Ethiopia's Calculated Use of Maritime Diplomacy to Camouflage its Irredentist Ambitions in the Region

The onus rests squarely on the international community to look beyond Ethiopia's carefully choreographed diplomatic rhetoric and judge its intentions by the explicit pronouncements and actions of its political and military establishment.

Whenever the Ethiopian ruling party finds itself bereft of a defensible legal argument for an array of warped and unlawful ambitions in the region, its customary reflex is to convene a symposium.

Over the past year, consistent with its three-year campaign of aggression against the State of Eritrea, the Prosperity Party (PP), in predictable fashion, has embarked on a convoluted campaign of maritime forum diplomacy. Through the Organisation of blue-economy conferences, the dispatch of delegations to naval security panels, and the sponsorship of strategic dialogues, the Ethiopian regime has sought to manufacture a veneer of international legitimacy around its illegal demand for "sovereign sea access," in the futile effort to launder territorial revisionism through multilateral engagement.

In diplomacy, form invariably betrays intent. Consider the conceptual paradox witnessed in late October 2026, when the Ethiopian Navy, a military institution belonging to a landlocked country, presided over a European Union-supported workshop on maritime security and search-and-rescue operations that brought together Naval Representatives from Puntland and Somaliland alongside the Representatives from Djibouti.

By assembling select, non-autonomous, coastal actors while pointedly bypassing the Federal Government of Somalia in favor of regional administrations, the organizers inadvertently exposed the underlying political architecture of the exercise. A genuinely technical workshop on navigational safety does not begin by undermining the recognized sovereignty of a coastal state. Rather, such platforms appear designed to normalize the participation of a landlocked state in

Red Sea security arrangements, gradually eroding the fundamental legal and geographical distinction between littoral states and their hinterland neighbours.

This institutional choreography is further reinforced through domestic policy platforms, such as the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, and newly established strategic institutes, where state-aligned interlocutors routinely advance a doctrine that should alarm the international community.

Notably, the recent Tana High-Level Forum, convened in of Bahir Dar from 23–25 October 2026, served as yet another platform to project this dangerous agenda. Addressing the forum, Ethiopia's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) Director General, Ambassador Redwan Hussein, argued that because the Red Sea has evolved into a geopolitical nexus for global superpowers, driven by its strategic significance, abundant resources, and critical commercial arteries, landlocked-Ethiopia insists on being granted a formal role in guaranteeing its maritime security. He maintained that the responsibility of securing the Red Sea is not a mandate reserved solely for coastal nations.

Stripped of its academic varnish, the PP's distorted proposition is that Ethiopia's demographic scale, reportedly exceeding 130 million, and its mounting macroeconomic pressures, somehow confer a quasi-moral entitlement to override the established territorial boundaries of neighbouring states. PP officials routinely speak of refusing to remain a "prisoner of geography" and portray Ethiopia's return to the Red Sea as a "historical inevitability". Yet invoking demographic weight or economic necessity to justify claims over another nation's coastline is neither legitimate nor given; it is a familiar rhetoric of irredentism.

For Eritrea, the legal and historical record admits no ambiguity, nor does it require an endless succession of seminar rooms to amplify the indelible truth. International law establishes a clear and well-established equilibrium between the sovereign rights of coastal states and the transit needs of landlocked countries. Landlocked states enjoy the right of access to and from the sea through good-faith negotiated commercial arrangements, governed by applicable international law, appropriate bilateral agreements, and the sovereign regulatory jurisdiction of transit states. What international law does not confer upon them, however, is any unilateral entitlement to annex port infrastructure, station naval assets on foreign shores, or impose arrangements that compromise the sovereignty of a neighbouring coastal state.

Moreover, Eritrea has never opposed mutually beneficial commercial utilization of its ports, provided such arrangements are founded on respect for Eritrean sovereignty. Indeed, even following the outbreak of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war in May 1998, Eritrea did not block or obstruct Ethiopia's access to its port facilities at Assab and Massawa. Eritrea's subsequent offers for Ethiopia to use its ports to facilitate the transportation of vital food assistance in 2000 and again in 2002 were likewise rejected by Ethiopia. In a stark reversal, the PP now weaponizes that

self-inflicted isolation, framing "sovereign sea access" as an existential imperative to justify expansionist rhetoric and military aggression.

Furthermore, following the 2018 peace declaration, Eritrea once again opened its doors in good faith, offering an opportunity to transcend the destructive legacy of confrontation and establish a new foundation for bilateral cooperation. It was the Ethiopian ruling party, however, that squandered this historic opportunity, reverting instead to hegemonic nostalgia, belligerent posturing, and increasingly brazen territorial rhetoric.

This historical record exposes the hollowness of today's narrative: Ethiopia's lack of access to Eritrean ports was never the consequence of an Eritrean policy of exclusion, but rather a consequence of decisions taken by successive Ethiopian governments.

The international community must therefore discern Ethiopia's carefully designed diplomatic rhetoric and assess its intentions against the explicit pronouncements and conduct of its political and military establishment. Diplomacy is rendered meaningless when conciliatory language in conference halls and hotel ballrooms is simultaneously contradicted by the Army's top brass and senior Government officials openly threatening to secure sea access through the use of force; designating Assab as a strategic objective; and questioning the inviolability of internationally recognized borders. A government, in this case of a landlocked country, cannot credibly posture as a guarantor of Red Sea maritime security while its own senior officials contemplate actions that would constitute a flagrant violation of Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which unequivocally prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.

The increasingly brazen character of this irredentist rhetoric was further underscored on 13 November 2026, when Ethiopia's Field Marshal Birhanu Jula, in an address to representatives of the city of Mekele, asserted that Dogali, Gundet, and Adulis belonged to Tigray, before extending this extraordinary historical revisionism to Somalia by claiming that the port of Zeila was originally Ethiopian.

Such pronouncements are neither isolated verbal indiscretions nor inconsequential political theatrics. They are part and parcel of the ruling Prosperity Party's longstanding and deeply troubling irredentist narrative, which seeks to manufacture historical pretexts for territorial claims against Eritrea and other countries in the Horn of Africa. The international community would be gravely mistaken to dismiss such declarations as mere domestic political posturing. When territorial pretensions are repeatedly articulated by senior military and political figures, particularly against the backdrop of explicit threats of force, they must be treated for what they are: a dangerous challenge to the sovereignty of neighbouring states, the inviolability of international borders, and the foundational principles of the international order.

In the event, external partners, particularly European and multilateral donors providing financial or institutional backing to maritime initiatives involving landlocked states with publicly declared

expansionist agenda, would do well to reflect on the wider implications and unintended consequences of their patronage. Subsidizing revisionist narratives does not advance regional integration or maritime security; it risks emboldening adventurism along one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime corridors.

In contrast to the PP's destabilizing ambiguity, Eritrea's principled position on the Red Sea is straightforward and firmly anchored in regional consensus: the security, environmental stewardship, and governance of the Red Sea are the exclusive prerogatives of its littoral states. Non-littoral actors possess neither the geographical standing nor the sovereign mandate to dictate the security architecture governing the Red Sea. Admitting non-coastal states into mechanisms intended for littoral governance inevitably dilutes the sovereign prerogatives of coastal nations, invites extraneous great-power rivalries and proxy competition, and risks undermining the stability of international maritime trade.

This principle was reaffirmed on 4 October 2026, when the leaders of Eritrea, Egypt, Somalia, and Sudan issued the El Alamein Joint Declaration, underscoring that, while freedom of navigation remains inviolable, the governance of the Red Sea is the exclusive prerogative of its coastal states. Together, these littoral nations have articulated a clear position in defence of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference.

Crucially, it must also be underscored that the wider Red Sea states, cognizant of the geostrategic and geopolitical significance of the corridor, are continuously engaged in structured diplomatic consultations. Reaffirming that Red Sea security rests squarely with its direct littoral states, these nations are engaged in accurately identifying threats to regional peace in order to better coordinate future security measures. Worth noting is Eritrea's own track record: across 35 years of independence, its Red Sea coastline has recorded zero incidents of piracy or maritime insecurity.

Meanwhile, major global powers, including the United States and China, continue to uphold the position that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Horn of Africa nations must be strictly respected, and that Red Sea security remains the exclusive domain of the concerned littoral states.

Ultimately, any seasoned observer of the Horn of Africa would recognize that the PP's sudden preoccupation with maritime forums has far less to do with the technical imperatives of trade logistics than with domestic political survival and the calculated use of maritime rhetoric to camouflage its irredentist ambitions in the region. Confronted with protracted internal conflicts, acute economic dislocation, and deepening fractures within its internal governance architecture, Ethiopia's ruling establishment appears increasingly inclined to manufacture an external strategic preoccupation to rally domestic sentiment and divert attention from its mounting governance failures. Yet the modern history of the region offers an unmistakable lesson: successive Ethiopian administrations that have sought to resolve their internal political crises by projecting

instability beyond their borders have invariably ended up compounding their own vulnerabilities and courting strategic ruin.

Sovereignty, at the end of the day, is not an obsolete artifact to be negotiated away in policy colloquiums, and internationally recognized boundaries are not provisional suggestions.

Eritrea remains steadfast in its commitment to genuine regional peace, mutually beneficial economic cooperation, and respect for international law. But it will not surrender an inch of its territory or maritime domain to diplomatic theatre, economic coercion, or the threat or use of force.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea
Research and Documentation Division
26 November 2026