
Ethiopia's Quest for Utilizing the Port of Berbera, Somaliland, since 2010: Drivers, Processes, and Challenges

Tezera Tazebew¹

Abstract

This essay presents a critical analysis of the factors driving Ethiopia's efforts to utilize the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, as well as the challenges that arise in this pursuit. The study employs a qualitative-interpretative methodology, using both primary and secondary sources of data, including key informant interviews and document analysis. Access to the sea has long been crucial for Ethiopia's economic and cultural interactions with the outside world, but colonial powers in the Horn of Africa region have historically challenged this access. Ethiopia has therefore sought to secure sustainable access to the sea, with Eritrean ports playing a significant role until the Ethiopia-Eritrean War disrupted this arrangement. The study finds that Ethiopia has been pursuing the use of the Port of Berbera as an alternative since at least the mid-2000s, motivated both by necessity and geopolitical maneuvering by various actors. However, challenges remain in effectively utilizing the port and establishing effective state control in the Somali region. The study concludes by recommending corrective measures to resolve disputes over port utilization and promoting similar initiatives to facilitate market-based integration in the Horn of Africa.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Somaliland, port development, Berbera, geopolitics.

1. Introduction

Behind Ambrose Bierce's (2000: 185) satirical definition of the port as "a place where ships taking shelter from storms are shattered by customs officers", lays a sheer recognition of the importance of ports in the development of nations. Historically, from ancient maritime powers to the Age of Sail, ports and port cities were associated with the rise of strong civilizations (Lambert 2018). In the contemporary world, ports are one of the contributing factors to the growth of nations. Landlockedness is seen as

¹ Tezera Tazebew (tezera.tazebew@uog.edu.et) is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Governance Studies at the University of Gondar, Ethiopia. The author would like to thank Asnake Kefale, Finn Stepputat, and the two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments and criticisms. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.

impending growth (Collier 2007; Sachs 2015). Paul Collier (2007) identifies being landlocked as one of the four 'development traps', the other three being conflict, natural resource dependency, and bad governance. He suggested that landlocked countries need to take several measures to reduce the negative effects of landlockedness, including improving access to the sea, reducing trade barriers, urging neighbors to pursue sound policies, etc. Similarly, Sachs (2015) argues that physical geography is one factor in the poverty trap, and being landlocked is a fundamental disadvantage for economic growth.

As the largest landlocked nation in the world, the issue of ports is one of the most contested issues in contemporary Ethiopian politics. Franz Dombrowski's (1985: 55) assertion that "the value of access to the sea often becomes most apparent when a country does not have one" rings true in contemporary Ethiopia. A random Google search of the word *ወደገ*, the Amharic word for port, would result in several results, ranging from news items to insightful analysis to angry commentary. The politics of ports usually revolves around two clashing policy choices: port ownership and port utilization. Those who claimed port ownership argue that Eritrean possession of Assab and Massawa is contrary to international law, and they demand their return to Ethiopia. Those who focus on port utilization, either by admitting the strategic mistakes made in the early 1990s or not, focus on the necessity of building mutually beneficial relations with port-owning countries in the region. Rather than antagonizing these countries by claiming legal or historical rights over their ports, they emphasize the possibility of market-based integration.

This study examines the drivers, processes, and challenges surrounding Ethiopia's endeavors to utilize the Port of Berbera in Somaliland. Using a qualitative interpretative methodology, it attempts to address three questions: what is the current state of Ethiopia's access to the sea via Djibouti? What factors are motivating Ethiopia's quest to utilize the Port of Berbera? What challenges impacted the decision and its implementation thereof? Primary and secondary data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with Ethiopian government officials and a diplomatic historian (conducted in 2017) and from such secondary sources as publicly available government data, newspapers, and academic literature. As a limit (and delimit), it should be noted here that much of this essay was also written during this period, with only occasional additions and revisions to address major developments since then.

The paper is organized into four parts. The following section provides a brief historical interpretation of the making of Ethiopia's port dependency. This will be followed by an overview of the Ethiopian government's policy choices in responding to port dependency; it explains the choice of the Port of Berbera as an important alternative. The third and fourth sections detail the early attempts and bilateral negotiations between Ethiopia and Somaliland regarding Berbera in particular. The fifth section assesses the implementation of agreements and the local, national, regional, and geopolitical actors and factors impacting the use of Berbera. Finally, the sixth section offers concluding remarks and general policy and theoretical implications.

2. The Context: Dependence on Djibouti

Ports are significant in the history of Ethiopia, whether we are talking about Adulis or Zeila. It is a historic irony that Djibouti, the smallest state in the Horn of Africa, has, by the end of the twentieth century, become the sole outlet to the sea for Ethiopia, the most populous and second largest country in the region. Ethiopia's dependence on Djibouti as its main and later sole lifeline, however, was a historical product of three crucial events since at least the nineteenth century (Belete 2007 Ethiopian Calendar [EC]). Without going further, dependence is used here to refer simply to any "external reliance on other actors" for securing a set of interests (Caporaso 1978: 1). Around 95% of Ethiopia's foreign trade is conducted via Djibouti, costing Ethiopia around \$2 billion annually (Reporter [Amharic] 14.10.2018).

As Samuel Negash (2016: 257) noted, "from the Ottoman views on Zeila since the 1650s to the construction of the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railway at the beginning of the 20th century, the issue of Ethiopia's access to the sea has crystallized several regional and international stakes for a long time." By the end of the 20th century, these regional and international factors had made Djibouti Ethiopia's sole outlet to the sea. The factors were international, regional, and domestic. Firstly, at the international level, colonialism and imperial rivalries, dating back to the 16th-century Ottoman-Portuguese rivalry over the monopoly of the Indian Ocean trade route to early twentieth-century rivalries between the British, France, and Italy, determined Ethiopia's access to the sea. First, it was the geopolitics of the region as manifested by colonial and imperial rivalries between great powers that laid the foundations. Beginning with the sixteenth-century Portuguese-Ottoman Turkish rivalry over dominance on the Red Sea coast, Ethiopia's access to the sea was directly impacted by regional and international developments (Abir 1980;

Dombrowski 1985; d'Alos-Moner 2012). Its dependence on Djibouti is no exception. Important in this regard were the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century rivalries between the British, France, and Italy. Italian penetration and later control over what was the northern part of Ethiopia, which they dubbed Eritrea, have denied Ethiopia access to the Red Sea ports (Dombrowski 1985; Alemseged 2006). And, in the later period of the century, the Red Sea becomes a "problem zone" (Belete 2017 int.). In contrast, access to the Indian Ocean routes was made attractive by the deliberate policies of rival European powers. The January 29–30, 1896, agreement between Ethiopia and France made Djibouti Ethiopia's "official outlet for commerce" (Dombrowski 1985: 63). France attempted to make the Port of Djibouti Ethiopia's sole 'vent'. To this end, it helped in constructing the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway. In Ethiopia, France's quest coincided with the rising role of concessions as instruments of European capitalist penetration into post-Adwa Ethiopia. Bahru Zewde (2002: 100) remarked that the concessions "were often viewed by Europeans as a sure means of making accessible to themselves the reputedly rich resources of the country that Adwa had denied them". Meanwhile, to counter French penetration into Ethiopia, the British also attempted to make the Zeila Corridor in their British Protectorate Ethiopia's outlet (Hamilton 1974; Dombrowski 1985).

Secondly, there are the regional factors, viz., the Eritrean factor, from secessionism to an outright 'border' war and bad neighborhoods in the Horn of Africa. With the secession of Eritrea (de facto as of 1991 and de jure as of 1993), Ethiopia became the world's largest landlocked state (Clapham 2006). Of course, Assab and Massawa handled most of Ethiopia's foreign trade even after secession, and Ethiopia was set to receive preferential treatment. For instance, by 1994/1995, the Port of Assab handled 73% of Ethiopia's imports and 51.7% of exports, while in Djibouti, 0.8% of imports and 3.2% of exports were held (Helen 2015). Ethiopia's use of the Port of Assab was based on and regulated by the *Transit and Ports Services Agreement between the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Government of the State of Eritrea*, dated September 27, 1993.

Nonetheless, Ethiopia's use of the Eritrean ports was marred by difficulties. Eritrean port management was ineffective, inefficient, and costly. Lack of goodwill on the part of Eritrea was also creating problems. It, for instance, made price changes unitarily. In 1996/97, Eritrea had a one-billion-birr profit from the ports (Marcus 2002). In the end, controversies over port management partly contributed to the outbreak of the war in 1998.

The outbreak of the Ethiopia-Eritrea War in May 1998 has made the use of Djiboutian ports a categorical imperative for Ethiopia. In explaining the economic effects of the conflict, Jon Abbink (1998: 553) remarked that during the war, "Eritrea held back all goods in the port of Asseb destined for Ethiopia, to a value of tens of millions of dollars, and Ethiopia diverted all its shipping for Massawa and Asseb to Djibouti port and threatened to block other ships from docking in the Eritrean ports". Thus, not only did the outbreak of the war in 1998 render the Ethiopia-Eritrea Port Agreement void, but it also made the Port of Djibouti Ethiopia's sole outlet to the sea.

Furthermore, the Horn of Africa region has long been characterized by volatile domestic and regional political dynamics. At the same time Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia, Sudan was in the early years of Omar al-Bashir's autocratic rule. Cordial relations existed between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and later the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and Sudan during the Ethiopian Civil War (1974–1991); Sudanese support for Ethiopian and Eritrean guerillas has been a key factor affecting the turn of events in Ethiopia. The relationship, however, cooled off following the 1989 Islamic Revolution in Sudan, which created an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in its relations with neighboring countries. In particular, the support that Sudanese agents gave in the 1995 assassination attempt on Hosni Mubarek in Addis Ababa made matters worse. Somalia was in turmoil in the aftermath of Siad Barre's overthrow in January 1991. Somaliland declared its independence in May 1991. Ethiopia's relations with Kenya, which became a pro-Western nation under Daniel Arap Moi, were strained during the Derg regime. And in all cases, there is poor port infrastructure and logistics.

Besides the international and regional factors, it was the domestic policy choices by the EPRDF regime that made absolute dependence on Djibouti inevitable. No attempt was made by the Meles Zenawi regime, either during the Eritrean secession process or the negotiations following the 'border' war, to reassert Ethiopia's need for permanent access to the seaport. As one commentator argued, Ethiopia "was officially rendered landlocked by a dubious and ignominious decision of the government in power and its international backers" (Addis Fortune 11.1.2015). This assessment is also shared by Gebru Asrat (2007 EC) and Abebe Teklehaimanot (2007), both former high-ranking government officials and senior members of the TPLF. The regime did not have much sensitivity to grasp the implications of the absence of a coastline for the Ethiopian state. Thus, the weakness of this policy is rooted in its vilified assumption of the importance of access to the sea

and not in the absolute lack of the former. With the help of hindsight, Ethiopia would have asserted its access to the sea via the Port of Assab, either during the secession or the negotiations following the 1998–2000 war. Rather, Meles Zenawi's regime was rightly seen as too conciliatory towards Eritrea. This has finally deprived Ethiopia of any chance of control over the Red Sea ports, which provide access to the sea.

3. Responding to Dependence: Ethiopia's Policy Choices

A combination of internal (both in Ethiopia and Djibouti) and regional factors has made the continuing use of the port of Djibouti problematic for Ethiopia over the past decade. Internally, Ethiopia's demand for imports and exports is growing rapidly. Currently, the Port of Djibouti provides traffic for nearly 98% of Ethiopian external trade (*The Reporter*, October 8, 2016). As the volume of Ethiopia's imports and exports increased continually, the Port began to be highly congested and incapable of accommodating this growing demand. This has created an outcry among transporters and importers, not to mention the government itself (Mengistu 2017 int.).

In Djibouti, there are poor logistics and management practices in port utilization. The country has also been accused of lacking a political commitment to work on a mutually beneficial basis (Firekal 2017 int.; Temesgen 2017 int.). Or, in Collier's (2007) formulation, Ethiopia failed to urge Djibouti to pursue sound policies so that there is a mutually beneficial relationship. In terms of prices, for instance, most informants emphasize that Djibouti port utilization is becoming highly expensive, often due to Djibouti's unilateral decisions. This is a feature of the 'resource curse' that Djibouti manifests (Brass 2008). As Clapham (2017: 172–173) noted, Djibouti remains "a thoroughly neo-patrimonial little state under the control of a family oligarchy".

Conversely, there is growing anxiety over what many Djiboutians perceive as Ethiopia's heavy-handed position on Djibouti. This relationship is seen as favoring the Issa-dominated regime of Djibouti (Brass 2008). It is to be recalled that during the 1990s, there was an armed insurgency by the Afar, the second-largest ethnic group, forming about 35% of the total population of Djibouti (Kadamy 1996). The Djiboutian government sought to counterbalance its dependence on Ethiopia's transit trade and protective umbrella. Around \$1.5 billion, i.e., 70% of the annual revenue of the Djiboutian government, is collected from Ethiopia's port utilization there (The

Washington Post, December 26, 2015). To this end, Djibouti has fostered relations with Arab countries abroad.

Importantly, however, Djibouti has made itself a site for geopolitical competition by allowing the establishment of several military bases by such diverse countries as China, France, Japan, and the US (*The Reporter*, December 31, 2016; Clapham, 2017). Found along a strategic location linking the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Djibouti serves as a route for shipments to and from the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. According to Tesfaye Tadesse, a retired navy commander, the presence of these foreign military bases poses an imminent threat to Ethiopian national security and its interests (*The Reporter*, December 31, 2016).

As the informants pointed out, the Ethiopian government recognizes the need to break out of its dependence on Djibouti. Few policy choices were proposed by the government and concerned citizens, both at home and abroad, to address these challenges. Three policy proposals can be identified, and for sake of clarity, they can be distinguished as minimalist, maximalist, and minimax strategies.

First, the minimalist strategy regarded the improvement of port and logistics facilities in Djibouti and the development of dry ports in the Ethiopian interior as viable solutions to mitigate the negative impacts of dependence on Djibouti's ports. For a long time, the Ethiopian government's policy has been a minimalist one. Significant for such efforts was the construction of a railway and a highway, which aimed at improving transport efficiency in the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Corridor. The new Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, inaugurated on October 6, 2016, stretches 756 km and connects the Ethiopian capital well into the Port of Djibouti (*The Reporter*, October 8, 2016). Government policy also aims at using different ports in Djibouti, such as the Port of Tadjoura. Thus, the Ethiopian government constructed a new road linking the Port of Tadjoura via Afar, expected to be of use in potash exports.

The Ethiopian Maritime Affairs Authority (EMMA) is also now engaged in a project titled the Ethiopian Trade Logistics Project to enhance "the performance of the Ethiopia-Djibouti corridor through improvements in operational capacity, efficiency, and range of logistics services at the Modjo Dry Port" (EMMA 2016: 1; Emphasis in original). The Modjo port was intended to alleviate the congestion at the Djibouti port. The Modjo Dry Port, the first of its kind in the country, began operations in 2008–2009 (Reporter,

1.4.2015). Currently, there are eight such dry ports; the latest of them was built in Woreta and began operations in February 2020 (AMC 2021).

Second, the maximalist proposals, perhaps the most controversial choices, include the reclaiming of the Port of Assab or reunification with Eritrea (Yacob 2003 EC; Samuel 2016), and political integration with Djibouti. The idea of political integration between Ethiopia and Djibouti was in the air for some time, so that Djibouti would become one regional state under the federal system. In a speech in 2015, Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, President of Djibouti, remarked that "protocols and formalities aside – a call to further action in our quest to meet the perennial demands of our two peoples for an ever closer cooperation, an even greater economic and social union, and, who knows, an even closer political integration that simply logically follows from our belief in and dedication to fulfilling our historic common destiny" (The Reporter 14.2.2015). Similarly, in a historic speech to the Djiboutian parliament on February 8, 2015, Ethiopia's former PM Haile-Mariam Deslaegn emphasized the necessity of political integration (Reporter 11.2.2015). For the proponents of this school, the precedent was already set by the United Nation's decision in 1952 to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, partly grounded on ensuring Ethiopia's access to the sea (see Tekeste 1997). Short of integration, Tesfaye Tadesse argued that Ethiopia "should have a military presence in [Djibouti] to defend [its] national interest at the highest level in the event of an international crisis in the area" (The Reporter, 31.12.2016). Short of political integration, it seems there is proto-market-based integration, largely based on Ethiopia's provision of water and electricity to Djibouti and Djibouti's provision of port services.

With these choices deemed unviable and erratic (wanting too much and too little) by government officials and independent analysts, ports in neighboring countries have come to be considered as 'minimax' alternatives, thus the third policy choice of diversifying Ethiopia's access to the sea. Diversification of ports was a pillar of the transportation goals of the Growth and Transformation Plan I and II. Recently, the government reaffirmed this position with its Ten-Year Transport Sector Perspective Plan (2020-2030) (*Reporter*, 9.5.2021; *Capital* 31.3.2021).

Several developments in diversifying ports happened since then. In 2012, the Lamu port initiative, part of the Lamu Port-Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) corridor project between Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, was inaugurated. The Kenyan government was determined to use the Port of Lamu to lessen its dependence on its chief port city, Mombasa.

A flagship megaproject of Kenya's Vision 2030 development plan, the LAPSSET gave further impetus to the increasing importance and visibility of Kenyan outlets (*The Star* 22.6.2021). The Lamu port project includes the construction of roads and the development of the Moyale corridor. The former Kenyan PM, Raila Odinga hailed this project as "a game-changer" (*Capital News* 28.6.2021). As part of the 2012 Ethio-Kenya Special Status Agreement, the first berth of the Chinese-built Lamu Port became operational in late June 2021 (*Walta* 2021). In Sudan, the Port of Sudan was used to deliver humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia. Bitter bilateral relations that exist between Ethiopia and Eritrea in the wake of the 1998-2000 war have made the latter a political pariah. Ethiopia was determined never-to-use Eritrean ports. But, following the well-publicized Ethio-Eritrean rapprochement in 2018, Assab and Massawa are also being re-considered (*Reporter* 25.7.2018; *Wazema Radio* 2021).

Nonetheless, the conversation about alternative ports in Ethiopia is still largely dominated by the Port of Berbera in Somaliland. Granted, Ethiopia's utilization of the Somaliland ports or attempt thereof is not a post-1991 phenomenon. By the early nineteenth century, Berbera had established significant trade relations with the Ethiopian interior (Pankhurst 1965). One of the principal purposes of Ras Tafari's visit to European capitals in 1924 was "to find a seaport... and access to the sea" (Haile Selassie 1999: 38). By the late 1920s, he also initiated a somber endeavor to gain access to the sea via Zeila (Hamilton 1974; Samuel 2016), which later remained dormant as Eritrea became part of Ethiopia. But it was only with very changing political and economic dynamics that the Port of Berbera began to be regarded as a viable alternative. The next section examines these dynamics.

4. Somaliland as an Alternative

A breakaway region in northwestern Somalia, the Republic of Somaliland is a *de facto* state, unrecognized by the international community. Despite this, Somaliland has ties with other sovereign states. Along the long Gulf of Aden coast, Somaliland enjoyed the presence of a centuries-old port town: Berbera. The port of Berbera was established in its present condition in 1968. For the unrecognized state of Somaliland, it serves as a resource to be capitalized on in the state-making and nation-building processes. Its control, for instance, has been a factor for intense intra-clan and inter-clan rivalries in the wake of the declaration of independence.

Changing political and economic dynamics made the port of Berbera a viable alternative for Ethiopia. Ethiopia's attempt to utilize the Port of Berbera should be seen against the backdrop of its general policy orientation toward Somaliland. Contemporary Ethiopian policy on Somaliland is characterized by uncertainties. The government's official foreign policy strategy is still grounded on engagement with Somaliland, short of recognition (Firekal 2017 int.). Somaliland's declaration of independence on May 18, 1991, has created a situation of unprecedented complexity for Ethiopian foreign policy. Nevertheless, Ethiopia's presence in Somaliland has steadily increased.

Ethiopia had significant involvement in the Somali Civil War (1988–1991). During this time, Ethiopia aided and abetted the activities of the Somali National Movement (SNM, created in 1981), the main guerrilla group fighting against the Siad Barre regime in Mogadishu. As Somaliland declared its independence, Ethiopia denied the new Somali entity de jure recognition of sovereign statehood. Ethiopia's position on the recognition of Somaliland was dictated by concerns over values and interests. It does not want to infringe on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Somalia, which the Organization for African Unity/African Union holds dearly. Most importantly, however, Ethiopia fears that recognition of Somaliland would backfire, to the detriment of its security and economic interests in the Horn of Africa and the Arab world.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia had effectively entered diplomatic relations with Somaliland, and a senior Somaliland official dubbed their bilateral relations a "strategic partnership" (Igeh 2016). Ethiopia and Somaliland become friendly neighbors and allies in national security, which plays favorably for their negotiations. As Eggers (2007: 213) rightly observed, "Ethiopia has gone the furthest of all states in its unofficial recognition of Somaliland by entering into bilateral agreements for cooperation in various arenas". What is unique here, however, is the fact that Somalia did not sever its relations with Ethiopia because of the latter's affairs with Somaliland. This can be contrasted with the fact that Somalia broke its diplomatic relations with Guinea over 'the red carpet' ceremony for the Somaliland President, Musa Bihi (*The East African*, 14.7.2019)..

In the context of political developments (domestic and regional) in the post-1991 period, the idea of Ethiopia's utilization of Somaliland ports began to appear early (Addis Fortune 14.5.2016). Already in 2003, a pre-feasibility study of the regional transport sector in the Berbera Corridor was

commissioned by the European Commission's Delegation in Kenya. Despite this, the study's recommendations for the development of the corridor infrastructure remained unimplemented (Delegation of the European Commission in Kenya, 2003). It was not, however, until the early 2010s that the Ethiopian government began a vigorous effort to utilize the Port of Berbera. The GTP I (2010–15) allotted 30% of Ethiopia's foreign trade to be handled along the Berbera Corridor, while the GTP II (2015–20) doubles down on the need for effective use of Berbera. This need was given much urgency due to the El-Nino-induced drought in 2015/16 and the resultant need for immediate humanitarian assistance. The El-Nino-induced drought necessitated the government buying food for humanitarian assistance and the World Food Program providing such assistance. Many food purchases, coupled with the private sector's purchases, created such unprecedented congestion at Djibouti port that the Ethiopian government issued an urgent directive requiring the use of Port Sudan and Port Berbera as alternatives to bring the required humanitarian assistance. In addition, Port Sudan was also used for the importation of fertilizer and wheat (Reporter 27.3.2016; Reporter 3.4.2016).

The informants highlight that there were several factors influencing the choice of Somaliland as a viable alternative. The first and foremost of which was its nearness to Addis Ababa. The Port of Berbera is 937km east of Addis Ababa, making it the second-nearest port to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital and largest city (Addis Fortune 17.5.2016).

The question should not be, however, 'why Somaliland?' But, 'why in 2010 and not in 2003?' Here, proximity does not seem like a convincing argument. It may be true that its nearness brings the Berbera Port into consideration by the Ethiopian government as an alternative. The fact remains, however, that Berbera in 2010 was as near Addis Ababa as it was in 2003 or so, the time at which the government inadvertently disregarded the proposals and recommendations. Thus, we should seek another explanation elsewhere.

Though the government has had interests in utilizing the Berbera Port, it was what might be described as "the Mogadishu factor" (Firekal 2017 int.). Somalia tried at least rhetorically to assert its control over the Port of Berbera and viewed any engagement, let alone recognition, with Somaliland as a breach of its sovereignty. The Ethiopian government has been faced with the problem of breaking whatever resistance comes from Somalia. It is also important to note that the attacks by Somali pirates and the general insecurity

of the Indian Ocean trade routes have been attributed to Ethiopia's lack of interest in Berbera Port. Mention must also be made of the importance of evolving geopolitical factors in terms of regional and superpower competitions in asserting dominance in the Horn, Red Sea, and Arabian Peninsula regions.

5. Ethiopia-Somaliland Negotiations for Port Utilization

The government's much-awaited decision to break with past Ethiopian policy on Berbera port utilization came only in 2010. The Ethiopian Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) I (2010–2015) apportioned 30% of Ethiopia's import/export cargoes to be handled along the Berbera Corridor. This was not, however, implemented. Thus, the GTP II, covering the period from 2015/2016-2019/2020, provides again for increased utilization of the Port of Berbera for Ethiopia's external trade. Weak transport and logistics systems are singled out as a serious challenge to the growth of the export sector. Thus, under the GTP II, it was planned to increase the share of the Berbera Corridor to 30% of Ethiopia's external trade (National Planning Commission 2016: 177). Currently, the Berbera Port handles only 2% of Ethiopia's external trade.

To this end, senior officials' consultative meetings and ministerial meetings between Ethiopia and Somaliland were continuously held, though to no avail. In the Ethiopia-Somaliland Joint Ministerial Meeting, held in 2007 and 2009 in Addis Ababa, an 'Agreed Minutes of Understanding on the Use and Development of the Berbera Corridor for Handling Ethiopian Cargo' was signed. As per the Agreed Minutes, a Joint Technical Committee was established. The conduct of this Ministerial Meeting, however, was denounced by Somalia.

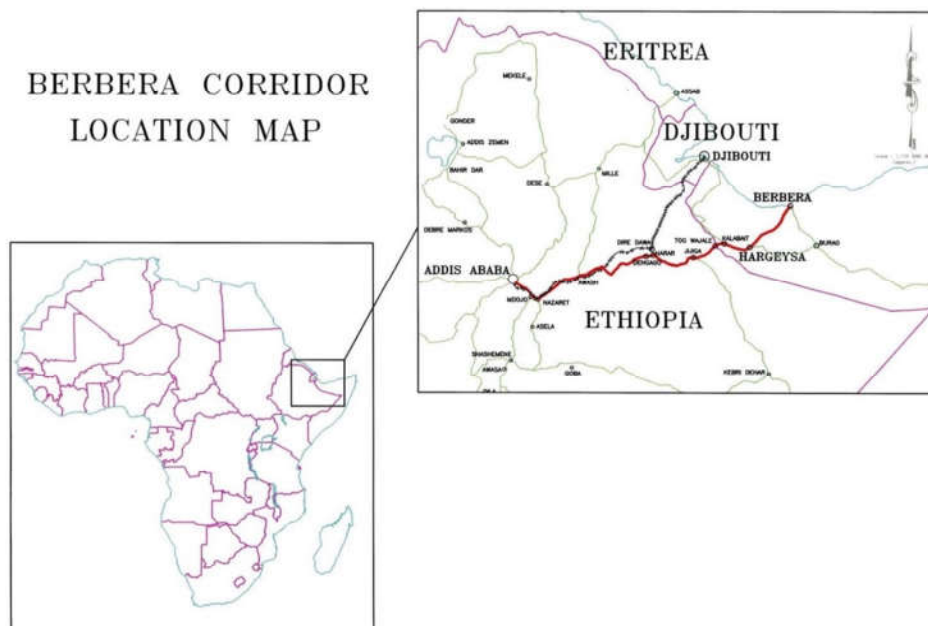


Figure 1: Berbera Corridor Location Map (*Source: Delegation of European Commission in Kenya 2003*)

As the Ministerial Meetings ended abruptly, they were replaced by senior officials' consultative meetings. The first 'Ethiopia-Somaliland Senior Officials Consultative Meeting' was held from November 30–December 1, 2012, in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. The groundwork for Ethiopia's port utilization was first laid by the 2005 EC Customs Transit Agreement, signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland on May 28, 2005. The Agreement, however, has never been effectively implemented.

Again, the 4th Ethiopia-Somaliland senior officials' consultative meeting was held on February 27–28, 2016, in Berbera, Somaliland. At the meeting, port and port-related issues were at the top of the agenda. Underscoring the ineffective implementation of the 2005 Port Service Agreement, the Meeting moved to the consideration of a draft Revised Port Service Agreement. Already in 2015, Ethiopia proposed a comprehensive revision of the earlier Agreement, which has gone into stall. To this end, a Joint Technical Committee (JTC) was established. The JTC was tasked with finalizing the revision of the Port Service Agreement.

The significant innovation in this meeting comes with the draft 'Customs Transit Transport and Port Utilization Agreement', on which both sides deliberated and agreed on its necessity. A decision was also reached to set up a Joint Operation Committee (JOC). The JOC is composed of the representative institutions of both sides. The Ethiopian side is represented by the Maritime Affairs Authority, Ethiopian Shipping and Logistics Services Enterprise (ESLSE), Road Authority, Customs Authority, and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Cooperation. The JOC mandated with the task of drafting and implementing the Terms of Reference (TOR) for all port-related issues, conducted its first meeting on March 14, 2016 in Addis Ababa.

In the meantime, several rounds of negotiations have led to the signing of the 'Bilateral Agreement between the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Government of Somaliland (GoS) for the Utilization of Port of Berbera and Services to Cargoes in Transit' was signed in Bishoftu, Ethiopia, on March 31, 2016.

The 'Bishoftu Agreement', as the agreement is known, granted rights and privileges to Ethiopia and cargoes thereto or therefrom. According to the Agreement, the Port of Berbera shall serve Ethiopia as a transit port for goods originating from and destined for Ethiopia free of taxes and customs duties. Per the specific port regulations of Somaliland, the Port of Berbera gives priority to Ethiopian transit cargo. It was also provided in the Agreement that the parties shall take all the necessary measures to guarantee the fast-forwarding of traffic and avoid unjustified delays to the flow of goods through their territories (Government of FDRE-GoS 2016).

Unique to its nature and logic, it was the EMMA on the Ethiopian side and not the Government of Ethiopia or its Ministries of Transport or Foreign Affairs that signed the agreement. The Agreement was not also ratified by the Ethiopian Parliament. Article 9(4) of the Constitution of the FDRE provides that "all international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land" (FDRE 1994). Since the Bishoftu Agreement has not been ratified, one might argue that it is not part of Ethiopian law. However, regarding its entry into force, the Bishoftu Agreement contains this illuminating provision: "This Agreement shall enter into force upon signature by *a duly authorized representative* of each Party" (Article 38, Emphasis added). It appears that by this provision, the Ethiopian Parliament was saved from serious diplomatic wrangling that might have occurred had it been officially involved (Abebe 2017 int.).

Under Article 32 of the Bishoftu Agreement, a Joint Operational Committee (JOC) was established. The ‘Terms of Reference for the Establishment of a Joint Operational Committee for the Berbera Port Utilization and Transit Facilitation’ was signed along with the Agreement. Composed of representatives of responsible authorities in Ethiopia and Somaliland, the new JOC has the objective of following up on and regulating all matters related to the Agreement. Its general duties and responsibilities include the development and initiation of legal and institutional frameworks and the coordination of the activities of several stakeholders aimed at efficient and effective implementation of the Agreement.

The fact that these negotiations were secretive and continued to be held behind the curtain has made an analysis of policy design and execution impossible. It is, however, clear that several stakeholders took part throughout all these negotiations. These include government offices such as the Ministry of Transport, the EMAA, the ESLSE, the Federal Transport Authority, the ERCA, the National Bank of Ethiopia, the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, the MoT, and the MoFA (Firekal 2017 int.; Temesgen 2017 int.). Most of these federal agencies are accountable to the Ministry of Transport itself. The EMAA, for instance, is responsible to “direct and coordinate the efforts of the respective governing bodies to minimize the transit time of import and export goods; analyze and solve problems arising from the use of seaports and negotiate on such matters” (Article 6/2, FDRE 2007). And, among other things, the ESLSE, the state-monopoly re-established in 2011, is also tasked with “the development, management and operation of ports” (Article 5/5, FDRE 2011).

While their lobbying power is insignificant, private business groups such as the Ethiopian Freight Forwarders and Shipping Agent Association (EFFSAA) and the Ethiopian Chamber of Commerce and Sectorial Associations indirectly have a stake and want to have their say in the ongoing negotiations and wider port policies (Firekal 2017 int.; Temesgen 2017 int.). In terms of port and freight shipping services, for instance, the EMMA has approved 83 agents as being competent to operate in Ethiopia. While it was difficult to map out the activities of these agents individually, it is possible to see how the EFFSAA, a national association of professional logisticians established in 1997EC, has been lobbying for improvements and changes in policies in the freight forwarding and shipping sectors of Ethiopia. Besides, these groups have long been complaining about the expensiveness of Djibouti port services, pressuring the government to pursue an alternative port (Belete 2017 int.).

Overall, the informants noted that the port negotiations were conducted in a win-win manner. There were no outlandish positions or demands from either side. Particularly, it was feared that Somaliland might be determined to require de jure recognition from Ethiopia before it allowed the latter to use its ports. The port, from the perspective of Somaliland, constitutes an important resource. In the context of the negotiated statehood framework, Hagmann and Péclard (2011: 8) understood resources as "the material bases of collective action, [including] tangible and intangible assets".

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Government of Somaliland needs "to preserve the delicate balance" (Belete 2017 int.) between recognition and beneficial relations with Ethiopia. Surely, it always wants political recognition. But it is also understated that maintaining good relations with Ethiopia short of official recognition is a categorical imperative for Somaliland's survival and functioning. Thus, no such demand has been put forward by Somaliland in the port negotiations.

6. Implementing the Terms of the Agreement

Almost a decade after Ethiopia officially began to pursue port utilization in Somaliland and nearly five years after the signing of the Port Agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland, the quest is still far from being successfully realized, with very limited results in Ethiopia's utilization of the Berbera Port and the development of the Corridor. Berbera is an important port in the trans-Indian Ocean trade. Changing geopolitical developments thus impacted the implementation of the Port Agreement. Unfortunately, local voices continued to be absent.

6.1. The Domestic Factors: Ethiopia and Somaliland

First, there are internal changes in Ethiopia's policy directions and Somaliland. Ethiopia still lacks a grand strategy to deal with emerging geopolitical issues (*Addis Fortune* 3.5.2016). But there seems to be an emerging consensus on the 'minimax' strategy—diversification of port alternatives; thus, in this regard, Ethiopian policy is characterized by continuity. Swift changes occurred following the 2018 political change. When Abiy assumed the premiership, his first foreign trip was to Djibouti (*Reporter* 6.5.2018).

During the discussions with Ismail Omar Guelleh, Abiy made a formal request for an Ethiopian share in Djiboutian ports. In addition, almost three decades

after its dissolution, attempts are being made to reconstitute the Ethiopian Navy with a base in none other than Djibouti, but the realization of this goal seems to have been adversely affected due to the Tigray war that erupted between TPLF-led forces in the Tigray region and the Ethiopian federal government in November 2020. The Navy's reestablishment is mainly funded by France (Capital 2.12.2019). Broadly, this decision is a manifestation of Ethiopia's potential emergence as a regional power. Nonetheless, the stalled Ethiopia-Egyptian negotiations over the second filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) seem to also have an impact.

According to the informants, most of the problems in implementing these agreements are rooted in the fact that Somaliland does not have a *de jure* recognition. As Finn Stepputat (2016 personal communication) noted, "in the case of Somaliland, the lack of international recognition...delimit what state institutions can do since the state has limited access to credits (for infrastructure development for trade, for example) and insurance of foreign investment. " In Somaliland, several factors impede the effective implementation of the port agreements. These include issues related to banking and insurance, the absence of bilateral trade agreements and logistical and management problems in port facilities. Somaliland lacks strong financial institutions. Its financial sector is rather dominated by money-transfer companies. In terms of port facilities and installation, the Berbera harbor is capable of a general cargo berth capacity of 3 ships, which is insignificant when compared to Djibouti's 25–30 ship capacity. Thus, the weak cargo handling capacity for cargo operations in Berbera Port requires heavy investment for reconstruction and rehabilitation (Temesgen 2017 int.).

Most importantly, however, the difference between Ethiopia and Somaliland lies not in their international status, whether recognized or not, but in their capabilities. Recognition by the international community is helpful for states, for it renders control over a defined territory and population legitimate (Hammer 2007). However, it is necessary to note that recognition and state capacity do not have a causal relationship in the sense that recognition causes state capacity or vice versa. Notwithstanding the importance of formal recognition of states and governments, "non-recognized states exist and operate as do other states in the international system despite the lack of formal recognition, even when they meet all the necessary criteria for statehood," as Leonard M. Hammer (2007: 32) puts it. Thus, in the language of social research, the correlation between state recognition and capacity does not imply causation. In terms of their capabilities, therefore, both Ethiopia and

Somaliland have only limited capacities for centrally governing their borderlands.

6.2. The Regional Factors: The Horn and the Middle East

The Ethio-Somaliland port utilization negotiations and their implementation are also dominated by the impact of diverse external (regional and global) factors. There are regional dynamics related to the Horn and the Middle East. Regionally, as in earlier periods, Middle Eastern politics continued to be a huge influence in the Horn. The Port of Berbera is becoming a site for a militarized geopolitical contest between the countries of the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With the 'return of geopolitics' (Mead 2014), the Indian Ocean in general and the Port of Berbera get a strategic edge. In particular, the Yemen crisis, the Iran factor (discussed below), and the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis (see below) have all made the region a site for intense geopolitical contests. Thus, in addition to global superpowers, the rival tripartite alliances in the Horn are also handmaidens of regional powers actively pursuing contrasting policies regarding Yemen and Qatar.

Particularly important is the UAE's growing interest in Somaliland. The dearth of well-equipped infrastructure in Somaliland was already pointed out as one significant factor in the limited results. This is despite the Bishoftu Agreement's provision that "the construction and reconstruction of the major routes of the network shall be done by [Ethiopia and Somaliland] in the framework of their national programs or in the framework of bilateral agreements" (Article 26). In this regard, the informants agreed that the deteriorated quality of the road connecting Berbera-Wajaale and Addis Ababa has negatively affected the development of the Berbera transit corridor along the Ethiopia-Somaliland borderlands. The road from Jigjiga to Tog Wajaale is paved asphalt, extending 65km. However, the Italian-constructed Wajaale-Berbera Road is in very poor condition.

The physical difficulties in the Berbera Corridor are partly attributed to a lack of finance. The establishment of a Joint Road Fund, provided for by the Bishoftu Agreement (Article 27), has not yet been realized. The GoS often complained that Ethiopia was not cooperating with it in the construction of the Berbera-Wajaale transit corridor. Two alternatives were proposed. The first was for the GoS to bid and for the contract to be given to an Ethiopian public enterprise. The second was for Ethiopia to help Somaliland secure an

international loan, with Ethiopia being put up as ‘collateral’ (Abebe 2017 int.). However, all these attempts failed because Ethiopia was not willing to accept the terms.

In any case, the geopolitical maneuvers surrounding port development also involve economic decisions. These were manifested in the Government of Somaliland’s decision to give the concession to develop the Port of Berbera to the French operator Bollore Africa Logistics (BAL), while not just the neighboring Arab countries were scrambling to obtain the concession. On September 5, 2016, after a long, delayed process that the GoS, led by its President Ahmed Mohammed Mohamoud (also known as Silanyo), finally awarded to Dubai Ports World (DPW), one of the world’s largest port operators, a thirty-year concession to run the Berbera Port (Addis Fortune 17.5.2016). The agreement allocates 65% ownership to the DP and the rest (35% ownership) to Somaliland. The UAE agreed to spend \$250 million to build a highway between Berbera and Ethiopia and upgrade Berbera’s Russian-built airport (The Messenger 3.4.2017). Per the agreements, DP World began the first phase of development of port infrastructure in March 2017; this first phase of expansion, i.e., development of the port’s container terminal, was inaugurated on June 24, 2021. In the meantime, as part of the war effort in Yemen, the UAE also established a military base at the Port of Berbera on February 12, 2017. Similarly, Eritrea gave the UAE a 30-year concession over the Port of Assab (Reporter 22.2.2017).

The UAE’s move comes as Turkey moves to establish a base in Somalia. Egypt, with its eye wide open to see what Ethiopia is doing on the Nile, requested a base at Berbera for the use of the Egyptian Navy. A Somaliland diplomat has also claimed that Egypt wants to surround landlocked Ethiopia and make easy the infiltration of anti-government fighters through the Somaliland borderlands.

To effectively manipulate DP’s coming to achieve its best interest, Ethiopia has requested a trilateral assessment of the issue among Ethiopia, Somaliland, and the DP World itself. During the negotiations, Ethiopia formally requested a 30% share in the management of the Berbera Port (Firekal 2017 int.; Temesgen 2017 int.). In March 2018, a final settlement was reached between the Somaliland government, the DP World, and the Ethiopian government, who will respectively own 30%, 51%, and 19% of the Port of Berbera (Reporter 20.5.2018).

While the coming of the DP World wet Ethiopia's appetite for utilizing the Berbera Port, there is one country that wants to keep its operations at bay: Djibouti. Djibouti pursues a policy of 'port hegemony'. It is important to recall here that DP's success in winning these concessions was facilitated by the Djiboutian dissident Abdurahiman Boreh (Addis Fortune 14.5.2016). DP World offered to run the Berbera Port after the Government of Djibouti terminated its 30-year concession and awarded 33% ownership rights to DP to develop and manage the Doraleh Container Terminal (DCT) in 2018 (Reporter 25.2.2018). Djibouti viewed the Port of Berbera's utilization as directly challenging its interests and enabling Ethiopia to bypass its ports. Of course, its senior officials described Ethiopia's search for alternatives as understandable (Reporter 6.12.2017). And Ethiopia claims that it "will use alternative ports without affecting the benefits of other ports" (Addis Fortune 7.2.2015). Thus, at least implicitly, Djibouti opposes the Ethiopia-Somaliland negotiations, thereby affecting Somaliland's bargaining power (Somaliland Nation News 2016).

Alarmed by Ethiopia's quest for alternatives, but also its desire to be "a leading maritime trading hub" (Financial Times 1.6.2021) à la Singapore, Djibouti has embarked on reforms in its port services, terminal development, and efficiency improvements. In late 2017, it built the Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port as an extension of the Port of Djibouti. As a goodwill gesture, the government of Djibouti announced it would lower tariffs for Ethiopia's use of the Port of Doraleh by 45% (Reporter 7.12.2017). Around the same time, the ports of Tadjourah and Ghoubet were inaugurated. The two ports target Ethiopia's potash and slat exports, respectively (Reporter 18.6.2017; Reporter 25.6.2017).

In addition to Djibouti, there is also resistance from Somalia. Somalia has long seen port utilization in Somaliland as a threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The former President of Somalia, Hassen Sheikh Mohamud, forcefully remarked that the investment and development of Berbera is a clear violation of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. On February 8, 2017, Somalia elects a new president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, also known as Farmajo. Viewed as a progressive by many of his countrymen, Farmajo was dreaded as "a populist and nationalist politician", signaling a Somali resurgence (Addis Fortune 8.5.2017). While Farmajo was expected to rather focus on pressing domestic agendas, asserting Somalia's control over Somaliland was assumed to be a priority in his foreign policy. Somalia has accused the UAE of violating international law by establishing unlawful

contacts with what it regards as its rightful region, which the Somaliland Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Sa'ad Ali Shire, dismissed as ridiculous (Somaliland Monitor 2017). In addition, Somalia requested that the Arab League take this issue seriously (Reporter 18.3.2018). But, with the fast-evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Horn, Somalia toned down its position following the political change in Ethiopia. The 'Trio' of Abiy of Ethiopia, Isayas of Eritrea, and Farmaajo of Somalia created a new alliance. This alliance, as much as it is a result of home-grown initiatives, should be seen as a counter-hegemonic alliance against Egypt, Sudan, and half-hearted Kenya.

The evident presence of the UAE in the Horn of Africa, Eritrea, and Somaliland, in particular, can significantly alter the geopolitical landscape of the region. Following Saudi Arabia, the UAE is the second-most important member state of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Established on May 26, 1981, the GCC is now composed of six member-states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It has been dubbed "the most reactive and potent alliance of Sunni Arab countries" (Reder 2017). But its cohesiveness was tested as Qatar's assertive foreign policy and readiness to cooperate with Iran led to what was called the 'Qatar Blockade', lasting from June 2017 to January 2021 (Ulrichsen 2021). And there is one country that has been following these developments with increasing concern: Iran. Being "a Persian nation among Arabs and Turks, a Shiite state among Sunnis" (Vaez, 2017), Iran's foreign policy conduct has long been impacted by threats, actual and perceived, to its national identity and security. Giving substantial support to what is regarded as the 'internationally recognized' government of mainland Somalia might be a weapon of choice for Iran to weaken the UAE's influence in the Horn of Africa. Pressured by Saudi Arabia, Somalia cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016 (Vatanka, 2016). But, if Tehran succeeds in mobilizing Mogadishu to reclaim Somaliland and undo the Port Agreement, the prospect of effective port utilization would be jeopardized. These factors can bring fundamental changes to the region, not least in the effective implementation of the port utilization agreements between Ethiopia and Somaliland. But the influence of regional powers is not limited to the Berbera corridor. Turkey is also interested in developing the historically Ottoman port in the Sudan, Suakin, while Qatar agreed to redevelop the Port of Sudan (Reporter 6.5.2018).

6.3.The Superpower Influences

Lastly, there is a growing superpower rivalry. It is to be recalled that, besides Mogadishu and Kismayo, the port of Berbera was a vital facility in the Soviet sphere of influence in the Horn during the 1970s. As the superpowers switched sides between Ethiopia and Somalia, Berbera began to serve US military interests in the 1980s. There is an impending consensus that with the rise of China and the re-assertiveness of Russia in the early twenty-first century, the world might be heading into a new Cold War (*Financial Times* 5.10.2020). As a corollary to this, the strategic importance of the Atlantic world order might be receding, and a 'post-Atlantic world' (*NewAfrican* 22.4/15) is evolving. Superpower rivalries in the Horn should be assessed against this broader background.

China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative has its influence on port developments in the Horn and beyond. Somalia has been a participant in the Belt and Road Initiative since 2015, Kenya since 2017, and Ethiopia, Djibouti, South Sudan, and Sudan since 2018 (Sacks 2021). China also supported the Lamu port in Kenya and the Doralleh Port in Djibouti. It is important to note here that the state-owned China Merchant Holdings (International) constructed the Doralleh Port and owns 23.5% of its share, while the government of Djibouti owns the remaining 76.5% (Reporter 18.6.2017; Reporter 25.6.2017). Chinese involvement in Doralleh is, however, marred by controversies over the Djibouti-DP World legal dispute. Djibouti has indeed become "a linchpin of global commerce" (*Financial Times* 30.10.2018), not to mention the presence of eight military bases there. In addition, as in earlier periods in the history of the Horn, rival global powers tend to use regional powers and countries of the Horn as their proxies.

7. Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, the Ethiopian state has been earnestly working to make its presence more visible in the Somali region, be it benevolently or violently. The development of the infrastructural power of the Ethiopian state in the region is one such manifestation. Many changes have happened in the last two decades or so, during the past ten years, regarding infrastructural development in the Somali region. The development of the Berbera corridor is part of this endeavor.

This paper briefly examines Ethiopia's attempt at utilizing the Berbera Port in Somaliland since the early 2010s. Ethiopia's quest generally resonates with

the notion of frontier governmentality in the eastern Ethiopian periphery. It is at odds with the model of Westphalian international relations in that Ethiopia's attempt to foster relations with Somaliland is contrary to the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity (of Somalia). Theoretically, the viability of Somaliland and its determination to use the port as a resource requires a re-thinking about the dynamics of state survival and recognition.

In terms of determining and transforming the nature of the Somali region in general and the Ethiopia-Somaliland borderlands, however, Ethiopia's pursuit to utilize Berbera as an alternative has only made little headway in unleashing new politico-economic forces in the borderlands. The decision to use Berbera did not yet succeed in transforming the nature of the Somali Region and Ethiopia-Somaliland borderlands. These limited results are caused by a set of geopolitical factors-ranging from Ethiopia's lack of a grand strategy to the involvement of regional and global powers that complicate the situation.

In terms of domestic policy, it appears that Ethiopia is trying to bridge the gap between port ownership and utilization alternatives. Important regarding Ethiopia's access to the sea was the impact of external presence and the influence of regional and international developments. Thus, domestic forces and political developments, regional geopolitics, and international 'systemic' factors come into full play in influencing Ethiopia's access to the sea and thereby the governance of the Somali periphery.

Thus, the prospect of proper development of the Berbera Corridor is at stake. The success or failure of Berbera Port's efficient and effective improvement will be determined by the dynamics of actors with their specific preferences, local, national, and regional/geopolitical. Should Ethiopia and Somaliland eventually establish efficient port utilization, this would be a positive force for the integration of these borderlands with Ethiopia's 'heartland'. But, in the absence of institutions, it is improbable that these interests will bear fruit in the foreseeable future.

It is, however, undeniable that despite its limited achievements so far, Ethiopia's decision to use the port of Berbera is decisive. The development of Berbera Port can be an important milestone in improving the quality of life of the local populace. Thus, the Ethiopian government needs to take corrective measures to overcome the difficulties faced in utilizing the Port of Berbera in Somaliland as well as start similar initiatives, as they can be foundational in moving the region from years of conflict and poverty to a just society based on market-based integration.

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