



CDRC

Digest

August 2026 Vol. 10 No. 7

Contents

Page 1

Egypt is Trying to Drive Developments in the Horn: Will it Succeed?



CDRC is a non-profit, independent Ethiopia-based policy institute engaged in research and analysis. The Centre looks at opportunities and key challenges in the Horn of Africa, and focuses on policy ideas on development, sustainable peace and security.

The CDRC Digest is the Centre's monthly publication, endeavoring to provide an African perspective on political, economic and social developments as well as mechanisms of sustaining peace and security in the Horn of Africa, the African continent and beyond. The publication is based on dialogue, rigorous research and analysis.

A monthly publication of the Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC), in partnership with the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ethiopia

CDRC Digest Team:

Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, Ph.D (Executive Director)
Amb. Kasahun Dender (Deputy Executive Director)
Wegene Mengistu (Senior Researcher)
Yidnekachew Mitiku Ph.D (Senior Researcher)

Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation
Ethio-China Friendship Avenue
Medina Tower 5th floor
Tel: +251 975310129

Email: communication@cdrcethiopia.com
<http://www.cdrcethiopia.com>

Egypt is Trying to Drive Developments in the Horn: Will it Succeed?

Al-Jazeera recently published an article titled "Who is driving diplomacy in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, and why?" that examines a series of diplomatic consultations in Cairo involving Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, and a senior United States envoy. The article correctly identifies Cairo's growing effort to position itself as a principal diplomatic coordinator on security issues in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. However, its framing under-specifies the strategic architecture underpinning the diplomatic choreography. The significance of the consultations lies not merely in the meetings themselves, but in the way Egypt is attempting to aggregate disparate bilateral disputes into a coherent regional narrative that advances its broader geopolitical objectives.

Egypt's convening of Somalia and Eritrea is therefore not simply the gathering of states with shared concerns about regional stability. Rather, it represents an attempt to assemble a coalition of actors, each carrying its own independent grievance against Ethiopia—or possessing domestic and regional incentives that Cairo can strategically leverage. Eritrea's growing estrangement from Ethiopia following the deterioration of relations in the aftermath of the Pretoria Agreement, Somalia's continuing sensitivities over the Ethiopia-Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding—despite the temporary easing of tensions through Turkish mediation—and Egypt's longstanding concerns over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) are fundamentally different disputes. They arise from distinct historical contexts, involve different strategic interests, and require different political solutions.

Egypt's diplomatic innovation lies in seeking to weave these separate fault lines into a single strategic narrative. Rather than presenting them as isolated bilateral disagreements, Cairo increasingly frames them collectively as elements of a broader

regional security challenge, perhaps associated with what they might believe is Ethiopia's expanding influence. This reframing is particularly important because it makes the conversation more intelligible and compelling to external partners, especially the United States and other Western powers. Instead of asking Washington to engage in three separate disputes—over the Nile, Somaliland, and Ethiopia-Eritrea relations—Egypt presents them as interconnected components of a wider Horn of Africa and Red Sea security agenda requiring coordinated international attention.

Within this framework, the participation of a senior United States envoy assumes particular significance for Cairo. Its importance lies less in any immediate American military or financial contribution than in the perceived "political legitimacy" it confers upon the process. The presence of the United States elevates what might otherwise be viewed as an Egyptian-led consultation among states with bilateral disagreements with Ethiopia into a broader discussion on regional security. In diplomatic terms, American participation broadens the frame from an anti-Ethiopian consultation to an internationally recognized dialogue on the future security architecture of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. This represents a classic exercise in agenda-setting and diplomatic venue management: legitimacy is derived not from formal alliances or binding commitments, but from the composition of the participants and the framing of the discussions themselves.

Seen from this perspective, the Cairo consultations are best understood as an exercise in coalition-building through diplomatic venue capture rather than through treaty-based alignment. Egypt is not constructing a formal regional bloc; instead, it is creating a political platform through which multiple

grievances can be articulated under a common strategic narrative. Such a platform allows Cairo to amplify concerns that might otherwise remain fragmented and to position itself as the indispensable convener of regional security discussions.

The Cairo meetings should also be viewed within the broader context of evolving regional alignments. They appear less as an entirely new diplomatic initiative than as the public, Washington-facing manifestation of relationships that have been gradually taking shape elsewhere in the region. In particular, the convergence of interests among Egypt, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), Eritrea, and elements within the TPLF and its army has become increasingly visible in the context of developments along Sudan's Blue Nile front and Ethiopia's northern strategic environment. While these actors do not necessarily constitute a formal alliance—and their interests diverge in important respects—their tactical convergence on limiting Ethiopia's strategic options has become more apparent over time. The Cairo consultations therefore provide a diplomatic façade through which these overlapping interests can be presented as part of a broader regional security dialogue.

The most uncertain component of this emerging configuration remains Somalia. Unlike Egypt and Eritrea, whose strategic concerns regarding Ethiopia are relatively structural, Somalia's participation appears considerably more contingent and transactional. Mogadishu's overriding concern remains the protection of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly regarding the Somaliland question. If these concerns are effectively addressed through bilateral engagement with Ethiopia or sustained Turkish mediation, Somalia may have fewer incentives to remain closely aligned with a broader balancing strategy directed against Addis Ababa. Conversely, renewed tensions over maritime access or sovereignty could reinforce Somalia's incentive to cooperate more closely with Cairo. Whether Somalia ultimately becomes a durable member of a broader balancing coalition or continues to pursue a more flexible, issue-based

diplomacy therefore remains one of the central unanswered questions. It is precisely this distinction—between a lasting strategic alignment and a temporary convergence of interests—that the Al Jazeera analysis leaves largely unexplored. Understanding that distinction is essential to assessing whether the Cairo consultations represent the foundation of a new regional order or simply another episode in the Horn of Africa's long history of fluid and transactional geopolitical alignments.

Ongoing Dynamics

At a time when Ethiopia's maritime ambitions continue to reshape regional geopolitics, instability persists along the Red Sea maritime corridor, and external powers are recalibrating their engagement with the region, the meetings appeared intended to project an image of strategic convergence among countries that share concerns about Ethiopia's growing regional influence. Whether that convergence translates into a durable political alignment, however, remains far less certain. Other observers take a more critical view of Ethiopia's approach to maritime access, arguing that it may have generated more regional friction than the current environment can readily absorb. These voices tend to advise that Ethiopia would be better served by prioritizing its internal vulnerabilities before pursuing this objective further.

Although only limited information has emerged from the consultations, it is evident that security in both the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea dominated the discussions. This in itself is significant. It illustrates how issues that were once treated as separate policy domains—Ethiopia's success on the Nile water development and the Nile dispute, the security of the Red Sea shipping lanes, Gulf rivalries, and broader geopolitical competition—have increasingly merged into a single strategic theatre. With Gulf states now actively engaged, the Horn, the Red Sea, and the Gulf are increasingly viewed as a single, inseparable geopolitical space — an integrated security complex where developments in one arena rapidly produce consequences in another.

The significance of the Cairo consultations therefore lies less in the specific outcomes announced publicly than in the diplomatic choreography itself. Egypt appeared to be seeking to demonstrate that it remains capable of convening regional actors around shared security concerns, while simultaneously positioning itself as a valuable and reliable partner to Washington in the region. It is worth noting, however, that the meetings appear to have consisted primarily of separate bilateral and trilateral consultations rather than a unified strategic dialogue involving all participants. This distinction is meaningful, as it suggests the absence of a fully shared strategic vision among the parties. The United States, Egypt, Somalia, and Eritrea continue to approach the Horn of Africa through somewhat different priorities, threat perceptions, and policy objectives. That said, other observers suggest that these actors may nonetheless converge around shared concerns arising from Ethiopia's stated policies and diplomatic engagements, even absent a formally unified strategic framework.

Nevertheless, Egypt has every incentive to cultivate the perception of an emerging strategic coalition. In international politics, perceptions often shape realities. By projecting diplomatic coordination, Cairo seeks to strengthen both its external bargaining position and its domestic political narrative. Internationally, such an image reinforces Egypt's claim that concerns over Ethiopia are shared by a wider coalition rather than representing a bilateral dispute over the Nile. Domestically, it allows the Egyptian leadership to demonstrate active diplomacy in defense of national security interests at a time when the GERD issue remains politically sensitive. In effect, Cairo is attempting to shape the regional narrative even where genuine policy convergence remains limited. This structure is itself revealing. A genuine multilateral security architecture would require Somalia, Eritrea, SAF, and Egypt to reconcile threat perceptions that are not, in fact, aligned — Mogadishu's preoccupation with Somaliland, Asmara's residual grievances from the Pretoria settlement and wanting to destabilize Ethiopia, and Cairo's Nile-security anxieties are

adjacent but not identical concerns. By keeping the consultations bilateral and trilateral rather than plenary, Egypt avoids having to paper over these divergences in a single joint communiqué, while still allowing the appearance of convergence to circulate through the choreography of the visits themselves. The coalition, in other words, is being performed one meeting at a time rather than negotiated as a whole.

Egypt's Security Calculus is Moving Beyond the Nile

For more than a decade, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been the defining issue in relations between Cairo and Addis Ababa. While the dispute over Nile waters remains at the core of Egypt's national security doctrine, Cairo's concerns extend beyond the immediate question of water allocation. From Egypt's perspective, the strategic challenge lies not only in the volume of water retained by the GERD, but in Ethiopia's success in overturning the historical hydro-political order that long ensured Egypt's dominance over Nile water utilization. Equally significant is the prospect that regulated, year-round flows from the GERD could unlock Sudan's vast agricultural and industrial potential, enabling Khartoum to utilize substantially larger volumes of Nile water and thereby further eroding the historical distribution of benefits along the river. In Egyptian strategic thinking, therefore, the GERD represents not merely an engineering project but a structural shift in the political economy and balance of power of the Nile Basin.

A critical strategic question therefore emerges: will Egypt be willing to accept a transformed Sudan whose economic and agricultural potential is unlocked by the GERD? From Egypt's perspective, the answer is far from straightforward. Historically, Egypt's Nile policy has been premised on preserving a hydro-political order that guaranteed its privileged access to the river's waters. While Cairo has consistently affirmed Sudan's rights under existing Nile agreements, a Sudan capable of exploiting regulated, year-round flows from the GERD would fundamentally alter the political economy of the Nile

Basin. Such a transformation would enable Sudan to expand irrigated agriculture on an unprecedented scale, increase hydroelectric generation, accelerate industrialization, and become a much larger consumer of Nile waters than has historically been the case. In effect, Sudan would move from being a largely passive beneficiary of seasonal flows to an active and powerful stakeholder in a new basin-wide development model.

This raises an uncomfortable strategic dilemma for Egypt. Publicly, Cairo has long emphasized solidarity with Sudan on Nile issues. Yet a prosperous, agriculturally expansive, and industrializing Sudan — one drawing on Nile water volumes well beyond its 1959 allocation as development proceeds — would inevitably narrow the strategic flexibility Egypt has historically enjoyed under the status quo. The very development benefits GERD promises to deliver Sudan are precisely those that would consolidate a new hydro-political reality, one in which the historical distribution of Nile benefits is permanently altered.

Consequently, Egypt's concerns extend beyond Ethiopia itself. They encompass the wider redistribution of economic opportunity and strategic influence across the Nile Basin. The GERD is viewed not only as enhancing Ethiopia's upstream leverage but also as creating the conditions for Sudan to emerge as a far more consequential agricultural and industrial power. Together, these developments would shift the basin away from the historical model in which Egypt remained the overwhelmingly dominant beneficiary of the Nile.

Whether Cairo ultimately accepts this transformation or continues to resist it will be one of the defining strategic questions for the future of the Nile Basin. Attempting to preserve a hydro-political order that is steadily becoming obsolete may prove increasingly difficult as physical infrastructure, demographic pressures, and economic realities reshape the incentives of all riparian states. A more sustainable approach may ultimately lie not in resisting the redistribution of development opportunities, but in

negotiating a new cooperative framework that recognizes the legitimate development aspirations of upstream and downstream states alike while safeguarding the core water security interests of each.

At the same time, Cairo's assessment of Ethiopia appears to have broadened considerably. Ethiopia's growing diplomatic activism, pursuit of sovereign maritime access, expanding regional partnerships, and increasing military and economic weight have collectively contributed to a shift in how Addis Ababa is perceived — from a state viewed primarily as an upstream riparian to one increasingly regarded as Egypt's principal strategic competitor in Northeast Africa. The Nile dispute has thus become embedded within a wider geopolitical contest over regional influence, connectivity, and the future security architecture of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

Egypt also appears attentive to Ethiopia's internal vulnerabilities — including the crises in Tigray, Amhara, and parts of Oromia — which some in Cairo may view as points of relative fragility. Similarly, tensions between Ethiopia and its neighbors, Eritrea and Sudan, may be seen by some Egyptian strategists as openings to advance Egyptian interests. There is reason to believe that Cairo perceives these fault lines as opportunities worth engaging with, whether through indirect means or by cultivating relationships with relevant actors. Regardless of Cairo's broader posture toward peace in Sudan, a degree of separation between Sudanese and Ethiopian positions on the Nile question would likely constitute a strategic advantage for Egypt.

In many respects, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. A comparable strategic concern emerged during the period following the federation of Eritrea in 1952. For the first time in the modern era, Ethiopia possessed an extensive Red Sea coastline while simultaneously controlling the headwaters of the Blue Nile. From Cairo's perspective, the combination of upstream hydrological influence and direct maritime access significantly enhanced Ethiopia's geopolitical

position. Although the subsequent independence of Eritrea in 1993 fundamentally altered that equation by rendering Ethiopia landlocked, Ethiopia's contemporary efforts to secure reliable sovereign access to the sea have revived long-standing Egyptian concerns about the emergence of a stronger, more strategically integrated Ethiopian state capable of projecting influence from the Nile Basin to the Red Sea. Today, it is this convergence of hydro-politics and maritime geopolitics—rather than either issue in isolation—that increasingly shapes Egypt's strategic calculations.

This evolution reflects a profound shift in Egyptian strategic thinking, driven less by changes in Egypt's core interests than by the transformation of Ethiopia itself. For decades, Cairo's strategic calculus rested on several enduring assumptions. First, it assumed that Ethiopia's chronic internal instability, political fragmentation, recurring conflicts, and limited state capacity would prevent it from developing the institutional, financial, and technical capabilities necessary to utilize the Nile's waters fully. Second, Egypt benefited from Ethiopia's historically difficult relations with many of its neighbors, which limited Addis Ababa's regional influence and strategic reach. Third, Cairo successfully mobilized its diplomatic influence with international financial institutions and major external partners to discourage financing for large-scale upstream water infrastructure in Ethiopia, thereby preserving the historical status quo on Nile utilization.

These assumptions shaped Egyptian policy for decades. The prevailing expectation in Cairo was not simply that Ethiopia lacked the capacity to fundamentally alter the hydro-political balance, but that structural domestic weaknesses and regional fault lines would continue to constrain its strategic ambitions for the foreseeable future.

However, developments during the first decade of the twenty-first century fundamentally challenged this long-standing assessment. A period of relative internal stability and sustained economic growth enabled Ethiopia to dramatically expand its state

capacity, invest in major infrastructure projects, and pursue an increasingly ambitious regional foreign policy. Most consequentially, Ethiopia demonstrated an unprecedented ability to mobilize domestic political and financial resources to construct the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam largely without external financing—thereby circumventing one of the principal constraints upon which Egypt's traditional strategy had relied. For Cairo, this represented not merely a setback in the Nile dispute but a strategic surprise that overturned assumptions that had underpinned Egyptian policy for generations.

At the same time, the Arab Spring profoundly altered Egypt's own strategic environment. Beginning in 2011, successive waves of domestic political upheaval, economic disruption, and institutional uncertainty forced Cairo to concentrate inward. Managing political transition, restoring economic stability, and confronting internal security challenges inevitably diverted attention and diplomatic resources away from long-term regional competition. During precisely the period when Ethiopia was consolidating its internal capabilities and advancing transformative projects such as the GERD, Egypt found itself preoccupied with preserving domestic stability. The result was a significant shift in the regional balance that Cairo had neither anticipated nor effectively countered.

As Egypt gradually re-emerged from this period of internal turbulence, it found itself confronting a markedly different geopolitical landscape. Ethiopia was no longer viewed simply as an upstream riparian seeking greater utilization of Nile waters; rather, it had come to be seen as an increasingly influential regional actor, with growing diplomatic reach, expanding economic weight, and broader strategic ambitions. Consequently, Egyptian strategic thinking appears to have broadened considerably in response. That said, Ethiopia continues to face significant internal challenges and vulnerabilities of its own. Resolving its internal disputes and strengthening relations with its neighbors remains essential — not only for Ethiopia's own stability, but

for the broader regional trajectory. Should these internal and regional challenges remain unaddressed, they may continue to present opportunities that external actors, including Egypt, could seek to leverage — potentially reinforcing existing fractures and constraining prospects for genuine regional transformation.

Today, Cairo increasingly interprets Ethiopian actions not as isolated policy initiatives but as interconnected components of a larger project aimed at reshaping the regional balance of power. Ethiopia's pursuit of sovereign maritime access, its engagement with Somaliland, its evolving role in Somalia, its diplomatic activism across the Horn of Africa, and its continued insistence on sovereign rights over Nile development are viewed through a single strategic lens. From Egypt's perspective, these are not separate issues but different manifestations of Ethiopia's emergence as a regional power capable of challenging long-established geopolitical arrangements.

This integrated perspective has fundamentally altered Egypt's security doctrine. The challenge posed by Ethiopia is no longer confined to hydro-politics or the management of transboundary water resources. Instead, it is increasingly understood as a broader geopolitical challenge involving the future distribution of power and influence across the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. In Cairo's strategic calculus, the fresh waters of the Nile and the salt waters of the Red Sea have become part of the same security equation. Managing Ethiopia, therefore, is no longer simply about protecting downstream water security; it is about shaping the wider regional order in a manner that preserves Egypt's strategic position in Northeast Africa.

Whether this assessment fully captures Ethiopia's actual intentions is, of course, a separate question. Nonetheless, in international politics, perceptions often carry as much weight as underlying realities. Egypt's contemporary regional diplomacy — including its deepening engagement with Somalia and Eritrea and its efforts to internationalize discussions on Horn of Africa security — can

arguably be better understood against the backdrop of this evolving strategic outlook. Cairo appears to be responding not only to the GERD, but also to what it perceives as the emergence of a more capable, confident, and strategically consequential Ethiopia than it may have anticipated a generation ago. At the same time, it is worth considering that Cairo may also be drawing on this narrative instrumentally, in service of its own broader national interests.

In this regard, Egypt increasingly wants to conceptualize the Nile Basin and the Red Sea as a single interconnected security complex, although it's not a new phenomenon. The distinction between freshwater and maritime security has become blurred. Ethiopia's capacity to challenge the historical status quo over Nile water utilization is now perceived alongside its aspiration to become a maritime actor with greater access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Consequently, the "two waters"—the freshwater of the Nile and the saltwater of the Red Sea—have become strategically inseparable within Egyptian security planning. Both are viewed as critical theatres in which shifts in regional power could directly affect Egypt's long-term national security.

This integrated perspective also reflects the growing strategic importance of the Red Sea itself. For Egypt, the Red Sea is no longer merely a shipping corridor linking the Suez Canal to global markets. It has always been an extension of Egypt's national security perimeter. The security of maritime trade, freedom of navigation, the stability of Bab el-Mandeb, and the uninterrupted operation of the Suez Canal all directly affect Egypt's economic resilience and geopolitical standing. Consequently, developments along the African coast of the Red Sea have acquired strategic importance comparable to developments along the Nile.

Somalia has Become the Strategic Pivot

Somalia occupies a particularly important place within Egypt's regional strategy since the 1950s. Its significance extends well beyond its internal political

fragility or counterterrorism challenges. Geographically, Somalia commands Africa's longest coastline and occupies a strategic position adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. Politically, it has become central to regional debates over sovereignty, maritime access, and the future balance of power in the Horn.

The deterioration in Ethiopia-Somalia relations following the January 2024 Memorandum of Understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland transformed Somalia from a peripheral actor into a central element of regional diplomacy. Although the agreement has effectively been placed on hold following Turkish mediation and subsequent diplomatic normalization between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, its strategic consequences continue to shape regional alignments.

For Ethiopia, the Somaliland initiative appears to have served several strategic purposes simultaneously. While securing long-term maritime access was likely a central objective, the initiative also seems to have generated broader strategic leverage within the wider regional contest. By opening a new front in regional diplomacy, Ethiopia arguably redirected some regional attention away from the Nile dispute, while also encouraging Egypt to divide its diplomatic focus between water security and maritime politics. Viewed this way, the MoU functioned not merely as a maritime strategy but as a wider geopolitical maneuver aimed at reshaping the regional agenda. Some observers may reasonably ask what tangible benefit Ethiopia has derived from this move. Perhaps its most notable achievement has been to normalize the question of Ethiopian access to the sea — transforming what was once a largely unspoken aspiration into a legitimate and openly discussed policy objective.

Somalia's response further accelerated regional realignments. Fearful that Ethiopia's initiative challenged its sovereignty and territorial integrity, Mogadishu actively sought stronger diplomatic and security cooperation with Egypt. For Cairo, Somalia presented an opportunity to re-establish a more

permanent strategic foothold in the Horn while simultaneously increasing political pressure on Ethiopia. Egyptian military cooperation, security assistance, and diplomatic engagement with Somalia therefore serve both bilateral objectives and Cairo's wider regional strategy.

Eritrea: A Tactical Partner, not a Strategic Ally

Eritrea represents another layer of complexity in Egypt's regional calculations. Owing to its extensive Red Sea coastline, strategic geographic location, and historically volatile relationship with Ethiopia, Eritrea remains indispensable to any discussion of regional security for Cairo. Yet Asmara's interests only partially overlap with those of Cairo.

While both Egypt and Eritrea share concerns regarding Ethiopia's expanding regional influence, their motivations differ significantly. Egypt's principal objective remains constraining Ethiopia's strategic rise and preserving leverage over the Nile dispute. Eritrea's priorities, by contrast, are driven primarily by regime survival, regional autonomy, and maintaining a favorable military balance with Ethiopia. Asmara has consistently demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with diverse external partners whenever such cooperation serves its own strategic interests. This was observed in 2018 when it allied with Addis Ababa, making Cairo desperate to look for fault lines.

This distinction limits the durability of any Egypt-Eritrea partnership. Rather than representing a formal alliance, the relationship is better understood as a convergence of tactical interests. Both governments currently benefit from coordinating positions regarding Ethiopia, but neither is likely to subordinate its broader strategic objectives to the priorities of the other. Cairo may calculate that continued friction between Eritrea and Ethiopia serves its own interests by keeping Addis Ababa's attention divided. Conversely, a genuine rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea would likely be viewed in Cairo as an unwelcome development, insofar as it could reduce Egypt's regional leverage.

Can Egypt Actually Shape the Region?

The critical question remains whether Egypt possesses sufficient leverage to drive developments in the Horn of Africa. The answer is likely more mixed than Cairo's vocal diplomacy suggests.

Egypt unquestionably retains important sources of influence. It remains one of Africa's largest military powers, exercises considerable diplomatic weight within the Arab world and the African Union, controls the Suez Canal, and maintains longstanding security partnerships with major international actors. These assets provide Cairo with significant convening power and enable it to shape regional diplomatic narratives.

However, influence should not be confused with control. The Horn of Africa has become an increasingly multipolar strategic arena in which no single actor possesses the capacity to determine outcomes unilaterally. Ethiopia remains the region's demographic, economic, and military heavyweight despite its internal security challenges. Turkey has substantially expanded its military and economic footprint in Somalia. The United Arab Emirates continues to wield considerable influence through ports, logistics networks, and security partnerships. Saudi Arabia is deepening its engagement along the Red Sea. The United States remains focused on maritime security and counterterrorism, while Russia and China continue to pursue strategic access and political influence. Qatar and Iran also maintain growing interests across different parts of the region. Israel, which appears to have secured a notably favorable strategic position in Somaliland, is likewise emerging as a significant factor shaping regional politics and the broader competition among middle powers.

Within this crowded geopolitical landscape, Egypt's capacity to shape outcomes depends less on its own capabilities than on its ability to sustain overlapping coalitions and proxies among actors whose interests frequently diverge. That is an inherently difficult task. For now, Somalia's priorities remain domestic stabilization and sovereignty. Eritrea values its

potential to thwart Ethiopia above all else. Washington's objectives extend well beyond the Nile dispute. Even among Arab states, competition over influence in the Horn often produces competing rather than complementary policies. Consequently, Egypt can influence regional developments, but it cannot unilaterally drive them.

A Region Defined by Competitive Multipolarity

Ultimately, the Cairo consultations illustrate an important geopolitical reality: the Horn of Africa is entering an era of competitive multipolarity that is more visible at present than bloc politics. States are increasingly engaging in flexible, issue-specific partnerships rather than fixed alliances. Temporary alignments will continue to emerge around particular crises, but they are unlikely to evolve into durable strategic coalitions because the interests of regional actors only partially overlap.

For Egypt, this suggests that diplomacy will remain an essential instrument for managing Ethiopia's regional influence — including, potentially, by engaging with Ethiopia's internal fault lines and regional vulnerabilities where opportunities arise. However, diplomacy alone is unlikely to reverse the structural transformations currently underway. Ethiopia's demographic scale, economic trajectory, central geographic position, and continuing pursuit of maritime access suggest that it will remain a defining actor in the region's future security architecture, provided it is able to overcome its internal vulnerabilities and fault lines.

The question, therefore, is not whether Egypt can isolate or contain Ethiopia. Rather, it is whether Cairo can successfully shape the emerging regional order in ways that protect its own interests while accommodating the reality that the Horn of Africa is becoming increasingly interconnected, contested, and strategically multipolar. The evidence thus far suggests that Egypt can influence this evolving order, but it is unlikely to dominate it.

Why Washington's Role Matters

The participation of a senior United States envoy in the Cairo consultations added a significant international dimension to the discussions and underscored Washington's renewed strategic engagement in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. At a time when the region is experiencing overlapping security crises, intensifying geopolitical competition, and growing uncertainty over the future regional order, the presence of the United States signaled that developments in the Horn are no longer viewed as peripheral regional concerns but as issues with direct implications for global security, international trade, and great-power competition.

Following separate meetings in Cairo with Somali and Eritrean officials, US President's Senior Adviser for Africa, Massad Boulos, emphasized themes that have increasingly defined Washington's engagement in the region. After meeting Somalia's Foreign Minister, Boulos stated that the discussions focused on "important issues of security and stability in the Horn of Africa," including regional stability and support for Somalia's domestic political dialogue. Likewise, following his meeting with Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh, he noted that both sides had explored opportunities to strengthen cooperation in trade, regional economic development, and security, while stressing the importance of "working together constructively to address regional conflicts and advance lasting peace, stability, and prosperity in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa."

These carefully calibrated public statements reveal several important features of Washington's current approach. First, the United States is framing its engagement in terms of regional stability rather than bilateral disputes. Second, it seeks to broaden its agenda beyond traditional security cooperation by incorporating economic development and regional integration. Third, Washington is signaling that the security of the Horn of Africa and that of the Red Sea are inseparable components of a single strategic theater requiring coordinated diplomacy.

For Washington, the Horn of Africa remains closely

tied to several enduring strategic priorities: preventing state collapse, containing violent extremist organizations, preserving freedom of navigation through one of the world's busiest maritime corridors, and preventing strategic competitors from expanding their influence. However, these priorities have acquired greater urgency following the disruption of Red Sea shipping caused by the Houthi conflict, the war in Sudan, renewed instability in Somalia, and growing competition among regional middle powers and global actors alike. The Horn has therefore moved from being primarily a counterterrorism theater to becoming an increasingly important arena in the broader contest over regional order.

At the same time, Washington's interests only partially overlap with those of Egypt. Cairo naturally seeks to portray the American presence as evidence of international support for its broader regional agenda. Yet there is little evidence that the United States has embraced Egypt's strategic objective of constraining Ethiopia's regional rise. Rather, Washington appears primarily interested in preventing the emergence of another destabilizing regional crisis while maintaining constructive relations with all major actors, including Ethiopia, Somalia, Egypt, Eritrea, and Sudan.

This distinction is important. The United States does not appear to view the Horn of Africa through the same lens as Egypt. Whereas Cairo's regional calculations remain heavily influenced by the balance of power vis-à-vis Ethiopia, Washington approaches the region through a broader strategic framework encompassing maritime security, regional stability, counterterrorism, migration, commercial shipping, and great-power competition. Consequently, American participation in the Cairo consultations should not necessarily be interpreted as an endorsement of a regional coalition directed against Ethiopia. Rather, it likely reflects Washington's effort to remain diplomatically engaged with all key stakeholders while preserving flexibility in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment. Indeed, Ethiopia occupies its own distinct place in American strategic thinking —

encompassing critical minerals, regional counterterrorism cooperation, and broader leverage considerations — a position that is not contingent on alignment against U.S. rivals, nor necessarily tethered to Washington's relationship with Egypt.

Whether the United States is attempting to construct a broader diplomatic architecture for the Horn of Africa or simply seeking to prevent simultaneous crises from converging into a larger regional conflict remains an open question. What is increasingly clear, however, is that Washington recognizes that the traditional compartmentalization of regional issues is no longer tenable. The security of the Red Sea, political transitions in Somalia, the conflict in Sudan, Ethiopia's regional ambitions or its internal difficulties, and the strategic calculations of Gulf states have become mutually reinforcing dynamics that require integrated policy responses rather than isolated diplomatic initiatives.

The Dam Dispute Remains Unresolved, but No Longer Stands Alone

Although the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has for years been the defining issue in Egypt-Ethiopia relations, there is no indication that the Cairo consultations generated any new developments regarding the dispute. The absence of public discussion on the dam should not be interpreted as evidence that the issue has diminished in importance. Rather, it illustrates a more fundamental transformation in Egypt's strategic outlook.

The GERD has gradually become one component of a much broader geopolitical competition between Egypt and Ethiopia. While disagreements over Nile water allocation remain unresolved, Cairo increasingly views Ethiopia's pursuit of sovereign maritime access, diplomatic outreach, military potential and growing economic weight as interconnected developments that collectively affect the regional balance of power.

In other words, the Nile dispute has become embedded within a larger strategic contest over

regional leadership. For Egypt, the challenge is no longer simply protecting downstream water security but countering the emergence of Ethiopia as a potentially influential regional power. Consequently, Cairo's diplomacy has expanded beyond the traditional Nile Basin to encompass the entire Horn of Africa and Red Sea region.

Conversely, Ethiopia increasingly regards the Nile issue and maritime access as complementary components of its broader strategic transformation. From Addis Ababa's perspective, both reflect the country's aspiration to overcome historical structural constraints—whether dependence on external port infrastructure or perceived inequities in the utilization of transboundary water resources. This strategic linkage helps explain why disputes over the Nile and access to the sea increasingly influence one another diplomatically, even though they remain legally distinct.

Sudan and the Broader Regional Balance

Although Sudan did not publicly participate in the Cairo consultations, developments there continue to exert a profound influence on the strategic environment in which these discussions occurred. Sudan occupies a unique geopolitical position linking the Nile Basin, the Red Sea, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa. Instability there inevitably reverberates across each of these interconnected regions.

For Egypt, Sudan is important to its southern security architecture as it is for Ethiopia's adjacent territories of Sudan. Historically, Cairo has regarded political stability in Sudan as essential for protecting its southern frontier and preserving the strategic depth of the Nile Valley. The prospect of the defeat of its ally, SAF, in Sudan represents to Cairo a structural challenge to Egypt's regional security.

Moreover, Sudan's possible partition has broader implications for the balance of power throughout Northeast Africa. It has intensified competition among external actors, complicated regional diplomatic initiatives, created humanitarian

emergencies, and introduced new uncertainties regarding border security, refugee flows, illicit trafficking, and military alignments. These dynamics inevitably influence the strategic calculations of Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Chad, South Sudan, and Gulf states alike.

Although there is no public evidence that Sudan featured prominently in the Cairo consultations themselves, its absence from official statements should not obscure its strategic relevance. Sudan forms part of the wider geopolitical backdrop against which every discussion about the Horn of Africa now takes place. It remains a critical variable shaping the regional security equation, even when not explicitly addressed.

Cairo's Broader Strategic Calculation

Taken together, the Cairo consultations should not be interpreted as the emergence of a new regional alliance. The participating states do not possess identical interests, nor do they share a common long-term strategic vision. Instead, the meetings represent an evolving consultation framework among governments whose security concerns increasingly intersect within an increasingly complex regional environment.

Their broader significance lies in what they reveal about changing strategic perceptions. Increasingly, policymakers are beginning to treat the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea as a single geopolitical theater rather than separate regional systems. Maritime access, energy security, port infrastructure, political influence, military competition, and economic connectivity have become mutually reinforcing dimensions of the same strategic landscape.

Within this evolving framework, Egypt's diplomacy seeks to shape the regional agenda by positioning itself as the principal convener of international engagement on Horn of Africa security. By bringing together Somalia, Eritrea, and the United States, while keeping Ethiopia—and Israel for that matter—at bay, Cairo aimed to demonstrate diplomatic

leadership and reinforce the perception that regional security discussions can proceed without key actors at the table.

However, this strategy also has important limitations. Excluding Ethiopia from discussions concerning the future security architecture of the Horn does not alter the geopolitical realities on the ground. Ethiopia remains the region's demographic, economic, and military center of gravity. Durable regional arrangements are unlikely to succeed if one of the region's principal actors is excluded from their formulation.

Indeed, there is a risk that diplomacy structured around exclusion rather than inclusion may inadvertently reinforce existing fault lines. Egypt appears to calculate that current tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea, lingering mistrust between Ethiopia and Somalia following the Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding, and periodic misunderstandings between Ethiopia and Sudan collectively present opportunities to constrain Ethiopia's strategic options. While such an approach may yield short-term diplomatic leverage, it also risks deepening regional polarization and transforming manageable political disagreements into more enduring geopolitical rivalries. This dynamic should also be understood as part of a broader and somewhat deeper regional fault line, one that includes a degree of divergence between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, regardless of whether specific episodes prove to be short-term misunderstandings or more lasting divergences. Viewed in this light, an exclusionary approach to regional diplomacy may prove counterproductive. What appears more important is that these dynamics be managed with care, so as to avoid contributing to a more serious escalation down the line. For this reason, it remains essential that Ethiopia continue to focus on addressing its internal fault lines and clarifying its relations with its neighbors.

A sustainable regional order cannot be built upon strategies of encirclement or competitive balancing alone. The Horn of Africa's security challenges—

including maritime insecurity, transboundary conflicts, terrorism, irregular migration, climate vulnerability, and economic underdevelopment—are inherently collective problems that require cooperative solutions. No durable security architecture can emerge without recognizing the legitimate security interests, sovereign rights, and developmental aspirations of all regional states, including Ethiopia, Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, and the wider Nile Basin countries.

For that reason, the African Union remains uniquely positioned to provide the normative framework for inclusive regional dialogue. While external partners can facilitate, support, and complement African initiatives, they cannot substitute for African ownership of regional security arrangements. An AU-led framework that integrates both Nile Basin and Red Sea security dialogues would be better suited to addressing the interconnected nature of today's regional challenges than fragmented diplomatic initiatives centered on shifting political alignments.

Conclusion

The Cairo consultations ultimately reflect Egypt's determination to move beyond reactive diplomacy and actively shape the evolving security architecture of the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. They demonstrate Cairo's recognition that regional influence will increasingly depend not only on military capabilities but also on diplomatic coalition-building and agenda-setting.

Whether that strategy succeeds, however, will depend on its capacity to foster cooperation rather than deepen geopolitical fragmentation. Diplomatic coordination that is perceived as excluding key regional actors, or as mobilizing balancing coalitions, may yield tactical advantages but is unlikely to produce lasting regional stability. Conversely, engagement that encourages inclusive dialogue, mutual recognition of legitimate security interests, and African-led institutional cooperation offers a more sustainable foundation for managing the Horn's increasingly interconnected challenges — although questions remain as to whether the African

Union currently possesses the institutional readiness and capacity required to effectively lead such a process.

The central strategic question, therefore, is not whether Egypt can convene consultations or mobilize diplomatic partnerships. It is whether those initiatives contribute to an inclusive regional security order or reinforce the competitive rivalries that have long prevented the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea from realizing their considerable strategic and economic potential.

Egypt's broader strategic objective extends beyond managing individual crises; it seeks to shape a regional order in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea in which Cairo occupies the central coordinating position and exercises significant political and strategic influence. Such an ambition is understandable given Egypt's historical role, military capabilities, and the importance of the Suez Canal to global commerce. However, the geopolitical realities of the region make the emergence of a Cairo-centered regional order increasingly unlikely. The Horn of Africa has evolved into a highly competitive and multipolar strategic arena where no single state possesses the political, economic, or military leverage to dominate regional affairs. Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and increasingly external powers such as Israel, the United States, China, Russia, and Iran all have significant stakes in shaping the region's future. In such an environment, regional leadership is necessarily negotiated rather than imposed.

Unable to establish a regional order under its own leadership, Egypt's strategy appears increasingly oriented toward preventing the emergence of an alternative order centered on Ethiopia. This appears to have translated into efforts to engage with existing internal vulnerabilities within Ethiopia, as well as with several regional fault lines — between Ethiopia and Somalia over maritime access, between Ethiopia and Eritrea amid renewed tensions, and between Ethiopia and Sudan over border and political disputes. Rather than constructing a cohesive anti-Ethiopian alliance, Cairo appears to be

seeking to ensure that these separate disagreements reinforce one another, thereby constraining Ethiopia's regional influence and raising the strategic costs associated with Addis Ababa's ambitions. This reflects less a strategy of regional integration than one of strategic balancing through the management of rivalries. For Ethiopia, however, addressing its internal challenges remains essential to realizing its regional potential.

For Ethiopia, the appropriate response is not to mirror this competitive approach by constructing opposing blocs, but to reduce the political space within which such balancing strategies can operate. That requires a more proactive and sophisticated regional diplomacy grounded in confidence-building rather than reactive crisis management. Addis Ababa should undertake a careful review of its regional policies to ensure that legitimate national interests—such as maritime access and regional economic integration—are pursued in ways that minimize unnecessary political friction and reassure neighboring states. Strategic objectives should be accompanied by equally robust diplomatic engagement that addresses regional perceptions, not merely Ethiopia's own intentions.

Equally important, Ethiopia should intensify bilateral engagement with its immediate neighbors to rebuild

trust and institutionalize cooperation. Durable bilateral understandings with Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Djibouti, and Kenya on issues of security, trade, infrastructure, border management, and economic integration would gradually narrow the fault lines that external actors can exploit. Strong bilateral relationships create resilience against geopolitical manipulation by providing direct mechanisms to resolve disagreements before they escalate into broader regional crises.

Ultimately, Ethiopia's long-term strategic advantage lies not in competing for regional dominance but in helping shape an inclusive regional order based on interdependence and shared interests. By investing in bilateral confidence-building while simultaneously strengthening African Union- and IGAD-led regional frameworks, Ethiopia can contribute to a security architecture in which differences are managed through dialogue and institutional cooperation rather than geopolitical competition. Narrowing the region's fault lines is therefore not simply a diplomatic objective; it is a strategic necessity that would reduce opportunities for external balancing, enhance regional stability, and create a more favorable environment for Ethiopia's own security and developmental aspirations.