



ETHIOPIA-ERITREA RELATIONS POST-2018: NATIONAL INTERESTS, FOREIGN POLICY DIVER- GENCE, AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF REGIONAL INSTABILITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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Abstract

The 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which ostensibly ended an 18-year ‘no war, no peace’ stalemate, was widely celebrated. However, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated with the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) and Ethiopia’s expressed assertive demands for access to the Red Sea. The article analyses the shifting dynamics of Ethiopia-Eritrea bilateral relations over the past seven years, in the context of the volatile geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. The paper analyses the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea by comparing their national interests with their foreign policies. It employs the Regional Security Complex Theory to examine tensions among neighbouring countries, such as Djibouti and Somalia, that have been exacerbated by Ethiopia’s Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. The study highlights the strategic interactions between regional and extra-regional powers. It argues that these developments have largely undermined the initial peace dividend, resulting in increased regional instability and a significant risk of renewed conflict. This situation emphasises the urgent need for effective diplomatic engagement and de-escalation efforts.

Keywords

Conflict, National Interest, Foreign Policy, Security Complex, Geopolitics

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1. Background

The contemporary relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea is deeply rooted in the colonial history of Eastern Africa. As a result of Italy's colonial ambition in the region, Ethiopia was forced to assert its sovereignty through a military encounter. After the victory at Adwa, Emperor Menelik II initiated negotiations with the Italians to delimit Ethiopia's boundaries with the French, British, and Italian colonies neighbouring Ethiopia. While progress was made in delimiting the boundaries with the French and the British, the Italian administration was notably slow to finalize its frontier. Ethiopia's persistent demands were met with Italy's evasion of the request, as its colonial project in the Horn would remain incomplete without occupying Ethiopia, as later witnessed during the 1935 Italian invasion (Zewde, 2021).

Eritrea gained independence when Italy was defeated and expelled from East Africa in 1941. Zewde (2021) argues that since Eritrea was considered '*terra irridenta*' by various Ethiopian regimes, the government of Emperor Haile Selassie I made significant efforts to unite Eritrea with the rest of Ethiopia. In 1952, a UN resolution decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia as a compromise between Eritrean separatists and unionists, heavily influenced by Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts (Zewde, 2021). Emperor Haile Selassie I repealed the federation in 1962, making Eritrea one of Ethiopia's provinces (Negash and Tronvoll, 2000). Eritrean forces began fighting for liberation in the early 1960s, and the guerrilla war achieved its objective in 1991, when the country gained *de facto* independence, which was later recognised *de jure* through a referendum in 1993.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), after overthrowing the Derg and assuming power, promptly recognised Eritrea's independence, as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had played an active role in the Derg's downfall. Eritrea's independence marked the end of Ethiopia's pursuit to regain access to the Red Sea, a goal pursued tenaciously by successive Ethiopian regimes (Novati, 2021). This milestone holds great significance in Ethiopian history and serves as a determining factor in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations.

The initially amicable relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, driven by the friendship between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and EPLF, did not last long, as Eritrea's ambition for dominance in the Horn of Africa became destabilising. Shortly after gaining independence, Eritrea experienced conflicts with all of its neighbouring countries (Novati, 2021). The relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia was more advantageous for Eritrea. Eritreans held prominent positions within Ethiopia's finance and industry sectors, acting as intermediaries for the Eritrean shadow economy. Eritrea imported Ethiopian goods, such as coffee, using the Ethiopian Birr, while exporting these items. This practice had a negative impact on Ethiopia's terms of trade, as the country struggled to obtain foreign currency to finance its exports. However, this situation changed with the introduction of Eritrea's new currency, the Nakfa, and the Ethiopian government's currency reform. This economic encounter is considered one of the root causes of the war that eventually broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998 (De Waal, 2015; Clapham, 2017).

Novati (2021) argues that regional competition also played a role in the outbreak of the 1998 war.

The 1998-2000 border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea was instigated by a territorial dispute over Badme which was under Ethiopian administration. The conflict started when Eritrean forces occupied the area, claiming it as part of Eritrea. Although the ensuing full-scale war resulted in a military advantage for Ethiopia, it failed to guarantee the country's interest in securing access to the Red Sea, contrary to a strategic outcome that many Ethiopians expected (Abebe, 2007; Zewde, 2021).

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998 to 2000 resulted in a deadlock. This situation arose from a disagreement over the ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), which granted Badme, a town symbolically significant to Ethiopia, to Eritrea (Zewde, 2021). Abebe (2007) criticises the Algiers agreement for failing to hold Eritrea accountable for its aggression against the sovereign state of Ethiopia, while also blaming the Ethiopian government for not negotiating for its rightful access to the sea, resulting in the loss of lives and resources. Berketaab (2019) argues that Eritrea insisted on the immediate implementation of the Algiers agreement, while Ethiopia rejected it. Contrarily, Abebe (2007) states that Eritrea also worked against the agreement by supporting armed groups opposing Ethiopia. Eritrea also violated the agreed-upon "Transitional Security Zone," a buffer zone in Eritrea.

The "no war, no peace" situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea persisted until an unexpected rapprochement occurred in 2018 with the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The rapprochement was fuelled by Ethiopia's decision to implement the Algiers accord. On July 9, 2018, a cessation of hostilities and a joint declaration of "peace and friendship" were signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Asmara, Eritrea. The reconciliation between the two conflicting parties was followed by the resumption of business activities, the opening of legations, the reopening of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, and the reopening of flights between Asmara and Addis (Fekuade, 2019). However, the rapprochement was criticised for relying on personal relations between the two leaders, Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki, and for being a 'war pact' given Eritrea's strong involvement in the Tigray war (Aweke and Mohammed, 2023; Demissie, 2023).

The central research question of this paper is "what are the implications of post 2018 Ethiopia-Eritrea relations for the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa?". To address this, the study examines key political developments that shaped the shifting trajectories of the bilateral relationship and their subsequent impact on broader regional events.

The study applies the Regional Security Complex Theory, which argues that security threats in certain geographic contexts are linked and therefore cannot be considered in isolation. By applying this framework to the Ethiopia-Eritrea relations, the paper explores its broader geopolitical implications for the Horn of Africa. The research relies primarily on secondary data including books, journal articles, and media reports which are analysed through qualitative thematic analysis. This approach facilitates an in-depth explanation of Ethiopia-Eritrea's relations on the Horn's geopolitics.

This paper is organized into six sections. It begins by providing a historical context on Ethiopia-Eritrea relations, followed by a theoretical discussion on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The third section examines bilateral relations in the post 2018 period, while the fourth analyzes how Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access influences this relationship. The fifth section explores the broader geopolitical implications for the Horn of Africa, before offering concluding remarks.

2. The Regional Security Complex Theory

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) has made a paramount contribution to analysing the security challenges that certain regions encounter. It emphasises the importance of regional adjacency in shaping security concerns (Wæver, 2004).

One of the major arguments of the RSCT is that 'most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones,' which leads to a pattern of security interdependence within the context of regional clusters referred to as 'regional complex' (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 4). A Regional Security Complex (RSC) was defined as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, 1991: 190).

More recently, following the update by the Copenhagen School, to ensure the 'multi-sectoral, multi-actor securitization perspective' Regional Security Complex was redefined as "A set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan 1991:19; Buzan et al., 1998:201).

The securitisation aspect is one side to understanding the RSC. David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan (1997) emphasised external threats as an important aspect of the RSC. They define Regional Security Complex as "a set of states continuously affected by one or more security externalities that emanate from a distinct geographic area" (Lake and Morgan 1997: 12).

The Horn of Africa is defined as a Regional Security Complex in numerous works of literature.¹ This article furthers the existing discussion by examining how the dynamic relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea shape security outcomes across the region.

3. Ethiopia-Eritrea Relations in the post-2018: From peace to war

The rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea resulted from the political reforms in Ethiopia in 2018, following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's ascent to power. The popular protest, which began in Oromia in 2015, eventually led to this reform when it spread to the Amhara regional state in 2016. The protest initially stemmed from the plan to expand Addis Ababa, encroaching upon the land rights of Oromos residing around the capital. It later evolved into a nationwide opposition to the ruling party in general and the TPLF in particular.

Upon assuming power, Prime Minister Abiy implemented significant changes, including the release of thousands of prisoners, the lifting of the state of emergency,

the dismissal of senior security and military officials, and the reopening of websites previously closed during the state of emergency. Rebel groups like Patriotic Ginbot 7, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oga-den National Liberation Front (ONLF), and the Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM) returned to Ethiopia following an amnesty declaration. Accepting the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) decision was also part of the reform efforts aimed at resolving years of conflict with Eritrea (Bereketab, 2019).

Prime Minister Abiy made a historic visit to Eritrea on July 5, 2018. On July 8, 2018, the Ethiopian delegation in Asmara announced that it was prepared to finalise a comprehensive peace agreement with Eritrea. This was followed by the signing of a cessation of hostilities and a joint declaration of 'peace and friendship' between the two countries on July 9, 2018, in Asmara. Subsequently, Isaias Afwerki made an official visit to Ethiopia from July 16 to 18, 2018 (Ylonen, 2018). These developments instilled hope among both Ethiopians and Eritreans, who had endured years of conflict. This was evident in the enthusiastic support demonstrated by the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea during their mutual visits (Bereketab, 2019).

The representatives of the two countries met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on September 16, 2018, and signed an agreement on Peace, Friendship, and Comprehensive Cooperation in the presence of King Salman of Saudi Arabia and the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, thereby giving the rapprochement international significance (Fakude, 2019). Plaut (2018) states that the UAE, the US, the UN, and the AU played a role in achieving reconciliation from both sides. The significant international support for the rapprochement is considered an important ingredient for realising such an unexpected deal.

Initially, the Ethiopia-Eritrea reconciliation yielded positive gains for both countries and contributed to relative stability in the Horn of Africa. Flights between Addis and Asmara resumed as early as July 18, 2018, while the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea opened on September 11, 2018. Nonetheless, it had the unanticipated consequence of thousands migrating from Eritrea to Ethiopia through the newly opened border, which eventually led to the border's closure in December 2018 (Awke and Seid, 2023).

In strategic terms, Eritrea successfully broke free from years of isolation in its relations with regional and international actors. The peace agreement between

Upon assuming power, Prime Minister Abiy implemented significant changes, including the release of thousands of prisoners, the lifting of the state of emergency, the dismissal of senior security and military officials, and the reopening of websites previously closed during the state of emergency.

Ethiopia and Eritrea sparked discussions between Somalia and Eritrea. On July 30, the leaders of the two countries signed a Joint Declaration on Brotherly Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation. This agreement was later expanded into a tripartite agreement among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia when the leaders of all three nations concluded a Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation. This declaration aimed to enhance their respective territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence (Bereketab, 2019).

Furthermore, the regional initiative sought to include Djibouti, as demonstrated by the visit of the Joint High-Level Committee, which comprised the foreign ministers of the three countries. This visit culminated in the Djibouti Agreement, marking the beginning of a new era of cooperation in the Horn of Africa (UN News, 2018). However, this new agreement was criticized for potentially weakening the existing regional integration process in the Horn of Africa through IGAD (RVI, 2024).

Following the rapprochement, the UN Security Council lifted sanctions imposed on Eritrea for nearly a decade. On Ethiopia's side, this development was seen as a strategic opportunity to diversify its access to the sea, especially since the country has been landlocked since Eritrea gained independence.

Aweke and Seid (2023) argue that while there were initial hopes for a comprehensive agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, such an outcome is unlikely in the near future. This is partly due to Eritrea's aggressive and destabilising role in the Horn of Africa, as well as the ongoing instability within Ethiopia. Eritrea's significant involvement in the civil war between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has particularly undermined the prospects for cooperation between the two countries. A joint investigation report by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) revealed that the Eritrean Defence Force, in concert with the Ethiopian National Defence Force and Tigray Special Forces, was responsible for attacks on civilians that resulted in numerous deaths and injuries.

President Isaias seized the civil war as an opportunity to exact revenge against the TPLF, with whom he held a long-standing grudge, while also seeking to end Eritrea's isolation in the Horn of Africa and regain influence in Ethiopia (Reid, 2022). Through its engagement in the war, Eritrea captured territories it had long claimed (Demissie, 2023). Ethiopian officials have stated that Eritrean troops left Tigray after the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government in November 2022, while the United States and international media outlets such as the New York Times, Reuters, and Al Jazeera reported that Eritrean troops were committing war crimes after the CoHA signing.

The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) was concluded between the TPLF and Ethiopia's government on November 2, 2022. The agreement was commended for ending the two-year civil war between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government, which led to the death of thousands and massive forced displacements. It reinstated federal authority in Tigray, a region that the TPLF openly resisted throughout the civil war. Moreover, the TPLF agreed to fully disarm and recognise the presence of

only one defence force in Ethiopia. The government of Ethiopia agreed to establish an interim administration in Tigray until elections were held in the region. However, the agreement was criticised for ignoring Eritrea's role in the conflict and for treating the state merely as a foreign entity intervening in Ethiopia's affairs. The agreement's conclusion also strained relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as the latter was particularly displeased to see the TPLF, which it had sought to annihilate, emerge as an important political actor in Tigray (RVI, 2024).

Relations between the Tigray regional administration and the Ethiopian Federal government have deteriorated as key provisions of the CoHA remain unfulfilled. Critical points of contention include the delay in Tigray Defense Forces' disarmament, the continued presence of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia, and the ongoing Amhara administration of Western Tigray (CFR, 2026). This has led to internal rivalry within the TPLF where the TPLF leader Debretsion blamed the previous president of Tigray Interim Administration (TIA) Getachew Reda for the slow implementation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Later leading to Getachew's replacement with Lieutenant General Tadesse Werede (one of the two vice presidents of the TIA and head of the cabinet secretariat for Peace and Security).

In April 2026, the TPLF stated that it is taking back control of the regional government, ending the already weakened CoHA (Hancock, 2026). These domestic tensions are mirrored by shifting regional dynamic; Eritrea's exclusion from CoHA compounded with Ethiopia's ambition to access the red sea through any means prompted Asmara to pivot toward an alignment with the TPLF. Ethiopia's strategic pursuit of Red Sea access has alarmed Eritrea, fueling concerns that Addis Ababa may attempt to seize Assab and Massawa- two ports along the Eritrean coast.

4. Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea: Implications for Ethiopia-Eritrea Relations

Ethiopia lost its access to the sea in the 19th century when Italy occupied parts of the country. Although the Battle of Adwa was significant, it did not lead to Ethiopia reclaiming its coastal access. Later, Ethiopia regained its access to the Red Sea when Eritrea was federated with the country in 1952. The Ethiopian government at that time, led by Emperor Haile Selassie I, made several attempts to unite Eritrea. This federation was ultimately seen as a success, as it restored Ethiopia's access to the sea after many decades.

Ethiopia's decision to abolish the federation and revoke Eritrea's autonomy in 1961 sparked resistance in Eritrea's lowlands (Novati, 2023). This resistance ultimately culminated in Eritrea's independence after three decades of struggle, with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), an ally of the Eritrean Liberation Front, seizing power in 1991 (Abebe, 2007; Zewde, 2023). As a result, Ethiopia became a landlocked country once again.

When a war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998, Ethiopia started using Djibouti's port. As the second most populous country in Africa, Ethiopia has used Djibouti as its primary seaport, which accounts for 95% of its maritime trade. A

2013 World Bank study, cited by ISS (2021), found that 85% of Djibouti's port activities are related to Ethiopia's imports and exports. Another alternative port access for Ethiopia is the Lamu Port. Ethiopia has concluded an agreement with Kenya regarding the development and future utilisation of the Lamu Port - South Sudan - Ethiopia (Lapsset) transport corridor (Kinyua, 2023).

It is widely acknowledged that landlocked countries face several negative economic consequences. Uperty (1994) explains that the lack of access to the sea in developing countries increases their transportation costs, leading to delays or even stagnation in development. Countries without access to the sea also incur foreign trade deficits due to the high transit costs they incur for their products, making them less competitive in international markets. Collier (2007), cited in Wilson (2008), states that 38% of the bottom billion people reside in landlocked states. Politically, being landlocked restrains Ethiopia's geostrategic options in the Horn of Africa and beyond (Marshland, 2023).

Ethiopia and Djibouti have invested in port infrastructure to facilitate the transit of goods. An example of such an investment is the construction of a 759 km electrified railway costing \$4.5 billion (Tarrosy and Vörös, 2018). Additionally, Ethiopia has been exporting hydropower to Djibouti since 2011 and remains an important source of piped water (Takele and Tolcha, 2021). While access to the sea via Djibouti has been convenient for Ethiopia, challenges arise from disputes over the railway, air transportation, and border/customs. Djibouti controls the rents, rates, and transit fees for goods Ethiopia imports, and there are instances in which Ethiopia believes the rates are unfair (Borowicz, 2017). Disputes over costs, taxation, and resistance to Ethiopia obtaining a stake in port facilities have also strained the Ethiopia-Djibouti relationship (Styan, 2013).

To reduce dependency on Djibouti, Ethiopia has been pursuing alternative strategies. One such initiative is partnering with Somaliland to use the port of Berbera. Using Berbera aligns with Ethiopia's interest in diversifying port access due to its proximity and opens the country's isolated eastern region to international markets for livestock and agricultural exports. However, collaborating with Somaliland, a de facto state in Somalia that has been recognized by only one UN member, namely Israel which recognized it on 26 December 2025, poses a threat to Ethiopia (Canon, 2017). Nevertheless, as of January 1, 2024, Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland to lease parts of Berbera Port and potentially provide recognition in return. This move followed repeated statements by Ethiopia's Prime Minister expressing the country's intention to assert its rights on the Red Sea.

Access to the sea is a crucial national interest for Ethiopia and informs the country's foreign policy. The Ethiopian Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy Document of 2002 equates protecting the country's national interest with protecting the interests of the people by facilitating rapid development and democracy, reflecting the inward-looking nature of its foreign policy. Following the reform, a new foreign policy was drafted, although it is yet to be adopted by the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR). Internal developments continue to remain as

important determinants of Ethiopia's foreign policy. According to Mersha (2024), the drive towards economic development remains an objective of Ethiopia's foreign relations. Access to a port is then a strategic interest for Ethiopia in its dealings with neighbouring countries, all of which have access to a port except South Sudan.

Rumours of Ethiopia's interest in assuming ownership of the Red Sea began circulating in July 2023. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed made this intention explicit on October 13, emphasising Ethiopia's economic struggle resulting from limited access to international trade. He stated that "By 2030 [the population of Ethiopia] will be 150 million," in a televised address to parliament. He also said "A population of 150 million can't live in a geographic prison." Prime Minister Abiy stated that economic exchange through a stake in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) or the country's flagship carrier, Ethiopian Airlines, will be a bargain that Ethiopia is willing to make rather than using force to secure sea access (Kinyua, 2023; Mhaka, 2023). The Ministry of Peace also released a strategy document titled "Ethiopia's National Interest: Principles and Content" immediately after his speech.² While his concerns are valid and represent a hurdle Ethiopia has carried for decades, the negative responses from neighbouring countries have raised scepticism about his proposal.

Ethiopia's neighbours were quick to express their reservations about Prime Minister Abiy's statement. Alexis Mohamed, a senior advisor to Djiboutian President Ismail Omar, stated, 'Our two countries have always maintained strong, friendly relations. But you should know that Djibouti is a sovereign country, and therefore our territorial integrity is not questionable, neither today nor tomorrow' (Kinyua, 2023). Similarly, Eritrean officials stated that their country has no intention of discussing Ethiopia's access to the sea following the Prime Minister's statement. Eritrea's Ministry of Information referred to the matter as one that 'has perplexed all concerned observers' (Ethiopia Observer, 2023). Somalia's State Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Omar, conveyed a strong message that his country's sovereignty and territorial integrity are sacrosanct and non-negotiable (Cacciati, 2023).

Though access to the sea has always been on Ethiopia's foreign policy agenda, it is unclear why direct access has become a current concern. Prime Minister Abiy presented direct access to the sea as existential for Ethiopia. Slowing economic growth in Ethiopia poses a real threat to the country, as it faces a foreign currency shortage that is affecting domestic industry and foreign investment. In December 2023, the country joined the ranks of African sovereign defaults after failing to make a \$33 million payment on its international government bond. As of the end of 2023, inflation remains extremely high (UNDP, 2023; Reuters, 2023). Internal conflicts in Tigray, as well as in the Amhara and Oromia regions, have been identified as major factors contributing to the country's economic decline (Gavin, 2023). However, it is questionable whether the proposed measures are worth the security risks posed to neighbouring states.

Eritrea's concern over Abiy Ahmed's recent statement about port ownership may stem from past regimes' efforts to make Eritrea part of Ethiopia. History shows

that most of Eritrea was under Ethiopian control until Italy's occupation in the 19th century. Ethiopians have also criticised the TPLF for failing to negotiate over port ownership during Eritrea's 1993 independence referendum and during the war between the two countries from 1998 to 2000 (Abebe, 2007; Zewde, 2023). Abebe, in particular, emphasised that Ethiopia should have been compensated with access to the sea it lost to Eritrea as punishment for Eritrea's aggression, as has been the historical trend. He cites past peace treaties concluded after World Wars that resulted in the exchange of territories and the payment of war reparations. Such arguments make Eritrea more cautious about any move by Ethiopia to gain port access than about moves by other neighbouring countries (RVI, 2024).

The perception that the statement regarding access to the sea is primarily aimed at Eritrea may be substantiated by the deteriorating relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea following the CoHA signed between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF. Prime Minister Abiy began mentioning Ethiopia's access to the sea as a priority two months after coming to power. At that time, the Eritrean government did not object to Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea, as the two countries were still in the honeymoon period of the peace deal (Woldemariam, 2023).

Claiming access to the Red Sea in a different time setting, after the two countries took diverging paths on how to handle the TPLF, became an essential ingredient that made the question unpalatable for Eritrea. The perception that such a statement was made to provoke Eritrea arose following the recent confrontation between the two countries when Addis Ababa chose to settle the war with the TPLF through the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement concluded in Pretoria in November 2022. This made the request for sea access entirely new for Eritrea and was seen by the Ethiopian Prime Minister as an act of provocation. Since the Comprehensive Agreement, Eritrea has been working on forming alliances against the Ethiopian government. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has grown closer to William Ruto and Hassan Sheikh, the leaders of Kenya and Somalia, respectively, while also collaborating closely with Cairo and Riyadh. He has also worked to establish stronger ties with Russia and China to maintain Eritrea's balance of power in the Horn of Africa.

In strategic terms, Eritrea's goals in its foreign policy – apart from its fears of Ethiopia and other nations in the Horn of Africa – remain unclear. The country has shown a strong commitment to its strategic interest of weakening its robust neighbours, especially Ethiopia, by any means necessary (Healy, 2008). Eritrea is known for its aggressive foreign policy, which has led to direct or indirect conflicts with all its neighbours. It has engaged in direct conflicts with Yemen, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, while also confronting Sudan as Asmara supported Sudanese rebels. The International Crisis Group (ICG) referred to Eritrea as a "Siege State" in 2010, highlighting that its government is suspicious of its own population, its neighbours, and the international community. Therefore, Eritrea's rejection of Ethiopia's aspirations for direct access to the Red Sea is not surprising.

Both internal and external determinants shape Eritrea's foreign policy. The internal determinant is mainly the regime's militarisation, with the justification of

a possible war with Ethiopia. The situation is exploited by the government to continuously absorb young people into the army and turn the state into a large prison, rejecting the requests of many to leave the country legally (Reid, 2018). Externally, its ambition to be a major power in the Horn of Africa has apparently influenced its foreign policy, which it has pursued by force. However, in the past, Eritrea's attempt to compete with neighbouring Ethiopia to establish itself as an important force led to its isolation in the regional and international arenas. The African Union (AU), Ethiopia, and Uganda pushed for targeted sanctions against Eritrea for supporting terrorist groups in Somalia, and the UN Security Council acted in December 2009 (ICG, 2010). Ethiopia played a role of uncovering a case regarding

Eritrea's support to Al-Shabab in Somalia to undermine the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) while Uganda formally introduced and sponsored Resolution 1907 as it held a non-permanent seat in the UNSC. The AU officially endorsed the call for sanction in July, 2009 (AU, 2009; Regassa, 2011).

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5. Ethiopia-Eritrea Relations and its Implications for Regional Security

Ethiopia's recent quest for direct control of the sea has prompted statements from neighbouring states warning that it threatens their sovereignty and territorial integrity. None of the states that Prime Minister Abiy intended to approach sent a positive signal in response to his business proposal to obtain a percentage stake in GERD or Ethiopian Airlines in exchange for direct access to the Red Sea. The fact that the Prime Minister publicly declared such a sensitive political issue, without first resolving the matter with the concerned states, was surprising to many. The request was openly rejected by Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea (Kinyua, 2023; Cacciati, 2023).

The proposition by Prime Minister Abiy's government to obtain direct ownership of the sea has been strongly resisted by Eritrea and clearly indicates that the expected outcomes of the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement are being challenged. The peace deal between the two states not only ended years of a "no war, no peace" situation but also held the potential for stability in the Horn of Africa. Although no direct war has been fought between the two countries since 2000, Eritrea has been supporting Ethiopian insurgents such as the OLF and Ginbot 7. Moreover, the Eritrean government pursued a strategy of supporting Islamist groups in Eritrea against Ethiopia. At the same time, Ethiopia advocated for a US-led global counter-terrorism rhetoric to counter Eritrea's influence in the region (Aweke and Seid, 2023).

The decline in relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea has negative implications for peace in the Horn of Africa, as Eritrea has been an important proxy for Egypt and the Gulf Countries in the region. Egypt, in particular, is accused of using Eritrea as a proxy to fight Ethiopia in its plea to maintain its hydro-hegemony over the Nile waters (Hailu, ND).

Eritrea is a member of the Arab League and the Red Sea Council. It has become one of the contested grounds between the Middle Eastern powers, with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia/UAE alliance and the Qatari/Turkey grouping vying for influence. When Ethiopia-Eritrea relations improved, Ethiopia benefited in different ways. First, it established friendships with Eritrea's Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies. The UAE has been particularly instrumental in supporting Ethiopia financially to stabilise its hard-currency shortage, and has also provided military support (Woldemariam, 2023). Moreover, Eritrea's role as a proxy for Egypt to sustain conflicts in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa was halted. However, the situation seems to have changed now that the differences between Ethiopia and Eritrea are widening, following the CoHA and recent statements by Ethiopia regarding ownership of the Red Sea.

Eritrea now has the opportunity to garner support from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia/UAE, which have been competing with the Qatari/Turkish group for greater influence over the Horn of Africa due to historical ties and the UAE's military facility in Assab (Mahmood, 2020). Eritrea's membership in the Arab League and the Red Sea Council brings it closer to these Middle Eastern countries. The Red Sea Council, in particular, can be used against Ethiopia, given that it excluded the country from membership, citing direct access to the Red Sea as an essential criterion. The Council addresses matters such as the development of port facilities, security, and irregular migration in the Red Sea region, all of which are concerns for Ethiopia. Egypt has particularly opposed Ethiopia's membership, insisting on a territory along the Red Sea coastline as an inviolable criterion (Vertin, 2019). The exclusion of Ethiopia from this forum will enable Eritrea to mobilise forces against Ethiopia's recent demands, since the request has been declared unacceptable.

Eritrea's pivoting toward a partnership with the TPLF to sustain indirect pressure on the Ethiopian federal government is further complicated by Egypt's deepening alignment with Eritrea. As Ethiopia moved forward with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Egypt constructed an 'indirect pressure architecture' involving Ethiopia's neighbour (Nesibu, 2026; Ambrose, 2025). Cairo views Eritrea as a vital strategic counterforce to Ethiopia. By working towards rapprochement with the TPLF, Eritrea reinforces this Egyptian-led encirclement of Ethiopia, complicating the country's security context on its northern frontier.

6. Conclusion

The relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea has not lived up to the optimistic expectations that followed their rapprochement. The situation deteriorated after

the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CoHA), which revitalised the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as a significant political force in Tigray. This development contradicted Eritrea's interest in the TPLF's demise. Additionally, the worsening of relations became evident after the Prime Minister's explicit mention of Ethiopia's desire for direct access to the sea.

Ethiopia's recent pursuit of direct ownership of the Red Sea has instigated tensions and raised concerns about regional peace and stability in the Horn of Africa. This is evident through the negative responses received from neighbouring states regarding Ethiopia's request. Even offers such as sharing stakes in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and Ethiopian Airlines were rejected by these countries. The already-declining relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea following the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) may not withstand such a shock, potentially leading to a return to the "no war, no peace" situation between the two countries.

This article looked into the implications of Ethiopia-Eritrea relations for the Regional Security Complex of the Horn of Africa. If Ethiopia and Eritrea take measures to escalate the issue further, the countries may revert to the pre-rapprochement situation, in which they weaken each other's governments and become sources of instability in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia should carefully analyse the implications of each measure it takes to improve its access to the sea, considering the stakes extend beyond the Horn of Africa. Middle Eastern countries are competing to expand their influence in the Horn of Africa, while superpowers such as the US and China maintain military bases in Djibouti. Hence, every action that Ethiopia takes will require in-depth consideration of potential implications vis-à-vis the national interests of these states, as well as those of the Horn of Africa countries. ✨

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Notes

- 1 See Kłosowicz, R. (2015). The role of Ethiopia in the regional security complex of the Horn of Africa. *The Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences and Language Studies (EJSSLS)*, 2(2), 85–99.; Walsh, B. (2020). Revisiting Regional Security Complex Theory in Africa: Museveni's Uganda and Regional Security in East Africa. *African Security*, 13(4), 300–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2021.1873507>
- 2 See <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/36980/>

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