



## The Asmara Summit: Affirming the Need for Unity & Stability in the Horn of Africa

In a significant diplomatic development, Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, hosted a trilateral summit bringing together leaders from Somalia, Egypt, and Eritrea. At the summit, held October 9-10, 2024, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi reaffirmed their commitment to Somalia's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In many ways, the trilateral gathering symbolized broad regional efforts at ensuring stability; countering renewed attempts at stoking conflict; and encouraging political harmonization and cooperation in this conflict-prone region – conflicts that are largely the result of meddling by those whose geopolitical interests and hegemonic maneuvering trump local aspirations of peace and development.

The summit, which in effect sought no approval or sponsoring from so-called global leaders, was welcomed by many in the region and beyond who viewed this significant event from the perspective of African countries taking matters of security and stability into their own hands.

Unsurprisingly, a number of Western media outlets chose to misrepresent the gathering dubbing it an "axis" against a neighboring country – namely, Ethiopia. In reality, however, the event signaled a long-held regional desire to shift away from fragmentation and constant instability exacerbated by the actions of bad faith renegade regional actors, external actors, and/or internal rivalries. For the three countries involved, this meeting was about reaffirming mutual respect for sovereignty, prioritizing peace, and countering destabilizing forces in Somalia as well as the region at large. It also represented a much-needed step toward political harmonization and regional unity.

### Axis for Peace: Countering Instability in the Horn of Africa

Geopolitically, the Horn of Africa, encompassing Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, is one of the most volatile regions on earth. International powers with significant economic and strategic interests have long been attracted to the region given its proximity to the strategic Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean. Historically, these nations have faced internal instability and external interference, resulting in fragmentation.

Ethiopia, in particular, has historically been the source of mayhem, using its size and various external alliances to exert influence over and bully its neighbors. However, deep internal strife, which has seen record levels of violence in all its regions, has left the country grappling with its own challenges, forcing the regime to look outwards to deflect attention from its inability to control its affairs.

While Ethiopia previously took part in a tripartite agreement with Somalia and Eritrea aimed at fostering regional cooperation, its subsequent actions have undone much of the progress achieved by this nascent alliance that promised coexistence in the Horn of Africa for the first time in recorded history. This deterioration in relations due to Ethiopia's own actions, which many viewed as betrayal, has prompted the need for other alternative partnerships that prioritize stability, mutual respect, and collaboration rather than sheer unbridled hegemony from a constituent party to the 2018 tripartite agreement.

### Media Misinterpretation and Projection

Certain sections of Western and Gulf media, particularly those heavily aligned with Ethiopian narratives, have been quick to frame the Asmara summit as the creation of an "axis" against Ethiopia. This interpretation distorts the summit's intent and overlooks the broader context of regional politics. The idea that Egypt and Eritrea are aligning against Ethiopia, using Somalia as a proxy, is not only overly simplistic but also ignores Ethiopia's expansionism and its own role in undermining previous agreements and regional stability.



It is important to recall that Ethiopia itself was part of a similar tripartite agreement with Somalia and Eritrea in 2018, an alliance formed to promote peace, security, and cooperation in the region. However, Ethiopia's actions since then, including its involvement in internal affairs, regional meddling and undiplomatic rhetoric, have derailed this agreement. As Ethiopia turned its back on its commitments, undermined its neighbors, and pursued unilateral aggressive actions to redraw its borders, it isolated itself from the regional consensus that is now emerging between Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt.

Far from creating an "axis" against Ethiopia, this recent Asmara summit that brought together Somali, Egypt, and Eritrea, seeks to repair the fragmentation that has long destabilized the region. It is a call for mutual respect, adherence to international norms, and, crucially, the protection of Somalia from further pitfalls to its security and sovereignty. Furthermore, agreements like this, which Ethiopia could have joined had it not been for its consistent erratic behavior and destabilizing action, are essential in countering any external forces that aim to disrupt peace in the region.

### The Asmara Summit: A Turning Point for Regional Diplomacy?

The trilateral summit in Asmara is significant because it signifies the region's collective exhaustion with political instability, largely attributed to Ethiopia's erratic actions such as its violation of Somalia's territorial integrity on January 1st, 2024 by attempting to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Somaliland, a self-declared secessionist region that remains internationally recognized as part of Somalia. This reckless action by Ethiopia, to forcefully annex illegally the land and sea of Somalia, was not only a breach of Somalia's sovereignty but also contradicted international norms and existing regional agreements. The move sparked diplomatic tensions, as it disregarded Somalia's territorial integrity, political unity and threatened to destabilize painstaking efforts aimed at maintaining peace and cooperation in the region.

Ethiopia's failed attempt to formalize relations with a region in Somalia further strained its relationships with several neighboring countries especially as it continues to seek the protection and respect of its borders. Somalia is a country still struggling to maintain its fragile security architecture amidst an ongoing battle with Al-Shabab insurgents. As such, it needs reliable allies now more than ever.

Ethiopia, in the last three decades, has repeatedly violated Somalia's sovereignty, most notably through unauthorized military incursions and endless interference in Somali internal affairs. Despite being a neighbor and previously part of a tripartite agreement with Somalia and Eritrea, Ethiopia, in its classic unpredictability undermined Somalia's sovereignty by deploying troops without consent and supporting proxy factions in several Federal States to influence Somali politics. These actions not only destabilize Somalia but also strain regional relationships, contradicting international norms of respect for national borders and sovereignty.

For Egypt, Somalia's stability is crucial for regional security and maritime interests. For Eritrea, a stable Somalia represents not just a safer neighborhood but also the revival of a Somali state whose positive historic role in the region is greatly missed. Therefore, the summit's reaffirmation of Somali territorial integrity is not only symbolic but a statement of collective commitment to peace and cooperation in the Horn of Africa.

Egypt also made a political declaration at the summit in which it welcomed the lifting of the United Nations arms embargo on Somalia, enhancing cooperation to combat terrorism and protect Somali borders. It also pledged full support for Somalia's UN Security Council term from January 2025 to December 2026.

### Ethiopia's Negative Role in the Region

Ethiopia's foreign policy has increasingly been viewed as self-serving. The most recent example came on 16th October 2024 during the Ministerial Summit of the African Union Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) held in Addis Ababa, which brought together Djibouti, Kenya, Uganda, and Burundi and brazenly excluded Somalia – the very nation whose affairs were under discussion, this has been interpreted as the latest episode of the hegemonic view Addis Ababa has grown accustomed to.

This glaring disregard for Somalia's sense of agency exemplifies Ethiopia's barefaced attempt to cling to staying on in Somalia under the pretext of peacekeeping, all while violating Somalia's territorial integrity and political unity. Such tone-deaf arrogance and blind indifference to the clear demands of the Somali government and its people—who want Ethiopia out of their lands—undermine both regional stability and the legitimacy of any of the African Union's missions including but not limited to any talk of peacekeeping efforts.

Whether it is the dam dispute with Egypt or its destabilizing intervention in Somalia's internal affairs, Ethiopia has alienated some of its former allies. Somalia and Eritrea, once partners in Ethiopia's tripartite agreement, now find themselves looking elsewhere for reliable partnerships. The Asmara summit was a reflection of this shift, a move toward building stronger bilateral ties that respect sovereignty and mutual interests.

The Ethiopian narrative of regional hegemony is rapidly losing ground, especially as countries like Somalia assert independence in foreign relations. The trilateral agreement in Asmara is a clear message: Ethiopia can no longer dictate the terms of regional diplomacy unilaterally. Instead, the region is moving toward a wider system where cooperation, rather than dominance, becomes the central tenet of interstate relations.

### A Call for Regional Unity and Cooperation

The trilateral summit in Asmara should not be viewed in isolation. It is part of a growing trend in the Horn of Africa, where countries are increasingly choosing cooperation over conflict. For years, Somalia has been a battleground for foreign influence, with various actors, both regional and international, seeking to assert their dominance. But as the country rebuilds from decades of civil war, its leadership is focused on forging partnerships that respect its sovereignty and prioritize stability.

The reaffirmation of Somalia's territorial integrity by Egypt and Eritrea is a signal to the rest of the region that stability must be built on respect for national sovereignty, not on attempts to undermine or manipulate some states. It is a clear rejection of the old politics of dominance and interference.

Similar high-level engagements across the region are not only possible but necessary. Countries in the Horn of Africa must come together to address their shared challenges. By building alliances based on mutual respect and shared goals, the region can move beyond the cycles of conflict and poverty that have characterized its past.