

Summary

On January 1, Ethiopia and the internationally unrecognized Somaliland struck a deal over Ethiopia's sea access. The agreement would ensure recognition of Somaliland in exchange for port access in the Red Sea. On January 6, Somali President Mohamud nullified the agreement and cut diplomatic ties with Ethiopia. Moreover, Somalia stated its willingness to wage war with Ethiopia if necessary. Although a military conflict between the two countries seems unlikely, current tensions could weaken security within Ethiopia and Somalia as well as the Horn of Africa.

Recent events and developments

On January 1, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and de facto Somaliland President Muse Bihi Abdi signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Addis Ababa. The agreement granted landlocked Ethiopia 50 years to lease 20 kilometers surrounding the port of Berbera on the Gulf of Aden with access to the Red Sea for its naval and commercial interests. Additionally, Ethiopia could build a military base in the port. In exchange, Ethiopia would grant Somaliland airline shares and formal recognition as a sovereign state, thus being the first country to acknowledge its independence since 1991. The Somali government rejected the agreement, as it regards Somaliland as part of its territory. Consequently, Somalia halted diplomatic ties with Ethiopia and it further stated that "it is ready for a war" if Ethiopia does not cooperate. The deal sparked protests among Somalis in Somalia and outside of the country. Ethiopia has at least 4,000 troops in Somalia as part of the AU Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) (set to withdraw by the end of 2024), and another 1,000 as part of bilateral agreements with Somalia.

Impact assessment

A possible military conflict with Ethiopia remains unlikely due to Ethiopia's military superiority (despite its ongoing internal conflict), which led to a devastating defeat during an earlier war in 1977-78. Furthermore, the Somali government remains dependent on Ethiopia in its efforts against Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Therefore, animosity between the two countries and the cut-off of diplomatic relations may hamper such counterterrorism efforts. Simultaneously, Al-Shabaab will likely capitalise on the current tensions by portraying the deal as a foreign attempt to further divide Somalia. In addition, the deal may further weaken the security situation in Ethiopia, which continues to deteriorate due to ongoing conflict in various regions, such as Amhara and Oromo. One reason for this is that the deal will likely revive old tensions between the Ethiopian government and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), a rebel secessionist group in Ethiopia's oil-rich Somali region demanding independence for Somalis from Ethiopia. The ONLF was engaged in a decades-long war with the Ethiopian government. Evidenced anti-Ethiopia sentiment among Somalis, via protests following the deal, may incite the ONLF to again pursue more autonomy.

Advice from Forth Global

- Advise staff to avoid disclosing their personal opinion on the political situation between Ethiopia and Somalia, both in person and via social media.
- Continuously monitor local news and liaise with local partners to stay up to date with any developments in the region of operations.
- Advise staff to avoid all kinds of protests.
- Staff traveling to Ethiopia or Somalia should undertake a three-day HEAT programme prior to deployment.

Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

+31 (0) 35 543 04 37

christiaan@forthglobal.com

We provide a wide range of services to prepare your organization and employees for situations like these. More information on our website: www.forthglobal.com