Eritrea's Coveted Geopolitical Location and Irreplaceable Strategic Role in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa



Eritrea's geopolitical significance and strategic role is deeply rooted in its geography, history, and the resilience of its people and statehood. From the earliest human migrations and the development of ancient civilizations to the emergence of the modern international system, the territory of present-day Eritrea has occupied an important position at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East, and the wider world. Its strategic importance, already considerable in antiquity (part of this history is covered in the book 'Periplus of the Erythraean Sea'), has assumed even greater significance in the modern era, particularly following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

Today, as the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region face mounting geopolitical rivalries, armed conflicts, and state fragility, Eritrea's location and political choices have implications extending well beyond its borders. Understanding this role requires looking at the historical, geographical, and political forces that have shaped the region.

A Crossroads of Human History and Civilization

The territory of present-day Eritrea is part of one of the world's historically significant corridors of human origins, movement and interaction. Archaeological discoveries in the wider Horn of Africa have contributed to our understanding of early human settlement, migration, and adaptation. Evidence of ancient human occupation, together with the development of agriculture and increasingly

complex societies, places the region within the broader story of humanity's emergence and expansion.

Over millennia, the area evolved into a meeting point of civilizations, cultures, religions, and modes of production. Its Red Sea coast facilitated exchanges between the African interior, the Arabian Peninsula, and territories farther afield. Trade, migration, and cultural interaction helped shape the societies that developed on both sides of this maritime corridor.

Eritrea also occupies a distinctive place in religious history. The region embraced Christianity during the 3rd century, the remains of the cathedrals built by the early followers was recently discovered in the ancient Port City of *Adulis*.

Prophet Muhammad's (PBUOH) earliest followers sought refuge across the Red Sea landing in Port of Massawa, and built there the *Sahaba* Mosque- (*Mosque of the Companions*) dating back to the First Hijrah (circa 615 CE) -the first mosque outside of the Arabian Peninsula.

These historical connections underscore a central point: Eritrea's strategic importance did not begin with European colonial competition or the establishment of modern nation-states. Its location has long connected societies, facilitated exchanges, and attracted the attention of political powers seeking influence over regional commerce and communications.

The Suez Canal and Geopolitics of the Red Sea

The opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869 fundamentally transformed the strategic value of the Red Sea. By linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and beyond, the canal created a shorter maritime route between Europe and Asia. The Red Sea consequently became an indispensable artery of international commerce, naval movement, and, increasingly, global energy transportation.

Eritrea's extensive Red Sea coastline, facing the Arabian Peninsula and lying within the broader approaches to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, acquired heightened geopolitical significance. The strait connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, making it a critical passage for vessels travelling between

Asian and European markets. Before the recent disruptions, annually more than 26,000 vessels transited through the Suez Canal, to and from the Red Sea, carrying goods amounting to some 10-15% global trade, worth about one trillion dollars.

The economic and geopolitical crisis that resulted from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz due to the war in that region has increased the urgency of maintaining the stability of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea as a whole. Eritrea is therefore a coastal State situated alongside one of the world's most consequential maritime corridors.

Colonial competition, the Cold War, and subsequent struggles over regional influence repeatedly reinforced this reality. The Horn of Africa became an arena for competing external interests, with military installations, strategic partnerships, and political alignments shaped partly by proximity to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

The region's significance has also been amplified by the global energy economy. Oil and gas shipments, commercial shipping, and the movement of strategic commodities have made maritime security a concern extending from neighbouring states to major economic powers. More recently, piracy and attacks on commercial vessels have demonstrated how instability around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden can disrupt international trade and impose costs on economies far removed from the immediate theatre of conflict.

Eritrea's location consequently gives it enduring strategic relevance, irrespective of fluctuations in the priorities of individual external powers.

From Cold War Rivalries to Contemporary Geopolitical Competition

The end of the Cold War did not eliminate the strategic competition surrounding the Horn of Africa. Instead, its forms and participants evolved. Counterterrorism, access to ports, military deployments, energy security, commercial infrastructure, and influence over regional political arrangements has become important elements of contemporary competition. In addition to the competition among global powers, countries such as the United Arab Emirates are pursing port imperialism across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

The Red Sea has increasingly linked the security calculations of the Middle East with those of northeastern Africa. Instability on one shore can rapidly affect the other, while conflicts within the Horn can draw in external actors whose interests extend beyond the immediate dispute.

The war in Yemen has demonstrated the vulnerability of international shipping to regional conflict. The consequences include rerouting vessels, increased transportation costs, and heightened risks to commercial and energy supplies. The strategic importance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait has direct consequences for international economic security.

Military competition and interventions driven by narrow interests can aggravate existing tensions, deepen divisions, and weaken the capacity of regional states to resolve their own problems.

For countries such as Eritrea, the central challenge is to safeguard sovereignty and national security while navigating an increasingly contested geopolitical environment. The ability to withstand external pressure and maintain an independent foreign policy is consequently a significant dimension of the country's regional position.

Eritrea recognizes the importance of creating cooperative and complementary relations among littoral states to safeguard the stability of the Red Sea. This aspect is well articulated in "Eritrea's stance on the Security of the Red Sea", of 23 September 2019. Eritrea joined the Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden with the objective of contributing to collective efforts of the littoral states.

The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, and the Specter of State Fragmentation

In his influential essay 'The Coming Anarchy', published in 1994 and subsequently developed into a book, Robert D. Kaplan 'warned of the destabilizing effects of state weakness, social fragmentation, and violent competition in parts of the developing world. His discussion of West Africa offered a particularly bleak picture of what might emerge when public institutions deteriorate and armed groups increasingly challenge the authority of the state.

Three decades later, the picture envisaged by Kaplan was mixed. West Africa has experienced both serious insecurity and important examples of political resilience. Meanwhile, many of the dangers associated with state fragmentation have become painfully evident elsewhere, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the adjoining Red Sea region.

Taken together, these crises illustrate how the erosion of state authority, the militarization of political disputes, and external interference can generate instability across interconnected geographical spaces. The danger is not simply that individual states may experience prolonged conflict, but that multiple crises may reinforce one another, creating a wider environment of insecurity.

Beyond its bilateral engagements with the concerned states aimed at contributing towards peaceful resolution of conflicts, Eritrea actively takes part in regional frameworks created by countries of the region to find solution to problems facing the region. One such recent opportunity was the Summit meeting of the Heads of States of Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan and Somalia held in El Alamein, Egypt on the 4th of October this year, which inter alia, "discussed the coordination of joint efforts to achieve regional stability, create a conducive environment for shared and sustainable development, and advance economic, trade and cultural relations…"

Eritrea's Resilience and Regional Responsibility

Against this background, Eritrea's self-reliant stance; independent foreign policy; resistance to alien/colonial occupation, sanctions and external pressures are important elements in understanding its contemporary geopolitical posture. The country's political trajectory has been shaped by a determination to defend its sovereignty and preserve its independence under difficult regional and international circumstances.

A state's capacity to maintain its political independence, protect its territory, and make sovereign decisions is consequential in a neighborhood where several countries face acute challenges to their territorial integrity and institutional cohesion.

Eritrea's contribution to regional stability must therefore be assessed in terms of both its strategic position and its conduct. Its constructive engagement with neighboring countries, solidarity with countries and peoples facing complex nation building challenges, support for peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and opposition to destabilizing external interference all contribute to a more secure regional environment.

The Eritrean Government considers its constructive role as an obligation, and its support and solidarity with the countries of the region as a solemn responsibility that is pursued with all earnestness and honesty. Indeed, this has been publicly acknowledged by its regional partners on various occasions. To mention a few of recent remarks:

- President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, "conveyed his gratitude to President Isaias Afwerki and the Eritrean people for their firm stance and support for the Government and people of Somalia."

- Sudanese Prime Minister, Dr. Kamil Idris: "Eritrea is an important country in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region, occupying a crucial strategic location. Its regional and international stances have always played a significant role in shaping policy. With the charisma and insightful vision that President Isaias Afwerki possesses, along with his strong ideas and intelligent mechanisms, Eritrea has an important role to play. In all situations, Eritrea has stood firmly for what is right and has supported Sudan wholeheartedly…. Therefore, due to its geographical and strategic position and its just stance, Eritrea has a pivotal role in addressing this conflict."

- Egypt's Foreign Minister, Dr. Badr Abdellaty: "[W]e view Eritrea as a fundamental pillar of stability in this troubled region, the Horn of Africa. We admire President Isaias's wisdom in managing relations with a high degree of tact, balance, and de-escalation."

- Chairperson of the AU Commission, H.E. Mahmoud Ali Youssouf; "noted Eritrea's strategic location & potential contribution to advancing regional cooperation, development, & stability."

The Horn of Africa needs approaches that recognize and are predicated on respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all its states rather than treating the region primarily as an arena for geopolitical competition. Durable stability cannot be imposed through threats, coercion, or attempts to subordinate neighbouring countries.

Beyond Geography: Eritrea's Irreplaceable Role in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa

Eritrea's strategic significance is a product of the interaction between geography, history, and political agency. Its Red Sea coastline places it alongside a vital maritime corridor; its historical connections link Africa and Arabia; and its experience of struggle and resistance has shaped its approach to sovereignty and national independence.

These factors assume greater importance as instability spreads across parts of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region. The crises in Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen are distinct in their origins, but together they underscore the dangers of prolonged conflict, fragmented authority, and competition for regional influence.

The future of this strategically vital region will depend partly on whether its states and their international partners can move beyond zero-sum calculations towards arrangements grounded in mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and shared interests.

Eritrea's strategic location and its resilience in overcoming orchestrated conflicts and external pressures, and its success in nurturing a self-reliant and resilient nation ensures that it will remain an irreplaceable stakeholder in the future of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa.

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