

The United Arab Emirates Engagement in Ethiopia

Implications for the Horn of Africa's Geopolitical and Security Landscapes

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Since 2018, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Ethiopia have significantly strengthened their bilateral relations through trade, investment, and security cooperation. Ethiopia has become the UAE's vital partner in the Horn of Africa, and its engagement in the country is multifaceted and strategic. However, this partnership is also exacerbating tensions between Ethiopia and other countries in the Red Sea region, namely Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Egypt. The alliance is reshaping geopolitics and security in the Horn of Africa, prompting the formation of new regional alliances and rivalries.

Since Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018, his country and the UAE have significantly enhanced their diplomatic, political, economic, and security relations through high-level visits, trade, and investment. The UAE's economic interest in Ethiopia and the Horn aligns with its strategic interest of diversifying its economy and enhancing food security. The slump in oil prices following the 2008 global financial crisis further encouraged Gulf states to diversify their economies and secure strategic assets, including ports and agricultural land.¹ With respect to this goal, Ethiopia is gaining strategic significance as a key partner for the UAE's economic diversification and food security policy in the Horn of Africa.

Only a few months after Abiy took office, the UAE provided USD 3 billion in aid and investment to help his political and economic reforms and alleviate foreign currency shortages.² The financial aid given to Abiy by the UAE to support his reform efforts has expanded into trade, investment, and military assistance. Ethiopia – Africa's second-largest country with more than 126 million people – is a crucial market for the UAE. In 2023, the UAE became the fourth most prominent Ethiopian export destination.³ Meanwhile, Ethiopia is also becoming a significant recipient of Emirati exports. Most recently, on 16 July 2024, both countries signed a bilateral currency swap agreement worth up to USD 817 million, enhancing their

¹ Redie Berekteab, *A New Era of Engagement: Gulf Countries and the Horn of Africa*, The Nordic Africa Institute, 20 September 2024, <https://nai.uu.se/stories-and-events/news/2024-09-20-a-new-era-of-engagement-gulf-countries-and-the-horn-of-africa.html>; Interview with expert, face-to-face, 19 August 2024, Mekelle.

² Ethiopian central bank received USD 1 billion to address foreign currency shortage, while USD 2 billion was allocated to tourism, renewable energy, and agriculture, see Aaron Maasho, "UAE to Give Ethiopia \$3 Billion in Aid and Investments", *Reuters*, 16 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/finance/uae-to-give-ethiopia-3-billion-in-aid-and-investments-idUSL8N1TH4GJ/>

³ "Emirati Investments in Ethiopia Totaled \$2.9b in 2022: Al Zeyoudi", *The Gulf Time Newspaper*, 19 August 2023, <https://gulftime.ae/emirati-investments-in-ethiopia-totalled-2-9b-in-2022-al-zeyoudi/>; Daniel Workman, "Ethiopia's Top Trading Partners", *World's Top Exports*, https://www.worldstopexports.com/ethiopias-top-trading-partners/?utm_content=cmp-truerab.com/analysis/why-rival-powers-are-backing-ethiopias-government

financial and commercial cooperation by providing local currency liquidity for cross-border transaction settlements.⁴

Ethiopia has also become a significant partner for UAE investment due to its cheap labour force, abundant arable land, and adequate water resources for agriculture. UAE companies are investing in sectors such as food and drinks, agriculture, livestock, logistical services, chemicals, aluminium, pharmaceuticals, storage, warehouses, and real estate.

Beyond the economic factors, the UAE's involvement in Ethiopia is driven by geopolitical and security motivations. Both countries are seeking to expand and improve port access in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean for mutual economic, geopolitical, and security reasons. For example, they have collaborated to expand the Berbera Port corridor in Somaliland.⁵ Given the UAE's economic development as a commercial hub and its major investments in ports worldwide, maritime security in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea regions has become a vital interest for the UAE. The gains made by the Houthis in Yemen, as well as piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, have posed challenges to the UAE's quest to protect its commercial interests. The need to react to these threats has prompted the UAE to establish a system of alliances across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa,⁶ including in Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia.

Moreover, the UAE has been a vital security partner to Abiy's government. The Emirates have supplied significant military assistance, trained the Republican Guard, and supplied critical weaponry, including drones during the devastating war in Tigray.⁷ More recently, in January 2025, the Dubai Police and UAE Ministry of Interior experts have trained the Ethiopian Federal Police in cybercrime investigations, VIP security, and counterterrorism.⁸

Although the UAE's increasing level of engagement offers economic and security benefits to Abiy's government, it also poses significant geopolitical and security implications for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. This policy brief examines the regional implications of the UAE's involvement in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's quest for port access and the role of the United Arab Emirates

Ethiopia was once considered a significant Red Sea power due to its control over the coastline that is now part of Eritrea.⁹ However, Ethiopia lost direct sea access after Eritrea gained independence in 1993. The country initially relied on ports in Eritrea and later Djibouti. The 1998–2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia resulted in Ethiopia losing access to Eritrean ports such as Massawa and Assab, thereby leading to Ethiopia's complete reliance on ports in Djibouti. However, Ethiopia's excessive dependence on these ports has been the cause of

⁴ "Ethiopian Federal Police Receive Training from UAE Experts", *Horn Review*, 27 January 2025, <https://hornreview.org/2025/01/27/ethiopian-federal-police-receive-training-from-uae-experts/>

⁵ Sankalp Gurjar, "The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean", *International Studies* 60, no. 3 (2023): 313–327.

⁶ Abdolgader Mohammed Ali, "UAE, Turkey, and Iran: Why Rival Powers Are Backing Ethiopia's Government", *The New Arab*, 14 February 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-rival-powers-are-backing-ethiopias-government>

⁷ Declan Walsh, "Foreign Drones Tip the Balance in Ethiopia's Civil War", *New York Times*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/africa/drones-ethiopia-war-turkey-emirates.html>; Ali, "UAE, Turkey, and Iran".

⁸ "Ethiopian Federal Police", *Horn Review* (see note 4).

⁹ Brendon J. Cannon and Ash Rossiter, "Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa", *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2017): 7–29. <https://rpquarterly.kureselcalismalar.com/quarterly/ethiopia-berbera-port-shifting-balance-power-horn-africa/>

frequent bilateral disputes over costs and taxation.¹⁰ Because of this reliance, Ethiopia has been actively exploring alternative sea-trading routes.

Within this setting, Ethiopia has looked to the Berbera Port in Somaliland as a way of reducing its dependency on Djibouti.¹¹ With the Berbera corridor, Ethiopia aims to enhance connectivity in the country's south and east. To this end, in February 2015, Somaliland and Ethiopia agreed to build the Berbera Port.¹² The 2015 UAE and Saudi Arabia campaign against the Houthis in Yemen prompted Ethiopia to collaborate with the UAE on the construction of the Berbera Port. The UAE and Saudi Arabia decided to acquire military bases in the fight against Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen around the Horn of Africa's coastline, particularly in the southern Red Sea.¹³ The UAE convinced Eritrea to sever its ties with Iran and allow the construction of a military base in Assab in order to support its war in Yemen.¹⁴ However, the UAE's increased involvement in Eritrea, including the Assab base, has sparked concerns in Ethiopia, which has been grappling with tensions and animosity in the region since 1998.¹⁵ Since then, Ethiopia has invested significant diplomatic capital in the UAE to sever the ties between the UAE and Eritrea.¹⁶ Ethiopia's Transport Minister was quoted as claiming: "*We are better off having the UAE investing in Somaliland than Eritrea.*"¹⁷ Thus, Ethiopia's lobbying and the 2015 military operation against the Houthis in Yemen led the UAE to develop the Berbera Port. This also came after a deterioration in Djibouti-UAE relations over the construction of the Doraleh Port – an extension of the Port of Djibouti. Ethiopia's influence – combined with these events – prompted the UAE to develop Berbera while downgrading the importance of Assab in the evolving geopolitical dynamics.¹⁸

Since then, the UAE has supported Ethiopia's quest for access to seaports in Berbera. In March 2018, the UAE and Somaliland signed a Berbera Port deal.¹⁹ In return, the deal enabled Ethiopia to establish a commercial hub in Berbera. The UAE's DP World acquired 51 per cent, Somaliland 30 per cent, and Ethiopia 19 per cent of shares for the development of the Berbera Port.²⁰ To operate this stake, Ethiopia promised to invest USD 80 million²¹ in a 260-kilometre road connecting Berbera with its borders. However, Ethiopia's commitment to connect the port did not materialize. As a result, in June 2022, Somaliland declared Ethiopia's loss of ownership stake in the port due to a failure to fulfil its obligations.

Most recently, on 1 January 2024, Prime Minister Abiy and former President of Somaliland Muse Bihi Abdi signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for a port deal in Berbera. The deal would allow Ethiopia to use the Berbera Port and its 20 kilometres of coastline in the Gulf of Aden for military and commercial purposes,²² connecting it to the Red Sea via the

¹⁰ Gurjar, "The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean" (see note 5).

¹¹ "Will Somaliland's Berbera Port Be a Threat to Djibouti's?", *The Africa Report*, 24 December 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/54136/will-somalilands-berbera-port-be-a-threat-to-djiboutis/>

¹² Taimur Khan, *Ethiopia-Eritrea Reconciliation Offers Glimpse into Growing UAE Regional Influence*, The Arab Gulf States Institute, 13 July 2018, <https://agsiw.org/ethiopia-eritrea-reconciliation-offers-glimpse-into-growing-uae-regional-influence/>

¹³ Zach Vertin, *Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn, and the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea*, Brookings, 2019.

¹⁴ Cannon and Rossiter, "Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power" (see note 9).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gurjar, "The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean" (see note 5).

¹⁷ CDE, "TPLF: We're Better Off Having the UAE Investing in Berbera Port than in Eritrea", 20 May 2016, Madote, <http://www.madote.com/2016/05/tplf-were-better-off-having-uae.html>

¹⁸ Cannon and Rossiter, "Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power" (see note 9).

¹⁹ *UAE Port Deal with Somaliland Stirs Up Trouble in the Horn*, Peace and Security Council report, Issue 102, Institute for Security Studies, May 2018, 11–12.

²⁰ Ibid. See also Gulaid Yusuf Idaan, "Fostering Reciprocal Diplomacy: Building Bridges – The Somaliland-Ethiopia MoU", *Modern Diplomacy*, 31 July 2024, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/07/31/fostering-reciprocal-diplomacy-building-bridges-the-somaliland-ethiopia-mou/>; Gurjar, "The Port of Berbera and Geopolitics of the Western Indian Ocean" (see note 5).

²¹ Khan, *Ethiopia-Eritrea Reconciliation* (see note 12).

²² Abdi Sheikh and Abdiqani Hassan, "Somalia Rejects Port Deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland", *Reuters*, 2 January 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalias-cabinet-calls-emergency-meet-ethiopia->

Bab-el-Mandeb Strait between Djibouti and Yemen.²³ In return, Ethiopia would recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state and share a portion of Ethiopian Airlines.²⁴ This would make Ethiopia the first country to recognize Somaliland as an independent state. According to the Somaliland authorities, Ethiopia has elevated its consular office in Somaliland to embassy status, although Ethiopia has not confirmed this. Somaliland hopes that the opening of an Ethiopian embassy will be a milestone towards international recognition.²⁵

Although the UAE did not publicly support Ethiopia’s port deal with Somaliland, several Ethiopian and international observers claim the Emirates played a role in brokering the deal. Ethiopia presumably could not enter such a costly deal without the support of international actors such as the UAE,²⁶ which has provided diplomatic support to the port deal that granted Ethiopia port access at Berbera.²⁷

Geopolitical Landscape of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa



somaliland-port-deal-2024-01-02/; “Reality Catches Up with Gambler Abiy,” *Africa Confidential* 65, no. 1, 4 February 2024, <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/14773/reality-catches-up-with-gambler-abiy>

²³ Liam Karr, *External Meddling for the Red Sea Exacerbates Conflicts in the Horn of Africa*, Africa File, 23 September 2024, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-special-edition-external-meddling-for-the-red-sea-exacerbates-conflicts-in-the-horn-of-africa>

²⁴ Gerrit Kurtz, Stephan Roll, and Tobias von Lossow, *Escalations Risks in the Horn of Africa*, SWP Comment 50/2024, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2024.

²⁵ Sadik Kedir Abdu, “Somaliland Strengthens Diplomatic Ties with Ethiopia amid Regional Tensions”, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 30 August 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/somaliland-strengthens-diplomatic-ties-with-ethiopia-amid-regional-tensions/3316871>; see also Idaan, “Fostering Reciprocal Diplomacy” (see note 20).

²⁶ Interview with expert, online, zoom meeting, 24 September 2024.

²⁷ “UAE Will Continue to Expand Footprint in East Africa”, *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.eiu.com/n/uae-will-continue-to-expand-footprint-in-east-africa/>

The UAE is likely to have supported the deal for two reasons. First, it will likely benefit the UAE, which is a major player in the Red Sea region that has strong relations with Ethiopia and Somaliland. It can benefit from Ethiopia's increased logistics and facilities partnership, which could enhance its trade route to Ethiopia and other Horn states. At the same time, Ethiopia promised to increase its trade volumes and use the port for 30 per cent of its trade to attract Emirati interest in the development of the Berbera Port.²⁸ Second, the deal strengthens the Emirati partnership with both Ethiopia and Somaliland. To this effect, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development is a significant backer of the project.

The UAE's engagement and the geopolitical and security implications for the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa has long been beset by regional tensions, which the UAE-Ethiopia partnership is now threatening to exacerbate. The UAE's strategic interests in Ethiopia have influenced its relations with neighbouring states, potentially escalating existing tensions with Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Egypt. Its ambitions and initiatives in Ethiopia are fueling geopolitical rivalries, competition, and alliance formation between the states of the Horn of Africa.

Uncertainties between Ethiopia and Somalia

The 2024 Berbera Port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland has sparked tensions between the two rival countries. Somalia immediately rejected the deal, claiming it violated its sovereignty and international law. On 6 January, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud signed a parliamentary bill declaring the pact "*null and void*".²⁹ In April 2024, Somalia formally expelled the Ethiopian ambassador from Mogadishu and recalled its own diplomat from Addis Ababa. Somalia repeatedly urged Ethiopia and Somaliland to withdraw from what it calls an "*illegal deal*". In an interview with *Al Jazeera*, President Mahmud warned Ethiopia not to proceed with the deal,³⁰ hinting at a possible military conflict between the two countries.

Mediation efforts by Turkey have since reduced these tensions. In December 2024 Ethiopia and Somalia pledged in the Ankara Declaration to work together to ensure Ethiopia's commercial access to the Red Sea. They agreed to finalize "*mutually advantageous commercial arrangements*" that will allow Ethiopia to "*enjoy reliable, secure, and sustainable access to and from the sea*" as part of the agreement.³¹ However, it remains unclear whether this means that Ethiopia will cancel its controversial naval base agreement with Somaliland. Officials from Somalia and Somaliland have since made contradictory statements regarding the implications of the Ankara declaration. On the one hand, Somali officials have insisted that Ethiopia should retract its agreement with Somaliland as part of the Ankara talks.³² On

²⁸ Khan, *Ethiopia-Eritrea Reconciliation* (see note 12).

²⁹ *The Stakes in the Ethiopia-Somaliland Deal*, International Crisis Group, 6 March 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia-somaliland/stakes-ethiopia-somaliland-deal>

³⁰ "Don't Do It": Somali President Warns Ethiopia over Somaliland Port Deal", *Al Jazeera*, 23 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/23/dont-do-it-somali-president-warns-ethiopia-against-somaliland-port-deal>

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Somalia [@MOFASomalia], post on X, 12 December 2024, 9:13 a.m., accessed 17 March 2025, <https://x.com/MOFASomalia/status/1867120512822022244>

³² Tom Gardner [@TomGardner18], post on X, 12 December 2024, 8:47 a.m., <https://x.com/TomGardner18/status/1867114091816550709>

the other hand, Somaliland officials said that the Ankara Declaration “does not concern” Somaliland, and that Ethiopia has insisted privately that it will not withdraw from the Somaliland deal.³³ In fact, the Ankara Declaration does not specifically address the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland; instead, it subtly recognizes the Somali government’s stance without bringing up the port agreement with Ethiopia. The declaration underscores respect for the territorial integrity, unity, and sovereignty of the two countries, technically nullifying the deal Ethiopia made with Somaliland.³⁴ Somalia has imposed the suspension of the Somaliland agreement as a prerequisite for negotiations. Meanwhile, it is unclear how the Ankara Declaration serves Ethiopia’s aim of ensuring access to the sea.

Furthermore, the port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland has sparked opposition from regional countries and has resulted in the development as well as shifting of regional alliances in the Horn of Africa and Middle East states. Egypt, Eritrea, and Djibouti opposed the deal and have since strengthened their diplomatic and military relations with Mogadishu. The deal has prompted Somalia to seek additional support from these countries, thereby strengthening their influence in the region. Egypt opposes the port deal – arguing that it infringes on Somalia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity – and has denounced the signing.³⁵ Its dispute with Ethiopia, especially following the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), has led to greater support for Somalia. Since the port deal was signed, President Hassan has visited Cairo three times to secure Egyptian assistance against Ethiopia’s port deal with Somaliland, including the recent visit on 23 January 2025. Subsequently, Somalia and Egypt signed a defence pact in August 2024 aimed at preventing Ethiopia from executing its port deal with Somaliland. Eritrea has also joined the Somalia and Egypt camp, indicating opposition to the port deal. Its alignment is impacted by Eritrea’s dispute with Ethiopia since its independence, particularly following the 1998–2000 border war between the two countries. Djibouti opposed the deal due to its economic losses, as Ethiopia has been its most important customer since the Ethiopia-Eritrea War.

These countries are concerned that Ethiopia’s access to the sea via the Berbera Port would give it significant influence in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa regions.³⁶ Such concerns were heightened by Abiy’s description of the deal as “historic”.³⁷ More broadly, over the past decade, regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have been in competition to establish seaports and military bases in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea. For example, the UAE has been the primary player in the construction of ports in Eritrea and Somaliland, but it has failed in Djibouti. Thus, these countries might have supported Somalia because the deal could put the UAE ahead of them in the race for control of the Red

³³ Ismail Shirwac, [@Ismail_Shirwac], post on X, 11 December 2024, 11:25 p.m., https://x.com/Ismail_Shirwac/status/1866972545712259467

³⁴ Eliab Taye, “Ankara Declaration: A Positive Development Imbued with Regional Risks”, *African Arguments*, 23 January 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/01/ankara-declaration-a-positive-development-imbued-with-regional-risks/>

³⁵ Mohammed El-Said, “Egypt Condemns Ethiopia’s Deal with Somaliland as Violation to Somalia’s Sovereignty”, *Daily News*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2024/01/04/egypt-condemns-ethiopias-deal-with-somaliland-as-violation-to-somalias-sovereignty/>

³⁶ Shola Lawal, “Why Is Somalia So Angry about Ethiopia’s New Red Sea Port Deal?”, *Al Jazeera*, 6 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/6/why-is-somalia-angry-about-neighbouring-ethiopias-new-port-deal>

³⁷ “Historic MoU with Somaliland Sees Ethiopia Secure Access to Sea, Diversify Seaport”, *Addis Standard*, 1 January 2024, <https://addisstandard.com/update-historic-mou-with-somaliland-see-ethiopia-secure-access-to-red-sea-diversify-seaport/>

Sea.³⁸ Ethiopian port access is likely to boost the UAE's position in its regional rivalry with other Gulf countries due to its strong relations with Ethiopia's government.³⁹

Moreover, the UAE's close ties with Ethiopia and Somaliland have sparked concerns among Somali officials over Emirati involvement in the port deal.⁴⁰ Relations between the UAE and Somalia initially improved after President Mohamud took power in June 2022. The MoU now risks jeopardizing the Somali president's ties with Abu Dhabi.⁴¹ Moreover, since 2017, the UAE's approach to Somalia's semi-autonomous regions – including Somaliland, Puntland, and Jubaland – has strained relations between the two countries.

Deteriorating relations and rising tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia

Relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea have been strained since the 30-year civil war, which led to Eritrea's independence in 1993. Their border war from 1998 to 2000 was the most devastating interstate conflict in the Horn of Africa, and thus they had complicated relations for nearly two decades until their rapprochement in 2018. Since Abiy took office, however, Eritrea has been a major actor in Ethiopia's political and security dynamics.⁴² Specifically, between 2020 and 2022, Eritrea and Ethiopia united to fight the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the war on Tigray. However, recent reports indicate that relations between the two countries are once more deteriorating.⁴³

Two subsequent developments have led to deteriorating relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. First, the Pretoria peace deal, signed on 2 November 2022, between the TPLF and Abiy's government created tensions with the Eritrean government. Eritrea's anger over the peace deal led to mistrust between the two regimes shortly after the deal was signed. Asmara is displeased with the signing of the peace deal for two reasons. First, Eritrea is dissatisfied with its exclusion from peace talks between Addis Ababa and the TPLF.⁴⁴ The TPLF had ruled Ethiopia during its war with Eritrea; President Isaias Afwerki likely sought a complete defeat of the TPLF as a form of revenge. The signing of the peace deal, however, provided an opportunity for the TPLF to survive.⁴⁵ Moreover, one of the key provisions of the Pretoria peace deal is that the federal government will ensure the withdrawal of foreign

³⁸ Samir Bhattacharya, "Understanding Ethiopia's Port Deal with Somaliland and Its Geopolitical Implications – Analysis", *Eurasia Review*, 26 January 2024, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/26012024-understanding-ethiopia-port-deal-with-somaliland-and-its-geopolitical-implications-analysis/>

³⁹ Liam Karr, *Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal Alters Horn of Africa Counterterrorism and Red Sea Geopolitics*, Institute for the Study of War, 4 January 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/salafi-jihadi-movement-update-special-edition-ethiopia-somaliland-port-deal-alters-horn>

⁴⁰ "Saudi Arabia and UAE Compete for Influence in Africa," *VOA*, 21 February 2024, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/saudi-arabia-and-uae-compete-for-influence-in-africa-say-analysts/7496345.html>

⁴¹ Federico Donelli, "Red Sea Politics: Why Turkey Is Helping Somalia Defend Its Waters", *The Conversation*, 28 February 2024, <https://theconversation.com/red-sea-politics-why-turkey-is-helping-somalia-defend-its-waters-224377>; *The UAE Builds Its Strategic Position in East Africa*, Intelbrief, The Soufan Center, 11 March 2024, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-march-11/>

⁴² Abel Abate Demissie, *Navigating the Regionalization of Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict*, Chatham House Research Paper, 8 September 2024.

⁴³ Federico Donelli, "Shifting Tides: Egypt's Strategic Deployment to Somalia and Its Regional Implications", Orion Policy Institute Policy Brief, 16 September 2024, <https://orionpolicy.org/shifting-tides-egypts-strategic-deployment-to-somalia-and-its-regional-implications/>; Mehari Tadele Maru, "Shifting Sands: The Anatomy of Geopolitical Conflicts in the Horn of Africa", YouTube video, 5 March 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo7sUTPyJ14>

⁴⁴ Demissie, *Navigating the Regionalization of Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict* (see note 42); "Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt Pledge to Bolster Security Ties", *Al Jazeera*, 10 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/10/somalia-eritrea-and-egypt-pledge-to-bolster-security-ties>

⁴⁵ Demissie, *Navigating the Regionalization of Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict* (see note 42).

forces and the preservation of Ethiopian territorial sovereignty.⁴⁶ This has led to the Eritrean government becoming exasperated with the Ethiopian federal government.⁴⁷

The second reason for Eritrea's deteriorating relations with Ethiopia is Abiy's declared interest in access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia's unresolved strategic interests in the Red Sea have led to renewed tensions with Eritrea. In fact, Abiy's speech came amid deteriorating relations with Eritrea due to the Pretoria peace deal, indicating that the two developments occurred concurrently. In his parliamentary speech in October 2023, Abiy underscored that Ethiopia would seek direct port access, either peacefully or forcefully.⁴⁸ Turning to history, he invoked the 19th century Ethiopian warriors, who claimed the Red Sea was the country's "natural boundary".⁴⁹ Abiy's irredentist remarks on Ethiopia's historical and territorial claims to Red Sea ports raised concerns in Asmara. Given the hostilities between the two countries, the potential presence of an Ethiopian navy on Eritrea's coast via Berbera is creating significant concern in Asmara.

In response, Eritrea has pursued alliances with Egypt and Somalia. In February 2024, the Eritrean president met with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo, expressing a desire to strengthen bilateral relations and expand cooperation in economic and security sectors.⁵⁰ Similarly, President Isaias has frequently hosted President Hassan, who has requested Somalia's assistance amid ongoing Ethiopian-Somali tensions. In October 2024, Eritrea hosted Somalia's and Egypt's presidents and signed a tripartite agreement in Asmara to cooperate on regional security.⁵¹

Since then, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea have continued to deteriorate. Ethiopia hosted a meeting of Eritrean opposition groups, allowing them to establish an office in Addis Ababa.⁵² In February 2025, former Ethiopian President Mulatu Teshome accused Eritrea's president of exploiting divisions within the TPLF to support the TPLF members who were unhappy with the peace deal. Mulatu accused Isaias of attempting to rekindle conflict in northern Ethiopia.⁵³ Senior TPLF officials and members of the Tigray Defence

⁴⁶ The African Union High Representative for the Horn of Africa, "Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF)", Pretoria, South Africa, 2 November 2022.

⁴⁷ Interview with expert, face-to-face, 23 August 2024, Addis Ababa.

⁴⁸ "Ethiopia's Prime Minister Wants a Red Sea Harbour", *The Economist*, 2 November 2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/11/02/ethiopias-prime-minister-wants-a-red-sea-harbour>; Alex de Waal, "Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed Eyes Red Sea Port, Inflaming Tensions", *BBC*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67332811>

⁴⁹ "Ethiopia's Prime Minister Wants a Red Sea Harbour", *The Economist*; Antony Sguazzin, "Why Is Abiy Threatening Ethiopia's Neighbors? Next Africa", *Bloomberg*, 20 October 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2023-10-20/why-is-ethiopia-s-abiy-ahmed-demanding-access-to-the-sea>

⁵⁰ The Arab Republic of Egypt Presidency, "President El-Sisi Receives President of Eritrea Afwerki", 24 February 2024, <https://www.presidency.eg/en/%D9%82%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9/news2422021/>

⁵¹ "Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia Agree to Boost Security Cooperation", *Reuters*, 10 October 2024,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-eritrea-somalia-agree-boost-security-cooperation-2024-10-10/>
⁵² "Eritrean Diaspora's Brigade Nhamedu Set to Open Addis Ababa Branch", *Africa Intelligence*, 7 February 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/02/07/eritrean-diaspora-s-brigade-nhamedu-set-to-open-addis-ababa-branch,110372794-bre>

⁵³ Mulatu Teshome, "To Avoid Another Conflict in the Horn of Africa, Now Is the Time to Act", *Al Jazeera*, 17 February 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/2/17/to-avoid-another-conflict-in-the-horn-of-africa-now-is-the-time-to-act>

Forces (TDF) are reportedly contacting the Eritrean government,⁵⁴ although the TPLF itself dismissed allegations of “secret talks” with Eritrea as “fabricated falsehoods”.⁵⁵

Eritrea’s relations with the UAE had been positive, particularly since the UAE used the Eritrean military base of Assab during the Yemen and Tigray wars. The UAE is among the few international actors capable of influencing President Isaias of Eritrea.⁵⁶ Eritrea accepted the UAE’s initiative to end the border war with Ethiopia and signed the 2018 Jeddah Peace Agreement between the two countries, demonstrating Asmara’s trust in Abu Dhabi. The UAE’s military base in Assab demonstrated a partnership between Abu Dhabi and Asmara. However, in 2021, the UAE withdrew from Assab⁵⁷ for reasons that are subject to speculation. Some argue that Emirati leaders may view the base as needlessly overstressing Emirati forces, as the operation against the Houthis is over.⁵⁸ Other observers believe the Eritrean authorities are dissatisfied with the Emirates’ activities and have therefore evicted them from Assab and other engagements. Although the current state of Eritrea-UAE relations is unclear, Asmara may nevertheless see the UAE’s economic and military backing for Ethiopia’s government as a threat, given its own deteriorating relations with Ethiopia.⁵⁹ Eritrean officials are concerned that the UAE is backing Ethiopia’s port agreement with Somaliland to support Ethiopia in constructing a naval base in Berbera.⁶⁰

Uncertainties between Djibouti and Ethiopia

The UAE-Ethiopia-Somaliland partnership could negatively affect Djibouti’s role as a transit and logistics hub in the region.⁶¹ More than 95 per cent of Ethiopia’s import and export trade passes through the Port of Djibouti via the Addis-Djibouti corridor.⁶² Ethiopia’s access to the Berbera Port would lead to huge losses for Djibouti’s port business. Unsurprisingly, Djibouti has joined the campaign against the port deal.⁶³ Djibouti’s relations with the UAE deteriorated in 2018 after unsuccessful negotiations and alleged corruption⁶⁴ led to the removal of DP World. As a result, Abu Dhabi remains outraged by Djibouti’s actions against it, and vice versa.⁶⁵

⁵⁴ “Tigray Leaders Dangerously Torn between Addis Ababa and Asmara”, *Africa Intelligence*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2025/02/24/tigray-leaders-dangerously-torn-between-addis-ababa-and-asmara,110378687-eve>; “TPLF Rejects Claims of ‘Secret Talks’ with Eritrea, Calls Accusations ‘Fabricated Falsehoods’”, *Addis Standard*, 27 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/tplf-rejects-claims-of-secret-talks-with-eritrea-calls-accusations-fabricated-falsehoods/>

⁵⁵ “TPLF Rejects Claims”, *Addis Standard* (see note 54).

⁵⁶ Demissie, *Navigating the Regionalization of Ethiopia’s Tigray Conflict* (see note 42).

⁵⁷ Aleksandar Olech, “Emirati Dominance – Takeovers of More Ports in Africa”, *Defence24*, 14 September 2024, <https://defence24.com/geopolitics/emirati-dominance-takeovers-of-more-ports-in-africa>

⁵⁸ Andreas Krieg, “The UAE’s Tactical Withdrawal from a Strategic Engagement in Yemen”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 7 Mar 2021, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/03/06/the-uaes-tactical-withdrawal-from-a-strategic-engagement-in-yemen/>

⁵⁹ Interview with expert, face-to-face, 20 August 2024, Mekelle.

⁶⁰ Interview with expert, face-to-face, 20 August 2024, Mekelle.

⁶¹ Francisco Serrano, “The Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal Could Sink Djibouti’s Economy”, *World Politics Review*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/djibouti-ethiopia-economy-trade/?one-time-read-code=2714111726689564124095>

⁶² Hailo Gelana Erko, “Analysing Opportunities and Obstacles in Ethio-Djibouti Relations: Post-Cold War Era Historical Analysis”, *Current Res. J. Soc. Sci. & Human* 6 (2023): 219–229; “Addis-Djibouti Corridor to Get Major Upgrade That Is Key to Unlocking Connectivity and Trade for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa”, World Bank Group, press release, 20 July 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/07/20/addis-djibouti-corridor-to-get-major-upgrade-that-is-key-to-unlocking-connectivity-and-trade-for-ethiopia-afe-hoa>

⁶³ “Djibouti Joins Fight against the Abiy-Bihi Pact”, *Africa Confidential* 65, no. 16, 2 August 2024, <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/15080/djibouti-joins-fight-against-the-aby-bihi-pact>

⁶⁴ Matina Stevis and Asa Fitch, “Dubai’s DP World Agrees to Manage Port in Somaliland for 30 Years”, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 May 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/dubais-dp-world-agrees-to-manage-port-in-somaliland-for-30-years-1464549937>

⁶⁵ Khan, *Ethiopia-Eritrea Reconciliation* (see note 12).

Tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia

Egypt and Ethiopia have had a long history of rivalry, with hostilities primarily focused on Nile River politics. Specifically, since 2011, the construction of the GERD has sparked significant diplomatic and military tensions between the two countries, and Egypt has made it clear that GERD poses a significant threat for two reasons. First, it is concerned about the dam's potential impact on its water supply. Second, the dam's development gives Ethiopia the upper hand over the Nile basin, putting Egypt's sphere of influence in the politics of the Nile at risk. However, two recent developments have exacerbated tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt.

First, Ethiopia's fifth-phase dam-filling last summer has sparked outrage in Egypt, which continually claims that Ethiopia should not fill the dam without a legally binding agreement that addresses concerns about the downstream effects. Second, Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland has exacerbated the already strained relations between the two countries. As tensions escalate between Ethiopia and Somalia, Cairo has capitalized on the opportunity to establish a presence in the region.⁶⁶ Following the signing of the MoU, President El-Sisi and President Hassan signed a defence pact in August to strengthen their relations, aiming to block Ethiopia's port deal in the Gulf of Aden.⁶⁷ Shortly after the signing of the pact, El-Sisi announced that Egypt intends to deploy troops to the African Union's new mission in Somalia, starting in 2025. On 27 and 29 August, Cairo sent two planeloads of troops, weapons, and ammunition to Mogadishu.⁶⁸ In September, the countries conducted joint military trainings in Somalia.⁶⁹

Egypt's military deployment and shipment of weaponry to Somalia is fuelling tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt. Ethiopia is claiming that Egyptian troops arrived in Somalia before the planned African Union transition mission at the end of 2024, and it is accusing these troops of threatening Ethiopia.⁷⁰ Ethiopia's foreign affairs ministry has warned the international community about external actors' expanding military presence in Somalia along its border, citing it as a national security threat that it "cannot tolerate".⁷¹ Ethiopia's Chief of General Staff, Field Marshal Birhanu Jula, referred to Egypt as the "historical enemy of Ethiopia".⁷² Reports indicate that Ethiopia is redeploying troops and restructuring its fortifications in the Ogaden region. It remains unclear what impact the Ankara Declaration will have in the context of these tensions.

Although Egypt and the UAE have overall maintained close ties, they have increasingly found themselves on the opposing sides of divides in the Horn of Africa. This applies both to the tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, and to the war in Sudan, where Egypt has supported the Sudanese Armed Forces, whereas the UAE has backed the Rapid Support Forces. Their conflicting alignments could lead to a deterioration in relations between Egypt and the UAE.

⁶⁶ Donelli, "Shifting Tides: Egypt's Strategic Deployment" (see note 43).

⁶⁷ "Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt Pledge to Bolster Security Ties", *Al Jazeera*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/10/somalia-eritrea-and-egypt-pledge-to-bolster-security-ties>; "Middle Powers Line up behind Addis and Mogadishu", *Africa Confidential*, 19 September 2024, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/15153/Middle_powers_line_up_behind_Addis_and_Mogadishu

⁶⁸ Karr, *External Meddling for the Red Sea* (see note 23).

⁶⁹ Hamza Hendawi, "Egypt and Somalia to Hold Military Drills in Show of Force", *The National*, 2 September 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/09/02/egypt-and-somalia-to-hold-military-drills-in-show-of-force/>

⁷⁰ Karr, *External Meddling for the Red Sea* (see note 23).

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia [@mfaethiopia], post on X, 28 August 2024, 06:08 p.m., <https://x.com/mfaethiopia/status/1828827074657935761>

⁷² "Middle Powers Line up behind Addis and Mogadishu", *Africa Confidential* (see note 67).

Conclusion

The UAE's involvement in Ethiopia provides economic, financial, diplomatic, and military benefits to Abiy's government, but it has exacerbated pre-existing tensions in Ethiopia's relations with Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Egypt. This is most evident in the case of the recent Berbera Port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland. More broadly, the UAE's engagement in Ethiopia is changing power dynamics and fuelling rivalries in the Horn of Africa. As a result, a clear regional divide is emerging in the Horn of Africa, with Ethiopia, Somaliland, and the UAE on one side, and Somalia, Egypt, Eritrea, and Djibouti on the other.

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