

Red Sea Dynamics: Eritrea's Sovereignty at the Nexus of Regional Rivalries and Nile Politics

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The recent Red Sea Wave 8 naval exercises¹ hosted by Saudi Arabia underscore the burgeoning strategic importance of the Red Sea region. However, these multinational drills, and the broader Red Sea security architecture, are now framed by an intensified competition for influence among regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the critical Nile dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia. Within this complex web, Eritrea's reported strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and its potential role in a Saudi/Egyptian-led Red Sea Alliance², profoundly impacts its steadfast commitment to protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity against Ethiopia's stated ambition for Red Sea access. This dynamic creates a critical juncture for Eritrea, potentially leveraging new alliances while navigating heightened geopolitical pressures.

The Red Sea's Evolving Significance and Converging Regional Interests

The Red Sea is a critical global artery, connecting the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Its strategic importance has long been recognized, but recent geopolitical shifts – including increased competition among regional and global powers, and the long-standing water security dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) – have amplified its salience. Nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are deeply invested in the region, seeking to enhance their maritime capabilities, control vital shipping lanes, combat piracy, and project influence.

The Red Sea Wave 8 exercises, led by Saudi Arabia, exemplify Riyadh's efforts to position itself as a key regional security guarantor and a leader in maritime cooperation. This initiative, alongside reports of Eritrea joining a Saudi/Egyptian-led Red Sea Alliance and fostering strategic relations with both countries, suggests a coordinated effort to shape the Red Sea security landscape. Saudi Arabia's alleged interest in gaining access to Eritrea's Assab port³, and Egypt's reported port development in Djibouti⁴, signal tangible efforts by these nations to project power and

¹ <https://www.newarab.com/news/saudi-arabia-hosts-massive-multinational-red-sea-naval-exercises>

² <https://apanews.net/egypt-and-eritrea-seal-red-sea-security-alliance/>

³ <https://eritrea-focus.org/saudi-arabias-strategic-investments-in-eritreas-port-of-assab-amid-rising-regional-tensions/> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9JpSTQJPMo>

⁴ <https://hornreview.org/2025/11/12/a-new-maritime-front-egypts-strategic-push-into-djibouti/>

secure strategic assets along the coastline. These actions are not merely about maritime security; they are deeply intertwined with broader geopolitical objectives, including counterbalancing rival influences (such as the UAE) and responding to perceived threats, like Ethiopia's growing regional power.

Crucially, Egypt's profound dispute with Ethiopia over the GERD introduces a powerful deterrent against Ethiopian expansion in the Red Sea. For Egypt, securing its Nile water supply is a national security imperative⁵. An Ethiopia with sovereign access to the Red Sea might be perceived by Egypt as a strategically stronger adversary, potentially complicating future negotiations over the GERD or enhancing Ethiopia's leverage in the region. This alignment of interests - Saudi Arabia seeking port access and influence, and Egypt aiming to constrain Ethiopia's maritime ambitions - places Eritrea in a unique, albeit complex, strategic position.

Eritrea's Stand: Leveraging Alliances for Sovereign Protection

Eritrea's reported decision to join a Saudi/Egyptian-led Red Sea Alliance, and its strategic relations with both countries, could significantly bolster its position regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially in the face of Ethiopia's Red Sea access demands.

Dr. Gebre Gebremariam forcefully argues that Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's pronouncements, implying a potential re-evaluation of Eritrea's sovereign status to gain sea access, are not merely diplomatic missteps but a "dangerous flirtation with international lawlessness" and a "profound rejection of reasoned statecraft"⁶. This rhetoric is particularly egregious given the historical context of Eritrean sacrifices for Ethiopian stability, including support during the Tigray War. To now articulate designs on Eritrean territory, combined with alleged insults, is seen as a "profound act of historical revisionism, a severe diplomatic breach, and a deep moral betrayal"⁷.

The core issue revolves around the inviolable principle of state sovereignty. Eritrea's independence in 1993, achieved through immense sacrifice and overwhelmingly endorsed by a referendum, is unequivocally recognized by the global community⁸.

⁵ The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute and its implications for Egypt's water security are extensively covered by international media, think tanks, and academic research on hydro-politics in the Nile Basin (https://hsu.edu/site/assets/files/4464/1999-0afegypt_and_the_hydro.pdf)

⁶ <https://eritreahagerey.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/The-Geopolitical-Quagmire.pdf>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ The 1993 Eritrean independence referendum and subsequent international recognition are well-documented historical facts. The Algiers Agreement (2000) and the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) ruling (2002) further confirm Eritrea's borders.

Any rhetorical or practical attempt to unilaterally challenge this recognition is a direct assault on the fundamental principles governing global order, the UN Charter, and, crucially, the core tenets of African unity and stability.⁹

Eritrea's strategic alliances with Saudi Arabia and Egypt provide potent external backing for its sovereignty claims. Both Riyadh and Cairo would likely view any Ethiopian aggression against Eritrea, or any attempt to unilaterally seize Eritrean territory, as a destabilizing act detrimental to their own Red Sea and regional security interests. Saudi Arabia, in particular, would be unlikely to tolerate threats to a partner that offers potential strategic port access like Assab. Egypt, driven by its Nile dispute with Ethiopia, would have a strong incentive to support Eritrea's territorial integrity to prevent Ethiopia from gaining a strategic advantage in the Red Sea, thereby limiting its overall regional power projection. This convergence of interests could provide Eritrea with enhanced diplomatic and potentially even security assurances against Ethiopian territorial ambitions.

African Principles Under Threat Amidst Geopolitical Chessboard

The African Union (AU) has long upheld the principle of *Uti Possidetis Juris*, which dictates that colonial administrative boundaries existing at the time of independence should be recognized as international frontiers. This pragmatic decision, enshrined in Article 4(b) of the OAU's (now AU's) constitutive acts, was designed to prevent endless territorial conflicts on the continent.¹⁰ Eritrea's recognized borders with Ethiopia fall squarely within this framework, confirmed by the Algiers Agreement and international arbitration.¹¹

The AU's Constitutive Act also explicitly calls for "respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each Member State and its inalienable right to an independent existence" (Article 4(f)) and strictly adheres to the principle of non-interference.¹² Ethiopia, as a founding member of the OAU and a prominent member of the AU, is bound by these principles. To challenge Eritrea's sovereignty is to undermine the very framework that has sought to ensure peace and stability in post-colonial Africa.¹³

However, the involvement of powerful external actors, particularly the Gulf powers and Egypt, adds another layer of complexity. While the AU champions non-interference, the economic and strategic incentives offered by Riyadh and Cairo can create a dynamic where African states are pulled into broader geopolitical contests.

⁹ The Constitutive Act of the African Union, particularly Articles 4(b) and 4(f), outlines the principles of *Uti Possidetis Juris*, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cf. Footnote 8.

¹² Cf. Footnote 9.

¹³ Cf. Footnote 6.

This makes upholding AU principles even more challenging, as internal disputes can be exacerbated or mitigated by external rivalries. Eritrea's strategic alignment, therefore, while bolstering its immediate defense of sovereignty, also situates it within a larger geopolitical chessboard, where the interests of its allies might shape regional outcomes.¹⁴

Flawed Justifications and the Peril of "Might Makes Right"

The justifications reportedly advanced by Ethiopia, such as the "we are many, so we must have sovereign access to the sea" argument, are not only illogical but also incredibly dangerous. International law and ethics do not base national borders or sovereign rights on demographic figures. Such an argument, as Dr. Gebremariam points out, is akin to "resource envy" and a "profoundly dangerous reassertion of the most predatory forms of international relations." It fundamentally rejects the rules-based international order that emerged after centuries of devastating conflicts, an order emphasizing negotiation, respect for treaties, and peaceful resolution of disputes.¹⁵

The concept of one state unilaterally "revoking" the sovereignty of another internationally recognized state in peacetime is a legal and historical non-starter. It fundamentally violates the post-Westphalian order, the UN Charter's prohibition on the threat or use of force, and the principle of non-intervention.¹⁶ Historical "precedents" for states losing their sovereignty against their will have invariably been through illegal conquest, colonialism, or the dissolution of larger entities – none of which apply to Eritrea.¹⁷

Catastrophic Implications and the Red Sea Security Architecture

Should Ethiopia attempt to act on such pronouncements, the implications would be catastrophic and potentially amplified by the Red Sea's complex regional dynamics.

- **Regional War and Instability:** Any military enforcement of a claim to Eritrean territory would inevitably lead to a full-scale war, drawing in other regional actors. The explicit alignment of Saudi Arabia and Egypt with Eritrea would mean that any such conflict would immediately become a regionalized proxy war, with potentially direct involvement or significant backing from these powerful states.

¹⁴ Various geopolitical analyses and news reports detail the competing port investments, military bases (e.g., UAE's former base in Assab, current presence in Berbera), and diplomatic engagements by Saudi Arabia and the UAE across the region (<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-uae-saudi-arabia-rivalry-becomes-a-rift/>)

¹⁵ Cf. Footnote 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

This would transform a bilateral dispute into a wider regional conflagration with devastating humanitarian and economic consequences, jeopardizing the stability of critical maritime trade routes.

- **International Condemnation and Isolation:** While Ethiopia would face severe diplomatic isolation and sanctions from global bodies, the backing of key Red Sea players like Saudi Arabia and Egypt for Eritrea would further legitimize international condemnation of any Ethiopian aggression, making it much harder for Ethiopia to find sympathetic ears or diplomatic off-ramps.
- **Economic Ruin:** Both nations, already facing significant economic challenges, would be plunged into deeper crises. The costs of war, disruption of trade, and international sanctions would devastate their development prospects. The stability of Red Sea trade, crucial for global commerce, would be severely impacted, affecting Gulf economies and international shipping.
- **Humanitarian Catastrophe:** Conflict would lead to mass displacement and immense human suffering, placing an unbearable burden on international aid agencies and potentially creating refugee flows that impact neighboring states.
- **Undermining the African Union and Regional Security:** Such an act would fundamentally undermine the AU's foundational principles. The presence of powerful external, competing interests could further complicate efforts by African bodies to mediate and enforce peaceful resolutions, potentially weakening the continent's ability to manage its own security affairs and setting a dangerous precedent for external intervention in African disputes.

The Path Forward: Legitimate Access vs. Illegitimate Ambition

Ethiopia's desire for direct sea access, while understandable from a geopolitical and economic perspective, cannot come at the expense of another nation's sovereignty or through threats of force. The only legitimate pathways for Ethiopia to gain more favorable sea access are through:

- **Bilateral Negotiations and Agreements:** Constructive dialogue with Eritrea (and other coastal states like Djibouti and Somalia) to negotiate mutually beneficial access agreements, port usage, and transit facilities. Any such agreements would need to be free from the undue influence of external rivalries.
- **Economic Cooperation and Investment:** Investing in infrastructure and logistics in neighboring countries to facilitate trade and create shared economic benefits. This could also involve collaborative projects with Gulf partners that prioritize regional stability over competitive advantage.

Eritrea's strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and its participation in a Red Sea security alliance, fundamentally alter the risk calculus for Ethiopia. While these alliances provide Eritrea with a stronger protective shield for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, they also embed Eritrea more deeply into the complex geopolitical contestation of the Red Sea. The stability of this critical global space requires all actors, regional and external, to adhere to international law, respect sovereignty, and prioritize peaceful, cooperative solutions over unilateral ambitions driven by either perceived national "needs" or broader geopolitical rivalries. The convergence of Red Sea security interests with the Nile dispute underscores the urgent need for diplomatic solutions that uphold international law and respect the sovereign equality of all states.

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