

The Red Sea Mirage: Ethiopian Rhetoric, Eritrean Sovereignty, and the Peril of "Economic Cooperation"

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Recent pronouncements from Addis Ababa regarding "[economic integration](#)" with its neighbors have sent ripples of concern across the Horn of Africa, particularly in



Eritrea. While seemingly innocuous on the surface, such calls for cooperation, especially when emanating from a landlocked nation increasingly vocal about its "natural right" to Red Sea access, inevitably clash with the bedrock principle of Eritrean sovereignty. Against the backdrop of Gebre Gebremariam's compelling vision for a revitalized,

constitutional Eritrea, these Ethiopian overtures appear not as genuine invitations to mutual prosperity, but potentially as a thinly veiled stratagem to circumvent international law and disguise expansionist ambitions.

Gebremariam's "[Alternative Path](#)" articulates a future for Eritrea rooted in the dismantling of its current predatory regime and the establishment of a robust, inclusive constitutional order. His vision for post-constitutional Eritrea explicitly embraces an outward-oriented, private-sector-led growth strategy, acknowledging Eritrea's small state characteristics and the necessity of finding a niche in international markets. Crucially, he identifies **"a viable regional economic integration/cooperation as a learning platform for a successful international trade or equivalently, as a piece meal approach to multilateral trade liberalization."** This is a nuanced advocacy for cooperation, not as an end in itself, but as a strategic means to an end – a step towards broader international competitiveness and regional stability.

The inherent conditions for such genuine cooperation, as outlined by Gebremariam, are paramount: strong political will, **durable peace and security in the region**, and fundamentally, **rule of law, democracy, and good governance**. These preconditions are not mere footnotes; they are the very foundations upon which any meaningful and equitable integration can be built. They ensure that economic collaboration fosters

mutual benefit, rather than serving as a conduit for the interests of one party at the expense of another's autonomy.

This is where the recent Ethiopian rhetoric throws a stark shadow. When a powerful neighbor, having openly declared an "ambition" to secure access to the Red Sea – an ambition that infringes upon the territorial integrity and sovereign rights of coastal states like Eritrea – suddenly champions "economic cooperation," the alarm bells ring. Ethiopia's pronouncements are not emerging from a context of established peace, transparent governance, or unquestioned respect for existing borders. Instead, they follow a period where its Prime Minister has stated unequivocally, "Our existence is tied to the Red Sea... We need to get out to the sea." This frames "economic integration" not as a partnership among equals, but as a potential instrument to achieve a declared strategic objective that directly threatens Eritrean sovereignty.

From the Eritrean perspective, particularly one aligned with Gebremariam's constitutional aspirations, any discussion of "economic cooperation" must be viewed with extreme caution. The fear is that "integration" becomes a euphemism for encroachment, a pretext for asserting de facto control or influence over Eritrean ports and coastline. The historical context of complex relations between the two nations, further exacerbated by the recent conflict in Tigray and regional instabilities, only heightens this apprehension.

Gebremariam's previous work on the subject itself indirectly highlights the potential for exploitation if the foundational conditions are not met. He notes that the Western and Southwestern Eritrea, Northwestern Ethiopia, and Eastern and Southeastern Sudan can be defined as one "big economic space" served by a transportation network draining to the Red Sea via Eritrean ports. While presenting this as an opportunity for joint investment, he immediately qualifies it: **"Currently, there is no strong political will and commitment to realize this objective."** This lack of political will, rooted in the absence of trust and respect for sovereign boundaries, precisely underscores why Ethiopia's current calls for economic integration are so problematic.

Moreover, Gebremariam's vision for Eritrea includes the establishment of Export Processing Zones and "Free Ports" under its own jurisdiction. This is a clear assertion of Eritrea's sovereign right to leverage its geographic location for its own development, entirely within its national framework, rather than as part of an externally dictated "integration" that could compromise its control over these strategic assets.

Generally, while genuine economic cooperation, predicated on mutual respect, established peace, and democratic governance, could indeed unlock immense potential for the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia's recent rhetoric regarding Red Sea access fundamentally undermines its calls for "economic integration." For Eritrea, particularly in its quest for a truly sovereign and constitutional future as envisioned by Gebremariam, these overtures cannot be divorced from the explicit geopolitical ambitions articulated by Addis Ababa. Until Ethiopia unequivocally respects Eritrea's sovereignty, refrains from rhetoric questioning existing borders, and commits to the foundational principles of rule of law and mutual trust, its calls for "economic cooperation" will likely continue to be perceived not as an alternative path to prosperity, but as a dangerous mirage concealing a deeper, more concerning agenda against Eritrean sovereignty.