



Ethiopia's Quest for a Seaport: A Threat to Regional Stability?

Redie Bereketeab

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ethiopia seeks a port on the Red Sea

Large but landlocked, Ethiopia has long sought ownership of a port on the Red Sea coast, arguing that this is a historical right and essential to its prosperity and development.

Domestic issues are driving Ethiopia's calculus

Abiy appears to be motivated by the need to deflect criticism over domestic conflicts and an economic crisis, as well as the growing influence of external powers along the Red Sea coast.

The push for port access risks a regional conflict

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's renewed drive for a seaport or naval base, through diplomacy or force, risks sparking conflict with Ethiopia's neighbors and dismantling a key 2018 peace deal.

Compromise is possible

While Ethiopia needs to diversify its maritime access, ownership of a seaport is not essential to this end. Negotiated deals with its neighbors could enhance its access to the sea without destabilizing the region.

KEYWORDS

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Port of Berbera

Port of Djibouti

Red Sea

Abiy Ahmed

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Cover Image: A picture taken on December 5, 2015, shows the Port of Berbera in Somaliland. (Photo by ZACHARIAS ABUBEKER / AFP)



Introduction

In October 2023, Ethiopian Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Abiy Ahmed made an announcement that shocked his country's neighbors. Citing historical rights, national prestige, and economic necessity, he declared that Ethiopia must acquire its own port on the Red Sea. "If this is not going to happen, there will be no fairness and justice," he said in the televised address, "and if there is no fairness and justice, it's a matter of time, we will fight."¹

Ethiopia is the most populous landlocked country in the world. Lacking access to the sea, it has periodically revived claims to a Red Sea port, based on three main arguments: historical and legal rights; the imperatives of national development; and the country's international standing. According to the Ethiopian premier, the lack of a maritime harbor "[prevents] Ethiopia from assuming its place in Africa."²

Currently, Ethiopia relies heavily on the Port of Djibouti, which accounts for more than 95% of its exports and imports.³ This reliance costs the country over \$1 billion a year in fees—a price the cash-strapped nation can ill afford.⁴ Its heavy reliance on a single port has already pushed Addis Ababa to seek out alternatives. In January 2024, Ethiopia reached a controversial deal with Somaliland to access the Berbera port for commercial and naval uses, stoking tensions with the federal government of Somalia.⁵

Ethiopia, with a population of 127 million people,⁶ is separated from Eritrea's Red Sea port of Assab by a band of territory approximately 60 kilometers (37 miles) across. Yet, only six years after formally ending his country's two-decade conflict with Eritrea and Somalia—in a landmark peace agreement that won him the Nobel Peace Prize—Abiy, through his speech, has sparked fears about regional instability.

Ethiopia's coastal neighbors—Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti—responded to his speech with a

mix of concern and rejection.⁷ Two weeks later, Abiy toned down the rhetoric, telling troops that "Ethiopia will not pursue its interests through war. We are committed to [promoting] mutual interest through dialogue and negotiation."⁸

However, his quest for a port came in the wake of a ruinous war in the Tigray region, a domestic economic crisis, and Ethiopia's existing tensions with its neighbors—some of which were already wracked by other conflicts. In doing so, Abiy has added another layer of complexity to the Horn of Africa's geopolitics. Indeed, his move threatens to deepen fissures on several fronts and create new ones.

Navigating these issues will require careful diplomacy that addresses the concerns of all parties. This issue brief analyzes the rationale behind Abiy's renewed quest for a seaport in light of the struggle for control of the Red Sea, domestic factors, and the shifting geopolitics of the region, exploring how the standoff could be mitigated or resolved.

Historical Claims and a "Geographical Prison"

When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced his quest for a port in October 2023, he turned to maps dating back to the third-century kingdom of Aksum to back up Ethiopian territorial claims to Red Sea ports on what is now Eritrean territory.⁹ While Ethiopia's leaders have hailed the country's purported 3,000 years of continuous history across a territory stretching to the coast,¹⁰ the reality is more complicated. What is today the Eritrean coastline was controlled for three centuries by the Ottoman empire before falling into the hands of Egypt, which had a presence at the key port of Massawa from 1865 through the mid 1880s.¹¹

Under the 1884 Hewett Treaty between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Britain, Ethiopia was guaranteed "free

access to the port of Massawa.”¹² The following year, however, the port fell under Italian occupation,¹³ which lasted until the British gained control in 1941 and administered it until 1952.¹⁴ Emperor Haile Selassie I, who ruled Ethiopia for more than four decades starting in 1931, later laid claim to former Italian Somaliland and what is today Eritrea based on purported historical ties.¹⁵

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As the United States (U.S.) emerged as a leading world power following World War II, Ethiopia’s status as a key U.S. ally encouraged Washington to back its claims to Eritrea, which it annexed.¹⁶ This finally placed it in possession of a seaport.¹⁷ Yet while Ethiopia saw Eritrea as a lost territory re-joining its mother country,¹⁸ Eritreans argued that it was a violation of their rights to decolonization and self-determination.¹⁹ By 1991, Eritrea’s war of independence had left Ethiopia without direct access to the sea.²⁰

Two decades later, with a growing population and a struggling economy, Ethiopia’s government finds the status quo unacceptable. As Abiy argued in his October speech: “By 2030 [the population of Ethiopia] will be 150 million ... A population of 150 million can’t live in a geographic prison.”²¹

The Scramble for the Red Sea

The question of who controls the Red Sea is at the heart of geopolitics in the surrounding region. Cold War-era rivalries over one of the world’s most sensitive waterways motivated several powers to establish naval bases in the Red Sea. The U.S. established such positions at the port of Berbera, while the Soviet Union established rival bases at ports and islands belonging to Eritrea.²²

Following the end of the Cold War, the region saw the rise of multiple new actors, including the Gulf

states. Diverging interests among the Gulf countries further complicated inter-state relationships in the region, particularly with regard to seaports.²³

Indeed, Ethiopia’s foreign policy has been partly driven by concerns about Red Sea control and certain Arab states’ influence there. Its alignment with Israel²⁴ has been dictated partly by its drive to deter Arab states involved in power projection in the Red Sea. Eritrea and its fight for independence thus became pawns in the struggle for control over the Red Sea. While Ethiopia aligned itself with U.S. and Israeli interests, many Arab states supported Eritrean independence fighters.²⁵

The membership of Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia in the League of Arab States has further deepened Ethiopia’s perception of a threat from these countries.²⁶ The creation of the Saudi-led Council of Arab and African Littoral States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in January 2020, excluding Ethiopia, cemented this perception.²⁷ This appears to have been one factor triggering Ethiopia’s renewed quest to acquire a port and establish a military presence on the coast to boost its position in the scramble for control of the Red Sea.

The United Arab Emirates, through the Dubai-based companies DP World and P&O Ports, has been one of the most active investors in seaports in the Horn of Africa.²⁸ The presence of various foreign military bases, particularly in Djibouti and Somalia, also has a clear impact on Ethiopia’s strategic calculus. Abiy has repeatedly asked why Ethiopia should not establish a naval base in the Horn when forces from distant countries have been able to do so.

Today, Ethiopia is seeking to establish a naval base in Somaliland, on the coast of the Gulf of Aden. The two actors signed a memorandum of understanding in January, in which Somaliland agreed to lease part of its coast to Ethiopia for naval and commercial uses.²⁹ In return, Addis Ababa promised an “in-depth assessment” on recognizing the breakaway region’s statehood.³⁰ It would be the first country to do so.



The announcement prompted a vehement condemnation from Somalia's federal government, which sees Somaliland as an integral part of its territory. Indeed, the deal risks not only sparking a conflict between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu but also empowering Al-Shabab jihadists.³¹

While the exact location of the planned base is unclear, such a move would also give Ethiopia influence over the Red Sea and one of the most crucial chokepoints for world maritime traffic, furnishing it with significant geopolitical leverage and boosting its ambitions for global influence.³² It could also put other Red Sea countries, such as Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, at a disadvantage.

Ethiopia's Domestic Concerns

While regional geopolitical rivalries provide the context, domestic factors including wars and Ethiopia's troubled economy appear to be the immediate drivers for Abiy's renewed push for a seaport. When the Ethiopian premier signed the 2018 peace deal resolving the border conflict with Eritrea,³³ many Ethiopians believed that the deal would usher in a new era of peace and stability. Since then, however, the leader's popularity has been eroded by further conflicts and the country's economic woes. Observers have thus seen his push to acquire a seaport as part of a strategy to regain popularity.³⁴

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The worst of the conflicts Abiy has overseen was the war against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which began in November 2020 and involved rivalries between some of Ethiopia's biggest ethnic groups and diplomatic tensions be-

tween China and the United States.³⁵ The conflict left hundreds of thousands dead, saw both federal troops and TPLF forces commit widespread atrocities,³⁶ and left almost half the population of Tigray region in "severe" need of food aid, according to the World Food Programme.³⁷

Despite having fought for decades to secure its independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea allied with its former enemy against the Tigray rebels. For Asmara, this arguably makes Abiy's drive for a seaport, less than two years since the ceasefire, seem like a betrayal.

Peace in Tigray remains extremely fragile.³⁸ Yet Addis Ababa has since embarked on another conflict, this time in the Amhara region, where the Fano ethno-nationalist Amhara militia is fighting federal troops who had attempted to disarm it.³⁹ Fano, which had allied with the federal government against the TPLF,⁴⁰ regarded the decision to disarm it as evidence of a double standard by the government, which had allowed the TPLF forces to keep their arms—in violation of the Pretoria peace agreement—while demanding that Amhara fighters disarm.

Abiy has also failed to find peaceful solutions to conflicts plaguing the Oromia region. There are fears that the Oromo Liberation Front, fighting the federal army, might combine forces with the Amhara rebels. In such a scenario, Abiy's position would be further threatened. The federal government has already lost control of many parts of the country, and Ethiopians struggle to move between Addis Ababa and other regions.⁴¹

To compound these problems, the war in Tigray has left Ethiopia close to bankruptcy.⁴² Amid severe inflation, the conflict also prompted the U.S. to expel Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), dealing a heavy blow to exports.⁴³ Hundreds of Ethiopian companies have since gone under.⁴⁴

Given these crises, the timing of Abiy's announcement suggests that the step was a gambit to win back political support at home.⁴⁵ Yet it is one that has put Ethiopia's neighbors on edge and threatens to exacerbate problems in the wider region.

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In Search of Compromise

Central to Abiy's demands for a seaport are the claims that owning such a facility is an existential imperative and vital to the country's economy. While such a message may play well with parts of Abiy's domestic audience, it is strongly rejected by neighboring states. Recent history has shown that Ethiopia is quite capable of flourishing economically without direct access to the sea. It experienced rapid economic growth between 2004–2017 despite lacking its own seaport.⁴⁶

Moreover, Ethiopia's leadership has, advertently or inadvertently, conflated access to maritime routes with ownership of such a port. Yet in practice, all Ethiopia's neighbors recognize its practical need to access the sea and have expressed their willingness to accommodate its needs—providing it abides by international law and does not violate the territorial sovereignty of its neighbors.

For example, Somalia's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Ali Omar has said that while Mogadishu “will never accept” Ethiopia having a naval base in Somaliland, it would consider “granting Ethiopia commercial port access” to the coast, in accordance with international law and subject to bilateral negotiations.⁴⁷

Indeed, Ethiopia has several options for accessing the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, via ports on the coasts of Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, and

Sudan. A notable, less controversial alternative is the Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor that could link it with the Kenyan coast.⁴⁸ Indeed, Ethiopia has already begun diverting some shipments of fertilizer and livestock to Lamu.⁴⁹

Under a 2017 agreement with Somaliland regarding Berbera, Addis Ababa was to have a 19% share in the port there, although that deal has not materialized—reportedly because of payment issues from Ethiopia's side.⁵⁰ This has prompted doubts over how it would pay for its proposed naval base. Following the 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea,⁵¹ the road connecting Addis Ababa with Eritrea's Assab port was to be rehabilitated to serve Ethiopia's needs.⁵² Finally, Ethiopia has the option of the Port of Djibouti through which more than 95% of Ethiopia's access to the sea is currently conducted.⁵³

Given these options, Ethiopia's neighbors suspect that its real motive goes beyond gaining commercial access to the sea, extending to the ownership and establishment of a naval base that would allow it to project power in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

The tripartite agreement signed on September 5, 2018, by Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia generated great hopes for a more peaceful future in the region.⁵⁴ Based on the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs, the agreement sparked optimism regarding greater regional integration and economic prosperity.

These hopes appear to have dissipated following Abiy Ahmed's announcement that Ethiopia must acquire a seaport. While Ethiopia has an undisputed right to access a maritime trade outlet, its neighbors argue that this can only be achieved through negotiated deals that respect international laws and conventions, as well as its interlocutors' territorial integrity and sovereignty.



Ethiopia has many options for accessing the sea in ways that cultivate trust, peace, security cooperation, and development in the Red Sea region. Its neighbors have indicated that they are willing and able to accommodate Ethiopia's legitimate needs. Conversely, veiled threats to annex territory risk leading to renewed conflicts and insecurity. Ethiopia thus needs to engage in mutually beneficial dialogue with all its neighbors, who in turn must realize that accommodating Ethiopia's legitimate needs is in the best interests of all parties.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Redie Bereketeab is a nonresident senior fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. Bereketeab has been a senior researcher at the Nordic African Institute in Uppsala, Sweden, since January 2010. He oversees a research project on conflict and state building in the Horn of Africa, and regional economic communities and peacebuilding in Africa.



Bereketeab has published several books, book chapters, and journal articles. His book contributions have been published by Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan, and James Currey among others. His last books include *Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Horn of Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); *Recent Developments in Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023); and *Alternatives to Neoliberal Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Africa* (Routledge, 2022).

Bereketeab's articles have appeared in many journals including African Studies, the African Studies Review, and African and Asian Studies, covering a variety of topics such as state legitimacy and government performance in the Horn of Africa and the role of education in nation-building in postcolonial Africa. Bereketeab also serves on several journal editorial advisory boards.

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