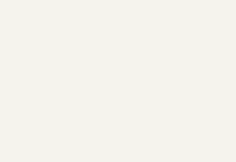




Med-Or Monthly AFRICA REPORT

EDITOR'S NOTE

A new development paradigm is taking shape between Europe and Africa, one centered less on aid and increasingly on industrial partnerships, investment platforms, and strategic economic integration.

At Med-Or, we began the month by hosting Kenyan President William Ruto for a lecture during his official visit to Rome. Two weeks later, Nairobi became the stage for the France–Africa Summit. In between, we travelled to Brussels, where discussions with senior European officials engaged on Africa offered an equally revealing perspective on the evolving state of Euro-African relations.

Two key conclusions emerge from these engagements.

First, Kenya has effectively positioned itself as one of Africa's foremost diplomatic and economic hubs: a continental convening center for Africa–Europe relations, a gateway for finance and investment, and an increasingly influential interlocutor within the Global South. This evolution is taking place despite domestic tensions, most recently, protests linked to rising fuel prices and broader cost-of-living pressures. Much of this positioning reflects Kenya's longstanding pro-business environment, but also President Ruto's distinctly global outlook: climate-oriented, business-minded, and strategically non-aligned in its international partnerships. As Ruto remarked during our Med-Or event in Rome, "we neither look East nor West, we look forward."

Second, a new development paradigm is taking shape between Europe and Africa, one centered less on aid and increasingly on industrial partnerships, investment platforms, and strategic economic integration. President Ruto framed Africa's core challenge not as a shortage of capital, but as a chronic mispricing of risk that inflates borrowing costs and deters investment, while the African Development Bank (AfDB) used the Nairobi summit to advance its proposed New African Financial Architecture for Development - a framework built on guarantees, blended finance and continental insurance mechanisms designed to unlock institutional capital at scale. The summit's €23 billion investment package was paired with plans to strengthen Nairobi-based ATIDI as a pan-African risk guarantee platform. Attention now turns to the upcoming G7 summit in France, where Nairobi and Paris are expected to seek broader backing for their agenda.

There is a paradigm shift underway. Governments on both continents appear increasingly inclined to move away from past cooperation models driven primarily by NGOs, civil society organizations, and UN development agencies toward frameworks led by states, industrial actors, development banks, and long-term capital. This direction is visible across Europe's major initiatives toward Africa - from the European Union's Global Gateway to Italy's Mattei Plan and France's Africa Forward agenda.

Behind these initiatives lies a growing recognition that scattershot projects and soft-power-centric engagement have often failed to advance strategic priorities. What is now emerging instead is a search for industrial projects in strategic sectors capable of producing tangible geo-economic returns and ideally integrate Africa into global (and European) supply chains. Importantly, this shift is not being imposed solely from Europe. It increasingly reflects the priorities articulated by African governments themselves.

The same logic increasingly underpins Med-Or's engagement across Africa. As a Foundation committed to bridging industry and development through strategic partnerships and projects between Italy, Europe, and the Global South, this approach lies at the core of our mission. It is precisely for this reason that we established our operational base in Kenya, a choice that recent summits have only further validated. From here, we work alongside key African partners and leading industrial actors to help shape concrete, long-term projects in sectors critical to Europe and Africa competitiveness and resilience: cybersecurity, underwater infrastructures, critical minerals, and next-generation agricultural models.

Yet we should harbor no illusions. The emergence of a more business-oriented narrative, one deliberately moving away from influence models traditionally centered on military patronage, as in parts of France's historical relationship with Francophone Africa, or on governance conditionality, as often favored by Europe, does not mean that Africa and Europe can simply declare the age of instability over and enter a frictionless era of opportunity and commerce. Economic ambition alone will not wash away the hard reality in front of our eyes, that a large portion of the states in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa have either collapsed or are embroiled in conflict.

Recently, the advance of JNIM in Mali has coincided with the gradual retreat of Russian influence from key areas. The Sahel is increasingly emerging alongside Afghanistan as a global epicenter of international terrorism, in a region simultaneously endowed with vast reserves of critical minerals and crossed by migrant routes bound to Europe. Yet at the very moment Moscow's security architecture in Africa is showing signs of strain, the broader geopolitical context is also shifting: for the first time since the Ukrainian counteroffensive three years ago, the tide of the war appears to be turning in Kyiv's favor.

This matters well beyond Eastern Europe. Putin's image as strongman, a key element of Russia's appeal to several African regimes (and to leaders who brandish closer ties with Moscow as leverage to secure continued European support) may begin to erode alongside Russia's ability to project power abroad. Europe should recognize this opening and engage more, not less, with a rapidly evolving Sahelian landscape, beginning with deeper strategic coordination with West African coastal states. A good example is the EU's March 2026 Security and Defence Partnership with Ghana - the first such agreement ever concluded with an African country - alongside broader security and military assistance cooperation frameworks through the European Peace Facility for Nigeria, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Mauritania, all of which point to a more pragmatic and strategically engaged European posture in West Africa.

This is precisely why, alongside our work on innovative sectoral development projects, we believe investments in initiatives with both humanitarian and stabilization dimension remain much needed. It is also for this reason that we continue to closely monitor crises across the broader Mediterranean and African space. In this edition, we examine several of the most consequential peace and security dynamics currently reshaping the region. From developments in the Sahel - including Algeria's mediation efforts surrounding the Russian withdrawal from areas of Mali, analyzed by Matilde Vecchioni - to the increasingly interconnected crisis system linking Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the evolving situation in Tigray, explored by Corrado Cok as well as developments in Libya by Francesco Meriani. Luciano Pollichieni analyzes the growing transactional nexus between security and critical minerals underpinning the emerging U.S. approach in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a model that I fear may soon find parallels in the Sahel as Russian influence recedes from parts of the region.

Finally, Chepkorir Sambu reports from the recent IGAD workshop on mediation, attended by senior regional officials, distilling the principal lessons emerging from ongoing diplomatic efforts across the Horn of Africa. The results so far, however, remain limited. The renewed deterioration in relations between Tigray and Addis Ababa is only the latest reminder that the central obstacle is not the absence of capable mediators - the IGAD region and Africa more broadly possess many - but rather the persistent lack of political will among the parties involved and regional and international actors reluctance to focus on difficult files.

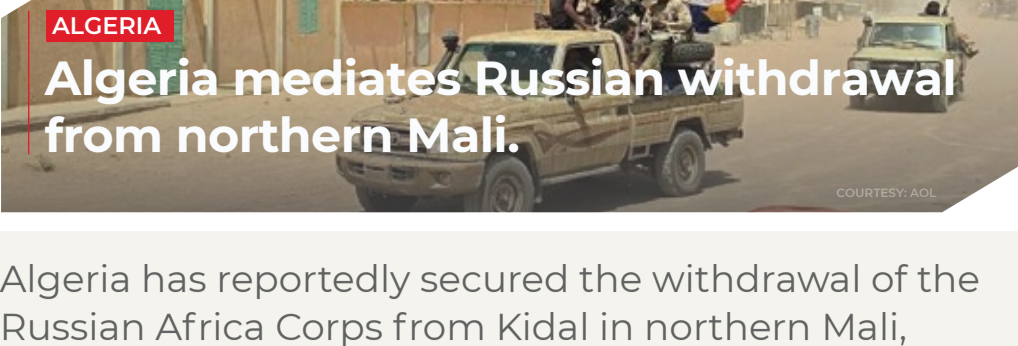
A final observation. This week in Rome, at the Med-Or Foundation, we hosted the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of Qatar for a discussion on mediation. Doha has distinguished itself from other Gulf actors for a markedly different, often constructive approach, seeking to build influence through mediation, most recently in the dialogue between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Yet what continues to weigh heavily on African security thinking is the precedent of Doha's negotiations with the Taliban, which ultimately facilitated the collapse of Afghanistan's fragile post-2001 state and the movement's return to power. That is precisely the scenario the international community cannot afford to see repeated in the Sahel or in Somalia.

Umberto Tavalato

Executive Director,
Med-Or Italian Foundation for Africa

UPDATES

NORTH AFRICA



Algeria has reportedly secured the withdrawal of the Russian Africa Corps from Kidal in northern Mali, which fell to Tuareg forces of the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) late in April. Algiers likely used its contacts within the FLA to ensure an ordered takeover of the city while preventing security spill-overs to southern Algeria. This may reinforce Algeria's political capital in northern Mali (and in Russia) while deepening mistrust in Bamako, whose junta has long accused Algeria of covertly supporting the rebels.

MOROCCO

Polisario strikes town ahead of Western Sahara negotiations.

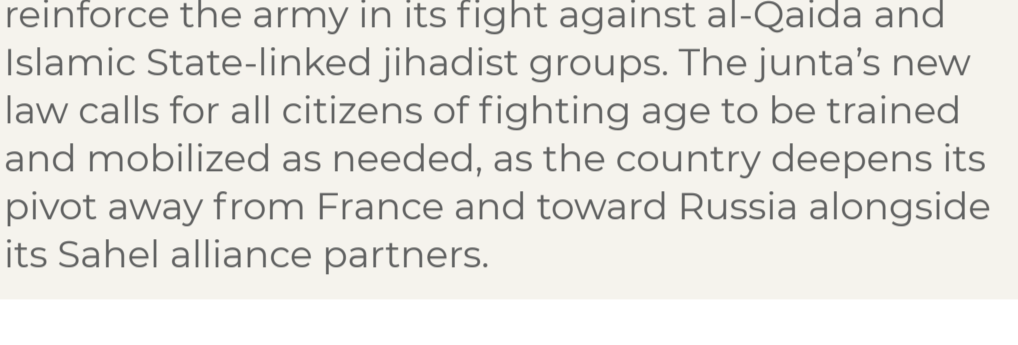
Two Polisario Front missiles hit the border town of Smara on May 8 th , wounding a civilian. While tactically marginal, the attack was likely aimed at bolstering the Front's position in the US-backed negotiations over Western Sahara, which brought together ministerial representatives from Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Polisario Front. On the backdrop of growing international favour for Morocco's ambitions over Western Sahara, Polisario likely sought a show of force to assert its own demands for Sahrawi independence.

EGYPT

Egypt scrambles to secure oil and gas imports.

With Gulf shipments in jeopardy and Israel halting exports in February, Cairo is looking to MENA partners to secure an additional 3,5 to 4 million barrels per month. To this end, it has struck a deal with eastern Libya for 1 million bpm of crude and is reportedly in talks with utility giant Sonatrach to purchase Algerian oil. Despite vast hydrocarbon reserves, Egypt struggles to meet its growing domestic consumption while its economy faces converging threats, including inflationary pressure on wheat supply, ballooning debt and the steep drop in State revenues following shipping disruptions in the Suez Canal.

WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL



Burkina Faso's Defense Minister announced plans to recruit 100,000 civilian reservists by the end of 2026 to reinforce the army in its fight against al-Qaida and Islamic State-linked jihadist groups. The junta's new law calls for all citizens of fighting age to be trained and mobilized as needed, as the country deepens its pivot away from France and toward Russia alongside its Sahel alliance partners.

NIGERIA

Joint US-Nigeria operation kills senior IS leader.

In a joint overnight operation in Nigeria's Borno state, US and Nigerian forces killed Abu-Bilal al-Minuki - described by President Trump as IS's second-in-command globally. The strike underscores the growing military cooperation between the two countries as IS continues to shift its focus to sub-Saharan Africa, where roughly 90% of its attacks now occur.

TOGO

Togo offers to act as a bridge between the Sahel and the international community

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EAST AFRICA AND THE HORN



Macron's mission to East Africa reaffirmed Paris' ambitions to restore and expand its influence across the continent through commercial cooperation, bilateral partnerships, and strategic investments. In the presence of more than 30 African leaders at the Africa Forward Summit in Nairobi, France promoted easier access to credit to mobilise capitals for economic growth, while announcing the mobilisation of €23 billion in investments - €14 billion from French companies and €9 billion from African partners - as part of a broader effort to redefine France's economic and security engagement in Africa after the setbacks faced in the Sahel.

SOMALIA

Somalia enters an institutional crisis.

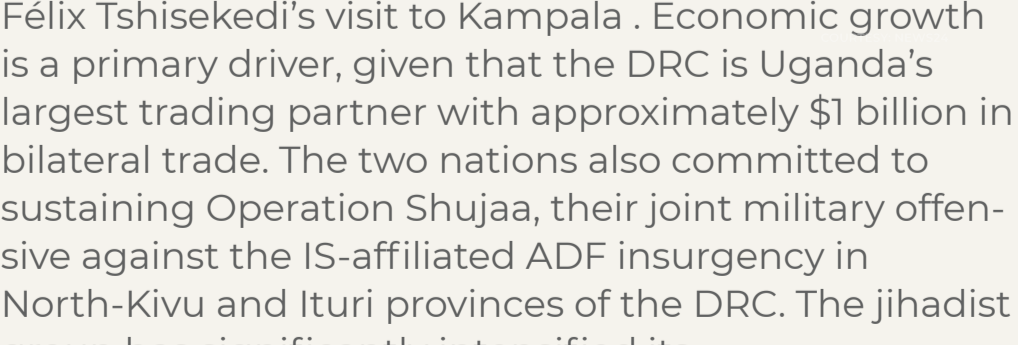
Somalia entered an institutional crisis between the government and the opposition coalition on 15 May. Federal institutions continue to operate following constitutional amendments that extended parliamentary and presidential terms and changed the electoral system, a move contested by opposition actors after unsuccessful political dialogue. Somalia's Western partners are stepping up mediation efforts, with a recent U.S.-UK-facilitated dialogue between the government and key opposition leaders.

UGANDA

A new Ebola creates concerns in East Africa.

WHO said the Ebola outbreak in eastern DRC and Uganda has grown to nearly 600 suspected cases, including 51 confirmed infections and 139 suspected deaths as of 20 May 2026. The outbreak involves the rare Bundibugyo strain, for which there is still no approved vaccine or treatment. WHO warned that insecurity in Ituri is severely hampering surveillance, contact tracing, and treatment operations. The expansion of Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) activity in Ituri is making access to affected communities increasingly dangerous for WHO and humanitarian teams.

CENTRAL-SOUTHERN AFRICA & THE GREAT LAKES



South African President Cyril Ramaphosa faces an impeachment procedure after the constitutional court has revived a case brought against him for hiding a considerable amount of cash in his game farm. While the procedure might take time and be potentially rejected by parliament, the scandal is shaking the African National Congress (ANC) and the national unity government at a time when the economy is rocked by the energy crisis, government budget is under strain, unemployment is rampant, and anti-migrant protests caused diplomatic backlash that weakens Pretoria's centrality in African diplomacy.

DRC

Felix Tshisekedi's trip to Uganda.

Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have signed six bilateral agreements during President Félix Tshisekedi's visit to Kampala . Economic growth is a primary driver, given that the DRC is Uganda's largest trading partner with approximately \$1 billion in bilateral trade. The two nations also committed to sustaining Operation Shujaa, their joint military offensive against the IS-affiliated ADF insurgency in North-Kivu and Ituri provinces of the DRC. The jihadist group has significantly intensified its attacks in 2025, putting Uganda's security in jeopardy.

ANGOLA

Oil-rich Angola opens its first refinery.

Owned by UK-based Gemcorp Capital, Cabinda started the production of diesel for the domestic market and of naphtha for export. Although volumes are still limited, the facility reduces the dependency of oil-rich Angola on expensive imported fuels, while turning it into a new global supplier, along with Nigeria. Against the closure of Hormuz, African procedures, which account for about 7% of global crude supply, are gaining increasing centrality. Growing refining capacity will be fundamental to partially replace Gulf exports.

Mali on the Brink and the Sahel Stress-Test

With Russia's role as Mali's security provider fading, the absence of a functional regional safety net becomes all the more evident.

BY: MATILDE VECCHIONI

On 25 April 2026, Mali experienced its most severe security shock in over a decade. A coordinated offensive by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) – the al-Qaeda-affiliated group – and the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA), a Tuareg separatist movement, struck several military installations across the country simultaneously. Kidal fell. Defence Minister General Sadio Camara was killed in his home in Kati. JNIM declared a total siege of Bamako. These attacks marked not merely a tactical escalation, but a new rupture in the Sahel's geopolitical order.

What distinguishes the April offensive from previous episodes of violence is its strategic design. JNIM, historically concentrated in rural and peripheral areas, has pivoted toward urban warfare, targeting government centres in Bamako and Kati. The return of the jihadist-separatist convergence also signals a new phase of conflict: one in which a beleaguered Malian state needs to face two parallel but coordinated insurgencies across its vast periphery.

The scale and sophistication of the offensive exposed alarming capability gaps both within the Malian Armed Forces and Russia's Africa Corps, ultimately exposing the latter's strategic miscalculations in the Sahel. The Africa Corps – successor to the Wagner Group – failed to prevent the fall of Kidal and push back the assaults, with images of its Algeria-brokered withdrawal damaging Moscow's credibility. This is compounded by the death of Camara, principal architect of the Mali-Russia partnership, whose killing leaves a significant strategic void and strains relations between the two capitals. With Russia's role as Mali's security provider fading, the absence of a functional regional safety net becomes all the more evident. If the April offensive could have been a moment of proof for the Alliance of Sahel States, it instead exposed its limits, while ECOWAS, formally expelled by the three juntas in 2025, watches from the sidelines, concerned by the ever-growing expansion of Sahelian jihadist groups across West Africa.

The collapse of Mali's security model compels Bamako to look for alternatives: from its reconciliation with Washington over intelligence-gathering flights, earlier in March, to deepening ties with Turkey. Yet these arrangements do not amount to a coherent plan to stabilise Mali; they rather reflect each actor's desire not to be left out of a strategic space. In the long run, this multipolar rush for influence may make Mali – and the Sahel more broadly – harder, not easier, to stabilise.

In this context, for European policymakers, the window for meaningful engagement is narrowing but not yet closed. The EU's current rethink of its Strategy in the Sahel already acknowledges the need for more pragmatic and interest-based cooperation – a considerable shift in tone from past democracy-first narratives. However, the EU is not a monolith in the Sahel – France's role in the AES countries has been sharply reduced, while Italy is the only member retaining a security presence through its mission in Niger. What remains is a narrow opening: a collective approach that focuses on concrete and long-term partnerships in strategic fields. Whether the current window is seized will determine if the Sahel becomes a new ground for strengthening EU-Africa cooperation, or a region increasingly shaped by actors hostile to European stability.

Libya Stirs Under The Surface

Developments point to a US-led shift in relations between Tripoli and Benghazi, while tensions are building in the Fezzan

BY: FRANCESCO MERIANO

Beneath the veneer of “cold peace” between the rival western and eastern governments, Libyan equilibria are shifting as a result of renewed US engagement. A diplomatic campaign pursued by Massad Boulos, president Trump's advisor for Arab and African affairs, aims to broker a lasting entente between the Dabaiba and Haftar ruling families. This bout of dealmaking would pave the way for Ibrahim Dabaiba to succeed his ailing cousin Abdul Hamid to the premiership of the western Government of National Unity, while Saddam Haftar would inherit command of the Libyan National Army – and de facto control of the eastern Government of National Stability – from his father Khalifa.

Under Boulos' watch, the two heirs-apparent met in Doha and Rome in 2025, then formalised a closed-door deal in Paris this late January, after which Boulos announced an agreement to harmonize the GNU-GNS fiscal budgets. Last month, officers of both governments attended the Flintlock 2026 military exercise in Sirte, the first joint participation since the eastern administration was established in 2022.

The US goal is likely twofold – first, ensure an orderly succession to shield Washington's Libyan investments from a dynastic struggle; second, curtail Russian and Turkish influence over Libya by offering alternative sponsorships to both Tripoli and Benghazi. This approach may effectively side-line UN attempts to politically reunify the country in favour of functional stabilization. The prospect has spurred the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to revive a push for national elections against resistance from Libya's legislative bodies, the High Council of State and the House of Representatives, who are currently locked in a dispute over the leadership of the electoral commission.

Meanwhile, trouble is brewing in Libya's resource-rich south, where the Haftars seek to centralize control over a complex tribal and ethnic landscape. After expanding their influence in the Fezzan by financing and co-opting tribal leadership, Khalifa and sons – particularly Saddam – are now eyeing a more forceful approach. Signals in the last few weeks – the creation of a unified LNA southern command, the elevation of Kufra-based Subul al-Salam battalion to a brigade – also address the rekindling of armed opposition, with warlord Mohamed Wardougou, head of the Southern Liberation Operations Room (SLOR) disrupting LNA activity at the Libya-Niger border.

The region has however been on alert at least since February 2025, when a key LNA unit – the 128th brigade led by Hassan al-Zadma – attempted to resist a disbanding order issued by Saddam Haftar, following quarrels with its commander over control of the gold mines bordering Chad. In the ensuing battle, fought in the Fezzan township of al-Qatrun, LNA forces also arrested a leader of a Nigerian rebel group who had reportedly sought shelter with al-Zadma. Interestingly enough, Abdul Hamid Dabaiba – whose forces were effectively pushed out of the south by LNA and allies in the last few years – recently chose al-Zadma's brother Salem as his own deputy prime minister for the Fezzan, likely seeking to profit from signals of discord within LNA ranks.

Upon this backdrop, an attempt to tighten the eastern grip on the south may well risk some convergence of residual anti-Haftar forces – dispossessed Toubou smugglers, LNA dissidents, rebels against the LNA-aligned Sahelian juntas – that could derail, or at least slow down, the family's ongoing absorption of the Fezzan. These dynamics in the south remain interlinked with the US-led mediation efforts. The Haftars may seek US financial support to expand in the Fezzan, while an embattled Dabaiba may attempt to capitalize on southern turmoil to gain leverage at the negotiating table. Once again, Libya faces interesting times.

Critical Minerals and private security: the driving forces behind the new US-DRC realignment

Access to critical mineral supply chains is traded for sophisticated paramilitary support and logistical investment.

BY: LUCIANO POLLICHIENI

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is executing a high-stakes geopolitical pivot, leveraging its status as provider of 70% of global cobalt to secure national territory and political stability. By transitioning from a passive supplier to an assertive player, Kinshasa is creating a “minerals-for-security” framework with the US and other partners most notably the UAE. This strategy aims to co-opt Western security architecture to neutralize the M23 insurgency in the eastern provinces while simultaneously resizing decades of Chinese hegemony in the mining sector.

The latest move in this shift is the creation of the “Garde Minière” (Mining Guard), a new paramilitary force financed by the US and the UAE tasked with protecting the DRC's primary mining sites. The rationale is clear: access to critical mineral supply chains is traded for sophisticated paramilitary support and logistical investment. This represents a departure from traditional diplomacy toward a transactional model prioritizing revenue sovereignty and physical protection through institutionalized forces. The new Guard in this sense represents a formal effort to professionalize the protection of the state's economic heartlands.

Geopolitically, the “Garde Minière” signals an environment where US private capital and “deep state” veterans are now increasingly involved in managing key mining areas. This approach aligns with a new “Trump Doctrine” for African security: mobilizing private sector military expertise and financial resources to achieve objectives linked to the US national interest. The creation of such an environment is clearly visible in at least two other cases. The first is the role played by Erik Prince's Frontier Resource Group (FRG) in fighting the insurgency across North and South Kivu. Eyewitnesses report Prince's men played a key role in recapturing the strategic city of Uvira last December from AFC/M23 rebels. Utilizing drone support and coordinating with Congolese special forces, these private actors provided the technical edge necessary to retake the border city.

Simultaneously, the US establishment is expanding its reach into the mining sector via tech investors, some of whom emerge from deep-state apparatuses. U.S.-backed KoBold Metals (funded by Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos), for instance, is using AI-driven exploration to leapfrog Chinese survey techniques. Their focus on the Roche Dure lithium deposit serves as a long-term play for battery chemistry dominance. In the same vein, the Orion-Virtus consortium, led by CIA and Green Beret veterans (Gregory Roberts and Phil Braun, respectively), has finalized the acquisition of CHEMAF, a crucial copper and cobalt producer that Beijing was actively attempting to acquire. Additionally, the US Treasury sanctioned former DRC president (and Tshisekedi's long-standing rival) Joseph Kabila due to his purported backing of AFC/M23, signaling further support for the current Congolese government that sentenced him to death in absentia.

The establishment of these complexes underpinning the new US-DRC relationship is also producing major shifts within Kinshasa's politics. The DRC government is increasingly attempting to bypass aid-dependency in favour of a hybrid security-industrial complex that secures assets from domestic rebels and foreign competitors. Simultaneously, the capital's political elite is trying to gain momentum thanks to this renewed US backing. In the aftermath of recent successes against the M23 in North and South Kivu, President Felix Tshisekedi has hinted at the possibility of running for a third term and is proposing constitutional reforms to achieve this aim. While the opposition remains staunchly against such moves, there is growing speculation that this new security-industrial alliance might provide the political leverage to facilitate such a transition.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea-Sudan triangle of tension heats up

The SAF recalled its ambassador to Ethiopia and deployed military units and anti-aircraft systems near the Ethiopian border.

BY: CORRADO ČOK

The risk of escalation around the Ethiopia-Sudan border has increased over the past month. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) accused Ethiopia of complicity in a drone strike targeting Khartoum International Airport on 4 May, allegedly carried out using Emirati-supplied drones. Addis Ababa responded by accusing Sudan of supporting anti-government Ethiopian groups, alongside Eritrea. Following the attack, the SAF deployed military units and anti-aircraft systems near the Ethiopian border. There, new tensions could intersect with longstanding flashpoints such as the disputed farming region of Al-Fashaga and Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Sudan and Egypt view as a major threat.

This feud confirms how the Sudanese civil war is increasingly intersecting with Ethiopia's internal crises. SAF General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan believes that Addis Ababa is facilitating the advance of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan's Blue Nile state, with backing from their shared ally, the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, other reports suggest that SAF has deployed fighters from the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) within its ranks and -together with Eritrea - is hosting coordination meetings between TPLF elements and other groups hostile to Addis Ababa, namely Amhara Fano militias and the Oromo Liberation Army. These dynamics risk transforming the Sudanese civil war into a broader regional conflict directly involving Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Tigray could become the immediate trigger for such an escalation. On 5 May, the TPLF ousted the Addis-backed Tigray Interim Administration led by Tadesse Woreda and reasserted control over the region, taking advantage of the unfolding feud between Ethiopia and Sudan. The removal of the Interim Administration eliminates a political buffer between the TPLF and the central government and drives another significant nail into the coffin of the 2022 Pretoria Agreement. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed did not respond militarily. However, Ethiopian forces, together with pro-government Tigrayan groups, remain stationed around Tigray and ready to intervene. In the background, Eritrea's growing ties with the TPLF - driven by fears of a possible Ethiopian move on Assab - suggest that Asmara could intervene on the Tigrayan side in the event of further escalation.

The international landscape surrounding the crisis is shifting as well. As the Hormuz crisis has increased the strategic importance of the Red Sea, Ethiopia and Eritrea have moved higher up the US foreign policy agenda. On 11 May, Secretary of State Marco Rubio hosted Ethiopia's Foreign Minister, Gedion Timotheos, for a high-level meeting aimed at relaunching cooperation with Addis Ababa on counterterrorism and the stabilization of the Horn of Africa. Meanwhile, the US has quietly re-engaged with Eritrea, with recent leaks suggesting that a partial lifting of sanctions on Asmara is under consideration. Washington appears intent on defusing additional threats around the critical Bab el-Mandeb Strait by distancing Eritrea from Iran, whose ties with Asmara have warmed in recent years. Beyond the strategic imperative of securing the Red Sea, the US must also navigate competing pressures from its main regional allies: the UAE, which backs Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia - alongside Egypt - which aligns more closely with Eritrea. The result has been a calibrated US diplomatic approach that could help defuse tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea, at least in the short term, even as contentious issues such as Addis Ababa's access to the sea and the GERD remain unresolved.

A dangerous triangle of tension has emerged between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan, with Tigray as its barycenter. While a full-scale escalation would spell disaster for all parties involved, the risk of miscalculation remains high, particularly as external backing from Middle Eastern actors intensifies regional competition. Sustained and coordinated pressure from the international community remains the only viable path to averting such a scenario.

The IGAD Mediation Reflection Conference: Adapting Mediation to Current Realities

“IGAD should not attempt to replicate AU structures but should focus on pursuing tailored approaches that reflect the Horn's specific challenges.”- El-Ghassim Wane

BY: CHEPKORIR SAMBU

The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) convened a first-ever conference in Nairobi on 28-29 April 2026. Its purpose was to specially reflect on mediation in the Horn of Africa, in the context of a turbulent conflict and multilateral environment. The conference gathered the Executive Director of IGAD, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Foreign Affairs, other government and non-governmental officials, political and civil society leaders, and subject-matter experts and scholars.

In recent years, conflicts have proliferated in the Horn of Africa. War, in some cases, and the threat of war, in others, have become unsparring realities for citizens of this region. South Sudan is stuck in transition with episodes of hostilities caused by the failure to implement the Revitalised Agreement. Somalia continues to grapple with centre-periphery infighting and an al-Shabaab comeback, whose effects reverberate across the region, particularly Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Sudan has been experiencing a brutal war since 2023, which has created the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, and Ethiopia and Eritrea are constantly on the brink of war in the aftermath of the devastating Tigray war of 2020-2022.

The IGAD Mediation Reflection Conference (MRC), alive to these realities, sought to ask what has changed and how IGAD and, by extension, the African Union (AU) can adapt its mediation strategies accordingly. Its participants noted that the nature of current wars has transformed. Wars: are more interconnected and cross-border; have become fragmented with weak command structures; involve heavy external support, especially from the Gulf and Middle East; utilise easily-accessible and cheap technological weapons, such as drones; and have created within themselves war economies that incentivise war rather than peace. As a result, the region is engulfed in proxy wars entrenched in transactionalism.

Participants also observed trends that further complicate wars or explain the failure of mediation to deliver. At the global level, multilateralism is under test, with states prioritising bilateral engagements or promoting alternative arrangements like the Board of Peace. Great power competition and transactionalism has done little to support multilateral structures that hold mediation: this has reduced mediation to a tool to push for foreign policy interests and short-term deal-making. At the regional level, there have been changes in leadership in IGAD states; a big demography of disenfranchised youth populations with a detached elite leadership; and a vacuum of a state champion and security guarantor within IGAD.

Subsequently, the African Peace and Security Architecture's relevance is waning. A mediator's legitimacy is no longer drawn from the credibility of a mediation process but from leverage; inclusivity must now encompass the wide range of actors present – it can no longer be elite-centric; and process cannot anymore follow linear sequencing, i.e., from cessation of hostilities to ceasefire to comprehensive agreements, as new conflicts are too dynamic. Moreover, fragmented initiatives undermine the success of mediation: in Sudan, for instance, there have been more than five uncoordinated mediation initiatives, which have instead competed with each other and therefore failed to produce tangible outcomes.

The conference concluded with recommendations ranging from process to substance, and to the role that IGAD can play moving forward. Process-wise, participants underscored: the importance of cohering initiatives and ensuring they are African-led; flexibility and constant adaptability in mediation; careful and intentional inclusivity as a cure for spoilers; implementation-focused processes; and speed and entrepreneurship in a mediator, enabling the cultivation of political will.

Substantively, participants emphasised that mediation remains a political process; security guarantees cannot deliver sustainable peace. They also insisted that the economic dimensions of conflicts and mediation itself must not be minimised. African ownership and leadership are essential, especially in defining the problem in a conflict, and ceasefires should not be the end-goal of mediation. In conclusion, there was consensus that IGAD's proximity positions it to better resolve and prevent conflicts in the Horn of Africa; as such, it should not attempt to replicate AU structures but focus on pursuing tailored approaches that reflect the Horn's specific challenges.

PHOTO GALLERY



H.E. President William Samoei Ruto and Med-Or President Marco Minniti ahead of a private meeting between the Kenyan and Med-Or leaderships in Rome.



H.E. President William Samoei Ruto delivering a speech at a public diplomacy event organised by Med-Or Italian Foundation at Luiss University in Rome.



President Marco Minniti and Med-Or leadership attending a public diplomacy event at Luiss University in Rome with H.E. Prime Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet Secretary for Foreign and Diaspora Affairs Musalia Mudavadi and H.E. President William Samoei Ruto.



Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, speaking at Med-Or in Rome about the critical role of his country in mediation, including in Africa.



Med-Or's Umberto Tavolato attends a dinner on the blue economy and maritime industry convened by EuroCham Kenya (European Business Chamber) with H.E. Hassan Ali Joho, Cabinet Secretary for Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs, an EU delegation and representatives from the private sector.



An in-person training on cybersecurity, organised by Med-Or and Italy's National Cybersecurity Agency with Leonardo's Cyber Academy, starts in Rome for experts from 11 African countries.



Med-Or's Chepkorir Sambu participates in a roundtable convened by IGAD on regional mediation in Nairobi.



Med-Or's Corrado Čok and Carlotta Ridolfi visit Italian FREMM Frigate Emilio Bianchi with H.E. Ambassador Vincenzo del Monaco.



Med-Or's Corrado Čok and Carlotta Ridolfi attend an event at Fort Jesus in Mombasa dedicated to Giovanni Battista Cairati, the Italian architect who designed the Portuguese fort in the XVI century.- Prima fila.jpg Med-Or and Kenyan leadership attending the public event for President Ruto.

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