

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Strategic Imperatives, Responses and Geopolitical Repercussions

Shimellis Hailu^{1*}, Hussein Gemma² & Yonas Ashine³

Abstract

This paper examined the strategic imperative and geopolitical repercussions of Ethiopia's pursuit of sea access, focusing on the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with Somaliland and the subsequent Ankara Declaration with Somalia. The study used primary data collected from key informants and relevant secondary data from current discourses. Ethiopia's maritime initiative, justified by demographic and economic growth, security concerns, and ambitions for regional leadership and integration, resulted in the signing of the MoU with Somaliland. This agreement has exacerbated geopolitical rivalries and led to the formation of three distinct camps: supporters, cautious observers, and adversaries. These rivalries intensified regional tensions, proxy politics, and the military presence of Egypt and Eritrea in Somalia. It also expanded Turkish influence and bolstered Ethiopia's efforts to secure sea access, which led to the signing of the Ankara Declaration. The Ankara Declaration marks a shift in regional dynamics. It eases tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, acknowledges Ethiopia's quest for sea access, reaffirms Somalia's territorial integrity, and re-engages Ethiopia in Somali security issues. However, Somaliland and key opponents of the MoU, who have formed a de facto alliance with Somalia, remain resentful, which could lead to further geopolitical shifts. Therefore, the Ankara Declaration does not supersede the MoU but adjusts regional alignments within ongoing rivalries. The core issues driving these rivalries, Ethiopia's quest for sea access and Somaliland's pursuit of statehood, remain central to the changing regional geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Ankara Declaration; Critical Geopolitics; Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU; HoA; Proxy Politics; Sea Access

Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HoA) is a strategically significant geopolitical flashpoint in the world. The region borders oil-rich Arabian nations and controls the strategically vital Bab el Mandeb Strait. It serves as a maritime gateway for Israel's critical supply lines and connects global shipping routes with the Red Sea. By overseeing parts of the Gulf of Aden

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- 1 Researcher, Institute of Foreign Affairs and PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University, corresponding author, email: shimellishailu@yahoo.com
 - 2 Department of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University
 - 3 Department of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University
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and the Indian Ocean, it facilitates the passage of numerous oil tankers crucial to the worldwide energy trade (Center for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC), 2023). Furthermore, the Horn offers views of the junction of the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean, which augments its geopolitical viability (Schwab, 1978). Its geopolitical significances made the HoA a center of rivalries and power struggles among regional powers, extra-regional powers, and non-state actors (CDRC, 2023; Gashaw & Zelalem, 2016; Kidane, 2011; Schwab, 1978).

The turbulent history of the HoA dates back to the colonial era when Italy, Britain, and France partitioned the region into their respective spheres of influence, with the notable exception of Ethiopia (Schwab, 1978). These dynamics persisted during the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union supported competing states, factions, and proxies in the region. This ever-shifting geopolitical competition has created a dynamic web of evolving alliances, rivalries, proxy politics, and ongoing instability in the area, which attracts the attention of policymakers and researchers. The HoA rivalries are, therefore, a significant research issue and a widely studied theme. Among studies preoccupied with such a theme are Bereketgab (2023), Berouk (2012), CDRC (2023), Gashaw & Zelalem (2016), and Kidane (2011).

However, the situation remains ever-changing and highly dynamic. For instance, since 2018, the HoA has undergone significant political dynamics, including Ethiopia's internal political reform, the fall of Sudan's longstanding regime, and the historic rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. During the first two years of Abiy Ahmed's government, Ethiopia emerged as a beacon of hope in the region, fostering optimism for lasting regional peace (Rift Valley Institute, 2022). Key regional initiatives, such as the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Abiy's mediation efforts between rival factions in Sudan, South Sudan, and between Somalia's federal government and regional states, have raised hopes for stability in the region (Rift Valley Institute, 2022).

Nevertheless, this trajectory began to shift with the emergence of a proposed trilateral alliance among Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia (Amare *et al*, 2024), which many analysts viewed as a destabilizing force that rekindled old geopolitical rivalries and disrupted hopes for a stabilized region (Rift Valley Institute, 2022). This tension further escalated with the outbreak of the Tigray war in Ethiopia (Amare *et al*, 2024). The conclusion of the Tigray War in 2022 reignited a fresh realignment of the HoA geopolitical landscape. The proposed trilateral alliance collapsed, Sudan entered a devastating civil war, and the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea deteriorated. The return of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to power in Somalia led to a recalibration of Somalia's ties with Ethiopia (Amare *et al*, 2024) while Ethiopia openly began to orchestrate its policy to gain direct access to the sea (Abiy, 2023). These developments collectively rekindled the fragile nature of HoA geopolitics. Access to the sea, which is stated as an existential necessity in Ethiopia's new foreign policy (Yohannes, 2019; FDRE Revised Foreign Policy Draft Document, 2019), is

at the forefront of this new geopolitical dynamic. Subsequently, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a MoU on January 1, 2024, marking the beginning of a new geopolitical rivalry.

Following the signing of the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland, the geopolitical landscape of the HoA underwent new dynamics (Alade, 2024; Mehari, 2024; Santos, 2023). After a year of antagonism between Ethiopia and Somalia, the two countries signed the Ankara declaration to de-escalate tensions. However, geopolitical rivalries persisted in various dimensions. Except for case-based commentaries (Alade, 2024; Santos, 2023), there are no in-depth analysis that exhaustively explores the strategic imperatives and initiatives of Ethiopia's quest for sea access and its geopolitical implications since the signing of the MoU. The paper addresses two interrelated questions: what strategic initiatives and justifications are employed to realize Ethiopia's quest for sea access? And what are the geopolitical repercussions of these justifications and initiatives?

Methodologically, the paper employed a qualitative research approach. Both primary and secondary data were obtained from various sources. The primary data were gathered from interviews with 15 key informants, comprising ambassadors, career diplomats, veteran diplomats, and researchers with experience in Ethiopia's foreign policy decision-making, implementation, and studies. These primary data were triangulated with contemporary discourses, including speeches by key political figures, academic analyses, policy documents, expert commentaries, insights from think tanks, and relevant literature. To understand and explain the complex geopolitical landscape of the HoA, the researcher attempted to engage in referencing multiple sources. The data gathered from these sources were triangulated to provide an understanding of the current HoA geopolitical configuration following the MoU and Ankara Declaration.

Theoretical Perspective: Critical Geopolitics

Critical geopolitical theory posits that geopolitics should not be limited to the physical geography and strategic location of a region but should also encompass the complex power dynamics, cultural influences, and historical legacies that shape the interactions between different actors (Agnew, 2007). This perspective challenges traditional state-centric views of geopolitics and encompasses the role of discourses, power relations, and competing narratives in shaping geopolitical realities (Agnew, 2007; Dalby & Tuathail, 2002). In the study of HoA geopolitics, examining how regional and extra-regional actors pursue their interests through the lens of ideology, identity, historical legacy, and nationalism is as vital as investigating the region's strategic importance (Dalby & Tuathail, 2002). This makes critical geopolitical theory relevant for analyzing HoA geopolitical dynamics.

The HoA is a site where various non-state actors intersect with both extra-regional and regional powers as they struggle to maintain their interests (CDRC, May 2023; Surafel, 2024). This competition for control over resources, trade routes, and spheres of influence is not solely about material gains; it also involves the projection of ideological and political

influence (Gashaw & Zelalem, 2016). Consequently, critical geopolitical theory helps uncover the underlying power structures, the positions of actors, and the discursive practices that contribute to the ongoing geopolitical tensions following the signing of the MoU.

The context of Ethiopia's foreign policy approach, which is the primary source of the ongoing geopolitical rivalries, can be examined through this critical geopolitical lens. Ethiopia's policy positions, narratives of regional leadership, security concerns, and the quest for sea access (Abiy Ahmed, 2023; Goitom, 2023; Yohannes, 2019) are analyzed using a similar theory. These narratives influence its interactions with regional and extra-regional actors. Therefore, this study argues that the narratives/discourses, historical legacies, and power relations surrounding the MoU and the Ankara Declaration have shaped the geopolitical complexities of the HoA region.

Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Strategic Imperatives and Geopolitical Repercussions

Strategic Imperatives and Justifications

Ethiopia, as the epicenter of the HoA geopolitical landscape, shares both the advantages and disadvantages of the region's geopolitical dynamics (Berouk, 2012; Goitom, 2023). Recently, Ethiopia introduced a foreign policy that emphasized access to the sea as an existential necessity (the FDRE revised Foreign Policy draft document, 2019), using three strategic imperatives as justifications. These are demographic-economic growth, military-security concerns, and regional leadership and integration.

The first strategic imperative and justification for Ethiopia's quest for sea access is dynamic demographic and economic growth. Ethiopia's rapid demographic and economic expansion has significantly intensified the need for direct access to the sea. With its population soaring from approximately 32 million in 1980 to over 135 million currently, the pressure on national infrastructure, economic systems, and natural resources has risen sharply (Country Economy, 2015; Worldometer, 2025). The current Ethiopia population is nearly equivalent to the total sum of all six HoA countries. Additionally, Ethiopia's population growth rate is the second highest, following Somalia (Worldometer, 2025).

Country	Ethiopia	Eritrea	Djibouti	Somalia	Kenya	South Sudan	Sudan
population	135,472,051	3,607,003	1,184,076	19,654,739	57,532,493	12,188,788	51,662,147
Po. growth	2.58%	2.02%	1.31%	3.4%	1.95%	2.05%	2.4%

Source: Worldometer, 2025 estimation

Economically, Ethiopia is among the fastest-growing countries and has the largest economy in the Horn of Africa (HoA). Ethiopia's economy presents significant opportunities for investment and trade. It is one of 11 African countries that experienced strong economic growth in 2024, with a projected growth rate of 6.7% (Africa Development Bank Group, 2024). Ethiopia also has the most substantial HoA GDP. For example, the ISS report showed that the HoA region's total GDP was about US\$160 billion in 2019, with most economic activity centered in Sudan and Ethiopia, which together make up 89 percent of the Horn's total GDP (ISS, 2023).

This surge in demographic and economic growth has driven urbanization and industrialization, which, in turn, have increased the demand for imports and expanded export capacity (Abiy, 2023). As the population grows, so does the demand for consumer goods, services, and trade volume. However, Ethiopia remains landlocked and almost entirely reliant on the port of Djibouti for over 95 percent of its imports and exports (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024). According to informants, high transportation costs, bureaucracy, and delays associated with using foreign ports undermine Ethiopia's efforts to build a resilient and competitive economy (Interview with KII-3, 18 January 2024). Furthermore, this dependence exposes the country to strategic and logistical vulnerabilities (Abebe, 2007), which could have a negative consequence on the national economy and food security. The quest for reliable maritime trade routes has also been linked to securing essential resources during crises and conflicts, such as food and military equipment, promptly (Interview with KII-8, 28 January 2024).

As Ethiopia's population and economy grow, the quest for sovereign access to the sea has become a strategic imperative for ensuring national security, economic resilience, and geopolitical influence (Interview with KII-1, 24 January 2024). This is because obtaining independent sea access would enable Ethiopia to access lower logistical costs, enhance export and import capabilities, and attract flow of foreign direct investment (Interview with KII-3, 18 January 2024). Similarly, maritime connectivity would enable Ethiopia to develop further port-adjacent industries, special economic zones, and regional supply chains, thereby contributing to sustainable development (Interview with KII-4, January 19, 2024).

The second strategic imperative and justification for Ethiopia's quest for sea access is military-security concerns. As a landlocked nation, Ethiopia has been vulnerable in both national defense and regional influence (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024). These vulnerabilities have grown more acute alongside rising regional tensions, transnational threats, and the demands of securing growing economic and security logistics (Abebe, 2007). The nature of the HoA, including state fragility, proxy politics, terrorism, and geopolitical competition, has exacerbated Ethiopia's vulnerability to port-related blackmail (Interview with KII-7, January 25, 2024).

The military-security concern is one of the primary concerns because Ethiopia depends on the port of Djibouti for nearly all its imports and exports (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024). In times of conflict or diplomatic breakdown, Ethiopia's lack of sovereign port access could jeopardize its national security. It is argued that "due to lack of its ports, Ethiopia consistently faces security challenges during crises such as the recent Tigray conflict" (Interview, 23 January 2024). During the Tigray conflict, Ethiopia had to carefully manage its port access to maintain logistics and supply chains, which emphasizes how Ethiopia's national security is vulnerable to political blackmail (Interview with KII-3, 18 January 2024). Ethiopia's complete reliance on Djibouti's port jeopardizes its economic viability and national security as Djibouti's militarization, due to the presence of competing foreign military bases, increases Ethiopia's vulnerability (*Ibid*).

Moreover, Abebe (2007) argued that Ethiopia's reliance on external infrastructure leaves the country exposed to potential blockades or economic sabotage, which could hinder its ability to mobilize or sustain military operations. He further recognized that, beyond economic reasoning, political uncertainties and the influence of extra-regional actors have made it very difficult for Ethiopia to rely on the ports of neighboring countries. He argued that due to political uncertainty and geopolitical rivalries, Ethiopia will constantly be vulnerable to blackmail (*Ibid*). Thus, in the volatile geopolitical environment of the HoA, lack of ownership or direct maritime access undermines Ethiopia's security, independence, and long-term viability.

Furthermore, Ethiopia's role as one of Africa's most significant contributors to peacekeeping missions and a security anchor state in the Horn requires it to project power and respond to crises in the region (Interview with KII-15, 02 October 2024). However, its lack of naval force and maritime infrastructure hinders its ability to patrol regional sea lanes, engage in joint naval operations, or counter threats such as piracy, arms smuggling, and maritime terrorism in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (Interview with KII-10, 22 December 2024). These water bodies are among the world's most strategically significant as they link Europe, Asia, and Africa. They are also highly vulnerable to security threats, due to increasing militarization by competing state and non-state actors (CDRC, 2023; Schwab, 1978). Without direct sea access, Ethiopia cannot adequately contribute to the security of these maritime corridors (Interview with KII-5, 23 January 2024).

Ethiopia's lack of a coastline places it at a strategic disadvantage in the geopolitically pivotal regions of the HoA and the Red Sea (Interview with KII-1, 24 January 2024). Maritime chokepoints, such as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, are critical for national and regional security (CDRC, 2023; Schwab, 1978). Ethiopia's exclusion from direct influence over these zones weakens its negotiating power and undermines its long-term security doctrine (Interview with KII-12, 20 December 2024). Therefore, Ethiopia's military-security rationale for seeking sea access is rooted in the need for strategic autonomy, defense logistics, maritime influence, and regional security (Interview with KII-15, 02 October 2024). In the HoA, where proxy politics, great-power rivalries, and non-state actors'

security threats are common, access to the sea is a vital national security imperative (Interview with KII-5, 23 January 2024).

The third strategic imperative of sea access for Ethiopia is an ambition for regional leadership and integration. Ethiopia's regional leadership role and its status as a key player in African integration have made sea access a strategic necessity. As the second most populous country in Africa and one of its fastest-growing economies (Goitom, 2023), Ethiopia seeks to exert influence beyond its borders in regional affairs, including the economy, security, military, politics, and diplomacy. However, its landlocked status limits its ability to achieve these ambitions fully (Interview with KII-7, 25 January 2024). Without direct access to maritime trade routes, Ethiopia faces logistical, security, and symbolic challenges that undermine its position as a regional leader and its goal of regional integration (Interview with KII-9, 31 January 2024).

Regional leadership in Africa, today, depends on a country's ability to run a dependable economy, which involves serving as a trade hub, supporting cross-border infrastructure, and facilitating the movement of goods and people (Loshkarev & Protasov, 2024). Ethiopia has made significant investments in transportation and energy projects, including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), transnational railways, and highways. However, the lack of a sovereign port forces Ethiopia to remain reliant on neighboring countries for maritime trade, which adds costs, delays, and risks to its regional trade efforts. This undermines its ability to serve as a reliable economic anchor state in East Africa. Moreover, in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Ethiopia's influence and competitiveness are limited without effective access to international shipping routes (Interview with KII-14, 01 October 2024). As the AfCFTA aims to reduce trade barriers by establishing a single continental market, countries with strong logistics will dictate the trade flows and rules of engagement (Osoro, 2019). Ethiopia's ambitions to lead in this process necessitate overcoming the structural disadvantage of being a landlocked country (Interview with KII-12, 20 December 2024).

Sea access is also necessary to enhance Ethiopia's symbolic and strategic standing. Regional leadership involves not only economic power but also perception and influence (Beer et al, 2018). A country that cannot independently manage its trade routes or secure access to global commerce risks being perceived as less sovereign and less capable of leading regional initiatives. In contrast, obtaining access to the sea indicates Ethiopia's rise as a more autonomous and capable power, strengthening its leverage in regional diplomacy and negotiations (Interview with KII-1, 24 January 2024).

Furthermore, the HoA is a region facing increasing geopolitical competition from regional states, extra-regional states, and non-state actors (Gashaw & Zelalem, 2016). HoA regional states are leveraging their strategic coastlines and ports as bargaining chips to attract foreign investment and pursue strategic partnerships (Interview with KII-11, 20 December 2024). Ethiopia, which lacks a coastline, encounters challenges in this

dynamic environment. Access to the sea would enable Ethiopia to engage more directly in shaping the regional order by hosting naval facilities, forming maritime partnerships, and becoming a more attractive partner in global and African initiatives (Interview with KII-5, 23 January 2024). In essence, Ethiopia's desire to lead and integrate Africa requires connectivity, autonomy, and a strategic presence. Sea access is, therefore, a prerequisite for fulfilling its regional leadership role and accelerating African integration (Interview with KII-6, 23 January 2024).

The MoU and the Actors' Responses

Based on the above-discussed strategic imperatives of sea access, Ethiopia signed MoU with Somaliland on January 01, 2024. The MoU was the result of the convergence of Somaliland's pursuit of statehood and Ethiopia's quest for sea access (Mosley, 2024). Although the full contents of the agreement have not been released, based on the explanations from the signing parties, the MoU contains three core issues (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024): leasing a naval base for Ethiopia, port development for mutual benefit, and recognition of Somaliland as a state. However, the core issues of the agreement, Ethiopia's naval presence in the Indian Ocean and Somaliland's recognition as an independent state, are critical geopolitical concerns for both regional and extra-regional actors. Thus, the announcement of the MoU has sparked diverging official resolutions, reconfiguring HoA geopolitics and driving the emergence of three geopolitical camps: cautious, adversaries, and supporters of the MoU (Mehari, 2024; Ning, 2024).

Cautious Diplomatic Responses

The first group comprises states and entities that have responded to the MoU with cautious diplomatic statements. These actors have chosen to adopt a measured diplomatic approach, likely pondering the potential consequences of the agreement on their vested interests. For example, the major world powers (the US, China, and the EU) have introduced cautious diplomatic resolutions focusing on three key factors like Somalia's territorial integrity, respect for the AU and UN charters, and urging for diplomatic dialogue (Miller, 3 January 2024; Moa Ning, 2024; European Union External Action, 2024). Therefore, beyond the actual details of the MoU agreement, the three actors' cautious diplomatic positions emanated from their respective interests, ideology, and their responses to identity-based nationalism in the HoA (Interview with KII-11, 20 December 2024). For instance, the US is concerned with counter-terrorism and regional stability; China wants to maintain stability in the Horn for its trade and Belt and Road Initiatives, while the EU has taken a cautious position due to its concern for migration control and anti-piracy.

The Middle Powers (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Qatar) have also taken cautious and calculated positions regarding the MoU. Each of these countries has put forward resolutions calling for the preservation of territorial integrity and urging the involved parties to engage in peaceful diplomatic dialogue (International Crisis Group, 2024;

Mehari, 2024). They adopted cautious stances that cannot compromise their vested interests in port development in Somaliland, their strategic interests in Somalia, and investments in Ethiopia, aligning with their current economic diversification policy and regional influence (Interview with KII-11, 20 December 2024).

IGAD, AU, Djibouti, Kenya, and South Sudan have taken cautious diplomatic stands (International Crisis Group, 2024; Mehari, 23 January 2024). These countries have adopted a prudent policy of exploiting situations to their advantage without explicitly supporting or rejecting the MoU. Kenya aims to play a leading role in resolving the problem (Mehari, 2024) as it advances its aspiration to be a regional anchor state. Kenya's cautious position toward the MoU emanated from historical legacies of Kenya and Ethiopia's cordial relations and Kenya's current urge to systematically replace Ethiopia's anchor state position in the HoA. Djibouti faces a strategic dilemma, as it is concerned that if Ethiopia gains access to the sea, the port of Djibouti will lose its significance. Paradoxically, Djibouti is under threat from the ideology of Somali nationalists and has strained relations with Eritrea. Furthermore, Djibouti is cautious and worried about the rapprochement between Somalia and Eritrea following the MoU (Garowe Online, 2024). South Sudan has exhibited an indecisive stance by taking variant policy measures; first signed a military agreement with Egypt, then returned to ratify the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) which Egypt opposed (Abdul, 2024).

Given these circumstances and the calculations of their interests, the majority of the world's states and organizations have adopted a 'wait-and-see' diplomatic stance on the issue, neither openly opposing the MoU nor actively supporting it. Instead, they have sought to function as a proxy diplomatic platform for antagonistic forces, serving their vested interests (Interview with KII-14, 01 October 2024). This cautious approach reflects the complex and sensitive nature of the situation and the presence of actors' multilayer interests in the HoA region.

The Adversaries

The second camp consists of the adversary group. These actors perceive the agreement as a threat to their interests or a disruption of the existing power structures in the region. This axis includes Somalia, Egypt, the League of Arab States (LAS), and Eritrea, which have been actively working to challenge Ethiopia since January 1, 2024 (Mosley, 2024). This group employed assertive diplomacy, multilateral diplomacy, military deployment to Somalia, and proxy politics as strategic and tactical approaches to isolate and challenge Ethiopia.

Somalia contended that the MoU violated its territorial integrity, national unity, and sovereignty. Somalia's prime minister described the MoU as an attack on the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024). The Somali parliament condemned the agreement as a 'naked aggression' and declared it legally invalid (ISPI, 2024). Subsequently, Somalia's government withdrew its envoy from Ethiopia. It expelled

Ethiopia's ambassador from Mogadishu (Paravicini, 2024) while seeking support from international organizations and various state leaders to reaffirm bilateral ties and seek their assistance.

Following the Somali government's statement, the League of Arab States and Egypt condemned the MoU and issued a warning to Ethiopia. The League expressed its support for Somalia's decision to reject the MoU. It has called upon Ethiopia to adhere to the principles of good neighborliness, respect for state sovereignty, and noninterference (Mohammed, 2024). The League of Arab States' position primarily stemmed from historical legacies of mistrust, the Nile rivalries, the long-standing effort to distance Ethiopia from sea access, and narratives that characterized Ethiopia as a Christian state (Interview with KII-4, 19 January 2024). Egypt also supported Somalia's decision and condemned the MoU. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt emphasized his nation's commitment to utilizing all available resources to safeguard Somalia against external threats. Following this, Egypt has deployed its military to Somalia, and since August 2024, it has been sending various military equipment, trainers, advisors, and soldiers to the country. Media reports indicate that, as of October 2024, Egypt had deployed the largest number of soldiers to Somalia (MENAFN, 2024).

On October 10, 2024, the three central antagonistic states to the MoU (Somalia, Egypt, and Eritrea) held a tripartite summit in Asmara (MENAFN, 2024), during which the leaders reached key agreements on regional security, cooperation, and respect for international law (Geopolitical Monitor, 2024). This group employs diplomatic outreach, political maneuvering, and proxy strategies to challenge Ethiopia and advance their interests (Interview with KII-2, 01 October 2024). They have pursued three proxy strategies against Ethiopia. The first strategy involves domestic destabilization by sponsoring political factions in the ongoing conflicts within Ethiopia. The Somali prime minister openly confirmed that his government was ready to sponsor opposition political groups in Ethiopia (Oladele, 2024). Egypt has been engaged in such a proxy effort for a long time (Amare *et al.*, 2024), while Eritrea has experienced similar dynamics since the 1998 Ethio-Eritrea war (Mohammed, 2007). The second strategy focuses on regional diplomatic encirclement. Somalia, Egypt, and Eritrea are involved in an extended diplomatic cooperation to encircle Ethiopia diplomatically. Egypt's security agreement with South Sudan and the common resolution with Djibouti on Red Sea security are the showcases. Third targets the global diplomatic isolation of Ethiopia. This axis of resistance employed assertive and multilateral diplomacy to pressure and isolate Ethiopia from the international community (Interview with KII-12, 20 December 2024).

Both Egypt and Eritrea supported Somalia for their vested interests. Egypt's overt involvement in the geopolitical rivalries alongside Somalia does not stem from fraternity with Somalia's territorial integrity; rather, it is primarily due to its historical legacies of dispute over the utilization of the Nile River and the construction of the mega-Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia (Amare *et al.*, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024). Eritrea has

expressed dissatisfaction with the Pretoria Agreement, which ended the two-year war in which Asmara fought alongside the Ethiopian federal government and Ethiopia's pursuit of sea access (Interview with KII-8, 28 January 2024). Asmara has become a second diplomatic capital for Somalia, frequently hosting the Somali President since the signing of the MoU. The Eritrean regime has provided military and security training for the Somali government and organized tripartite alliance meetings among Somalia, Egypt, and Eritrea (MENAFN, 2024). These developments pave the way for new militarization in Somalia and increase the presence of anti-Ethiopian forces in Mogadishu (Interview with KII-5, 23 January 2024).

The new militarization and increased antagonistic foreign military presence in Somalia indicate a significant shift in the region's security landscape. The Somali government actively pursued partnerships with various regional and international actors that it suspects have diplomatic inconveniences or competing interests with Ethiopia (Geopolitical Monitor, 2024). Additionally, Egypt's military presence in Somalia provides direct access to Ethiopia's border, thereby heightening regional tensions. The long-term ramifications of these developments remain uncertain.

Signatories and Supporters

The third group consists of supporters of the MoU, which is divided into the signatories and silent supporters. The signatories are Ethiopia and Somaliland. These signatory states view the agreement as an opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation, foster economic ties, and enhance their strategic positioning in the HoA (Interview with KII-13, 12 August 2024). Ethiopia and Somaliland have expressed their support for the agreement based on the principle of reciprocity. For Ethiopia, it signifies the restoration of access to the sea and naval bases, while Somaliland views it as a step toward gaining international recognition as a statehood (nationalism) (International Crisis Group, 2024; Mehari, 2024). The MoU has also been presented as an opportunity to enhance bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland, potentially improving port development and elevating the economic and geopolitical standing of both parties in the region (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024; Mehari, 2024). Somaliland and Ethiopia have sought to justify the benefits of the MoU from three perspectives: bilateral benefit, African connectivity, and the benefit to global society at large (Interview with KII-13, 12 August 2024).

The two parties to the MoU utilized both defensive and strategic diplomacy to maintain their positions (Interview with KII-11, 20 December 2024). Ethiopia employed defensive diplomacy in response to backlash from Somalia and regional actors to avoid diplomatic isolation. It engaged in talks mediated by Turkey to ease tensions and framed its actions as legal and development-driven in response to international perceptions and pressures (Interview with KII-15, 2 October 2024). In doing so, Ethiopia utilized historical, nationalistic, and developmental reasoning. Strategically, the Ethiopian government continued to pursue access to the sea to reduce its dependency on Djibouti and sustained

engagement with Somaliland, despite prevailing pressure (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024).

Similarly, Somaliland employed both defensive and strategic diplomacy to address the challenges associated with the MoU (Interview with KII-13, August 12, 2024). It used defensive diplomacy to address international push-back and Somalia's strong rejection, reinforcing its narrative of sovereignty while seeking diplomatic support to legitimize the MoU and protect its autonomy from perceived threats (Bizuneh & McCabe, 2024). In a strategic move, Somaliland leveraged the MoU to further its pursuit of international recognition, positioning itself as a viable partner and attracting regional and global attention. This potentially increased its leverage in future negotiations (Interview with KII-13, 12 August 2024).

In addition to Ethiopia and Somaliland, there are also silent supporters of the MoU due to their strategic interests. Beyond their respective governments' official resolutions, many great and middle powers have strategic interests in both Somaliland and Ethiopia (Horn Observer, 2024). Somaliland, due to its strategic geographic location and relative stability, and Ethiopia, due to its abundant investment opportunities and its role as a gateway to Africa, attract the attention of great and middle powers. This advantageous geographic position has made Somaliland an attractive partner for nations seeking to establish a foothold in the region, particularly in the context of maritime security, anti-piracy operations, investment, and counterterrorism efforts (Rende 2024). For instance, countries such as India, Israel, British, Russia, and the United States have expressed interest in establishing a military base within Somaliland borders (Horn Observer, 2024). For instance, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as one of Somaliland's and Ethiopia's closest allies, establishing a military base in Somaliland (Horn Observer, 2024) and making considerable investments in Ethiopia (Interview with KII-4, January 19, 2024). The UAE is among the first states to grant *de facto* recognition to the Republic of Somaliland and has invested significantly in the region. Additionally, the UAE has offered training for Somaliland's security forces, further strengthening the strategic partnership between the two entities. Complementing this military cooperation, the Dubai-based logistics company DP World has initiated a \$101 million project to expand the Berbera port (Horn Observer, 2024).

There are also political pushes in the British (Horn Diplomat, 2024) and American (African Intelligence, 2024) governments to support Somaliland's aspirations for statehood. Reports suggest that Israel is in the process of establishing a military presence within Somaliland (Horn Observer, 2024). Moreover, other regional powers, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have strong economic and political ties with both Somaliland and Ethiopia, and they do not want to lose their influence in the region by countering the MoU that Somaliland and Ethiopia have taken as their vital national interest (Horn Observer, 2024).

Thus, the matrix of interests, such as the Abiy Ahmed government's firm insistence on

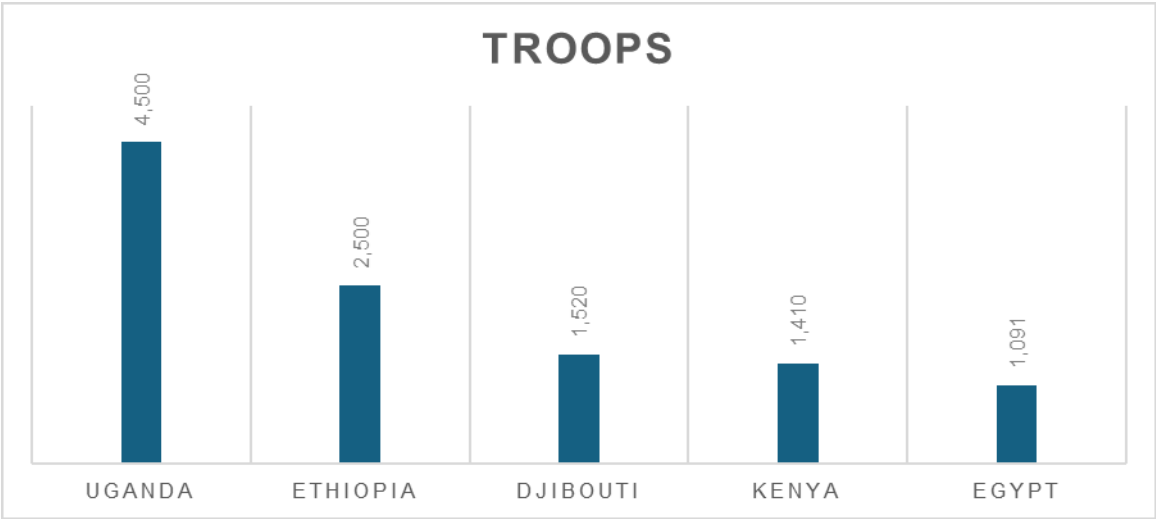
sea access, Somaliland's strategic location and quest for statehood, Somalia's rejection of the MoU, and the competing interests of regional and extra-regional actors, the historical legacies of conflict and proxy politics in the region have attracted significant international attention, creating a new landscape of geopolitical rivalries. Here, issues of national sovereignty, competing interests among actors, historical legacies of actors' relations, and security concerns intersect in ways that defy straightforward official resolutions. After one year of geopolitical rivalry, the MoU recalibrated into the Ankara Declaration on December 11, 2024.

From MoU to Ankara Declaration: Reverse or Tribute to the Rivalries?

The MoU signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland has triggered a cascade of complex geopolitical consequences in the HoA, recalibrating regional security dynamics and diplomatic realignments. After a year of diplomatic quarrels, the leading actors in the two opposing sides of the MoU rivalries, Ethiopia and Somalia, signed an Ankara Declaration to de-escalate the tension. The Ankara Declaration is a diplomatic initiative underscoring solidarity with Somalia's territorial claims and Ethiopia's pursuit of sea access (Ethiopia's Press Agency, 2024). It further illustrates how the Horn's shifting alliances are being shaped by extra-regional actors seeking to influence the crisis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Turkey, 2024). It raises the critical question of whether it will reverse or enhance Ethiopia's quest for sea access. A careful reading of the declaration's contents reveals that the Ankara Declaration does not alter the original terms of the MoU. However, it has the potential to reconfigure emerging geopolitical alliances and rivalries surrounding the issue (Tyson, 2024).

The first geopolitical repercussion of the Ankara Declaration is that it recognized the essential claims of both Ethiopia and Somalia: the pursuit of access to the sea and the respect for territorial integrity, state sovereignty, and national unity, respectively (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Turkey, 2024). The resolution of the Ankara Declaration formally acknowledges Ethiopia's pursuit of access to the sea (Ethiopian Press Agency, 2024). The resolution asserts that Somalia recognizes the potential benefits that could result from Ethiopia's assured access to and from the sea. Furthermore, the two parties agreed to collaborate on finalizing mutually beneficial commercial arrangements through bilateral agreements, including contracts, leases, and similar modalities, allowing Ethiopia to secure reliable, safe, and sustainable access to and from the sea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Turkey, 2024). Thus, the Ankara Declaration has advanced Ethiopia's maritime aspirations, evolving from rejection to broader acceptance and making a central pillar of the formal diplomatic agenda (Interview with KII-10, 22 December 2024).

The second geopolitical repercussion of the Ankara declaration is the re-engagement of Ethiopia’s security presence in Somalia and the diminishing roles and contributions of Egypt. In the Ankara Declaration, the Somali government acknowledged the contributions of Ethiopia’s military to Somalia’s security and agreed to include Ethiopia’s troops in the newly reconstituted African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Turkey, 2024). Five countries contribute 11,900 troops to AUSSOM, with Ethiopia being the second-largest contributor after Uganda, while Egypt, a key actor in opposing the MoU, is the least contributor (Maruf, 2025). Originally scheduled to lead the AUSSOM mission and expected to contribute 5000 troops, Egypt now plays a marginal role in AUSSOM.



Source: VOA, Maruf, 2025

The third geopolitical repercussion of the Ankara Declaration is that it affirms Turkey’s status as an emerging global mediator (Interview with KII-10, 22 December 2024). The Ankara Declaration reinforces Turkey’s role in the HoA in two ways. First, it enhances Turkey’s influential role and trust among HoA countries as a peace broker. It bolsters Turkey’s status as a key player in the evolving geopolitics of the HoA and the broader Red Sea region. The AU, EU, US, and UK applauded Turkey for its role in mediating Ethiopia and Somalia. This strengthens Turkey’s economic, military, and political presence in the HoA. Second, the Ankara Declaration helps Turkey to maintain its investments and relationships with both Ethiopia and Somalia (Ondit, 2024; Tyson, 2024).

The fourth geopolitical repercussion of the Ankara declaration is that it alters the regional balance of power by creating diplomatic uncertainty among Somalia, Egypt, and Eritrea, which have formed a trilateral antagonistic force against Ethiopia. The Ankara Declaration

has diminished the influence of the tripartite alliance by effectively countering Cairo and Asmara's attempts to position themselves as strategic alternatives to Ethiopia for Somalia (Interview with KII-10, 22 December 2024). The decrease in Egypt's troop contribution to AUSSOM, along with the increase in the number of Ethiopian troops is one of the indicators (Maruf, 2025).

The Ethiopian-Somali rapprochement raises doubts about the future of the tripartite Egyptian-Eritrean-Somali alliance. While Mogadishu is unlikely to abandon its relations with Egypt and Eritrea, it may choose a more balanced policy that reduces its involvement in regional proxy politics. This strategy may not align with Egyptian and Eritrean aspirations, as it limits their ambition to prevent Ethiopia from accessing the Red Sea. Consequently, they may be less inclined to continue supporting Somalia and more eager to bolster their bilateral alliance and seek other antagonistic forces against Ethiopia (Tyson, 2024). This can pave the way for another geopolitical realignment. The recent agreement between Egypt and Djibouti to collaborate on restoring security in the Bab El Mandeb Strait of the Red Sea (Egypt Today, 2025) is part of this realignment.

The fifth geopolitical repercussion of the Ankara declaration is that it leaves the status of the MoU, the relations between Ethiopia and Somaliland, and the relations between Ethiopia and Egypt's military in Somalia uncertain, thereby exacerbating distrust among former allies amid the MoU rivalries. For instance, following the Ankara Declaration, diplomatic activities between Somaliland and Ethiopia have declined. Moreover, the Ankara Declaration coincided with the Somaliland election and the inauguration of Abdirahman Irro as the new President, whose stance on the MoU remains unclear. Although Addis Ababa has not openly abandoned the MoU, it has temporarily frozen it. This allows Ethiopia to retain this MoU as a bargaining chip if Mogadishu fails to provide a viable alternative for port arrangements. Additionally, Mogadishu invited Ethiopia's troop contribution to AUSSOM, leaving the military tension between Ethiopia and Egypt in Somalia.

Thus, the Ankara Declaration did not offer a definitive resolution to Ethiopia's ongoing pursuit of sea access nor Somaliland's pursuit of statehood. Rather than settling these contentious issues, it redirected geopolitical rivalries into new dimensions, further entrenching regional uncertainty and strategic competition. It reconfigures the existing geopolitical alliances and rivalries, potentially paving the way for new geopolitical clusters and rivalries. Therefore, the Ankara Declaration does not represent a reversal; instead, it recalibrates the ongoing geopolitical rivalries in the HoA, which may lead to another form of geopolitical alignment.

Concluding Remarks

The HoA region is characterized by intricate geopolitical rivalries, where major powers compete to pursue their strategic interests. This paper examined the strategic imperatives of Ethiopia's quest for sea access and its geopolitical implications, focusing on the ripples of the MoU and Ankara declaration. Demographic growth, economic growth, military-security concerns, and the aspiration of regional leadership and integration have driven Ethiopia's reclaiming of access to the sea since 2018. The discussions revealed that the complex web of new geopolitical rivalries in the post-MoU period led to diplomatic and political divisions, resulting in the formation of three distinct geopolitical camps: cautious, adversaries, and supporters of the MoU. These new alignments and rivalries have resulted in militarization in Somalia, heightened regional tension, increased the security presence of Egypt and Eritrea in Somalia, exacerbated regional proxy politics, expanded Turkey's role in the region, popularized Ethiopia's quest for sea access, and led to the Ankara declaration. The Ankara Declaration, signed between Ethiopia and Somalia, has sparked a fresh geopolitical reconfiguration by de-escalating tensions between the two countries (Ethiopia and Somalia), re-engaging Ethiopia's security presence in Somalia, acknowledging Ethiopia's quest for sea access, and reaffirming Somalia's territorial integrity.

The new rapprochement between Ethiopia and Somalia has left the fate and position of Somaliland's statehood aspiration unclear. There is also the potential resentment from members of the antagonistic forces toward the MoU. This is because most of these anti-MoU groups did not necessarily join the Somali camp out of concern for Somalia's territorial integrity; instead, they did so to advance their hostile stance against Ethiopia. Egypt and Eritrea are active participants in the opposing pole of geopolitical competition. Following the MoU agreement, they may harbor resentment toward the Ankara Declaration, and these dynamics could lead to the formation of a new geopolitical alignment. Despite the de-escalation of tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, the Ankara Declaration did not resolve the original issues covered in the MoU (Ethiopia's quest for sea access and Somaliland's claim of statehood), which remain a significant topic in the HoA's geopolitical rivalries. Therefore, the Ankara Declaration does not represent a reversal; instead, it underscores geopolitical recalibration, which may give rise to another form of geopolitical competition.

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Appendix: Lists of Key Informants

No.	Code	Position	Place	Date of interview
1	KII-1	Ethiopia's Ambassador to South Sudan	Addis Ababa	24 January 2024
2	KII-2	Veteran Diplomat and Chair, CDRC	Addis Ababa	01 October 2024
3	KII-3	Ethiopia's Ambassador to Djibouti	Addis Ababa	18 January 2024
4	KII-4	Ethiopia's Ambassador to the UAE	Addis Ababa	19 January 2024
5	KII-5	Ethiopia's Ambassador to Somalia	Addis Ababa	23 January 2024
6	KII-6	Consulate General of Ethiopia's Consulate in Somaliland	Addis Ababa	23 January 2024
7	KII-7	Ethiopia's Ambassador to Sudan	Addis Ababa	25 January 2024
8	KII-8	Career Diplomat, Diplomat at the Ethiopian Embassy in Asmara	Addis Ababa	28 January 2024
9	KII-9	Diplomat, Sudan Desk Officers @MOFA	Addis Ababa	31 January 2024
10	KII-10	Researcher, FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	22 December 2024
11	KII-11	Lead Researcher, FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	20 December 2024
12	KII-12	Senior Researcher, FDRE Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)	Addis Ababa	20 December 2024
13	KII-13	Somaliland Diplomat @Somaliland Embassy in Addis Ababa	Addis Ababa	12 August 2024
14	KII-14	Veteran Ambassador and late state minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Addis Ababa	01 October 2024
15	KII-15	Career Diplomat, officer, IGAD Affairs	Addis Ababa	02 October 2024