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The Horn of Africa on the Brink: Rising Red Sea Tensions and the Risk of Regional War

ESNhub Strategic Alert

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Executive Summary

Recent geopolitical developments in the Horn of Africa indicate a growing risk of regional conflict that could destabilize the Red Sea corridor, one of the world's most important maritime trade routes. A recent analysis by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), *"Fault Lines in the Horn of Africa,"* warns that the region sits on dangerous geopolitical fault lines where external rivalries and regional tensions could escalate into wider conflict.

At the same time, reporting from the Wall Street Journal and analysis from the Critical Threats Project highlight significant military buildup in northern Ethiopia along the Eritrean and Ethiopian border. Combined with increasingly aggressive rhetoric regarding Red Sea access, the risk of miscalculation is rising.

If tensions escalate into conflict, the consequences could extend far beyond the region, threatening the security of the Bab el-Mandeb strait and disrupting global trade flows between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

Military Developments and Escalating Risks

Reports from *The Wall Street Journal* and analysis by the Critical Threats Project indicate that Ethiopian forces are mobilizing in northern Ethiopia near the Tigray region bordering Eritrea. These developments are occurring amid growing political rhetoric in Ethiopia advocating for "returning to the Red Sea" and securing sovereign port access.

When military mobilization coincides with increasingly assertive political narratives, the potential for miscalculation increases significantly. Historical precedents demonstrate that conflicts in the Horn of Africa can escalate rapidly once military movements and nationalist narratives reinforce one another.

Dangerous Narratives and Public Mobilization

Alongside military developments, Ethiopian media outlets have increasingly promoted narratives questioning Eritrea's sovereignty and advancing claims over Eritrean ports.

These narratives often frame Ethiopia as a "victim" of lacking sea access over the past three decades. However, such framing ignores the historical context: Eritrea was forcibly annexed by Ethiopia, leading to a 30-year independence struggle that ultimately ended with Eritrea's internationally recognized independence in 1993 following a UN-monitored referendum.

State-affiliated media outlets, including the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), have aired statements from senior Ethiopian officials such as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Field Marshal Berhanu Jula, along with large military rallies asserting that Ethiopia has a "historical" or "natural" right to the Red Sea and its ports.

Such messaging risks inflaming public sentiment and creating unnecessary tensions between the Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples.

Historical Context and International Law

It is important to clarify the historical record:

- Eritrea and its ports were not administered by Ethiopia prior to the period of forced annexation.
- Eritrean independence followed a 30-year struggle to reverse that annexation.
- In 1993, a UN-monitored referendum granted Eritrea internationally recognized sovereignty.

Respect for internationally recognized borders remains a cornerstone of international law and regional stability.

Strategic Importance of the Red Sea Corridor

The Bab el-Mandeb strait represents one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. It connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and serves as a major transit route linking Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

Any instability in the Horn of Africa that threatens this corridor would have immediate global consequences, including:

- disruption of international trade flows
- increased energy transport risks
- heightened global shipping costs
- destabilization of regional security dynamics

For this reason, tensions in the Horn of Africa cannot be viewed solely as a regional issue; they carry significant global economic and security implications.

Preventive Diplomacy is Critical

The international community should pay close attention to the warning signs emerging in the region. Early diplomatic engagement by the United States, Western partners, and international organizations could help prevent tensions from escalating into open conflict.

The Horn of Africa cannot afford another Sudan-like catastrophe. Preventive diplomacy and respect for international law remain the most effective tools for maintaining stability in the Red Sea corridor.

Sources and References

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

"Fault Lines in the Horn of Africa"

<https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/fault-lines-in-the-horn-of-africa/>

Wall Street Journal

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<https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/troops-mass-as-landlocked-ethiopia-chases-access-to-the-sea-211eb089>

Critical Threats Project

Horn of Africa regional security analysis

<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/ethiopia-tigray-war-tplf-eritrea-sudan-red-sea-africa-file>

Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) References

- **Field Marshal Berhanu Jula speaking about securing port access**
<https://youtu.be/Nxu6hrTVEh8>
- **Military rally promoting the message that Ethiopia cannot remain landlocked**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDOqZtl0cHk>
- **Speech by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed discussing Red Sea access and historical claims**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVd6OO_fLOI
- **Broadcast advocating Eritrean ports be added to Ethiopia**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exqHeGDKmgw>

Prepared by the ESNhub Information and Digital Advocacy Pillar to highlight emerging risks to regional stability and the security of the Red Sea corridor.