



The Spirit of Adwa Must Carry Ethiopia Through GERD and the RED SEA

Sovereignty, Development, and Democratic Unity in the Age of Transactional Geopolitics

Mefkereseb G. Hailu (PhD)*

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Preface: When a New Generation Speaks, a Nation Must Listen

I am fortunate in many ways—none more so than in my regular interactions with high-calibre young professionals, university students born roughly between 1997 and 2012 (Gen-Z, or Zoomers), and the generation that follows them (Gen- α). Although my interactions with the younger generation are principally through my talks as a STEM Ambassador for the professional engineering institutions of which I am a Fellow, the deeper learning came from listening to them carefully and respectfully—especially when they challenge my settled assumptions.

The younger generations give reason for cautious optimism. Having grown up in rapidly evolving digital ecosystems, Gen-Z and the emerging Gen- α possess an intuitive fluency with technology that often translates into fresh approaches to work, innovation, and social change. Unlike older political traditions shaped by rigid ideological camps and zero-sum competition, their outlook tends to be more pragmatic and issue-driven: they are generally less attached to traditional party loyalties and more focused on outcomes—ethical technology, sustainability, inclusivity, and greater accountability from institutions. At the same time, their worldview has been shaped by economic uncertainty, geopolitical tension, and rapid technological disruption, producing a generation that is globally aware, technologically capable, and adaptable rather than naively optimistic. As the world they will inherit continues to evolve, older generations would do well to recognise this shift and create genuine space for their perspectives and leadership—allowing experience and new thinking to work together rather than permitting institutional seniority alone to govern the room.

Some of the Gen-Z and Gen- α individuals I encounter belong to the global Ethiopian community—whether born at home or of Ethiopian heritage in the diaspora.

Most are also, in my experience, admirers of Prime Minister Abiy—not through party propaganda, but through critical engagement with public discourse on platforms where ideas are interrogated rather than merely celebrated. My own son is a case in point. We have been visiting Ethiopia at least once a year since he was a toddler. He is acutely aware of the visible changes ... improvements both in connectivity, parks and roads. To improve his Amharic whilst also exploring a subject of genuine interest to him, I bought him Solomon Kasa's book *Girimite SciTech*, and he has since become a regular viewer of the *TechTalk with Solomon* programme, which I believe is inspiring Ethiopian youth everywhere. It is through that book and programme that my son was seriously engaged with Prime Minister Abiy, in his view, a leader who speaks the language of technology. My

*The author, aka MGH - is a global technical expert trained at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. The views expressed are his own and do not represent any institutional position. He can be reached via: mefkereseb.hailu1990@gmail.com



son attended one of Britain's most competitive schools on merit, earning many accolades in STEM subjects and currently a freshman at the (currently) number one university in the world. He is, by any measure, part of the next generation of analytical minds. He is not alone either. There are many Ethiopian students and students with Ethiopian-heritage at various elite institutions worldwide who may one day contribute to global innovation and technological leadership.

These young generation Ethiopians cite the visible changes in Addis Ababa and other parts of the country as a reason for their support to the PM whilst remaining acutely aware of the peace deficit. They defend the Prime Minister against the criticism most commonly levelled at him—that he remains silent on ethnically motivated displacement and massacres whilst simultaneously pursuing wars. They are careful to acknowledge that Abiy is not perfect; no leader in any nation is/was—as neither Churchill nor Roosevelt were. But they invariably pose a counter-question with quiet precision: *Ethiopia has been independent for thousands of years, and yet one of our enduring infamies is that millions have died from hunger. Why should any leader be compelled to amplify every cowardly act of violence that claims lives in the thousands, when he could instead concentrate on building a nation capable of saving many ten millions—where people are more invested in their future than easily manipulated into fratricidal conflict?* This is not naivety nor an invitation to ignore genuine grievances of injustice—whether arising from factionalism or from the state itself. Rather, it is an argument grounded in the empirical literature on economic development and conflict: prosperous societies have more to lose from violence, and loss aversion is among the most durable deterrents to it [1, 2]. The argument is compelling, even if one holds serious reservations about specific policies or the handling of specific conflicts.

In the aftermath of the Tigray conflict, I wrote an article arguing that neither war nor ethnic identity politics, but investment in our human, natural, and cultural capital, is the path to prosperity for all Ethiopians. That article was apolitical by design. This one is not. There are moments when silence is itself a political act—and this is one of those moments in which a nationalist view must be expressed openly. My opinion then and now is simple, and only altered ever so slightly: *listen to the younger generation—the nation is theirs to inherit.*

The numbers also demand that we take this seriously. Ethiopia's young demography is the envy of most nations. The country's approximate generational distribution is striking:

Generation	Birth years (approx.)	Share of population
Gen- α	2013–present	36.6% (~49.6 million)
Gen-Z	1997–2012	28.7% (~38.9 million)
Gen-Y (Millennials)	1981–1996	17.9% (~24.2 million)
Gen-X	1965–1980	13.0% (~17.6 million)
Baby Boomers and older	before 1965	3.8% (~5.2 million)

Together, Gen-Z and Gen-Y account for nearly half of the national population. They are the ones who will develop, defend, and ultimately define the Ethiopia of the mid and late twenty-first century. And yet the levers of political power have been dominated, throughout the modern era, by Gen-X and the Baby Boomer generation—the generation that led the student movement, overthrew the Emperor, built the EPRDF, and whose internal disputes remain the primary fuel of Ethiopian political instability today. Prime Minister Abiy himself, born in 1976, is a Gen-X leader. His



cabinet, despite the historic and genuinely laudable achievement of 50 % gender parity in 2018—a first for Africa that earned congratulations from the African Union Commission [4]—contains virtually no ministers under the age of thirty-five. This is despite the PM being known for picking young professionals for high positions. Gender parity was achieved; *age parity was never attempted*. The government and society at large must be acutely aware that those young people left untrained and unheard will become significant liability—economically, politically, and diplomatically. A country whose median age is approximately nineteen years, governed almost entirely by those above forty-five, is a country living in structural denial of its own demographic reality. In fact, if Abiy focuses on continuing to mentor the young and garner their support, his victory on the upcoming election will be a forgone conclusion.

Notwithstanding, the external pressure bearing down on Ethiopia through transactional geopolitics demands that Ethiopians of all backgrounds, ethnicities, political leanings, and continents of residence make a clear choice: stand behind the national interest, or allow it to be bargained away in private rooms by those whose interests are not ours. Abiy Ahmed’s stated position on GERD (or the Nile in general) and on Ethiopia’s historical and sovereign right of access to the Red Sea is not a partisan virtue—it is a national one, and it must be defended by Ethiopians regardless of their view of the man himself.

When Abiy wrote to President Biden on 17 September 2021, he articulated something that reached beyond political calculation into the bone-marrow of African historical memory—marrow being the body’s deepest generative tissue, the right image for a memory that is not merely recalled but constitutive of identity:

“The humiliation our ancestors have faced throughout the continent for centuries will not be resuscitated in these lands upon which the Green, Gold, and Red colours of independence have inspired many to successfully struggle to their freedom.”

— Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, Open Letter to President Joseph Biden, 17 September 2021 [3]

The theme of this article is simple but it calls for further detail analysis: stand with Ethiopia on GERD. Stand with Ethiopia on the Red Sea. Build real democracy—not through the bullet, but through the ballot. Respect ethnic diversity but reject ethnic political oligarchy and entrepreneurship. Reject any mediation framework that converts our lawful sovereignty into a private bargain. Finally, front and end, listen—seriously, structurally, institutionally—to the generation that will live longest with the consequences of the decisions being made today.

1 GERD and RED-SEA: The Test That Cannot Be Deferred

On 9 September 2025, Ethiopia inaugurated the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam—Africa’s largest hydroelectric facility, a 6,450-megawatt structure rising from the Blue Nile gorge [5]. The ceremony was not merely a ribbon-cutting. It was the culmination of a project financed, bond by bond and birr by birr, through the voluntary contributions of tens of millions of Ethiopians over more than a decade. Civil servants gave months of salary. Members of the diaspora mobilised. Children whose schools lacked



electricity contributed to a dam that would one day light those same schools. No infrastructure project of comparable scale on the African continent has been so genuinely, so audaciously self-financed by its own people. GERD is not simply a dam; it is a national narrative converted into steel and megawatts.

In African political memory there is a category of events that do more than shift policy—they reorganise dignity. The Battle of Adwa (1896) occupies this space: a moment when external imposition was rejected and political agency was preserved. GERD functions as a twenty-first-century Adwa analogue—not a battlefield triumph but a developmental one. A people who unite behind this understanding will maintain their dignity and shape their own destiny.

But on 16 January 2026, a mere four months after the inauguration of GERD, United States President Donald Trump offered to restart mediation between Egypt and Ethiopia over Nile water-sharing [6]. The offer was framed around Trump’s personal relationship with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in the immediate wake of Egypt’s role in brokering the Israel-Hamas ceasefire. Egypt welcomed it with enthusiasm [7]. Ethiopia had not been consulted before the offer was made and must have read it as a structural warning, not merely a diplomatic gesture.

The juxtaposition is not incidental. Ethiopia completes its greatest modern national achievement, and within four months a great power proposes to reopen it as a negotiating item—not because Ethiopia had acted unlawfully, not because the dam’s engineering was disputed, but because a bilateral geopolitical relationship between Washington and Cairo created a diplomatic opportunity that Ethiopia’s landlocked vulnerability and incomplete domestic unity made available. This is a structural test of Ethiopian sovereignty. It requires a structural response.

But the test is not only diplomatic. At its deepest level, it is a generational test: whether the Gen-X political class that built GERD can now protect it, and whether they will have the wisdom to hand the strategic leadership of that protection to the generation that will carry its consequences longest. The preface to this article makes the demographic argument: approximately 65 % of Ethiopians are under thirty. They are not an audience for the decisions of their elders. They are the demographic majority of a sovereign nation, and the question of whether Ethiopia maintains its gains on GERD, whether it secures meaningful access to the Red Sea, and whether it builds the institutions that make prosperity durable is ultimately their question—not ours to answer on their behalf.

This article argues that Ethiopia’s response to its present moment must be grounded in four foundations that are inseparable from one another. The first is the Adwa doctrine—not as nostalgia but as operational principle: external imposition on Ethiopian sovereignty will be refused, and that refusal will be conducted through institution-building, coalition-building, and strategic intelligence rather than through isolation or military bravado. The second is a serious, urgent, and unflinching commitment to building real democracy and genuine prosperity through technology, using Ethiopia’s extraordinary endowment of human and natural resources. The third is national defence capable of guaranteeing that diplomatic achievements cannot be reversed by force. The fourth, and the one most systematically neglected, is the full empowerment of the young generation—not as symbolic participants in a political class designed by their elders, but as architects and leaders of the Ethiopia that only they can build.

This is not a brief for any political party. It is an argument grounded in Ethiopian history, international law, the political economy of the Horn of Africa, and the strategic logic of great-power mediation. The Adwa generation understood that sovereignty is not given; it is held. That understanding is overdue for a new generation’s full inheritance.



One further premise must be stated at the outset, because the rest of this article’s argument depends upon it: Ethiopia’s access to the Red Sea is not a diplomatic preference or a developmental wish-list item. It is a sovereign right—historically grounded in three thousand years of maritime civilisation, legally supportable under evolving international norms governing landlocked states, and strategically indispensable to a nation of Ethiopia’s population and continental weight. The priority for recovering that right is unambiguously peaceful: negotiated port agreements, bilateral coastline arrangements, and multilateral frameworks that restore Ethiopia’s maritime presence without armed conflict. But the principle that underwrites the peaceful pursuit must be clearly understood by all parties: Ethiopia’s right to Red Sea access is not contingent on the goodwill of neighbouring states or great-power mediators. It exists independently of their recognition. A people that won their sovereign dignity at Adwa understand that rights not asserted are rights surrendered, and that the failure of peaceful means does not extinguish the right itself. This article does not advocate war; it advocates the kind of strategic clarity that makes war unnecessary—because every party understands that the alternative to a negotiated settlement is not the permanent acceptance of injustice.

2 Adwa, Legitimacy, and the Architecture of Sovereignty

To understand why GERD carries the political weight it does—and why its inauguration provoked not only continental celebration but Egyptian protest and American diplomatic intervention—one must understand how Ethiopia’s relationship with its own history works as a political force. Christopher Clapham, whose decades of scholarship on the Ethiopian state remain the most rigorous external analysis available, makes a point that is easy to underestimate: history in Ethiopia is not merely remembered. It is rewritten, performed, and deployed by state elites, regional challengers, diaspora communities, and ordinary citizens to define who holds legitimate authority and what forms of compromise or coercion are politically thinkable [8]. The state’s most scarce resource, in Clapham’s analysis, is not cash or military capacity but compliance—the everyday willingness of citizens and regional powers to accept the centre’s authority [10]. GERD has been a remarkable compliance-generator for exactly this reason.

The Battle of Adwa in March 1896 sits at the centre of this historical architecture. Ethiopia’s defeat of the Italian colonial army was not simply a military event; it was a civilisational statement that reorganised the political imagination of an entire continent [11]. African and colonised people more generally elsewhere, who had been told in various idioms that European technological and organisational superiority was destiny, saw a Black African state—with African soldiers, African command, African strategy—destroy that narrative on a Tigrayan hillside. The institutional memory that Adwa established was precise: external imposition on Ethiopian sovereignty will be rejected. When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed invokes Adwa in connection with GERD, he is not making a rhetorical flourish; he is activating a public commitment device that raises the domestic political cost of capitulation to a level that any rational mediator must account for.

The Adwa tradition carries a shadow, however, that must be acknowledged honestly. The same institutional memory that enables principled resistance to external imposition has, at various moments, been weaponised to justify internal coercion. Haile Selassie’s centralisation drive of the 1950s and 1960s invoked a sovereignty script whilst undermining the legitimacy bargain that sovereignty requires for sustainability [9]. The Derg’s Marxist revolution reproduced the same dynamic in a different idiom: external sovereignty without internal accountability. The TPLF-led government of 1991 to 2018 attempted to address this tension



through ethnic federalism—constitutionally encoding regional autonomy and even the right of secession—but as John Markakis and Leenco Lata have documented, federalism under single-party dominance produced a competitive market for identity entrepreneurship, not genuine democratic pluralism [12, 13]. Ethnic categories, having been formalised as the unit of political entitlement, became the primary currency of political competition rather than instruments of genuine self-governance.

Abiy Ahmed’s Prosperity Party, launched in 2019 by merging the EPRDF’s ethnic member parties—notably excluding the TPLF—represents a deliberate attempt to break this dynamic. His political philosophy, *Medemer* (literally “synergy” or “addition”), argues that Ethiopia’s diversity is a resource to be woven together rather than a problem to be partitioned [14]. But *Medemer* remains more a philosophy than an institutional achievement. The 2020–2022 Tigray war, the 2023–2024 conflict in Amhara between federal forces and FANO fighters over the Amhara region, and persistent instability in parts of Oromia demonstrate that the political project of genuine cross-ethnic unity has not yet crossed the threshold between aspiration and operational reality. The domestic programme of building that unity is not separable from the diplomatic challenge of defending GERD and pursuing the Red Sea. A government negotiating under conditions of unresolved internal legitimacy disputes is a government whose adversaries and mediators can see the cracks—and they will use them.

3 Contested: Abiy Between Transformation and Accusation

3.1 Abiy the Ethnic Entrepreneur and Dictator

No honest treatment of Ethiopia’s present situation can avoid the most difficult question about its current leadership. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is simultaneously the most consequential Ethiopian leader in a generation and the most contested. He is the winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize and the commander-in-chief during a war that claimed an estimated half-million or more lives. He is the architect of the 2018 Eritrea peace agreement and the leader under whose watch some of the worst documented instances of ethnically motivated violence in modern Ethiopian history occurred. He is the champion of *Medemer*—the philosophy of unity in diversity—and the leader whom significant Amhara, Tigrean, and Eritrean communities accuse of conducting, whether by commission or permissive omission, campaigns that have been described in harsh terms by his most vocal critics.

It is necessary to engage this directly, because this article broadly supports the national position on GERD and the Red Sea—a position that Abiy’s government currently represents. That support is for the *national interest*, not uncritical endorsement of every policy. The two must be distinguished carefully, because conflating them produces both analytical error and political harm.

The sharpest version of the critique comes from Amhara-aligned and diaspora-opposition commentary, which describes Abiy not as a reformer gone wrong but as an Oromo nationalist whose *Medemer* rhetoric is a calculated disguise for the systematic weakening of non-Oromo communities—most acutely the Amhara, but also Tigreans and Eritreans. This view holds that the Prosperity Party manufactures consensus whilst Ethiopia disintegrates beneath a surface of Addis Ababa renovation and international Nobel glamour [15]. In its most extreme formulation—and the extreme formulation is encountered with some frequency in diaspora political discourse—Abiy is compared to Adolf Hitler: a charismatic consolidator of centralised power over ethnic minorities, using a language of unity as cover for ethnic dominance.

This comparison must be engaged and then firmly set aside. It is not analytically supportable. Hitler’s programme was exterminatory in explicit ideology and systematic industrial execution. The violence



associated with Abiy's government, whilst severe, documented, and demanding accountability, does not belong in that category. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED) documents that government forces have been responsible for approximately 40 % of civilian targeting incidents since 2018, resulting in thousands of reported fatalities [16]—figures that are gravely serious and constitute documented human rights violations. But serious human rights violations, of which the Ethiopian state has been guilty throughout its modern history under every governing arrangement, are not genocide in the technical or moral sense, and conflating them produces rhetorical escalation at the cost of political precision.

The more measured, and more analytically productive, version of the critique is this: that the Prosperity Party has not, in practice, delivered the genuine cross-ethnic co-governance that Medemer promises; that Amhara communities have experienced federal policies—from the Wolqait zone dispute to the conduct of the 2023–2024 conflict—as threatening to their collective political survival; that Oromo communities who initially supported Abiy through the Qeerroo movement felt betrayed when he turned the instruments of state against the Oromo Liberation Army; and that the pattern of internet shutdowns, journalist arrests, and political detention documented by Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International represents a democratic regression that is incompatible with the legitimacy claims that GERD's defence requires [16].

These critiques have weight. They are made by serious scholars and community representatives, not simply by foreign enemies or ethnic entrepreneurs. An article defending Ethiopia's national interest on GERD and the Red Sea must acknowledge them rather than smooth over them, because the democratic deficit they identify is not merely a moral concern—it is a strategic vulnerability. A government that cannot credibly claim to represent all Ethiopians is a government whose adversaries can always present an alternative coalition. The diaspora Amhara community in Washington is as large and as politically active as any other community; their alienation is an open door that a coercive mediator can walk through.

Where this article disagrees with the harshest critics is on the conclusion to be drawn. The conclusion that follows from legitimate criticism of Abiy's governance is not Ethiopian fragmentation, not international isolation of Abiy's government, not diaspora lobbying for sanctions that weaken Ethiopia's negotiating position—all of which serve the interests of those who benefit from Ethiopian landlocking and GERD concessions. The conclusion is democratic accountability through democratic institutions: credible elections, functioning courts, a free press, transparent federal resource allocation, and accountable military conduct. These are not luxuries that can wait until the diplomatic crisis is resolved. They are the source of the legitimacy that makes the diplomatic position defensible.

The youth dimension makes this imperative more urgent, not less. Young Ethiopians—across the Amhara, Oromo, Tigrean, Somali, and all other communities—are not the authors of the ethnic grievances that divide their elders' political loyalties. They are the generation that will either inherit a state capable of delivering on its citizens' aspirations or spend their productive years navigating the wreckage of a sovereignty that was bargained away and a democracy that was never built. Their interests are not served by either uncritical support for Abiy or by the diaspora opposition politics that would weaken Ethiopia's sovereign position in the name of accountability. Their interests are served by the harder path: demanding accountability whilst defending sovereignty, building democratic institutions whilst refusing coerced concessions, and doing both things simultaneously because they are not in fact in conflict.



3.2 Vision, Scarcity, and the Archaeology of Neglect

A second, more technically framed category of critique charges that Abiy Ahmed is an economic novice: a leader whose development philosophy substitutes positive thinking for disciplined prioritisation, who pursues speculative mega-projects at the expense of structural investment, and under whose administration measurable deterioration has occurred in manufacturing output, education spending, and middle-class welfare. This critique is advanced with data and deserves serious engagement. But it is also sequencing-blind in important respects, and at times so focused on failure that it cannot register the transformation occurring in plain sight.

3.2.1 On Selling Ambition: Statecraft and the Vision Premium

There is a body of literature in political economy on what leaders of resource-scarce countries actually owe their populations, and it does not begin with technically optimal resource allocation. It begins with the prior question: can a population be persuaded that transformation is possible at all? Park Chung-hee told South Koreans in 1961 that they would become a wealthy industrial nation when per-capita income was below \$100 [40]. Deng Xiaoping told the Chinese Communist Party that it was glorious to get rich when the economy was still predominantly agrarian and the living memory of the Cultural Revolution was raw [41]. Both men were dismissed by serious economists of their era as decoupling ambition from structural reality. Both turned out to be selling not delusion but the necessary precondition of the transformation itself: a national conviction that the existing order was not destiny.

Ethiopia's challenge is structurally different, but the principle is not. A country where the dominant political culture for more than a century was one of zero-sum ethnic competition—where development resources were prizes to be captured by the ethnically aligned governing coalition, and where peripheral regions were not merely underinvested but actively ignored [12, 13]—requires, as a prior condition of any structural reform, a national conviction that the Ethiopian state will distribute its attentions more broadly than it historically has. Abiy's "if you can imagine it you can make it happen" rhetoric is easily ridiculed from a neoclassical welfare economics standpoint. From the standpoint of building a national development coalition across forty ethnic communities with deep mutual grievances, it is considerably harder to replace.

3.2.2 The Archaeology of Neglect: What the Skylines Are Actually Doing

The argument that corridor development, urban beautification, and infrastructure investment represent misallocation of scarce resources rests on an implicit premise: that the cities being transformed had adequate basic infrastructure before, and that the investment is therefore luxury consumption. That premise is descriptively false. Dire Dawa, Jijiga, Hawassa, Arba Minch, Bahir Dar—these are not cities that received adequate public capital investment under any previous governing arrangement and then received unnecessary cosmetic upgrades. They are cities that experienced near-zero meaningful state investment for decades, whose populations had reasonable grounds for concluding they would always be last in line [43]. The visible transformation that foreign visitors now document—the lakeside promenades of Hawassa, the boulevard infrastructure of Bahir Dar, the modernisation of Jijiga and Dire Dawa—represents the first time that significant state resources have been directed to regions whose historical marginalisation was a structural feature of the Ethiopian political economy, not an accident.

This matters economically, not only politically. Urban infrastructure is the precondition for private investment [34, 35]. A developer will not build a hotel in Jijiga without a functioning road, reliable



electricity, and a municipal administration capable of issuing permits. A manufacturer will not establish a plant in Hawassa without the logistics infrastructure connecting it to markets. The argument that manufacturing should be built before the city inverts the actual mechanism: it is the city-building that creates the conditions under which manufacturing can follow [34]. The GERD-powered industrial parks at Hawassa, Dire Dawa, and Kombolcha are not separable from the urban infrastructure investment that critics characterise as vanity [43]. They are the same strategy expressed in two registers. There is more than one way to skin this particular cat.

On tourism specifically: the critique that tourism cannot serve as a development engine for a low-income economy has genuine comparative support. But it badly understates what a peaceful, well-governed, and physically transformed Ethiopia would represent to the global market. Ethiopia has Lalibela, Aksum, Gondar, the Omo Valley, the Danakil Depression, the Simien Mountains, and Harar—one of the four sacred cities of Islam. It possesses the longest continuously recorded civilisational history of any sub-Saharan nation and a diaspora with cultural reach far exceeding its current economic weight. The binding constraint on Ethiopian tourism is not the supply of attractions; it is security, infrastructure, and international perception [44]. All three are addressable. If the current generation of Ethiopians were to choose co-operation in building peace rather than sustaining insurgencies, the tourism potential of a stable, open, and transformed Ethiopia would exceed anything that cautious macroeconomic modelling currently projects. Rebels and separatists are not only destroying lives; they are destroying a tourism economy that would benefit every Ethiopian region, including their own.

3.2.3 On the Corridors versus Irrigation Debate

The most technically rigorous version of the economic critique is the opportunity-cost counterfactual: that resources directed to corridor development would have generated higher returns if invested in electric-powered irrigation and power transmission, given the documented productivity gains of electrified farming and the decisive cost advantage of electric over diesel pumping. The underlying data—yield gains of 50 to 300 % where irrigation has been introduced, and farm profitability improvements of 58 to 98 % on switching from diesel to electric pumping [45]—are persuasive. The argument deserves acknowledgement rather than dismissal.

But it contains a hidden assumption: that the two investment streams are mutually exclusive, and that the political economy of large-scale rural irrigation investment was as tractable as the political economy of visible urban transformation. Neither assumption is secure. Most importantly, GERD's full commissioning is itself the precondition that makes cheap electric irrigation economically rational at national scale [45]. The investment in GERD *is* the irrigation strategy, deferred one step in sequence. The power that GERD generates will fundamentally alter the cost calculus of rural electrification and electric pumping across the entire Nile basin hinterland. Criticising corridor development without recognising that GERD and the transmission infrastructure being expanded in parallel constitute the same integrated strategy is to treat parts of a connected sequence as if they were competing alternatives.

3.2.4 On Debt Ratings and the IMF's Actual Verdict

The claim that international creditors have effectively shut the door on Ethiopia selects from a picture that is more complete and more nuanced than any single verdict suggests. It is accurate that all three major rating agencies have classified Ethiopian sovereign debt as speculative or distressed, reflecting a default on a commercial Eurobond repayment. Those facts are not disputed.



What the junk-rating narrative elides is the context. Ethiopia simultaneously engaged the G20 Common Framework for debt restructuring and secured the IMF Extended Credit Facility described in §4: a \$3.4-billion, 48-month programme. By January 2026, Ethiopia had drawn \$2.18 billion in tranches across four consecutive reviews. The IMF Executive Board’s completion of the fourth review characterised outcomes as “better than anticipated,” citing strong growth, rising exports, improved revenue mobilisation, and declining inflation [24]. A country completing four consecutive IMF reviews with better-than-expected results, drawing disbursements totalling \$2.18 billion, is not by any standard definition in economic free fall. Junk ratings during an active managed restructuring reflect the status of a specific defaulted instrument; they do not constitute a verdict on the trajectory of an economy that is simultaneously achieving record export revenues, projecting GDP growth of 9.3 % in 2025/26, and holding its fiscal deficit at approximately 2 % of GDP.

3.2.5 What the Critique Gets Right, and What Co-operation Could Achieve

None of the above constitutes a comprehensive defence of Abiy’s economic record. The documented fall in education expenditure from approximately 5.8 % of GDP in the years before 2018 to around 2.3 % in 2025 is not adequately explained by war costs or transitional adjustment [46]. A country whose national university entrance pass rate stands at approximately 8 % is consuming its human capital future [47], and no quantity of boulevard construction compensates for that structural erosion. Concerns about property-rights enforcement—diaspora investors facing arbitrary land reallocation, lease contracts being unilaterally renegotiated by regional governments—are legitimate and economically damaging [43]. The concentration of economic decision-making in the executive, insulated from both legislative scrutiny and technocratic expertise, is a real governance failure with quantifiable costs.

These are genuine problems. They are, however, problems of institutional consolidation and political prioritisation—problems that are, in principle, solvable—not evidence that the underlying development trajectory is fraudulent or that transformation is impossible. The historical record of successful late industrialisation shows no country that avoided institutional dysfunction on the path to development [42, 40]; it shows countries that resolved it, unevenly and imperfectly, over time, whilst simultaneously building the visible infrastructure of progress.

The deeper point is this: the same energy that Ethiopia’s political community currently expends sustaining insurgencies, funding diaspora opposition lobbying, and relitigating ethnic grievances could, if redirected, accelerate every dimension of the development agenda. The rebels in the Amhara highlands, the diaspora voices lobbying Washington for sanctions on a government they cannot build a coalition to replace, the ethnic entrepreneurs who read every infrastructure project as a zero-sum resource competition—all of them are paying a cost, and imposing a cost on the Ethiopian people, that does not appear in any macroeconomic model but is as real as the birr exchange rate. What Abiy is selling—sometimes clumsily, sometimes in ways that cross from ambition into hubris—is the possibility of that different future. If the institutional and democratic reforms this article calls for were pursued in genuine good faith, and if the armed groups sustaining the current security burden were brought inside a political settlement, the trajectory that critics currently project as doomed would look very different. The answer is not foreordained, and it never was.



4 GERD: A Social Contract Built in Steel and Megawatts

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is Africa's largest hydroelectric facility, but it is far more than an engineering achievement. It is a social contract: a project financed through the voluntary contributions of a people who understood, even as they gave, that the benefits would take years to materialise and that external forces would attempt to appropriate those benefits before they could be fully realised. No other infrastructure project of comparable scale on the continent has been so genuinely self-financed by its own population. Civil servants contributed months of salary. Diaspora professionals bought bonds. Families in rural Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, Somalia and urban Addis Ababa alike participated in a national mobilisation that, whatever its imperfections of execution, represented a genuinely civic act of self-determination [22, 23].

When the Adwa analogy is deployed in connection with GERD, it is analytically precise rather than merely rhetorical. At Adwa in 1896, the Ethiopian army that defeated Italy was a national mobilisation: emperor, church, mosque, regional nobles, and peasant fighters all participated in defending a common dignity. GERD has reproduced something structurally analogous in the economic domain. The diversity of its source base—civil servants in Addis Ababa, diaspora professionals in London and Washington, rural communities in Afar, merchants in Dire Dawa—creates civic ownership across the ethnic, regional, and class lines that typically fracture Ethiopian political life. That ownership is the political shield that makes externally coerced concessions politically unsustainable. Any leader who gives away what millions of citizens paid for will answer to those citizens. This is not merely a moral constraint; it is a structural feature of Ethiopian politics that any mediator attempting to impose terms must reckon with.

The dam's economic case is transformative on its own terms. Ethiopia's electrification rate stands at approximately 45 % of households, one of the lowest per-capita rates in the world for a country of its population. The 6,450 MW generating capacity of GERD, when fully operational, represents nearly triple Ethiopia's previously installed capacity and would extend reliable electricity to tens of millions of currently unelectrified Ethiopians [23]. The World Bank has estimated that each percentage point increase in electrification access correlates with measurable gains in rural household income—making GERD's full commissioning one of the most consequential poverty-reduction events in African history currently in progress.

However, there is a dimension of the GERD story that is rarely stated with the directness it deserves: the dam sits in contested territory. Benishangul-Gumuz Region—and specifically the Metekel zone—is not merely an underdeveloped periphery of the Ethiopian state. It is land whose administrative status is disputed, and that dispute is among the live grievances fuelling the FANO insurgency in the Amhara region. Amhara communities have historical claims to parts of Metekel, and the constitutional assignment of those territories to Benishangul-Gumuz under the 1995 ethnic federal arrangement is contested precisely as vigorously as the Wolqait and Raya disputes that more commonly appear in international coverage [16, 12]. To build Africa's largest dam on contested land without resolving the underlying territorial dispute is to construct a sovereignty asset on an unresolved internal fault line. The strategic imperative is therefore twofold: defend GERD externally whilst simultaneously resolving, through inclusive political dialogue rather than military suppression, the internal legitimacy questions that surround the land on which it stands. A dam that is defended against Egypt but contested internally by Ethiopians themselves cannot achieve its full function as a national unifying symbol. The Adwa analogy demands that all Ethiopians—including those with legitimate grievances about Metekel's status—are inside the coalition, not outside it.



4.1 The Macroeconomic Context: Progress, Pain, and the Path Ahead

GERD's development dividend does not land on a stable economic foundation. In July 2024, the Ethiopian government floated the birr as the central condition of a four-year, \$3.4-billion IMF Extended Credit Facility—part of a broader \$10.7-billion package from development partners and creditors—approved by the IMF Executive Board on 29 July 2024 [24]. The immediate effect was severe: the official exchange rate collapsed from approximately 57 birr per U.S. dollar to roughly 112–114 birr within ten days—a near-doubling of the exchange rate in less than a fortnight. The depreciation continued thereafter: by early 2025 the rate had stabilised in the 120–130 birr range, and by March 2026 the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia's official selling rate stood at approximately 155–156 birr per dollar. The parallel market, which had commanded a premium of roughly 65 birr above the official rate immediately after the float, had by early 2026 narrowed to within 5–10 birr of the official rate—a sign that the exchange rate unification effort has largely succeeded. The cumulative depreciation from the pre-reform rate amounts to approximately 170 % over twenty months [25, 26].

The distributional consequences have been severe. Overall inflation averaged 32.5 % in 2022/23 and, whilst it has since moderated, prices of fuel, imported medicines, fertiliser, and consumer goods remain significantly elevated relative to household incomes. Fuel prices were raised three times in the first half of 2025 alone, with cumulative increases of 30 % for diesel and 35 % for petrol, as implicit fuel subsidies were phased out under the reform programme. The World Bank has warned that poverty could rise to 43 % by 2025, up from 33 % in 2016 [26]. Public sector workers—teachers, nurses, engineers in state employment—have experienced dramatic real-terms income cuts that compound the social effects of years of conflict.

The reform's gains are real but unevenly distributed. Total goods export revenues reached approximately \$5.3 billion in the first nine months of the 2024/25 fiscal year—already surpassing the entire \$3.8 billion earned in 2023/24—driven by surging international coffee and gold prices [25]. Coffee alone generated a record \$2.65 billion for the full 2024/25 fiscal year, a 147 % increase in value year-on-year; gold contributed a further \$2.2 billion in the nine-month period, overtaking coffee as the single largest export earner. Full-year goods exports for 2024/25 are estimated at approximately \$6.5–7 billion. The IMF's fourth review, completed in January 2026, characterised macroeconomic progress as better than anticipated, with real GDP growth projected at 9.3 % in 2025/26, the fiscal deficit at approximately 2 % of GDP, and participation in Treasury-bill markets increasing steadily [24]. Total IMF disbursements under the ECF had reached \$2.18 billion by January 2026, with the remaining tranches contingent on continued reform performance. Inflation is projected to reach approximately 11.9 % by the end of the 2025/26 fiscal year—still elevated, but on a sustained downward path towards single digits over the medium term.

The tension between macroeconomic stabilisation and the infrastructure investment required to realise GERD's development dividend is genuine and must be stated plainly. The IMF programme constrains fiscal space precisely when the transmission and distribution network that carries GERD's power to industrial parks and population centres requires accelerated investment. Managing this tension requires deliberate political prioritisation: GERD's electrification agenda must be ring-fenced within the reform programme as a strategic investment, not treated as a discretionary expenditure subject to fiscal consolidation. An Ethiopia that stabilises its macroeconomy but fails to extend GERD's power to the population will have bought financial credibility at the price of the social contract that makes the dam politically invulnerable.



4.2 GERD and the Urbanisation Imperative

One of the most consequential strategic choices Ethiopia must make in the GERD era concerns not the dam itself but its hinterland. Ethiopia's topography is amongst the most challenging on the continent: highlands exceeding 3,000 metres, deep river gorges, dispersed rural settlements across a terrain of extraordinary geographic complexity. The conventional electrification model—extending the grid village by village across this landscape—is neither economically rational nor technically feasible at the speed and scale the country's development requires. The scientific and economic evidence is unambiguous: the most effective way to deliver electricity, clean water, healthcare, education, broadband connectivity, and modern agricultural services to the maximum number of Ethiopians in the shortest time is through deliberate urbanisation [34, 35].

The logic is well-established in development economics. Agglomeration effects—the productivity gains that arise when people, firms, and services concentrate in urban centres—have been documented across every region of the developing world. The Lewis structural transformation model demonstrates that economies make their fastest development gains when labour moves from dispersed, low-productivity subsistence agriculture to higher-productivity urban manufacturing and services [36]. In Ethiopia's specific context, where over 70 % of the population is currently rural and where agricultural productivity is constrained by fragmented land holdings, lack of mechanisation, and inadequate market access, the urbanisation pathway offers a compounding development dividend that extending electricity to isolated villages cannot. A family connected to an urban power grid also gains access to hospitals, schools, digital infrastructure, formal employment, and the rule of law. A family connected to a rural solar panel gains light in the evening. This shows that while other renewables are also important their parity with GERD for urbanisation is limited.

GERD's 6,450 MW generating capacity is the enabling infrastructure for a national urbanisation strategy. Industrial parks anchored to reliable bulk electricity supply—at Hawassa, Bole Lemi, Adama, and future sites in Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, and the Amhara region—can serve as the nuclei of planned secondary cities that pull rural populations off fragmented land and into productive employment. Agricultural mechanisation follows from this: as labour moves to urban centres, the land-to-labour ratio on remaining farms rises, making mechanised farming economically rational and enabling the productivity revolution that Ethiopia's food security requires. The transition from smallholder subsistence to mechanised commercial agriculture is not possible without prior urbanisation; it is the demographic shift that creates the conditions for it, not the reverse [37].

This urbanisation-led development model has a direct bearing on GERD's diplomatic invulnerability. A dam that powers an urbanising, industrialising economy generating growing tax revenues, formal employment, and rising middle-class consumption is a dam that becomes progressively harder to concede in any negotiation, because its beneficiary constituency grows every year. An Egypt that delays GERD's full commissioning by even five years through coercive mediation imposes enormous development costs on the Ethiopian population in precisely the period when the urbanisation dividend is compounding most rapidly. That cost must be made visible in Ethiopia's diplomatic communications: the argument is not only that GERD is legally Ethiopia's sovereign right, but that every year of delay is a quantifiable development loss for tens of millions of Ethiopians who are not yet connected to its power.

Beyond electricity, Ethiopia's other economic assets must be understood as strategic as well as commercial. Coffee—approximately 4 % of global production, sustaining some 15 million livelihoods—is not merely an export commodity; it is a cultural identity that commands premium global positioning. Ethiopian



Airlines, Africa's most profitable carrier operating over 130 destinations, is a soft-power projection of extraordinary reach. These assets represent economic relationships diversified across dozens of partners. A country whose economic geography is this diverse is structurally harder to coerce through the withdrawal of any single bilateral relationship. Building and protecting these assets is simultaneously good economic policy and national security policy.

5 The Geopolitical Interests That Robbed Ethiopia's Coastline

The loss of Ethiopia's Red Sea coastline in 1993 is routinely narrated as an inevitable consequence of Eritrean self-determination: a people who fought for thirty years for independence exercised their democratic right through a referendum, and the international community recognised the outcome. This narrative is not false, but it is incomplete in ways that matter deeply for understanding Ethiopia's present strategic position. The complete version must name, without euphemism, the principal external architect of that outcome: Egypt. Ethiopia's landlocking was not an incidental consequence of Eritrean nationalism; it was a strategic objective pursued deliberately and resourced systematically by Cairo and its Arab allies over three decades, because a landlocked Ethiopia was a weaker Ethiopia in every dimension of Nile diplomacy.

The ancient port of Adulis, on the southern shore of the Gulf of Zula in present-day Eritrea, was one of the great trading cities of the ancient world. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*—a Greek merchant's guide of the first century CE—describes Adulis as the principal entry point for ivory, gold, and luxury goods moving between the African interior and the Mediterranean world [17]. The Axumite Empire at its height commanded both shores of the Red Sea simultaneously: its maritime sovereignty was not a colonial concession but the organic expression of a civilisation that defined the Red Sea's economic life for centuries. To frame Ethiopia's desire for Red Sea access as a revisionist territorial ambition is to sever three thousand years of recorded maritime history from the political debate.

The modern sequence requires a more careful account than the standard narrative provides. It is historically inaccurate to describe Haile Selassie's 1962 dissolution of the Eritrean federation simply as forcible annexation of an unwilling territory. When Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952 under a UN-brokered arrangement, opinion within Eritrea was genuinely divided [18]. The Eritrean Unionist Party, with substantial support particularly amongst the Tigrinya-speaking Christian highlands, actively sought full union with Ethiopia. The independence movement drew its early strength from the Muslim lowlands—and crucially, it was conceived, resourced, and diplomatically championed from outside Eritrea. Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser was the primary patron. Nasser provided financial resources, training grounds, and diplomatic cover to the Eritrean Liberation Front from the early 1960s onward, and this support was continued and expanded by his Arab allies—Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria—throughout the 1970s and 1980s [21]. The motivation was transparent and geostrategic: a landlocked Ethiopia would be economically constrained, militarily vulnerable to arms embargoes, and diplomatically weakened in precisely the Nile basin negotiations where Egyptian leverage needed to be maximal. Blocking Ethiopia's access to the sea was not an incidental consequence of supporting Eritrean nationalism; for Egypt and its allies, it was among the primary strategic objectives of doing so.

Haile Selassie's decision to dissolve the federation in 1962—terminating Eritrean autonomy and incorporating the territory directly as an Ethiopian province—was a serious political miscalculation. But it was made in the context of a federally autonomous Eritrea that was already becoming a staging ground for



an externally financed liberation movement. The error was Selassie's, but the movement that his error galvanised was one that Egypt had actively cultivated and resourced for a precise strategic purpose [19].

By 1991, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front had achieved military dominance over its territory. The May 1991 London Conference—convened by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen to manage the transition after the Derg's military collapse—produced the framework that would define Ethiopia's strategic geography for a generation. Meles Zenawi's government agreed to allow an Eritrean independence referendum within two years, without conditioning that agreement on any arrangements for Ethiopian sea access [20].

The 1993 referendum returned a 99.8 % vote for independence, and this figure deserves a frank analysis rather than uncritical acceptance as evidence of democratic legitimacy. The referendum was not technically falsified in the conventional sense—ballot stuffing or counting fraud—but it was conceptually rigged from the outset. The question posed was, in its political meaning, a choice between freedom and subjugation: an Eritrean population that had endured thirty years of brutal counter-insurgency war, including the destruction of entire villages, chemical weapons use under the Derg, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands, was asked whether it wished to be independent or to remain under Ethiopian administration. To expect any outcome other than near-unanimity under those conditions is to misunderstand what the question actually was. The pernicious political climate of 1993 made any other answer not only psychologically unthinkable for most Eritreans but practically unsafe for those who held it [18, 19]. The Unionist constituency of 1952 had been shattered by three decades of war and the perception that Ethiopia had forfeited any claim to Eritrean loyalty through the conduct of its successive governments. A vote taken in those circumstances cannot be read as a pristine democratic expression; it was the referendum that an Egyptian-supported armed movement, thirty years of war, and the deliberate destruction of the pro-union alternative had made statistically inevitable. Notwithstanding and despite the 35-years of propaganda on Eritrean exceptionalism, these are our brothers and sisters - one people in fact, and their union with Ethiopia proper must be left open.

Ethiopia's coastline—possessed for three thousand years, contested for thirty, and central to the country's economic and strategic geography—was lost without a single Ethiopian vote on the question of what access arrangements would govern their country's maritime future. Meles Zenawi's decision to accept the 1991 framework without conditioning it on sea access served the TPLF's immediate tactical interest in consolidating power in Addis Ababa. It simultaneously delivered the outcome that Egypt had spent thirty years engineering: a permanently landlocked Ethiopia, dependent on transit states, commercially constrained, and strategically weakened in every dimension of Nile diplomacy.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali served as Egypt's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs from 1977 to 1991, directly presiding over Egyptian Nile strategy across the entire period that shaped the London Conference framework. He became UN Secretary-General in January 1992 and oversaw the UN's institutional role in the 1993 referendum process. The question is not one of personal intent but of structural alignment: the individual who had represented Egyptian strategic interests for fourteen years occupied, at both critical stages of the 1991–93 process, precisely the institutional positions from which those interests would most naturally be advanced [21]. This is not conspiracy; it is documented convergence.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has pursued sea access through multiple simultaneous diplomatic tracks. The 2018 peace agreement with Eritrea opened theoretical possibilities for Assab port negotiations. The January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland—granting Ethiopia a twenty-kilometre coastal strip and access to the Berbera port for fifty years—provoked immediate regional alarm: Somalia's



government declared it void; Turkey and Egypt expressed concern. That reaction is itself the clearest evidence of the geopolitical stakes. States do not react with alarm to purely economic infrastructure deals. They react to sovereignty moves. The controversy proved precisely the point the MoU may have been designed to make. There have been very shallow comments on this subject with shallow interpretations - forgetting the old maxim "there's more than one way to skin a cat".

It is vital the sovereignty dimension must be stated in full. A state of Ethiopia's scale—130 million people, second most populous on the continent, seat of the African Union, commander of the Blue Nile headwaters—without sovereign coastal access is an incomplete state in a geopolitically relevant and deliberately maintained sense. Its near-total dependence on Djibouti is not merely a logistics cost; it is a permanent structural lever available to any state or mediator willing to threaten Djibouti's co-operation. Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access is the legitimate and historically grounded assertion of the world's most populous landlocked nation to recover the sovereign economic geography that its civilisational history, population size, and continental role warrant. It is not territorial aggression. It is not post-Cold-War revanchism. It is a civilisation recovering what was taken from it, by instruments that can now be documented and named.

5.1 The Right to the Red Sea: Peaceful Priority, But Not Peaceful Exclusivity

Let the argument be stated without diplomatic softening, because the softened version has failed to produce results for three decades. Ethiopia has the right to regain sovereign access to the Red Sea. The preferred and primary means of exercising that right is peaceful: bilateral negotiation with Eritrea for a leased or sovereign strip of coastline of meaningful scale—the stretch running from the Doumeira Mountains on the Djibouti–Eritrea border southward to Beilul, a distance of approximately 180–200 kilometres, linking the coast directly to the Danakil Depression hinterland, would restore genuine strategic and economic functionality—port access agreements with Somaliland and Djibouti as interim measures, and multilateral frameworks anchored in the African Union that legitimise a new Horn of Africa maritime architecture [39]. The diplomatic and legal case for peaceful recovery is strong, the economic incentives are compelling for all parties in the region, and the reputational gains of a negotiated resolution would serve Ethiopian interests better than any other outcome. Peaceful recovery is therefore not merely the morally preferable option; it is the strategically superior one, and it should be pursued with the full force of Ethiopian diplomatic and economic resources.

But peaceful priority is not the same as peaceful exclusivity. Ethiopia is a sovereign nation with a documented historical right to coastline that was removed by an engineered political process, not by any legitimate cession of Ethiopian rights. The legal doctrine of *uti possidetis*—which freezes colonial-era boundaries at independence—was never designed to extinguish the rights of a state whose maritime geography was stripped not at independence but thirty-two years after independence, through a process in which Ethiopian citizens had no vote. The international community's silence on this structural injustice does not constitute its legitimation. A state with the sovereign right to recover what was taken from it retains, as a matter of last resort, the right to act in defence of that interest by whatever means its survival requires. This is not a threat; it is a statement of principle that every state in the international system would assert if it were in Ethiopia's position, and that many have asserted under comparable or lesser provocations. The purpose of stating it clearly is not to invite conflict; it is to ensure that the cost of refusing reasonable peaceful arrangements is understood by all parties as something other than zero.



5.2 The Full Cost of Continued Landlocking

The case for Red Sea access is not only historical or emotional. It is economic, strategic, and demographic with a precision that demands quantification. Ethiopia's continued landlocking imposes costs that compound annually and that no development programme, however well-designed, can fully offset so long as the underlying structural vulnerability persists.

Economic costs. Ethiopia currently transits approximately 95 per cent of its trade through the port of Djibouti, a country of under one million people whose port infrastructure, however recently upgraded, is a single-point bottleneck for a nation of 130 million [23]. Transit fees, port charges, and logistics costs imposed by this dependency add an estimated \$1.5–2 billion annually to Ethiopian import and export costs—a permanent structural tax on every Ethiopian business and household, paid not to the Ethiopian state but to a foreign sovereign. As GERD's power enables industrialisation and the manufacturing export economy that Ethiopia's development strategy requires, the volume of goods moving through Djibouti will grow, and with it the dependency cost. An Ethiopia exporting manufactured goods to Asia and the Gulf without sovereign port facilities will be commercially disadvantaged against every competing manufacturing economy that controls its own maritime logistics. The arithmetic of sovereign port access versus transit dependency is not close: ownership of the 180–200 kilometre Doumeira-to-Beilul coastal strip, with an expanded Assab port or a developed deep-water port at Beilul or its vicinity, would generate fiscal revenue, reduce import costs, and improve export competitiveness across every sector simultaneously.

Strategic costs. The Djibouti dependency is not merely a commercial liability; it is a strategic one. Djibouti hosts U.S., French, Chinese, Japanese, and Italian military installations. Its government must balance the interests of all of them simultaneously, which structurally constrains its ability to serve exclusively Ethiopian interests in any moment of regional tension. During any future crisis in which Ethiopia's adversaries can credibly threaten Djibouti's political alignment—or simply apply economic pressure to a small state with diversified great-power entanglements—Ethiopia's 95 % trade dependency becomes a lever of coercion of the first magnitude. An Ethiopia that cannot import weapons, fuel, or critical goods under conditions of political pressure on Djibouti is an Ethiopia whose sovereignty is contingent on Djibouti's diplomatic posture. This is not a theoretical risk; it is the structural condition of Ethiopia's current strategic geography. Recovering coastal access eliminates it.

Diplomatic costs. Ethiopia's landlocking systematically weakens its negotiating position in every regional dispute. In the GERD diplomacy, Egypt can credibly threaten to apply pressure through multiple channels—U.S. military assistance conditionality, regional coalition-building, Djibouti dependency leverage—simultaneously. A coastal Ethiopia with sovereign port facilities and maritime economic zones would negotiate from a fundamentally different structural position: one in which its own economic geography provides revenue, reach, and resilience rather than vulnerability. The diplomatic value of removing a lever of coercion is not merely additive; it is multiplicative, because every other negotiating position Ethiopia holds becomes stronger when its adversaries cannot simultaneously threaten its trade lifeline.

The demographic cost of inaction. Ethiopia's population is growing by approximately three million people per year - approximately more than the total population of Eritrea or three times that of Djibouti. Each of those additional three million Ethiopians will, over their productive lives, pay the transit tax of landlocking in the prices they pay for imports, the export margins they do not receive, and the employment they do not have because the manufacturing economy that sovereign ports enable has not been built. Delaying the recovery of Red Sea access by one decade means that an additional thirty million



Ethiopians will spend their entire working lives in a landlocked economy when they need not. This is the demographic cost of treating the geopolitical injustice of 1993 as a settled question rather than an active wrong demanding remedy. Ethiopia could field a third of this demography as capable offensive power that is also technologically entrepreneurial. There is a clear choice.

The strategic objective: sovereign coastline from the Doumeira Mountains to Beilul (approximately 180–200 km).

A sovereign coastal strip running from the Doumeira Mountains—the tripoint where Djibouti, Eritrea, and the Red Sea meet—southward to the small port town of Beilul in present-day Eritrea, a distance of approximately 180–200 kilometres, is the specific and historically grounded territorial objective. This stretch commands the southern approaches to the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, connects directly inland to the Danakil Depression and the Afar region, and encompasses the natural harbour geography that previously served Ethiopia’s maritime economy. It would provide: (1) one or more deep-water port facilities, with Beilul as the primary candidate site, capable of handling containerised cargo at the scale Ethiopia’s industrialising economy will require; (2) a maritime economic zone generating fisheries revenue and potential offshore resource access; (3) a naval base capability sufficient to protect Ethiopian maritime interests and project credible regional deterrence; (4) the elimination of single-point transit dependency on Djibouti; and (5) a platform for Ethiopian participation in the Red Sea’s emerging strategic economy, including undersea cable infrastructure, maritime trade route security, and regional logistics networks. This is not an expansionist programme. It is the restoration of the minimum maritime geography that a state of Ethiopia’s scale and continental role requires to function as a genuinely sovereign actor in the twenty-first-century regional order.

6 What Equitable Nile Utilisation Actually Requires?

The diplomatic debate over GERD and Nile water-sharing is frequently conducted as though it were a contest between Ethiopia’s ambition and Egypt’s survival. This framing that — these were the only two terms in the equation, and as if the legal framework were either absent or hopelessly indeterminate is a pernicious ploy by the enemy. Both assumptions are false, and Ethiopia’s diplomatic strategy must begin by refusing them.

The foundational documents of downstream Nile diplomacy are the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Agreement, which allocated an Egyptian veto over Nile development projects across the entire basin, and the 1959 Egypt-Sudan Bilateral Agreement, which allocated virtually the entirety of the Nile’s annual flow between only two of its eleven riparian states. Ethiopia was not party to either agreement. Ethiopia was not consulted during their negotiation. That roughly 85 % of the Nile’s water originates in Ethiopian territory—primarily through the Blue Nile and the Atbara—is not a contested hydrological fact; it is the central datum of the entire dispute [29]. The legal argument that colonial-era agreements to which Ethiopia was never a party can bind Ethiopia’s sovereign development choices is not merely weak; it has been rejected by the international community’s own framework for water law.

The 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses [28] establishes the governing principles: equitable and reasonable utilisation, the obligation to co-operate, and the duty to prevent significant harm. Ethiopia’s legal position is strong under each. The equitable utilisation doctrine requires that each state’s right be assessed in light of its economic and social needs, its



contribution to the watercourse, its population, and the extent of its existing use. On every one of these measures, Ethiopia has a compelling upstream claim. Egypt, moreover, has alternatives that landlocked upstream states simply do not possess: the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer System—one of the world’s largest non-renewable groundwater reserves—lies beneath Egyptian territory, and Egypt commands over 3,500 kilometres of Mediterranean and Red Sea coastline with desalination potential that Gulf states have exploited aggressively and at declining unit cost [27]. A framework of equitable utilisation requires these alternatives to be weighed. Ethiopia has no such alternatives; its development imperative cannot be extinguished by a legal architecture it never signed.

The drought-risk question is genuinely complex and must be engaged honestly. Egypt’s legitimate concern is not normal-year Nile flow but drought-year shortfall, when a large upstream reservoir and a large downstream population both face reduced water availability simultaneously. Ethiopia’s legitimate concern is that the no-significant-harm principle becomes a permanent development cap, requiring maintenance of downstream flows that privilege historical allocations regardless of upstream population growth. The bargaining space between these positions is real and navigable: symmetric drought-year rules that share the burden of variability equitably, joint technical monitoring committees, real-time hydrological data exchange, and agreed emergency procedures. Verification obligations must be symmetric on all sides. One-way transparency—in which Ethiopia provides real-time dam data whilst downstream states provide no equivalent disclosures—is not a confidence-building mechanism; it is a surveillance instrument dressed as diplomacy, and it must be refused on those terms.

7 Trump, Sisi, and the Anatomy of Coercive Mediation

On 16 January 2026, President Trump offered to restart Nile mediation in a manner that was framed as a diplomatic gesture but functions as a structural event [6, 7]. To treat it as merely the former is to misread the geopolitical environment in which Ethiopia must now operate. There is a structural difference between process mediation—in which a neutral facilitator helps parties reach agreement under symmetric rules—and deal mediation, in which a mediator steers the outcome towards the party with which it shares the stronger relationship. The architecture of the January 2026 offer signals deal mediation with structural clarity.

Five structural signals embedded in the January 2026 offer

1. **Direction of origin.** The offer was made *to Egypt*, not jointly to Egypt and Ethiopia. Trump communicated to Sisi; no equivalent communication to Abiy was reported. The mediator’s first act was downstream-facing, pre-establishing whose framing would anchor the geometry of any negotiation.
2. **Framing as reward.** The mediation was explicitly linked to Egypt’s role in the Israel-Hamas ceasefire—transforming GERD from a bilateral water dispute governed by international law into a side-payment in U.S.-Egypt geopolitical accounting. Legal merits become secondary to alliance management.
3. **Channel of delivery.** The use of a personal presidential letter rather than State Department channels signals personal deal-making, bypassing the institutional memory and legal expertise that constrain mediator bias in formal channels.
4. **Absence of prior Ethiopian consultation.** No public record exists of Ethiopian officials



being consulted before the offer was made. This sequencing pre-emptively established Egypt as the aggrieved party and Ethiopia as the state to be brought to the table.

5. **Timing after GERD's inauguration.** The offer came four months after GERD's September 2025 inauguration [5], transforming a completed national achievement retroactively into an open negotiating item—signalling that great-power mediation can reopen settled developmental facts.

These signals point to a structural dynamic that is not new. During Trump's first term, the U.S. attempted to broker a GERD agreement whose terms Ethiopian officials described as reflecting Egyptian priorities rather than a neutral resolution of competing legal rights. Ethiopia refused to sign. That refusal was the correct response then and it established a precedent that must be honoured now. The Trump-Sisi personal relationship provides the structural architecture of the current risk: Egypt receives approximately \$1.3 billion per year in U.S. military assistance, and Trump's public praise of Sisi's leadership is a matter of documented record. A mediator whose principal regional partner is the downstream state in a water dispute is not a neutral mediator, whatever the language of the offer.

The coercive pattern is not confined to African diplomacy. In 2025–26, U.S. policy has included explicit pressure for accelerated NATO burden-sharing with operational deadlines [30, 31], direct pressure over the sovereign territory of alliance partners [32], and rhetoric that drove senior European leaders to explicitly reassert the rules-based international order [33]. If leverage instruments of this character are deployed against wealthy European alliance partners, a developing African state should expect its disputes to be handled with considerably less procedural delicacy. The appropriate response is not isolation—that serves no strategic purpose—but conditional engagement: participation only under process rules that transform deal mediation into genuine process mediation, with those conditions stated publicly in advance and backed by a diplomatic coalition that makes departing from them costly.

8 Technology as Ethiopia's Enduring Sovereignty

There is a version of Ethiopian nationalism that is entirely reactive: defined by what Ethiopia refuses, by the impositions it resists, by the injustices it calls out. That version has its honourable place—there are impositions that must be refused and injustices that must be named. But it is not sufficient, and the Adwa generation understood this. They did not only refuse Italian colonialism; they built an army disciplined enough to defeat it and a national narrative compelling enough to hold an extraordinarily diverse coalition together under fire. The twenty-first-century equivalent of building that army is building an economy and a technological capacity that reduces Ethiopia's structural vulnerability to coercion. Sovereignty is not only defended at the diplomatic table; it is built in laboratories, factories, universities, and digital infrastructure.

Ethiopia's starting conditions for this programme are more favourable than is sometimes acknowledged. The country has a demographic advantage of historic proportions: 130 million people with a median age of approximately nineteen years, meaning that the working-age population will continue to grow for decades. Ethiopian Airlines is not only Africa's most profitable carrier; it is proof of concept that Ethiopian institutions, when given access to world-class training and management structures, can operate at global standards. The airline has produced a generation of Ethiopian engineers, pilots, and logistics managers whose expertise is respected internationally. The industrial parks developed since 2015 have attracted manufacturing investment from China, Turkey, and India, demonstrating that Ethiopia can



compete as a manufacturing location when infrastructure and governance are aligned.

The direct link between GERD and the technology agenda is the most strategically important connection in Ethiopian economic policy that is currently understated. GERD's 6,450 MW generating capacity is not merely a poverty-reduction tool; it is the infrastructure backbone of a digital economy. Data centres, fibre network infrastructure, manufacturing automation, and the computationally demanding environments of artificial intelligence and advanced engineering all require reliable, affordable electricity at scale. An Ethiopia that fully commissions GERD and builds the transmission network to distribute its power is an Ethiopia that can host the digital economy of a continent. The African Union's digital transformation agenda, the demand for data sovereignty amongst African governments, and the growth of Africa's technology startup ecosystem all represent a structural opportunity that GERD makes possible and landlocking currently constrains.

Ethiopia's agricultural sector—employing over 70 % of the population and generating the coffee and other exports on which foreign exchange depends—is almost entirely non-mechanised and non-digitalised. Precision agriculture, weather forecasting tools, market-price information platforms, and supply-chain management technologies could transform smallholder productivity at scale in ways that fixed infrastructure spending alone cannot. Ethiopia's health sector, chronically short of trained professionals, could be extended dramatically by telemedicine, AI-assisted diagnostics, and digital health records. These are not aspirational bullet points; they are deliverable policy choices that a government serious about technology as a form of sovereignty would make with urgency.

The Ethiopian diaspora, so often discussed primarily through the lens of its political fractures, is an under-deployed technological resource of the first order. Diaspora professionals include engineers, scientists, physicians, software developers, and entrepreneurs at world-class institutions across North America, Europe, and the Gulf. The challenge is creating the institutional conditions—stable governance, credible property rights, reliable power and connectivity, professional meritocracy over ethnic patronage—that make return or sustained professional engagement with Ethiopia rational rather than frustrating. A technology economy built on diaspora expertise, domestic engineering talent, and GERD-provided power is an economy that generates the economic diversification and the middle class that, as both Collier and Acemoglu-Robinson have documented, are the most structurally reliable guarantors of political stability and conflict prevention [1, 2]. An Ethiopia whose economy is diversified across manufacturing, digital services, aviation, agriculture, and energy exports is an Ethiopia that no single bilateral relationship can coerce into concessions on GERD.

9 Mentor and Allow The Young Generation To Lead

There is a sentence that contains its own refutation. It is the sentence, encountered across Ethiopian political discourse in various formulations, that the young generation must be “included,” must be “given a voice,” must “have their perspectives heard.” The refutation is embedded in the demographics. Ethiopia's median age is approximately nineteen years. The majority of Ethiopians have not only grown up in a world entirely shaped by digital connectivity and post-Cold-War geopolitics; they are now old enough to vote, to build businesses, to serve in government, to lead civil society, and to define the political terms on which the next generation of Ethiopians will live. They are not a constituency to be *included*. They are the demographic majority of a sovereign nation.

The political and intellectual character of this generation differs from its predecessors in ways that should be engaged honestly rather than managed. Ethiopian Gen-Z grew up with the Tigray conflict, the



Oromo protests, and the political upheaval of the late 2010s as the formative backdrop of their political consciousness. They witnessed these events on smartphones, in real time, with access to international media, diaspora commentary, and the unfiltered accounts of communities whose experiences official narratives routinely omit. They are consequently harder to manipulate through ethnic mobilisation alone, more sensitive to the gap between political rhetoric and governance reality, and more attuned to international standards of democratic accountability than any generation before them. Their pragmatism is not naivety; it is the product of watching ideological politics fail, repeatedly, to build the country they were promised.

What the young generation of Ethiopia demands—and has earned the right to demand:

- Democratic institutions that make civic participation *consequential*, not theatrical—accountable governance that responds to organised public pressure through functioning courts, free elections, and a press that can investigate without existential risk.
- Economic opportunity that reflects educational investment—a labour market governed by merit, creativity, and competence rather than ethnic or political patronage networks.
- Connectivity and digital infrastructure as the basic platform of twenty-first-century economic participation, not a luxury available only to urban elites.
- A credible national project that transcends ethnic identity—not because ethnicity should be erased, but because they are old enough to know that ethnic entrepreneurship has never built a country.
- Physical safety—from state violence, from communal conflict, and from the manipulation of their identities by political actors whose interests are not theirs.
- Genuine leadership roles—not symbolic youth quotas in institutions designed by their elders, but real decision-making authority in the political, economic, and diplomatic institutions that will shape their lives.

The diaspora youth dimension is equally important and is too often treated separately from the domestic one, when it should be integrated. Young Ethiopian-British, Ethiopian-American, and Ethiopian-Swedish citizens are not simply Ethiopians who happen to live abroad. They are dual-cultural citizens who carry Ethiopian identity through lived connection rather than legal obligation, who engage with Ethiopian politics through the analytical frameworks of the countries where they were educated, and who have international networks, technical skills, and institutional access that most Ethiopians at home do not. The question is not whether they care about Ethiopia; demonstrably, they do. The question is whether Ethiopia's institutions can create the conditions under which that care translates into durable contribution rather than sustained frustration.

The critical institutional translation of this demographic reality begins with education. Ethiopia's educational system, despite significant expansion since 1991, remains structurally misaligned with the economy that GERD and the technology agenda require. STEM education at secondary and tertiary levels is underfunded relative to its strategic importance. University entrance systems remain heavily centralised, with subject allocation determined by government formula rather than student choice and aptitude—a system that produces a graduate cohort whose skills profile is systematically mismatched to available opportunities, generating the educated unemployment that is politically volatile and economically wasteful in equal measure. A country with 130 million people, a government committed to technological



transformation, and 65 % of its population under thirty cannot afford an educational system calibrated for a mid-twentieth-century economy.

The Adwa analogy, applied to this generation, requires an interpretation that honours the original without distorting it. Adwa's soldiers were young. Menelik's commanders were young. The tactical innovation that defeated Italy—the use of terrain, the integration of traditional and modern military capability, the maintenance of coalition discipline under fire—came from a generation that had not yet accumulated the conservative institutional reflexes of established position. The twenty-first-century equivalent of that adaptive, coalition-sustaining, tactically innovative generation is not primarily to be found in government ministries or established political parties. It is in the universities, the technology startups, the civil society organisations, the diaspora professional networks, and the digital platforms where Ethiopian ideas are being argued out in real time. The obligation of the Gen-X political class is not to step aside entirely—experience is not worthless—but to step back far enough to allow young Ethiopians not merely to participate in institutions designed by their elders, but to redesign those institutions for the conditions they will actually govern.

10 National Defence: The Guarantee of Every Other Right

Every argument in this article—about GERD, the Red Sea, technology, democracy, and the young generation—rests ultimately on a foundation that would be intellectually evasive not to state directly: capable national defence. This is a subject close to my heart in my adopted nation and profession. Sovereignty is not merely argued at diplomatic tables or built in laboratories. In the final analysis, it is guaranteed by the credible capacity to defend what is at stake against those who would compromise it by force or by the threat of force. This is not militarism. It is the consistent historical record of every state that has maintained sovereignty under pressure, and it is particularly the record of Ethiopia.

The Battle of Adwa was won because Menelik II had an army—not merely a large one, but one that was organised, motivated, supplied, and commanded with strategic sophistication that the Italian expedition fatally underestimated. Ethiopian sovereignty has never been preserved through diplomatic elegance alone. It has been preserved through the combination of diplomatic skill and the credible military capacity that makes the cost of testing that sovereignty prohibitively high for potential aggressors. An Ethiopia that cannot defend its interests is an Ethiopia whose diplomatic arguments, however legally correct, remain ultimately advisory rather than binding on its adversaries.

In the contemporary context, national defence means several things simultaneously. It means the conventional military capacity to deter external aggression and to protect the physical integrity of GERD—an infrastructure asset whose disruption would be not only economically catastrophic but a strategic and political humiliation of the first magnitude. The dam must be understood as a defence priority as much as an economic one, and its security architecture must reflect this. It means intelligence capability adequate to detect and counter the external funding of domestic destabilisation—the pattern by which external actors, including some of Ethiopia's regional neighbours, have historically sought to weaken the Ethiopian state through support for internal armed groups. And it means, increasingly, cybersecurity and digital infrastructure protection: a country pursuing a digital economy inevitably accumulates digital vulnerabilities that adversaries, both state and non-state, will probe systematically.

Ethiopia's pursuit of Red Sea access has a defence dimension that cannot be separated from its diplomatic and economic dimensions. An Ethiopia with a coastal presence will require maritime capability to secure



it. The lesson of the Somaliland MoU is not only that Ethiopia can make sovereignty moves through unconventional diplomatic channels; it is that those moves provoke reactions from neighbouring states, regional powers, and extra-regional actors whose interests are threatened. Managing those reactions requires the underlying military credibility that makes threatening responses by adversaries costly and accommodating responses rational. Defence investment is therefore not a competitor to the diplomatic and development agenda; it is the condition that makes both credible.

The civil-military relationship is the crucial governance question within this argument. Strong national defence under genuine civilian democratic oversight is a fundamentally different political reality from strong defence under security-apparatus dominance. A military disciplined by civilian democratic accountability is a guarantor of sovereignty; one that substitutes for civilian institutions becomes the primary threat to them. Ethiopia's young generation has the strongest interest in ensuring that the security apparatus they inherit protects democratic institutions rather than crowding them out. Defence capability and democratic accountability are not competing priorities; they are the two load-bearing pillars of a state genuinely capable of protecting both its citizens and its sovereignty.

11 What Ethiopia Must Do—and How: Voices From Adwa

Arguments about sovereignty are incomplete without a strategy for defending it. But strategy is not the same as transparency. One of the most persistent errors in Ethiopian public discourse about GERD diplomacy is the instinct towards declarationism—the idea that publishing clear positions, red lines, and minimum conditions constitutes strength. It can. But in adversarial negotiation conducted under conditions of great-power pressure, premature transparency frequently constitutes a gift to the opponent. A negotiating party that publicly announces its minimum acceptable outcome has, in effect, done its counterpart's job for them. Henry Kissinger, whose diplomatic record may be contested but whose negotiating intelligence is not, understood this precisely: the side with the clearer sense of what the other will accept, combined with the greater willingness to tolerate uncertainty, almost always prevails. If Kissinger were an Ethiopian diplomat today, he would not publish a GERD operating doctrine. He would do something considerably more sophisticated. Ethiopia should keep its BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement) generally a secret but should actively use it as a silent guide to inform its strategy, confidence and reservation price. Timing to reveal its BATNA is vital and revealing a weak alternative is never a strategy but a slaughter.

11.1 Maintain Strategic Ambiguity—and Make It Work

The first principle of effective negotiating strategy under great-power pressure is to deny the adversary the information they need to calibrate their coercive offer precisely. A mediator who knows Ethiopia's exact minimum acceptable settlement can construct a coercive offer calibrated precisely to that minimum, knowing Ethiopia will accept it rather than walk away. A mediator who does not know this threshold must construct a more cautious offer, or risk Ethiopia's refusal, which carries its own political cost for the mediating power. Strategic ambiguity is not confusion; it is the deliberate preservation of informational advantage. Ethiopia should make clear what it will *never* accept—external operating vetoes, colonial-era legal frameworks, one-way verification—without ever specifying what it will accept. The space between those two positions is Ethiopia's sovereign negotiating room, and it belongs to Ethiopia, not to the mediator.



11.2 Create Facts on the Ground Before the Table Is Set

Kissinger's triangular diplomacy with China in 1971–72 did not begin at the negotiating table. It began with years of back-channel communication, the deliberate cultivation of alternative relationships, and the systematic construction of a new strategic landscape before any formal talks commenced. By the time Nixon arrived in Beijing, the terms of the relationship had already been substantially shaped. Ethiopia should operate on the same principle: the most important diplomatic work on GERD and the Red Sea must be done before any mediation framework is accepted, not within it. GERD's filling schedule should continue on its technical merits, regardless of diplomatic pressure. Red Sea access diplomacy—with Eritrea, with Somaliland, through multilateral Horn of Africa frameworks—should be accelerated precisely because a more economically independent Ethiopia is a less coercible Ethiopia. Facts created before a mediator arrives constrain what the mediator can reopen. Facts created after—in response to diplomatic pressure—are concessions.

11.3 Build the African Coalition Before Entering Any Bilateral Frame

A fundamental error in bilateral diplomatic confrontations with great powers is to accept the bilateral frame. A bilateral negotiation between Ethiopia and the United States, mediated by a partner of Egypt's choice and conducted in Washington, is structurally disadvantageous before a single substantive word is exchanged. The correct response is to arrive at any negotiation not as a single state but as the representative of a coalition whose interests the mediator must also accommodate. The Nile Basin Initiative provides an institutional framework; GERD's electricity export relationships with Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania provide a commercial coalition; the African Union's mandate on continental development provides a normative platform. Ethiopia should invest in building explicit political commitments from these partners—commitments that make a coerced bilateral settlement politically costly for the mediator, because third-party beneficiaries have publicly identified their interest in the outcome.

11.4 Use Linkage Politics in Both Directions

Kissinger's genius was to understand that no negotiation is isolated: every issue is connected to every other issue in the relationship, and the skilled negotiator uses those connections as leverage rather than accepting the agenda as presented. Washington has strong interests in Horn of Africa stability, counter-terrorism co-operation, the management of the Somalia situation, the Sudan transition, and Djibouti's strategic hosting arrangements. Ethiopia is a significant actor in all of these. Ethiopian co-operation on these issues is not automatic; it is a function of the bilateral relationship. A U.S. administration that imposes coercive mediation on GERD should expect its co-operative relationship with Ethiopia on other regional priorities to deteriorate proportionally—and this expectation should be communicated through private diplomatic channels with sufficient clarity to be heard, without being stated publicly in a way that invites a confrontation Ethiopia should not seek. This is not blackmail; it is the normal conduct of state relations, and every major power uses it systematically.

11.5 Divide the Downstream Coalition

Sudan's interests in GERD are materially different from Egypt's. GERD reduces the flash flooding that periodically devastates Sudanese communities downstream. GERD provides electricity supply opportunities for Sudan's chronically energy-deficient economy. Sudan's historical position in Nile negotiations has been more accommodating than Egypt's, precisely because the dam's operational



profile serves Sudanese interests better. Ethiopia should invest systematically in deepening the Sudan relationship—commercially, diplomatically, and technically—in ways that make a unified downstream position impossible for Egypt to maintain. A mediator who arrives at negotiations expecting to represent a unified downstream bloc and instead finds a significant divergence between Egyptian and Sudanese positions has lost a crucial structural advantage before the first session begins.

11.6 Deploy Information Asymmetry as a Strategic Asset

Ethiopia knows more about the Blue Nile's hydrological behaviour than any downstream state. It knows more about GERD's engineering parameters, operational flexibility, and the technical detail of every drought-year operating scenario. This knowledge is a strategic asset, and it should be treated as one. A negotiation conducted with genuinely symmetric information—in which Ethiopia makes all its hydrological data publicly available before any framework is agreed—surrenders this advantage. Technical complexity, when deployed strategically, makes rapid deal-making impossible and forces any mediator to engage with the engineering reality on Ethiopia's terms. Ethiopia's technical teams should be positioned as the indispensable authority on GERD's operational parameters, making any settlement that does not reflect their technical judgements operationally unworkable and therefore not binding in practice.

11.7 Demonstrate Commitment Through Costly, Visible Actions

The most credible diplomatic signals are those that are expensive and irreversible, because cheap signals can always be dismissed as rhetoric. Ethiopia's commitment to GERD sovereignty and Red Sea access must be demonstrated through actions that impose real costs on the signalling state and cannot easily be walked back. The Somaliland MoU was such a signal: it provoked regional alarm precisely because it was a costly, visible action that demonstrated the direction of Ethiopia's strategic trajectory regardless of any single negotiation outcome. Accelerating electricity export agreements with East African neighbours, deepening the peace process with Eritrea on port access, and making visible infrastructure investments in alternative trade corridors are all costly, visible signals that constrain what any mediator can credibly offer, because they demonstrate that Ethiopia's no-agreement baseline is already improving independently of the negotiation.

11.8 Treat Red Sea Recovery as a Non-Negotiable Strategic Objective

The Red Sea access objective must be separated analytically and diplomatically from the GERD negotiation, even though both are expressions of the same underlying sovereign interest. The risk of conflating them is that a mediator who offers partial GERD concessions can present those concessions as a sufficient exchange for Ethiopian silence on the coastal access question. These are distinct issues with distinct legal bases, distinct timelines, and distinct costs of inaction. GERD is a fait accompli whose operational sovereignty must be defended. Red Sea access is an active recovery objective whose achievement remains incomplete. Treating them as a package deal allows an adversary to trade a concession it cannot in practice revoke against an objective that remains outstanding.

The recovery strategy for Red Sea access has three tracks that must be pursued simultaneously and with equal seriousness. The first is the Eritrea track: the 2018 peace agreement opened a window that has not been fully exploited. The souring relationship between Abiy and the oldman Isaias could be exploited strategically. A negotiated agreement granting Ethiopia a sovereign or long-term-lease coastal strip in the vicinity of Assab—with appropriate compensation arrangements that make Eritrean co-operation



economically rational—is the diplomatically cleanest and geographically most suitable outcome [20]. The second is the Somaliland track: the January 2024 MoU must be converted from a framework agreement into operational infrastructure, with port development investment that creates facts on the ground faster than regional opposition can organise. The third is the multilateral track: Ethiopia should table the Red Sea access question at the African Union as a matter of continental concern—the world’s second most populous nation being permanently landlocked by an engineered historical injustice is not a bilateral Ethiopian problem; it is a precedent with implications for every African state whose territorial geography was determined by external powers rather than by its own people’s choice. This is my preferred track as it will provide the highest diplomatic engagement and allow the shortest defence millage.

If all peaceful tracks fail—if Eritrea refuses, if the Somaliland arrangement is overturned by external pressure, and if the African Union cannot build the normative framework for a just resolution—Ethiopia retains the option of last resort that every sovereign state retains. This option need not be threatening but must be stated publicly. Abiy has shown great courage to state it in Parliament despite his day-time TV consuming detractors - most of them, who never set foot in high level diplomatic or military posturing. It need only be understood, by those who study Ethiopian history, that a nation which mobilised its entire population to build a dam without foreign aid, which marched to Adwa and won, and which has repeatedly confounded the expectations of those who assumed its compliance, is a nation that does not accept permanent injustice as a final answer. The purpose of exhausting peaceful means with maximum strategic intelligence and minimum premature concession is precisely to ensure that this last resort is never reached. But the argument for peaceful means is strongest when all parties understand that they are not the only means available.

12 A Closing Word to the Generation That Must Hold the Pen

There is a question that settles over all arguments about Ethiopia’s present and future, and it is worth stating it plainly before closing: *Is Ethiopia’s story, at this moment, one of a nation rising or a nation disintegrating?* The honest answer is that it is both simultaneously—and the outcome depends, in ways that are not predetermined, on the choices made by Ethiopians in the next five to ten years, above all by the young.

The strategic position on GERD and the Red Sea is structurally sound. GERD has been built, it is filling, and its operation is a sovereign fact. It was not built through foreign charity or colonial grace; it was built by Ethiopians, for Ethiopians, through an act of national will that deserves to be called what it is: an Adwa for the twenty-first century. The 1993 loss of the coastline was a diplomatic injustice, engineered by Egypt and its Arab allies whose strategic interests were served by Ethiopian landlocking—but it was not a permanent settlement of a permanent condition, and it must not be treated as one. Every decade of acquiescence in that injustice is a decade in which the transit tax is paid, the coercion leverage is available, and thirty million more Ethiopians enter adulthood in a landlocked economy. Ethiopia’s engagement on multiple Red Sea access tracks, its demographic weight, and the economic leverage that GERD itself provides all give the current generation tools that the 1993 leadership did not have. The objective is specific: sovereign coastline from the Doumeira Mountains to Beilul—approximately 180–200 kilometres linking the Red Sea to the Danakil hinterland—recovered peacefully through whatever combination of bilateral negotiation, multilateral frameworks, and economic incentive succeeds. The peaceful path is the priority. It is also, stated with the honesty this moment demands, not the only path available to a sovereign nation asserting a right that was never legitimately surrendered.



The critique of Abiy Ahmed's governance is real, documented, and demanding of democratic accountability. Ethnic violence against Amhara communities, the Tigray war's catastrophic human cost, the contested status of Metekel, the suppression of the press, the detention of journalists and opposition figures: these are not fabrications of hostile diaspora networks; they are documented realities that a country serious about democracy must confront. But the conclusion they demand is accountability through democratic institutions—not the fragmentation of Ethiopia's sovereign position that serves the interests of those who profit from its weakness. The ballot, not the bullet. Courts, not militias. Elections, not exile politics.

The young generation carries the weight of this inheritance without having chosen it. Ethiopian Gen-Z did not make the 1993 decision that cost the country its coast. They did not design the ethnic federalism that incentivised identity entrepreneurship. They did not start the Tigray war. And yet they will live longest with all of these legacies. What they can do—what only they can do, by virtue of their numbers, their connectivity, their trans-ethnic pragmatism, and their demonstrated analytical capability—is refuse to reproduce those failures. The Adwa spirit, passed to them, does not require them to fight the same enemies. It requires them to identify, with the same strategic clarity that Menelik's commanders brought to the Tigrayan hills, exactly who and what threatens Ethiopia's sovereign future today—and to meet it with the full force of their intelligence, their unity, and their institutional creativity.

The Gen-X political class, for its part, has an obligation that is simple to state and difficult to fulfil: get out of the way far enough, and fast enough, for the generation that follows to lead. Not as symbols. Not as youth wings of adult parties. Not as token ministerial appointments to demonstrate demographic sensitivity. As the architects, the decision-makers, and the primary holders of accountability for the Ethiopia that is being built now, in real time, whilst this article is being read. Again, I am fortunate to see the geopolitics of Ethiopia only through the lenses of the hermitised intellectuals (not seasoned) of the past but the youth that own son belongs, who happen to be more accommodating and forgiving to Abiy's leadership that they believed is doing its utmost to bring both economic prosperity and genuine democracy through urbanisation and more acutely through GERD and Red-Sea sovereignty. His leadership my heed to the goodwill of Gen-Z and the generation that follow before any stressed tectonic plate is exploited by our eternal enemies and signals further cracks and generate political earthquakes.

GERD is Ethiopia's megawatts. The Red Sea is Ethiopia's sovereign birthright—taken by an engineered injustice, to be recovered by strategic patience, diplomatic intelligence, and the full weight of a nation that has not forgotten what was done or why. Democracy is Ethiopia's internal armour. Technology is Ethiopia's economic independence. And the young generation is all of these things in potential, waiting only for the institutional structures that convert potential into sovereign power.

Stand with Ethiopia on GERD. Stand with Ethiopia on the Red Sea. Demand democratic accountability—through the ballot, the court, and the press. Build the technological economy that no great power can take away. Recover the coastline—peacefully, strategically, persistently, and by whatever sovereign means a free people may ultimately choose. And when this era is written into history, ensure that it is the youngest Ethiopians who hold the pen—because it is their story, and it always was.

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