

Preventing an Afghanistan Redux in Somalia

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Abstract

The article argues that an effective peace intervention results from a balance between the three sides of the peace triangle formed by peacekeeping (security), peacebuilding (development), and peacemaking (political settlement). It examines the situation in Somalia to highlight that in case peacemaking is neglected, it is likely that Somalia may fall to the al Shabaab on the draw down and departure of the African Union peace enforcement force. It, therefore, recommends a political prong of strategy to complement the military prong to address the challenge al Shabaab poses in Somalia.

Introduction

An earlier article in this journal had made the case that for returning peace to a conflict afflicted area, a modicum of balance is desirable between the three sides of the peace triangle – peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.¹ During the lifecycle of any peace intervention, the centre of gravity, at a particular point in time and conflict circumstance will shift between the three sides. However, the three must be so poised that together they can contain and roll back a conflict. Operational Art in a peace operation lies in leveraging the three sides in a manner that the resulting balances mid-wife success. Somalia suggests itself as a case study for application of this hypothesis.

Somalia has been site of peace enforcement for some 15 years now. In the mid to late 2000s, the de-facto control of Somalia by the Islamic Courts was wrested away from it by intervention of Ethiopia to install a transitional federal government that had been

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formed in 2004 with the support of the regional organisation, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).² Meanwhile the Islamic Courts's administration mutated, with its militant youth wing forming the al Shabaab. In 2007, Ethiopian intervention was substituted by an African Union (AU) peace enforcement operation, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).³ Over the 2010s, the AMISOM progressively wrested control of territory from the al Shabaab even as the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was installed in Mogadishu and Federal Member States (FMS) were formed. In 2013, the United Nations' (UN) Political Office in Somalia was transformed into a special political mission, the UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), to assist with statebuilding and peacebuilding.⁴ The al Shabaab's association with the al Qaeda initially, and later the Islamic State (IS) in the 2010s, led to its figuring on the UN terror entity sanctions' list since 2010.⁵ This effectively placed it out of bounds for a peacemaking outreach. Thus, while peace enforcement and peacebuilding proceeded, peacemaking was not in evidence. The imbalance between the three sides of the peace triangle visualised in relation to Somalia, continues till today.

Somalia today has a follow-on mission to the AMISOM, the AU Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), in place since April 2022. Assessing that instability has reduced considerably and security sector reform initiatives were in hand to upgrade the Somali National Army (SNA) and police, in 2021, the ATMIS is expected to draw down and depart within 30 months. The ATMIS is to assist the SNA regain government control through joint operations and capacity building, even as it draws down while the SNA gains strength and confidence.⁶ Despite considerable progress with both state building and peacebuilding by UNSOM, the situation does not lend confidence to the assumption that the SNA will hold up on departure of foreign forces. In other words, with peacemaking absent, peacebuilding and peace enforcement has not been well served.

A scenario as obtained on the departure of the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces from Afghanistan stares Somalia in the face. There is scope for the international community and the regional bodies to reappraise the three sides of the peace triangle in the two fraternal missions in place, ATMIS and UNSOM. While ATMIS is assisting with provision of security,

UNSOM, integrated with the rest of the UN family of Agencies, Funds and Programs (AFP) and in league with allied actors, concentrates on statebuilding and peacebuilding. Missing in the menu is peacemaking. In light of the recent precedence in Afghanistan, this deficit might yet sabotage not only the long-standing peace intervention but Somalia itself. Consequently, the question explored here is whether an Afghanistanlike future can be escaped by Somalia, and, if so, how?

Background

Somalia has been in an unsettled situation since the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, it was stable only in its first decade under democratic government. In the sixties, the first democratic turn-over of government in post-colonial Africa was witnessed in Somalia. However, as typical for the era, Siad Barre installed himself in power in a military coup, whereupon Cold War dynamics took over. The two superpowers switched clients in the Horn of Africa, with the US supporting Somalia against Soviet and Cuba-backed Ethiopia. In late seventies, a war broke out over Oromia in Ethiopia, an area occupied by Somali ethnic groups. Within Somalia, Siad Barre also asserted his authority with ruthless suppression in Somaliland, the erstwhile British colonial possession that in 1960 had merged with the Italy-colonised Somali territory to forge Somalia. The end of the Cold War pried loose the US umbrella over Siad Barre.

The Somali state dissolved in famine. The story thereafter is more familiar, with India deploying a brigade under UN Chapter VII auspices as part of an upgraded peacekeeping operation, UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II). The preceding operation, UNOSOM I, had a mandate to widen humanitarian access. Met with anarchy, the international community temporarily deployed a US-led peace enforcement operation, Unified Task Force (UNITAF).⁷ It was to contain the clan violence, which it succeeded in doing by enforcing an elitist peace by deterring the warlords through a display of military might. The hand over from UNITAF to UNSOM II saw warlords back in action, targeting, in one infamous incident Pakistani peacekeepers. American forces, outside the UN framework, went after the warlord responsible, Farah Aideed, who incidentally had been Somali ambassador in Delhi for three years. The Black Hawk incident resulted. Withdrawal of Americans soon thereafter scuttled the UNSOM II.⁸

Somalia fell out of the international radar, with the international community fatigued by international humanitarian intervention post contemporary instances in Bosnia and Rwanda. A lesson from the American-led 'global war on terror' was on the dangers of persistence of ungoverned spaces. The FGS that initially functioned out of Baidoa and moved to Mogadishu, when the security situation was stabilised by AMISOM. Since 2012, when the FGS was finally emplaced formally, it has had two iterations of elections. Its most recent election, in 2022, returned the first president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, to power.

President Mohamud has set the SNA to undertake operations in conjunction with ATMIS and the clan militias against al Shabaab.⁹ The idea is to soften the al Shabaab and create conditions for talks from a position of strength for the FGS. The idea of using clan militia is reminiscent of the Iraqi awakening in which Iraqi Sunnis were used to wrap up the al Qaeda in the Sunni Triangle in 2007-08. However, it is predictable that as an insurgent group with demonstrated resilience against the AMISOM over past 15 years, the al Shabaab will melt away only to re-emerge elsewhere and by night.¹⁰ It is amply clear that a solely military approach will not suffice.¹¹ Consequently, President Muhamud's intention to follow through with talks 'at the right time' is a promising opportunity.¹² It gives peacemaking to make a debut, with international community support.

Desirability

Whether to talk to the Taliban was a perennial question through the 2010s.¹³ Consensus had it that military operations needed complementing with a talks outreach, even as peacebuilding by provincial reconstruction teams proceeded alongside. In the event, talks did come about in Doha. The anticipated upgrade of the Afghan National Security Forces was slow in coming as a result, the Taliban were less eager at the talks table awaiting the departure of the foreign forces. The fears were confirmed in their take-over of Kabul last year.¹⁴ Given such a possibility in Somalia, it is only desirable that every effort be made to avoid an Afghanistan redux.

There is a perspective is that talking to terrorists is not a strategic move. Terrorists will take advantage of talks for gaining legitimacy. This will make them get ahead of the government in the stakes for peoples' hearts and minds, especially since the FGS is hampered by allegations of corruption, clanism, incapacity,

and association with external powers. Terrorist entities are strategic players and might, through talks, take power they have been denied militarily. Regional states, as Uganda and Kenya that have borne the brunt of al Shabaa out-of-area terror attacks, would be unwilling to treat it as a legitimate interlocutor.

The constraint is that the ATMIS is slated to depart in the middle term. Under financial pressure, the European Union - that largely funded it so far - is downsizing the budget. The prominent regional state, Ethiopia, has been beset with internal security issues. Initially, when AMISOM was being inducted, a move to plant a hybrid, or UN peace operation instead, had been struck down. It is uncertain if the international community would reappraise this decision. The feeling of 'community' among the international community has been considerably strained in wake of the Ukraine War. There is a recession looming and the prospects of funding another giant UN mission are not appetising. This inability to up the ante militarily implies that a 'politics first' approach must compensate.

The lesson from the Afghanistan experience is, thus, not against talks as much as to use talks productively. Both antagonists were loath to share power in Afghanistan, making talks infructuous. In Somalia, the al Shabaab is a nationalist outfit. Somalis are nationalist and - unlike in most places in Africa - are relatively homogenous as an ethnic group inhabiting a defined space. As with the Taliban, it is not only religious extremism that drives it, though Wahabbi influence has impinged on the Sufistic culture in Somalia.

Somalia provides a timely opportunity to test the UN's freshly minted motto, 'primacy of politics'¹⁵, intended to get to peace through peaceful means. For long, other actors have tried to address their respective troubles in Somalia. Europe, contending with a migration influx from Africa, funded the AMISOM. The AMISOM, among others from as far away as Senegal, comprised troops from neighbouring countries seeking to tackle terrorism at its origin. However, alleged human rights violations and collateral damage by peacekeepers has partially alienated Somalis.¹⁶ The US, fearing homeland terror from its Somali diaspora immigrants, intervenes militarily through its Africa Command base, while at times causing civilian casualties.¹⁷ Somalis have thus been subject to pursuit of aims of others on their land and at their cost. The

UN's shift to people-centric peacekeeping makes it inescapable that peacemaking must proceed apace to rescue people from the cycle of violence.

Feasibility

The UN has a policy guiding political approaches to armed groups. There is no proscription on such outreach intended to end violence. Any such outreach would have to ascertain if the al Shabaab wants to travel away from terror tag. Continuing humanitarian and peacebuilding support can act as incentive, particularly as Somalia faces its fourth year of drought. For now, the areas it controls have restricted humanitarian access. The possibility of exiting the terror list – as was the case with elements of the Taliban – is another carrot to influence the al Shabaab. The reputational risk from a rebuff or the talks going awry, in an egregious terror incident would have to be factored. The FGS will require forging a consensus and a joint front with the FMS on talks.

There are multiple forums that can act as lead: the UN, the regional organisation, and the FGS itself. If the FGS wishes to be in the lead then capacity building support for both parties and logistics facilitation might be necessary. The regional organisations – both AU and the IGAD – are well experienced though financing might yet be required. External actors – such as from the Nordic or Gulf states – could lend a hand. The multiple special envoys for the Horn of Africa would require a coordination forum. The UN is better positioned to play a supportive as against a protagonist role. Its mission in the country for the last ten years indicates its political capacity, while the UN Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) that supported the AMISOM, and now supports the ATMIS and elements of SNA, can help with the logistics – particularly with helicopter support to access al Shabaab areas.

Taking cue from the Doha talks with the Taliban, the talks would require first ending the violence – an issue not taken up at Doha and which resulted in continuing violence even as talks proceeded. This is especially important in Somalia to urgently open up the humanitarian space. Besides, the instrumental use of violence by both sides tends to influence the negotiations negatively. The table then becomes yet another battlefield. With violence at ebb, talks could dwell on a road map on the progressive co-option of the al Shabaab. Usually, an agreement spells out a transition period of power sharing followed by an election. The

ongoing Constitution review and the reform in election system, away from being clan-based to 'one person one vote', can see al Shabaab participation. The national reconciliation program underway could, post conflict, also cover al Shabaab controlled areas.¹⁸

The period of transition might require overseeing. Since the AU mission may be too closely associated with neighbouring countries, it may require substitution. Political momentum in the talks could perk up Troop Contributing Countries' willingness to contribute blue berets and boots on ground in a monitoring and protective role respectively. A lean mission with a civilian component, including civil affairs and human rights officers with a pronounced national staff complement, can be foreseen. A clear timeline culminating with the next elections or as agreed in a comprehensive peace agreement can serve as focus for an exit strategy and handover to the UN Country Team.

A Role for India?

India is in the midst of taking up its destined role as a leading state. It has been a member for over last two years of the UN Security Council (UNSC). It has recently taken over chair of the G-20. India has to seize opportunities to supplant UNSC declinist veto-holding pen holders, Britain and France. Envisaging a greater role for itself as a security provider, in the ocean that bears its name, is a first step.

Its strategic moves in the Indo-Pacific theatre have not been at the cost of the western Indian Ocean. It has been a player in anti-piracy operations off Somalia since inception of the joint naval operations. Managing security along Indian Ocean Rim in proximity of the Horn of Africa to South West Asia - and the scene of conflict in Yemen - is significant. The strategic weight of the region is seen in the setting up of bases in close proximity to each other by the US and China. The risk of instability multiplying, such as in the increased presence of Islamists southwards along the African coast in Mozambique, must be acknowledged.

Since India is now a pragmatic power, balancing China in Africa will not be far from its concerns. Africa is a site for power competition where India cannot find herself India missing-in-action. In taking a proactive role, India would only be returning to its historical role as an important rimland naval power, evidenced by

communities originating in Horn of Africa resident across the Deccan and the Malabar Coast. India must step up to complete a task left unfinished when, in 1995, its navy evacuated troops of the UNOSOM II.

India lending a hand as a 'friend of the mediation', through appointing a special envoy would enable herself to push for consensus in the UNSC on a light footprint mission to arrive at and help implement any agreement reached. It can lead with boots on the ground. It could contribute to the humanitarian Somalia Trust Fund or bilaterally increase humanitarian support.

Conclusion

Peace operations cannot be done in a political vacuum. In Somalia, absence of a political prong of strategy to tackle the al Shabaab has resulted in the insurgency persisting. Current-day dire humanitarian straits compel a political outreach to the al Shabaab. By all means, care must be taken not to empower terrorist affiliates but this apprehension can be mitigated by enlightened design of the mediation or facilitation, taking on board the lessons of the peace process in Afghanistan. The terror tag to groups must be amenable to revision now that international terror has subsided considerably. An outreach can, in a first step, influence the group to distance itself from terror. The FGS is already contemplating a political solution. Once the regional organisations have bought into this line of action, the UN could lend a hand by including the remit in its next resolution on UNSOM. This will pave way for UNSOM to acquire political teeth and to transform into a short-duration, light-footprint peacekeeping mission overseeing induction of al Shabaab into the Somali national mainstream. The Somalia case study validates the hypothesis that all three sides of the peace triangle need ministration in varying degrees during the lifecycle of a peace intervention, failing which, peace is liable to prove elusive. Peacemaking must be added to the peace repertoire Somalia to complete the peace triangle.

Endnotes

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