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Ethiopia and its search for an exit to the Red Sea in a complex geopolitical context

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Abstract:

Ethiopia seeks an exit to the Red Sea, which it considers a right, and which it lost with Eritrea's independence. The Government of Addis Ababa has recently signed an agreement with Somaliland for such access through a port in the latter's territory.

Adding to the delicate geopolitical context in the region are the regional tensions fuelled by the signing of the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum. The reactions of neighbouring and not-so-neighbouring countries have the potential to redraw the geopolitics of the region.

Keywords:

Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, Red Sea, conflict.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) or the Spanish Ministry of Defence.

Etiopía y su búsqueda de una salida al mar Rojo en un entorno geopolítico complejo

Resumen:

Etiopía busca la salida al mar Rojo, que considera un derecho, y que perdió con la independencia de Eritrea. Recientemente, el gobierno de Adís Abeba ha firmado un acuerdo con Somalilandia para lograr dicho acceso a través de un puerto en su territorio.

Al delicado contexto geopolítico de la región se suman las tensiones regionales que aviva la firma del memorando entre Etiopía y Somalilandia. Las reacciones de los países vecinos, y no tan vecinos, tienen el potencial de redibujar la geopolítica de la región.

Palabras clave:

Etiopía, Somalilandia, Somalia, mar Rojo, conflicto.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia seeks an exit to the Red Sea¹, which it considers a right, and which it lost with Eritrea's independence. The Government of Addis Ababa has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland for such access through a port in the latter's territory.

Ethiopia became landlocked in 1993, making it the world's largest landlocked country. Since then, it has been forced to rely on its neighbours, especially Djibouti, for the use of seaports and access to international trade routes.

The context, both in Ethiopia, Somaliland and the Red Sea, is very delicate at this time. Whilst international attention is focused on the threat posed by Yemen's Ansar Allah Houthi attacks on world trade in this sea, other regional tensions have been revived since the signing of the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum.

As will be discussed in this paper, the reactions of neighbouring countries have the potential to redraw the geopolitics of the region.

2. THE SITUATION IN ETHIOPIA

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is at a very fragile political and economic juncture.

A major threat to the government is posed by armed insurgencies by ethnic groups fighting for self-determination in the Tigray, Oromia and Amhara regions. Indeed, human rights violations during the armed conflict that took place in Tigray from 2020 to 2022 were met with the imposition of US sanctions on the Ethiopian Government². These sanctions meant the loss of a traditional ally such as the US. This prompted Abiy, the 2019 Nobel

¹ In this document, the reference to the Red Sea refers to the Red Sea only. In other contexts, the term includes the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

² THE UNITED STATES, Executive Office of the President [Joe Biden]. Executive Order 14046, 17th September 2021. Available in: [Executive Order 14046](#).

Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 1st March 2024.

Peace Prize laureate, to turn his head towards new supporters and models such as Russia, China and Iran³, distancing himself more and more from the West.

There are also losses closer to home, as the diplomatic gap between Ethiopia and its neighbours Eritrea, Egypt and even Sudan is widening⁴. This situation places the country in a precarious position in the regional context as well.

In addition to this complex and insecure scenario, it is possible that efforts to regain access to the sea⁵ may be an attempt to respond to internal conflicts by constructing a nationalist narrative that also distracts public opinion from hunger, poverty and violence⁶. The country is under severe financial stress⁷ to such an extent that nearly 400 people have died of starvation in Ethiopia's Tigray and Amhara regions in recent months and millions are in need of food assistance⁸.

3. ESCALATING TENSION WITH ERITREA

In the past millennium, Ethiopia had access to the Red Sea between 1952 - when the Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea was born - and 1991, when it lost it with Eritrean independence. This lack of access to the sea is currently a major source of tension, not only between the two countries, but also in the region as a whole. But it is not the only one between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which seemed to have reached a point of understanding and collaboration in the Tigray conflict. Precisely one of the results of that confrontation is the continued presence of Eritrean soldiers in the Tigrinya region, which Eritrea claims as part of its territory⁹.

³ These new diplomatic alliances became evident on 18th October 2023, during his visit to China and his alignment with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

⁴ AYNTE, Abdi. "Ethiopia's dangerous game in East Africa could spark conflict", *Al Jazeera*. 30th January 2024. Available in: [Ethiopia's dangerous game in East Africa could spark conflict | Opinions | Al Jazeera](#)

⁵ Read more about Ethiopia's arguments for regaining its supposed historical position as a maritime power at: [Is Ethiopia indulging an imperialist fantasy for the Red Sea? | African Arguments](#)

⁶ DARAR, Mahad. «Ethiopia's Abiy takes a page from Russia, China in asserting the right to restore historical claim to strategic waters», *The Conversation*. 13th November 2023. Available in: [Ethiopia's Abiy takes a page from Russia, China in asserting the right to restore historical claim to strategic waters \(theconversation.com\)](#)

⁷ AYNTE, Abdi. *Op. cit.*

⁸ MUHUMUZA, Rodney. "Nearly 400 Ethiopians have died of starvation recently. Millions more need food aid", *Associated Press*. 31st January 2024. Available in: [Nearly 400 Ethiopians have died of starvation recently. Millions more need food aid | AP News](#)

⁹ AHMAD, Talmiz. "The Ethiopia-Somaliland deal aggravates regional tensions", *Arab News*. 3rd February 2024. Available in: [The Ethiopia-Somaliland deal aggravates regional tensions | Arab News](#)

The escalation of tension is not confined to the level of rhetoric; there appear to be indications that Ethiopia is massing troops in Zalambessa, near the Eritrean border and the port of Assab. It is also possible that Eritrean President Afwerki is supporting the Amhara¹⁰.

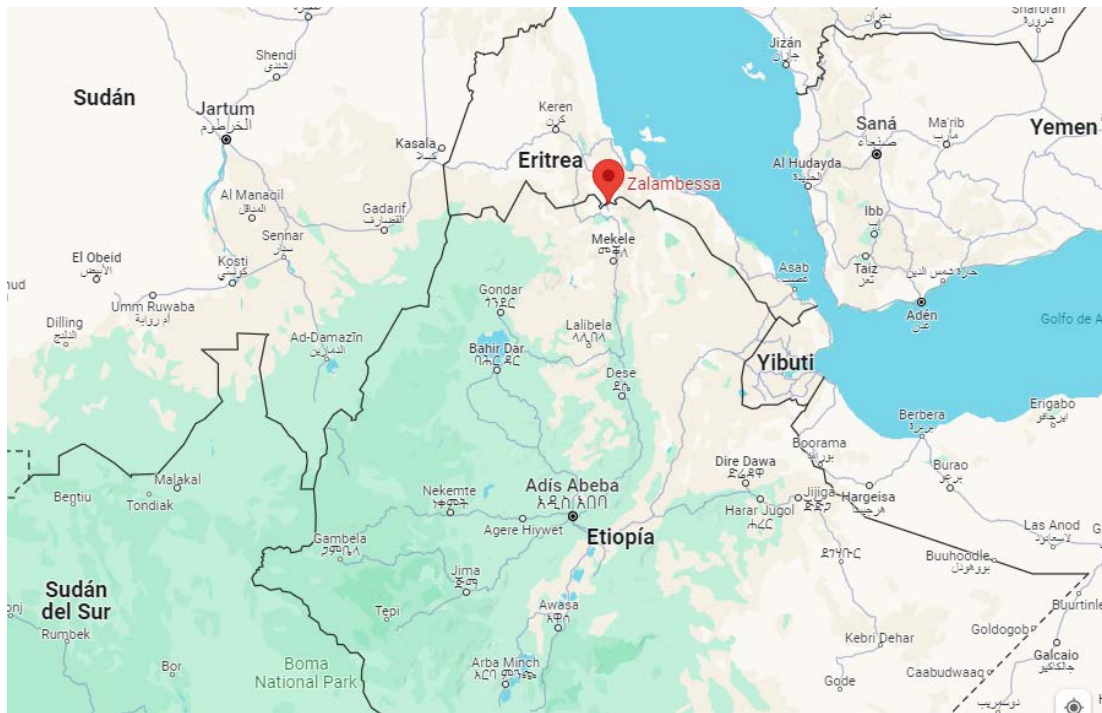


Figure 1. Map of the location of Zalambessa. Source: Google Maps

Tension between the two countries, which was already high before this agreement, has been heightened by Eritrean fears of Ethiopia's potential strengthening through access to the sea via Somaliland. The situation has become so delicate that a miscalculation, or a small incident, could lead to the outbreak of armed conflict. The incident that has the greatest potential to open hostilities could involve the Amhara region, because of its proximity to and support from Eritrea and its ability to destabilise Ethiopia¹¹. However, neither country is in a position economically or militarily to reach such a scenario.

¹⁰ OMER, Mohamed Kheir. "Are Ethiopia and Eritrea on the Path to War?", *Foreign Policy*. 7th November 2023. Available in: [Ethiopia and Eritrea Fought the TPLF Together. Now They Might Fight Each Other Again \(foreignpolicy.com\)](https://foreignpolicy.com)

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

The Ethiopian Army is dispersed and faces multiple challenges, especially in the aforementioned Amhara region and in Oromia. The conflict in the latter region has been simmering for five years without much international attention, mainly confined to Oromia itself, but occasionally affecting adjacent regions such as Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella and Amhara.

4. CONTEXT OF SOMALILAND

Somaliland, the other contracting party to the agreement that would give Ethiopia access to the Red Sea, declared itself independent in 1991 but has not secured international recognition. Despite this, it has democratic structures and institutions of its own that allow it to function *de facto* as a relatively peaceful State, in stark contrast to the situation in Somalia, which is considered a failed State.

The agreement with Ethiopia, although its specific terms remain secret, appears to provide for military cooperation and recognition of Somaliland as an independent State by Addis Ababa. Both would give it strength vis-à-vis Somalia, which in turn has been quick to speak out against this Memorandum of Understanding. Relations between Somaliland and Somalia, which were not smooth and constructive, have worsened significantly as a result of this alliance.

Many of the agreements that Somaliland has signed with other countries have not been made public. Its diplomatic relations are unofficial, but deal with development, infrastructure and natural resource extraction¹². It also has consular relations with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Kenya, amongst others. However, it must be reiterated that it is not recognised as an independent State.

¹² YLÖNEN, Aleks. "Somaliland has been pursuing independence for 33 years. Expert explains the impact of the latest deal with Ethiopia", *The Conversation*. 24th January 2024. Available in: [Somaliland has been pursuing independence for 33 years. Expert explains the impact of the latest deal with Ethiopia \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/somaliland-has-been-pursuing-independence-for-33-years-expert-explains-the-impact-of-the-latest-deal-with-ethiopia)

Against this backdrop, the possibility of Ethiopia recognising it as an independent country opens a door and an opportunity for the future that Somaliland is willing to go through at any cost.

Somaliland, unlike its neighbours, is governed by a democratic political system. Despite this, it has internal security threats, such as the situation in the Sool region, which is administratively dependent on Somaliland and also Somalia. Another possible source of internal tension could be the elections to be held in the summer of 2024, which have been delayed for two years, and in which the tensions of some clans who perceive themselves as marginalised in relation to others may be felt¹³.

Moreover, there is no unanimity among the Somaliland population on the agreement signed. Some communities, especially those in the Awdal region - where Eritrea appears to stand to make territorial gains - are openly opposing the Memorandum signed with Ethiopia¹⁴.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned benefits to be gained from the agreement, the Somaliland Government may also see it as a convenient distraction from internal tensions and problems.

5. ETHIOPIA AND THE OUTLET TO THE SEA

For years, Ethiopia had been talking about the possibility of regaining an outlet to the sea, with ambitions for the ports of Berbera, Zeila or Sayilac, with the idea of ceasing to depend on Djibouti for almost all its economic activity. For example, in August 2023, Ethiopian representatives visited the Kenyan port of Lamu to explore a possible agreement.

¹³ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. "On the Horizon: October 2023-March 2024". 18th October 2023. Available in: [On the Horizon: October 2023-March 2024 | Crisis Group](#)

¹⁴ HORN OBSERVER. "Protests and resignation roil Somaliland over Ethiopia Red Sea deal". 8th January 2024. Available in: [Protests and resignation roil Somaliland over Ethiopia Red Sea deal \(hornobserver.com\)](#)

But it was not until last October 2023, when, in a speech in parliament, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed outlined several ideas to "liberate" Ethiopia from its "geopolitical prison"¹⁵.

The first of these concerned the possibility for neighbouring landlocked countries to permanently share the sea with Ethiopia, at a low price and in exchange for a share in the profits of companies and projects such as the Grand Renaissance Dam, Ethiopian Airlines or Ethio telecom.

He also outlined the possibility of Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and Ethiopia joining together to form one large country with broad access to the sea, a country that could be "another Russia, another China, another America". Finally, in his speech¹⁶, he made it clear that although it is not his wish to resort to violence to obtain access to the sea, this is not ruled out as a last resort if the other options fail.

¹⁵ Quoted by MHAKA, Tafi. "Abiy Ahmed's imperial ambitions are bad news for Africa, and the world", *Al Jazeera*. 14th November 2023. Available in: [Abiy Ahmed's imperial ambitions are bad news for Africa, and the world | Abiy Ahmed | Al Jazeera](#)

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.



Figure 2. Horn of Africa. Source: DSN

A few months later, in January 2024, Abiy announced that he had signed a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland for the use of the port of Berbera for 50 years¹⁷. What has transpired of the agreement indicates that the use of the port would be in exchange for rent, although some claim¹⁸ that the unwritten terms of the agreement refer to Ethiopia gaining ownership of the port as well as land in the Awdal region, where it could establish a military base.

¹⁷ CARCEDO, Diego. "Ethiopia leases a sea outlet to Somaliland", *Atalayar*. 8th January 2024. Available at: <https://www.atalayar.com/opinion/diego-carcedo/etiopia-arriendo-salida-mar-somalilandia/20240108190000195440.html>

¹⁸ GARRISON, Ann. "Red Sea Politics: Ethiopia, Somalia, and the US/EU/NATO", *Black Agenda Report*. 17th January 2024. Available in: [Red Sea Politics: Ethiopia, Somalia, and the US/EU/NATO Black Agenda Report](#).



Figure 3. Location of Awdal, region outlined in red. Source: Google Maps

If this is true, it would explain, albeit perhaps only in part, why Abiy seems to find the outlet to the sea that it has long been using at a high price from Djibouti insufficient or unacceptable. Djibouti charges Ethiopia more than a billion US dollars a year in port fees, a huge sum for a country under economic sanctions and where almost a fifth of its population is dependent on food aid¹⁹. The possible purchase of a port from Somaliland would improve these conditions.

The apparent motives for the agreement therefore appear to be economic. Ethiopia seeks to establish a direct sea route by reducing its costly dependence on other ports. However, the Memorandum has the potential to alter Red Sea geopolitics and affect maritime security and the fragile regional stability.

Although the details of the agreement remain secret, one crucial element of the deal that has come to light is Ethiopia's formal recognition of Somaliland, a self-proclaimed State

¹⁹ ZELALEM, Zecharias. «Is landlocked Ethiopia starting another war over ports in Horn of Africa?», *Al Jazeera*. 7th November 2023. Available in: [Is landlocked Ethiopia starting another war over ports in Horn of Africa?. | Features | Al Jazeera](#)

independent of Somalia. The Mogadishu government has described this Memorandum as an act of aggression²⁰.

The most obvious consequence of the various reactions to the agreement is that the tone of the interventions by the Ethiopian Government is lowering from its initially aggressive intensity. In this vein, Ethiopian National Security Advisor Redwan Hussien, stated on the social networking site X in late January that they would redouble efforts to reach a good understanding by seeking coordination and softening rhetoric²¹.

Although the agreement was expected to be concluded within a month, having been signed on 1st January, there is no indication at the time of closing of this document that progress has been made²². The reason for this change and the call for cooperation may be that the geopolitical tensions provoked by this agreement have taken on a regional dimension beyond the initial expectations of the signatories.

6. INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

Reactions to the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement have not only come from the Somali Government. Several countries and international organisations have spoken out on the situation caused by the Red Sea Memorandum.

All official demonstrations are in favour of Somalia's territorial integrity and therefore against the agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland. These include major players such as Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, the United States, China, the European Union, the African Union and the Arab League²³. Russia has so far remained silent on this issue.. At the time of going to press, no country has come out openly in favour of the agreement.

²⁰ ABDJAZIZ, Abdisamad and YIBELTAL, Kalkidan. "Somalia calls Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement act of aggression", *BBC*. 02/01/2024. Available in: [Somalia calls Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement act of aggression - BBC News](#)

²¹ HIIRAAN. "Ethiopia open to dialogue over Somaliland deal - official". 24th January 2024. Available in: [Ethiopia open to dialogue over Somaliland deal - official \(hiiraan.com\)](#)

²² BORKENA. "MoU Ethiopia signed with Somaliland showing no progress". 3rd February 2024. Available at: <https://borkena.com/2024/02/03/ethiopia-somaliland-mou-showing-no-progress/>

²³ LAWAL, Shola. "Why is Somalia so angry about Ethiopia's new Red Sea port deal?", *Al Jazeera*. 6th January 2024. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/6/why-is-somalia-angry-about-neighbouring-ethiopias-new-port-deal>

Ethiopia's neighbouring coastal countries, such as Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea, have rejected this agreement with Somaliland. But they are not the only ones, as will be seen in this section.

One of the most apparent reasons for this opposition is the Ethiopian president's stated hostility and aggressiveness, which raises fears of armed confrontation with Eritrea, with whom he maintains a very tense situation. In addition, both Eritrea and Egypt may be apprehensive about Ethiopia's increased naval presence in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which in the event of conflict would give it many advantages.

The Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement appears to have opened up old regional wounds. The situation in the region was already tense and unstable, and this new front that Ethiopia is opening up could aggravate it.

Of particular controversy is also Ethiopia's promised recognition of Somaliland's independence. Somalia has called it an act of aggression against what it considers one of its provinces²⁴. Its President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, has stated that Somalia does not oppose Ethiopia's access to the sea, but that it does oppose Ethiopia's access to the sea by taking over a piece of land²⁵. The situation is complicated by the fact that Ethiopian troops are deployed in Somalia to fight Al Shabaab while President Mohamud says he is ready to defend his nation against Ethiopia.

The situation raises fears of open conflict with Mogadishu. The two countries have long-standing hostilities, the high points of which were the 1977-1978 war and the unresolved dispute over their shared border²⁶.

In addition to the reactions of Governments, it is interesting to pay attention to the reactions of the citizens of the countries involved, which can also open up security loopholes for them. While the majority of Somalilanders and Ethiopians support the

²⁴ YIMENU, Bizuneh and McCABE, Robert. "Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea: success rests on good relations with its neighbours", *The Conversation*. 11th January 2024. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-quest-for-access-to-the-sea-success-rests-on-good-relations-with-its-neighbours-219621>

²⁵ AL JAZEERA. "'Don't do it': Somali president warns Ethiopia over Somaliland port deal". 23rd January 2024. Available in: ['Don't do it': Somali president warns Ethiopia over Somaliland port deal | News | Al Jazeera](#)

²⁶ AYNTÉ, Abdi. *Op. cit.*

agreement²⁷, thousands of citizens from the rest of Somalia have protested in the streets of the capital calling for the defence of their sovereignty. This discontent could be exploited by Al Shabaab to swell its ranks, as it has used animosity towards Ethiopians to its advantage in the past. It would not be the first time that the terrorist group has championed the pan-Somali narrative rooted in anti-Ethiopian sentiment.

Other regional neighbours such as Djibouti, Eritrea and Egypt see this possible move by Eritrea as a threat to them. The first of these, Djibouti, relies heavily for its survival on the fees it charges Ethiopia for use of its coastline. This agreement could mean bankruptcy²⁸ for Djibouti because it would no longer receive 1.5 billion US dollars a year in port fees²⁹.

Eritrea, for its part, perceives the threat of this agreement as existential as it enables the development of an Ethiopian Navy, which could be the first step in an offensive against its territory and independence.

Egypt's fierce opposition to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project adds further tension and complexity to the region's immediate future³⁰. Regarding the Memorandum, Egypt stated that it will not allow any threat to Somalia³¹ and will assist in its defence if necessary. Egypt's Foreign Minister said Ethiopia has become a source of instability in the region³².

On the other hand, from a broader geographical point of view, one must recognise the interconnected dynamics between the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, and their impact on the rest of the globe, which are becoming so evident with the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea in the context of the armed conflict between Israel and Gaza.

Qatar, Turkey and the US, among many others, have spoken out in favour of respecting Mogadishu's sovereignty and therefore against the Ethiopia-Somaliland deal.

²⁷ WELDEMARIAM, Alemayehu. "Ethiopia's deal with Somaliland upends regional dynamics, risking strife across the Horn of Africa", *The Conversation*. 13th January 2024. Available in: <https://theconversation.com/ethiopias-deal-with-somaliland-upends-regional-dynamics-risking-strife-across-the-horn-of-africa-220617>

²⁸ SERRANO, Francisco. "The Ethiopia-Somaliland Port Deal Could Sink Djibouti's Economy", *World Politics Review*. 2nd February 2024. Available in: [Djibouti's Economy Depends on Ethiopia's Trade | WPR \(worldpoliticsreview.com\)](https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/djiboutis-economy-depends-on-ethiopia-trade)

²⁹ AHMAD, Talmiz. *Op. cit.*

³⁰ KELECHA, Mebratu. "Ethiopia's Red Sea gambit raises tensions in Horn of Africa", *The Reporter Ethiopia*. 3rd February 2024. Available in: [Ethiopia's Red Sea Gambit Raises Tensions In Horn Of Africa | The Reporter | Latest Ethiopian News Today \(thereporterethiopia.com\)](https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/ethiopia-red-sea-gambit-raises-tensions-in-horn-of-africa)

³¹ REUTERS. "President Sisi says Egypt will not allow any threat to Somalia or its security". 21st January 2024. Available in: [President Sisi says Egypt will not allow any threat to Somalia or its security | Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-president-sisi-says-egypt-will-not-allow-any-threat-to-somalia-or-its-security-2024-01-21/)

³² REUTERS. "Egypt's FM says Ethiopia has become source of instability in region", *Al Arabiya*. 17th January 2024. Available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/01/17/Egypt-s-FM-says-Ethiopia-has-become-source-of-instability-in-region>

White House National Security Spokesperson John Kirby said in mid-January that the Ethiopia-Somaliland deal could open up a conflict in the region that could damage the fight against Al-Shabaab, the security of the region and even the security of the USA ³³.

It is conceivable that Russia, which has not made a statement on the issue, could support Ethiopia in this conflict. The relationship between the two countries is good, as it is with the Houthis, and the tension in the Red Sea is deeply damaging to Western countries.



Figure 4. Abiy and Putin. Russia-Africa Summit, July 2023. Source: TASS. Al Jazeera

As far as supranational organisations are concerned, the demonstrations are along the same lines as those seen with neighbouring and remote governments. The African Union, the European Union, the United Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the Arab League have spoken along similar lines, urging Ethiopia and Somalia to de-escalate tensions, and in defence of Somali sovereignty. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD³⁴) has been even more involved: which decided to address the issue at the extraordinary summit on 18th January despite Ethiopia's announcement that it would not be able to attend. The summit concluded that Ethiopia cannot sign agreements with the Somali region of Somaliland without the approval of the Somali government³⁵.

³³ EUROPA PRESS. "THE USA says the agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland "threatens to disrupt" the fight against Al Shabaab. 17th January 2024. Available in: [US says Ethiopia-Somaliland deal "threatens to disrupt" fight against Al Shabaab \(europapress.es\)](https://www.europapress.es)

³⁴ Composed of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda.

³⁵ INFOBAE. "Ethiopia cannot make a deal with Somaliland without Somalia's approval, says IGAD". 18th January 2024. Available in: [Ethiopia can't make a deal with Somaliland without Somalia's approval, says IGAD - Infobae](https://www.infobae.com)

7. POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

The possible consequences of the Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement depend on its implementation. For the time being, it is an issue that has been reduced to the realm of rhetoric. And it could stay there, as a mere smoke bomb to distract the attention of a population exhausted by simmering conflict and hunger³⁶. Ambitions to regain access to the sea have been a constant in Ethiopia's recent history as part of nationalist discourse.

But it could also be carried out, which could ignite even more hotly contested regional disputes. It could possibly serve as a spark for an armed conflict with Eritrea or Somalia. This would be a very serious, and unlikely, way out of this situation as none of the three countries can afford such a confrontation. Their political, economic, military and social situation is precarious.

But even if Ethiopia were to go ahead with the deal, contrary to international opinion and norms, the chances of success would be slim. Its military force is more powerful but has been badly decimated after the Tigray war, and it is unlikely to win a quick victory. On the other hand, the Ethiopian government has no control over most of its territory, so engaging in an external conflict does not even seem feasible.

As mentioned, the possibility that seems most realistic is that this move by Ethiopia is a kind of flight forward and that it is rooted in the deep domestic crisis that is tearing the country apart. The intention could be twofold: to divert public attention to a cause that could support a sense of internal unity and to buy some time.

Regarding the internal situation in Ethiopia, it should be noted that Somaliland is governed by the Somali branch of the Ethiopian Prosperity Party, whose legitimacy has been questioned by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which advocates self-government for Ethiopian Somalis. Until the 2018 peace agreement, the ONLF was engaged in a secessionist armed conflict with the Ethiopian government. The agreement with Somaliland could give wings to the ONLF and thus to the struggle for autonomy of

³⁶ ZEZALEM. *Op. cit.*

the Somali community in Ethiopia, which in turn could fuel the latent conflicts of the Amhara and the State of Oromia and even Tigray.

In terms of regional stability, there are several possibilities: from a mutual defence pact between Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea against Ethiopia, to Turkey's support for Somalia, or even Turkey's support for Egypt³⁷.

In any of these scenarios, Abiy's attempts to distract attention from internal crises could generate other crises of greater proportions. At this point, the only peaceful way out is to return to the access to the sea provided by Djibouti or to start new negotiations with the Somali government to obtain it.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland to secure the former's access to the sea has conflicting interests amongst then parties directly or indirectly involved. For Ethiopia, obtaining an outlet to the sea is a right, and to achieve this it does not rule out the use of force, even if, to date, it has not gone beyond the margins of rhetoric. For Somaliland, it is an opportunity to gain recognition as a sovereign and independent State and to gain economic advantages. For Somalia, the terms of the agreement that have emerged constitute an attack on its sovereignty.

International reactions from both neighbouring and more distant countries are supportive of Somalia's sovereignty, i.e. against the agreement. Various supranational organisations have taken the same line.

The most credible explanation for this move by Ethiopia is that it seems to be rooted in an attempt to divert attention from internal difficulties. It is possible that the backlash may have exceeded initial expectations, and this is the reason for the apparent slowdown in the implementation of the agreed terms. The region is a powder keg and any step could trigger unwanted and unacceptable reactions for the countries involved.

³⁷ GARRISON. *Op. cit.*

The possibility of unofficial support for the agreement from powers such as Russia and China, which are increasingly present on the African continent with the consequent loss of prominence of Western powers there, cannot be ruled out. As in many contemporary conflicts, one cannot rule out the possibility of external interference that provokes tensions or conflicts through "proxy forces".

The likelihood of regional disagreements escalating into armed conflict does not seem high, because neither actor is in a position of strength and cannot afford to do so. However, no outcome can be ruled out. In any case, if the Ethiopian President's real intention was to divert attention from internal difficulties and gain time in office, the objectives have been successfully achieved, albeit balancing on a high tension wire in which any false step could prove very costly.

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