Geopolitical Leverage

ETHIOPIA'S RED SEA IMPERATIVES IN THE ERA OF BRICS

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Abstract

This article examines Ethiopia's evolving strategy to secure access to the Red Sea, with particular focus on its long-standing interest in the Assab port, within the broader context of intensifying geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa. It asks how Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access is shaped by regional rivalries and its positioning within an emerging multipolar order, including its engagement with BRICS. Methodologically, the study combines analytical eclecticism with comparative case studies of port access arrangements and regional cooperation frameworks based on secondary sources. The findings indicate that Ethiopia's landlocked status constitutes a structural constraint with significant implications for national security, economic development, and political discourse. While BRICS membership offers opportunities to diversify partnerships and reduce dependence on Gulf and Western actors through enhanced South–South cooperation, persistent tensions—particularly in Ethiopia–Eritrea relations—continue to limit strategic options. The article argues that Ethiopia's Red Sea ambitions are most likely to be realized through diplomatic pragmatism, regional cooperation, and the strategic use of multilateral platforms,

rather than coercive approaches. Overall, the study highlights the limits of unilateral strategies and underscores the importance of negotiated regional arrangements in mitigating Ethiopia's geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Keywords
Assab Port; Ethiopia; Geopolitics; Horn of Africa; Red Sea

Introduction

The Red Sea has long been recognized as one of the most strategic maritime corridors, linking the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean. It facilitates nearly 10 percent of global trade, including vital energy shipments from the Gulf to Europe and Asia (Hermann et al., 2022; Sultana & Cohen, 2025), and is characterized by complex geopolitical dynamics and growing external interest in the region (Ashine, 2024). The Red Sea is vital to global trade, as it connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean, facilitating major energy shipments and container traffic (Donelli & Levaggi, 2021; Sultana & Cohen, 2025). The region's significance has also intensified with the rise of multipolarity (Gürcan, 2019), as emerging powers such as China, Russia, and India seek to expand their influence through infrastructure investment, naval presence, and diplomatic engagement (Badawi, 2024; Fulton, 2022; Quamar, 2022). Within this shifting order, BRICS has emerged as a platform for alternative global governance, offering developing states opportunities to diversify partnerships beyond Western-dominated institutions (Gürcan & Otero, 2024), thereby increasing the strategic importance of critical maritime corridors such as the Red Sea in the evolving multipolar landscape.

The Horn of Africa plays a crucial role in the geopolitics of the Red Sea, with Djibouti hosting military bases for the U.S., China, and France (Campbell, 2021; Mrdaković & Todorović, 2023). Eritrea's ports attract interest from Gulf States and Russia, while Somalia and Somaliland engage in port diplomacy with various global actors (Assefa, 2020; Valbjørn, 2020). Despite efforts by the African Union and IGAD to enhance maritime security, competi-

tion among external powers often undermines these initiatives (Cannon & Donelli, 2019; Chanie, 2024). The region also has geopolitical challenges that are deeply intertwined with internal conflicts, external interventions, and regional rivalries (Dubale, 2024). In this context, the Horn of Africa's significance is heightened due to regional instability, migration issues, and resource competition, making it a focal point for global influence (Cardoso, 2016; Donelli & Levaggi, 2021; Farah, 2024), and balancing these and aligning with the contemporary dynamic of demand for the region's countries is a primary concern. In this context, Ethiopia has long been viewed as a pivotal actor in the Horn of Africa, owing to its strategic location, demographic significance, and historical legacy as a non-colonized state. These factors have shaped its regional and global identity (Assefa & Yemane, 2017; Mulat, 2020).

In Ethiopia, historical ties to the Red Sea can be traced to the Aksumite Kingdom, which flourished in the 1st century CE. This ancient civilization maintained a bustling maritime trade through the ports of Adulis and Massawa, connecting Ethiopia to the Red Sea and beyond (Pankhurst, 1961). It sought maritime access due to its ancient role as a seafaring civilization. This kingdom controlled key Red Sea ports, facilitating extensive trade networks that connected Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia (Holbert, 2022; Rukuni, 2020). However, since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, Ethiopia has been landlocked and lost direct access to the Red Sea. This geopolitical shift has had significant implications for Ethiopia's security, economy, and regional influence (Guiziou, 2023).

Ethiopia’s geopolitical situation has been significantly impacted by its landlocked status. The country, as of 2024, has a population exceeding 126 million, making it the second-most populous country in Africa (World Bank, 2023; 2025), which relies on the Red Sea for trade and security. With 95% of its trade passing through Djibouti, Ethiopia incurs annual logistics costs of $1.5 to $2 billion (Farah, 2024; Takele & Tolcha, 2021). By combating this vulnerability, with an average annual GDP growth of 6.1% over the past decades (International Monetary Fund, 2024), the country has achieved its growth. But now, the Ethiopian government views access to

maritime routes as vital for its sovereignty, economic growth, and regional leadership, especially following its accession to BRICS in 2024 (Grishenkin & Zamesina, 2024; Hailu et al., 2023). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed highlighted the need for Ethiopia, with its population of 150 million, to break free from being a "geographical prisoner." After losing direct sea access in 1993 due to Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia became the world's most populous landlocked nation (Woldemariam & Endaylalu, 2025). This loss has left it vulnerable, relying heavily on neighboring ports like Djibouti and facing potential disruptions (Takele & Tolcha, 2021; Cannon & Rossiter, 2017). Due to such pressures, for Ethiopia, access to the sea is not an abstract debate. It is a question that touches on economic resilience, national unity, and long-term sovereignty. It imposes itself as a legitimate strategic priority rooted in geography, history, and economic necessity (Manaye, 2025).

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 rooted in millennia of maritime presence, legal recognition, and civilizational identity (Asrat & Gashaw, 2024). This is why this study analyzes the geopolitical leverage of the Ethiopian Red Sea imperatives, because the contemporary geopolitical dynamics in the Horn region have seen the existence of power projection and scramble for military bases by extra-regional states, competition for commercial ports, the Nile Rivalry, and regional configuration of states amid political transitions (Abebe, 2021). These geopolitical dynamics have brought both opportunities and challenges for Ethiopia at any period, but the quest is a matter of existence for the future citizens of the country.

Even as the country pursues a rapprochement strategy centered on its historical seaport, it has simultaneously sought to diversify port access through agreements with Somaliland and Kenya (Cannon & Rossiter, 2017), reflecting a deliberate strategy of economic and geopolitical diversification. While tensions with Somalia have led to Turkish mediation and the December 2024 Ankara Declaration, Somaliland upholds the MoU. Ethiopia is also exploring improvements in Djibouti and a potential focus on Assab

(Irrum & Humza, 2025). The reconstitution of Ethiopia's navy in 2019 is a testament to its quest for maritime sovereignty (Holbert, 2022). This attempt implies that the loss of direct access to maritime routes has framed access to ports as a national priority linked to sovereignty and security (Farah, 2024).

The other vital element is that Ethiopia's engagement with BRICS in 2024 reflects its broader ambition to leverage multipolarity for economic growth and geopolitical influence. By aligning with BRICS, Ethiopia seeks to secure infrastructure financing, diversify trade routes, and enhance its bargaining power in the Horn of Africa (Malik & Khadir, 2024; Tijjani et al., 2025). In addition to this, Grishenkin and Zamesina (2024) articulate that this BRICS membership elevates Ethiopia's international profile and offers access to new financing, infrastructure projects, and greater diplomatic leverage, though it may also heighten tensions in the region. Hence, the rise of BRICS has intensified competition for critical trade routes, impacting nations like Ethiopia that rely on these Red Sea chokepoints (Haralambides, 2024).

The Horn of Africa exemplifies the complexities of this regional controversy. Ethiopia faces significant challenges due to its landlocked status, relying almost entirely on Djibouti for its trade. Thus, Ethiopia's Red Sea imperatives must be understood within the global contest for maritime corridors, the regional competition in the Horn of Africa, and its national struggle to overcome landlocked dependency. This study context situates Ethiopia's maritime ambitions as both a domestic necessity and a strategic opportunity in the era of BRICS. This enables Ethiopia's efforts to convert its Red Sea challenges into sustainable geopolitical advantages amid global competition, shifting regional port dynamics, and its quest for maritime sovereignty.

The study aims to analyze the geopolitical leverage of Ethiopia's Red Sea imperatives in the context of the BRICS multipolar era. Specifically, it examines the historical, diplomatic, and regional security implications of the Red Sea for stability in Ethiopia, evaluates Ethiopia's alignment with BRICS and its geopolitical perspectives in the Red Sea, analyzes the comparative case studies that

focus on Ethiopia's port access and geopolitical dimensions in the Red Sea, and identifies strategic approaches and develops scenarios for Ethiopia's maritime futures within the context of the BRICS era.

This study is also significant to situate Ethiopia's maritime imperatives within the broader context of BRICS and multipolarity, filling a gap in existing literature. It provides empirical insights into Ethiopia's negotiation strategies and regional responses, offering policy-relevant recommendations. In addition, it contributes to comparative analysis for the port access from geopolitical dimensions implications by applying them to a contemporary African case.

The study draws on analytical eclecticism, understood as a problem-driven research strategy that pragmatically combines insights from multiple theoretical traditions rather than privileging a single paradigm. It reframes research questions to reflect real-world complexity and builds integrated explanations by linking different types of mechanisms (e.g., material, ideational, structural, and agential). Methodologically, it works by selectively extracting and recombining concepts across theories within a single analytical framework, typically at the level of middle-range explanation (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010).

BRICS, Multipolarity, and Ethiopia's Maritime Strategy: A Literature Review

The emergence of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and its expansion to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE, and other nations as BRICS+ presents a multipolar alternative to Western-dominated institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. This group emphasizes cooperation among Global South countries, economic diversification, infrastructure investment, and reform of multilateralism (Petry & Nölke, 2024; Rached & Sá, 2024; Gürcan, 2023). The Will for Peace 2026 naval exercise, also referred to as Mosi-3, illustrates the contrasting maritime strategies of BRICS and Western powers in the Red Sea and adjacent waters. Conducted off South Africa's coast with the participation of China, Russia, Iran, and South Africa, and observed by Ethiopia, the exercise was less

about operational naval capacity and more about projecting multipolar legitimacy and inclusivity (Martin, 2025; Lesedi, 2026). Analysts note that the exercise's impact was primarily geopolitical, projecting BRICS' willingness to contest Western maritime dominance (African Security Analysis, 2026).

BRICS offers Ethiopia alternative financing, market access, energy development, diplomatic backing, and greater geopolitical influence; however, this reliance on external powers like China and Russia raises concerns about its sovereignty. Yet, Taye & Getachew (2025) argue that this situation reflects Ethiopia's pursuit of alternative partnerships in a multipolar world, focusing on South-South cooperation and reducing dependency on Western institutions. Its maritime ambitions are shaped by global rivalries, including China's Belt and Road initiatives and U.S. military presence in Djibouti (Farah, 2024). The country's upcoming BRICS membership orientation with its maritime goals, evidenced by participation in naval exercises like "Will for Peace 2026." Scholars note that Ethiopia's "Red Sea doctrine" and "Two Waters Grand Strategy" seek to enhance its geopolitical role (Taye, 2025), and the ensuing strategy is the inauguration of the construction of the largest dam in its history, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), without foreign aid, through the collaboration of the people, like the Adwa victory.

Ethiopia's accession to BRICS+ exemplifies a broader global trend toward multipolarity, where emerging economies are seeking greater autonomy from Western institutions (Malik & Khadir, 2024). This shift is particularly pronounced in the Horn of Africa, where intensifying geoeconomic competition is evident as China, India, Russia, and Gulf states heavily invest in ports and logistics hubs along the Red Sea (Donelli & Dentice, 2020). By inviting Ethiopia, a landlocked state striving to reassert maritime relevance, BRICS signaled its intent to broaden maritime governance beyond traditional coastal powers, positioning itself as a counterweight to exclusionary Western-led frameworks (African Security Analysis, 2026; Fikru, 2026). For Ethiopia, participation in BRICS maritime initiatives represents a strategic opportunity to gain visibility and legitimacy in contested maritime governance, even without a coastline,

while simultaneously navigating the risks of dependence on Western patrols for actual Red Sea security (Fikru, 2026).

Despite being landlocked, Ethiopia strategically utilizes BRICS discourse to position itself as a maritime stakeholder, leveraging discursive power to reshape its geopolitical identity (Tijjani et al., 2025). However, Ethiopia's maritime ambitions are interlinked with regional security dynamics: instability in Somalia, Eritrea's militarization, and the presence of Gulf naval deployments create a complex web of interdependence that complicates Ethiopia's access strategies (Clapham, 2017). Within BRICS, Ethiopia positions itself as a gateway to Africa's interior, a strategy that enhances its bargaining power in both global and regional contexts (Grishenkin & Zamesina, 2024). Simultaneously, Ethiopia's alignment with BRICS represents a broader strategy aimed at escaping dependency, focusing on reducing reliance on Western maritime regimes and embedding itself within South-South cooperation networks. This multifaceted approach illustrates how Ethiopia's maritime discourse serves both as a developmental imperative and a geopolitical strategy within the evolving framework of multipolarity, addressing historical legitimacy, economic necessity, strategic leverage, and the reconfiguration of dependency.

The politics surrounding Djibouti's port, characterized by multiple foreign military bases, underscore Ethiopia's vulnerability, while alternative options such as Berbera in Somaliland and Massawa in Eritrea illustrate its geoeconomic bargaining tactics (Cannon & Rossiter, 2017; Chanie, 2024). Nonetheless, these initiatives carry the risk of exacerbating regional rivalries, particularly with Eritrea and Somalia, while simultaneously deepening the involvement of Gulf states in Horn politics. Thus, Ethiopia's maritime ambitions sit at the intersection of multipolarity, security interdependence, and geoeconomic competition.

The scholars and analysts demonstrate above that, even though Ethiopia is a new member of the BRICS and has a history in the Red Sea Ambitions, the current involvement in BRICS+ naval exercises shows the symbolic significance of its reconstituted navy since 2019 in asserting legitimacy and visibility in maritime governance.

Within BRICS, Ethiopia gains both a structural and discursive platform to redefine its position in the global order, transforming its landlocked status into a narrative of strategic importance.

Ethiopia's contemporary maritime aspirations are deeply rooted in historical narratives that invoke its imperial naval legacy (1955–1991), thereby legitimizing current claims to maritime relevance despite its landlocked status (Woldemariam & Endaylalu, 2025). These ambitions are not merely symbolic but tied to pressing economic imperatives: as Africa's second most populous country, Ethiopia's development trajectory depends on secure maritime access for trade, energy imports, and the export of industrial goods (Farah, 2024). The reconstitution of its navy in 2019 and ongoing port negotiations thus serve dual purposes, addressing developmental necessities while simultaneously enhancing geopolitical leverage. Thus, Ethiopia's pursuit of assured maritime access is neither aggression nor expansion (Manaye, 2025).

Ethiopia's aspirations for Red Sea access represent a critical component of its strategy for sustainable development and regional peace. As Ethiopia continues to navigate this geopolitical challenge, constructive engagement from regional stakeholders and the global community will be essential in shaping the future of the Horn of Africa (Santos, 2023). 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 (Asrat & Gashaw, 2024). The geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa have presented challenges to Ethiopia in terms of alienating neighbors, threatening sovereignty, escalating tensions, jeopardizing religious coexistence, and maintaining security and sustainability (Abebe, 2021).

Recent developments have marked a decisive shift in Ethiopia's maritime strategy, reframing sea access as a matter of national security and existential importance. This alteration acknowledges that maritime presence is not merely a logistical convenience but a multidimensional imperative encompassing sovereignty, national security, economic development, and regional influence (Asrat & Gashaw,

2024). The literature from different maritime geopolitical aspirations has various views. Thus, for this study, Ethiopia's Red Sea imperatives are organized into four interrelated dimensions: security vulnerabilities arising from its landlocked status, economic necessities for cost reduction and growth, historical narratives that legitimize claims, and dynamics of regional influence amid rivalries and involvement from external actors in the BRICS multipolarity expansion era.

Regarding the Security dimension, the Red Sea region has become a site of military competition between regional and international powers. Several countries have established military bases in the region. This has led to concerns about the militarization of the region (Narbone & Widdershoven, 2021). In the Horn of Africa, the importance of the Red Sea intersects with regional instability, migration flows, and resource competition, establishing it as a focal point of global influence (Mahmood, 2019; Vertin, 2019). A study by Takele & Tolcha (2021) points out that the risks are posed by regional instability and the foreign militarization of the Red Sea, including the presence of Chinese, U.S., and French bases in Djibouti. This dependency intensifies perceptions of encirclement, while (Cobbett & Mason, 2021) Ethiopia's exclusion from governance over littoral waters further reinforces concerns about strategic marginalization and limited influence over regional maritime affairs. Initiatives to revive naval capabilities, such as establishing the 2025 Addis Ababa headquarters and training centers, along with the 2024 Somaliland MoU for commercial and naval facilities, are viewed as strategic moves to restore deterrence and diversify maritime access (Chanie, 2024). The militarization of the Red Sea region is already a geopolitical hotspot with the presence of international naval forces. Ethiopia's ambition to establish a naval base in collaboration with regional actors such as Somaliland could add another layer of military complexity (Verhoeven, 2018). While some neorealist perspectives, Irrum & Humza (2025) interpret these actions as essential responses to underlying vulnerabilities, critics caution that they may heighten regional tensions. Egypt also makes use of the alliance between Sudan, Turkey, and Qatar to rekindle its

interest in the Nile River conflict, particularly the GERD project, and to wage war against Sudan, which has a bigger problem. The Egyptian and Ethiopian governments are at odds over the utilization of the GERD. This looked to be impeding cooperation with Ethiopia on a multilateral strategy for security in the larger Red Sea region at the time (Ashine, 2024). Furthermore, Ethiopia stands as a major anchor state in the Horn, contributing significantly to regional stability through its involvement in peacekeeping missions and counterterrorism efforts with a presence in the region. Thus, access to the sea is existential and vital for protecting global maritime security, supporting regional peace, and fostering economic integration (Manaye, 2025). As a result, the conflict over GERD and the contrasting geopolitical and geo-economic race in the Horn of Africa have larger security implications (Cardoso, 2016). That is why the security dimension is the one aspect of geopolitical concern for Ethiopia in the Red Sea.

In economic terms, Ethiopia's economy has experienced sustained growth over the past two decades, driven by agriculture, manufacturing, and services, while the nation's lack of direct access to the sea has imposed limitations on international trade (Santos, 2023). This leads to increased transportation costs and vulnerability to supply chain disruptions (World Bank, 2025), since the country's near-total dependence on Djibouti for import and export trade has been widely critiqued as a strategic vulnerability, including the economic burden of transit fees that are estimated to be two billion dollars annually. Ethiopia incurs what scholars call a permanent tax on trade, estimated at 15.2% of value, comprising 12.2% in direct port fees to Djibouti and 3% from delays, damage, and inefficiencies (World Bank, 2023; UNCTAD, 2022), this translates into annual GDP losses of $19–31 billion**,** or 13–23% of GDP in recent models (African Development Bank, 2024). The profit margin of Ethiopia diminishes due to rising fees and a drain on foreign exchange, consuming a significant portion of export revenues. Chanie (2024) argues that reliance on Djibouti and the dependency by itself undermines Ethiopia's aspirations to achieve middle-income status. Subsequently, maritime access is perceived as critical for reducing

trade costs, boosting export competitiveness, and facilitating Ethiopia's integration into frameworks like the AfCFTA, mounted as a developmental and geopolitical necessity for Ethiopia. Scholars such as Asrat and Gashaw (2024) view BRICS as a platform for economic de-risking in a multipolar world, though some doubt its effectiveness in reducing dependencies. The geopolitical and strategic significance of the Red Sea region for international trade, the regional economy, and general instability (Ashine, 2024). The complete sensitivities, Assefa (2025) argues that Ethiopia's renewed demand for Red Sea access is a reflection of its growing economic aspirations and strategic insecurities. Therefore, to ensure efficient logistics and connectivity for successful integration into continental trade frameworks, BRICS, and the broader global economy.

From a historical perspective, Ethiopia's maritime aspirations are often framed within restorative historical narratives. Scholars often reference the Aksumite Empire's Red Sea ports, like Adulis, as well as Ethiopia's pre-colonial and Italian-era control over Assab to demonstrate long-standing maritime ties (Negash, 2016). Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed frames this legacy as a "natural" and "legitimate" right under UNCLOS Article 125 and colonial-era acknowledgments (Woldemariam & Endaylalu, 2025). In addition, Kahsay (2007) views these narratives as a form of justice-oriented reclamation, while perspectives from critical geopolitics warn that this framing could obscure contemporary legal and diplomatic challenges. This tension reveals how historical legitimacy is utilized to counter accusations of expansionism and to strengthen Ethiopia's position in negotiations. The Red Sea is not simply a body of water. For Ethiopia, it represents economic lifelines, national cohesion, and long-term security. History makes one point unmistakably clear: Ethiopia has flourished when connected to the sea and faltered when cut off from it (Manaye, 2025).

In terms of regional influence, the Red Sea region is becoming increasingly important in global geopolitics due to its strategic location. Several countries in the broader Gulf region and external powers are extending their influence to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. This has led to growing geo-economic projections, mili-

tary rivalries, and the risk of confrontation between key regional players and international actors (Narbone & Widdershoven, 2021; Vertin, 2019). The new superpower rivalry in the Red Sea is a complex issue that involves several global and regional powers. This competition is driven by the strategic importance of the region, which serves as a critical passage for global trade and military operations (Ashine, 2024). This rivalry is evident through military bases, port investments, and security agreements, driven by interests in energy security, trade route control, counterterrorism, and regional influence projection (Singh, 2023). Stabilizing the region is facing several challenges that require regional cooperation to address. Several initiatives have been launched to promote regional cooperation in the region (DeLozier, 2021). Research by Hailu et al. (2023) documents Somalia's backlash, Turkey's mediation efforts through the Ankara Declaration, and the perception of encirclement within the Egypt-Somalia-Eritrea axis. Gulf investments in Berbera and other corridors further complicate these dynamics, creating both interdependence and the potential for proxy conflict.

Scholars debate whether Ethiopia's actions reflect a pragmatic adjustment to a multipolar world or threaten regional stability. This accentuates the need to view Ethiopia's Red Sea strategies through both realist security lenses and historical institutionalism interpretations of history and legitimacy. Ethiopia's maritime ambitions are intricately tied to navigating the complex political landscapes of its neighbors: Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan. Djibouti functions as Ethiopia's main trade gateway for its commerce, with high costs, and the presence of multiple foreign military bases renders it a strategically contested hub (Cannon & Donelli, 2019), acting as a leverage point in the context of great-power competition. Sudan's ongoing civil war and contested Red Sea ports, particularly Port Sudan, involve Russian, Iranian, and Gulf actors, further complicating Ethiopia's access routes (Verhoeven, 2018). Similarly, Somalia, including Somaliland, is characterized by overlapping agreements and rival external influences (Chanie, 2024). Eritrea's control over the Assab port continues to exacerbate tensions stemming from historical disputes, shifting Gulf alliances, and resistance

to Ethiopian overtures (Cannon & Donelli, 2019). These dynamics emphasize the need for Ethiopia to carefully balance its bilateral negotiations, avoid escalation as seen with Eritrea, leverage its BRICS+ membership for diplomatic support, and advocate for inclusive governance in the Red Sea to mitigate fragmentation and external dominance (Woldemariam & Endaylalu, 2025). Ultimately, Ethiopia's maritime pursuits are closely connected to regional stability, where enhanced maritime access promises mutual economic and security benefits amid multipolar pressures. Through empirical observation, these ambitions intersect with three critical domains: the global realignment toward multipolarity through BRICS, the volatile security situation and port politics in the Horn of Africa, and Ethiopia's developmental imperatives grounded in historical claims to maritime legitimacy.

Conceptual Framework

Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access and its broader geopolitical leverage in the context of BRICS and shifting global power dynamics can be conceptualized through multiple theoretical lenses, ranging from critical geopolitics to neorealism, geoeconomics, regional security complex theory, and historical institutionalism. For example, neorealism suggests that in an anarchical world, states are more driven towards survival and relative power maximization, responding to systemic pressures such as the balance of power and security dilemmas (Waltz, 1979). The states respond to these problems pragmatically to reduce vulnerabilities, such as through relationships, hedging, and improving capabilities for confrontation (Ikenberry & Mearsheimer, 2001). As the most populous landlocked nation, Ethiopia faces large-scale power asymmetry and vulnerabilities from its neighbors. Moreover, potential encirclement by relations with Egypt and by alignments among Egypt, Somalia, and Eritrea. This situation prompts Ethiopia to balance its position through diversified access, exemplified by its memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, and to seek alliances like BRICS for leverage against regional rivals (Grishenkin & Zamesina, 2024).

The naval revival of Ethiopia, as well as participation in BRICS+ exercises, indicates that self-reliance as a part of this sector of globalization concerning maritime freedom in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea needs to be an operational strategy of the African and international community, with emphasis on defense against the existential potential in a new space.

Regional security complex theory defines regions as clusters of states whose primary security concerns are so interlinked that national insecurities cannot be analyzed or resolved apart from one another, often with patterns of amity/enmity and penetration by external powers (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The theory helps conceptualize Ethiopia's ambitions within the interdependent security environment of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, characterized by securitization spillovers, patterns of amity and enmity, and extra-regional influences (Cannon & Donelli, 2019). Ethiopia's distance from the regional council raises the challenge of containment and proxy war. In addition, BRICS's access to the outside world creates multipolar realities and can lead Ethiopia to resolve and alleviate regional conflicts through broader alliance frameworks and maritime security interactions (Mohammed, 2024), promoting inclusive collaboration and addressing proxy threats (Mangani, 2024). The theoretical framework in this analysis places Ethiopia's interests at the center of a high-speed Horn's interdependent and volatile security environment (Clapham, 2017). Ethiopia's maritime ambitions cannot be separated from this region's volatile environment, Somalia's instability, Eritrea's militarization, and the naval presence of Gulf states; all influence Ethiopia's strategic assumptions. In support of this view, Terrefe (2025) clarifies that port politics in the Horn is tied up with competing sovereignties and untrustworthy facilities. Therefore, theory describes that Ethiopia's Red Sea imperative is a result of a complex web of regional vulnerabilities, with maritime access both a national interest and the threat of a flash point in the region.

Therefore, multipolarity is equally relevant within the frameworks of neorealism and regional security complex theory. Multipolarity can be described as a global order with multiple power

centers, fostering multi-alignment and hedging by middle or emerging powers against unipolar dominance (Acharya, 2018). This international system represents multi-linking of power and how global power, like non-state frameworks and dynamics, comes against unipolar power in complex politics, which also applies to the context of South-South cooperation (Gürcan & Otero, 2024; Ikenberry, 2011). BRICS is thus emblematic of this shift toward Global South-led multipolarity, offering Ethiopia agency to pursue multi-alignment, balancing Western ties with non-Western partnerships, for development leverage and geopolitical elevation (Patrick & Hogan, 2025). Ethiopia's BRICS role enhances influence over the Red Sea and maritime norms without full alignment, countering exclusion and amplifying its voice in a fragmented order. Therefore, the geopolitical leverage for Ethiopia's Red Sea imperative is not a singular arrangement but rather a multidimensional venture involving economic imperatives, security interdependence, historical narratives, discursive positioning, and structural repositioning. It follows that Ethiopia's maritime initiative does not just result in access to the sea; it is a move at strategic leadership in a world where BRICS presents important angles of influence.

From the perspective of multipolarity, on the one hand, BRICS is a Global South instrument by which Ethiopia can navigate changes in the multipolar landscape and move against unipolar circumstances (Mansour & Baiche, 2025). Joining BRICS provides Ethiopia with diplomatic protection, alternative financing options, and exposure to maritime norms (Tijjani et al., 2025), as shown by its observer role in initiatives such as the Will for Peace 2026. This involvement enhances Ethiopia's geopolitical stature concerning Red Sea dynamics without confrontation. These theoretical frameworks interconnect to illustrate Ethiopia's use of BRICS for so-called discursive, structural, economic, regional, institutional, and multipolar aims toward overcoming Red Sea challenges. These frameworks, together, signify Ethiopia's ambitions towards the Red Sea as a multi-layered project, geoeconomic leverage as it relates to port access and trading corridors, security entanglement with reference to the volatile Horn of Africa and all other parts of Africa,

historical legitimacy in imperial narratives, discursive power manifested through critical geopolitics and the symbolism of BRICS, and structural autonomy as a result of South-South cooperation and reduced dependency.

Narratives and questions of legitimacy also point to the relevance of critical geopolitics, which looks at geopolitics not simply as a geographic determinism problem but rather as socially constructed discourses, narratives, and power-knowledge relations from which spatial imagination and political practice are constructed and put forward in a manner of power (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2007). Critical geopolitics, as articulated by Ó Tuathail (1996), examines how states ' spatial narratives of spatial power are built to justify power. It approaches how states shape and challenge geopolitical narratives to justify their claims and policies. In Ethiopia, critical geopolitics shows precisely why the Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed considers access to the Red Sea as both a vital necessity and a historical right, drawing on the legacies of the Axumite Empire's ports and the well-established Two Waters doctrine that links the Nile and the Red Sea. The Prime Minister views landlocked status as a geographical prison and a historical injustice, presenting access to the sea as an existential issue while appealing to the Aksumite maritime legacy to justify his claims (Asrat & Gashaw, 2024; Terrefe, 2025). This approach helps elucidate the power-knowledge basis of Ethiopia's claim as a legitimate maritime stakeholder in the Red Sea and to counter its inclusion within BRICS as a multipolar solution to global maritime governance centered on the West (Tijjani et al., 2025). The argument of important critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2007) provides the source of re-structuring Ethiopia's pressing maritime issues on the foundation of a more discursive basis. Ethiopia's dialogue on its maritime destiny is part of a grand geopolitical narrative where Ethiopia seeks to portray a part of the world that it is not part of for a time, to its landlocked state as unjust and temporary (Hyndman, 2009).

From the literature sources, the naval combat and exercises in BRICS+ and other nations, Ethiopia symbolically positions itself as

a maritime stakeholder, despite lacking direct access to the sea. Ethiopia's geopolitical leverage lies in its ability to strategically reposition itself within global South solidarities, using BRICS as a platform to contest exclusionary maritime governance. The BRICS membership puts Ethiopia on the stage of globalization by changing its narrative from being in a state of relative landlocked vulnerability to a global state of political importance within multipolar global networks and enhances its position in international discussion through non-Western multilateral narratives.

Different from critical geopolitics, historical institutionalism emphasizes how timing, sequences, and path dependence shape institutions and outcomes, with critical junctures enabling contingent change amid lock-in effects (Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 1999). Historical institutionalism, as discussed by Pierson (2000) and Thelen (1999), emphasizes the concept of path dependency and how historical narratives shape contemporary claims. It shows the impact of previous trajectory on current strategies, as well as Ethiopia's use of historical memory to justify the naval reconstitution of 2019. Historically, the narrative of Ethiopia, like that of its naval presence in the imperial age and its claim to a Red Sea identity, can only strengthen its position and justify a naval reconstitution. It is in landlocked Ethiopia's road after 1993, which is unsustainable with Djibouti, that its reliance on other countries and inefficiencies, but now, in 2019, the Somaliland MoU from BRICS and rebuilding is at its most crucial time frame. BRICS is also an opportunity for maritime diversification and maritime security, though it is still locked up to geographical competitive dynamics. Ethiopia is justified in a sense under international laws that include the right to restore its maritime territory and cultural traditions (Paulos & Halabo, 2025). From this perspective, the ongoing securitization of the Red Sea doctrine can be understood in relation to historical legacies, but more precisely as a reference point for emerging strategies in the BRICS era aimed at navigating institutional constraints.

Relatedly, geoeconomics examines the intersection of economics and geopolitics, treating maritime access both as a developmental necessity and as a geopolitical instrument through which economic

tools are used to advance strategic objectives (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016). It views economic instruments, trade, investment, and infrastructure as extensions of geopolitical power, where states pursue strategic goals through market leverage rather than purely military means (Luttwak, 1990). Ethiopia's Red Sea imperatives align with reducing trade costs that amount to billions annually via Djibouti, boosting exports, and integrating into AfCFTA and WTO pathways. Meanwhile, BRICS mechanisms like the New Development Bank financing provide opportunities for infrastructure leverage and reducing dependence on Western economies. Scholars like Blackwill and Harris (2016) argue that states increasingly deploy economic tools, such as trade routes, investments, and connectivity, as instruments of strategic competition in a geoeconomics framework.

An analysis by Obajinmi and Garba (2025) suggests that geoeconomic tools enhance Ethiopia's bargaining power for corridor diversification and multipolar economic influence in the BRICS era. Maritime access is thus framed not only as a developmental necessity but also as a geopolitical instrument. Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access illustrates the logic of geoeconomics, where economic corridors and port infrastructure serve as levers of political influence. Geoeconomics frames maritime access as both a developmental necessity and a strategic leverage point (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). In the establishment of this impression, Taye (2025) states that Ethiopia's focus on port negotiations with Djibouti, Somaliland, and Eritrea exemplifies this geoeconomic logic, aligning with BRICS' broader agenda to reshape global trade flows. Within this framework, Ethiopia's maritime ambitions are framed as both survivalist for developmental access and revisionist for geopolitical leverage, positioning the country to benefit from BRICS' infrastructure and trade realignments.

To conclude this section, scholarly attention on Ethiopia's maritime ambitions within the BRICS context is sparse, leaving a gap in understanding how the nation can leverage multipolarity to address its landlocked status. Furthermore, existing literature has addressed Ethiopia's maritime ambitions mainly through bilateral

rivalries and security concerns (Vreÿ, 2025), but lacks integration of economic factors linked to BRICS, historical narratives such as discourse, and frameworks that connect security, economics, and regional influence. From the perspective of analytical eclecticism, the absence of an integrated framework that connects Ethiopia's maritime priorities with BRICS multipolarity points to a critical research gap.

Ethiopia and the Red Sea from an Analytical Eclecticism Perspective

Historically, the interests of Ethiopia concerning the Red Sea stem from its past connected to the ancient pre-colonial Aksumite ports and the previous Italian-era port of Assab. These connections are critical to the country's demographic and economic well-being. In addition, scholars say in their work that Ethiopia's maritime claims have a historical foundation in the importance of Aksumite ports and Assab, which was the focal point of 85% of Ethiopia's trade before 1993 (Paulos & Halabo, 2025; Takele & Tolcha, 2021). Terrefe's (2025) research provides further support for this perspective through its description of an evolution from Assab that was once the hub of Ethiopia's trade, with Djibouti now being the primary source for Ethiopia in its current dependency, and presents Landlocked Ethiopia as an anomaly in post-colonialism.

Beyond this tragic loss, Ethiopia lost its historical seaport and land during the EPRDF rule, even the treaties and agreements are not legally based according to many Ethiopian legal scholars, which means it is a matter of political party or party to politics, not consensus, not on a people's agreement (Clapham, 2017). Yet, Gizachew & Endaylalu (2023) note that many Ethiopians interpret the landlocked dimension of the country's status as an existential anomaly, an aspect that contributes to constructing narratives of sovereignty. This perception is reflected in the public media and social media activities of today's citizens of Ethiopia, who express their claim to the Assab Port.

According to existing scholarly writings, Ethiopia's discourse on

maritime access is more than only economic issues, and is entangled with the notions of sovereignty and national identity (Alexander, 2015). On the one hand, Terrefe (2025) stresses the economic susceptibility of Ethiopia's dependence on Djibouti, and Clapham (2017) discusses Ethiopia's maritime goals in the framework of structural Neorealism. Markakis (2011) also underscores the historical continuity of such aspirations and argues that the loss of Assab following Eritrea's independence played a major role in eroding Ethiopia's stature as a geopolitical power in the region. On the other hand, Reid (2019) and Markakis (2011) study reveals that the impact of colonial legacies exacerbated Ethiopia's landlocked status and resulted in enduring structural vulnerabilities in its postcolonial state.

From the day of the Accord between the Eritrean and Ethiopia government back in those days, the elite of Ethiopia were against the act. According to Abbink, the maritime discourse around questions of the quest is presented as a project to restore sovereignty, while access to the Red Sea provides an occasion for national pride and legitimacy (Abbink, 2003). This narrative, based primarily on an identity, serves to increase the power of Ethiopia's bargaining, but potentially exaggerates the symbolic nature of a specific narrative. Furthermore, Young (2020) highlights the structural economic vulnerabilities created by Ethiopia's dependency on Djibouti, where high logistics costs deter its competitiveness. This puts a premium on the salience of historical claims for diversified maritime access. Recently, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, in his 2023 parliamentary speech, emphasized the strategic and existential importance of sea access for Ethiopia's burgeoning population and expanding economy. As the government of Ethiopia, he argued that reliance on Djibouti for maritime trade, currently responsible for almost all of Ethiopia's import and export activities, is unsustainable in the long term (Abebe, 2023). Besides this context, Ferede and Degu (2025) suggest that the country's BRICS membership enables Ethiopia to reimagine its past maritime claims in the context of multipolar governance, interpreting its narratives of sovereignty as vehicles for collective bargaining.

Within this framework, Ethiopian officials can integrate historical narratives into their diplomatic conversations by presenting maritime access as a restoration of Ethiopia's sovereignty legacy rather than as an entitlement. This strategic messaging can potentially increase Ethiopia's visibility in the regional body politic. Portraying maritime negotiations as a restoration of historical rights not only bolsters legitimacy in regional discussions but also serves as a foundation for modern-day negotiations. To be sure, though, we must counterbalance this with practical corridor diversification so we do not lose sight of symbolic narratives. Ethiopia's historical narratives may also provide Ethiopia with discursive leverage, but if not backed up by effective action, this means of narrative needs to be supplemented by practical methods to guard against mere symbolic overreach.

Beyond historical narratives, modern-day diplomatic strategies are another concern for Ethiopia's situation. The recent study conducted by Hailu et al. (2023) emphasizes that Ethiopia's maritime initiative, driven by population growth and security concerns, has intensified rivalries and fostered proxy politics in the region. The MoU with Somaliland is seen as a pragmatic strategy to diversify trade routes and enhance maritime presence. These initiatives, notably the January 2024 Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding, which involves leasing approximately 20 kilometers of coastline for 50 years in exchange for recognition, assessment, and infrastructure improvements, have intensified rivalries with Eritrea, Somalia, and Egypt (Chanie, 2024). Analysts indicate that this approach has reduced Ethiopia's dependence on Djibouti and revitalized its navy. However, tensions with Somalia persist despite Türkiye's mediation efforts to stabilize relations (Hailu, 2025). This implies that currently securing trade routes is crucial for Ethiopia's maritime diplomacy.

The effectiveness of this initiative yields mixed results; while commercial benefits are anticipated, full sovereignty remains limited. However, regarding these diplomatic efforts, a study by Gizachew and Endaylalu (2023) argues that Ethiopia's unilateral maritime actions could heighten tensions, particularly with Somalia

and Egypt, both of which view Ethiopia's naval ambitions as a threat to their coastal dominance. This diplomatic step does not address the tensions arising from Ethiopia's demands regarding the port, as Irrum and Humza (2025) acknowledge that Berbera's potential for diversification raises concerns regarding Somalia's sovereignty claims. There is significant domestic nationalist support for the MoU, but the complexities of sub-national clan politics pose risks of fragmentation (Abbink, 2003). Another researcher, de Waal (2015), earlier perceived that maritime strategies in the Horn of Africa often become entangled in proxy conflicts, with Gulf states and Turkey exploiting Ethiopia-Somalia tensions for their strategic advantage. Clan fragmentation remains a pressing concern, as Abbink (2003) warns that Ethiopia's engagement with Somaliland could exacerbate clan divisions, undermining Somalia's fragile statehood and jeopardizing Ethiopia's own border stability.

In a broader context, Ferede and Degu (2025) emphasize that Ethiopia's membership in BRICS provides a platform for gaining international legitimacy for its MoU with Somaliland, although this relies on pursuing multilateral recognition rather than depending solely on unilateral agreements. Economic pragmatism also plays a crucial role, as Mekonnen (2024) notes that Ethiopia's diversification of trade corridors is a response to structural constraints. However, the study cautions that without regional support, the potential economic benefits may be compromised by diplomatic isolation.

From the analysis, Ethiopia should pursue multilateral recognition of the Somaliland MoU through BRICS, AU, and IGAD platforms, while simultaneously investing in naval capacity building to secure maritime corridors. Diplomatic engagement with Somalia must be prioritized to prevent sovereignty disputes from escalating into proxy conflicts. Contemporary approaches demonstrate Ethiopia's pragmatic adaptation to geopolitical realities but require a careful balance between nationalist discourse and regional diplomacy. While Berbera offers opportunities for diversification and reduced dependency, unilateralism risks destabilization. Integrating Ethiopia's maritime initiatives within BRICS and regional governance frameworks presents the most sustainable path forward.

In regional terms, Ethiopia has a trend of peacekeeping, negotiating involvement, and an anchor for security and stabilization from history to recent events. Ethiopia's maritime strategies present both risks of destabilization and opportunities for cooperative security (Bayeh, 2022). These strategies may lead to short-term volatility, such as the formation of a Tripartite Alliance and the potential for proxy conflicts; they also offer prospects for long-term interdependence through diversified trade corridors. There is positive potential in fostering inclusive Red Sea forums and enhancing counter-terrorism cooperation (Young, 2020). In the current instance, Ferede and Degu (2025) argue that BRICS provides normative frameworks for promoting peace and security in the Horn of Africa, potentially freeing states from Western dominance. From a critical geopolitics perspective, this dynamic points to processes of discursive escalation, as Christopher Clapham (2017) notes, whereas neorealism suggests that regional actors are likely to engage in balancing behavior. Taken together, these insights support a cooperative strategy, such as inclusive Red Sea forums, negotiated port agreements, and BRICS-backed financing, as the most viable pathway for Ethiopia to achieve stability and legitimacy.

In addition to the implications for the region and other ports, two current steps taken by the Ethiopian government are noteworthy. Concerning Eritrea, particularly regarding Assab Port, if Ethiopia pursued militarization to reclaim Assab, the risks of destabilization would be significant. After the agreement, Abbink (2003) notes that conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea have historically escalated into proxy wars involving external actors, and it continues. A militarized approach to Assab would likely provoke intervention from Egypt and Gulf states, undermine Ethiopia's credibility in BRICS discussions, and ignite regional arms races. Although Assab offers geographic and economic advantages, coercive strategies would destabilize the Horn of Africa and contradict BRICS principles of cooperative security (Verhoeven, 2018; Alexander, 2015). This process is currently progressing and has been added to the agenda, whereas the previous government kept it as a suppressed issue for the security and stability of both countries.

In another step, Somaliland, unilateral access by Ethiopia to Berbera Port without Somalia's consent poses risks for sovereignty disputes. The situation reveals that Hailu et al. (2023), Ethiopia's maritime claims have already triggered nationalist mobilization in Somalia, while Irrum and Humza (2025) warn of potential clan-based fragmentation. Pursuing access to Berbera without formal recognition could undermine Ethiopia's standing in the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) forums, invite counterbalancing actions by Türkiye or Gulf states, and weaken Ethiopia's ability to leverage BRICS as a stabilizing platform. To have a privilege on the security and stability of these steps, Ethiopia's influence in the BRICS era leans towards pragmatic stability if pursued through multilateral channels. The maritime strategies of the country need to avoid unilateral militarization or violations of sovereignty. Instead, the country should pursue corridor diplomacy by embedding it in BRICS and regional governance frameworks, such as cooperative approaches.

The analysis of the literature suggests that Ethiopia should prioritize participation in inclusive governance forums on the Red Sea and should view BRICS as a platform for fostering cooperative security arrangements. Ethiopia can also strengthen regional stability by integrating counter-terrorism and anti-piracy initiatives into its maritime diplomacy. Although pursuing unilateral maritime strategies may escalate tensions, involvement in multilateral efforts through BRICS and regional forums can open avenues for turning competition into cooperative security.

In this regard, one should emphasize that Ethiopia's membership in BRICS significantly enhances its bargaining power by providing alternative financing options, infrastructure development, participation as an observer in naval drills, and diplomatic protection from Western pressures. This is because, according to a study by Mekonnen (2024), this membership allows Ethiopia to access infrastructure financing outside of traditional Bretton Woods institutions, reducing its vulnerability to imposing conditionalities. The BRICS alliance intensifies Ethiopia's leverage by offering observer

roles in naval drills and alternative infrastructure financing, as well as insulating it diplomatically from Western pressures.

The scholarly consensus around Ethiopia's participation in BRICS also extends to its integration into the maritime norms of the Global South, countering Egypt's littoral-only doctrine, which aims to exclude landlocked states from governance in the Red Sea (Mansour & Baiche, 2025). The same source notes that Ethiopia's observer role in the BRICS+ naval drills recalibrates its legitimacy and visibility, enhancing its symbolic presence in multipolar maritime politics. Related study evidence indicates that BRICS membership enhances Ethiopia's bargaining power without immediate provocations, aligning with the multipolarity theory (Lee & Sims, 2024). Furthermore, a recent enquiry by Tijjani et al. (2025) argues that the expansion of BRICS reflects Ethiopia's integration into multipolar governance, positioning the country as a bridge between various geopolitical interests. Analysts note that while BRICS exercises are largely symbolic, emphasizing political signaling and multipolar cooperation, Western operations provide tangible maritime security through kinetic readiness and patrols (African Security Analysis, 2026; Wingrin, 2026).

The literature reflects a consensus on Ethiopia's structural vulnerabilities and historical legitimacy, while also highlighting ongoing debates regarding the diplomatic risks and economic feasibility of its maritime strategy (Woldemariam & Endaylalu, 2025). While the analyses by Donelli & Dentice (2020) suggest that integration into BRICS could provide a form of diplomatic protection, one should also take into account the contested landscape of Ethiopia's regional influence, oscillating between the risks of escalation and the opportunities presented by a multipolar framework. In this context, Ethiopia can strengthen its engagement with BRICS by linking port development projects to BRICS financing and actively participating in BRICS+ maritime forums. This strategy would allow Ethiopia to integrate its maritime strategy into broader multipolar governance structures. While BRICS membership offers valuable diplomatic and financial alternatives, its effectiveness ultimately depends on transforming

symbolic participation into tangible benefits in infrastructure and security.

Port Access and Geopolitical Dimensions: A Comparative Study

To understand Ethiopia's maritime imperatives, four specific case studies are to be taken into account: Djibouti, Somaliland (Berbera), Eritrea (Assab), and Sudan (Port Sudan). In this section, therefore, each case is analyzed across four geopolitical dimensions—security considerations, economic advantage, historical context, and regional impact—providing a comparative analysis for evaluating Ethiopia's strategic choices within our integrated conceptual framework.

As a neighboring country, Djibouti still serves as Ethiopia's essential maritime partner, but it also reveals Ethiopia's structural vulnerabilities. Since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, Djibouti has been Ethiopia's lifeline to the sea, playing into narratives of dependency and geographic entrapment. Ethiopia also plays out in its regional and foreign military environments, and many foreign military bases have been entrenched, notably those with the United States, China, and France (Demeke, 2025). Ethiopia economically directs over 95% of its trade to Djibouti, with annual logistics costs in the range of $1.5–2 billion (Guiziou, 2023). Such reliance does not just weigh heavily on Ethiopia's economy but also reduces its bargaining power in regional negotiations. Djibouti's strategic position at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait gives it additional leverage, but Ethiopia's reliance means that Addis Ababa is vulnerable to geopolitical shifts and Djibouti's own calculations. As a result, Djibouti represents among Ethiopia's most reliable partners but its biggest brake in achieving maritime sovereignty. This being said, Ethiopia has the opportunity to successfully navigate its dependence on mutually beneficial diplomatic measures that could boost agricultural output and energy potential for Djibouti. This would be a reward for sustaining access to the port, given that Ethiopia's actions are successful.

Moreover, Ethiopia's relations with Sudan have historically oscil-

lated between cooperation and rivalry, shaping the dynamics of maritime negotiations and trust-building. While Port Sudan offers Ethiopia a potential platform for maritime diversification, its reliability would be constrained by both Sudan's internal instability and the nation's contested role in Red Sea politics. There is also a lackadaisical policy of stability in Ethiopia to attain consistent access to ports (Takele & Tolcha, 2021). Ethiopia's ability to secure consistent access is undermined by infrastructural deficiencies and fragile governance (Young, 2020). Port Sudan could reduce economically Ethiopia's dependence on Djibouti, yet logistical challenges and political uncertainty hinder its viability. Logistical issues and political uncertainty undermine Port Sudan's economic potential in helping to lessen Ethiopia's reliance on current ports. In the region, Sudan's participation in Red Sea forums makes it a gatekeeper, complicating Ethiopia's entry into maritime governance structures (Cardoso, 2016; Farah, 2024). Ethiopia's ambitions are toughened by Sudan's instability and the wider geopolitical rivalry for the Red Sea, even as Port Sudan provides an aspirational prospect. Consequently, Port Sudan is a more evocative snapshot of structural barriers that impede Ethiopia's pursuit of diversifying its maritime access, indeed, a reality, instead of a solution.

Regarding Somaliland, the 2024 Memorandum of Understanding signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland is a bold decision to diversify Ethiopia's maritime options. Ethiopia would also offer leased access to naval and commercial facilities in Berbera, hoping to relieve its reliance on Djibouti and better integrate within the Gulf-linked trade routes. Yet, that arrangement is not the only one that raises diplomatic considerations; Somalia considers the deal a violation of its sovereignty, contributing to tensions across the Horn of Africa (Farah, 2024; Irrum & Humza, 2025). From the economic standpoint, Berbera provides Ethiopia with avenues to expand its regional trade and develop logistical capacity, and from the political standpoint, Ethiopia casts the deal as a victory over spatial imprisonment that is consistent with Ethiopia's claim to sovereignty and its assertion of maritime agency (Irrum & Humza, 2025; Gathoni, 2025). However, the deal may also make Ethiopia more diplomati-

cally isolated, because opposition in Somalia could undermine Addis Ababa's legitimacy in regional forums. Berbera, therefore, is symbolic of Ethiopia's ambition to break free from dependency and the geopolitical stakes of seeking unilateral maritime solutions.

Finally, Assab port was Ethiopia's main shippable hub until the outbreak of war with Eritrea in 1998, which permanently severed access to the port (Abbink, 2003). Ethiopia used the port of Assab before 1993, but ties were severed after the 1998–2000 conflict. Ethiopia claims historical rights to the port, while Eritrea insists on its sovereignty, ignoring local consent. Assab's loss, due to Eritrea's independence, signifies a major breach in Ethiopia's maritime legacy, confirming patterns of dispossession and vulnerability for both sides (Woldemariam & Endaylalu, 2025; Paulos & Halabo, 2025). Today, Eritrean militarization of Assab and involvement of external actors, including the UAE, further undermines any opportunities for Ethiopian use of the port (Clapham, 2017). Eritrea, in tandem with Gulf states and Egypt, constrains Ethiopia's aspirations in the Red Sea, and Assab serves simultaneously as a reminder of Ethiopia's historical access to the sea, at the same time as a check to its future ambitions. For Ethiopia, Assab is the paradox of proximity with no reach, a port capable of meeting its maritime challenges but obstructed by political antagonism (Guiziou, 2023). Assab is still Ethiopia's best port geographically, but political hostility between the two states inhibits any real-time engagement. Assab offers a logistical advantage due to its proximity to Addis Ababa, lowering transportation costs. Although underused, Assab has potential for revival, but political obstacles remain. Security is a concern, as Assab's closeness to the Red Sea poses risks due to historical animosities. The rhetoric from Ethiopia for 2023–2026 has heightened tensions, with Eritrea viewing access attempts as threats. The erosion of the 2018 peace deal increases the potential for conflict, which could destabilize the Horn of Africa and draw in regional powers like Egypt and the UAE. Peaceful negotiations could foster integration, but risks of coercion may trigger a broader conflict involving proxy forces.

Conclusion

From an analytical eclecticism perspective, this study contributes to the literature by developing an integrated explanatory model that connects four interrelated dimensions of Ethiopia's Red Sea imperatives: security vulnerabilities associated with landlockedness, economic imperatives related to trade and development, historical narratives of maritime legitimacy, and regional influence dynamics shaped by multipolar competition and BRICS expansion. Rather than privileging a single theoretical lens, this framework demonstrates how Ethiopia's maritime strategy emerges from the interaction of material constraints, historical legacies, geopolitical rivalries, and evolving opportunities within a changing global order.

Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access in the BRICS era reflects a historically grounded yet forward-looking geopolitical transformation shaped by the interplay of sovereignty claims, economic imperatives, and shifting global power configurations. While historical narratives, from Aksumite maritime linkages to pre-1993 access via Assab, provide discursive legitimacy, they cannot substitute for pragmatic, institutionally grounded strategies in an increasingly complex regional environment. The core dilemma facing Ethiopia is therefore not merely access, but how to reconcile historically rooted claims with the constraints and opportunities of contemporary multipolar geopolitics.

To address these issues, one could propose policy-based strategies for the future. A diversification strategy, based on expanding access through Berbera, Port Sudan, and potentially Assab, emerges as the most viable and resilient option. By reducing dependence on Djibouti, Ethiopia can lower transit costs, enhance trade competitiveness, and mitigate security vulnerabilities associated with single-corridor reliance. At the same time, a geopolitical balancing strategy, leveraging BRICS membership to expand diplomatic and financial maneuverability, offers a complementary but conditional pathway that requires careful management of regional tensions and sustained economic growth. In contrast, the encirclement scenario highlights the structural risks of strategic stagnation, where

continued dependency and regional rivalries could constrain Ethiopia's autonomy and expose it to external pressure. Similarly, the Assab reclamation pathway represents a high-risk, high-reward option: while negotiated access could significantly strengthen Ethiopia's sovereignty narrative and logistical efficiency, any coercive approach would likely destabilize the Horn of Africa and undermine Ethiopia's credibility within a multipolar diplomatic framework.

These alternative strategies underscore that Ethiopia's maritime future hinges on its capacity to operationalize multipolarity through concrete institutional, infrastructural, and diplomatic mechanisms. In the short term, Ethiopia should prioritize corridor diversification by deepening agreements with Somaliland and Sudan while embedding these initiatives within BRICS-backed financing frameworks. In the medium term, it should institutionalize its role within BRICS and broader South–South networks, enhancing its bargaining power through coordinated diplomacy and economic upgrading. In the long term, Ethiopia should pursue inclusive Red Sea governance mechanisms, negotiate sustainable access arrangements for Assab, and promote regional security architectures that transform maritime competition into cooperative stability.

Ultimately, Ethiopia's Red Sea strategy cannot be reduced to port access alone. It represents a broader project of geopolitical repositioning—one that seeks to align historical identity, economic transformation, and multipolar integration. The success of this project will depend not on maximalist claims or unilateral actions, but on Ethiopia's ability to navigate regional rivalries, leverage emerging global institutions, and embed its maritime ambitions within a framework of cooperative and sustainable regional order.

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