the imperative to respect unity, territorial integrity and

full sovereignty of all African Union member states including the Federal Republic of Somalia and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.'

Further from the region, the European Union (EU) stated 'the importance of respecting the unity, the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia pursuant of its constitution, the Charters of the African Union and the United Nations.' The Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Arab League also expressed similar views, stating the need 'to abide by the rules and principles of good neighbourly relations' and to 'respect the sovereignty of [neighbouring] countries and not to interfere in their internal affairs'.

As Somalia pushes for the convening of UNSC session, there is pressure on the PSC to provide guidance for the African 3+1 members of the UNSC and set the tone for a possible UNSC meeting. Today's meeting is accordingly meant to enable the PSC to play its part within the framework of its mandate in the maintenance of peace and security in Africa as set out in the Protocol establishing it.

Apart from the concern about the escalating situation getting out of hand and leading to armed confrontations, members of the PSC are also concerned about the risks of this situation undermining the AU Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), to which Ethiopia is a major troop-contributing country. It is also widely recognized that the presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia contributes to putting a check on the terrorist group Al Shabaab. At the same time, the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland and the nationalist fury it unleashed can easily be instrumentalised by Al Shabaab for its recruitment efforts. Al Shabaab also issued a statement rejecting the MoU and threatening attack against Ethiopia.

Although the exact form of the outcome remains unknown as we go to press, if previous practice of the PSC is any guide, the

expected outcome of the session would be a communiqué. The PSC may express its grave concern about the escalating tension between the two countries and emphasize the need for maximum restraint on the part of the two countries to ensure that the situation does not descend into confrontation. The PSC is also expected to welcome the statement issued by the AU Commission Chairperson on 3 January and in that respect urge respect for the principle of territorial integrity of member states which is one of the principles enshrined both in the Constitutive Act establishing the AU and the PSC Protocol. The PSC may also call for a high-level diplomatic effort to avert further escalation and find avenues for peaceful resolution of the situation.