

Sovereignty vs. Hegemonic Ambition: Ethiopia's Expansionist Quest for Outlet to the Sea



Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has once again, in his recent rhetoric, aired via Ethiopian state media earlier this month, attempted to frame sovereign sea access as an “existential” and “irreversible national objective.”

This narrative rests on the flawed premise that a large country/population, Ethiopia in this case, can inherently rationalize territorial expansion at the expense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring countries as well as the security and stability of both the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

Globally, landlocked states – from Botswana to Switzerland to Kazakhstan – secure and conduct their trade and commercial transactions through normative agreements with the relevant transit coastal States. As it happens, Eritrea has consistently shown, since its de-jure independence in 1993, unreserved willingness to open its ports for commercial use and has subsequently allowed Ethiopia to use its ports under generous terms.

PM Abiy's deliberate conflation of commercial needs with territorial expansion – shifting from commercial “access” to claims of “ownership” to challenging “the very legitimacy of Eritrean statehood,” is not a matter of economic necessity and/or securing digital privacy. It is, rather, an obsolete hegemonic aspiration deeply woven into the very nature of the current Ethiopian regime. Such a stance represents a flagrant violation of international law and the African Union's core principle on the sanctity of colonial-era borders.

The timing of these claims, especially the comparison and weaponization of population size to imply that smaller states are incapable of ensuring the security and safety of the Red Sea reveals, the current Ethiopian regime's sinister purposes. As of early 2026, Ethiopia continues to face staggering inflation, pervasive poverty, and persistent armed conflicts in regions such as Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray. Thus, the regime in Addis-Ababa is using the fabrication of existential necessity and security as a rally-round-the-flag tactic to distract the people from its maladministration as well as Ethiopia's mounting internal crises. In so doing, the Prosperity Party seeks to unify a deeply fractured domestic political landscape and regionalize Ethiopia's internal contradictions. This pattern mirrors the policies of past Ethiopian regimes that used "external actors and white elephant projects" to mask their domestic administrative failures.

Perhaps the most outlandish of PM Abiy's justification is the claim that a landlocked Ethiopia must safeguard the Red Sea from threats such as the potential blockade the Bab el-Mendeb or tensions in the Strait of Hormuz. First off, it is a geopolitical irony for a government that cannot stabilize its own land borders to propose itself as the primary guarantor of a vital global shipping lane. This line of thinking invokes a common Tigrigna saying, 'ጽንብላሊዕ'ሲ ነብሳ ዘይከደነት፡ ሞሬት ከደነት,' which roughly translates to: 'a butterfly, though it cannot cover itself, seeks to cover the earth'.

Secondly, Ethiopia's claim that small countries lack the capacity for security is historically and practically disingenuous. Eritrea's successful struggle for independence "against all odds", including against a far larger Ethiopian military supported by the most powerful states from both Western and Eastern blocs proves that size does not dictate power or defensive capability.

Third, under international law, a landlocked state cannot unilaterally deploy military assets into its neighbour's territorial waters without a host-nation agreement. More importantly, regardless of whether one country is big or small, close or far, and strong or weak, maritime security is the exclusive purview of the littoral States.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that Ethiopia has frequently leveraged regional organizations, particularly the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental

Authority on Development (IGAD) to influence agenda-setting in pursuit of outlet to the sea. Such actions risk establishing a dangerous precedent among member states.

Needless to emphasize, Eritrea's sovereignty and territorial integrity is non-negotiable and sacrosanct. In the event, Eritrea views Ethiopia's continuous aggressive rhetoric, its recent military maneuvers and associated regional diplomatic schemes – such as the 2024 Somaliland MOU – as dangerous provocations fraught with igniting regional havoc.

The path to stability and prosperity in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region lies in mutual respect; not in reckless, expansionist ambitions of a neighbor clearly at odds with itself. Eritrea reaffirms its commitment to regional economic integration but maintains that lasting peace requires Ethiopian leaders to reassess their strategies and respect the irrevocable reality of Eritrean Statehood.

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