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Africa's Blue Gateway Transformation: Connectivity Engines and Ethiopia's Strategic Predicaments

Introduction

Contemporary maritime transformations are reshaping the architecture of global dynamics. Rising trade flows and shifting supply chains have placed maritime domains at the very center of future trajectories. As traditional routes face mounting pressures, states are investing in new corridors, deep-sea ports, undersea digital infrastructure, localized shipping, and sustainable blue industries. This is not just an economic adjustment but is a reimagining of sovereignty and opportunity across waters and beyond. In this new age, maritime spaces are evolving from simple corridors of passage into engines of connectivity, linking economies worldwide, and most critically, amplifying the role of emerging economies.

The rise of new maritime domains signals a profound reconfiguration of global trade geography and production networks. New geographies, interests, and stakeholders are emerging, with Africa positioned at the heart of this transformation. Nations are rediscovering the oceans as engines of growth, innovation, and security, advancing bold investments in shipbuilding and maritime infrastructure. Africa's geostrategic location, anchored in critical choke points, endowed with minerals vital for the green economy, and offering agricultural exports essential for food security, renders its coastlines indispensable to global infrastructure. From the Gulf of Guinea to the Horn of Africa, African blue gateways are shifting from the periphery to the center, becoming pivotal nodes in the evolving power map of global trade.

As vulnerabilities in global trade routes intensify, coastal economies are building resilient maritime corridors, modernized ports, and undersea infrastructure to safeguard connectivity. A new wave of shipbuilding and maritime manufacturing is emerging, driven by policies that promote local industry, technological integration, and sustainable development. Global powers are recalibrating their maritime strategies, reflected in initiatives such as the Belt and Road, the Global Gateway, and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. These projects underscore the strategic imperative of strengthening new connectivity. Within this context, Africa's coastline is no longer marginal, it is becoming a decisive engine of global integration.

Mega-infrastructure projects are rising across Africa's seaboards: Kenya's Lamu port now anchors the largest vessels; Nigeria's Lekki port has emerged as West Africa's most advanced maritime gateway; and Ghana's Tema port expansion is positioning the country as a logistics hub for the African Continental Free Trade Area. These projects exemplify how African states are embedding themselves into the global connectivity map. Morocco's Tanger-Med port underscores the scale of this shift. Ranked among the world's top 25 busiest ports, it handles more containers than several major European hubs. Strategically located at the Strait of Gibraltar, Tanger-Med connects 180 global ports and has become the primary transshipment hub linking Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Its free trade zone, the largest industrial port complex in Africa, illustrates how maritime infrastructure is being leveraged not only for logistics but also for industrial clustering and value-addition.

To the east, Berbera port demonstrates how strategic investments are reshaping regional trade lifelines. Under DP World's $442 million investment, Berbera now features a 400-meter quay, 17-meter depth, and a new economic zone connected to Ethiopia via the Berbera corridor. Positioned along the Red Sea, Berbera offers a potential alternative to the congested Bab al-Mandeb choke point. For

Ethiopia, heavily reliant on Djibouti, Berbera represents a second, politically stable trade artery. In the Horn of Africa, Djibouti remains one of the most critical maritime hubs globally, serving as the entry point for much of East Africa's cargo and anchoring Asia-Europe shipping routes. In the south, Durban port continues to dominate as the busiest in Africa by cargo volume, handling over 60 percent of South Africa's container traffic. Current upgrades aim to transform Durban into a world-class logistics hub, reinforcing Southern Africa's role in continental and global trade.

These developments mark Africa's coastal revolution, a sweeping transformation where thousands of kilometers of new shipping corridors are dismantling legacy colonial routes. By offering deeper harbors, faster turnaround times, and integrated logistics, these modern blue gateways serve as critical engines of connectivity and the backbone of a rising continental economy. Ultimately, the stakes are long-term: this infrastructure does not just update regional trade flows; it permanently embeds Africa into the core of global commerce. In this connection, the Horn of Africa remains a region marked by complex infrastructural interdependencies, where the decline and emergence of trade corridors continue to reshape the economic and political relations within and between states.

For landlocked Ethiopia, whose maritime strategy is deeply intertwined with broader regional power structures and continues to be shaped by external influences, the ongoing transformation of African blue gateways offers promise, yet simultaneously sharpens Ethiopia's strategic predicament. Greater interconnection deepens exposure to single-point failures and magnifies both economic and geopolitical costs. While the continent's evolving port and corridor systems encourage cooperative inter-state linkages, they also generate new frictions: sovereignty disputes, regional rivalries, and security dilemmas with neighbors such as Eritrea and Somalia. Ethiopia thus finds itself navigating a paradox, benefiting from enhanced connectivity while confronting heightened security risks, severe economic vulnerabilities, and a complex geopolitical entanglement. This paper seeks to trace the trajectory of Africa's maritime frontier from corridors to engines of connectivity and Ethiopia's strategic dilemmas within this emerging order.

Africa's Blue Gateways Revolution: From Corridors to Connectivity Systems

Historically, African transport corridors were conceived primarily as extractive conduits, designed to move commodities from the hinterland to coastal ports and onward to global markets. This model captures limited value for African economies and undermines Africa's industrialization and regional integration. Yet for decades, the maritime nodes were constrained by systemic inefficiencies: aging infrastructure, inadequate berth capacity, and cumbersome customs procedures, all of which limited their ability to serve as engines of regional connectivity. In Eastern Africa, the absence of natural deep-water ports further constrained corridor development, shaping both political economies and regional geopolitics. For much of the twentieth century, the region depended on only four natural deep-water ports: Djibouti, Mombasa in Kenya, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and Maputo in Mozambique. These few gateways carried disproportionate weight: in some cases, supplying over 90 percent of Eastern Africa's imports and serving as the primary outlets for exports.

But, in recent years, a surge in public–private partnerships and foreign investment has catalyzed a renaissance in port development across Africa. The expansion of port facilities and the emergence of viable economic and transport corridors have prompted governments to pursue ambitious projects aimed at reconfiguring regional connectivity. Resource deposits and their export potential have further driven states, often in collaboration with external partners, to invest in the building of port facilities, railroads, roads, and economic zones that extend beyond isolated maritime nodes. Crucially, advances in port engineering and construction have reduced the

historical dependence on natural deep-water sites. While such locations remain optimal, they are no longer a strict prerequisite for corridor development. This technological shift has widened the possibilities for states to build and expand port infrastructure, thereby reshaping the geography of access and altering the strategic calculus of regional trade and politics.

Among Africa's most ambitious infrastructure visions is the LAPSSET Corridor, a massive network aiming to connect Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan through ports, highways, railways, airports, pipelines, industrial zones, and tourism developments. The project is envisioned as a more than 2000KM economic artery stretching from Kenya's Indian Ocean coast deep into the African interior. The idea behind the LAPSSET is to create a trade route that gives landlocked countries direct access to the ocean while opening up some of East Africa's least developed regions to investment and industrialization.

At full service, the port is expected to handle substantial volumes of containerized and bulk cargo. Beyond that, however, the port forms the coastal gateway to the wider LAPSSET network, connecting the Indian Ocean to northern Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. For Ethiopia, the corridor could provide another route to the international maritime trade and reduce its dependence on a single external gateway. For South Sudan, the stakes are even more significant. South Sudan's Oil export remains heavily dependent on infrastructure running through Sudan toward the Red Sea. LAPSSET offers an alternative route. Instead of relying entirely on northern infrastructure, South Sudan could eventually move oil and other goods South ward toward Kenya and through Lamu. This would make LAPSSET become an alternative economic lifeline for a country that has struggled with infrastructure, high transportation costs, and political instability. Across the continent, several ambitious multi-country infrastructure megaprojects, including the Lobito Corridor, the Berbera Corridor, the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor, the Central Corridor, and the Djibouti Corridor, stand as transformative engines of regional connectivity.

In this context, a "Blue Gateway" should be understood as a system that includes ports, railways, roads, inland dry ports, logistics platforms, industrial zones, digital infrastructure, financial services, and maritime institutions, and not as a harbor alone. The Central Corridor, for instance, links the Port of Dar-Es-Salaam with economic clusters in Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC using roads, railways, and inland waterways. The blue gateways framework, therefore, treats these zones as critical anchors for the broader blue economy, regional integration, and global supply chain diversification. Conventional corridors were historically linear, structured around resource extraction: focused mainly on moving cargo from an inland point to a coastal port for foreign export. Today, however, corridors are increasingly reconceptualized as engines of connectivity. One significant shift lies in efforts to relocate processing and value-addition to the continent itself, a move with the potential to reconfigure familiar global shipping routes. The challenge still is to invert the old logic, linking African production first to African markets, and then extending outward through global maritime networks.

These emerging blue gateways are critical in bridging Africa's seaboard with its resource-rich interior and connecting both to dynamic markets in Asia, Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East. Yet the rise of mega-infrastructure projects has not escaped criticism. The Lobito Corridor, for example, is framed in competing terms: proponents, including the African Development Bank, present it as a regional logistics catalyst enhancing cross-border connectivity among Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zambia. By contrast, critical analysts interpret it as an extractive transport nexus leveraged by Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, to secure supply chains for critical minerals such as copper and cobalt, indispensable to the green energy transition. Without robust mechanisms for domestic processing and value-addition, they warn,

such projects risk reproducing historical dependencies by privileging raw material exports over equitable industrial growth.

Against this backdrop, the emerging model must be multidimensional, running from production through logistics, processing, and regional markets to ports and global trade, with flows moving in both directions. The distinction is crucial: infrastructure alone does not guarantee connectivity. A railway linking an inland economy to a port can still function as an extractive corridor if it merely channels unprocessed resources outward. The objective should be to cultivate connectivity ecosystems in which ports stimulate manufacturing, agro-processing, services, logistics, technology, tourism, and maritime industries. In such a system, a farmer in the hinterland is linked to global consumers, and a factory in an emerging city is integrated into international supply chains. Africa must therefore ask not only which ports connect it to the world, but also what economic ecosystems those ports generate behind them.

Africa's Coastlines and the Emerging New Maritime Frontier

The ocean is entering a new era. A new maritime frontier is steadily taking shape across the globe, driven by the intensifying strategic, economic, and infrastructural developments along coastlines and maritime domains. Once viewed primarily as peripheral spaces for resource extraction and trade passage, these littoral zones are now being reimagined as dynamic theaters of connectivity, industrialization, and geopolitical competition. From Africa's seaboards to Asia's sea shores, coastal regions are becoming laboratories of innovation where ports, logistics hubs, and maritime institutions converge to redefine the geography of global commerce and security. This reality is most visible in the proliferation of mega-infrastructure projects, blue gateways, and integrated corridors that extend far beyond traditional harbors.

With oceans underpinning the global economy, carrying over 80 percent of world trade by volume and hosting seabed cables that transmit 98 percent of internet traffic, states increasingly view maritime domains as strategic assets to be controlled and shaped in line with national interests. Within this context, new centers of activity are emerging across coastal and maritime spaces, opening possibilities for growth, innovation, and collaboration. Investments in ports, railways, inland dry ports, and digital infrastructure are turning coastlines into multidimensional systems that connect resource-rich interiors with global markets. At the same time, maritime domains are increasingly contested by external powers seeking secure supply chains, strategic footholds, and influence over critical sea lanes.

As great powers vie for dominance in the oceans, African coastlines are increasingly becoming important. Africa sits astride some of the most consequential maritime spaces in the world: the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Gulf of Guinea, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Mozambique Channel. These waters link the continent to Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific, and their importance has grown as global trade has become more exposed to disruption at chokepoints. The Suez-Red Sea-Bab el-Mandeb-Gulf of Aden-Indian Ocean system shows especially clearly how African maritime geography intersects with global economic and security dynamics.

In this connection, Africa's ports, maritime corridors, and coastal economic zones should no longer be understood merely as entry and exit points for trade. In the shifting geopolitical landscape of the world, they are becoming strategic platforms through which African economies connect to external partners. As the global economy shifts and new trade routes emerge, Africa's ports are undergoing significant transformations. A new generation of ports equipped with state-of-the art technology and backed by immense investment are becoming centers of connectivity in the emerging new maritime frontier. Most of these ports leverage their geography to exert an influence that extends far

beyond their national borders. That creates both an opportunity and a vulnerability. Africa can benefit from its position only if its states have the infrastructure, institutional capacity, maritime security, and bargaining power to turn geography into an advantage. No doubt, the opportunity can be utilized only if the challenge of peace and security is addressed effectively.

While Africa has invested heavily in roads, railways, and ports, the new pathways of global maritime growth are being reshaped by green corridors, digital transformation, new technologies, and evolving standards that will define the future of trade and connectivity. For Africa, ensuring meaningful participation in this transformation will be critical to avoid widening existing gaps and to enable more inclusive maritime development. Expanding access to technology, finance, skills, and decision-making processes can empower emerging economies to move from adapting to global changes to actively shaping them. Moreover, international cooperation, inclusive standards, and equitable partnerships can enable emerging economies such as Africa to participate more effectively in the next phase of maritime transformation.

Security as an Inseparable Factor from the Economic Function of Blue Gateways

Maritime security constitutes the indispensable foundation of blue gateways, underpinning both their economic viability and connective function. Without secure waters, ports, harbors, and shipping corridors cannot operate predictably, and the promise of integration collapses. These nodes remain acutely vulnerable to physical disruption, geopolitical tensions, and cyber threats. When security falters, targeted attacks at chokepoints or cyber incidents at digitalized terminals can freeze supply chains, forcing vessels to reroute and triggering cascading costs in fuel, insurance, and consumer prices. Ensuring secure seas is therefore inseparable from sustaining the blue economy, and without it, the connective promise of blue gateways cannot be realized.

Global maritime trade is now under mounting pressure from piracy, armed conflict, trafficking, geopolitical confrontation, and political instability. Recent disruptions underscore how inseparable security is from economic function: tariff disputes, armed clashes, and attacks on shipping have destabilized the rule-based maritime system that underpins global trade. Freedom of navigation is increasingly contested, with ships attacked at critical chokepoints from the Strait of Hormuz to the Bab al-Mandab. Traffic through these corridors has dropped significantly amid the US–Israel war with Iran and Houthi strikes in the Southern Red Sea, transforming regional waterways into first-order security concerns. Such disruptions alter global resource distribution, shift burdens onto African corridors, and are compounded by the resurgence of piracy off Somalia's coast. Together, these dynamics highlight that without secure seas, the promise of blue gateways as engines of connectivity and growth cannot be realized.

But Maritime security should not be reduced to military considerations alone. A comprehensive approach integrates naval and coastguard capabilities with maritime domain awareness, port security, fisheries management, law enforcement, regional information-sharing, and the economic resilience of coastal communities. Narrow frameworks that privilege military responses or focus solely on coastal states leave critical economic stakeholders such as Ethiopia exposed and overlook the necessity of inclusive regional diplomacy. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden illustrate how conflict in a single country can reverberate across the wider maritime system, affecting shipping routes, insurance premiums, port operations, and food prices. True maritime safety is therefore inseparable from governance on land: weak state capacity ashore enables non-state actors to weaponize coastlines, making the stabilization of local economies as vital as patrolling the waves. Economic connectivity thus requires security cooperation, and security increasingly depends on economic connectivity.

Landlocked African States and Blue Gateways

Landlocked African states such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Botswana are not detached from maritime commerce. These economies depend on reliable transport networks and regional partnerships to connect with global markets and maritime trade. Their fortunes depend on the efficiency and reliability of neighboring coastal gateways. For them, access to the sea is not merely a commercial matter but one of national resilience, strategic autonomy, and foreign policy. Access arrangements should therefore rest on predictable commercial agreements, infrastructure investment, risk-sharing, and regional cooperation, rather than on episodic geopolitical bargaining. The strategic aim should be multiple reliable gateways instead of dependence on a single corridor or port.

In this regard, African infrastructure planning has too often viewed ports through a national lens, even though many ports are inherently regional, with commercial viability that depends on hinterlands extending across borders. A port in East Africa, for instance, should not be seen only as the property of the state in which it sits, because its strategic value depends on its capacity to serve landlocked neighbors and regional production networks. That requires a move from competition among isolated ports to complementarity within port systems. Planners should ask which ports should specialize in what, where logistics hubs and dry ports should be located, how rail and road networks can connect multiple countries, how customs systems can be harmonized, and how cargo can cross borders without being trapped by administrative fragmentation. The result would, therefore, be more than a port. It would be a corridor of interdependence. This matters because landlocked countries' economic future is increasingly tied to the maritime economy. Modern development requires access not merely to land but to shipping, energy, technology, markets, and global production networks.

Maritime gateways must also remain commercially viable, minimally militarized, and insulated from political friction to unlock a true win-win scenario for both coastal and inland nations. When transit corridors prioritize commercial efficiency, they function as vital economic lifelines rather than geopolitical leverage points. Lowering tariffs, streamlining customs, and upgrading infrastructure directly reduces shipping costs and transit times, which lowers the cost of living for the landlocked nation while generating consistent transit revenues and port fees for the coastal host. Conversely, militarizing or politicizing these maritime gateways introduces severe risks that disrupt this mutual prosperity. Heavy military presence often signals instability, driving up insurance premiums and discouraging international shipping lines from using the corridor. Furthermore, using port access as a political weapon or diplomatic bargaining chip creates an unpredictable trading environment and political tensions. By keeping ports neutral, secure, and purely business-driven, both nations can build regional economic interdependence that fosters long-term peace and shared wealth.

The Horn, the Red Sea, and Ethiopia's Strategic Predicament in the Evolving Maritime Frontier

In the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden are not simply trade lanes. They are contested political spaces. The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden carry a large share of Europe-Asia commerce, and the Horn sits on the southern and western shoulder of that route. Yet the region has captured remarkably little of the value that passes along its shores. Ships transit Bab el-Mandeb every day, but the surrounding coastline is shaped less by the interests of the states that own it than by outside rivalries: the Gulf monarchies, Egypt, Türkiye, the United States, and others, each with its own ports, bases, proxies, and red lines. Layered on top are a civil war in Sudan, a fragile Somali federal order, and a heavily militarized Eritrea. The corridor matters to everyone, but control over it is disputed, and the Horn's own states have too little say over how it is governed. This is the central

irony: the region is the geographic hinge of a global trade artery, and it is the least able to shape the rules that apply to it.

Moreover, while the Horn of Africa is often portrayed as an emerging frontier of infrastructure-led transformation, the proliferation of corridors has not translated into genuine regional integration. Instead, infrastructure has become a geopolitical instrument by selectively organizing connectivity, deepening economic dependency, and reconfiguring regional order. External actors intensify this dynamic: their heavy investments in ports, railways, and logistics hubs tend to privilege bilateral ties over collective frameworks, producing a patchwork of linkages that bind certain states closely to external patrons while sidelining regional institutions. Projects such as the Addis–Djibouti railway or Kenya's LAPSSET corridor are celebrated as engines of modernization and connectivity, yet they simultaneously entrench asymmetries. In this sense, the Horn's infrastructure boom is less a narrative of integration than of contested order, where the very tools of connectivity become instruments of geopolitical competition

For landlocked Ethiopia, the strategic predicaments are not merely abstract geopolitical observations. The country's maritime corridors transcend their role as conduits for goods and services, thereby emerging as critical arenas where local, national, and international actors negotiate their visions of sovereignty, autonomy, and security. Ethiopia moves the overwhelming majority of its external trade through a single port, Djibouti, along a single road and rail corridor. The problem is not Djibouti per se. Indeed, Djibouti has provided Ethiopia with an indispensable economic service. Ethiopia's relationship with Djibouti should be understood as one of mutual interdependence rather than unilateral dependence. The problem is the structural vulnerability created when a country's principal gateway to the world is concentrated in one corridor, particularly against the backdrop of intensifying Red Sea militarization and shifting regional alliances.

Ethiopia, therefore, has a rational interest in multiple maritime gateways. Djibouti has been a dependable partner, and nothing in this argument should be read as criticism of it. The point is structural. When one route carries nearly all of a continental-scale economy's trade, any disruption is amplified into a national shock. A security incident along the corridor, a political dispute with the host state, a labor stoppage, a congestion crisis at the port, or a regional escalation would not be a local problem. It would be felt in fuel queues, fertilizer shortages, factory input delays, export losses, and foreign-exchange pressure across the whole economy. A single route also weakens Ethiopia's bargaining position, since a customer with nowhere else to go has little leverage on tariffs, port charges, or service quality, and an exposed corridor invites others to treat Ethiopia's access as a pressure point. Resilience, in other words, is not a luxury. It is the central requirement of Ethiopia's maritime strategy.

However, every alternative to Djibouti carries its own cost, and no option is purely commercial. Berbera, reached through Somaliland, is commercially attractive: it has a modernized port, Gulf investment, and a developing corridor. But using it entangles Ethiopia in the unresolved question of Somaliland's international status and in Mogadishu's objection that any deal with Hargeisa infringes Somali sovereignty. Assab and Massawa are the natural geographic outlets, and Assab in particular is the closest sea outlet to Ethiopia's population and industrial centers. But access depends on relations with Eritrea, which are currently hostile. Mombasa and Lamu offer an outlet through Kenya, though the distances are long and the infrastructure connections are incomplete. Port Sudan is closer in theory, but it is undermined by the war and the instability of the Sudanese state. Each of these routes is therefore either costly, contested, or fragile.

This is why Ethiopia's push for sea access should be read, first and foremost, as an attempt to escape dependence on a single corridor. That reading matters because it shapes how others respond. If Ethiopia's ambition is understood and pursued as a

quest for multiple, negotiated, commercially structured routes, it can attract partners and even reassure neighbors, since it offers them revenue and a stake in stability. If it is pursued, or perceived to be pursued, through coercion or the language of historical entitlement, it will harden opposition, accelerate counter-alignments, and shrink the very set of options Ethiopia is trying to expand. The method will determine whether the quest for sea access widens or closes Ethiopia's choices.

A gateway is only as safe as the politics behind it. The resurgence of piracy off Somalia, the war in Sudan, and the standoff along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border all show that physical infrastructure does not insulate trade from political risk. They also show that external alignments, such as the Egypt-Eritrea-Sudanese Armed Forces axis and the rivalries among Gulf states, mean that port agreements and corridor investments are rarely read as neutral commercial arrangements. A port deal in one capital is interpreted in another as a strategic move against its interests, and it triggers a response. The cumulative effect is the externalization of Ethiopia's maritime policy into a dense and multilayered geopolitical arena. Nearly every Ethiopian infrastructure decision is now interpreted through competing strategic frameworks emanating from Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, Ankara, and Tel Aviv. Investors, lenders, shippers, and insurers recognize this reality, and they price it in. Political risk thus materializes as a financial premium on every corridor in the region, reducing that premium becomes as critical as building the infrastructure itself.

In sum, Ethiopia's reliance on the goodwill of coastal neighbors for transit exposes the limits of existing normative frameworks, which offer principle but little protection. The Djibouti Code of Conduct, IGAD's convening role, the African Union's maritime strategy, and the transit-rights provisions of UNCLOS all recognize the legitimate interests of landlocked states, but none provides enforceable guarantees when coastal states act otherwise. The realistic pathway forward is therefore not primarily legal but grounded in reciprocal interdependence. Coastal states should earn real and visible returns from hinterland trade through transit fees, shared infrastructure, joint-use arrangements, and employment, so that keeping the corridor open becomes a matter of their own interest rather than of charity. A neighbor that profits from Ethiopian trade has a reason to protect it. That is a sturdier guarantee than any declaration.

Ethiopia and the Two Test Cases in its Evolving Maritime Ambitions

As global trade, supply chains, energy transitions, digital connectivity, and geopolitical competition increasingly converge at sea, maritime access has become central to economic growth and strategic influence. Ports are no longer simply places where cargo is loaded and unloaded. When connected to reliable transport networks, productive industries, digital systems, and predictable rules, they can link inland economies to regional and global markets. But that potential is not automatic. A port can become a gateway to integration only when the political arrangements around it are stable enough to support long-term investment and cross-border exchange.

This distinction is especially important in the Horn of Africa. The region borders some of the world's busiest maritime routes, yet its ports often function as competing national assets rather than components of a coordinated regional network. Political rivalries, disputed sovereignty, and security anxieties repeatedly interrupt efforts to turn geographic proximity into shared economic opportunity. Ethiopia's changing maritime ambitions bring this tension into sharp focus. Since 2018, Addis Ababa has placed greater emphasis on diversifying its access to the sea and reducing its reliance on a single corridor. The experiences of Assab and Berbera show both the strategic logic behind that effort and the limits imposed by regional politics.

These two cases present contrasting barriers. Assab is geographically attractive but politically inaccessible because of Ethiopia's fraught relationship with Eritrea. Berbera is commercially

promising and increasingly reachable, yet Somaliland's disputed political status makes agreements around it vulnerable to diplomatic and security crises. Together, they show that port development in the Horn is not only a logistics challenge. It is a negotiation over sovereignty, security, economic dependence, and the regional distribution of power.

Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Assab

Assab, associated with its proximity and history, is often described as Ethiopia's most direct maritime outlet. Its position makes it a plausible gateway for trade from Ethiopia's central highlands and industrial corridors. Yet geographic logic has not translated into political access. Before the 1998–2000 Ethiopia–Eritrea war, Assab handled much of Ethiopia's transit trade. The war severed that connection, and the ensuing "no war, no peace" period entrenched the separation. Ethiopia redirected almost all of its external trade through Djibouti, while Assab ceased to function as an ordinary commercial route for the Ethiopian economy.

The 2018 rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Asmara briefly raised hopes that relations might normalize and the Assab corridor could reopen. Those expectations did not endure. The diplomatic thaw produced no durable settlement of the underlying political and security concerns, and mutual suspicion returned. Eritrea has not agreed to allow Ethiopia to use Assab, asserting its right as a sovereign state to withhold cooperation.

The corridor's closure also reflects the physical consequences of prolonged political separation. Reopening it may not be technically insurmountable, but the infrastructure serving Assab and its connections to the hinterland have deteriorated. Efforts to rehabilitate those links have not restored access. Their condition underscores the cost of allowing a functioning trade route—and the jobs, commercial ties, and shared economic opportunities it could have supported—to fall into disuse. Rebuilding the corridor could therefore expose the scale of the opportunity lost through political choices, which are difficult to explain.

There may also be domestic political concerns in Eritrea. Some observers speculate that the government fears greater cross-border contact could give Eritrean youth additional avenues to avoid or leave the country's indefinite national service. That remains an interpretation rather than an established explanation, but it points to how internal political considerations may shape decisions about external connectivity.

The result is a striking paradox: the physically shortest route to the sea remains blocked by one of the region's most enduring rivalries. The obstacle is not simply distance or engineering capacity. It is the absence of a political framework that both states consider secure and legitimate, compounded by the deterioration of infrastructure that once offered a basis for trade and cooperation.

The two governments also attach very different meanings to maritime access. For Ethiopia, which has a large population and depends heavily on seaborne trade, diversified and reliable access is an economic and strategic priority. Concentration on one main corridor exposes the country to congestion, disruption, and the possibility that a political or security crisis could interfere with trade. From this perspective, access to additional ports is part of economic resilience and long-term strategic autonomy.

For Eritrea, however, an Ethiopian role at Assab cannot be understood as a commercial question alone. Given the history of war and mistrust, Asmara may view a new Ethiopian presence as the first step toward a deeper security or political role. An arrangement presented in Addis Ababa as a mutually beneficial transit agreement could therefore be interpreted in Eritrea as a potential erosion of sovereignty. The same proposal can appear to one government as prudent diversification and to the other as a threat to national independence.

This gap in perception has practical consequences. When Ethiopian arguments for maritime access are framed in terms of historical grievance or inherent entitlement, they can intensify Eritrean fears and make compromise more difficult. Such language also creates opportunities for other regional actors to interpret or portray the issue as a contest for influence. Eritrea's concerns may then become tied to broader alignments with states wary of Ethiopia's growing regional role. The result is a political environment in which even a commercial arrangement with potential benefits for both sides can be recast as a strategic contest.

A viable Assab corridor would therefore require more than agreement in principle to move goods through the port. It would need dependable transit rules, clearly bounded rights, transparent fees, customs procedures, and credible guarantees that commercial access would not imply a change in sovereignty or a security presence. Both states would need confidence that the arrangement could survive political tensions and that disputes could be managed without closing the corridor. Regional institutions could help provide forums for dialogue and support confidence-building, although they cannot substitute for the political commitment of the two governments.

Any arrangement would also be viewed by actors beyond Ethiopia and Eritrea. Egypt and some Gulf states, among others, may assess an Assab agreement through the lens of regional security and shifting alliances. That scrutiny makes transparent, reciprocal terms especially important. A corridor negotiated through clear rules and wider regional engagement would be more difficult to present as an instrument of unilateral pressure. Until the relationship between Addis Ababa and Asmara changes substantially, however, Assab will remain a nearby but inaccessible gateway: a potential economic lifeline for Ethiopia and, at the same time, a source of anxiety for Eritrea.

Ethiopia, Somaliland, and Berbera

Berbera presents a different case. The port's development demonstrates that commercial integration can advance even when diplomatic recognition remains unresolved. Investment associated with DP World and Gulf capital has helped modernize Berbera and strengthen its role as a trade route for the Horn of Africa. The port and its corridor offer Ethiopia a potential addition to its overwhelming reliance on Djibouti, while creating opportunities for Somaliland to expand its commercial connections.

This potential has given Berbera strategic importance beyond the port itself. A functioning corridor depends on road and other transport links, customs coordination, border procedures, and predictable access for traders. If those components operate reliably, Berbera can widen Ethiopia's options and contribute to a more diversified regional trade system. It can also support investment and employment along the route. But these gains depend on political arrangements that are durable enough to protect commercial activity from sudden changes in relations.

The central vulnerability is Somaliland's unresolved international status. Somaliland governs itself and conducts external commercial relations, but it has not received broad international recognition as an independent state, except from Israel, which makes engagement even more challenging. The Federal Government of Somalia regards arrangements made directly with Somaliland as matters affecting Somalia's territorial integrity and rejects agreements that it sees as bypassing Mogadishu's authority. The experience of the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed with Hargeisa created commotions that needed a Turkish role to be managed. The Berbera situation produces a mismatch between the authority that operates locally and the authority recognized internationally—a mismatch that can complicate contracts, political guarantees, and regional diplomacy.

The tension became more pronounced after the January 2024 Ethiopia–Somaliland memorandum of understanding. The proposed arrangement, which

envisaged maritime access for Ethiopia, was presented by its proponents as a response to Ethiopia's need to diversify its access to the sea. Somalia, however, condemned the agreement as a violation of its sovereignty. The dispute quickly became a regional issue, drawing responses and diplomatic positioning from actors including Egypt, Türkiye, and the Arab League. The episode showed how a port-access proposal can trigger consequences far beyond the commercial corridor it is intended to support.

Berbera therefore illustrates a broader lesson in infrastructure governance: a corridor may be commercially viable while remaining politically exposed. If an agreement is contested by a government that is widely recognized internationally, investors and operators may face uncertainty over the agreement's durability, the authority behind it, and the handling of future disputes. The practical effect of that uncertainty will vary by investor and contract, but it can influence financing, insurance, and long-term commitments. Political and legal ambiguity thus becomes an economic factor, not merely a diplomatic abstraction.

This does not mean Berbera lacks value. It means that its full potential depends on reducing the gap between local arrangements and wider political legitimacy. Durable access would benefit from dialogue among Ethiopia, and Somaliland, with a consent from Somalia, supported where useful by regional and continental institutions or other third parties. Agreements that clarify commercial rights and acknowledge the political sensitivities involved would be better positioned to withstand shifts in regional relations. Without such arrangements, Berbera may continue to expand as a port while remaining vulnerable as a corridor.

Two Bottlenecks, One Regional Problem

The contrast between Assab and Berbera clarifies the choices and constraints facing Ethiopia. Assab is geographically close but politically blocked by interstate hostility. Berbera is a more accessible commercial alternative, but its political foundations are contested. One corridor is out of reach because relations between two states remain deeply adversarial; the other is vulnerable because the parties disagree over which authorities can make binding agreements. Neither case supports the idea that infrastructure alone can resolve the region's connectivity problem.

This is why Ethiopia's maritime strategy should be understood as an effort to manage dependence and reduce vulnerability, not simply to acquire a port. Diversifying routes can reduce the risks associated with concentration on one corridor. Yet each additional route depends on the political consent and institutional cooperation of neighboring authorities. Ethiopia can initiate agreements, invest in transport links, and shape its own policy, but it cannot control how those decisions are interpreted by Eritrea, Somalia, Somaliland, or external partners. Its maritime choices are consequently made within a regional system where other actors can enable, constrain, or reframe them.

The broader regional challenge is that the Horn sits beside major maritime routes but has not yet built the level of cross-border coordination needed to convert that position into shared economic strength. Ports and corridors frequently develop as national projects, while the trade that passes through them depends on cooperation across borders. Rivalries, territorial disputes, changing alliances, and security concerns raise the cost of that cooperation. As a result, ports that might complement one another are often treated as competing instruments of influence, and landlocked economies remain exposed to a limited number of transit options.

The strategic case for diversification is therefore real, but so is the case for interdependence. Ethiopia cannot secure resilient access by relying solely on unilateral planning. Sustainable resilience depends on multiple routes, clear rules, and neighboring states that have practical reasons to keep trade moving. That requires a shift from treating access as a prize to be won toward treating reliable transit as a shared economic interest. The

political challenge is to create arrangements in which coastal states retain meaningful control and landlocked states gain dependable access, without either side perceiving the outcome as a loss of sovereignty.

The Wider Maritime Context

The importance of these choices extends beyond the Horn. Global trade is being reshaped by geopolitical fragmentation, shifting production networks, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and the transition toward lower-carbon energy systems. These changes increase the value of reliable ports and diversified transport routes. For African countries, maritime gateways can support industrial growth and regional trade, but their benefits depend on more than the volume of cargo passing through them. Ports become economic multipliers when they connect to productive industries, transparent institutions, secure maritime environments, regional markets, and become economic corridors whereby production, infrastructure development and services operate in an integrated economic system.

The claim that more than 90 percent of Africa's imports and exports travel by sea is often used to underscore the continent's maritime dependence. Whatever the precise share across countries and measures, the larger point is clear: seaborne trade is central to African economies. Yet a port that mainly moves unprocessed commodities through a territory may generate little local value compared with one connected to manufacturing, services, and regional supply chains. The policy challenge is to build corridors that support production and trade within Africa, rather than serving only as conduits between resource extraction sites and overseas markets while leaving African participation in the resulting value chain marginal.

The central question, therefore, is how African countries can capture a greater share of the value created as commodities move from origin to market. What processing, manufacturing, logistics, financial, and service activities take place in Africa along that route? How much value do African firms and workers contribute—and retain—within the supply chain? Answering these questions would shift the measure of maritime success from cargo volumes alone to the extent that ports and corridors support African jobs, skills, businesses, and value addition.

For the Horn of Africa, that means linking ports with inland railways and roads, industrial parks, logistics services, energy systems, and digital infrastructure. It also means improving the institutions that govern movement across borders. Customs interoperability, consistent documentation, reliable dispute resolution, and coordinated border procedures can determine whether a corridor is genuinely efficient. A port may be modern, but if cargo faces unpredictable delays or politically motivated interruption inland, its commercial advantage is limited.

The Horn's port options—including Djibouti, Berbera, Assab, and southern routes such as Kenya's Lamu corridor—should therefore be evaluated as parts of a possible network. Their value need not depend on one port defeating another. A diversified system can distribute risk, support different trade flows, and create incentives for better service. But that outcome requires states to coordinate investments and rules rather than treating each port as an isolated strategic asset. The more fragmented the political arrangements, the harder it becomes to achieve the efficiencies that infrastructure is meant to provide.

The central question is whether Horn of Africa states can move from zero-sum competition toward a connected maritime architecture in which several routes remain open and commercially useful. The region could strengthen its role in global trade by combining modern ports with dependable inland links, manufacturing capacity, economic and industrial corridors, and regional market integration. But it will not become a shared gateway merely because of its location. Its states must develop the political and institutional foundations that make access predictable, investment credible, and cooperation resilient to diplomatic disputes.

Recommendations

Build trust through negotiated, reciprocal arrangements: Governments in the Horn should pursue sustained confidence-building alongside port negotiations. Transit agreements should set out access rights, fees, customs procedures, security responsibilities, and dispute-resolution processes in clear terms. Coastal states need assurances that commercial access will not become a pretext for undermining their sovereignty; landlocked states need confidence that agreed access will not be withdrawn arbitrarily. Joint infrastructure planning, regular consultations, and transparent reporting on corridor operations can help turn these assurances into practice. Where appropriate, revenue-sharing or other forms of mutual benefit could give both parties a material interest in keeping routes open.

Develop regional rules for transit and maritime cooperation: Regional governments should work toward common standards for transit procedures, port operations, customs documentation, and cross-border infrastructure. International law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, provides important principles concerning maritime rights and access, but those principles do not by themselves create a complete regional transit system. Practical implementation requires agreements that account for the geography, legal arrangements, and political relationships of the Horn. The African Union and relevant regional bodies could support dialogue on shared principles, encourage transparency in port and corridor agreements, and provide processes for resolving disputes before they disrupt trade. Trust and sustained political commitment can help states and their societies move beyond rivalry by turning shared visions of integration into practical arrangements. In the Horn of Africa, such arrangements—built on reliable agreements, reciprocal benefits, and institutions that can manage disagreements—could enable the region to leapfrog toward deeper cooperation and more resilient connectivity.

Connect ports to industrial and digital ecosystems: Ports should be planned as part of wider economic systems rather than as stand-alone transshipment facilities. Governments and investors can strengthen their contribution to local economies by linking port operations to industrial parks, free trade zones, logistics services, energy supply, and efficient road and rail connections. Digital cargo tracking, interoperable customs systems, and reliable data exchange can reduce delays and improve planning. Tanger Med in Morocco is often cited as an example of a port integrated with industrial activity; the relevant lesson for the Horn is to adapt that general model to local markets, institutions, and infrastructure rather than simply replicate its physical design.

Tie corridor development to AfCFTA and regional value chains: The African Continental Free Trade Area offers a framework for making ports serve more than export flows to overseas markets. If corridor planning is coordinated with continental trade rules and industrial strategies, producers can source inputs across borders, process goods in regional manufacturing centers, and sell to a wider African market. The measure of success should therefore include whether a corridor helps firms trade with and supply one another, not only how much cargo it moves. Ports, border systems, and industrial policy should be planned together so that improved connectivity supports more local processing and value creation.

Give regional organizations a practical coordinating role: The African Union, IGAD, the East African Community, and other regional bodies can add value by setting common standards and facilitating coordination among governments. Their work could focus on interoperable customs procedures, corridor governance, maritime information-sharing, infrastructure standards, investment coordination, and regional resilience planning. They can also help establish regular channels for consultation and dispute resolution. These institutions are unlikely to replace national governments as builders or operators of major infrastructure, but they can reduce the policy inconsistencies that weaken cross-border systems.

Encourage external partners to support regional resilience: Outside governments and investors have an influence on the region's ports through financing, construction, trade, and security relationships. Their support will be most constructive when it strengthens transparent agreements and diversified connectivity rather than intensifying exclusive competition. Investment in multi-corridor infrastructure, sustainable port operations, green energy, and digital logistics can improve the region's capacity to handle trade. External partners can also support technical cooperation and dialogue, while respecting the need for regional governments to determine the terms of access and coordination.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's maritime ambitions reflect an economic and strategic concern: reliance on a single principal corridor leaves the country exposed to disruptions it cannot fully control. Diversifying access could improve resilience, broaden trade options, and strengthen Ethiopia's ability to plan for long-term growth. But the cases of Assab and Berbera show that a viable route cannot be secured by geography or infrastructure alone. Assab is constrained by entrenched interstate distrust; Berbera's promise is qualified by unresolved political status and diplomatic contestation.

The task, then, is not simply to identify an additional port. It is to imagine and build a system of negotiated access, shared rules, and regional incentives that can withstand shifts in political relations. Littoral states can transform underused access points into economic hubs and corridors that connect coastal infrastructure with inland markets and production. Doing so requires political vision and a willingness to pursue diversification in good faith, with openness to arrangements that address neighboring states' sovereignty concerns. Coastal governments, in turn, can recognize that predictable transit can generate shared economic benefits without diminishing their control.

The Horn of Africa's maritime position could support a more connected regional economy, but only if states treat access as a matter for durable negotiation rather than unilateral assertion or zero-sum competition. When leaders lose sight of cooperation, they may present the obstacles they create for a perceived rival as victories. Yet measuring success by a rival's losses adds little to the lives or livelihoods of the people in either country; its principal reward is political satisfaction for leaders who see their competitors weakened. A more meaningful measure is whether regional choices create jobs, strengthen trade, and improve economic opportunity across borders. With multiple routes, interoperable rules, productive links to inland economies, and credible mechanisms for resolving disputes, ports can become shared engines of integration. Without those foundations, they will remain strategic assets whose commercial potential is repeatedly constrained by the politics surrounding them.