RED SEA DIALOGUE

Regional Consultative Forum on Red Sea Security Dynamics: **The Need for Dialogue and Cooperation at a Time of Global Geopolitical Shifts**

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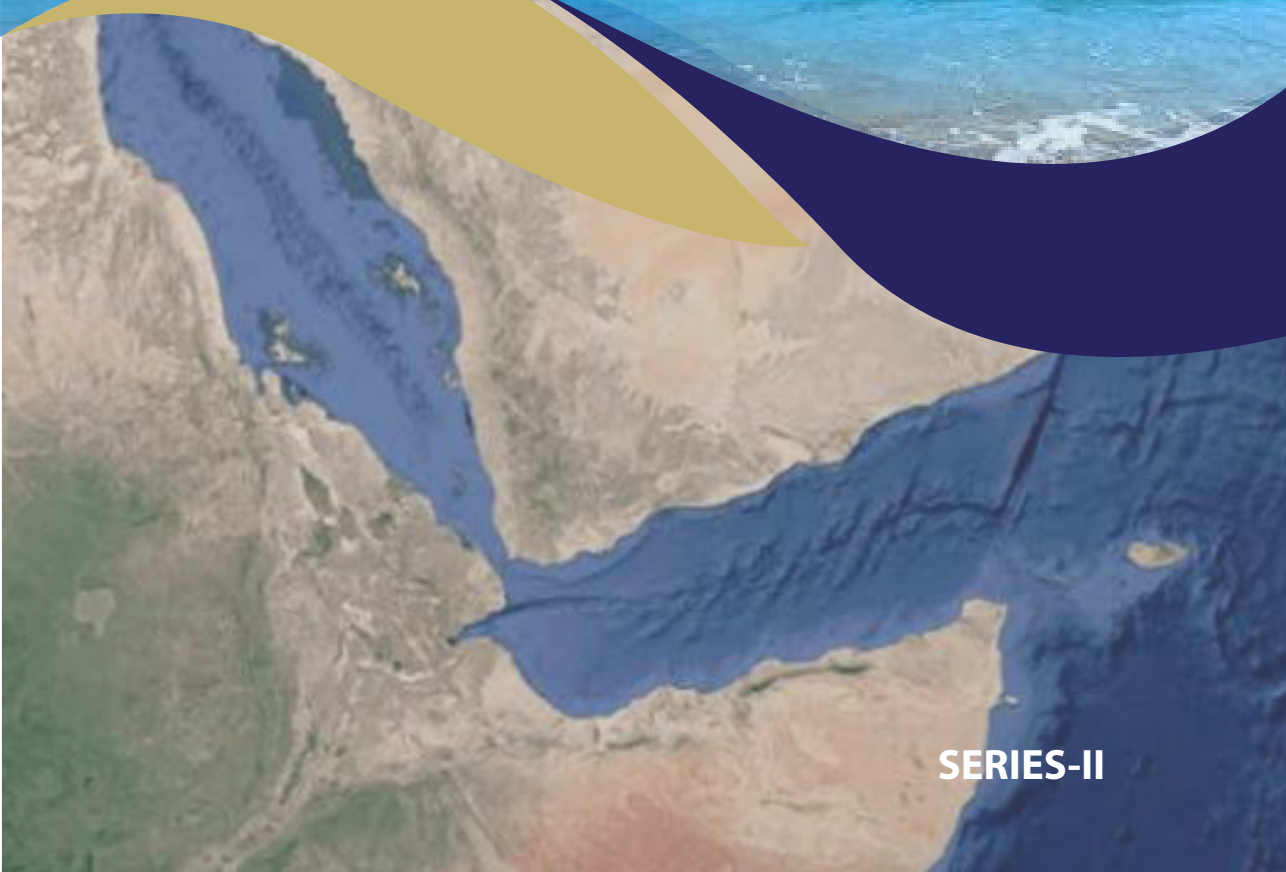
Skylight Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia



SERIES-II

THE RED SEA DIALOGUE SERIES-II

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RED SEA DIALOGUE CONSULTATIVE FORUM
THE SECOND RED SEA DIALOGUE

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Introduction

Ethiopia is one of the world's ancient countries with rich history of trade and commerce with both littoral and non-littoral states in the Northeast Africa, the Levant and the Gulf countries since time immemorial. Ethiopia's past missed opportunities, misguided policy towards accessing the Red Sea and lack of coordinated move to realize Ethiopian peoples' aspiration remain to break both imaginary and geographical trap. The Red Sea region is one of the most significant geostrategic areas of the world. It has always been the site of power plays among countries vying for its control. From the ancient Egyptian expeditions to Punt land to the Romans who established its role as an important artery for trade with the East. And today, it remains in constant flux as its regional players and those from outside compete for a chance to secure their interests. The strategic artery can be both a beacon of peace and a catalyst for destruction.

Because of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa (HOA) has become a political theatrical stage. These days, owing to the intensive militarization and commercialization of ports, the HOA has shown major changes in its security domain. Besides the Gulf States, international actors from Europe, North America, and Asia are currently operating in the region and playing with their competing geopolitical and economic interests. As a result, the Horn region has experienced a proliferation of foreign military bases, principally since 2001. Commercially, the region has also become an important entrance to the African market for the leading countries of Asia and the Middle East.

At the midst, common security threats such as piracy, radicalism, extremism, terrorism, and various types of trafficking and illicit finance on one hand, and the need to revamp cultural, religious, trade, and investment ties, on the other hand, brought the Horn countries and particularly the Gulf states together. Such issues cannot be managed unilaterally. They, instead require regional cooperation and integration.

There are a variety of platforms (bilateral & multilateral) organized by state governments resulting in cooperation in the aforementioned region with respect to the growing security situation. Worth mentioning, among those, includes the Djibouti Code of Conduct signed in 2009 and the Council of Arab and African countries of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden dubbed the Red Sea Security Alliance formed in 2020, etc... However, some of these frameworks seem to lack proper consultation with concerned states and stakeholders. Because key states that could have played vital roles in meeting common objectives were either intentionally ignored from membership or refused to join. Whereas, others who are members of one or more frameworks could not contribute much as they could to enhance the security environment in the region.

From time to time, security in the Red Sea region is becoming highly complex, volatile, dynamic, and transnational. Therefore, a continuous and sustained regional consultative forum is vital to have robust regional security cooperation.

Understanding the necessity of dialogue, collective engagement and consultative approaches to Ethiopia's quest for access to the Red Sea, the Institute of Foreign Affairs inaugurated the Red Sea Dialogue series in September 2023. The first of its kind was conducted on 21 September 2023 under the title "Red Sea Security Dynamics: The Need for Dialogue and Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Entanglements." And the second conference was conducted on 30 May 2024 under the title "Red Sea Dialogue: The Need for Regional Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Shifts," convened at Skylight hotel. This conference was unique from the previous similar occasion for two main reasons. First, the conference was carried out at a time when the Red Sea region has faced serious threats from the Houthi Rebels of Yemen following the outbreak of the Hamas-Israel war in October 2023. Second, the dialogue was also conducted after Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland to access sea ports. The agreement grabbed major attention with the belief that it could alter the Red Sea security dynamics.

The Second Red Sea Dialogue engaged senior Ethiopian diplomats, academia, scholars from the global South, and deliberated over two major themes: Red Sea Maritime Security, and Exploring ways of accessing seaports. The papers presented covered topics such as the Red Sea crisis, the geopolitical dynamics of the Red Sea region and the need to strengthen cooperation, integrated security for the Red Sea, Exploring ways of accessing the seaports in East Africa, the international relations theory and the new world system, accessing seaports, and international experiences, access to the sea: the case of Djibouti and Ethiopia relationship, and the Red Sea region and security complex: implications for the Red Sea Council and national security.

The Ethiopian Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA) has been instrumental in organizing the forum, and in total, ten research papers were presented for further deliberations.



PART I
SPEECHES OF THE CONFERENCE



Welcoming Speech



H.E. Jafar Bedru,
Executive Director, Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA)

Good morning, everyone!
Your Excellency, Ambassador Eshete, CSO to the Minister of Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Excellences, distinguished guests, presenters, and panelists!
First and foremost, I would like to welcome you all to the second Red Sea Dialogue series. It is with great pleasure that I stand before you today extending the Ethiopian warm welcome to all distinguished guests, presenters, and panelists from different countries, from around the Middle East, from the Horn of Africa, and the world. We are gathered here to attend the second RSD.

In a world where geopolitical dynamics is constantly evolving, the security architecture in the Red Sea is increasingly complex and challenging. Today, the IFA organized the second series with the theme "The Need for Regional Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Shifts." Last year, the Institute organized the first consultative forum on a similar topic where the region faced global geopolitical entanglement and the deliberations produced important policy recommendations.

Excellences and distinguished guests, the Red Sea region provides opportunities for trade, economic growth, and access to resources such as fish, and other natural resources including oil. Its geopolitical significance and importance cannot be exaggerated as the region contains two major international maritime trade chokepoints – Bab el Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal.

The Red Sea and Gulf of Eden provide immense opportunities. The fact that the Red Sea is essential for global trade, its importance is not only to the significant water body not only to the state within the region but also states beyond the region. The critical importance of the Red Sea happens in recent security challenges related to the global geopolitical shifts demand a discursive engagement from all stakeholders. All concerned states need to carefully craft the consultative actions in Red Sea and the surrounding area sustainable and suitable for peace and development. Dialogue events like this one play a critical role in bringing scholars, opinion makers, and policy makers together – providing a platform to entertain diverse opinions and produce alternative policy options.

Now, at this juncture, I need to ask why? Why Ethiopia referred to as, in some literatures, "non-littoral state" and such dialogue helps to reverse such narratives. We strongly believe that any initiative related to Red Sea security cannot be successful by excluding and isolating Ethiopia. Any regional or continental institution established to entertain issues of the Red Sea must reflect the interest of Ethiopia. Ethiopia's proximity to the Red Sea and its economic and demographic size which is the biggest from among the many of the littoral states makes Ethiopia the significant player on the Red Sea region

It is also worth mentioning that the historical reasons of Ethiopia – from antiquity to the present day where the major littoral state of the world and still now we are a non-littoral littoral state. Red Sea is an integral part of Ethiopian history, and the present generation is also keen to maintain this historical presence. It is also true that Ethiopia is the biggest country in the Western side of the Red sea. Hence the security of Ethiopia has direct impact in the security of the region. The Security of the Red Sea has also its own impact on the national security of Ethiopia.

Very recently, the government of Ethiopia has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Republic of Somaliland to advance its presence over the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The MoU is then seen as a road map towards regional integration, sustainable development and peace and prosperity. Ethiopia is now in a better position to collaborate with every concerned state or institution towards a better future for the people and countries living around the Red Sea. The Institute of Foreign Affairs has therefore organized this regional consultative forum to address four key issues or questions.
These are:

- The changing security environment of the Red Sea and its impact on Ethiopia and the region at large.
- Explore access to the sea and sea ports and highlight international experience on sharing sea ports.
- Identify gaps in the current security architecture in the region explore opportunities for collaboration among the Red Sea states and Beyond.
- Highlight the models of regional cooperation and best practices from other Maritime regions.

Finally, as we engage in the dialogue today, let us focus on the key issues of enhancing security to promote economic development and regional integration. I look forward to the insightful discussions and deliberations in this dialogue and I once again thank you.

I, once again, thank you! Shukran!

Opening Speech



Ambassador Eshete Tilahun
COS to the Minister. MFA, Ethiopia

It is a pleasure to join this high-level platform. The opening session of the second RSD focuses on assessing the geopolitical dynamics of the region to strengthen cooperation. The Red Sea is one of the most static waterways for the global economy. It is a critical shipping route for trade with an estimated 20-50% of the world's annual trade. This passes through this sea way. In terms of currencies involved, it is estimated to be one trillion USD; its notable proportion of the global GPP. So, this makes the route important.

In the region, foreign military bases are now proliferating. This will create a conflicting interest and a significant threat to the future. Cooperation among the regional government and that is also why we need to discuss, and others from this situation.

Following the latest development in the Middle East, and the commercial vessels passing through the Red Sea, shipments and the route from Bab el Mandeb and Suez Canal is affected as some reports indicate this has caused 50% drop in the volume of goods transit through these important trade routes.

The ever-evolving regional security dynamics and geopolitical landscape region demands collective engagement as I indicated above. This today's conference, I hope, purports a unique opportunity for us to engage in a most frank and open dialogue; shared thoughts and chart a course for a more collaborative future. At this juncture, I think it is important to analyze the significance of the Red Sea in terms of linking Afro- Arab partnership. It must serve us as it is naturally there, as a linkage not a source of rifts. In this shared Afro-Arab relations Ethiopia advocates a comprehensive cooperation, a conclusive multilateral mechanism to make the region a peaceful state and prosperous.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ethiopia is on the journey of transformation. Development projects are being finalized, economic ties are strengthened, particularly after the leadership of PM Abiy Ahmed. We are akso at historical juncture in which Ethiopia is no longer victim of history; Ethiopia will chart her future not only in her interest only but also in the interest of wider Afro-Arabian security as well as economic endeavors. It is for this very reason that Ethiopia must be afforded with dependable maritime access. Ethiopia has the capability to contribute to global peace and security. Ethiopia has been part of the Global War on Terror and has been cooperation in various peace and security developments.

I am confident that the second Red Sea Dialogue can provide an opportunity for meaningful conversations that would investigate the details and contribute ideas for charting a greater future for all of us in the region. I propose rotating the organizing of the upcoming RSD. We expect that the deliberations and actionable ideas to member states of the region and the regional organization.

Let me highlight the following points that this conference might try to explore in relation to the geopolitical shifts. Number one, exploring and indicating safe and reliable access to markets and different economic linkages including infrastructures/faculties/ such as ports, and sharing experiences of different regions on how states support each other or relieving the burdens of landlocked states. Number two; mapping the mounting regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. In this regard, the states, big powers, and non-state actors will buy significant actors in this deliberation. Number three; alternative policy options that can create robust, inclusive regional security mechanisms in the Red Sea are very critical. Security is a very critical agenda in the Horn of Africa.

As I conclude, can we deliberate that the future of the prosperity of the Red Sea region depends on ability to act together fostering the spirit of mutual gains. We can address security and development issues for our next generation, as the IFA Director highlighted. There is no second thought or second option in this regard.

I wish you a fruitful discussion and I declare the forum is officially opened. I, thank you!



Keynote Speech



Comm. Abebe Muluneh
IGAD Head of Mission to Ethiopia

Your Excellency Ambassador Eshete Tilahun, CSO to the Minister of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the FDRE
Your Excellency Mr. Jafar Bedru, Executive Director of Institute of Foreign Affairs,

Observed protocols'
Ladies and Gentlemen:
First and foremost, I would like to thank the Institute for Foreign Affairs for the organization of this very pertinent regional consultative forum on Red Sea Security Dynamics: The Need for Dialogue and Cooperation at a time of Global Geopolitical Affairs and giving me the opportunity to moderate ***"Red Sea Maritie Security: War and New Security Challenge in the Region.".*** The hijackings by Somali pirates, the Yemen Crisis, the Israel/Hamas conflict and the retaliation Missile and armed drone strikes by Houthi militias have destabilized maritime shipping from the Red Sea to the Western Indian Ocean, impacting security and trade for all of Africa.

Attacks on shipping in the Red Sea by the Houthi militia in Yemen have exposed the vulnerability of African maritime security. Since November 2023, there have been 133 reported incidents, including 14 vessels struck by missiles or drones and 18 vessels hijacked by Somali pirates. The disruptions caused by nonstate actors unbounded by international law and with access to stocks of standoff armaments pose fundamental challenges to Africa's security and economic development. The Houthis further threatened to disrupt the 20 submarine cablesproviding subsea communication networks around the Red Sea. Shortly thereafter, a vessel carrying 21,000 metric tons of ammonium phosphate sulfate fertilizer, the Rubymar, was struck by a Houthi missile and began sinking. Its dragging anchor is believed to have damaged three subsea cables.

The attacks have convulsed shipping from the Red Sea through the Gulf of Aden to the Western Indian Ocean, through which 25 percent of global shipping traffic flows. The repercussions have been immediately visible. African Citizens are paying the price of delays, more expensive consumer goods, disruption to local economic entities, and political waterways. Global shipping companies have diverted routes away from the Red Sea, altering shipping flows between the huge global markets of Asia and Europe. Insurance premiums for shipping have surged, raising the costs of goods for consumers in Africa and around the world. Diversions around South Africa can add up to 2 weeks and 6,000 extra nautical miles to a vessel's journey. Uncertainty over energy flows and freight are impacting many countries who are dependent on imports, contributing to a highly unpredictable business environment. This uncertainty directly impacts Egypt's $10 billion in annual revenues from tolls on vessels using the Suez Canal. Meanwhile, pollution from the debris generated by the attacks and responses have degraded the waters and marine ecosystems along Africa's Red Sea coastline.

The 57 million East Africans facing acute food insecurity, including more than 10 million refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), are in the firing line as well. All food supplies to the Horn and East Africa flow via the Red Sea from Europe, Russia and Ukraine, and the Western Hemisphere. The 6.6 million IDPs in Sudan, in particular, are heavily dependent on food aid delivered through the Red Sea. In short, it is African citizens who are paying the price of delays, more expensive consumer goods, disruption to local economic entities, and polluted waterways from maritime insecurity in the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean.

Maritime security is vital to the African continent—sometimes referred to as the planet's largest island. The sudden escalation in attacks has revived threats posed by the decade dormant disruption caused by Somali piracy in the first years of the 21st century. The insecurity at sea off Yemen has also revealed the threadbare nature of African maritime security—the impacts from which are not just felt in the Red Sea but across the entire continent. The spike in the costs of freight shipped to Africa raises prices to consumers and businesses for virtually every item imported or exported. For fragile economies and those of landlocked countries in East Africa most dependent on the free flow of goods from the Red Sea, any rise in the cost of consumer goods has a direct effect on lives and livelihoods.

Your excellences,
Esteemed participants

No East African navy is currently capable of mounting anti-piracy operations in their waters. Any naval assets committed to thwart the attacks in the Red and Arabian Seas leave fewer vessels to police African maritime hotspots along the east coast of the continent—including Sudan's humanitarian crisis, the potential regionalization of Somalia and Ethiopia's diplomatic row over sea access via Somaliland, and a possible scenario of militant extremists employing Houthi tactics against energy infrastructure off the northern coast of Mozambique. The spike in maritime incidents in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean are creating space for heightened piracy incidents and illicit trafficking. Diverted shipping around the rest of Africa also creates more targets of piracy elsewhere, particularly where more vessels must sail close to the coast. Every African Country – Coastal or Landlocked depends on goods carried by shipping and subsea cable networks.

The Houthis have also demonstrated a robust capacity for ballistic missile, drone, and subsea technological disruption. These deployments flag the proliferation of modern materiel to nonstate armed groups. The increased maritime militarization of nonstate actors and criminal groups poses a direct threat to African assets, infrastructure, and national interests elsewhere on the continent. The Red Sea maritime crisis has shown how the acts of what may seem a faraway nonstate actor, have impacted global economic dynamics. African governments must consider that the tactics the Houthis are using could be employed elsewhere on the continent and, thus, be prepared to safeguard their maritime and economic interests. The Red Sea crisis has underscored the importance of redundancy. Every African country—coastal or landlocked—depends on goods carried by shipping and subsea cable networks.

Having the ability to reroute telecommunications, for example along the subsea cable networks around South Africa, provides valuable backup. The Cape of Good Hope route thus offers an interim dual alternative for surface and subsurface maritime services for the continent.

The crisis has also highlighted the suboptimal functionality of some African ports, which force ships to wait for prolonged periods outside the harbor, making these vessels more attractive targets for piracy or other criminality. Ports that function well, are secure, and located at strategic passes on the shifting shipping routes, stand to benefit. Currently, the majority of Africa's harbors are struggling to handle the current volume of freight and cope with the security impacts from these delays and late arrivals. The increased shipping flows around the rest of the continent require a heightened awareness and readiness for off-shore assistance, possible resupply, dependable bunkering services, medical support, and search and rescue certainty. Yet, many countries lack credible maritime policing capabilities. Some have modern naval vessels but these are largely harbor bound, leaving commerce to sail through weakly governed and vulnerable maritime routes.

Your excellences,
Esteemed participants

Maritime domain awareness (MDA) is the basis for extending good order at sea off Africa. There are 5 subregional maritime rescue coordination centers (MRRCs) and 26 subcenters around the continent to cover the entire African coastline for purposes of search and rescue coordination. Two centers began operation in 2022: a Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC) in Madagascar, providing monitoring and sharing of suspicious vessel activity in the region, and a Regional Centre for Operational Coordination (RCOC) in Seychelles, which uses the information from the RMIFC to coordinate maritime security responses in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). Though the means for better MDA are in place with the network of MRRCs and the two WIO centers, very little, if any, capacity exists in the African region bordering the Red Sea to help mitigate the range of threats at play—despite the information available and shared. Western navies and the Indian Navy have stepped in to contain the emerging threat landscape through multinational naval responses—including Prosperity Guardian, Operation Aspides (EUNAVFOR), and Operation ATALANTA (anti-piracy). These efforts are vested in maintaining the integrity of the maritime component underpinning the global economy.

Yet African navies are conspicuously absent. Not even Egypt, which has a very capable navy and stands to suffer significant economic losses from the crisis, has deployed a single vessel.

As parties to the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 47 African countries have a shared responsibility to keep the seas safe from armed interference for free and safe transit in international waterways. Yet, many African governments are seemingly not taking their national maritime interests seriously, ignoring their obligations under UNCLOS and the multiple conventions regulating safe shipping and international cooperation. At the national level, individual maritime security strategies and programs to promote blue economy opportunities have come under pressure. National policy processes for many African littoral countries have not resulted in enhanced maritime security. Several countries like Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya, regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the island states of Seychelles and Mauritius are addressing this matter. For the majority, however, there is a need to extend security beyond Africa's littoral zones if they are to achieve the maritime ambitions of the African Union (AU) to develop a sustainable and thriving blue economy through its 2050 AIM Strategy as well as the economic growth and development vision in the AU's Agenda 2063.

The Red Sea maritime crisis demands a recalibration of African maritime security efforts to help keep the routes of trade open, safeguard undersea communications cables, and protect the rule of law. Furthermore, it is needy to expand the scale and scope of maritime information fusion centers to heighten maritime domain awareness, scale up existing security cooperation structures to respond to maritime crisis, elevate African diplomacy to enhance general protection trade routes, subsea cable networks, and humanitarian assistance, and as parties to the law of the sea (UNCLOS) 47 African Countries have shared responsibility to keep seas safe.



PART II
PRESENTATIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

THEME I – RED SEA MARITIME SECURITY: WAR AND NEW SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE REGION

Red Sea Crisis



Narayanappa Janardhan (PhD),
Director of Research and Analysis, AGDA (UAE)

Our world needs to be seen with new perspectives. In particular, the Red Sea Region could be understood with four concepts begin with letters 'T', 'P', 'M' and 'C' that expresses the situation in the region: T- turbulence, transition, turmoil, terrorism and tension; P - power, peace, prosperity, principles, pragmatism, prestige, personality (of a leader) and propaganda; M - multipolar, multinetworked, multi-aligned, middle Powers, multiplex, and mini-laterals; C- capital, commerce, collaboration, connectivity, climate, cyber (technology), competition, and compromise, respectively. When all these points put together in the current global geopolitics, it gives an understanding that the world is being challenged, and change has never been in order.

In the global politics, there is a mix of issues from security, diplomacy to geopolitics. Undeniably, there is a shift of power from independence to dependence. In this multi polar world, the world is flat. At the midst, the role of middle powers and the new mantra of the emergence of Global South is an evolving area of interest. Therefore, the Western hegemony of more than 250 years is being challenged while the collective power of the developing nations is disrupting/challenging/ the system. Geoeconomics is influencing geopolitics more than the other way round. Globalization gave way for a short period of deglobalization, now we are in the age of re-globalisation – where the supply-chain mechanism is being recalibrated and rewired. Thus, there's increasing economic-foreign policy-security linkage.

A wide range of factors had contributed to the emergence of the multi-polarity. These include the failure of international actors, especially the US; the belief that the world's problems can't be solved by one or a few countries, the new mantra that regional problems require regional solutions; the rise of the Global South and its confidence to deal with regional problems amid failure of global powers to solve their problems, and the shift of old school, ideological framework or as alliances but as new school, non-ideological, and pragmatic partnerships.

Furthermore, the case of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is worth to mention here. Interestingly, the non-engagement of GCC in the Red Sea Crisis stems from geo-economic reasons (their oil supplies are to the East and most of the Global South, and this saved them for being in the direct line of fire); security concerns (attacks on their assets don't happen again); chose to ensuring and corollary economic fallout that they may face in the future; opted for de-escalation policy in the region; the US's belated bid to tame Houthis does not suit GCC interests, and thus, non-engagement is their strategy to stay on the politically-right side of the region with regard to the war in Gaza.

More importantly, in countering the Red Sea Crisis India has been proactive. Thus, India claims that it has taken affirmative action and deterrent presence through setting up task groups with destroyers & frigates to assist merchant vessels, increased aerial surveillance to have complete maritime domain awareness, established surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zone, set up Information Fusion Centre-International Organizations for Real-time Information (IOR), deployed 11 submarines, 35 ships and five aircrafts, and 300 vessels searched by end of April in counter-piracy efforts.

Along similar lines, from 2008 to 2022 China's Navy escorted over 7,000 vessels, more than half of them non-Chinese ships, in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia. And when it comes to countering the Red Sea Crisis, China is interested in de-escalation of the Red Sea crisis. This is because of its investment Belt Road Initiative (BRI) projects, investments in Egyptian & Saudi ports in Red Sea region, among others. And yet, after Saudi Iranian deal in 2023, Beijing is now influencing Houthis via Tehran.

As one of the primary stakeholders, when it comes to Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular, the following questions are critical: shouldn't it be more involved in finding ways of managing or resolving the crisis rather than allowing the erstwhile powers to deal with it? Should there be less or more internationalization of the security dynamics in and around Africa? Is there resonance in Africa for any new and informal collective security architecture in the Afro-Asian region that includes the current hotspots? Generally, in a multiplex world, with multiple powers in complex scenario states are not the only players, non-state actors, international organizations and MNCs are also equally relevant players. The point is, whether we like it or not, non-state actors are here to stay. Hence, we need to be more innovative and creative in designing solutions to problems. Moreover, no actor can really escalate the Red Sea crisis into an inferno in the near term and no actor can extinguish it completely in the near term. It is in everybody's immediate interest to keep the fire simmering because most actors involved in the crisis are benefitting from it. For this, we need more collective action, based on a new roadmap not dictated by the West, but that should emanate from a Global South-led initiative, which the West can also join if it wishes to contribute positively.



Accessing Seaports and International Experiences



Mr. Ahmed Y. Hersi,
Associate Researcher, ISIR, Somaliland

Abstract

Access to the Sea from water body such as the Red Sea has great geostrategic importance. It has immense potential for economic development. Historically, the Gulf of Eden, the Dahlak, Tadjoura, and others have continued to be the most important sites. As soon as the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, it continued to support commerce in the region. Rich states like Saud Arabia, UAE, and others are trying to play political game in a time where there are turbulences. The northern part of the Red Sea, Egypt, Jordan and Israel exert influence. The states are often working towards taking advantage of the insecurities and lack of governance in the area. In fear of insecurities in the Red Sea, commercial vessels are traveling through the Cape of Good Hope. There is huge literature within the framework of international law frameworks that can help landlocked countries to access seaports. For instance, the UNCLOS and subsequent treaties that the landlocked countries could take advantage of.

Most of the landlocked countries are within the developing economies of the world and facing immense challenges, and thus they need access to the seaports for import and export purposes. At the midst, the issue of infrastructure needs also to be taken seriously. For instance, like the Railway between Djibouti and Ethiopia, there should be more seaports and other facilities that could enhance economic integration in the region. To this end, inclusivity - considering the countries on the west side of the Red Sea and revisiting the Red Sea issues are crucial steps to be followed.



Red Sea Maritime Security: Analysis and Response



Yuval Eylon (ReAdm)
Senior Researcher, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Israel

A 2022 report by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) highlighted that "Maritime security is key to our peace and prosperity. We will strengthen our posture and situational awareness to deter and defend against all threats in the maritime domain, uphold freedom of navigation, secure maritime trade routes and protect our main lines of communication." From this one can understand that the twenty first century prosperity and life is based by and large on world economy and world communication. And the world economy is established on the sea, and more than 97% of world communication utilizes underwater cables than satellites. The sea harbors both the world economy and world communication, and hence, the focus on maritime security is a matter of taking care of the world's lifeline. Thus, the world's economy travels through the sea, i.e. maritime chain of supply uses water ways, and it characterizes it as "routes of life."

Maritime "choke points" such as the Harmuz Straits where 50 000 ships passes through annually, Bab el Mandab Straits (25,000 ships), Suez Canal (22,000 ships), the Turkish Strait (40,000 ships), Straits of Gibraltar (100,000), Malaka Strait (90,000 Ships) and the Panama Canal (14,000) ships passes through to provide goods and services to and from the global market. Now-a-days four major threats to the world chain of supply can be identified. These includes but not limited to world demographic changes, geopolitical changes, global warming (ecology) and maritime terror. For instance, the Houthi threats against surface fleets and thus endangering the global economy can be one of the vivid manifestation of global surge in maritime security. On the other hand, the onset and proliferation of manned and unmanned submarine cable threats and possession of such weapons by terrorist and extremist groups has increased global maritime concern.

Global Chokepoints and Ships Passing through them

No	Choke Points	Total # of Ships/annual	Location (Connects)
1	Hormuz Straits	50,000	Oman Gulf & Persian Gulf
2	Bab el Mandab Straits	25,000	Mediterranean, Red Sea & Indian Ocean
3	Suez Canal	22,000	Red Sea & Mediterranean Sea
4	Turkish Straits	40,000	Eastern Mediterranean & Black Sea
5	Gibraltar Straits	100,000	Mediterranean Sea & Atlantic Ocean
6	Malacca Straits	90,000	Indian Ocean & South China Sea/Pacific
7	Panama Canal	14,000	Atlantic & Pacific Ocean

Source

In the case of the current Red Sea Crisis and Houthi's assault there witnessed repeated attacks. From November to December 2023 alone there were a total of 15 attacks. Of which 10 of them were successful (66% success rate).

Again from Jan-February 2024, there have been 64 major attacks in which 14 were successful (22% success rate) and from March-April 2024 there were 66 attacks where only 2 were successful (3% success rate). Hence, these shows that there is growing maritime threats against merchant and naval fleets in the Red Sea region by the Houthi and other extremist groups. This, therefore, calls for a coordinated and concerted global and regional response against piracy and other maritime security threats.

Since there is a proliferation of these threats in the Red Sea region, "what should be done" has to be the critical question that need to be pondered by every littoral and close by states of the Red Sea region. As a result, developing and enhancing national maritime awareness, creating Red Sea Maritime Alliance with adequate action plan (provide military and economic support, assure "on time" response and strategic maintenance, prevent any terror threat against freedom of passage), Joint or multilateral military coalition operations (JMCO) and similar mitigating mechanisms shall be implemented to reduce, deter and combat any maritime threat posed by organized piracy and armed robbery as well as other maritime threats flourishing in the Red Sea region. In realizing such, create and maintain "real time situational awareness center", activate protection of sea lines of communication, active protection of "on" and "Offshore" Assets, and block and destroy terror routes and assets will be necessary from real strategic military point of view.

Time Period	Total # of Attacks	Total # of successful attacks	% of successful attacks
Nov. – Dec. 2023	15	10	66%
Jan. – Feb. 2024	63	14	22%
Mar. – Apr. 2024	66	2	3%

Regional Cooperation Platforms in the Red Sea Basin



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Introduction

Currently, there are two main regional cooperation platforms dealing with security in the Red Sea basin:

The IGAD Taskforce on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden and the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The IGAD Taskforce on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

The IGAD Taskforce on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden was established following a resolution of the 46th Ordinary Session of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Council of Ministers held on February 27, 2019 in Djibouti to create awareness concerning advancing regional cohesion, coordination, cooperation and the possibilities for IGAD's regional economic integration. Through the 18 taskforce members – three representatives from each IGAD state (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Uganda) IGAD continues to carry out the resolution of the 46th Ordinary Session of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Council of Ministers with financial assistance from the European Union, Finland and Norway.

The taskforce meets on a quarterly basis according to its terms of reference and is co-chaired by the IGAD Special Envoy for the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The taskforce is responsible for: formulating policies and strategies on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, including the development of a common IGAD position on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden area; charting a regional plan of action with clear timelines; drafting IGAD convention on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden; undertaking policy-oriented research; and creating awareness on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The main aim of the task force has been to protect the interest of the littoral and non-littoral IGAD member states in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

On October 7, 2023, IGAD validated the five-year regional plan of action and common position that will provide a roadmap towards unlocking the Gulf of Aden's potential and addressing a myriad of challenges facing the region. IGAD has identified four key areas of interest that plan seeks to address including: regional cohesion and cooperation; socio-economic development; maritime and terrestrial matters; research, technology and innovation; and capacity building. IGAD termed the implementation of this plan as key to the achievement of IGAD peace and security objectives as well as to the safeguard of the interests of member states and to the strengthening of their cooperation on safety issues in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden area. On March 7, 2024, IGAD issued a press release in which it said that IGAD finalizes its common position and regional plan of action. The endorsement of the regional plan by IGAD will help combat security threats such as piracy, kidnapping and resurgence of radical groups in a region that provides a passageway to more than 10% of global maritime trade.

Yet, Sudan and Eritrea, which have a long Red Sea coast, are not part of this task force Somaliland is also not part of this platform although it has a long Gulf of Aden coast, the regional plan has not yet been realized and in order for this task force to be effective, it needs to collaborate with the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden

On January 6, 2020, Prince Faysal bin Farhan bin Abdullah, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, affirmed that the signing of the foreign ministers of the Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden on the founding charter reflects the keenness of the leaders of the importance of coordination and consultation on the Red Sea. He said that "in light of the increasing challenges in the region, we must exert efforts and coordinate among our countries to reach integration among us in all fields within the framework of preserving security and stability as well as achieving development in a way that achieves prosperity for our countries", affirming that the council is a joint action system for coordination and cooperation. He stressed that the council's headquarters would be in Riyadh. He further said that no other military force would be built since all member states have defensive capabilities. The countries that signed the founding charter are: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti.

Since the mid-2010s, the Red Sea has been at the center of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Economic projects under its "vision 2030", such as the futuristic city of Neom, the resorts of the Red Sea project, the modernization of the Jeddah port, etc., make it important for Saudi Arabia to have a stable Red Sea. Yet, the council framework has been far from an effective regional system for collective security, apart from some Saudi-led joint drills in Saudi Red Sea waters. Regional wars, political tension and the exclusion of countries with substantial influence in Red Sea affairs, mainly the UAE, Ethiopia and Somaliland, have made it difficult for Saudi Arabia to make the council into an effective regional integration platform.

The global struggle between the super powers

In addition to these two ineffective and non-operational regional cooperation platforms, another cause for the inability to develop regional cooperation platforms in the Red Sea basin is the global struggle between the super powers. As the attacks of the Houthis on international shipping continues, the US seems to have lost its interest in the African coast of the Red Sea basin as happened when the Suez Canal was closed between 1967 – 1975. Its place is taken by Russia, who is about to sign an MoU with the Sudanese government on building a maritime logistical base in Port Sudan and whose frigate, Marshal Shaposhnikov from the Russian Pacific Fleet, visited Eritrea to commemorate 30 years of bilateral ties.

Moreover, as attacks of the Houthis on international shipping continue, the Red Sea basin is divided more and more into two geopolitical different spheres: the northern Red Sea with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel and the southern Red Sea with Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia and Yemen. The US tries to build a bloc of northern Red Sea countries to counter Iran. This sphere has already maritime and land routes bypassing the Bab al-Mandab and connecting the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean Sea. Between these two spheres a civil war has been raging for more than a year in Sudan, which affects both spheres.

In this current geopolitical situation in which both regional cooperation platforms are defunct, the global struggle between the super powers reaches the Red Sea and the Red Sea is divided into two with its northern part becoming an independent geopolitical sub-region, it will be very challenging to create a regional cooperation platform integrating all Red Sea basin countries.



Integrated Security for the Red Sea: From land to the Sea



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The Red Sea, a vital maritime route for global trade and a major player in the international seaborne energy trade is critical for maintaining security. Its complex maritime security ecosystem involves a network of governments, navies, coast guards, shipping companies, and international organizations.

Several security challenges, such as piracy and terrorism, threaten the stability and safety of the Red Sea maritime environment. These threats, primarily from non-state actors, have significant economic implications. For instance, conflicts could lead to an immediate contraction in market capacity and a surge in shipping rates. Persistent disruptions could result in a 2% increase in goods inflation and a doubling shipping costs. Rerouting ships around Africa could be a costly alternative.

The maritime security challenge along the Red Sea is closely tied to the security issues in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The conflict patterns in these areas demonstrate significant connections, requiring a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Tackling these challenges demands increased cooperation among regional and international actors. Improving maritime security involves joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building initiatives. Developing maritime security frameworks and applying best practices contribute to a more robust and coordinated security ecosystem. Regional collaboration is increasingly vital in light of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

A coordinated maritime security system depends on collaborative efforts and shared resources. Enhancing regional cooperation amid geopolitical changes is crucial. Recommendations to achieve a more holistic approach include resolving regional conflicts comprehensivjely, tackling underlying issues, reconsidering the growth of non-state actors, and advancing regional infrastructure and economic integration.



Theme II Exploring Ways of Accessing to Sea Ports: International Experiences of Sharing Sea Ports

Challenges in the Red Sea and Its Implication in the Horn of Africa



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Abstract

This paper examines the escalating security challenges in the Red Sea and their destabilizing effects on the Horn of Africa, focusing on great power competition, maritime insecurity, and regional instability. The study highlights the economic repercussions of disrupted global trade, particularly inflation in the Horn, and analyzes Ethiopia's critical role in regional dynamics. Emphasizing the need for adherence to international law (notably UNCLOS Article 125), the paper critiques Ethiopia's port-access strategies, including its contested MoU with Somaliland, and calls for cooperative regional frameworks to ensure stability and economic integration.

Introduction

The Red Sea has emerged as a flashpoint for geopolitical rivalries, maritime insecurity, and economic disruptions, with profound consequences for the Horn of Africa. The paper underscores the interplay of these challenges, stressing the urgency of regional cooperation to mitigate crises exacerbated by Houthi attacks, great power militarization, and fragile statehood in the Horn.

Red Sea Crisis: Drivers and Implications

The Red Sea crisis stems from three interconnected threats: maritime insecurity, great power competition, and economic fragility. Houthi attacks on shipping lanes and subsequent U.S.-led military responses have disrupted global trade, spiking inflation in the Horn of Africa. Simultaneously, rivalries between global powers (U.S., China, UAE) have militarized the region, while weak governance in coastal states exacerbates instability. For landlocked Ethiopia, which relies on Djibouti for 95% of its trade, these dynamics amplify economic risks and underscore the urgent need for diversified, law-based port access. The crisis reveals how regional conflicts and external interventions compound vulnerabilities, demanding coordinated solutions to safeguard trade and stability.

Ethiopia's Dilemma: Port Access and Regional Stability

Ethiopia faces a complex balancing act in securing sea access while maintaining regional stability. Although UNCLOS Article 125 guarantees its right to maritime transit, Ethiopia remains dependent on volatile bilateral agreements, particularly with Djibouti, which handles 95% of its trade. The controversial MoU with Somaliland—a breakaway region unrecognized by the AU—has drawn sharp criticism for undermining Somalia's sovereignty and international norms, risking diplomatic isolation. While diversification is economically imperative, the paper argues Ethiopia must pursue alternatives through recognized states (e.g., Somalia) to avoid destabilizing the Horn. This dilemma highlights the tension between Ethiopia's developmental needs and its obligation to uphold regional stability through lawful, cooperative frameworks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Red Sea's instability demands a cohesive regional response, centered on lawful cooperation and inclusive economic partnerships. Ethiopia's maritime aspirations, though legitimate, must align with international norms to avoid exacerbating tensions. The paper asserts, the Horn's future hinges on collective action—not unilateral maneuvers—to transform the Red Sea from a crisis zone into a corridor of shared prosperity. To address Red Sea instability and Ethiopia's port access challenges, a three-pronged cooperative approach is essential: First, uphold international law, particularly UNCLOS and AU principles; second, jointly develop infrastructure such as ports and trade corridors; and third, strengthen IGAD and AU security frameworks—transforming regional competition into collective stability.



Exploring Ways of Accessing the Seaports in East Africa: The Prospects for Ethiopia's Legitimate Quest



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Abstract

This paper examines Ethiopia's strategic pursuit of maritime access through port diplomacy in East Africa, analyzing its economic, political, and security dimensions. Drawing on international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the study highlights Ethiopia's bilateral agreements with coastal states (Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, and Somaliland) while underscoring the challenges of sovereign port access. The paper argues for regional recognition of Ethiopia's legitimate maritime interests and calls for multilateral cooperation under the African Union (AU) and IGAD to secure Ethiopia's rights to sea access.

Introduction

Ethiopia, a landlocked nation with deep historical and socio-economic ties to the Red Sea region, faces systemic barriers in securing sovereign maritime access. "Port diplomacy" is a critical tool for leveraging maritime resources in international relations. This paper therefore, delves into the concepts of port diplomacy, bilateral peaceful port agreements and Ethiopian maritime challenges.

Conceptual Explication: Port Diplomacy

Port diplomacy refers to the strategic use of maritime infrastructure and coastal access as instruments of foreign policy, enabling states to advance their economic, political, and security interests. For landlocked countries like Ethiopia, securing reliable seaport access is not merely a logistical necessity but a geopolitical imperative, shaping trade dependencies, regional alliances, and national security. Coastal states leverage their ports to exert influence—through exclusive trade agreements, foreign military basing rights (e.g., UAE in Assab), or infrastructure control (e.g., DP World's management of ports across the Red Sea). Under international law, particularly UNCLOS Article 125, landlocked nations are entitled to maritime access, yet practical implementation hinges on bilateral negotiations, often creating asymmetrical power dynamics. Ethiopia's port diplomacy has thus focused on diversifying partnerships (Djibouti, Somaliland, Sudan) while advocating for regional recognition of its rights. However, challenges persist, including overdependence on Djibouti, rivalries among port operators (e.g., UAE vs. Turkey in Sudan), and the securitization of Red Sea chokepoints. Ultimately, effective port diplomacy requires balancing sovereign aspirations with collaborative frameworks, ensuring Ethiopia's access without destabilization.

Bilateral Agreements and Peaceful Engagement

Ethiopia has pursued maritime access through a strategy of bilateral agreements and peaceful engagement, seeking to balance its economic needs with regional stability. Recognizing the limitations imposed by its landlocked status, Ethiopia has established key partnerships with coastal states, most notably with Djibouti through a series of agreements since 1993 that govern port utilization, transit corridors, and infrastructure development.

These arrangements, while vital, have also highlighted Ethiopia's acute dependency on a single route, prompting Addis Ababa to diversify its options through ongoing negotiations with Somaliland and existing agreements with Sudan and Kenya. This diplomatic approach reflects Ethiopia's commitment to international norms, particularly UNCLOS provisions that guarantee landlocked states' right to maritime access, while avoiding confrontational postures that could destabilize the region.

Ethiopian Maritime Challenges

Ethiopia's landlocked status forces heavy reliance on Djibouti's ports, creating economic and security vulnerabilities. Geopolitical rivalries in the Red Sea, lack of sovereign naval power, and restrictive bilateral port agreements further strain access. While UNCLOS guarantees maritime rights, Ethiopia must diversify routes (e.g., via Somaliland or Kenya) and bolster regional diplomacy to mitigate risks.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's maritime access is a legitimate imperative under international law and a prerequisite for regional stability. Coastal states and regional bodies must recognize Ethiopia's strategic interests to foster equitable cooperation. Ethiopia's peaceful port diplomacy offers a model for resolving landlocked states' challenges through legal and collaborative frameworks.



Access to the Sea: The Case of Djibouti and Ethiopia Relationship



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The Ethio-Djibouti case is interesting; as we know Ethiopia and Djibouti had a very long history of relationship, 127 years of relationship. It is a unique relationship, and sometimes it is seen as an example of an international relationship. Historically, Djibouti had only one port built by the French, and now there are six ports in Djibouti. These includes Port of Djibouti, Port of Tadjoura, Port of Doraleh (Doraleh Multi-Purpose Port), Damerjog Livestock Port, Port of Ghoubet; and two terminals, namely: Horizon Terminal and SGTD (Société de Gestion du Terminal à Conteneurs de Doraleh) Terminal. The historical Djibouti port, one multipurpose port built outside of the city, port of Tadjoura, port of Gube, the major port, and each one of them are operational.

Djibouti multi-purpose is mainly connected to railway and road. All the goods that are unloaded from the ship are directly transported to Ethiopia. In terms of capacity, 814 million tons of cargo and it is very huge in terms of land size. The major reason for Djibouti's diversification of ports, among other, is because of Ethiopia. In 2001, when the war broke between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the only alternative for Ethiopia was port in Djibouti. To expedite export and import, Ethiopia opted Djibouti. The regional and global economic and political dynamics contributed to the proliferation of ports in Djibouti.

However, currently there are two challenges that need highlighting. First, Djibouti understands that Ethiopia needs to have access to the seaports. Every day the hundreds of tracks transport goods back and forth to and from the international market through the port of Djibouti to Ethiopia. And, Ethiopia shall maintain its historical closer ties with Djibouti. Second, we understand that Ethiopia need to diversify its access points. That is why Ethiopia has currently signed a Memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Somaliland. There is nothing wrong with that. In conclusion, there are areas where Ethio-Djibouti works towards improving relations. For example, goods often stay longer in ports, and port fees may be lowered. Also, improving the quality of ports, and roads that connects Djibouti to Ethiopia is important. There are also security issues along the Ethio-Djibouti road, and it needs to collaborate in these areas and improve the safety and security of the route.

New Security Challenges in the Middle East from a Revised International Relations Framework Perspective



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Introduction

This presentation addresses the mounting security challenges in the Middle East and Read Sea region from an international relations perspective. Assuming that the traditional IR framework, is struggling to understand and respond to the new realities at the global and regional levels, the paper details the phenomenal rise of failed states and non-state actors, both in numbers and impact. Rethinking the IR conceptual framework and basic assumptions is necessary to make sense of the changing global and regional system and deal with these unprecedented security challenges.

Traditional IR and Changing World System

International Relations Theory (IR), in its dominant approaches, neorealist and neoliberal, is based on geopolitical realities. The international order, according to this framework is an inter-state system in which states are the basic units. States are rational actors and their ultimate goal is survival. As the international environment is generally hostile, maximization of power is the way for states to survive, secure their national interests, and preserve their national security. However, since power is not always enough to guarantee security, states can survive and achieve their security through mutual cooperation.

Globalization provided more avenues for cooperation and maximized interconnectedness among nations by creating an extended network of organizations and alliances, both regionally and globally. The growth of economic cooperation, culture exchange, and traffic of goods, people and ideas are all aspects of globalization. The international law, along with bilateral and multilateral treaties and arrangements, helped create what has been known as a "rules-based system".

In this system, various types of security architectures have been shaped mutually and cooperatively. Regional and international security frameworks have been developed in many parts of the world to regulate the use of common or shared resources, monitor and protect navigation, especially in areas of strategic and geopolitical importance, such as waterways, trade routes, energy pipelines, fiber connections, and river flows.

Besides rules and regulations, power projection, the use of force, deterrence, containment, diplomacy, negotiations, etc. are familiar concepts and tools used to manage this system, solve problems and deescalate tensions. Managing crises and conflicts and dealing with security issues in this rules-based international system and looks simple and straightforward. However, during the last few decades and years, the global system has gone through significant and worrying changes. The significance of such changes can be seen in the following: a) the international order is transforming from a unipolar to a multipolar system; b) the geopolitical basis of the existing system is giving way to geo-economics realities. The Chinese road and belt initiative and the India-Middle East economic corridor are just examples in this regard; c) asymmetric warfare is replacing conventional warfare in various parts of the globe.

These changes are also worrying because new realities have emerged and made the world more complex and unpredictable. They are more visible in the Middle East than anywhere else in the world. On top of these changes is the intertwined phenomenal increase of both failed states and non-state actors.

The Changing Setting of the Middle East and the Rise of Non-state Actors
A close look at the map of the Middle East and Africa (North, East and West), shows that the number of failed states, where non-state actors operate the most, has multiplied during the last decade. In these countries, not only have non-state actors grown in numbers, but also in influence at all levels, militarily, politically, socially and in the media and communication spheres. In a divided North African Libya, a number of non-state actors operate for more than a decade. This includes the Libyan National Army, al-Zintan Revolutionaries, the Libya Dawn, in addition to Daesh and the Russian Wagner forces. In Sudan, where a civil war is tearing the country apart, the Rapid Support Forces, the Sudan Liberation Movement, the Justice and Equality Movement are just a sample of an active array of non-state actors. In the horn pf Africa, Somalia is no exception. In addition to Al-Shabab movement, the threat of pirates is still looming.

Across the Red Sea, Yemen is host to a number of active non-state actors, including Ansar Allah (the Houthis), the Southern Transitional Council, and Al-Qaeda. In Iraq, it is difficult to name all those actors. Among the most influential ones are Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Al-Nujaba Movement, Daesh, and the newly formed umbrella, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. Syria, another divided country, has become a fertile ground for non-state actors, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Syrian National Army, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and Daesh. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is the main and most powerful player. In Palestine, there is no failed state; there is no state in place, except for an internationally recognized authority under occupation, with very limited resources and territorial sovereignty. In the Palestinian context, resistance movements like Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees, and Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades are very active non-state actors.

What do these developments mean for the international system in general and the regional security in particular. First, they mean that a substantive part of this region no longer functions as an integral part of the existing rules-based international inter-state system as we know it.

Second, a number of concepts, along with the theoretic framework of traditional IR is hardly, or no longer applicable to the current regional setting. This includes concepts such as deterrence and containment.

The ongoing crisis in the Red Sea exemplifies these developments. It shows that the old security architecture is becoming more and more dysfunctional in this changing international environment. With the Suez Canal to the north and Bab al-Mandab Strait to the South, the Red Sea is one of key waterways for global trade. It is one of the world's busiest cargo and oil transit with almost 12% of international merchandise trade passing through it.

The Red Sea is not just a corridor for logistics but also a chessboard for regional and global powers. The US operates a multinational task force focusing on preventing the smuggling of arms and narcotics, and protect international maritime security in the region. Recently, during the war on Gaza, they, along with Britain launched Operation "Prosperity Guardian" to counter the Houthis activities and curb their missile capabilities. In 2023, India, Israel, the UAE and the US established the quadrilateral group, known as I2U2, to work together on a number of initiatives in the Red Sea region. The Iranians are bolstering their presence in the Red Sea through the Houthis to expand their regional influence beyond Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The Red Sea is also an important component of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Russia announced plans to set up a naval base on the red Sea in Sudan, while Djibouti hosts foreign military bases for a number of competing powers such as the US, China, France, Italy and Japan. Turkey plans to rebuild the port of Suakin in Sudan, which will complement its already growing presence in Somalia.

The increasing presence of the US, China, and Russia in the Red Sea points not only towards the evolving reality of intensifying great power competition, but also towards the level of threats to regional security and stability. Along with power competition among states, which is completely understandable from the traditional IR perspective, we are witnessing a growing presence of non-state actors, actively seeking to further their agendas. The Houthis activities in the Red Sea is a clear indication of this development. Linking their actions to the Israeli war on Gaza, they first targeted Israeli ships and ships going to Israel, then later they expanded the scope of their targets to include American and British vessels, causing significant disruption of maritime traffic through Bab al-Mandeb Strait.

Key Characteristics of Non-state Actors in the Region

The following points illustrate the main features characterizing non-state actors operating in the Middle East:

- **Ideological:** Almost all non-state actors in the region are ideologically driven groups. A few of them act out of social grievances or territorial or separatist claims.

- **Anti-Western:** They mostly consider the West, particularly the U.S. as the source of all the problems in the region, either through direct involvement or via unconditional support of corrupt and authoritarian regimes.

- **Interconnected:** The war on Gaza showed clearly how interconnected these actors are and how coordinated their actions and responses to crises can be.

- **Armed:** Not only do these actors receive weapons from regional powers to which they have open access, they also acquired advanced capabilities to develop, reproduce and manufacture their own weapons, some of which are very sophisticated.

- **Social:** In addition to their growing military capabilities, these actors also provide social services and, to some extent, replace the failing states within which they operate.

- **Proxies:** Most of these players act as agents or proxies for the competing regional powers, mainly Iran, Turkey and the UAE.

- **Dynamic:** There is no "one size fits all" formula, which applies to these actors. Some of them are semi-state or partly state partly non-state actors. For instance, Hezbollah in Lebanon acts both from within and without the state. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its components in Iraq is a semi-state organization. It is state-funded, it operates as part of the state army hierarchy, but it also pursues a non-state domestic and regional agenda. As for Hamas, after winning the 2006 elections and forming a national unity government, it did not get international recognition. Since then, Gaza has gone under siege until the current war broke out. This dynamism shows the limits of the "non-state actor" concept, which needs rethinking.

These characteristics complicate the geopolitics of the Red Sea even further and make the dealing with regional security more challenging.

Approaches to Security Arrangements in the Red Sea

The geopolitics of Red Sea is inseparable of that of the Middle East, what happens there eventually has an impact here, and vice versa. This connection is best exemplified by the Houthis' attacks on shipping routes in the Red Sea. These attacks, which started in November 2023 by targeting Israeli ships and ships heading to Israeli ports came to "protest against the Israeli aggression, support the Palestinian brothers, and will continue as long as the war is on", as the group claims. In such a connected environment, how regional security can be achieved and maintained?

- The old IR theoretic framework does not seem to be able to cope with the emerging realities. Approaches such as confrontation, deterrence, containment, have so far failed to provide a solution. The US - UK led operation "Prosperity Guardian" confirms this failure. Instead of curbing the threat, this operation contributed to the escalation of the situation and the threat gained new grounds, from the Red Sea, to the Indian Ocean and now to the Mediterranean.

- Recognizing these new realities, as we update our theoretic framework may, in the end, lead to recognizing these actors, their interests and their rights as defined in international law and treaties.

- Rethinking the way we label and categorize these actors and make more efforts to differentiate between ***"terrorists", "rebels", "resistance", and "freedom fighters".***

- Coupling the use of force with other tools, which may be more effective such as negotiation and mediation. These tools worked in other cases, including with the Taliban in 2021 and Hamas back in December 2023.

- Dealing with the problem rather than the symptoms. In the Houthis' case in particular, the problem is not in the Red Sea, it is in Gaza.

- Understanding the regional inter-connections between the different non-state actors, so we can deal with them as a complex phenomenon that needs a complex approach.

- Engaging regional powers to which these actors are proxies. Regional security is best maintained when regional powers cooperate. Global powers come and go, sustainable security and stability should be a matter of regional powers in the first place.

- Finally, helping failed states to overcome their weaknesses and fragility so they can regain their unity and extend their sovereignty and control over their territories.

The Red Sea Council (RSC): Opportunities and Threats for Ethiopia's National Security



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Abstract

The establishment of the Red Sea Council (RS) in December 2018 marked a significant development in the geopolitics of the Red Sea region. However, Ethiopia's exclusion from this forum has raised critical concerns, given its status as the most populous and strategically influential state in the Horn of Africa. The paper argues that the Red Sea region is characterized by a complex and dynamic security environment, shaped by asymmetrical power distribution, historical rivalries, and the involvement of both regional and global actors. Ethiopia stands to gain several strategic advantages from potential membership in the RSC, including the ability to counter Egyptian subversion, access energy resources, reduce the tragic deaths of Ethiopian migrants crossing the Red Sea, and acquire advanced naval expertise.

Conversely, the paper identifies significant threats, such as the risk of port shutdowns, naval blockades, Suffocation of Alternative Port Access, damage to underwater internet cables and threat of Regional Proxy Conflicts, which could severely impact Ethiopia's economic and security interests. To address these challenges, this paper recommends a dual strategy of multilateral diplomacy and military deterrence. Ethiopia should actively seek membership or observer status in the RSC to influence its agenda and neutralize hostile actions, while simultaneously strengthening its naval capabilities to safeguard its maritime interests. By adopting these measures, Ethiopia can enhance its national security and assert its role as a stabilizing force in the region.

Introduction

The Red Sea region has emerged as a critical geopolitical space where regional security dynamics intersect with global strategic interests. The establishment of the Red Sea Council (RSC) in 2018 marked a significant development in the institutional architecture of regional security governance. This intergovernmental organization, founded under Saudi Arabian leadership, brings together littoral states from both the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, including Egypt, Jordan, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and Eritrea. The Council's primary mandate focuses on addressing shared security challenges such as maritime piracy, terrorism, and irregular migration through coordinated regional responses.

A central point of contention surrounding the RSC concerns its restrictive membership criteria, which limits participation exclusively to coastal states. This provision has effectively excluded Ethiopia, despite its pivotal role as the demographic and geopolitical anchor of the Horn of Africa region. Many analysts interpret this exclusion as reflecting Egyptian strategic calculations, particularly in the context of ongoing tensions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The Ethiopian government has protested this exclusionary approach, questioning the Council's effectiveness in addressing regional security issues without the participation of the region's most populous nation and a key counterterrorism actor.

The potential implications of Ethiopia's exclusion from the RSC warrant careful examination across several dimensions. First, regarding counterterrorism efforts, the absence of Ethiopia - which has been at the forefront of regional counterterrorism operations through its contributions to AMISOM and other initiatives -

raises questions about the Council's operational capacity. Second, in addressing irregular migration flows, the exclusion of the primary source country for Red Sea migration appears counterproductive to the Council's stated objectives. Third, the geopolitical consequences of this exclusion may reinforce existing fault lines in regional relations, particularly between Egypt and Ethiopia.

Ethiopia's potential membership in the RSC could yield significant benefits for both the country and the broader region. Participation would provide Ethiopia with access to maritime security intelligence and technical cooperation, crucial for its emerging naval capabilities. The Council could serve as a platform for neutralizing hostile agendas, particularly concerning the GERD dispute, through multilateral engagement. Furthermore, membership might facilitate access to financial and logistical resources from Gulf States, supporting Ethiopia's maritime security development. Collaborative mechanisms within the RSC framework could also enhance efforts to protect Ethiopian migrants traversing the Red Sea corridor. This paper, therefore, delves into examining the potential opportunities and threats the Red Sea Council (RSC) present for Ethiopia's national security

Opportunities of the RSC for Ethiopian National Security

The Red Sea Forum (RSC), despite Ethiopia's current exclusion, presents several strategic opportunities that could significantly enhance the country's national security and regional influence. If Ethiopia were to secure membership or even observer status, it could leverage the forum to neutralize adversarial agendas, access critical resources, and strengthen its maritime capabilities. Below is an expanded analysis of these opportunities:

Neutralizing Egyptian Subversion

Egypt has consistently used regional platforms, including the Arab League and the GCC, to isolate Ethiopia diplomatically, particularly concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The RSC, with its focus on Red Sea security, could serve as another instrument for Egypt to rally regional opposition against Ethiopia. However, Ethiopia's inclusion in the forum would provide a counterbalancing mechanism. By engaging directly within the RSC, Ethiopia could disrupt Egypt's unilateral narratives, foster dialogue, and seek collaborative solutions to trans-boundary issues.

Membership would also allow Ethiopia to form alliances with other member states—such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, or Djibouti—who may have diverging interests from Egypt, thereby diluting Cairo's influence.

Access to Financial and Energy Resources

The RSC is heavily backed by Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have substantial financial resources and energy investments in the region. Ethiopia, facing economic challenges and energy deficits, could benefit from potential funding opportunities, infrastructure partnerships, and petrodollar-backed development projects facilitated through the forum. For instance, Gulf countries have historically invested in African ports, logistics hubs, and renewable energy projects. Ethiopia could position itself as a strategic partner in Red Sea trade and security, attracting investments in alternative ports (e.g., Berbera or Lamu) and energy infrastructure, reducing its dependency on Djibouti.

Mitigating the Humanitarian Crisis of Ethiopian Migrants

Ethiopia is one of the largest sources of irregular migration in the Horn of Africa, with tens of thousands of its citizens risking dangerous crossings of the Red Sea and Yemeni deserts to reach the Gulf. Many perish en route or face severe human rights abuses in transit countries. The RSC's mandate includes combating human trafficking and enhancing maritime security, which aligns with Ethiopia's need to protect its citizens. Through collaborative patrols, intelligence-sharing, and joint rescue operations, Ethiopia could work with RSC members—particularly Saudi Arabia and Yemen—to establish safer migration pathways, repatriation agreements, and anti-smuggling initiatives. This would not only save lives but also reduce the political and economic burden of mass deportations, as seen in the repatriation of over 400,000 Ethiopians from Saudi Arabia between 2017 and 2021.

Naval and Maritime Capacity Building

Ethiopia's naval capabilities have been negligible since the loss of its Red Sea coastline in 1993. However, the government has recently prioritized rebuilding its naval force to safeguard maritime trade routes and deter potential blockades. Membership in the RSC would provide Ethiopia with access to technical expertise, joint training exercises (such as the "Red

Waves" drills), and intelligence-sharing mechanisms on piracy, illegal fishing, and underwater threats. Countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia possess advanced naval infrastructures, and partnerships with them could accelerate Ethiopia's maritime modernization. Additionally, participation in RSC-led security initiatives would enhance Ethiopia's credibility as a regional security actor, potentially leading to bilateral defense agreements or port access deals.

Threats to Ethiopia's National Security from the Red Sea Forum

The Red Sea Forum (RSC), while presenting opportunities, also poses significant threats to Ethiopia's national security, particularly given its exclusion from the grouping. The forum's current composition and strategic orientation—dominated by Egypt and Saudi Arabia—could be weaponized to undermine Ethiopia's economic stability, maritime access, and regional influence. Below is an expanded analysis of these threats:

Port Shutdown and / or Naval Blockade

One of the most immediate threats is the potential for RSC member states to impose port restrictions or naval blockades against Ethiopia during periods of heightened tension, particularly concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Given that over 95% of Ethiopia's trade transits through Djibouti—an RSC member—any collective action by the council to limit Ethiopia's port access could cripple its economy. Historical precedents, such as the GCC's blockade of Qatar in 2017, demonstrate how regional alliances can enforce economic isolation with devastating effects. Egypt, which views the GERD as an existential threat, could lobby within the RSC to impose similar measures, citing "regional collective security" justifications. Even short-term disruptions could lead to fuel shortages, inflation, and supply chain breakdowns, exacerbating Ethiopia's already fragile economic situation.

Suffocation of Alternative Port Access

Although Ethiopia predominantly use the port of Djibouti (almost 95%), it is also aspiring to use the neighboring ports of Somaliland and Kenya. Given the growing commercialization and militarization of ports in the Red Sea Region, however, many regional and non-regional powers with their powerful economic capacity rushed to lease or rent ports from the poor African members of the RSF.

This in the long run hinders Ethiopian aspirations to have access to alternative ports in the region and thereby implicated the economic development of the country.

Strategic Marginalization in Red Sea Governance

Ethiopia's exclusion from the RSC risks its long-term marginalization in critical decisions about Red Sea security and trade policies. The forum's deliberations on issues like maritime security, counterterrorism, and port regulations could directly impact Ethiopia's interests, yet Addis Ababa would have no formal avenue to influence these discussions. For instance, if the RSC adopts restrictive shipping regulations or prioritizes port access for member states, Ethiopia could face higher trade costs or delayed shipments. Over time, this could erode Ethiopia's regional leverage, leaving it dependent on the goodwill of neighboring states that may not always align with its interests.

Threats to Undersea Internet Cables

Ethiopia's internet connectivity relies heavily on submarine fiber-optic cables passing through the Red Sea, primarily via Djibouti and Sudan. These cables are vulnerable to sabotage—whether by state actors, terrorists, or accidental damage—and Ethiopia lacks the naval capacity to monitor or protect them. Within the RSC framework, Egypt or other adversarial members could theoretically exploit this vulnerability, either by pressuring Djibouti to disrupt connectivity or by conducting covert operations under the guise of "maritime security drills." A severing of these cables would disrupt Ethiopia's digital economy, financial systems, and government operations, with cascading effects on business, education, and emergency services. Given Ethiopia's growing reliance on digital infrastructure, such an attack would constitute a critical national security breach.

Encouragement of Regional Proxy Conflicts

The RSC's security agenda, if dominated by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, could exacerbate proxy conflicts in the Horn of Africa, further destabilizing Ethiopia. For example, Egypt has historically supported anti-Ethiopian elements, including rebel groups and opposition factions, to undermine Addis Ababa's stability. Through the RSC, Cairo could legitimize such interventions by framing them as part of broader "regional security cooperation."

Additionally, if the forum adopts a militarized posture against non-members (e.g., through joint naval patrols), Ethiopia could face de facto containment, limiting its ability to project influence or secure alternative trade routes. This would be particularly damaging if the RSC aligns with Egypt, which has a fraught relationship with Ethiopia and could use the forum to isolate its neighbor diplomatically.

Conclusion

The establishment of the Red Sea Council (RSC) in 2018 has significant geopolitical implications for Ethiopia, which remains excluded despite its strategic importance in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's potential inclusion in the RSC could offer key advantages, such as countering Egyptian diplomatic pressure, accessing Gulf financial and energy resources, protecting Ethiopian migrants crossing the Red Sea, and enhancing naval capabilities through regional cooperation. However, its current exclusion poses serious threats, including economic vulnerability due to potential port shutdowns or naval blockades, marginalization in Red Sea governance, risks to undersea internet cables, and the possibility of intensified proxy conflicts fueled by adversaries like Egypt. To mitigate these risks and capitalize on opportunities, Ethiopia should pursue a dual strategy of multilateral diplomacy—actively seeking RSC membership or observer status to influence regional security and economic policies—and military deterrence, including establishment of naval power and port diversification to reduce dependence on Djibouti. By engaging constructively with the RSC while strengthening its defensive and economic resilience, Ethiopia can safeguard its national interests and reinforce its role as a stabilizing force in the Red Sea region.

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Closing Remark

Mr. Mekbib Mengesha
Director, MED, MFA, Ethiopia

H.E. Jafar Bedru, Executive Director, Institute of Foreign Affairs
Distinguished Participants
Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,
It is a distinct privilege to be here this afternoon and make closing remarks at this very important Regional Consultative Forum.
I am aware that this inter Regional Consultative Forum on this interesting topic of the Red Sea Dynamics is not the first time that Institute of Foreign Affairs is organizing such a high profile Regional Forum.

I therefore, would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciations to the Institute of Foreign Affairs and its partners for organizing the 2nd Red Sea Dialogue with theme of "The Need for Regional Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Shifts".

I strongly believe that the forum has touched upon many important issues on the Need for Regional Cooperation at a Time of Geopolitical Shifts.
Therefore, at the outset, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the participants of the Forum for coming and attending this informative forum.

It is known to all of us that, our shared region is undergoing a profound change. Certainly, there are positive developments. Countries of the region have opened a new chapter of normalizing relations. Notable progresses have been made in the Red Sea region in resolving differences and conflicts through dialogue.
Our region has also made important steps towards durable peace and stability, despite persistent insecurity in some countries of the region.
However, it is also quite very important to underline and identify new developments of security challenges in our shared region so that to design new strategies and address them timely. Because our goal of regional development endeavors and interconnectedness cannot be achieved in a state of any security threat.

In this regards, due to the enormous opportunities of the geographic positioning of the region, today we, continue to face new peace and security challenges with different forms and size that need different new approach and inclusive mechanism to address them. Because regional challenges that we are facing have global in character and they demand regional response as they cannot by individual countries.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The new developments in the Red Sea region and the Gulf of Aden is one of the issue that we all need to commit ourselves to do everything we can to maintain and promote a real and durable peace and stability to the peoples of our shared Region and meet our common objectives of attaining economic development and prosperity.

In this regards, Excellences, allow me to draw few concluding remarks about why we need to collaborate approach.

Firstly, the security challenges in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, is compounded by the continuing illegal exploitation of natural resources, the emergence of competition and related tension for strategies assets of the region as well as illegal trade of arms, which are further hampering our efforts to yield the full potential of regional peace and economic development.

Secondly, as we all aware, there is a growing search for strategic assets, not only ports and sea-lane but also other strategic assets such as agricultural lands and mineral resources, oil and gas, together with the growing geopolitical interest and competition among global actors. And competition for strategic resources in the absence of an organized and inclusive regional or multilateral mechanism for dialogue and cooperation would impede progress not just economic development but also hamper the peace and security of the region.

Therefore, these issues surely require our sustain attention and greater regional collaboration in order to effectively neutralize the negative effects of the new developments and Geopolitical shifts and as well as to effectively transform our regional resources into vehicles of shared prosperity.

Thirdly these issues require a collective, and multilateral approach and to establish an inclusive regional mechanism or platform to promote dialogue not only among countries of the Red Sea but also with other international partners and Stake holds. Furthermore, it requires, to develop a common strategies and positions to protect the common economic and Security interests of the region.

Lastly, it also requires regional ownership to promote participator, credible and inclusive dialogue on the regional matters, and formulate a shared norms and alternative policy frameworks to stand together as one in order to effectively promote our regional objectives as well as common strategic goals for greater good.

Therefore, taking the new developments and the dynamic nature of peace and security of the Red Sea Region into account I hope the 2nd Regional Consultative Forum has helped us to comprehend the importance of establishing all-inclusive and participatory regional mechanisms in order to enhance a strategic dialogue to make knowledge - based policy decision on strategic issues in our shared region, to address the emerging challenges, and finally ensure sustainable peace and economic development.

Finally, I would like to reiterate my thanks once again to all of the participants for taking part in this important Regional Consultative Forum and for sharing the perspectives.

I would like to express my appreciation and thanks to those excellent presenters, panelists, moderators, as well as the organizers of this Consultative Forum.

For those of you who are first time visitors to Addis Ababa, I hope had the opportunity to explore what our city has to offer. In this regard, should you visit us again as tourists or to participate in similar forums in the future, I can assure you that you will be warmly welcomed in the tradition of Ethiopian hospitality.

Thank you again for joining us here and I wish all you a safe journey home. I Thank You!

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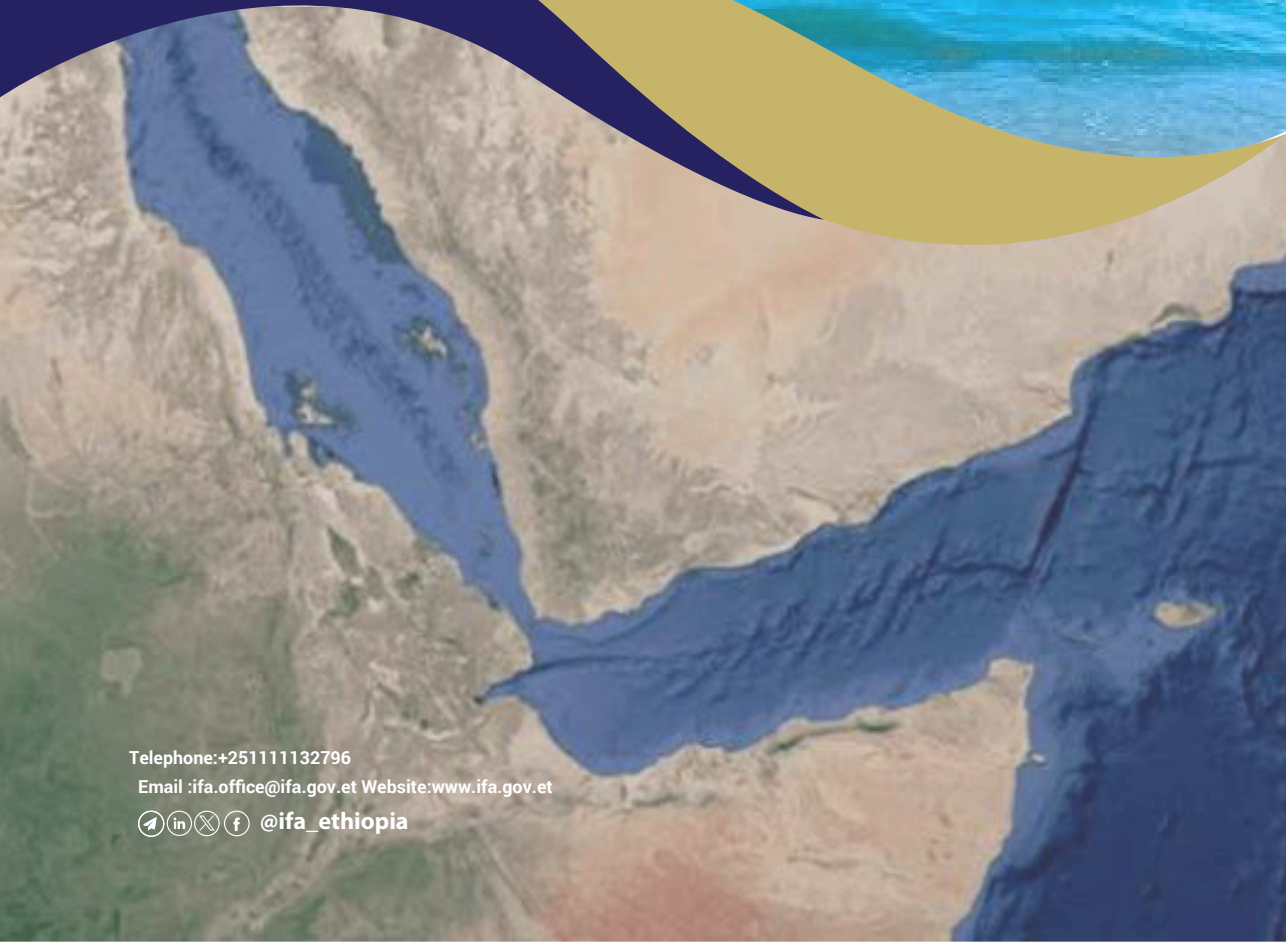

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