Ethiopia's Diplomatic Hurdles with Gulf Countries: Trends, Factors and Implications on Regional Security Dynamics

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Abstract

This research analyses Ethiopia's diplomatic challenges with the Gulf States in the context of the Red Sea's rising strategic importance. Using qualitative methods—including expert interviews and the review and analysis of policy documents—the study examines the underlying causes of diplomatic hurdle in these relations. Key sources of tension include historical rivalries, religious influences, economic competition, and disputes over water security, divergent political outlooks, and the role of external actors. In the contemporary period, these factors are compounded by new pressures. Ethiopia's strained relations with Eritrea affect its access to regional maritime networks, while Gulf investments in agriculture, energy and infrastructure create both opportunities and concerns regarding sovereignty and equitable resource distribution. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has further intensified water-security anxieties across the Nile Basin, despite Addis Ababa's assurances. Likewise, intensifying global rivalries in the Red Sea have contributed to proxy conflicts and heightened maritime security risks and limiting Ethiopia's strategic choices. The study argues that Ethiopia should pursue a proactive but carefully balanced diplomatic approach toward the Gulf States. By addressing historical factors, managing regional economic interests and engaging effectively in collective security initiatives, Ethiopia can protect its national interests while contributing to resilient stability in the Horn of Africa and the broader Red Sea region.

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Introduction

The diplomatic relationship between Ethiopia and the Gulf states has long been shaped by the geopolitical worth of the Red Sea. This relationship often reflects a tension between the pursuit of mutual cooperation and competing regional interests (Abdi, 2019; Al-Harthi, 2018). As AI-Arian (2018) and Al-Harthi (2019) also argue, Ethiopia–Gulf relations are embedded in a centuries-long legacy of cultural, social and economic exchange across the Red Sea maritime corridor—an area historically known for the movement of both commerce and communities (Munro-Hay, 1991;Tsegaye, 2020). These connections continue today through economic interests, labor migration and security concerns (Tsegaye, 2020; Negash & Teshome, 2010).

Likewise, diplomatic engagement between Ethiopia and the Gulf states that persists due to shared demands for development partnerships could accelerate economic progress. The Gulf States, in turn, have sought to expand their political and economic influence across the Horn of Africa (Cascão, 2008; Woldemichael, 2019). However, such progress is frequently unsettled by high-stakes competition for maritime influence. In this case, rival visions of Red Sea security often collide with incompatible port development strategies and broader efforts to secure maritime control (Cascado, 2014; Khalid, 2017; Schofield, 2019).

Beyond these regional tensions, Ethiopia's efforts to broaden its strategic horizon—most notably by deepening ties with Turkey and continuing a thoughtful dialogue with Iran—have unsettled Gulf leadership, who remain focused on keeping their regional control (Al-Jaber et al., 2017; Ahmed, 2018; Negash, 2018). These geopolitical moves are ultimately associates with economic reality; a chronic pattern of skewed trade and uneven investment. In Addis Ababa, this structural asymmetry has fostered a deep sense of unease. There is a growing observation that these economic imbalances do more than just stifle growth; they represent a direct threat to Ethiopia's sovereign agency and the fragile prospects for long-term regional peace (Abdulkarim, 2021).

While academic interest in the Ethiopia–Gulf alliance has intensified (Ilcus, 2025), much of the existing analysis fails to capture the fundamental diplomatic hurdles that keep these two sides at odds. A notable oversight in current research is the tendency to focus on isolated events rather than the structural resistance caused by competing regional agendas. Specifically, a lack of comprehensive understanding of how Ethiopia's pursuit of strategic autonomy frequently runs into the red lines of Gulf powers, and creating a persistent diplomatic bottleneck that goes beyond mere internal politics (Almamy & Alkhanlita, 2018).

Furthermore, the existing evidences in earlier work have largely remained silent on the specific diplomatic mechanisms required to bridge these incompatible security priorities across the Red Sea basin. Instead of looking exclusively at domestic issues, more attention is needed on the transactional and often contradictory nature of this relationship (Girma, 2018; De Waal, 2019). There is also a critical need to examine how these bilateral hurdles—ranging from maritime disputes to rival security agenda—condition the foreign policy choices of both sides and limit the potential for a stable, long-term partnership.

Even though Ethiopia's regional role is acknowledged (Pankhurst, 1984; Mahmood, 2019), there is a persistent need to examine how internal political turmoil reshapes foreign policy choices and provides an opening for manipulation by rival Gulf powers

(Mahmood, 2019). Bridging these gaps, this research investigates the diplomatic hurdle between Ethiopia and the Gulf states. It places a specific focus on evolving engagement trends, the structural factors driving these hurdles and the broader consequences for security dynamics across the Horn of Africa.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative design to examine the diplomatic hurdles shaping Ethiopia–Gulf relations. Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of eight high-level stakeholders: senior diplomats, policymakers and regional scholars. To ensure ethical compliance and facilitate institutional access, the research design and interview protocols were authorized by the Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA). In addition to my experience in qualitative research, therefore, this confirmation was helpful in gaining entry to senior diplomatic and policy networks.

The interview process was iterative. While a core set of preliminary questions guided the discussions, the prompts were adapted to align with each participant's area of expertise and professional background. For example, questions posed to diplomats and policymakers were tailored to capture firsthand perceptions of the drivers and security implications of Ethiopia's diplomatic with the Gulf States. To support the credibility of the findings, the study triangulated participants' accounts with a systematic review of contemporary policy frameworks and relevant policy documents.

Ethiopia's Diplomatic Hurdles with Gulf States

The geopolitical landscape of Ethiopia's engagement with the Gulf monarchies has undergone a profound recalibration since the 2018 political transition in Addis Ababa. By adopting a multi-vector foreign policy, Ethiopia has systematically expanded its strategic reach, repositioning the Gulf States not merely as sources of liquidity, but as integral components of its broader regional security architecture (Clapham, 2002; Allo, 2017a,). Yet, this deepening interdependence is fraught with complexity. Ethiopia must navigate a delicate equilibrium: attempting to harness Emirati investment and Saudi diplomatic mediation while simultaneously contending with the Gulf's established security pacts—most notably with Egypt—and their disparate strategic visions for the Red Sea corridor (Lancaster, 2007: Allo, 2017b).

Trends in Ethiopia–Gulf Relations: Opportunity and Structural Constraint

Ethiopia's engagement with the Gulf States has become a central component of its foreign policy, shaping both its diplomatic leverage and its security concern. Key actors—including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar—have emerged as

influential investors, political brokers and security stakeholders across East Africa (Abdi, 2019; Smith, 2019). This trend has shifted regional power dynamics in which Gulf-led initiatives increasingly influence the security and economic agendas of the Red Sea region and the broader Horn.

Contemporary Ethiopia–Gulf dynamics are characterized by dialectic of burgeoning geopolitical opportunity and persistent structural limitations. The Gulf monarchies have decisively pivoted from the strategic periphery to become linchpins of Ethiopia's economic and security architecture. Their role as providers of vital liquidity and humanitarian relief has become an essential buffer against Ethiopia's domestic volatility and recurring environmental contingencies (Shinn, 2016; Omer et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2018). This deepening economic footprint has effectively translated into diplomatic leverage, repositioning Gulf States as influential regional interlocutors. A landmark example of this influence was the 2018 rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea—facilitated largely by the UAE—which demonstrated the capacity of Gulf statecraft to catalyze fundamental political shifts within the Horn (Lancaster, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2018).

On the other side, Gulf investment carries risks of long-term dependence. While Saudi investments in agriculture and renewable energy offer pathways for modernization, the structure of engagement can also create an uneven balance of power. Such reliance on external capital may weaken Ethiopia's bargaining position, particularly in relation to maritime sovereignty. As Dubai and Qatar expand their influence through port-related infrastructure and commercial ties in Puntland and Somalia, Ethiopia's strategic reach across Red Sea access points may be gradually constrained (Smith, 2019).

Several underlying factors reinforce these imbalances. Ethiopia's limited direct sea access since Eritrea's independence makes secure port arrangements a standing national priority (Bereketeab, 2019; Tronvoll, 2009; Abbink, 2011). As Gulf powers compete for port assets across Djibouti, Somaliland and Sudan, Ethiopia may face relegation unless it can offer reciprocal resources, stable guarantees and credible long-term commitments. Domestic instability—reflected in ethnically oriented political fragmentation and periodic unrest—further reduces Ethiopia's attractiveness as a sustained partner and discourages Gulf actors from continuing deeply embedded investments (Abbink, 2022).

Historical depth and the Red Sea's enduring strategic meaning

Historically, the Red Sea has served as a pivotal commercial base, seamlessly connecting East Africa with the Middle East and Asia (Hirth & Regel, 1909). Ethiopia played a

significant role in these ancient networks, providing valuable commodities such as coffee and incense, alongside the regrettable trade in enslaved people (Pankhurst, 1984; Manning, 1990). As global trade expanded and maritime security became a heightened concern, competition for dominance over Red Sea commercial routes intensified. This period saw Gulf States assert greater prominence through strategic investments in port infrastructure (Abbink, 2011; Smith, 2020). However, it is crucial to recognize the complexity of this dynamic: Gulf States do not operate with a singular agenda, and Ethiopia's internal religious diversity and varied political narratives fundamentally shape its foreign policy approach (Abbink, 2011; Schofield, 2019)).

The Red Sea has long been central to the interests of states bordering it, and its significance is not simply a contemporary policy agenda. Instead, the affluences of Red Sea littoral powers have been tied to shifts in religious authority, changes in the balance of power, and the evolution of regional commercial systems. Control over Red Sea trade routes has therefore shaped both richness and conflict, frequently with religious narratives masking political and economic objectives. Over centuries, the Red Sea also served as a bridge linking the Mediterranean world to the Indian Ocean, enabling the movement of goods, ideas and religious traditions—thereby strengthening stable links between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Punkhrust, 1984; Schofield, 2019). This historical ties helps to explain why today's Ethiopia–Gulf relationship remains deeply rooted in older dynamics (Abbink, 2011).

In this regard, the Red Sea region is shaped by an interlocking relationship between religion, history, and trade networks. These forces continue to influence Ethiopia's strategic options and shape the Gulf States' regional motivations. In similar view, research participants commonly described Ethiopia–Gulf connections as grounded in enduring historical ties—shared religious beliefs in some contexts, trade linkages, geographic proximity and cultural affinities. In their opinion, the participants could stress that the Red Sea's role as a global crossroads inevitably draws competing interests (Interviewees 1–3; 2024).

Religion and soft-power competition as symbolic struggle

Religious dynamics—often undervalued in strategic analyses—also shape power competition along the Red Sea corridor and within the Horn of Africa. They influence strategic choices made by both Ethiopia and Gulf states (Almamy & Alkhalifa, 2020). Ethiopia's religious diversity and longstanding Christian traditions, for example, create distinctive constraints and opportunities in a region where Islamic influence and competing interpretations increasingly matter for political alignment (Schofield, 2019).).

Gulf States on the Arabian Peninsula have also cultured their relationships with Muslim communities across the Horn, including within Ethiopia, potentially reshaping regional dynamics and affecting maritime security considerations (Abbink, 2011; De Waal, 2019).

One mechanism described by the literature is religious soft power projection, including Islamic education and scholarship pathways that help build influence through social institutions (Brown, 2014). In the field data, however, interviewees indicated that religious competition often centers not only on doctrine, but also on symbolic capital and the management of sacred sites. The interviewees (7, 8:2024) note, examples such as the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Axum (a repository of Christian relics) alongside Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina (Simpson, 2019). As pilgrimage destinations and enduring symbols of identity, these sites acquire strategic value through access, visibility and influence (Tronvoll, 2009; Schofield, 2019).).

From the interviewee evidence, religious competition appears less like a straightforward clash of faiths and more like a contest over moral authority and leadership claims over Red Sea space. As one interviewee put it, “the waterway functions as a spiritual landscape where control over holy sites translates into influence” (Interviewee 5, 2024). Similarly, the contest is often better understood as a struggle for influence, access, and soft-power projection rather than complete ownership (Abdulkarim, 2021). This intricate interplay between domestic identity and external policy is vividly illustrated by the challenges Ethiopian leaders face in balancing the nation's historical Christian heritage with its contemporary religiously diverse populace. As one interview participant described, Ethiopian leaders could navigate the tension between Ethiopia’s Christian heritage and its religiously diverse social reality. He stated: “We are constantly navigating between our proud Christian heritage and the reality of our religiously diverse society. This isn’t just an internal matter; it directly impacts how the Gulf States perceive us and how they engage with us in the strategic Red Sea region” (Interview 6, 2024). This observation underscores how internal religious dynamics are not merely domestic concerns but critical variables that directly influence external diplomatic engagement strategies.

Thus, the roots of this contestation stretch back to the medieval period, reflecting divergent religious landscapes across Ethiopia and the Gulf (Pankhurst, 1984; Simpson, 2015). Muslim merchants established commercial networks and settlements in key Red Sea ports, gradually expanding Islamic influence along the coastline (Interviewee 4, 2024). In response, Aksumite and Zagwe rulers reportedly supported Christianity and viewed Islamic expansion as unenviably contributing to periodic conflicts (Pankhurst,

1984; Simpson, 2015).

From medieval contention to contemporary competition

This historical foundation intersects with Ethiopia's current rise in economic importance and strategic positioning as a gateway to Africa. Gulf States therefore have incentives to deepen economic links and safeguard their geopolitical objectives across the Red Sea (Almamy & Alkhalifa, 2020). While Ethiopia–Gulf engagement echoes earlier patterns of external involvement in the Horn, the contemporary setting involves new actors and additional forms of leverage, including Turkey and China. Motivations increasingly extend beyond economic interest toward strategic control of access points and maritime infrastructure. Growing Gulf investment and security footprints in strategically located countries such as Djibouti and Somalia illustrate how competition is intensifying (Annette et al., 2018).

At the practical level, this history helps generate mistrust and complicates interpretation of Gulf intentions. Consequently, diplomatic hurdles between Ethiopia and Gulf states are not only a product of current bargaining positions; they also reflect how centuries of interaction shape risks of misinterpretation and destabilizing policy choices. As one Ethiopian foreign policy analyst noted, balancing recognition of historical sensitivities with forward-looking diplomacy is essential (Interviewee 5, 2024). Interviewees also stressed that Ethiopia's foreign policy took for entrenched geopolitical contention and enduring power asymmetries account when engaging in Gulf capitals.

Despite intermittent periods of collaboration, relations between Ethiopia and the Gulf States are increasingly characterized by intense strategic competition for regional influence along the Red Sea corridor. This growing tension is fundamentally driven by the waterway's critical role in global commerce and the diverging ambitions of both regional and international actors (Al-Harthi, 2018). Insights from Ethiopian diplomatic personnel and Red Sea security specialists indicated that this rivalry significantly impacts existing relationships. Particularly, this concern, in turn, could lead access to crucial harbors (notably facilities in Djibouti and Eritrea), maritime security concerns, and control over vital commercial chokepoints like Bab el-Mandeb. These factors necessitate a comprehensive re-evaluation of Ethiopia's engagement with Gulf powers within the rapidly evolving Red Sea security environment (Interviewee 3, 2024; Smith, 2022; Woldemichael, 2019).

Overall, the evolution of Ethiopia–Gulf relations produces a paradox of proximity. The capital needed for Ethiopia's modernization can also create structural dependency that threatens strategic autonomy and maritime sovereignty. This contemporary tension extends a centuries-old drama in which the Red Sea functions not only as a commercial root but also as a contested spiritual landscape, where Ethiopian Christian heritage and internal religious diversity meet Gulf soft-power projection rooted in Islamic influence.

Key Challenges in Ethiopia–Gulf Diplomacy

Political and Ideological Disparities: The Core Diplomatic Hurdle

Centuries of interaction between Ethiopia and the Gulf have cultivated deep religious and cultural ties and have supported the movement of people and goods across the Red Sea. Nonetheless, these relationships have rarely been seamless. The central obstacle to deeper cooperation remains the ideological and political opening between the two regions. Due to this divide, aligning diplomatic priorities is inherently difficult when their governing norms, political trajectories and state models diverge substantially. These disparities are further intensified by competing strategic interests along the Red Sea corridor (Ahmed, 2018).

Ethiopia's federal governance structure and its commitment to Pan-Africanism differentiate it from the more centralized, authoritarian governance models that characterize several Gulf States. This produces distinct policy preferences regarding regional security and economic integration (Eshetu, 2018; Girma, 2018). In parallel, Ethiopia's long-standing tradition of non-alignment—and its historical skepticism toward external intervention—often conflicts with the Gulf states' more assertive security arrangements and alignment patterns with wider international alliances (Allo, 2017a:Bruton 2018). Across multiple administrations, these ideological misalignments have persisted as a continuing barrier to a unified regional vision.

The evidence from interviews reinforces this point. A former Ethiopian diplomat with extensive experience in the Gulf region argued: "The fundamental problem is a difference in worldview. Ethiopia prioritizes non-alignment and Pan-Africanism, while the Gulf States are often more closely aligned with Western powers and seek to project their influence throughout the Red Sea region. This creates a constant tension, even when we have shared interests, such as combating piracy or promoting trade" (Interviewee 2, 2024). This indicated that the divergences in their world view shape even routine diplomatic exchanges and impede the development of shared Red Sea strategies (Tronvoll, 2009; Conca, 2006).

Governance practices also generate diplomatic hurdle. Several Gulf States, accustomed to highly stable autocratic arrangements, may view Ethiopia's electoral processes with suspicion. In similar vein, an Ethiopian political analyst noted: "Our electoral government system, while it is imperfect or not, is viewed with suspicion by some in the Gulf. They prefer stability and predictability, and they see our democratic processes as potentially destabilizing to the region, potentially disrupting trade flows and challenging existing power structures within the Red Sea arena" (Interview 7, 2024). This infers that Ethiopia's democratic consolidation—though driven by internal political goals—may be perceived externally as a potential source of volatility, thereby constraining partnerships tied to maritime security and port development.

Beyond contemporary governance differences, diplomatic relations continue to shape political perceptions. Ethiopia's ties to the Soviet Union and its sustained Pan-African orientation have contributed to persistent divergences with Gulf States regarding relationships with Western powers and approaches to regional conflicts (Al-Arian, 2018; Bruton, 2018; Girma, 2018). These historical ternds influence how motives are interpreted during diplomacy and sustain underlying suspicions within the Red Sea context. Such sensitivities are also intensified by enduring Ethiopian perceptions that external interference contributed to the separation of Ethiopia and Eritrea, including the widely held belief that Egypt played a significant role in that process. This narrative—often compounded by claims that some Gulf states tacitly supported Eritrean independence (Bruton, 2018)—has affected diplomatic relations and may raise the risk of future tensions over the Red Sea's political order.

The ideological and political divide is further reinforced by diverging Gulf policies within the Horn of Africa. In particular, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's pursuit of competing political alignments and regional partnerships have helped intensify competition for strategic advantage along the Red Sea (Tadesse, 2019; Mahamood, 2019). Consequently, Ethiopia–Gulf diplomatic difficulties arise from the interaction of ideological differences, strategic competition and contrasting approaches to security and human rights (Soliman, 2019; Tadesse, 2019).

Economic Competition, Port Infrastructure and Ethiopian Strategic Autonomy

The same political divide also interprets into economic competition among Gulf States over strategic ports and trade routes. Because it directly affecting infrastructure development and regional economic integration—especially for a landlocked Ethiopia. While Gulf investments in Djibouti and Eritrea, alongside financing for airports, roads and related infrastructure in neighboring states, can strengthen connectivity and support

growth. These also cause concerns within Ethiopia about safeguarding its bargaining position and strategic autonomy in an evolving Red Sea order (see also Tsegaye, 2020).

Ethiopian policymakers and analysts, however, emphasize the importance of an active—not passive—strategy. A proactive approach is viewed as necessary to convert potential disadvantages into leverage. Some Gulf States have therefore advocated increased investment in Ethiopian infrastructure, particularly in transportation and logistics systems that link Ethiopia to Red Sea ports. This is intended to preserve Ethiopia's competitiveness within a rapidly shifting regional economic environment and maintain Ethiopia's attractiveness to Gulf investors (Tsegaye, 2020).

Trade is central to Ethiopia's relationship with Gulf states, not only for attracting investment and improving access to global markets (Tadesse, 2019), but also for diversifying the economy and reducing reliance on traditional agricultural exports (Eshetu, 2019). For this to be sustainable, Ethiopia could manage Gulf investment in port and logistics facilities (Bruton, 2020) while also addressing the rights and welfare of Ethiopian labor migrants in Gulf States (Brown, 2014). Thus, a policy that specially governed the two side relationships can help to ensure that Gulf investments align with Ethiopia's longer-term development goals and contribute to a more balanced relationship (Bruton, 2018).

Ethiopia's diplomatic relations with Gulf States are also inseparable from the Red Sea's wider geostrategic environment. Two interlinked forces—water-security concerns stemming from the Nile dispute and broader geopolitical competition—shape shifting alignments and affects the stability of maritime trade routes. At the center of these tensions stands the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which embodies both opportunities for cooperation and risks of escalation (Arsano, 2017). In this similar context, the evidence obtained from interviewees' data, the positions within the Gulf differ due to the combined influence of economic interests, political priorities, and religious or identity-linked considerations in foreign policy. Several participants suggested that Saudi Arabia and the UAE often align with Egypt's concerns about water security and regional stability, in part due to their close ties with Cairo. In contrast, Qatar has reportedly adopted a more nuanced stance, including occasional support for Ethiopia. These differences illustrate that Gulf engagement with Nile-related disputes cannot be fully explained by material power interest alone; they also replicate identity-based solidarities and historical bonds (Arsano, 2017; Bruton, 2018).

The GERD also raises broader implications for Nile management. Ethiopia's sovereign right to harness its water resources for development inevitably collides with downstream

security needs—particularly for Egypt and Sudan, whose populations and economies depend heavily on the Nile's flow. As such, the GERD is simultaneously perceived as a symbol of Ethiopia's development determinations and as a potential threat to neighboring states' survival, especially regarding agriculture, long-term stability and navigation of trade routes. The project therefore activates anxieties related to scarcity and existential security—dynamics that resemble contested trans-boundary water conflicts elsewhere (Allan, 2001, Turton, 2003),

Scholars emphasize the high stakes involved. Mahood (2019) and Arsano (2017) and Awulachew argue that the perception of Ethiopia's development as challenging historical water entitlements has deepened fears about economic security in Egypt and Sudan. One interviewee captured the underlying mechanism: "When people and families rely on these resources to survive, what you expect? It will always breed tensions when it is perceived as a direct threat to their livelihoods and their way of life" (Interviewee 3, 2024). The comment reflects a broader reality: disputes over essential resources frequently generate tensions that extend beyond technical disagreements. This case supports the broader proposition that scarcity becomes a security threat when livelihood concerns are suspended, reinforcing the need for cooperative and equitable water governance frameworks. As Smith (2007) notes, collaborative and sustainable approaches to shared rivers are among the most reliable pathways for reducing conflict potential and supporting long-term regional stability.

Moreover, the GERD's implications extend beyond immediate Nile basin politics into the external behavior of Gulf States engaged in Ethiopia's agricultural sector (Arsano, 2017). Gulf actors have reportedly invested significantly in large-scale irrigation projects that rely on water resources. The increasing sensitivity of Ethiopia's diplomatic relationships and adding additional layers to Red Sea could link geopolitical tensions. This creates a strategic challenge for Ethiopia: managing such investments in ways that advance national interests rather than deepening external dependencies. An interviewee expressed this strategic framing directly: "The issue isn't whether these Gulf States inherently support Ethiopia or not; the more pressing and strategic issue is how to proactively engage with these and other foreign powers to secure support for Ethiopian people and to promote sustainable development that benefits all stakeholders in the region" (Interviewees 4, 2024). The argument showed that sovereignty, external influence, and competing development narratives which requiring a people-centered framework that prioritizes affected communities and promotes equitable cooperation across shared resources (Atnafu, 2019; Bilgin, 2019).

Furthermore, International mediation has often been central to managing disputes over shared resources, and Nile negotiations are no exception. Interviewees (1-8, 2024) consistently emphasized the role of external actors—particularly the United States and the European Union—in attempts to reduce tensions and encourage dialogue among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. At the same time, they cautioned that mediation can carry reputational and political risks. Even when presented as neutral, mediation may be perceived as biased or self-interested, thereby deepening mistrust between parties (Casao, 2014: Bruton 2018).

As Soliman (2019) argues, when external actors appear to favor one side or impose predetermined agendas, they may undermine negotiations rather than advance them. Interviewees echoed concerns that the process sometimes underestimates Ethiopia's sovereignty or minimizes its developmental priorities, increasing resentment and further destabilizing regional bargaining. Brüne and Mehler (2018) similarly document that Western positions may amplify Egyptian and Sudanese claims, placing Ethiopia in a more defensive posture during negotiations. These dynamics not only erode trust; they also reveal how competing notions of fairness and legitimacy shape the diplomatic process.

Ultimately, these tensions demonstrate that water security disputes cannot be separated from power politics. They are embedded within a broader geopolitical environment in which Gulf states, Western powers, and Nile basin countries are simultaneously shaping—and being shaped by—shifting alliances. The Ethiopia–Gulf relationship around the GERD thus illustrates the intersection of sovereignty, resource competition, and diplomacy in one of the world's most strategically consequential regions.

Implications for Regional Security Dynamics

Diplomatic entanglements between Ethiopia and Gulf states carry substantial implications for broader security planning and the implementation of governance arrangements across the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. A central consequence of the diplomatic hurdle is attributed to Ethiopia's systemic relegation from maritime governance. Despite Ethiopia's status as the region's most consequential demographic and military power, limited diplomatic engagement and the absence of reliable sovereign port access restrict its ability to participate in collective security initiatives. As a result, the regional vicinity hegemon becomes structurally dependent on external patrons for maritime reach. This exclusion undermines the coherence of regional implementation strategies and complicates efforts to build an inclusive Red Sea governance framework (De Waal,, 2018, Buzan, 2018).

Findings from qualitative interviews with eight high-level stakeholders (Interviewees 1–8, 2024) indicate that the diplomatic friction is not only a bilateral issue, but also a meaningful driver of regional insecurity. A recurring theme among diplomats was Ethiopia's exclusion from emerging security forums, including the proposed "Red Sea Council." One senior diplomat argued that sidelining the region's largest military and demographic power produces a measurable security imbalance: "You cannot have a stable Red Sea if the largest country in the hinterland is treated as a bystander. When Ethiopia is excluded from maritime governance, it is forced to seek unilateral, often desperate, port arrangements that rattle its neighbors. This lack of inclusion turns a commercial need into a potential military flashpoint" (Interview 2, 2024). This perspective suggests that port access—previously a commercial and logistical question—is increasingly framed and securitized as a strategic security challenge. The interviews further suggest that Gulf actors are not only engaging Ethiopia's federal institutions on a bilateral basis, but are also, in some cases, bypassing Addis Ababa to negotiate directly with regional states and subnational constituencies.

Analysis of interviewee responses suggests that Ethiopia's multi-vectored hedging strategy—simultaneously managing ties with Turkey, Iran, and the UAE—has generated a state of "strategic clutter" that inadvertently catalyzes proxy competition (Buzan, 2018; Cahan, 2017; Bereketeab, 2018). One practitioner characterized this predicament as a "proxy trap," noting that "every time Addis Ababa leans toward a new partner like Turkey to balance a Gulf state, it invites a counter-move from a rival. This creates a cycle of polarization where the Horn of Africa becomes a theater for Middle Eastern rivalries rather than a zone of indigenous cooperation" (Interview 8, 2024). From this perspective, diverging external alignments risk transforming Ethiopian diplomacy into a catalyst for regional fragmentation, ultimately hollowing out the collective agency of Horn states to govern their own security environment.

These findings suggest that Ethiopia's diplomatic hurdles produce security effects that extend well beyond trade and logistics. In particular, maritime marginalization emerges as a structural risk factor: Ethiopia's exclusion from Red Sea governance structures is not simply a diplomatic slight, but a condition that encourages unilateral strategic maneuvers and heightens the likelihood of tension between neighbors. This risk is intensified by what one interviewee described as subnational diplomacy, whereby Gulf actors—rather than working primarily through federal channels—build influence through direct engagement with subnational actors (Interview 6, 2023). Taken together, these developments suggest that the Red Sea is increasingly shaped by proxy competition. Ethiopia's balancing efforts, including attempts to manage relationships with rival Gulf

and non-Gulf partners may therefore generate "strategic overreach" that undermines stability across the wider Horn (Interview 8, 2023).

Overall, Ethiopia's constrained relations with Gulf States limit its participation in joint initiatives to safeguard maritime routes. Likewise, deepening Gulf rivalries interact with political fragmentation across the Horn in ways that raise the probability of Ethiopia being drawn into extra-regional disputes. This competitive environment reduces the collective agency of East African states and hinders their ability to pursue coherent Red Sea governance arrangements. Moreover, instability within Ethiopia itself can create entry points for Gulf influence through selective partnerships that further loosen the consistency of federal–regional relations. As such, Ethiopia's diplomatic hurdles with Gulf countries directly shape the security balance across the Red Sea arena (Brüne and Mehler, 2018).

Beyond maritime governance, the same diplomatic pressures contribute to heightened regional polarization and proxy competition. Rivalries among Gulf powers can extend into Ethiopia's domestic political landscape, exacerbating fragmentation and weakening Ethiopia's capacity to function as a stabilizing regional actor. This dynamic also accelerates the erosion of state coherence, as perceptions of diminished central authority create strategic openings for external actors to circumvent federal institutions. Consequently, Gulf bypassing of central governance does not only weaken Ethiopian sovereignty in the internal sphere—it also impacts security relationships across the Red Sea (Brüne & Mehler, 2018).

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The preceding analysis has showed the complex and evolving dynamics shaping Ethiopia–Gulf relations. It reveals a landscape characterized by significant opportunities alongside serious geostrategic constraints. The findings suggested a shift in regional power dynamics: increased diplomatic hurdle—particularly related to competing interests in Red Sea ports and trade routes—signals the growing influence of Gulf actors in the Horn of Africa. This competitive environment complicates diplomatic engagement and creates risks for regional security, especially maritime security in the Red Sea, where enduring historical connections are strained by contemporary rivalries. As the Red Sea's strategic importance intensifies, Ethiopia faces the challenge of navigating an increasingly precarious diplomatic environment, in which its historical regional standing is being tested. These constraints extend beyond bilateral relations and materially shape the fragile security balance of the Horn of Africa—a region linking Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Key drivers of instability include Red Sea geopolitical competition,

unresolved border issues with Eritrea, and complex disagreements such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and its implications for Nile water resources.

To effectively navigate the competing interests of the Red Sea and safeguard its sovereign integrity, Ethiopia must transcend the limitations of reactive diplomacy in favor of a proactive statecraft grounded in strategic foresight and genuine regional partnership. This necessitates a multi-layered approach that prioritizes the systematic monitoring of shifting alliances, the promotion of inclusive dialogue, and—crucially—the strengthening of domestic economic resilience to bolster the nation's bargaining capacity against external pressures. The current paradox of rising engagement without institutionalized stability leaves the Horn of Africa precariously exposed to strategic overreach and the persistent threat of externally-enabled proxy conflicts. Therefore, Addis Ababa should adopt a position of proactive neutrality, building the strategic vision to identify geopolitical tremors before they solidify into entrenched rival blocs, and ultimately repositioning the Red Sea away from a zero-sum contest toward a framework for collective stability and shared responsibility.

In sum, this study points to a central paradox. While the trends show rising volume and ambition in Ethiopia–Gulf engagement, the Hurdles—including high-stakes hydro politics and identity-linked friction—continue to prevent these ties from maturing into a durable alliance. This gap creates a dangerous policy vacuum. As the Security implications indicate, without progress toward formal and predictable diplomatic mechanisms, Ethiopia and the wider Horn will remain exposed to strategic overreach and the persistent risk of externalized proxy conflict.

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