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THE RED SEA BASE ECOLOGY

After Djibouti's Functional Monopoly

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Introduction: Is Berbera Replacing Djibouti?

What changes when foreign military access in the Red Sea no longer depends primarily on one host state, but instead operates through a network of ports, airfields, intelligence facilities, commercial infrastructure and negotiated access arrangements?

For nearly two decades, Djibouti has been the principal military hub connecting the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean. American, French, Chinese and Japanese forces operate from facilities concentrated within a remarkably small territory. Their missions include counterterrorism, counter-piracy, intelligence collection, logistics, force protection and the evacuation of nationals. This coexistence has made Djibouti the region's most concentrated platform for external military power.

Djibouti never possessed an absolute monopoly over foreign military access. Eritrea's Assab port supported Emirati operations connected to the Yemen war, while Berbera's strategic value predates the present phase of Red Sea competition. Djibouti nevertheless developed a functional monopoly: it was the only internationally recognised, politically stable and operationally mature location capable of hosting several major powers simultaneously without forcing them into an unresolved territorial dispute.

That position is no longer uncontested. Berbera's commercial expansion, the United States Africa Command's assessment of the port in November 2025, Israel's recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 and continuing concern over threats around Bab el-Mandeb have increased demand for alternatives. These developments do not establish that Djibouti is being replaced, or that a confirmed American, Israeli or multinational base already operates in Berbera. They show something more defensible: external actors increasingly value strategic redundancy outside a single primary hub.

The deeper transformation is therefore structural. Red Sea security is shifting from concentrated dependence on one dominant platform toward a hub-and-network system in which permanent bases, dual-use ports, airfields, surveillance sites, logistics corridors and contingency-access agreements perform different but connected functions. This article uses the phrase distributed base ecology as descriptive shorthand for that system. It does not propose a new theory. The established analytical foundations are networked military access, overseas basing politics and strategic redundancy, all of which emphasise that infrastructure has military value only when host-state permission, logistical connectivity and political legitimacy allow it to be used.

This article argues that Djibouti will probably remain the primary hub, but its exclusivity is weakening. Berbera may become a supplementary node; Assab and Massawa remain contingent options; and the Yemeni coast and Bab el-Mandeb shape the value of every African-side facility. The central problem is not simply where another base may appear. It is that access decisions are advancing faster than the regional institutions responsible for managing their consequences. As a result, operational choices by external powers can convert unresolved sovereignty disputes into wider security confrontations.

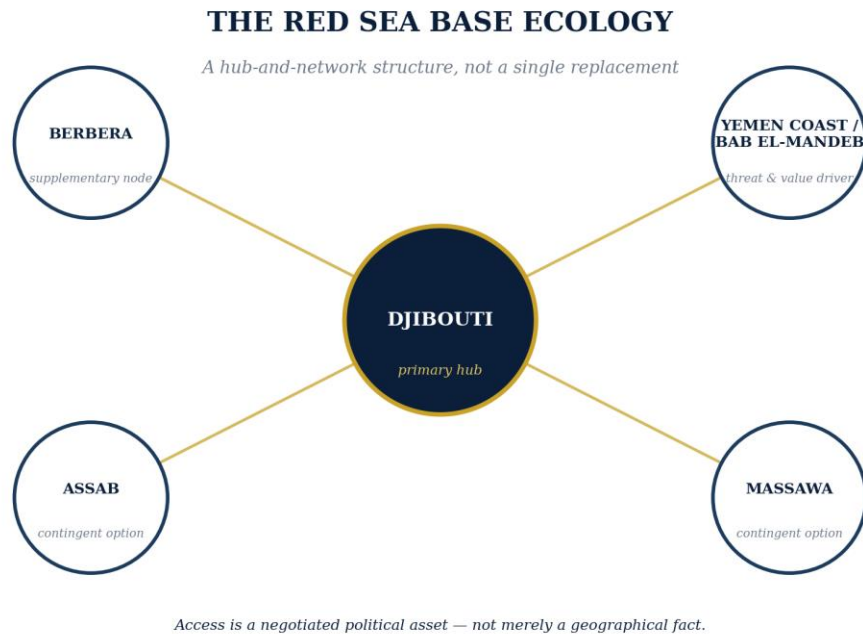


Figure 1. The Red Sea base ecology: Djibouti as primary hub, with Berbera, Assab and Massawa as supplementary or contingent nodes.

Analytical Framework: Networked Access, Not Base Replacement

Research on overseas military posture distinguishes among permanent installations, rotational deployments, pre-positioned logistics, temporary access, commercial facilities with military utility and cooperative arrangements that can be activated during crises. These are not interchangeable. A large permanent base provides command, maintenance and force protection. A smaller site may offer intelligence coverage, refuelling, emergency landing, naval replenishment or evacuation without hosting a continuous combat presence.

The politics of access is equally important. A port may possess an excellent runway, deep water and proximity to a conflict zone, yet remain unusable if the host government refuses a particular operation. Conversely, a modest facility may become strategically valuable when a host state grants permissive access at a critical moment. Access is therefore a negotiated political asset, not merely a geographical fact.

The Red Sea should consequently be analysed as a connected theatre. Decisions at one node alter the value of others. Restrictions in Djibouti increase the appeal of Berbera or Assab. Military construction in Berbera affects Somalia's sovereignty calculations. Gulf investment changes Ethiopia's corridor options. Houthi attacks can produce military demand on the African shore. The relevant unit of analysis is the network and the political bargains that activate it, not the isolated port.

Djibouti's Functional Monopoly

Djibouti's strategic position rests on geography, political continuity and institutionalised access. Situated close to Bab el-Mandeb, it connects the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Peninsula and East Africa. Its government has converted this geography into diplomatic and economic leverage by hosting forces from states that are sometimes strategic competitors.

This model gives external powers legal certainty, established agreements, mature port and airport infrastructure, and proximity to major maritime routes. It also allows them to operate through an internationally recognised government rather than becoming directly entangled in a territorial-status dispute.

Djibouti has also benefited from strategic pluralism. Rather than relying exclusively on one patron, it has accommodated several. The presence of competitors creates operational and intelligence risks, particularly as United States-China competition extends into surveillance, maritime infrastructure and access to strategic corridors. Yet it also reduces the likelihood that one external actor can dominate the host state completely.

Density does not mean Djibouti has become unusable. Its established infrastructure, recognised agreements, political predictability and force-protection experience remain difficult to reproduce elsewhere. The more defensible conclusion is that external actors seek additional options, not abandonment. A supplementary node provides redundancy while preserving the original hub; a substitute seeks to displace it. Available evidence supports the first interpretation more strongly than the second.

Djibouti's leverage may therefore erode at the margins, but its centrality remains substantial. Its future advantage will depend less on being the only viable location and more on remaining the most predictable, secure and operationally capable one.

The Houthi Factor and the Demand for Redundancy

The military geography of the Red Sea cannot be understood without Yemen. Since late 2023, Houthi attacks on commercial shipping have shown how an armed actor based on one shore can alter trade routes, insurance calculations, naval deployments and diplomatic choices across both shores.

Responding to such threats requires more than naval patrols. It may require intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; aerial refuelling; drone operations; air defence; maintenance; emergency landing; evacuation capacity; and secure logistical access. No single facility needs to perform all these functions.

Djibouti is well placed to support many of them, but it is also a concentrated asset. Heavy reliance on one location can create exposure to congestion, political restrictions, intelligence compromise or disruption during a severe confrontation. Strategic redundancy is therefore rational even when the principal hub remains effective.

A distributed posture could allocate functions across the theatre:

- a permanent command-and-logistics hub,
- a separate location for surveillance and intelligence,
- an airfield for emergency landing, refuelling or evacuation,
- a commercial port capable of naval replenishment; and
- bilateral arrangements permitting temporary access during a crisis.

The strategic significance of these locations arises from their ability to operate together. They need not be equal, permanent or publicly acknowledged. Their value lies in the options they create and in the political conditions under which those options can be activated.

Berbera as the Test Case

Berbera is the clearest test of this transition because its commercial, geographical and political significance overlap. DP World began operating the port in 2017 and later invested in a new container terminal, expansion plans, an economic zone and the wider Berbera corridor. These projects were designed to support a regional trade hub, including potential Ethiopian transit trade.

This chronology matters. Commercial development created the physical platform on which later strategic interest could build. Political recognition did not create Berbera's value. It altered the diplomatic environment surrounding an already useful port and airfield.

The November 2025 visit by the Commander of United States Africa Command demonstrated Berbera's growing operational relevance. AFRICOM reported that its leadership toured the port to assess the security environment and review operational capacity.³ This was an assessment, not an announced basing decision.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland on 26 December 2025 then changed the political meaning of such assessments. Israel became the first United Nations member state to recognise Somaliland formally, prompting strong objections from Somalia and debate in the United Nations Security Council.⁴

A July 2026 investigation by Le Monde, based on satellite imagery and security sources, reported construction at Berbera airport consistent with a possible military expansion and linked the activity to Emirati, Israeli and American interests.¹ This is not resting on a single outlet: it converges with an earlier report describing Israeli security personnel active in Somaliland ahead of formal recognition, with satellite analysis suggesting the excavated structures follow an air-defence layout, and with subsequent reporting that Somaliland provided a covert staging position to Israeli aircraft during the Iran war.² Convergent reporting across outlets still does not substitute for public confirmation by the governments concerned. The article therefore treats the construction, reported visits and alleged cooperation as indicators of an emerging possibility, not conclusive proof of a fully operational trilateral base.

These developments connect three questions that were previously easier to separate: Somaliland's campaign for recognition, foreign interest in Berbera's infrastructure, and the operational requirements generated by Yemen and the Gulf of Aden.

This produces the first central paradox. Somaliland's strategic utility may increase foreign engagement without producing broad recognition. External powers can often obtain commercial access, intelligence cooperation or contingency use without resolving Somaliland's final status. For governments seeking operational benefits while avoiding confrontation with Somalia, the African Union and states committed to territorial integrity, ambiguity can be useful.

Strategic importance and political recognition are therefore not automatically reinforcing. Israel's decision may encourage Somaliland to link access more directly to diplomatic recognition. Other actors may prefer extensive commercial and security engagement without a formal position on sovereignty.

Berbera's geography creates a second paradox. Its proximity to Yemen makes it attractive for surveillance, interception and contingency access. The same proximity could expose the facility and its commercial corridor to threats or retaliation if it were used for offensive operations. Its strategic value and vulnerability arise from the same location.

Eritrean Ports and the Return of Contingency Geography

Assab and Massawa form a second category within the emerging network. Unlike Berbera, they are not located within an internationally contested sovereignty arrangement. An agreement concerning an Eritrean port would be concluded with a recognised sovereign government, removing one major legal and diplomatic complication.

Assab's use by the United Arab Emirates during the Yemen war demonstrates its latent military utility. Beginning in 2015, the UAE developed port and airfield facilities there to support operations across the Red Sea.⁶ Elements of the facility were later dismantled as the UAE reduced its direct military role in Yemen.

The Assab experience yields three lessons. Military infrastructure can expand rapidly when operational demand is high. It may be temporary rather than permanent. Its value depends as much on the host government's calculations as on geography.

Eritrea could potentially benefit from renewed demand for Red Sea access, but infrastructure constraints, political risk and tense regional relationships limit the immediate attractiveness of its ports. Assab and Massawa are not dormant substitutes waiting automatically to replace Djibouti. They are contingent nodes whose activation would require host-state consent, external investment and a favourable political environment.

For Ethiopia, this is especially important. Any future access involving Eritrean territory would require peaceful negotiation, mutual benefit and full respect for Eritrea's sovereignty. Maritime geography cannot be separated from the political relationship between the two states.

Where External Interests Overlap and Collide

The Red Sea is not divided neatly into a Western, Gulf and African camp. Actors pursue different objectives, and temporary convergence does not necessarily produce durable alignment.

The United States. Washington's principal interests include counterterrorism, freedom of navigation, intelligence collection and the protection of American personnel and commerce. Djibouti remains central. Berbera offers possible redundancy and proximity to the Gulf of Aden, but operational engagement with Somaliland can be interpreted as movement toward political recognition even when formal policy is unchanged.

China. Beijing has a strong interest in preserving Djibouti's strategic importance. Its facility supports naval logistics, protection of overseas interests and a wider maritime presence. China also benefits diplomatically from an order that emphasises sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is therefore more likely to monitor diversification than welcome a network that expands American or allied access around the Gulf of Aden.

The United Arab Emirates. The UAE has been among the most consequential external actors shaping the Horn's port geography. Through commercial investment and logistical development, it helped make Berbera operationally credible. Its earlier use of Assab demonstrated the link between Gulf military objectives and African coastal infrastructure. Its distinctive advantage is that it can pursue extensive commercial and strategic engagement without formally recognising Somaliland.

Israel. Israel's recognition of Somaliland makes it the actor most directly connecting diplomatic status to Red Sea security. Houthi missile, drone and maritime capabilities give the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden direct security relevance. Recognition expands the range of possible cooperation, but it should not itself be treated as proof of a military agreement.

Türkiye. Türkiye has substantial political and security relations with Somalia and mediated the Ankara Declaration between Ethiopia and Somalia.⁵ The declaration reaffirmed sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity while acknowledging the potential benefits of Ethiopia obtaining reliable access to and from the sea under Somalia's sovereign authority. Türkiye therefore has an interest in preventing maritime access from reopening confrontation between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu.

Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf. The Gulf states share an interest in secure maritime routes, but they do not constitute a unified strategic bloc. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Oman have different relationships with Yemeni actors, political movements and Horn governments. Common concern about the Houthis does not produce identical regional policies. Port investments and security partnerships should therefore be assessed actor by actor rather than interpreted as one Gulf strategy.

Egypt. Egypt's security relationship with Mogadishu and its prospective role in African Union arrangements in Somalia add another layer. Cairo's stated position emphasises Somalia's sovereignty and the stabilisation of the Somali state. Ethiopia nevertheless has legitimate reasons

to assess how the broader Egypt-Somalia relationship may affect regional alignments. Diplomatic accuracy requires separating the formal purpose of AUSSOM from wider geopolitical interpretation: the mission is mandated to support Somalia against Al-Shabaab, assist stabilisation, protect civilians and facilitate the transfer of security responsibilities.

Egyptian participation under an African Union mandate should not automatically be described as an anti-Ethiopian deployment. At the same time, transparency, sustained dialogue with Somalia and protection of the mission's collective African purpose remain necessary to prevent bilateral rivalry from weakening a multilateral security operation.

Sovereignty as an Operational Variable

The most consequential feature of the emerging network is that sovereignty disputes are no longer only diplomatic questions. They are becoming variables in operational planning.

Somalia maintains that it alone possesses the legal authority to conclude international security agreements concerning Somali territory. Somaliland, which declared independence in 1991 but has historically remained internationally recognised as part of Somalia, argues that its long-standing self-government and separate institutions entitle it to conduct its own foreign relations.

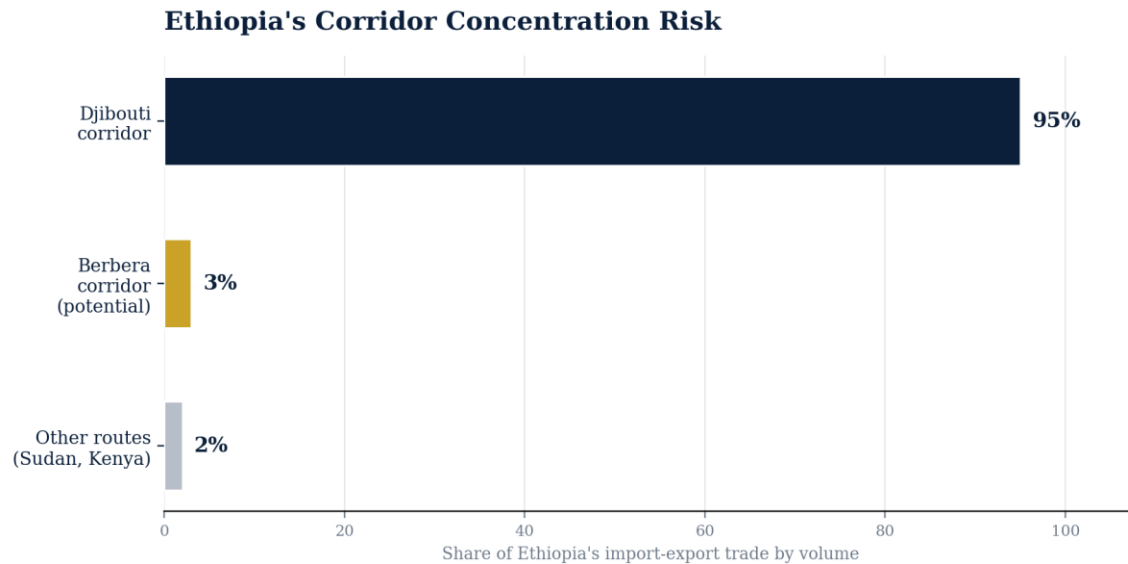
External powers may try to avoid choosing between these positions. In practice, however, infrastructure investment, military visits, intelligence cooperation and recognition decisions redistribute political leverage. An actor that uses Berbera without recognising Somaliland strengthens Somaliland's practical autonomy. A state that recognises Somaliland challenges Somalia's territorial claim directly. A government that rejects recognition but negotiates operational access through Hargeisa occupies an ambiguous position between those outcomes.

The problem is not merely legal inconsistency. Bilateral arrangements can produce regional security consequences before the underlying sovereignty dispute is resolved. This reverses the expected sequence. Rather than settling political status before concluding sensitive security arrangements, external actors may obtain access first and leave African institutions to manage the consequences later.

The more strategically useful Berbera becomes, the harder this contradiction will be to contain. Operational ambiguity may offer short-term flexibility, but it can create long-term insecurity for Somalia, Somaliland, Ethiopia and the wider region.

Ethiopia's Strategic Exposure

Ethiopia is not a Red Sea littoral state, but it is deeply exposed to the region's military and commercial order. Its population, trade requirements, security responsibilities and regional influence make developments around Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden matters of national economic security. More than 95 percent of Ethiopia's import-export trade by volume has historically moved through the Addis-Djibouti corridor.⁷



Source: World Bank trade data, cited in IFA, "Ethiopia's Corridor Imperative" (2026).

Figure 2. Ethiopia's corridor concentration risk: the overwhelming share of trade volume still moves through Djibouti.

Djibouti is therefore not simply a neighbouring port. It is a central component of Ethiopia's economic security. Diversification should not be framed as rejection of Djibouti. The rational objective is to preserve Djibouti as the principal reliable corridor while developing supplementary options that reduce concentration risk.

The base ecology changes how those options must be evaluated. A commercially attractive port may also carry military exposure. Consider the causal chain that could emerge around Berbera: expanded foreign security use improves infrastructure and protection; the same use creates a perception that the facility supports operations against Yemen; that perception raises the risk of threat, retaliation or tighter security restrictions; insurers and shipping firms price the additional uncertainty; and a corridor intended to diversify Ethiopian trade becomes less predictable. The relevant question is therefore not whether military investment is simply good or bad. It is how the operational role of a port changes its commercial reliability for Ethiopia.

Ethiopia requires a portfolio approach based on four principles.

1. Diversification must remain peaceful and lawful

Reliable maritime access should be pursued through negotiation, commercial agreements and respect for neighbouring sovereignty. The Ankara process offers the clearest framework regarding Somalia because it allows Ethiopia to defend an economic interest without presenting access as a territorial claim.

2. Commercial corridors must be separated from military alignment

A port can be economically useful to Ethiopia while hosting facilities linked to external powers. This does not require Ethiopia to join those powers' military agendas. Djibouti

already demonstrates that commercial dependence on a corridor does not equal alignment with every mission operating from the host state.

3. Strategic autonomy and balanced Gulf relations must be preserved

Ethiopia's interests are not served by importing Gulf rivalries into the Horn. Relations with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Türkiye and other partners should be assessed according to mutual interests rather than exclusive alignment. Cooperation should remain issue-based and should avoid dependence on a single external patron.

4. Relations with Hargeisa and Mogadishu must be managed together

Ethiopia has long-standing economic, security and social connections with Somaliland, while relations with Somalia and cooperation against Al-Shabaab are also strategically important. Commercial engagement with Berbera should be pursued consistently with the Ankara framework and with the objective of access without regional polarisation. As a general principle, Ethiopian commercial engagement with any Red Sea corridor should remain strictly commercial in character and separable from the offensive military use of that corridor by any third party.

A practical corridor assessment should therefore compare more than distance and port fees. It should include legal status, political reliability, infrastructure quality, external-force presence, military mission, insurance exposure, host-state stability and the effect of each corridor on relations with neighbouring states. Berbera's corridor potential is commercially real, including through earlier Ethiopia-DP World discussions, but its strategic value cannot be separated from its evolving security role.

The Governance Gap

The Red Sea does not suffer from a complete absence of institutions. It suffers from fragmented authority. The African Union has continental peace-and-security responsibilities, norms concerning borders and sovereignty, and maritime frameworks. IGAD has a Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Mission tasked with promoting regional dialogue, developing a common position and supporting a regional plan of action. The Red Sea Council brings together eight coastal states, but excludes Ethiopia because it was organised around littoral membership.

The Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, United Nations Security Council and several naval frameworks address additional parts of the problem. None routinely governs the interaction among foreign basing, dual-use infrastructure, sovereignty disputes, commercial corridors and African regional security.

The institutional gap is therefore not jurisdictional emptiness. It is the absence of coordination among institutions with partial authority. An American assessment in Berbera affects Somalia's sovereignty dispute. An Israeli recognition decision engages African Union norms. A Gulf-financed port alters Ethiopia's corridor options. Houthi attacks may generate military operations from African territory. No existing forum consistently brings these consequences together.

The appropriate response is not to prohibit foreign security partnerships. It is to make them more transparent and conflict-sensitive. The African Union Peace and Security Council should request the AU Commission, working with the IGAD Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Mission, to develop a voluntary notification and consultation mechanism for major external-access arrangements. The mechanism should distinguish among four categories: commercial investment, logistical access, intelligence and surveillance cooperation, and offensive military deployment.

Such a mechanism should produce an annual regional risk assessment, provide confidential consultations when a proposed arrangement affects a sovereignty dispute, and establish an urgent channel for host states and neighbouring countries when new deployments create a risk of retaliation or miscalculation. It should engage the Red Sea Council, Gulf states and major external military actors without surrendering African institutional leadership. The AU's existing maritime strategy provides a continental foundation, while IGAD supplies the regional membership and political knowledge needed for implementation.

Counterargument: Djibouti May Remain Indispensable

The strongest counterargument is that the distributed-network thesis overstates the evidence. Berbera's commercial expansion does not guarantee military conversion. AFRICOM's visit does not prove a United States basing decision. Israel's recognition does not confirm a permanent Israeli presence. Reported construction may support a narrower Emirati role, and Assab's earlier military use declined when the operational requirement changed.

Djibouti meanwhile retains advantages that alternatives cannot easily reproduce: mature infrastructure, recognised agreements, political continuity, established force-protection arrangements and long experience hosting competing powers.

The likely outcome may therefore be a hub-and-network system rather than the end of Djibouti's centrality. Djibouti remains the primary hub, while Berbera, Assab, Massawa and other locations provide specialised or contingency functions. The system becomes more distributed without becoming fully decentralised.

This counterargument does not invalidate the thesis. It refines it. The transformation lies not in the disappearance of the primary hub, but in the declining willingness of external powers to depend exclusively on it.

Three Scenarios and What to Watch

Scenario One: Managed Distribution

Djibouti remains the principal hub, while Berbera and other locations provide commercial and limited contingency access. External powers preserve political ambiguity over Somaliland.

Ethiopia diversifies carefully without joining a military bloc, and African institutions improve consultation. This is the most stable and, in the near term, the most plausible outcome.

Indicators to watch: continued commercial investment without a public permanent-basing treaty; episodic rather than continuous foreign deployments; rising Ethiopian cargo use; and the creation of an AU-IGAD consultation mechanism.

Scenario Two: Militarised Competition

Berbera acquires an explicit foreign military role connected to counter-Houthi operations. China strengthens its position in Djibouti, while other actors seek access to Eritrean or Yemeni locations. Ports become associated with rival security networks, increasing surveillance competition, political pressure on host states and exposure to retaliation.

Indicators to watch: installation of air-defence or long-range surveillance systems; repeated foreign combat deployments; restricted civilian access around Berbera airport; formal defence agreements; and visible counter-expansion at Djibouti or other nodes.

Scenario Three: Sovereignty-Driven Escalation

External military arrangements deepen the Somalia-Somaliland dispute. Mogadishu mobilises diplomatic and security partnerships in response, while Somaliland uses access to seek additional recognition. Ethiopia's corridor diplomacy becomes entangled in the dispute and the Ankara framework weakens. A temporary operational requirement produces a political conflict that outlasts it.

Indicators to watch: new recognitions of Somaliland; a publicly confirmed basing agreement concluded through Hargeisa; Somali diplomatic or security countermeasures; deterioration in Ethiopia-Somalia technical talks; and attempts to exclude regional actors from corridor or security arrangements.

Policy Implications

For Ethiopia

Establish a permanent inter-agency corridor-security assessment led jointly by the institutions responsible for foreign affairs, transport, trade, finance and national security. It should score each corridor against commercial cost, legal status, political reliability, military exposure, insurance risk and regional diplomatic effect. Ethiopia should also define a clear distinction between using a commercial corridor and permitting its territory or logistics to support offensive operations.

For Djibouti

Respond to emerging alternatives by strengthening the qualities competitors cannot easily reproduce: predictable agreements, operational neutrality, mature infrastructure, reliable services and disciplined management of great-power proximity. Djibouti's comparative advantage is not exclusivity alone; it is trusted continuity.

For Somalia and Somaliland

Increase transparency concerning the commercial and military use of Berbera. Even without a final political settlement, clarity over ownership, mission, duration, command arrangements and permitted operations would reduce miscalculation. Opaque agreements may create short-term leverage but harden the sovereignty dispute over time.

For IGAD and the African Union

Create the proposed notification and consultation mechanism through an AU Peace and Security Council mandate and the operational support of IGAD's Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Mission. Its first product should be a regional mapping of foreign bases, dual-use facilities, contingency agreements and the political disputes attached to them. The exercise should be consultative rather than accusatory and should protect legitimately confidential information.

For External Powers

Distinguish clearly among commercial investment, logistical access, intelligence cooperation and offensive deployment. Consult affected African institutions and neighbouring states when an arrangement intersects with an unresolved sovereignty dispute. Ambiguity can preserve short-term freedom of action, but it transfers political and security costs to host states and the wider region.

Conclusion

The Red Sea is not witnessing the simple replacement of one foreign-base hub by another. Djibouti remains the region's most established and capable military platform. What is changing is the structure around it.

Berbera's expansion, Assab's demonstrated contingency value, threats from Yemen, Gulf investment and external military assessments are producing a more distributed security environment. In that environment, ports and corridors can no longer be treated as exclusively commercial infrastructure. Their value, risks and political meaning are increasingly shaped by the military networks in which they may operate.

The most important consequence is political. As strategic access spreads across multiple nodes, external powers interact more deeply with unresolved sovereignty disputes. Somaliland's utility becomes connected to recognition politics. Somalia's territorial claim becomes part of maritime-

security planning. Ethiopia's corridor diversification becomes exposed to military competition across the Red Sea.

For Ethiopia, the appropriate response is neither passive dependence on Djibouti nor entry into a competitive race for militarised access. It is lawful corridor diversification, balanced external partnerships, support for freedom of navigation, respect for neighbouring sovereignty and active African diplomacy. The objective should be access without alignment, diversification without confrontation, and regional security arrangements that do not undermine commercial reliability.

The Red Sea base ecology becomes dangerous not simply when more actors seek access, but when operational decisions move faster than the institutions capable of anticipating their consequences. The strategic task is therefore not to stop the network from emerging. It is to govern the network before its weakest political fault line becomes the region's next security crisis.

Notes

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