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**Somaliland, Ethiopia, and Somalia:
The Shifting Politics Behind the Red
Sea Access Deal**

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1. About The Center

The Centre for Democracy and Governance (CDG) is an independent, Somaliland based nonprofit center of excellence that promotes the advancement of democracy and good governance

The Centre for Democracy and Governance (CDG) is an independent, Somaliland based nonprofit center of excellence that promotes the advancement of democracy and good governance. By deepening of democracy and works to contribute to peace and security in Horn of Africa, the African continent and beyond through dialogue, the pursuit of knowledge and rigorous analysis of critical issues and developments.

CDG activities target Socio-economic groups (Local Communities) Civil societies
Academic institutions Government and non-governmental institutions Political Parties Refugee and IDPs. In exercising this responsibility, CDG focuses on the challenges of
institution capacity building, democratic governance and the rule of law, as well as
opportunities for peace, security, cooperation and integration.



1. Introduction

As Somaliland's president arrives in Addis Ababa tomorrow, eyes across the Horn of Africa are fixed on what could become a decisive moment in regional diplomacy. This is the first visit to Ethiopia since his election in November 2024, and it comes amid renewed debate over the controversial memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between Somaliland and Ethiopia last January 2024, a deal that promised Addis access to the Red Sea in exchange for potential recognition of Somaliland.

The trip follows weeks of quiet but intense regional activity. Somaliland's new administration has already been in the United Arab Emirates, a long-time partner with heavy investments in Berbera Port. Meanwhile, Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud visited Addis Ababa earlier this week a move widely seen as a pre-emptive step to shape Ethiopia's position before Hargeisa's arrival.



The convergence of these visits signals an unfolding three-way chess game between Mogadishu, Hargeisa, and Addis Ababa each seeking to redefine influence, sovereignty, and access in a fast-changing Horn of Africa.

2. A Deal That Shook the Region

The January 2024 MoU between Somaliland and Ethiopia gave the landlocked giant a symbolic foothold on the Red Sea coast, with reports suggesting a 50-year lease of roughly 20 kilometers of Somaliland's coastline. In return, Ethiopia promised to "consider recognizing" Somaliland as an independent state and hinted at economic partnerships, including potential shares in Ethiopian Airlines.

For Somaliland, the deal was a diplomatic breakthrough a long-sought recognition from a regional heavyweight. For Ethiopia, it was a strategic milestone in its decades-long search for a seaport. But for Somalia's federal government, it was nothing short of a violation of sovereignty.

The MoU provoked immediate protests from Mogadishu, which recalled its ambassador from Addis and launched diplomatic complaints at the African Union, Arab League, and United Nations. The international community largely urged calm, but the issue has since remained unresolved.

3. Hassan Sheikh's Countermove

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's sudden visit to Addis Ababa this week is widely interpreted as an effort to cool tensions or at least reassert Somalia's relevance in Ethiopia's Red Sea calculus. His government hopes to persuade Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to reconsider or slow down any direct engagement with Somaliland that undermines Somalia's territorial integrity.

Some regional observers suggest Hassan Sheikh may also be seeking to rebuild wider ties with Ethiopia after months of strain, including over border security, trade, and the activities of Somali regional forces. Whatever the case, the timing of his visit just days before the Somaliland president's arrival is unlikely to be coincidence.

4. A New Somaliland Approach

For the new Somaliland government, tomorrow's trip to Addis will be as much about reassurance as negotiation. It inherits an MoU that divided public opinion at home: some saw it as a bold step toward international recognition, while others viewed it as reckless, trading national sovereignty for uncertain promises.

The administration is expected to review the deal's terms, possibly seeking to adjust its scope or implementation timeline. The priority may shift from political recognition to practical cooperation emphasizing trade, infrastructure, and regional stability over grand symbolism.

Sources close to Hargeisa's diplomatic circle suggest that the president aims to project pragmatism: keeping Ethiopia close, but not alienating other allies such as the UAE, Djibouti, or even Turkey. The UAE visit two weeks ago likely laid groundwork for such balancing, as Abu Dhabi has stakes in maintaining stable maritime and commercial routes across the Red Sea corridor.

5. Ethiopia's Calculated Patience

For Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, the MoU remains a card of strategic leverage. Despite domestic and regional criticism, Ethiopia has never formally withdrawn from the agreement. Its government appears intent on keeping the option alive a signal to both Mogadishu and Hargeisa that Addis holds the key to the region's next maritime order.

But Ethiopia also faces diplomatic limits. Pushing the MoU too aggressively risks alienating Somalia and straining relations with neighboring states such as Djibouti and Egypt. Abiy may therefore use the Somaliland visit to signal continued interest without committing to full implementation preserving flexibility while avoiding escalation.

6. Toward a New Regional Equation

If both visits Hassan Sheikh's and the Somaliland presidents are read together, they mark the beginning of a new diplomatic balancing act in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia seeks access; Somaliland seeks legitimacy; Somalia seeks to defend sovereignty. None can afford open confrontation, yet each must prove control to domestic audiences.

Tomorrow's talks may not produce concrete agreements, but they will shape how Addis, Hargeisa, and Mogadishu define their relationships going forward. Whether the MoU survives, is amended, or quietly shelved, its ripple effects will continue to define Red Sea politics for years to come.

For Somaliland, the trip represents a test of diplomatic maturity to secure benefits without isolation. For Ethiopia, it is about managing ambition with realism. And for Somalia, it is a reminder that regional influence must be maintained not only through resistance but through engagement.

Whatever emerges from Addis Ababa this week, the Horn of Africa's political map is once again being redrawn not with borders, but with deals, visits, and the quiet negotiations that decide who controls the corridors to the sea.