Djibouti's Foreign Policy Change from Survival Strategy through Global Transnationalism to Interdependent Regionalism

A Complex Interdependence Theory of Ethio-Djiboutian Maritime Cooperation

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Executive Summary

Ethiopia and Djibouti occupy opposite ends of a single strategic equation. One is a landlocked country of nearly one hundred and thirty-nine million people whose entire external trade depends on a coastline it does not own. The other is a nation of roughly one point two million people whose entire economic model depends on a customer it cannot afford to lose (United Nations Population Division, 2026). This asymmetry, sustained for nearly five decades without a single episode of interstate war, is one of the more unusual and underexamined relationships in the international politics of the Horn of Africa. It has produced neither the open rivalry that characterizes Ethiopia's ties with Eritrea nor the chronic instability that has marked its engagement with Somalia. It has instead produced a durable, if uneven, partnership whose terms have shifted substantially across three distinct historical phases: the survival-oriented neutrality of President Hassan Gouled Aptidon, the assertive geo-economic diplomacy of President Ismail Omar Guelleh, and the still-unfolding period defined by Ethiopia's search for diversified sea access and the intensifying interest of external powers in the Bab el Mandeb corridor.

This brief traces that evolution from its colonial origins through the present day, drawing on the historical scholarship of Tafesse Olika and David Styan, on Ethiopian and Djiboutian primary statements, and on the documented record of recent diplomatic and commercial disputes, including the January 2024 memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland, the Ankara Declaration of December 2024, the prolonged arbitration between Djibouti and DP World over the Doraleh Container Terminal, and the ongoing negotiations over the Port of Tadjourah. It corrects several claims that circulate informally about the history of the relationship, most notably the notion that Ethiopia's naval remnants were peacefully and permanently accommodated in Djibouti after 1991. The historical record shows a more complicated episode: Ethiopian vessels did shelter in Djiboutian waters for several years, but the arrangement ended in 1996 when Djibouti impounded and auctioned the fleet over unpaid harbor dues, a footnote that says as much about the fragility of informal security arrangements as it does about goodwill between neighbors.

The brief argues that both countries face a genuine structural problem, not merely a rhetorical one. Ethiopia's near-total dependence on a single external corridor constitutes a legitimate national security exposure that would concern policymakers in any country of its size. Djibouti's anxiety about hosting a military presence from a neighbor roughly one hundred and sixteen times its population is understandable and grounded in the same logic of small-state survival that shaped Gouled's original doctrine. Neither government's position can be dismissed as unreasonable, and neither is served by the other side treating the relationship as a zero-sum contest. The brief closes with a set of recommendations built around functional cooperation, not territorial or sovereign concession: an upgraded and legally binding institutional architecture for managing transit and investment disputes, a diversified, not singular, Ethiopian corridor strategy, a maritime security partnership calibrated to Djibouti's stated redlines, and a more active use of the diplomatic instruments, chiefly IGAD, that the two countries already share.

I. Introduction: The Strategic Puzzle of an Asymmetric Partnership

Few bilateral relationships in Africa combine such disproportionate size with such durable peace. Ethiopia is the second most populous country on the continent and the largest landlocked country in the world by population. Djibouti's entire territory could fit inside a single Ethiopian region several times over, and its population is smaller than that of a mid-sized Ethiopian city. Yet since Djibouti's independence in 1977, the two states have never fought each other, a record shared with almost none of Ethiopia's other neighbors. Ethiopia went to war with Somalia in 1977 and again supported insurgencies against it through the 1990s. It fought a catastrophic border war with Eritrea between 1998 and 2000 whose consequences still shape the region's politics today. Its relationship with Sudan has oscillated between cooperation and border friction over the Fashaga region. Djibouti alone has been spared this pattern.

That peace has not been costless for either side, and it has not been static. It has instead been continuously renegotiated as the balance of dependency between the two states has shifted. During the 1980s, when Ethiopia still controlled the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa, Djibouti was a marginal actor in Ethiopian trade calculations, and its foreign policy was correspondingly defensive, organized around the single goal of not being swallowed by its two much larger neighbors, Ethiopia and Somalia (Olika, 2019). By the end of the 1990s, following Eritrean independence and then the catastrophic collapse of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations, Djibouti had become the conduit for nearly all of Ethiopia's foreign trade, and its foreign policy shifted accordingly, from defensive neutrality to an assertive effort to convert geography into leverage (Styan, 2013). Today, a third transition is underway. Ethiopia, prompted by population growth, economic expansion, and a political leadership that has made sea access an explicit item of national strategy, is attempting to diversify away from total reliance on Djibouti, while Djibouti, having watched a twenty-year concession agreement with a major international port operator collapse into years of costly arbitration, is recalibrating its own approach to sovereignty, investment, and the hosting of foreign military and commercial partners.

This brief treats these developments as an integrated historical process, not a sequence of unrelated news events. It is written from an independent research position, without institutional affiliation to either government, and it has been prepared with the explicit intention of remaining analytically balanced between Ethiopian and Djiboutian interests. Where the analysis identifies opportunities that would particularly benefit Ethiopia, given the acute nature of its landlocked exposure, it also identifies the corresponding safeguards that Djibouti would reasonably require before accepting any change to the status quo. The Horn of Africa has suffered enough from foreign policy built on wishful thinking about what neighbors will tolerate. The intention here is to describe what is actually possible, given what each government has already said, done, and to set out a path that leaves both nations better off than the status quo.

Framing the Central Question

Should the security alignments and commercial choices of a small transit state be treated as strategically separable from the systemic consequences they impose on a much larger, structurally dependent neighbor? And, in turn, what obligations does that dependent neighbor owe to the smaller state whose sovereignty and revenue base it has, by force of geography, come to dominate? These two questions, read together and not in sequestration, define the policy space this brief seeks to map.

II. Colonial Origins and the Making of a Border, 1839 to 1977

The relationship between Ethiopia and the territory that became Djibouti did not begin with two independent states negotiating as equals. It began with a European scramble for control of the southern entrance to the Red Sea, in which imperial Ethiopia was itself a participant, if a constrained one. French exploration of the African shore of the Bab el Mandeb dates to the expeditions of Rochet d'Héricourt between 1839 and 1842, and French purchase of the anchorage at Obock from local Afar sultans in 1862 marked the beginning of a colonial foothold that would gradually expand along the Gulf of Tadjourah (Olika, 2019). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 sharpened Anglo-French competition for the sea lanes linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, giving French interest in this stretch of coastline an added strategic urgency as a counterweight to the British presence across the strait in Aden.

Ethiopia's own emperors were not bystanders to this process, even though they lacked the naval capacity to contest it directly. Emperor Menelik II, having decisively defeated an invading Italian army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, used the diplomatic capital of that victory to negotiate directly with France over the boundary between Ethiopian territory and the expanding French protectorate. The 1897 Franco-Ethiopian border agreement formalized this division, and in exchange for Ethiopian concessions on territory, France reportedly gave assurances that recognized Djibouti as Ethiopia's natural commercial outlet to the sea (Olika, 2019; Marcus, 1994). A further understanding is said to have circulated at the time, to the effect that should France ever relinquish its colonial claim to Djibouti, the territory would revert to Ethiopia instead of passing to a third power (Spencer, 1984). Whatever the precise legal weight of this understanding, later events showed it counted for little once great-power interests shifted. When Italy pressed its own claim to the Djiboutian coast during the First World War, France responded not by ceding the territory but by reaffirming its 1897 undertaking to Ethiopia, only to abandon that same posture two decades later. In 1935, as fascist Italy prepared its invasion of Ethiopia, France permitted the transit of Italian arms and matériel through the port of Djibouti while blocking Ethiopian arms shipments along the same route and along the Ethio-Djibouti railway, a decision the historian Harold Marcus has described as a direct antecedent to the occupation that followed (Marcus, 1994; Spencer, 1984). The lesson Ethiopian diplomats drew from that episode, that access to the sea through a foreign-controlled corridor is a privilege that can be withdrawn precisely at the moment it matters most, has echoed through every subsequent Ethiopian discussion of port access, including the most recent ones.

The postwar decades brought a slow and contested transition toward Djiboutian self-government. A territorial assembly was created in 1956, followed by a form of self-government in 1957 and referenda in 1958 and 1967 in which the territory's Afar population, reportedly encouraged by French administrators wary of losing the strategic port to a unified Somali state, voted to remain under French rule instead of joining an independent Somalia or coming under Ethiopian influence (Olika, 2019). The territory was renamed the French Territory of the Afars and Issas to reflect this internal balance. By the early 1970s, however, anti-colonial pressure, both domestic and from the Organization of African Unity, had made continued French rule untenable, and in 1976 the colonial citizenship law was revised in favor of the numerically larger Issa Somali population. A referendum on 8 May 1977 produced a decisive vote for independence, and the Republic of Djibouti was proclaimed on 27 June 1977, with Hassan Gouled Aptidon, an Issa Somali, becoming its first president and Ahmed Dini, an Afar politician, its first prime minister (Olika, 2019).

Ethiopia's own posture toward Djiboutian independence had shifted substantially by this point. The imperial government of Haile Selassie had at times asserted a claim over the territory on ethnic and historical grounds, describing its population as an extension of the Ethiopian people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1966, cited in Olika, 2019). The military government that displaced the monarchy in 1974 took a different approach, formally accepting Djiboutian independence on the condition that the new state would not act against Ethiopian interests in the use of its port (Olika, 2019). This condition, agreed at the very moment of Djibouti's birth, established the essential terms on which the two countries would manage their relationship for the next half century: an accepted, if occasionally strained, exchange in which Djibouti's independence and security were implicitly guaranteed by Ethiopian restraint, and Ethiopia's commercial access to the sea was implicitly guaranteed by Djiboutian accommodation.

III. The Gouled Doctrine: Positive Neutrality as a Strategy for Survival, 1977 to 1999

Djibouti's first president inherited a state whose viability was anything but assured. A territory of roughly twenty-three thousand square kilometers, mostly arid and resource-poor, wedged between two much larger neighbors who had themselves gone to war with each other within months of Djiboutian independence, Gouled's Djibouti faced what political scientists would recognize as a textbook case of small-state existential vulnerability. The Ogaden War of 1977 and 1978, fought between Ethiopia and Somalia over the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region, erupted almost immediately after Djibouti's founding, and it placed the new state directly between the two belligerents, each of which had reason to doubt Djiboutian loyalty. Ethiopian officials reportedly viewed the Issa-dominated Djiboutian government with suspicion, associating it with pan-Somali irredentism that threatened Ethiopia's own Somali-inhabited territories (Olika, 2019, citing Murison, 1999).

Gouled's response, and the doctrine that would define his presidency for the next two decades, was a policy that Ethiopian and international scholarship has since labeled positive neutrality. Djibouti banned the sale of military equipment to either belligerent, refused to let its territory be used as a staging ground for either army, and positioned itself instead as a mediator (Olika, 2019, citing Dolley, 1987). In practice, this neutrality was not always perfectly even-handed. During the early phase of the Ogaden War, when Somali forces held the military advantage, Djibouti reportedly permitted Somali forces to use its territory as a conduit for arms and personnel while restricting Ethiopian civil aviation, only to adopt a more balanced posture once the tide of the war turned in Ethiopia's favor (Olika, 2019). This oscillation illustrates a recurring feature of small-state neutrality: it tends to track the regional balance of power instead of transcending it, a pattern realist scholars would consider predictable more than hypocritical.

Alongside this balancing act, Gouled built two additional pillars into his foreign policy architecture. The first was an exclusive security guarantee from France, which maintained a substantial garrison in Djibouti and underwrote the young state's external defense in exchange for continued basing rights, a arrangement that kept Djibouti a closed, French-protected enclave through the 1980s and 1990s (Olika, 2019, citing Academia.edu, n.d.). The second was regional diplomatic entrepreneurship. Djibouti hosted the founding conference of the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development in January 1986, an organization created initially to coordinate famine and drought response among six Horn of Africa states and later reconstituted in 1996, again in Djibouti, as the broader Intergovernmental Authority on Development, or IGAD (African Union, n.d.; IGAD, n.d.). Hosting the permanent secretariat of the region's principal intergovernmental body gave Djibouti a diplomatic weight far exceeding its size, and it remains, to this day, an underused asset in Djiboutian foreign policy, one this brief returns to in its recommendations.

Relations between Ethiopia and Djibouti strengthened notably after the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front took power in Addis Ababa in 1991. The two governments held joint ministerial commission meetings in 1993 and 1994 to resolve outstanding bilateral issues, reached agreements covering diplomatic, economic, defense, security, and refugee matters, and undertook a series of reciprocal gestures, including Djibouti's handover of former Derg officials wanted for crimes committed during the previous regime and Ethiopia's parallel repatriation of Djiboutian refugees (Olika, 2019, citing Mulushewa, 2005). It was during this same period, and in this same spirit of pragmatic accommodation, that one of the more instructive and least accurately remembered episodes in the bilateral relationship took place: the fate of Ethiopia's navy.

Correcting the Historical Record: The Ethiopian Navy Episode, 1991 to 1996

A claim occasionally repeated in informal discussion of Ethio-Djiboutian relations holds that Ethiopia's navy relocated peacefully and permanently to Djibouti after the loss of Assab, and that this arrangement stands as evidence of an enduring Ethiopian naval welcome on Djiboutian soil. The documented record is both more modest in scale and, in its way, more instructive. At its height in 1991, the Ethiopian Navy consisted of roughly two dozen vessels, including two frigates, eight missile craft, six torpedo craft, and six patrol boats, with a personnel strength of around three thousand five hundred (Grokipedia, 2026; FutureUAE, 2023). As Eritrean forces advanced on Assab in May 1991, fourteen of these vessels evacuated to Yemen, while several others were left behind or lost in the fighting (Grokipedia, 2026). Yemen expelled the Ethiopian ships in 1993, at which point sixteen vessels relocated to Djibouti, with the remainder abandoned as no longer seaworthy (Horn Review, 2025). By 1996, having accumulated unpaid harbor dues from the stranded Ethiopian fleet, Djibouti seized the remaining vessels and auctioned them off. The episode is genuinely relevant to the present debate, but its lesson cuts in a constructive direction. It demonstrates that Djibouti has, in fact, already hosted a stranded Ethiopian naval presence once before, and that the arrangement ended not through any Djiboutian objection to the principle of an Ethiopian naval presence, but through the absence of any formal legal or financial framework governing it. Ethiopia, for its part, did not respond to the seizure with any form of retaliation, choosing instead to accept the loss through ordinary administrative channels, a restraint consistent with the broader pattern of peaceful engagement that has defined the relationship since 1977. The precedent this sets is a constructive one: informal, undocumented arrangements around basing and port fees are structurally unstable, whereas clearly defined, treaty-bound arrangements are not, and Djibouti's willingness to host Ethiopian vessels once before, absent any legal architecture at all, suggests considerably more room for a properly structured arrangement today.

Domestically, Gouled's government during these same years struggled with the underlying ethnic tension between the Issa Somali majority, who dominated the political and economic life of Djibouti City, and the Afar minority, concentrated in the country's north, who felt systematically excluded from power (Olika, 2019, citing Dolley, 1987; Ofcansky, 2000). This exclusion produced a civil war between government forces and the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy that ran from roughly 1991 until a Libyan-brokered peace accord in 2000, later reinforced by a further agreement in 2001 (Olika, 2019). The conflict is a reminder that Djiboutian foreign policy, like that of any state, has never been formed in a vacuum insulated from domestic politics; a government managing an internal insurgency has correspondingly less appetite for external arrangements, including basing agreements with any foreign power, that could complicate its domestic security calculus. This is a structural constraint on Djiboutian decision-making that persists in modified form today, and any credible Ethiopian strategy toward Djibouti needs to account for it instead of treating Djiboutian caution as pure obstinacy.

IV. Rupture and Reroute: The 1998 to 2000 War and the Making of a Monopoly

If the Gouled era established the underlying architecture of the bilateral relationship, the Ethiopian-Eritrean war of 1998 to 2000 transformed its economic content decisively. Prior to the war, Ethiopia's trade moved substantially through the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa, with Assab alone reportedly handling around eighty percent of Ethiopian import and export traffic between 1991 and 1998 (Olika, 2019, citing Henze, 2001; Styan, 2013). The outbreak of war in May 1998 severed this arrangement overnight. Ethiopian cargo, previously carried on a route with underdeveloped port facilities and a poorly functioning rail link, was rerouted almost entirely to Djibouti, whose handling of Ethiopian general cargo and petroleum products is reported to have quadrupled in a very short period (Styan, 2013). Within a few years, Djibouti was managing something in the range of ninety-five to ninety-seven percent of all Ethiopian maritime trade, a dependency ratio that has remained roughly constant, with modest fluctuation, ever since (Olika, 2019).

This shift converted Djibouti from a marginal transit option into the single point of failure for the external trade of one of Africa's largest economies, and both governments moved to formalize the new relationship. Ethiopia and Djibouti signed an Agreement on Port Utilization and Services to Cargo in Transit on 13 April 2002, intended to regularize tariffs, transit procedures, and service standards (Olika, 2019). In practice, as Olika's research documents, Djibouti has periodically revised transit tariffs and port charges in ways Ethiopian officials have viewed as unilateral, and successive Ethiopian governments have found their bargaining leverage limited by the basic asymmetry of the relationship: a landlocked state with no practical alternative outlet has little room to hold out for better terms against the one country that controls its access to global markets (Olika, 2019).

The same period saw Djibouti begin the process of internationalizing the management of its port infrastructure, a decision with consequences that would resurface with considerable force nearly two decades later. In 2000, the government granted a twenty-year concession for the management of the Port of Djibouti to Dubai Ports World, a decision President Guelleh's own diplomacy had framed as regional cooperation among port authorities but which in practical terms placed a foundational piece of Ethiopia's trade infrastructure under the operational control of a Gulf state enterprise (Olika, 2019). The economic logic of this decision, diversifying capital and management expertise away from a French colonial legacy that had left Djiboutian port facilities underdeveloped, was sound on its own terms. Its longer-term political consequences, however, illustrate a recurring pattern in Djiboutian statecraft: a preference for bringing in successive external partners, whether Gulf, Asian, or Western, to build and operate strategic infrastructure, followed by periodic renegotiation or outright reversal of those arrangements once domestic political calculations shift. Ethiopia, as the largest single user of that infrastructure, has consistently been a bystander to these cycles of concession and reversal, not a party to them, a position of vulnerability worth stating plainly and without euphemism.

V. The Guelleh Doctrine: From Positive Neutrality to Regional Power Politics, 1999 to 2018

Ismail Omar Guelleh's accession to the presidency in 1999, following two decades as chief of staff and head of security under Gouled, marked a deliberate and self-conscious break with his predecessor's cautious diplomacy. Guelleh had signaled his intentions even before taking office. In a widely cited 1998 statement made in his capacity as cabinet chief, he argued that Djibouti must not remain a prisoner of its colonial history, proposed a strategic alliance with Ethiopia, and suggested that foreign military bases posing a danger to regional security ought eventually to be dismantled, since while France would sooner or later leave the region, Djibouti's neighbors would always remain (Indian Ocean Newsletter, 1998, cited in Olika, 2019). It is worth pausing on this statement, because it anticipates, almost word for word, the argument now made by those urging Djibouti to embrace closer strategic integration with Ethiopia today. The irony, discussed further below, is that Guelleh's own governing record after 1999 moved in something close to the opposite direction: toward multiplying, not reducing, the number of foreign militaries hosted on Djiboutian soil.

Guelleh's foreign policy activism unfolded along two connected tracks. The first was regional diplomatic assertiveness, particularly toward the collapsed Somali state. Guelleh hosted the Arta reconciliation conference in 2000, which produced Somalia's Transitional National Government, a diplomatic achievement that also served, in the assessment of Ethiopian scholarship, to position Djibouti as a rival to, and not a partner of, Ethiopia's own long-standing, IGAD-mandated efforts at Somali reconciliation (Olika, 2019). The second track was the deliberate monetization of Djibouti's geographic position through the hosting of foreign military installations. The September 11 attacks proved, in Olika's phrase, a diplomatic windfall for Djibouti, giving Guelleh's government the standing to open the country to American basing in a manner that would have been far harder to justify a decade earlier (Olika, 2019). The United States established the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa in 2002, initially at a former French Foreign Legion post, later consolidated into the larger Camp Lemonnier complex (Olika, 2019, citing researchgate.net, n.d.). France retained its own long-standing garrison. Japan opened its first permanent overseas military base since the Second World War in Djibouti in 2011, a decision scholars of Japanese security policy have treated as a landmark departure from decades of postwar military restraint (Asian Security journal literature, cited via Styan, 2013). Italy established a smaller logistical facility, and in 2017, China opened its first overseas military base anywhere in the world at Doraleh, a development widely reported at the time as a signal of Beijing's growing strategic interest in the western Indian Ocean and Red Sea approaches (New York Times, 2017, cited in Asian Security journal literature). By the middle of the 2010s, Djibouti had become, in David Styan's description for Chatham House, an international maritime and military laboratory, the only country in the world simultaneously hosting American, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, and soon Chinese armed forces (Styan, 2013; Researchgate summary of Styan, 2013).

Styan's own analysis attributes this transformation to four converging forces: the 1998 to 2000 Ethiopian-Eritrean war and the resulting Ethiopian dependency on Djiboutian transit; the sustained growth of the Ethiopian economy and the corresponding growth in the volume of Ethiopian trade; the post-9/11 reorientation of American strategy toward the Horn of Africa and the wider Middle East; and the surge of Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden during the 2000s, which drew in an unprecedented range of naval deployments, from NATO and European Union missions to independent Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and other Asian naval task forces (Styan, 2013). Each of these forces reinforced the others. A more prosperous Ethiopia generated more cargo through Djiboutian ports, generating more revenue for the Djiboutian state and greater incentive to protect that trade from piracy, which in turn justified an expanding foreign military footprint, which in turn increased Djiboutian government revenue through basing fees, all while Ethiopia itself remained structurally outside the security arrangements protecting its own principal trade artery.

Note

There is a genuine paradox worth naming directly. Djibouti's post-1999 foreign policy has been justified, both by its own officials and by outside analysts, as a strategy for converting a small state's only asset, its location, into durable national income and security guarantees from powerful friends. Yet this same strategy has left Ethiopia, the single largest economic stakeholder in the stability of that same stretch of coastline, almost entirely outside the resulting security architecture. Djibouti has found it easier to accommodate the armed forces of the United States, France, Japan, Italy, and China than to formalize any comparable security role for the neighbor whose trade sustains its ports. This is not, on Djibouti's part, an irrational choice. Extraregional powers do not carry the same domestic political entanglements, ethnic cross-border ties, or historical claims that a large, geographically adjacent neighbor inevitably carries. But it does mean that the country most exposed to instability along this corridor has the least formal say in how that corridor is secured, an imbalance that deserves more direct acknowledgment in Ethiopian foreign policy circles than it typically receives.

The costs of this transactional model became sharply visible in 2018. On 22 February of that year, the Djiboutian government terminated its concession agreement with DP World for the Doraleh Container Terminal, and by September had nationalized the shares held by the state port authority in the terminal outright, describing the move as necessary to protect the fundamental interests of the nation (PR Newswire, 2018; Bloomberg, 2018). DP World rejected the termination and pursued arbitration and litigation across multiple jurisdictions, including the London Court of International Arbitration and courts in England, the United States, and Hong Kong. Successive rulings, including a 2022 arbitral award and a further 2024 U.S. court enforcement decision, found substantially in DP World's favor, with total awards and enforceable damages reported in the range of several hundred million dollars, and DP World's broader claims, including against Djibouti's subsequent Chinese partner, China Merchants Port Holdings, reported to exceed a further billion dollars (AGBI, 2025; SupplyChainBrain, 2025; TDM Journal, 2024). As of late 2025, Djibouti had not complied with these awards, and the state-owned Djiboutian company SGTD continued to operate the terminal (World Bank PPP database, n.d.; DredgeWire, 2025).

The Doraleh episode matters for this brief not because of its legal merits, on which reasonable observers can differ, but because of what it reveals about Djiboutian governance of strategic infrastructure: a demonstrated willingness to reverse major concession agreements when domestic political calculations shift, regardless of the contractual and reputational costs involved. Any Ethiopian strategy premised on securing a durable, long-term stake in Djiboutian port or naval infrastructure needs to grapple honestly with this precedent. A handshake agreement, or even a signed memorandum lacking robust legal and institutional backing, offers Ethiopia considerably less security than its proponents sometimes assume.

VI. Convergence, Divergence, and Rivalry: The Search for Sea Access, 2018 to 2026

A change in Ethiopia's national leadership in 2018 initially appeared to offer Ethiopia an alternative path out of its dependence on Djibouti altogether. A rapid rapprochement with Eritrea, formalized in a joint declaration on July, raised the prospect of restored Ethiopian access to the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa, and Ethiopian officials reportedly visited Assab early in this new period and later indicated that Ethiopia had begun operating at Massawa (Geeska, 2026). For reasons neither government has fully disclosed, this operational access did not ultimately materialize in practice. Ethiopia's government has since stated, in remarks to parliament, that it raised the question of Assab directly and repeatedly with Eritrea's government after 2018, including proposals to rehabilitate roads and to supply electricity and equipment at Ethiopian expense, and that these efforts were rebuffed by Eritrea (Addis Standard, 2026; Martin Plaut, 2026).

Citing Ethiopia's growing population and economic weight, Ethiopia's government raised the sea access question publicly in October 2023, describing access to the sea in terms it characterized as central to the country's long-term future and calling for national discussion of the issue. The remarks drew attention across the region, and Ethiopian officials subsequently emphasized that the country would pursue its interests through dialogue and negotiation (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2025). Two months into the following year, Ethiopia moved from rhetoric to a concrete diplomatic instrument. On 1 January 2024, Ethiopia's government and the then president of Somaliland, Muse Bihi Abdi, signed a memorandum of understanding in Addis Ababa under which Somaliland would lease Ethiopia approximately twenty kilometers of coastline near Lughaya and Zeila for fifty years for the construction of a naval facility, in exchange for a stake in Ethiopian state assets and what Somaliland's government described as an intention on Ethiopia's part to formally recognize Somaliland's independence (ACLED, 2024; African Arguments, 2024; AllAfrica, 2024).

The reaction was immediate and, from Mogadishu's perspective, existential in its own right. The Somali federal government, which does not recognize Somaliland's 1991 declaration of independence, characterized the memorandum as a violation of its territorial integrity, and the Somali parliament passed legislation nullifying the agreement within days (AllAfrica, 2024). Regional and international actors, including the African Union and several Western governments, called for both sides to respect Somali sovereignty and pursue dialogue. Over the course of 2024, Turkish mediation produced a partial de-escalation, culminating in the Ankara Declaration of December 2024, under which Ethiopia and Somalia agreed to pursue technical talks on Ethiopian sea access while both sides affirmed respect for Somali territorial integrity, a formulation that effectively sidelined, without formally abandoning, the question of Ethiopian recognition of Somaliland (The Reporter Ethiopia, 2026; National Interest, 2026).

It was against this backdrop of regional alarm that Djibouti made its own counteroffer. In September 2024, Djiboutian Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf announced that Djibouti was prepared to grant Ethiopia expanded, and at various points reportedly full, management rights over the Port of Tadjourah, a smaller facility roughly one hundred and twenty kilometers from the Ethiopian border, explicitly framing the offer as a means of easing regional tensions generated by the Somaliland memorandum (Maritime Executive, 2024; Arab Weekly, 2024; Addis Fortune, 2024). Djiboutian officials were careful to distinguish this commercial offer from any concession of sovereignty, with Youssouf stating publicly that Djibouti was not selling the port, only proposing joint management (Hiiraan Online, 2024). By April 2026, the chairman of the Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority, Aboubakar Omar Hadi, described the actual offer that had been on the table as a sixty percent equity stake in Tadjourah, and stated that Ethiopia had declined it, seeking instead a transit corridor with what Djiboutian officials characterized as extraterritorial features, alongside the naval basing rights that President Guelleh had separately and publicly rejected (Capital Ethiopia, 2026; Saxafi Media, 2026). Guelleh himself, in remarks to the French-language magazine Jeune Afrique, stated that Ethiopia had sent a delegation requesting a corridor with extraterritorial status between the Ethiopian border and Tadjourah together with a naval base, a proposal he said Djibouti could not accept, and he is reported to have added, in a phrase that has circulated widely since, that Djibouti had made clear to Addis Ababa that Djibouti is not Crimea (Eastleigh Voice, 2025; Saxafi Media, 2025). With the Tadjourah negotiation effectively stalled, Djibouti proceeded in October 2025 to award a thirty-year concession for the port's operation to Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Gateway Terminal, a decision that both diversified Djibouti's roster of external partners away from its earlier reliance on DP World and effectively closed, for the medium term at least, the specific pathway toward Ethiopian equity control that had briefly appeared open in 2024 (Ecofin Agency, 2025; Capital Ethiopia, 2026).

This sequence of offer, counteroffer, and diversification cannot be understood in isolation from the wider reconfiguration of external interest in the Red Sea corridor that has accompanied it. Egypt, whose relationship with Ethiopia has been strained for more than a decade by the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and its effects on downstream Nile flows, has pursued a parallel deepening of ties with both Djibouti and Eritrea, reportedly agreeing to develop port infrastructure in both countries in a manner that would allow Egyptian naval vessels, including destroyers and submarines, to refuel and resupply there (Addis Standard, 2025). Cairo and Djibouti signed a memorandum of understanding in November 2024 covering port modernization, logistics, and infrastructure, followed by a further set of agreements in December 2025 covering solar energy generation for port operations and additional logistics zone development (Diaspora Djibouti, n.d.; Daily News Egypt, 2025; Ecofin Agency, 2025). Analysts have read Egyptian engagement in the Horn of Africa's port infrastructure at least partly through the lens of the Nile dispute, as a means of generating strategic leverage against Ethiopia in a theater where Cairo has historically had limited reach (Addis Standard, 2025). Saudi Arabia, for its part, has expanded its own commercial and, prospectively, security footprint in Djibouti, a trajectory that regional analysts link to the deterioration of Djiboutian-Emirati relations following the Doraleh dispute and a corresponding Djiboutian pivot toward alternative Gulf partners (Geeska, 2026). Turkey, meanwhile, has parlayed its mediating role in the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute into a broader position of regional influence, a role that both Djibouti and Ethiopia have publicly credited with helping to de-escalate tensions generated by the Somaliland memorandum (Eastleigh Voice, 2025).

Relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea have grown more cautious since roughly 2023, the two governments whose 2018 rapprochement had briefly seemed to offer Ethiopia its most direct route back to the sea. Ethiopia's government has continued to state publicly that it does not intend to pursue sea access through conflict, and open hostilities between the two states had not resumed as of early 2026, though the more cautious climate between the two capitals has, for the time being, narrowed the practical near-term viability of Assab and Massawa as options for diversifying Ethiopian trade.

Ethiopia has continued, in parallel, to rebuild the domestic institutional foundations of a naval capability, notwithstanding its lack of any sovereign coastline. A brown-water naval force was re-established in 2019, headquartered on Lake Tana, (African Military Blog, 2020). with the Ethiopian defense ministry framing the move explicitly around the need to monitor developments among the foreign powers establishing bases in Djibouti (African Military Blog, 2020). Ethiopia has since pursued naval training and capacity-building partnerships with a range of external partners, reportedly including France, Norway, and more recently Russia, reflecting a long-term ambition to rebuild the institutional and human capital of a maritime force even in the continued absence of a settled question of where, precisely, that force would ultimately be based (African Military Blog, 2020; Ethiopian Tribune, 2025; Horn Review, 2025).

Summary Timeline of the Post-2018 Sea Access Debate

- July 2018: Ethiopia and Eritrea formally end their state of war; early hopes for restored Ethiopian access to Assab and Massawa are not realized in practice. - October 2023: Ethiopia's government describes sea access as central to the country's long-term future, prompting regional attention. - 1 January 2024: Ethiopia and Somaliland sign a memorandum of understanding on coastal access and a prospective naval base, tied to a possible Ethiopian recognition of Somaliland. - January 2024: Somalia's parliament nullifies the agreement; regional and international actors call for dialogue. - September 2024: Djibouti offers Ethiopia expanded, and at points reportedly full, management of the Port of Tadjourah as a counteroffer. - November 2024: Egypt and Djibouti sign a port and logistics cooperation memorandum. - December 2024: The Ankara Declaration commits Ethiopia and Somalia to technical talks on sea access within a framework respecting Somali territorial integrity. - Through 2025: Negotiations over Tadjourah stall over Ethiopian requests for a transit corridor and naval basing rights. - October 2025: Djibouti awards a thirty-year Tadjourah concession to Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Gateway Terminal. - December 2025: Egypt and Djibouti sign further agreements on port energy supply and logistics zone expansion.

VII. An Analytical Framework: Reading the Relationship Through Theory

The historical narrative above supports several overlapping theoretical readings, each of which illuminates a different facet of the relationship and none of which, on its own, captures the whole picture.

A neorealist reading, attentive to the distribution of material capability between states, would characterize Djibouti's entire post-independence foreign policy as a case study in small-state balancing under conditions of extreme asymmetry. Gouled's positive neutrality and Guelleh's multi-alignment with distant global powers are, in this reading, two variations on a single underlying strategy: since Djibouti cannot match the material power of its neighbors, it seeks security instead through the patronage of actors powerful enough to deter those neighbors. This logic is closely related to what regional scholarship has termed an omnidirectional hedging strategy, in which small states deliberately cultivate simultaneous relationships with multiple great powers to avoid dependence on any single one of them (International Journal of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, 2024). Andrew Cooper and Timothy Shaw's foundational study of small-state diplomacy makes a related point: small states situated amid genuine regional volatility tend to rely on soft-power diplomacy and cooperative anchoring relationships precisely because their vulnerability leaves little margin for isolation (Cooper and Shaw, 2009). That vulnerability is not abstract in Djibouti's case. To the south lies Somalia, marked by state fragility since the collapse of central government in 1991. To the north lies Eritrea, with which Djibouti fought a border clash in June 2008 over the disputed area of Ras Doumeira, a dispute the two governments did not formally set aside until a normalization agreement in September 2018 (Wikipedia, 2026; GlobalSecurity, 2026). Directly across the Red Sea lies Yemen, whose prolonged civil conflict has generated spillover risk of its own. Read against this regional environment, Cooper and Shaw's argument suggests that Djibouti's most valuable long-term security asset is not simply a longer list of distant patrons, but a stable, cooperative anchor relationship with the one neighbor that does not sit inside this volatile perimeter and whose own prosperity is inseparable from Djibouti's stability.

A liberal institutionalist reading would emphasize the depth of economic interdependence binding the two states, an interdependence that has only deepened over time. Djibouti's port revenue depends overwhelmingly on Ethiopian cargo; Djibouti's own energy supply now depends substantially on Ethiopian electricity, with Djiboutian officials reporting in 2025 that roughly half the country's power consumption is sourced from Ethiopia (Ecofin Agency, 2025); and Ethiopia's entire external trade depends on Djiboutian port infrastructure. This is precisely the kind of dense, asymmetric but mutual interdependence that Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence describes: relationships in which multiple channels connect two societies, in which no strict hierarchy separates economic issues from security issues, and in which force plays little to no role in managing disputes between the parties themselves (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Applied to the specific question of a maritime security role for Ethiopia, the theory yields a direct and testable implication. Ethiopia and Djibouti already satisfy all three conditions of complex interdependence: multiple channels already connect them, through the port system, the electrical grid, the Ethio-Djibouti railway, and IGAD, whose secretariat Djibouti has hosted since 1986; economic and security questions have never been ranked in strict hierarchy between them, since Djibouti's own September 2024 Tadjourah offer was itself a commercial response to a security-driven tension; and in fifty years of managing disputes, from the 1996 navy episode to the ongoing Tadjourah negotiations, neither government has ever used force against the other. Keohane and Nye's framework predicts that where these conditions hold, cooperation extends naturally across domains because the trust and institutional habits built in one area carry over into the next. On that logic, a treaty-bound maritime security role for Ethiopia is not a departure from the pattern the two states have already established; it is the specific domain where the pattern has not yet been completed.

Robert Putnam's two-level games framework offers a further useful lens, particularly for understanding the constraints on Djiboutian decision-making. Any Djiboutian government negotiating with Ethiopia is simultaneously negotiating with its own domestic constituencies, including an Afar population with long-standing grievances about political exclusion and, in some cases, direct ethnic and familial ties across the Ethiopian border in the Afar Regional State. A Djiboutian leadership seen as too accommodating to Ethiopian security demands risks domestic political costs that have nothing to do with the merits of the Ethiopian proposal itself, a dynamic Olika's research documents at length in its discussion of the persistent, unresolved marginalization of Djibouti's Afar community (Olika, 2019).

Finally, Barry Buzan's regional security complex theory, a framework Olika's own paper explicitly invokes in describing the Horn of Africa, helps explain why bilateral Ethio-Djiboutian dynamics cannot be analyzed in isolation from the wider regional system (Olika, 2019). Ethiopian sea access ambitions in Somaliland immediately implicate Somalia; Ethiopian sea access ambitions toward Eritrea immediately implicate the unresolved legacies of the 1998 to 2000 war; and any Djiboutian accommodation of Ethiopian security demands is watched closely by Eritrea, Somalia, Egypt, and the Gulf states alike, each of which has independent reasons to prefer that Ethiopia not resolve its landlocked vulnerability on favorable terms. The security complex is genuinely regional, not merely bilateral, and any policy recommendation confined only to Addis Ababa and Djibouti City risks underestimating the number of other capitals with a stake in the outcome.

A fifth lens, less formally established in the international relations literature but increasingly useful for understanding small states positioned at maritime chokepoints, might be described as a rentier theory of strategic geography. Scholars of the resource curse have long observed that states whose revenue derives disproportionately from a single extractable asset, oil, minerals, or transit fees, tend to develop governing habits organized around managing access to that asset instead of around broader productive diversification, and that this pattern can persist even when the underlying asset itself is not a physical commodity but a location. Djibouti's economy fits this description closely. Port and basing revenue, not agriculture, manufacturing, or a broadly diversified service sector, constitutes the core of state income, and the governing incentive this creates is not primarily to resolve disputes over that asset through binding long-term commitments, but to keep as many paying tenants as possible, on terms that can be periodically renegotiated as leverage allows. This helps explain a pattern that recurs across the Guelleh era: sequential concession, dispute, and reallocation, first with the transfer of port management to Dubai Ports World in 2000, then its reversal in 2018, and now the pivot toward Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Gateway Terminal at Tadjourah. None of this reflects bad faith so much as the ordinary governing logic of a rentier gatekeeper state, and Ethiopian policymakers who expect a single permanent settlement, not a recurring cycle of renegotiation, are likely to be repeatedly disappointed by a state whose entire fiscal model depends on keeping its options open.

A Note on Terminology: Why This Brief Avoids the Language of "Naval Base"

Djiboutian officials have been unusually explicit, across multiple public statements between 2024 and 2026, in drawing a bright line between commercial port cooperation, which they have offered in expanding forms, and any facility described in the language of a foreign naval base or an

> extraterritorial corridor, which they have rejected outright and characterized, in President Guelleh's words, as incompatible with the country's status as a sovereign state and not a contested territory like Crimea. Analysts and advocates on the Ethiopian side would be well served by taking this distinction seriously instead of treating it as a negotiating posture likely to soften with pressure. The remainder of this brief, and in particular its policy recommendations, therefore deliberately avoids framing Ethiopian maritime security interests in the language of sovereign basing, and instead builds its proposals around the kind of functional, jointly administered security cooperation that Djibouti's own public statements suggest remains genuinely open for discussion.

VIII. Current Ground Realities: Mapping the Interests of the Principal Actors

A durable policy blueprint has to start from an honest account of what each relevant actor actually wants, not what outside observers might wish they wanted. The following mapping draws directly on the documented statements and actions traced above.

Ethiopia seeks diversified, reliable, and cost-effective access to the sea, a goal its own officials have framed in terms of economic necessity given a population exceeding one hundred and thirty-nine million and continued export growth. Ethiopian officials have also expressed interest in a naval or security presence along at least one stretch of regional coastline, a goal pursued through the Somaliland memorandum, through the reported request for basing rights at Tadjourah, and through the reconstitution of a domestic naval institution on Lake Tana. Ethiopia's underlying vulnerability, structural and not merely political, is that it currently has no sovereign coastline of its own anywhere, a condition shared by very few states of comparable population and economic weight.

Djibouti seeks to preserve the commercial centrality that has underwritten its national income since the late 1990s while diversifying its roster of external patrons and safeguarding the political legitimacy of a government that has now led the country, across two presidents, for the entirety of its independent history. Djiboutian officials have been explicit, publicly and repeatedly, in distinguishing between commercial cooperation, which they have offered Ethiopia in expanding forms, and any concession of military basing rights or extraterritorial corridor status, which successive Djiboutian statements have rejected as incompatible with sovereignty. This position is consistent with the underlying logic of positive neutrality that has anchored Djiboutian foreign policy since 1977, and marks no real departure from it.

Somalia seeks to preserve the international legal fiction, increasingly difficult to sustain in practice but still diplomatically consequential, that Somaliland remains part of a single Somali state, and it has demonstrated, through both legislative action and diplomatic mobilization, a willingness to expend significant political capital defending that position against any Ethiopian arrangement that implies recognition of Somaliland's separate statehood.

Somaliland seeks international recognition above nearly all other foreign policy goals, and has shown a consistent willingness to offer Ethiopia expanded port and security access as the principal instrument for achieving that recognition, a strategy whose success remains, as of this writing, unrealized in the wake of the Ankara Declaration.

Eritrea seeks to retain undivided sovereign control over Assab and Massawa, having fought a costly war with Ethiopia in part over questions of territorial demarcation, and Eritrean officials have publicly characterized renewed Ethiopian interest in the ports as a revival of what they describe as hegemonic ambition, a characterization Ethiopian officials reject.

Egypt seeks strategic leverage against Ethiopia in the context of the unresolved dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and has pursued this partly through deepened port and logistics cooperation with both Djibouti and Eritrea, a strategy that gives Cairo a stake in Red Sea corridor dynamics disproportionate to its direct commercial interests there.

The Gulf states, chiefly the United Arab Emirates and, increasingly, Saudi Arabia, seek continued commercial and, in some cases, security footholds along the Bab el Mandeb corridor, a strategic priority sharpened by their own direct exposure to instability in Yemen and the wider Red Sea shipping environment. Djibouti's own relationship with these two Gulf states has itself been reshaped by the Doraleh dispute, with Djiboutian authorities appearing to favor deepening ties with Riyadh even as the dispute with the Dubai-based DP World remains unresolved.

External powers with existing bases, the United States, France, China, Japan, and Italy, seek continuity of their existing basing arrangements, which serve counterterrorism, counterpiracy, and broader strategic monitoring functions across the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and each has a quiet interest in a stable, non-escalatory resolution of Ethio-Djiboutian tensions that does not disrupt existing basing arrangements or draw them into an unwanted regional dispute.

Turkey, finally, has emerged as an increasingly consequential mediating actor, credited by multiple regional governments with helping de-escalate the Ethiopia-Somalia dispute, and Ankara's growing diplomatic and, in Somalia's case, security role in the region gives it an interest in being seen as an honest broker capable of managing future disputes of this kind.

Read together, this mapping suggests that the Ethio-Djiboutian relationship, however central to both countries, is no longer, if it ever truly was, a purely bilateral affair that Addis Ababa and Djibouti City can resolve between themselves. At least eight distinct governments and one significant unrecognized territory now hold a stake in how any renegotiation of Red Sea corridor access unfolds, and several of them, Egypt most conspicuously, have incentives to see the Ethio-Djiboutian relationship remain unsettled instead of resolved, since an Ethiopia permanently absorbed in securing its own maritime access is an Ethiopia with correspondingly less diplomatic bandwidth to press its position on the Nile. This does not mean bilateral diplomacy between Addis Ababa and Djibouti City is futile. It means that any bilateral arrangement the two governments reach needs to be resilient enough to withstand the countervailing pressure that outside actors, pursuing their own separate agendas, are likely to apply once such an arrangement becomes public.

IX. Policy Recommendations: Toward a Functional Rather Than Territorial Compact

The historical and analytical material presented above points toward a set of recommendations organized around a single overarching principle: durable cooperation between Ethiopia and Djibouti is more likely to be achieved through functional, legally institutionalized arrangements than through territorial or sovereign concessions of the kind that Djiboutian officials have already, repeatedly and publicly, ruled out. The following recommendations are addressed to policymakers in both countries and, where relevant, to the wider set of regional and international actors with a stake in the outcome.

1. Establish a binding Ethiopia-Djibouti Strategic and Economic Council. The existing joint ministerial commission mechanism, dating to the early 1990s, has proven useful but insufficiently robust to manage disputes of the scale and complexity now involved. A upgraded council, with a permanent secretariat, defined dispute-resolution procedures, and binding arbitration provisions agreed in advance, would give both governments a structured venue for resolving transit tariff disputes, port investment terms, and security cooperation questions before they escalate into public confrontation. The

Doraleh experience demonstrates the cost of relying on informal understandings and personalized diplomacy in place of durable institutional architecture.

2. Pursue a diversified Ethiopian corridor strategy. Ethiopia's structural vulnerability stems specifically from its near-total dependence on a single port system. A portfolio approach, incremental development of commercial access through Djibouti, Berbera, and, other ports that can reduces Ethiopian exposure to any single point of failure and strengthens Ethiopia's negotiating position across every one of its regional partnerships simultaneously.

3. Establish a structured maritime security partnership. Djiboutian officials have been consistent in distinguishing between commercial cooperation, which they have repeatedly offered, and military basing or extraterritorial corridor status, which they have repeatedly refused. A more realistic and, on the evidence, more achievable goal would be a structured maritime domain awareness and counterpiracy cooperation framework, joint patrols under Djiboutian legal authority, shared intelligence on smuggling and trafficking routes, and Ethiopian personnel training alongside Djiboutian coast guard units, that addresses Ethiopia's legitimate interest in the security of the corridor it depends on without requiring Djibouti to cross the sovereignty line it has drawn clearly and repeatedly in public statements.

4. Deepen energy and infrastructure interdependence as a stabilizing anchor. Djibouti's growing reliance on Ethiopian electricity, alongside existing rail and road linkages, represents an underappreciated source of mutual leverage that could be formalized and expanded through joint investment vehicles, potentially including Ethiopian equity participation in Djiboutian energy infrastructure paired with continued Djiboutian control of port assets, an arrangement that would deepen interdependence without requiring either side to cross its stated redlines.

5. Anchor Ethiopian sea access diplomacy in multilateral legal frameworks, not bilateral pressure. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea recognizes a right of access to and from the sea for landlocked states, exercised through negotiated transit arrangements with neighboring coastal states. Ethiopia's case is considerably stronger when framed through this established international legal architecture than when framed through bilateral demands that neighboring governments, whether Djiboutian, Somaliland, or Eritrean, have publicly characterized as attempts at territorial or sovereign encroachment. A legally grounded, multilaterally framed approach is also less likely to generate the kind of alarmed regional reaction that met the October 2023 parliamentary remarks and the subsequent Somaliland memorandum.

6. Make fuller use of IGAD as a venue for managing regional corridor competition. Djibouti currently holds the chairmanship of IGAD, while an Ethiopian national serves as its executive secretary, an institutional configuration that reflects the genuine, longstanding interdependence between the two states and that remains underused as a forum for managing precisely the kind of multilateral corridor competition, involving Somalia, Somaliland, Eritrea, and Djibouti simultaneously, that bilateral diplomacy alone has struggled to contain.

7. Improve transparency in port investment negotiations to rebuild investor and neighbor confidence alike. The Doraleh arbitration has demonstrated the reputational and financial costs of opaque or contested concession arrangements. Future Ethiopian investment in Djiboutian port infrastructure, whether at Tadjourah or elsewhere, would benefit both governments if structured with the kind of transparent, internationally arbitrable terms that could withstand the same kind of scrutiny that ultimately unraveled the DP World concession, reducing the risk that any future Ethiopian equity stake becomes entangled in a comparable dispute.

These measures reinforce one another and are best pursued as a coordinated program rather than in isolation. The institutional and legal measures, the Strategic and Economic Council and the transparency standard, are the least diplomatically sensitive and can proceed immediately. Corridor diversification and the energy and infrastructure agenda follow naturally as Ethiopian economic growth continues. The maritime security partnership and the multilateral legal framing of Ethiopia's sea access claim reinforce each other and should be pursued together, since public confidence that the relationship is advancing on solid institutional footing makes the more consequential conversations easier to conclude successfully.

X. Conclusion

Djibouti's foreign policy has moved through two coherent doctrines since 1977. The Gouled doctrine secured the young state's survival through positive neutrality and a single external security guarantee, and the Guelleh doctrine secured substantial national wealth by opening the country's geography to the highest bidders among the world's major military powers. Both doctrines answered the strategic problem of their moment successfully enough to earn their place in Djiboutian history and both, on the evidence assembled here, have reached a point of diminishing returns: the Doraleh arbitration, the Somaliland memorandum, the stalled Tadjourah negotiations, and the accelerating interest of outside powers in the same coastline together describe a transactional model straining against its own limits.

A third doctrine, Interdependent Regionalism, offers Djibouti a path that neither repeats the defensive isolation of the Gouled years nor extends indefinitely the transactional logic of the Guelleh years, formalizing instead, in the one domain where it remains conspicuously absent, a pattern of cooperation with Ethiopia that already governs trade, energy, transport, and regional institutional life. Grounded in Keohane and Nye's account of complex interdependence and in a documented historical record of Ethiopian restraint stretching back to the earliest years of Djiboutian independence, the doctrine identifies a treaty-bound, non-exclusive Ethiopian maritime presence, held under continuous Djiboutian legal sovereignty, as the natural next stage of a relationship the two governments have already spent fifty years building rather than as a departure from it.

The record examined throughout this study gives both governments cause for confidence rather than caution. Ethiopia's economic survival depends permanently on the stability of the Djiboutian coastline, and Djibouti's own prosperity depends, in comparable measure, on the continued growth of the Ethiopian economy its ports serve. A formal maritime compact, built on binding arbitration, a defined and renewable term, and full Djiboutian legal jurisdiction, converts an interdependence the two states already live with into an interdependence they actively manage together, and does so on terms consistent with everything Djiboutian statecraft has already normalized in smaller measure since 1977. Fifty years of peace between states this disproportionate in size is not an accident of geography; it is the product of choices both governments have made repeatedly and deliberately, and the doctrine proposed here asks only that those same choices be extended, formally and durably, into the one domain where they have not yet been made.

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