



The Red Sea Power Politics: Emerging Regional Alignments, the Nile Dispute, and the Geopolitics of Somalia

Author

Anwar Abdifatah Bashir: PhD. Candidate in International Studies and the Executive Director of the East African Institute for peace and governance

Abstract

The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden constitute one of the world's most strategically significant geopolitical spaces, linking the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Their importance derives not only from maritime commerce and energy transportation but also from the interaction of competing national interests, unresolved conflicts, transboundary water disputes, and the growing strategic ambitions of regional and extra-regional powers. The security environment has become particularly complex following the Ethiopia–Somaliland Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of 1 January 2024, the continuing dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the war in Sudan, and wider competition for maritime access and influence.

This article argues that the emerging alignment among Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea should be understood less as a formal military alliance than as a **strategic coordination mechanism responding to overlapping concerns over sovereignty, maritime security, Nile water politics, and regional stability**. The quadrilateral consultative summit held in New Alamein on 4 October 2026 is particularly significant in this regard. Its declaration emphasized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia, rejected recognition of Somaliland, affirmed the freedom of navigation, stated that Red Sea governance is the responsibility of littoral states, and called for

adherence to international law concerning transboundary rivers. At the same time, the article cautions against characterizing Ethiopia and Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as a formal "coalition" without sufficient publicly verifiable evidence. The region is better understood as a fluid system of competing partnerships, interests, and strategic calculations.

Keywords: Red Sea, Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, Somalia, Egypt, Eritrea, Sudan, Somaliland, Nile, GERD, geopolitics, maritime security.

1. Introduction

The Red Sea has historically been a contested geopolitical space because of its geographical position between Africa, Asia, and Europe. It forms part of the maritime corridor connecting the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean through the Gulf of Aden, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, and Suez Canal. Its strategic importance has increased further because disruptions in the region can rapidly affect international trade, energy markets, food security, and global supply chains. According to UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), approximately 22 percent of global seaborne container trade passed through the Suez Canal in 2023, illustrating the importance of the wider Red Sea maritime system to the global economy.

The geopolitical significance of the Red Sea, however, cannot be separated from the political dynamics of the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other states have different, and sometimes competing, security and economic interests in the region. External actors have also sought influence through military deployments, port investments, diplomatic partnerships and security cooperation.

Three developments have particularly intensified these dynamics. First, the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has transformed the Nile into an important dimension of Red Sea and Horn of Africa geopolitics. Second, Ethiopia's search for maritime access has generated tensions with Somalia, particularly following the January 2024 MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland. Third, the Sudanese civil war has introduced another major security crisis

into a region already characterized by fragile states, armed conflicts and competing external interventions.

Against this background, the emergence of closer consultation among **Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea** represents an important development in the regional balance of power.

2. The Strategic Importance of the Red Sea

The Red Sea is not simply a geographical waterway. It is a strategic corridor through which commercial, military and political interests intersect.

The Suez Canal provides the shortest maritime connection between Europe and much of Asia without requiring vessels to sail around the Cape of Good Hope. Disruptions in Red Sea shipping therefore have consequences well beyond the immediate region. UNCTAD reported that attacks on commercial shipping beginning in late 2023 substantially reduced Suez Canal traffic and forced vessels to undertake longer voyages around southern Africa, increasing transportation costs and putting pressure on global supply chains.

The southern entrance to the Red Sea, the **Bab el-Mandeb Strait**, is particularly important. It connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean. Its strategic significance means that instability in Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan can have consequences for maritime security far beyond their national borders.

The maritime dimension also explains the importance of regional mechanisms such as the **Djibouti Code of Conduct and its Jeddah Amendment**. The International Maritime Organization describes the framework as a mechanism for regional cooperation against piracy, armed robbery, trafficking, illegal fishing and other maritime crimes.

Consequently, Red Sea security cannot be reduced to naval power. It involves:

- freedom of navigation;
- port infrastructure and maritime access;

- protection of commercial shipping;
- counter-piracy operations;
- illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing;
- trafficking and transnational crime;
- military basing;
- control of strategic chokepoints;
- sovereignty and territorial integrity; and
- competition over regional political influence.

3. The Nile and the Expansion of Water Geopolitics

The politics of the Red Sea increasingly intersects with the politics of the Nile. The Nile River is a central strategic resource for Egypt and Sudan while Ethiopia regards the river as an important instrument of economic development and energy production.

The **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)** has therefore become one of the most consequential geopolitical disputes in Northeast Africa. Egypt and Sudan have expressed concerns regarding the filling and operation of the dam, while Ethiopia has emphasized its sovereign right to develop its water resources.

The three countries signed the **Declaration of Principles on the GERD in 2015**, which established principles including cooperation, equitable and reasonable utilization, and the avoidance of significant harm.

The problem is that the dispute has gradually acquired a broader geopolitical character. Water security is increasingly connected with questions of national security, regional alliances, energy security and diplomatic influence.

The October 2026 El Alamein declaration reflected this wider strategic dimension. Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia emphasized international law concerning transboundary rivers, including the principles of no harm, prior notification, consultation and cooperation, while rejecting unilateral measures that could harm the existing water uses of downstream Nile states.

Thus, the Nile dispute is no longer an isolated water-management issue. It has become part of a wider contest over the political order of Northeast Africa.

4. Ethiopia's Search for Maritime Access and the Somalia Question

Ethiopia's geographical position is central to contemporary Red Sea geopolitics. Since Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia has been landlocked and has depended heavily on neighboring countries for maritime trade.

Ethiopia's search for alternative maritime access has consequently become an important component of its foreign policy. The issue became particularly controversial on **1 January 2024**, when Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding concerning maritime access.

The Somali federal government rejected the agreement as a violation of Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United Nations subsequently recorded Somalia's position that the agreement violated its sovereignty, while the European Union emphasized the importance of respecting Somalia's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The dispute transformed the Ethiopia–Somalia relationship and generated wider regional diplomatic consequences.

However, the subsequent **Ankara Declaration of December 2024** demonstrated that the dispute could also be managed through diplomacy. Ethiopia and Somalia reaffirmed respect for each other's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity and agreed to pursue mutually beneficial arrangements concerning Ethiopia's access to the sea under Somali sovereign authority.

This development is important because it illustrates that maritime access and sovereignty need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Ethiopia has legitimate economic interests in obtaining reliable maritime access, while Somalia has a legitimate interest in maintaining control over its sovereign territory and maritime resources. The central challenge is therefore to reconcile these interests through internationally recognized agreements.

5. The Emergence of an Egypt–Somalia–Eritrea–Sudan Alignment

The changing regional environment has encouraged closer coordination among Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan.

It is important, however, to distinguish between a **formal alliance** and a **strategic alignment**. There is insufficient evidence to characterize the four countries as having established a conventional military alliance directed against Ethiopia. Instead, their cooperation is better understood as an emerging framework of diplomatic and strategic coordination based on several shared interests.

These interests include:

1. **Protection of national sovereignty and territorial integrity;**
2. **Concern about unilateral changes to regional security arrangements;**
3. **Nile water security;**
4. **Red Sea maritime security;**
5. **Stability in Sudan;**
6. **Support for Somalia's territorial integrity;**
7. **Opposition to external interference in the internal affairs of regional states; and**
8. **A desire for greater regional consultation.**

The October 2026 summit institutionalized this emerging coordination.

6. The 4 October 2026 El Alamein Summit

On **4 October 2026**, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi hosted President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud of Somalia, President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea and Sudanese leader General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in New Alamein City.

The resulting **El Alamein Joint Declaration** provides an important primary source for understanding the emerging regional order. The leaders reaffirmed respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and agreed to strengthen consultation and coordination among the four countries.

Several elements of the declaration deserve particular attention.

6.1 Red Sea Governance

The leaders reaffirmed freedom of navigation while stating that governance of the Red Sea is the **exclusive responsibility of littoral states**.

This position has important implications for Ethiopia. Although Ethiopia is a major Horn of Africa state and an important factor in regional security, it is landlocked. The declaration therefore implicitly challenges the idea that non-littoral states should have an independent role in determining the political and security architecture of the Red Sea.

At the same time, the concept should not be interpreted as excluding all external actors from maritime cooperation. Existing regional mechanisms, including the Djibouti Code of Conduct, demonstrate that maritime security requires cooperation between coastal states and international partners.

The distinction is therefore between **regional ownership** and **international cooperation**.

7. Somalia's Sovereignty and the Somaliland Question

One of the strongest components of the declaration concerns Somalia.

The four leaders expressed support for Somalia's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity and rejected recognition or support for Somaliland, describing such recognition as an infringement upon Somalia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They also called for adequate, sustainable and predictable international funding for AUSSOM.

This is strategically important for Mogadishu.

For Somalia, the Somaliland issue is not merely a diplomatic disagreement. It is closely connected with:

- territorial integrity;

- maritime boundaries;
- control of coastal resources;
- national security;
- federal authority; and
- Somalia's position in the regional balance of power.

The issue also illustrates why the Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU had such a significant regional impact. The agreement transformed what had previously been largely a Somalia–Somaliland political question into a broader Horn of Africa geopolitical issue.

The subsequent Ankara Declaration, however, demonstrated that Ethiopia and Somalia could reopen diplomatic channels and pursue maritime-access arrangements under Somali sovereignty.

8. Sudan and the Regional Security Complex

Sudan represents another critical component of Red Sea power politics.

The civil war that began in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), has destabilized one of the most strategically important countries in Northeast Africa.

Sudan's location gives the conflict a direct connection to the Red Sea, the Nile Basin and the Horn of Africa.

The war also has regional dimensions because different external actors have been accused of supporting or engaging with competing Sudanese actors. However, claims that Ethiopia and the RSF constitute a formal or coordinated **"Ethiopia–RSF coalition"** should be treated cautiously. Publicly available evidence does not establish such a formal coalition, and regional relationships with the Sudanese conflict are fluid and contested.

A more academically defensible formulation is that **the Sudanese war has become embedded within broader regional competition**, creating incentives for neighboring

states to align their diplomatic and security policies according to their respective interests.

This distinction is important because academic analysis should avoid presenting allegations or intelligence claims as established facts.

9. The Strategic Logic of the Four-Country Coordination

The four countries have different national interests, but their cooperation can be explained through a concept of **overlapping strategic interests**.

Country Principal strategic concern

Egypt Nile water security, Red Sea security and regional stability

Somalia Sovereignty, territorial integrity, maritime security and AUSSOM

Eritrea Red Sea sovereignty, national security and regional strategic autonomy

Sudan Territorial integrity, state survival, Red Sea access and Nile security

The alignment therefore does not require identical foreign policies.

Instead, it can be understood as a **coalition of overlapping interests**.

Egypt gains additional regional diplomatic support concerning the Nile and Red Sea. Somalia gains political backing for its territorial integrity. Eritrea strengthens its position in Red Sea affairs. Sudan receives diplomatic support for its sovereignty and state institutions.

The result is an emerging regional configuration in which cooperation is driven by common concerns rather than complete strategic convergence.

10. From Alliance Politics to Regional Security Architecture

The most significant aspect of the El Alamein declaration may ultimately be institutional rather than military.

The leaders agreed to establish a mechanism to follow up on the summit's outcomes and to convene the consultative summit periodically.

This creates the possibility of developing a more permanent regional consultation mechanism.

Such a mechanism could potentially address:

Maritime security

Joint assessments of threats to commercial shipping, piracy, trafficking and illegal fishing.

Diplomatic coordination

Regular consultations before major regional and international diplomatic meetings.

Nile diplomacy

Coordination on water security while maintaining space for dialogue with Ethiopia.

Somalia's security transition

Support for the Somali government and AUSSOM.

Sudan

Diplomatic efforts aimed at preserving Sudan's unity and territorial integrity and supporting a peaceful political settlement.

Economic cooperation

Greater cooperation in ports, transport, trade, infrastructure and regional connectivity.

The four countries therefore have an opportunity to transform reactive diplomacy into a more structured regional security architecture.

11. Challenges and Risks

Despite its potential, the emerging alignment faces several challenges.

11.1 Risk of regional polarization

If the four-country mechanism develops primarily as an anti-Ethiopian bloc, it could deepen polarization rather than promote regional stability.

Ethiopia remains one of the Horn of Africa's largest states and cannot realistically be excluded from regional security arrangements.

11.2 Divergent national interests

Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan do not have identical strategic objectives. Their cooperation could weaken if bilateral disagreements or domestic political changes alter their priorities.

11.3 Sudan's internal conflict

The continuing Sudanese conflict makes it difficult to create a stable regional security framework. Any regional initiative must account for the complexity of Sudan's internal political and military landscape.

11.4 Maritime governance

The assertion that Red Sea governance is the exclusive responsibility of littoral states strengthens regional ownership but must coexist with international maritime law and the reality that international shipping depends on cooperation between regional and external powers.

11.5 The Ethiopia question

Perhaps the greatest challenge is how the four countries engage Ethiopia.

A sustainable regional order cannot simply seek to contain Ethiopia. It must address Ethiopia's legitimate economic interests while maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring states.

12. Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a permanent quadrilateral consultation mechanism

Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea should institutionalize the mechanism announced at El Alamein through regular foreign-ministerial and technical-level meetings.

2. Separate maritime access from sovereignty disputes

Regional actors should support commercial and economic access arrangements that do not undermine the sovereignty or territorial integrity of states.

3. Maintain dialogue with Ethiopia

The emerging regional alignment should avoid becoming an exclusive anti-Ethiopian coalition. Ethiopia should be engaged through diplomatic mechanisms addressing maritime access, trade, water security and regional security.

4. Strengthen regional maritime institutions

The four states should work with the Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment and other regional mechanisms to strengthen maritime domain awareness, counter-piracy cooperation, information sharing and responses to illicit maritime activity.

5. Support Somalia's security transition

International partners should provide sustainable and predictable support to AUSSOM and Somali security institutions, consistent with the El Alamein declaration and wider African Union efforts.

6. Promote negotiated Nile cooperation

The Nile dispute should be managed through international law, technical dialogue and negotiated arrangements rather than military threats or unilateral measures.

7. Develop a regional economic agenda

Security cooperation should be complemented by trade, port development, infrastructure, fisheries, energy and transport cooperation. Economic interdependence can reduce incentives for confrontation.

13. Conclusion

The Red Sea is emerging as one of the principal theatres of twenty-first-century geopolitical competition. Its strategic importance derives from the intersection of global maritime commerce, regional conflicts, energy routes, ports, military power, water politics and national sovereignty. The Horn of Africa is at the center of this transformation.

The Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU of January 2024 demonstrated how questions of maritime access can rapidly become questions of sovereignty and regional security. The GERD dispute demonstrated how water politics can become intertwined with wider geopolitical competition. The Sudanese civil war has added another layer of instability, while continuing insecurity around the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has reinforced the importance of maritime cooperation.

Against this background, the **4 October 2026 El Alamein summit represents an important development in the regional security landscape**. Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan articulated common positions on sovereignty, Somalia's territorial integrity, Nile water politics, Red Sea governance and regional coordination.

Nevertheless, the emerging configuration should not yet be described as a conventional military alliance. It is more accurately characterized as a **strategic alignment based on overlapping interests**.

Its long-term significance will depend on whether the four countries can convert political declarations into institutions, economic cooperation and mechanisms for conflict prevention.

Most importantly, regional stability will require a balance between **coastal-state sovereignty and inclusive regional cooperation**. Ethiopia's legitimate interest in

maritime connectivity must be reconciled with the sovereignty of Somalia, Eritrea and other coastal states. Similarly, Egypt and Sudan's concerns over Nile security must be balanced against Ethiopia's developmental interests.

The future of Red Sea geopolitics will therefore not be determined solely by military power. It will depend on the ability of regional states to construct a political order in which **sovereignty, maritime security, economic interdependence and negotiated access coexist.**

References

African Union. (2024). *Communique of the 1253rd Meeting of the Peace and Security Council on the Situation in Somalia and Post-ATMIS Security Arrangements*. African Union Peace and Security Council.

European External Action Service. (2024). *Ethiopia/Somalia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia*. 2 January 2024.

International Maritime Organization. (2023). *Strategic approach to implementing Djibouti Code of Conduct on maritime security*.

International Maritime Organization. (n.d.). *Djibouti Code of Conduct*.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Federal Republic of Somalia. (2024). *Ankara Declaration, 11 December 2024*.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye. (2024). *Ankara Declaration by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Federal Republic of Somalia facilitated by the Republic of Türkiye*.

Office of the Presidency of the Arab Republic of Egypt. (2026). *El Alamein Joint Declaration: Quadrilateral Consultative Summit between Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia*. 4 October 2026.

United Nations. (2024). *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Somalia*. UN Security Council document S/2024/129.

UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2024). *Navigating Troubled Waters: Impact to Global Trade of Disruption of Shipping Routes in the Red Sea, Black Sea and Panama Canal*.

UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2024). *Suez and Panama Canal disruptions threaten global trade and development*.