

Ethiopia's Quest for Sovereign Sea Access: Historical and Geopolitical Contexts

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Abstract

Ethiopia's quest for sovereign sea access stems from its historical, legal, psychological, and geographical connections to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Although Ethiopians have never psychologically accepted their landlocked condition, the EPRDF regime (1991-2018) formally recognized it and treated ports primarily as commercial commodities rather than existential-cum-geopolitical assets. Since the 2018 political reform, maritime access has re-emerged as a central element of state policy under the incumbent government. Drawing on qualitative analysis of public and policy debates in which the authors participated as speakers, policy documents, and secondary sources, this study argues that Ethiopia's pursuit of sovereign sea access represents a national struggle to reclaim its historical and rightful place on the geopolitical map of the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden. The maritime aspiration is deeply rooted in historical use, legal and natural rights, socio-cultural and psychological connections and driven by geopolitical necessity – to overcome landlockedness, reduce dependency, and extend Ethiopia's presence beyond its borders through naval force. The study finds that Ethiopia's maritime access strategy is shaped by both internal imperatives and external regional dynamics, including competitive port development, military build-ups, and maritime insecurity. The study implies that achieving permanent, reliable, and sustainable sea access requires a context-driven diplomacy that links the maritime agenda to regional peace and security, economic integration, and the aspirations of the African Union's Agenda 2063. Furthermore, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, grounded in national unity, is essential to realize Ethiopia's maritime aspiration.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Access to the Sea; Red Sea, Geopolitics; Landlockedness

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Etiyopya'nın Egemen Deniz Erişimi Arayışı: Tarihsel ve Jeopolitik Bağlamlar

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Özet

Etiyopya'nın egemen deniz erişimi arayışı, ülkenin Kızıldeniz ve Aden Körfezi'yle olan tarihsel, hukuki, psikolojik ve coğrafi bağlarından kaynaklanmaktadır. Etiyopyalılar, psikolojik olarak kara ile çevrili bir ülke olma durumunu hiçbir zaman kabullenmemiştir. Ancak Etiyopya Halkının Devrimci Demokratik Cephesi rejimi (1991–2018), bu durumu resmi olarak tanımış ve limanları varoluşsal ya da jeopolitik birer unsurdan ziyade ticari bir meta olarak değerlendirmiştir. 2018'deki siyasi reformdan bu yana denize erişim meselesi, mevcut hükümetin devlet politikasının merkezî bir unsuru olarak yeniden ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma, yazarların konuşmacı olarak yer aldığı kamu ve politika tartışmalarının nitel analizi, politika belgeleri ve ikincil kaynaklar temelinde, Etiyopya'nın egemen deniz erişimi arayışının, Kızıldeniz–Aden Körfezi jeopolitik haritasında tarihsel ve meşru konumunu yeniden kazanma yönünde ulusal bir mücadeleyle temsil ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. Söz konusu denizcilik hedefi, tarihsel kullanım, hukuki ve doğal haklar, sosyo-kültürel ve psikolojik bağlar üzerine derinden kök salmış olup; kara ile çevrili olma durumunun aşılması, dışa bağımlılığın azaltılması ve Etiyopya'nın deniz kuvvetleri aracılığıyla sınırlarının ötesinde varlık göstermesi gibi jeopolitik zorunluluklarla şekillenmiştir. Çalışma, Etiyopya'nın deniz erişim stratejisinin hem içsel gereklilikler hem de rekabetçi liman gelişimleri, askerî yığınaklar ve deniz güvenliği sorunları gibi dış bölgesel dinamikler tarafından belirlendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Kalıcı, güvenilir ve sürdürülebilir bir deniz erişiminin sağlanması; denizcilik gündeminin bölgesel barış ve güvenlik, ekonomik entegrasyon ve Afrika Birliği'nin Gündem 2063 hedefleriyle ilişkilendirildiği bağlama duyarlı bir diplomasi gerektirmektedir. Ayrıca ulusal birliğe dayalı, bütüncül bir devlet ve toplum yaklaşımı, Etiyopya'nın denizcilik hedefini gerçekleştirebilmesi açısından hayati önemdedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Etiyopya, Denize Erişim, Kızıldeniz, Jeopolitik, Denize Kapalı Olma

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مساعي إثيوبيا للوصول لمنفذ بحري سيادي: السياقات التاريخية والجيوسياسية

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ملخص

تتبع مساعي إثيوبيا للحصول على منفذ بحري سيادي من الروابط التاريخية والقانونية والنفسية والجغرافية للبلاد بالبحر الأحمر وخليج عدن. حيث لم يتقبل الإثيوبيون بتاتا وضعهم كدولة غير ساحلية محاطة بحدود برية فقط. ولكن نظام الجبهة الديمقراطية الثورية الشعبية الإثيوبية (1991-8102) اعترف رسميا بهذا الوضع، وتعامل مع الموانئ في إطار كونها محورا تجاريا وليس عناصر وجودية ومصرية أو جيوسياسية. وبعد هذا النظام ومنذ الإصلاح السياسي عام 8102، عادت قضية المنفذ البحري للتربع على رأس الأجندة كمادة رئيسية في سياسة الدولة الحالية للحكومة. ترى هذه الدراسة التي أجريت وفق تحليلات نوعية للنقاشات العامة والسياسية التي شارك فيها الكتاب كمتحدثين، ووثائق سياسية ومصادر ثانوية، أن مساعي إثيوبيا للحصول على منفذ بحري سيادي يمثل كفاحا وطنيا من أجل استعادة مكانتها التاريخية والشرعية على الخريطة الجيوسياسية للبحر الأحمر وخليج عدن. ويمتد هذا الهدف البحري للجذور بعمق في الاستخدام التاريخي والحقوق القانونية والطبيعية والروابط الاجتماعية والثقافية والنفسية، وقد تشكل هذا الهدف من خلال الضرورات الجيوسياسية مثل تجاوز وضعية التقوقع داخل حدود برية، وتقليص الاعتماد على الخارج، وبناء وجود خارج حدود إثيوبيا عبر قواتها البحرية. وتظهر الدراسة أن استراتيجية إثيوبيا للوصول إلى منفذ بحري تحددها كل من المتطلبات الداخلية والديناميات الإقليمية الخارجية مثل تعزيز الموانئ المنافسة والتعزيزات العسكرية وتحديات الأمن البحري. إلا أن ضمان الوصول لمنفذ بحري دائم وموثوق ومستدام يحتاج إلى دبلوماسية حساسة في سياق يتماشى مع الأجندة البحرية والسلام والأمن الإقليميين والتكامل الاقتصادي وأهداف أجندة 3602 للاتحاد الإفريقي. وإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن اتباع نهج للدولة ونهج مجتمعي شامل قائم على الوحدة الوطنية أمر بالغ الأهمية لإثيوبيا من أجل تحقيق هدفها البحري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إثيوبيا، منفذ بحري، البحر الأحمر، جيوسياسي، الانغلاق تجاه البحر.

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Introduction

Ethiopia's quest for sovereign sea access is not a recent ambition, but a historically anchored national priority,¹ deeply embedded in the country's geopolitical mindset, civilizational identity, geographic orientation, and socio-cultural connection to the sea. From the Aksumite era to the modern Ethiopian state, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have served not merely as maritime corridors, but as vital frontiers for trade, diplomacy, and defense, and, more importantly, as outlets and bridges to the world.² Ethiopia's historical presence along geostrategic ports such as Adulis, Zeila, Massawa, Tadjoura, Djibouti, and Asseb – across both extended and episodic periods – reveals a long-standing maritime tradition that has shaped its internal development, external relations, and foreign policy orientation toward the wider world. Building on Ethiopia's enduring maritime tradition, its pursuit of sea access has remained a permanent national interest³, interrupted only, most notably, during the rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, 1991–2018). Those ports historically linked the Ethiopian highlands and hinterland to Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trade networks, reinforcing the country's dual continental and maritime character.

Dynasties such as the Zagwe⁴ and Solomonic,⁵ alongside the Muslim Sultanates of Ifat and Adal, actively contested control over these coastal outlets. However, between the 16th and mid-19th centuries, Ethiopia experienced maritime exclusion as the Red Sea came under Ottoman, Egyptian, and later Italian control. The federation and later the reunion of Eritrea with Ethiopia (1952–1991) briefly restored Ethiopia's coastal status, only to be reversed in 1993, when Eritrea's *de jure* statehood cut off Ethiopia's direct access to the sea.

While Ethiopia's historical engagement with the sea was marked by continuity and contestation, the post-1991 period represented a decisive rupture in its maritime orientation. Two dominant patterns emerged. First, the aspiration to regain sovereign sea access persisted among the Ethiopian populace,⁶ reflecting a deeply rooted national consciousness. Despite its landlocked status, Ethiopians have never psychologically or historically accepted this condition as permanent.

1 Yacob Haile-Mariam, *Assab Yemanat: YāItopyā Yābaḥr Bāri Tīyaqē* (Tarik Printing, 2018).

2 Lapiso Dilebo, *Yethiopia Rejem Yhezab ena Yemngest Tarik* (Addis Ababa, 1982).

3 Dilebo, *Yethiopia Rejem Yhezab*.

4 Tekeste Negash, "The Zagwe Period Re-interpreted: Post-Aksumite Ethiopian Urban Culture," *Medievalists*, January 29 2012, <https://www.medievalists.net/2012/01/the-zagwe-period-re-interpreted-post-aksumite-ethiopian-urban-culture/>.

5 Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (United Printers, 1972).

6 Haile-Mariam, *Assab Yemanat: YāItopyā*.

Second, the EPRDF regime desecuritized maritime access, reframing it as a routine economic concern rather than an existential national security imperative. Public advocacy for sea access was frequently stigmatized as chauvinistic or imperialist nostalgia. The regime's technocratic approach redefined ports as commercial assets, treating maritime access as a transactional commodity⁷ rather than a multidimensional strategic imperative. As Prime Minister Meles Zenawi stated, "port is a commodity, and we can purchase it where it is affordable,"⁸ signaling a paradigmatic shift in Ethiopia's maritime outlook. Prior to 1991, access to the sea had been regarded as an existential necessity – integral to Ethiopia's security, sovereignty, and long-term development. However, the EPRDF government systematically decoupled maritime access from these broader strategic and developmental frameworks, reframing it as a routine logistical concern. This shift not only marginalized a historically embedded national aspiration but also depoliticized a core element of Ethiopia's geopolitical identity.

In effect, the nearest coastline became the furthest political frontier, and Ethiopia's historic maritime consciousness was supplanted by continental inwardness. Although Meles officially declared that the Red Sea, which Ethiopia had claimed as its natural border for centuries, was no longer on the national policy agenda, the question of Red Sea access persisted and remains a resonant issue among the Ethiopian public, elites, intellectuals, and political actors to this day.

The loss of direct sea access in 1993 marked a rupture not only in territorial geography but in Ethiopia's meta-narrative of sovereign continuity. In Ethiopian oral tradition, the Red Sea is often described as an "outlet and bridge" that connects Ethiopia with the external world its main gateway for trade, cultural interaction, and civilizational exchange with Asia and Europe. It is also remembered as "the gate of foreign invasion" (In Amharic word "ቀይ ሀህር የወረረ ቦር"),⁹ symbolizing both an entry point for imperial powers and a channel of Ethiopia's engagement with the wider world. This dual imagery reflects the Red Sea's enduring role as a conduit of both vulnerability and vitality in Ethiopia's historical consciousness. Major defensive wars – including Maqdala, Gundet, Gura, Adwa, and Maychew were fought against forces arriving via maritime routes, underscoring the existential necessity of maritime presence for national survival.¹⁰ The Red Sea was not merely a border; it was a strategic buffer

7 Shimelash Dagnew and Tebarek Lika Megento, "Effects of Ethiopia's Landlocked Status on Ties with Its Neighbours," *African Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2024): 19-30, <https://doi.org/10.36615/46mr8r52>.

8 Dagnew and Megento, "Effects of Ethiopia's Landlocked."

9 Dilebo, *Yethiopia Rejem Yhezab*.

10 Belete Belachew, *Djibouti: Yetigegninetachin Masaferiya* (Addis Ababa, 2008).

and a conduit of civilizational exchange. Ethiopia's maritime history – from Aksumite trade with the Greco-Roman world to the Solomonic and Muslim Sultanates' control of coastal ports – demonstrates that sea access has always been central to its statecraft and survival. The post-1991 deviation from this trajectory was not due to historical ignorance but political blindness. The insurgent-turned-government elite underestimated the strategic significance of maritime geography in shaping power, security, and sovereignty, contradicting Ethiopia's millennia-old narrative of inseparability from the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

In the contemporary era, the logic of sea power has evolved. Maritime access is now central to hybrid sovereignty defined by the integration of land, sea, air, space, and cyber capabilities.¹¹ Undersea cables, maritime data routes, and naval deterrence constitute essential components of national security, digital autonomy, and economic resilience. Ethiopia's absence from this multi-domain strategic architecture limits its ability to project power, safeguard interests, and participate fully in regional and global governance. Sovereign sea access is thus not merely a logistical concern but a geopolitical imperative.

This study revisits Ethiopia's maritime question within shifting historical and geopolitical contexts. It examines why, despite its deep maritime heritage and natural geographic rights, Ethiopia deviated from its historical trajectory after 1991, and why reclaiming maritime presence has re-emerged as a strategic priority under the post-2018 political leadership. Drawing on qualitative analysis of policy debates, official statements, and scholarly sources, the paper situates Ethiopia's maritime aspiration within the broader context of Red Sea geopolitics, hybrid security, and regional integration. It argues that sea access is not a matter of revanchism but of restoring Ethiopia's rightful geopolitical continuity – anchored in history, legitimized by geography and law, and necessitated by the imperatives of twenty-first-century sovereignty.

This article addresses two central questions:

- How have Ethiopia's historical, legal, and socio-cultural ties to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden shaped its enduring pursuit of sovereign sea access?
- In what ways do geopolitical imperatives such as mitigating landlocked constraints, reducing economic dependency, and asserting regional presence drive Ethiopia's maritime ambitions?

11 James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* (Penguin Press, 2017).

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in historical and geopolitical dimensions. It integrates both primary and secondary sources to ensure analytical depth and contextual relevance. Primary data were collected through the authors' direct participation in public and policy debates over the past eighteen months, providing firsthand insights into the evolving positions of regional and international actors involved in maritime affairs across the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden corridor. Additional primary sources include speeches and official documents, while secondary sources encompass academic literature and media reports addressing Ethiopia's maritime history, strategic orientation, and regional dynamics. A thematic analysis was employed to interpret these materials, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, conceptual linkages, and dominant narratives surrounding sea access, regional competition, and geopolitical strategy.

Historical Contexts of Ethiopia's Maritime Access

Ethiopia's historical relationship with the sea is deeply embedded in its civilizational trajectory and geopolitical orientation. From the early Aksumite period through successive dynastic transitions and imperialist expansion disruptions, the pursuit and loss of maritime access have shaped Ethiopia's state behavior, foreign policy orientation, national consciousness, and regional interactions. The Aksumite Kingdom, which flourished from the first to the eighth century A.D., represents the earliest and most robust phase of Ethiopia's maritime sovereignty.

Located in the northern highlands of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Aksumite Kingdom exercised direct control over key coastal ports, most notably Adulis¹² and Zeila.¹³ These ports served as conduits for trade with the Greco-Roman world, Southern Arabia, and the Nile Valley, integrating Aksum into transregional commercial and diplomatic networks. The strategic location of Adulis on the Red Sea enabled Aksum to project its influence across the sea into Southern Arabia. During the climax of the Aksumite Kingdom, from the third to the seventh centuries CE, Aksum emerged as both a naval and trading power.¹⁴ Its geographic position between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley contributed significantly to its rise as one of the great powers of the ancient world. Even before the third century, Aksum had undertaken military expeditions into South Arabia, demonstrating its maritime capability and regional ambition.

12 George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean* (Hakluyt Society, 1980).

13 Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (United Printers, 1972).

14 Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*.

Under King Kaleb in the sixth century, both sides of the Red Sea fell under Aksumite control. Aksum expanded its influence into Himyar (invasions in 518 CE; 525 CE), establishing a Christian protectorate and reinforcing its role as a regional power broker.¹⁵ As written by the renowned historian Sergew, “the king [Kaleb] had expanded his dominion on both sides of the Red Sea... he went by sea to the other side of the Red Sea where he occupied some part of northern Arabia.”¹⁶ Another source similarly notes that “in the sixth century King Kaleb reiterated Aksumite claims to some sort of control in the Yemen by mounting an invasion.”¹⁷ Phillipson also confirms that “on at least one occasion Aksum controlled parts of South Arabia, on the other side of the Red Sea.”¹⁸ These accounts attest to Aksum’s maritime strength and its capacity to shape Red Sea geopolitics through both naval and diplomatic means.

Red Sea access was the primary factor in the rise and fall of the Aksumite Kingdom. As historian Professor Tadesse Tamrat and Sergew Hable Sellassie clearly stated,

The whole civilization and culture of Axum, as well as its economic life, was based on its international maritime connections...Axum had become an integral part of the Hellenic world. Axum held the same position also during the Roman and Byzantine Empires...It was also from the Eastern Mediterranean that the first Christian missionaries come to Axum. Abuna Salama and others such as the Nine Saints came from the Byzantine world... These regular contacts continued down to the seventh century, and all-important economic, political, and religious developments in the Byzantine world were also reflected in Axum. With the rapid Muslim conquest, however, these historical channels of communication were almost completely cut off. Only with the Alexandrian Church did Christian Ethiopia continue to have precarious contact.¹⁹

This disconnection from its maritime lifelines marked not only the decline of Aksum’s naval and commercial prominence but also the beginning of Ethiopia’s gradual inward turn – a historical shift from maritime openness to continental isolation that would define much of its subsequent history.

15 Rugare Rukuni, “Religious Statecraft: Constantinianism in the Figure of Nagashi Kaleb,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.5885>. Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*. Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

16 Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 63.

17 Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation*.

18 David W. Phillipson, “The Aksumite Roots of Medieval Ethiopia,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 39, no. 1 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00672700409480389>.

19 Sergew Hable Selassie, *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*, 2nd ed. (Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1997).

As historian Sergew observed, “Ethiopia was isolated from the outside world from the ninth century AD, and thereafter the dark age followed.”²⁰

Hence, the rise of Islam in the seventh century reconfigured the geopolitical order of the Red Sea. Muslim control over key coastal territories and trade routes gradually diminished Aksum’s maritime dominance, although commercial exchanges between Arab and Ethiopian merchants persisted. The decline of Adulis and the subsequent shift of trade centers toward Islamic sultanates marked the beginning of Ethiopia’s maritime marginalization – a structural transformation that would shape the region’s political and economic landscape for centuries to come.

Following the decline of Aksum, the Zagwe Dynasty maintained limited maritime engagement through Zeila and the Dahlak Islands rather than the Aksumite ports along the Red Sea, which had fallen under external control.²¹ Moreover, the Christian-centered political orientation of the dynasty made sea access less of a strategic priority. Consequently, its inland focus and reduced naval capacity curtailed Ethiopia’s ability to assert sustained influence over coastal infrastructure and maritime trade routes.

The Solomonic Dynasty, which ascended to power in 1270, briefly revived Ethiopia’s maritime ambitions through its “North Policy”.²² The North Policy was explicitly designed to achieve three interrelated goals: maintaining the political legacy of Aksum, expanding imperial authority toward the coast to secure sovereign sea access and regional influence, and controlling the Red Sea corridor to preempt possible invasions by Arab and Ottoman powers. This latter objective was especially critical, as external actors – including Arab states wary of Ethiopia’s potential cooperation with Christian Europe to close the Red Sea corridor – sought to confine Ethiopia inland, while Egypt remained anxious about the possible diversion or restriction of the Nile’s flow.²³

To counter these external threats of encirclement and intervention, successive emperors Amde Tsion, Eskender, Zera Yacob, Sarsa Dengel, and Zedengel pursued policies aimed at securing access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Emperor Amde Tsion, for instance, expanded his domain to the coast, taking control of the vital port of Zeila and incorporating coastal communities, re-

20 Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 1.

21 Negash, “The Zagwe Period.”

22 Andrzej Bartnicki and Joanna Mantel-Niećko, *Historia Etiopii*, 2nd ed., (Ossolińskich, 1987).

23 Jules Perruchon, *Les Chroniques de Zar’a Yâ’eqôb et de Ba’eda Mâryâm, Rois d’Éthiopie de 1434 à 1478: Texte éthiopien et traduction; précédées d’une introduction* (Forgotten Books, 2018).

portedly hoisting the imperial flag there.²⁴ Emperor Zera Yacob further pursued a proactive maritime expansion by extending his realm to the Indian Ocean²⁵ and institutionalizing coastal governance through the elevation of the Bahre Negash (Lord of the Sea) – a title ranked above other regional governors.²⁶

Yet these gains proved episodic and fragile, constrained by logistical challenges and the rise of competing regional powers. Muslim sultanates – including Makhzumi, Walasma, Ifat, and Adal – emerged as dominant actors along the eastern seaboard, redirecting maritime power and trade networks away from the Ethiopian highlands. Ironically, the elevated status of the Bahre Negash also generated internal instability, most notably the rebellion of Bahre Negash Yisshaq against Emperor Minas and Emperor Sarsa Dengel. The latter was simultaneously forced to confront an alliance between the rebellious governor, the Turks, and the Harar Sultanate.²⁷ This prolonged contestation between the Solomonic emperors and the Islamic sultanates over the geo-strategic and geo-economic control of the Red Sea defined the medieval era. It underscores the enduring connection between Ethiopia's quest for a maritime outlet and its struggle for political survival in the face of shifting internal and external power dynamics.

From the mid-sixteenth century onward, Ethiopia entered a prolonged phase of maritime exclusion shaped by the ascendancy of external powers. The Ottoman Empire established control over the Red Sea from 1557²⁸ to 1846, followed by Egyptian administration and Italian colonial consolidation of Eritrean ports. These external powers systematically restricted Ethiopia's access to the sea, transforming the Red Sea from a frontier of opportunity into a barrier of containment. During the Zemene Mesafint, few emperors made intermittent attempts to reclaim maritime access in a very fragmented way. Rulers such as Bekafa, Eyasu II, and Eyoas sought to reassert influence over coastal territories, but their efforts were constrained by internal instability and external encroachments. The consolidation of Italian control over Asseb and Massawa in the late nineteenth century further entrenched Ethiopia's landlocked condition, despite diplomatic and military efforts by emperors (1855-1952) such as Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, Menelik II, Lij Iyasu, and Ras Teferi the later Emperor Haile Selassie to negotiate or reclaim sea access.

24 Joseph Tubiana, "'Turning Points' in Ethiopian History," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 21 (1965) Yilma Deressa, *Ya' Ityopyā Tārik: Ba'ašerā Sedestañāw Kefla Zaman* (Mankusa Publishing House, 1999).

25 Deressa, *Ya' Ityopyā Tārik Ba'ašerā*, 27.

26 Bartnicki and Mantel-Niećko, *Historia Etiopii*.

27 Bartnicki and Mantel-Niećko, *Historia Etiopii*.

28 Haile Mariam, *Assab Yemanat: YāItyopyā*.

A major historical reversal came centuries later with the post-World War II settlement concerning Eritrea. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 390(V)A (Adopted on 2 December 1950), commonly referred to as the Federal Act, laid the legal foundation for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The resolution stipulated under Article 1 that “Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown.”²⁹ In reaching this decision, the General Assembly explicitly recognized among its considerations “Ethiopia’s legitimate need for adequate access to the sea.”

The federation, implemented in 1952, briefly restored Ethiopia’s maritime sovereignty. Through ports such as Massawa and Assab, Ethiopia re-established its strategic presence on the Red Sea, reviving trade, naval development, and regional diplomacy. This period coincided with Ethiopia’s broader modernization agenda and efforts to project geopolitical agency in the Horn of Africa. Yet, the federation proved fragile, and soon dissolved. Eritrean nationalist movements, coupled with the centralizing tendencies of Addis Ababa, triggered rising political tensions and ultimately armed confrontation. Eritrea’s formal secession in 1993 terminated Ethiopia’s direct access to the sea, reintroducing the strategic vulnerabilities of landlockedness. The loss was not merely territorial; it symbolized a rupture in Ethiopia’s long-standing narrative of maritime identity.

In sum, Ethiopia’s maritime history reveals a persistent pattern: the pursuit of sea access has been a strategic imperative across dynastic during ancient, medieval and modern periods. The Aksumite legacy of maritime power, the episodic resurgence under Solomonic rule, and the modern period federation and later reunion of Eritrea with Ethiopia under the UNGA Federal Act all underscore Ethiopia’s enduring orientation toward the sea. Conversely, periods of exclusion – whether due to Islamic expansion, Ottoman control, or European colonial power encirclement – have coincided with strategic contraction and geopolitical vulnerability. This historical trajectory informs Ethiopia’s contemporary maritime aspirations. The legacy of Adulis, Zeila, Massawa, Berbera, Djibouti and Asseb continues to shape national discourse, policy debates, and regional diplomacy. Understanding this historical continuum is essential to contextualizing Ethiopia’s current strategic posture and its evolving engagement with Red Sea geopolitics.

29 Eritrea: Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea (Report of the Interim committee of the General Assembly of the Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea), A/RES/390 (December 2, 1950), <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unga/1950/en/7687>.

From Commoditization to Existential Imperative: The Geopolitical Lens in Post-2018

Following the 2018 political transition, Ethiopia's maritime strategy underwent a profound transformation, shifting from the EPRDF's commoditized and transactional view of port access to a securitized and existential framing of sea access (Ethiopia News Agency 2025). Under the Prosperity Party, led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, maritime access has been redefined as a matter not of economic convenience but of national sovereignty, security, and development. This transformation reflects a broader reorientation in Ethiopia's foreign policy thinking, in which sovereign sea access is pursued in parallel with port diversification, signaling the country's intent to reclaim its historical maritime rights and restore its geopolitical agency. Ethiopia's geographical proximity to the Red Sea, juxtaposed with its landlocked condition, epitomizes a paradox of peripherality being at the heart of the region yet constrained by the absence of direct maritime presence.

Ethiopia's redefinition of sea access as an existential necessity is grounded not in symbolism but in the material realities of being a landlocked developing country (LLDC). Domestically, a rapidly growing population and expanding economy have intensified the need for efficient, reliable, and secure maritime outlets. Geography has imposed a heavy burden on the country, as it is surrounded by politically fragile and often unpredictable neighbors. As Collier (2007) notes, being landlocked is already a significant challenge, but when compounded by bad neighbors, it becomes even more complex and difficult for landlocked states to achieve sustainable development. Ethiopia's dependence on external corridors for trade has created chronic vulnerabilities and inflated logistics costs. The absence of direct sea access has entrenched high transport expenses, port congestion, and logistical inefficiencies that constrain the country's competitiveness in both regional and global markets. These cumulative constraints extend beyond trade performance they influence industrial policy, investment inflows, and the overall trajectory of economic transformation.

According to the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLS), LLDCs face "disproportionately high logistics costs"³⁰ that structurally undermine their competitiveness and development.

30 UN-OHRLS, *Quantifying Logistics Costs of Landlocked Developing Countries* (UN-OHRLS, 2023), https://www.un.org/ohrls/sites/www.un.org.ohrls/files/quantifying_logistics_costs_of_landlocked_developing_countries.pdf.

On average, LLDCs incur export logistics costs that are 63 percent higher than those of transit developing countries, 53 percent higher than developed countries, and 44 percent higher than other developing economies. Import logistics costs are similarly inflated 75 percent higher than transit developing countries and 42 percent higher than developed economies.³¹ Other studies also show that, landlocked countries, on average, they lag 20 percent behind their growth potential due to structural constraints tied to geography³².

These challenges are particularly acute in Africa, where landlocked states endure the world's highest port-hinterland transport costs, further exacerbated by fuel price volatility, infrastructural bottlenecks, and periodic supply-chain disruptions.³³ Such costs are not merely economic abstractions; they represent enduring structural constraints that erode productivity, weaken industrialization, and deepen dependency.³⁴

For Ethiopia whose economy remains heavily reliant on agricultural exports and imported industrial inputs these logistical barriers translate directly into reduced competitiveness, distorted market incentives, and heightened food insecurity. Empirical evidence shows that Ethiopia's landlocked condition imposes tangible and disproportionate economic losses. The country depends on Djibouti for roughly 90 to 95 percent of its total imports and exports, creating a quasi-monopolistic dependency that is both financially burdensome and strategically risky. In 2008, Reuters reported that Ethiopia paid approximately USD 700 million annually in port fees to Djibouti;³⁵ this figure has since more than doubled, exceeding USD 1.5 billion³⁶ and even more³⁷ per year. The cost of maritime dependence filters through the economy in multiple ways contributing to inflationary pressures, constraining fiscal space, and forcing difficult trade-offs regarding which essential goods to import under tight cost conditions. The agricultural sector, which forms

31 UN-OHRLS, *Quantifying Logistics Costs*.

32 UNCTAD, *Trade and Development Report 2022: Development Prospects in a Fractured World: Global Disorder and Regional Responses* (UNCTAD, 2023).

33 UN-OHRLS, *Quantifying Logistics Costs*.

34 World Bank, *World Development Report 2022: Finance for an Equitable Recovery* (World Bank, 2022).

35 "Djibouti Port Fees Will Fuel Inflation: Ethiopia," Reuters, December 12, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/djibouti-port-fees-will-fuel-inflation-ethiopia-idUSJOE4BB0IV/>

36 "Ethiopia's prime minister wants a Red Sea harbour," *The Economist*, November 2, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/11/02/ethiopias-prime-minister-wants-a-red-sea-harbour/>

37 Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access: Balancing between Escalation and De-Escalation," *Institute of Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/2024/11/19/ethiopias-quest-for-sea-access-balancing-between-escalation-and-de-escalation/>.

the backbone of Ethiopia's economy, is particularly vulnerable: estimates suggest that fertilizer imports have declined by nearly 68 percent due to logistical and cost-related challenges, directly undermining productivity and rural livelihoods. Similarly, export-oriented industries such as coffee, leather, crude vegetable oil, and hides and skins have seen reductions of 43 percent, 49 percent, 80 percent, and 72 percent respectively.³⁸ These figures underscore the structural vulnerability created by landlockedness and demonstrate why maritime access has been reinterpreted by the post-2018 government as a developmental and security imperative rather than a commercial preference.

This strategic reorientation aligns with the developmental rationale of the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries (2014-2024), which identifies access to the sea, transit facilitation, and regional infrastructure development as critical pillars of sustainable growth. For Ethiopia, the cost of landlockedness is not only economic but also geopolitical—it restricts policy autonomy, reduces bargaining power in regional diplomacy, and reinforces asymmetric dependencies on transit states and external powers. The shift from a policy of “commoditized port access” to one of “sovereign maritime reclamation” represents an effort to convert structural vulnerability into strategic agency. By reframing sea access as a “right to development,” Ethiopia situates its maritime aspiration within the broader international discourse on equitable growth and the principles of sovereign equality. This repositioning provides both normative and legal justification for the country's renewed assertiveness in the Red Sea region, where it seeks to restore its historical maritime presence and rectify the developmental inequities inherent in its landlocked condition.

Beyond economic limitations, Ethiopia's dependence on foreign ports heightens its strategic and security vulnerabilities. Reliance on Djibouti for nearly all maritime trade exposes Ethiopia to potential manipulation, inspection delays, and external pressures, particularly during periods of political friction. The inability to control the flow of strategic imports, including defense materials, underscores the national security cost of landlockedness. This dependency curtails Ethiopia's strategic flexibility, compelling it to navigate regional politics shaped largely by coastal states and extra-regional actors with entrenched military presences along the Red Sea corridor. Hence, the quest for maritime access has evolved into an integral component of national

38 Dessie Tarko Ambaw et al., *Landlockedness and Trade: Evidence from a Quasi-Natural Experiment in Ethiopia* (African Development Bank, October 2019), https://aec.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2019/10/07/landlockedness_and_trade_-_evidence_from_a_quasi-natural_experiment_in_ethiopia.pdf.

security and sovereignty – a means to secure strategic autonomy, enhance resilience, and restore Ethiopia's rightful place within the geopolitics of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

The 2018 normalization with Eritrea represented the first major geopolitical step toward re-gaining maritime access diplomatically. The rapprochement, celebrated globally as a peace breakthrough, was initially conceived as a pragmatic framework through which Ethiopia could regain access to the ports of Assab and Massawa.³⁹ Yet the optimism that accompanied the peace declaration dissipated as political trust eroded and the two countries drifted back to competition and hostility following the Pretoria Agreement⁴⁰ that ended the war in Northern part of the country. The failure to operationalize port access through this rapprochement period revealed both the fragility of regional alliances and the enduring mistrust that defines Horn politics. It also illustrated that normalization alone, without clear institutional and legal guarantees, could not secure Ethiopia's long-term maritime interests.

Subsequently, the Abiy administration recalibrated its approach through a combination of diplomatic engagement and strategic bargaining designed to diversify port options and reassert Ethiopia's rightful place in regional maritime affairs. In pursuit of this objective, the government proposed concession-based arrangements – offering stakes in major national assets such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Ethio Telecom, and Ethiopian Airlines – in exchange for sustainable sea access. However, the response from neighboring coastal states proved far from encouraging. Most regional actors interpreted Ethiopia's proposals with caution or skepticism, reflecting both entrenched geopolitical rivalries and divergent national interests across the Red Sea and Horn of Africa littoral. This second strategy, despite its innovative and conciliatory approach, similarly failed to yield tangible results, reinforcing Ethiopia's perception that diplomatic overtures alone were insufficient to overcome the structural and political barriers imposed by its landlocked condition.

The 2023 memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland marked a decisive shift from defensive dependency to proactive diplomacy.⁴¹ By engag-

39 "Ethiopia Says Re-opening Roads to Eritrea's Red Sea Ports a Priority," *Africa News*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.africanews.com/2018/07/11/ethiopia-says-re-opening-roads-to-eritrea-s-red-sea-ports-a-priority/>.

40 Center for Preventive Action, "Conflict in Ethiopia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated March 20, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ethiopia>.

41 "Somalia and Ethiopia agree to restore diplomatic ties after year-long rift," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/12/somalia-and-ethiopia-agree-to-restore-diplomatic-ties-after-year-long-rift/>.

ing a semi-autonomous entity rather than a sovereign state, Ethiopia sought to expand its strategic room for maneuver while testing new modalities of access that align with its sovereign ambitions. Although the MoU provoked strong opposition from Somalia, Egypt, Eritrea, and other Red Sea littoral states, it underscored Ethiopia's willingness to challenge existing geopolitical hierarchies and reassert its agency in shaping the regional order. This third approach represents a more assertive phase in Ethiopia's maritime strategy, signaling a shift from defensive dependency to proactive pursuit of sovereign maritime rights and regional influence.

Complementary diplomatic steps, including the Ankara Declaration⁴² and subsequent engagements with Gulf and Middle Eastern, have sought to internationalize Ethiopia's maritime aspirations and link them with broader regional integration and development agendas. This strategy recognizes that the Red Sea has become an increasingly contested geopolitical arena, where major powers – from the United States and China to Middle Powers such as the UAE and Türkiye – compete for influence through port investments, military bases, and naval deployments. Ethiopia's engagement within this multipolar environment aims to convert vulnerability into opportunity by leveraging partnerships to enhance maritime security cooperation, infrastructural connectivity, and naval capacity building.

Despite these proactive measures, Ethiopia faces opposition and pushback from regional and external actors. Eritrea, Egypt, and Somalia have formed tactical alignments to contain Ethiopia's assertiveness, while Djibouti, anxious about losing its monopoly over Ethiopian trade, has aligned itself with this camp. The Arabization of the Red Sea narrative, increasingly promoted by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, further marginalizes non-Arab states like Ethiopia from regional maritime governance structures. In response, Ethiopia's discourse of sovereign sea access – anchored in historical rights, legal principles, and developmental necessity – has emerged as a counter-narrative to these exclusionary frameworks. It reframes sea access not as an act of expansionism but as a legitimate exercise of its rights.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's quest for sovereign sea access reflects a historical continuum of active engagement with the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden an engagement

42 Gizachew Asrat and Gashaw Ayferam, "Ethiopia's Maritime Aspirations: Revitalized by the Ankara Declaration," *Institute of Foreign Affairs*, December 20, 2024, <https://www.ifa.gov.et/2024/12/20/ethiopiasmaritime-aspirations-revitalized-by-the-ankara-declaration/>.

rooted in millennia of maritime presence, legal recognition, and civilizational identity. From the Aksumite Kingdom's naval and commercial expansion to the episodic maritime pursuits of the Solomonic dynasty and the modern federation and reunification with Eritrea, Ethiopia's maritime orientation has consistently served as a central determinant of its geopolitical agency and state survival. Periods of maritime exclusion whether resulting from Islamic expansion, European encirclement, or Eritrea's secession in 1993 coupled with internal power struggles and egocentric political elites, have made Ethiopia a unique case globally: a nation with one of the largest populations in the world that remains landlocked, situated barely 60 kilometers from a coastline it once possessed. These conditions have coincided with strategic contraction, economic dependency, and heightened national vulnerability

The post-2018 political reform represents a decisive shift in Ethiopia's maritime strategy, moving from the EPRDF's transactional and commoditized approach to a securitized, existential framing of sea access. This transformation acknowledges that maritime presence is not merely a logistical convenience but a multidimensional imperative encompassing sovereignty, national security, economic development, and regional influence. The reorientation leverages historical claims, legal and natural rights, and geography to pursue diversified and sustainable maritime outlets, complemented by naval capacity building and diplomatic engagement across the Red Sea corridor. Initiatives such as the 2023 MoU with Somaliland exemplify Ethiopia's proactive approach to expanding strategic options while navigating entrenched regional rivalries.

However, realizing permanent and reliable sea access requires more than bilateral agreements or opportunistic partnerships. It necessitates integrated diplomacy, regional cooperation, and a whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategy grounded in national unity. Ethiopia's maritime aspiration is inseparable from the broader goals of regional peace, economic integration, and alignment with continental development agendas, including the African Union's Agenda 2063. By framing sovereign sea access as both a developmental right and a strategic necessity, Ethiopia seeks to transform structural landlocked vulnerabilities into instruments of geopolitical agency. Ultimately, the pursuit of maritime presence underscores the interplay of historical consciousness, legal legitimacy, and contemporary geopolitical strategy, reaffirming Ethiopia's determination to reclaim its rightful place in the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden arena.

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