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Understanding Ethiopia's Maritime Deal with Somaliland Through Abiy Ahmed's Foreign Policy

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Policy.*

This paper examines Ethiopia's maritime deal with the de facto state of Somaliland in line with Abiy Ahmed's foreign policy. A qualitative approach was employed, and secondary data sources obtained from the literature, such as books, journal articles, government and international organisation reports, newsletters, and other credible internet sources, were analysed through qualitative data analysis techniques. The study's findings can be summarised as follows: The study postulates that Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland raises regional tension in the Horn of Africa, a region often known for conflict and persistent instability. The deal also draws the contending interest of external forces. Turkey becomes the guardian of Somalia's coastline, the UAE supports Ethiopia's agreement with Somaliland, and Egypt provides direct military support to Somalia for the first time in four decades. This development contributes to the escalation of diplomatic strife between Ethiopia and Somalia and regional tensions. The study also examines Ethiopia's post-2018 foreign policy since Abiy Ahmed took office. It underlines that Ethiopia remains without a clear foreign policy despite Abiy Ahmed's attempt in his early tenure to revise the 2002 Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy. The study asserts that the country's foreign policy is significantly influenced by Abiy Ahmed's highly personalised diplomacy and foreign relations that often bypass institutional approaches. In an assertion, the Ethiopian government was working to use multiple ports, including in Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia, through port diversification policy. However, all the previous port diversification attempts were abandoned without a clear justification. In exchange, Abiy Ahmed signed a direct sea access maritime deal with Somaliland to recognise Somalia's breakaway region. This development resulted in a suspicious attitude among Ethiopia's neighbours, notably Eritrea and Somalia, who initiated a new tripartite bloc with Egypt. This has the potential to isolate Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa diplomatically.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2024, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to get direct access to the sea with the de facto state of Somaliland. Somalia rejected the maritime deal that Ethiopia signed with the breakaway region of Somalia, as Somaliland is still not an independent country that the government of Somalia still considers an integral part of Somalia. It makes sense that Somaliland welcomes the deal with a proxy of recognition from Ethiopia as an independent state, a recognition that still needs to be provided at the AU or UN level. The deal immediately ignited regional tension in the Horn of Africa, often known for conflicts despite the region's geo-strategic significance. Somalia considers the agreement as Ethiopia's government is interfering in the internal affairs of Somalia, which violates the independence and sovereignty of Somalia (Al Jazeera, 2024c).

Ethiopia lost its access to the sea since Eritrea's secession in 1993, making the country solely dependent on Djibouti's port. In 2018, Abiy Ahmed came to power, followed by dramatic changes both in Ethiopia's domestic politics and the government's relations with the neighbouring countries, particularly with Eritrea. Abiy Ahmed has shown an immediate interest in revising the 2002 foreign and security policy of Ethiopia due to several reasonable factors that are taking place

globally and regionally; however, Ethiopia remained on Abiy Ahmed's highly personalised diplomatic relations and unilateral decisions despite the initiative to develop a new foreign policy.

Since Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia has been struggling to secure dependable and affordable port access. Attempts have been made to apply a port diversification policy, particularly since 2018. Apart from this national and regional strategic and diplomatic move, Abiy Ahmed signed a surprising maritime deal in January 2024 to get direct access to the sea from Somalia's breakaway region. This deal has led to diplomatic tension between Ethiopia and its neighbour Somalia. Additionally, this development brought external powers such as the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Egypt into the matter.

This paper intends to analyse how Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland, within the context of Abiy Ahmed's highly personalised foreign policy, has exacerbated regional tensions and drawn the interests of external powers in the Horn of Africa. The study employs a qualitative approach. Thus, the researcher obtains secondary data sources from the literature, such as books, journal articles, government and international organisation reports, newsletters, and other credible internet sources, and analyses them through qualitative data analysis techniques.

THE ETHIOPIA-SOMALILAND PORT DEAL

Following Eritrea's secession in 1993, Ethiopia has been one of the largest landlocked countries in the world, with over 120 million people, making the country dependent on Djibouti's port for its international trade. In January 2024, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding for a port deal with the de facto state of Somaliland, pursuing direct access to the Sea. Al Jazeera (2024a) reports that the agreement aims to lease 20 km (12 miles) of Somaliland's Sea coast to landlocked Ethiopia and Somaliland in exchange for receiving shares in Ethiopian Airlines and getting formal recognition as a sovereign state. Somaliland is a breakaway region of Somalia that has been seeking international recognition since 1991.

Though Somaliland declared its independence three decades ago, Somalia still regards it as an integral part of its territory. It claims that Ethiopia's deal with Somaliland is an act of aggression against its sovereignty and territorial integrity. According to the BBC (2024), Somalia fears Ethiopia's recognition of Somaliland in exchange for the port deal could encourage other nations to follow. Ethiopia's maritime deal with Somaliland led to the discords between Ethiopia and Somalia. In a direct response to the port deal, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, President of Somalia, in an interview¹ with Al Jazeera, called the deal "a violation against Somalia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence, and it is only the federal government of Somalia that has a legitimate right to make such deals, not a breakaway region of Somalia."

As tensions continued escalating between the two countries, in April 2024, Somalia expelled Ethiopia's ambassador and decided to shut down Ethiopia's consulates in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital (Al Jazeera, 2024c). Additionally, the Somali Civil Aviation Authority (SCAA) threatens

Ethiopian Airlines to suspend flights to Somalia if the airline refuses to properly identify the destinations in Somalia, including Hargeisa (The Africa Report, 2024). In the mounting tension, Somalia has also ordered the withdrawal of all Ethiopian peacekeeping troops from the country by the end of 2024 as the African Union Transition Mission mandate expires in December (VoA, 2024b). The decision to expel Ethiopian troops from Somalia's territory is a response to Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland.

Besides the diplomatic tension between Ethiopia and Somalia, Somalia has made separate military and economic cooperation agreements with Turkey and Ethiopia's Nile River rival Egypt. The subsequent developments indicate that the tension has become regionalised, which poses a massive threat to the regional stability of the already fragile Horn of Africa. The geopolitical stakes are high, threatening to draw in Middle Eastern powers, which have long been entangled in the region's complex political landscape with the potential to determine the shift of alliances and rivalries and reshape the regional order (The Reporter, 2024). The next section will discuss the involvement of regional powers following the maritime deal.

The Involvement of External Powers and Regional Rivalry

Turkey

Turkey began to maintain a strong tie with Somalia when the then-Turkish Prime Minister (current president) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a humanitarian visit to Somalia during a devastating famine in 2011. Erdoğan's visit was significant because it laid a strong foundation for the two countries' relationship. Turkey's presence in the Horn of Africa enabled the country to establish a large military facility training centre in Mogadishu in 2017. Regarding Turkey's policy towards the Horn of Africa, Van Loon (2022) explains that

¹ Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's interview with Al Jazeera <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KN3kalgYtWk>

Turkey's activities in Somalia aim to advance President Erdoğan's Neo-Ottoman vision, which intertwines international aid missions to promote a Turkish form of political Islam.

In February 2024, Somalia signed a Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement in response to Ethiopia's maritime deal with Somaliland. This new ten-year agreement between Somalia and Turkey entrusts Ankara to support Somalia's maritime security by building, modernising, and training its naval forces through air, land, and sea operations around Somalia's 3,333 km coastline (Sofos, 2024). Relatedly, DW (2024) reports that a Turkish Defence Ministry official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, stated that under the 10-year bilateral agreement, Turkey will also support Somalia's naval forces to develop its capacity and capabilities to combat illegal and irregular activities in its territorial waters and foreign interference. Additionally, as part of the Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, in March 2024, Turkey signed a deal with Somalia to explore oil and gas, development and production of petroleum from onshore and offshore blocks, as well as distribution of petroleum (VoA, 2024c).

Turkey has a good relationship with both Ethiopia and Somalia. However, the port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland could create a setback in diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Turkey. Turkey supported Ethiopia's government during the conflict with the TPLF forces by providing military supplies, notably unmanned aerial vehicles (drones). Ankara's recent efforts to mediate Ethiopia and Somalia can be seen as an approach to keeping its relationships with the two countries. Nevertheless, the maritime deal between Somalia and Turkey, making the latter the coastguard of Somalia, indicates that Turkey's strategic interest highly favours Somalia.

In the context of Turkey's political allyship and positioning in the region, the Emirates Policy Center (2024) notes that Turkey takes a calculated risk,

particularly because Somalia's geostrategic position with a 3,000-kilometre coastline is more critical to Ankara than Ethiopia's geographic position in the Horn of Africa. In this case, the situation has the potential to make Turkey an unfriendly country to Ethiopia on the one hand and exacerbate foreign powers' rivalry over the Horn of Africa on the other, fuelling the ongoing regional tension.

Turkey has been UAE's regional rival in the Middle East regional dynamic, particularly since the 2011 Arab Spring. The two countries have had a diplomatic rift; however, both have exerted efforts to de-escalate the tension in recent times. In November 2021, the UAE's Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan visited Turkey to repair their relationship. Turkey's President Erdogan reciprocated in February 2022, visiting the UAE to mend ties with Ankara (Dalay, 2022). Despite this development, Turkey is positioning itself against the UAE, which backs Somaliland and Ethiopia, and the maritime deal.

Turkey's presence and multiple strategic agreements with Somalia while the UAE maintained its strong footprint in the breakaway Somaliland will put them in a conflicting position in the Horn of Africa's geopolitical landscape. President Muse Bihi Abdi of the de facto state of Somaliland said in their effort for independence, the UAE would train Somaliland security forces, including the police, as part of the UAE's deal to establish a military base in Somaliland (Reuters, 2024b). This deal is clearly against Somalia's sovereignty and territorial claim over Somaliland and its February 2024 defence agreement with Turkey, which puts the UAE and Turkey in a divergent position in the ongoing regional tension.

The United Arab Emirates

The UAE maintains a good relationship with Ethiopia and the de facto state of Somaliland and is believed to encourage and facilitate the January 2024 port deal. The port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland was signed six months after the UAE's

president visited Ethiopia. In Somaliland, the UAE-based global ports operator DP World manages a substantial economic free zone at the Port of Berbera. The port operator DP World signed a 30-year concession agreement to manage the Port of Berbera in May 2016, with a vision to make it a regional maritime hub in the Horn of Africa (The National, 2016).

Ethiopia's relations with the UAE have shown significant progress since the 2018 political transition in Ethiopia and Abiy Ahmed took office. In August 2023, the UAE's President, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, officially visited Ethiopia. The visit aims to strengthen bilateral cooperation between the two countries. According to the African Business (2023) report, the two countries have signed various memoranda of understanding agreements in 17 fields, including agriculture, food security, energy, trade, investment, and technology.

From a military point of view, the United Arab Emirates provides crucial military support for Ethiopia's government. It has been supporting the training of Abiy Ahmed's Republican Guard tasked with protecting senior government officials, Ardemagni (2024). On the economic aspects, for instance, the central banks of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Ethiopia have signed a bilateral currency swap agreement with a value of up to 3 billion dirhams (\$816.79 million) and an initial agreement to establish a framework for the use of local currencies in settling cross-border transactions (Reuters, 2024c).

The UAE has been leveraging its growing economy to expand its sphere of influence in the Horn of Africa. Over the last two decades, the UAE has invested aggressively in infrastructure, roads, and logistics in the Horn of Africa to take advantage of natural resources and growing consumer markets in the region, situated near the Bab al-Mandab, a vital trade water lane linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean (Cafiero, 2024). As recent developments have witnessed, the UAE's presence

in the region goes beyond economic interests, increasingly playing a military role aiming to counter terrorism and piracy, partnering with countries of the region through military assistance and defence cooperation for a stability-oriented long-term presence in countries where the UAE invests Ardemagni (2024).

The UAE conducted its first publicly reported drone strike in Somalia in June 2023, targeting a jihadist-controlled village in the country's Galguduud region (Levy, 2023). In February 2024, a terrorist attack claimed by al Shabab killed eighteen soldiers, including three from the UAE and one from Bahrain, at the General Gordon Training Centre in Mogadishu, a military facility run by the Emiratis (Ardemagni, 2024). This attack is an indicative incident that the UAE could retaliate for Al Shaba's attack on its soldiers and military facility. The UAE's June 2023 airstrike can be seen as it might continue to conduct the same military operation against the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group al-Shabab.

Regionally, the UAE's position is often against Turkey and Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates is likely to align itself with Ethiopia and Somaliland in the escalating Ethiopia-Somalia tension. At the same time, Turkey and Egypt have already positioned themselves in Somalia (The Reporter, 2024). In an assertion, for instance, the UAE backs the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar. While Turkey supports the opposing UN-recognised Government of National Accord, and in Sudan, the UAE has reportedly been supporting the Rapid Support Forces, while Egypt backs Al Burhan.

The origins of the rivalry between Turkey and the UAE go back to the Arab uprisings of 2011 that overthrew several governments in the Arab World. Erdogan's Islamist-leaning and right-wing Justice and Development Party (AKP) sees the governments that took office in Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt as friendly, hoping that the new regional order would alter the Arab world in the ancient

power structure (Aydintasbas, & Bianco, 2021). All this signalled danger to several Gulf monarchies, including the UAE, that the popular uprising in the region could challenge their societies, where the UAE considers Turkey a catalyst in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. In contrast, as an avowedly secular and absolutist state, the Emirates seeks to contain the spread of political Islam, an ideological populism that is attributed to the events of the Arab Spring (Van Loon, 2022).

Egypt

Historically, for the longest period, Egypt's relationship with Ethiopia has always been about the Nile River, and the two countries' rivalry has intensified since 2011 when Ethiopia began to build the Grand Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam (GERD). In January 2024, a few weeks after Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud visited Egypt, seeking the country's support. In a conference, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said that his government stands shoulder to shoulder with Somalia, and Egypt will not allow anyone to threaten Somalia or affect its security (Al Jazeera, 2024b). It was clear that Egypt sought the tension between Ethiopia and Somalia to expand its sphere of influence in the region and pressure Ethiopia by aligning with Somalia.

In the ongoing event, according to Reuters (2024a), Egypt condemned the Ethiopia-Somaliland port deal and subsequently signed a security agreement with Somalia in August 2024, agreed to send its troops to a new peacekeeping mission in Somalia, and delivered its first military aid to the country in more than four decades. Egypt's plan is for up to 5,000 Egyptian soldiers to join a new African Union peacekeeping force at the end of this year, with an additional 5,000 to be deployed separately (BBC, 2024). This indicates that the disagreements between Ethiopia and Somalia have allowed Egypt's long-awaited dream of a physical presence in the Horn of Africa to be true, at least in the name of a peacekeeping mission at this time.

Egypt might use the peacekeeping mission as a foundation to further strengthen its relations with Somalia and capitalise on its interests, similar to Turkey's political strategy. Turkey's 2011 aid mission to Somalia grew to build a military base in Mogadishu in 2017 and now extends to being a coastline guard of Somalia. Similarly, Egypt's current relationship with Somalia has the potential to be a renewed strategic partnership in the future, which might grant Egypt a permanent military presence in the country. According to the New Arab (2024), Egypt sees Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland and the country's demand to build a naval base as a threat to Egypt's presence in the Red Sea.

The port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland resulted in military cooperation between Egypt and Somalia, bringing Ethiopia's Nile rival to its border. This situation could lead to a "low-scale inter-state conflict" between Ethiopia and Egypt if their troops meet at the Ethiopia-Somalia border (BBC, 2024). If not, Egypt can be a proxy to pressure Ethiopia in the ongoing tension between Ethiopia and Somalia. Following this significant regional shift, Ethiopia has strongly warned that the increasing Egyptian military presence near its border poses a national security threat (Institute for the Study of War, 2024).

The Resurgence of Al-Shabab and Terrorism Threat

Historical relationships and carefully built international relations have given Ethiopia favourable protection from terrorism in the Horn of Africa. However, given the persistent internal political upheavals in the country and weaker diplomatic relationships, it is very difficult to be certain if this political and military protection continues. One militant group threat to Ethiopia is the Al-Shabaab, an Islamist militant group based in Somalia that has been fighting for years to overthrow the Somali government and establish an Islamic state in the country.

The group has conducted several terrorist attacks in Somalia and expanded its threat to neighbouring countries, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Uganda, making the entire Horn of Africa vulnerable to terrorism threats. According to Berouk (2011), the region has seen several terrorist attacks since the mid-1990s, including the attacks in Kenya targeting the US Embassy in 1998 and the bombing of a hotel in Mombasa in 2002, which have made the region listed under the US's war against terrorism that was followed after the September 11 terrorist attack.

Terrorism has been an existential threat to Ethiopia since the collapse of Somalia after Siad Barre was removed from power. The FDRE Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy Strategy (2002) states that Al-Shabab has been a major external security threat to Ethiopia following the absence of an effective central government and the expansion of religious extremists with irredentist and expansionist motives advancing a greater Somalia agenda. The EPRDF-led government had been working closely with the Western countries, mainly the US, to create the capability to defend Ethiopia and foil any attack by Al Shabab.

After being weakened and lessened, Al-Shabab is regrouping and becoming a visible threat to the Horn of Africa again. The militant group has encroached on the Ethiopian border in the eastern part of the country during the war between Abiy's government and TPLF forces. In July 2022, over 500 al-Shabaab fighters travelled at least 150 kilometres into the Somali region in eastern Ethiopia following many aborted attempts to conduct massive strikes on Ethiopian soil (Holmquist, & Ida, 2023). The Al-Shabaab militants entered the Somali region through the Afdheer zone on July 20 through the Bakool region of neighbouring Somalia, bordering Ethiopia's Somali region (Addis Standard, 2022b).

Al-Shabaab conducted a terrorist attack while Ethiopia was facing several complex internal issues, which opened the opportunity for the terrorist group

to cross the country's border. As Ethiopia is going through multifaceted internal political problems, Al-Shabaab may continue to conduct further terrorist activities in Ethiopia, which might contribute to the internal instability of Ethiopia and exacerbate the country's already existing problems. VoA (2023a) reports that in September 2023, Al-Shabab militants attacked military convoys carrying Ethiopian soldiers in Somalia's southwestern Bakool region, and the group claimed responsibility in a statement that it killed 167 Ethiopian soldiers, destroyed military vehicles, and seized a cache of weapons and ammunition.

Previously, Al-Shabaab expanded its influence to Somali-inhabited countries beyond current-day Somalia, appointing leaders from Somaliland and recruiting fighters from Ethiopia and Kenya, aiming to bring ethnic Somali regions of East Africa into one (Bacon, 2022). Viewing Al-Shabab as an existential threat to Ethiopia, Somalia's government's decision to expel Ethiopian peacekeeping soldiers following Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland is an indication that this development has denied Ethiopia's role in fighting terrorism.

Al-Shabaab considers Ethiopia a preeminent and eternal enemy of Somalia, portraying Ethiopia as a country seeking to occupy Somalia's seaports and lands (Ibid). The group may use Abiy Ahmed's port deal with Somaliland to ignite ultra-nationalistic sentiments and recruit more members. The group may also take advantage of Ethiopia's ongoing internal conflict, which would make it harder for Ethiopia to deal with external threats while struggling with several internal crises. According to Stigant (2022), Al-Shabab could use the ongoing crises in Ethiopia and Sudan to spread its recruitment and influence and pose a threat to the peace and stability of the broader Horn of Africa. One of the signs of the resurgence of Al Shabab is that the militant group has made a deal with the Houthis in Yemen to get weapons and work together (CNN, 2024).

The Post-2018 Foreign Policy of Abiy Ahmed

Following the 2018 political transition in Ethiopia that brought Abiy Ahmed to office, the new government took steps to amend the 2002 Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy (FANSPS) of the country, which combines foreign policy and national security strategy. The 2002 FANSPS was mostly an inward-looking policy focusing on fighting poverty, eradicating illiteracy, achieving economic development, and protecting national security. The FANSPS takes economic diplomacy as the key element of the country's relationships with other nations based on identifying markets, attracting investment, requesting grants, and striving to utilise available opportunities.

In 2019, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government proposed a new foreign policy called "The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Foreign Relations Policy"². A public discussion was held on the proposed foreign policy (The Reporter, 2019). Changes in global and regional politics of the Horn of Africa over the past 20 years, the birth of South Sudan as an independent state, the normalisation of Ethiopia and Eritrea relations, and the growing geopolitical and strategic competition of foreign powers over the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are among the major factors for the revision of Ethiopia's previous foreign policy. The revised Ethiopia's Foreign Relations Policy asserts that it pays special attention to the neighbouring countries to move along with the geopolitical developments in the region over the past twenty years.

It has been more than six years since Abiy Ahmed became Ethiopia's Prime Minister; however, despite the moves to amend the 2002 FANSPS, Ethiopia remains without a clear foreign policy. The FDRE Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been sidelined to effectively execute the country's foreign relations since 2018 because the country's foreign policy has been under Abiy Ahmed's personal influence instead of following institutional

approaches. Related to this, Belete (2024) suggests the urgency to adopt and ratify a compatible foreign policy because the lack of clear foreign policy can misplace the country's priorities and challenge its foreign relations with the ever-evolving regional and global phenomena.

The Highly Personalised Foreign Policy of Abiy Ahmed

Despite efforts to revise the 2002 foreign and security policy, Abiy Ahmed's policy has been highly personalised, often bypassing institutional frameworks. Since 2018, Ethiopia's foreign policy has been characterised by the highly personalised diplomacy of Abiy Ahmed. Sarkar (2023) asserts that Ethiopia's foreign policy is deinstitutionalised, which cuts the Ministry of Foreign Affairs roles and diplomatic staffing, focusing on diaspora advocacy rather than professional diplomats. Abiy Ahmed has been applying his philosophy called Medemer (Synergy), a semi-religious rhetoric of hope, love, and reconciliation in Ethiopia's foreign relations to consolidate his power (Ibid.). Abiy Ahmed himself explained in the 2019 World Economic Forum, Davos, that regional integration and openness to the world are among the main pillars of his philosophy. Yet, his unilateral approach and decisions have placed Ethiopia's foreign policy towards the Horn of Africa in the wrong position.

During his early tenure, Abiy Ahmed was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for initiating rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, ending the two decades of stalemate between the two countries. This moment was regarded as a promising implication for the broader regional stability in the fragile Horn of Africa. The tripartite treaty signed in January 2020 between Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia was the significant development that followed the Ethiopia-Eritrea rapprochement. The three countries agreed on a Joint Plan of Action for 2020, focusing on strengthening peace, stability, and security and promoting regional economic and

² Draft Document.

social development (Henneberg, & Stapel, 2020). This coalition was expected to bring peace and stability to the conflict-ridden region, mainly because Ethiopia's previous relationships with the two countries were known for conflict and tension.

The Ethio-Eritrea war and the following two decades of tensions accompanied by the support of one another's opposition and insurgent groups, Somalia's fragility and Ethiopia's military intervention, and the emergence of Al Shabab as a terrorist group are among the factors that influenced Ethiopia's relationships with the two countries. In 2007, Eritrea suspended its membership in IGAD following the Ethiopian troop's presence in Somalia, which undermined IGAD's regional integration goals and regional peace and security in the Horn of Africa. In 2009, Eritrea was sanctioned by the UN Security Council for arming, training, and equipping armed groups and their members, including Al-Shabaab, and attempts to destabilise the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia. In 2018, a range of international sanctions imposed against Eritrea nearly a decade ago, including an arms embargo, travel restrictions, and a freeze on the assets of its political and military leaders, were unanimously lifted by the Security Council for signing a peace agreement with Ethiopia in July (UN News, 2018).

Gradually, Ethiopia's relations with Eritrea and Somalia couldn't be seen as expected. First, the highly personified relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea started deteriorating following the Pretoria peace agreement between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF in November 2022, then fuelled by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's recent ambition to secure direct access to a seaport (Emirates Policy Center, 2023). Second, Ethiopia's relationship with Somalia declined when Hassan Sheikh Mohammed replaced Farmajo. It has worsened since the January 2024 port deal, raising tensions in the Horn of Africa.

Recent developments reveal that Eritrea and Somalia are strengthening ties and invited Egypt to

form a new tripartite bloc. Egypt considers the ongoing tension in the Horn of Africa as an opportunity. The foreign minister and intelligence chief of Egypt visited Eritrea on September 14, 2024, and conveyed a message from President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to his Eritrean counterpart (Egypt Today, 2024). In less than a month, leaders of Egypt, Somalia, and Eritrea have met in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, which had strained relations with Ethiopia.

During their meeting, President El-Sisi of Egypt and his counterpart, Essayas, agreed to boost their relationship for mutual benefit. The need to adhere to the basic principles and pillars of international law, respect for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the countries of the region, and rejection of interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region under any pretext or justification are among the major areas the two leaders emphasised (Eritrea Ministry of Information, 2024). Egypt's presence on top of Ethiopia's maritime deal with Somaliland can potentially alienate Ethiopia from its neighbouring countries and create enmity among states of the Horn of Africa, brewing tensions and conflict.

Abiy Ahmed's Move for Access to the Sea

Before Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding with Somalia, Abiy Ahmed's government had an initiative of port diversification policy. This attempts to use Port Sudan and Berbera Port in addition to Djibouti. Securing access to durable and reliable port services to facilitate import and export trade is one of the significant features of the 2019 proposed foreign policy, which stresses the importance of connecting Ethiopia through roads and infrastructure with its neighbouring countries to secure durable port services and transit corridors. Ethiopia aims to diversify its port access facilities and services to improve its trade corridor access routes, East African Business Week (2021).

For instance, in the case of Berbera Port, Ethiopia made a move to get a 19 percent share from DP

World. In this regard, Essa Kayd Mohamoud, foreign minister of the self-declared state of Somaliland, explains in an interview³ that Ethiopia and Somaliland were discussing at ministerial commissions and technical committees the conditions under which Ethiopia could get the 19 percent stake from Berbera port, where Somaliland has a 35 percent stake, and DP World a 65 percent stake.

Furthermore, an Ethiopian delegation led by the former Minister of Transport, Dagmawit Moges, discussed with Sudan's Minister of Infrastructure and Transport ways aimed at helping Ethiopia as an additional option through Port Sudan by identifying the bottlenecks encountered in using the port (Fana Broadcasting Corporation, 2020). These attempts from Ethiopia were promising to get access to multiple ports and realise the port diversification policy despite being a landlocked country, which has the potential to enable Ethiopia to secure access to durable and reliable port services to facilitate import and export trade. However, this approach was abandoned by the Ethiopian government, and Abiy Ahmed signed a new port deal with Somaliland, indicating how his government lacks clear and long-term foreign policy.

Relatedly, after the July 2018 diplomatic resumption between Ethiopia and Eritrea, an Ethiopian commercial ship called "Mekelle" was docked in September 2018 at the port of Massawa for the first time in two decades. This happened when Prime Minister Abiy visited the port cities of Massawa and Assab, which indicated the reopening of the roads connecting Ethiopia and Eritrean ports to recommence services (Ethiopian News Agency, 2018). The two leaders agreed to strengthen economic relations, including using Eritrean ports, Massawa and Assab. During that time, the Ethiopian Maritime Affairs Authority (EMAA) announced the finalisation of a study in October

2018 specifying port usage rates and logistics service provisions to use Eritrean ports (The Reporter, 2018).

It was expected that Ethiopia's normalisation of its relations with Eritrea could be institutionalised and further elevated to a long-term strategic partnership in different aspects, including enabling Ethiopia to get access to Eritrean ports. Before the war broke out between the two countries in 1998, the Assab port was instrumental in facilitating Ethiopia's imports and exports trade despite Eritrea's independence in 1993.⁴ However, due to Abiy Ahmed's highly personalised approach to Eritrea, the agreements signed between the two leaders are nowhere near being implemented. This can be because of two major reasons. On the one hand, the substances of the peace agreement signed between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in September 2018 were never made public (Sarkar, 2023), and the failure to repair the two countries diplomatic rift following the November 2022 Pretoria Pece deal between Abiy's government and the TPLF on the other.

The Ethiopian government has failed to continue to engage on the already established paths and shifted to sign a new maritime deal with Somaliland, which has led to regional tension. This indicates the inconsistency of Abiy Ahmed's policy towards neighbouring countries with coastlines, which might create a sense of suspicion and mistrust against Ethiopia and make the country diplomatically isolated in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, the extent of Ethiopia's maritime deal with Somaliland is not clear, whether it is just a commercial port deal or if it does include building a naval force.

As part of Abiy Ahmed's military reform, the Ethiopian government has shown an interest in establishing a naval force in the Red Sea, and efforts

³ "We are Buffer Zone for Ethiopia." The Reporter interview with Essa Kayd Mohamoud. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/31447/>

⁴ Eritrea-Ethiopia: IRIN Focus on Assab, 5 June 2000.

were made to realise it. A military cooperation deal was signed between France and Ethiopia in 2019, including building a navy for Ethiopia during Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's visit to France. Nevertheless, France suspended the agreement in 2021 as a result of the war between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF forces and violations of human rights and war crimes (Agence France Press, 2021; Mahmoud, 2021). Efforts from the Ethiopian side have continued despite France's cancellation of the deal; hence, the Russian Navy delegates led by Major General Ostrikov met with the Commander-in-Chief of the Ethiopian Navy, Commodore Walatsa Wacha, and discussed Ethiopia's efforts to modernise the Ethiopian Navy, and an agreement on a bilateral cooperative framework has been reached in various fields (Addis Standard, 2022a).

The ongoing geopolitical rivalries over the Horn of Africa and the increasing foreign military presence in the region, particularly the welcoming attitude of Djibouti towards foreign military bases, where Ethiopia is solely dependent on port services, can be an existential threat to Ethiopia's pursuit of dependable port service. It is clear that this situation, combined with its growing population and economic demands, motivated Ethiopia to search for alternative port access. However, despite the justifiable causes of the country, the Ethiopian government's approach and decision towards access to ports is not based on a clear foreign policy; rather, it is driven by Abiy Ahmed's personal ambition, which complicates the country's relationship with its neighbours.

In the conflict-ridden Horn of Africa, peaceful mechanisms are essential for Ethiopia's quest for access to dependable ports. Regarding this, Mahemud (2024) argues by referring to several articles of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), including Article 125 of the convention, which stipulates;

"I, the landlocked states, shall have the right of access to and from the sea for the purpose of exercising the rights provided for in this

Convention, including those relating to the freedom of the high seas and the common heritage of mankind. To this end, land-locked states shall enjoy freedom of transit through the territory of transit states by all means of transport; II, the terms and modalities for exercising freedom of transit shall be agreed between the land-locked states and transit states concerned through bilateral, subregional, or regional agreements; and III, transit states, in the exercise of their full sovereignty over their territory, shall have the right to take all measures necessary to ensure that the rights and facilities provided for in this Part for land-locked states shall in no way infringe their legitimate interests."

Diversionsary Policy

Ethiopia is going through a synchronous of internal instability and regional tensions following Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland. The deal might be intended to divert and quell the Ethiopian people's growing grievance against Abiy Ahmed's government due to the persistent internal political crisis to the old Red Sea nostalgia. Leaders can apply diversionsary tactics to distract the populace's attention and survive politically when they face public antagonism over domestic economic, social, and political problems by entering into conflict with foreign countries, Kanat (2011). In the Ethiopian context, this attempt was seen when former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi decided to build a hydroelectric dam, GERD, over the Nile to divert the post-2005 political grievances of the people and deter the inflow threat of the Arab Spring when a popular uprising engulfed the Arab world.

However, given the ongoing deadliest conflicts and gross human rights violations in the country, it seems unlikely that Abiy Ahmed's government can effectively divert domestic issues and strong opposition, as what is going on in the country is more concerning than the quest for direct access to the sea. Experts in the field, such as Mr. Tilahun

Adamu⁵, a former Ethiopian diplomat in Mogadishu, Somalia, noted that it is implausible for the Ethiopian government to mobilise the people in Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland while many Ethiopians are domestically fighting existential threats.

Abiy Ahmed's domestic reform, particularly the military, is about consolidating his power and silencing opponents, using the army as a sole means to handle domestic issues instead of working for the prevalence of unity and good governance. Abiy's approach to tackling his opponents has led the country to continuous conflict that has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of millions since he came to power, International Crisis Group (2023). One of the reasons that most Ethiopians supported the 2018 political transition and Abiy Ahmed was the promises that he and his colleagues made to bring unity by changing the post-1991 ethno-territorial federalism arrangement that significantly affected the socio-political relationships of the Ethiopian people. It has become crystal clear that Abiy Ahmed has failed to keep and deliver his promises of uniting the divided Ethiopian society when he came to power. This situation significantly eroded the public's trust in the government, bringing a legitimacy crisis against Abiy Ahmed's government.

CONCLUSION

The memorandum of understanding signed between Ethiopia and the de facto state of Somaliland on January 2024, aiming at gaining direct access to the sea in exchange for recognising Somaliland as an independent state, has become a significant source of regional tension in the Horn of Africa. The surprising deal that Abiy Ahmed signed was consequential, leading to Somalia's diplomatic cut with Ethiopia, and paved the way for Egypt, Ethiopia's Nila rival, to get a military presence in

Somalia through peacekeeping missions and military cooperation. Egypt is gaining influence in the region and working to form a new regional bloc with Eritrea and Somalia, as the two countries strained ties with Ethiopia. Furthermore, recent developments following Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland bring the competing regional interests of Turkey and the United Arab Emirates to the Horn of Africa.

The maritime deal that Abiy Ahmed signed with Somaliland has sidelined the previous efforts to realise port diversification policy through foreign policy revision aimed at paying particular attention to neighbouring countries. This inconsistent approach is a sign of how Ethiopia's foreign relations are driven by Abiy Ahmed's ambition, bypassing institutional approaches and diplomatic engagements, which left the country without a clear foreign policy and long-term strategic objectives towards the region regardless of the initial moves to amend the 2002 Foreign Affairs and National Security Policy and Strategy document. Abiy Ahmed's highly personalised diplomacy places Ethiopia's interest in the region and its relations with its neighbouring states without a clear foreign policy.

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⁵ Interview with Meseret Media. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18Nc2ajLNAQ>

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