

## Viewpoint

### ETHIOPIA'S MARITIME AMBITIONS: SECURING RED SEA ACCESS AND REGIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

On 1 January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a landmark agreement granting Ethiopia access to the Red Sea through a 20-kilometer strip of Somaliland coastline, enabling the construction of a naval base for 50 years. In return, Somaliland is set to receive shares in Ethiopian Airlines and formal recognition as an independent state. This deal aims to alleviate Ethiopia's reliance on the Port of Djibouti, which handles 95% of its trade but presents logistical and cost challenges. The agreement has provoked diplomatic friction with Somalia, which views it as a threat to its sovereignty and has reacted with protests and efforts to counterbalance Ethiopia's influence with regional countries support. Additionally, the establishment of a naval base raises security concerns, particularly in light of the upcoming withdrawal of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia and potential regional instability.

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On 1 January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland inked a landmark agreement that promises to reshape the geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa. This historic deal grants Ethiopia, a landlocked nation, access to the Red Sea through a 20-kilometer strip of coastline along Somaliland. The agreement is set to last for five decades, during which Ethiopia will build a naval base in the region. In exchange, Somaliland is purportedly set to receive shares in Ethiopian Airlines and official recognition as an independent nation<sup>1</sup>. This accord could have extensive implications for Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, and the broader Horn of Africa region. Ethiopia's quest for maritime access is deeply rooted in its historical context. The country's previous attempt to establish a naval presence date back to the early 1950s when it established the Imperial Ethiopian Navy (IEN) as part of its broader military modernization efforts. Under the leadership of Admiral Desta, the IEN successfully developed naval infrastructure in Eritrea and built a fleet that peaked at 1,380 active-duty officers and sailors by 1974. However, Eritrea's secession in 1991, following a prolonged struggle for independence, rendered Ethiopia landlocked<sup>2</sup>. The dissolution of its naval assets and the loss of direct sea access left Ethiopia dependent on neighbouring countries for trade and logistics. The historical significance of maritime access for Ethiopia cannot be overstated.

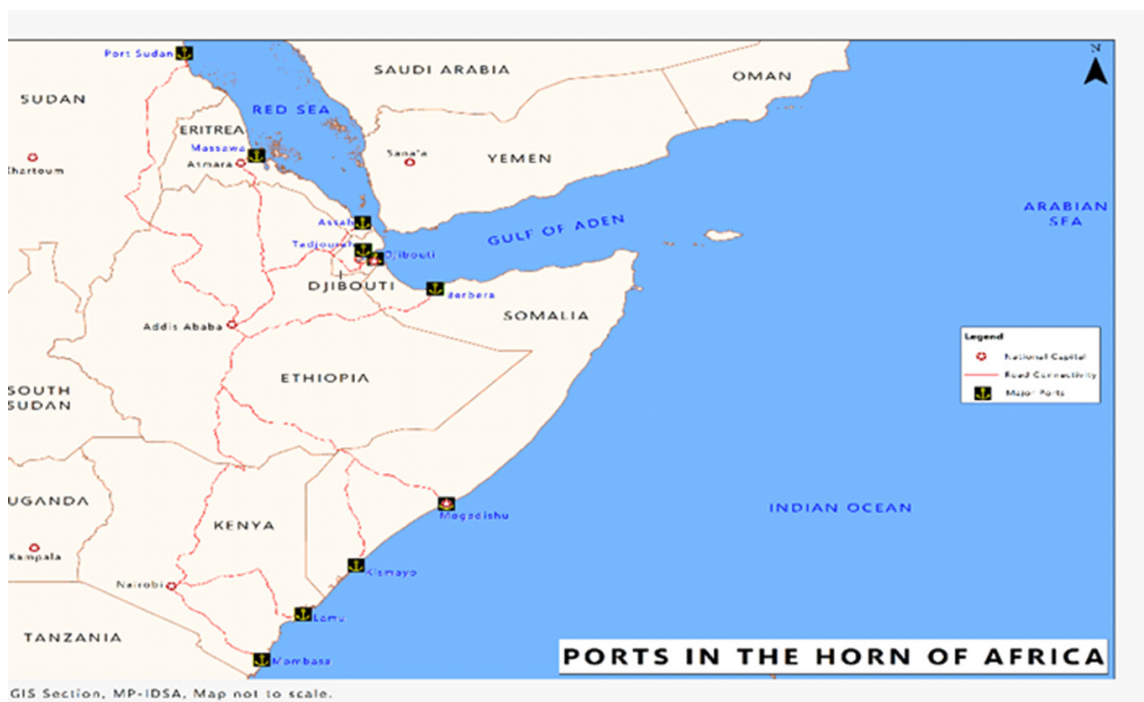
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Prior to Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia had maintained a strategic naval presence, which was integral to its economic and military posture<sup>3</sup>. The recent deal with Somaliland represents a calculated effort by Ethiopia to re-establish a maritime foothold, thereby reducing its reliance on neighbouring ports and mitigating the risks associated with political instability and conflict in the region.

### Current Port Dependencies and Challenges



Being a landlocked nation, Ethiopia is heavily dependent on ports for conducting its trade. The Port of Djibouti is the primary gateway for Ethiopian trade, handling an overwhelming 95% of the country's foreign trade<sup>4</sup>. This reliance on a single port underscores Ethiopia's vulnerability to disruptions in Djibouti's political and economic stability. The other alternative ports in the Horn present its own set of logistical challenges. For instance, Port Sudan and the Eritrean ports face limitations due to ongoing conflicts and strained diplomatic relations. The Port of Djibouti, despite its crucial role, poses its own set of challenges, including high costs and logistical complexities associated with Ethiopia's trade which costs \$1bn a year<sup>5</sup>.

Additionally, Ethiopia's access to the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa was blocked following the border war of 1998-2000. Restrictions imposed by Eritrea on Ethiopian use of

its ports further exacerbated these challenges, creating a pressing need for Ethiopia to secure alternative and more secure maritime access. The proposed deal with Somaliland seems to address these concerns by offering Ethiopia a direct and secure route to the Red Sea. The establishment of a naval base in Somaliland further enhances Ethiopia's strategic position, providing it with increased control over maritime activities in the region.

### **Political Dynamics: Ethiopia-Somaliland Relations and Somalia's Reactions**

The bilateral relationship between Ethiopia and Somaliland has been defined by shared strategic interests and mutual benefits. Ethiopia has been instrumental in supporting Somaliland's pursuit of international recognition and has served as a guarantor of its security. This partnership aligns with Ethiopia's broader objective of stabilising the Somali region and ensuring its own security by fostering strong alliances in its neighbourhood. Somaliland, for its part, views Ethiopia as an important partner in its pursuit of recognition and security. The support from Ethiopia has been instrumental in bolstering Somaliland's position in the region, providing it with both economic and strategic benefits<sup>6</sup>.

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However, the deal has sparked significant diplomatic friction with Somalia, which views the agreement as a direct challenge to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Somalia's response has been marked by a series of diplomatic protests, including the expulsion of Ethiopia's ambassador, the recall of its own ambassador from Addis Ababa, and the demand for the closure of Ethiopian consulates<sup>7</sup>. These actions underscore the tension between Somalia's central government and the autonomous region of Somaliland, as well as the broader regional dynamics at play. Somalia's reaction to Ethiopia's deal with Somaliland includes efforts to counterbalance Ethiopia's influence. Turkey has emerged as a key security partner for Somalia, reflecting a strategic move to offset Ethiopia's growing presence in the region<sup>8</sup>. Somalia's President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, has even signed a parliamentary bill declaring Ethiopia's agreements with Somaliland as 'null and void', further escalating the diplomatic conflict<sup>9</sup>. Public opposition in Mogadishu, including protest marches against Ethiopia's plans, highlights the depth of the disagreement and the potential for ongoing tension in the region<sup>10</sup>.

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### **Security Implications and Regional Reactions**

The establishment of a naval base in Somaliland and Ethiopia's broader maritime ambitions have significant security implications for the Horn of Africa region. The potential resurgence of militant groups like Al-Shabaab poses a serious threat to regional stability as the group has pledged to strike strategic locations such as the Berbera Port. While Al-Shabaab does not have a physical foothold in Somaliland, it still retains a capacity to strike critical

infrastructure<sup>11</sup>. The anticipated withdrawal of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) by the end of 2024 adds another layer of complexity to the security landscape<sup>12</sup>. The drawdown in international peacekeeping forces could create a security vacuum and potentially allow terrorist groups to regain strength and influence in the Horn<sup>13</sup>. Ethiopia's new maritime ambitions may exacerbate these security challenges, as regional actors and militant groups respond to the shifting dynamics.

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In neighbouring countries like Djibouti, the economic model centers on shipping services and maritime logistics, primarily serving Ethiopian needs. With over 95% of Ethiopia's trade passing through Djibouti's port, this sector significantly contributes to Djibouti's GDP. In fact, more than 75% of Djibouti's GDP depends on transport services to Ethiopia<sup>14</sup>. Despite this substantial economic interdependence, Djibouti grapples with challenges such as unemployment and poverty and is burdened by a high level of public debt, much of which is owed to China.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi stated that Egypt stands shoulder to shoulder with Somalia<sup>15</sup>. He called on Ethiopia to seek benefits from seaports in Somalia and Djibouti through transitional means, rather than attempting to control another country's territory. Egypt's opposition to Ethiopia's agreement with Somaliland is also influenced by its ongoing dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River. Egypt's interests in Somaliland include countering Ethiopia's regional influence and securing access to the Nile by being close to Ethiopia's capital<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, the one country that has acutely felt the threat is Eritrea. After Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's speech on 13 October 2023, Eritrea and Ethiopia moved troops to their shared border<sup>17</sup>. Although Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki met in 2018, they worked together to implement a momentous peace deal, which led to the reopening of diplomatic relations, trade, and travel between the two nations. However, cooperation began to sour amid growing unresolved issues and lingering hostilities<sup>18</sup>. A joint military campaign was launched by Eritrea and Ethiopia against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 2020, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis and heightened regional tensions. The Pretoria Peace Agreement, signed in November 2022 between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government, excluded Eritrea and Amhara militias from negotiations, leaving unresolved grievances. Eritrea supports Amhara militias against the Ethiopian government. Amhara militias hold key strategic territories in Tigray and have access to Eritrea. Ethiopia's potential focus on the Assab Port is significant, given its history of conflicts with both Somalia and Eritrea over their contested borders – in 1977-78 and 1999-2000, respectively – and the powerful emotions these territorial threats still stir up in the Horn of Africa.

## Conclusion

Ethiopia's maritime ambitions of pursuing a naval base and securing direct access to the Red Sea has flared geopolitical and diplomatic tensions in the Horn of Africa region. In such an unfolding scenario, achieving any sustainable resolution will require political will, broader regional cooperation and the establishment of effective mechanisms to manage maritime affairs. While Ethiopia's ambitions may drive new investments and development projects, the likelihood of a formal maritime treaty or widespread recognition of Somaliland remains uncertain. For a stable and mutually beneficial resolution, it is essential for littoral states to collaborate and establish a regional mechanism for managing the Red Sea. This approach could help address Ethiopia's concerns while maintaining regional stability and minimising the risk of conflict. However, given the existing geopolitical divisions and interests of various regional actors, achieving such a cooperative framework may prove challenging. The role of Ethiopia, Somaliland, and other regional players in shaping the future of maritime access and regional cooperation will be crucial in determining the outcome of these ambitions. While a maritime treaty or formal recognition of Somaliland could potentially lead to increased investments and development, the immediate focus will likely be on managing tensions and navigating the complex regional dynamics. As Ethiopia navigates its maritime ambitions, the interplay between historical context, current dependencies, political dynamics, and security implications will shape the future of its maritime strategy and regional relationships. The success of Ethiopia's endeavours will depend on its ability to manage these complexities and foster cooperation with its regional partners while addressing the broader geopolitical and security concerns that underpin its maritime aspirations.

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  - <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>6</sup> Medhane Tadesse, Making Sense of Ethiopia's Regional Influence, in Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (ed.), *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2015, pp 333-356. (Accessed 4 April 2024).

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