


Ethiopia's Quest for Access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden: Historical Precedents and Contemporary Implications

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Abstract

Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden is crucial to its development and future. The question of access to the sea has been a topic of significant academic and policy discussion, especially after Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1991. Ethiopia's political establishment have rarely publicly declared an interest in accessing the sea. Nevertheless, historically, expansionary ambitions into the eastern regions of Oromia, Somaliland, and Afar has been a fundamental strategic objective for various subsequent Ethiopian regimes. In the late 19th century, Menelik, the King of Shoa, requested assistance from European countries to open a road to the coast to introduce European civilization, intelligence, and arts into his country. Haile Selassie also presented a memorandum to the United Nations in 1948, lamenting how Ethiopia had lost access to the sea due to the division of the Horn of Africa by European powers.

With reference to the historical and contemporary factors surrounding the issue of Ethiopia's access to the sea, this paper argues that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's controversial speech to the Ethiopian parliament in October of 2023 marked a significant shift in the nation's narrative on this matter. In his oration, he vigorously argued that a country of over 120 million people cannot be landlocked, and emphasized the importance of access to the sea for Ethiopia's economic development and national security. This paper contends that Abiy's rhetorical shift on the issue of access to the sea represents a new paradigm in Ethiopia's national narrative, and that his retrogressive stance could potentially create new conflicts in the already tumultuous Horn of Africa region, which has been engulfed by deep-rooted conflict for the past five decades. As the most populous and economically advanced country in the region, Ethiopia has an obligation to develop a tone and narrative that promotes non-violence and cooperation, rather than domination, to its neighboring countries. The article will pay particular attention to Ethiopia's relations with Somaliland, which is the only country that has granted Ethiopia a stake in its port, as a means of pointing toward a more beneficial alternative to Ethiopia's pursuit of access to the sea.

Key Words

Abiy Ahmed, access to sea, Ethiopia, Somaliland, Red Sea

1. Introduction

In 1978, an article entitled "Which Way to the Sea, Please?" was published by the renowned Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah. The article delved into Ethiopia's aspirations to gain access to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden through the Somali coastline (Farah, 1978). Farah posed the question of whether Somalia had reason to fear that Ethiopia, supported by a foreign power, might invade its territory with the intention of capturing the northern coastal cities of Berbera and Zeila. He further asked if there was any historical precedent for such an action by Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa, citing any incidents or events that might suggest Ethiopia's intent to occupy these ports.

With the available records, Ethiopia's interest in access to the sea had never been publicly declared as a matter of official policy. In the era before Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia, the question of access to sea was not as pressing. The former regime of Ethiopia—the Derg—was otherwise focused on suppressing the insurgency led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), as well as beating back Somalia's own incursion into the Ogaden region in 1977. As such, at the time of Farah's article, the threat of Ethiopian expansionism was low, and Somalia, with all its strength, was on the offensive, seeking to retrieve land such as the Somali-populated Ogaden and the Hawd Reserve Area that they felt had been taken from them through imperial horse-trading.

Despite this, the novelist argued that access to the sea has been a fundamental motivating factor in Ethiopia's expansion into the eastern regions of Oromia, Somali, and Anfar, dating back to the 19th century. In line with this historical argument, in a letter sent in 1878, Menelik, the King of Shoa, addressed major European countries, requesting assistance in opening a road to the coast, as a means to introduce European civilization, intelligence, and arts into his country. He explained that his path to the coast was currently blocked by Muslims, who were preventing him from receiving provisions, arms, agricultural implements, artisans, and even messengers of the Gospel. He implored European countries to use their powerful voices to help him open this path (*Farah 1978*).

In 1948, Haile Selassie presented a memorandum to the United Nations in which he lamented how Ethiopia had lost access to the sea due to the territorial division of the Horn of Africa by European powers. He stated that, prior to this, Ethiopia had an extensive coastline along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, but that this situation was abrogated by the Italian seizure of Massawa in 1885. This was followed by the Italian seizure of the Benadir and areas of what came to be known as Somaliland in agreements made across 1880, 1890, 1891, and 1894, all of which were concluded without Ethiopia's consultation (*Farah, 1978*).

During the Cold War, this imperial division of territory between Ethiopia and the Somali regions would lead to irredentist conflict, a history which looms large in relations between these neighbors. However, not all Somali territories are the same. Somaliland, which dissolved its union as part of Somalia in 1991 and reclaimed its independence, soon after forged a relationship with Ethiopia which can be characterized as highly cordial. Since then, the relationship between the

two nations has only strengthened, with Somaliland's pursuit of statehood contributing to a resolution of territorial disputes between Somalia and Ethiopia.

The dynamics of the relationship between the two countries have undergone a significant transformation in the post-1990s period, with Somaliland emerging as a strategic partner for Ethiopia. Despite being unrecognized by the international community, Somaliland, in its three decades of existence, has managed to rebuild itself from the devastation of the war against the former dictatorial regime in Somalia, and has enjoyed relative peace and stability compared to its neighbors. With more than seven successful popular elections held in its territory, Somaliland has cultivated a strong culture of democracy and stability, which is unparalleled by the Horn of Africa countries (*Hersi, 2015*).

Somaliland's stability and security have led its neighbors, including Ethiopia and Djibouti, to establish diplomatic relations in areas such as trade, security, and the policing of transnational crimes. In particular, relations with Ethiopia have been Somaliland's earliest and deepest, dating back to the establishment of governance in the 1990s. Today, the Somaliland-Ethiopia security partnership is a crucial component of the wider regional peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, these relations are not immune to shifting geopolitical calculations in the region and beyond. With this in mind, this article focuses on the historic city of Zeila in Somaliland's Awdal region, as a microcosm of Ethiopia's shifting relationship with Somaliland, in view of its renewed interest in access the sea. It seeks to understand the motivations of Ethiopia's current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, as well as what "access to the sea" means to Ethiopia.

2. The Reinvigorated Focus of Ethiopia on the Red Sea: An Exploration of the Current Context

Since Somaliland reclaimed statehood in 1991, its political leadership has maintained substantive diplomatic relations with Ethiopia. This initiative was initially undertaken by the country's second president, the late Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, and has been continued by subsequent heads of state, who engaged directly with their Ethiopian counterparts, despite Somaliland's lack of international recognition. All of President Egal (1993-2002) President Rayaale (2002-2010), and President Silanyo (2010-2017) met with Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia on several occasions to discuss mutual interests, mainly on regional security, with the latter also meeting with Meles' successor, Hailemariam Desalegn. More recently, current president Muse Bihi has met with Abiy in Addis Ababa, following the latter's rise to power in 2018. These diplomatic exchanges have addressed Ethiopia's access to the port on multiple occasions. Interviews of former Somaliland ministers of foreign affairs serving from 1998 to 2023 confirms that access to the sea was a topic of discussion between the two governments during all of theirs' tenure. However, the TPLF-led government, which was effectively in power from 1991 to 2018, framed the issue in a manner that did not pose a threat to regional security and economic integration.

Ethiopia has put many offers on the table in exchange for access to the port of Zeila (de facto military control of Zeila), including Somaliland everything from trade agreements, defense agreements, and even international recognition. What success 'access' entails was spelled out by a former Ethiopian ambassador to a neighboring country, who described it as "a permanent, geographic accessibility of the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden." This can be interpreted as Ethiopia's intent to annex land and territories owned by neighboring sovereign states, including not merely Somaliland, but potentially Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, or Kenya. Somaliland has rejected all such offers, with several reasons at play. These include existential fears of Ethiopia's expansionist ideology towards Somali territory, Somaliland's historical loss of territory to Ethiopia, and concerns that Ethiopia's presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden would create regional power competition between Ethiopia and other dominant players in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (*Somaliland, 2023*). As an unrecognized and small nation, Somaliland chose to adopt a peaceful, non-partisan, and non-aligned approach to its diplomatic counterparts, in order to maintain balance in the shifting geopolitical landscape of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Ahmed, Ethiopia has shifted towards a more nationalist approach regarding access to the sea in both its diplomatic tone and foreign policy logic, one that firmly establishes Ethiopia's 'right', or entitlement, to access the sea as a fundamental governing principle. In a policy paper entitled 'Ethiopian National Interests: Principles and Content. Ethiopia's Ministry of Peace emphasizes that, in order to achieve unimpeded access to the sea as a national security imperative, Ethiopia should engage with other nations so as to overcome any geostrategic obstacles that may hinder its development (*Mengesha, 2023*). Furthermore, the policy paper argues that Ethiopia should have access to the Red Sea given its security, geopolitical, and economic interests in the Red Sea, given its proximity to the sea and its growing population and economy. Additionally, the document asserts that the African Union should have ultimate authority over Africa's water resources, seas, and ocean shores (*Mengesha 2023*).

Given the stakes of the issue, it is clear that an increased understanding of Ethiopia's pursuit of access to sea is necessary. However, it is equally important to consider the implications of this pursuit for Ethiopia's national security and economic interests. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia seeks access to the Red Sea or Gulf of Aden to ensure continued economic prosperity, particularly through a desire to have sovereign security over its resources and trade and transit routes. Most importantly, excessive port charges that Ethiopia have to pay to neighboring coastal countries to make use of their logistical services, have hindered Ethiopia's growth, with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed himself recently noting that the amount of money spent on these charges could be used to build the Renaissance Dam every three years (*Observer 2023*).

Moreover, in Abiy's view, when Ethiopia had access to the Red Sea, it would cement the country's position as a great power, a status which it would use to promote the interests of all peoples in the region (*Observer, 2023*). In return for Ethiopia's economic transformation, the Prime Minister expressed Ethiopia's interest in sharing the spoils, such as those yielded by the Renaissance Dam, and the expansion of national industries like Ethiopian Airlines and Ethio Telecom (*Observer,*

2023). The Prime Minister reiterated the crucial importance of addressing this matter in a timely fashion, to prevent future generations from resorting to conflict, through concrete discussions over investment options, shares, and leases (*Observer, 2023*). "We are not insisting on Massawa or Assab specifically. Rather, we seek an accessible gateway, whether through purchase, leasing, or any mutual arrangement. This is our objective," the Prime Minister stated (*Observer 2023*).

At the same time, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has warned that failure to take seriously Ethiopia's need for direct access to the sea risked damaging relations with its neighbors, who he saw as exploiting the advantages of Ethiopia's economic power without suffering any of the costs. For example, thanks to ventures like the recent construction of a pipeline between Djibouti and Ethiopia, which was undertaken at Ethiopia's expense, Ethiopia has become a crucial water source for neighboring nations. In a rebuke to his counterparts, the Ethiopian leader emphasized that while none of the neighboring countries provided water to Ethiopia, they all benefited from it. This perceived lopsided relationship has fed into a justification of Ethiopia's right to pursue access to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, which the Ethiopian leader saw as a way to correct a situation where "I will take yours, but I won't give you mine". He further cautioned that if an alternative to the current arrangement is not found through peaceful dialogue and discussion, it could lead to negative consequences, a situation he claimed no one in the region would want (*Observer 2023*).

For Ethiopian nationalists, pursuit of access to the sea is framed in terms not primarily about the economic benefits, but more so for its perceived role in fostering national unity and strength. Ethiopia's official narrative presents a disconnect between a country's limited accessibility to the sea and its economic growth potential. However, Ethiopia's landlocked status does not necessarily impede economic development and growth. Evidence supporting the correlation between access to the sea and economic development presented by Ahmed is lacking. In fact, up until now, Ethiopia, with its limited access to the sea, has been one of the fastest-growing countries in Africa, achieving an average of 10% growth over the past 15 years, with the country relying on mutually advantageous partnership—through port access and transport, trade and transit agreements—with its coastal neighbors (*Bank, 2022*). Nevertheless, there is a growing perception that Abiy's bid for access to the sea through negotiated settlements, coupled with implicit threats of force, constitutes a new strategy for establishing a naval military presence along the Red Sea's long coast. This would enable Ethiopia to project power and presence in the Nile, Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Aden. Ethiopia's naval presence in the Red Sea has significant security implications, particularly with regard to controlling the Bab-el Mandeb Strait, one of the world's narrow waterways that connects Mediterranean and Indian ocean to the Suez Canal in Egypt.

3. The Trilateral Partnership of Abiy, Farmaajo and Isaias

In the face of ongoing intra- and inter-state conflicts that have plagued the region for decades, Abiy Ahmed was elected Ethiopia's newest prime minister in 2018. In his early days in office, the leader was hailed for his novel, revolutionary approach to foreign policy, which included reengagement with Eritrea, where relations had been tense and hostile since the 1998-2000

border war between the two countries. However, in an historic move, Abiy visited Eritrea's capital of Asmara in 2018, reaching an agreement to end the stalemate and bring about positive changes in the relationship between the two countries. This move was met with approval from both Africa and Western world.

In addition to his efforts to improve relations with Eritrea, Abiy also extended a hand of cooperation to Somalia's political leadership, inviting former President Mohamed Abdirahman Farmaajo to join the Joint Declaration of Comprehensive Cooperation Between Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea focused on regional integration through trade, access to ports, and security cooperation. The three nations of Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea formed an alliance with Abiy, vowing that they would become more economically and politically interconnected. However, the countries of Djibouti and Somaliland were left out of this new arrangement thanks to their longstanding rivalries with Eritrea and Somalia, respectively.

Within Ethiopia's political establishment, particularly its former ruling party, the TPLF, concerns over the reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea grew. Combined with its growing isolation within Abiy's domestic coalition, the TPLF found its back against the wall, provoking them to escalate conflict with the central government, culminating in what would become a two-year civil war, which only ended through a 2021 peace deal brokered by the United States and South Africa, following the death of an estimated 600,000 civilians. During the war, the alliance among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia proved resilient and mutually beneficial. However, Eritrea's intervention in Ethiopia's civil war, initiated with Abiy's consent, would have long-term repercussions in terms of Ethiopia's internal divisions as well as the regional balance of power. Abiy's vision of a unified region was upended by the war, and it appeared that the alliance was on the verge of collapse, particularly with the defeat of the former president of Somalia, Farmaajo to Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud, a critic of the tripartite alliance. Djibouti and Somaliland took advantage of this rift to push for the formation of an alliance led and driven by the three Somali regions.

During the heyday of the tripartite alliance, Abiy pursued his goal of accessing the sea, reaching an agreement with Somalia's President Farmaajo to use four unnamed ports along Somalia's coastline, including Somaliland. This deal was opposed by opposition leaders in Somalia, but Somaliland chose to downplay the matter and focus on a more strategic approach to relations with Ethiopia, to avoid being caught up in this political war of words and emotions.

In 2016, DP World, a port operator owned by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), turned its attention to Somaliland after losing its concession agreement over its port in neighboring Djibouti. DP World was determined to maintain access to the growing Ethiopian market and negotiated a deal with Somaliland to invest in the port of Berbera, Somaliland's only maritime gateway. During the discussions over the deal, Ethiopia joined the agreement by acquiring a 19% stake in Berbera Port, whereas DP World and Somaliland held 51% and 30%, respectively. Ethiopia's 19% stake allowed DP World to secure a more favorable deal than the one it had with Djibouti. However, Djibouti and China, Djibouti's main creditor for the Djibouti corridor railway, free zones, and port infrastructure development, were not pleased with the deal.

The development of the Djibouti trade and transport corridor with Ethiopia, an unparalleled achievement in the region, was driven by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This Djiboutian Chinese initiative, however has faced strategic competition from Somaliland and the UAE, over access to the Ethiopian market. However, with Ethiopia securing 19% of the port of Berbera, the Somaliland-Emirati initiative seemingly offered a better deal, granting Ethiopia direct and unhindered access to sea.

Despite these obvious advantages, yet, the Abiy government's alliance with Eritrea and Somalia, including its deal with President Farmaajo regarding the utilization of Somali ports, caused Ethiopia to pull back from its commitments to Berbera, even if the specific terms of the agreement remain shrouded in secrecy and have never been disclosed. By 2022, the Somaliland government announced that the agreement had been annulled, following what it claimed was the failure of Ethiopia to meet the conditions of the agreement. This has also led to tensions between Ethiopia and DP World.

Ethiopia's missed opportunity to own a stake in the Berbera port represents a significant loss for the country. Not only was it a setback in Ethiopia's relationship with Berbera, but it also contributed to a deterioration of diplomatic relations with Somaliland and Djibouti, while exacerbating the tensions that contributed to the war in Tigray. To add insult to injury, the secret deal brokered with Somalia's Farmaajo never materialized due to resistance from opposition parties in Somalia and the government of Somaliland. For the latter, historic memory of territorial losses suffered by Somaliland in the hands of Ethiopia during the period of British imperial rule, has made them wary of direct Ethiopian domination or annexation, preferring to focus on trade instead.

4. Ethiopia's Historical Pursuit of Access to a Sea and the Somaliland Dilemma

Most Ethiopian foreign policy experts agree with the government in considering access to the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Aden as essential components of Ethiopia's national security (*Somaliland, 2023*). However, the question arises as to which sea is being referred to and how it is possible for Ethiopia, a landlocked country, to acquire access to the sea. In this context, it is worth highlighting two historical events which jeopardized Ethiopia's opportunity to gain geographical access to sea outlets.

A) Italian Colonization of Eritrea in 1882: Italian military involvement in the Horn of Africa resulted in the loss of Assab and Massawa to Italy. Although Ethiopia would eventually reincorporate these lands into a federated state with decolonization, the historic and political differences engendered during this period would have a lasting impact on relations between center and periphery. As part of agreement between the TPLF and EPLF in their rebellion against the Ethiopian state, Eritrea was allowed to separate from the rump of Ethiopia upon victory in 1991. This ended Ethiopia's claims of state sovereignty over Eritrea, and Massawa and Assab became Eritrean ports, cutting off Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea via this outlet.

B) The Zeila and Hawd Reserve Area Exchange: In the medieval era, Zeila, an ancient port situated in Somaliland's Awdal region, served as a crucial trade route for Ethiopia's eastern region. In 1548, the Ottoman Empire annexed Zeila, which was later occupied by Egypt until the British established the British Somaliland Protectorate in 1884. Since then, Zeila has remained a strategic port for those governing Somaliland, and rivalries between Ethiopia and Egypt over the control and influence of this important port have persisted. According to Samuel Nagash, historical discussions between the British and Ethiopians regarding the exchange of Hawd, a grazing reserve area in the southwest of Somaliland, for Zeila began in 1927 in Addis Ababa (*Nagash, 2016*). During these discussions, Ras Kassa, an Ethiopian diplomat, inquired about the possibility of ceding or leasing Zeila into Abyssinia, returning the grazing areas in return. However, the negotiations were interrupted by several factors, including disagreements over the future of the Issa, Gadabuursi, and Isaaq clans that resided in British Somaliland, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, and French opposition to the Anglo-Ethiopian deal, fearing that it would eventually cost them their investment in Djibouti. Negotiations on the Hawd-Zeila exchange were suspended in July 1949 and only resumed in January 1950, as Ethiopia's claim to Eritrea was disputed by Italy. Despite the Ethiopian government's inclination to postpone the resolution of the Eritrean question until a definitive outcome was achieved, their confidence in acquiring either Assab or Massawa turned their attention away from Zeila Port. Additionally, the trade associated with the Zeila Corridor significantly reduced its value. In the event of the HawdZeila exchange's failure, the British government had contemplated several options: (a) leasing the Hawd, which was considered a more feasible option, (b) entering into a new grazing agreement, which was considered less feasible, and (c) an outright purchase, which was deemed highly impractical. Unfortunately, both internal and external factors contributed to the failure of the Zeila-Hawd exchange, resulting in Ethiopia's permanent loss to access to sea. As Amanuel Abraham stated, "the fate of the Hawd-Zeila exchange was sealed forever when Somaliland gained independence in 1960 and began pursuing the annexation of the entire Ogaden" (*Nagash, 2016*).

5. The Ethio-Djibouti Trade and Transit Partnership

Since the outbreak of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998, Ethiopia has turned to Djibouti's ports as an alternative. Because of the changing regional security paradigm of the Horn in the late 1990s, Djibouti has been the main strategic beneficiary of (a) the Ethio-Eritrean war, (b) Somaliland nonrecognition, (c) Somalia's continued unrest, and (d) Ethiopia's landlocked condition. As the World Bank notes, "Since the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998-2000, Ethiopia has not used any of the Eritrean ports, even though Assab is located slightly closer to Addis than Djibouti. Ethiopia relies heavily on Djibouti, which handles approximately 93% of Ethiopia's imports and exports" (*Bank, 2013*). As a result of its trade with Ethiopia, Djibouti's main revenue comes from two main streams: the port and foreign military bases (of governments ranging from the US to China), both of which are connected to the strategic importance of Djibouti in maritime trade and maritime security. With more than two decades of partnership, the Ethio-Djibouti trade partnership has proven highly sustainable, and Djibouti, with financial support from multilateral partners, has modernized its ports and services for the benefit of all parties. However,

Ethiopia's ambition is not only about access to the sea in terms of trade, but also has a security dimension--setting up military bases and naval installations—which require sovereign, rather than foreign control.

6. Somaliland's Position Toward Ethiopia's Quest to Access the Sea

As discussed above, volatility over Ethiopia's commitment to the Berbera port expansion has strained its relationship with Somaliland. But this is not the only area of contention in relation to Ethiopia's maritime ambitions. Recently, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has approached his counterpart, President Muse Bihi of Somaliland, regarding the possibility of accessing the Zeila Port. Ethiopia reportedly attempted to convince Somaliland to grant access to Zeila, with a focus on acquiring both sea and land. However, it is unclear whether the Ethiopian government's motivation in this case is solely trade-related, or if there are other strategic objectives at play. It is worth noting that Somaliland, unlike its neighbors, is not recognized under international law as a de jure sovereign state, despite the Somaliland government's de facto control over its territory. The issue of sovereignty in the case of Somaliland continues to be contested between Hargeisa and the authorities in Somalia's capital, Mogadishu. Somaliland asserts its independence from Somalia and governs its territory without interference from its former ruler, and on this basis seeks international recognition as an independent state, whereas Somalia aims to maintain the unity of the entire Somali territory that existed as a singular nation before the government's collapse in 1991. As such, a deal between Addis Ababa and Hargeisa is contingent upon resolving Somaliland's status. A mutually agreeable path to this outcome has been sponsored by the international community through bilateral negotiations between Somaliland and Somalia; nevertheless, despite over a decade of low-level talks between the two sides, no resolution has been reached.

If the case of Somaliland is resolved through dialogue with Mogadishu, leading to its recognition, Hargeisa and Addis Ababa could discuss a possible arrangement for the use of the Berbera and Zeila ports. Until such a time, and so long as Somaliland remains in diplomatic limbo, any such deal negotiated between Somaliland Ethiopia should not involve issues of territorial sovereignty. Instead, such a deal should be trade-oriented and not involve any permanent geographical accessibility to Somaliland's ports. This would fall short of Prime Minister Abiy's call to explore purchase agreements, but could involve a lease agreement or bilateral investment in exchange for deals beneficial to Somaliland. As Abiy emphasized, the conversation pertaining to the matter at hand should remain open, but it must equally preserve Somaliland's territorial integrity and independence. It should be recognized, however, that any arrangement that bestows upon Ethiopia benefits surpassing those currently derived from Djibouti would face external pressures. As the sole beneficiary of Ethiopia's landlocked status, Djibouti would oppose any negotiations granting Ethiopia access to the sea and would seek to employ its soft power over Somaliland to thwart such a deal. Djibouti has a longstanding relationship with Somaliland, particularly its current ruling administration.

In addition to Djibouti, Somalia, the UAE, and China all possess inherent interests in Ethiopia's maritime accessibility. The Emirates have invested substantially in Somaliland with the expectation that Ethiopia would utilize the port of Berbera. Similarly, China has invested in Djibouti, and both Djibouti and Ethiopia are indebted to China. Should Ethiopia pursue a deal leasing one of the regional ports without first repaying its loans to China, it risks damaging its amicable relations with Beijing it currently enjoys, instead finding China an obstacle in Ethiopia's bid for a sea outlet.

7. Regional Factors: Ethio-Egyptian Regional Rivalries and their Impact on Somaliland

The Nile waters have been a major, unremitting source of tension between Egypt and Ethiopia since the emergence of the two states. However, following Ethiopia's decision to fundamentally reorganize governance and usage of the river through the creation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, these tensions have significantly worsened. It is clear that relations between these two heavyweights in the region will significantly impact, and be impacted by, Ethiopia's ambition of access to sea, which touches upon the interests not solely of countries in northeastern Africa, but also the larger Arab world, who have only increased their projection of power over the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea in recent years.

Bad-el Mandem and the Suez Canal Straits: With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the narrow waterway of the Bab-el Mandem Strait, which previously was of little geostrategic importance, became a critical chokepoint of global maritime trade, linking the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. In this context, Egypt has sought to maintain its strategic control over the Red Sea through influence over the strait, in order to protect and project its security and trade. That said, Egypt's dependence on the Nile and the Suez Canal, two lifelines for the country, is interconnected with the geopolitical dynamics being played out in the Horn of Africa. For Egypt, the lack of access to the sea by one of its geostrategic rivals, Ethiopia, has served a significant advantage in influencing the Red Sea states. If this situation were to change, it would directly implicate Egypt's dominance of the Red Sea vis-à-vis Ethiopia.

In light of these factors, Somaliland's interests lie in balancing the geopolitical rivalries of Egypt and Ethiopia, both of which are members of the African Union (with Egypt is also being a member of the Arab League). The two countries have each sought access to Somaliland's coast with Egypt desiring a naval base in Somaliland, and Ethiopia seeking to garner unimpeded maritime trade and power projection through both a naval base and a port. Given the rival interests of these two countries, Somaliland will have to exhibit great strategic dexterity and caution.

Certainly, the trade volume between Ethiopia and Somaliland is substantial, estimated at over \$350 million per year, with Somaliland experiencing a trade deficit with Ethiopia (OEC, 2021). Indeed, Somaliland has historically preferred a better relationship with Ethiopia than Egypt. At the same time, Somaliland's deep ties to the Arab World, with whom they share a common faith,

culture, ideology, and history of commerce cannot be ignored. What is more, Somaliland is being pulled towards such ties with Ethiopia and the Emirates as a result of changes to their longstanding security partnership with Ethiopia, which has come to an end following Ethiopia's decision to host meetings on its territory aimed at destabilizing Somaliland's eastern Sool region.

The question remains whether Somaliland will use the threat of an Egyptian naval base as leverage to restore relations with Ethiopia, or whether closer relations to Egypt might cause Ethiopia to increase its pressure on Somaliland. Somaliland's decision here depends on several factors, including the extent to which Ethiopia recognizes the Somaliland's strategic advantages when compared to its rival Somali administrations in Mogadishu or Puntland. These advantages include Somaliland's comparative proximity to Addis Ababa and Somali Regional State of Ethiopia (SRS). On the other side of the coin, if countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia signal a commitment to building on their historic ties with Somaliland through Egypt as a proxy such calculations could take Somaliland in the other direction.

8. United Arab Emirates Influence Over Somaliland, Somalia and Ethiopia

In 2016, the Djibouti government unilaterally terminated a concession agreement with DP World, leading to a legal dispute between the two parties that has yet to be resolved. Two courts, one in London and the other in Hong Kong, ruled in favor of the DP World, but the judgments have not been enforced, and the port is currently under the management of the Djiboutian government. As a result, DP World moved to Somaliland's Berbera port and invested over \$400 million to build a new terminal that would facilitate Ethiopia's maritime trade. The World Bank predicts that, from a trade volume of 3 million tons in 2016, Berbera Port will rise to 18 million tons by 2050, creating substantial economic growth for Somaliland and the wider region (Group, 2018). Additionally, DP World and the Somaliland government have partnered to build a new "integrated maritime, logistical, and industrial hub" in the 'Berbera Economic Zone', which is expected to compete with the Djibouti International Free Trade Zone (DFTZ) that China has invested heavily in (*World, 2023*).

However, the UAE is not only invested in Somaliland, but has recently resumed security and defense cooperation with Somalia, after a hiatus caused by political differences, and is heavily involved in providing economic and military support to the Ethiopian government as well. These various initiatives constitute a long-term grand strategy in the Horn of Africa, with a particular focus on Somaliland, Somalia, and Ethiopia. This strategy toward the Horn of Africa, which also involves the coastal countries of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, is influenced by several factors and players:

A) China's growing influence in the region: The level of Chinese engagement in the Horn of Africa has increased dramatically since the inception of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Djibouti and Ethiopia serve as China's gateways for this megaproject due to Djibouti's geostrategic location and Ethiopia's growing economy. Chinese investment in these two countries is unparalleled, with over 3.5 billion dollars allocated to finance the development of Africa's largest free trade zone (FTZ), expected to create 200,000 new jobs and handle 7 billion trades (Focus,

2019). Chinese companies have various stakes in Djibouti's FTZ, and other major projects include the development of new container terminals, railway lines connecting Djibouti to Ethiopia, and a water pipeline costing \$770 million. Prior to China's investment in Djibouti, the UAE partnered with Djibouti and managed the operation of the Dorel container terminal. However, with growing ties between China and Djibouti, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated, leading the UAE to relocate to Somaliland. Because of China's increasing presence in Djibouti, including its only overseas military base, the UAE's strategic interests in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have declined. Somaliland has used access to its port to exploit these deteriorating relations, although becoming implicated in the competition between China and the UAE for maritime dominance has also added political complexity to Somaliland's position within a fragmented geopolitical climate.

B) Intra-GCC competition over the control of the resources and power of the region: The GCC member states of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been engaged in intense competition for influence over the Horn of Africa, since the beginning of the Arab Spring. This external competition has grafted itself onto many of the lingering divisions in the Horn of Africa that have historically plagued the region, giving them new life and direction. For example, Eritrea and Djibouti are currently embroiled in a territorial dispute that was first sparked in 2008, while Somaliland and Somalia's relations have deteriorated thanks to fighting in the contested borderlands of Sool. Additionally, relations between Ethiopia and various Somali populations, which have suffered four decades of territorial dispute, have equally witnessed an uptick in divisiveness as competition over the Red Sea has reinvigorated Ethiopia's desire to control the Somali-dominated coastline.

C) The growing influence of Turkey in Somalia: Unlike GCC members, Turkey has assumed significant influence over Somalia's airport, port, and security apparatus. Turkey maintains an overseas military base in Mogadishu, which serves as the largest military base in Africa. During the tenure of former President Mohamed Farmaajo, Turkey and Qatar exerted their influence over the leader to peel Somalia away from the Emirates, something which contributed to the UAE's shift from Mogadishu to Hargeisa. However, with the change in Somalia's leadership from Mohamed Farmaajo to the incumbent, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud, the UAE has used the opening to reestablish close relations with Mogadishu. In fact, the UAE now has a closer relationship with Mogadishu than with Hargeisa.

D) The US's decline in the influence of the Horn and the UAE's interest in playing a regional power: Since the end of the Cold War, the United States' policy towards the Horn of Africa has significantly declined. According to Gabriel Negatu of the Atlantic Council, during the Cold War, the United States' engagement in the region focused on containing communist expansion. However, following the collapse of communism, US policy in the region became static and lost strategic coherence, making it unsuitable for a rapidly changing region (*Council, 2022*). Additionally, the tragic fallout from US intervention in Somalia deterred enthusiasm for actively engaging in the region. The US refocused its attention only after a series of terrorist attacks, including the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the September 11 attacks, and

incidents of maritime piracy. The main objective was to disrupt the local Islamic extremists linked to a global jihadi network, and the United States and its Western allies deployed significant resources in the region. However, as the war on terror settled into a quagmire, and state-building efforts in the region failed to make significant gains, American attention, which had already repivoted to great power rivalry in the Asian-Pacific and eastern Europe, increasingly waned, allowing regional powers such as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Qatar, as well as global powers like China, to take the lead.

9. Possible Scenarios

With a detailed picture of the current and historical context in place, it is time to closely examine possible scenarios for how Ethiopia's aspirations for access to the sea might unfold in the future. In what follows, the paper will explore several potential outcomes, which are informed by the analysis presented in the preceding sections of the paper, seeking to trace the potential consequences and trajectories of the various domestic and international political issues at stake.

9.1 Lease

One proposal that Ethiopia has floated to coastline states in its pursuit of sea access is a bilateral, two-way lease framework. Under this arrangement, in exchange for the use of a port with full control over management and revenues for a designated period of time, Ethiopia would offer shares in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Ethiopian Airlines, and the Ethiopian telecom sector. However, one of the main challenges to negotiating such an arrangement is the balance of power between regional and global powers, which each have varied maritime trade and interests in Horn of African countries

Therefore, the possibility of a lease arrangement between Ethiopia and its coastal counterparts is a non-starter. Somalia is unlikely to entertain this option for two main reasons: a long history of disputes of territorial control and hegemony, and the long-standing enmity felt by the Somali people towards Ethiopia following the latter's 2006 invasion of southern Somalia. For Djibouti, it is clear that their interests lie predominantly in its position as an intermediary in Ethiopia's trade with the world, and a stake in Ethiopia's energy, water, telecoms, and airlines sectors cannot substitute for the revenues it generates from exploiting Ethiopia's maritime trade dependence. For Eritrea, a history of antagonism between the two nations spanning the 1998-2000 border disputes and the current fallout over the war in Tigray, mean that the prospect of peaceful maritime partnership is extremely slim.

Somaliland's policy toward Ethiopia's ambition for sea access, on the other hand, has been far less clear. On one hand, Somaliland views Ethiopia as a trading and security partner with future potentialities, while, on the other hand, when it comes to the issue of sea access, Somaliland takes a much more cautious and calculated approach. In collaboration with the UAE, Somaliland is the sole country that has granted Ethiopian ownership stakes in one of its ports. Unfortunately, despite the initial agreement and commitment from Ethiopia, the latter failed to live up to its side

of the bargain for unjustifiable reasons. However, in the context of a lease arrangement, Somaliland's position is unambiguous: any such agreement can only be negotiated and discussed if Somaliland is recognized as an independent and sovereign state. This is due to the potential security implications of such a ceding of territorial control.

9.2 Investment with the Ownership of Stakes: The Berbera Case

Unlike Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, Somaliland took the significant step of granting Ethiopia a stake in one of its ports. This took the form of a tripartite agreement which also included DP World in 2016, in which Ethiopia was granted 19% stake in the Berbera Port, to DP World and Somaliland's 51% and 30% shares, respectively. Despite this offer, Ethiopia has not shown sufficient interest in following through on the deal, and the reasons for this are unclear. Since then, Somaliland and their Emirati counterparts built a new container terminal at the port without Ethiopia's participation. Interestingly, after years of modernization, Ethiopia has returned to the table, arguing that their 19% stake is still valid and the agreement still operable. However, the Somaliland government opposed this, as the project was implemented without Ethiopian involvement.

Despite this, both Somaliland and Ethiopia would benefit greatly from maximum utilization of Berbera and other ports, such as Zeila, which would increase the movement of goods and people. It is therefore in the best interest of both parties to negotiate and reach a new agreement that gives Ethiopia a 19% stake, provided that Ethiopia fulfills its commitment to transport 30% of its imports and exports through Berbera. However, any deal of this nature is complicated by its impact on regional power dynamics. In particular, Djibouti, as the main beneficiary of the current status quo, opposes any form of investment in Berbera, which is indeed one of the reasons why the Berbera Port expansion lost the buy-in it had at the outset of the agreement in 2016. Djibouti has considerable soft power influence over Somaliland's political class through business and clan affiliation, which it has used to unsettle and divide commitment to the port expansion from inside Somaliland. Combined with reluctance from the Ethiopian side, the Berbera Port investment has not yet reached its potential, although if it were to, it would solve part of Ethiopia's needs in terms of access to the sea.

9.3 Use of Force

The use of force by Ethiopia to achieve its sea access ambitions is the least likely scenario, but has been taken seriously as a possibility in certain quarters. Several coastal countries, including Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, have publicly rejected Ethiopia's aggressive and presumptuous assertion of its 'right' to access the sea, emphasizing that these discussions would compromise their territorial integrity. Two primary factors now threaten Ethiopia's ambition: historical factors, such as persistent border conflicts, and the current geopolitical dynamics of the region, which have left Ethiopia in a state of uncertainty and instability. Many countries in the region, such as Somalia and Eritrea, have longstanding grievances toward Ethiopia, in terms of differing models

for how the region should be multilaterally governed, and none of these issues have been addressed. So far, in response to Ethiopia's proposal for an open discussion among coastal states regarding access to the sea, Eritrea officially declared its disinterest in participating in such forums. Unlike other nations, Ethiopia and Eritrea have an exceptionally complex historical relationship characterized by wars and mistrust.

The government of Djibouti has stated that discussions on granting Ethiopia access to the sea are contrary to the international rule-based order, according to an official statement released by Alexis Mohamed, senior adviser to Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh. The statement noted that Djibouti has always been open to good relations with its neighboring countries, including Ethiopia, and that it will wait for a peaceful proposal from Ethiopia before granting access to the Red Sea (Marks, 2023). Taking a more steadfast approach, the Minister of Commerce of Somaliland stated that the only proposal that Somaliland would consider was a mutually beneficial economic agreement. He also noted that Ethiopia's desire for access to the coast contradicts its earlier commitment to the Berbera port deal. It is worth noting that the use of force by Ethiopia to gain access to the sea is highly unlikely and difficult to imagine given the regional security and stability of the Horn of Africa and the historical factors that drive regional conflict.

Nevertheless, the use of force in the current situation remains a possibility, yet such an escalation would not be advisable for to a number of reasons. Firstly, the war in Tigray has had significant consequences both domestically and internationally, with Ethiopia facing condemnation from global powers for its actions in the region. Expanding the war beyond its borders would not only further isolate Ethiopia, but might equally leave Ethiopia overstretched and vulnerable. Secondly, internal political dynamics in Ethiopia have created security problems, and the country appears unprepared for a regional war that would not only affect Ethiopia but also the entire Horn of Africa region. Thirdly, using force against Somaliland, Somalia, and Djibouti would likely increase support and resistance from radical groups due to historical factors between Somalis and Ethiopians. Finally, regional and global powers such as the UAE, EGYPT China, and the US have security and trade investment interests in the region that would be negatively impacted by any such moves. Considering these factors, an invasion would be practically impossible and therefore irrational.

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