

ETHIOPIA'S RED SEA POLITICS: CORRIDORS, PORTS AND SECURITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Biruk Terrefe



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MAP

Jillian Beryl Luff

COVER PHOTO

"Ethiopian cargo ship at Port of Djibouti" by Mikhail Goldovski is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

DESIGN/LAYOUT

Maggie Dougherty

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MAP



SUMMARY

- The Horn of Africa is a region marked by complex infrastructural interdependencies, where the decline and emergence of trade corridors continue to reshape the economic and political relations within and between states.
- This study draws on the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in January 2024 granting Ethiopia access to the sea in exchange for recognition of Somaliland to examine why and how these corridors divert and recirculate political and economic capital.
- Drawing on interviews with key stakeholders, public statements, and previous work on corridors and ports, the paper illustrates how national security considerations are the driving force behind these seemingly commercial agreements.
- Donor and stakeholder expectations for the Berbera corridor—centred on technical issues including increased economic activity and efficiency gains driven by the competition between the ports of Berbera and Djibouti—overlooked growing domestic and regional tensions and political instability.
- The MoU was driven by the Ethiopian government's growing perception of encirclement by hostile states, particularly Egypt, at a time when the spectre of geopolitical conflict looms in the waters of the Red Sea.
- Regional tensions have implications for domestic politics in both Ethiopia and Somaliland, as domestic conflicts are further fuelled by regional actors. For Somaliland, the MoU raises questions about the balance between pursuing recognition, and economic autonomy, while managing internal tensions.
- Fundamentally, the Ethiopian government's vision extends beyond trade liberalisation, aiming to position Ethiopia as a regional superpower with grand ambitions of geopolitical significance.
- The signing of the MoU marks a tactical shift in Ethiopian foreign policy, breaking long-standing taboos and setting a new narrative around the Red Sea's importance.
- From the perspective of some of Ethiopia's neighbours, this strategy evokes memories of its former imperial ambitions, while domestic critiques view these manoeuvres as a distraction from ongoing internal conflicts and a tactic to reignite nationalistic fervour around a generational legacy.
- Ethiopia's trade corridors transcend their role as conduits for goods and services; they serve as critical arenas where local, national and international actors negotiate—and occasionally contest through conflict—their visions of sovereignty, autonomy and security.

INTRODUCTION

When in October 2023, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed gave a lecture to parliamentarians entitled 'From a Drop of Water to Sea,' he challenged a fundamental assumption in our understanding of the Horn of Africa's political economy. Namely, the world's most populous landlocked country should no longer depend on bilateral arrangements and the goodwill of its neighbours to import and export goods. Ethiopia has an explicit desire to gain direct access to the sea. In his lecture, Abiy presented an alternative model, akin to a Red Sea doctrine, with significant political ramifications for the Horn of Africa and numerous international actors. The Ethiopian government's perspective on logistics, infrastructure and access to the Red Sea is indicative of its broader vision of Ethiopia's place in the world. This paper uses the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland in January 2024 and its aftermath as an entry point to examine the broader political economy of ports and trade corridors in the Horn of Africa.

The MoU for 'Partnership and Cooperation' was announced (without being published) as a 'multisectoral' framework to bolster 'diplomatic relations' between Ethiopia and Somaliland, while also strengthening the 'security, economic and political partnership'.¹ Two days after this announcement the Ethiopian government released a more comprehensive briefing to counter speculation, public outcry and international condemnation. According to the briefing, the MoU provides Ethiopia with access to 'a military base' and 'commercial maritime services' in the Gulf of Aden through 'reciprocity' and 'a lease agreement'.² The parties agreed to the development of an Ethiopian military base that will house a revamped Ethiopian naval force. This reportedly encompasses a 20 km strip in and around the Woqooyi Galabeed regions (ranging from Zeila, Lughaya to Bulhar and Berbera).³ The signing of the MoU led to a significant diplomatic rift between Ethiopia and Somalia.

In its clarification briefing, the Ethiopian government also stated that it would consider the question of recognition without explicitly confirming the media reports. According to the International Crisis Group, however, it would be unlikely for Somaliland to 'move ahead with

1 Ethiopian Government, Press Release, 1 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/MFAEthiopia/posts/january-1-2024addis-ababa-prime-minister-abiy-ahmed-and-the-president-of-somalil/681884857430014/>.

2 Ethiopian Government Communication Service, 'A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Partnership and Cooperation has been signed between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and Somaliland', 3 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=793218696151688&id=100063906939403&_rdr.

3 There are some reports that Berbera itself would host the military base, as discussed below.

such an explosive initiative without extracting the prize of official recognition', concluding that both parties see this as a 'port-for-recognition swap'.⁴ While relations between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu continued to deteriorate, Somaliland accepted the credentials of Ethiopia's new ambassador, Teshome Shunde Hamito, in August 2024—indicating the potential future elevation of Ethiopia's consular office in Hargeisa to an embassy, and further signalling that recognition may be on the cards.

Beyond the naval base, the MoU includes a separate commercial lease agreement, which reportedly allows Ethiopia to build commercial facilities and divert up to 30 per cent of all its imports and exports to the Berbera port. This is reportedly to be done in exchange for an 'equivalent share' in Ethiopian Airlines given to Somaliland.⁵ In mid-September, the governments of Somaliland and Ethiopia confirmed that the details of the MoU had been finalised and that 'a practical agreement' had been reached.⁶ The details of the MoU remain highly classified and only a handful of individuals at the highest echelons of both governments have seen it, but what is certain is that this deal has military and civilian components that are inextricable. Whether these components exist within the same port complex or are related to different facilities remains strategically ambiguous.

In December 2024, as tensions continued to grow, Türkiye's mediation efforts led to the signing of the Ankara Agreement between Ethiopia and Somalia. This agreement—along with the Somaliland elections in November 2024—has slowed the momentum around the MoU while introducing new corridor options for Ethiopia through mainland Somalia. Given these shifting dynamics of corridor politics, this paper aims, on the one hand, to analyse the key events, motivations, and actors and, on the other, to examine the core principles undergirding Ethiopia's maritime politics.

While the century-old calculus of diversifying Ethiopia's risk portfolio by having access to multiple port outlets remains, it is insufficient to understand this latest episode. This MoU and its aftermath, Ethiopia's new Red Sea doctrine and the broader geopolitical dynamics invite us to examine the politics of shifting trade corridors and the new set of elites that emerge

4 In this second briefing, the Ethiopian government noted that Somaliland had declared its independence twice, once from the United Kingdom (UK) in 1960 and again in 1991 from Somalia. The Ethiopian government goes on to explain that, despite not being recognised, Somaliland has had diplomatic relations with several countries and has signed international agreements with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and even the UK. The implication is that these agreements set the precedent for this MoU. International Crisis Group, 'The Stakes in the Ethiopia-Somaliland Deal,' 6 March 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-of-africa/ethiopia-somaliland/stakes-ethiopia-somaliland-deal>.

5 The details of this remain unclear, given that Ethiopian Airlines' fleet is partially owned by Ethiopian banks.

6 *Addis Standard*, 'Somaliland tells diplomats in Hargeisa MoU with Ethiopia "finalized," "formal legal agreement imminent"', 11 September 2024.

both within and beyond the Horn.⁷ What are the underlying drivers that have created this infrastructure-security complex from the Ethiopian government's perspective? And why and how has the Ethiopian government entangled its Red Sea doctrine to broader questions of development and security?

This latest attempt at reconfiguring port-corridor linkages in the Horn of Africa, while marking a rupture, also reflects key principles in the region's political economy. First, the region's infrastructural map is characterized by an interdependent logistical system spanning multiple states.⁸ Ethiopia's importers depend on the corridor-port linkages to neighbouring countries, while the profitability of these port operators depends on Ethiopian demand. Therefore, the construction of a corridor connecting Addis to Somaliland's Berbera Port is not simply a bilateral affair, but part of web of infrastructural dependencies that impacts other corridors. Given relatively low trade volumes, the emergence of new corridors has historically undermined alternative routes resulting in zero-sum politics. Second, these corridor changes also significantly impact relations between sub-national groups. The Horn is home to cultural and linguistic communities, and in some case nations, that exist across state borders. As certain infrastructural corridors develop or decline, economic and political capital is redistributed, connecting certain groups to power while marginalizing others. In other words, these logistical networks and political orders are 'co-produced'.⁹ These dynamics unfold against a backdrop of realigning global interests, with the Gulf, Türkiye, China and the West reshaping their relations in the region.

To illustrate these dynamics effectively, this paper is structured as follows. The next section examines the history of Ethiopia's century-long quest to gain access to the sea culminating in the latest developments around the MoU signed with Somaliland. The following section closely examines Abiy Ahmed's Red Sea doctrine and the deeper underlying motivations and machinations that explain his Red Sea politics. The final section disentangles the security considerations from the economic justifications by analysing the Ethiopian perception of encirclement, the growing geopolitical tensions and its sub-national manifestations.

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- 7 J. Dua, *Chokepoints and Corridors: Ordering Maritime Space in the Western Indian Ocean*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; A. M. Musa, 'The Berbera corridor development & Somaliland's political economy', in *Land, Investment & Politics*, edited by J. Lind, D. Okenwa and I. Scoones, 110–121, Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2020; F. Stepputat and T. Hagmann, 'Politics of circulation: The makings of the Berbera corridor in Somali East Africa', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37/5 (2019): 794–813.
- 8 B. Terreffe and H. Verhoeven, 'The road (not) taken: The contingencies of infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa', *Political Geography*, 110, 103070 (2024).
- 9 P. Schouten, F. Stepputat and J. Bachmann, 'States of circulation: Logistics off the beaten path', *Environment & Planning D: Society and Space*, 37/5 (2019): 779–793; T. Hagmann and F. Stepputat, *Trade Makes States: Governing the Greater Somali Economy*, London: Hurst, 2023.

HISTORICIZING ETHIOPIA'S ACCESS TO THE SEA

On 1 January 2024, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Muse Bihi Abdi signed an MoU that allegedly gives Ethiopia access to Somaliland's coastline in exchange for the recognition of Somaliland. The undisclosed MoU sparked significant political tensions with Somalia resulting in the ouster of Ethiopia's ambassador to Mogadishu¹⁰ and the widespread condemnation of Ethiopia's infringement on the 'unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity' of Somalia.¹¹ While Türkiye brokered a deal in December 2024 that has eased immediate tensions, this yearlong episode has illustrated the political vulnerabilities associated with port-corridor infrastructure in the region. On the one hand, this was the latest iteration of Addis Ababa's century-old quest to secure access to the sea. On the other hand, the recent machinations are intertwined with significant geopolitical realignments on both sides of the Red Sea. While the signing of the MoU made a set of domestic, regional and international conflicts more explicit, the following sections trace the critical historical junctures that precede the current tensions.

ETHIOPIA'S CORRIDOR-PORT CONFIGURATIONS

The question of access to the sea has been a central endeavour of the modern Ethiopian state since the late nineteenth century. Djibouti and Eritrea, at different points during the past century, alternated as Ethiopia's primary port outlet.¹² A historic analysis of the kingdoms of Harla, Adal Ifat and Aksum and their port outlets from Zeila to Adulis goes beyond the scope of this study. For our purposes, the completion of the imperial Franco-Ethiopian Railway in 1917 marks a useful departure point.

This railway linked Ethiopia's central highlands via Dire Dawa to Djibouti, serving as a crucial conduit for imports and exports. The railway was an 'unprecedented opportunity' for Emperor

10 BBC World News, 'Somalia expels Ethiopian ambassador amid row over Somaliland port deal,' 4 April 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68734631>.

11 EEAS Press Team, 'Statement by the Spokesperson on the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia', 2 January 2024. Accessed 16 March 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ethiopiasonalia-statement-spokesperson-territorial-integrity-federal-republic-somalia_en.

12 Djibouti between 1917–1950s, and 1998–present; and Eritrea between the 1950s–1998. W. Muluneh, 'Landlockedness and dependency on coastal countries: The Case of Ethiopia', *Geopolitics*, 2/1 (1997): 56–68.

Menelik and his successors 'to exercise control over trade'.¹³ This development not only facilitated trade but also contributed to 'shifting imperial dominion towards Shewa' (the central highlands) and away from the traditional centres of power in the north, such as Gondar, Wello and Tigray.¹⁴ For Djibouti, which had been a refuelling station for French ships, this was also the infrastructural birth of a French colonial state inhabited by Issa Somalis and Afaris.¹⁵ Djibouti had become the primary outlet for Ethiopia's imports and exports, especially at a time when the Ethiopian emperor was more willing to work with the French in Djibouti than with the Italians, who controlled Eritrea's Assab and Massawa since the late 1880s.

The region's corridor-port connections were restructured yet again after Ethiopia and Eritrea formed a federation in 1952. This included the construction of Ethiopia's only oil refinery in Assab during the 1950s¹⁶ and major road infrastructure investments toward Eritrea, particularly between 1969 and 1973.¹⁷ Djibouti faced further challenges after gaining independence in June 1977. Just weeks later, the Ogaden War (July 1977–March 1978) between Somalia and Ethiopia severely damaged the railway, crippling the trade corridor. As the Djibouti corridor declined in the 1980s, Ethiopia's 'entire dependence' fell on Assab, and it became the key port for the delivery of aid during the 1984 famine.¹⁸ Even in 1994—after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) regime came to power in Addis Ababa and Eritrea achieved independence—Assab continued to handle 85 per cent of Ethiopia's external trade,¹⁹ including 90 per cent of imports and 50 per cent of exports.²⁰

However, the cooperative relationship between Ethiopia and newly independent Eritrea was short-lived. The 1998–2000 war resulted in the closure of the Assab–Addis Ababa corridor. Djibouti, once again, became Ethiopia's main and only outlet to the sea with traffic increasing from 1.7 million tonnes in 1997 to 4.2 million tonnes in 2002 (80 per cent of which was Ethiopian traffic).²¹ By the late 2000s, 95 per cent of Ethiopia's imports and exports were being channelled

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- 13 C. Barnes, 'Provinces and princes: Power and the eastern Ethiopian periphery 1906–1916'. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 34/2 (2001), 104.
- 14 Terreffe and Verhoeven, 'Road (not) taken', 5.
- 15 J. Dua, 'From pirate ports to special economic zones: Violence, regulation and port-making in the Somali Peninsula'. DIIS Working Paper 2017: 12. Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017; G. Easterly, 'From imperial port city to logistics hub: The production of strategic space in Djibouti (1859–2020)', *Crossroads*, 19/1 (2021): 74–98.
- 16 C. Clapham, 'The road to the sea: The regional politics of Ethiopia's trade', in *Afro-regions: The dynamics of cross-border micro-regionalism in Africa*, edited by F. Söderbaum and I. Taylor, 136–152. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2008.
- 17 UNCTAD, 'Improvement of Transit Systems in The Horn of Africa', 7 April 2003. Accessed 13 March 2025, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ldc20034_en.pdf.
- 18 Clapham, 'Road to the sea'.
- 19 IMF Staff Appraisal Report, 'Ports Rehabilitation Project', 20 October 1997.
- 20 UNCTAD, 'Improvement of Transit Systems'.
- 21 UNCTAD, 'Improvement of Transit Systems'.

through Djibouti. The construction of the new USD 4.3 billion Addis–Djibouti Railway between 2012 and 2018 and the major renovations to the ports of Djibouti (Doraleh Container Terminal, Doraleh Multipurpose Port and Horizon Djibouti Terminals) have solidified this corridor as Ethiopia's main outlet since the late 1990s.

CHALLENGES OF THE DJIBOUTI CORRIDOR

The Ethiopian government's press release referred to Ethiopia's 30-year long landlockedness as a 'historical and legal mistake'²² that is now being rectified through this MoU, curing 'decades old stress and anxiety.'²³ This historical backdrop is necessary to appreciate the political and ideological rupture that has now taken place. The MoU's signing came at a time when relations between Ethiopian and Djiboutian actors were notably strained. As one former Ethiopian official noted, 'we are Djibouti's guarantor and biggest threat.'²⁴

First, Ethiopia's reliance on Djibouti's ports has led to high demurrage costs and port fees. Stepputat and Norman 2024 cite USD 1.5 billion as Ethiopia's annual payments to access the seaport.²⁵ Ethiopian officials tend to cite higher costs:

Djiboutians know that Ethiopia's desire to diversify has strategic consequences for them. We pay them USD 4 billion annually.²⁶

According to the World Bank, Ethiopia's logistics costs are equivalent to 20 per cent of its GDP. However, 15 per cent of these costs (almost USD 2 billion) are attributed to 'operational inefficiencies':²⁷

The inefficiencies manifest in delays and unreliability of shipments, poor utilization of assets and investments in infrastructure, and high inventory costs in the economy.²⁸

Accurate data on Ethiopia's total annual costs are difficult to determine, as Djibouti's imports of water and electricity from Ethiopia make it challenging to assess Ethiopia's net expenses. To make matters worse, Djibouti still has not paid its 25 per cent share of the new railway

22 Government Communication Service, 'An MOU for Partnership and Cooperation'.

23 IMF, 'Ports Rehabilitation Project'.

24 Interview, Former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 5 April 2024.

25 F. Stepputat and T. Norman, 'Logistics, Politics and Berbera in the Eye of an International Storm', *Politique Africaine*, 173/1 (2024): 179–198.

26 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

27 World Bank, 'Combined Project Information Document', Ethiopia Trade Logistics Project, 2023.

28 World Bank, 'Combined Project Information Document'.

(equivalent to USD 125 million) to Ethiopia.²⁹

Beyond costs and outstanding payments, a second major sticking point relates to the dilapidated state and capacity of Djibouti's port-adjacent infrastructure. These are infrastructures in and around the port that are central to its effective functioning. For example, last mile connectivity issues at the railway's terminals have made the seamless multimodal transport of goods from (1) ships onto the railway and (2) from the railway into Ethiopia's dry ports impossible.³⁰ There are also long-term concerns about the capacity of Djibouti's ports to accommodate Ethiopia's growing demands. Djibouti's Horizon Oil Terminal currently has a capacity of 6 million litres per day, while Ethiopia has a daily demand of 9–11 million litres of benzene and kerosene.³¹ Recent legislation to ban the import of internal combustion engine (i.e. non-electric) cars in Ethiopia may also be read alongside these long-term logistical challenges. Ethiopia's vulnerability became evident when floods in Djibouti resulted in fuel shortages in Addis Ababa in March 2024.³²

Other port-adjacent infrastructures that require attention include the roads. Although Ethiopia has completed the roads leading to the border towns of Balho, Galafi and Dewele, including a new expressway from Mieso to Dire Dawa, Djibouti has not adequately developed or maintained the roads on its side of the border, especially the one leading to Galafi:

Galafi road was our main concern, we need to build that connection. We have a wind park in Assela and we wanted to get turbines in, but we couldn't get these in because of the roads, and the demurrage costs were expensive.³³

The Djibouti-Dikhil-Galafi road is largely in poor condition, and agreements with the Saudi Fund for Development and the Japan International Cooperation Agency have so far only resulted in minor upgrades rather than significant improvements. Ethiopia's use of Tadjourah Port, which handles most of its steel and coal imports as well as potash exports, would benefit from having an operational border crossing at Galafi. Currently, goods from Tadjourah are primarily routed through Balho, a third border town. This road, completed in 2019 with funding from the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, provides a reliable link to the Afar, Amhara and Tigray regions in Ethiopia but is less efficient for transporting imports and exports to key regions like Addis Ababa, Oromia and Somali. Additionally, ongoing conflicts in the Amhara region have made the Balho and Galafi corridors increasingly vulnerable to sabotage and militia attacks.

29 Interview, Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC) Official, Addis Ababa, 1 April 2024.

30 The recent handover of the management contract to Ethiopian and Djiboutian employees after six years may offer new opportunities to revisit these issues. ESLSE's expansion of the Modjo Dry Port into the Modjo Green Logistics Centre, funded by the World Bank, may also alleviate some of the chokepoints at these dry ports (and allow new actors to use the dry port).

31 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

32 *Addis Fortune*, 'Gas Pumps Dry in Addis as Floods Block Vital Import Route', 30 March 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://addisfortune.news/gas-pumps-dry-in-addis-as-floods-block-vital-import-route/>.

33 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

Finally, recent dynamics around Ethiopia's logistics reform further illustrate the tensions between Ethiopian and Djiboutian counterparts. Initial plans to privatise Ethiopian Shipping & Logistics Services Enterprise (ESLSE) were halted in 2020, citing concerns about the loss of sovereign control over critical logistics assets. However, to address ESLSE's monopolistic position and enhance the efficiency of Ethiopia's logistics services, the Ministry of Transport issued Directive 802/2021, paving the way for private multimodal logistics enterprises to enter the market.

Following this directive, the Ethiopian Maritime Agency initially approved three private actors (Panafric Global Logistics Plc,³⁴ Tikur Abay Transport Plc³⁵ and Cosmos Multi Modal Share Company³⁶) in March 2024, which were given six months to meet the requirements. Interestingly, the bid of the Ethio-Djibouti Standard Gauge Railway Share Company—the joint venture which operates the new rail service—was initially rejected; foreign logistics enterprises decided against submitting bids in the final round.³⁷ A week later, Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority prohibited the entrance of non-vessel operating common carriers (NVOCCs) as multi modal operators, as they are not eligible to issue bills of lading, disqualifying all three private actors from operating in Djibouti.³⁸

From Djibouti's perspective, there was an uncertainty among its freight forwarders (Association des Transitaires Djiboutiens) that these new private entrants would meet their obligations, given the currency shortages and structural challenges facing Ethiopian logistics companies.³⁹ Freight forwarders have built long-standing relations of trust with ESLSE, even when ESLSE has failed to pay its fees on time.⁴⁰ A number of indebted unimodal transit companies have filed for bankruptcy in recent years, and the multi-modal market 'requires a cash flow of over a

34 *The Reporter*, 'Foreign freighters shy away from multimodal logistics operator bid', 16 March 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/39271/>.

35 Panafric, founded by Tekeste Berhan Habtu and now led by Elizabeth Getahun, submitted its bid together with the Belayneh Kindie Group (largest exporter of sesame). Panafric works with major international air cargo companies including Lufthansa, Turkish Airlines, Jazeera, as well as local trucking associations with more than 600 trucks.

36 Tikur Abay is a subsidiary company of NIGAT Corporate, formerly known as TIRET Corporate. NIGAT is a charitable organization accountable to the Amhara Region Council. Tikur Abay has its headquarters in Kombolcha and operates 384 trucks covering 76 per cent of the Amhara region's demands (according to the company's public profile).

37 Cosmos Multi Modal Share Company is a joint venture between Tradepath International (owned by WoubGet Holdings, which specialises horticulture and vegetables and has recently set up a cold chain storage facilities in Modjo) and Gada Transport & Logistics, a subsidiary of TUMSA Development Group owned by the Oromia Regional Government.

38 *Capital*, 'Djibouti prohibits NVOCCs as Multimodal Operators,' 25 March 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.capitalethiopia.com/2024/03/25/djibouti-prohibits-nvoccs-as-multimodal-operators/>.

39 A. Mahdi, 'Trois nouveaux opérateurs logistiques en Éthiopie', *Human Village*, April 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://human-village.org/spip.php?article1650>.

40 Mahdi, 'Trois nouveaux opérateurs'.

billion dollars' according to Djiboutian freight forwarders.⁴¹ From an Ethiopian vantage-point, however, these concerns may not be as clear:

[Djiboutian] resistance on maritime issues must have felt to Abiy like Djibouti is only interested in siphoning off trade from port fees without pulling its weight on its own side.⁴²

Djiboutian actors are unlikely to collaborate if their concerns about the impact of Ethiopia's logistics reforms on Djiboutian transitters are not addressed. As one official at the Ethiopian Railway Corporation (ERC) put it: 'Djibouti's allegiance is to others, not to Ethiopia.'⁴³ To complicate matters, Ethiopia has announced the full liberalization of the logistics sector and enabling full foreign ownership of logistics companies. Ethiopia's domestic operators have voiced their concerns about this move.⁴⁴ In March 2025, three more multimodal transporters were given the licences to operate: Ethio-Djibouti Railway SC, Ethiopia Railway Logistics Plc⁴⁵, and Gulf Ingot FCZ.⁴⁶ At the time of publication, none of the six licensed multimodal transporters had started operations. Notably, ESLSE has retained exclusive rights on the trade routes to China and the UAE, which handle at least 60% of Ethiopia's imports.⁴⁷

In sum, tensions surrounding increasing costs, unreliable infrastructure and new entrants in the logistics sector have given impetus to Ethiopian policymakers to develop long-term strategies that overcome their reliance on Djiboutian officials.

FINDING ALTERNATIVES: BEYOND DJIBOUTI AND ERITREA AS OUTLETS

Successive Ethiopian governments have attempted to diversify access to ports to minimize the risks associated with single chokepoints. The EPRDF's Growth and Transformation Plan II (2015-2020) explicitly aimed to increase the share of Ethiopia's trade through the Berbera Transit Corridor to 30 per cent, while expanding the share of Port Sudan to 10 per cent.⁴⁸ Since 2008, Ethiopia has also expanded its infrastructural investments towards Kenya as part

41 Mahdi, 'Trois nouveaux opérateurs'.

42 Interview, Former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 5 April 2024.

43 Interview, ERC Official, Addis Ababa, 1 April 2024.

44 *Addis Fortune*, 'Ethiopia fully opens logistics to foreign capital', 13 October 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://addisfortune.news/ethiopia-fully-opens-logistics-to-foreigners/>.

45 Ethiopia Railway Logistics Plc is a joint venture between Ethiopian Railways Corporation & GetAs International Plc.

46 Gulf Ingot FZC, a UAE-registered company based in Sharjah and operating in the Jebel Ali Free Zone, has been manufacturing PET preforms in Dire Dawa's Industrial Park since 2022. It is the first international entrant into the logistics sector. 'IPDC has made the necessary arrangements for local manufacturing companies to enter industrial parks' August 2022. Accessed 18 March 2025, <https://ipdc.gov.et/news/post/36/>.

47 *Capital*, 'ESL retains exclusive cargo management rights', 17 March 2025. Accessed 18 March 2025, <https://capitalethiopia.com/2025/03/17/esl-retains-exclusive-cargo-management-rights/>.

48 National Planning Commission, *Growth & Transformation Plan II (2015-2020)*, May 2016.

of the Lamu Port-South-Sudan-Ethiopia (LAPSSET) Transport Corridor. Ports in Mombasa, Mogadishu and Massawa were seen as long-term projects.

Abiy's administration has elaborated on the EPRDF's plans since coming to power in 2018. In 2022, the Ministry of Transport published the Ethiopian Transport Plan 2022–2052, which explicitly outlined the following:

The development of new ports, particularly Berbera and Assab, as an alternative to the ones in Djibouti will reduce the land-locked country logistics gap and will favour the economic integration and the good relationships with the neighbouring countries. At the same time, Ethiopia will develop the transit traffic, particularly for South Sudan, contributing to the repayment of land infrastructures investments.⁴⁹

In this masterplan, the corridors leading to the ports of Assab, Djibouti and Berbera are labelled as the 'trident axis':

The trident will assure the access at three different ports (the nearest ones) which belong to three different nations (Djibouti, Eritrea, Somaliland), stimulating the competitiveness between them and ensuring Ethiopian trade against possible future emergency in one or two of the transit countries.⁵⁰

The focus on Assab remains both aspirational and speculative, given deteriorating relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The focus on Berbera emerges from its proximity to the Ethiopian border. Several consultative and ministerial meetings have taken place since the early 2000s.⁵¹ Berbera was regarded as a complementary, rather than an alternative, outlet with a focus on livestock trade.

In April 2016, Somaliland signed a 30-year concession with Dubai Ports (DP) World to redevelop and manage the port at a cost of USD 442 million, including the development of the transport corridor, a free zone and an airport.⁵² In 2018 a tripartite agreement allocated Berbera port ownership shares as follows: DP World 51 per cent, Somaliland 30 per cent, and Ethiopia 19 per cent. To support these efforts, the UK also financed the Hargeisa bypass (USD 23 million), as part of the wider upgrading of the road from Berbera port to Tog Wajaale on the border,

49 Ministry of Transport, 'Ethiopian Transport Plan 2022–2052', 14.

50 Ministry of Transport, 'Ethiopian Transport Plan', 54.

51 T. Tazebew, 'Ethiopia's quest for utilizing the Port of Berbera, Somaliland, since 2010: Drivers, processes, and challenges', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 56/1 (2023), University of Gondar.

52 *Reuters*, 'DP World lands deal to manage port in Somaliland: WSJ', 30 May 2016. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/dp-world-lands-deal-to-manage-port-in-somaliland-wsj-idUSKCN0YLOG8/>.

financed by the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (USD 90 million).⁵³

In 2018, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) built a business case for the Berbera Corridor. By 2023 there would be 'increased economic activity', including greater 'efficiency', allowing Ethiopia to use the corridor 'for goods such as sand and steel'.⁵⁴ The aim was to create a competitive corridor with a 'modernised investment climate for local and international businesses'.⁵⁵ Prior to Ethiopia's multiple wars, container demand was predicted to rise 'fourfold to reach close to 2.5 million TEU [twenty-foot equivalent units] by 2035', while non-containerized cargo would rise threefold to 30 million tons.⁵⁶ DFID also assessed that this would attract additional investments up to USD 500 million from the private sector to 'expand Somaliland's trade'.⁵⁷

By 2021, significant infrastructure developments were completed in Berbera. A new container terminal, with an annual capacity of 500,000 TEUs, and the airport were inaugurated. Shortly after, the highway and bypass were finalized. These advancements were supported by a USD 320 million investment from British International Investment (BII, formerly CDC) in the Berbera Economic Zone and the expansion of a quay, part of BII's Africa-wide partnership with DP World (also covering ports in Senegal and Egypt).⁵⁸

In 2022, during the conflict in northern Ethiopia, Ethiopia lost its shares in the Berbera Port after allegedly failing to meet its obligations.⁵⁹ At the same time, BII's partnership with DP World secured a 6 per cent share in the port. Recent developments include the construction of a new edible oil terminal by Singapore's Trafigura.⁶⁰ Additionally, British oil company Genel Energy has been involved in onshore oil exploration in the region.⁶¹

DFID's projections for Berbera's demand were overly optimistic. The focus on trade and

53 *Emirates News Agency*, 'Abu Dhabi Fund for Development earmarks AED330 million for development projects in Somalia', 19 April 2017. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.wam.ac/en/details/1395302609362>.

54 DFID, 'Unlocking Prosperity in the Horn of Africa' Business Case, 2018.

55 DFID, 'Unlocking Prosperity'.

56 DFID, 'Unlocking Prosperity'.

57 DFID, 'Unlocking Prosperity'.

58 BII, 'We're partnering with DP World to chart a stronger course for African trade around the world', Press Release, 12 October 2021. Accessed, 13 March 2025, <https://www.bii.co.uk/en/news-insight/news/were-partnering-with-dp-world-to-chart-a-stronger-course-for-african-trade-around-the-world/>.

59 *Capital*, 'Ethiopia loses its 19 percent share on Berbera Port as it fails to meet conditions set by the government of Somaliland for the ownership.', Facebook post, 9 June 2022. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/capitalethiopia/posts/10160187709039923/>.

60 Stepputat and Norman, 'Logistics, Politics and Berbera'.

61 Iain Esau, 'Genel in talks with Somaliland suitors ahead of drilling 650 million barrel wildcat', *Upstream*, 26 September 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.upstreamonline.com/exploration/genel-in-talks-with-somaliland-suitors-ahead-of-drilling-650-million-barrel-wildcat/2-1-1716029>.

corridor efficiency meant that major parameters, such as the political instability of Ethiopia, the growing internal tensions in Somaliland and the increasingly hostile political climate in the Horn of Africa were not adequately weighed. At the same time, the likelihood of increasing trade flows remains high, even amid potential political instability. This complicates the zero-sum notion outlined above that more goods through one corridor necessarily mean fewer through another. Prior to the MoU, the reorientations appeared more gradual compared to Ethiopia's previous, more dramatic corridor shifts. There was potential for Berbera and Djibouti to be both complementary and competing—incentivizing efficiency, innovation and even distribution of economic rents and political leverage along the corridors.

The MoU challenges this vision and raises questions about the corridor's future. While the exact modalities of the MoU remain unknown, the Berbera corridor is now part and parcel of a new regional security configuration. As will become clear below, the UK's investments can no longer be separated from Ethiopia's national security interests.

While the exact location of the naval base remains undisclosed, and its proximity to the existing Berbera port complex remains unclear, it is increasingly evident that the commercial aspect of the MoU pertains to the Berbera port. A separate commercial port complex would not be in Somaliland's interest and would undermine the Berbera corridor's entire business case. The Berbera port ensures the economic viability of an independent Somaliland. It is unlikely that the Hargeisa elite would sacrifice their future economic autonomy for international recognition. However, narratives of a separate commercial port facility are effective to garner support among Ethiopians, as a smokescreen intended to distract from the naval component.

That said, parts of the broader port complex, including the road and logistics networks, as well as the airport are likely to function as 'dual-use' infrastructures, serving both civilian and military purposes. Based on a geospatial analysis, it is likely that the UAE has already constructed a separate 'deepwater port' for exclusive military use about 10km west of the commercial facility.⁶² Already in 2017, the UAE had received a free 36-year concession from Somaliland for a military base 'at the site of the old Soviet military facilities'.⁶³ According to Young and Khan, it was 'clear that the two facilities are interlinked'.⁶⁴ Similar arrangements could be part of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU. This dual functionality could support trade while facilitating military logistics, a cost-efficient option Ethiopia and its contractors. However, this dual-use arrangement also raises concerns about security, sovereignty and oversight by port authorities, investors and Somaliland officials. For external investors, such as the UK, this also means that its investments may be used for military purposes.

62 Grey Dynamics, 'Emirati Base Development in Berbera: Geospatial Intelligence Assessment,' 23 May 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://greydynamics.com/emirati-base-development-in-berbera-geospatial-intelligence-assessment-2/>.

63 K. E. Young and T. Khan, 'Extended states: the politics and purpose of United Arab Emirates economic statecraft in the Horn of Africa', in *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, influences and instability*, edited by R. Mason and S. Mabon, 99–126, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022, 119.

64 Young and Khan, 'Extended states'.

In sum, Berbera's emergence as a strategic corridor highlights Ethiopia's determined efforts to diversify its outlets beyond Djibouti and Eritrea. While its commercial potential remains, the integration of military dimensions into the port's operations adds layers of complexity, implicating regional and international actors such as the UK and the UAE. These dual-use dynamics blur the lines between civilian and military infrastructure. As Ethiopia recalibrates its port-corridor linkages, Berbera offers insights into how Ethiopia is embedding its economic diversification strategy into its new Red Sea doctrine.

ETHIOPIA'S RED SEA DOCTRINE

Prime Minister Abiy's lecture to parliamentarians in October 2023 offers a useful entry point to examine a number of principles that shape the government's pursuit of access to the Red Sea. In his presentation, Abiy frames this as matter of national necessity, driven by demographic pressures and the need to secure peace, prosperity, and stability. He further ties this to historical claims and the shifting dynamics of regional geopolitics. Abiy's speech, while focused on the Red Sea, offers insights into his 'grand strategy'.⁶⁵ As one former MFA official noted: 'Abiy cannot be explained by norms or rules—this MOU was a vacancies announcement, a tender—Abiy does not care about conventional foreign policy.'⁶⁶ This was fundamentally about disrupting the status quo. In order to fully account for the reconfiguration of political and economic parameters around the Red Sea and the region's transport corridors, it is important to take these ideas seriously.

AN EXISTENTIAL QUESTION: SECURITISATION OF THE RED SEA AGENDA

At the forefront of Abiy's parliamentary address is the fundamental principle that access to the Red Sea is not merely economically advantageous, but essential for Ethiopia's survival and long-term prosperity. He categorically states that 'this is a matter of national interest',⁶⁷ signalling that the issue transcends ordinary policy discussions. By framing the pursuit of Red Sea access as 'existential',⁶⁸ Abiy discursively securitises this topic and puts it above and beyond debate. Ethiopia is 'an island surrounded by water and yet suffers from thirst'.⁶⁹ These analogies have a long history in Ethiopian politics. Prime Minister Hailemariam and others have referred to the Djibouti corridor as the country's vein, artery and throat.⁷⁰ The Deputy CEO of the Ethiopian Railway Cooperation even referred to Ethiopia's landlockedness as akin to 'prison borders'.⁷¹

65 G. Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy and the rise and decline of Ethiopia's regional status', *International Affairs*, 99/3 (2023): 1127–1147.

66 Interview, former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 25 March 2024.

67 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament. *Fana Television*, 'ከጠባቃ ውኃ አስከባሪ ውኃ ...[From a Drop of Water to Sea]', 13 October 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nIkFolF2Tw>.

68 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

69 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

70 B. Terrefe, 'Infrastructures of Renaissance: tangible discourses in the EPRDF's Ethiopia: Infrastructures de Renaissance: discours tangible dans l'Éthiopie de le FDRPE', *Critical African Studies*, 14/3 (2022), 259.

71 Terrefe, 'Infrastructures of Renaissance'.

Abiy echoes the EPRDF's securitised approach to economic development,⁷² despite having a different substantive focus and target.⁷³ Abiy Ahmed, in his October address, similarly referred to Ethiopia as a 'prisoner of geography' that 'cannot survive without' access to the sea:

We were 50 million people when we lost access to sea [1993]. By 2030, we will have 150 million people. A population of 150 million cannot live as a geographical prisoner. We can't. We have poverty. It will blast, whether you like it or not, it will explode.⁷⁴

These demographic pressures and Ethiopia's population 'explosion' have been repeatedly used as discursive devices to signal to donors, partners and neighbours that the question is not *whether* but *how* the world's most populous land-locked country will be 'land-linked'.⁷⁵ The question of the Red Sea is a matter of security, as it is necessary for 'sustainable and durable peace'.⁷⁶ Abiy threateningly notes that this needs to be resolved now 'so that our kids do not eat each other'.⁷⁷

REGIONAL DESIGNS AND GLOBAL AMBITIONS OF POWER

Beyond this existential framing, Abiy wants to project a vision of a powerful Ethiopia: A regional hegemon that can instrumentalize the current geopolitical interest in the Red Sea to its advantage. As such, the Memorandum of Understanding is not primarily about trade facilitation or the diversification of Ethiopia's commercial port outlets. Such arrangements could have been facilitated through other types of agreements as seen in the past. This MoU is about Ethiopia's 'grand strategy' and must be seen in the long *durée*.⁷⁸

According to Abiy, Ethiopia has the potential to become not just a regional hegemon,⁷⁹ but a 'superpower'. It is 'this thing [access to the Red Sea] that is stopping Ethiopia from taking its rightful place and position in Africa'.⁸⁰ This 'rightful' position is characterized as the continuation of a glorious past, drawing a direct historical line between modern Ethiopia and the Kingdoms of Axum and Ifat, which both had access to the Red Sea. This echoes Gebreuel's characterisation

72 F. Gebresenbet, 'Securitisation of development in Ethiopia: The discourse and politics of developmentalism', *Review of African Political Economy*, 41/sup1 (2014): S64–S74.

73 Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy'; B. Terrefe, 'Urban layers of political rupture: The "new" politics of Addis Ababa's megaprojects', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 14/3 (2020): 375–395.

74 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

75 Interview, ERC Official, Addis Ababa, 22 July 2017.

76 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

77 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

78 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

79 H. Verhoeven, 'Africa's Next Hegemon-Behind Ethiopia's Power Plays', *Foreign Affairs*, 12 April 2015. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ethiopia/2015-04-12/africas-next-hegemon>.

80 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

of the Prosperity Party's approach to foreign policy as deeply rooted in 'Abyssinianist grand strategic concepts and objectives'.⁸¹ PP has embraced the traditional notion of Ethiopia as a 'civilizational state' destined for a place at the 'top of the global status ladder'.⁸² In 2021, Abiy Ahmed notably declared that Ethiopia aims to become 'one of only two global superpowers by 2050'.⁸³ In his lecture, Abiy goes on to explain that 'if there were 10 powerful kingdoms [back then], then we were one of them'.⁸⁴ Abiy even leans on Ras Alula⁸⁵ who proclaimed the Red Sea to be Ethiopia's 'natural border' more than 100 years ago.⁸⁶

These narratives are important not because of their empirical accuracy, but because of the government's self-perception. These ambitions of grandeur first became explicit at Davos in 2019, when Abiy spoke about the potential of regional integration, and that Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia had no need for separate armies and embassies.⁸⁷ In October 2023, he again asked, 'regardless of federalism or federation', if these countries were united:

Do you think they'd beg [for foreign aid]? This [united country] would be a different Russia, China, America - a very big country [...] This is why we should be united. [...] As you know China has invested in Djibouti. UAE has invested in Berbera. Turkey is investing in Mogadishu [...] How about if we, the beneficiaries, could invest in those too?⁸⁸

Even some opposition figures that have been critical of Ethiopian nationalism went so far as to state that it would be 'unrealistic to expect Ethiopia to remain a passive observer' as geopolitical dynamics drive countries from across the world to secure a naval presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.⁸⁹

When asked by Western diplomats about the MoU, Minister of Defence Abraham Belay has even suggested that the Ethiopian navy could help the Americans and Europeans fight the Houthis in the Red Sea if it had a base there.⁹⁰ As one senior member of the government's foreign policy institute noted:

81 Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy', 1143.

82 Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy', 1143.

83 Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy', 1143.

84 Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy', 1143.

85 One of the most prominent Ethiopian generals (1827–1897) also known by his horse name, Aba Nega, who fought against the Ottomans, Egyptians and Italians.

86 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

87 World Economic Forum, 'Abiy Ahmed: A Conversation with the Prime Minister of Ethiopia (Davos 2019)', 10 February 2019. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2l7KscqRro>.

88 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

89 *Addis Standard*, 'Jawar Mohammed – The Interview', 2 May 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/the-interview-jawar-mohammed/>.

90 Conversation with Western diplomat, Addis Ababa, 9 April 2024.

We have to see it as an opportunity—the absence of great power or middle power—that Red Sea is experiencing insecurity. It's an opportunity for Ethiopia to be there and take responsibility for the Red Sea.⁹¹

This is an attempt by the new government to reposition Ethiopia as an anchor of stability in the so-called war on terror, a status which the EPRDF regime used strategically, and which Abiy's regime had relinquished.⁹² Since the Houthis began actively patrolling the Red Sea, the costs of trade in the Bab El Mandeb Straight have risen significantly. In Djibouti, costs per container have gone up by 50 per cent with 20 additional days of travel time.⁹³ In June 2024, shipping giant Mediterranean Shipping Co. (MSC) suspended its operations to Djibouti and Berbera, citing security concerns.⁹⁴ The Red Sea has become a global theatre of conflict and instead of being a passive observer, the Ethiopian government wants to engage both diplomatically and militarily.

Diplomatically, Ethiopia's exclusion from the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in 2020 was a setback. Initiated by Saudi Arabia—and joined by Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Yemen and Jordan—the council was established to offer a platform to manage Red Sea Affairs. Significantly, key regional players including Ethiopia and Somaliland were excluded, explicitly at the behest of Egyptian and Somali officials respectively.⁹⁵ Other actors with significant assets and logistics networks in the Red Sea, such as the UAE, were also excluded. Since then, Abiy's government has attempted to join alternative fora to push its agenda. The joining of the BRICS in 2023 was one such endeavour. During a parliamentary session in October 2024, Abiy stated that Ethiopia should pursue membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Arab League,⁹⁶ arguing that Ethiopia has a Muslim population larger than the rest of the Horn of Africa combined. This has important implications on how the Ethiopian state sees and redefines itself.

Militarily, Ethiopia's government wants a naval presence in the Red Sea. The intention to rebuild Ethiopia's navy is not new. Abiy has spoken repeatedly about his desire to resurrect the

91 Presentation, Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) Official, 19 November 2024.

92 H. Verhoeven, and M. Woldemariam, 'Who lost Ethiopia? The unmaking of an African anchor state and U.S. foreign policy', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43/4 (2022): 622–650.

93 Ilywas Dawaleh, X/Twitter, 16 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://x.com/Ilyasadawaleh/status/1747253430933213689>.

94 *Africa Intelligence*, 'MSC suspends main operations in Red Sea after fresh attack', 29 June 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2024/06/29/msc-suspends-main-operations-in-red-sea-after-fresh-attack,110253090-art>.

95 *RFI*, 'New Red Sea alliance launched by Saudi Arabia, but excludes key players', 10 January 2020. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200108-new-red-sea-alliance-formed-saudi-arabia-notable-exclusions>.

96 Institute of Foreign Affairs, 'Ethiopia and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation: The Balance Sheet for Potential Membership', 17 December 2024. Accessed 18 March 2025, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/2024/12/17/ethiopia-and-the-organization-of-islamic-cooperation/>; *The Reporter*, 'Ethiopia's Arab League ambitions: Weighing benefits against risks', 23 November 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/42663/>.

Ethiopian navy, which saw its heyday from 1953 and 1974 when Haile Selassie's navy received significant support from Great Britain, Norway and the United States.⁹⁷ Already in March 2019, Abiy signed a 'defence cooperation agreement' with the French government to provide technical support in the training of a naval force. This included the 'reconstruction of the Ethiopian navy' and the secondment of a French naval officer to the Ethiopian naval chief of staff.⁹⁸ This agreement was never ratified by the French parliament, notably due to the onset of the war in Ethiopia.⁹⁹ In 2022, reports emerged that the Russians had replaced the French in supporting the Ethiopian navy.¹⁰⁰ In April 2024, however, France hosted naval exercises that the Ethiopian navy participated in, suggesting ongoing military co-operation.¹⁰¹ In his December 2024 visit to Ethiopia, President Emmanuel Macron was accompanied by a sizeable French delegation, including the foreign minister and navy officials, confirming continued engagement on this front. But in March 2025, Ethiopia signed a cooperation agreement with the Russian navy 'to jointly strengthen the naval force and facilitate further cooperation' suggesting that French involvement is unlikely to continue openly, though it is not entirely off the table.¹⁰²

Ethiopia's ambitions for regional dominance and a renewed global stature are inextricably linked to its strategic pursuit of Red Sea access and naval capabilities. This vision, rooted in historical narratives and grand strategic concepts,¹⁰³ reflects a profound shift in Ethiopia's foreign policy. Through a combination of diplomatic manoeuvres and military aspirations, Ethiopia seeks to redefine its role as a stabilizing power in an increasingly contested and volatile geopolitical landscape.

THE SUB-NATIONAL DIMENSIONS

The politico-economic reconfigurations are not only taking place at a regional or geopolitical level, but also significantly at a sub-national level. Trade corridors are connective tissues that integrate certain communities into circuits of trade, accumulation and state power, while disembedding others.¹⁰⁴ Similarly in the Horn, different corridors assemble different constellation of actors

97 Q. Holbert, 'A Forgotten Fleet: The Imperial Ethiopian Navy, 1953–1974', in *African Navies: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (1st ed.), edited by T. Stapleton, 45–65. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

98 French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'France and Ethiopia', last updated 18 February 2020. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/ethiopia/france-and-ethiopia-65128/>.

99 The status of this agreement remains contested. See section below.

100 *Africa Intelligence*, 'Moscow makes move to replace France for navy training', 25 March 2022. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2022/03/25/moscow-makes-moves-to-replace-france-for-navy-training,109763308-art>.

101 *Expertise France* is also the implementing agency of the EU's CRIMARIO II programme, which has trained Ethiopian officials in the use of the *Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing* (IORIS) platform.

102 Fana BC, 'Ethiopian, Russian navies sign cooperation agreement', 14 March 2025. Accessed 17 March 2025, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/ethiopian-russian-navies-sign-cooperation-agreement/>.

103 Gebreluel, 'Ideology, grand strategy'.

104 Hagmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*.

and communities. Central to understanding the politico-economic implications of changes in certain corridors is the mapping of these various actors and communities (which goes beyond the scope this framing study). Importantly, new infrastructural connections enable new forms of political and economic autonomy for some, while disabling alternative political orders.¹⁰⁵ When it comes to the eastern corridors of Berbera and Djibouti, this has implications for several groups, notably the Afaris and Somalis. In his October 2023 address, Abiy instrumentalized the fact that 1.5 million Afaris are 'denied from seeing the Red Sea', even though Eritrean Afaris, Djiboutian Afaris and Ethiopian Afaris meet in Asaita to 'choose their traditional leaders' every year:

It's not just one language and one culture, despite the governments and borders, they recognize the same sultan and live together. Therefore, separating them doesn't work historically nor demographically, because Afaris are Afaris.¹⁰⁶

Along the same line of thinking, Abiy continues to ask:

Somalis in Djibouti have access to the Red Sea; Somalis in Somalia have access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Kenyan Somalis have the Indian Ocean. What offense have Ethiopian Somalis committed to be solely denied access to the sea? While other Somalis are getting, why are Ethiopian Somalis denied? If there are [Somali] people here and there, why are they the only ones denied?¹⁰⁷

These remarks illustrate the government's strategic use of Ethiopia's various sub-national groups. Here, the government deviates from its retelling of Ethiopian history by emphasizing these sub-national groups and their cultural-linguistic linkages across state borders in the Horn of Africa. While Ethiopia's territorial integrity is not up for debate, in this case, Abiy is explicit in stating that 'the focus should not just be on colonial borders'.¹⁰⁸ Ironically, while this narrative is intended to get buy-in from these groups, Ethiopian Somalis and Afari leaders were not consulted prior to the signing of the MoU. Despite Abiy's instrumentalization of these communities, sub-national actors are indeed critical to the functioning of any transport corridor in the Horn.

Strengthened trade between Somaliland and Ethiopia would give impetus to the growth of Jijiga and Harar, central economic hubs in Eastern Ethiopia, especially if infrastructural linkages to Berbera are realised.¹⁰⁹ These cities have the potential to rival Dire Dawa, which

105 Terrefe and Verhoeven, 'Road (not) taken'; Stepputat and Hagmann, 'Politics of circulation'.

106 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

107 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

108 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

109 Ethiopia's 'National Transportation and Logistics Master Plan' (2022) includes designs for a railway connecting Dire Dawa to Berbera via Harar and Jijiga.

has significant infrastructural connections to Djibouti with the Addis-Djibouti Railway, the Dire Dawa Industrial Park and the dry port. However, even if Jijiga benefits from the MoU's implementation, recognition of Somaliland's sovereignty is not a price that certain factions within Ethiopia's Somali Region would be willing to pay.

Without essentialising clan, the MoU exemplifies how clan and sub-clan loyalties exist and operate across states. Most notably, the realisation of the MoU and the development of the Berbera corridor would take place in largely Isaaq inhabited territory, thereby potentially bolstering their economic and political leverage in the region. At the same time, Ogadeni factions within the Somali region in Ethiopia (which continue to dominate the region despite recent attempts by Somali Regional President Mustafa Omer to diversify) have deep loyalties to Mogadishu and find Abiy's manoeuvring to be further dividing Somalis across the Horn. As one Ethiopian official put it:

We have dragged ourselves into the internal clan politics of Somalia and getting out of that will be tougher. Its politics of identity, not interest [...] but Ethiopia is also a uniting factor for Somalia.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, tensions between the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the Mustafa Omer have surfaced in recent months, after Ethiopia National Defence Forces Chief of Staff General Berhanu Jula referred to the ONLF as a proxy of Egypt.¹¹¹ Overall, this ambivalence among the various factions captures the complexity of the situation. On the one hand, various Somali groups may exploit this MoU and Ethiopia's intervention to advance their own agendas (e.g. independence, autonomy, centralisation) as discussed in the final section of this paper. On the other hand, Mogadishu has used public mistrust of Ethiopian expansionism to reignite pan-Somali nationalism, also through irredentist claims.

THE 'TWO WATER GRAND STRATEGY': OVERCOMING THE TABOO

In February 2024, the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), the government's primary foreign policy think tank, published a 150-page book entitled *The Two Water Grand Strategy*. The book was drafted during the Tigray war and was seen as a long-term strategic response to the logistical bottlenecks and security challenges faced during the conflict.

The book focuses on securing Ethiopia's long-term political, economic and environmental interests. At the core of the strategy lies the recognition that *both* the Nile and the Red Sea are central to Ethiopia's foreign policy and national security strategy. Abiy pre-empted the publication of this book in his October 2023 lecture. The main point was that the Red Sea is no

110 Interview, MFA diplomat, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

111 *Hiraan Online*, 'ONLF condemns Ethiopian military chief's accusations as threat to 2018 peace agreement', 13 September 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://hiiraan.com/news/2024/Sept/198010/onlf-condemns-ethiopian-military-chief-s-accusations-as-threat-to-2018-peace-agreement.aspx>.

longer a matter to shy away from: 'Why should we fear dialogue? Because on the Nile, no one has been afraid of us. Nobody.'¹¹² The rationale is that because most countries have involved themselves in discussions around the Nile, trans-boundary water rights and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethiopia, too, should be able to discuss matters surrounding the Red Sea:

While many are talking as they please about your Abay [Nile] and your dam, that you built with your money, talking about the Red Sea, even as an idea, why is that a taboo? [...] How are we embarrassed to talk about it?¹¹³

For Abiy, 'the Red Sea and the Nile define Ethiopia': these two bodies of water are 'intertwined with Ethiopia' and are the 'foundation for Ethiopia's development or demise'.¹¹⁴ Therefore, the Red Sea is nothing to be 'silent about,' as it is 'not a trivial issue'.¹¹⁵

Beyond this grand strategy rationale, there is a tactical dimension to the signing of the MoU that should not be underestimated. The federal government has shifted the discursive needle and has created new norms around Ethiopia's landlocked status. Discussions of the Red Sea, and the questioning of the status quo were absolute taboos, especially given fragile relations with Eritrea and Somalia.

With the signing of the MoU, Abiy has achieved two tactical aims. The first is the development of a new 'narration'. Abiy told parliamentarians in October 2023 that those individuals opposed to talking about a naval force had to 'straighten out' their narratives: '[T]hey amaze me. How can you hate preparation?'¹¹⁶ There is a clear awareness to focus on messaging: '[O]ur speeches and our media need to be conscious'.¹¹⁷ This means signalling externally and internally that these are new norms, and to prepare the population 'socially and psychologically'.¹¹⁸

The establishment of such new norms is also evidenced by the fact that even certain political opposition figures do not disagree, with some referring to Ethiopia's desire for sea access 'as one of the most unifying agendas in our otherwise fragmented, chaotic and polarized public sphere'.¹¹⁹ The question, once again, is not whether Ethiopia should have access to the sea, but *how*—and according to this opposition figure, this requires 'careful sequencing', with the

112 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

113 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

114 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

115 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

116 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

117 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

118 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

119 *Addis Standard*, 'Jawar Mohammed'.

economic aspect of regional integration as the priority. Therefore, the issue around the Red Sea needs to be embedded in a broader framework of regional integration instead of getting bogged down 'with these seasonal controversies'.¹²⁰ Even EU diplomats acknowledge this reality:

We felt that Global Gateway and regional economic integration is the way out. Access to the sea for Ethiopia and it is beneficial for the region if there is better infrastructure connecting markets to the sea. Two aspects that we are following.¹²¹

These comments almost echo Abiy's sentiments arguing that the Horn is highly interdependent and that Ethiopia's access to the sea should be seen as an 'element of a multifaceted project to improve collective security and development'.¹²² Here again, the MoU is one component in a broader shift in Ethiopia's regional position and geopolitical ambitions.

The second tactical aim is that discussion, dialogue and new narrations actually generate new insights. As Abiy put it, 'when we discuss [this issue], we can get more data and more alternatives [...] we will be able to find the right time and options'.¹²³ The MoU is thus also an *information gathering* device. Various reactions by countries, sub-national actors and international donors are insights for the government in assessing what is actually possible and where the various infamous red lines lie. Overall, the goalposts of public discourse have significantly shifted since the signing of the MoU. In the final section, this analysis examines the various logics that drive Ethiopian actors to seek access to the sea, illustrating that an economic logic is insufficient to understand the security and military drivers of the MoU.

120 *Addis Standard*, 'Jawar Mohammed'.

121 Presentation, Western Diplomat, Nairobi, 19 November 2024.

122 Presentation, Western Diplomat, Nairobi 19 November 2024.

123 Abiy Ahmed, Presentation to Parliament.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY DRIVERS OF ETHIOPIA'S MARITIME STRATEGY

The MoU, understood in the context of Ethiopia's emerging Red Sea doctrine, represents primarily a military agreement with secondary commercial elements tied to the Berbera corridor. Regardless of its implementation, key underlying drivers will continue to influence Ethiopian decision-making. Chief among these is a growing perception of encirclement within Ethiopian leadership. While public discussions of Ethiopia's maritime strategy often focus on port fees and demurrage costs to appeal to domestic and international audiences, deeper security concerns remain at the core. The following analysis unpacks these motivations, examining both regional and domestic factors. Regionally, Ethiopia's relationship with Somalia revolves around the fight against al-Shabaab and its engagements with federal member states. Türkiye's mediation between Ethiopia and Somalia may yield a short-term deescalation but the underlying tensions remain. With Egypt, the central issue remains the Nile, while tensions with Eritrea stem from the Pretoria agreement and the conflict in Sudan.

ESCAPING ENCIRCLEMENT

The signing of the MoU has laid bare the extent of Ethiopia's strained relationships with Egypt, Somalia and Eritrea. During 2024, Somalia has deepened its cooperation with both countries, marked by Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's frequent visits to Cairo and Asmara and culminating in the formation of a (new¹²⁴) Tripartite Alliance.

Ethiopia's manoeuvres in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea are heavily influenced by its tensions with Egypt, particularly over the GERD.¹²⁵ The absence of a binding agreement and failed negotiations have deepened mistrust between the two countries:

On the Nile, we have an irreconcilable position. If Egypt changes its constitution,

124 Replacing the September 2018 Tripartite Alliance declared between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia.

125 T. Lavers, F. Gebresenbet, B. Terrefe, E. Fantini, E. Woldegebrael and L. Puddu, *Dams, Power, and the Politics of Ethiopia's Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

particularly Article 44, then we can maybe come to an agreement [...] They have imposed a colonial yoke on us. We want equitable utilization, and then we would be ready, but until then we will continue [...].¹²⁶

Construction of the GERD is a *fait accompli*. From Egypt's perspective, Ethiopia's potential naval base in the Red Sea, with its downstream influence over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—a critical passage to the Suez Canal—is seen as an additional threat to Egypt's strategic control in the region. According to an Ethiopian diplomat, satellite images in early 2024 indicated that the Egyptian navy had moved its main fleet from the Mediterranean into the Red Sea:

They [Egypt] are trying to encircle Ethiopia, even through Sudan and Kenya. When you are a wounded animal, they add salt to it. They are trying to exploit our domestic vulnerabilities with Fano and Shene.¹²⁷

Egypt's President El-Sisi responded to the signing of the MoU by stating that his country would 'not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or endanger its security'.¹²⁸ On 14 August 2024, Egypt and Somalia signed a defence pact to bolster 'security cooperation between the two brotherly nations'.¹²⁹ Somaliland also permanently closed the Egyptian Cultural Library in Hargeisa, due to 'serious security concerns'.¹³⁰ The Egypt-Ethiopia dispute has found fertile ground in the Somalia-Somaliland conflict.

The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) saw the signing of the MoU as an infringement on its sovereignty and territorial integrity, with high profile former officials referring to the potential recognition of Somaliland as 'the nuclear option' and threatening a military response.¹³¹ In a public speech, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud went so far as to state that Somalia had two enemies: al-Shabaab and Ethiopia.¹³² Mogadishu's irritation was further aggravated by Ethiopia's

126 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

127 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

128 *Al Jazeera*, 'Egypt's el-Sisi says Cairo will not allow any threat to Somalia', 21 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/21/egypts-el-sisi-says-cairo-will-not-allow-any-threat-to-somalia>.

129 *Anadolu Ajansi*, 'Somalia, Egypt sign defense pact to bolster security cooperation', 14 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/somalia-egypt-sign-defense-pact-to-bolster-security-cooperation/3303837>.

130 MFA Somaliland, *X/Twitter*, 11 September 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://x.com/somalilandmfa/status/183379586470531105>.

131 Abdi Aynte, *X/Twitter*, 2 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://x.com/Aynte/status/1742446062806180295>.

132 Heritage Institute, 'Ethiopia's MoU with Somaliland: A Threat to Somalia's Sovereignty and Regional Stability', March 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://heritageinstitute.org/ethiopias-mou-with-somaliland-a-threat-to-somalias-sovereignty-and-regional-stability/>.

government when it hosted a delegation from Puntland in April 2024.¹³³ In response, Somalia expelled the Ethiopian ambassador.¹³⁴ Somalia sees Ethiopia's manoeuvres and engagements with Somaliland and Puntland as undermining its sovereignty and territorial integrity. According to one Ethiopian MFA official:

We had semi-independent relations with Puntland. Nothing has changed, the new thing is the tension between Puntland and Mogadishu on the constitution and federalism.¹³⁵

In late September, Somalia condemned an arms shipment from Ethiopia to Puntland, as yet another 'infringement'.¹³⁶ Since October 2024, both Jubaland and Puntland have severed ties with the FGS, which has left Mogadishu increasingly isolated.

Ethiopia will prioritize its own security interests without waiting for Somalia's state-building efforts to stabilize, although Addis Ababa expects Somalia to continue blaming Ethiopia for what it considers Somalia's internal challenges. Nor does Ethiopia believe dissolving the MoU would address these underlying issues. Ethiopian diplomats have been explicit:

Ethiopia will not be dictated by anyone. It's guided by national interests. You are going to align your means to your ends. Either they work with us, or they won't have peace.¹³⁷

Tensions have been further compounded by the shared but fraught priority of combating al-Shabaab, particularly as they coincided with the end of the African Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and the transition to African Union Support Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). ATMIS included 3,000 Ethiopian soldiers,¹³⁸ with an additional 5,000 troops stationed in Somalia through a bilateral agreement.¹³⁹ In August 2024, Somalia's Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre indicated that Ethiopian forces would not be part of AUSSOM unless the MoU was voided.¹⁴⁰

133 *France 24*, 'Somalia expels Ethiopian ambassador for "bluntly interfering" in internal affairs', 4 April 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240404-somalia-expels-ethiopian-ambassador-for-bluntly-interfering-in-internal-affairs>.

134 The acting ambassador, Ali Mohamed Aden, who was previously the military attaché, was subsequently declared a persona non grata in October 2024.

135 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

136 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Somalia, Press Release, 20 September 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/MOFASomalia/posts/press-release-somalia-expresses-grave-concern-over-unlawful-arms-shipment-from-e/910776317741815/>.

137 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

138 In August 2023, the 'frontline states' summit outlined 'Operation Black Lion' to fight al-Shabaab. This was initially funded by the UAE, who seem to have pulled out their financing.

139 *Reuters*, 'Somalia accuses Ethiopian troops of "illegal" incursion', 24 June 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalia-accuses-ethiopian-troops-illegal-incursion-2024-06-24/>.

140 VoA, 'Somalia: Ethiopian troops cannot be in AUSSOM, unless Somaliland deal nixed', 23rd August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-ethiopian-troops-cannot-be-in-aussom-unless-somaliland-deal-nixed/7754481.html>.

Intensifying tensions between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa, Somalia then asked Egyptian troops to replace the Ethiopian troops.¹⁴¹ The Egyptian government agreed to contribute 5,000 troops to AUSSOM, and station an additional 5,000 soldiers in the Hiiraan region bordering Ethiopia.¹⁴² Ethiopia noted that it could not 'stand idle while other actors are taking measures to destabilize the region'.¹⁴³ Later in August 2024, two Egyptian C-130 cargo military planes landed in Mogadishu delivering arms.¹⁴⁴ By the end of August, eight cargo flights were reported to have landed in Mogadishu with 1,000 Egyptian commandos reportedly 'now on the ground'.¹⁴⁵ In response, according to local media reports, Ethiopian peacekeeping troops took hold of all airports in southern Somalia, except Mogadishu, to stop air shipments from Egypt. Relations remained fraught until Turkish mediation facilitated a rapprochement in December 2024 (see below).

Finally, tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea have deteriorated significantly—both since the signing of the Pretoria agreement in November 2022, due to continued disagreements on the handling of the war against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and increasingly the conflict in Sudan, where the two parties are far from aligned. Ethiopian Airlines stopped its service in Asmara in September, after Eritrea announced the suspension of Ethiopian Airlines flights.¹⁴⁶ On 14 September 2024, Isayas hosted the chief of Egypt's General Intelligence Service and foreign minister to deepen bilateral ties,¹⁴⁷ thereby further fuelling Ethiopian concerns.

In early December, Ethiopia's state broadcaster heavily criticized the Eritrean President for his comments on Ethiopia's domestic and regional challenges during a lengthy interview, citing his authoritarian rule and the lack of democratic reforms as blatant contradictions to his criticisms of Ethiopia.¹⁴⁸ In Sudan, Eritrea supports the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) backed by Egypt.

141 *Foreign Policy*, 'Turkey tries Diplomacy in Ethiopia-Somalia Dispute', 21 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/08/21/somalia-ethiopia-turkey-port-somaliland/>.

142 *The East African*, 'Ethiopia rattled as Egypt delivers military aid to Somalia', 28 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/egypt-sends-arms-to-somalia-following-security-pact-4741922>.

143 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, 'Press Statement on the Current Situation in the Horn of Africa', 28 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=822692786682553&id=100068255168345&set=a.234261422192362>.

144 *Reuters*, 'Egypt sends arms to Somalia following security deal, sources say', 29 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-sends-arms-somalia-following-security-pact-sources-say-2024-08-28/>.

145 *The National*, 'Ethiopia alarmed as Egypt sends special forces and arms to Somalia', 29 August 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/08/29/ethiopia-alarmed-as-egypt-sends-special-forces-and-arms-to-somalia>.

146 Teklemariam Bekit, 'Horn of Africa airlink, once symbolic of peace, suspended', *BBC Tigrinya*, 3 September 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c62f1f5g8160>.

147 *Ahram Online*, 'Egypt intelligence chief, foreign minister discuss regional developments with Eritrean President Afwerki in Asmara', 14 Sep 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/531819.aspx>.

148 *Fana B.C.*, 'የአስመራው መንግስት ነገር - 'የራሷ አርባት', 9 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdzP3vtR4DI>.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia has tried to maintain relations with both sides, but its key Gulf ally, the UAE, supports the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), creating complex web of relations:

We need policy attention to following alignments. SAF with Eritrea and Egypt—this has the potential to change the course of the war. Again we are observing that there is an alignment between Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia targeting Ethiopia. [...] And the new alignment between Ethiopia-UAE-Somaliland also needs policy attention.¹⁴⁹

The war in Sudan, the GERD and the Nile Basin, the MoU and the fight against Al-Shabaab are all interlinked, with key actors leveraging each issue to advance their interests and secure influence across the region. The October summit hosted by Isayas further solidified the Tripartite Alliance between Mogadishu, Cairo and Asmara, where security and cooperation between 'littoral states of the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait' was on the agenda.¹⁵⁰ The parties also agreed to strengthen Somali state institutions, enabling the army to 'confront terrorism' and secure borders.¹⁵¹ Egypt's 'offer to contribute forces within the framework of peacekeeping efforts in Somalia' was welcomed, and a 'Joint Tripartite Committee of Foreign Ministers' was established for strategic cooperation.¹⁵² This alliance not only underscores Ethiopia's growing regional isolation but also reinforces its government's initial perception of encirclement.

Amid Ethiopia's worsening relations with Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia, and significant uncertainty about the situation in Sudan—coupled with rising geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea—Ethiopia's officials recognize their country's landlocked status as a significant vulnerability. Particularly in the event of a military escalation in the Red Sea, the Ethiopian government sees itself as an island surrounded by hostile states:

The Bab-El-Mandeb to the Suez Canal is part and parcel of our national security, as you have non-state actors, Somali piracy, the Houthis, Daesh, al-Shabaab. This can trap our services. If Djibouti becomes the theatre of global war, given the presence of all these military bases including of China and America, then we are trapped.¹⁵³

While Djibouti is not yet a theatre of global war, the economic implications of the Houthis' activities in the Red Sea are already 'trapping' services and resulting in significantly higher costs for Ethiopian importers. Diversifying commercial port access certainly reduces risks of a single chokepoint. But beyond commercial access, there is a more fundamental concern about a different type of service: military logistics and intelligence of landlocked states.

149 Presentation, Official, Institute of Foreign Affairs, 19 November 2024.

150 Eritrean Ministry of Information, 'Joint Statement of the Tripartite Summit', 10 October 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://shabait.com/2024/10/10/joint-statement-of-the-tripartite-summit/>.

151 Eritrean Ministry of Information, 'Joint Statement'.

152 Eritrean Ministry of Information, 'Joint Statement'.

153 Interview, MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 10 April 2024.

According to Ethiopian government officials, this became particularly evident during the war in Tigray, when the government was unable to covertly and effectively import arms. Most planes landing at the Bishoftu military airbase were visible on public radar systems. Arms imports through the ports in Djibouti and Sudan often had to go through local clearances, while the use of Ethiopian Airlines violated international civil aviation regulations.¹⁵⁴ For Ethiopia's military, a naval base is not only about patrolling the Red Sea or protecting key commercial routes for Ethiopian importers and exporters, but it is also about joining the far murkier world of international shipping,¹⁵⁵ enabling the safeguarding of military intelligence and logistics. The MoU, therefore, was also an attempt to overcome encirclement commercially and militarily.

ENTANGLED SECURITY: TÜRKIYE AND THE GULF IN THE HORN

Amid escalating tensions, Türkiye offered to mediate between Ethiopia and Somalia, leveraging its close ties with both regimes.¹⁵⁶ Türkiye stands as Somalia's largest single investor, with Mogadishu hosting Camp TURKSOM, Türkiye's largest overseas military facility. In Ethiopia, prior to the UAE's significant increase in investments, Türkiye was the second-largest investor after China. From the construction of the Awash-Weldiya Railway by *Yapi Merkezi*¹⁵⁷ and the closure of all Gulen-affiliated institutions in Ethiopia to its role in drone diplomacy,¹⁵⁸ Türkiye's engagement with Ethiopia has expanded across various sectors. Notably, Ethiopia's military chief awarded Baykar's CEO a 'Medal of Honour' for the Bayraktar TB2 drone's critical role in shifting 'the trajectory of the conflict in the government's favour'.¹⁵⁹ Given these ties, Türkiye believed it was uniquely suited to mediate between the two parties, despite signing a ten-year defense cooperation agreement with Somalia in February 2024 and securing parliamentary approval for the deployment of the Turkish navy and the oil and gas exploration vessel *Oruç Reis* in Somali waters.¹⁶⁰

Initial attempts at mediation in July and August failed, despite 'convergence on some major

154 GNN, 'Ethiopia used its flagship commercial airline to transport weapons during war in Tigray', 8 October 2021. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/06/africa/ethiopian-airlines-investigation-tigray-war-intl-cmd/index.html>.

155 L. Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula*, London: Verso Books, 2020.

156 J. Mosley, N. Wannu, Y. Nigatu, M. Wasuge, A. Hamaizia, G. Cole and F. Donelli, *Turkey and the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: Fluctuating dynamics of engagement, investment and influence*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021.

157 Yapi Merkezi has taken Ethiopia to court over damages to the railway during the Tigray war.

158 European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Turkey's drone diplomacy: Lessons for Europe', 31 January 2022. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/article/turkeys-drone-diplomacy-lessons-for-europe/>.

159 Baykar, 'Press Release: Ethiopia awards Medal of Honour to Türkiye drone CEO Bayraktar', 18 December 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://baykartech.com/en/press/ethiopia-awards-medal-of-honour-to-turkiye-drone-ceo-bayraktar/>.

160 Reuters, 'Turkey to send navy to Somalia after agreeing oil and gas search', 19 July 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-send-navy-somalia-after-agreeing-oil-gas-search-2024-07-19/>.

principles', including Somalia's offer to provide Ethiopia with access to the sea.¹⁶¹ In December, this offer was revisited and culminated in the signing of the Ankara Declaration, which affirmed Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity while granting Ethiopia commercial access to the Somali coastline. Abiy initially hesitated to sign the agreement, but after seven hours of negotiations involving Erdogan and Foreign Minister Fidan, the two sides resolved the main sticking point, which, according to one source, centred on the reference to 'territorial integrity' in the statement.¹⁶² The parties agreed to technical talks, facilitated by Türkiye, on Ethiopia's 'reliable, secure, and sustainable access to and from the sea' under Somalia's sovereign authority.¹⁶³ The first of these talks took place on 18 February 2025 and yielded no concrete results beyond further 'commitments to the letter and spirit' of the Ankara declaration.¹⁶⁴

Türkiye's involvement goes beyond mere facilitation, as the country holds significant stakes in key regional ports: *Albayrak Group* owns 45 per cent of the Port of Mogadishu,¹⁶⁵ while *Metag Holding* has acquired a 30 per cent share in Galmudug's Hobyo Port through a partnership with the Somali Hobyo Investment Company (HICO).¹⁶⁶ These two corridors are going to be key agenda items going forward. More importantly, the Ankara Declaration notably omits any mention of the MoU with Somaliland or Ethiopia's naval ambitions, leaving these critical issues unaddressed. While Somalia claims that the MoU is now off the table, Ethiopia and Somaliland have not explicitly confirmed this and remain strategically ambiguous.¹⁶⁷

The Ankara Declaration was driven more urgently by the looming uncertainty surrounding the post-ATMIS security landscape. For Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, securing Ethiopia's continued troop presence was critical, while Ethiopia sought to maintain its buffer zone in Somalia,¹⁶⁸ particularly amid concerns over potential Egyptian involvement. The declaration provided a face-saving resolution for both leaders after the sabre-rattling of the previous year, allowing

161 Interview, MFA Official, LOCATION, 10 April 2024.

162 *Middle East Eye*, 'Inside the Turkey-backed Somalia-Ethiopia deal', 12 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/inside-turkey-backed-somalia-ethiopia-deal>.

163 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Türkiye, 'Ankara Declaration', 11 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/etiyyopya-federal-demokratik-cumhuriyeti-ve-somali-federal-cumhuriyeti-nin-ankara-bildirisi.en.mfa>.

164 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Türkiye, 'Statement on First Round of Technical Negotiations', 18 February 2025. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/somali-ve-etiyyopya-arasinda-gerceklestirilen-teknik-muzakerelerin-ilk-turuna-iliskin-aciklama-18-02-2025.en.mfa>.

165 F. Stepputat, A. Warsame, Q. Omer, S. Wallisch and M. Wasuge. 'The revival and re-embedding of Somali ports', in *Trade makes states: Governing the greater Somali economy*, edited by T. Hagmann and F. Stepputat, 77–100, London: Hurst & Company, 2023.

166 *The Africa Report*, 'Türkiye secures major stake in Somalia's Hobyo Port', 11 October 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.theafricareport.com/364137/turkiye-secures-major-stake-in-somalias-hobyo-port/>.

167 *The Economist*, 'Ethiopia and Somalia claim to have settled a dangerous feud', 19th December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/12/19/ethiopia-and-somalia-claim-to-have-settled-a-dangerous-feud>.

168 S. Mesfin and A. D. Beyene, 'The practicalities of living with failed states', *Dædalus*, 147/1 (2018): 104–117.

them to reassure their domestic audiences that key priorities—Somalia's territorial integrity and Ethiopia's maritime ambitions—were being addressed. However, the primary aim was to enable Ethiopia to join AUSSOM as a troop-contributing country. Ultimately, the fight against al-Shabaab was a mutual priority, as reflected in Abiy Ahmed's comments during the press conference announcing the Ankara Declaration:

Not only do Ethiopians and Somalis share common ancestry, language and culture, but we are also held together with the blood sacrifice that has been paid by thousands of Ethiopian soldiers in the defence of the security of the state of Somalia from terrorist forces.¹⁶⁹

The declaration only serves as a preliminary framework and, while outlining a set of principles for regional cooperation, leaves underlying tensions unresolved.

These challenges became apparent on 23 December when Somalia accused Ethiopian forces in Doolow of killing Somali troops, calling it 'a blatant violation of the Ankara Declaration.'¹⁷⁰ On the same day in Cairo, Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty confirmed the deployment of Egyptian troops under the AUSSOM mission. Shortly afterward, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud met with Eritrean President Isayas Afwerki in Asmara to strengthen their bilateral ties. Tensions were also explicit during the UN Security Council's approval of AUSSOM's mandate, as Somalia hinted at excluding Ethiopia.¹⁷¹ However, days later Ethiopia's Defense Minister Aisha Mohammed visited Mogadishu to finalize AUSSOM's composition, which includes both bilateral and multilateral components.¹⁷² While the final deployment and funding commitments are to be finalised by July 2025, Somalia appears to be using these unresolved decisions regarding troop realignments and locations as leverage in pursuing its regional interests.¹⁷³ The Ankara Declaration exemplifies how entangled the regions corridor-port configurations are with security imperatives.¹⁷⁴

This entanglement is further complicated by the active involvement of external powers such

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- 169 Abiy Ahmed, Press Conference. See ENA, 'Ethiopia, Somalia Reach Agreement in Turkish-brokered Talks to Foster Cooperation', 11 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_5611650.
- 170 Somalia MFA, 'The Federal Government of Somalia Condemns the Blatant Aggression by Ethiopian Forces in Doolow', 23 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://web.mfa.gov.so/the-federal-government-of-somalia-condemns-the-blatant-aggression-by-ethiopian-forces-in-doolow/>.
- 171 *The Reporter*, 'Somalia excludes Ethiopia from AUSSOM following presidential visit to Asmara', 28 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/43152/>.
- 172 Somalia MFA, 'Press Release', 3 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=984846843668095&id=100064283665263&set=a.296016092551177>.
- 173 *The Guardian*, 'UN authorises new mission against al-Shabaab in Somalia', 28 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/28/un-authorises-new-mission-against-al-shabaab-in-somalia>.
- 174 In February 2025, Somalia announced the troop composition of AUSSOM to include Uganda (4,500 troops), Ethiopia (2,500), Djibouti (1,520), Kenya (1,410), and Egypt (1,091). VOA, 'AU, Somalia agree on troop numbers for new mission', 25 February 2025. Accessed 18 March 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/au-somalia-agree-on-troop-numbers-for-new-mission/7987913.html>.

as Türkiye and the Gulf States. Geopolitical and regional rivalries are exported to the Horn, characterized by a race for ports, investments in agriculture, real estate, and mining, as well as military cooperation through arms deliveries, training, and mercenaries. In this vein, Türkiye's mediation efforts in the region can also be seen as a response to its competition with Egypt.¹⁷⁵ While there has been some cooperation in recent years, the two countries have pursued 'diametrically opposed regional agendas' in the Gulf and the Horn: Egypt with its 'secular-statist, nationalist-militarist' approach and Türkiye with its 'pan-Islamist, neo-Ottomanist, expansionist, and religiously-militant project'.¹⁷⁶ The two countries supported opposing sides in the Libyan war, and Ankara is not interested in entertaining Cairo's troops in Somalia.

For Türkiye and the Gulf States, the Horn of Africa has become an 'integral part of their core security perimeter' and an 'extension of the regional order they seek to build'.¹⁷⁷ This was most evident when Egypt and three members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) cut ties with Qatar in 2017, resulting in a flurry of activities and investments in the Horn.¹⁷⁸ This web of alliances has intensified the flow of financial and military support in recent years.¹⁷⁹

The UAE initially established its regional presence through strategic investments in Djibouti's ports in the mid-2000s and a military base in Eritrea's Assab in 2015. While Doraleh Port was a key commercial asset, the Assab base played a crucial role in supporting the UAE's military operations during the Yemen war. However, the UAE's partnerships have since shifted. DP World was dramatically expelled from Djibouti in 2018, and the UAE dismantled its Assab base as part of its broader withdrawal from the Yemen conflict in 2021. In response, the UAE has diversified its regional footprint, investing not only in Berbera, but also in Puntland's Bosaso Port through DP World and Kismayo Port in Jubaland through Abu Dhabi Ports (AD Ports).¹⁸⁰ A comparable shift occurred in Sudan, where AD Ports had also signed a deal in 2022 to develop the Abu Amama Port linked to the Abu Hamad Agricultural Zone. However, the agreement was cancelled by Sudan in 2024 citing the UAE's support for the Rapid Support Forces.¹⁸¹ While the

175 Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 'Turkish-Egyptian Relations in the Horn of Africa', 23 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/turkish-egyptian-relations-in-the-horn-of-africa-195420>.

176 M. Maziad, 'The Turkey-Qatar alliance: Through the Gulf and into the Horn of Africa', in *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, influences and instability*, edited by R. Mason and S. Mabon, 127-150. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022, 132.

177 H. Verhoeven, 'The Gulf and the Horn: Changing Geographies of Security Interdependence and Competing Visions of Regional Order', *Civil Wars*, 20/3 (2018), 352.

178 F. Donelli and A. Gonzalez-Levaggi, 'Crossing Roads: The Middle East's Security Engagement in the Horn of Africa', *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 33/1 (2021): 45-60.

179 R. Mason and S. Mabon, eds, *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, influences and instability*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

180 Both Jubaland and Puntland, however, have strained relationships with the central government in Mogadishu, which complicates the UAE's position.

181 *Sudan Tribune*, 'Sudan scraps \$6 billion UAE port deal, citing RSF support', 4 January 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://sudantribune.com/article292879/>.

UAE pursues a set of long term goals as discussed below, its manoeuvres in the region have been characterized by 'zigzags and reversals of both political and financial commitments',¹⁸² mirroring similar tendencies in Ethiopia's foreign policy since 2018.

These shifting regional partnerships reflect the agility of UAE's 'economic statecraft,' shaped by its strategic priorities particularly in the areas of food security and logistics - 'whether food production in Sudan and Serbia and securing port access from Aden to Suez' (Young & Khan, 2022, p.103). As a country that imports 85 per cent of its food,¹⁸³ the UAE is acutely vulnerable to global supply shocks, as was evident during the pandemic and various geopolitical crises. In response, the UAE's *National Food Security Strategy 2051* aims to address this vulnerability by not only increasing domestic production, but also securing 'arable land in foreign countries,' as has been evident in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan, 'to cultivate and transport produce back to the UAE.'¹⁸⁴ This includes a broader strategy to diversify food imports and facilitate global agri-business trade through, for example, the development of the world's largest 'Logistics Hub for Foodstuffs, Fruit and Vegetable Trade' in Dubai.¹⁸⁵

Projects like this exemplify how state-owned enterprises (SOEs) like DP World, Etihad and others across the emirates serve as tools for positioning the UAE as a 'nexus-state'—a global hub of connectivity.¹⁸⁶ At the same time, these SOEs enable UAE's federal government to consolidate greater coordinative capacity over the semi-autonomous city-states, aligning Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah on national strategic priorities, even if competitive elements remain (ibid). The UAE operates 12 domestic ports, handling 61 per cent of all cargo destined for GCC countries, and over 100 ports globally.¹⁸⁷ This is further supported by the UAE's extensive air freight network, managed by Emirates and Etihad Airlines.

Ethiopia offers the UAE an opportunity to secure vital agricultural resources in its geographic vicinity. The country's vast and arable land, similar to Sudan, is ideal for large-scale production of crops like wheat, pulses and vegetables, as well as livestock. In contrast, the UAE possesses what Ethiopia lacks: a highly advanced maritime logistics system, anchored by a global network of ports and shipping infrastructure. These complementary assets have prompted major agri-businesses like Al Dahra Group LLC, Jenaan Investment LLC, and Elite Agro Projects to invest in Ethiopia's agricultural sector. The Berbera corridor is the focal point of this convergence of

182 Young and Khan, 'Extended states', 122.

183 The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 'The UAE's Path to Food Self-Sufficiency', 19 July 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://agsiw.org/the-uaes-path-to-food-self-sufficiency>.

184 The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 'The UAE's Path'.

185 *The National*, 'Dubai to set up 'world's largest' food trading logistics centre', 10 July 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2024/07/10/dubai-to-set-up-worlds-largest-food-trading-logistics-centre/>.

186 C. Henderson, 'The UAE as a Nexus State', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7/1 (2017): 83–93.

187 Government of UAE, 'Seaports', Last updated 1 February 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/infrastructure/civic-facilities/seaports>.

interests, embodying the entanglement of agriculture, logistics, and security.

Both Türkiye and the UAE's engagements in Ethiopia and the Horn exemplify a broader trend in changing nature of international relations. As one western diplomat noted:

We see a tendency towards manylateralism, and opportunistic alliances instead of a true investment in multilateral alliances. The region is missing the guard rails that multilateral institutions would impose on the region [...] this leaves the region wide open to external influences, including a divide and conquer logic. [...] The type of activity we see is a lot less transparent regarding cash and arms, it's less through multilateral channels [...] sometimes the strings attached are less visible and less transparent.¹⁸⁸

The increasingly untransparent activities in the region point to a shift towards *manylateralism*. Significantly, the Horn of Africa could become entwined with the political fallout from the Abraham Accords, which marked the normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel. Reports from Israeli newspapers suggest that the UAE and Israel have already set up a joint military and intelligence facility on the Yemeni islands of Socotra and Abdul Kuri. More importantly, the UAE is reportedly mediating on Israel's behalf to establish a military base in Somaliland.¹⁸⁹ With the Trump administration in the United States signalling potential interest in the Somaliland question,¹⁹⁰ various political manoeuvres appear to be unfolding. The lack of clear multilateral channels leaves the Horn of Africa vulnerable to these shifting, unaccountable power dynamics.

DOMESTIC CALCULATIONS, PROXIES AND RECIRCULATION OF RENTS

The analysis thus far has focused on geopolitical and inter-state tensions in the region. But as some of the interviewees indicate, even geopolitical concerns manifest at the sub-national level, as international actors seek to exploit domestic disputes. Similarly, Abiy Ahmed has justified Ethiopian access the sea in explicitly sub-national terms, arguing that Ethiopian Somalis and Afaris should enjoy the same access to the sea as their counterparts across the borders in Somalia and Eritrea, respectively (as discussed above). While a detailed analysis of proxy dynamics and sub-national communities goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the constant shifts in political alignments. As one Western diplomat put it:

The proxy dynamics are overemphasised and very much in flux. There are very few factors

188 Western Diplomat, Presentation, Nairobi 20 November 2024.

189 *Haaretz*, 'All Eyes on Somaliland: The Tiny African State That's Key to Israel's War on Houthi Terror', 27 November 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-11-27/ty-article-magazine/premium/all-eyes-on-somaliland-the-tiny-african-state-thats-key-to-israels-war-on-houthi-terror/00000193-6df4-da6e-afdb-7ff7e2fd0000>.

190 Yinka Adegoke, 'A Trump White House looks set to recognize the world's newest country', *Semafor*, 10 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.semafor.com/article/12/10/2024/somaliland-trump-white-house-looks-set-to-recognize-the-region>.

that remain constant in the Horn. The divide between Addis and Asmara and the divide between Addis and Cairo. Everything else seems up in flux and dynamic.¹⁹¹

Keeping in mind the potential for these proxy dynamics to unfold, there are several domestic calculations that both Abiy Ahmed and Muse Bihi had to consider when signing the MoU. The Ethiopian federal government remains at war with the Fano militia in Amhara and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in Oromia, while tensions with factions of the TPLF continue to resurface. Given some of Abiy's underlying convictions and political machinations, and contrary to the argument that the MoU is only a distraction from on-going domestic disputes, the MoU should be understood as a tool for galvanising disparate groups in service of his generational legacy:

He believes in it, under his stewardship, Ethiopia must have better access to the sea. He wants a legacy, and the legacy of building the dam was taken by Meles, even if Haile Selassie had plans and had the Americans study it. He [Abiy] can't change that. What is missing? It's access to the sea. [...] When he feels like he's in the corner, he needs to come up with a narrative, so this [MoU] is a combination of what he believes should happen and his legacy.¹⁹²

At the same time, access to a naval base and a commercial port in Somaliland has long-term implications for Ethiopia's internal political geography. Infrastructure hardwires political and economic relations, integrating some communities and elites into circuits of rent accumulation and power while excluding others.¹⁹³ In the case of Abiy's Ethiopia, the implementation of the MoU is not only about re-routing imports and exports, but it is also about 're-routing Ethiopian politics'.¹⁹⁴ In particular, the MoU has the potential to consolidate Oromo and Somali ascendancy in Ethiopian politics, diminishing the strategic importance of the northern corridors that connect to Assab and Port Sudan via Afar, Tigray and Amhara.¹⁹⁵ This opens up new sources of rents for those with political capital and geographic proximity to the corridor. Ethiopia's corridor connections are ultimately mediated, both physically and administratively, through the buy-in and support of political and economic elites and local communities near these borders.

In the case of Bebera, Jijiga's political and economic elite would benefit most immediately, as the city would become a central logistics hub. In 2021, Ethiopian Shipping Lines commissioned

191 Conversation, Diplomat, Addis Ababa, 2 April 2024.

192 Interview, Former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 5 April 2024.

193 Schouten et al., 'States of circulation'; Haggmann and Stepputat, *Trade Makes States*; Terrefe and Verhoeven, 'Road (not) taken'.

194 Interview, Former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 25 March 2024.

195 Interview, Former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 25 March 2024.

a feasibility study for the development of a dry port in Jijiga.¹⁹⁶ However, Dire Dawa's elite, with strong historic and clan links to Djibouti, may feel their position in eastern Ethiopia threatened. While significant infrastructural investments in the dry port, industrial zone and railway ensure that Dire Dawa remains part of the central artery, effective linkages between Dire Dawa and Jijiga will be essential for the Berbera corridor to succeed.

Similarly, Muse Bihi's primary concern was the centralization of power. One strategy was the reconfiguration of the Berbera Port Authority to the Somaliland Port Authority in 2021, which represented a strategic move to harvest what Stepputat et al. describe as a 'sovereignty rent'—the economic and political capital derived from controlling key infrastructural assets. But this move risked marginalizing local communities, such as the Issamusa, who have traditionally dominated the Berbera port.¹⁹⁷ For Muse Bihi, the MoU was part of his domestic calculus especially in light of the situation in Las Anod and Awdal.

In early 2023, Somaliland troops withdrew from Las Anod after clashes with protestors, which had been triggered by political assassinations. The political and security vacuum was taken up by Dhulbahante clan elders and militias who pushed back Somaliland's security forces and declared their autonomy from both Somaliland and Puntland. By October 2023, Mogadishu endorsed the newly formed SSC-Khatumo administration and its status as an autonomous state (which includes parts of the Sool, Sanaag and Cayn regions).¹⁹⁸ President Muse Bihi's engagements with Ethiopia were thus also related to these tensions, as he navigated the delicate balance between asserting central authority and managing local clan grievances.¹⁹⁹

Tensions also flared in the western Awdal state with the Awdal State Movement (ASM) positioning itself in firm opposition to the MoU.²⁰⁰ Clashes between Awdal youth and Somaliland forces in response to the MoU had further entrenched the conflict. Awdal delegations travelled to Mogadishu in the weeks after the MoU was signed. In June, Djibouti also hosted the leaders of the ASM in an attempt to further undermine the MoU.

For Djibouti, the MoU is not only a potential economic threat as Ethiopian traders gain alternative means of importing and exporting, but it would also undermine President Ismail Omar Guelleh's influence in Somaliland (Issaq-dominated), particularly in the Awdal region

196 *The Reporter*, 'Shipping Lines vies to develop Dry Ports', 23 October 2021. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/12158/>.

197 Stepputat et al., 'Revival and re-embedding'.

198 International Crisis Group, 'Time for Somaliland and Dhulbante to Talk', 19 May 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-of-africa/somaliland/time-somaliland-and-dhulbahante-talk>.

199 J. Norman, 'Conflict in Las Anod and Crisis in Somaliland', *African Arguments*, 3 March 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2023/03/conflict-in-las-anod-and-crisis-in-somaliland-external-investment-intensifying-internal-competition-and-the-struggle-for-narrative/>; Stepputat and Norman, 'Logistics, Politics and Berbera'.

200 Some have speculated that Abiy initially negotiated with Awdal leaders before Bihi signed a deal in order to scupper Awdal's agreement with Addis.

dominated by the Gadabuursi clan.²⁰¹ Djibouti's interests in Somaliland are so vested that in late August, Djibouti Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf—as of February 2025 chairperson-elect of the African Union Commission—even offered Ethiopia the '100 per cent management' of the Port of Tadjourah, located in the Afar-dominated parts of Djibouti, in an attempt to undermine the MoU:

President Guelleh did that just to help Somalia and Ethiopia really find a way for dialogue and stop that escalation [...] we cannot say that tensions in the neighbouring countries do not affect us. So, it's really a major source of concern if that crisis happens to take the escalation direction. [...] We are really calling both governments and countries to deescalate in the narratives and rhetorics.²⁰²

Thus, Issaq and Issa clan dynamics across the Djibouti-Somaliland border play a significant role in understanding some of the sub-national politics of the MoU.

Newly elected President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Irro) has stated that his administration will carefully assess the contents of the MoU and make decisions in Somaliland's interest. His foreign policy decisions are focused on international recognition. As a former diplomat, he is seen as a more conciliatory person, who 'opts to make decisions based on consensus'.²⁰³ His cabinet includes ministers from a number of clans, including a foreign minister from the Gadarbursi clan, who has voiced concerns about the MoU in the past. Irro is also committed to resolving the conflict with SSC-Khaatumo, even though fighting has sporadically continued in December. Hargeisa asked a delegation from Ethiopia's Somali Region to mediate, indicating continued strong relations.²⁰⁴ Regional President Mustafe Omer also attended Irro's inauguration in early December. In sum, whether the MoU is implemented or not, it has crystallized the underlying geopolitical and sub-national faultlines reshaping the Horn of Africa's political economy.

201 Interview, Former MFA Official, Addis Ababa, 25 March 2024; M. Renders and U. Terlinden, 'Negotiating statehood in a hybrid political order: The case of Somaliland', *Development and Change*, 41/4 (2010): 723–746.

202 *BBC Focus on Africa*, Interview with Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, 31 August 2024.

203 *The Africa Report*, 'Abdirahman Irro: 'Consensusdriven' leader who offers new hope for Somaliland', 25 November 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.theafricareport.com/369578/abdirahman-irro-consensus-driven-leader-who-offers-new-hope-for-somaliland/>.

204 *Hiiraan*, 'Somaliland and SSC Khaatumo leaders signal readiness for peace talks', 29 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, https://hiiraan.com/news/2024/Dec/199578/somaliland_and_ssc_khaatumo_leaders_signal_readiness_for_peace_talks.aspx.

CONCLUSION

On 1 January 2024, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Somaliland's former President Muse Bihi Abdi signed a secretive Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) granting Ethiopia access to Somaliland's coastline, allegedly in exchange for recognizing Somaliland's independence. This MoU has sparked significant political tensions with Somalia, leading to the dismissal of Ethiopia's ambassador in Mogadishu and accusations of infringing on Somalia's sovereignty. While the MoU has both military and commercial implications, it also represents the latest chapter in Ethiopia's long-standing efforts to secure access to the sea that continues to play out along different corridors. Historically, Ethiopia has navigated a shifting landscape of corridor-port configurations, from Djibouti to Eritrea. Yet, these seemingly kaleidoscopic realignments have continually reshaped the region's political economy and political geography, redrawing power dynamics within and beyond state borders.

This paper set out to answer broadly two research questions: What are the underlying drivers that have created this infrastructure-security complex from the Ethiopian government's perspective? And why and how has the Ethiopian government entangled its Red Sea doctrine to broader questions of development and security?

In the late 2010s, donors and stakeholders had high expectations for the Berbera corridor, anticipating increased economic activity and that Ethiopia would reap the efficiency gains driven by the competition between the ports of Berbera and Djibouti. However, their technical focus on trade liberalization and corridor efficiency overlooked the growing domestic and regional tensions and political instability. The MoU was driven by the Ethiopian government's growing perception of encirclement by hostile states, particularly Egypt, at a time when the spectre of geopolitical conflict looms in the waters of the Red Sea. These regional tensions have implications for domestic politics in both Ethiopia and Somaliland, as domestic conflicts are further fuelled by regional actors. For Somaliland, the MoU raises questions about the balance between pursuing recognition, and economic autonomy, while managing internal tensions.

From the Ethiopian government's perspective, the MoU was primarily a security agreement in response to its national security concerns. At a time when Türkiye and the Gulf States continue to invest in the region's ports, capitals and corridors—in an effort to establish a foothold in the logistics, agriculture, real estate and mining sectors—the Ethiopian government saw this as an opportunity to create new interdependencies. From the perspective of some of Ethiopia's neighbours, this strategy evokes memories of its former imperial ambitions, while domestic critiques view these manoeuvres as a distraction from ongoing internal conflicts and a tactic to reignite nationalistic fervour around a generational legacy.

Fundamentally, the Ethiopian government's vision extends beyond trade liberalisation, aiming to position Ethiopia as a regional superpower with grand ambitions of geopolitical significance. In his October 2023 speech to parliament, Prime Minister Abiy framed the Red Sea issue as existential, emphasizing Ethiopia's growing population and the critical need to break free from its landlocked status. He invoked Ethiopia's past access to the Red Sea, drawing parallels with ancient kingdoms to justify this latest agenda. The signing of the MoU with Somaliland also marked a tactical shift in Ethiopian foreign policy, breaking long-standing taboos and setting a new narrative around the Red Sea's importance. This doctrine, outlined in the *Two Waters Grand Strategy*, has once again entangled Ethiopia's economic future with its maritime security strategy.

In conclusion, the unpublished Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU exemplifies the intricate and often conflicting interplay between economic ambitions and security concerns in the Horn of Africa. As the world's most populous landlocked country, the Ethiopian government's emerging Red Sea doctrine is fundamentally shaped by security priorities, even as it carries significant economic implications. Ethiopia's trade corridors transcend their role as conduits for goods and services; they serve as critical arenas where local, national and international actors negotiate—and occasionally contest through conflict—their visions of sovereignty, autonomy and security.

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