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# LANDLOCKED ETHIOPIA AND THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF ATTEMPTING TO REACH OPEN WATER

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## Abstract

Ethiopia seized an opportunity amidst ongoing developments by striking a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) with authorities in the Somaliland region on January 1, 2024. This agreement grants Ethiopia access to the port of Berbera, situated on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea. In return, Somaliland's governing bodies received stakes in Ethiopian Airlines, alongside official recognition of the region's independence from Somalia and acknowledgment of its sovereignty. This agreement has stirred considerable debate and raised questions about its implications and strategic impact on the Horn of Africa region. This study aims to explore the effects of this understanding on Ethiopia's regional standing, as well as the interests of other influential powers.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, landlocked country, Somaliland, Somalia, the Red Sea, Horn of Africa, Berbera Port

## Introduction

Political and academic articles often focus on the interactions in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions, driven by several considerations and motives. This region of the African continent, with its intertwined interactions and peculiarities, has been a witness to bloody events and periods of intraregional and internal conflicts. The African continent as a whole, and the Horn of Africa in particular, have evolved into a field and an attractive space of tense and burgeoning rivalry for various interests of states and major powers, all aspiring to expand their spheres of influence in the context of the changing world order that characterizes the current international system.

Landlocked countries, a geographical phenomenon, are found in many African states and presents several challenges and imperatives. This geographical reality has raised concerns in many cases. The Ethiopian case is not immune to this semi-tense situation. It has strived to escape this situation and impose a new geopolitical reality that suits its growing demographic and socioeconomic status. The Ethiopian government and the authorities of Somaliland signed an MoU at the beginning of this year with the aim to grant Ethiopia a sovereign presence on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea. The agreement has sparked controversy and debate and raised old and new questions and problems. This study aims to answer the following question: How far did the landlocked geographical reality help Ethiopia adopt different approaches and strategies to reach the Red Sea, and what are the strategic implications of the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland? This question branches off the following important questions: What is the concept of a landlocked country? What is the political context of the Ethiopian decision? What are the motives behind the Ethiopian government's pursuit of accessing the sea at the entrance to the Red Sea? How does Ethiopia's pursuit of accessing the Red Sea affect the formation of new alliances in the Horn of Africa? What are the most prominent reactions and potential implications for the security and stability of the Horn of Africa region resulting from the Ethiopian decision?

The study is based on the general hypothesis that there is a contradiction between what the Ethiopian authorities promote, which is a desire to have zero problems with neighboring countries due to the landlocked geography of Addis Ababa, and the policy of managing regional issues, particularly regarding access to the Red Sea and the division of the Nile waters. To answer the aforesaid questions, the study adopts the theory of realism which is based on the principles of interest and the logic of global power interactions. It also depends on the case study approach to track and analyze Ethiopian behavior, seeking to access the Red Sea through various policies and strategies adopted by successive Ethiopian governments. The study presents an explanation of the conceptual aspect of a landlocked country and the historical background of Addis Ababa's endeavors to

access open water, highlighting the content of the MoU and the general contexts in which it was concluded, and outlining the significant ramifications of this step.

### **The Concept of a Landlocked State and Ethiopian Attempts to Access Open Water**

Territory, along with the population and the political leadership, has always been the bedrock of establishing states. Due to its vital significance, securing a coherent identified territory has always been a source of dispute and conflict between different states. Territory is highly significant as it grants the state variant sources of power at the geopolitical, economic, strategic and military levels. In this context, the phenomenon of landlocked countries as a case and concept of complex connotations takes up vast space in academic literature and debates. By viewing the literature and writings that have dealt with the concept primarily, the extent of the overlap and complexity of the scholarly cognitive frameworks that have discussed the concept is clearly evident. According to the Office of the High Representative of the United Nations for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and small island developing states,<sup>(1)</sup> abbreviated as (UN-OHRLLS), a landlocked country is a country that does not have territory connected to the sea, posing two challenges: limited access to world markets, and accumulated development difficulties. These countries have a total area of 15 million kilometers,<sup>2</sup> housing up to about 533 million people, with a population growth of about 2.3%. The office has estimated the average distance between its land border and the nearest sea coasts, about 1,370 kilometers.<sup>(2)</sup>

In the introduction of his doctorate thesis submitted to the University of Leeds, UK, Daosadeth Soysouvanh states that the concept of a landlocked country implies a fundamental economic dilemma and this is one of the most hindering factors to economic development.<sup>(3)</sup> However, Samiullah Mahdi, in his master's thesis submitted to the University of Massachusetts, Boston, United States, argues that this phenomenon ( a landlocked country) itself does not constitute an obstacle as much as neighboring countries do. According to Mahdi, many of the 42 landlocked countries are designated as rich developed countries, according to the criterion of stability and development and the quality levels of infrastructure that is provided.<sup>(4)</sup> In their contribution to the *Journal of Economic Integration*, researchers Lahiri Bidisha and Masjidi Feroz pointed out that while approximately 20% of the world's countries are landlocked, these countries represent around 40% of the world's low-income economies and less than 10% of the world's high-income countries. These statistics highlight the unique economic challenges faced by landlocked economies. They argue that "Landlocked countries are often surrounded by coastal countries that differ with respect to their diplomatic, geographic, and socioeconomic aspects," adding these differences play an integral role in the landlocked countries' visions and foreign and domestic strategies; thus, they should be relatively diplomatic in their regional policy.<sup>(5)</sup>

The majority of academic studies address the negative connotation associated with landlocked countries compared to other countries around the world. According to Ingo Borchert and others, landlocked countries are victims of geography; therefore, this geographical inevitability forcibly insulates and deprives landlocked countries of many privileges and benefits, including notably the ease of trade flows, tourism, and even knowledge. As per the two researchers, these countries still have to choose among the political, economic or strategic approaches that will improve the process and dynamics of their communication and smooth interaction with the rest of the world.<sup>(6)</sup>

In this context, it can be said that the history of the Horn of Africa region has witnessed many significant changes and transformations, both in the intra-boundaries of states and those associated with the balance of power equation and major power competition for projection of influence. Regarding the current Ethiopian state, the presence and control over water access to the Red Sea coast have been pivotal issues for ages. Since the founding of the Kingdom of Axum (also known as the Aksumite Empire) in 325 BC by the descendant of the Prophet King Solomon)<sup>(7)</sup> and the establishment of a vital port in the city of Adulis, the ruling political leadership of Abyssinia at that time was fully aware of the benefits and important economic and commercial returns of the Red Sea coast. This enabled Ethiopia to dominate the joint commercial activities between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea later and wield influence and political and military control that lasted for many centuries. However, with the arrival of the Ottomans at the beginning of the 17th century to the region, Ethiopia's control declined when the Ottomans seized most of the ports and water crossings along the coast, mainly the strategic port of Massawa, which marked the beginning of Ethiopia's attempts to access open waters again.<sup>(8)</sup>

The 1920s to 1932 marked the Ethiopian authorities' latest attempt to break from being a landlocked country and dominate the coast to serve the country's commercial and economic interests. They adopted many geopolitical approaches to achieve this strategic goal, especially given that different European colonial powers dominated the majority of the Horn of Africa states. This reality granted the Horn of Africa states more room and margin to negotiate and win further gains. In this context, Italian-Ethiopian<sup>(9)</sup> bilateral discussions emerged related to signing a deal for the exchange of territories between occupied Eritrea and Abyssinia. The Italian proposal accorded Ethiopian sovereignty over Assab, with Italy having the right to establish, operate and own the railway project from the port to the capital, Addis Ababa. The latter deemed this proposal difficult or impossible to accept.

In the same context, the Ethiopian-British understandings of the territorial exchange between Ethiopia and British Somaliland between 1946 and 1952 was a step toward and a second attempt by Addis Ababa to access the sea.<sup>(10)</sup> Discussions centered on what is known in the academic community as the Heud-Zeila Exchange, which was tasked to extend Ethiopia's authority and sovereignty

over the port of Zeila (*Saylac* in Somali) located in the British part of occupied Somaliland. In exchange, Britain would benefit from fertile lands in the Ogaden and had the right to enjoy concessions in the vital Lake Tana and Baro Salient projects. However, the proposal was opposed by France, which, at the time, had control over the second part of Somaliland. Paris was concerned about the decline in trade activity in Djibouti port.<sup>(11)</sup>

The Ethiopian authorities were keen to access the Red Sea coastline. Therefore, they diversified their geopolitical and economic strategies and approaches to ensure that they benefited from the rising trade flows in the Horn of Africa and new markets for the sake of increasing domestic production of commodities for export. Also, through this access, Ethiopia would win strategic political benefits as it would be present along the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. In this context and Ethiopian endeavors over the decades, various projects such as those related to road and railway infrastructure are deemed ideal for landlocked countries like Ethiopia to break free from their geographical constraints.

### Electrified Railway Linking Djibouti Port and Addis Ababa

It is the first project (see Map 1) in Africa and part of the Chinese Silk Road Initiative. The project costs \$3.4 billion. It was launched to carry passengers in 2016. Two years later, this project was utilized for commercial purposes on January 1, 2018. The train travels at a speed of more than 753 kilometers and is the lifeline of Ethiopia's international trade and contributes to approximately 90% of trade flows.<sup>(12)</sup> Its capacity is about 24.9 million tons, with is expected to increase by 3.1 million tons by 2030, and the transit time will reduce from 50 hours to 10 hours.<sup>(13)</sup>

Map 1: Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway



Source: © OpenStreetMap.

## **Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Road Linking Djibouti's Tajoura Port to the Northern Provinces of Ethiopia**

The project costs \$78 million and was financed by a loan from the Kuwaiti Fund for Economic Development. It was inaugurated in 2019 and spans over 112 kilometers.<sup>(14)</sup> Ethiopian authorities deem this project a vital alternative that must be supported and maintained, reflecting their approach to diversify trade and access the sea, to avoid being solely dependent on Djibouti port. This has led Ethiopian leaders to consistently consider investing in other ports in the region, with a primary focus on the port of Berbera in Somaliland.

The observations of successive Ethiopian attempts to access the Red Sea reflect that decision-makers have diversified their visions and strategies to achieve the aforesaid goal. However, in light of the influence and impact of the geographical reality of landlocked countries and the socioeconomic infrastructure of coastal countries (neighbors), the Ethiopian authorities usually resort to two options: cooperation or imposition of *fait accompli* to access the sea. Regardless of national efforts to establish a network of regional understandings to serve its economic and commercial interests, Ethiopia often violates its bilateral obligations; the most recent example was in 2022 when Ethiopia lost its shares in the Berbera Corridor because it did not finance the development of the port as agreed in 2016 with Somaliland. Eventually, this setback led Ethiopia to adopt the politics of *fait accompli* again.<sup>(15)</sup>

### **Ethiopia's MoU With Somaliland: Motives and Reactions**

Observers of Ethiopian policies during the last decade, especially as Abiy Ahmed became prime minister in 2018, can notice the inclusive and accelerated approach in dealing and interacting with various political actors in the East African region in general, and the states of the Horn of Africa in particular. In this context, many researchers and specialists in Ethiopian affairs refer to a mosaic that characterizes the country's course and dynamics. It has many controversies and contradictions, making the prediction of its course and dynamics very complicated. This mosaic developed due to two main reasons as follows:

■ The early days of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's tenure and the administration of Ethiopian foreign policy relied on a "zero problem" approach with neighboring countries. He undertook extensive visits and held meetings with the leaders and heads of states within Ethiopia's regional circle. The reconciliation and normalization of bilateral relations with Eritrea was the most significant development and direction of the policy pursued by Addis Ababa with the region's capitals. In this regard, Abiy Ahmed's government realized that it was significant and imperative for a landlocked country to forge ties with its neighbors — especially with Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, so that Ethiopia could further benefit from the preferential advantages of trade transactions through their seaports. Abiy Ahmed worked hard to rebuild inter-trust with the leaders

of these countries and to play a leadership role in the Horn of Africa region with a new political approach. However, Abiy Ahmed's policy of "zero-problems" with neighbors conflicts somewhat with his ambition to establish dominance and access to the open sea, which could have negative repercussions in the region and with neighboring countries.

■ The ruling political elite in Addis Ababa has been keen to attain a symbolic achievement. Since Abiy Ahmed's tenure as prime minister, the government has intensively employed various tools of symbolic and populist rhetoric, which have had the most meaningful impact on Ethiopian public opinion. The narrative of the historical Ethiopian dominant empire over the Horn of Africa has become the central focus of the official speeches of the current prime minister. This invocation of Ethiopia's glorious past has been systematically used to raise and manage several national and regional issues. The first issue was the Nile waters and the furious defense of the right to construct the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam without paying attention to the consensual solutions and approaches proposed by the downstream countries like Egypt and Sudan. With the same approach and narrative, the Ethiopian government is working to access open waters, employing all means and methods available. It recently concluded an MoU with the authorities of the Somaliland region to exploit Berbera port, which resulted in the violation of the sovereignty of Somalia and mixed reactions from regional governments.

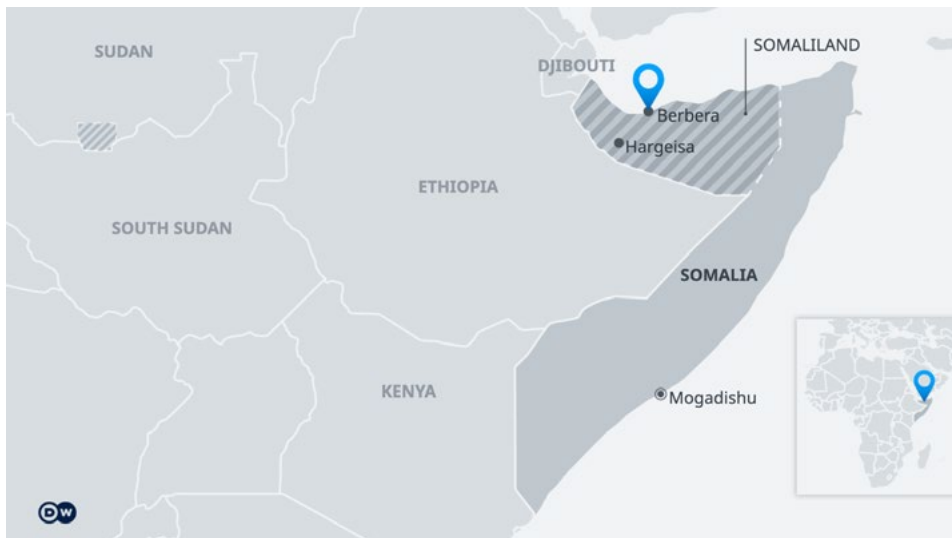
The starting point of the current events in the Red Sea region can be identified from the moment when Addis Ababa announced the conclusion of an MoU with the ruling authorities of the Somaliland region to benefit from the services of Berbera port for a short period. On October 13, 2023, in his speech to the Ethiopian Parliament, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed made a provocative statement when he announced that his landlocked country's access to the Red Sea is "an existential matter."<sup>(16)</sup> He added that land corridors are not enough. Ethiopia should have full sovereign ports through Eritrea, Somalia, or Djibouti. Quoting a famous 19th-century general, Ras Alula, Abiy Ahmed said that the Red Sea was "Ethiopia's natural boundary."<sup>(17)</sup> His remarks are an example of the populist and symbolic rhetoric he has used since he took power. Regional leaders deemed his remarks as representing a dangerous escalation of Ethiopia's prior intention to use non-peaceful means to gain access to the sea. Some observers argue that this intention is a preliminary step for Ethiopia to announce a deal and sign an MoU with Somaliland.

A bilateral MoU between Addis Ababa and the ruling authorities of Somaliland was concluded on January 01, 2024. The Ethiopian prime minister considered it as a restoration of the sovereign presence on the shores of the Gulf of Aden in the Red Sea after a long period of absence since the declaration of independence of Eritrea from Ethiopian rule in 1993<sup>(18)</sup> and the signing of the Algiers Agreement (2000), which ended the war between the two countries that lasted for two years (1998-2000). The MoU would grant Ethiopia access to 20 kilometers of coastline



of the Red Sea, including the port of Berbera, through a 50-year lease ( see Map 2) — during which Addis Ababa can manage its commercial and economic interests.<sup>(19)</sup> The coast of Somaliland can be leased by the Ethiopian navy for military purposes.<sup>(20)</sup> In exchange, the Somaliland authorities will be provided with shares in Ethiopian Airlines. Most importantly, Ethiopia will be obliged to officially recognize the independence of the territory from Somalia and deal with it as an independent state, which has not been the case by any state or government since the territory announced its separation from the central government of Mogadishu three decades ago in 1991.

**Map 2: The Port of Berbera at the Entrance to the Red Sea**



Source: DW.

The key factors that led to concluding the MoU with Somaliland can be summarized as follows:

### **The State of Tension and Chaos That Marked the Political and Security Situation in the Red Sea Region**

Since the outbreak of the Israeli war on Gaza, violence and conflict have steadily increased because of the Houthi militia's increasing involvement in the Gaza conflict. The militia pursues the strategy of targeting ships crossing the Red Sea, especially those heading to Israeli ports. Subsequently, the United States and UK launched a barrage of strikes against Houthi-controlled areas. For Ethiopia, these events provided an opportunity to take the step of concluding an MoU with Somaliland. It was a unilateral policy and a *fait accompli* that has the potential of changing the map of regional and international influence in the region.

## **The Growing Rapprochement Between the Ethiopian Government and the Somaliland Authorities**

Over the past three years, relations between the Ethiopian government and the Somaliland authorities have developed significantly, which has often aroused the anger of the ruling political leadership in Mogadishu. This rapprochement came as part of the Ethiopian tactic to balance the ongoing regional transformations within the framework of what has become known as the “ports war” in the Red Sea region. Djibouti excluded Dubai Ports World (DP World) — an Emirati multinational logistics company based in Dubai — from the management of Djibouti port in 2019, the most used port in Ethiopian trade by more than 90%. In response to being excluded by Djibouti, DP World signed an agreement in 2022 under which Ethiopia would be a strategic partner in Berbera port in Somaliland by 19%.<sup>(21)</sup> The UAE took this step to distance Ethiopia from the government of Djibouti, encouraging Addis Ababa to make further gains through an MoU with the authorities of Somaliland. Addis Ababa took advantage of the Somaliland authorities’ need to sign high-level international understandings to double the odds of accelerating international recognition and to be treated as an independent state from Mogadishu.

## **The Need of the Governments of Ethiopia and Somaliland to Enhance Internal Legitimacy**

In the Ethiopian case, the status and popularity of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed were adversely affected by the war conducted by the National Army against the militants of the Tigray region. The war led to negative repercussions on the domestic front and significantly depleted the country’s economy and undermined its infrastructure. Muse Bihi Abdi, the president of Somaliland, lost a lot of legitimacy among his people, especially among the Ishaq tribe in Somaliland, as many of them supported his rule until recently. The situation worsened after the war waged by Muse Bihi Abdi on Las Anoud city, the administrative capital of Somaliland’s eastern Sool region, following the announcement made by tribal leaders that they had joined the Somali federal government. This war claimed many lives, burdened the economy with many crises, and showed the “dark side” of Somaliland, which until recently was considered a peaceful state and democratic in the eyes of many outside observers. Meanwhile, it also undermined the reputation of the president of Somaliland.<sup>(22)</sup>

## **Afro-Arab Preoccupation With Issues that Have Burdened the Foreign Affairs of Regional States**

Arabs, including in Somalia, turned have turned their attention to the repercussions of the Israeli war on Gaza, its security and humanitarian consequences, and the current events in Sudan, which is the common denominator between Arab and African states. All these events have offered opportunities for the Ethiopian authorities to proceed with signing such understandings. Subsequently, it broke

the barrier of precedence by dealing with the Somaliland authorities which have been isolated internationally and regionally. It violated the sovereignty of Somalia, a member of the League of Arab States and the African Union.

The Ethiopian step was met with extensive reactions. Since the conclusion of the bilateral MoU, Somalia condemned the Ethiopian move to access the entrance to the Red Sea through the territory of Somaliland. Mogadishu used all ways and means to undermine and repel the Ethiopian move. Initially, the national federal Parliament of Somalia passed a law that cancelled the MoU and deemed it non-institutionalized and a violation of the national sovereignty of the country. In parallel, Mogadishu worked to recruit various regional and international forces and actors. This explains the Somali prime minister's statement<sup>(23)</sup> in which he called on the United Nations, the League of Arab States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the IGAD bloc and the European Union to hold emergency meetings to discuss Ethiopian violations, which would have severe repercussions for the region as a whole, at the level of the African regional system. The current Somali-Ethiopian crisis exposed the fragility and weakness of African states in various forms and organizational levels. Given the official positions of both the African Union and IGAD, we note the absence of an explicit condemnation of the step taken by Ethiopia that violated Somalia's sovereignty. This can be explained in two different ways. The first suggests that the two organizations adopted a de-escalation approach as a preliminary move to further control the trajectory of events and exclude all possible triggers of tension. This is an apparently optimistic explanation of the diplomatic behavior of the two blocs. The second presents a different perception associated with the alleged presence of the political dominance and influence of Addis Ababa on the decision-making of the bodies and structures of IGAD and the African Union. This explains the near-total absence of any condemnation of Ethiopian approaches on this issue. The African Union statement only called for de-escalation and mutual respect to defuse escalating tensions.<sup>(24)</sup> IGAD's statement mentioned that "[the organization] is diligently monitoring the situation and recognizes the potential implications for regional stability," adding "IGAD remains steadfast in its commitment to promoting peace, stability, cooperation, and regional integration."<sup>(25)</sup>

On the other hand, the League of Arab States' position on the crisis in the Horn of Africa exclusively rejected and fully supported the course of the ruling political leadership of Somalia. The content of the official statement<sup>(26)</sup> of the league issued on January 3, 2024, reflected the organization's commitment to the unity of Somali territory and the rejection of any form of violation and intentional encroachment by Ethiopia. What is striking about the Arab position is that the league viewed the Ethiopian step as a hindrance and threat to peace efforts and Somali reunification initiatives at home between the central government and other federal regions and potentially provoking secessionist tendencies that pose a threat to national and regional stability.

On the other hand, the Egyptian position was consistent with this Arab approach, and it was sharp and persistent in affirming Cairo's commitment to the unity and integrity of Somali territory. Egypt expressed its readiness to help Mogadishu repel any threat to its sovereignty. Observers of the evolution and course of the crisis view the Egyptian position as the most supportive of Mogadishu. This confirms the cautionary approach led by Cairo in the face of Ethiopian "encroachment" in the region, which indicates that the region is entering a new stage involving the reconfiguration of different regional alliances, especially since Ethiopian policies have become a source of destabilization in its regional environment, according to the Egyptian Foreign Minister.<sup>(27)</sup> Cairo has shared its position with several capitals of the Horn of Africa, especially Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia.

Finally, the Saudi position is decisive on this matter. A joint Saudi-Somali statement released at the end of the visit of Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to Saudi Arabia in April 2024 stressed the utmost commitment to the unity of the Federal Republic of Somalia and sovereignty over its entire territory. Both sides reiterated the need to adhere to the principles of good neighborliness, which implies the rejection of the Ethiopian agreement with Somaliland. This position is consistent with the Arab position and the support of Saudi Arabia for Arab countries at the political and economic levels.<sup>(28)</sup>

### **The Implications of the Ethiopian MoU With Somaliland**

The different reactions to the Ethiopian decision to conclude an MoU with the government of Somaliland to take advantage of the seaports on the shores of the Red Sea have several dimensions and interpretations — given the fact that the region has been facing critical issues for a long time. Complexities and reactions increased after the eruption of the military conflict between the Western powers and the Houthis in the context of the Israeli war on Gaza. Needless to mention, Somalia is particularly significant to both the Arab world and Africa, prompting variant reactions and positions that can be explained as follows:

#### **Enhancing Ethiopia's Position and Threatening Somalia's Sovereignty**

Rapidly unfolding regional and international developments presented an opportunity for Addis Ababa to achieve a strategic gain at the national and regional levels. This achievement would support the position of the Ethiopian prime minister in the internal political arena, enhance the country's influence, and alter the power balances in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region. At the economic level, the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south and the Suez Canal in the north receive about 12% of total seaborne oil trade and about 8% of global liquefied natural gas shipments.<sup>(29)</sup> Ethiopia's objective in gaining sovereign maritime access is to develop into a regional hub for industry and logistics, fostering economic growth and enhancing its influence in the Horn of Africa. Therefore, it will be able to link regional economies with the Ethiopian economy, consolidate Addis Ababa's presence and dominance, and make it a destination for

foreign investments.

On the other hand, the Ethiopian decision was a violation of Somalia's national sovereignty and a threat to the territorial integrity of the country, especially given Ethiopia's commitment to recognize Somaliland as an independent state (see Map 3). Mogadishu's concern is not strange or new. By reviewing the historical background of Somali-Ethiopian relations, and with the rest of the countries of the Horn of Africa since the establishment of the Somali Republic in 1960, Mogadishu, "Ogaden" or "Western Somali," which was annexed to Ethiopia by the British colonial authorities after the end of the Second World War, is a thorny issue and a threat to the perpetuation of relations between the two countries. This concern is fueled by Somalia's Constitution, which calls for the nascent republic to act to restore its sovereignty and unity by annexing the rest of the other territories: the Western Somali region "Ogaden," French Somalia "Djibouti," and the northeastern province of Kenya.<sup>(30)</sup>

**Map 3: Borders of Somaliland**



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica.

### **Affecting the Strategic Balance in the Horn of Africa Region**

At the strategic and geo-strategic level, by having access to the Red Sea, Ethiopia will secure a role in the security equation of the Red Sea and own a maritime base next to the Bab-al-Mandab Strait for promoting Ethiopian trade and protecting the passage of international trade and marine navigation. Access to the sea will help Ethiopia to win back Western confidence in the Ethiopian authorities, especially after ties between both sides retrogressed due to the implications of the recent Ethiopian war in the northern Tigray Region. This access also diversifies its strategic options rather than relying on Djibouti port only.<sup>(31)</sup>

Reformation, restructuring and reconstruction are excessively used terms in the analysis of observers of the Horn of Africa region following the conclusion of the MoU between Addis Ababa and Somaliland. These are related to the prospect of the nature of the alliances between the regional states surrounding Ethiopia. These terms focus on Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. At first glance, these countries are jointly bound within the Arab dimension unless we exclude Eritrea which also has a significant segment of the “Arab component” in its demographics or, more precisely, in its cultural blend. From a real-political point of view, all these countries are adversely affected to varying extents and accounts by the unilateral action of Ethiopia. The forecasts on further areas of rapprochement between the five mentioned countries will resonate and have an objective justification of no less importance. Egypt and Sudan deem the Red Sea a vital area of influence because their commercial and economic interests will be adversely affected by the continuing concern over Addis Ababa’s regional behavior, especially since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. He has pursued unilateral impulsive policies with regard to the Nile’s waters and in the context of the Renaissance Dam’s construction. Eritrea believes that Ethiopia’s blatant attack on the sovereignty of a brotherly state will reoccur if it remains silent and does not confront it decisively and collectively. Asmara’s rejection of the Pretoria agreement, which Ethiopia signed with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front in November 2022 to stop the war, and the reported support of Asmara to the Amhara Fano Popular Front in the recent war against the Ethiopian authorities are factors that have contributed to initially rebuilding the rapprochement between Eritrea and Cairo, especially on their visions of critical regional issues. Djibouti perceives the event as a blow and barrier to its diplomatic efforts aimed at bringing the Somali parties closer, especially since it came only two days after the conclusion of an agreement to resume negotiations between the central government in Mogadishu and the government of Somaliland.<sup>(32)</sup> It also threatens the economic interests of the port’s revenues, though which more than 90% of Ethiopian trade passes. All these indicators predict a strong possibility of forming a regional deterrent front in the face of the unilateral orientations and policies of Addis Ababa in the region.

On the other hand, given the specificity and significance of the issues of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region, the implications of the Ethiopian decision

have complex dimensions. These are generally related to the interests of political actors and those seeking to play new roles at the political and economic levels. In addition to the above implications of the reconstruction of the power balance and alliances of the Horn of Africa, the decision has repercussions on the policies of other regional and international powers such as the UAE, Turkey, and Iran.

### **The Impact on the Orientations of Regional and International Powers in the Red Sea Region and the Horn of Africa**

In terms of the potential regional repercussions, we find the UAE's role in the Red Sea region the most dynamic and effective, at least when compared to the rest of the region's non-African Arab countries. For an indefinite time, the UAE has focused its economic and political orientations on constructing a strip of ports along the Red Sea coast to ensure smooth trade supply chains related to its national and global economy. Except for Djibouti and Eritrea, Emirati interests are represented across all ports in the region by the companies DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports, comprising a network comparable to the Chinese the Silk Road. Abu Dhabi seeks to draw a trade line in East Africa from Egypt to Mozambique. This range includes the in-depth discussion to sign a deal on developing a special economic zone (SEZ) in Dongo Kundu, near the port of Mombasa for \$300 million.<sup>(33)</sup> This is consistent with the Ethiopian move to conclude an MoU with Somaliland. The UAE has no objection to this issue practically since DP World granted 19% of Berbera port's shares in Somaliland to Addis Ababa in 2022.<sup>(34)</sup> It was an adverse move because Djibouti terminated a concession contract to exploit its main port in 2019, a step that will enhance the influence of Ethiopia on the Red Sea coast.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the growing Turkish role by considering the complex interests in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions. The decision-making circles in Ankara, with a rich history, legacy, and orientation dating back to the Ottoman period on the shores of the warm waters of the Red Sea, play a significant role in steering the country's foreign policy toward this increasingly important geographical area. Therefore, Turkey's expansion of its spheres of influence in Africa is focused on entrenching its influence in regional countries and with political actors.

Following Ethiopia's signing of an MoU with Somaliland at the beginning of this year, Turkey and Somalia signed an agreement in the field of defense cooperation, allowing the Turkish army to protect the sea coasts of Somalia, and Ankara's right to exploit 30% of the wealth of the Somali coast, the longest on the African continent. The agreement includes defense and economic cooperation, combating piracy, preventing foreign interference and illegal fishing, and training, building and supplying equipment to the Somali navy.<sup>(35)</sup> It also provides Turkey with the privilege of exploiting the port of Mogadishu for 20 years under the bilateral agreement in 2016. According to this agreement, the Turkish Albayrak group was tasked with managing Mogadishu port with a total revenue share of 45%, thus adversely affecting the Ethiopian presence on the coast of

Somaliland. Somalia via these agreements and understandings enters into the political calculations of Ankara. This explains the establishment of the Turkish military base in Somali territory in 2011, aid programs and development projects, including the construction of schools and hospitals and the construction of roads. The military dimension of Turkish policy in the region has played a historical role, as the Turkish navy previously joined the International Joint Task Force (CTF-151)<sup>(36)</sup> to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea on February 25, 2009. It also established the second military base in Djibouti in 2016.

In the context of Iran's foreign affairs, the explanation and analysis of the potential implications of the signing of the Ethiopian-Somaliland MoU are complex and contradictory in some of its aspects. Undoubtedly, the growing importance of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region has dominated Tehran's foreign policy since 1979. However, its engagement in Addis Ababa's efforts to access the Red Sea is difficult to explain. Tehran offered large-scale military cooperation with Ethiopia, especially during the conflict and the internal war waged by the central government against the militants of the Tigray Region, through the significant supply of (espionage/offensive) drones Mohajer 6.<sup>(37)</sup> It attempted to establish a strong presence and link with one of the largest countries in the region, Ethiopia. This clashes with the Ethiopian potential scenario of having a foothold on the Red Sea through Somaliland so it can exploit international maritime navigation of trade and get closer to Western powers. The Houthis, Iran's proxy in Yemen, keep hindering international navigation in the Red Sea by their attacks on Israel due to the latter's war on Gaza, ultimately negatively affecting Iran's strategic political interests in the Red Sea.

The Saudi rejection of this agreement reflects the significance of Horn of Africa in Riyadh's policy, given the fact that this region has become a center of geopolitical competition and regional and international attention in recent years. It is worth noting that Saudi-Somalia relations have evolved in recent years, especially at the economic level. The volume of intra-trade in 2022 increased by around 105% compared to 2021. The kingdom is looking to pump more investments into Somalia. It crowds out other regional and international roles, but Saudi Arabia intends to forge cooperation, support stability, and stimulate development and mutual economic relations.<sup>(38)</sup> In November 2023, Saudi Arabia signed a security agreement with Somalia. This agreement aims to enhance security cooperation, combat terrorism, exchange intelligence, and provide capacity-building between the two countries. It also reflects the kingdom's desire to play a significant role in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions, in line with its regional ambitions and projects.

### **Creating Regional Havoc and Undermining Joint Efforts to Confront Extremist Groups**

Extremist groups in the Horn of Africa may view the tensions caused by the Ethiopian step as an opportunity to strengthen their activities. In his remarks,



Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud did not hide his concerns about the repercussions of the content of the MoU in the near term throughout the region. He hinted at the possibility of undermining international and regional efforts to combat extremist armed groups. He singled out the “youth Mujahideen” movement that is active in the regions and states of the Horn of Africa in general, as the latter may exploit the security instability and havoc that may result from the hostile Ethiopian move.<sup>(39)</sup> Therefore, according to different observers’ readings, the evolving dimensions of the disagreement between Ethiopia and Somalia may negatively impact bilateral coordination of efforts to combat the movement. This movement’s operational command is based in Somalia and it is active in neighboring states. Ethiopia provides military personnel for the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), Burundi, Djibouti, Kenya, and Uganda. This was based on the tasks entrusted to it in April 2022 upon the decision of the African Peace and Security Council and with the approval of the UN Security Council.<sup>(40)</sup>

## Conclusion

The developments and changes in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions over the last decade have progressively led to the formation of a new geopolitical landscape characterized by intricate alliances and interactions. These have set the stage for forecasting potential future scenarios. The recent crisis resulting from the repercussions of signing the MoU between Addis Ababa and Somaliland is only one example in a long series of developments that could adversely affect the security and stability of the region. As explained previously, in taking this step, Ethiopia took into consideration all developments and tensions in the region and how they coincided in time and place with the rising tensions and maritime insecurity in the Red Sea. These developments help forecast the future balance of power in the region in the near future. In its policy, Ethiopia, since 2018, has adopted the *fait accompli* approach despite its remarks in which it affirms its adherence to the “zero problems” principle with regional states. This was evident in the continuous developments in the Nile waters file and its confrontation with Egypt and Sudan.

The *fait accompli* policy has been used by Somaliland as a strategic card to gain international recognition from new political units and actors; thus, it will be the biggest winner from these accelerated tensions. In addition to the fact that the crisis has increased the prospects of further rapprochement between Cairo, Mogadishu and Asmara, the three parties believe that the persistent approach to access the sea is a threat to the region’s stability and their national security and vital economic and trade interests. Therefore, the situation in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa will likely be open to variant scenarios and complex equations.

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