

Ethiopia's Strategic Influence: Shaping Geopolitical and Economic Dynamics in the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

Ethiopia, a country with considerable geopolitical and historical significance, stands at a critical juncture in the Horn of Africa. This paper explores Ethiopia's potential role as either a driving force for regional progress or a source of instability. Through an analysis of Ethiopia's ambitious infrastructure projects, including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), and its diplomatic strategies, the study examines the country's impact on the region. While Ethiopia's investments in infrastructure and energy, such as the Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway, suggest a move towards regional cooperation and economic development, tensions with neighboring countries particularly concerning the GERD and ongoing historical disputes underscore the challenges Ethiopia faces in promoting stability. The country's infrastructural initiatives reflect its commitment to improving connectivity and fostering economic integration within the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, Ethiopia's goal to become a regional energy powerhouse via the GERD offers both opportunities and risks, especially in its relationships with downstream countries like Egypt and Sudan. These issues highlight the complex balance Ethiopia must maintain between pursuing its national interests and encouraging regional collaboration. The paper also discusses Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts, focusing on its leadership role within the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), as it manages internal conflicts and external pressures. Ultimately, the study concludes that Ethiopia's future in the Horn of Africa will depend on its ability to maintain domestic stability while navigating diplomatic challenges and building cooperative relationships with its neighbors.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Horn of Africa, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Regional integration, Development

1. Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a region characterized by significant geopolitical complexity and socio-economic challenges, with Ethiopia playing a pivotal role in shaping the region's dynamics. As the second-most populous country in Africa and a key factor in regional politics, Ethiopia's historical independence and strategic location allow it to wield considerable influence in the Horn. Home to the African Union's headquarters, Ethiopia is uniquely positioned to drive regional integration and act as a stabilizing force. However, its dual identity as both a peacekeeper and a perceived regional aggressor complicates its standing within the region. This paper delves into Ethiopia's historical relationships, its developmental ambitions, and its diplomatic engagements to assess whether it serves as a catalyst for progress or as an aggressor in the Horn of Africa (Abbink, 2003; Abiy, 2019).

Ethiopia's complex relationships with its neighbors Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, and Djibouti are influenced by a combination of shared historical experiences, economic interests, and political rivalries. While Ethiopia aims to promote regional stability through infrastructure projects and energy partnerships, it also faces diplomatic challenges stemming from tensions over resources, such as water access from the Nile River, and historical territorial disputes. This paper seeks to unpack these complexities and provide a nuanced perspective on Ethiopia's evolving role in the region, assessing how its strategies in infrastructure, energy, and diplomacy define its potential as a force for progress or an aggressor. By examining Ethiopia's regional policies, this paper highlights the delicate balance between its aspirations for leadership and the challenges posed by both internal and external factors (Hussein, 2021; Yohannes, 2022).

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, synthesizing secondary data from academic journals, policy reports, and expert analyses. Historical and contemporary events are analyzed to assess Ethiopia's regional strategies and their implications. Key areas of focus include Ethiopia's infrastructural investments, its relationships with neighboring countries, and its diplomatic efforts in securing regional stability (Geda & Assefa, 2020; Hussein, 2021).

3. Analysis

i. Ethiopia's Strategic Relations in the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia, as a landlocked nation situated in the heart of the Horn of Africa, plays an undeniably crucial role in shaping the region's political, economic, social, and cultural fabric. Its relationships with its neighboring countries Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, and Kenya are complex and multifaceted, driven by a long history of cooperation, rivalry, and shared interests. These relationships, marked by both collaboration and tension, are influenced by geographical realities, historical legacies, and the ever-evolving dynamics of regional politics (Lewis, 2002; Lund, 2009).

Economically, Ethiopia's interactions with its neighbors are a blend of interdependence and competition. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia relies on Djibouti's port for the lion's share of its trade, with over 90% of its imports and exports passing through it (Zhang, 2020). This dependence on neighboring countries for access to global markets highlights the vital role that regional cooperation plays in Ethiopia's economic survival. Similarly, Ethiopia's trade ties with Kenya, its largest regional trade partner, have expanded within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), underscoring the growing importance of regional trade agreements for the prosperity of all involved (Geda & Assefa, 2020).

Regional infrastructure projects further demonstrate the interconnectedness of Ethiopia's economy with its neighbors. The Ethiopia-Djibouti railway, built with Chinese financing, significantly enhances connectivity between Ethiopia and Djibouti, easing the flow of goods and services. Additionally, Ethiopia's ambition to become a regional energy powerhouse is evident in projects like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The dam, while a source of national pride, also has significant implications for neighboring Sudan and Egypt, raising both opportunities for regional energy integration and challenges in diplomatic negotiations (Hussein, 2021). Moreover, the Ethiopia-Kenya power grid interconnection has not only strengthened economic ties but also facilitated energy access for both nations, illustrating the potential for shared development through cross-border collaboration (Geda & Assefa, 2020).

Politically, Ethiopia's relations with its neighbors have been marked by periods of tension, conflict, and cooperation. The longstanding conflict with Eritrea, which culminated in a devastating war from 1998 to 2000, cast a shadow over the region for decades. However, the peace agreement signed in 2018 between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki marked a transformative moment. The normalization of relations between the two countries not only paved the way for the reopening of trade routes but also contributed to greater regional stability, signaling a new era in Ethiopia-Eritrea relations (Abiy & Afwerki, 2018).

Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia, particularly in combating the militant group al-Shabaab, further demonstrates its role as a key regional player. Despite territorial disputes, notably over the Ogaden region, Ethiopia has played a pivotal role in supporting Somalia's stability by providing military aid under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) framework (Hussein, 2020). Similarly, Ethiopia's diplomatic relationship with Sudan is shaped by mutual concerns over regional stability and shared interests in managing the complex dynamics surrounding the Nile River and the GERD (Sheng, 2021).

Ethiopia's relations with Kenya have evolved into one of the most stable and cooperative partnerships in the region. Both nations have shared security concerns, especially in light of the threat posed by al-Shabaab militants operating in the border regions. Their collaborative efforts in addressing this threat have reinforced political ties and fostered greater stability in the region (Yohannes, 2022).

Culturally and socially, Ethiopia shares deep historical and cultural ties with its neighbors, shaped by centuries of interwoven ethnic, linguistic, and religious connections. The Horn of Africa is home to a rich mosaic of ethnic groups, many of which transcend national borders. Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti, for instance, are predominantly home to Cushitic-speaking peoples, while the wider region is united by the Afro-Asiatic language family (Lewis, 2002). These shared ethnic and linguistic bonds lay the foundation for social and cultural exchanges that foster a sense of regional solidarity.

Religion, too, plays a central role in shaping the social fabric of the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's religious landscape, dominated by Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, is complemented by a significant Muslim population, particularly in the eastern parts of the country and across its borders with Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan. This shared religious heritage, along with cross-border pilgrimages and interfaith dialogues, has fostered a unique cultural and social interconnectedness between Ethiopia and its neighbors (Lewis, 2002).

The historical legacy of colonialism also influences Ethiopia's relationships with its neighbors. While Ethiopia is unique in the region for its successful resistance to European colonization, this experience has made the country a symbol of African sovereignty and pride. This history of resistance to colonial domination has shaped Ethiopia's cultural and diplomatic interactions with neighboring countries, particularly Somalia and Eritrea, which experienced colonial rule. For Ethiopia, these shared experiences of resistance to foreign powers have fostered a sense of cultural solidarity and mutual respect among the people of the Horn of Africa (Lund, 2009).

ii. Economic Aspirations and GERD: Ethiopia's Path to Energy Independence

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which is expected to generate 6,000 megawatts of electricity, stands as a testament to Ethiopia's ambitious vision for economic development and regional integration. The dam symbolizes not only Ethiopia's push for energy independence but also its aspiration to become a regional energy powerhouse in the Horn of Africa (Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2016). This project holds transformative potential, as it will enable Ethiopia to meet its domestic energy needs and address the severe electricity deficit that has long hindered its industrialization efforts.

Ethiopia's plan to export surplus energy from GERD to neighboring countries such as Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, and even parts of the Middle East through the African Power Pool (APP) represents a strategic move towards regional energy interdependence. This is particularly significant given the rapid economic growth in the Horn of Africa, which has outpaced energy supply. By harnessing its hydroelectric potential, Ethiopia not only boosts its energy security but also provides a much-needed resource for the economic growth of its neighbors. The GERD project is expected to reduce power shortages and drive down electricity costs across the region, thus stimulating industrial growth and improving living standards (Gebru, 2020).

However, the geopolitical tensions surrounding the GERD, particularly with downstream countries like Egypt and Sudan, underscore the complexities involved in Ethiopia's aspirations. Egypt, in particular, has expressed concerns that the dam could disrupt the flow of the Nile, upon which it depends for over 90% of its freshwater supply. While Ethiopia maintains that the dam will not adversely affect downstream countries, these disputes highlight the need for transparent and cooperative negotiation frameworks to ensure equitable distribution of benefits. The successful resolution of these issues would not only enhance Ethiopia's role as a regional leader but also set a precedent for water-sharing agreements in trans-boundary river basins (Hussein, 2021).

Ethiopia's commitment to the GERD and its broader energy initiatives reflects its determination to elevate its status within the global energy landscape. The project is aligned with Ethiopia's Vision 2030, which aims to make the country a middle-income economy by diversifying its sources of revenue, boosting its industrial sector, and increasing its energy exports (Gebru, 2020).

iii. Infrastructure Investments: Driving Regional Integration

Ethiopia's infrastructural investments, particularly in transportation and connectivity, are central to its ambition of fostering regional integration and economic cooperation within the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway, one of the most significant infrastructure projects in East Africa, is a prime example of how Ethiopia is investing in regional connectivity. The railway connects the Ethiopian highlands with the strategic port of Djibouti, which handles the majority of Ethiopia's imports and exports. This railway not only reduces the logistical costs associated with landlocked trade but also boosts the economic ties between Ethiopia and Djibouti, facilitating smoother and more efficient trade flows across the region (Gebru, 2020).

Ethiopia's investments in cross-border road networks are another critical aspect of its regional integration strategy. These projects aim to reduce trade barriers and ease the movement of goods and people across national borders. Improved infrastructure also supports Ethiopia's goal of enhancing access to regional and international markets, which is crucial for a growing economy that seeks to increase its exports and attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Through initiatives like the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor, Ethiopia is positioning itself as a key transit hub for goods flowing to and from East Africa and the Middle East (Hussein, 2021).

The Ethiopian government's focus on building road networks and improving transportation infrastructure reflects an understanding that regional integration is not only about political alliances but also about creating

economic linkages that reduce isolation and foster mutual growth. Ethiopia's infrastructural development is not just about domestic growth but is also a crucial driver of regional stability, as it encourages cooperation and strengthens interdependence with neighboring countries (Gebru, 2020).

iv. Renewable Energy Leadership: Positioning Ethiopia as a Green Energy Hub

Beyond the GERD, Ethiopia is positioning itself as a regional and global leader in renewable energy, focusing on wind, solar and geothermal power generation. These resources, which are abundant in Ethiopia, are being developed with the aim of diversifying the country's energy mix and reducing its dependence on hydroelectric power, which is vulnerable to climate variability. Ethiopia's investments in renewable energy not only ensure a more sustainable energy future but also provide a pathway for regional economic cooperation through energy exports (Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2016).

Ethiopia's geothermal energy potential is particularly promising. The country sits atop the East African Rift, which offers significant geothermal resources that could be harnessed to meet both domestic and regional energy needs. By tapping into this resource, Ethiopia is poised to contribute to regional energy security, especially for countries like Kenya, which has been increasing its reliance on geothermal energy in recent years. The Kenya-Ethiopia electricity interconnection project, which is designed to export Ethiopia's excess power, is a key example of how renewable energy is driving regional economic integration (Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2016).

Moreover, Ethiopia's emphasis on solar and wind energy complements its overall strategy of positioning itself as a green energy hub. The country's energy exports to Sudan and Kenya not only generate revenue but also promote deeper economic ties and regional cooperation. Ethiopia's leadership in renewable energy is aligned with global sustainability goals, positioning the country as a key player in the African Union's efforts to promote green growth and reduce carbon emissions (Gebru, 2020).

The emphasis on renewable energy aligns with Ethiopia's Vision 2030, which seeks to achieve middle-income status by diversifying the economy and creating jobs in sustainable industries. The expansion of the renewable energy sector, along with the development of new infrastructure to support energy exports, is crucial to Ethiopia's economic aspirations. As Ethiopia develops its renewable energy resources, it is not only securing its own energy future but also positioning itself as a leader in the Horn of Africa and beyond, capable of influencing regional energy policies and promoting sustainable economic development (Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2016).

v. Diplomatic Strategies for Regional Stability: Ethiopia's Role in IGAD and the AU

Ethiopia's diplomatic strategies for regional stability in the Horn of Africa reflect its commitment to fostering peace, security, and economic cooperation through African-led solutions. As a founding member and key leader of both the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU), Ethiopia plays a pivotal role in shaping the region's diplomatic landscape. Through these platforms, Ethiopia has been instrumental in promoting peace talks, conflict resolution, and regional integration, positioning itself as a stabilizing force in a region fraught with instability (Fitsum, 2020).

One of Ethiopia's core diplomatic strategies has been its emphasis on negotiation and dialogue as solutions to regional conflicts. Despite its own domestic challenges, including the Tigray conflict, Ethiopia has remained committed to facilitating peace talks and acting as a mediator in regional disputes. The country has worked closely with neighboring countries to resolve issues ranging from border disputes to terrorism, recognizing that regional stability is vital for its own security and development. Ethiopia's role in mediating peace processes in South Sudan and Somalia has demonstrated its willingness to take on a leadership position in promoting peaceful resolutions within the continent (Shiferaw, 2021).

However, Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts are not without their challenges. Domestic conflicts, particularly the Tigray crisis, have occasionally complicated its external diplomatic strategies, affecting its standing in the international community. Despite these challenges, Ethiopia continues to prioritize regional cooperation and dialogue, leveraging its position in IGAD and the AU to foster understanding and collaboration among Horn of Africa nations. Ethiopia's ongoing role in these organizations underlines its belief in African solutions to African problems, supporting peace initiatives that reflect the interests of the region rather than external powers (Abiy, 2019).

Ethiopia's focus on infrastructure projects like the Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway and joint ventures in renewable energy further solidifies its diplomatic reach. These projects are more than just economic investments; they serve as platforms for fostering trust, building regional partnerships, and ensuring interdependence between Ethiopia and its neighbors. The Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway, for example, enhances bilateral relations between the two nations and serves as a model of regional cooperation in transport and trade, offering both economic and

diplomatic benefits (Fitsum, 2020). Additionally, joint ventures in renewable energy, such as Ethiopia's export of electricity to Kenya and Sudan, contribute to regional energy security and economic integration, laying the groundwork for a peaceful, collaborative future (Gebru, 2020).

Through these efforts, Ethiopia is positioning itself as a leader in fostering regional stability and cooperation in the Horn of Africa. Its diplomatic strategies, focused on negotiation, dialogue, and infrastructure development, are central to its vision of a peaceful and prosperous region. However, Ethiopia's success in maintaining regional stability will depend on its ability to manage internal challenges while continuing to strengthen its role in regional organizations and collaborative initiatives (Shiferaw, 2021).

vi. Ethiopia's Need for Access to the Sea via Diplomatic, Win-Win Approaches

Ethiopia's lack of direct access to the sea has long been a major challenge in its pursuit of economic growth and regional influence. As Africa's second-most populous country, located at the crossroads of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia's strategic position has the potential for significant regional economic integration. However, being landlocked means Ethiopia must rely heavily on its neighboring countries, primarily Djibouti, for access to international trade routes. This dependency on foreign ports creates vulnerabilities in the Ethiopian economy, as it is susceptible to fluctuations in political stability and efficiency in these neighboring ports. With the aim of mitigating these challenges, Ethiopia has consistently pursued diplomatic solutions to secure access to the sea, prioritizing cooperation over confrontation (Zhang, 2020).

Access to the sea is not merely an economic issue for Ethiopia; it is also critical to its national security and regional aspirations. Maritime access provides Ethiopia with diversified trade routes, reduced trade costs, and improved economic opportunities, all of which are crucial for a landlocked country with significant economic potential. In this context, Ethiopia's pursuit of diplomatic solutions emphasizes fostering regional peace and cooperation, not creating competition. A win-win approach would involve Ethiopia working with neighboring countries to create partnerships where both sides can share in the benefits of improved infrastructure, energy cooperation, and trade facilitation, ensuring that regional stability is maintained as a foundational element of any agreement (Gebru, 2020).

One of the most promising avenues for Ethiopia to achieve its goals is through expanding regional infrastructure projects, particularly in transportation and energy. Ethiopia's cooperation with neighboring Djibouti and Sudan to improve port operations, rail and road connectivity, and energy distribution would strengthen both Ethiopia's economy and those of its neighbors. Such initiatives not only guarantee Ethiopia's access to ports but also contribute to regional integration, fostering a cooperative dynamic in the Horn of Africa that mitigates the risks of competition over resources. By investing in these projects, Ethiopia can create a cooperative framework that benefits all countries involved, rather than fostering tensions over territorial or economic issues (Hussein, 2021).

Ethiopia's active participation in the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) provides valuable platforms for diplomatic engagement, facilitating dialogue on matters of port access and shared resources. These regional organizations can play a pivotal role in crafting agreements that ensure equitable access to waterways and other resources, helping to alleviate potential conflicts while promoting sustainable cooperation. In this way, Ethiopia can utilize diplomatic efforts to not only secure access to the sea but also contribute to broader regional stability (Fitsum, 2020).

Ethiopia is not alone in seeking diplomatic avenues to secure sea access. Other landlocked countries have faced similar challenges and have found ways to overcome them through cooperative, win-win agreements with their neighbors. For instance, Nepal has long depended on India for port access through a trade and transit treaty signed in the 1950s. This agreement has been instrumental in Nepal's participation in international trade and has resulted in mutual economic benefits, despite occasional disputes between the two countries (Regmi, 2008). Bolivia, which lost its coastal territory to Chile in the 19th century, has similarly worked with neighboring countries like Peru to ensure continued access to the sea through port agreements, fostering regional economic cooperation despite the loss of sovereignty over a coastline (Albarracín & Barros, 2014). Mongolia, also landlocked, has leveraged its relationships with Russia and China to gain access to ports for its mineral exports, establishing efficient trade routes through its neighbors (Hassan, 2018). Here is a table summarizing the examples of other countries gaining sea access through development cooperation:

Country Pair	Geopolitical Context	Diplomatic Approaches and Agreements	Key Results/Benefits
Nepal – India	Nepal is landlocked and relies on India for port access.	Trade and transit treaty signed in the 1950s for Nepal to use Indian ports.	Enhanced trade via cross-border infrastructure (roads and railways). Mutual economic benefits despite occasional disputes.
Bolivia – Chile	Bolivia lost its coastline to Chile in the 19th century but seeks access to the sea.	Diplomatic relationship maintained despite loss of coastal territory. Regional trade agreements and infrastructure projects with Peru for port access.	Continued participation in international trade despite no direct coast. Strengthened regional cooperation through infrastructure.
Mongolia-Russia-China	Mongolia is landlocked and leverages ties with Russia and China for trade access.	Agreements with China to access Chinese ports for mineral exports. Cooperation with Russia to develop trade routes through Russian ports.	Ability to participate in global trade without a coastline. Strengthened diplomatic and economic ties with neighboring powers.

Sources: South Asian Studies, 27(1), 41-59., Journal of Latin American Studies, 46(2), 295-320, and Mongolian Journal of International Affairs, 12(1), 78-95.

These examples demonstrate that landlocked countries can successfully navigate their geographical constraints by engaging in diplomatic negotiations and regional cooperation. Ethiopia can follow a similar path, building on existing partnerships with neighboring countries and forging new alliances that focus on mutual benefits. Infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and trade facilitation can create the foundation for Ethiopia to secure reliable access to the sea and promote regional peace and prosperity. By adopting a win-win diplomatic approach, Ethiopia has the opportunity to overcome its landlocked status, ensuring long-term economic growth and stability for itself and the region as a whole (Gebru, 2020).

4. Conclusion

Ethiopia's need for access to the sea and its role in the Horn of Africa are deeply interconnected, reflecting the country's strategic vision for regional development and cooperation. Securing access to the sea through diplomatic, win-win approaches is crucial not only for Ethiopia's economic growth but also for fostering stability and peaceful collaboration with neighboring countries. By leveraging existing cooperative frameworks such as the African Union (AU) and IGAD, alongside regional infrastructure and energy projects like the Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Ethiopia can enhance its position as a key player in regional integration. These initiatives create interdependence, promoting shared prosperity and development. However, Ethiopia's geopolitical aspirations are tempered by challenges such as territorial disputes and internal conflicts, which complicate its regional leadership. Ethiopia's ability to balance economic growth with regional peace and stability will determine its future role in the Horn of Africa, offering both opportunities and risks in the pursuit of its broader goals for the region.

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