Outcomes
REPORT

> Challenges to Political Transitions and Strategies for Regional Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa

June 2025

Radisson Blu Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On June 27-28 a high-level policy dialogue was organised by the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) and the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) African Peacebuilding Network and Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa (APN and Next Gen) program in order to explore the key challenges undermining stable political transitions in the Horn of Africa and propose for strategic pathways for regional peace and stability, aligning with the Africa Union's (AU) Silencing the Guns objectives and Agenda 2063 vision.

The dialogue addressed the structural challenges hindering stable political transitions in the Horn of Africa (HoA), highlighting a persistent mismatch in governance systems. It emphasised that the region's unstable transitions are not sudden events, but rather the cumulative outcome of prolonged systemic issues. Key discussions included the role of civil wars in state formation, the fluid nature of armed groups, and the influence of both traditional actors and external stakeholders in shaping the political landscape.

The importance of adopting an integrated, multi-dimensional approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution was stressed, with particular attention to the role of the AU's Silencing the Guns (STGs) as an ongoing initiative for supporting stability on the continent. The dialogue concluded with actionable recommendations and forward-looking strategies to support sustainable peace and political reform across the region.

BACKGROUND

Political transitions are inherently complex and rarely linear, and transitions in Africa face both internal and external challenges. The Horn of Africa—comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti—remains one of the continent's most volatile regions, marked by complex political transitions, protracted conflicts, and deep-seated socio-economic fragility. Despite intermittent opportunities for democratisation, these states are frequently derailed by authoritarian resurgence, the militarisation of politics, factionalism, external interference, and recurring communal violence.

Against this backdrop, the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS) of Addis Ababa University and SSRC's APN and Next Gen Program jointly organised a timely high-level policy dialogue under the theme "Challenges to Political Transitions and Strategies for Regional Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa". The event was held at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 27-28 June 2025. The event covered four sub-themes: (I) Rocky Transitions: Structural Causes, Regional Linkages; (II) Understanding Wars and Insurgencies in the Region; (III) Making and Sustaining Peace in the Horn of Africa; and (IV) The Role of Regional and Continental Organisations to STGs.

MAJOR OUTCOMES OF THE EVENT

The high-level dialogue commenced with introductions and an overview of the event by Ms Olu Adenekan, Program Manager (SSRC), followed by welcoming remarks by Dr Cyril Obi, Program Director (SSRC) and Dr Fana Gebresenbet, Interim Head of the Centre for Peace and Security Studies, on behalf of Dr Mercy Fekadu, Interim Director (IPSS).

Keynote Speech

H. E. Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the African Union (AU) High Representative for Silencing the Guns and Chairman of the AU High-Level Panel on the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan, noted the peculiarities of the Horn of Africa as it still faces difficulties in building sustainable democracies. His Excellency emphasized Sudan's case and identified marginalisation and exclusion from political power and economic resources as the source of agitation. He also underlined how the militarised nature, and the lack of inclusive institutions due to the historical legacy within the region continues to incapacitate the states. The regional security complex exacerbates existing tensions, leading to rooted instability.

He suggested actionable solutions for the challenges in the Horn which includes learning from successful political transitions and contextualising them to local conditions, conducting political dialogue as identified during the midterm evaluation of the AU Master Roadmap for Silencing the Guns in Africa, following joint border demarcation approach, applying suited federal system of governance, and strengthening the AU and IGAD mechanisms for mediation and stable transitions in the Horn.

Dr. Chambas also noted that the AU member states should comply with normative frameworks and show political will, which would then enable the AU to have leverage on the belligerents because the midterm evaluation of the AU Master Roadmap for Silencing the Guns in Africa, showed that AU has all the instruments for addressing the challenges on the continent. He concluded his speech with a call to action, he stated: "We must restore hope to our people by ending war, silencing the guns, and forging a path toward a brighter, more peaceful future."

Session I: Rocky Transitions: Structural Causes, Regional Linkages

There are deep-rooted structural challenges to a stable political transition in the HoA due to historical legacies, governance failures, and regional dynamics. Colonial legacy, when followed by policies of isolation and neglect that created disparities across sectors, was underscored by taking South Sudan's case, where the security apparatus consequently experienced a lack of professionalism and ethnic divide.

The session further discussed the dual contradictions of the mismatch between the European-style nation-state model and the lived realities of ethnically and religiously diverse societies and the contradiction between state institutions and political communities. The panellists noted that these mismatches contribute to creating complexity in identity management and the co-optation of uprisings by the elite, thereby renewing authoritarianism.

Participants further added that the Sudan crisis goes beyond the civil-military conflict and extends to internal divisions among civilian groups. Such a wide range of divisions hinder national unity and effective resistance. The conflicts in the HoA also contribute to trans-boundary threats where they involve various foreign combatants challenging the region's security. The session also identified the role of external actors in exacerbating internal divisions by exploiting existing vulnerabilities for strategic gain.

The session concluded by noting that the turbulent transition in the HoA is not accidental, but rather a by-product of deeply embedded historical, institutional, and geopolitical dynamics. Participants highlighted the need for African-led inclusive solutions rooted in accountable institutions and meaningful political dialogue. It was also noted that strengthening regional cooperation is key to silencing the guns and advancing the goals of Agenda 2063.

Session II: Understanding Wars and Insurgencies in the Region

The session commenced by illustrating how long-standing civil wars, insurgencies, and counterinsurgencies have consistently shaped state-building in the HoA. Participants also noted that the scale, form, and actors have changed dramatically in recent decades.

Since 2018, violence in the region has increased, marked by both continuity and change. Drawing on the experiences of Ethiopia and Sudan, participants pointed to the role that the remnants of the old

regime rooted in militarised and centralised structures in governance played vis-à-vis weakened state institutions and rising public demand for reform has generated new waves of expectations, fear, and resistance.

The dynamics of conflicts in the region were analysed using the political theory framework "who, what, when, why and how" as guiding questions. Using this framework, the cases of Sudan and Ethiopia were analysed, where widespread access to small arms, communal militarisation, and historical antagonism between the state and society were cited as core contributors to ongoing instability. Whereas, Somalia's colonial legacy played a fundamental role in shaping post-independence conflicts.

State formation across the Horn is further complicated by structural and ideological challenges.

The states in the region remain unfinished projects and are constantly in a state of flux. When central regimes collapse, the state itself is often imperilled, as seen in Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia.

The fluidity of armed actors in the region compounds this complexity. External actors do not directly instigate conflicts but often exploit internal divisions through local proxies to advance their geopolitical interests.

The use of drones and the rise of digital platforms have significantly changed warfare and state control. The growing concern regarding drone usage by insurgents is another aspect of the development of such strategic weapons. Social media has democratised information flows but also introduced new challenges in controlling narratives, verifying facts, and managing the psychological dimensions of conflict.

Participants also reflected that on how traditional governance ideologies are struggling with delivering sustainable peace and inclusive state building in the region, while external actors' intervention using technological tools, without regard for local dynamics, challenges sovereignty and self-determination.

The session concluded by reaffirming that the political economy of violence in the Horn is deeply entrenched and shaped by a convergence of structural inequality, historical legacy, fragmented institutions, and new technologies. Addressing these crises requires robust state reform, inclusive dialogue, and rethinking governance models suited to the region's unique historical and social realities.

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Session III: Making and Sustaining Peace in the Horn of Africa

The panel addressed the complex question of how peace can be achieved in the HoA by examining the interplay and role of local, national, and regional mechanisms for conflict resolution and the structural causes of persistent regional instability.

Conflicts in HoA are interlinked. Violence at the communal level, especially among pastoralist communities engaged in cross-border resource contestation, is often intensified by broader systemic issues. Local innovations, especially those involving women, supported by development organisations and regional bodies such as IGAD, are promising entry points for sustainable peacebuilding. The interdependence of conflicts can be seen by underscoring refugee flows with a specific example of the South Sudan conflict.

Traditional authorities can contribute to peacebuilding efforts as they possess local legitimacy, deep knowledge of community dynamics, and often have access to actors involved in violence. Historically, they have contributed to conflict resolution through mediation and reconciliation. However, concerns regarding their patriarchal structure, clan-based affiliations, religious exclusivity, and capacity to consistently uphold civic values cannot be overlooked.

The significant role of regional organisations like IGAD and AU in conflict mediation, early warning, and regional coordination is undeniable, but the issues of credibility, neutrality, and lack of internal coherence cannot be overlooked. The lack of commitment by member states to such regional institutions, combined with the absence of strong leadership, limits their effectiveness. Internal legitimacy and governance reforms are needed to minimise vulnerability to external interference and increase the capacity to foster sustainable peace.

"Cultural entitlement" was also identified as a source of exclusion and renewed conflict once it is institutionalized. There is a need to embrace civic values, build good governance protocols in the region, and prevent authoritarian entrenchment.

Participants suggested a hybrid model as an effective way of integrating traditional authorities into the macro-level peace process, while being cautious of their susceptibility to politicisation and

destabilisation. Accordingly, traditional leaderships were to be engaged through co-designed, culturally grounded frameworks, supported by financial and human resources to increase capacity, tempered by the principles of modern civic governance.

The use of unmanned drones by both state and non-state actors has changed the nature of warfare in the region. Similar to the previous session, the role of social media platforms in disrupting the state's monopoly on information, shaping perception, and fueling political mobilisation was noted, while misinformation and the leverage it gives insurgents were identified as points of concern. The panel reflected on the philosophical and structural dimensions of peace by noting the impact of emerging technologies. They also asserted that peace must be understood in the context of unresolved historical grievances, entrenched poverty, and systemic inequality as foundational to avoid new cycles of conflict as Africa continues to suffer from inequitable distribution of wealth and governance deficits.

In conclusion, the panel emphasised that peacebuilding in the HoA requires a multilevel, integrated approach that combines local legitimacy with national reform and regional coordination.

Session IV: The Role of Regional and Continental Organizations to Silence the Guns

The discussion reflected on the core function of the AU in managing political transitions and advancing the Silencing the Guns (STGs) initiative. The lack of clarity regarding the meaning of STG hinders effective communication between institutions and citizens. Since the AU primarily operates as a policy-making body, implementation largely falls on Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and member states, often leading to gaps in execution due to weak political commitment and institutional constraints. The AU's limited capacity to bring peace to conflict zones, such as the DRC, has allowed external actors to take over mediation efforts. While the AU relies on member state cooperation, the organisation's effectiveness is hampered by dysfunctional governance in some member states. This was observed in relation to the conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia.

It was advised that the AU needs to focus on proactive conflict prevention by emphasising the STG as a long-term adaptive framework and publicising its achievements, such as its assistance in the Gambia's peaceful transition. Closing the gap in knowledge management was identified as paramount in furthering the collaborative effort to contextualise peacebuilding within African epistemologies.

Geopolitical dynamics further complicate the AU's role, with emerging powers, such as Türkiye and Gulf states, engaging bilaterally in ways that undermine multilateral approaches. The AU's ability to mobilise resources and coordinate with RECs remains

a challenge, exacerbated by member states' competing priorities and growing humanitarian crises in regions such as Sudan. Despite these hurdles, participants stressed the importance of reforming the AU system, leveraging anchor states (Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa), and strengthening local ownership of peace initiatives.

Way Forward and Recommendations

The below are recommendations that emerged throughout the different sessions:

- The need for stronger linkage with CSOs, women groups and youth movements to bridge the gap in knowledge production and dissemination regarding the AU.

- Critically assess the influence of emerging powers on Africa's political transitions to ensure that such engagements do not worsen conflicts.

- To work on resolving member states crises to strengthen the legitimacy of regional bodies.

- Strongly emphasized the need for a structured research agenda, clear benchmarks, and broader dissemination strategies to transform STGs from an abstract idea into actionable policy.

- To go beyond addressing symptoms and provide more profound institutional recalibration options for tackling the root cause of cycles of violence and weak state-society relations.

- The need for consistency within the AU in taking actions especially in cases of documented war crimes.

- Indigenous knowledge systems emerged as an underutilised resource. Examples like Somaliland's traditional conflict resolution models demonstrated the potential of localised peacebuilding.

WAYS FORWARD

- Financing the AU initiatives, strengthening mediation structures, and fostering trust among regional states.

- Researchers were urged to produce policy-relevant studies and ensure their findings reach decision-makers.

- Working towards internal cohesion through inclusive dialogue and commitment to translating knowledge into tangible progress to minimise vulnerabilities to external powers as global power dynamics continues to shift.

- Conceptual decolonisation of African security discourse as a dilemma between offering solutions or a distraction from immediate crises.

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CONCLUSION

The high level dialogue reaffirmed that the Horn of Africa faces unique challenges; however, the normative frameworks established by the AU and IGAD are adequate to address them. Nevertheless, the absence of political will among member states and deficiencies in governance emerge as significant obstacles. In this regard, the role of effective knowledge management, advocacy for paradigm shift, and dissemination of success stories through collective collaboration is indispensable.