

# The Abraham Accords: The Force Re-shaping the Gulf–Red-Sea–Horn Energy & Geopolitical Architecture (Part 2/4: Competition and Permissive Disorder)

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April 19, 2026

## Recap of Part 1: Structural Order under NATO Crisis

Part 1 argued that the Abraham Accords function as a transactional security platform restructuring the Gulf–Red Sea–Horn energy and geopolitical architecture around Israeli strategic primacy. Netanyahu’s “Hexagon” concept—a networked architecture linking Israel with Mediterranean, Gulf, and African partners through distributed partnerships rather than treaty obligations—provides the strategic framework, with the Abraham Accords as its institutional foundation. Operation Epic Fury (28 February 2026) degraded Iran’s military capacity, validated the Accords under fire, and compressed Gulf states’ strategic space for hedging. The post-Iran settlement produces an *alignment of winners*—Saudi modernisation through Israeli technology, an overland energy corridor bypassing Suez, commercial primacy for the UAE, corridor options and GERD protection for Ethiopia. Gulf states face a forced choice between collaboration, submission, and the pursuit of alternatives that the war itself has rendered less credible. NATO’s erosion and Europe’s marginalisation remove the multilateral constraints that historically moderated middle-power competition in the Horn.

The Netanyahu–Abiy–MBZ triangle positions Ethiopia as a co-architect of the emerging Red Sea order: a role grounded in civilisational affinity with Israel, an economic proposition of global scale (Israeli technology, Emirati capital, Ethiopian workforce and developmental space), and the sovereign imperative to recover the Doumeira–Beilul coastline—a right anchored in the continuous legal chain from the Wuchale Treaty (1889) through UN Resolution 390(V) (1950), which explicitly preserved Ethiopia’s maritime access irrespective of Eritrea’s political status. Ethiopia’s compass is provided by four singular interests: GERD, Red Sea sovereignty, economic development, and internal unity.

On Red Sea sovereignty, I strongly argued that the diplomatic cost of reclaiming what belongs to Ethiopia—whether the claim is traced to biblical covenant, Ottoman-era administration, or the pre-colonial sovereignty that Italian occupation violated—would be substantial but finite. The cost of permanent landlockedness is existential and compounding: economic strangulation, corridor dependency, strategic vulnerability to every external actor that controls a port. A rational calculus favours paying the former to avoid the latter, and I have added the below if I was not clear at all:

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“...anyone who has an ounce of blood of Ethiopianness shall support the recalibration of our maritime sovereignty without delay. *Ethiopians need to ditch the monkey habit of ethnic entrepreneurship and be real Ethiopians, be Africans, and be humans* — because we have lost our humanity and are prone to be played for bananas or crumbs. To put it bluntly, bananas are good treats for those with monkey habits, and feeding on crumbs under the table while elites feast on top via patronage politics and structural inequality is what characterises ethnic entrepreneurship.

How this plays out does not depend on the short-term results of the closing or opening of the Strait of Hormuz, or the newly released Teddy Afro song and the support it may garner, or even who will lead Ethiopia — Debretsion, Zemene Kasse, Eskinder, Jal-Marro, Abiy, or any other contender you could name. Yes, I have argued against change of leadership through bullet - preferring the ballot, particularly at this moment, because the situation is too unstable to attempt it - preferring the devil we know. I also argued that Abiy’s government has the support of the youth, impressed by the visible socioeconomic progress he is trying to achieve despite meager means and various conflicts. Many forget how complicit they were in Abiymania and the election that followed. If anything, there is a chance to speak at the ballot. Cynics will say how? The answer is to cast their vote according to the rules. If the the election is truly rigged, civil disobedience through the withdrawal of consent not to be used as the scaffolding for the system but instead to guide it towards sovereignty, development, and democratic unity is the answer. No system exits on its own unless we are complicit in it. Democracy (derived from Greek *demos* and *kratos*) is nothing but “people power” and how it is expressed. We the people need to express it on how to be governed without forgetting the geopolitical danger lurking around.

Our internal democratic unity to protect and utilise GERD, to reclaim our Red Sea sovereignty, and the means to achieve these through economic development, rule of law, civil liberties, free and fair elections shall be our nation’s scaffolding. *Otherwise, in the new geopolitical order, Ethiopia is a nation like a lamb to the slaughter.*

Let us hold on to what unites us before it is too late.

This second instalment examines how the structural order described in Part 1 translates into competitive dynamics on the ground—including rivalries that the post-Iran settlement reopens rather than settles, and threats that Eritrea’s weakness generates rather than prevents.

## 1 Introduction: From Architecture to Competition

The structural order created by the Abraham Accords, validated by Epic Fury, and shaped by NATO’s erosion does not produce a settled hierarchy. It produces a *competitive system* in which middle powers exploit great-power distraction to advance their positions through ports, recognition diplomacy, security outsourcing, and sub-state partnerships. The analytical concept that organises this instalment is *permissive disorder*: the condition that obtains when great-power attention is consumed elsewhere and middle powers face fewer stabilising constraints on their manoeuvres.

For Ethiopia (*Eritrea*)<sup>1</sup>, permissive disorder is simultaneously opportunity and trap. It widens the menu

<sup>1</sup>In this series, *Eritrea* refers to a polity that is internationally recognised as independent but historically and structurally inseparable from Ethiopia. The political separation was shaped by a combination of internal administrative mismanagement and, more decisively, by externally sponsored secessionist engineering via the EPLF, facilitated by colonial sentiments, Cold

of external partners and corridor options; it also raises the cost of miscalculation, because no great-power referee exists to mediate escalation or enforce restraint. The competitive system is not anarchic—it operates through portfolios of contracts, basing permissions, recognition signals, and security services—but it is ungoverned, and the premium on internal cohesion is therefore maximal.

For Ethiopia specifically, the stakes are existential rather than merely diplomatic. The four singular interests identified in Part 1—GERD, Red Sea sovereignty, economic development, and internal unity—are not a wish-list; they are survival requirements. GERD is not merely a power station but the engine of urbanisation and industrialisation without which Ethiopia’s 130 million people cannot be employed or fed. Red Sea sovereignty is not primarily an economic convenience but a self-defence imperative: a landlocked Ethiopia of 130 million bordered by a dwindling, economically failing Eritrea that serves as a potential launching pad for any hostile power is an Ethiopia permanently exposed to coercive leverage. Alignment with the coalition of winners is the means by which these objectives are advanced. And national unity—the transition from ethnic fragmentation to civic solidarity—is the precondition without which none of the other three can be achieved. This instalment examines how the competitive environment either advances or obstructs each of these interests.

## 2 Permissive Disorder

Permissive disorder arises when great powers retreat and middle-power assertiveness becomes the rule of the game. The Red Sea–Horn corridor has become an arena for middle-power competition because the great powers that historically moderated it are distracted, depleted, or disengaged. Three developments in 2025–26 have deepened this condition into a structural feature of the geopolitical architecture.

**First**, American strategic engagement with the Horn has not disappeared—it has been *restructured* through the Accords-adjacent convergent alignment, producing a form of partisan presence that amplifies competition rather than moderating it. The US–Israeli war on Iran absorbs American strategic bandwidth on a scale not seen since the 2003 Iraq invasion. Nearly 900 strikes in twelve hours, sustained air operations across twenty-six Iranian provinces, Strait of Hormuz disruption, and retaliatory strikes on Gulf states have required the redeployment of carrier strike groups, air assets, and intelligence resources from other theatres.[21, 22] The 2026 US National Defense Strategy subordinated Europe to homeland and China priorities, and the Iran campaign accelerates this triage.[20] Yet Washington has not abandoned the Horn; it is re-engaging through the Somaliland node. AFRICOM Commander General Dagvin Anderson personally visited Hargeisa—in November 2025, and inspected Berbera’s deep-water port and airfield—one of Africa’s longest runways, that was redeveloped (from 1980 to 1991) and leased by NASA as an emergency landing site for the Space Shuttle program. Somaliland’s top diplomatic representative in Washington disclosed that “every month, there has been a delegation from AFRICOM to Hargeisa”. In February 2026, Somaliland’s Minister of the Presidency Khadar Hussein Abdi publicly offered the United States exclusive access to mineral resources and military bases, stating: “We are willing to give exclusive access to our minerals to the United States. Also, we are open to offer military bases to the United States.” Somalia immediately counter-offered, proposing to renew a 1980 agreement on US military port and airport access—an arrangement Mogadishu controls on paper but cannot deliver at Berbera, which Somaliland has administered independently for over three decades.

AFRICOM officially denied seeking new basing in April 2026, stating that “such actions do not align with the America First security framework articulated by the President and Secretary of War.” The State Department reaffirmed recognition of Somali sovereignty including Somaliland. But the opera-

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War geopolitics, and Nile-basin rivalries aimed at weakening Ethiopia and, by extension, Africa.

tional reality contradicts the diplomatic posture: monthly general-officer visits to a facility that Israel has already surveyed for intelligence operations, adjacent to UAE logistics infrastructure, and connected to Ethiopia's 2024 MoU for twenty kilometres of coastline, amount to a de facto integration of Berbera into the US–Israeli security architecture regardless of formal basing agreements. The distinction between “basing” and “access” is precisely the kind of semantic flexibility that transactional geopolitics exploits. Djibouti—where Camp Lemonnier hosts the only permanent US military base in Africa—is reportedly becoming “increasingly uncomfortable” with certain administration policies, making Berbera's operational value rise with each diplomatic friction.

The analytical consequence is that permissive disorder in the Horn does not mean American absence; it means American engagement that is *partisan rather than moderating*. Washington is not functioning as a neutral interlocutor constraining middle-power competition; it is embedding itself within the convergent alignment (Israel–UAE–Somaliland–Ethiopia) through the Hexagon architecture while the balancing coalition (Egypt–Turkey–Somalia–Saudi Arabia) operates without American constraint. For the convergent alignment, this is a force multiplier. For the balancing coalition, it deepens the threat perception that drives counter-mobilisation. For Ethiopia, it means that the convergent alignment's infrastructure is becoming American-backed—but only so long as Ethiopia remains a credible, cohesive partner within it. The US intervention in Venezuela (January 2026)—capturing Maduro to control oil and expel Chinese and Russian presence—further demonstrates that the “America First” framework uses force where vital interests are directly engaged.<sup>[16]</sup> The Berbera engagement suggests that the Red Sea corridor is being elevated toward that threshold, channelled through the Somaliland node rather than through traditional multilateral diplomacy.

**Second**, Europe's internal preoccupation with rearmament, Ukraine, and intra-alliance management reduces the EU's bandwidth for the Horn to near zero. The June 2025 Hague commitment to five per cent of GDP on defence by 2035 consumes fiscal and political capital that would otherwise fund development finance, conflict mediation, and multilateral diplomacy in the Horn.<sup>[20]</sup> European development agencies continue to operate, but their strategic direction is increasingly disconnected from the corridor politics that actually determine Horn outcomes. Trump's public questioning of Atlantic alliance reciprocity after Spain refused basing for Iran strikes, the Greenland tariff episode, and the handover of NATO command structures to European leadership collectively signal that the transatlantic relationship's foundational assumption—that the United States underwrites European security in exchange for alliance solidarity—is no longer operative. Considering that the United States contributes approximately 62% of NATO defence spending while also providing roughly 85% of the alliance's air force and naval assets and more than 65% of ground force assets and troops, the alliance's existence is questionable without US endorsement and leadership. For the Horn, the consequence is not merely reduced European engagement but the erosion of the normative framework—multilateral governance, rules-based dispute resolution, development conditionality—through which Europe historically exercised influence in the region. What replaces it is raw transactional competition among middle powers operating without external constraint.

**Third**, Russia and China remain present but become less determinative than the competing operational strategies of regional middle powers. Russia's Africa Corps (successor to Wagner) operates in Sudan, and China's Djibouti base and Belt and Road logistics provide alternative patronage options for Horn actors. But as Part 1 demonstrated, neither Russia nor China offers a credible security alternative to the US–Israeli architecture: Russia did not defend Iran despite a strategic treaty; China abstained on the Security Council resolution condemning Iranian retaliatory strikes on Gulf states. Their presence creates diplomatic optionality for Horn actors but not security guarantees, and in a system increasingly governed by force and transactional interest, optionality without security is a wasting asset.

In the Red Sea itself, the vacuum amplifies disruptions to a degree that directly affects Ethiopia's four interests. Houthi attacks and resurgent piracy have transformed local instability into global economic disruption, raising shipping insurance costs by multiples and rerouting supply chains.[1] The degradation of Iran's Axis of Resistance under Epic Fury may reduce Houthi operational capacity over time—Iranian ballistic missile launches fell from approximately 350 on day one to roughly 25 by mid-March, and drone launches from over 800 to approximately 75, indicating managed decline.[23] Yet even a degraded Houthi force retains the capacity to disrupt Bab al-Mandab shipping, raising the strategic salience of alternative corridors—Berbera, Assab, Lamu—and thereby intensifying the corridor competition that structures Horn politics. Every Houthi missile that disrupts a container ship transiting the Bab al-Mandab increases the strategic premium on whoever controls those alternative routes—and thereby increases the stakes of Ethiopia's sovereign coastline claim.

The net effect is that permissive disorder is no longer a speculative forecast but an observable condition of the geopolitical architecture—but it is a disorder of a specific kind. The rules-based order that nominally governed Red Sea security has been replaced by a transactional system in which the United States is present but partisan, Europe is absent, Russia and China offer optionality without security, and middle powers compete through sub-state nodes, basing concessions, and recognition diplomacy. The US–Israeli–Emirati infrastructure coalescing at Berbera—intelligence facilities, deep-water port, runway, Ethiopian corridor access—is becoming the dominant security node on the western Red Sea littoral, but it operates through the convergent alignment rather than through multilateral governance. For Ethiopia, this environment is perilous not because Ethiopia is weak—it is the largest military and demographic power in the Horn—but because its internal divisions create the fracture lines through which external competitors can penetrate, manipulate, and exploit. A state whose internal cohesion matches its external weight thrives in this environment; a state whose ethnic fractures invite proxy exploitation is consumed by it.

### 3 Bloc Competition and the Red Sea–Horn Strategic System

The competitive structure within the architecture is best characterised as overlapping blocs rather than a clean bipolar order.

#### 3.1 The Convergent Alignment and the Horn as an Active Front

On one side sits the Israel–UAE–India–Ethiopia convergence analysed in Part 1, expressing itself through close ties with Somaliland, investment in logistics and port infrastructure, and the Netanyahu–Abiy–MBZ triangle's interlocking interests. The Hexagon concept provides the strategic framework: a networked architecture in which Israel functions as the central connector, the UAE provides finance and implementational capacity, India supplies naval presence and long-horizon corridor planning through IMEC, and Ethiopia provides strategic geography and corridor demand.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland (26 December 2025) operationalised this architecture in the Horn.[7] By early March 2026, Israeli teams had surveyed sites near Berbera—high ridges approximately one hundred kilometres west of the port and locations within the port area itself—for intelligence-sharing and anti-Houthi operations, adjacent to the UAE's existing Berbera complex with its deep-water dock and four-kilometre runway. Ethiopia's 2024 memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, which provided for approximately twenty kilometres of coastline near Berbera in exchange for diplomatic backing on recognition, now sits directly atop this new Israeli military infrastructure. The convergence of Israeli

basing, Emirati logistics, and Ethiopian corridor interests in a single geographic node demonstrates the architecture's capacity to fuse commercial, military, and diplomatic instruments into an integrated strategic position.

The consequence—underappreciated by most external observers—is that the Horn has become an active front in the Iran war. Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi immediately declared any Israeli assets in Somaliland “legitimate military targets”. The 150–200 kilometres of open water from western Yemen to Berbera is technically trivial for a force that has already struck targets 1,800 kilometres away in Israeli airspace. Somaliland's legal grey zone—unrecognised by all but Israel among UN member states—means the diplomatic fallout of a Houthi strike would be far lighter than an attack on Djibouti's Camp Lemonnier or sovereign Emirati territory. A single drone—a Mohajer-6 or a Samad variant slipped out of western Yemen—could achieve three objectives simultaneously: demonstrate to Tehran that the Houthis remain operationally relevant, exploit Somaliland's legal ambiguity, and drag the entire Horn into a conflict happening three thousand kilometres away. The geopolitical architecture has absorbed the Horn into this conflict theatre, and corridor politics now operate under the shadow of Iranian retaliation whether Horn actors intended it or not.

Somaliland's leadership expects to finalise a trade partnership with Israel, marketing resource and investment opportunities including minerals.[13] DP World's continued operation at Berbera amid Somalia–UAE tensions illustrates the fusion of commercial logistics with security relationships.[15] The addition of American engagement—AFRICOM's monthly delegations, the commander's personal inspection of Berbera's facilities, and Somaliland's formal offer of exclusive basing and mineral access—transforms Berbera from an Israel–UAE node into a potential US–Israel–UAE–Ethiopia strategic complex. Whether Washington formalises basing or maintains the current posture of operational engagement without formal commitment, the convergent alignment's infrastructure at Berbera is acquiring an American dimension that the balancing coalition cannot replicate at any of its own nodes. Somalia's counter-offer to renew its 1980 military access agreement with Washington—an arrangement Mogadishu controls on paper but cannot deliver at Berbera, which Somaliland has administered independently for over three decades—underscores the competitive dynamic: the convergent alignment controls the physical infrastructure; the balancing coalition controls only the legal fiction.

For Ethiopia, the convergent alignment now offers what no single patron can deliver: corridor diversification, GERD protection, technology transfer, investment capital, diplomatic cover for the sovereign coastline claim, and—through the Berbera node—proximity to American security infrastructure that strengthens Ethiopia's negotiating position across every dimension. But it also binds Ethiopia's corridor interests to the Iran war's trajectory and to American strategic choices that Addis Ababa cannot control—risks that only internal cohesion can manage.

### 3.2 The Balancing Coalition and the Saudi–UAE Divergence

The countervailing configuration involves Saudi Arabia, Somalia's federal government, Turkey, Egypt, and Eritrea—actors whose interests converge around resisting unilateral corridor re-ordering. Turkey and Qatar have long invested in Somalia's federal centre; Egypt's Nile security concerns and rivalry with Ethiopia pull Cairo toward counter-balancing Ethiopian maritime ambitions; and Turkey's defence-industrial capacity—Bayraktar drones, naval shipbuilding, the TF-X fifth-generation fighter programme, indigenous satellite capabilities, and cyber-warfare investments—makes Ankara Israel's most capable regional technological rival and the only Horn actor able to contest Israeli supremacy across a broad front.[10, 2]

Turkey's February 2024 Somalia pacts—maritime security and hydrocarbons—position Ankara as a counterweight with Indian Ocean access and a military footprint in Mogadishu.[3] Turkey publicly condemned Israel's Somaliland recognition as illegal and destabilising, linking it to Ankara's tightening partnership with Mogadishu.[12] Turkish military basing in Mogadishu, combined with the 2024 Turkey–Somalia defence cooperation agreement, demonstrates that Ankara is converting technological capacity into strategic presence at a speed that the convergent alignment cannot ignore.

Within the balancing coalition, the Saudi–UAE divergence adds a layer of complexity that the simple “pro-Israel versus anti-Israel” framing obscures. The divergence reflects fundamentally different strategic doctrines about how to manage regional instability. Saudi Arabia pursues what analysts have described as *de-escalatory developmentalism*: prioritising the prevention of state failure as the foremost threat, emphasising tension reduction and border security to safeguard Vision 2030's domestic reforms. As a vast continental state with substantial resilience, the kingdom regards the regional landscape as fundamentally navigable, opting to dial down conflicts as they emerge while fortifying frontiers against spillover. Riyadh's focus remains inward, channelling resources into transformative domestic initiatives rather than costly external engagements that might undermine those goals or provoke wider instability.

The UAE, by contrast, embraces *pre-emptive activism*: perceiving unchecked fragility in neighbouring states as the greater peril and advocating proactive measures to reshape vulnerable structures before they crumble. In this view, Iran and its proxies pose actively destabilising threats that require forward engagement—basing, arms transfers, commercial penetration, and the cultivation of sub-state partners—rather than defensive containment. The Emirati port-and-basing model (Assab, Berbera, Bosaso) is the operational expression of this doctrine.

The divergence reached a breaking point in Yemen, where advances by the UAE-supported Southern Transitional Council sparked Saudi counter-strikes that reversed those gains and led to the council's quiet dissolution—the first direct military clash between proxies of the two Gulf powers. This episode signalled not merely a localised tactical dispute but a broader strategic parting of ways with direct ramifications for the Horn. Saudi Arabia's subsequent accommodation with Turkey—including coordinated diplomatic pressure against Somaliland's recognition—demonstrates that Riyadh is prepared to constrain Emirati overreach even at the cost of aligning with Ankara, whose own ambitions in the Horn compete with Saudi interests. A rising Saudi–Turkish accommodation, however fragile, could produce a formidable counter-alignment in the Red Sea: one that combines Saudi finance, Turkish military technology, Egyptian demographic weight, and Somali sovereignty claims against the convergent bloc's corridor ambitions.

These alignments are not fixed: they are transactional, sometimes internally contradictory, and frequently mediated through commercial entities, security contractors, and regional administrations rather than formal treaties.[8] The Saudi–Turkish rivalry for Islamic leadership adds further complexity: both court Egypt as the decisive swing actor, whose demographic weight, Al-Azhar religious authority, and military capacity make it capable of tipping the balance toward whichever configuration it joins. For Ethiopia, the critical implication is that the balancing coalition is not a residual formation of also-rans but a serious competitive force whose coherence depends on whether its internal rivalries can be managed—and whose capacity to obstruct Ethiopia's four interests should not be underestimated.

### 3.3 Recognition as a Corridor Instrument

Israel's Somaliland recognition demonstrates that recognition has become a policy tool within the geopolitical architecture—one that changes expectations about financing, insurance, and security partnerships. The act transforms a sub-state entity into a legible international partner, altering risk calculations for

investors, insurers, and military planners. Corridor diplomacy now incorporates recognition as a lever that re-prices risk and re-ranks partners.

For Ethiopia, the Somaliland precedent is strategically double-edged. On one side, it validates the principle of boundary revision in the Horn and creates a framework that Ethiopia can invoke for its own coastline claim: if Israel can recognise Somaliland's separation from Somalia, the principle of territorial reconfiguration in the Horn is established, and Ethiopia's assertion of sovereign rights over the Doumeira–Beilul corridor—rights anchored in the continuous legal chain from the Wuchale Treaty through Resolution 390(V)—gains diplomatic precedent. On the other side, it internationalises disputes, potentially pulling Ethiopia deeper into proxy alignment logic. If Ethiopia is seen as an agent of Somali fragmentation, the balancing coalition gains a powerful legitimacy argument against Ethiopian “expansionism”.

The deeper significance is structural. The post-2020s geopolitical architecture is characterised by permissive disorder, competitive middle-power patronage, and the strategic use of sub-state nodes. Where the pre-2011 order relied on state-to-state bargains under great-power management, the current system operates through portfolios of contracts, legitimacy signals, and security services.[8] In this environment, Ethiopia's capacity to navigate bloc competition depends not on choosing the “right” side but on maintaining the institutional coherence to extract maximum benefit from the convergent alignment without being captured by it—and to engage the balancing coalition without being obstructed by it.

## 4 Sudan and Yemen as Transmission Belts

Sudan and Yemen are not peripheral to Horn stability. They function as transmission belts through which Middle Eastern competition propagates into Horn corridor politics, amplifying the permissive disorder that defines the current architecture. Understanding their dynamics is essential for assessing the risks to Ethiopia's four interests.

In Yemen, conflict in and around the Bab al-Mandab has direct consequences for shipping, insurance, and the strategic salience of ports on the African littoral. The Houthi resumption of Red Sea attacks following Epic Fury—targeting commercial shipping to pressure the US–Israeli coalition into a ceasefire—raises the value of alternative corridors and heightens the corridor competition that structures Horn politics. Every Houthi missile that disrupts a container ship transiting the Bab al-Mandab increases the strategic premium on Berbera, Assab, and Lamu as alternative routes—and thereby increases the leverage of whichever power controls those ports. Yemen's war has also become the theatre in which the Saudi–UAE divergence manifested most violently: Saudi airstrikes against the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council marked the first direct proxy clash between the two Gulf powers, with reverberations that extend directly into Horn corridor politics. The dissolution of the STC altered the balance of power in southern Yemen, but the underlying Saudi–Emirati tension over how to manage fragile states—de-escalation versus pre-emption—persists and shapes both powers' engagement with Horn actors.

For Ethiopia, Yemen's war is not a distant Middle Eastern conflict but a direct determinant of corridor economics and bargaining power. The cost of shipping through the Red Sea has increased by multiples since the Houthi campaign began; Ethiopian imports and exports—transiting through Djibouti, which handles over ninety per cent of Ethiopian trade—bear this cost directly. Higher insurance premia, longer routing, and supply-chain delays compress Ethiopian fiscal space and raise the urgency of corridor diversification. The Berbera option (through the Somaliland MoU) and the Assab option (through sovereign coastline recovery) are not merely desirable; they are necessitated by a Red Sea security environment that Yemen's war has rendered structurally unstable.

In Sudan, rival patrons have cultivated relationships with competing armed actors, producing a civil

war that functions as a proxy arena for Gulf rivalry and a cautionary tale for Ethiopian strategists. UAE backing of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) for gold and port access diverges sharply from Saudi and Egyptian support for the Sudanese Armed Forces, fracturing Gulf unity and producing atrocities that erode legitimacy.<sup>[17]</sup> The RSF's significant territorial advances in late 2025 prompted Egypt and Saudi Arabia to intensify their backing for the military, creating a three-way competition among external patrons that has prolonged the war and devastated Sudanese civilians.

Sudan's instability threatens direct spillover into Ethiopia's western borderlands—refugee flows, arms trafficking, and the potential for armed groups to exploit the porous frontier. More consequentially, Sudan demonstrates what happens when a state fragments under conditions of permissive disorder: each faction attracts a different external patron, corridor assets become prizes in a proxy war, and the state's capacity to pursue any coherent national interest evaporates. Sudan's Red Sea coast—Suakin, Port Sudan—has become a contested asset in the Gulf rivalry, with implications for alternative corridor routes. Sudan is the cautionary example that Ethiopia must study and avoid: a state whose internal fractures were exploited by external patrons until the state itself ceased to function as a coherent actor. Ethiopia's ethnic-federal structure, if left unreformed, provides precisely the kind of fracture map that external patrons can read and exploit—a point developed in depth in Part III.

## 5 Eritrea as a Vulnerability Node: The Launching-Pad Thesis

Within the architecture of bloc competition, Eritrea occupies a position that is analytically distinct from any other Horn actor. It is not a competitor; it is a *vulnerability node*—a weak state whose very weakness makes it a threat to Ethiopian sovereignty.

The logic is precise and historically grounded. Eritrea's population has dwindled to fewer than four million, depleted by decades of indefinite military conscription (the national service programme that functions as forced labour), economic stagnation, and emigration that has produced one of the world's highest per-capita refugee outflows. Its economy is among the least productive in Africa: GDP per capita remains below \$700, formal employment is negligible outside the military, and the state depends on diaspora remittances and mining rents that cannot sustain institutional development. Its political system—indefinite one-party rule under Isaias Afwerki, no constitution implemented since independence, no elections held, no independent judiciary—produces a garrison state whose legitimacy rests entirely on the narrative of permanent threat from Ethiopia.

The historical pattern is instructive because it reveals that Eritrea's existence as a separate political entity has always been a function of external engineering designed to weaken Ethiopia. Italy unilaterally proclaimed the colony in 1890—after the Wuchale Treaty's signing, without Ethiopian consent, on the basis of commercial transactions with local Afar leaders that conferred no sovereign title. When Italy was defeated in World War II, Britain took control (1941–1952) and immediately attempted to partition the territory to serve imperial interests. Brigadier Stephen Longrigg, Chief Administrator from 1942 to 1944, proposed annexing the western lowlands to Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, creating a “Greater Tigray” under British trusteeship designed to contain Ethiopian sovereignty, and transferring the Danakil coast directly to Ethiopia. The entire scheme was designed not for Eritrean welfare but for British control over Red Sea shipping lanes and Nile hydrology. Longrigg exploited ethnic and religious divisions between Muslim lowlanders and Christian Tigrinya highlanders as instruments of colonial administration, establishing a template that subsequent external actors—including EPLF sponsors—would follow.

The United Nations rejected this partition and instead federated Eritrea with Ethiopia through Resolution 390(V) of 1950. The resolution explicitly preserved Ethiopia's right to sea access irrespective

of Eritrea’s political status—a provision that demonstrates the international community’s recognition that Ethiopian maritime sovereignty was a right prior to and independent of any particular arrangement with Eritrea. The federation was not a gift to Ethiopia; it was a corrective to colonial-era distortions that had severed Ethiopian coastal territories through coercion rather than legitimate cession. The UN commission’s field study confirmed that the majority of Eritrea’s population favoured reintegration; the federation served both Eritrean developmental interests and Ethiopian maritime security.

What followed—Haile Selassie’s dissolution of the federation (a strategic error whose consequences Ethiopia is still paying for), the Derg’s militarised repression, the EPLF’s externally sponsored secessionist war financed by Nile-basin rivals and Cold War actors, and the 1993 independence—was a sequence in which Ethiopia’s maritime rights were progressively extinguished not through legitimate self-determination but through the same combination of external manipulation and internal misgovernance that the UN had sought to prevent. The 2000 Algiers Agreement addressed the land boundary but left sovereign sea access entirely unresolved—a legal and strategic vacuum that the current geopolitical architecture is filling with external military installations, basing concessions, and proxy relationships.

In a global order that is attuned to force and transactional interest—the order that Epic Fury has demonstrated—Eritrea’s weakness is not a reason for Ethiopian complacency. It is a reason for alarm. A failing state on Ethiopia’s northern border, controlling approximately 1,200 kilometres of Red Sea coastline including the strategically critical ports of Assab and Massawa, is a launching pad that any hostile power can lease, co-opt, or exploit. The UAE’s 2016 lease of Assab—ostensibly for Yemen operations but also projecting Emirati influence into the Horn—demonstrated the principle. Egypt’s reported interest in establishing military presence on the Eritrean coast illustrates the threat directly: an Egyptian naval or air facility at Assab, positioned within approximately 500 kilometres of GERD, would place Egyptian precision-guided munitions and cruise missiles within striking range of Ethiopia’s most consequential infrastructure project. Egypt has publicly treated GERD as an existential water-security threat; the combination of Egyptian capability, Egyptian motivation, and an available Eritrean platform creates a threat that no responsible Ethiopian strategist can ignore.

The escalating Ethiopia–Eritrea war of words—including Ethiopian allegations of Eritrean support to armed groups—illustrates how corridor issues bleed into security escalation in an environment of permissive disorder.<sup>[18]</sup> This is why sovereign sea access is, for Ethiopia, a matter of *self-defence* before it is a matter of economics. The economic case for sea access is overwhelming—landlockedness costs Ethiopia an estimated three to five per cent of GDP annually—but the security case is primary. A nation of 130 million people cannot permit its most strategically sensitive frontier to be controlled by a garrison state whose survival depends on external patrons whose interests may be actively hostile to Ethiopia’s. Eritrea’s weakness does not make it harmless; it makes it *available*—available to Egypt, to any power seeking a platform from which to threaten Ethiopia’s sovereignty, its GERD, or its territorial integrity.

## 6 Ethiopia’s Strategic Portfolio Under Permissive Disorder

Ethiopia’s challenge is to convert corridor competition into leverage without becoming the arena in which external rivals settle scores. The four singular interests provide the analytical framework; each is tested by the competitive dynamics analysed above.

*GERD* benefits from the alignment of winners: the Netanyahu–Abiy–MBZ triangle shields the dam from Egyptian obstruction, and the prospective Saudi–Israel pipeline squeezes Egyptian fiscal capacity (Suez revenue diversion compounding upstream water management from Addis Ababa). But GERD is not merely a foreign-policy asset; it is the engine of Ethiopia’s structural transformation. Its 6 GW

capacity—while insufficient for long-term domestic demand as urbanisation accelerates—provides the electricity that powers industrial parks, urban infrastructure, and agricultural processing in the near term. Early export agreements with Sudan, Djibouti, and Kenya establish Ethiopia as the region's energy anchor and generate revenues that fund further development. GERD's protection is therefore the precondition for everything else: without it, Ethiopia's industrialisation stalls, its urbanisation produces slums rather than productive cities, and its demographic trajectory becomes a source of instability rather than strength. The threat of Egyptian military action against GERD—enabled by the availability of Eritrean basing—makes the sovereign coastline imperative inseparable from GERD protection. The two interests are not merely parallel; they are structurally linked.

*Red Sea sovereignty* is the self-defence imperative. The approximately 180–200 kilometres of coastline from Doumeira to Beilul must be recovered—peacefully through negotiation, multilateral frameworks, and economic incentive if possible; by force if every diplomatic avenue is exhausted. The legal foundation is continuous (Wuchale, Adwa, Resolution 390(V), Algiers Agreement's unresolved silence). The strategic logic is that sovereign naval capacity eliminates the launching-pad threat, extends Ethiopia's defensive perimeter, and converts the Doumeira–Beilul corridor from a vulnerability into an asset. Israel's recognition of Somaliland validates boundary revision as a corridor instrument and creates a precedent Ethiopia can invoke. The emerging American engagement at Berbera adds a further dimension: an Ethiopia with sovereign Red Sea access becomes a direct partner in US Red Sea security operations, not merely a landlocked state dependent on others' facilities. Washington's interest in Berbera is driven by the need to control the Bab al-Mandab and counter the Houthis; an Ethiopia commanding the Doumeira–Beilul coastline opposite Berbera would complete the dual-shore architecture that the Hexagon concept requires. This convergence of American, Israeli, Emirati, and Ethiopian interests at the strait makes the sovereign coastline claim not a unilateral Ethiopian demand but a structural requirement of the emerging security architecture.

*Economic development* requires converting the mutual economic dividend described in Part 1—Israeli technology, Emirati capital, Ethiopian workforce and developmental space—into tangible outcomes: agri-industrial processing, manufacturing, infrastructure, technology education. This demands institutional capacity to channel investment toward public goods rather than patronage networks. The Ankara-brokered Ethiopia–Somalia compromise of December 2024 demonstrates that structured diplomacy can create off-ramps from crisis dynamics, but such off-ramps are fragile and vulnerable to external shocks.[19]

*Internal unity* is the binding constraint on all three preceding interests. Permissive disorder does not create Ethiopia's ethnic fractures, but it amplifies them catastrophically. When external coalitions compete, they prefer counterparties who can deliver concessions quickly; this selects for elite bargaining and reinforces extraction unless institutions impose transparency. Corridor revenues become ethno-distributional prizes; security partnerships are interpreted through internal threat narratives; foreign policy becomes an extension of factional competition rather than national strategy. If Ethiopia cannot present a unified position at the bargaining table, it cannot protect GERD, cannot recover its coastline, and cannot absorb the investment that the alignment of winners offers. The balancing coalition (Egypt–Turkey–Saudi Arabia–Somalia) does not need to invade Ethiopia to obstruct its four interests; it merely needs to identify and support factions within a fractured state. Parts III and IV examine this internal constraint in the depth it demands.

## 7 Conclusion: Competition Sharpens the Four Interests

Permissive disorder recalibrates costs—but it is a disorder of a specific kind. The United States has not abandoned the Horn; it is re-engaging through the convergent alignment’s Somaliland node, with AFRICOM’s monthly delegations, the commander’s personal inspection of Berbera, and Somaliland’s offer of exclusive basing and mineral access transforming the western Red Sea littoral into a potential US–Israel–UAE–Ethiopia strategic complex. This is not traditional great-power moderation; it is partisan engagement that strengthens one alignment while the balancing coalition operates without constraint. The Horn has become an active front in the Iran war through this infrastructure; the Saudi–UAE divergence has fractured Gulf unity and produced a counter-alignment with Turkey that could obstruct Ethiopian corridor ambitions; and Eritrea’s weakness has made it a vulnerability node that any hostile power can exploit as a launching pad against Ethiopia’s sovereignty and infrastructure.

The emerging geopolitical architecture does not mechanically determine Ethiopia’s fate; it raises the payoff to cohesion and the cost of fragmentation. If Ethiopia fragments, each successor entity inherits weaker corridor bargaining power, higher transaction costs, and higher susceptibility to patronage capture. Eritrea’s weakness becomes an invitation to hostile powers rather than a buffer. GERD becomes a contested asset rather than a national engine. The coastline remains lost. The alignment of winners becomes a patron–client trap rather than a partnership of equals.

Conversely, a unified Ethiopia—one governed through civic institutions rather than ethnic bargaining—can protect GERD, recover its coastline, absorb investment at scale, and function as the dominant power in the Horn–Red Sea region that its demography, geography, and economic trajectory destine it to become.

Part III turns inward. Ethiopia’s ability to navigate bloc competition depends on internal legitimacy, the management of ethnonational mobilisation, and the capacity to prevent external alignment from becoming domestic factional patronage. The four singular interests can only be pursued by a state that is institutionally credible at the bargaining table.

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