

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Shifting Alignments in the Horn of Africa: Egypt, Eritrea and Ethiopia

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S*ummary*

The Egypt–Eritrea understanding is shaped by concerns over Ethiopia's growing regional influence, the future of Red Sea security and the unresolved Nile waters dispute.

Introduction

President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea visited Egypt from 7 to 9 June 2026.¹ He held talks with President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo on 8 June 2026.² The visit focused on bilateral relations, economic cooperation, Red Sea security and regional stability. However, the timing gives the visit greater strategic meaning. Ethiopia's relations with Eritrea have worsened after the initial optimism created by the 2018 peace agreement. Egypt remains dissatisfied with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). At the same time, Ethiopia's repeated call for access to the Red Sea has created anxiety among its neighbours, particularly Eritrea.

The Egypt–Eritrea understanding is therefore not merely a routine diplomatic engagement. It reflects a broader convergence of interests shaped by concerns over Ethiopia's growing regional influence, the future of Red Sea security and the unresolved Nile waters dispute. While it may be premature to describe this as a formal anti-Ethiopia bloc, the pattern of coordination between Cairo and Asmara shows that the regional balance in the Horn of Africa is being reworked.

Egypt–Eritrea Convergence and the Ethiopia Factor

The Egypt–Eritrea engagement should be seen as part of a wider shift in the Horn of Africa. It is not yet a formal alliance against Ethiopia. Still, it clearly shows that Cairo and Asmara are moving closer because both countries are worried about Ethiopia, though for different reasons. Egypt's concern stems mainly from the GERD, while Eritrea's stems from Ethiopia's repeated demand for access to the Red Sea.

For Egypt, the GERD remains one of the most important issues in its relations with Ethiopia. Cairo sees the Nile as a matter of national survival and has long argued that the dam could affect its water security. Years of negotiations have not produced a binding agreement that satisfies Egypt.³ This has pushed Cairo to look for other ways to increase its influence around Ethiopia. Eritrea becomes useful in this context because of its location, its tense relations with Ethiopia and its position along the Red Sea. Therefore, Egypt's outreach to Eritrea is not just about bilateral cooperation. It is also part of Cairo's attempt to strengthen its position in the wider Nile dispute.

¹ [“President Isaias Afwerki Departs for Egypt”](#), Ministry of Information Eritrea, 7 June 2026.

² [“President El-Sisi Receives President of Eritrea”](#), State Information Service Egypt, 8 June 2026.

³ Dawit Endeshaw, [“Ethiopia Opens Africa's Largest Hydroelectric Dam to Egyptian Protest”](#), *Reuters*, 9 September 2025.

For Ethiopia, however, the GERD is not just a dam or an infrastructure project. It has become a symbol of national pride, development and sovereignty. In a country marked by ethnic tensions, political divisions and civil conflict, the GERD is one of the few projects that Addis Ababa can present as a shared national achievement. For Egypt, the GERD is a water-security concern. For Ethiopia, it is also a nation-building project.⁴ Any external pressure on the dam may therefore be viewed within Ethiopia as an attempt to weaken its sovereignty and development ambitions. This makes the issue harder to resolve.

Eritrea's concern is shaped by Ethiopia's search for access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia is a large, landlocked country, and its need for reliable port access is understandable from an economic perspective. However, the way this demand has been expressed has created anxiety among neighbouring states. Eritrea is especially concerned because Assab, located near the Ethiopian border, has become a sensitive point in Ethiopia's maritime ambitions. For Asmara, Ethiopia's demand is not simply a trade issue; it can also be read as a possible territorial and security challenge. The risk is that any confrontation over Assab could quickly widen beyond a port-access dispute and draw in Tigray and other fragile conflict theatres in the Horn of Africa.⁵

This explains why President Isaias Afwerki's visit to Cairo carries importance. Eritrea does not want to appear isolated at a time when Ethiopia is speaking more openly about maritime access. By strengthening ties with Egypt, Asmara is signalling to Addis Ababa that it has external support. At the same time, Egypt benefits from having a partner close to Ethiopia's northern flank. This creates a common space between Egypt and Eritrea, even though their immediate concerns differ.

Assessment

The Eritrean strategy also appears to go beyond Egypt. Eritrea is reportedly reaching out to internal Ethiopian actors, including Tigrayan factions and FANO in Amhara. This is important because it suggests that Asmara may be trying to put pressure on Ethiopia from multiple directions. Rather than relying only on external partnerships, Eritrea may be using Ethiopia's internal fractures to constrain Addis Ababa's strategic options. Recent reports have also highlighted Ethiopian accusations that Eritrea is backing armed groups and that contacts between

⁴ Haggai Erlich, [“Greater Tigray and the Mysterious Magnetism of Ethiopia”](#), Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 175.

⁵ Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe and Alex de Waal, [“Ethiopia's Tigray Temptation: Only America Can Prevent a New War in the Horn of Africa”](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 5 August 2025.

Eritrea and some Tigrayan actors may be emerging amid renewed insecurity in northern Ethiopia.⁶

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) angle is especially significant because of the long and complicated history between the Tigrayan and Eritrean movements. The TPLF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) once cooperated against the Derg regime, but their relationship later became strained after Eritrean independence. The 1998–2000 Ethiopia–Eritrea war further deepened mistrust between Eritrea and the TPLF-led government in Addis Ababa.⁷ Later, when Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, he sidelined the old TPLF leadership, which then returned to Tigray. This eventually contributed to the conflict that began in 2020. If Eritrea is now reopening channels with Tigrayan actors, it shows how flexible and tactical politics in the Horn of Africa can be. Former enemies may speak to each other again when they face common pressure.

Ethiopia's internal situation adds another layer to this uncertainty. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's Prosperity Party retained a large parliamentary majority in the recent elections, securing around 90 per cent of the contested seats. On paper, this gives Abiy a strong political mandate. However, the elections were also affected by unrest. Several polling stations were closed in the Amhara and Oromo regions due to insecurity.⁸ This shows the contradiction in Ethiopia's current position. The central government appears electorally strong, but the country remains politically unsettled. Armed groups, regional tensions and ethnic divisions continue to shape Ethiopia's domestic politics.⁹

For Egypt and Eritrea, Ethiopia's internal divisions may appear as an opportunity to apply pressure on Addis Ababa. For Ethiopia, however, closer coordination between Cairo and Asmara, along with possible Eritrean links to internal Ethiopian actors, may appear to be encirclement. This could make the Ethiopian leadership more defensive and less willing to compromise. Instead of reducing tensions, such moves could strengthen mistrust on all sides.

⁶ Sheriff Bojang Jnr, [“Ethiopia-Eritrea: Has Abiy Met His Match as Asmara and Tigray Join Forces?”](#), *The Africa Report*, 10 February 2026.

⁷ Haggai Erlich, [“Greater Tigray and the Mysterious Magnetism of Ethiopia”](#), Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 149–62.

⁸ [“Ethiopian Prime Minister's Party Gets Another Big Parliamentary Majority”](#), *Reuters*, 21 June 2026.

⁹ [“OLF Warns Country's Problems Cannot be Solved by Elections Alone, Flags Alignment of 'Tsimdoo' Forces Targeting Northern Oromia”](#), *Addis Standard*, 22 June 2026.

Somalia’s position shows that the regional picture is still fluid. After Ethiopia signed a controversial memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, Somalia appeared to move closer to Egypt and Eritrea because Mogadishu saw Ethiopia’s move as a challenge to Somali sovereignty. However, the Turkish-mediated Ankara Declaration between Somalia and Ethiopia has changed the situation.¹⁰ Somalia now appears less willing to join an anti-Ethiopia alignment fully. Its immediate priority remains countering Somaliland’s international outreach rather than joining a fixed regional bloc.

This shows that alignments in the Horn of Africa are not permanent. Countries cooperate when their interests meet, but they also step back when their priorities change. Egypt and Eritrea are clearly moving closer, but Somalia’s shifting position suggests that a formal anti-Ethiopia coalition remains uncertain.

Conclusion

The wider concern is that the Horn of Africa is becoming more fragmented. Egypt and Eritrea are converging. Ethiopia is seeking sea access. Somalia is recalibrating its position. Eritrea may be engaging with internal Ethiopian actors. Sudan’s conflict is creating space for outside involvement. The Red Sea is also becoming increasingly important due to Houthi attacks, the Gaza war, Gulf rivalries and external naval activity. All these developments are taking place simultaneously, making the region more unstable. The main risk is that political competition may turn into proxy competition. If Egypt and Eritrea deepen their coordination in ways that directly pressure Ethiopia, and if Ethiopia responds by hardening its position, the region could move towards greater confrontation. This would make it more difficult to resolve the GERD issue, Ethiopia’s port access question or Red Sea security concerns.

¹⁰ [“Somalia, Ethiopia Agree to Work Together to Resolve Somaliland Port Dispute”](#), *Reuters*, 12 December 2024.

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